

Beyond Perspectives: Delivering on Normalization

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) together with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), reconvened on November 14-16, 2025 in Solothurn, Switzerland, the group of senior officials of all major political parties of Kosovo and Serbia, both governing and opposition. The EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue also took part. The goal of the initiative is to provide complementary support to the EU-facilitated dialogue, advance normalization of relations, generate ideas, strengthen the political commitment of domestic actors, help narrow political and ethnic divides, and offer an inclusive and sustainable platform for engagement. The discussion was held under Chatham House Rule and this report does not necessarily reflect the views of individual participants, CIG, or the FDFA.

Key Takeaways

EU's Perspective

- ***The 2023 Ohrid Agreement remains the framework for implementation.*** The essential task ahead is to formalize what has already been agreed and move decisively toward implementation.
- ***The EU expects genuine and consistent engagement from both parties,*** including the same clarity in their public communication as demonstrated in their closed-door discussions.
- ***Normalization cannot be imposed.*** It is a voluntary process grounded in the interests of the parties. Success requires broad societal involvement.
- ***The EU perspective is unequivocally linked to progress on normalization,*** and there is no Plan B. Neither side will advance on its EU path without substantial and sustained progress in the process, which is not indefinite. The EU seeks solutions, not new problems, and expects the parties to demonstrate that they are an asset, not a burden, by resolving their disagreements.
- ***The implementation gap is significant.*** Out of 94 agreements reached to date, implementation has stalled for roughly 40% and 30% remain unimplemented. Moving forward requires activating existing commitments rather than creating new agreements.

Participants' Perspectives

Structural and Political Constraints

- The dialogue suffers from limited transparency and an insufficient open domestic debate.
- Deep trust deficits—between the two parties, between the parties and the EU, between governments and oppositions, and between ethnic groups—continue to undermine normalization. Political polarization on both sides restricts room for compromise.
- The unresolved political status issue continues to be used for domestic political purposes.

Reinforce EU Incentives

- Stronger EU incentives are needed to ensure progress. Serbia requires clarity on its EU accession timeline. Kosovo seeks acceptance of its EU membership application. Other

incentives to consider include Kosovo's membership in the Council of Europe, associate EU membership for the region by 2028, and inclusion of the region in the Schengen area.

Change Narratives

- Serbia and Kosovo need to reach/maintain broad interparty consensus on EU integration and on the Brussels/Ohrid Agreements, and publicly declare their commitment to implementation.
- Political leaders on both sides must be honest with citizens about the state of affairs and realities on the ground, change harmful narratives about the other side, and present a more positive vision of future relations.
- The narrative should emphasize that normalization is a matter of national interest, focusing on improving relations and the situation of Serbs in Kosovo.
- More positive stories from bilateral relations are needed. Visits by officials must be facilitated.
- Belgrade and Pristina should consider unilateral implementation of certain agreements. Such steps would increase trust and help unlock progress on more difficult issues.

Address Everyday Challenges and Citizen-Centered Priorities

- Socio-economic and administrative obstacles—including licensing and certification barriers, diploma recognition, energy governance issues, and restrictions on freedom of movement—should be resolved. These are low-cost, high-impact areas where progress could quickly build trust and demonstrate the value of normalization.
- Priorities should include improving transportation links between Kosovo and Serbia, accelerating diploma recognition, and renewable energy development, particularly in the north.
- Pristina should identify the needs of Kosovo Serbs through engagement with local communities, avoid regulatory measures that inadvertently harm residents, and instead provide incentives that make daily life—and thus integration—easier. This would help rebuild trust of the Kosovo Serb community and ensure more inclusive governance.

Improve Security Perceptions

- Security concerns remain shaped by political narratives, historical fears, and the lingering impact of the Banjska attack, all compounded by broader geopolitical instability. Banjska intensified mistrust and reinforced mutual suspicion.
- Participants stressed the need to shift public narratives away from portraying each other as existential threats and toward practical cooperation.
- Potential areas for confidence-building include joint efforts in civil protection, wildfire response, and coordination on natural disasters.

Measures for Sustainable Integration of Serbs in Northern Kosovo

Existing Foundations Already in Place

- Kosovo's constitutional and legal framework provides a strong system for minority-rights protection, including reserved seats, decentralized municipal powers, and guaranteed representation in institutions. All provisions regarding non-majority rights already in Kosovo's legislation should be implemented in good faith.
- Budgetary arrangements linked to decentralization function partially.
- In October, Kosovo conducted successful local elections with active Serb participation.

Priority Steps for the Next Six to Twelve Months

- The newly elected mayors of the four northern municipalities should be invited by the Kosovo Government to discuss serious concerns related to upcoming municipal transitions. The EU and international missions should begin visiting the new mayors immediately. Discussions

should also address how to prevent possible escalations linked to decisions on symbols (e.g., flags, street names).

- Municipalities in the north could significantly expand access to funding by submitting formal requests for co-investment in infrastructure, development projects, “green” initiatives, and EU-supported programs, as many existing mechanisms remain underused.
- Participants stressed the urgency of resolving administrative and legal obstacles such as civil-registration gaps, recognition of Serbian documents, residency and mobility issues, vehicle registration, and the status of educational institutions.
- Clarifying the operation of the Fund for the North—particularly now that customs revenues are collected solely at the Merdare crossing—and ensuring equal access to public services are essential for restoring community trust.
- The Serb List should actively engage on issues of overall concern in Kosovo and function as a Kosovo political party. An internal interethnic political dialogue should be established.
- The upcoming Kosovo regulation on foreigners may affect thousands of residents—including students, professors, and other professionals—impacting the northern economy and the basic functioning of the community. Its impact should be mitigated through careful legal adjustments to ensure that changes do not displace residents or disrupt daily life.

Desired State of Integration Within Three Years

- Participants envisioned a fully functional Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM) aligned with Kosovo’s laws and providing practical coordination and services.
- Improved trust in the police and judiciary, reintegration of judges and law-enforcement personnel, and expanded bilingualism—particularly through increased Albanian-language instruction among Serb schoolchildren—were identified as key markers of successful integration.

Extended Discussion

EU’s Perspective

Growing expectations from Brussels. The discussions reflected a shared perception that the EU’s expectations regarding normalization have become firmer and more outcome-driven. Brussels increasingly evaluates progress not by the level of diplomatic engagement, but by the extent to which commitments are translated into visible, sustained implementation. It was observed that “time hasn’t been wasted this year, but the real work is still ahead of us,” capturing both the sense of movement achieved so far and the recognition that future progress depends on consistent delivery rather than new rounds of negotiation. This reflects an understanding that the credibility of both sides rests on practical results that reinforce stability on the ground.

A widening communication gap. The discrepancy between the constructive tone in diplomatic settings and the markedly different messaging often conveyed to domestic audiences was highlighted. Several participants acknowledged that internal political pressures compel leaders to soften their positions privately while hardening rhetoric publicly, creating confusion about intentions and hence eroding trust. One participant noted that “whatever problems we have—stalled implementation or political disagreements—become highly controversial the moment they reach the public sphere,” illustrating how domestic sensitivities shape what political elites feel able to state publicly. This communication gap has made it difficult for any side to project consistency, complicating the broader political climate in which normalization takes place.

Impact of a shifting geopolitical environment. Participants also discussed the changing geopolitical context, noting that global instability and evolving debates within the EU have introduced new pressures on the enlargement process. One participant remarked that “it is more difficult now than twenty years ago,” referencing not only shifting attitudes in European capitals but also higher expectations that candidate states demonstrate reliability, institutional stability, and constructive regional engagement before advancing further. This climate has elevated normalization as a key indicator of readiness for deeper European integration, situating it within a broader strategic framework.

A narrowing window of opportunity. While it was reemphasized that the EU remains committed to supporting progress, participants also sensed that the political space for meaningful advancement is not indefinite. Several referenced the momentum achieved by Albania and Montenegro, suggesting that Kosovo and Serbia risk falling behind if they do not demonstrate progress soon. “If we wait for the EU to police us and do things for us, we will never get anywhere,” one participant warned, underscoring the need for proactive leadership and domestic ownership over the normalization process. This sentiment reinforced the understanding that normalization is increasingly viewed as a measure of political maturity and preparedness for EU membership obligations.

Participants’ Perspectives

A difficult political climate. Participants discussed the domestic political constraints that complicate efforts to advance normalization. Some representatives explained that attempts to introduce more openness into public debate remain fraught with risk, as political actors are often met with accusations of betrayal when acknowledging the realities surrounding Kosovo. “Nobody talks honestly about what our real stance on Kosovo is,” one participant noted, pointing to a broader reluctance to confront long-standing narratives that shape public expectations. This dynamic narrows the space for compromise and inhibits constructive political discourse.

Internal ambiguity. Participants from Kosovo spoke about the uncertainties surrounding the interpretation and status of previous agreements, noting that this ambiguity affects institutional coordination and public perceptions. The observation that “in Kosovo, the debate is whether we have an agreement or not” reflected how differing political interpretations hinder decision-making, weaken confidence, and allow competing narratives to proliferate. These uncertainties complicate efforts to build consensus.

Polarized public narratives. Discussions also underscored the extent to which harmful public rhetoric negatively shapes the environment in both Serbia and Kosovo, amplifying defiant positions over conciliatory ones. One participant described the situation as “a competition of narratives in which the rational narrative has lost,” highlighting how emotionally charged discourse can overshadow the practical benefits of normalization.

A gap between politics and daily life. Participants stressed that normalization must become more closely aligned with the daily needs of citizens if it is to gain broader public legitimacy. Practical issues—such as mobility, documentation, educational recognition, and economic opportunity—were described as central to restoring trust. “We forget ordinary people... big questions will come anyway, but what about quality of life?” one participant asked, emphasizing that visible improvements can help rebuild confidence more effectively than strategic messaging alone.

A rare space for candid dialogue. Despite domestic constraints, participants agreed that the Solothurn Process remains a valuable space for constructive engagement where political actors can discuss sensitive issues without the pressures of public scrutiny or partisan interpretation.

Measures for Sustainable Integration of Serbs in Northern Kosovo

From rule of law to lived experience. Participants agreed that while Kosovo’s legal framework for minority rights provides an important foundation, meaningful integration requires these protections to be reflected consistently in administrative practice. They cited ongoing barriers—such as difficulties with civil registration, professional licensing, vehicle documentation, and diploma recognition—as obstacles that erode trust and generate frustration. One participant cautioned that new regulations affecting foreign citizens “could affect tens of thousands of residents,” demonstrating how policy decisions that appear technical can carry major implications for communities already facing uncertainty.

Restoring trust in institutions. The justice and security sectors were described as particularly sensitive areas requiring careful attention. Participants emphasized that the withdrawal of Serb personnel from these institutions in 2022 continues to influence perceptions of legitimacy and fairness. References to the Banjska attack and its aftermath illustrated how security incidents can reinforce community fears and create new political constraints.

A delicate moment for local governance. The recent municipal elections in northern Kosovo were seen as both a significant positive development and a potential source of tension. Participants noted that Serb participation in these elections was driven “by the necessity of the community, not pressure from Belgrade,” suggesting an emerging local agency that could support more constructive engagement. However, the transition of authority in these municipalities was described as a sensitive process that must be managed with care. Participants stressed the need for clear communication between municipal leaders and central institutions, cautioning that decisions related to staffing, symbols, and services could easily escalate if not handled responsibly.

Beyond institutions: society and identity. Participants emphasized that integration must also address social and cultural factors, as administrative reforms alone cannot transform inter-community relations. Many spoke about the persistent language barrier and encouraged greater investment in bilingual education to facilitate communication and increase access to services.

A vision of equal belonging. Throughout the discussions, participants articulated a shared long-term aspiration for a Kosovo in which all citizens—regardless of location or ethnicity—experience equal access to services, stability, and a sense of dignity. One participant expressed this vision clearly by saying that integration should mean “no difference when you are a Serb in Pristina, Leposavic, Strpce, or Peja,” reflecting a hope that institutional consistency and social inclusion can eventually strengthen trust across communities. Achieving this outcome will require sustained coordination, transparent communication, and a long-term commitment to practical and societal dimensions of integration.