

Belgrade-Pristina Relations and Role of the Serbian Opposition

Introduction

On January 31, 2020 in Belgrade, Serbia, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened a group of representatives of Serbia's opposition parties to discuss their role in an eventual new Belgrade-Pristina negotiation process in the context of their announced boycott of the upcoming parliamentary elections. The participants discussed in detail the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and possible solutions. Given the complexity of the political situation in Serbia and the increasing polarization between the ruling and the opposition parties, the focus of the meeting was also on the upcoming parliamentary elections and possible effects of the announced boycott.

The opposition party representatives argued that the current Serbian government is undermining the media freedom, independence of institutions, and that it does not respect democratic norms and procedures, and thus they will boycott the elections. After several rounds of dialogues facilitated by civil society and several European Parliament members, most of opposition representatives concluded that the election boycott is the only option. If the boycott takes place, the question is what will be the impact and consequences of this permanently polarized system on the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue.

The roundtable is part of an initiative on Belgrade-Pristina relations implemented in cooperation with and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The following suggestions and conclusions are not necessarily based on consensus at the roundtable but merely represent opinions of individual or several participants.

The opposition's views on the dialogue and possible solution

The opposition representatives expressed critical attitudes towards the current state of dialogue and how it is conducted. They offered various opinions on the possible solution of the Serbia-Kosovo issue. Most of the participants favored some sort of dialogue with Kosovo. They did not oppose the dialogue but pointed out, among others, the lack of inclusiveness in the current process. In particular, they were critical that the parliament was not included in it in a substantial way. Some of the participants disapproved the decision by the opposition to boycott the last session of the parliament where Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic presented the results of the process. "Parliament should be included in the process but the current boycott of the institutions is not bringing anything substantial and the opposition missed a chance to express its opinions about the

dialogue.” Others disagreed, claiming that even if the opposition MPs participated in the session, it would not bring anything substantial.

“The opposition has two options: either to clear the path to the government to solve the issue or to capitalize on this issue by opposing the dialogue or its results,” a participant said, and added that the government should find a way to include the opposition in the process. Many said that Kosovo’s new Prime Minister Albin Kurti has promised that he will find a way to include Kosovo’s opposition in the process, and that something like that should also happen in Serbia, but both the ruling majority and parts of the opposition seem to avoid this issue. A participant outlined that it is difficult for the opposition to state their honest opinion on Kosovo unless the opinion is highly patriotic/nationalistic. Any opposition voice favoring Kosovo’s recognition is attacked by the pro-government media and destroyed in the social media. In this atmosphere, voicing your honest opinion is virtually a political death sentence.

The process should contain a political perspective, and there is nothing on the horizon. Lack of a clear EU future for both sides and insufficient EU and US attention to the quality of democracy in Serbia make the situation worse. “The Kosovo issue preserves the government in power and corruption and similar issues do not matter for the West. It seems that they are ready to tolerate them,” a speaker outlined.

Many of participants said that the current dialogue process is weak and that the most productive approach would be a heavy international engagement like in Dayton in 1995. Others said that this is not realistic, that the current process is incremental in nature and that the key is to implement what has been agreed. “We should talk about the price of not resolving the issue for both societies as Kosovo in 2010 is not the same as Kosovo in 2020 and there we should find our answers about what are the goals of the process,” a speaker said.

Several participants were concerned that the problem is in the approach in solving the status. The process should not focus on a timeframe, but on a substantial framework and steps for normalization. “We always start from the status and move further and further away from the solution,” a speaker said. Another speaker said that the approach in Serbia should be based on the following points: “1) Kosovo is populated by Albanians; 2) Kosovo is also Serbian as there are Serbs living there, cultural and religious monuments, and there is Serb property; 3) Serbia does not have any sovereignty over Kosovo in reality.” Thus, “it is not a question anymore of if Serbia will recognize Kosovo but when.” A speaker said that the main problem is the legacy of the war, and there are victims about whom the sides in the dialogue do not have a unified opinion. “Thus we are in some kind of a loop, always returning to the issue of status as the most important.” Several other participants agreed that it is unrealistic to expect the status issue to be solved soon. They emphasized that Serbia should recognize “everything besides *de facto* recognition.”

Three speakers agreed that Serbia cannot ignore its constitution and the UNSC Resolution 1244. Thus, one speaker outlined, “any solution has to be in line with those

documents.” However, they said that more realistic is that Kosovo issue will not be solved and that Serbia will not enter the EU.

Many favored a quick solution, but some emphasized that societies are not ready to make substantial steps forward. Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo President Hashim Thaci agreed on partition, but it was not accepted by the populations. Others claimed that the partition of Kosovo is the only realistic solution. “We shall not enter the EU if we do not recognize Kosovo and the partition is the only way for Serbian population to accept it.”

One participant was particularly blunt about President’s Vucic and EU capability of resolving the issue. “Vucic does not have the will while Europe does not have a clue.” Many criticized the opposition too but not being able to articulate a coherent platform that could compete successfully with the government’s approach.

Upcoming parliamentary elections, announced boycott, and the issue of Kosovo

The participants discussed the opposition’s announced boycott of the upcoming parliamentary elections in the context of the Kosovo issue. Without the overall democratization, several pro-boycott speakers said that any agreement with the current leadership would not be accepted by the people. “For any kind of solution there is a need for free and fair elections.” The idea of boycott is that Vucic and his ruling coalition will not have sufficient legitimacy for major decisions – and that leaves the question if any kind of agreement he or a member of his elite signs will not be legitimate and not substantial and lasting.

Several other speakers, who were quite critical of the boycott, said that if they are not in the institutions, the ruling elite would continue doing what they do without them anyway. “It is an illusion that people would go to the streets again” a speaker said. Others agreed that “if they (the opposition) step back, the ruling elite will have space to do whatever they like, including the issue of Kosovo.”

Quite a few expect that the EU will react positively to the boycott and act similar as they did in the case of North Macedonia. “North Macedonia was an exception, a participant disagreed, and the EU and the West in general will not be engaged in such a way.” The EU representatives do not understand the boycott as an approach, as they emphasized many times during the dialogue between the government and the opposition that they mediated. Thus, the opposition should have at least representation in the parliament, even if they boycott the plenary session, a speaker outlined.

A speaker said that it is likely that the boycott will lead to the disappearance of this opposition, as it happened in Kosovo in 2008, when Serbia pushed Kosovo Serbs leaders to boycott the elections. Then new leaders appeared and most of the previous leadership became politically insignificant.

Participants

Balša Božović, President, Belgrade Board, Democratic Party

Gordana Čomić, General Secretary, Democratic Party

Vladimir Đurić, Member, Parliament of Serbia, Party of Modern Serbia

Marko Đurišić, Vice President, Social Democratic Party

Shpjetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Pavle Grbović, Deputy President, Free Citizens Movement

Nada Lazić, Member, Main Board, League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina

Petar Miletić, Member, Presidency, Free Citizens Movement

Igor Novaković, Representative in Serbia, Council for Inclusive Governance

Marija Janjušević, Member, Parliament of Serbia, People's Movement „Dveri“

Jean-Luc Oesch, Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Switzerland in Serbia

Sanda Rašković Ivić, Vice President, People's Party

Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Dobrica Veselinović, Activist, Don't Drown Belgrade

Janko Veselinović, President, Movement for Reversal

Emma Quaedvlieg, International Relations Adviser to the Mayor of Sabac and President of the Together for Serbia Party

Zoran Živković, President, New Party