

Rethinking Normalization

Introduction

On June 1, 2026, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened a workshop in Nis, Serbia, with experts and analysts from Kosovo and representatives of political parties from Serbia, to discuss the current state and prospects of the Belgrade-Pristina normalization process. The meeting took place against a backdrop of growing political uncertainty in both Serbia and Kosovo, increasing geopolitical volatility, and an ongoing debate about the future of the EU enlargement process. The event was organized in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES).

The discussion focused on several interconnected issues: the implementation of existing agreements, the political and security situation of Kosovo Serbs, the role of the European Union and other international actors, prospects for political change in Serbia and Kosovo, and the contribution that civil society and public debate can make to rebuilding trust and creating conditions for a more sustainable normalization process.

A central theme that emerged throughout the workshop was the widening gap between formal negotiations and realities on the ground. While political dialogue formally continues, participants repeatedly underscored the absence of a shared vision of normalization, persistent shortcomings in the implementation of agreed commitments, increasing societal polarization, and the lack of meaningful communication between the communities most directly affected by the process.

This report summarizes the main themes and insights that emerged from the discussion and presents key observations, conclusions, and recommendations. The views reflected herein do not necessarily represent a consensus among participants, nor do they reflect the official positions of CIG and FES. The workshop was conducted under the Chatham House Rule. The report was prepared by Mirjana Djordjevic, CIG Associate, and Igor Novakovic, CIG Senior Adviser.

Key Takeaways from the Discussion

Implementation Gaps and Political Drift

Several participants described the current state of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue as one of stagnation. Although communication channels remain formally open and several technical arrangements have recently been agreed, many questioned whether the process is producing tangible political or societal results.

A recurring observation was that the dialogue has gradually moved away from fundamental political questions, toward crisis management and the negotiation of technical arrangements. While such agreements remain important, participants argued that implementation has become the

central challenge. Despite formal commitments reached by the parties, citizens continue to face administrative obstacles and practical difficulties in their daily lives.

The question of sequencing remains particularly contentious. Key stakeholders continue to disagree over the order in which obligations should be implemented, while additional political conditions introduced by both sides have further complicated progress. As a result, agreements are often subject to competing interpretations, limiting their effectiveness as mechanisms for resolving practical issues and advancing normalization.

Political uncertainty in Kosovo, including prolonged institutional deadlock and discussions about possible early elections, has narrowed the political space for compromise. At the same time, domestic political tensions and democratic challenges in Serbia have reduced the willingness of political actors to engage openly on Kosovo-related issues. In this environment, normalization is frequently subordinated to short-term political calculations rather than pursued as a long-term strategic objective.

The aftermath of the Banjska attack was identified as particularly significant. Participants noted that it exposed the fragility of the existing security and political environment and highlighted the substantial gap between political agreements and realities on the ground. While international actors often describe the security situation as relatively stable, many underlying tensions remain unresolved and continue to shape perceptions and relations among affected communities.

Hence, the primary challenge facing the dialogue is no longer the absence of agreements, but their ineffective implementation in an increasingly fragile and deteriorating environment.

No Shared Vision, Little Trust

Perhaps the most significant challenge identified during the discussion was the absence of a shared understanding of what normalization ultimately entails, both internally within Kosovo and Serbia and between them. A participant from Kosovo noted that different actors continue to interpret the concept through fundamentally different lenses. For some, normalization primarily means coexistence and practical cooperation; for others, it implies mutual recognition; while many political actors avoid articulating clear long-term objectives. This lack of conceptual clarity has become a persistent obstacle to implementation and broader public engagement.

The ambiguity surrounding the process has contributed to a wider crisis of trust. Several participants from Serbia emphasized that citizens often lack reliable information about the substance of agreements, the status of their implementation, and their practical implications. Limited transparency has created space for misinformation, political manipulation, and competing narratives, further complicating efforts to build public confidence in the dialogue.

Nationalist rhetoric was identified as a major barrier to progress. Political actors on both sides continue to rely on identity-based narratives and historical grievances to mobilize support and reinforce political legitimacy. Such rhetoric undermines trust between communities and narrows the political space necessary for compromise. Hate speech, mutual accusations, and public stigmatization further deepen divisions and make constructive engagement increasingly difficult.

Several participants also observed that the normalization process has become highly personalized and closely tied to the political calculations of individual leaders. This dynamic has hindered the development of broader societal ownership and limited opportunities for alternative voices and approaches to emerge. As a result, the process remains vulnerable to shifts in domestic political agendas and leadership priorities.

All of this indicates that there is still no shared understanding of what normalization should ultimately mean in either political or practical terms, while trust remains low. Nationalist rhetoric and hate speech continue to undermine prospects for reconciliation and compromise. Public trust in the dialogue process is further weakened by ambiguity, inadequate communication, and persistent political polarization.

Kosovo Serbs and Politics of Uncertainty

Participants described a profound transformation of the institutional and political environment in which Kosovo Serbs operate. Following the withdrawal of Serb representatives from Kosovo institutions and subsequent developments in northern Kosovo, local communities have experienced significant changes affecting governance structures, access to public services, and perceptions of security and legitimate political representation.

Several participants argued that the integration of Serbian-supported institutions into Kosovo's institutional framework has often been perceived by local communities not as institutional transformation, but as institutional disappearance. In their view, the transition has generated uncertainty regarding the continuity of services, political representation, and the preservation of mechanisms through which local communities had previously addressed their needs and concerns.

Security remains a prominent concern. Although large-scale violence has been avoided, many participants emphasized the persistence of insecurity, particularly in northern Kosovo. Trust between local communities and public institutions remains limited, while many residents perceive existing governance arrangements as increasingly centralized and insufficiently responsive to local priorities. These perceptions continue to shape public attitudes toward both Kosovo institutions and the broader normalization process.

Several participants from both Serbia and Kosovo also highlighted the absence of meaningful political dialogue involving Kosovo Serbs. Communication between Kosovo institutions and Kosovo Serb representatives remains limited, while divisions within the Serbian community itself further complicate efforts to articulate coherent political interests and policy priorities. A speaker from Kosovo stressed that sustainable normalization will be difficult to achieve without more substantive engagement with Kosovo Serbs and a clearer vision of their future political, social, and economic position within Kosovo.

At the same time, a range of practical issues continues to affect everyday life. Participants pointed to persistent challenges related to the recognition of diplomas, access to citizenship rights, telecommunications, residency documentation, social services, and administrative procedures. Despite previous agreements intended to address many of these matters, implementation remains incomplete in several areas. As a result, unresolved issues continue to affect employment opportunities, freedom of movement, access to public services, and the overall quality of life of local residents.

Participants concluded that Kosovo Serbs remain central to the normalization process, yet there is still no clear long-term vision for their political and institutional future. Despite numerous agreements, practical issues affecting citizens' daily lives remain unresolved.

The EU Incentive Gap

European integration remains the key strategic framework for normalization. However, participants noted that the credibility of this framework has increasingly come into question, particularly as the transformative influence of the EU enlargement process has diminished. While support for EU membership remains substantial across the region, persistent uncertainty over the pace and prospects of enlargement has weakened incentives for political compromise and long-term reform.

The absence of a credible and clearly articulated accession perspective was identified as a major structural challenge. Participants argued that, without tangible rewards for progress, political leaders have fewer incentives to undertake politically sensitive decisions, while citizens become increasingly skeptical about the benefits of reforms, regional cooperation, and the normalization process itself.

At the same time, participants emphasized that normalization and European integration remain fundamentally interconnected. Serbia's and Kosovo's EU paths will depend significantly on improved bilateral relations and the implementation of existing commitments. Conversely, continued stagnation in the dialogue process risks delaying European integration and undermining broader efforts to strengthen regional stability, cooperation, and long-term development.

EU integration is the key leverage for advancing normalization between the two capitals and societies. At the same time, the credibility of EU enlargement remains closely linked to tangible progress toward normalization.

Rebuilding Normalization

Although participants expressed considerable concern about current trends, the discussion also identified several avenues for future progress. A recurring recommendation was to place greater emphasis on practical cooperation and on issues that directly affect citizens' daily lives. Participants argued that progress in areas such as education, mobility, documentation, public services, trade, infrastructure, and economic cooperation could generate tangible benefits, improve conditions for local communities, and help rebuild trust between the parties.

Another prominent theme was the need for stronger societal engagement through a meaningful bottom-up approach. Participants stressed the importance of fostering direct contacts between communities, supporting youth cooperation, promoting academic and professional exchanges, and strengthening regional networks. Such initiatives were seen as essential for reducing mistrust, challenging entrenched stereotypes, and creating opportunities for meaningful interaction beyond formal political processes.

The discussion also underscored the importance of developing a broader political vision for normalization. Participants noted that technical arrangements, while necessary, are insufficient to sustain long-term progress on their own. Lasting normalization will require political leadership capable of articulating a credible and inclusive future based on cooperation, European integration,

economic development, and shared prosperity. Without such a vision, the process risks remaining reactive, fragmented, and vulnerable to recurring political crises.

Finally, participants repeatedly emphasized that respect for human rights, property rights, the rule of law, and the protection of minority communities must remain at the center of any sustainable settlement. Without meaningful progress on these fundamental concerns, broader trust-building efforts are unlikely to produce lasting results.

This indicates that sustainable normalization requires a gradual, inclusive, and society-centered approach, focused on trust-building and practical cooperation.

Conclusions

The dialogue remains formally intact but strategically uncertain. The discussions in Nis demonstrated that the normalization process remains in a period of strategic uncertainty. While the dialogue framework remains formally intact, persistent implementation deficits, deepening political polarization, and the absence of a shared vision of normalization continue to constrain meaningful progress. Participants noted that the process is increasingly affected by the disconnect between high-level political negotiations and the realities experienced by communities on the ground, raising questions about its long-term effectiveness and public legitimacy.

Normalization remains indispensable. Despite profound disagreements and recurring political tensions, dialogue continues to represent the only viable mechanism for managing disputes, reducing the risk of renewed instability, and creating opportunities for future cooperation. However, sustainable progress will require more than political negotiations alone. It will also depend on broader societal engagement, stronger democratic institutions, a credible EU perspective, and sustained efforts to rebuild trust between communities and institutions.

Progress requires moving beyond crisis management toward a citizen-centered strategic vision. Instead of a crisis-management model and transactional bargaining the process must be anchored in a long-term strategic vision that places citizens at its core, prioritizes practical cooperation, safeguards human and minority rights, strengthens the rule of law, and promotes inclusive economic and social development. Only through such an approach can the foundations be laid for a more stable, prosperous, and integrated European future for both Serbia and Kosovo.