

KOSOVO/SERBIA IN ONE ROOM

WHAT DO PEOPLE REALLY THINK?



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia has long been stalled due to deep-seated mutual distrust, a lack of goodwill, and recurring tensions, which have hindered political dialogue and cooperation at the community level. In both countries, the process is viewed as opaque and elite driven, with civil society and citizens largely sidelined from meaningful participation or influence.

This report is based on focus group discussions held in Prishtina and Belgrade. Their aim was to engage citizens in developing proposals for normalising Kosovo–Serbia relations. Inspired by citizens' assemblies, participants first received expert input and then discussed potential solutions within the broader context of EU integration. In Kosovo, discussions focused on options such as establishing the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM), exploring territorial compromises, or continuing without a resolution. In Serbia, scenarios included de facto or de jure recognition of Kosovo, or maintaining the status quo (not resolving the issue). While the conversations offered valuable insights, methodological limitations of the use of snowball sampling mean the findings are indicative rather than representative and require further research.

The results of the discussion groups reveal the differing expectations each society holds regarding the dialogue process. In Kosovo, participants emphasised the importance of transitional justice and Serbia's acknowledgement of war crimes—issues that were notably absent from the conversations in Belgrade. A shared positive outcome from both groups was the rejection of maintaining the status quo or avoiding dialogue altogether. However, the most desirable outcomes identified—implementing the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) in Kosovo and de facto recognition of Kosovo in Serbia (implementing the Brussels agreement)—were each contingent upon specific guarantees, reflecting ongoing mutual distrust. Kosovo participants called for security assurances such as NATO membership or Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's territorial integrity, while Serbian participants emphasised the need to protect the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serb community in Kosovo, regardless of ASM implementation. A perhaps surprising outcome of the Belgrade focus group (de facto recognition) can be explained by the expert input, which had a particularly strong influence on the discussion, underscoring the future importance of informing citizens before involving them in any decision-making on Kosovo.

INTRODUCTION

The process of normalisation of Kosovo-Serbia relations has been stalled for years, deeply affecting relationship at the community levels. The mutual distrust and a lack of good faith between the engaging parties, along with occasional escalations on the ground, have created unfavourable conditions for the continuation of political dialogue. The situation further hinders regional cooperation and presents significant hurdles to regional stability and progress. In Serbia, the process of normalisation is captured by the ruling elite which behind closed doors makes false commitments whilst

domestically promotes intolerance and nationalism.

The dialogue has become a central issue in the political polarization of Kosovo. However, the Banjska attack in the northern part of Kosovo has further damaged the dialogue process and deepened the layers of distrust between the parties.

In both Kosovo and Serbia the process of dialogue has been seen as non-transparent and insufficiently inclusive. The civil society and citizens are absent from the process and apart from public opinion polls which to some extent

give insights into the general sentiments and attitudes, no further effort was made to actively engage citizens in deliberations concerning the relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The main

goal of this research was to create a space for an attuned dialogue where citizens can engage in safe environments to pursue a consensual proposal for the Kosovo and Serbia issue.

METHODOLOGY

This report draws on findings from focus groups held with citizens in both Prishtina and Belgrade. The aim of these focus/discussion group was to engage ordinary citizens in the search for a resolution to the long-standing Kosovo–Serbia frozen conflict. First, selected participants were given the opportunity to receive direct information from experts and then contribute to formulating proposals for normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo. This approach was inspired by citizens' assemblies, increasingly used in various countries to gauge public sentiment on sensitive political issues.

However, several methodological limitations must be considered when interpreting the outcomes of these unconventional focus groups. Most notably, the use of the snowball sampling method may compromise the representativeness of the sample. Since participants were recruited through personal networks and referrals rather than random selection, the sample may reflect the biases of the initial contacts. Both the Belgrade and Prishtina groups showed an overrepresentation of women and highly educated individuals, potentially skewing the results and limiting their generalizability. Therefore, the findings should be viewed as indicative of broader public opinion, but not as definitive or statistically representative.

The framework for discussions in both countries was anchored in the EU integration process, with tailored scenarios reflecting national contexts:

In Prishtina, the conversation focused on Kosovo's aspirations for closer integration with the EU, and considered three possible paths:

- **Implementing the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM)**
- **Territorial compromises with Serbia.**
- **Proceeding without a resolution, meaning no compromise with Serbia and, consequently, no progress toward EU integration.**

In Belgrade, the discussions worked with a hypothesis that Serbia could join the EU by 2030 and examined three potential approaches to resolving relations with Kosovo:

- **De facto recognition of Kosovo.**
- **De jure recognition of Kosovo.**
- **Status quo jeopardising Serbia's EU membership prospects.**

These scenarios were designed to assess both public and expert views on potential pathways to normalisation, peace, and stability, while also taking into account domestic political challenges and wider regional dynamics.

At the end of each session, participants were invited to vote for the scenario they considered the most realistic and desirable in the context of Kosovo–Serbia normalisation efforts.

KOSOVO: WHAT DO PEOPLE REALLY THINK?

In Kosovo, the conversation focused on Kosovo's aspirations for closer integration with the EU, and considered three possible paths:

- **Implementing the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM)**
- **Territorial compromises with Serbia**
- **Suspension of Dialogue with Serbia**

Before addressing the scenarios, participants emphasised that the primary obstacle to any potential agreement between Kosovo and Serbia is the absence of transitional justice and the persistence of conflicting historical narratives. These unresolved issues have significantly undermined reconciliation efforts. Attempts to “move on” without confronting past atrocities have eroded trust and hindered any prospects for sustainable peacebuilding.

Scenario 1: Establishment of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM)

The establishment of the ASM was envisioned as a cornerstone of the 2013 Brussels Agreement, aiming to integrate the Serb community in Kosovo's north while advancing Kosovo–Serbia normalisation. Despite being ratified by the Kosovo Assembly, the agreement sparked immediate political turmoil and public backlash within Kosovo.

While the ASM remains central to ongoing dialogue, its unresolved legal status and deep political divisions have stalled implementation for over a decade, leaving the normalization process in limbo.

In this scenario, participants discussed both the potential advantages and drawbacks of implementing the ASM.

Advantages:

Participants agreed that the establishment of the ASM could help pave the way for Kosovo's EU

accession, encourage recognition by the five EU non-recognising states, facilitate eventual recognition by Serbia, and create clearer opportunities for membership in other international organizations.

Some participants also noted that the ASM could serve as a mechanism to regulate and monitor Serbian financial support in Kosovo. Currently, much of this support is untracked and reportedly benefits criminal networks. By channeling funds through the ASM, financial flows could become more transparent and accountable, allowing Kosovo's institutions to monitor their distribution. Participants emphasized that there would be no objection if such funds were directed toward the needs of ordinary citizens.

Disadvantages:

Many participants expressed serious concern that establishing the ASM could increase Serbia's influence within Kosovo and potentially undermine the country's sovereignty. There was widespread uncertainty and confusion regarding the exact scope and powers the ASM would hold.

Several participants drew comparisons to Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, warning that replicating such a model could lead to institutional dysfunction and long-term instability in Kosovo.

Participants also emphasized that Serbia has not demonstrated goodwill, particularly as it continues to deny Kosovo's statehood and maintain parallel structures in Serb-majority areas. Many viewed the ASM as incompatible with Kosovo's Constitution and called for alternative models to safeguard the rights of Kosovo Serbs without establishing a separate autonomous entity.

A consistent message throughout the discussions was that Serbia must first formally recognize Kosovo's independence. Without this, participants felt that no meaningful concessions should be made. They also criticized Serbia's failure to ensure the rights of Albanians living within its borders, questioning why similar

protective frameworks are not proposed on Serbia's side.

Scenario 2: Territorial compromises with Serbia

In 2018, the presidents of Kosovo and Serbia floated the idea of a 'border correction', possibly involving the exchange of northern Kosovo for Serbian municipalities bordering Kosovo with an Albanian majority.

Despite growing pressure on both sides to finally reach a deal that could unlock the door to EU membership, relations remain tense and progress towards normalization is currently at a standstill. Though often floated in political discourse, this idea has never been formally negotiated or endorsed.¹

During the discussion held in Kosovo, this scenario revealed serious reservations, despite some acknowledging its surface-level appeal as a way to resolve ethnic divisions.

Advantages:

Some participants viewed territorial exchange as a potentially practical solution, citing the legacy of conflict and entrenched ethnic divisions. They suggested that while territorial separation could enable progress, certain shared resources—such as Ujman/Gazivoda lake and Trepça—might continue to be jointly managed.

Disadvantages:

Participants raised concerns that redrawing borders could lead to population displacement, noting the intermingled populations of Serbs in Kosovo and Albanians in southern Serbia. They viewed such proposals as outdated and potentially destabilizing, arguing that they should have been considered immediately after the war, not decades later. Many emphasized that territorial exchange along ethnic lines contradicts

EU values of integration, minority rights, and peaceful conflict resolution, and warned it could jeopardize Kosovo's European integration.

Scenario 3: Suspension of Dialogue with Serbia

This scenario considers the possibility of halting negotiations and suspending official dialogue with Serbia, instead redirecting focus toward Kosovo's internal development, social cohesion, and transitional justice. During the discussion in Kosovo, participants weighed whether this shift would be viable or beneficial to Kosovo's long-term peace and normalisation processes.

Advantage:

Many participants expressed frustration and scepticism regarding the ongoing dialogue with Serbia. They argued that Serbia continues to deny war crimes and Kosovo's statehood, making the process feel one-sided and ineffective. Serbia's lack of genuine intent was seen as a major obstacle to progress.

Several participants advocated for prioritising internal state-building and social healing over continued dialogue. They emphasised the need for public education about the war, justice for victims, and acknowledgement of missing persons. They argued that Kosovo has yet to process its trauma or fully articulate a cohesive national narrative. Building internal cohesion and addressing unresolved tensions within the population must be a foundational step before meaningful engagement with Serbia can occur.

Disadvantage:

While some participants favoured suspending dialogue, they also acknowledged the potential consequences. International partners may interpret such a move as uncooperative or regressive, undermining Kosovo's efforts to join NATO or the EU or gain wider recognition. *This will*

¹[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EP_RS_BR\(2019\)635512](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EP_RS_BR(2019)635512)

cause Kosovo to be isolated. Therefore, the dialogue should continue.

Even those advocating for a pause in negotiations admitted that dialogue with Serbia cannot be avoided indefinitely. While suspending talks might provide short-term breathing room for internal consolidation, participants agreed that Kosovo would ultimately need to re-engage with Serbia to resolve outstanding disputes and secure its international future.

Conclusion

At the end of the discussion, participants were asked to vote on the scenario they considered the most realistic and acceptable pathway toward normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Although the first scenario—the establishment of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities—is widely seen as the most viable option, it has raised serious concerns among participants regarding Kosovo’s sovereignty and internal stability. The second scenario -territorial compromise with Serbia—was rejected mainly due to its perceived threat to regional peace and democratic principles.

Some participants expressed conditional support for continuing dialogue under the first Scenario,

noting that progress would only be acceptable if accompanied by firm guarantees, particularly on Kosovo’s security. These included NATO membership and formal recognition by Serbia. In the absence of such assurances, support for the ASM remained cautious and limited.

Nevertheless, the establishment of the ASM was seen by some as a potentially acceptable option, but only under strict conditions. It must not imply autonomy or executive powers and must remain fully within the framework of Kosovo’s constitutional order.

In the absence of credible guarantees, especially from the international community, such as NATO membership and Serbia’s formal recognition of Kosovo, support for the third scenario, Suspension of Dialogue, appeared to be growing. Participants argued that a temporary suspension would allow Kosovo to prioritize internal institution-building, address the unresolved legacies of the war, and deepen international partnerships, particularly with NATO and the European Union.

Ultimately, participants agreed that none of the proposed scenarios offered a fully acceptable solution. This reflects the persistent mistrust and diverging national interests that continue to challenge the normalization process.

SERBIA: WHAT DO PEOPLE REALLY THINK?

The framework for discussion in Serbia centered on the prospect of joining the European Union by 2030 and the pressing need to address the Kosovo issue. In Serbia, the initial segment of the sessions was devoted to expert presentations outlining the trajectory of the Belgrade–Prishtina dialogue and its relevance to Serbia’s EU accession path. Key agreements and developments from the past fourteen years were discussed, with particular emphasis on the Ohrid Agreement and its Implementing Annex.

Participants were instructed to work with the hypothesis that Serbia could join the EU by 2030, without debating the likelihood of this outcome. Three scenarios served as the basis for discussion:

1. **De facto recognition of Kosovo**
2. **De jure recognition of Kosovo**
3. **Maintaining the unresolved status and foregoing EU membership**

Scenario 1: De Facto Recognition of Kosovo

This scenario was primarily discussed in the context of the Ohrid Agreement. In other words, Serbia’s implementation of the Ohrid Agreement and its Annex was interpreted as a form of de facto recognition of Kosovo. Nevertheless, it was emphasised during the expert presentations that many provisions of the Ohrid Agreement remain ambiguous and require further clarification.

It was noted that the Ohrid Agreement has become an integral part of Serbia’s EU accession process. As of 2024, it was incorporated into Chapter 35 of the EU negotiation framework. In practical terms, this means that Serbia must implement the obligations agreed upon in Ohrid to progress toward EU membership.

Advantages:

The majority of participants viewed this scenario as both realistic and desirable for resolving relations between Kosovo and Serbia. It was

concluded that Serbia should honour the commitments it has made, as doing so would foster predictability and stability in bilateral relations.

At the same time, participants stressed the importance of additional measures to protect the Serb community in Kosovo and to develop policies that would support their continued presence there. One participant expressed this view clearly:

“If de facto recognition allows for a certain degree of autonomy for the Serbian Orthodox Church and protection of the people, then we should accept the agreements. This would likely be welcomed by Serbs in Kosovo, as it directly concerns them.”

Disadvantages:

Despite general support for the scenario, participants acknowledged potential resistance and backlash from the broader public. A recurring concern was the lack of public awareness—many admitted they were hearing key information about the Ohrid Agreement for the first time during the expert briefing.

Scenario 2: De Jure Recognition of Kosovo

In this scenario, Serbia would formally recognise Kosovo as an independent state, taking a significant step toward the full normalisation of relations. During the expert presentations, this scenario was mentioned as a potential requirement by some EU member states. However, at present, it is not an official precondition for Serbia’s accession to the European Union.

Advantages:

Some participants argued that de jure recognition could definitively resolve the Kosovo–Serbia dispute and significantly accelerate Serbia’s path to EU membership. They associated EU integration with tangible benefits such as improved access to education, better job

opportunities, and overall economic development.

It was also noted that Serbia might eventually be compelled to recognise Kosovo in the future, making early recognition a more pragmatic option. As one participant put it, "If it's inevitable, then it's better to do it sooner rather than later."

Disadvantages:

Despite these arguments, most participants considered this scenario unrealistic under the current political and societal conditions. The disadvantages were captured in the following quote:

"The obstacle to ever reaching de jure recognition is the fact that both Belgrade and Prishtina have built their politics for years on divisions, nationalism, and hatred. This has taken root among the population, especially among the youth.

It will take many years of pursuing a completely different policy and promoting a new narrative in the media for citizens to be ready to take a step further."

The deep-seated public sentiment and the influence of political narratives over the past 13 years have created an environment in which de jure recognition is currently unfeasible. Although a few focus group participants expressed a willingness to support it, the scenario was generally seen as politically blocked and socially unacceptable at this stage.

Scenario 3: Status quo - Maintaining the unresolved status and foregoing EU membership

This scenario involves indefinitely postponing a resolution to the Kosovo issue, effectively maintaining the current status quo. Within the framework of the discussion, it implies sacrificing Serbia's EU accession process in order to avoid

making a definitive decision on the normalisation of relations with Kosovo.

In practical terms, this would mean Serbia not implementing the Ohrid Agreement and halting any further progress in the dialogue. However, it was acknowledged that previously implemented agreements cannot be undone; thus, this scenario does not represent a return to the pre-dialogue era. Rather, it reflects a strategy of prolonged indecision, leaving the situation unresolved.

Advantages:

Several participants expressed support for this option, often rooted in scepticism about the long-term viability of the European Union. As one participant remarked:

"The EU is going to disintegrate soon, so there is no need for us to act on Kosovo."

From this perspective, the advantage of maintaining the status quo lies in waiting for potentially shifting geopolitical dynamics that might create a more favourable context for Serbia. This reflects a broader sentiment that Serbia is being pressured into resolving relations with Kosovo against its own interests, rather than doing so as part of a proactive, self-directed strategy.

Disadvantages:

This scenario was also criticized, particularly in relation to a broader critique of the current state of governance in Serbia. One participant captured this sentiment with the following statement:

"We, as a society, don't have a position on anything. We don't have a functioning state, and someone else will end up resolving this. As a society, we are shrinking—there is no real governance in the country that would allow for any clear stance on anything. Our problem is bigger than Kosovo."

Thus, the most significant disadvantage of this scenario is the state's apparent inability or unwillingness to make decisive moves. Choosing to avoid a decision on Kosovo is seen not as a deliberate strategy, but rather as passive

resignation to external forces. In this context, Serbia is not perceived as an active agent shaping its future, but rather as a bystander to its own geopolitical destiny.

Conclusion

The discussion in Serbia centered on the country's potential EU accession by 2030 and the need to resolve the long-standing Kosovo issue. Participants discussed three scenarios: de facto recognition of Kosovo through continued implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, de jure recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, and maintaining the unresolved status while foregoing EU membership. The first scenario was viewed as the most realistic, with benefits in stability and EU progress, though concerns about public backlash remained. In addition, the need to ensure additional protection of the Serb community in Kosovo was underlined within this

scenario. De jure recognition was seen as potentially beneficial but politically and socially unfeasible in the current climate. The status quo scenario drew some support from EU-skeptic participants but was broadly criticised as a symptom of weak governance and strategic paralysis, where Serbia risks becoming a passive observer of its own future.

The structure of the discussion, beginning with expert input, highlighted the importance of informing citizens before asking them to form opinions or make decisions. The expert presentation appeared to lay the groundwork for many participants to view de facto recognition as the only viable option under current circumstances. This suggests that timely, accurate information about the dialogue process could play a significant role in shaping public opinion, reducing nationalist bias, and creating greater openness to compromise.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The discussions in both Kosovo and Serbia reveal a shared recognition that current options for resolving their long-standing dispute are far from ideal, reflecting deep-rooted mistrust, unresolved legacies, and diverging national interests. In Kosovo, the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities emerged as the most viable yet highly contested option, with support contingent upon strong international guarantees, especially NATO membership and Serbia's formal recognition. Meanwhile, in Serbia, the continued implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, which implies de facto recognition of Kosovo, is seen as the most viable path to EU accession. However, public resistance and political sensitivity remain significant barriers.

A shared positive outcome, despite contextual differences, from both groups was the rejection of maintaining the status quo or avoiding dialogue altogether. The importance of international engagement and credible guarantees was emphasized in both discussions, alongside the need for informed public debate. Ultimately, the lack of a mutually acceptable scenario underscores the fragility of the normalization process and highlights the critical role of inclusive communication and involvement of various stakeholders, along with institutional resilience and external support in moving forward.

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