**EU-facilitated dialogue remains key for the normalisation of Kosovo-Serbia relations**

**The 51st Western Balkans Follow-up Committee meeting, held on 3 December 2021, placed conflict resolution and normalisation of relations between Kosovo\* and Serbia in the spotlight. The meeting, presided by Ionuţ Sibian, hosted prominent speakers from the ranks of EU officials, Western Balkans experts, as well as civil society representatives from the local communities, all of whom agreed that EU-facilitated dialogue was the only way to move forward.**

The participants' recommendations included promoting high-level dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, highlighting that there is no alternative to the EU perspective of the region, emphasising mutual recognition as the outcome of the dialogue, communicating directly to the local public and improving EU engagement with local civil society organisations.

**Miroslav Lajčák**, EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues, provided an overview of the EU-facilitated dialogue and related challenges, expressing regret that the discussion once more had to be centred on conflict resolution, rather than completion of the normalisation process. Mr Lajčák stressed the need to restore the credibility of the enlargement process in order to enhance the EU's leverage in facilitating Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. He pointed out that the next high-level meeting between Kosovo and Serbia, whose date had yet to be confirmed, needed to yield tangible results.

**Marko Prelec** from the Crisis Groupstated that acomprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia was not a realistic goal at the moment, as any such agreement would include mutual recognition. Instead, he argued that more clarity was needed on how both sides envisioned the future without a comprehensive agreement in place, living with the *status quo* as best they can. **Leon Hartwell** from the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) lamented the fact that there was very little political will to implement the existing 30 EU-brokered agreements between Kosovo and Serbia. He stressed that on the EU side, the division among Member States on the issue of Kosovo's status placed significant limitations on its capacity to facilitate Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. **Branislav Staníček** from the European Parliament's Research Service (EPRS) presented the recent activities of the European Parliament in this respect, and underlined the importance of transatlantic cooperation for the success of the normalisation dialogue.

Participants from local civil society organisations from Belgrade, Pristina and North Mitrovica highlighted the importance of creating conditions for bridging the ethnic divide between the communities. **Igor Bandović**, Director of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, stated that the EU needed to devise new ways of direct communication with the local public, and provide a source of accurate information about the proceedings and probable outcomes of the dialogue. **Fisnik Korenica**, Professor at the University of Pristina, stressed that the EU and the US should play a major role in ensuring that the final deal between Kosovo and Serbia enabled the peaceful cohabitation of all ethnic groups in the area. He pointed out that mutual recognition, however, remained an essential part of the normalisation process from Kosovo's perspective. **Jovana Radosavljević**, Director at New Social Initiative, emphasised that more willingness was needed by Pristina in establishing the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities, as this would bring Kosovo's municipalities with ethnic Serb majorities closer to Kosovo's institutions and further away from Belgrade, to which they are currently directly reporting.

During the meeting, the Committee also discussed the 2021 Enlargement Package, the Western Balkans agenda on innovation, research, education, culture, youth & sport and the Western Balkans in 2035 Foresight Study, as well as the work programme for 2022.

\*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

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