

Relations between Serbia and Kosovo may become normalised

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Another round of negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia, which were initiated under pressure from the European Union, is set to take place on 17–18 May in Brussels. The previous three rounds have not given any major results. However, the tension in relations between the two countries has significantly decreased. In effect of this, a high-ranking representative of the Serbian government paid a formal visit to Pristina on 12 May. This means that the first goal of the EU, namely the creation of a platform for dialogue between the two countries, has been achieved.

These are the first negotiations to have been conducted since the proclamation of independence by Kosovo in 2008, and are still in the initial stage. Considering the scale of the disagreements and the contentious issues, the parties are unlikely to reach agreement in the immediate future. Furthermore, given the fact that both governments are in a weak position at home and that opposition to concessions or even negotiations themselves is especially strong in Kosovo, compromise will be difficult to achieve. Therefore, real progress in these talks will depend on the determination of the USA and the EU and the pressure they bring to bear on the two parties to this conflict.

The subject of the negotiations

The negotiations, which commenced under pressure from the EU in March this year, concern mainly technical issues which prevent the normal functioning of Kosovo. Since Kosovo declared independence, Serbia has refused to recognise any documents issued by Pristina, including passports, identity cards, driving licences, registration certificates and trade documentation. This has blocked the movement of people and goods from Kosovo via Serbia. Belgrade has also closed Serbian airspace for planes flying to Pristina. Railway communication between the two countries was suspended already in 1999. At the same time, public registers (civil registry, cadastral records) concerning the citizens and lands of Kosovo are now located in Serbia, to which the Kosovar administration has no access. Such documents need to be regained to enable the normal functioning of the state, including to unblock real estate trading. The conflict between the two parties also covers supplies of water, electric energy and telecommunication services to Kosovo. The issues of people who went missing during the Albanian-Serbian military conflict in the 1990s and the takeover of the former province's cultural assets by Belgrade are also expected to be addressed during the talks. Serbia has also been blocking Kosovo's membership of international

organisations. The forms of Pristina's participation in regional organisations (including CEFTA) on conditions acceptable to both parties will also be considered during the negotiations. Serbia, which still treats Kosovo as part of its territory, has so far rejected any concessions in these areas since, according to the government in Belgrade, these would mean an implied recognition of its former province's independence.

Issues essential for Belgrade, such as the position of the Serb minority and Orthodox Church in Kosovo as well as Kosovo's status, which is still an open issue from the Serbian point of view, have been excluded from the agenda. The parties will also not talk about the northern region of Kosovo, Northern Kosovo, which is inhabited by an ethnic Serb community and is beyond the control of Pristina.

Serbia ready for compromise?

Since the International Court of Justice announced its opinion regarding the unilateral proclamation of independence by Kosovo (it was unfavourable for Serbia) and the EU made Belgrade's progress in European integration dependent on the commencement of talks with Pristina, the rhetoric concerning the issue of Kosovo has changed fundamentally. At present, the Serbian government is declaring its readiness to negotiate and compromise with the Kosovar government. Another positive sign is that political parties are no longer using the problem of Kosovo to mobilise the public.

Neither the political elite nor society of Serbia are now ready to formally recognise Kosovo as an independent state (71% of citizens are opposed to this). However, at the same time, more and more people believe that it is already impossible to regain control of the former province and that doing so would not pay off, from both the political and economic point of view. Integration of the two million strong Albanian community would be very expensive and would cause a great amount of tension inside the country.

However, since parliamentary elections are close (spring 2012), the Serbian government will avoid making any decisions which could be interpreted as a *de facto* recognition of independence or an overly submissive stance on Kosovo. This may significantly impede agreement being reached concerning technical issues, which will require concessions mainly on the Serbian side. On the other hand, the most important task on the agenda of the present Serbian government is to obtain official status as an EU candidate country already in 2011. This is supposed to guarantee re-election and the retention of power to the groupings which form the present government. Serbia is unlikely to meet the main condition for gaining candidate status, namely arresting Ratko *Mladic* and Goran Hadzic. For this reason, compromise with the Kosovar government will be Serbia's main bargaining chip in its talks on candidate status with the EU.

Increasing opposition against the negotiations in Kosovo

The Kosovo-Serbia negotiations started at a very unfortunate time for Pristina. Problems with holding democratic elections and the formation of a legal government, as well as suspicions of corruption and links to criminal groups brought against Kosovar politicians have adversely affected the country's image on the international arena and also the

government's position at home. Additionally, recurring reports on the slow process of implementing reforms in Kosovo are undermining its reliability. All this has substantially weakened Pristina's position in negotiations with Belgrade and also with the EU, which seems to prefer to support a faster transformation of Serbia. EU member states are more and more likely to stop pressing Belgrade to resolve the issue of Kosovo and this would be a very negative scenario for Pristina.

However, the Kosovar government may not agree to make any essential concessions to Serbia due to increasing public opposition not only against the negotiations but also the continuation of the international supervision of Kosovo's internal and foreign policy. Vetevendosje, a grouping which is gaining popularity in Kosovo, believes that the negotiations are being conducted solely to enable Serbia to gain candidate status, and are unfavourable for Kosovo itself. For this reason Vetevendosje is trying to block government activity aimed at reaching a compromise both in parliament and in the streets of Kosovo, by holding protests and demonstrations (for example during the Serbian negotiator's visit to Pristina). This stance is supported by the other two opposition parties present in parliament. As a result, the Kosovar government may take a less flexible stance during the negotiations with Serbia. This, though, will mean loss of support from the EU and thus a freezing of the *status quo* in the region.