

Kosovo's Election and Prospects for Dialogue

On February 18, 2021, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized a discussion for a group of analysts from Serbia and Kosovo. The meeting served as an opportunity for addressing the prospects for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. The debate also focused on the possibilities for more collaboration between the US and the EU and how Serbia and Kosovo will react to it.

The following are a number of conclusions and recommendations that came out of the discussion, which are based either on consensus or on broad agreement or on individual opinions. They do not necessarily represent the views of CIG or the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), which is supporting CIG's larger project on normalization between Kosovo and Serbia. The discussions reported here are a part of that project. The discussion was held under the the Chatham House Rule.

Conclusions and recommendations

The dialogue is in a stalemate. Some think the 2018 offered the best window of opportunity to resolve the dispute. With that opportunity missed, the problem could drag for longer than a decade now. But this does not mean there are no avenues forward and that the dialogue is unsalvageable.

- For the first time in many years, Kosovo is moving to be an equal participant in the dialogue, as now its incoming leadership has strong domestic support, similar to the one Vucic has in Serbia. However, the domestic support also means that there is strong opposition, as that keeps the government accountable. There is always a need for strong opposition.
- For the majority of the Kosovo population, the dialogue with Serbia is not a priority, preferring the new government addresses unemployment and rule of law. There are indications that Kurti, unlike his predecessors, does not want to be remembered as 'the dialogue guy,' even though the dialogue was a key issue he dealt with when in opposition. He will be careful about the dialogue and will accept only results that are favourable to Kosovo. However, Kurti cannot ignore the legacy of past negotiations – above all, the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities (ASM) and the Washington Agreement.
- Regarding Kosovo's domestic position towards the dialogue, one of the essential aspects is who will be the new minister of foreign affairs. The personality of the new minister will shape Kosovo's approach to the dialogue. Despite some calls for a national unity team in Kosovo for the dialogue with Serbia, it is not needed. Finally, regarding the expected 'toughness' of Kurti in the future dialogue, some said that there was a similar opinion about Vucic ten years ago. In fact, the tougher position of Kurti offers more opportunities for an honest dialogue.

- Kurti should start the process of an internal dialogue in Kosovo to answer the question of what it means to be a citizen of Kosovo. In many aspects, Kosovo failed to implement the Ahtisaari Plan's provisions, thus creating a great level of distrust among the Serb community and an unwillingness to trust Pristina regarding the integration.
- There is currently no momentum in Serbia either. Because of the announced elections at all levels, Vucic will definitely not compromise his position with a breakthrough on the dialogue. He and his ruling elite are already facing challenges in the announced dialogue with the opposition regarding the electoral terms that should start in March and the increased concern of some institutions in the EU (especially the European Parliament) regarding democracy in Serbia.
- The situation in Serbia becomes increasingly unfavorable for a deal. New generations with no immediate memories of war and crisis grew up in an atmosphere based on defiance and internal complexes. They do not see the Kosovo issue as something that should be resolved in order to move forward, but as an issue where Serbia should remain stiff and determined to its position that Kosovo should remain a part of Serbia. The mythical 'Kosovo pledge' remains as relevant as before and represents a severe obstacle for the future of the dialogue and an eventual compromise.
- The ball is more on the transatlantic side. The West should come out with a new vision for the region. The EU's legitimacy in the region is shaken. Even if an agreement comes soon, nobody can say it would unlock the European perspective for Kosovo and Serbia. EU struggles with the accession process: Montenegro closed only three chapters out of 35, and North Macedonia and Albania are yet to open the negotiations. There is an apparent lack of political appetite for the enlargement. There is an obvious need for some new thinking and initiative. There are not too many new elements for technical negotiations. Thus, it is evident that the dialogue should be focused on political issues. That complicates the process, suggesting that the sides in the dialogue should be creative, frame it differently, and find avenues that would first aim to improve mutual relations and economic cooperation. Some of the avenues could also focus on achieving implicit recognition and unlocking Kosovo's international perspectives.
- The term 'dialogue' should be replaced with 'conflict resolution.' Prime ministers do not need to go to Brussels to discuss technical issues – the professionals could do this. 2021 should be the year of the change of the narrative about each other and the civil society could act as its principal vehicle.
- The results of the previous dialogue should be "rehabilitated." ASM is a subject of populist rhetoric. The EU and the US should help to establish ASM. Some say the ASM is in conflict with the Ahtisaari provisions, which call for integration, while the ASM, according to some speakers, leads to the Serb community's segregation. Others say ASM would only help its the Serb integration. ASM is often compared to Republika Srpska, but it is fundamentally different. ASM cannot challenge the functioning of the central authorities. In Bosnia, the challenge is with the power-sharing at the central level, and that would not be the case with ASM.

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