

Serbia and Kosovo Can Be Partners

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized a roundtable on July 3-4, 2021, in Istanbul, Turkey, for a number of senior political party officials from Kosovo and Serbia. The participants discussed ways of widening the cooperation between Belgrade and Pristina and making it more sustainable. The roundtable is part of a larger project on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia funded by and implemented in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). The report does not necessarily represent the views of individual participants, CIG, or FDFA but rather reflects the discussion as a whole. CIG prepared the report and assumes responsibility for its content.

Recommendations

Kosovo and Serbia seek a win-win solution. But they have different understandings of what a ‘win-win’ option should look like. Pristina believes Serbia’s unconditional recognition benefits both sides. But Belgrade argues that a ‘win-win’ means both sides are equally happy, demanding that Pristina also offers concessions. The negotiation process will likely be long and bumpy. A good start is to recognize Serbia’s and Kosovo’s individual interests and then define the mutual interests. Kosovo’s recognition is not in “Serbia’s interest” but stability is a “mutual interest.” Pristina does not have “to agree with Serbia’s position,” but it is helpful “to recognize Serbia’s reasons for that position.” Furthermore, if Kosovo needs Serbia’s recognition, then it also needs “Serbia’s cooperation.” Serbia also needs Kosovo’s cooperation to “resolve its ‘Kosovo issue’ and open the way for EU membership.” There is a consensus that the resolution of the dispute is a “mutual interest,” but the parties are struggling to reach a solution that does not hurt their “other national interests.”

1. Pristina and Belgrade should define their visions about the future of their relations. They could begin by defining the objectives and agendas of the ongoing formal dialogue. Neither side seems to have a clear plan for what they want to achieve from the dialogue. A good starting point is to recognize that a solution is a “mutual interest, urgent,” and that a “win-win solution” is possible if both sides show enough political will. The participants defined a “mutual interest” as “peaceful co-existence between future generations.” They agreed that this generation should assume the responsibility to reach a “historic deal,” and thus free future generations from this “historic burden.”
2. Belgrade and Pristina need to transform their existing narratives from the ones that support the status quo into ones that highlight the need for a breakthrough. Though the leaders say that an agreement is needed, they fall short of efforts to reach one. They need to build a more supportive narrative about the dialogue, openly saying that they are engaged in a discussion to find a solution and not because the international community is asking them to do so. The

leaders should also publicly address the consequences of no agreement, not only talk about the costs of compromises.

3. Officials in Kosovo and Serbia should spend more time and effort in trying to understand each other's positions and the difficulties each side faces at home in "selling an eventual deal." They should also refrain from blaming each other when dealing with their domestic challenges.
4. Belgrade and Pristina officials urgently need to change their rhetoric, refraining from collective blame and better counter fake news. Both sides need to strictly and swiftly denounce ethnically motivated smearing campaigns and actions when they occur.
5. Kosovo and Serbian leaders should commit that dialogue is the only way to a solution and convince their constituencies that violence will not be used to achieve political goals. Various polls show that people in Serbia and Kosovo fear violence could return if efforts to find a solution through dialogue fail. Politicians should address these fears.
6. Pristina and Belgrade should prioritize practical needs and problems while they negotiate a broader solution. The list could include freedom of movement, documents, missing persons, and diplomas. And both sides should recognize and promote positive results when they occur.
7. Pristina and Belgrade should work on fulfilling preconditions for a win-win solution: a) beginning to believe in the EU, b) supporting a more conciliatory narrative, c) convincing the public that leaders are engaged in dialogue to find a solution and not to advance their own personal political objectives, and d) publicly articulate "the costs of failure to reach an agreement." Some speakers said that Pristina and Belgrade are losing the "public battle," with polls showing the youth is becoming increasingly nationalistic.
8. The EU should find ways to reinvigorate the dialogue and the EU enlargement process, deliver on its own promises, and develop a vibrant menu of incentives for the parties. The prospects for the agreement have deteriorated drastically when it became clear that the EU is failing to deliver on its own promises, such as the date to start the negotiations with North Macedonia or to grant visa free travel to citizens of Kosovo.
9. The Association/Community of the Serb-Majority Municipalities should be formed. EU's and US's support is necessary to "build a domestic political will" needed for the implementation.

Other discussions points

Though dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia seems inevitable, a solution remains elusive. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic says dialogue is painful but he will remain engaged. Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti says the dialogue is not his priority but he will take part in it. Both leaders suggest that the dialogue is less about their willingness to resolve the dispute and more about responding to international pressure to engage in it. Though the EU and the US seek an agreement between the sides, they say their role is only to facilitate. Pristina and Belgrade seem to agree that the dialogue has no alternative, but they at the same time suggest that an agreement has an alternative, the status quo.

1. Serbia cannot be "humiliated in the process again." It will not recognize Kosovo unless the agreement is "win-win." Serbia cannot be blamed for Kosovo's 'non-recognitions' or for the

inability to join the UN. Serbia is interested for a sustainable solution and peace for the generations to come, but not at all costs.

2. Leaders remain vulnerable to a compromise. Serbia's recognition of Kosovo is politically too risky for Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic. A strong Association/Community in Kosovo is also politically too risky for Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti. Therefore, it is expected that both leaders will make very slow and carefully calculated moves. Political leaders are concerned that 'bold compromises' might trigger domestic instability and affect their popularity among the voters.
3. There are a number of dialogue drivers. Serbia's are a) to have a more predictable future, b) resolve the existing problems, c) improve the political and security environment and by extension the economic development, d) and improve regional security. Kosovo's are a) integration of the Serb community, b) resolution of many political and economic barriers with Serbia, c) potential recognition by five EU non-recognizers, and d) more support from the international community for its "international integration."
4. Kosovo says the agreement should be "just," while Serbia says the agreement should be "fair." Measuring what is 'just' and what is 'fair' and how to distribute costs and benefits of eventual compromises will be a major challenge in the dialogue.
5. Pristina and Belgrade do not have a tradition in "articulating and selling a deal." In the Rambouillet and Vienna talks, the international community did it all.
6. There is little public support for the dialogue. Each side believes they have been cheated in the past processes and politicians on both sides continue to criticize the dialogue and previous agreements. There is little talk about the consequences of 'no agreement' and the social and economic cost of the ongoing dispute. Pristina and Belgrade leaders should say "we need to close this chapter in our relations and we will close it."
7. The mutual recognition narrative has been built for years in Kosovo, so that it is not likely to change. It is going to be difficult for Kosovo leaders now to accept an agreement that does not offer recognition.
8. About 2/3 of the people in Serbia say "we will never get Kosovo back," but at the same time the same people say "we should not recognize Kosovo." It was not popular in Serbia and not easy for the Serbian government to agree to integrate the Serb community in Kosovo into Kosovo's institutions, but Belgrade did it because it thought the Serbs in Kosovo will get the Association/Community in return for integration. Now Belgrade feels it has been "betrayed." Pristina also feels cheated because "Serbia did not recognize it." But Belgrade did not "promise to recognize Kosovo" at the end of the process. Kosovo, on the other hand, agreed to form the Association/Community, ratifying the agreement in its parliament.
9. Serbia was ready for a "grand land bargain," and short of it, Belgrade does not know on what a compromise could be based.
10. Political leaders are not alone in obstructing a breakthrough. Their hands are also tied by the rather conservative beliefs of their voters, party supporters, and other actors, such as controversial businesses and monopolies, who may have an interest in prolonging the dispute.
11. There are two parallel 'peace processes' going on: the negotiations between the formal authorities on one hand and the public or social level deliberations on the other. The 'public peace process' could help shape the relationship with the other side but also re-examine the relationship between the publics and political leaderships. The Kosovo-Serbia dispute should not be treated as a bargaining process just between the two governments. It should be

converted from transactional into transformative. More efforts should be put in promoting public deliberations and incorporating them in the official process.

Group work

The participants were divided into two groups to articulate a number of common interests and common challenges. Below is a list of suggestions from both groups.

Common interests

1. Sustainable peace and stability.
2. Improving standard of living.
3. Rule of law.
4. Free movement of people.
5. People to people contacts.
6. Cooperation on social and economic issues, such as removing non-tariff barriers.
7. Cooperation on environment with a focus on pollution.
8. Connectivity agenda.
9. EU membership.
10. Improving minority rights.

Common challenges

1. Improving the ways we treat each other.
2. Implementing existing agreements.
3. Agreeing to a common market.
4. Membership into the EU, especially now that the EU does not seem excited about bringing in new members.
5. Free future generations from the Kosovo-Serbia dispute.
6. Domestic economic and political reforms.
7. Minority rights.
8. Influence of external actors.
9. Social cohesion.
10. Conflicting narratives about the past and unresolved issues from the past, such as the missing persons.
11. Low level of socio-economic development.

In conclusion, each participant was asked to formulate one-sentence statements to address their own and the other side's publics to promote the dialogue and the normalization of relations. They came up with the following statements: An agreement for peace and development; Lasting peace and Europeanization; Stability in Europe; No agreement, no better future, no EU path, and isolation; We have been handed the responsibility to conclude this dispute and we need to do it now, and not pass it to the next generation; An agreement based on a compromise that sacrifices some interests but preserves both sides' dignity; Mutual benefit should be the foundation of an agreement; An agreement can be achieved with mutual honesty, reciprocal concession steps, and a clear vision; We have an opportunity to write a better history page together and we should do it; An agreement based on mutual respect and dignity; We should not be a threat to each other, we should be partners for peace; Kosovo and Serbia can be partners.

Participants

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