

REPORT OF AN INFORMAL DISCUSSION | 21 MAY

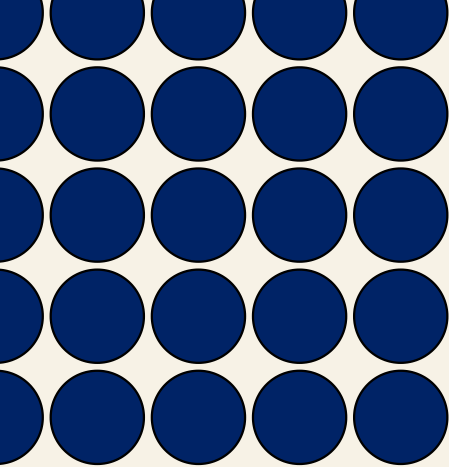
CHANGING TIDES:

WHAT OPPOSITION GAINS
MEAN FOR THE KOSOVO—
SERBIA DIALOGUE



NEW
SOCIAL
INITIATIVE





THE DIALOGUE'S STRUCTURAL DEADLOCK

The Kosovo–Serbia dialogue is not merely stalled — it is caught in a structural impasse defined by two questions that neither side has shown willingness to resolve: Will Serbia ever formally recognize Kosovo? And will Kosovo implement the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM) in a form Serbia considers credible?

These are not new questions. Participants largely dismissed the notion that the current crisis did not emerge from recent geopolitical turbulence. The dialogue has been in crisis since 2015. What followed were episodic advances on technical matters such as vehicle plates, freedom of movement, and missing persons, that overshadowed the persistent stagnation on the political fundamentals. This year opened with some modest momentum: the return of displaced persons, progress on the missing persons commission, and agreements on foreign nationals and vehicle registration. But these developments sit at the margins of a process whose core remains frozen.

SERBIA: A DIALOGUE PERCEIVED AS CAPITULATION

For Serbia, the dialogue is not a negotiation between two parties of comparable standing — it is widely perceived domestically as a gradual, step-by-step recognition of Kosovo. This framing shapes everything. Since 2011, Serbia has accepted significant changes and integration of the Kosovo Serb institutional system into Kosovo's institutional framework. From Belgrade's perspective, these were concessions, and the expectation of further unilateral movement in the same direction by Belgrade, without substantial external pressure, participants argued, is unrealistic.

Crucially, Serbia does not treat the dialogue as a political priority. There is no domestic incentive to push it forward, and considerable domestic cost to appearing to concede further ground. The dialogue moves when pressure is applied from outside; it stalls when that pressure eases.

VUČIĆ'S DELIBERATE DISTANCE

A notable development since 2024 has been President Vučić's studied withdrawal from Kosovo as a public topic. Day-to-day Kosovo issues have been delegated first to Prime Minister Vučević and later to Foreign Minister Đurić. Participants read this not as disengagement but as a form of political insulation: Vučić is deliberately avoiding a domain where there are no available wins.



Yet in the rare moments when he does address Kosovo publicly, his statements diverge markedly from what he is reported to have committed to international partners, and awareness of that gap is slowly penetrating even his core constituency. The depth of this disconnect surfaced vividly during the discussion itself. When one participant drew on a Vučić quote to build an argument about his ideological position - a perfectly reasonable analytical move, since public statements are normally the basis on which a politician's views are assessed - Serbian participants in the room laughed instinctively. The reaction was not dismissive of the argument but illustrative of something important: for large parts of Serbian society, Vučić's words have been so consistently decoupled from his actions that they have ceased to function as meaningful evidence of his intentions. In a political environment as polarized as the Serbian, his statements are simply not processed as policy signals. It was a small moment that spoke to a larger problem – that of a leader whose public communication has lost credibility.

The picture that emerges is of a leader who feels politically trapped, unable to credibly protect Kosovo Serbs from Pristina's encroachments, unable to halt Kurti's actions in the north, and unwilling to be publicly associated with a process he cannot control or deliver on. He has, in the assessment of participants, effectively given up on the process while maintaining the appearance of engagement through surrogates.

KURTI: TACTICAL AGREEMENTS, STRATEGIC DELAY

Albin Kurti presents a different but equally complex picture. Participants noted the apparent paradox: Kurti built his entire political identity on refusing dialogue with Serbia, yet in 2023, he made an agreement. That shift, however, has not translated into implementation. Instead, he has used the agreement as cover while systematically narrowing the space that any future ASM could occupy.

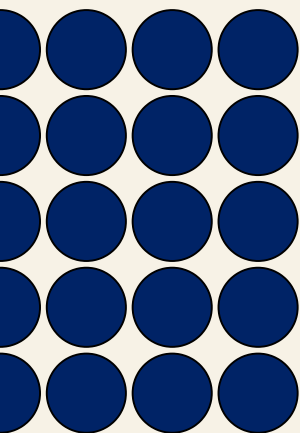
The mechanisms are both institutional and territorial. On the institutional side, Kurti has begun stripping competencies in health, education, and local development, which would logically fall under ASM authority. On the territorial side, actions such as declaring a National Nature Park in Zubin Potok remove development resources from the local Serb community, shrinking the economic base over which ASM might exercise meaningful governance. Participants described this as a colonization of the north: gradual, incremental, and difficult to contest internationally on any single measure.

Kurti's current posture exploits his technical (caretaker) government status to decline participation in high-level political dialogue, framing non-engagement as a procedural necessity rather than a political choice. In reality, participants suggested, he is buying time, waiting for a change in political leadership in Belgrade that might open different possibilities.

THE ASM: TECHNICAL LABEL, POLITICAL CORE

Health care and education are routinely discussed as "technical" issues in the dialogue framework. Participants rejected this framing entirely. Every substantive dispute over services in the north is inseparable from the question of ASM competencies. Who administers schools, who funds hospitals, who controls local development budgets - these are not implementation details. They are the substance of the political contest.

The same applies to resources. The ASM, as Serbia envisions it, would require a financial and administrative base to function. Kurti's actions, whether reclassifying land, redirecting funding, or asserting Pristina's jurisdiction over previously ambiguous domains, are systematically eliminating that base before the ASM is ever constituted. The result is that even if an ASM is eventually established in formal terms, it may be left with neither competencies nor resources sufficient to operate meaningfully.



OPPOSITION ACTORS: CRITICAL BUT DIRECTIONLESS

KOSOVO'S OPPOSITION

Over the past five years, Kosovo's opposition parties have consistently attacked Kurti's handling of the dialogue. What they have not done is offer a coherent alternative. No opposition actor has articulated a substantive position on how they would differently approach negotiations with Serbia, what they would offer, or how they would handle the ASM question. Participants suggested that the political incentive runs in the opposite direction: outflanking Kurti to his right, appearing more nationalist, more resistant, may prove electorally safer than proposing a more constructive but unpopular path.

SERBIA'S OPPOSITION AND THE STUDENT MOVEMENT

The Serbian opposition landscape is considerably harder to read. The student movement that has drawn international attention raises more questions than it answers. Is it a political actor? Does it represent a liberal or conservative constituency relative to Vučić? Can it translate street presence into institutional power?

To understand the movement, participants argued, you first have to understand what produced it, and that means reckoning with Vučić himself, his legacy, and the apolitical environment he created which is extremely hostile to opposition. There is an irony that often goes unremarked:

Western observers tend to cast Vučić as a hardline nationalist on Kosovo, when in practice he has been the Serbian leader who made the most concessions - on police, judiciary, and institutional integration - while simultaneously his proxies make life untenable for Kosovo Serbs on the ground. He is, in this reading, a performative nationalist and populist rather than an ideological one, and his management of the Kosovo file has left a large part of the Serbian population feeling that Kosovo Serbs have been abandoned and betrayed. The student movement is, at its core, a natural reaction to precisely that frustration. It is the elephant in the room that neither side of the dialogue tends to name openly.

Seen in that light, the absence of a coherent Kosovo policy in the movement's output is not entirely surprising - it is a manifestation of frustration, not a policy platform, and it would be strange to expect otherwise. That said, the specific content of the students' memorandum on Kosovo still warrants scrutiny. Participants found it substantively empty, recycling standard nationalist talking points without introducing new thinking. More troubling were specific formulations: references to "historical peoples" (flagged as carrying exclusionary overtones), calls for "just peace" (implying the current settlement requires revision), and appeals to a "global family of equal nations" (read as implicitly anti-European in framing).

The nationalism on display was nonetheless characterized as performative and shallow - emotionally resonant but not ideologically rooted in the way older Serbian nationalism was. The students are expressing a real and legitimate frustration; they are not, at this stage, articulating a Kosovo policy.

GENERATIONAL DYNAMICS: COMPLEXITY BENEATH THE SURFACE

The generational picture complicates any simple narrative. Among younger Serbs broadly, pro- Russian sentiment is more prevalent than among older cohorts, a finding that runs against standard assumptions about generational liberalization. But university students specifically show stronger pro-EU attitudes than any other age group, suggesting that the student movement and broader youth opinion are not the same constituency.

Youth nationalism in Serbia, where it exists, tends to be more symbolic and less embedded than the nationalism of generations shaped by the 1990s. This does not make it harmless, but it does suggest it is more susceptible to change and less likely to harden into the kind of political identity that drives long-term policy positions.

INTER-COMMUNITY RELATIONS: WHAT HAS ALREADY BEEN LOST

One of the starkest assessments in the discussion concerned the state of Kosovo Albanian- Kosovo Serb relations. What civil society organizations built over years of painstaking relationship work has, in participants' view, largely been undone. The social fabric that once allowed for some degree of inter-community interaction and trust has deteriorated to the point where people are now afraid to be seen engaging in dialogue, a fear that was not present even a few years ago.

This matters beyond the interpersonal. Communities that do not interact produce political actors who cannot afford to compromise. The social preconditions for a negotiated settlement are eroding at exactly the moment when the political will to reach one is also at its lowest.

THE ASYMMETRY OF COSTS

The discussion's most consequential finding concerns who bears the cost of continued deadlock. Participants were direct: the cost of inaction falls disproportionately on Kosovo, not Serbia.

Serbia can afford to wait. It has no urgent internal need for normalization, faces no imminent cost for stagnation, and retains leverage as long as Kosovo's international status remains unresolved. Kosovo, by contrast, needs the dialogue to move forward: for access to international institutions, for economic development, for the political legitimacy that normalization would confer.

If the current trajectory continues, Kosovo Serbs pushed further into isolation or out of Kosovo entirely, the situation does not simply freeze. It deteriorates in ways that create new facts on the ground, narrow future options, and eventually, participants warned, could give Serbia credible grounds for escalation based on the treatment of its community. The dialogue may appear stagnant, but the underlying dynamics are moving - in a damaging direction.

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion produced no optimism about near-term prospects. The dialogue process continues formally, but the political conditions for genuine progress: willingness to move on recognition, credible ASM implementation, functional inter-community relations, and coherent opposition alternatives, are absent on both sides.

What remains is a process that both governments manage tactically: Kurti to delay while consolidating Kosovo's position in the north, Vučić to avoid exposure while maintaining the appearance of engagement. Neither opposition is positioned to offer a credible alternative. The student movements in Serbia express genuine frustration but lack the political cohesion to translate it into a policy shift. Kosovo's opposition risks competing with Kurti for nationalist ground rather than offering a different approach.

The central risk is not a dramatic breakdown but a slow, compounding deterioration of inter-community relations, of dialogue credibility, and of the conditions that would make a future settlement achievable. By the time the political moment arrives, the ground-level reality may have shifted too far to build on.

