

FOURTH REPORT ON MONITORING THE INTERNAL DIALOGUE ON KOSOVO

(16 February 2018 – 15 March 2018)

SUMMARY

In the reporting period spanning from 16 February to 15 March 2018, Serbia's internal dialogue was noticeably pushed in the background due to struggle for power in the local elections held in Belgrade. Nevertheless, according to government officials, the internal dialogue has entered the final stage.

Institutionalized internal dialogue in the past reporting period was conducted as highly controlled and guided process. This refers to the selection of student representatives and young leaders who participated in the roundtables, and efforts to maintain "political correctness" of the discussion, resulting in superficial discussion rather than providing a deep insight into the situation and coming up with applicable solutions.

Despite these weaknesses, the good thing about the internal dialogue is that it was moved to Kosovo during the past reporting period. The most important and substantive roundtable was held in Laplje Selo village, after the meeting of Aleksandar Vučić with the Serbian National Forum in Belgrade on 30 January 2018. The roundtable "Laplje Selo II" was different from all other roundtables held within the internal dialogue, because it was the first time that government officials and their opponents confronted their viewpoints in a public debate. This roundtable was not "guided" and its participants were not inhibited from expressing critical views and independent ideas, which makes it different from other roundtables.

In view of the above, the benefits of an institutionalized internal dialogue to formulate the political platform, which would steer Serbia towards EU – are small, but problematic. This leads to the conclusion that it is time for the initiator of the internal dialogue and the direct patron of the institutionalized internal dialogue, Serbian President Vučić to develop and activate an exit strategy. This, in turn, requires a change in the dominant public relations pattern and an influence over the media close to the Government.

If the initiator relies solely on the results of the institutionalized dialogue, then no significant progress can be expected, either in terms of facing reality or in terms of the policies advocated thus far. However, in addition to facing reality the initiative has also set reaching a sustainable solution as one of its objectives. To achieve these goals, the initiator – President Vučić – will have to take into consideration the entirety of the internal dialogue, as well as the wealth of knowledge and experience that have not been expressed in the internal dialogue thus far.

In this period, again, in the reactions to the initiative, in discussions within the internal dialogue, there have been statements that show the deeply rooted stereotypes and belittling view of the Albanian ethnic community, but also those that show an extraordinary lack of responsibility for language spoken in public. However, the lack of reaction to such positions can mean any of the following two things (or both): first, that the participants of the round table failed to react, because they see nothing contentious in the statement or because they agree with it, which is a problem unto itself; and second, a lack of reaction could indicate that the representatives of the working group and the emissary of the President of Serbia feel that the discussions at the round table are not of importance, thus failing to pay any heed to this statement.

Resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo relations that relies on division/delineation was by far the most discussed option in this period. Compared to the previous reporting period, the statements “for“ and “against“ this option were more frequent. This is because a belief has been created, both in domestic and in the international public, that there's “something rolling behind the hill“, that the political leaders of both Albanians and Serbia stand behind the revival of this narrative.

This plan starts from the idea that all members of a nation, as in, a community based on blood and soil and not a political community, should be gathered in a single state. The plan does not encompass a territorial, but an ethnic division.

Advocates of this „map rearrangement“ claim that multi-ethnic communities in the Balkans fail to thrive. The greatest irony in such disputed ideas is the fact that the majority of Kosovo Serbs actually live in enclaves in the South of Kosovo. Therefore, such an agreement would not allow them to continue living in Serbia - it would probably mean that they would have to leave their homes or be banished from them.

Those who oppose the division primarily emphasize the consequences for the region and its destabilization, only then mentioning the consequences for the population, exchange of population and the new suffering this would cause.

In this reporting period there has been increased interest in the topic of implementation of the Brussels agreement and the open issues in the normalization process. The position, formulated by the Serbian President as “compromise, not giving in“, will also mark the discussions on the topics of the implementation of the Brussels agreement and the entire process of normalization in Kosovo, as well as of the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo.

The topic of a legally-binding agreement was thoroughly discussed in public for the first time. This question had actually been raised by the President Vučić himself, three months prior. The increased interest in this topic is definitely the result of an increased interest of Serbia in the EU, among other things, because the Strategy of EU Enlargement with the Western Balkans, presented at the beginning of February 2018, inspired a shift in public discourse reflected in frequent appeals to compromise and the perspective of Serbia as an EU member state. However, in the discussions within the internal dialogue, a strong mistrust in the EU has been expressed, as well.

In this reporting period, the CSM is the “most frequently repeated Serbian mantra”, on which there is a wide consensus in the first place. At that, the issue of Priština’s fulfilment of its obligation to form the CSM is being notably amplified. This is being turned into a real campaign, motivated by the media reports in Serbia that Priština is declining to form the CSM. This portrayed as the entire negotiations process between Belgrade and Priština being brought back to the beginning. Although, the CSM has the potential to become the “red line” - Serbia will not cross it. Perhaps, the reason behind “raising the stake” of CSM could be to strengthen Serbia’s negotiating position. However, another possible reason could be to see the effect or the reaction of Kosovo and Brussels, that is, to pressure them to implement the agreement on CSM. Hypothetically speaking, this could also be an announcement of “Plan B” activation if Kosovo fails to form the CSM, or exit strategy for abandoning the delineation/division/exchange of territory policy. In any event, current approach to the Brussels dialogue is at a crossroads. The summary assessment is that the CSM “debate” has been reduced to

whether the Albanian side is asking for amendments to the agreement on CSM which would be in line with the Decision of the Kosovo Constitutional Court. And so, the CSM has been put up as the topic which would decide the faith of the continuation – or perhaps the entire Brussels dialogue. One reason is that since 2013, the CSM has been presented as a major, but also the only, political gain for the Serbian side; but also, that since 2015, no progress has been made in implementing this part of the Brussels agreement.

Statements have been heard in public about the lack of stability, in terms of security, in the North of Kosovo – or even in a wider area. However, it is still noticeable that the public debate on the matters of population security and general security finds no support with the authorities, and, consequentially, with the general public either. This issue is still seen, both by the public and by the authorities in Serbia, through the criteria typical for the previous century and the Cold War. It is most likely that this is motivated by the lack of preparedness to open this issue at a time when potential consequences could be significant, primarily because Serbia and Kosovo are important topics in assessing power of the USA, EU and NATO on one hand, vis-à-vis Russia, with interim assistance from Turkey, on the other. In addition, opening the issue of the (lack of) security for Serbs and criminalizing Albanians and Kosovo institutions, leads to a quick and powerful ethnic mobilization of Serbs. This, in turn, reduces the potential for criticism and careful reconsideration of the existing policies towards Kosovo. However, judging by the positions held by representatives of Serbs from Kosovo, which were expressed in discussions with authorities (as was discussed in this Report), as well as by the ever more frequent reconsideration of the delineation ideas, from the viewpoint of regional security, the authorities in Serbia will have to find a new response to this issue.