

Comment: Making Pristina-Belgrade Talks Effective

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US and European Union must play a part in forcing real dialogue on well-prepared and substantive issues.

While the United Nations mission and the Contact Group prepare the formal opening of the first direct dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade since the Kosovo conflict, the main ingredients of success lie elsewhere. Strong engagement by the United States and the European Union, as well as careful groundwork by both Serbs and Albanians, are essential if the talks are to succeed.

It is essential that the Americans and the EU both contribute to the negotiating process which follows the official opening of talks, scheduled for October 14 in Vienna. The major recent peace-making moments in the Balkans have resulted from engagement by the US and the EU, and from the combined weight of both.

The 1995 Dayton agreements on Bosnia came from a US push, and the relative success of their implementation is a combined US-EU effort. The Belgrade agreement that has temporarily stabilised the relationship between Serbia and Montenegro was reached with under EU pressure, with substantial US support. It was a joint EU-US effort that ended the 2001 Albanian insurgency in Macedonia.

In both Kosovo and Serbia, the formula has been essential. Support for the indigenous effort to oust Slobodan Milosevic from power was a combined US and EU effort. The backbone of the protectorate in Kosovo is likewise formed by the US and the EU, not the UN.

The Contact Group has always been a means of keeping the Russians involved, but at one remove from the main action. The hope is that engagement will prevent them from acting as spoilers, and convince them to use their weight (especially with Serbia) in the right direction. The mainspring of international engagement is the US and the EU.

Where do the US and the EU feature in the Vienna meeting, and the technical-level talks that will follow? It is not yet clear.

The issue is not their formal status, but whether the negotiating parties are made to feel the full political and economic weight that Washington and Brussels can bring to bear.

Neither Belgrade nor Pristina sees political advantage in successful talks. Any politician who comes home to either capital after being too friendly to the other side will suffer for it.

While they are anxious to establish good relations with the new Special Representative of the Secretary General, Harri Holkeri, neither Pristina nor Belgrade sees the UN Administration Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, as a neutral broker, or as one with political muscle. If the dialogue is to succeed, they must be made to understand that Brussels and Washington expect them not only to talk but also to produce results. There will need to be consequences if they fail.

US and European political and economic pressure alone cannot, however, guarantee success. Careful preparations are needed on both sides.

Belgrade has already unified its political forces by passing a parliamentary resolution asserting sovereignty

over Kosovo, and is engaging in the necessary substantive spadework on potential agenda issues. It has begun the hard work of accounting for missing Albanians, tracking down Kosovo artifacts in Serbia, totting up what it thinks Kosovo owes in World Bank debt and the proceeds of privatisation, and studying the possibilities for decentralisation of governance in Kosovo. It has also been cataloguing security incidents in which harm has been done to Serbs.

Pristina is behind in its preparations. So far, the international community has discouraged the Kosovo assembly from making any unified political statement, since that would necessarily declare independence to be the ultimate goal. It therefore remains risky for any of the Albanian political parties to push for dialogue with Belgrade, for fear of appearing to compromise the overwhelming goal of the electorate.

The Provisional Institutions of Self-Government, PISG, that govern Kosovo are handicapped in talking with Belgrade by the role of UNMIK, which retains the powers needed to address likely agenda issues. Even accounting for missing people is still regarded as a security issue and therefore as UNMIK's responsibility, although it can hardly achieve much without Albanian cooperation. Important aspects of telecommunications, electricity trade, privatisation and other possible agenda items still lie within UNMIK's responsibilities.

Without either political cover or full authority, Pristina's preparatory work on technical issues has lagged. There appears to be no concerted effort to identify precisely which public records the Serbs took when they left Kosovo, though it is clear enough that the return of property and birth registers is a main concern of Pristina. There appears to be no study of how Serb monuments might be protected by the Kosovo Police Service, which is still largely controlled by UNMIK.

The Kosovars object to Serbia providing telecommunications and other services to Serb enclaves in Kosovo, but there has been no study of how these enclaves could be reconnected to the local network.

Pristina is handicapped in other ways as well. Its institutions have no representation in New York, Washington, Brussels or Belgrade. They have no coordinating structure for the talks. Nor do they have access to the UN Security Council, as Belgrade does. Next to none of Kosovo's politicians and high officials has been in Serbia for years, and they have no formal mechanism for gathering and analysing information on what is going on there.

PISG and UNMIK documents are not accepted by Belgrade. People travelling on UNMIK documents are blocked from entering Serbia, and it is even difficult for someone arriving from Washington to travel there from Kosovo because of the lack of a Serbian passport stamp.

The ceremonial opening of the dialogue can only be the first step in a larger process. As that process continues, UNMIK will have to transfer more authority to the PISG and clarify their respective responsibilities. Serbia will need to accept UNMIK and the PISG as legitimate authorities under UN Security Council resolution 1244, and the PISG will have to intensify its political and technical preparations.

With a lot of push from the US and EU, the dialogue will then have some hope of success.

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