

Building Space for Dialogue

On September 26–27, 2025, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened a roundtable in Skopje, North Macedonia. The meeting brought together current and former members of parliament from governing and opposition parties, and civil society representatives from Kosovo and Serbia. Participants engaged in discussions on the state of Kosovo–Serbia relations, the challenges facing the dialogue process, and opportunities for renewing cooperation at both political and societal levels. The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule and was supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The discussion does not necessarily reflect the views of individual participants, CIG, or the Swiss Federal Department of Federal Affairs. CIG’s Associate Jeta Loshaj prepared the report.

This roundtable took place at a moment when official dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo remains at a standstill. The Brussels-facilitated process has yielded only limited results in recent years, with political leaders on both sides reluctant to take steps that could carry electoral costs. Against this backdrop, the meeting in Skopje assumed heightened significance by providing one of the few active platforms for direct engagement. Participants emphasized that such forums are critical for maintaining communication, identifying entry points for cooperation, and preventing further polarization at a time when official channels remain blocked.

Current Challenges

The discussion highlighted a number of pressing challenges that shape the Kosovo–Serbia relations. Chief among them is the persistent mistrust between the two governments, reinforced by divisive political narratives. Citizens increasingly view the dialogue as remote, ineffective, or externally imposed, further eroding confidence in its potential. At the same time, local communities face immediate concerns such as access to healthcare, recognition of documents, and the delivery of public services – issues rarely prioritized on the high-level agenda. Participants also noted that, under current conditions, it is unrealistic to expect meaningful progress in the dialogue given the internal political constraints faced by both sides: in Serbia, mass protests initiated by students have placed the government under considerable domestic pressure, while in Kosovo the delay in forming a new government has created institutional deadlock. International actors, particularly the EU, were further criticized for their handling of the process. While intended as mediators, they are increasingly perceived as sustaining rather than resolving disputes by allowing problems to linger unresolved.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following conclusions and recommendations do not necessarily represent consensus, but they capture the essence of the discussions at the roundtable.

Deconflicting Narratives as a Precondition for Dialogue. An initial central theme of the discussion was the damaging effect of competing political narratives on the prospects for meaningful dialogue. Leaders in both Belgrade and Pristina continue to frame the process in zero-sum terms, often addressing their domestic audiences with rhetoric that entrenches divisions, radicalizes public opinion, and narrows the already limited political space for compromise. Such discourse fuels mistrust between the two societies and undermines the legitimacy of dialogue itself, reinforcing the perception that negotiations are about tactical wins rather than shared durable solutions. Participants stressed the urgent need to “deconflict narratives,” calling on political leaders to adopt language that reduces tensions and fosters public readiness for compromise. Beyond rhetoric, several argued that building a more constructive narrative is a precondition for sustaining public support and ensuring that dialogue is seen not as a foreign imposition, but as a pathway to stability, cooperation, and eventual EU integration.

Dialogue as a National Interest, Not an Imposition. Participants underscored that dialogue must be framed as a national interest for both Kosovo and Serbia, rather than as an externally imposed obligation. The perception that negotiations are primarily driven by pressure from the EU or the United States undermines domestic ownership and erodes public support. To counter this, political elites were encouraged to present dialogue as an integral component of their countries’ long-term strategic objectives, particularly the path toward EU integration. Positive examples were cited, most notably the Berlin Process launched in 2014, which successfully positioned regional cooperation within the framework of shared national interests and remains a credible platform. As one participant noted, “If we see dialogue as our path to Europe, not Brussels’ demand, then it becomes a project we own.” With respect to the recent Ohrid Agreement, several participants called for greater political responsibility, stressing that both governments appear reluctant to advance implementation due to the perceived electoral costs of compromise.

Local-Level Cooperation as a Foundation for Trust. Despite the impasse at the top, local leaders and several civil society representatives highlighted that cooperation continues at the municipal level. Practical collaboration in healthcare, education, and service delivery demonstrates that dialogue can produce tangible benefits for citizens. One participant commented, “We don’t have the luxury of political games at the local level, people need solutions today.” Such examples provide a model that national leaders could replicate, showing that small steps at the grassroots level can help rebuild trust and generate momentum for broader normalization.

Civil Society as a Safeguard Against Silence. Civil society actors emphasized their indispensable role in sustaining dialogue when political leaders fail to engage. Participants noted that civil society provides continuity, channels citizen concerns, and helps prevent dialogue from collapsing into prolonged silence. Several proposals were raised, including the institutionalization of civil society engagement through permanent councils or structured platforms where NGOs, academics, and public figures could articulate joint positions and advocate for normalization. One participant suggested the creation of formalized initiatives, developed in partnership with public institutions, to ensure that civil society perspectives are systematically integrated into the dialogue process rather than treated as ad hoc contributions. At the same time, another participant cautioned that

while civil society initiatives are welcome and necessary, they cannot substitute for the responsibility of political leaders; without genuine engagement by politicians, civil society alone cannot move the process forward. Nonetheless, civil society representatives stressed that even limited communication is preferable to silence, arguing that maintaining dialogue at any level is essential to prevent stagnation. Civil society, in this sense, was described as a safeguard against the “normalization of silence.”

The EU’s Role: From Managing to Resolving. While the EU remains the central mediator, participants voiced growing frustration that the Brussels process has turned into a framework that manages rather than resolves disputes. Unresolved issues are continually recycled, allowing leaders to exploit the absence of enforcement mechanisms and delay meaningful action. As one participant remarked, “The EU is managing the conflict, not solving it.” Several participants stressed the need for stronger transatlantic coordination and clearer benchmarks to restore credibility, while others cautioned that unless the EU sends a convincing message that enlargement fatigue is not its prevailing stance, it risks losing influence and credibility altogether. At the same time, it was acknowledged that the EU itself is dealing with broader geopolitical challenges—from foreign malign influences to the war in Ukraine—which appear to have limited its ability to act decisively. The consensus was: unless the EU moves beyond conflict management and assumes a more proactive role in driving resolution, the current stalemate will only deepen.

The Passing of Time and the Cost of Delay. Participants repeatedly underlined that the absence of tangible progress in the dialogue is itself destabilizing. The sense that the process has become cyclical, producing meetings but yielding no results, has fueled growing frustration among both political elites and the wider public. One participant warned, “We are becoming time-eaters, consuming years with no solutions, only repetitions.” This prolonged stagnation not only erodes public patience but also risks delegitimizing the entire dialogue framework, reinforcing skepticism that negotiations are little more than an empty political ritual. Several participants emphasized that delay carries tangible costs: it entrenches mistrust between communities, allows nationalist rhetoric to dominate the political space, and weakens the credibility of the EU as a facilitator. Furthermore, failure to demonstrate progress risks locking both sides into a state of permanent confrontation, with negative spillover effects on regional cooperation and the broader EU integration agenda.

Community Needs and the ASM Debate. Participants emphasized that the dialogue risks losing relevance if it fails to deliver meaningful benefits for citizens, particularly for non-majority communities in Kosovo. Persistent challenges, such as limited access to healthcare, shortcomings in education, and difficulties with the recognition of documents, continue to erode confidence in the process. Much of the discussion centered on the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM), which remains the most divisive issue. For some, the ASM represents a legal obligation that must be implemented as agreed; for others, it is a highly politicized obstacle that blocks further progress. This duality reflects the broader impasse in the dialogue: the ASM can be viewed simultaneously as an instrument for cooperation and a symbol of entrenched division. Debate also surrounded the Agreement on the Path to Normalization—known as the Ohrid Agreement—with some participants arguing that Kosovo has already signaled readiness to implement it, while others pointed to Serbia’s red lines and insistence on the ASM as a precondition. One politician remarked that before the larger political disputes can be resolved, it is essential to “zoom in” and “return to the basics”—focusing on immediate community needs and practical solutions that can gradually rebuild trust and set the stage for progress on more sensitive issues.

Conclusion

The Skopje roundtable made clear that while it remains difficult to envision how or when the official dialogue might resume, given the political deadlock in Kosovo and the mounting domestic pressures in Serbia, abandoning engagement altogether would only deepen mistrust and entrench division. In this context, modest but consistent channels of communication, whether through local cooperation, civil society initiatives, or structured dialogue platforms, become essential safeguards. They help prevent silence from becoming the norm, sustain a minimal degree of trust, and preserve space for compromise once political conditions allow. At the same time, participants stressed that these efforts must not obscure the ultimate goal: a comprehensive normalization of relations grounded in accountability, implementation of agreements, and a clear trajectory toward EU integration. For this to happen, leaders must show the political courage to lower the temperature of rhetoric, prioritize citizens' everyday concerns, and rebuild credibility by treating dialogue as a national interest rather than an external imposition. International mediators, particularly the EU, must also recalibrate their role, moving beyond crisis management to more assertive facilitation with clear benchmarks and consequences for inaction. Without such recalibration, the cost of delay will continue to rise – eroding public confidence, further undermining regional stability, and narrowing the already limited window for a viable settlement.

Participants

English Alphabetical Order

Julia Agosti, Human Security Advisor, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
Mimoza Ahmetaj, Vice Chair, Democratic Party of Kosovo
Gordana Comic, Former Member of Parliament of Serbia
Shpetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Dukagjin Gorani, Former Member of Parliament of Kosovo
Lutfi Haziri, Member of Parliament of Kosovo; Vice President, Democratic League of Kosovo
Ramadan Ilazi, Research Director, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies
Xhevahire Izmaku, Member, Parliament of Kosovo, Social Democratic Initiative Nisma
Jelena Jerinic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Green Left Front
Dalibor Jevtic, Vice President, Serb List; Mayor of Strpce (Kosovo)
Mimoza Kusari Lila, Member of Parliament of Kosovo; President, Alternativa Party
Jeta Loshaj, Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance
Leon Malazogu, Analyst
Miodrag Marinkovic, Director, Center for Affirmative Social Action
Petar Miletic, Former Deputy Speaker of Parliament of Kosovo
Ugljesa Mrdic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Serbian Progressive Party
Besian Mustafa, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo
Igor Novakovic, Senior Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance
Vladimir Pajic, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, Free Citizens' Movement
Miguel La Plante Perez, Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Switzerland in Serbia
Milan Radin, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Serbian Progressive Party
Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Juerg Sprecher, Ambassador of Switzerland in Kosovo
Stefan Surlic, Assistant Professor, University of Belgrade
Besnik Tahiri, Vice President, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo