

Serbia and Kosovo are starting talks

On 8–9 March the first talks between representatives of the respective governments of Belgrade and Pristina since Kosovo declared independence were held in Brussels. The talks were launched under pressure from the EU which made progress in the integration of the two countries with the EU dependent on initiating dialogue between them. However, due to large disparities in the positions held by the two countries, the chances of agreement in the short term are slim. For the EU, the starting of the negotiations is a boon in itself, therefore the EU is not expecting immediate results. What it is counting on, however, is increased trust in relations between the two parties and thus less tension in the whole region.

The EU demanded that the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina begin by the UN General Assembly adopting a resolution in September 2010 that shifted supervision of normalisation of relations between the two countries to the EU. The launch of the talks was significantly delayed due to Kosovo's internal problems and its difficulties in establishing a new government. The fact that the talks started proves there has been an important change in the policies of the two countries, which is a success for the EU. Until now Serbia has refused all contact with representatives of the independent government in Kosovo and demanded that Pristina be represented by the UN mission UNMIK. The government in Kosovo dismissed this demand by arguing that it questions its sovereignty.

The chances of concluding an agreement soon are rather improbable when the divergences in the positions of the two countries are taken into account. The main issue of contention (also within the EU) is Kosovo's ultimate status. Neither has the scope of the talks been determined. The EU assumes that it should cover 'technical questions', that is: mutual recognition of documents, protection of the borders, trade exchange, transport, telecommunications, electric energy, water management, protection of cultural and historical heritage and fighting organised crime. Reaching agreement between the two sides can be however impeded by the two governments' weak position, a strong objection to any concessions or even the negotiations themselves from the opposition in the two countries and also by the many internal problems caused by a bad economic situation. <MarSz>