

Parliamentarians Support Normalization

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on December 3 2021, in Brezovica, Kosovo, another roundtable in its series for current and former members of parliaments of Serbia and Kosovo. The participants discussed how the parliamentarians could support the dialogue and prevent incidents. 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 reflects the discussion as a whole.

Recommendations and Conclusions

- **Political leaders should see a ‘peace agreement’ as part of their legacy.** A good legacy currently does not seem to be important to political leaders. They tend to focus largely on winning elections. However, they should consider legacy when they negotiate. To reach an agreement, they should begin with softening the established narrative first. A new narrative should point out that Serbs and Albanians could be a useful resource to each other, not a threat. Serbia and Kosovo could begin to see each other as potential partners, not permanent enemies. The discourse should focus more on economic and social cooperation, and less on ethnic and territory issues. Many speakers were optimistic about a normalization agreement.
- **Kosovo and Serbia should see the Brussels dialogue as an opportunity, not as a burden.** Both sides see the dialogue process as having more risks than opportunities. They need to change this thinking, and see dialogue as an opportunity. And this is the politicians’ responsibility. The leaders should not use their “citizens’ opposition to dialogue” as an excuse not to take bolder steps. The focus of the dialogue should also be less focused on “improving the past and more on improving the future.” Serbia and Kosovo need “an agreement for the future, not about the past.” The parties need to first agree about their future relations, which is a precondition for addressing the past in a more rational way. Belgrade and Pristina have different perspectives on the dialogue: while Belgrade sees it as continuation of the old dialogue, Pristina sees it as something only about recognition. The parties should try to see the process with the eyes of the other sometimes. While it is fine that both sides strive for their maximum, they should also explore why the other side wants what it wants.
- **Parties should work on instilling a ‘win-win logic’ in the dialogue.** A peace process can succeed only if it has a win-win logic. The parties need to explore how to build a process based on such a logic, what are the necessary compromises, and what are the likely win-win outcomes. Serbs and Albanians have to work on understanding the dialogue in the same way. A speaker said that they can’t predict the elements of the agreement, but can work on it. The narrative about the dialogue needs some modification too: the parties need to agree on the

narrative, then coordinate and synchronize it. The message should be that that dialogue is not pushed on the parties but they are interested in this mechanism to resolve their disputes. They need to understand each other's perspective: Belgrade needs to see why Kosovo needs recognition while Kosovo needs to see why it is difficult for Serbia to recognize it and why Kosovo Serbs need their rights. A speaker said that the agreement should be between two independent states and leave no open issues. Even if the agreement does not include the *de jure* recognition, it would require changing of the Serbian constitution. But first, the parties need to agree about the aim of the dialogue and then about a path of how to get there. The goal of the process should be formulated as to agree on a functional modality of existence of two independent entities, suggested one participant. Another speaker said that the parties could work on many non-sensitive areas until the recognition is possible. "Smaller agreements don't have to be hostage to the big agreement."

- **Regional cooperation could help resolve bilateral disputes.** A positive side effect of the Open Balkans economic initiative could be the resolution of a number of bilateral disputes between Kosovo and Serbia, such as free movement of people and goods, trade, and diplomas, among others. The initiative could also serve as a tool for creating better prospects for entrepreneurs and producers by enlarging the markets and opportunities. A speaker said the Washington Agreement should also be honored by governments and implemented, as it would improve economic relations.
- **Dialogue and agreements should be based on equality and reciprocity.** A Kosovo speaker said that the agreements in Brussels should be based on equality. "Kosovo should no longer be footnoted." Many speakers said that the parties are equal in the dialogue, but Kosovo has 'an unequal status' in other forums, but that this is not Serbia's fault. "You can't blame Serbia why Kosovo is not in the UN." Another speaker said that there is a need to articulate the fact that an eventual agreement would benefit each side.
- **Risk of escalation will be present as long as the dispute remains unresolved.** Serbs and Albanians should do more "peace promotion and less patriotism promotion." The situation could always escalate because the disputes are framed in ethnic terms. A speaker said that the parties should address problems before they turn into crises, like the car plates issue, and also implement what they have agreed on. Non-implementation feeds mistrust and sends the message that that future agreements might not be implemented even when signed and ratified.
- **Distrust is not an obstacle, conflicting interests are.** Distrust is not so much a problem for dialogue, but different and often contradicting interests and goals are. Kosovo's position is that "it needs to go to the table, defend its position, and try its best to reach its goals." But Serbia has different goals. A speaker said that while Kosovo expects an agreement centered on mutual recognition, Serbia expects one without recognition. Reconciling these positions is "almost impossible." Another speaker said that a comprehensive agreement could come in phases, including recognition by Serbia in the final phase, recognition by the EU non-recognizers, and finding a modality for the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities.
- **Compromises needed in every step.** What is a compromise? Taking the discourse at the roundtable as an example, the speaker said a compromise would be for the Serb participants

“not to use Kosovo and Metohija, but only Kosovo, and for Albanian participants not to use Republic of Kosovo, but Kosovo.” He added that “Kosovo is not a part of Serbia, but a country that Serbia doesn’t recognize.” Compromise is giving up some maximalist positions and coming up with solutions that are good for all citizens. An agreement without recognition could bridge the gap between the two positions. It would be a sort of both win-win and lose-lose story: Kosovo would not get recognition but would unlock its future integration into the international community, while Serbia would have to remove Kosovo from its constitution but it would not have to grant a diplomatic recognition. The win-win part is that both Kosovo and Serbia would move faster towards the EU. However, the biggest question is whether the parties want an agreement! If they do, they will be flexible with their maximalist positions. If not, they will keep their maximalist positions and will continue blocking the negotiations. Practical benefits for Serbia would be accelerating its EU integration, increasing trade with Kosovo, and getting Kosovo into the Open Balkans. Practical benefits for Kosovo would be visa liberalization, new recognitions, and recognitions by the four NATO members that currently do not recognize Kosovo. However, it looks like “the frozen conflict is just fine for Serbia’s and Kosovo’s leaders.”

- **Resolve problems before they escalate.** There was substantial progress in dialogue at the beginning, the parties reached a number of agreements, and there were expectations that there will be a final agreement. There was less hesitation from the parties than now. Pristina did not have to send the police to the north for car plates. Did it do that just for the election campaign? If it did, then it backfired, a speaker said. The parties need to talk, even without an agenda, just to relax their relations. Friendlier relations produce new opportunities, making it easier to resolve disputes. The parties need better communication, perhaps establish a ‘hotline’ between the two governments. A speaker said that the Serb List could serve as a bridge between Belgrade and Pristina. The problems should be resolved “at the table, not in the street.” The speaker also suggested more bilateral official visits between Kosovo and Serbia officials.

Many speakers said that the societies want stability and therefore would support an agreement. When politicians say the societies are against an agreement, it is just their excuse “to do nothing.” The speaker said that immediate goal of the dialogue should be to “relax the relations between the two entities.” They recognized that a lot has been achieved in recent years, even though it may not be satisfactory. Many suggested the Pristina and Belgrade should address their disputes more on “democratic terms” rather than on “ethnic terms.”

Participants

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