

A CHANGE OF WINDS OR BUSINESS AS USUAL? NON-RECOGNISING EU MEMBER STATES' ATTITUDES TOWARDS KOSOVO

Hamza Gurdic

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Abstract: Kosovo celebrates the 15th anniversary of its declaration of independence in 2023. Although Europe's youngest country is alive and well, it sometimes faces difficulties in international relations. As of 2022, 22 out of 27 EU member states have recognised Kosovo as an independent state, while Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain still have not done so. There are geopolitical, economic, and ethnic aspects behind the decision of non-recognition among these five countries, to protect the stability of their own statehood, as except for Greece, they all share fears of secessionism. This paper provides an overlook of Pristina's opportunities in the global arena of international politics, focusing on the relations between Kosovo and the five non-recogniser EU member states between 2008 and 2022. Their position on granting recognition to Kosovo has remained the same; however, while attitudes in Greece, Romania, and Slovakia have shifted towards the softer side of non-recognition, Spain and Cyprus remain hard opposers.

Keywords: Western Balkans, Euro-Atlantic integration, Kosovo, state recognition, EU non-recognisers

Introduction

Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia on 17 February, 2008. The states of the international community expressed their opinion about the new-born country: out of the 193 United Nations (UN) member

states, 117 have recognized Kosovo's statehood until 2022, leaving 76 non-recogniser countries globally (Kosovo Thanks You, 2022). Although Kosovo can count on the support of key UN Security Council members like the United States, France, or the United Kingdom, China and Russia remain tough opposers, and by exercising their veto rights they deny Kosovo accession to the UN and influence others' position over the recognition of Kosovo. The European Union (EU) presents a position of status neutrality in that it is up to the member states to decide on their opinion concerning recognising Kosovo as a state.

The five EU member states that do not recognise Kosovo (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) have different interests and concerns that shape their position on the issue. Except for Greece, non-recogniser countries are home to ethnic minority groups that are actively trying to secede (e.g. in Spain), or groups that are historically perceived by governments as being prone to do so (e.g. in Romania or Slovakia). Cyprus, on the other hand, already faces a *de facto* state within its territory, and it does not want to provide it with legitimating arguments for its existence by recognising Kosovo as an independent state.

Beside self-interest, bilateral relations with Serbia are also decisive. Cyprus, Greece, and Romania, for example, share religious and cultural values with Serbia and have historically supported each other's national causes. Slovakia, along with Greece, has an interest in the stability of the Western Balkans due to the direct economic rewards stability could bring to them. Additionally, Greece could increase the containment of its regional rival Türkiye. Spain and Cyprus, in addition to the stability of their statehood, have an interest in facilitating the EU integration process, thus they promote a diplomatic solution of the dispute between Belgrade and Pristina. Romania has also tried to appear as a mediator in the past to boost its international reputation. Serbia welcomes the rapprochement of the non-recognising countries, although it voices its dissatisfaction as soon as it detects signs of easing in the policy of the non-recognising countries towards Kosovo. Considering these motives, this paper analyses how the relations between the five EU non-recognisers and Pristina have evolved between 2008, when Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence, and 2022.

Kosovo's Opportunities for Manoeuvre in International Relations

The international community is divided on the question whether Kosovo should be regarded as an independent state (or a state altogether), which presents difficulties for Pristina in the international arena. Non-recognition hinders its accession to international organisations, thus limiting the country's room for manoeuvre in its foreign policy. However, full state recognition is not necessary for a country to be able to participate in international relations. For instance, Kosovo is not a member of the UN, which means that legally the country is not a member of the international community, but in a political sense Kosovo participates in the economic, cultural, and geopolitical dimensions of international politics just as much as the Republic of China (Taiwan), which was stripped of its UN Security Council permanent membership in 1971 and ultimately lost its UN membership. Furthermore, Kosovo is a member of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the Olympic Committee, demonstrating that the lack of full state recognition does not mean that Kosovo cannot exist on the international stage.

Beside the fact that Kosovo is not a member of the UN due to the continuous Russian and Chinese vetoes, Pristina's aspirations to become a member state of the European Union and NATO are also challenging in the absence of state recognition. However, considering the criteria of statehood that were laid down in the Montevideo Convention in 1933, Kosovo could be considered a state, since it has a permanent population, a defined territory, a government that controls power in its entire territory, as well as a capacity to conduct international relations.¹ In its Advisory Opinion delivered in 2010, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) concluded that "the declaration of independence of Kosovo adopted on 17 February, 2008 did not violate international law" (ICJ, 2010). Pristina utilises the legally non-binding opinion of the ICJ as a legitimating argument for independence, although the judiciary panel in the Hague merely stated that the way Kosovo declared independence does not violate public international law, nor does customary international law include restrictions regarding a state's ability and ways to declare independence.

¹ Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States 1933. Article 1.

During the first few years after 2008, Kosovo started to engage in international relations as much as circumstances allowed, first by establishing its own Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora in March 2008. Most state recognitions in the international community were issued during the first two years after Kosovo declared its independence, after that the process slowed down, resulting in rare instances of progress. The latest step forward was achieved in 2020, when Pristina established diplomatic ties with Israel by opening an embassy in Jerusalem, and Israel has recognised Kosovo's statehood in return for its recognition of Jerusalem as the capital.

As far as membership applications to international organisations are concerned, Kosovo has suffered several losses over the past decade: in 2015, Pristina failed to gain UNESCO membership in a narrow vote, which Serbia celebrated as a diplomatic victory. To gain membership, Kosovo needed to lock in two-thirds of the votes. 142 countries voted, with 92 backing the motion and 50 voting against (including Cyprus, Slovakia, and Spain), while 29 countries abstained (including Greece and Romania) (UN Tribune, 2015). Kosovo's Interpol bid was another unsuccessful membership application, as Pristina was rejected in 2018 because it did not get enough supporting votes for a two-thirds majority (Gaši et al. 2018). On the bright side, Kosovo managed to get a win in sport diplomacy when it was accepted as the 55th member of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) in 2016 and later to Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) (Homewood, 2016). Kosovo's latest application was made in May 2022, when Pristina applied for a membership in the Council of Europe, using Russia's exit as an opportunity, which has angered Serbia. Kosovo showed confidence when it suggested that it had sufficient support from the 46 member countries to get the two-thirds majority vote that is required for acceptance. Kosovo's membership in the Council of Europe's Venice Commission is a good start, since it is a related democracy-and-rights advisory body that Pristina joined in 2014 (Cvetkovic, Baliu, 2022).

The EU has played a vital role in Kosovo's state-building, and it has actively sought to facilitate Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration and reconciliation with Serbia from the start. In 2008, the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) was launched to support relevant institutions in the establishment of the rule of law and to promote EU values. After the United Nations Mission in Kosovo

(UNMIK) supervision ended in 2012, EULEX replaced UNMIK and facilitated the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue to promote the peaceful solution of the issues between Serbia and Kosovo. The first success the dialogue brought was the Brussels Agreement, which was signed by the parties in 2013. The agreement addressed the formation of the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities, the integration of parallel structures in the police and the judiciary in North Kosovo, and the commitment not to hinder the parties' efforts to acquire EU membership. Pristina's latest success in the Euro-Atlantic integration process was in 2015, when Kosovo signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The EU took advantage of the full legal personality it had gained with the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon to bypass the condition of the member state unanimity that was required for signature. Consequently, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo became a potential candidate country. However, Pristina is still a long way from EU accession, as membership still requires unanimous agreement of all member states.

Pristina's foreign policy is constantly obstructed by Belgrade, who tries to prevent other states from granting recognition to Kosovo or to encourage the withdrawal of recognition already granted. Additionally, Serbia does its utmost to keep the doors of international organisations closed to Kosovo. Since 2017, Belgrade has been campaigning to accomplish recognition withdrawals, notably among African and Oceanic countries. As a result of the campaign, the first withdrawal happened by Suriname in 2017, whose example was followed by eight countries in 2018. Serbia's aim to delegitimise Kosovo in the international arena met with limited success, since some of the few countries that had assisted Belgrade in its campaign have since revoked their withdrawn recognition (Cakolli, 2020. pp. 19–22.).

Albin Kurti, who came to power for the second time in 2021, promised Kosovo “an active, innovative and principled foreign policy” (Xhambazi, 2022), although so far the results are still to come, as the plans to achieve new memberships in international organisations or recognitions have not advanced. However, it is quite an accomplishment that the leaders of large EU member states such as Germany consider mutual state recognition to be the end of the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, on a multinational trip to the Western Balkans,

emphasized the need to clarify the question of Kosovo's recognition, as two countries that do not recognise each other cannot become members of the EU (Euronews, 2022).

Kosovo–Cyprus Relations

The Republic of Cyprus (hereafter: Cyprus) is in a rather complex and controversial situation when it comes to the recognition of Kosovo. This is because, according to the Greek Cypriots, Türkiye invaded the country in 1974 and created a *de facto* Turkish state in Northern Cyprus, which then declared independence in 1983, recognised only by Türkiye.² Despite the similarities to the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, it is problematic to compare it to the case of Cyprus. The “national problem” of Cyprus has predestined its firm stance on not recognising Kosovo's statehood from the beginning. Nicosia strongly disagreed with the EU's visa liberalisation³ intentions with Kosovo and opposed the recognition of Kosovo's travel documents as much as in the case of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. However, Kosovo's citizens can travel to Cyprus with a multiple-entry Schengen visa. This attitude changed in 2022, after the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cyprus, Ioannis Kasoulides confirmed Nicosia's support for Kosovo's visa liberalisation in a meeting with Prime Minister Albin Kurti (Office of Kosovo PM, 2022). When it comes to applications to international organisations, there is no change in approach: contrary to Greece, who stayed neutral, Cyprus voted against Kosovo's UNESCO membership proposal (Ioannides, 2017. p. 48.).

2 Kosovo does not recognise the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and therefore does not have any formal relations with it.

3 The European Commission launched the visa liberalisation dialogue with Kosovo in 2012, and although in 2018 the Commission confirmed that Kosovo met all the criteria, the visa facilitation process stalled due to a lack of approval by the European Parliament and the Council. Consequently, Kosovo citizens remain the only ones in Europe who cannot travel visa-free to the European Union. France has given reassuring signals to withdraw its vote against Kosovo so that the visa liberalisation process can move forward, paving the way for Pristina to join the visa-free zone. MEPs have called on the Council to proceed with the adoption of a visa-free regime for Kosovo, but no progress was made in June 2022 during the EU–Western Balkans summit in Brussels.

Nicosia's foreign policy is strongly based on valuing international law and human rights (as they refer to it, its "position of principles"), thus it supports the resolution of the dispute within the framework of international law, through dialogue and negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo. Cyprus was granted EU membership in 2004, despite having an open bilateral conflict and not exercising sovereignty over its entire territory. The Annan Plan has failed to reconcile the parties and could not establish a reunited Cyprus, although the EU membership pertains to the island as a whole. The body of common laws, rights, and obligations that bind all the member states together within the EU (otherwise known as the *acquis communautaire*) is limited to the areas on the island where the government of the Republic of Cyprus exercises effective control. On the territory of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, the application of EU law has been suspended. To avoid such complications in the future, the EU tries to promote reconciliation among potential future members. Consequently, the resolution of bilateral differences was made a precondition for accession after Nicosia joined, like in the case of Greece and North Macedonia, or Serbia and Kosovo. Even if Belgrade and Pristina did come to an agreement, Cyprus would not necessarily recognise Kosovo as a state. While Cypriot foreign policy understands the motivation behind Greece's attitude towards Kosovo regarding a high level of cooperation, Nicosia would not join its ally in supporting recognition even if the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue ended with success, due to the complications of how that would be interpreted in the case of Northern Cyprus.

Today the positions have softened compared to 2008, since (in principle) Cyprus is willing to recognise Kosovo if Serbia does so. Cyprus is also a firm supporter of Serbia's EU accession. This transformation of foreign policy is the result of becoming more united with the EU foreign policy and trying to be a constructive member rather than the 'odd one out', who solely pursues its own national interests. In this spirit Cyprus did not hinder the establishment of the EULEX mission in Kosovo, although it does not participate in it actively, either (Ioannides, 2017. pp. 49–50.).

Bilateral relations with Serbia (along with Greece), are historic, owing to mainly cultural and religious ties that share Christian Orthodoxy. Cyprus has always been a supporter of Belgrade's standpoint that Kosovo belongs

to Serbia. Furthermore, at the grassroots level the Greek-Cypriot population also sympathises with the Serbs. According to the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Nicosia, the Serbs living in Cyprus do not feel like foreigners because the two nations share the same religion, have a similar culture, and they share the struggle for the preservation of their respective territories. Nenad Bogdanović, who is the President of the Serbian-Cypriot Friendship Association, also underlined this when he stated that “Greek Cypriots see Serbs as a brotherly people and all the relations we have experienced in Cyprus were like with our own people” (Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Nicosia, n.a.).

Other than cultural ties, Serbia is the only country from the Western Balkans region that has noteworthy trade and tourism relations with Cyprus, along with cooperation in education and security (Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Nicosia, n.a.). At the political level, Cyprus has opened its only embassy in the Western Balkans in Belgrade to facilitate maintaining relations, while other diplomatic missions function with parallel accreditations to neighbouring countries to the region, such as Greece or Hungary.

While economic ties between Cyprus and Kosovo are virtually non-existent, and cooperation between civil societies is limited, there have been efforts to establish connections: in 2014, the British Council arranged a visit for the first-ever delegation of representatives from various Kosovar NGOs, think tanks, and media outlets to Cyprus. This visit helped break down misconceptions about Kosovo and started a slow process, with a reciprocating visit by a Cypriot delegation the following year (Fazliu, 2016a). Lacking real economic interests, the way to recognition might be mostly dependent on diplomacy, but the process has evolved slowly since the first steps that were taken in the mid-2010s, and with Türkiye backing Pristina to push its own agenda forward in Northern Cyprus, Nicosia refrains from recognising Kosovo.

Kosovo–Greece Relations

After Kosovo declared its independence, instead of expressing a firm rejection given its historical and religious bonds with Serbia, Greece remained neutral. Greece formulated a rather diplomatic stance on

the issue, underlining that both parties must refrain from escalating the situation, which could ultimately cause war and destabilisation in the region (Krisafi, 2018. p. 161.). Over the years, Greece has transformed its initially neutral standpoint on the matter according to its own geopolitical interests, which align with the security of the region: Athens is invested in EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. As Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias has highlighted, if Europe sits idle and does not accelerate the integration process, rival forces will step in and try to gain influence in the region, undermining EU–Western Balkans relations (Maček, Radosavljevic, 2022). This has led to the current foreign policy stance, which still does not recognise Kosovo as an independent state, although Greece is the only country among the five EU non-recognisers that seemingly has no internal issues with minorities concentrated in substantial numbers in a given region of the country (because the Greek Constitution does not recognise ethnic and religious minorities) and consequently, it is not exposed to the risk of separatism. The primary concern for Athens is mainly about avoiding giving the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus an argument against the Republic of Cyprus by granting recognition to Kosovo.

In 2009, the Greek standpoint was that recognition would only happen after Serbia and Kosovo mutually agree on a solution within the framework of international law, emphasizing that this is the only acceptable way of dealing with the issue to conserve the stability of the region. In 2017, during a visit to Serbia, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras assured Serbia of its support on the matter along the principles expressed in 2009, which was repeated five years later (Trkanjec, 2022a). Despite the lack of recognition, Greece has been a very cooperative partner to Kosovo: it has recognised Kosovo's passports and conducted many high-level diplomatic meetings with it, but when it comes to meetings at the level of foreign ministers, Kosovo is not represented as a state but as an economic partner. Greece also backs Kosovo's visa liberalisation progress (B92 Net, 2021) and has not impeded Kosovo's attempts to join international organisations (Fetahu, 2021).

Greece, unlike the four other EU non-recognisers, is diplomatically represented at ambassadorial level in Kosovo by the Liaison Office in Pristina, accredited by the UNMIK, and it participates in EULEX and NATO's KFOR missions. Moreover, being an advocate for promoting the economic development of the Western Balkans, viewing international trade as a tool for maintaining peace and stability, has enabled Kosovo to establish an Economic and Commercial Affairs Office in Athens (Hellenic Republic Foreign Affairs website, n.a.). Greece is fairly active in the economic aspect of bilateral relations with Pristina, having substantial investments in Kosovo mainly in food-related sectors, such as beverages, but Greek companies are present in the production of construction materials, petroleum products, and waste management as well (Hellenic Republic Foreign Affairs website, n.a.). According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Kosovo's exports to the EU in 2021 amounted to EUR 237.7 billion (31.5% of total exports), with Germany (8.2%) the main export destination in the EU. As for imports, EU countries accounted for 44.3% of total imports in 2021, worth approximately EUR 2 billion. Greece accounted for a 4.4% share of imports in Kosovo, coming third after Germany (13.1%) and Italy (5.9%). Imports from non-EU countries amounted to 36.6% of all imports or EUR 1.7 billion, 12.5% of which originated from Türkiye, which was the highest share in the group of countries outside the EU (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2022). As the statistics show, Türkiye's presence in Kosovo's trade in terms of imports is thrice the volume compared to that of Greece.

Greece has renewed its interest in the Western Balkans to counter Türkiye's ambitions in the region because Ankara pursues an active foreign policy with Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo. Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias has expressed that the future of the Western Balkans cannot be along the idea of 'neo-Ottomanism' (MacroPolis, 2022). Türkiye has also offered help as a mediator in solving the political crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina by intensifying its diplomatic efforts. The close economic and military cooperation between Türkiye and Serbia is tangible proof of Ankara's success in the region, which was emphasized in 2021, when bilateral relations between Türkiye and Serbia reached their best level, according to officials from both countries (MacroPolis, 2022).

With the growing economic role of Athens in the Western Balkans, Kosovo has become an important partner in terms of energy diplomacy and energy sector investments. Greece is in favour of connecting the Western Balkans

to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) to support the gas supply of the region through interconnecting pipelines. While it does not exclude traditional energy supply sources, Pristina would like to embrace a forward-looking policy that combines renewables with fossil fuels (Trkanjec, 2022b). Greece in the past couple of years has engaged in dialogue with Kosovo about investment opportunities in the field of energy, particularly regarding petroleum products, wholesale, and retail trade (Jakupi, 2021).

In April 2022, the Foreign Affairs Ministries of Greece and Kosovo signed a cooperation agreement on boosting trade relations and economic efforts, which underlines Athens' interests in terms of investing in innovation, tourism, and the energy sector of Kosovo (DTT-Net, 2022). The latter could present various promising opportunities for Greek investors, since Kosovo aims to boost the share of renewables in electricity consumption by 2031 (Todorović, 2022).

Along with the economic connections, academic exchanges and several projects of research-related cooperation between civic groups have also intensified (Ker-Lindsay, Armakolas, 2017). Relations within academia first blossomed during the Yugoslav era, but the 1999 war distanced the two countries from each other, partly owing to Greece's alliance with Serbia. However, after 2008, an era of reconstruction commenced in academia, and Kosovo signed agreements with Greek educational institutions that provide Kosovars with scholarships, allowing students from lower-income families to study in Thessaloniki (Drosopoulos, 2019. pp. 209–210).

Kosovo–Romania Relations

Romania was one of the first countries in the world that clearly refused to recognise Kosovo as an independent state. The decision was made just one day after Pristina's 2008 unilateral declaration, based on a legalist approach, as Romania accused Kosovo of breaching international law. Then in 2010, after the ICJ opinion, Romania took a firm position on supporting Serbia by reiterating its attitude of not recognising Kosovo, highlighting the "limitative approach" of the Court. For instance, the lack of examination whether the declaration of independence had led to the

legal creation of a state and whether international law vested Kosovo with the right to declare independence or a right to secession, and the inability of the Court to examine the applicability of the right to self-determination in Kosovo's case as being beyond the scope of the question, considering the way it was formulated (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, n.a.).

A fear of witnessing a dangerous precedent of secessionism, which might inspire ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania, contributed to the reasoning of Romania, even though gaining independence seems unrealistic in the current diplomatic setting, as Hungary tries to establish the best relations possible with its neighbouring countries.⁴ Furthermore, Bucharest tends to defend its national interests vigorously by dismissing the objective of granting protection to cultural, linguistic, or other interests of Hungarians in Romania. This defensive approach has come to the fore again when Hungarian President Katalin Novák posted on social media during a visit to Romania that her priority is to represent the interests of all Hungarians, regardless of the country they live in. As a response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania issued a statement explaining that Hungary could only have ties of cultural cooperation with ethnic Hungarians living in Romania, but it cannot represent their interests, as Bucharest considers them Romanian citizens even if they have acquired Hungarian citizenship (Manzinger, 2022).

Furthermore, non-recognition is used as a bargaining chip with Serbia when it comes to the dispute about the Romanian minority (Vlachs) in Serbia (Fazliu, 2016b). Despite its non-recognition, Bucharest has contributed to the security mission led by the European Union by deploying a contingent of police and gendarmes to help maintain order and security on the territory of Kosovo (Chiriac, 2015). Moreover, along with Greece, Romania did not hinder any of Kosovo's attempts to become a member of international organisations.

The rigid policy of Romania first changed in 2012, with the change in government: the new Prime Minister, Victor Ponta made it clear that Bucharest would rather support a swift recognition of Kosovo than

4 Considering neighbourly relations, Romania has a fundamentally better relationship with its eastern neighbour, Moldova than with Hungary. The unification of the two countries is a question that arises from time to time, which could be compared to the bilateral relations between Albania and Kosovo.

pursue an inflexible approach of saying no (Troncotă, Beysoylu, 2021). This was the first instance of the Romanian government making such an announcement. In 2013, the year Serbia and Kosovo signed the Brussels Agreement, Victor Ponta hinted that 2015 might be the year when Romania would recognise Kosovo. However, Romanian President Traian Băsescu did not share this opinion, nor did the wider political discourse. Consequently, this occurrence was quickly forgotten when the political landscape became fraught with scandals, and Prime Minister Ponta had to step down. The new technocratic government of Dacian Cioloş did not change the policy on Kosovo. Troncotă and Beysoylu believed that Prime Minister Ponta's announcements were rather a result of external pressure from the US, but these acts could not initiate a substantial change in policy towards Kosovo, since the Constitution grants the President the final say in recognising a state (Troncotă, Beysoylu, 2021).

Under President Klaus Iohannis, Romania proposed to act as a mediator between Serbia and Kosovo to push forward the EU integration process, but Pristina strongly rejected the offer, given Romania's close ties to Serbia. According to Fati (2018), at the time there were press claims about Iohannis preparing to enter the race to become President of the European Commission. He wanted to gain the political capital needed for the position by getting involved as a mediator between Serbia and Kosovo. In 2019, Romania did not oppose Kosovo's Chairmanship in the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), following up on an instance in 2014, when Romania acted positively under its presidency, which made it possible for Kosovo to join a meeting within SEECP (Troncotă, Beysoylu, 2021).

In the changing Romanian political landscape, the topic of Kosovo is not really on the public agenda, it does not appear in the program of any political party, and exchanges at the political or civil sector level are virtually non-existent (Damian, Demjaha, 2019). One thing is certain: the Romanian parties widely support the country's official position on the question, which tries to balance between Serbia and Kosovo in the role of a mediator, who will only change its stance if the two disputing parties settle.

Kosovo–Slovakia Relations

Slovakia considers itself a country close to the Western Balkans, which became a territorial priority of Slovak foreign policy after its EU and NATO accession. Together with the other member states of the Visegrad Group, Slovakia is determined to help the countries in the region towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

Slovakia's attitude towards the Kosovo question is often explained by a fear of setting a precedent to the 422,100 ethnic Hungarians (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2022) living in the southern part of the country, although a Kosovo-type of event is unlikely, since tensions between minorities and the Slovak state are rare. That being said, in 2006, several incidents took place within a short timespan: an ethnic Hungarian woman was first robbed and beaten up, then her T-shirt was marked with the Slovak nationalist slogan "Hungarians, return to behind the Danube". The next day, three men were arrested for bringing a banner saying "death to the Hungarians!" to a soccer game (Goldirova, 2006). Another, more recent case happened in 2019, when Slovakia's Foreign Affairs Ministry summoned the Hungarian Ambassador to Slovakia as a diplomatic response to Hungarian fans' behaviour of chanting anti-Slovak slogans as well as denigrating state symbols during a football match between Hungary and Slovakia (Bernau, 2019). Slovakia worries that recognising Kosovo might trigger a demand for broader autonomy from the Hungarian minorities, bearing in mind the fact that the language law restricting the use of the Hungarian language contributes to causing tension (Fazliu, 2016c).

Other important factors that influence Slovakia's approach to the Kosovo question should not be forgotten about, either. First, Slovakia is a historical ally of Serbia, which dates back to the nineteenth century and is not only based on the notion of Slavic solidarity but also the existence of a Slovak community of 50,321 people, which accounts for 2.6% of the total population of Vojvodina according to the 2011 census (Bubalo-Živković et al. 2019. p. 33). Second, Slovakia experienced a peaceful secession from Czechoslovakia, which has influenced Bratislava's views on the Kosovo question in that the country does not comprehend the impossibility of reaching a political agreement between Serbia and Kosovo after the armed conflict of 1999 (Nič, 2017. pp. 35–36).

Bratislava conducts active diplomacy in the Western Balkans and views the area as a favourable destination to invest in. However, since Bratislava does not recognise Kosovo as an independent state, Slovakia has not opened an embassy in Pristina, instead it operates a Liaison Office in Kosovo, similarly to Greece (Orosz, 2017. p. 8.), and there is a history of regular contact between the officials of the two countries (even if it is not in the focus of public attention). In civil society, projects such as the Open Kosovo Market, which aims to enhance Kosovo's private sector capacities and grant opportunities for investment, are currently ongoing (Slovak Liaison Office in Pristina, n.a.). Another example of this type of activism is the Pontis Foundation venture called the "Slovak-Balkan Public Policy Fund in Northern Kosovo", which had the objective of contributing to the support of the democratisation process in Kosovo by supporting the civil society, with the "transfer of experience of Slovak civil society from cooperating with local and national government in solving specific themes and contributing to creation of concrete policies" (Activ Society, 2016).

Concerning political engagement, several public debates have been hosted to discuss Kosovo's way forward with Kosovo officials, entrepreneurs, and even artists, with the help of Slovak NGOs, while on the Kosovar side the British Know How Fund in Pristina and the Kosovo Foundation for Open Society (KFOS) have been the main contributors to these programmes. Seeing the success of these events, some have even argued that Kosovo would be soon recognized, which would lead to a domino effect, with other countries like Greece and Romania following (Nič, 2020. p. 164.). Even though Andrej Kiska, who had previously stated on record that he would recognise Kosovo, won the 2014 presidential elections, he did not keep his word in order to avoid confrontations with Robert Fico, who stayed in position as head of government. Despite the changes in political leadership, the attitude did not change, and consequently Slovakia did not come closer to recognising Kosovo. In addition, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought the importance of territorial integrity and secessionist challenges back to the fore in foreign policy and diminished the importance of the Balkans in Slovakia's international affairs policy. Slovakia has consistently opposed the illegal secession of Crimea and thus has not changed its policy towards Kosovo (Nič, 2017. p. 38.). Since then, Slovakia merely reassures Serbia from time to time on its position regarding the recognition of Kosovo.

Kosovo–Spain Relations

Spain, being a plurinational and diverse state, has always been an advocate for countries with similar characteristics, thus it supported Yugoslavia's fast-track accession to the European Community to save it from dissolution in the early 1990s. However, the initial policy towards the Western Balkans has changed, and it became reactive with the adoption of so-called red lines as a reaction to secessionism in the region, diverging from the common EU position. Spain has always been reluctant concerning secessionist processes, and no matter the external pressure, Madrid's stance on the issue has always been unshakable (Ferrero-Turrión, 2020. p. 4).

The separatist ambitions of Catalonia and the Basque region are the fundamental reasons why Spain has taken the position of being a hard-line opposer of Kosovo's recognition as a state. It is common to draw comparisons between Kosovo and the Catalan independence movement, although there are several differences that render the comparison pointless. The most obvious one is that Kosovo has already declared its independence, and it functions as a state, while Catalonia is still an integrated region of Spain, with many links to the government in Madrid. Metodiev (2018) highlights the fact that the common argument is that the two cases have a few similarities but also many vital differences. He emphasizes that while the aims are the same for Catalonia and Kosovo, the methods to get results, the main political actors who are involved, and the international realities are rather different.

First, Kosovo encountered and used military force, and organised violence during the struggle for its independence, while Catalans have never done so (it is highly unlikely to happen in the future as well, but it can never be excluded). Second, its economic interests are crucial for Catalonia, while in Kosovo this was not the essential force driving the battle for independence. Finally, a big difference lies in the historic international and regional context of ethnic coexistence that has influenced Spain and Serbia: in the former, people have lived together in Catalonia without division, while in the latter Serbs and Albanians are separated physically and culturally, and they speak different languages (Metodiev, 2018. p. 294.).

The events reflecting separatist ambitions in recent years have shown that the issue is currently present in Spain, making Madrid cautious. Nevertheless, Spain only criticises the procedure through which Kosovo declared independence, opposing the unilateral act of secession, and Madrid does not have a problem with the creation of new countries if independence is gained in harmony with international law. For this reason, Spain granted recognition to Montenegro in 2006 and recognized South Sudan in 2011 (Ferrero-Turrión, 2017. p. 53.). According to Spain, Kosovo's process of gaining independence violated international law, and the government has not recognised Pristina due to this. Madrid has emphasized that the decision had nothing to do with the internal situation of Spain concerning Catalonia and the Basque country, suggesting that the two cases should be treated separately. Throughout the years Madrid has remained consistent about its standpoint, regardless of the political party in power (Demjaha, 2019. pp. 73–74.).

In fact, Spain is not uninterested in solving the question, and it supports the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue and acts proactively, using its good relations with Serbia to push the diplomatic process forward. Spain acted as a key donor in UNMIK and KFOR until 2009, although it refused to play any role in the EULEX mission, since it led to effectively building a state that had gained independence in a way that violates international law according to Spain (Ferrero-Turrión, 2017. pp. 53–54.). There was an instance when the status of Kosovo was questioned regarding its participation in the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC) in the General Court of the EU in the *Spain vs. Commission* case. Madrid argued that Kosovo could not be considered a third country for the purpose of its participation in BEREC. Since Kosovo does not exist as a state according to Spain, it cannot enter into an agreement with the EU to become a member of BEREC. Spain lost the case and was ordered to pay for the costs (Info Curia, 2020).

Engagement in the academic and civil sectors was initiated by Spanish think tanks, which have invited Kosovar scholars, academics, and activists to contribute to the discussion about the situation in Kosovo in workshops and seminars. The results of the discussions in these events, however, have never been made public, and participation was by invitation only, which

made this a failed attempt to connect the two nations. Furthermore, since Spain does not recognise Kosovo's passports, many invitees had difficulties entering the country (Ferrero-Turrión, 2017. pp. 53–54.).

Spain maintained its firm policy on Kosovo's non-recognition after 2011, but the newly elected government in 2020 was expected to thaw the icy relations, as Spain confirmed its prerequisites for granting recognition. Getting behind the idea of a Western European vision for Kosovo, Madrid has expressed that it would be prepared to recognise Kosovo if a settlement was signed together with Serbia (Mallick, 2020). The Spain–Kosovo relations had hit a low point in Sofia in 2018, when the Spanish Prime Minister refused to sit in the same meeting as his Kosovar counterpart. The current Spanish government has been perceived as more flexible on the issue due to its attending meetings together with representatives of Kosovo (Krasniqi, Rettmann, 2020). In 2020, under the new Spanish government, the virtual meeting of Zagreb was a small step forward, where the terms of Spain's cooperation were to include no flags or country name (Montoro, 2020). After some hope, in 2021 Spain announced in a public statement its international football match with the 'territory of Kosovo', which marked a return to its initial hard-line viewpoint (Trkanjec, 2021).

Conclusion and Outlook

Kosovo's relationship with Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain is truly complex, with the links between these countries influenced by many aspects. The fear of strengthening secessionist tendencies in countries that have considerable ethnic minority groups continues to strongly influence the policies of non-recognition in all the analysed states, except Greece. Geopolitical factors are mostly considered by Greece, since it is the country most connected to Kosovo in terms of economic and political relations. This combines with the Greek interests in countering Türkiye's diplomatic efforts in the region. Slovakia is also a serious player, advocating for the EU accession of the region and supporting its stability while also seeking economic opportunities in Kosovo.

Another key aspect is how close the respective countries are with Serbia: Greece, Cyprus, and Romania can all relate to their shared historic ties of Christian Orthodoxy, while Slovakia has a connection with Serbia that relies on the notion of Slavic solidarity. Spain is the only country that does not have any historic, cultural, or religious ties with Serbia. Naturally, all non-recognisers consider respecting international law and protecting stability in international order to be crucial. Spain and Romania make up for their lack of direct cooperation with Kosovo by being strong promoters of solving the problem diplomatically and through facilitating the Euro-Atlantic integration process.

Experts believe that the deadlock would be solved if even one country chose to recognise Kosovo as an independent state. However, taking the first step is always the hardest, and in this case, recognition could be costly for certain countries. For instance, if Greece decided to grant recognition to Kosovo, Serbia could controversially choose to recognise the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Such an act would, however, essentially lead to the indirect recognition of Kosovo. Romania uses its non-recognition as leverage for the benefit of its Romanian minority in Serbia, which would be gone but if it recognised Kosovo, and Serbia might make things more difficult for Romanians in the country.

Overall, the initial positions on Kosovo's independence have changed for the better since 2008: Greece and Slovakia have become the two most cooperative countries, easing political opinions on the issue. Romania has also softened its stance, although it still firmly opposes the idea of granting recognition. Only Spain and Cyprus have remained the hard-line opposers they were in 2008. Spain has briefly revealed its flexible side under the current government, while Cyprus still does not have any kind of connection with Kosovo, since it would be fatal for the Cypriot "national problem", although it has given the green light to Kosovo's visa liberalisation.

How the normalisation of bilateral relations between Kosovo and the five non-recognisers will develop in the future is an open question; however, it is most likely that Greece and Romania could have a change of heart to the extent that at least they would not block Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration. Although Slovakia voted against Kosovo's UNESCO membership application, Bratislava is positioned closer to the softer stance of Greece and Romania. If Bucharest was to recognise Kosovo, it could encourage Slovakia, who shares the concerns of the (unrealistic) secessionist aspirations of the Hungarian

minorities living on its territory. Spain and Cyprus could remain the two rigid opposers, whose attitude would be more significantly influenced by Kosovo's relationship with Serbia, as they would not continue to object if Belgrade declared its recognition.

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