

# Youth and Conflict: Serb-Albanian Relations

## Introduction

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized a workshop on September 22, 2018 in Novi Sad, Serbia, for several Serbian and Kosovar students and civil society on the effects of conflict and post-conflict transitions on social attitudes, values, conflict interpretations, and the impact the conflict has on the youth and their future prospects. The discussion illuminated key challenges, obstacles, and prospects for the relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The workshop followed two separate focus groups for Serbs and Kosovo Albanians held in Belgrade and Pristina. The Open Society Foundation and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs supported the workshop and the focus groups.

Youth in Serbia and Kosovo face post-conflict challenges that substantially alter their lives, future prospects, and their relations with members of other ethnicities. Youth have been marginalized during the political transition, as ‘conflict leaders’ monopolized political institutions and established their control of the private sector through corruption and their favorite monopolies. The youth remain excluded from the normalization and reform processes, the participants concluded.

Nearly two decades after the war, the Serbian and Kosovo societies remain entrenched in their post-war stalemate. Reconciliation still remains a distant objective. The two societies have built contradictory narratives about the past, with very few points of consensus. Serbs and Albanians have learned that wars bring catastrophic consequences, but have not yet figured out how to resolve their disputes. Politicians still think how to enlarge their countries with the territories that belong to the others rather than how to make their countries better developed and improve their citizens’ lives.

Neglecting problems and delaying their resolution for a “better time” only complicates the situation. Despite their post-conflict stalemate, the Serbian and Kosovo societies are done with wars—polls show they have no willingness to fight again under any circumstances. “We learned that wars are not fun.” However, they have not been able to find a middle ground. Conflicting interpretations about the conflict remain a major obstacle to reconciliation: while the Kosovo Albanians consider the war as a struggle for liberation, the Serbs see it as defending their sovereignty. “These are both viable interpretations.” The Serbian and Kosovo societies need a frank debate to reach understanding about the past and agreement for the future. “We can have a better future even without agreeing about the past.”

## **Youth and normalization**

Rebuilding friendly relations between societies after ethnic wars is a complicated and sensitive process and requires engagement of all levels of society. Governments in Pristina and Belgrade and a few international officials in Brussels have monopolized the process of normalization. “Youth is completely excluded from the process, we communicate with each other only through workshops.” Political developments affect youth’s perceptions and behavior, and youth, like other parts of society, remain manipulated by politicians. Most young people take the information as it is served to them, mostly news coming from controlled media. Public opinions are also shaped by politicians, who, in a way control “how and what the society thinks.” Politicians also intentionally keep interethnic tensions high. The youth do not have enough public space to shape future relations.

Communication between young Kosovars and Serbs helps shape better perceptions and contribute to reconciliation. “Communication changes us. I have different perceptions now. It was difficult for me to hang out with Serbs at the beginning. I no longer see them with an ethnic eye.” However, not enough communication is taking place.

Though the relations between Pristina and Belgrade have evolved in the past two decades, the conflict remains “kind of frozen.” “It looks normal if you travel to Pristina or Belgrade, but the situation will remain fragile until the status is resolved.” Relations between Serbian and Kosovo societies also remain sensitive. “Conflict keeps the wounds open and the politicians tend to them but with no intention of healing them.” Many said that Kosovo and Serbia politicians are a product of conflict and they need a frozen conflict to stay in power. “All they know is conflict; if conflict is gone, they will be gone too, and they know it.”

Fake news and heavy headlines charged with ethnic hatred shape the youth’s opinions. Even though the Brussels dialogue has not been as successful as many expected, it has sent a message that it is normal to talk. Kosovo and Serbia lack pluralism. The Serbian Progressive Party is the only party that handles the dialogue and manages public opinion in Serbia. Former war leaders in Kosovo have also monopolized the public discourse. “Ironically, the radicals in Serbia and in Kosovo are considered as pragmatist and capable of reaching solutions.” Some said that when liberal politicians were engaged in similar efforts, they were considered traitors.

Most of the participants acknowledged that the Brussels dialogue is not perfect, but that it has improved relations and “unfroze many segments of the conflict.” Many said that the future of the dialogue depends largely on the international community. “Our leaders are not focused on genuinely stabilizing their relations, but only to get the rewards.” There was almost consensus that the relations will improve slowly, and that the threat of rising nationalism and violence is negligible. “Though it looks like the public support a conscript army, nobody wants to join it.”

## **Reconciliation**

Politicians that produce “bloody pasts rarely build peaceful futures.” The participants did not expect that their leaders would reach any meaningful peace and reconciliation. “They are engaged in a weak dialogue, but that is their limit; they cannot do more than simply talk.” The

focus on past narratives remains an obstacle to reconciliation. Furthermore, many said that the narratives are flawed, based more on mythology than reality. “Our narratives are produced more by music instruments than real facts.”

Various mechanisms and institutions can be established in tackling the consequences of violence. Instruments of reconciliation, such as truth and reconciliation commissions, have been relatively successful in such places as South Africa. However, the participants said that the political will is essential in achieving durable peace and reconciliation. “When political will exists, all methods and instruments will work,” concluding that political will is missing in Kosovo and Serbia.

Why is it so difficult to apologize in the Balkans? People focus on their misfortunes, so everyone feels as a victim, thus not willing to apologies to the other. Serbia acknowledges that it has committed crimes but argues that it has processed most of them, either through Serbia’s local courts or at the Hague Tribunal. Kosovo says that only Serbia committed crimes. Many said that even if the politicians apologized, it would not be genuine and would not reflect how the societies feel. “In fact, apologies may alienate the public.”

While apologies are relevant, transitional justice is much more important. “Apology is about collective guilt, and I cannot feel guilty for something I did not commit,” a speaker argued. Many said that apologies coming from the current leaders would have no effect on reconciliation. “We all know they would not be genuine.” It will not be a Willy Brandt-type apology, “genuine and not a result of pressure.”

Can Serbs and Albanians have a fresh start? The participants were skeptical that relations would improve in the short and medium term. They argued that it is difficult to have a new beginning with existing myths, past interpretations, weak education, poor social and economic development, and non-democratic institutions. A long-term conflict consequence is “production of warlords, who are now in power in Kosovo and Serbia.”

Reconciliation also cannot be reached while Kosovo and Serbian leaders talk about ‘ethnic solutions,’ such as border changes along ethnic lines. While they agreed that “ethnic correction” is a bad idea, many speakers said that Presidents Vucic and Thaci are talking about such “dramatic solutions” just to attract attention and stay relevant. A speaker said that it is “pretty unwise for Kosovo to put its sovereignty on the negotiating table.” Many said it is equally unwise for Serbia to seek Kosovo’s partition given that the majority of Serbs live south of the Ibar River. Neither the north of Kosovo nor the Presevo Valley would be better off changing states. “I do not see why it would be good for Presevo to join Kosovo. I cannot believe that Kosovo can provide a better life for the Presevo Albanians.” Few expected that the lives of the Serbs in the north would be better if they joined Serbia.

The speakers concluded that normalization remains a distant goal. Albanians do not see Serbia’s recognition of Kosovo as important. Many people in Kosovo say internal development should become a priority. “Recognition can wait, but rule of law should happen now.” Normalization is not a priority for Serbia either. Serbia is engaged in the process because of the EU integration. But Belgrade is finding out that EU membership is a complex and a distant process, likely to take longer than many in Serbia expected. So normalization with Pristina is not urgent.

## Participants

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