

S P E E C H

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

RULE OF LAW PROGRAM
SOUTH EAST EUROPE
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April

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Opening speech – Workshop “How can the relations between Belgrade and Pristina be normalized”

- Pristina, April , 2013

Allow me to welcome you on behalf of the Rule of Law Program South East Europe of the Konrad Foundation to the second workshop in the framework of the discussion rounds about the normalization of the relations between Kosovo and Serbia, which we initiated last year, when a similar event took place in the Montenegrin city of Budva. We are therefore very happy that our event last November was not a singular occurrence and we sincerely hope that we will be able to host similar workshops in the future as well.

For many years the very idea of bringing together representatives of civil society and of the media from Serbia and Kosovo at the same table would have been discarded as idealistic – or even naive. Yet here we are today – and I am particularly pleased to bear witness to this in the context of the recently encountered difficulties in the negotiation progress between Pristina and

Belgrade under EU aegis on the future of the bilateral relations – wherein lies a prerequisite for the European path of both sides. The fact that you are here today shows that, even if sometimes politicians may have difficulties in reaching agreement, we can still work on building and consolidating bridges between societies that have in the past been rooted in conflict and mistrust.

In my welcoming speech last year in Budva, I had stressed that people in Belgrade and Pristina share the same desires for functioning state institutions, for the rule of law to be established and for corruption and organized crime to be fought against. I had also pointed out to the fact that a majority of the people in Kosovo and Serbia alike would like to see their countries making progress towards European integration. But, as you all know, the European Union cannot accept new member states which have not solved

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their bilateral disputes. And personally, I do not think that there is an alternative to European integration – not only for Pristina and Belgrade, but for all countries in the region, even if the road to Brussels is long and not always without stepping stones.

Together with our partners from the Kosovo Institute for Policy Research and Development in Pristina and from the Forum for Ethnic Relations in Belgrade, we thought that organizing a workshop for journalists and media representatives from both sides would represent an – albeit modest – contribution to the effort of promoting the rapprochement between the two societies. We believe that the media can make an essential contribution in the process of deconstructing the negative imagery of the “other” – stereotypes which have been cultivated for years and have nurtured feelings of hate and resentment. You can show your audiences that people on the other side of the border have the same problems and aspirations – both in their private life, and for their communities. We also firmly believe that courageous journalists will always raise their voices if they bear witness to violations of human rights – and this includes, of course, the rights of minorities.

Some of you may believe that the title of our workshop – the question about how relations between Belgrade and Pristina can be normalized – is too far-reaching to enable the identification of answers. But I must confess that this is not our goal. Our more realistic approach is to provide a forum for an

honest and open debate on an admittedly controversial topic. While in international diplomacy, drawing the curtain over certain issues may be helpful, journalists have always been known for being outspoken. So do not fear to speak your mind – as long as you are prepared to listen and understand the arguments of your peers. Our hope is that this dialogue will convince you of the need for well-balanced debates on this issue – and that this approach to the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia will gradually replace the still emotional coverage we sometimes encounter in the media of the two sides.

Let me once again tell you that we are very glad that you accepted our invitation. I wish you interesting and enriching discussions and a successful outcome of this conference.