

Cooperation During a Pandemic: Genuine or Pretended

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) gathered a group of experts from Serbia and Kosovo for the second time since the pandemic began via a teleconference to discuss the developments in relations between Belgrade and Pristina during this global crisis. Many speakers were pleased with the cooperation between the ministers of health of Serbia and Kosovo. Kosovo's and Serbia's governments also took a few encouraging and no so popular steps: Pristina allowed doctors and medical workers from Serbia to serve in Kosovo's mostly Serb-majority municipalities; the Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo's north respected Kosovo's measures; Serbia donated 1,000 COVID-19 tests to Kosovo and Pristina accepted them, despite strong criticism by Kosovo's opposition parties; Pristina donated 500,000 euros to Presevo Valley and Belgrade allowed it to go through; and Serbia's and Kosovo's ministers of health and foreign affairs took part in various regional discussions via teleconference. Last but not least, not a single interethnic incident took place since the pandemic began. The international community, primarily some EU countries, supported and in some cases facilitated such cooperation.

The workshop examined this cooperation and offered recommendations on how to build on these positive developments, improve and expand relations between Serbia and Kosovo in other areas during and after the pandemic. Participants also considered possible answers to the questions on countering populist pressures against any cooperation and preserving a constructive tone of communication in the future. They also did some forecasting on the relations between Kosovo and Serbia during what is expected to be "hot" summers in Belgrade and Pristina, and maybe in Brussels and Washington.

The workshop is part of a larger CIG initiative on the Kosovo-Serbia relations supported by and implemented in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The COVID-19 virus has shown that when facing a common threat, there is a common interest to cooperate. Belgrade's donation of 1,000 tests and Pristina's acceptance show that there is a will for cooperation on both sides, even when such steps are unpopular and sometimes politically harmful. Allowing Serbian medical workers to work in Kosovo, and the fact that the north accepted and respected the measures prescribed by Pristina during the pandemic show that both sides can see the necessity of cooperation and worthlessness of insisting on old principles in moments when the situation gets out of control.

Despite the positive results of cooperation in the fight against COVID-19, the real effects were sometimes lacking. In Serbia, the information was largely ignored by most national media outlets, probably due to the upcoming parliamentary elections. In Kosovo, this cooperation received little support. Instead many criticized it and said it was counterproductive, saying the donation as a kind of "Trojan Horse" for Kosovo or "humiliation." Some even said that the tests originated from Russia or China, thus being unreliable. "There is a war of narratives, and everything is related to this moment," said one

of the analysts. Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti is being criticized for agreeing to cooperate with Serbia, and he was the one who opposed any kind of cooperation in the past. “Kurti’s opponents are using Kurti’s own old narratives to fight him now.” Others said that the opposition was worried that the donation could have an effect on the session of the UN Security Council. “Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic misused the donation at the Security Council session, and humiliated Kosovo.”

An analyst from Serbia pointed out that this is an example of good cooperation, but that we got a political counter-effect. He pointed out that the conversation between the two ministers of health at the meeting organized with the Italian mediation was more than productive and full of mutual respect. The ministers also discussed the growth of cooperation in the future. “However, then the foreign ministers intervened and the whole story slipped in the direction of daily politics.” A speaker said that this showed that professionals—the health ministers—cooperate better than politicians—the foreign ministers.

Many valued cooperation no matter how small it was, and no matter how much the public opposes it. An analyst from Kosovo emphasized that this cooperation represents “a new quality for both sides” and that in the future it could mean the establishment of a new mechanism for crisis management. The analyst said that Kosovo made more concessions in this cooperation, arguing that accepting the tests was very sensitive. “It was a small step for Belgrade, but a big step for Pristina.” However, Pristina gained a lot from this cooperation as the north, encouraged by Belgrade, followed Kosovo government measures. Serbia took no steps to undermine Kosovo’s authority in the north during the pandemic. The most significant result is the establishment of accurate database of the infected and deceased in the north, as before the agreement there was no such control mechanism.

Many speakers suggested using the existing interim period and initiate cooperation between experts. It is important that cooperation is supported in public, but the problem is that with the current state of the media in both Serbia and Kosovo, it may not be possible.

In Pristina the situation is deeply polarized, several analysts argued. Each side tends to capitalize on the other's mistakes, hence preventing a constructive approach to the dialogue. While some claimed that Albin Kurti showed that he was interested in preserving power and wanted to instrumentalize the situation around the dialogue and become “the new Thaci instead of [Kosovo President Hashim] Thaci,” others stated that Kurti showed that a different policy and approach are still possible. Some pointed out that the main unknown of the political scene in Kosovo is the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), and that from 2007 until today they were the ones who enabled the ‘war elite’ to be in power and capture the state. They pointed out that if a new government is formed, LDK and their coalition partners would agree to any final agreements between Kosovo and Serbia that is put on the table by the White House.

Some stated that Kurti did well on issues related to cooperation with Serbia and did not succumb to a nationalist discourse. Another good thing is the fact that young voters, who support the Self-Determination Movement, are now largely following Kurti because of the change he promises, not because of his once nationalist positions. Others were not convinced, pointing out that Kurti missed the political moment and did not recognize the influence and strength of external factors, especially of the United States. An analyst from Kosovo compared him to former Greek Finance Minister Janis Varoufakis, who openly clashed with Germany and lost his political influence.

Conclusions

A number of notable conclusions can be digested from the discussion;

- Regardless of the problematic situation and tensions in communication between Belgrade and Pristina, cooperation on the pandemic-related issues goes on. The crisis and the ensuing cooperation demonstrated that the liaison officers have not proved to be up to the challenge and alternative mechanisms need to be considered in the future.
- On issues of general interest, and where cooperation is necessary, sovereignty issues should be less important and the focus should be on how to provide all citizens with security and an effective health care.
- The relations between Serbia and Kosovo is so bad at the moment, that there are many opportunities for cooperation between individuals and smaller groups, and perhaps now is the time to strengthen cooperation between the civil societies.
- Cooperation initiatives, which can build on cooperation during a pandemic, depend on the influence of politicians both from the government and the opposition. Cooperation should be established at several levels and foreign partners who support cooperation should be also involved.
- The public should put pressure on politicians to establish cooperation on vital issues (previously identified within the CIG-facilitated expert exchange), both for Serbia and Kosovo. Such a list should be incorporated into a future agreement. If cooperation on the fight against COVID-19 is possible, why it is not cooperate on the issues of the environmental protection, energy, etc.? EU should help such an initiative, as it will create a new reality on the ground and in the relations between Serbia and Kosovo.
- There will be no progress in the dialogue until the autumn, primarily due to the elections in Serbia and the political situation in Kosovo. Any cooperation initiative should focus on that period, while strengthening the capacity to support EU in its efforts.

Participants

Gordana Comic

Shpetim Gashi

Ismet Hajdari

Una Hajdari

Vincent Hug

Sonja Licht

Agon Maliqi

Milivoje Mihajlovic

Branislav Nesovic

Igor Novakovic

Zoran Ostojic

Lulzim Peci

Natasa Petrovic

Jovana Radosavljevic

Alex Roinishvili Grigorev

Nexhmedin Spahiu

Stefan Surlic