



Weekly Briefing

Serbia political briefing:
Inter party dialogue in Serbia: the second lane
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Inter party dialogue in Serbia: the second lane

Abstract

Following the March 1st beginning of the inter-party dialogue process, mediated jointly by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and the European Parliament, during the April unexpected change happened: due to the strong opposing of some Serbian parties and political and citizens movements, this process has split into the two lanes: the dialogue with the opposition parties that accepted the European Parliament mediation and the dialogue with the opposition parties that rejected it. No matter to this change, the chairman of the dialogue remained the same -Mr. Ivica Dačić, Serbian Parliament Speaker.

Second lane dialogue: origin

Following the March 1st beginning of the inter-party dialogue process, mediated jointly by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia and the European Parliament, during the April this process has split into the two lanes: the dialogue with the opposition parties that accepted the European Parliament mediation and the dialogue with the opposition parties that rejected it.

Namely, speaker of the Serbian Parliament, Mr. Ivica Dačić, announced on April 6th that the dialogue with the opposition parties which reject the mediation of the European Parliament, all of whom participated in the 2020 elections and failed to cross the 3% threshold, would start in the next two weeks.¹ To tell the truth, the idea of opening a “second lane” of the dialogue with the Eurosceptic parties surfaced a couple of months ago, but the opposition that boycotted the 2020 elections, as well as analysts, has serious doubts about the sincerity behind this idea.

Dačić reminded that he called upon the MEP's to start the dialogue by the middle of March, but they refused it, advocated for two months long preparatory phase. Considering the fact that there are also parties that want to participate in the dialogue only without representatives of the international community, Dačić decided to start the dialogue with those

¹ “Dačić: Pokrenuću dijalog sa onima koji neće posredstvo EP”, *Danas*, 05/04/2021, <https://www.danas.rs/politika/dacic-pokrenucu-dijalog-sa-onima-koji-nece-posredstvo-ep/>, accessed on: 05/05/2021.

parties. The intention was to give them opportunity to express their views, to give their remarks and make some proposals.²

As Mr. Dačić explained, this consultation phase is the key in developing a stable and realistic agenda for cross-party dialogue and identifying all elements that can help reach a political consensus. Therefore, it is the most important not only to listen what parliamentary groups in the National Assembly are saying, but also to listen carefully the opinion and point of view of those political platforms that currently are outside of the Parliament. There is no doubt that their opinion also matter and may have an important influence in resolving some of the most important issues for the democracy of Serbia. Of course, for successful completion of that task is necessary that each participant approach these talks in a positive and constructive way.

This type of dialogue was demanded by the conservative Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), monarchist Movement for the Renewal of Kingdom of Serbia (POKS), extreme right-wing Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and the local party of the mayor of Čajetina municipality, Milan Stamatović, Healthy Serbia (ZS), Enough is enough movement (Dosta je bilo –DJB), etc. They were joined by the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS) led by Aleksandar Šapić, who is, since 2020, a part of the ruling coalition. All of them has rejected the EU mediation as an affront to the sovereignty and dignity of Serbia. The example of such position, for instance, was given by the leader of DSS, Miloš Jovanović, who explained: “Our problems should be solved among ourselves. I would be ashamed to attack (the government) in front of foreigners... Dirty laundry should not be aired in public, if there is dirty laundry”.³

From the point of view of the opposition parties that are in favor of the European Parliament mediation, these second lane dialogue participants are considered as parties that have warm relations with the ruling parties. Unlike the other group, they regularly appear on televisions with national coverage, which remain almost entirely closed for the boycotting opposition, with DSS leader Miloš Jovanović and SRS leader Vojislav Šešelj being particularly regular guests on the overwhelmingly pro-government television channels. They are also excluded from the criticism and smearing campaigns these two channels and pro-government newspaper direct at the boycotting opposition.

³ <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/opposition-leader-inter-party-dialogue-to-end-six-months-before-2022-vote/>

The opposition parties demanding the EU mediation in the Dialogue – including Freedom and Justice Party (SSP), Democratic Party (DS) and Free Citizens Movement (PSG) – consider that there is no doubt that the nature of these parties and the aim of the parallel dialogue has only one goal - to undermine the prospects of the process that involves the EU within Serbian political milieu.

Some scholars share similar position. They think that this second lane dialogue serves to put focus away from the EP-mediated dialogue. Completely artificially, the self-excluded parties from the true political conflict in Serbia, suddenly became key factors in this process.

Significantly is that even the President of Serbia and the ruling party - Srpska Napredna Stranka - SNS (Serbian Progressive Party), Aleksandar Vučić, openly supported this second lane of the dialogue, stating that he might personally participate in that one, but not the one mediated by the EU. Particularly due to President Vučić's agenda, the meeting initially scheduled for April 26th, later was postponed for April 28th.

Surprisingly, Vučić indicated that he even might step down from his position as the President of SNS in order to mediate this lane of the dialogue! Anyway, knowing that he didn't step out immediately after his election for the President of Serbia, it is not likely that he will do that now.⁴ All prior announcements of him relinquishing the helm of the party soon, which have been surfacing every few months in the past several years, have so far never materialized.

Vučić's strong opponents consider his recent movements to be motivated by internal political needs and the perception of his voters of the EU and European integration. These are not pro-European voters, and, to them, the second lane would probably seem more relevant, with Vučić defending this disagreement with the EU and willing to talks with everybody who is against EU. There is no doubt that this type of attitude is exclusively for the purposes of the internal campaign.

Second lane dialogue: perspective

One of the main criticisms of the previous round of the inter party dialogue (IPD) was that the ruling parties focused only on the aspects of the electoral process that were less relevant to the opposition and boiled down to mere technicalities. The opposition expressed its desire to

⁴ Indeed, according to Serbian legal norms there is no such provision that would demand one to withdraw from the party's chair position after the election for the president of the state. Still, one would be expected to do that, since he/she should act as the president of all citizens and not only of its party members.

ensure that key topics will be the part of the discussion. Still, it is not likely that the parallel dialogue will lead towards it. Holding two parallel dialogues is bound to complicate the already difficult political situation in Serbia even if its goal was to include all political actors in a sincere attempt to reach an agreement on electoral conditions. There are serious doubts, however, that this is the case.

What has been reached recently was a kind of the agreement among the boycotting opposition upon the negotiating platform, which is focused on media pluralism, putting an end to the pressure of voters and holding the presidential, parliamentary and local elections in Belgrade separate from each other, namely on three levels.

According to Mr. Ivica Dačić, this second lane or parallel dialogue will focus on the topics of electoral legislation, control of the elections, party financing and the media. Considering the type of relations between the ruling party and this “desirable” opposition, it might be expected that some of their demands will be accepted. That will be a perfect excuse for all those in and out of Serbia that criticize current system.

Therefore, if opposition really intend to have a dialogue that will make substantive and necessary change in political life of Serbia, they have to sit together at the same side of the negotiating table.

Conclusion

Inter party dialogue in Serbia, no matter if it involves or not the third parties, has to be run in a positive and constructive way. It should be considered as process based on cooperation, consensus and trust, process aimed to create conditions for fair and free elections. Without dialogue and willingness to compromise, it is not likely to obtain successful democratic process that will address the major problems in Serbian political life.