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Belgrade and Prishtina

Dialogue about the Dialogue

2020 has been marked by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted all aspects of life, from our daily routines to international politics. The pandemic has also had an effect on Belgrade-Prishtina relations, serving as a pretext for the fall of the Kosovo Government led by Albin Kurti at the end of March 2020. One of the first moves by the new Government of Kosovo, headed by Avdulah Hoti, was to withdraw the measures of so-called reciprocity with Serbia, introduced by their predecessors. This meant the removal of the formal barrier to the continuation of the dialogue with Serbia, which had been deadlocked since the end of 2018. The dialogue indeed revived – on multiple tracks.

Presidents Vučić and Thaçi were invited to a White House meeting on June 27, which was followed by speculation that the meeting would result in Serbia recognizing Kosovo's independence. However, the Hague-based Kosovo Specialist Chambers filed an indictment against Thaçi, charging him with a range of crimes against humanity and war crimes committed during Kosovo war, and the White House meeting was cancelled. On the other hand, the Brussels Dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina resumed shortly afterwards, at both the high political level and the so-called expert level. A number of meetings took place from July to September in which a range of issues were discussed, including economic cooperation, missing and displaced persons, the status of minority communities and mutual financial claims between Kosovo and Serbia.

The postponed White House meeting eventually took place on September 3 and 4. The documents signed in Washington were described as "historic", primarily by Trump's administration, but also by President Vučić and the media under his control. However, the content of the documents suggests that we cannot talk about significant progress in the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Prishtina. Still, the intensified involvement of the United States in this process remains a fact and, against this background, four think tankers and journalists from Belgrade, Brussels, Prishtina and Washington will seek to discuss the following questions:

How will the US presidential election scheduled for November 3 affect US involvement in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia? What resources does the EU have at its disposal to encourage the two sides to reach a comprehensive agreement? How will internal political change in Serbia and Kosovo – or the lack of it – affect the dialogue? How will the conflicting interests of the US, the EU, Russia and China affect the domestic political situation in Kosovo and Serbia, and consequently the normalization process? What is a feasible solution for future relations between Kosovo and Serbia?

1) Since the end of the Kosovo war, and especially since Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, the US has not been particularly interested in relations between Kosovo and Serbia, nor in the Balkans in general. However, this changed last year when President Trump appointed Amb. Richard Grenell as his special envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Grenell has been eager to push for a quick deal which could be presented to American citizens as a foreign policy success for Trump. The "agreement" signed in Washington on September 4 confirms that its principal aim is to improve Trump's position in the presidential race, rather than to bring progress to Serbia-Kosovo mutual relations. Two weeks now remain until the US presidential elections, and the most recent polls suggest a Joe Biden victory. How would you assess US engagement in the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue so far and what can we expect after the US presidential elections?

Agron Bajrami, editor-in-chief of Koha Ditore: US engagement in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue has to be welcomed, because it brings energy to a process that has frequently been led astray by EU mediators, and which has been stalled for some time. US engagement is also supposed to bring clarity to the process at a time when the EU is unable to define the end game clearly enough, due to five non-recognizing countries as well as internal difficulties due to consensus-based decision-making.

But the US also needs to be careful with its drive – sometimes it seems to us that while the EU has been too slow, the US is too fast.

In my view, the notion of a quick deal is an illusion; it can happen, but it will not be a solution. The Washington deal is the proof – it has been hailed as historic, but in reality it is not even a formal agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. It was not signed by both parties, and is really more a list of promises that each party is making to the US administration. Besides, some of the promises are repetitions of what has previously been agreed but has not been implemented. And finally, there is no mechanism to oversee the implementation of what was agreed; it is subject to the political will of the parties, and since each paper is signed by only one party, I do not think it meets the conditions to be called legally binding.

As for the suggestion that this deal is part of a plan to win more votes in the US presidential elections, I do not think that Kosovo-Serbia economic normalization in itself matters at all to US voters. There are Albanian-American and Serb-American voters, but their numbers are not large enough to warrant expending US political resources and energy on this process. On the other hand, maybe this is the reason that the Washington papers – if I can call them that – include issues that have no relevance to Kosovo-Serbia normalization (such as G5, Israel, Hezbollah, etc.). Anyway, it is good for nobody if the Kosovo-Serbia deal is just an election issue for the US; the election is close, and afterwards we need continued engagement from the next US administration, albeit maybe with a little bit more tact and coordination with the EU.

Edward P. Joseph, lecturer at John Hopkins SAIS: The Trump Administration's engagement in the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue has been one of steadily diminishing expectations. It began with a lofty objective, stated in written letters from Trump himself to Presidents Vučić and Thaçi, proclaiming "mutual recognition as the central element" of an "historic" agreement. It included fulsome support, including active backing and diplomatic engagement from State Department officials for what would have been a destabilizing partition of Kosovo. The administration then pivoted from territory to economics, touting the transformative power of economic growth and job creation.

In a region facing chronic emigration, a focus on boosting trade and growth is welcome. But the ballyhooed White House event on September 4 is mainly a continuation of infrastructure agreements already made (and kept secret) back in January and February, along with increased activity in SME loans and Kosovo's participation in the Mini-Schengen initiative. As I have argued, even if laudable, there is little reason to believe that economic projects will lead to a political breakthrough.

As for the non-economic provisions involving Israel, dubious technology from China and the diversification of energy sources, implementation remains highly uncertain. Prime Minister Brnabić has already walked back the prohibition against using "untrustworthy vendors" in her recent warm words for Chinese technology.

As American voters know, the choice in the elections is as stark as it has ever been in modern times. Leadership, democracy, rule of law, science, truth, fairness, decency, international cooperation, respect for allies and knowledge of and interest in the Balkans – they are all on the ballot.

Vessela Tcherneva, deputy director of the European Council on Foreign Relations: The dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina is one of the few international issues that can take a sharp turn after the US presidential elections in November. While President Trump aims for short-term political gains, mainly related to his interests in the Middle East, Joe Biden is well-versed in the development of the region, and is surely not the type of political leader to claim he deserves a Nobel Peace Prize for stopping "mass killings" between Serbs and Kosovars. Joe Biden's transatlantic orientation would be a breath of fresh air for the dialogue and would reinvigorate coordination between the US and Europe, which has always been the only winning strategy for the region.

Igor Bandović, director of Belgrade Centre for Security Policy: The recent US involvement in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue should be looked at from various perspectives. Firstly, the US has been involved in the dialogue between the two parties mostly in the background, using its own channels to push for agreements to be signed within the framework of the Brussels-led dialogue. The State Department considers the Kosovo issue to be one of the most important for its approach to Balkan affairs, which it pursues mostly by pressuring Serbia to recognize Kosovo's independence. Recent moves seem to evidence more understanding of the issue, and the US sees the dialogue as needing more care and engagement. Also, the Trump administration's renewed interest is pursued more by a close circle of Trump officials than by the State Department apparatus.

Secondly, bearing in mind the Trump administration's attitude towards many multilateral organizations, including NATO and the EU, and given the EU's lack of decisiveness on the issue, this is also how the US meddles in the EU's backyard, showing off its influence and leverage.

And thirdly, in overstating the significance of the "Washington" agreement", Trump tried to show his voters that he is relevant on the international stage. With his "America first" approach during his first term and the failure of peace talks with North Korea, the current president has little success to present in the global arena. Portraying the relationships between Serbs and Albanians as a bloody and unfinished conflict, he aims to portray himself to voters as a successful and significant player who can bring peace regions of conflict across the globe.

2) The dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina, led under the auspices of the EU, has failed to meet numerous expectations. First and foremost, it has not produced any long-term sustainable solution and neither has it brought many tangible benefits for the “common man”. However, the EU has recently re-launched the dialogue and it is now being mediated by EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajčák. Although the EU emphasizes the European perspective of the two sides as an incentive for reaching agreement, the fact is that 5 EU member states have not recognized Kosovo, that Serbia’s European integration has almost stopped, that Kosovo is frustrated with the issue of visa liberalization and that there are huge challenges on both sides regarding democracy and the rule of law. In this context, what resources does the EU have at its disposal to encourage the two sides to reach a comprehensive agreement?

Agron Bajrami: Next March it will be 10 years since the EU-mediated Kosovo-Serbia dialogue began. Considering the amount of time and resources that have been invested in the process by all parties, the results are poor. Especially disappointing were the years of high-level dialogue under former EU Representative Mogherini, which saw the process descend into secret talks involving the redrawing of borders and the exchange of territory.

The new EU team led by Mr. Lajčák first has to restore the credibility that was damaged by that process. The first steps taken by Lajčák and Borrell – distancing themselves from the idea that a solution can be found by meddling with borders – was a step in the right direction, but it should be followed by clearer steps to show the EU means business.

In Kosovo’s case, the lack of a positive decision on visa liberalization will always be interpreted by many Kosovars as proof that the EU is not to be trusted (even if the fault for this state of affairs is shared by Kosovo’s institutions).

The main resource at the EU’s disposal to convince the parties to approach any kind of agreement is of course EU membership. Even with the current instability, EU membership is still the best thing both countries could get out of the process. There is nothing more valuable Kosovo and Serbia can give to each other. As we are seeing in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, even mutual recognition is no guarantee of a bright future. And it is this issue – the European integration process – where Lajčák encounters the greatest stumbling block: Kosovo is hostage to five non-recognizing countries, while Serbia is hostage to agreement with Kosovo. This means that Lajčák would do himself (and all of us) a huge service if he could engage positively with the five non-recognizers in order to obtain their active support for a comprehensive and legally binding agreement. Practically, this means that Kosovo needs to be reassured that the final agreement will bring about not just Serbia’s recognition of independence, but also formal recognition by the non-recognizing five and an open road to EU membership. On the other hand, this should also benefit Serbia: after agreement with Kosovo, Serbia should also get certainty about EU membership.

Edward P. Joseph: The premise of the question is entirely correct. The EU-led dialogue has resumed with far more in the way of fanfare than leverage. On the positive side, the EU’s lead negotiator Miroslav Lajčák is a very smart, experienced hand in the Balkans. We saw this almost immediately when he openly contradicted EU Foreign Minister Josep Borrell’s mistaken endorsement of the land swap. In a rarity, Borrell himself soon followed his own subordinate and walked back his ill-advised words about “not being more Catholic than the Pope” when it came to border changes.

In addition, the EU and member states like Germany and France have some leverage over Belgrade. President Vučić's self-described "balancing of relations" requires at least an illusion of positive relations with the EU and key member states.

So it would be incorrect to say that the EU has zero leverage. But the question is whether Brussels has sufficient leverage to achieve the goal of the talks, which according to the EU is the "normalization" of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. The US has taken a formal position that normalization means "mutual recognition." The EU position on what constitutes normalization is vague. Some believe it is simply a euphemism for recognition, used in deference to the five EU states that do not presently recognize Kosovo. However, the new Slovakian Ambassador to Serbia recently contradicted that, stating that normalization does not necessarily mean recognition. In sum, to judge whether EU resources are adequate, we need to know if the EU is going to lower the bar on what normalization means. If Brussels will simply "declare victory", while leaving Kosovo unrecognized by Belgrade – and therefore without wider international recognition, that poses a serious problem.

On the other hand, if Brussels accepts – as the Slovakian Ambassador did not – that the US position is recognition and that resolution of the dispute requires mutual recognition, then it's clear that Brussels does not have the resources to achieve that goal. There are simply no indicators that Belgrade is prepared to recognize Kosovo without obtaining substantial territory as part of the settlement. Vučić stated quite clearly in the run-up to the originally scheduled White House talks that even EU membership – something that is far off and that Brussels cannot simply "offer" without qualification – is not enough. There are simply no objective reasons to believe in a change in this stance, for example, acknowledgement of Serbia's own role in creating the situation it finds itself in over Kosovo as opposed to constantly blaming NATO and the Albanians. There are no indicators to back up the claim that Vučić is ready to conclude a final settlement with Kosovo but somehow Moscow and "pro-Russia groups" are standing in the way. This is a line concocted precisely to relieve pressure in the West.

The Trump Administration and Richard Grenell insist that "economic normalization" will transform the relationship. As I have written, this flies in the face of experience in the region. We simply do not have examples of either economic interest or growing trade transforming political relations; the opposite is typically the case, as economic cooperation follows political breakthrough.

Will Washington and Brussels come up with something else that could entice Belgrade, besides dividing Kosovo's territory?

Vessela Tcherneva: The role of the EU should be one of aiming to engage all interested stakeholders at all levels in the dialogue, including civil society, parliaments and regional actors, as well as the US and the UN. The mandate of EUSR Miroslav Lajčák will be strengthened if he manages to grasp the expectations of Kosovo's citizens. In this line of thought, the EU should stick to the provision of visa liberalization to Kosovo while Serbia will probably expect more EU investment in infrastructure and connectivity projects.

As for the current circumstances, post-pandemic recovery is another opportunity for the EU to increase its visibility and regain the trust of those who remain disappointed with its actions in recent years. The European Green Deal also provides a channel for modernization of the region, from which both countries could benefit significantly.

Nevertheless, even though the European perspective is an encouraging framework for negotiations, it cannot be viewed as a panacea, especially in the current context of the pressing challenges on the EU's agenda. Brussels is unable to create incentives for Serbia and Kosovo if the two sides demonstrate unconvincing stances on advancing the process. The EU can only facilitate and steer the process in the right direction, while Belgrade and Prishtina must show the political will for Serbia to proceed on its path to European integration and for Kosovo to obtain a negotiation mandate with buy-in from wider society. The EU's new enlargement methodology is about rewarding progress and punishing backsliding, and therefore democratic deficiencies will not be tolerated. Given China's growing footprint in the Balkans and tensions with Turkey and Russia, the EU will expect a higher level of foreign policy alignment.

Igor Bandović: The resumption of dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo and the appointment of experienced Balkan envoy Miroslav Lajčák as a facilitator of the talks is clearly a good sign of the European Union's interest in solving the outstanding issue in the Western Balkan region as well as in remedying and consolidating its own foreign and security positions regarding Kosovo. However, one should not seek either fast or easy success in this renewed process. Despite the international community's growing impatience about finding a solution for the problem, much is at stake, including the consequences of the process for the internal governance and dynamics of both Kosovo and Serbia. The dispute between Greece and North Macedonia over the name issue was only found after 27 years, with the Prespa agreement signed 3 years ago. Furthermore, seeking a "European solution" to the problem, a phrase repeatedly used by Miroslav Lajčák, involves taking account of a lot of other elements of the equation, especially when progress on this track is equally followed by a lack of progress or regress on the other tracks of European integration. For the EU, its institutions and especially for the member states still interested in the region, solving Kosovo is no longer a silver bullet or an express train which will undoubtedly lead Kosovo and Serbia to the European Union, but the lack of a "perfect offer" for the negotiating parties has already had its pitfalls. So, what should it be? Who should get it? Motivating the leaders in the dialogue to conclude their dispute is worthless. They are primarily motivated by their own political agendas and the internal dynamics of their societies. Direct communication with Serbian and Kosovar society and public, engaging in dialogue with the local communities, is how the EU should regain credibility, and more importantly show that for a European solution to the problem, Kosovo, Serbia and Europe should all share ownership as Europeans.

3) Serbia will soon get a new government. However, its policy will not differ from the current one. The landslide victory of the ruling SNS cannot be disputed, but the authoritarian tendencies of the Serbian regime have become hard to ignore. In Kosovo, on the other hand, President Thaçi withdrew from the dialogue after his indictment by the Special Court, while current Prime Minister Hoti seems to lack both political power and democratic legitimacy. How do you see the dynamics between Vučić and Hoti? How will internal political change – or the lack of it – affect the dialogue? How will the conflicting interests of the US, the EU, Russia and China affect the dialogue and the internal political situation in both Kosovo and Serbia?

Agron Bajrami: The latest internal developments in Kosovo give reason to believe that the current governing coalition led by PM Hoti is not sustainable. Once President Thaçi's situation with his possible indictment by Specialist Chambers is clarified, it is more than likely Kosovo will have to move towards new elections. Even without indictment, Thaçi's mandate expires in March, and Kosovo's parliament will have to

either elect a new president or be disbanded. With this in mind, whatever dynamics can be built between Hoti and Vučić are quite irrelevant, since the expectation is that the current Hoti government will not last. While Vučić commands an absolute majority in Serbia, Hoti is not the decisive decision-maker even within his own party, and his coalition is also very broad and has a weak majority of just one MP. On the other hand, PM Hoti also has a very tense relationship with president Thaçi, who has more than once criticized Hoti's conduct of negotiations.

All this means that Kosovo's internal dynamics will most definitely and essentially affect the dialogue.

Furthermore, what makes the dialogue process even more difficult is that since it began it has been part of internal political conflict in both Kosovo and Serbia. Both countries' governments and negotiators have been attacked by opposition parties for giving too many concessions to the "enemy", while those at the negotiating table have always viewed the process as a tool to ensure Western support in their quest to retain power. So, while negotiators have regularly ended up being labelled "traitors", the opposition and critics of dialogue have been called out as "anti-American" and "anti-European". This poisoned atmosphere is a bad environment for any normalization deal, no matter how good or fair it might be.

On the last point, about the conflicting interests of the EU, the US, Russia and China, it must be noted that this issue is most relevant for Serbia. In Kosovo's case, it is only the recently uneasy US-EU relationship that has influenced internal politics, as in the case of how the Kurti government was toppled. If the next US administration returns to its traditional coordination with the EU, this problematic issue will solely be about Russian and Chinese influence in Serbia.

Edward P. Joseph: Too much is made of Hoti's political weakness, which is a function of both a slim majority in parliament and the fact that a major reshuffle will take place any day now, if the indictment against Thaçi is confirmed in the Hague and the president has to resign. The prospect of early elections cannot be ruled out (which could bring in Albin Kurti as PM); at the same time, early elections are not guaranteed. But let us imagine that Hoti stays on – or that elections are held and Kurti is elected. What is the difference when it comes down to the core issue: Serbia's recognition of Kosovo? Is Belgrade more likely to recognize Kosovo with Hoti as Prime Minister than with Kurti? Is Hoti somehow prepared to do the one deal that we know Vučić will accept – trading Kosovo's territory for recognition?

As long as we stay focused on the real issue – recognition by Belgrade – there is less risk of confusion over the various political scenarios. In the end, the negotiating dynamics do not depend so much on what happens in Prishtina but on what happens in Belgrade, and Belgrade is highly unlikely to change its position on recognition of Kosovo as long as Moscow and Beijing are blocking Kosovo's UN membership. The size of Vučić's victory does not seem to matter, as some may have thought it would. Besides, the July protests and the police reaction have tarnished that victory, calling greater international attention to authoritarian trends. Again, however, those do not seem to translate into flexibility on the Kosovo question. Why would any of this affect Belgrade's position on Kosovo as long as EU membership is so distant and as long as Belgrade is so indifferent to joining the EU?

As I've written, the way to resolve the dispute over Kosovo is to circumvent the Russo-Chinese Security Council veto by bringing Kosovo into NATO. This is accomplished

with four, not five, recognitions (Spain, Slovakia, Romania and Greece.) It is precisely the wider conflicting interests on one hand of the US and the EU and on the other of Russia, China, and Turkey. Greece, for example, is currently facing serious and escalating threats from Turkey. How important is it for Athens to carry Serbia's water over Kosovo – as opposed to stabilizing Greece's relations all over the Balkans and solidifying its support from Washington and the full EU? Isn't there a better way for the Trans-Atlantic community to address concerns over separatism in Spain, Slovakia, and Romania than by not recognizing Kosovo? Why not create a US-EU-NATO dialogue that shores up state sovereignty and territorial integrity and pushes back on Russian encroachments in Europe? Why not unburden Madrid, Bratislava and Bucharest in a way that addresses their anxieties far more directly than by allowing Moscow to keep the Kosovo question open?

Vessela Tcherneva: External actors like Russia and China create a false sentiment towards the EU in the region, which might result in erroneous political decisions with detrimental repercussions for the people. Russia and China get along with authoritarian leaders more easily than with complex representative democracies. They will support President Vučić until the moment he looks too weak and useless to serve their interests. On the other hand, paradoxically the compliant nature of weak political leaders might surprisingly shape the dialogue in a positive way.

As for the current US agenda, Serbia and Kosovo are small distant places from which President Trump can gain political benefits, but he is hardly concerned about the quality of the democratic systems in the two countries.

The success of the EU's actions in the region will very much depend on the outcome of the US elections. Considering the EU's damaged reputation, a US approach under a second Trump mandate could prevail in the process. But in this case, a process aimed at long-term concrete normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo should not be expected.

Igor Bandović: I would phrase this question in the opposite way: How does the dialogue affect the internal challenges of both Kosovo and Serbia? And the answer is clear: the dialogue has paramount importance and affects both countries deeply. However, while this was obvious with the fall of Kurti's government in Kosovo, in Serbia it has not resulted in any power change. The reason for this is that Vučić communicates different (false) narratives about the dialogue itself, its content and its progress. For the domestic audience, he wants to be perceived as the last stand against recognition and fully-fledged independence for Kosovo, and so the Serbian public is unprepared and misinformed about current and previous attempts at dialogue. He is not preparing the public for any possible compromise or what most people, and mostly his own voters, would see as a Serbian loss.

As for Russia and China, this is again a question more for Serbia, since I don't see these countries as having any significant influence on Kosovo. Despite recent moves and the agreement in Washington signaling closer official ties with the US, this does not mean that Serbia is shying away from Russia. However, Russia's influence on Serbia is hard to measure, especially over the Kosovo issue, and only with a bold and clear cut with Russia in Serbia's foreign policy would we potentially see how great that influence is. As for China, I do not think it has any interest in influencing Serbia over the Kosovo issue. China has some other, primarily economic, interests in the country, while China's seat on the Security Council gives it more power than it actually needs or has asked for regarding Kosovo.

4) The solution to the problem between Serbia and Kosovo should be sustainable and acceptable for everyone. Many would say that the solution has to be a compromise – everyone should gain something, while also losing something. What do you think about that? How do you see the solution for future relations between Kosovo and Serbia?

Agron Bajrami: What I think is that we cannot find a better and fairer solution than the Ahtisaari proposal – that is if we aim to build Kosovo as a multiethnic and democratic society. And when I say the Ahtisaari proposal, I mean the Ahtisaari proposal, not Ahtisaari plus or any other modified versions.

The notion that everybody should gain something while also losing something is in my view a play on words that is randomly applied to all kinds of negotiations and deals. But in the case of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, this play on words is dangerous because it is an invitation to bring to the negotiation table all the historical myths about ownership: an invitation to talk about land, not people; an invitation to some sort of trade-off, not concerned with the people’s quality of life but mostly about politicians “saving face”.

I also happen to think that the Ahtisaari proposal, as imperfect as it was, was the most realistic long-term solution. In it were embedded not just mechanisms to secure minority rights, but also relevant standards related to rule of law, democracy and the economy, which were great tools for the European integration of Kosovo.

Of course, the Ahtisaari plan was refused by Serbia, was not accepted by the Security Council and was not approved collectively by the EU, which left Kosovo and its Western supporters in a situation of unilaterally implementing parts of the plan. Ultimately, the spirit of the idea – creating a state of citizens, not a nation state – never took root.

But what are the alternatives?

Ethnic borders?

Exchange of territories (and people)?

Partition?

So far, everything else that has been suggested is in essence a 19th century idea: ethnic entities, ethnic borders, ethnic solutions.

In my mind, this is not the way forwards. Quite the contrary, it will only turn us back to our ethnic trenches, which it seems many of us have never left.

Edward P. Joseph: I believe there are solutions to all the disputes in the Balkans, including the most intractable one: the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo. The key is to create a negotiating framework that allows the two sides to negotiate as equals. As long as Serbia enjoys the position of keeping Kosovo isolated by doing nothing – thanks to the Russian and Chinese UNSC vetoes – there will be no transformation of relations. Once that superior negotiating position is gone, the possibility immediately opens up for the only stabilizing solution: securing the position of Kosovo Serbs inside an independent, unitary Republic of Kosovo, and protecting Serbia’s permanent interests in the country. I am confident that the US and the EU can help the parties achieve this kind of settlement – one that truly honors the inalienable, historic, and permanent Serbian nexus to Kosovo. Such a final settlement would have both practical and symbolic elements. As we have seen in other countries in the region, over time relations between Serbs and Albanians can and will improve; they already have improved in the south of Kosovo.

This can be achieved if only four EU-NATO countries recognize Kosovo. Impossible? If two Persian Gulf countries can defy the longstanding policy of the wider Middle East and recognize Israel – accepting the risk of reprisals from Iran, Turkey and even jihadists – then there is every reason to believe that four EU-NATO members can join, not defy, the rest of their allies in recognizing Kosovo. A final, just settlement for Serbs and Albanians will soon follow. That is my belief and my vision.

Vessela Tcherneva: Any solution to the Kosovo-Serbia negotiation process must include a scenario in which Serbia recognizes Kosovo while preserving its economic weight and gravitas in the region. The European perspective for the two countries should be sustained as a guarantor of structural reforms. It should be complemented by a multi-level consensus among EU member states on the one hand, and the US and Europe in the framework of the transatlantic relationship on the other.

Igor Bandović: For me it is clear: the only possible, sustainable European solution for Kosovo-Serbia relations are democratic Serbia and democratic Kosovo as a part of the European Union. We have seen in our region what happens when we seek solutions with strongmen. They have only created more problems and left them for the generations that follow to deal with. This time around, we must have that in mind.

Conclusion

Despite some differences of opinion, our discussants agree on numerous points. There is no doubt that increased US engagement in Serbia-Kosovo relations is welcome. However, the Trump administration's approach to the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue gives reason for concern. From the newly signed "Washington Agreement" (or "Washington Papers"), it is evident that this effort has been focused less on mutual relations between Kosovo and Serbia and much more on gathering support for Trump's reelection. Moreover, despite being celebrated by some as a big step forward, the signed documents do not indicate a revolutionary breakthrough.

As for the EU's role in the normalization process, the discussants agree that both Serbia and Kosovo should remain committed to the EU integration process. Still, the question of the EU's leverage in the dialogue remains open. There is no consensus on whether intensified economic cooperation would eventually lead to political normalization of relations. The discussants generally agreed that there is no quick fix for Kosovo-Serbia relations and that the EU representative Lajčák has a difficult task not only to restore the talks, but also to restore trust in the process.

The question of the internal political dynamics of Kosovo and Serbia, and how this affects the dialogue, is one on which our interlocutors have strikingly different perspectives. Opinions are divided on whether the dynamics of negotiations depend more on the course of the Serbian government or on who will form Kosovo's next government, and when. Also, our discussants attach different weight to the influence of great powers in the region as opposed to the local ownership of certain political processes, such as the power struggle between Kosovo's government and opposition and the narrative strategies of the Serbian President, intended to capture public opinion in nationalist frames.

Finally, the future of relations between Belgrade and Prishtina depends on numerous factors, including whether the land-swap idea will be rejected, whether Serbia will recognize Kosovo's independence, whether other countries that currently do not recognize Kosovo as a state will change their stance and whether Kosovo Serbs will be adequately protected. But perhaps most importantly, future relations depend on the democratization of both societies, a potential which is not yet fully realized.



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