

A New Beginning for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue

On July 1, 2021, CIG organized in Belgrade an informal discussion for several Serbian analysts, experts, and politicians from the ruling coalition to discuss the prospects of the renewed Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. The roundtable focused on the current situation and the possible dialogue topics in the coming period. The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule. This report, prepared by CIG, does not necessarily represent the views of individual participants or of CIG but rather reflects the discussion as a whole.

Participants in the Belgrade meeting reached several conclusions and recommendations, which are based either on consensus or individual opinions.

- The first meeting between Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic was more about introduction between the two leaders. At this point, it was important enough just to have the meeting than to aim for any substantial engagement. In the short term, due to the approaching summer break and upcoming elections both in Kosovo and in Serbia, it is not likely that the dialogue address major issues. But some breakthroughs on technical issues are possible after the middle of next year. Some said that the EU has to develop a new framework for the negotiations and guarantee the implementation of the agreed.
- The new Kosovo government is in the process of figuring out a strategy to address the dialogue. Though Kurti acts as if the past dialogue and its results did not happen, he will soon realize that he cannot change much and has to himself engage in the process. Some said Kurti would try to postpone the process as long as he can. A speaker worried that the progress of the past dialogue could be at risk if dialogue and cooperation is neglected.
- The 'territory solution' will remain a realistic option for Belgrade, especially if Pristina does not establish the Association of the Serb-Majority Municipalities.
- The principle "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" could solidify the *status quo*. Many speakers said that Kosovo should be open to negotiating about all modalities of a solution, and not only those that include recognition. Instead of pushing the discourse that the Ahtisaari package is the only possible solution, Pristina should recognize that it was not sufficient to reach a compromise in the first place and should include new topics.
- Some participants opined that the process is just as important as the results. In other words, it is critical that the populations support the dialogue, passions are calmed, and stability is maintained. All that would create options for a solution.
- The current negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia are essentially negotiations of Kosovo against Serbia and Serbia against Kosovo. This paradigm has to change and

both sides should find their vital interest. There will be no success in the process if there is no de-escalation of rhetoric, decentralization, and democratization.

- The dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina cannot be separated from the EU itself. The dialogue at this moment is not very high on the EU agenda. The same is true for the enlargement, an essential process for the dialogue's success. At this moment, France is opposed until the EU's internal issues are resolved. Some opportunities lie in the regional integration, by "turning to ourselves through the Berlin Process and complementary/connected initiatives such as the Common Regional Market and Mini-Schengen."
- Kurti's stable majority in Kosovo is desirable even for Serbia, because it is easier for stable governments to reach agreements. It is also necessary to have the US at the table and actively involved, as it would lead to an agreement and serve as a guarantee for implementation. One of the possible solutions is achieving Kosovo's membership in the international organizations, but without recognition, which implies that the solution could be modeled on the two Germanys. But what does it mean for Kosovo to sign an agreement where Serbia and five EU non-recognizers continue to not recognize it? Pristina will not sign any agreement without a clause that guarantees the five EU members' recognition after certain conditions are met. That scenario also demands a clause that the agreement would be valid for Serbia when it becomes a member of the EU. Both Serbia and Kosovo need from the EU firm guarantees to become members and not just talk about an EU perspective.
- The opinion polls in both Serbia and Kosovo show that their youth are among the most conservative and most belligerent sections of the population, which is, among other things, a consequence of the lengthy dialogue process. Thus, options for a compromise will reduce over time.
- The regional integration could also be beneficial for Serbia and Kosovo, as they would solve some of the bilateral issues. It will also include the countries of the region in the process, giving them a chance to say what options and solutions they would support and help with, and not just outline what they are against. Kosovo is surprised when they see the effects of an improved regional cooperation such between Belgrade and Tirana. They realize now that they are essentially left behind.
- The status issue is not connected to solving everyday problems in Kosovo. Nothing prevents Pristina from working on the integration of the Serbs. Some suggested that only Kosovo's membership in international organizations, such as the Council of Europe, could improve the current situation and secure the rule of law.

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