

Albanian-Serb Relations and Kosovo Status Dispute

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized a focus group in Pristina on June 20, 2018. The focus group included students and members of civil society organizations from Kosovo. It consisted of seven groups of questions, ranging from interethnic communication to the status dispute between Belgrade and Pristina. This report includes the main points of discussions.¹

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 Serbs

- Most of the participants have had interactions with Kosovo Serbs and Serbs from Serbia in professional contexts. Many reported that the communication with the Serbs is becoming more normal. Many participants had been in Serbia for professional activities and reported friendly interactions with the Serbs there.
- They took part in various workshops and roundtables focusing more on social issues, but political topics were part of the discussions as well, including the integration of Kosovo's north and the Brussels dialogue.
- Politics has an impact on the relations between the youth in Serbia and Kosovo. Some reported that during a joint visit in Brussels, the Serbian group refused to take part in a visit to the Kosovo Embassy in Brussels. Albanian and Serb participants at the Brussels event were also divided on many other political issues, reflecting their own politics at home.
- Many said that the communication and interactions between the youth in Kosovo and Serbia are not sufficient, that the number of joint activities is limited.
- The interactions showed that the youth in Kosovo and Serbia share more issues than it is generally believed. A number of participants said that the youth in both countries are victims of their own politics.
- On Kosovo's north's integration, the participants were divided: some said that the north resists the integration into Kosovo while others said that Kosovo is to blame too for not providing enough opportunities to facilitate integration.

¹ In March 2018, CIG organized a similar event in Belgrade. The report from the Belgrade focus group is available at <http://www.cigonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Serb-Albanian-Relations-and-Kosovo-Status-Dispute-Focus-Group-1.pdf>.

- The past remains a burden to better communication and cooperation. Some of the participants had themselves experiences the war and communication with the Serbs right after the war was “traumatic.” Many said that the Serb and the Albanian societies assign collective guilt to each other, but “the fact is that not all were involved in crimes.”
- Relations divided into pre and post-war, and the war remains a major obstacle to rebuilding relations and trust. The war is being manipulated by the political elites for their own interests. Very few Serbs in Serbia are aware of the scope of the crimes that were committed during the war in 1999 in Kosovo.
- The Brussels dialogue has improved the relations somewhat and resolved some issues, such as travel documents, but has had little impact on the normalization of relations between the two societies.

2. Past, interpretations, and dialogue

- Kosovo and Serbia have had a difficult past mostly dominated by hostilities, but even in when some level of coexistence existed in Yugoslavia it was not fully voluntary. The system coerced Serbs and Albanians to work together. The Albanian and Serb societies do not have a good reference point for the past. Even during the communism in Yugoslavia when the relations between the two societies looked good on the surface, both Albanians and Serbs held grudges toward each other.
- Kosovo politicians, just like the Serbian politicians, are also involved in manipulating the past for their personal and political interests.
- Albanian and Serb societies are not willing to accept their part of responsibilities for the hostilities in the past. Many said that Serbia committed the majority of the crimes, but that some Albanians, organized or not, also committed crimes particularly after the war. It is in the interest of the Albanian and Serb communities to ‘clean’ their societies from criminal elements.
- Ethnic hatred more emphasized in rural areas in Kosovo and Serbia. However, many said that hatred and nationalism are declining gradually. People are becoming more concerned with looking for jobs and improving their economic situations than with “advancing the national causes.”
- Textbooks filled with ethnic hatred and exaggeration of crimes of the other side are a major stumbling block to reconciliation and building normal relations, especially between the youth of the two countries. Many young people have no interactions and communication with the other side and their only introduction to the other side is through textbooks. Such textbooks are creating big gaps in the normalization of relations that would take years to rectify.

3. Reconciliation

- The reconciliation process between Serb and Albanian societies remains complicated and neither society is willing to address the past through a non-emotional and realistic debate. The discussion on reconciliation is dominated by the government and political party leaders who do not seem to have any interest in advancing the process.
- The process should be run by non-politicians and focus on the experiences that members of both societies have had. Reconciliation through addressing of political disputes only complicates the process.

- The civil society is reluctant to address the real issues that burden the two societies. They organize a lot of debates but avoid sensitive issues, especially in public. More public debates on the war, crimes, responsibility, and justice are needed in order to make people believe that reconciliation is possible.
- Rule of law is the main component of the reconciliation process. The perpetrators should face justice for the crimes they have committed. Those who suffered during the war cannot reconcile with the perpetrators. The societies should be more willing to denounce war crimes and support the institutions in achieving some results in shedding light on the major war crimes. Both societies still treat their crime suspects as heroes.
- Prejudices remain strong on both sides.
- There are two processes of reconciliation: one between Kosovo and Serbia, and another between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo. Kosovo should first begin the process of reconciliation with Kosovo Serbs in an effort to make them feel part of Kosovo's social and institutional fabric. Kosovo Serbs should also not shy away from denouncing the crimes that were committed by some Kosovo Serbs.

4. Challenges to normalization of social relations

- Prejudices, the past, and lack of rule of law remain the main challenges to building better social relations between the two societies.
- Political elites coming from the war times are seen with suspicion by the societies. Not only they are not trusted by the other side, but, in most cases, they also lack the trust of their own populations. Many considered that institutions in Kosovo and Serbia are not democratic enough even though they are elected through "free elections." The leaders sometimes make some good steps toward normalization, such as the Brussels agreements, but often they themselves create incidents that throw the normalization back to the beginning.
- The civil society organizations in Kosovo and Serbia could do more in creating genuine communication and interactions between the two societies.
- The international community could become more engaged in pushing the sides towards normalization by helping with the implementation of the Brussels agreements.

5. Comprehensive normalization

- Kosovo is ready for normalization but only if Serbia agrees to recognize Kosovo. Very few Kosovars believe full normalization is possible without recognition. "We cannot be friends with someone who claims our home."
- Normalization is taking place only between the governments, but not between the societies. Many said that the societies most likely would remain barricaded in their current positions, refusing to make major steps towards social normalization.
- The Brussels agreement has created some opportunities in political normalization but the tensions associated with the implementation threaten the progress.
- Normalization depends on a small group of people in Kosovo and Serbia. In Kosovo there are around five people who will decide about the course of the process, while in

Serbia there is only one such person. So the process could go either way: advancing normalization or slipping towards a new conflict.

- Kosovo and Serbian societies are not even internally “normal” in many aspects: weak economies, inadequate social welfare, increasing gap between rich and poor, corruption, and organized crime.

6. Status options

- It is becoming increasingly confusing how the final agreement between Kosovo and Serbia will look like. The agreement should be based on EU values and take into account the interest of the populations.
- Partition should be off the table. It will most likely create chaos in Kosovo, destabilizing the country, creating interethnic clashes, and weaken Kosovo’s position on the international scene. Many politicians in Kosovo and Serbia interested in creating chaos aiming to prolong their stay in power, especially that the economic situation is deteriorating.
- The Association/Community of the Serb majority municipalities should be formed in line with Kosovo’s constitution. Almost all the participants were against making constitutional and law changes to offer the Association/Community more powers.
- Serbia’s explicit recognition of Kosovo is the best option.
- Status quo and continuation of the Brussels dialogue is not tenable. However, given the unwillingness of the leaders to reach compromises, status quo in the next decade is a likely option.