

Editor's word

*Jovan Ratkovic, Senior Fellow, Agora Strategy Institute and Marko Savkovic, Executive Director, Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence

Thirteen years have passed since Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia. Yet, full international confirmation of its statehood is still missing. By 2021, it is clear this can be attained only through an agreement with Belgrade/Serbia. Kosovo's internal functionality is still problematic; Serbs in Kosovo, particularly those living in four municipalities in the north, will not recognize Kosovo's sovereignty without an all-inclusive agreement between Belgrade and Pristina that would grant them the kind of self-governance they already enjoy in practice. Many speak of two realities; one, where Kosovo Albanians do not recognize the sovereignty of Serbia over any part of Kosovo; and the other, where Kosovo Serbs in the north, where they are a clear majority, do not recognize Kosovo's sovereignty over that region.

The 2013 Brussels Agreement was an attempt to appease Kosovo Serbs into accepting Pristina's sovereignty by granting them the Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities (ASM/CSM) as an instrument of limited autonomy. However, as of 2015 and the referral to Kosovo's Constitutional Court, successive governments in Pristina have failed to take concrete steps towards implementing this part of the Agreement. Meanwhile, Belgrade has slowly started disengaging from the implementation of remaining agreements – seeing no incentive in doing so.

While different outcomes may be possible, major elements of a comprehensive, compromise solution have remained mostly the same throughout the past two decades. All solutions that have worked in the region and elsewhere in Europe were creative and novel at the time of their introduction.

Both Kosovo and Serbia do not live in a “time bubble”; since the dialogue between the two sides started at earnest in 2011, the world has changed dramatically. Non-recognizers' opposition has not waned; particularly that of the two Permanent Members of the Security Council that have not recognized Kosovo. By calling onto countries to revoke their recognitions, Serbia has been leading a knife-edge policy, placing it at odds with its key partners in the West. European Union membership aspirations, for reasons not only related to progress in the dialogue, are weaker today, just as the likelihood of membership itself has grown more distant. An EU perspective is simply not major carrot for either side anymore. Believing otherwise would take us further away from the chance to reach a lasting and comprehensive solution. Thus, any type of sustainable and comprehensive solution must address first and foremost the legitimate interests and concerns in/about Kosovo of both sides.

While the request for more transparency in the process is logical, the two sides do indeed need space to negotiate, having in mind the experiences of existing arrangements in the region (Dayton, Ohrid or Prespa Agreement). The solution needs to be all-inclusive; the salami-slicing approach has led us nowhere. Finally, while the international community

needs to work together, there is also the need to provide both sides with strong and credible incentives.

Within the framework of the “Balkan Dialogues” initiative, this policy study contains summaries of eight thematic papers on key aspects of normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. They tackle four distinct issues, first discussed in separate thematic workshops that were organized in August and September 2020: the future status of majority-Serb areas in Kosovo; the status of Serbian sacral and cultural heritage; economic, energy and property issues; and the “end game” with regard to Kosovo’s international status. Every attempt was made to incorporate the views and ideas of both sides. Workshops participants’ insights and comments have proved invaluable to our authors.

The organizations leading the “Balkan Dialogues” initiative do not advocate any particular solution presented below. The two sides, together with the international community, have been trying to find a solution – unsuccessfully – for more than two decades. What we did was to identify four principal issues, and sought to catalogue all possible options, apart from maximalistic and thus completely unrealistic ones. This meant thinking outside the box predicated on open conversation and exchange – without any taboos or potential solutions peremptorily taken off the table. Finding authors brave enough to approach these issues in such a way was not an easy task at all and we are thus immensely grateful to them. We leave it to our readers to judge whether we have been successful in this attempt to humbly support the facilitation of a comprehensive and sustainable normalisation agreement.