

## **Dialogue and Dynamics**

### **Prospect for Kosovo-Serbia Normalization in 2021**

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized in Belgrade on February 19, 2021, an in-person discussion for a group of analysts from Serbia and Kosovo on the prospects of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue in 2021 and the dynamics between Serbia's president Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo's likely new prime minister Albin Kurti. The participants analyzed a number of major recent developments that could have an impact on the dialogue, including the landslide election victory by Albin Kurti's Self-Determination Movement (VV), the new administration in the US, and an expected reinvigorated transatlantic collaboration. The discussion also focused on what the non-governmental sector can do to improve the relations between Belgrade and Pristina, especially if there is an absence of a substantial official dialogue.

This brief report is based on the discussions held under the Chatham House Rule. The recommendations and conclusions reported below are based either on consensus or on broad agreement and some reflect just individual opinions. They do not necessarily represent the views of CIG.

### **Recommendations and conclusions**

- The status remains the main point of contention between Belgrade and Pristina, with Pristina insisting on outright recognition while Belgrade demanding something substantial in return for a peace deal. Despite this seemingly intractable problem, the parties should remain engaged in the dialogue and build on the past achievements, which both sides should recognize: moving from a barricaded north in 2013 to a 70 percent Serb turnout for Kosovo's elections in 2021 is no small feat. Kurti says dialogue is his priority number four, preceded by economy, rule of law, and the pandemic management. This should not be an obstacle to dialogue. Belgrade has more or less the same sequencing of its priorities.
- Serbian government officials often cited Kosovo's former leaders' war legacy as a major obstacle to a breakthrough. Now with Kosovo's war leaders out of the way, Belgrade should have no excuse to drag its feet. The Serbian leadership should come up with a sustainable negotiating strategy that aims to resolve the conflict once and for all. Kosovo's new government will be just as strong as Serbia's government and most likely be around for at least two mandates. Having two strong governments with a solid popular support is a key requirement for a final settlement. Despite Kurti's inflexible position on the dialogue, he showed during his two-month governance last year that he could cooperate with Belgrade. He accepted a donation of 1,000 COVID-19 tests from Belgrade despite the sensitivity of the issue. Now given their strong election mandates, Vucic and Kurti should seriously engage in reaching

a solution that is beneficial for the future of their people, even if it harms their domestic popularity in the short term.

- Kurti's VV has promoted an internal dialogue on local issues with the Serbs in Kosovo. Though in principle any dialogue is welcome, Kurti's legacy – his protests against the Ahtisaari plan and his position against collective rights – will be a major stumbling block in building the necessary trust for a successful dialogue. Many noted that Kurti's political positions have evolved, showing more understanding for community rights. But the success of such dialogue also depends to a large degree on Belgrade's decision to support it or not. The need for such dialogue exists, but not the will, at least for now.
- A likely Serbian election in the fall 2021 (or even in the spring of 2022) could further complicate the dialogue. Many said 2021 would resemble the 2020 when it comes to the Brussels dialogue. The parties should instead focus on the implementation of what has been already agreed and on addressing less sensitive issues, including economic cooperation and infrastructure projects.
- Pristina and Belgrade could work together in the regional context. The Berlin Process is supporting a regional common market, strongly promoted by Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia. Despite its reservations, Kurti should sit at the negotiation table and discuss the common market's models. Kurti cannot afford to go against the Berlin Process. Also, Serbia is already Kosovo's major trading partner. So why not further regulate and liberalize that relationship under fair and free principles. The common market removes a number of obstacles: recognition of diplomas; free regional travel (effectively eliminating the visa regime between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina); and recognition of professional degrees so as to liberalize labor market and make it easier to share expertise. If done right and in good faith, there would be only winners in the regional common market agreement.
- Another regional area in which Pristina and Belgrade could cooperate is the fight against organized crime and corruption. Organized crime in one country is connected with organized crime in other countries. Unless the leaders cooperate together, it will be difficult to defeat organized crime in each country separately.
- The non-governmental sector should fill the void in the communication between Serbian and Kosovo societies, offering alternative opportunities for communication between ordinary people, professionals, and young politicians. These activities would help maintain the relatively peaceful relations between Pristina and Belgrade, improve understanding between societies, and build more stable ground for continuation of the official dialogue.

In conclusion, the analysts were pessimistic about the official dialogue, but optimistic about the new momentum and opportunities for long-term normalization that 2021 has brought so far. Strong leaderships in Serbia and Kosovo, a US administration that understands the conflict and the region, and a new US and EU partnership are all necessary ingredients for a successful peace process.

## **Participants**

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