

The Future of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue

On July 4, 2019 in Belgrade, Serbia, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened a group of experts and politicians to discuss the current state of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Participants came up with a number of suggestions and conclusions on the dialogue and on what should be done, including short-term confidence building measures, to resume it. The discussion reflected the participants' skepticism about a final settlement. They also said that the normalization process should be more focused on the normalization of societies. In the short term, the international community, the governments and the civil society should focus on measures that build confidence.

The roundtable is part of an initiative on Belgrade-Pristina relations implemented in cooperation with and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Foundation for an Open Society. The following suggestions and conclusions are not necessarily based on consensus at the roundtable.

Reasons for the dialogue deadlock

With the cancellation of the July Paris meeting, the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue is fully immobilized, and its future prospects look bleak. The regular elections in Serbia next year and probably a snap election in Kosovo allow for the "blame game" to continue, with neither side willing to move from their entrenched positions, unless there is some kind of victory to declare. While Belgrade insists that Pristina that remove the 100 percent customs tariff for the dialogue to resume, Pristina seems to demand the visa free regime from the EU as a condition to lift the tariff. Though the tariff might seem as a culprit, the dialogue was suspended long before the tariff was introduced.

The participants offered a number of explanations of why the dialogue did no function well.

- All three sides—the international community, Belgrade, and Pristina—were dishonest in the process, all providing different interpretations of the dialogue's objectives and the agreements' content.
- Several participants emphasized Pristina's responsibility for the 100 percent tariff and blamed "some forces in the West" for encouraging the Kosovo leadership to keep the tariff. They also said that the international community did not do enough to change the situation.
- A number of participants from the opposition and the civil society argued that it would be impossible to reach a solution and pursue normalization with the current elites "who led us into war in the first place." Several participants claimed that the only purpose of the dialogue was for the current elites to preserve their power.
- Many criticized the format of the dialogue, arguing that it was a dialogue between two persons and not between two societies. The dialogue, on the other hand, ensured that there was no conflict, even though there are some tensions and incidents. A participant stressed

that a large-scale conflict is not possible due to the presence of NATO. Others claimed that there are tangible prospects for a conflict.

- Bringing the status issue to the table undermined the normalization process and the implementation of the Brussels agreements. Others, however, said that it is strange that the proposal for delimitation/partition of Kosovo was rejected even before the proposal was presented.
- Participants agreed that the dialogue would remain dormant for now, but also stressed that the status quo is not tenable either.

Interim confidence building measures

Participants suggested a number of confidence building measures to be implemented by Belgrade, Pristina, and the international community during the pause in the dialogue.

- EU should give the visa free regime to Kosovo.
- Pristina should abolish the 100 percent tariff. In return, Belgrade could offer some goodwill measures pertaining to the sources of the trade war.
- Facilitate full freedom of movement of people and goods, including eliminating the barriers left from the Brussels agreements.
- Serbian and Kosovo officials should refrain from hate speech rhetoric and instead act as statesmen driven by public interest rather than emotions. They should explain to their publics that the dialogue is the only way forward.
- Belgrade should encourage the Serb community in Kosovo to use the opportunities provided by the technical dialogue and refrain from criticizing individual for integrating while at the same time supporting the integration of institutions.
- Belgrade should consider a change of approach and not block Pristina's international participation in non-political, less controversial areas, such as sports competitions.
- The meetings of members of parliaments should continue.
- The sides should set up a joint media house that would report about mutual relations in an unbiased manner.
- Benefits of the previous agreements should be emphasized in public.
- Introduction of teaching of Serbian and Albanian languages in Albanian and Serbian schools, respectively. Belgrade and Pristina should encourage establishment of a department for Serbian at the University of Pristina and a department for Albanian at the University in Mitrovica North.
- The sides and the international community should facilitate and foster improved contacts and cooperation of local communities in Kosovo and between Kosovo and Serbia on issues of common interest such as sustainable development and environment.
- The Serb List should start a dialogue with Kosovo's main opposition parties, the Democratic League of Kosovo and the Self-Determination Movement.

Resuming the dialogue

The participants came up with a number of suggestions on how to resume the dialogue.

- Belgrade and Pristina should formulate their visions, i.e. what they would like to achieve in five to ten years and in what kind of region they would like to live in. This could provide a better basis for negotiations.

- The official dialogue will remain in the hands of the EU. The change of the current format is not likely. However, some argued that it would be better if the process is not linked directly to the EU integration: Belgrade and Pristina should understand that the normalization of relations is in their own interest, regardless of EU integration. They should also believe that they are doing it for the sake of their futures, and not as a reaction to pressure from abroad.
- The international community should continue to make pressure on Belgrade and Pristina for normalization with the right “sticks and carrots.” The EU should reconsider how to regain credibility which was lost during the dialogue run by the current High Representative.
- The new High Representative should focus more about the process and not on the end result, since there is a huge chance that this process would not be over during his/her mandate.
- The format of the dialogue should be extended and made wider, to avoid its “privatization” by the ruling elites and to ensure its sustainability.
- All sides should critically evaluate the existing agreements and the level of their implementation. This would bring back the credibility to the process.
- Many suggested that the future dialogue should put the status issue aside, while focusing on normalization and technical issues, to allow normal functioning and communication of people, transport, trade, and education. They claimed that the delimitation/partition or even the recognition of independence of Kosovo by Serbia would open a Pandora’s Box in the Balkans. Others claimed that the delimitation/partition of Kosovo could bring a lasting peace, and insisted that the technical dialogue is possible but it is a question if it would bring opportunities. “Only a final political agreement could allow for full normalization, as there is no normalization if the borders are contested.” Any solution is better than the absence of a solution, as the new generations are coming where the ethnic distance is even wider than ever before, thus the conflict is possible in the future. For the official Belgrade, the issue of status is closely connected to the question of territory and people who live there. Some participants said that Serbia did not enter the process not because of the delimitation/partition but because of normalization and reconciliation. “A land swap is not a good basis for reconciliation,” they insisted. Some said that the existence of the agreement on delimitation/partition is not a guarantee that it would be implemented, as the examples of the previous agreements suggest.
- One of the urgent topics in the future dialogue is a full freedom of movement for people, capital, goods and services between Serbia and Kosovo. This would enable contacts and direct communication and a lowering of tensions.

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