

## Serb-Albanian Relations and Kosovo Status Dispute

The Council for Inclusive Governance organized a focus group in Belgrade on March 2, 2018. The focus group included students and members of civil society organizations from Serbia. It included seven groups of questions, ranging from interethnic communication to the status dispute between Belgrade and Pristina. This report includes the main points of discussions.

The roundtable is a part of CIG's project on normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia supported by and implemented in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

### 1. Interactions with Kosovo Albanians

- Most of the participants have had direct communication with Albanians in various contexts. They reported friendly interactions. Some were surprised that they could speak Serbian in Pristina without attracting attention. Their perception was that it was not safe to speak Serbian in public places. At no point they felt unsafe in Pristina.
- Some have not been to Kosovo but have communication with Albanians in south Serbia. The interactions were mostly in social contexts. There were professional contexts too, such as the summer program in post-conflict studies at the American University in Pristina and the OSCE Academy that gathers a number of women from Serbia and Kosovo.
- The past remains a burden to the normalization of relations. While the Serb students had good communication and interactions with Albanian students in Prizren, they were aware that the Serbs were driven out of the town and Serbian religious and cultural sites were targeted in the years after the war. Coming to grips with the past is a condition for better relations.
- During the visits in Kosovo, for the first time we discussed the consequences of the politics of the 1990s with those who bore the brunt of it. We learned that it was worse than we had thought. These interactions helped us understand the past. We need to understand the past before we begin to address it.
- A student from a small village in Vojvodina reported that people there don't care about Kosovo and what happens with it. She doesn't expect any disturbances even if Serbia recognizes Kosovo's independence today.
- It is important to challenge our perceptions. Many people in Serbia have bad perceptions about Albanians even though majority of them never met any Albanians.
- Some said that relations with Albanians are not good, but neither are Serb relations with Croats, for instance. So, we don't have to be good friends to build some working relations. In other words, governments in Kosovo and Serbia should move on with institutional normalization even if they don't have explicit support from their populations. If the Serbian government had asked the people, it would have never recognized Croatia.

## **2. Past, interpretations, and dialogue**

- The past remains an obstacle to a genuine process of social normalization. We have partial information about the past, and mostly focus on what happened to our own people. Alternative history lessons are needed; not only what we learn in our schools, which is mostly about the violence against our own people, but try to understand what happened to the other side as well.
- Different interpretation of the past. Serbs say they liberated Kosovo in 1912, while Albanians say Serbs occupied it. Is it possible to begin a rational dialogue about the past? We don't have an answer to the question.
- What we know determines our positions, so maybe we should learn more, listen to the other side, try to confirm the information we get from the other side, put it into context, and try to isolate some factors.
- The debate about the past is still dominated by historical claims of who was in Kosovo first, and what movements of populations into and out of Kosovo occurred, and under what circumstances—coerced or voluntary. Both sides maintain that since their ancestors were the first ones to be present in the region, the territory should belong to them. Both sides still claim same historical figures: Serbs say Miloš Obilić was theirs while Albanians say his name was Milosh Kopili and he was an Albanian.
- For Albanians the 1990s was a decade of apartheid, while for the Serbs it was a decade of Albanian terrorism.
- Different interpretations are fine, but politicization of history is problematic. Germans and French don't agree about their history but it doesn't prevent them from developing good relations. Swiss communities also have different interpretations about history but they were able to build a functional state.
- Kosovo represents also an element of the Serbian identity—the church and religion in general—and for many Serbs it is not just a piece of land.
- History is not just a story; it is also a people's identity, so it is difficult to revise and change it.
- Consensus in history will never be reached but we don't need it; we can be friends without consensus.

## **3. Reconciliation**

- Contradictory interpretations. It may not be possible to get everyone to agree on the same interpretation, but the first task of the analysts should be to reveal and clarify the disputes, so that people can see where they differ and move toward reconciliation.
- Interpretations are more powerful than facts.
- Should we forget history? Regardless of whether we agree about the past or not, we should move on and build better relations.
- How to increase communication between societies? One of the answers is more interaction between the young generations.
- Our whole life we have been dealing with Kosovo. Whether it was ours or not is less important than the future of our new generations.
- We need to address taboo themes and deconstruct them. It is important what you offer people; if you offer hate, they will hate.

- Until we resolve the status of Kosovo, we can't achieve reconciliation. However, the status resolution is not a guarantee for reconciliation. Serbia and Croatia recognize each other but their societies haven't reconciled, so reconciliation requires more than the resolution of the status dispute.
- Unfortunately we may not be the generation capable of reaching reconciliation. Maybe we might have to wait for another generation that will be born and grow up in normal conditions. We are the 'conflict generation,' born and raised in conflict.
- The state should begin a program on reconciliation; it should see it as a national interest, for security and economic reasons.
- We have had an education system that hasn't taught us much about reconciliation.
- What is reconciliation? Is reconciliation Serbia's recognition of Kosovo, which in fact is Serbia losing its territory? It doesn't work that way. None has to lose from reconciliation.

#### **4. Challenges to normalization of social relations**

- Some normalization has started, but has had very little effect on the people.
- US could do more to push sides for normalization.
- Political elites are ruthless. It is also easy to manipulate poor societies. Stronger economic societies are more difficult to be manipulated.
- We have our politicians cooperating, our thieves cooperating, so lots of legal and illegal cooperation goes on, yet no normalization. We should put economic interests ahead of political ones, so those that would have direct economic benefit would cooperate.
- EU membership could serve as incentive for normalization to both sides.
- How do we know if we are still in conflict? Is it because politicians tell us so? What else?
- Serbia gave up Montenegro easily, which is populated by people culturally and ethnically identical to the Serbs; why not give up Kosovo where the majority of the population is Albanian?

#### **5. Comprehensive normalization**

- The Serbian society is ready for comprehensive normalization, but without explicit recognition.
- We all say Kosovo is Serbia, but we all know it is not; but we also know it is not something you say; this is false morality: I know that the sea is blue but the official moral doesn't allow me to say so. Some say Kosovo is de facto independent, but others, mostly nationalists, say it is Serbia. Everyone has a right to his opinion but also the opinions should be based on knowledge and facts.
- If we ask Serbian people if they are willing to have 20 percent Albanian ministers in government and of the army, they would oppose it. We talk about Kosovo as part of Serbia but without Albanians. Polls show a lot depends on how you ask the question: if you ask Serbs in Serbia if they are willing to live in Kosovo, they say no, or if they agree with their daughters marrying Albanians, they say no. Yet, they are not willing to give up Kosovo.
- It will depend a lot on who will present that comprehensive agreement; if President Vucic says it is good, people most likely will accept; it really depends on what the "chief says."
- People would definitely accept large autonomy for Kosovo or any other options that keeps Kosovo within Serbia.

- If you say something is mine but you don't control it, how are you going to take it back? Only through force. But Serbia is not in a position either to take Kosovo back by force or recognize it, so most likely continuation of status quo.
- Serbia is not ready to accept independence; Kosovo is about our identity.
- Serbia has de facto given Kosovo up: Belgrade has signed many agreements with Pristina, treating Kosovo as a counterpart; Serbia's path to EU is without Kosovo. Serbs know that they can't bring Kosovo back forcefully and that Albanians will not be reintegrated in Serbia peacefully.

## **6. Status options**

- Debates on the Kosovo status continue to be dominated by historical claims and ignores the more salient realities created after the war. Both Serbs and Albanians continue to use historical claims to justify their territorial aims and to shape national goals.
- The final agreement will most likely have some ambiguity, allowing Kosovo to say it is independent and Serbia to say it is not.
- Another option is acceptance of independence in exchange for a strong association/community for the Kosovo Serbs.
- Partition or exchange of territories are unlikely options and too dangerous for the region.
- Explicit recognition is not likely either.
- Management of conflict through a type of dialogue.
- Kosovo will remain a frozen conflict.
- Recognition with some shared sovereignty over some issues, some cultural autonomy for Kosovo Serbs.
- Military options completely off the table. Even if Serbia chooses this option, it doesn't have the military capacity.

## **7. Social coexistence**

- Serb-Albanian relations are much better than they look.
- We have seen that we can easily undermine brotherhood and unity.
- Lack of language knowledge is an obstacle to common life. If you don't speak the language of the place where you live, you are a foreigner in your own country.
- Life on a common territory is possible.
- Serbs and Albanians live next to each other, in parallel societies.
- The governments are not reflection of Serbian and Kosovo societies. Societies are better than governments.
- If we decide that we can't live together, then we have to think of other options.
- For a common life, we need to get rid of the ongoing disputes.