

Andreas Poltermann, Heinrich Böll Foundation Belgrade

Welcome to the Workshop on Serbia's regional politics- on neighborly relationship between Serbia and Kosovo

Belgrade, December 10 2013

Your Excellencies, honorable members of the German Bundestag, Serbian Parliament and the Kosovo Parliament, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to warmly welcome you to this roundtable discussion on the relations between Serbia and Kosovo with representatives of the government and the civic societies of both states. My name is Andreas Poltermann, I am the head of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Belgrade, the organization which prepared this event together with the Center for Foreign Policy, Belgrade, and the Democratization Policy Council, Berlin and Washington.

Throughout this year, the word "historic" was very often used in connection with the Brussels Agreement on the normalization of relations between the two countries. "Historic" means: this Agreement is an outstanding event – the beginning of a new era in which normal relations between Serbia and Kosovo are to be introduced and achieved. In order to get a step closer to this goal, we have invited you to take part in this roundtable discussion.

It is clear that both countries are still far from having normal relations. Normal relations imply mutual recognition of two countries as states and the recognition of their respective territorial integrity and state sovereignty. That remains a task for the years to come. Much will depend on the manner in which the rapprochement of both states with the European Union is linked with the process of normalization between the two countries. It is remarkable enough that Brussels is preparing for accession negotiations with the Republic of Serbia whose state borders to Kosovo are a subject of dispute, even though they function, de facto, as borders. This question and many others must be resolved before Serbia or Kosovo are allowed to join the European Union.

Serbia and Kosovo need the approximation to the European Union because they lack the strength to resolve their respective vast problems. For, they are weak states with weak

economies; states which are forcing people into grey economy, states whose peoples to a large extent refuse to comply, for instance, by not paying their bills, taxes and fees; they are states in which an enormous, party-controlled public service sector and state-owned enterprises exploit the private sector by means of continual re-indebtedness. Weak states require populist policies for their stabilization: spectacular arrests of wealthy individuals, symbolic tax increases (“solidarity tax”) and a foreign-policy conflict. In the previous years, Serbia has improved its relations to most countries in the region; still, they cannot be labeled as good, bearing in mind the tension with Croatia. However, the conflict issue in Serbia that has the most mobilizing potential in terms of interior politics and also one that aims to cover up the state’s weakness – is the Kosovo issue. There is similar behavior in Kosovo, as well. Here, too, the conflict issue regarding the Serbs in the northern parts of the country has long served as a cover-up for the weaknesses of one’s own state.

Therefore, the normalization of relations between the two countries must be accompanied with the development of normal statehood in Serbia and Kosovo, respectively. To that effect, both countries need support from the European Union, that is the support of the transformative power of conditionality driven by the Copenhagen criteria. However, this is where the parallels between Kosovo and Serbia cease to exist. Namely, the Republic of Kosovo wants, carried by a broad social consensus, with no ifs and buts, to join the European Union. Is this also the case in Serbia? The preliminary failure of reaching the Association Agreement between the Ukraine and the European Union and the pressure from Russia that contributed to this failure, gives rise for questioning the Russian influence on the Serbian approximation to the European Union and the normalization of the relations with Kosovo. Only recently, the Russian Ambassador to Serbia, Chepurin, spoke of red lines which will be crossed, from Moscow’s point of view, should Serbia want to join NATO. He amended this interference by noting that the approximation to the European Union should not compromise Serbia’s relations with the Moscow-desired Eurasian Economic Union. The construction of the pipeline in Serbia, intended to transport the gas to Italy by the Russian state-owned enterprise *Gazprom* in two years, has led to discussions in the Serbian public, as well as in parts of the Serbian Government, about the advantages and downsides of this major infrastructure project. It is notable that the Russian state-owned company has been given conditions for this pipeline in Serbia that are more profitable in comparison with those in, for example, Bulgaria. This suggests that through this joint venture which, incidentally, partly contradicts the European Energy Community Treaty, Serbia aims to secure a long-term strategic support from Russia as a veto power in the United Nations Security Council. This support, particularly concerning the Kosovo issue, has its economic and political price,

as recently outlined by the Russian Ambassador. The conflict between the European Energy Community Treaty and the contract on the Serbian-Russian joint venture can be resolved. However, a question of far greater importance is whether Serbia, backed and assisted by Russia, will oppose a comprehensive normalization of its relations to Kosovo, thus jeopardizing its path towards the European Union.

In order to prevent this scenario from becoming reality, we intend to discuss today the normalization between Serbia and Kosovo in connection with their accession to the European community.

Thank you very much for your attention!