

# Outcomes of Serbia's Internal Dialogue and Prospects for a Comprehensive Normalization

## Introduction

Serbian government officials confirmed that Serbia's internal dialogue on Kosovo has been concluded with a session for civil society representatives held on March 31, 2018. After considering the dialogue's outcomes, the President of Serbia intends to present his platform on how to solve the Kosovo dispute. Serbia should reach a final deal with Kosovo in order to successfully complete its EU accession negotiations and to join the EU. The recently published EU's Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans underlines that Belgrade and Pristina must sign an agreement on comprehensive normalization. Such an agreement is a crucial target set by the EU for Serbia. Brussels is also clear that three chapters of its accession negotiations with Serbia are more crucial than the others: Chapters 23 and 24 that deal with the rule of law and basic rights and Chapter 35 that deals with Kosovo. The leadership in Serbia underlines that it is in Serbia's own interest to close the Kosovo problem, so that it can the move forward with other issues. For the Serbs in Kosovo, the comprehensive normalization, according to Belgrade, should produce guarantees for the continuation of their Serbia-provided education and healthcare and a degree of self-governance.

This report includes conclusions from CIG's fifth roundtable in our series on Serbia's internal dialogue on Kosovo held on April 11, 2018 in Belgrade. The meeting gathered civil society representatives, academics, and journalists who deal with issues related to the Belgrade-Pristina relations. The participants considered the options for resolving the Kosovo issue that came of the internal dialogue and determined which of them deem serious consideration by the Serbian government and the president.

We have tried to be accurate and balanced in summarizing the discussions, and ask for the understanding of the 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's Associate in Serbia, drafted this report.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For reports on previous CIG roundtables on the internal dialogue please see [cigonline.net](http://cigonline.net).

## Internal Dialogue Options

After 21 dialogue rounds the government's working group articulated eleven options for resolving the Kosovo dispute stemming from these meetings:

1. Reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia's constitutional order;
2. Partition along ethnic lines or exchange of territories;
3. Freezing of conflict and 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 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.

According to the same information, the vast majority of participants in the internal dialogue favored option three, i.e. freezing the conflict and keeping the status quo. The final phase of the dialogue was affected by the incident in North Mitrovica where the Kosovo Police arrested Marko Djuric, the Director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija of the Government of Serbia. It remains unclear what would be the next steps of the Serbian government.

## Conclusions

1. Incidents, such as the one with Marko Djuric's arrest in North Mitrovica in 2018 or the train in 2016, bring the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue further away from its goals. Every incident is a step back. Therefore, Belgrade and Pristina leaders contribute to creating an atmosphere of conflict in which a comprehensive normalization agreement has no point. This generation of Serbs and Albanians has a chance to break the spiral of hatred and try to build relations on a new foundation. A number of participants pointed out that the current discourse created in part through the conduct of the internal dialogue is very far from what President Aleksandar Vucic wished for in his opinion piece published in the *Blic* daily in summer 2017 when launching the process.
2. The majority of proposals stemming from the internal dialogue do not reflect the reality. There are only three options from the list presented by government officials that are realistic, but resulting in different consequences: a) freezing of conflict and maintaining of status quo, 2) partition along ethnic lines or exchange of territories, and c) recognition of Kosovo's independence. Some participants claimed there are only two realistic options: the comprehensive normalization as the outcome of the current Brussels dialogue or regression of relations and a frozen conflict.
3. None of the options addressed the current implementation of the 2013 Brussels Agreement that is to result in the establishment of the Community/Association of the Serb-majority municipalities by Kosovo and full normalization of relations, including Serbia's not

blocking Kosovo's membership in the United Nations and other international organizations.

4. Some speakers claimed that partition or an exchange of territories is the worst option but it is also not realistic, mostly because of a possible domino effect it would produce in the region and wider Europe. Partition could also lead to a Serb exodus in south of Kosovo, where the majority of the Serb community lives. The interest of the Serbs in Kosovo as a whole is to avoid partition, as it would in the best case weaken the Serb community's position in Kosovo. Furthermore, with rejoining Serbia, the north would lose all of its current privileges, hence the citizens in the north should be aware of this. Other speakers claimed that partition is good as it permanently solves the issue of Kosovo, which is what is important in the current geopolitical context. However, the international community should give guarantees and strengthen efforts to prevent a domino effect from taking place. Some claimed that there are two options for partition: Serbia takes the north in exchange for recognition and UN seat or a swap of territories where Kosovo would obtain some parts of the municipalities of Bujanovac and Presevo west of Corridor 10 (the highway Belgrade-Skopje-Thessaloniki).
5. All speakers agreed that the normalization will not lead to Kosovo's recognition by Serbia, although some pointed out that Serbia would not be able to join the EU without recognizing Kosovo. Some claimed that the recognition would lead to the same domino effect as partition. However, if Serbia recognizes Kosovo, it would ensure the implementation of rights and standards for the Serbs in Kosovo. On the other hand, if Serbia stops to oppose Kosovo's UN and EU memberships, it does not mean that Kosovo will have a membership perspective in these bodies. The renewed US-Russian confrontation dictates new international dynamics and it forces the EU to insist on a more rapid process of normalization. Consequences of this confrontation might be that Russia would continue to oppose Kosovo's membership in international organizations, especially in the UN. On the other hand, it is Spain in the current post-Catalan referendum environment who is reluctant to approve a clear EU perspective for Kosovo.
6. A comprehensive agreement on normalization of relations should lead to special relations between the two governments, including full freedom of movement of people and goods and services. However, a haste to reach the agreement could lead to wrong outcomes, and 18 months, that some members of the international community mention for reaching such an agreement, are not enough. The right approach would be to restart the process with a genuine dialogue between the Serbian and Kosovo Albanian societies and bring them closer. Without contacts and cooperation between the two societies there would be no implementation of the comprehensive agreement, even if the leaders reach on their own some kind of solution, as it would be hard "to sell it to the public."
7. Some speakers were skeptical that the Brussels dialogue would lead to a comprehensive normalization. At this stage, constructive ambiguity is creating more problems than resolving. Thus, Belgrade sees normalization as a process that would allow Serbs in Kosovo to have as many ties to Serbia as possible and that there will be no Serbian recognition of Kosovo, while for the Kosovo Albanians the final step of normalization is the recognition of Kosovo by Serbia. Therefore, Brussels should be explicit in what the normalization of relations is. Participants also criticized the process as it is not bringing closer the Serbian and the Kosovo Albanian societies and instead of searching for a historic agreement that would cover all spheres of life and bring normality to them, it creates

obstacles and serves the politicians on both sides as a tool for their continuing stay in power. USA, on the other hand, is the actor that could assure substantial improvements in the situation of the Kosovo Serbs thus delivering something of substance to Belgrade. This type of assistance could advance the process of comprehensive normalization in a very serious way.

## Participants

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