

The Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue in the New Geopolitical Context

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has drastically changed the geopolitical situation in Europe and in the world, opening many questions about the dynamic of persisting conflicts in different regions, including the Western Balkans. The West has reacted swiftly in support of Ukraine, introducing several sanctions packages against Moscow, supplying Ukraine with arms and funds, and adapting its foreign and security policy to the new developments. However, the EU and the US have so far not formulated a new approach toward the Western Balkans, continuing to prioritize fragile stability over permanent solutions. Serbia is in a challenging position: it first held a parliamentary election campaign and now has to form a new government, which could be delayed until the fall. The good news is that the opposition has returned to the parliament after the boycott of previous elections, thus opening the space for a more inclusive debate on the most challenging issues, including Serbia's position vis-à-vis the Ukraine war, the European integration, and the dialogue with Kosovo.

Aiming to explore the perceptions about these issues in Serbia, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG), in cooperation with and support from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), organized on May 9, 2022, in Belgrade a discussion for a group of current and new members of parliament and political representatives and analysts. This report is based on the discussions held under the Chatham House Rule. The participants took part in the meeting in their personal capacities. CIG has tried to be accurate and balanced in summarizing the discussions and asks for participants' understanding whose remarks may not have been fully captured in this brief report. The report does not necessarily reflect the views of CIG and FDFA.

How does the Russian invasion of Ukraine affect the Western Balkans?

The war in Ukraine has changed the discourse about the Serbia-Kosovo issue. There is an increasing talk about new solutions, but the goal is more to leave an impression that something is in motion. The focus of the West is on stability in the Western Balkans. Bosnia is a thorn with tensions expected during the upcoming elections in October, with every three sides pushing their own nationalist agendas. There is a new minority government in Montenegro, but the question is how stable and effective it will be, having in mind its ambitious agenda related to the fight against organized crime. North Macedonia still has problems with the Bulgarian veto regarding the opening of negotiations with the EU, thus holding down Albania too. In Serbia, the biggest question is if and when it will align itself with the EU sanctions on Russia. All these issues suggest that the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue is a minor issue for the moment and that the Ukraine war could drag the negotiations indefinitely.

Many participants saw the war in Ukraine as an obstacle. However, some of them stressed that the region's own experience with wars could positively influence the prevention of new conflicts often mentioned in the national discourses. "The new geopolitical reality is an obstacle, not an opportunity, and the time is for a dialogue that leads towards an approximation of attitudes and normalization on the ground," a participant said.

One of the MPs of the ruling majority stressed that the war in Ukraine has a potential for Serbia and that Serbia now has a hand to play and take certain positions. "I do not see any other grouping of states where Serbia belongs apart from the EU. The so-called Eurasian integration is an illusion." The EU should act geopolitically, and it should accept Serbia and the Western Balkans into the union and then solve the remaining issues, just as it did with Romania and Bulgaria. The purpose should be the same, suppression of Russian influence. "If Europe wants to see this part of the world in peace and stable, it must act geopolitically, focusing on security."

One of the most significant issues is Serbia's non-alignment with the EU sanctions on Russia. EU and US representatives frequently stress the importance of this move, but the Serbian position, even after the elections, remains unchanged. Serbia supported the vote against the Russian aggression in the UN General Assembly, the Council of Europe, and some other bodies, and aligned itself with the sanctions against the former Ukrainian President Yanukovich. However, it did not touch the bulk of restrictive measures introduced after February 24, 2022. Serbian President Vucic often stresses that Serbia does not believe in sanctions because of its own historical experience and finds them ineffective measures. Also, his statements focus on comparing Serbia with Ukraine by stressing the importance of respect for international law.

Most of the participants believed that Serbia would introduce sanctions on Russia, but the question is when and to what extent. "Sanctions on Russia are a sensitive topic for Serbia. First, Serbia is completely dependent on the Russian gas and is about to renegotiate a long-term natural gas supply deal by the beginning of June. Second, there are misperceptions about the importance of Russia for Serbia, but this misperception in public creates problems for the president," said a representative of the ruling majority. "In politics, all states focus on interests first, only after that come friendships." One of the opposition representatives said that the issue of sanctions should be a subject of a broader debate. "Like after World War II, the official discourse has been focused on nurturing of love towards Russia. And then all were in shock after the 1948 split of Yugoslavia with the USSR. Now we can see that the discourse is slowly changing." The decision of Serbia will be one of a major significance, as it will decide the country's trajectory for the next several decades.

A zero-sum game approach must end. The ball is in the EU court.

Most of the participants said that the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo should be a part of the broader package for approximation of the region with the EU. War in Ukraine represents thus an opportunity to use the broader picture of the EU integration process as a cohesive factor. The most important is to avoid parallels between Ukraine and former Yugoslavia, as it would contribute to freezing the process between Belgrade and Pristina.

The ball is in the court of Brussels. If the EU wants stability, it needs to make bold moves related to the Western Balkans and Ukraine. Until this moment, Brussels acted irresponsibly, especially delaying the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. Thus, the EU should be responsible for providing a new context above mere stability for the region. At the same time, Belgrade and Pristina should recognize that the region is in peril and commit to act responsibly.

A number of participants, both from the opposition and governing parties, insisted on implementing what had been already agreed upon in Brussels as a precondition for moving forward. “This could be a powerful sign of goodwill.” If the agreements, such as the 2013 Brussels Agreement and the so-called 2020 Washington commitments, do not apply, it should be said so. The critical issue is for some of the key Western states to have goodwill to find an alternative approach to this issue.

Another opposition MP stressed that Kosovo wants recognition of independence, while Belgrade in some way still promotes the formula “more than autonomy, less than independence.” Currently, the whole process is based on a zero-sum game.” Others stressed that if Kosovo applied for membership in the Council of Europe, then Belgrade would react with new derecognitions, which would open a negative spiral, and there would be no advance in the process.

Another participant asked if there could be a solution for Kosovo to become a member of the Council of Europe, but without stressing its independence. Kosovo’s membership would allow access for Serbs from Kosovo to the European Court of Human Rights, which is undoubtedly beneficial. “We should be able to discuss this without immediately “pulling out knives at each other.”

“The West is increasingly pressuring Serbia to reach a comprehensive agreement with Kosovo, intending to remove arguments from Putin’s hand for recognition of the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk,” said an MP from the ruling majority. However, the dialogue is on a dead-end street, as Pristina does not want to implement the previous agreements. Most of the participants agreed that Kosovo Prime Minister Kurti’s actions were not contributing to the dialogue. “The fight against organized crime and corruption is desirable, but the problem is when the guilty ones come only from one ethnic community.”

Some participants recognized that the biggest issue is not the implementation of reached agreements but the poisonous rhetoric from both sides. “There is no constructive dialogue without softening of rhetoric about the other side in the tabloids and some TV stations with the national frequency,” said one opposition politician. Without this change, there would be no change in public opinion, without stopping making sensationalist titles and using bad words about Albanians.

This is also valid for the discourse in Kosovo. The decision not to allow the vote on the referendum and the parliamentary elections contributed to even less trust between the sides. Another participant stressed that the major problem is the “ideological wanderings” of the ruling elite in Kosovo. A discourse that Serbia has committed genocide on Kosovo and that Kosovo and Albania should unite is not helping the dialogue and normalization with Serbia either. There will be no

stepping forward with Kosovo constantly accusing Serbia of being Russia's ally, who is prepared to "invade Kosovo."

Participants stressed that the dialogue should not stop. A number of participants said that there are signs that some change is possible. "Last year, I passed with Serbian car plates from the north of Kosovo to Decani Monastery, and there were no problems. This signifies that there is some degree of goodwill."

Several MPs stressed the importance for the parliaments to be included in negotiations in some form. Not maybe in the dialogue at the highest level, but to participate in exchanges and arrangements. "If there is a desire to have a real normalization, parliaments must be included." Some participants even suggested a more transparent than the ones currently organized by CIG dialogue between the MPs on both sides. "We should initiate a Kosovo-Serbia MPs meeting with cameras present, even with journalists and even tabloid editors. If there is a serious desire to lower tensions, this should be possible, to show to the populations that we can function as people."

Conclusions and recommendations

The participants offered a number of recommendations to improve the dialogue and move forward. The recommendations are not based on consensus but rather reflect important elements of the discussion.

- The EU should formulate and implement a comprehensive vision for the region. The current EU accession model is not functioning well and does not answer the challenges that arose with the Ukraine crisis. This does not mean that Brussels should refrain from its demands for democratization, the rule of law, and the media, but should also add the geopolitical component to its approach towards the Western Balkans.
- Serbia and Kosovo should first commit to stability and refrain from using violence. Leaders should recognize that the region is in peril and that it is their responsibility to act together to prevent instability and tensions. This would send a powerful message to the West and the rest of the region that violence is not acceptable in a time of the worst security crisis in Europe since World War II.
- Both Belgrade and Pristina should commit to a joint fight, formal or informal, against organized crime. Despite the nature of mutual relations, the police should start cooperation. This would send a powerful message to populations and establish trust between the sides.
- The official dialogue in Brussels is not enough, and parliaments should be included to some degree. Currently, the whole process seems to be covered by a veil of secrecy, and without some transparency, there will be no steps forward. Belgrade and Pristina need a dialogue for understanding not just a dialogue for decision making.
- Kosovo and Serbian MPs could organize a joint meeting in the presence of the media, even include some of their representatives in the dialogue.

Participants

In English alphabetical order

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