

Normalization in 2026: Reigniting Political Will and Building Support

On December 9, 2025, in Rome, Italy, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG), supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFAIC) together with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), convened the next round of the Solothurn Process discussions of senior party officials from Kosovo and Serbia. This time, they were joined by representatives from Italy, Germany, France, Switzerland, and the UK. This meeting marked the third round of the Solothurn format in 2025 and aimed to reflect on discussions held throughout the year, assess lessons learned, and generate ideas for reigniting the Kosovo–Serbia normalization process in 2026. Participants broadly agreed that the Solothurn format continues to provide meaningful added value to the EU-facilitated Brussels Dialogue by offering a trusted space for political reflection and problem-solving. The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule and it does not necessarily reflect the views of individual participants, CIG, the MFAIC, or the FDFA. The report was drafted by Jeta Loshaj, CIG Associate.

Executive Summary

The discussion underscored a shared sense of urgency to restore political momentum in the Kosovo–Serbia normalization process amid growing skepticism, stalled implementation, and declining public trust. Participants broadly agreed that while the existing framework – anchored in the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements – remains valid, progress has been undermined by insufficient political will, inconsistent incentives, and weak communication with domestic constituencies. Several participants stressed that “the process cannot advance unless the parties themselves take responsibility for difficult decisions,” highlighting that normalization remains a voluntary but indispensable path toward European integration. Participants from Serbia and Kosovo emphasized the need for credible incentives from the EU linked to tangible progress, particularly in areas such as EU accession pathways, economic integration, and mobility. At the same time, participants warned that reliance on coercive measures alone risks deepening resistance rather than fostering cooperation. The meeting concluded that 2026 should focus on achievable, confidence-building steps that improve daily life, rebuild trust, and demonstrate that normalization delivers real benefits. Recommitting to implementation, enhancing moral agency, and restoring credibility – both domestically and at the EU level – were identified as essential pillars for moving forward.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Political Will and Ownership: From External Pressure to Internal Commitment. A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the persistent deficit of political will and ownership on both sides of the Dialogue. Participants noted that normalization has increasingly been framed as something imposed from outside rather than a strategic choice made in the national interest. As one participant observed, “too often, leaders speak as if things are being done to them, not by

them.” This dynamic has weakened accountability and reinforced a transactional mindset focused on rewards and penalties rather than long-term gains. Several interventions emphasized that no mediator, including the EU, can substitute the political courage by the parties themselves. The discussion highlighted the need to shift from reactive behavior to proactive leadership, including unilateral steps that improve conditions on the ground even in the absence of immediate reciprocity from the other side. Recommendations included fostering internal political dialogue within Kosovo and Serbia to rebuild consensus around normalization as a societal goal. Without such ownership, participants warned, even the most carefully designed incentives will fail to generate sustainable progress.

Between Incentives and Red Lines: Restoring Credibility to the European Perspective. The credibility of incentives emerged as one of the most contested yet central issues of the roundtable. While EU accession has been declared as the primary strategic objective by both Serbia and Kosovo, many participants questioned whether the pathway still feels attainable to citizens. Several noted that “what remains visible today are the sticks, not the carrots,” contributing to growing public disillusionment. At the same time, representatives from EU member states reaffirmed clear red lines, including the rejection of violence, key importance of preserving stability, the protection of minority rights, and respect for territorial integrity. The discussion underscored that incentives must be realistic, sequenced, and clearly communicated, ranging from progress on accession chapters and candidate status to economic integration measures such as SEPA participation and mobility schemes. Serbia wants to see clarity on its EU accession timeline. Kosovo seeks acceptance of its EU membership application. Other incentives to consider, according to the participants, 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. Participants from EU member states emphasized that the promise of EU membership for the Western Balkans remains the single strongest incentive. Participants recommended aligning incentives more closely with implementation milestones rather than abstract promises. Restoring trust, it was argued, requires demonstrating that progress is both possible and rewarded, while maintaining consistency and coherence within the EU itself.

Implementation Gaps and Reviving the Ohrid Framework Through Practical Steps. Participants broadly agreed that the core challenge is no longer the absence of agreements but the failure to implement them. The Ohrid Agreement was repeatedly cited as the central reference point, with estimates suggesting that only a fraction of its provisions have been fully implemented. One participant noted that “we are debating new ideas while the old ones remain unfinished.” The discussion emphasized that reopening or renegotiating agreed frameworks risks further delay and confusion. Instead, participants called for renewed focus on concrete, measurable implementation steps, including those related to local governance, security arrangements, and institutional reintegration in northern Kosovo. Recommendations included prioritizing technical solutions, empowering chief negotiators, and ensuring closer linkage between the EUSR’s mandate and the enlargement process. Participants stressed that implementation itself can generate momentum by rebuilding confidence and demonstrating seriousness.

Domestic Narratives and Public Trust – Changing the Story Beyond Concessions. The disconnect between political negotiations and domestic narratives was identified as a major obstacle to normalization. Participants noted that in both Kosovo and Serbia, the dialogue is often portrayed as a zero-sum concession rather than a pathway to improved security, prosperity, and dignity. As one intervention put it, “we are failing to explain why this process matters for ordinary

people.” The discussion highlighted the absence of effective communication strategies that translate technical agreements into everyday benefits. Participants recommended reframing normalization around issues such as economic opportunity, freedom of movement, youth prospects, and human security. Engaging civil society, local communities, and younger generations was seen as essential to counter entrenched mistrust and polarization. Several participants warned that without narrative change, political leaders will continue to see normalization as electorally costly. Building public support, they concluded, is not an accessory to the process but a prerequisite for its success.

Youth, Moral Agency, and Security. The role of youth and the broader human security context also featured in the discussion, with participants expressing concern over rising alienation and emigration across the Western Balkans. One participant cautioned that “if young people were at this table, they would say we are wasting their time.” Issues such as depopulation, climate risks, and lack of economic opportunity were identified as underlying drivers of instability that normalization alone cannot resolve but directly influences. Participants argued for greater moral agency, encouraging leaders to pursue initiatives simply because they are beneficial, not because they are negotiated concessions. Recommendations included expanding youth exchanges, joint educational initiatives, infrastructure projects, and practical cooperation outside the formal dialogue framework. Small, visible improvements to daily life were seen as powerful confidence-building tools. Addressing human security alongside political normalization, participants agreed, is essential to making the process relevant for future generations.

Making Progress Visible in 2026. Looking ahead in 2026, participants emphasized the importance of achievable “quick wins” that could alter the political cost-benefit calculus for leaders and rebuild trust among communities. The north of Kosovo was frequently described as a testing ground for normalization, where progress on reintegration, local governance, and security cooperation could have symbolic and practical impact. Following the smooth transition of power of the newly elected Serb mayors in the four Kosovo northern municipalities, additional suggestions included facilitating the return of judges and prosecutors and (re)integration of more Serb police officers, improving conditions in municipal institutions, and addressing visible symbols of tension such as checkpoints. Participants stressed that these steps should be framed not as incentives but as obligations that improve governance and security for all. Equally important was respect for democratic outcomes and institutional cooperation across communities. Kosovo participants emphasized that the current lifting EU measures, starting discussing Kosovo’s EU application, and moving towards next steps towards NATO would provide serious incentives for moving forward in 2026. Serbian participants mentioned opening of new clusters in their country’s EU negotiations. The discussion concluded that while bold breakthroughs may be unrealistic in the short term, incremental, well-communicated progress in 2026 could help restore momentum and credibility to the normalization process.

Participants

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