

POLICY PAPER

Albania – Serbia relations: Bridging over troubled waters

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- **The relations between Albania and Serbia have been marked over past decades by the absence of political dialogue and the presence of diplomatic friction. This weakness has been reflected in the relations between respective peoples. Despite being the two major ethnicities in the region, the mutual relations are still far from being considered mature and demand for the presence and intermediation of third parties in order to smooth down long-lasting prejudices, intolerance and distrust.**
- **In the aftermath of the Kosovo war, both countries resumed the bilateral relations as of January 2001 through an exchange of diplomatic notes. However, the mutual relations did not break through until November 2014, when Prime Minister Rama visited Belgrade - the first official visit of an Albanian leader in Serbia in 68 years. This symbolic and historical act created a fresh political momentum and imprinted a hopeful beginning of a new cycle of political and societal rapprochement.**



The official visits in the respective capitals of Rama and Vucic were strongly backed by major international actors like Germany, EU and the United States, and were organized at the margins of the so-called Berlin Process. During the first joint press conference, both political leaders shared their vision that time had come to move forward the mutual relations through a “unified approach for a better future for our peoples”¹. In technical terms, these countries do not have any open bilateral issues. However, the Achilles’ heel and most contentious issue for both remains the question of Kosovo’s statehood, which cannot be excluded from the agenda when referring to the improvement of relations between the two countries. The fluctuation of relations between Prishtina and Belgrade certainly has an external effect on the relations between Serbia and Albania. Therefore, the resolution of Kosovo’s status would contribute to furthering of bilateral relations and overall stability of the region.

Moreover, over the past decades other obstacles have plagued the bilateral rapprochement between Albania and Serbia. In particular, there has been a lack of a true governmental commitment on both sides to embark into a trust-building and normalisation/reconciliation process. Additionally, the time factor has affected the countries’ political dynamics, resulting in a missed opportunity to broaden mutual understanding, in line with the general international political developments. The main challenges that have fuelled the negative perceptions between Albanians and Serbians lie on the widespread historical enmity, nationalist rhetoric, different interpretation and instrumentalisation of the past by political elites, mutual prejudices raised by a lack of knowledge and people-to-people interactions, miscommunication, etc. In particular, the education has been affected and misused for the perpetuation of stereotypes among several generations.

Today Albania and Serbia need to invest more in the development of a shared vision of the future. In this regard, the EU accession perspective provides for a collective ambition not only for these two countries but for the whole

region and it can serve as an impetus for a broad and sustainable reconciliation process. In fact, the Summit of Thessaloniki in 2003 offered to the region a European perspective, and since then the countries have made several steps ahead. Recently, the European Commission included reconciliation and resolution of existing bilateral disputes as a flagship priority in its last enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans. This move constitutes a step ahead in the prioritization of reconciliation process, besides being an additional conditionality for the countries. The Western Balkan countries need to step up their collective efforts in order to improve mutual relations and get prepared to take on the membership obligations.

Against this background, the present chapter seeks to identify the main steps forward made in the improvement of bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia since the leaders’ breakthrough of 2014. The overall aim is to reflect on lessons learned over the past five years and to provide recommendations on how to bring forward this newly established cooperation momentum and invest in a more sustainable and multi-level reconciliation process.

Bilateral rapprochement: one step at a time

The normalisation/reconciliation process between Albania and Serbia needs to be seen from a multi-dimensional perspective, which provides space to learn from past failures and take adequate measures to address existing bottlenecks at bilateral level. Berlin Process framework has created space for these countries to frequently meet on different occasions and address bilateral relations and inter-societal rapprochement from a wider regional perspective. This expanded approach has provided for a broader negotiation space and has contributed to enhance bilateral cooperation in new policy areas, which fall particularly in the soft policy sphere. During the past five years, between Albania and Serbia four new bilateral

¹ “Albania’s premier makes historic visit to Belgrade”, *DW*,

<https://www.dw.com/en/albanias-premier-makes-historic-visit-to-belgrade/a-18051456> [31 October 2019].

agreements have been signed in the field of youth, culture, tourism and statistics and some of them have already provided some track record of implementation.

The cooperation between Albania and Serbia has been established since 1926, and the number of bilateral interstate documents amounts to 66 (being agreements, conventions, protocols, etc.), including also those signed between Albania and the former Yugoslavia. With the reestablishment of regular dialogue in early 2000s, the new agreements were signed in compatibility with the European agendas of the two countries, such as in the field of evasion of double taxation, investments' protection, fighting against organized crime, readmission, etc. It was only in 2006, after the secession of Montenegro, that Albania could conclude interstate agreements exclusively with Serbia.²

According to the census in Serbia in 2011, there are 21 national minorities³, including Albanian. Serbia has in place regulations on national minorities in compliance with the modern European standards⁴. Albanian minority has its National Council of Albanian National Minority⁵ representing its interests and providing implementation of its rights. In Albania nine national minorities, including Serbian, are recognized by the law. There are three registered associations of Serbs and Serbs and Montenegrins. In October 2017, a framework Law on the Protection of National Minorities was adopted⁶ followed by 5 related bylaws in May 2019⁷ with remaining bylaws in the procedure. The status of national minorities is getting upgraded in both countries with permanent monitoring of national, European and international institutions.

What this bilateral cooperation pipeline suffers from still today is not the quantity of agreements or the

differentiation of policy areas, but the presence of an implementation strategy and political will lasting beyond the mandate of the leaders who have signed those agreements. At the moment, there are in the pipeline few draft bilateral agreements ready to be signed, such as on planning and urban development or international road traffic, which have not been concluded due to the countries' fluctuating dedication and enthusiasm. The oscillations in the contractual relations remain hostage of the political developments at the regional level; thus, additional time is needed in order to create a flexible and pragmatic mindset to address pressing and mutually benefiting issues.

Economic rapprochement

Focusing particularly on the economic cooperation, with the entry into force of the free trade regime (CEFTA) in 2006, mutual trade experienced some impetus. The annual rates of growth in mutual trade of goods and services are high, especially for services. There are mutual investments of individuals and companies from both countries, which while very low steadily increase. The business sector follows its own norms and principles, distancing itself to a certain extent from the political rhetoric, and thus contributing to the facilitation of interactions between the citizens of both countries. Some joint companies were established and business climate for cooperation of respective business communities is considered as favorable. Although the trade is based on the low value-added products, it is expected that expansion of construction works in both countries will contribute to the

² Simurdic M., "Srpsko-albanski odnosi", European Movement in Serbia, www.arhiva.emins.org/uploads/useruploads/dokumentipdf/Srpsko-albanski-odnosi---Simurdic-15-07-2016-.pdf, [31 October 2019].

³ "Rezultati popisa stanovništva, Srbija 2011", *Vreme*, <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1157758>, [31 October 2019].

⁴ "Zakon o zaštiti prava i sloboda nacionalnih manjina", online at https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_zastiti_prava_i_sloboda_nacionalnih_manjina.html, [31 October 2019].

⁵ "Zakon o nacionalnim savetima nacionalnih manjina", online at

https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi_download/zakon_o_nacionalnim_savetima_nacionalnih_manjina.pdf, [31 October 2019].

⁶ European Commission, "Albania 2018 Report", <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-albania-report.pdf>, [31 October 2019].

⁷ European Commission, "Albania 2019 Report", <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf>, [31 October 2019].

advancement of its structure and induce the exchange of more sophisticated goods and services.

The establishment of the Albanian-Serbian Chamber of Trade and Industry in 2016 constitutes a positive step forward. It facilitates circulation between business communities, information exchange, organization and participation in fairs and business forums, and exploring opportunities to apply with joint projects for funding from different European programs.

A promising area for cooperation is tourism, since there is a growing interest and potential for both countries. The establishment of a direct flight route between the two capitals in 2014, has contributed to the increase of tourism. In 2017, the number of Serbian citizens visiting Albania was approximately 5.000.⁸ Last year, the two countries signed a five-year cooperation agreement on tourism, designed to attract foreign tourists, promote cooperation between tourism organizations and increase the bilateral touristic traffic. The joint ambition is to create a common tourism strategy, which includes also the other countries of the region.

At the regional level, the two countries are members of more than 50 regional organizations.⁹ In view of the prospective EU membership, regional structures remain the main binding factor in the Western Balkans, providing the necessary space for “normality” in this turbulent region, where different actors are able to recognize common interests and commit to realize them – moving from economic and social sphere, to infrastructure and energy, environment, etc. The introduction of the 100% tax by Kosovo to exports from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina did not affect trade between Serbia and Albania. It only increased the unregistered flows of goods, which existed

previously at a lower level. However, this move led to polarization of parties’ interests (Albania supporting Kosovo and Serbia coupling with Bosnia and Hercegovina), and paralyzed the work of CEFTA, which already had internal problems with reorganization. These divisions are dangerous for the work of other regional organizations and projects in which the activities had developed rather smoothly a year ago.

The existing regional organizations as well as the newly established ones are supposed to bear the complex burden of intertwined activities in order to get Western Balkan countries closer to the EU and to each other. Any serious deterioration of bilateral relations inflicts harm to the great efforts that have been invested into regional cooperation.

Inter-societal connectivity

The fact that only after seven decades the two countries finally exchanged visits at the highest level and established normal diplomatic relations had influence also on media reporting. Reporting on policy areas like culture, economy and tourism are seen as the bearer of normalization process, despite referring to politics still being subject to negative media coverage on each other. This trend is most visible in Serbia, while in Albania reporting tends to be neutral.¹⁰ It is important to note that political leaders influence the general tone of media reporting which then shapes the overall public opinion.

Opinion polls conducted on the mutual perceptions of bilateral relations show that there is a prevailing conviction among the citizens that the other side is not ready to build friendly relations, while its own nation and state are evaluated as benevolent in this respect.¹¹ The importance

⁸ Rudic F., “Albania, Serbia Team Up to Boost Tourism”, *Balkan Insight*, www.balkaninsight.com/2018/05/18/albania-serbia-team-up-to-attract-foreign-tourists-05-17-2018, [31 October 2019].

⁹ Regional Cooperation Council, “Changing with the Region: RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2017-2019, Annex 1”, available at <http://www.rcc.int/admin/files/docs/reports/RCC-Strategy-and-Work-Programme-2017-19-rich.pdf>, [31 October 2019].

¹⁰ Pavlović A., Čeriman J., “Albania in the Serbian Media (January–September 2017)”, *European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade* 2017, www.emins.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Albania-in-the-Serbian-Media_eng.pdf, [31 October 2019].

¹¹ Faktor Plus, “The relationship between the Serb and the Albanian nations, perspectives of that relationship, friction points, possibilities and fields of cooperation”, Belgrade, 2018, as a part of a broader project “Serbs and Albanians - Which Way Further?” that



of bilateral relations is perceived as significant for overall position of each state both internationally and regionally (57% Serbs and 47% Albanians)¹² since it is considered an important factor of stability and security in the Balkans. Majority of the public believes that deepening of these relations is in the best interest of both countries, even despite the unresolved relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and clear position of both sides regarding this issue is 'to agree to disagree'. These polls show that the lack of information and knowledge on both sides is one of the strongest barriers in changing deeply rooted ethno-centric attitudes and negative stereotypes. Economic cooperation, tourism and cultural exchange are considered as sectors of change that can contribute to generating normalization and stabilisation in mutual relations.

Different civil society organizations in both countries have worked closely since the early 2000s, in order to accompany the normalization process between the countries, break existing enmity and prejudice and become a direct contributor to inter-societal reconciliation. As this type of cooperation has shown to be fruitful, the number of joint projects, initiatives and CSOs networks has boosted over time in various areas.¹³ Different European institutions, member states as well as the US and other bilateral donors support efforts of CSOs. However, there has been lack of continuity, long-term strategy and coordination, and wider outreach at the societal level.

Positive development was recorded after establishment of the first two regionally-owned intergovernmental organizations aimed to support CSOs - Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and Western Balkan Fund (WBF). The establishment of RYCO lies upon the Memorandum of Understanding on Youth Cooperation that was signed in November 2014 between the leaders of Albania and Serbia. It envisaged the establishment of a permanent dialogue between the youth and institutions of

both countries. Initially conceived as a bilateral instrument to bring together the younger generations, fight mutual prejudice and strengthen inter-cultural learning, this memorandum turned into a blueprint for a region-wide non-formal education on commonly shared values at the European level. The bilateral memorandum on youth cooperation is currently implemented by the ministries in charge of youth affairs, with the support of OSCE offices in the two countries. Since 2015, at least eight summer/winter schools and training activities have been organized in Albania and Serbia on cross-cultural dialogue and democratic values. Over three years, more than 2.000 people have shown interest to attend these bilateral activities,¹⁴ marking so a step forward mutual knowledge and comprehension.

Meanwhile, WBF was established with the strong support of the Visegrad countries, following the example of the International Visegrad Fund. RYCO and WBF rely upon annual quotas devolved by governments of the region, beside external funding sources. Both organizations have managed to bring together grass-root organizations from all the countries of the region, enhancing the exchange of knowledge and people-to-people connectivity. In 2018, RYCO received 278 project applications, where 44 applicants from Albania had 17 partners from Serbia, and 79 applicants from Serbia had 32 partners from Albania. Whereas the WBF preliminary assessment shows that about 60-65% of project applications or projects approved have been submitted jointly by partner organizations from Serbia and Albania and the percentage is even higher for Serbia-Kosovo CSO partners. These figures show that grass-root organizations are expanding their networks and bringing young people closer to each other, creating a new cornerstone in the reconciliation process.

However, what has not been addressed in this panorama, are the existing **language barriers** between the citizens. Enhanced support to learning Albanian/Serbian

Serbian news agency Tanjug organised with the Albanian news agency ATA, with the support of the Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade.

¹² 13% Serbs and 26% Albanians do not consider them as important. Ibid.

¹³ For example: Balkan Civil Society Development Network, Regional Convent on European Integration, RECOM, Western

Balkans Enabling Project for Civil Society Monitoring of Public Administration Reform – WeBER, SEE Think Net, etc.

¹⁴ OSCE, "OSCE Presence in Albania brings young people from Western Balkans together in third edition of Youth Trail", available at: www.osce.org/presence-in-albania/420851, [31 October 2019].

language would facilitate access to information, enhance inter-personal communication and provide a deeper sense of respective traditions, culture and identity. The interest in the other country's language has been growing, and accessible language courses would certainly counter the negative stereotyping of the past.¹⁵ At the University of Belgrade there is an Albanian Language Department, whose establishment lies back to 1925, and around 10-15 students enroll annually in the study program. Three years ago, following the establishment of the Albanian Cultural Club association in Serbia, an Albanian language course was organized and more than 50 people enrolled immediately.¹⁶ Whereas, in Albania this opportunities are still missing, despite the strong interest shown not only by young people and civil society activities, but also ordinary citizens that have a keen interest in deepening their knowledge of the region.

The **intermarriages phenomenon** is a direct contributor in the establishment of cross-cultural connections. Life stories show that the countries are much closer than public polls indicate. According to unofficial evidence of interpreters who facilitated marriages in some parts of Serbia, in the area from Belgrade to Pirot, there were around 500 marriages of Serbian males and Albanian females (mostly from Shkodra and its surrounding, and Tirana) during 2012-2017.¹⁷ Many families from Serbia and Albania continuously communicate and visit each other. Albanian brides have been highly respected as good mothers, diligent housewives, and adaptive to the social environment. The majority of Albanian ladies are Catholics (70%), but also of Muslims confession (30%), usually converting into the orthodoxy. It is interesting that most of media reporting of these marriages is positive.

Finally, steps forward have been made also in **cultural cooperation**, contributing to developing channels of mutual understanding, dialogue and knowledge based on 'sameness' rather than 'otherness'¹⁸. Although additional

efforts are still needed in discovering common grounds that connect the countries, there is some evidence on a growing interest to learn more on respective art and literature. Various authors from both countries have been published in the respective languages, such as Ismail Kadare, Dragan Velikić, Svetislav Basara, etc. The Albanian Ministry of Culture has given particular importance in this regard to the inclusion of Serbian authors in the list of books translated under the Literature Translation Fund. The respective ministries signed in 2017 the Memorandum on Cultural Cooperation with the aim to strengthen mutual cooperation, exchange and implementation of joint activities in the field of art, culture and cultural heritage, in line with European and UNESCO standards. Although this type of cooperation can certainly contribute to spread of connecting symbols and social trust-building, yet the cooperation remains dependent on political will and financial opportunities provided by the governments. At the moment, there is no clear strategy or joint event calendar on both sides on how to proceed with the materialization of the political declarations and legal instruments in place.

Conclusions and recommendations

There are several areas where positive steps ahead have been made in the past years. The EU accession process constitutes the glue for the fostering of cooperation between Albania and Serbia and there are good opportunities in the economic and soft policy sector to capitalise upon the existing momentum. The historical animosities and prejudices, the unresolved Kosovo issue, lack of knowledge and communication, different composition of international affiliations and traditional geopolitical gravitation (Mediterranean vs. Central European) remain to represent obstacles that need to be addressed. While some of them could be overcome in the

¹⁵ Salihu F., "Learning each other's language", *Kosovo 2.0*, <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/learning-each-others-language>. [31 October 2019].

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Serbs increasingly marry Albanians! There is no divorce", *Espresso*, www.espresso.rs/vesti/drustvo/171717/srbi-sve-vise-

[zene-albanke-sve-ih-je-vise-razvoda-nema-a-ovako-su-im-ugovoreni-brakovi-video](http://www.albanke-sve-ih-je-vise-razvoda-nema-a-ovako-su-im-ugovoreni-brakovi-video), [31 October 2019].

¹⁸ Alpekin H. B., "The issue of 'otherness' has become a cliché, but the problem still exists", European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, www.eipcp.net/policies/2015/alpekin/en/print.html, [31 October 2019].

near future and others not, they provide potential for a way towards long-term normalisation and partnership.

Albania and Serbia, two small countries, although representing two biggest ethnic groups in the region, are the main axis of the complex regional structure of different organisations, networks, initiatives covering all relevant issues, at different levels. Any crisis in Serbian-Albanian relations is harmful for everybody else in this setting and for the EU, as the main mentor and architect of the „regional approach“. In a near future, a spectacular improvement of bilateral relations cannot be expected. But small improvements on a day-to-day basis are taking place despite the ups and downs instigated in the political sphere. The political will is a crucial stepping stone for furthering progress, although incentives and successes in other areas exert pressure to change the political attitudes.

Some steps that should be taken into account by the countries are following:

- Legal framework for bilateral relations is slowly getting better but its development should be further encouraged;
- Further improvement of the status and rights of minorities should be one of the priorities;
- Trade is always making its way legally or illegally being one of the best indicators of positive developments in bilateral relations. Thus, any obstacles to trade and investment should be removed especially in tourism and other services where the exchange is getting more balanced;
- Constructing and connecting the infrastructure will bring people and businesses closer and improve the position of the two countries in the European surroundings;
- Mobility of citizens and professionals is crucial for improvement of mutual knowledge and understanding;
- Civil society should be encouraged to increase its contribution to opening new avenues for partnership and cooperation;
- Youth is the critical actor of normalisation and the most sensitive one as the young people have been exposed more than other generation to negative propaganda and nationalistic political patterns.

That is why cooperation between Serbian and Albanian universities and other educational or scientific institutions and individual experts has to be encouraged and supported by national, regional and European donors as a crucial leverage in developing new cooperation patterns and realistic perceptions.

- Bilateral relations of Albania and Serbia could be considered as one of the least difficult cases in the region as there is no burden of recent past and the main task is normalisation not reconciliation. Both countries can contribute to releasing Kosovo from its historical trap and opening the space for much wider Serbian-Albanian alliance, which could transform the Balkans and contribute in consolidating the EU.

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