

Normalization in Uncertain Times

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) gathered a group of Serbian and Kosovo experts in Pancevo, Serbia, on May 17, 2025, to discuss the future of Kosovo-Serbia normalization. The meeting also addressed the shifting global and European geopolitics, declining international attention to the Western Balkans, and political instability in both Serbia and Kosovo. Participants said that the EU remains the only actor with a concrete offer and commitment to the region—and the only one able to move the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue forward. The discussion focused on prospects for renewed dialogue and the role civil society can play as the political space narrows.

Held under Chatham House Rule, the meeting was supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Office in Belgrade. Igor Novakovic, CIG's Senior Associate, prepared the report. CIG assumes sole responsibility for its content.

Between local deadlock and international shifts

EU's High Representative Kaja Kallas and Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue Peter Sorensen have expressed strong support for normalization during the current EU mandate. Yet, the path forward remains unclear. "We are stuck," the High Representative recently admitted. A participant described the current situation as "extremely confusing—like a boxer trying to regain consciousness after a knockdown," making it difficult to focus on anything, let alone the dialogue.

Both Kosovo and Serbia face internal instability. In Kosovo, the failure to elect the parliament speaker may lead to early elections. In Serbia, ongoing protests since November 2024 have shaken the government. With both societies polarized, there is little room for dialogue or concrete results.

A participant said that technical solutions already exist, but have consistently been rejected. "Everybody knows what normalization entails—good relations between two sovereign countries." The true obstacle is years of anti-normalization rhetoric. Now, in the context of student protests, any concession to Pristina by Belgrade is seen as "national treason." Meanwhile, Serbia's influence on the ground in Kosovo is shrinking, while the Kosovo government steadily consolidates control in the north. For now, the best possible outcome is to maintain peace and to reopen communication.

Some argued that no progress on the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities (ASM) or the implementation of other agreements can happen without political change. Nationalist rhetoric continues to poison the public and divide communities. Any concession or move is made tactically, not strategically, lacking a vision for reconciliation, stability, or peace. The dialogue,

participants agreed, is disconnected from citizens. Even major breakthroughs like the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements are seen as temporary measures, not long-term solutions.

Rather than forcing the dialogue, participants suggested, the EU facilitator should focus on building stronger political support within EU member states. “Clearer and more unified EU messaging is needed.” The EU should also work with civil society and media to shape a new public narrative on normalization. A participant made a proposal: the EU should adopt a policy on gradual normalization—setting clear expectations and a timeline. The EU should also consider deterrents for those who “cause trouble,” and reward for actors who are constructive.

The broader EU strategy for the Western Balkans should present accessions as the consolidation of Europe. The EU High Representative recently stated that the EU “needs a solution through normalization or any other means,” hinting at possible new approaches, including an international conference. She also emphasized that the US should be on board, as it remains the only actor with enough leverage over both sides.

However, the US is likely waiting for a new government in Kosovo. A participant warned that if the US faces failures elsewhere—especially in the Middle East or Ukraine—it may try to impose a quick deal between Kosovo and Serbia, sidelining the EU.

Civil Society Navigating Change

Civil society in Serbia and Kosovo is struggling—caught between reduced funding and political uncertainty. Once key advocates for normalization, CSOs now risk losing momentum. Another challenge is the rise of GONGOs—government organized NGOs—that “receive large funding from the EU and other major donors but promote anti-normalization and nationalistic agendas.

Despite these challenges, civil society remains vital, especially when governments are not talking. CSOs are bridge-builders but they can not substitute for political will. A participant stressed that the EU must actively support those CSOs working for normalization. For example, the EUSR could support Serbia and Kosovo CSO meetings ahead of official negotiations, helping strengthen their voice.

“Normalization has been a dialogue between political elites,” a participant said. “We need to make it a dialogue between societies.”

A participant proposed a “Coalition for Dialogue,”—a platform of CSOs that could support the EU process as an informal channel. The first step could be a joint letter from CSOs to EU officials outlining their shared vision for normalization. Youth cooperation could be an element of this coalition—modeled on the Franco-German example and separate from the Regional Youth Cooperation Office.

For any of this to work, funding must be sustained and strategic. The EU needs a less bureaucratic, more political approach to supporting civil society.

Key Takeaways

The following reflect participants' diverse views, not necessarily a consensus.

- **No major progress expected in 2025.** With protests in Serbia and political deadlock in Kosovo, meaningful dialogue this year is unlikely. The EU should empower its EUSR to prepare a strong long-term strategy for “gradual normalization,” help shift public narratives, and support CSO engagement.
- **The EU should rebrand enlargement as “European consolidation.”** Within that framework, the EU should either reform the dialogue format or consider new alternative solutions—like an international conference.
- **Support friends of normalization.** Rather than solely relying on political leaderships, the EU should engage more with individuals and organizations who actively promote normalization.
- **US support is crucial but uncertain.** Traditionally with the greatest leverage over both parties but now focused on crises and issues elsewhere, Washington may potentially push for “quick fix,” if efforts in the Middle East or Ukraine falter, possibly sidelining the EU.
- **Not all CSOs support normalization.** A significant problem is that many CSOs are GONGOs that primarily support their government positions rather than normalization. The EU should align its support more closely with its normalization goals.
- **The EU should back a Serbia-Kosovo CSO coalition.** A joint civil society platform could outline a shared vision for normalization, opening new space in the process. The Coalition could serve as an informal initiative that would also support the Special Representative’s efforts to promote normalization.

Participants

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