

## Transatlantic Cooperation and the Prospects for Dialogue

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on February 26, 2021 a discussion on trans-Atlantic cooperation and the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue for a group of politicians and civil society representatives from Kosovo and Serbia. Two CIG board members, former senior officials in the U.S. Department of State and the European Commission, took part as well. The meeting specifically addressed the effects of expected revitalized transatlantic cooperation now with President Joe Biden in office, the changes in Kosovo after Albin Kurti's February 14 election victory, and the prospects of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue in 2021. The following are a number of conclusions and recommendations based either on consensus or broad agreement. They do not necessarily represent the views of CIG and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), which supports CIG's initiative on normalization between Kosovo and Serbia. The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule.

### Conclusions and recommendations

The change of governments in Kosovo and in the US are positive elements for the continuation of the dialogue. However, there are other pressing issues and reluctance both in Belgrade and in Pristina that make it almost impossible for the dialogue to achieve breakthrough this year.

- The February 14 election outcome in Kosovo signaled a significant change both at the socio-political level and on the future of the dialogue with Serbia. For the first time since the negotiations with Serbia began in 2011, Kosovo will be represented by a leader who is openly saying that he will not yield to any international pressure to make “damaging agreements or compromises.” “However, this is not a principled position, but rather aimed at gaining personal political benefit,” a speaker, skeptical of Kurti's stated objectives, said. As prime minister, Kurti will have two major challenges: fulfilling his electorate's expectations on producing quick results on good governance and handling the inevitable international pressure to resume the talks with Serbia. Despite international pressure, Kurti should not enter into a new dialogue before a new Kosovo president is elected and consequently another snap election avoided. Acknowledging the importance of balancing local and international priorities, Kurti should take into account the US and EU advice when formulating his government's agenda.
- With Kurti's solid victory, Serbia seems to be somehow cautiously optimistic about having a more stable dialogue process. The two parties should engage in honest discussions and become the drivers of the process rather than rely on international pressure.
- The international community should replace its current approach with a new framework built on clarity, credibility, and achievable objectives. The new framework should unlock Kosovo's 'international integration' and deliver a face-saving deal for Serbia.

- The EU should define its approach and demonstrate it is willing to conclude the process, rather than keep a *pro forma* dialogue. The EU should give Kurti the space he needs to define his domestic and foreign policy agenda, and only then resume the dialogue.
- For Belgrade and Pristina to compromise, the dialogue needs to be institutionalized. It should become part of their domestic political processes so that agreements remain in place even when governments change.
- The US and the EU need to coordinate on setting up a clear framework that eliminates the land swap idea, supports Kosovo's democracy, and allows Kosovo Serbs to feel safe to establish normal lives in Kosovo. The West needs to develop clear incentives for all parties.
- Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic claims he is pressured to reach an agreement, but it is Kurti who is being pressured to do so even before taking office. Kurti aims for an inclusive dialogue in which institutions and citizens are involved. He proved both parties can work as equal sides during the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic when the two health ministers worked together. Kurti wants to work for the benefit of the Kosovo Serbs, but it will be difficult to do so given the Serb List's alleged manipulation of votes for non-Serb minority parties in the recent election. The dialogue should not be a matter of winning or losing, but rather a win-win not just for Kosovo and Serbia, but for the entire Western Balkans.
- The election of President Biden is a positive news. However, the narrative that the US supports Kosovo and pressures Serbia is irrelevant, given that the new US administration aims to rebuild alliances. This administration will work with the EU, will call for a transparent Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, and will fight corruption globally. If Kurti's first priority is to fight corruption, he should be getting the support from the US for that. Such important priorities should also be the US and EU priorities.
- EU's envoy Miroslav Lajcak should engage more in public diplomacy. First, he should work more with the civil society, the public and the media to promote and explain the process. Second, he needs to sit down with EU's member states to reduce the internal divisions. Third, through coordination with Washington, Belgrade and Pristina, Lajcak should lead a process based on incremental steps. No big agreements can be achieved in 2021 but significant concrete steps to create new conditions for the dialogue could be taken.
- The current, rather negative narrative on the dialogue and on the Serb-Albanian relations needs to be improved. Social media is often being used as a tool for creating a contaminated climate, which is also contributing to a rising nationalism. This endangers any substantial dialogue. The *status quo* can no longer be used as a comfort zone. Influential EU-member states—Germany, France, and Italy—can help the two parties to restore faith in the process by engaging stakeholders who can influence the public opinion, such as the civil society, in order to reestablish channels of communication and work on changing the narrative.
- The region may not join the EU in this decade, which is why the EU can no longer use accession as a carrot. This is leading to others' meddling—primarily Russia and China. While Vucic portrays himself as cooperative with the West, he also works with Russia against Kosovo. The five EU non-recognizers also inadvertently, by not recognizing Kosovo, contribute to instability in the Southeast Europe. Their Kosovo policy is not in line with EU's goals and values. The Quint needs to become more active, and the United Kingdom, a P-5 member, should also remain part of the process.

## Participants

*English alphabetical order*

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