

Advancing a Better Kosovo-Serbia Relationship in 2021

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on February 24, 2021, a discussion for a group of analysts from Serbia and Kosovo. The focus of the meeting was on the future of relations between Kosovo and Serbia following the overwhelming victory of the Self-Determination Movement (VV) in the February 14 elections in Kosovo. The meeting explored avenues for improving relations in 2021, reflected in the following conclusions and recommendations, which are based either on consensus or broad agreement or on individual opinions. They do not necessarily represent the views of CIG. The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Brussels dialogue, currently in a stalemate, has not yet approached the substance of the dispute, the status. Some said 2018 had “offered a good window of opportunity to resolve the dispute,” but with that opportunity “missed,” some opined, the problem could drag on indefinitely. However, new opportunities could be created to have an effective dialogue.

- There is a new political reality in Kosovo. The relations between Belgrade and Pristina depend considerably on the dynamics between Serbia’s leadership and Kosovo’s new leadership as well as on the international efforts. For Kurti, the dialogue with Belgrade is not a top priority; it comes after rule of law, jobs, and the pandemic. The majority of the Kosovo people do not consider the dialogue important. As it is unlikely that Belgrade will recognize Kosovo anytime soon, it is hard to expect Kurti’s interest in the dialogue to increase.
- Analysts from Kosovo differ in their views about Kurti’s objectives. Some believe he will not use the dialogue for personal gain, unlike his predecessors, arguing that Kurti will seriously engage in fighting corruption. “Kurti is not against the dialogue in principle;” he is indeed interested in addressing big challenges, “but thinks it can wait.” Others said that Kurti built his career on opposing the dialogue, so he will likely again instrumentalize it for his own purposes. “Kurti is a populist, and he will leave the door open for options that might appear along the road.” Some said that Kurti’s eventual attempts to address the rule of law will be adjusted to his own interests, that he will take some “spectacular steps” that would bring him popularity but not really “fight against corruption.”
- It has been ten years since the dialogue’s launch. In the recent years, the process has widened the gap between the two sides and the word “agreement” has acquired a negative connotation. Citizens see the dialogue as a consequence of the external factors’ engagement, and according to different opinion polls, the majority are against it. The dialogue was pushed by the EU and

the US, and there was never a significant local ownership, which is the key to its success. On the other hand, Serbia-Kosovo relationship has never been better after the war. The agreements reached in Brussels are about 80% implemented, which is more than the level of implementation of the domestic legislation or the implementation of the Albania-Kosovo agreements. This is something that the West and the sides in dialogue should promote to change the current attitudes. In addition, all sides should build on the results of Serbia-Kosovo cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Belgrade should actively support Kosovo's visa liberalization.

- Kurti's idea for launching a dialogue with the Kosovo Serbs as well as the implementation of the regional market idea will help move the normalization of the Serbia-Kosovo relations forward.
- The West lacks the momentum and instruments to stimulate the dialogue. The reach of the EU is limited. Apart from the weakness to deliver in substance, there is disbelief that the EU enlargement will happen anytime soon. The US has more interest in the process due to other "external" influences, such as China, Russia, and Turkey. But the EU and the US should first find a common ground, and for the beginning, stop mocking the results of the Brussels or the Washington agreements.
- Another problem is the false belief that the agreement will speed up the EU integration. Thus, the dialogue should be removed from the context of the EU integration process. The parties should see it as in their own interests, regardless of the intentions of the EU. The leaders' lack of trust makes the past agreements not foundations for a new dialogue but an obstacle. Without the trust, there will be no reaching nor implementation of an eventual final agreement.
- It is unlikely an agreement could be reached in 2021, but substantial progress could still be achieved. The West could push first for the two leaders to meet, which would have a symbolic value. The second stage should include the review of the already reached agreements and their implementation. Both sides will reevaluate the Washington and the Brussels agreements. The review would bring clarity about what to expect from the dialogue in the future. It should address the inconsistency of implementation with the actual ideas both of the agreements and the Ahtisaari package. The EU and the US could also compile the agenda for a future dialogue, that would include the cultural and religious heritage, property, economic connectivity, etc.
- Despite the fact that the official dialogue could remain in a stalemate, this should not prevent the civil society from discussing and promoting the achieved agreements' results and discussing the final settlement's elements. Civil society should also encourage cooperation between Serbs and Albanians in different fields, and the West should support their efforts.

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