

Dialogue Frozen, Trust Broken

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened a discussion on May 8, 2025, in Gracanica, Kosovo, bringing together civil society activists, analysts, and journalists from Albanian and Serb communities to discuss Kosovo's ongoing challenges with integrating the Serb community and the future of the dialogue with Serbia. Held under Chatham House Rule and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the conversation reflected personal insights, not the official positions of the organizations represented. Jeta Loshaj, CIG's Kosovo Associate, drafted the report.

The discussion came shortly after Kosovo's February parliamentary elections and offered an opportunity to reflect on shifting dynamics, emerging opportunities, and whether an eventual new government can take bolder steps to build trust—both between Kosovo Serbs and institutions and between Kosovo and Serbia.

There was frustration with the tense political and ethnic climate and with ongoing Assembly deadlock, but also cautious optimism—if political actors chose dialogue over division. Many also expressed concern over global distractions possibly weakening the EU's commitment as facilitator of the Kosovo-Serbia normalization process.

Key takeaways and recommendations

Restore political dialogue through legitimate channels

Many participants underlined that dialogue with Kosovo Serbs must go through elected representatives. Attempts of Albanian parties to sideline Lista Srpska (SL) have only deepened mistrust. The government and political parties must lead the way in re-engaging SL formally, while Serb representatives must move beyond ethnic agendas and contribute to broader governance.

Ensure fair, inclusive local elections

The participation of Serbs in the February elections was a promising sign. But upcoming local elections are a critical test. Conditions must allow full participation—free from intimidation or interference. That means Serbs running polling stations in Serb-majority areas, guaranteeing access to media for all parties, protecting the vote's integrity, and ensuring smooth transition in the four municipalities in the north.

Create economic opportunities and deepen integration

Kosovo Serbs remain economically dependent on Serbia. Kosovo's government should invest in job creation, infrastructure, and development in Serb-majority areas. While administrative access

for Serbs has improved (documents, services), true integration requires a sense of belonging—economic opportunities, cultural and identity rights, and legal security.

Focus on services that build trust

The closure of Serbian institutions (postal services, banking, currency) has left gaps that Kosovo's institutions have to address. Participants urged an immediate dialogue to resolve these essential issues. Municipalities like Strpce, Gorazdevac, and Gracanica were cited as examples where interethnic cooperation—grounded in the Ahtisaari framework—has made tangible progress.

Develop a shared and long-term vision for inclusion

Many participants called out the lack of a unifying vision from Kosovo's leadership—both for community inclusion and broader social cohesion. The post-election paralysis was seen as a symptom of this vacuum. Missed opportunities, like Council of Europe membership, are tied to this absence of strategic direction. Kosovo needs a forward-looking agenda built on European integration, community inclusion, and shared development.

Uphold constitutional protections and Ahtisaari commitments

The Ahtisaari Plan remains a cornerstone of Kosovo's multiethnic future. Recent government practices, some participants argued, are weakening Serbian language rights or bypassing decentralization, thus undermining the spirit of the Plan. Reviving these principles is not just about legal compliance. It is about restoring trust, stability, and Kosovo's credibility as a democratic and multiethnic state.

Strengthen civil society as a bridge

With the political dialogue stalled, civil society has become a critical voice for community needs. Despite being sidelined by political actors, civil society organizations have pushed for dialogue, inclusion, and accountability. Their role must be recognized and supported—both by domestic and international actors—as essential to Kosovo's democratic future.

Promote media pluralism and independent voices

A pluralistic media is critical—especially within the Serb community, where public discourse is often dominated by a single narrative. Independent media must be supported to inform citizens, offer diverse perspectives, and challenge dominating narratives. A participant noted that growing protests in Serbia have opened cracks in SL's hold over public opinion.

Resolve Kosovo's status to unlock progress

A participant said that “Kosovo has reached the limits of what's possible without recognition.” The unresolved status keeps Kosovo in limbo—weakening its economy, discouraging investment, and slowing reform. Dialogue with Serbia has consumed political capital, sidelining other priorities. Clarifying status is essential to unlocking Kosovo's path toward EU and NATO and to stability in the region.

Participants

English Alphabetical Order

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