

# Serbia's Internal Dialogue on Kosovo and EU Integration

## Introduction

Serbia's internal dialogue on Kosovo is entering its final phase. Few people expect quick and easy solutions for the century-old Kosovo dispute. Serbia needs to resolve the dispute before it joins the European Union. Belgrade officials say that normalization of relations with Pristina is also their own choice. They are not pursuing simply because it is an EU condition but because Serbia needs to resolve the issue in order to move forward. A number of options for the resolution have been articulated during the internal dialogue, but the dialogue is an unrestricted process, so in the end there could be a completely new not-yet-mentioned option. The only already determined option is EU membership. After the conclusion of the dialogue and based on its outcomes, its initiator Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic plans to come up with his own proposal in April 2018.

Chapter 35 of Serbia's negotiation framework with the EU defines the comprehensive normalization with Pristina. Many say that the main objective of the normalization agreement is to help Serbia join the EU but also to build a safe and sustainable environment for Kosovo Serbs, including their education, healthcare, and a degree of self-governance. Furthermore, the comprehensive normalization should bring to an end the century-long hatred, hostilities, and pave the way for a future of cooperation and peaceful coexistence. Recently released EU's enlargement framework for the Western Balkans requires Kosovo and Serbia to sign a legally binding comprehensive normalization agreement.

Below are some of the conclusions of a roundtable—the fourth in the series on the internal dialogue on Kosovo—organized by the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) on March 5, 2018 in Belgrade. The meeting gathered civil society representatives, academics, journalists, and politicians who deal with issues related to Belgrade-Pristina relations. The meeting addressed the implications that the dialogue outcomes might have for Serbia's EU integration prospects. The roundtable is a part of CIG's broader initiative on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia that is supported by and implemented in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The recommendations and conclusions resulted from the roundtable discussions and individual meetings. We have tried to be accurate and balanced in summarizing the discussions, and ask for the understanding of participants whose remarks may have not been fully captured in this brief

report, for which CIG accepts sole responsibility. The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule. Igor Novakovic, CIG Associate in Serbia, drafted the report.<sup>1</sup>

## Options

Government officials report that the dialogue is on the right track and will be concluded in March. After fourteen rounds of dialogue since December 2017, the working group has so far articulated eleven options.

1. Reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia's constitutional order;
2. Partition on ethnic lines or exchange of territories;
3. Keeping the status quo;
4. Serbia does not recognize Kosovo's independence but continues the Brussels dialogue to find a viable solution;
5. A confederation of Serbia whereby Kosovo becomes a unit in the confederation;
6. Resolution of economic issues without a political solution;
7. Community of Balkan nations;
8. Serbia and Kosovo enter the EU at the same time, putting the status issue aside;
9. Negotiations with the Kosovo Albanians under the patronage of the international community—UN or EU—based on a non-recognition policy and without signing any agreements;
10. A joint state of Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo as a condominium of Albania and Serbia;
11. Recognition of independence of Kosovo.

In the end, Serbia has only two basic options: to resolve the conflict with Kosovo now, or to leave it to future generations, a speaker said. Resolution of the conflict with Kosovo is even more important than the EU membership. Membership should be a result of Serbia's democratic development and normalization of relations with Kosovo, not a goal on its own. Some speakers said that the overwhelming majority of the Serbian citizens are against the continuation of the conflict with Kosovo.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The internal dialogue participants have not referred so far to the EU integration and the Brussels' condition for normalization of relations with Kosovo as factors that should shape the final proposal. Most of the proposals are even contrary to what President Vucic outlined in his original opinion piece published in July 2017. The majority of the proposals support the preservation of the status quo until major geopolitical shifts in the direction of global strengthening of Russia and China take place. It is not clear if Vucic and the government will be able to change this approach if they rely solely on the dialogue results. Some participants

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<sup>1</sup> For information about CIG's previous roundtables on the internal dialogue please see  
<http://www.cigonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Towards-a-Successful-Serbian-Internal-Dialogue-on-Kosovo-ENG-1.pdf>  
<http://www.cigonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Towards-a-Successful-Serbian-Internal-Dialogue-on-Kosovo-Nov-30-2017-ENG-1.pdf>  
[http://www.cigonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Dec\\_2017\\_Gracanica\\_Internal\\_Dialogue-1.pdf](http://www.cigonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Dec_2017_Gracanica_Internal_Dialogue-1.pdf)

argued that that the government's only motivation for the dialogue is to stay in power, and that the whole process is not genuine. Speakers believe that the President's proposal will be quite different from the options supported by the majority of the dialogue participants.

2. Serbia should use this moment and solve the Kosovo issue once and for all and enter the EU. Internally, no one on the political scene has enough power to oppose the resolution of the issue. The public in Serbia, although not prepared, will most probably accept any agreement, some say, due to the dominance of the government over most of the media. The strongest opposition to this process actually is in the ruling parties themselves. Also, if the process is not democratic enough, it could leave scars on the societal fabric for the future, similar to ones that we are visible to this day in Hungary resulting from the 1920 Treaty of Trianon.
3. There are rumors that the politicians in Belgrade and Pristina are jointly promoting options of partition of Kosovo and exchange of territories. This is a dangerous option. First, it could result in a domino effect—open other borders in the Balkans and in Europe in general. Second, it is likely to cause population moves both in the south and in the north of Kosovo and in the south of Serbia. Third, the majority of the Serbs in Kosovo live in the south, and they are against partition since it would probably result in disappearance of the Ahtisaari guarantees for communities in Kosovo. Fourth, Serbia should be interested in preserving of the Kosovo borders since the majority of Serb property and cultural and historic heritage is in the south. Finally, the Serbs in Serbia's municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja are also strongly against any exchange of territories.
4. Any solution for the issue of Kosovo should be a win-win solution. Any potential solution should pass a litmus test of satisfying these five elements: a) it should bring stability; b) it should stop the brain drain; c) it should satisfy the needs of the Serbs in Kosovo; d) it cannot result in population movements; e) it should bring better life for the people.
5. Chapter 35 of Serbia's EU accession negotiation framework differs from the other chapters whose implementation depends solely on Serbia's will and ability. Chapter 35 oversees the implementation of the Brussels agreements between Belgrade and Pristina, so progress in this chapter also depends on the attitude of Pristina when it comes to the implementation. Some said that it is good that the process is open and flexible because it allows both sides to reach a sustainable solution. However, Serbia made a choice to transform its society and state institutions to become a part of the EU and to function within that context. Serbia will not be able to join the EU without resolving the Kosovo issue.
6. If Serbia wants to join the EU in 2025, as outlined in the recent EU Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans, it should move fast. It has to fulfill the interim benchmarks from all negotiation chapters by 2019. By 2021, the European Commission must give its assessment and that should be the latest date for reaching the Agreement on Comprehensive Normalization with Pristina. Finally, in 2023, the EU should start the process of ratification of the accession treaty by the member states. It seems that the Serbian government does not have a strategy how to steer this process in order to meet the deadlines.
7. Chapter 35 is not the only chapter that deals with the issue of Kosovo. There are several other chapters—such as Chapter 24 that deals, among others, with the issue of readmission and the Schengen Treaty—that also contain provisions directly or indirectly connected to Kosovo. For their successful closure, Serbia should as soon as possible have a clear situation regarding its competencies and borders.

8. It is Serbia's and Kosovo's interest to reach a historic agreement, with or without the EU integration process. Serbian and Kosovo politicians should accept the responsibility and recognize the need of resolving this issue together.
9. The Agreement on Comprehensive Normalization should open a new space for dialogue between the two societies. Normalization allows Serbia to be institutionally present in Kosovo in the areas of healthcare, education, and protection of cultural and religious heritage. The Association/Community of the Serb-Majority Municipalities is an instrument for the protection of the Serbs, but it should not contribute to segregation. There is also hope that the Agreement would make existing criminal groups irrelevant and strengthen the rule of law.
10. Normalization does not exclude the need for a *de facto* recognition of Kosovo in the long run, as the enlargement is and will remain in the hands of the EU member states. There are no political guarantees that one or more EU member states will not condition Serbia's accession with the *de facto* recognition in the ratification phase of the process. Many were against the *de facto* recognition, while some said that the demand for an explicit recognition would lead to the strengthening of the anti-Western sentiment in Serbia.
11. Kosovo Serbs are not a factor in the process of negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina. They are affected by the fact that the Serbian government did not insist on the full implementation of the Brussels Agreement, in particular the part about the Association/Community, before implementing other aspects of the agreement.
12. A number of participants pointed out that Serbia has already recognized the "internal independence of Kosovo" and the next step in the Brussels dialogue should be fighting the organized crime in Kosovo, both in the south and the north. The organized crime influences the politics and the public life, both among the Albanians and the Serbs.

## Participants

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**Dusan Milenkovic**, Program Coordinator, Westminster Foundation for Democracy  
**Petar Miletic**, Columnist  
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**Igor Novakovic**, Representative in Serbia, Council for Inclusive Governance  
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