

## **Comment: Kosovo's Status Must Come First**

**Author:** [Janusz Bugajski](#)

Talk of practical matters should take a back seat to the bigger issue of the protectorate's future.

For the past few weeks, powerful international players have seemed more eager to push Pristina and Belgrade into a dialogue over practical issues than to touch on the question of Kosovo's final status.

They hope to forge a bilateral relationship between the two former protagonists for the first time. But questions remain about their intentions.

There are two possible scenarios for the talks. In one - which assumes the main players have constructive motives - international diplomats conclude that further delay over Kosovo will further destabilise the region. Hence, the talks are perceived as a precursor to setting a timetable for decisions on the protectorate's final status.

The current freeze in relations between Serbia and Kosovo helps neither side make reformist progress, and fuels nationalism and xenophobia. And without a final decision, Belgrade will remain distracted from its domestic priorities - rebuilding the economy, and achieving international integration.

Serbian prime minister Zoran Zivkovic recently acknowledged that Serbia cannot become fully democratic as long as Kosovo's status remains unresolved.

By launching "practical" discussions on border controls, state property, infrastructure, and refugees, both sides might appear to make compromises, while Serbia's pain over "losing Kosovo" might be compensated by practical economic and social gains.

According to the more optimistic scenario, the status question will surface as the talks proceed, and a timetable will be settled on de jure separation, while still guaranteeing "special status" for the Serbian minority.

Another, more pessimistic scenario - which seems more likely given the caution of the European Union and United Nations - is that the objective is simply to delay settling Kosovo's status. The artificial dialogue, meanwhile, will give both sides an opportunity to release their energies and distract attention from the problem.

With general elections soon to be scheduled in Serbia and the approach of next year's 200th anniversary of a Serbian revolt against Ottoman rule, the major powers do not want to encourage a nationalist backlash by allowing Kosovo to secede.

Moreover, elections are also approaching in the United States, and President George W Bush will not want another Balkan crisis to unfold while American troops are deployed in the region. For Washington, the priority is to reduce its forces, and this can only happen if political progress gets underway.

It has been speculated that dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade may open at the end of July at the EU's headquarters in Brussels.

Both sides may be pressed into a closed debate, discussing a pre-prepared list of topics. However, the illusion of substance is unlikely to fool anyone, and any compromises or commitments that are agreed are likely to remain on paper.

The dialogue will be worthless unless both sides recognise each other as equal partners.

At the moment, Belgrade and Pristina view each other with suspicion, and for both sides to feel equal, a decision on status is essential.

Only then will Belgrade take Pristina seriously, and only then will the latter feel confident that it is not being exploited to placate foreign diplomats.

The international community also has a role to play. Without strong US involvement, any agreement mediated by Brussels will lack durability.

The EU and US do not publicly differ on Kosovo. But behind the scenes, the Americans are impatient with the perceived failure to find a solution that will enable them to withdraw troops. Neither side wants to make the decisive step towards final-status discussions, though Brussels wants talks to begin to forestall any US "unilateralism" in the EU's "back yard."

Ultimately, talks on "practical" questions are necessary, but will not deliver lasting peace. Despite wishful thinking on the part of both Washington and Brussels, this is no substitute for a decision on statehood.

Instead, the practical discussions should run parallel to a decision on statehood. Above all, Washington and Brussels must agree a timetable for final status, with a package of rewards for Serbia.

No agreement between Belgrade and Kosovo leaders should be implemented until the province is declared independent, and its government empowered to act as a sovereign body.

If Serbia wants specific issues to be resolved, it must accept Kosovo's statehood.

Finally, Serbian membership of the EU should be made conditional on resolving Kosovo's position. "Status before integration" might well be an appropriate slogan for the region.

Janusz Bugajski is director of the Eastern Europe project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC.

**Location:** Serbia  
Kosovo

**Focus:** Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable  
Training

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/comment-kosovos-status-must-come-first>