

Kosovo's North and Pristina-Belgrade Relations

Introduction

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on June 26-27, 2014, in Istanbul, Turkey, a roundtable for political party and civil society representatives from Kosovo and Serbia. The discussion addressed the establishment of local institutions in Kosovo's north and the normalization of relations between Pristina and Belgrade. Participants included representatives of Kosovo's Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), Self-Determination Movement (VV), Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), and Kosovo's government and President's office; and Serbia's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), New Democratic Party (NDS), and an official of the Office for Kosovo of the Serbia's government. A number of analysts from Kosovo and Serbia also took part.

The roundtable is part of a project on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The first day of the discussion focused on the establishment of local institutions in the four municipalities in the north and their relations with Kosovo's central institutions. The participants listed a number of obstacles that are delaying the formation of the municipal institutions. Many Kosovo Albanian speakers held Belgrade--rather than the mayors in the north--responsible for the delay. The mayors were elected in accordance with Kosovo law, but they remain against integration into Kosovo's system, arguing that the elections they took part in were "status neutral" and that local institutions therefore should also be status neutral.

Hence, the Kosovo Albanian speakers argued that Belgrade is the real culprit for "non-compliance" with the Brussels agreement. They suggested that the international community should put more pressure on Belgrade, rather than on the local representatives in the north because "they simply implement Belgrade's decisions." Many of the Serb speakers disagreed, noting that the problem is also in Pristina. They argued that the Kosovo government is not willing to make any compromises, even on small technical issues such as municipal symbols and statutes, that took months to be resolved. Both sides, however, urged the European Union to get more involved in the implementation process.

The second day of discussions addressed the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. The majority of speakers said that the dialogue should continue and focus both on the implementation of the previous agreements and on reaching new ones. Some Kosovo Albanian representatives were against the continuation of the dialogue in this format,

arguing that Kosovo was not treated as a state and that only Serbia benefited from it.. They said that if their parties form the new government, the dialogue will continue but in a different format, and most likely with some conditions. Participants called on the European Union to take more responsibility in the process and to serve not only a facilitator of discussions but also as a monitor of implementation, enforcer of agreements. The European Union should also be ready to provide interpretation on the agreed points where necessary.

The following is a summary of the roundtable. To encourage frank discussions, remarks have not been attributed to specific speakers. The participants took part in the roundtable in their personal capacities and their positions do not necessarily reflect those of organizations they represent.

Establishing local institutions in the north

There was consensus among the participants that the Brussels agreement is not being implemented according to the deadlines. But while the Kosovo Albanian participants blamed Belgrade, new mayors, and the remaining parallel institutions in the north, such as so-called civilian defense and Serbian “provisional” municipal executive offices, the Serb speakers said that Pristina has stalled the process by not being willing to make the necessary compromises to go ahead with the implementation. A participant reported that the issue of municipal symbols and statutes has been resolved and the municipalities are expected to receive their budgets from the government. Municipal revenues are insignificant in Kosovo, especially in the north where no taxes are being collected, thus municipalities rely primarily on government grants. Currently, Kosovo’s north municipalities have no independent financial sources; they have been subsidized by Belgrade, but the Brussels agreement calls for phasing out such funding. Local authorities in the north must figure out how to resolve the financing of public enterprises in their territories, as it would be impossible to do through a typical Kosovo municipal budget. In order to survive and be successful such enterprises will have to operate according to free market rules.

Implementation of the agreement is lagging behind because nobody seems to be in a rush, an analyst said. Furthermore, the transfer of power from one pair of institutions to another is complicated, even when it takes place between institutions that are friendly to each other. Participants reported a number of political and technical obstacles. Technical problems are similar to the ones that other Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo’s south faced during their formation, but political problems are more complex. This stems from the fact that the formation of the municipalities in the north is based on an agreement driven by the national interests of Serbia and Kosovo rather than by the need to resolve the north dispute and normalize the situation on the ground.

A speaker said that the Brussels agreement was a result of Serbia’s ambitions to make progress towards the EU, and the pace of the implementation will be dependent and connected to the pace of Serbia’s progress towards membership. “Belgrade will take some positive steps when it is close to getting something, such as the candidate status or

date for negotiations, from Brussels.” Another speaker noted that the mayors in the north are not the problem, adding that “the mayors are doing everything they are asked to do; they are not in a position to defy Belgrade, even if they want to.” He concluded that the source of the problem as well as the solution is in Belgrade and that the international community should increase pressure on Belgrade to respect the deadlines of the Brussels agreement.

A speaker familiar with the technical aspects of the formation of the municipalities reported weak results on the implementation. He said that the north municipalities use only about seven percent of their budgets, an increase from two percent from the last month. The hurdles for getting their budgets have been eliminated, such as the statutes and symbols, but the mayors seem to be reluctant to receive funds from Kosovo’s institutions. He reported that the mayors are taking very small, cautious steps towards integration. “Small enough not to be seen as accepting Kosovo’s institutions and big enough not to violate the law explicitly and go to another local election.”

Another participant asked the Kosovo government for technical support for the municipalities in the north pointing out that some assistance is needed to help new municipal bodies understand how to function within the Kosovo system and in accordance with Kosovo’s laws that are quite different from those of Serbia.

A speaker from the north said that even small steps are non-existent. “Kosovo municipalities do not function at all, we all know it, and not a single local service is provided by them.” However, it was reported that the services continue to be provided by the Serbian institutions. The speaker added that the parliamentary elections were not regular, that “they were manipulated by [former Serbian minister responsible for Kosovo and current Serbian Minister of Labor] Aleksandar Vulin with prior blessing by Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic.” He added that the northern mayors and other elected officials do not care about their citizens because simply they are not their electorate. These officials were selected by Serbia and they see the Serbian government as their primary constituency, responding only to orders from Belgrade. He said that the international community should be tougher with Belgrade and the local officials in the north. He reported that the local assemblies are not functioning either. “Local assemblies do not hold sessions; they sometimes have meetings with the mayors and with Vulin,” so no institutional functioning exists. There is no communication between the mayors and the citizens. The citizens do not know what the mayors are responsible for. “Let’s not pretend as if we know nothing, as if everything is going well,” concluded the speaker.

A number of speakers argued that the reason for weak results in the north is the lack of clarity of the Brussels agreement. But another speaker said that the Brussels agreement is “very clear; it is unclear only for those who do not like it.” He added that the reason the municipalities are not functioning is because those in charge do not want them to function, and not because it is not clear how to form them. “We keep lying to each other, sign agreements, and one year later we do not have even the basic elements, such as the municipal statutes,” a speaker said. He blamed Belgrade for the lack of progress in the north but also Pristina for being reluctant to implement many things that are in the

Ahtisaari plan. He noted that from his experience in the south, the formation of the municipalities is a political issue, not a technical one. “Technical issues can be resolved in a day.” He suggested that Serbs create the statute for the Association of Municipalities, its mandate, clarify its responsibilities, and identify the sources of funding. He added that Pristina should also give more responsibilities and funds to the north municipalities, but also that the mayors in the north need to know and accept that they are Kosovo mayors.

Though they were invited to the roundtable, and one of them confirmed his participation, the mayors of the north municipalities did not come. A speaker suggested that they should take part in such forums and explain their difficulties in getting the municipalities running, and not “simply barricade themselves against every initiative.” He suggested that Belgrade should allow the local institutions to cooperate with Pristina and begin to provide services. Regarding the Association of Municipalities, he said that it is simply inter-municipal cooperation but it does not give new rights to municipalities. The mayors will remain the main actors and most responsible.

The removal of the barricade in Mitrovica and the re-blocking of the bridge with a “park” was also taken up by the participants during the discussions. A speaker said that the barricade or the park is not about improving rights, but it helps to keep tensions high, with the intention of “keeping people’s focus on patriotism.” If tensions were to be removed, people would ask for jobs, better education and healthcare. “Tensions and patriotism feed the people and enable the political leaders to continue to have a good life.” Responding to the lack of funding for the north municipalities, the speaker said that one can not give money to municipalities that are not formed and do not function. The behavior of the Serbian government is not clear. Whether it signed the agreement just to get the EU candidate status and a negotiation date or whether it is actually interested in resolving the dispute remains an open question, the speaker added. He predicted that institutions in the north would not begin to integrate as long as they continue getting money from Belgrade.

Participants concluded that the mayors in the north should nominate their municipal directors, complete the remaining administrative tasks to receive their budgets, form the municipal administration, resolve remaining symbols’ issues, put together a development strategy, and begin to implement projects.

Normalization of Relations

The dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade has stalled because of elections first in Serbia and then in Kosovo. Many expect the dialogue to resume after Kosovo forms its new government, but few know what new issues it will address and in what format. The Serbian government says it is ready to resume the dialogue. But critics point out at the lack of progress in the implementation of the Brussels agreement. “Belgrade is always ready to sign agreements because it knows it does not have to implement them,” a speaker said.

Kosovo parties are also in favor of continuing the dialogue, but in a different format, and some, like the Self-Determination Movement, insist on a number of conditions for Serbia. A speaker said that the Brussels dialogue has produced only crisis and tensions. As far as the north is concerned, “the dialogue has been a disaster,” the speaker argued. Another speaker explained that even though his party supported the dialogue, it is not happy with its results, adding that, if in power, his party will change the format of the dialogue and link it with the implementation. “What good are agreements that are not implemented?” The Kosovo speakers said that the future dialogue should deal only with interstate relations, and not with Kosovo’s internal issues. Another speaker said that Brussels should push Belgrade to become more constructive, and to take Kosovo out of its constitution. “It is difficult to have a genuine dialogue with someone who claims your land is his.”

The international community continues to carry the weight of mediation between Kosovo and Serbia. Though the majority of the speakers suggested a more intense involvement of the international community in the dialogue and in the implementation process, some were skeptical such involvement would produce more results, given “EU’s reduced leverage on Serbia,” now that Serbia has begun the negotiation process. Some, however, said that the EU should be a formal guarantor of the implementation of the agreements, and “not leave implementation to the good will of governments in Pristina and Belgrade.”

Despite its slow implementation, a group of speakers argued that the Brussels agreement was a “big step, maybe a weak big step, but still a big step,” given the circumstances under which it was reached. The agreement has made many things possible that were unthinkable just months before it was reached. The speaker said that maybe some people had higher expectations which consequently resulted in dissatisfaction with the process. “It’s simply not realistic to expect Serbia to help Kosovo with the UN membership or with recognitions by the five EU members.” While the speakers said that attempts have to be made to improve the process, they acknowledged that it is still better to have weak agreements than no agreements.

A participant suggested that Pristina should prioritize “normalization of Kosovo” rather than normalization of relations with Serbia. Kosovo citizens face a number of economic challenges while the Kosovo government spends most of the time dealing with Serbia. The speaker said furthermore that the EU has not been as fair to Kosovo, giving Serbia the negotiating date just for signing a paper, but not implementing it.

Conclusion

The north dispute is a reflection of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Asked to translate the current functionality of north municipalities into percentages, a speaker said that they function about seven percent since they use only seven percent of their budgets. He added that this percentage reflects the improvement of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, which before the Brussels dialogue was close to zero. If we look at the north as an isolated issue, we will miss the big picture, another speaker noted. The majority of

participants argued that Belgrade is the main address to file potential complaints regarding non-implementation of the Brussels agreement, not the mayors in the north.

The participants favored a more autonomous and competent local leadership in the north. Belgrade has been micromanaging local politics in the north for a long time, creating a dependency that will have a crippling effect on the development of the region. The “peace park” built on the bridge in Mitrovica was considered by Kosovo Albanian speakers as a step backward in the process, while Serb participants said that this is a step forward. Many Serb participants suggested that Pristina should show more willingness to compromise regarding the formation of the new institutions in the north.

What transpired once again during the discussion was that the municipalities in the north do not see it in their interest or advantage to integrate into Kosovo’s system. Nor do they have the impression, that Pristina is actually interested in their integration.

Regarding the normalization of relations through the Brussels dialogue and subsequent agreement, many participants were not happy with the results. However, none of them had expected that the agreement would be implemented in time. While the majority suggested the dialogue could be organized in a different format, they supported the continuation of an incremental process, rather than shifting the focus on a search for a comprehensive agreement.

List of Participants

Ilir Deda, Member, Self-Determination Movement

Jelena Djokic, Advisor to the Mayor of Zvecan

Sadri Ferati, Member of the General Council, Democratic League of Kosovo

Ardian Gjini, Deputy Chairman, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo

Adrijana Hodzic, Principal Executive Officer, Mitrovica North Administrative Office

Dusan Kozarev, Assistant Director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, Government of Serbia

Leon Malazogu, Executive Director, Democracy for Development Institute

Ljubisa Mijacic, Analyst, Zubin Potok

Petar Miletic, Former Deputy Speaker, Kosovo Parliament

Besnik Osmani, Secretary General, Ministry of Local Government Administration of Kosovo

Krstimir Pantic, Member of the Serbian Parliament, Serbian Progressive Party

Lulzim Peci, Executive Director, Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development

Dejan Radenkovic, Member of the Serbian Parliament, Socialist Party of Serbia

Nenad Radosavljevic, Board Director, Network of Serb TV Stations in Kosovo

Branko Ruzic, Member of Serbian Parliament, Socialist Party of Serbia

Besa Shahini, Senior Analyst, European Stability Initiative

Jelena Trivan, Director, Center for European Policies and Values

Janko Veselinovic, Member of Serbian Parliament, New Democratic Party

Arber Vllahiu, Chief of Staff of the President of Kosovo

Shpjetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Alex Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Jean-Luc Oesch, Chargé d’Affaires, Embassy of Switzerland in Serbia

Talia Wohl, Program Officer, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland