**CHAPTER 2**

**The United Kingdom: Kosovo’s Strongest Supporter in Europe**

James Ker-Lindsay

The United Kingdom has been Kosovo’s single most important European ally in its attempts to gain recognition and acceptance on the international stage. Having been at the forefront of efforts to NATO intervention in 1999, from the very start of the status process the British Government left no doubt that it viewed statehood as the only viable final status for Kosovo. Following the declaration of independence, in February 2008, Britain, along with the United States, led the international efforts to try to persuade countries to recognize Kosovo. As a result, Kosovo is now recognized by more than half the members of the United Nations. At the same time, Britain also helped pave the way for Kosovo’s membership of many key international bodies, including the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the International Olympic Committee. Britain also played a key role in supporting Kosovo during the International Court of Justice advisory opinion on the legality of the declaration of independence. For all these reasons, it would not be an exaggeration to say that no other EU member has done as much as the United Kingdom to support Kosovo’s recognition efforts.

Although Britain continues to support Kosovo’s international integration, and still lobbies for recognition whenever and wherever opportunities arise, there is no doubt that the intensity of British activity in this area has decreased in recent years. This is due to several factors. In large part, it is down to the increasing difficulty of persuading countries that have not yet recognized Kosovo to do so. Allied to this, there has been a growing realization of the damage that this failure to secure more recognitions has on wider perceptions of British influence. Then there is Britain’s frustration at what it sees as Kosovo’s inability to structure a plan to secure further recognitions. Meanwhile, British officials have expressed frustration at the dysfunctional domestic political situation in Kosovo. This has also made it more difficult to persuade countries to recognize Kosovo. Finally, all these factors are playing out at a time when the wider international environment is in a period of extreme change. The looming prospect of Britain’s departure from the European Union raises important questions about the way in which it can continue to support Kosovo in the years ahead.

**British positions on recognition**

Over the past two hundred and fifty years, Britain has been intimately involved in processes of recognition in international politics. Indeed, the modern practice of state recognition emerged at the time of the efforts by the thirteen colonies of North America to break away from British colonial rule, in 1776.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thereafter, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Britain and the United States led the way in developing the principle of recognizing de facto statehood, whereby territories that had substantively proven their existence as a self-sustaining polity, and where there was no realistic chance that the colonial power would be able to reassert their authority, should be accepted as independent states. Originally applied to Latin America, this principle opened the way for the independence of a number of countries in Europe, such as the countries that broke away from Ottoman rule in the late nineteenth century.

In the modern era, the United Kingdom has also been at the very heart of discussions on secession and recognition, not just as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, but also as the world’s most significant colonial power. Indeed, many of the most controversial cases of secession in the modern era were directly or indirectly tied to processes of British decolonisation. In this regard, it has played a part in shaping the modern prohibition on acts of unilateral secession. Most notably, it led the way in imposing sanctions on Southern Rhodesia when it unilaterally declared independence against Britain, in 1965; the first such UDI against British rule since the United States.[[2]](#footnote-2) Then, in 1983, Britain was responsible for marshalling international opposition against the decision of the Turkish Cypriot community to proclaim their own independent state in northern Cyprus.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, Britain was also intimately involved in Bangladesh’s secession from Pakistan, in 1972; a case that is particularly interesting as it the only example in the modern era where a state has unilaterally declared independence and eventually managed to secure UN membership.[[4]](#footnote-4) This experience has given the United Kingdom a pivotal role in the development of attitudes towards statehood and secession in contemporary international relations.

**Britain and the Balkans**

Over the course of the past three decades or so, the United Kingdom has emerged as a key actor in the Balkans. The collapse of Yugoslavia, and the wars that followed, forced Britain to engage with the region to a degree that it had rarely done so in the past. In addition to its efforts to end the conflicts, both through diplomacy and by military force, the United Kingdom was instrumental in post-conflict reconstruction. British troops also played an important role in peacekeeping. This high level of interest in the peace and security of the region continues to this day. For example, the British Government follows developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina closely. In 2014, it aligned with Germany to create a new initiative to try to break the political deadlock in the country.[[5]](#footnote-5) Meanwhile, in line with its general support for European Union enlargement to counter the prospect of ever closer political union, the United Kingdom became a champion for the region’s integration into the EU and NATO. Even with of Brexit on the horizon, the Balkans will remain an important area for the United Kingdom. The region still poses many security challenges, such as organised crime, various forms of trafficking and the rise of religious extremism.[[6]](#footnote-6) Russia’s growing efforts to exert influence in the region is also a source of concern for British policy makers.[[7]](#footnote-7)

While the United Kingdom takes a strong interest in the Western Balkans from a security perspective, at a bilateral level the links between Britain and the region are in fact relatively weak. Certainly, the relationship between Britain and the Balkans is on a far lesser scale than the ties it enjoys with other parts of the world, where it had a significant colonial presence. There is no long historical legacy of British involvement in the region. While Britain and Serbia were allies during the two world wars, this does not have appear to have a lot of bearing on the contemporary relationship between London and Belgrade. Meanwhile, economic and trade links between the United Kingdom and the countries of the region are very limited. Aside from its trading ties to the countries of the European Union, British firms have traditionally been far more focused on the Commonwealth. The Balkans remains a very alien environment for many British companies. Trade statistics show that for the most part, the countries of the Western Balkans are extremely low down the rankings as destinations for British exports or sources of imports into the United Kingdom.[[8]](#footnote-8) Macedonia is the biggest regional export destination, coming 53rd in the global ranking. Meanwhile, Serbia, in 85th position worldwide, is the highest ranked source of imports in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, there is not a particularly large Balkans diaspora resident in the United Kingdom. From across the region, the figure is around 80,000. Of this number, by far the most numerous are Kosovo Albanians. However, the number are still very low as compared with Germany, which has almost a million inhabitant from the Balkans. All this means that beyond the security dimensions of the relationship, there are no deeper bonds that tie the United Kingdom to the region.

**Britain and Kosovo’s Path to Independence**

Alongside Bosnia, Kosovo has been a central focus of attention in terms of Britain’s involvement in the Balkans.[[9]](#footnote-9) Under the Conservative government, British efforts to address the conflict in Bosnia were criticized heavily. As well as claims of a pro-Serb bias in certain quarters of the British establishment, there was a sense that Britain was not willing to make the necessary commitment to take military action to bring an end to the fighting. However, the emergence of a Labour government under Prime Minister Tony Blair, in 1997, marked a radical change in British policy towards the region. Guided by a belief in the need for robust interventionism when circumstances so demanded, Blair saw the growing conflict in Kosovo as a litmus test of the West’s ability to confront human rights abuses in the post-Cold War era.[[10]](#footnote-10) He lobbied hard for a strong response to the growing conflict in Kosovo. Once efforts to secure a peace agreement had collapsed, he led efforts to secure a NATO response against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This resulted in a 78-day NATO air campaign. At the start June 1999, Serbia capitulated. Soon afterwards, a NATO peacekeeping force (KFOR) entered Kosovo under the command of a British General, Sir Mike Jackson.

Under the terms of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, Kosovo formally remained under Yugoslav sovereignty. However, it was placed under UN administration pending a decision on the province’s final status. At the time, there was not a sense that Kosovo would inevitably become independent. While many certainly thought that it would do so, there was still a view that some form of negotiated autonomy might be possible. Recognising the sensitivity of the issue, the UN administration sought to push the whole question of Kosovo’s status off the agenda. Efforts were instead focused on developing Kosovo’s political and economic standing. However, by early 2004, it was becoming clear that the efforts to defer Kosovo’s final status could not continue indefinitely. In March that year, major riots broke out. It was clear that Kosovo could not be kept in limbo indefinitely. Therefore, in late-2005, the United Nations Security Council authorized the start of a process to determine the final status of Kosovo. Responsibility for overseeing this effort was handed to Martti Ahtisaari, the former president of Finland.[[11]](#footnote-11) Although Ahtisaari was mandated to oversee a process of negotiation between Serbia and Kosovo, from the outset he was clear in his own mind that the only viable outcome was independence. Indeed, soon after taking up the role, he briefed the Contact Group that the most useful thing that they could do to assist him in his efforts to broker a solution would be to tell Belgrade to prepare for Kosovo’s independence. He also made this clear to Belgrade and Pristina.[[12]](#footnote-12) He was not alone. From the very start, the United Kingdom was clear that this would lead to independence. Indeed, John Sawers, the then political director of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, became the first senior official of any Western state to admit as much. [[13]](#footnote-13)

As the UN process under Ahtisaari faltered due to the deep divisions between the sides, divisions started to open between the various members of the Security Council. Russia sided with Serbia and demanded that any settlement must be mutually acceptable to Belgrade and Pristina. Meanwhile, deep divisions emerged between key NATO and EU partners. Along with the United States, the United Kingdom saw little to be gained by wasting any further time on the status process.[[14]](#footnote-14) It was clear that regional stability in the Western Balkans now rested on an independent Kosovo. However, others were more hesitant. Germany needed more time to get its position in order. In the end, it was agreed that a further initiative would take place to see if the two sides could still reach a final agreement. A trio made up of representatives from the United States, Russia and the European Union was appointed to oversee this final effort. Although the UK was deeply skeptical of this approach, it nevertheless agreed to let it runs its course. In December 2007, the Troika announced that it had not been able to bridge the differences between Belgrade and Pristina. In the meantime, Kosovo’s leaders had been working with various supporters, most notably the United States and the United Kingdom, to open the way for a unilateral declaration of independence, on 17 February 2008. Britain was one of seven countries to recognize Kosovo within its first twenty-four hours of existence.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Support for Kosovo post-independence**

Even before Kosovo declared independence, Britain had started to process of persuading other EU members and international partners to recognize Kosovo. After Kosovo announced its statehood, these efforts were increased. Led by the Foreign Office, strong efforts were made to try to persuade countries to recognize Kosovo. Indeed, in the years following the declaration of independence it appears barely a meeting would take place between senior officials from the United Kingdom and non-recognising countries without the subject of recognition being raised. One group of countries that Britain focused on, and was very ‘helpful’,[[16]](#footnote-16) were the members of the Commonwealth of Nations, primarily made up of former British colonial territories. These included many African countries as well as many Caribbean island states. It also played a part in securing some other early stage victories for Kosovo. For example, while Kosovo could not join the United Nations due to Russia’s veto, it could become a member of parts of the UN system. Most notably, due to the weighted voting used by both organisations, which gave strength to Pristina’s western allies, Kosovo was admitted to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Meanwhile, Britain also supported Kosovo’s efforts to join various other international organsiations, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

From the moment of the declaration of independence, Serbia put up strong resistance to Kosovo’s efforts to gain recognition on the world stage. Although it had ruled out any form of military action to try to restore its sovereignty over Kosovo, Serbian officials made it clear that they would take any actions short of this to preserve its claim to Kosovo. Serbian officials now embarked on an international campaign to try to prevent countries from recognizing Kosovo. These efforts were led by its young and extremely energetic foreign minister, Vuk Jeremić. In many ways, his initiatives exceeded expectations. In an extensive lobbying effort, he visited 90 countries around the world trying to generate support for Serbia’s case.[[17]](#footnote-17) (These contacts would hold him in good stead later. In 2012, he was elected President of the UN General Assembly.) Indeed, they became a thorn in the side of the efforts by Britain and the other lead supporters of Kosovo to secure recognitions. So much so that one British official even suggested that perhaps they should all scale back their attempts to secure further recognitions in the hope that it would see Jeremić slow down on his counter-recognition efforts.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Perhaps the most important development following the declaration of independence was Serbia’s decision to try to secure an advisory opinion on Kosovo’s declaration of independence from the International Court of Justice (ICJ). To do this, it first needed a General Assembly resolution referring the matter to the Court. When the news first broke that the Serbian Government was preparing to bring the matter before the Assembly, Britain tried to dissuade the it from doing so. However, it soon became evident that this was in fact a counterproductive move. For a start, it could appear as if Britain did not believe the strength of its arguments in Kosovo’s favour. Also, having railed against Serbia’s use of force in the past to settle disputes in the region, it now appeared as though London was trying to prevent it from pursuing peaceful methods of dispute resolution.[[19]](#footnote-19) As a result, the British Government concentrated its efforts on trying to prevent countries from actively supporting the resolution. It was unsuccessful. On 8 October 2008, the Assembly voted by 77 votes to six to refer the matter the Court with the following question: ‘Is the unilateral declaration of independence by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo in accordance with international law?’[[20]](#footnote-20) Britain was one of 74 states, including most other members of the EU, that abstained in the vote. This proved to be a significant victory for Serbia in several ways. Apart from the fact that it had secured such strong international support for its call to have an advisory opinion, it also provided Belgrade with a vital tool in its efforts to prevent more countries from recognizing Kosovo. For as long as the case remained before the ICJ, Serbian officials could quite legitimately call on states to hold off recognizing Kosovo until the Court had provided its opinion. It was a highly effective move. Almost immediately, the pace of recognitions slowed.

The Court case provided a valuable opportunity for the two camps to put their positions on recognition before an international audience. In the end, the case attracted far more interest and proved to be far more contentious, than may have been expected. For the first time, all five permanent members of the Security Council took part in the proceedings of the Court. For its part, the United Kingdom not only presented a written submission before the Court,[[21]](#footnote-21) it also took part in the oral proceedings.[[22]](#footnote-22) In doing so, it strongly supported Kosovo’s right to declare independence. Britain also provided support for Kosovo in another way. Sir Michael Wood, the former head of the Foreign Office Legal Department, was a member of the Kosovo delegation – formally described as ‘the authors or the unilateral declaration of independence’ – at the proceedings. (As it happens, the Serbian delegation also included a British member: Malcolm Shaw, Professor of Law at the University of Leicester.) On 22 July 2010, the Court issued its opinion.[[23]](#footnote-23) In what proved to be a very finely balanced ruling, the Court ruled that a declaration of independence, unless specifically prohibited, such as by a Security Council Resolution, was not contrary to general international law. However, and crucially, the Court also deliberately avoided ruling on whether Kosovo was now a state. As a result, both sides saw the opinion as an important victory. For Kosovo, it meant that its declaration of independence was not illegal. Meanwhile, Serbia could claim that while the declaration may not have been illegal, it did not mean that Kosovo was now a state.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The ICJ Opinion appeared set to mark a new phase in the recognition battle. Serbia announced that it would not press for a new UN General Assembly resolution that would take note of the Court’s finding. However, at this point, the EU stepped in. Wishing to avoid a prolonged period of tension between Serbia and Kosovo, it now pressed Serbia to relent and prepare a joint resolution that would pave the way for a process of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina.[[25]](#footnote-25) The aim of this process would be to reach agreements on key issues affecting day-to-day life and paving the way for a process of normalization between the two. Again, the United Kingdom played an important role, albeit in an indirect sense. The first phase of talks was overseen by Sir Robert Cooper.[[26]](#footnote-26) Thereafter, the talks were run by Baroness Catherine Ashton, the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. In April 2013, this process led to its most significant breakthrough where Belgrade and Pristina signed 15-point agreement. This paved the way for the establishment of an association of Serb municipalities, and the integration of ethnic Serbs into Kosovo’s police service. The agreement also stipulated that neither Serbia nor Kosovo would attempt to block each other’s EU accession process.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The agreement marked a significant breakthrough. By this point, it appeared as if Serbia was slowly coming to terms with the loss of Kosovo and that political leaders were preparing the ground to persuade the wider population that the province had been lost. Meanwhile, the British government hailed the fact that Kosovo was now recognized by over half the members of the United Nations, and that Britain had played a role in this.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, despite earlier indications that Serbia was winding down its campaign against recognition, in the autumn of 2015 the battle appeared to resume as Belgrade and Pristina came to bitter blows over Kosovo’s attempt, to join the UN Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The Serbian Government argued that the move was an attempt by the Kosovo Albanian majority to claim key Serbian Orthodox religious sites as their own. In what proved to be a major diplomatic battle, the two sides enlisted their allies to press their case. As expected, Britain strongly supported Kosovo’s application. In the end, and much to the surprise of many observers, Kosovo’s attempt to join the organization was narrowly defeated.[[29]](#footnote-29) Crucially, several states that had recognized Kosovo abstained. Interestingly, when Kosovo had another chance to put forward another application, two years later, in 2017, it did not do so following consultations with the United Kingdom and its other key supporters.[[30]](#footnote-30)

By this stage, the pace of international recognitions had slowed dramatically. In the previous three years from 2014, just four countries recognised Kosovo.[[31]](#footnote-31) Nevertheless, by late 2017, nine years after Kosovo had declared independence, it was recognised by around 110 members of the United Nations, or approximately 57 per cent of the organisation’s membership. It was at that point that Kosovo suffered a significant setback. On 30 October, Suriname announced that it had revoked its recognition and had instead reaffirmed that it recognised Belgrade’s sovereignty over Kosovo.[[32]](#footnote-32) This was followed, a month later by an announcement from Guinea-Bissau that it too had decided to revoke its earlier recognition of Kosovo.[[33]](#footnote-33) In the case of Suriname, Britain sent a protest note to the government in Paramaribo,[[34]](#footnote-34) much to Serbia’s annoyance.[[35]](#footnote-35) Since then, the number of countries withdrawing their recognition appears to have increased. In November 2018, Belgrade announced that ten countries had now done so.[[36]](#footnote-36)

With the contest over recognition increasing again, attention has turned to the prospects of a comprehensive settlement between Kosovo and Serbia. In August 2018, it emerged that the presidents of the two countries, Hashin Thaci and Aleksandar Vucic had been involved in talks, and that these had raised the prospect of a potential territorial adjustment between the two countries. The idea sharply divided opinion, both in Kosovo and Serbia as well as internationally. While the United States signaled that it was open to the suggestion,[[37]](#footnote-37) Germany took a very strong position against any talk of land swaps or partition.[[38]](#footnote-38) Britain, which had previously been strongly against the idea when it had been raised during the status process has been relatively quiet on the matter; certainly, as compared to Washington and Berlin. While it is clear that British officials are opposed to the idea, and regional embassies have spoken out against it,[[39]](#footnote-39) it has been suggested that at senior political levels there is a willingness to see how the talks pan out before taking a firm position.[[40]](#footnote-40) Certainly some influential figures in British foreign policy circles, such as Sir Robert Cooper, who led the Belgrade-Prsitina Dialogue at its early stages, have called for an open mind on the matter.[[41]](#footnote-41) Meanwhile, in the absence of a deal, it seems like the renewed battle over recognition will continue.

**Current situation**

Although the United Kingdom emerged as Kosovo’s strongest ally in the European Union, there is no question that British efforts to press for Kosovo’s recognition on the world stage have declined in recent years. Having once used every opportunity to lobby for Kosovo’s recognition, Britain is not nearly as active as it once was. This is not to say that it has stopped. As noted, the United Kingdom supported Kosovo’s efforts to join UNESCO, in the autumn of 2015. However, there is simply not the scale of activity there once was, nor is the amount of diplomatic energy and capital expended now as it was in the years immediately after the declaration of independence. Speaking to British officials, there are a range of reasons for this.

The first reason for the decline in active support for Kosovo’s recognition is that the task of persuading states to recognize has now become that much more difficult. As one British official noted, ‘the low hanging fruit has been picked’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Those countries that were in any way inclined to recognize Kosovo did so long ago. The remaining 80 or so United Nations members that have not recognized Kosovo are, by and large, the tougher hold outs. However, the non-recognisers are not a homogenous group. In fact, one can discern four broad groups. The first group consists of those states that have a deep aversion to secession and still regard Kosovo as an unwelcome, if not dangerous, precedent. These include countries such as Spain and Cyprus. Secondly, there are those that continue to oppose Kosovo’s independence on ideological grounds. These include countries such as Russia and Iran, which see Kosovo as a Western project. The third group consists of those countries that would rather hold off until some sort of final settlement is reached between Serbia and Kosovo. In the British view, this includes Slovakia. Finally, there are what may be called ‘the inertia states’. These are countries that have not recognized Kosovo because they have some concern over secession, or an ideological reason for not doing so. Rather, the wheels of their diplomacy turn at a different pace. As noted, there are many countries, especially those in further flung corners of the world, that know little of Kosovo, and care even less. It is not that they do not want to recognize Kosovo. They simply do not prioritise it. In cases where recognition requires parliamentary approval, Kosovo may simply be a victim of far too many other, and more pressing, priorities.

Whatever the exact reasons why the remaining states have not recognized Kosovo so far, the fact is that persuading them to do so is now incredibly difficult. There is a sense in British official circles that the amount of diplomatic effort expended to try to persuade them to recognize Kosovo is just not worth it any longer. Again, this is not to say that Britain just ignores them, or will never be willing to lobby them. If it becomes clear that a country is open to recognizing Kosovo, London would be willing to lend a hand to such efforts. Such support can be especially important when the country in question is a Commonwealth member.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Tied to the above point, another factor that appears to have shaped Britain’s decision to disengage somewhat in terms of pressure on other states to recognize Kosovo is the harmful effects that continued pressure without results can have on Britain’s international standing. There is no doubt that after a sustained effort over several years to persuade countries to recognize Kosovo, the continued impression that London is continuing to lobby countries to do so, and is now simply being ignored, is undermining the United Kingdom’s standing, both to the countries concerned as well as within the wider international community. Britain is far from alone in this. Apparently, other members of the Quint – the five Western Countries tasked with overseeing Kosovo’s transition to its final status – have made the same observation. As one diplomat was reported to have told the other members of the group, the failure to attract further recognitions was, ‘becoming embarrassing’.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The domestic political situation in Kosovo in recent years has also done enormous damage to recognition efforts. British officials freely express their frustration at the way in which Kosovo politicians have undermined efforts to secure further international recognition.[[45]](#footnote-45) The disruption in the parliament, which saw opposition parties even resort to letting off tear gas on several; occasions, has done very severe harm to efforts to try to persuade the wider international community that Kosovo is a politically stable polity. Although many in Kosovo may believe that their internal political tensions do not receive wider international attention, the images of parliamentary scuffles were carried around the world.[[46]](#footnote-46) This was a public relations disaster for Kosovo. As British officials noted, it robbed them of a key argument to try to persuade countries to recognize Kosovo. They could not say that it had proven that it was a stable, well-functioning democracy when images of demonstrations, public scuffles with police and MPs in gas masks were being carried by the international news media. Although the situation may now be improving, there is little doubt that political instability, especially when accompanied by acts of political violence of one sort or another, has been highly damaging for Kosovo’s efforts to gain recognition, and has made it even harder for Kosovo’s supporters to make the case for more countries to accept its independent status.

Meanwhile, the situation has also been affected by broader changes that have taken place in the wider international environment over the decade since Kosovo declared independence. Back in 2008, there was little doubt that Kosovo was a major issue in wider international politics. As noted, at that time, Kosovo was a priority for British foreign policy. However, it has steadily dropped down the global agenda as other issues have come to the forefront of media and political attention. Within the European Union, the financial crisis diverted attention away from the enlargement agenda, and thus the Western Balkans. The Syrian civil war has taken up a lot of political bandwidth. But perhaps the most significant development was Russia’s decision, in March 2013, to engineer the invasion, occupation and subsequent annexation of Crimea. At the time, it was interesting to note the considerable parallels that were drawn with Kosovo. Even though the United Kingdom, and many others, went to considerable lengths to deny any link between the cases, there is no doubt that it did influence many countries, including some prominent European non-recognisers. More recently, the unilateral declaration of in dependence by Catalonia, in October 2017, also brought the question of secession to the forefront of international attention. As far as many observers were concerned, this was a disaster for Kosovo’s efforts to gain further recognitions. As for the British efforts to help Kosovo, these too suffered a setback when, in June 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. This has undoubtedly refocused British foreign policy towards a more specifically British agenda and, simultaneously, has undermined the influence the United Kingdom previously enjoyed on the world stage.

Lastly, matters have also not been helped by the fact that British officials have expressed frustration at what they see as Kosovo’s persistent inability to produce a comprehensive and viable plan to secure more recognitions. Although the Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs has apparently produced a plan for its internal planning purposes, it appears this remains confidential and has not even been divulged to Kosovo’s closest partners.[[47]](#footnote-47) British officials stress that they have repeatedly asked the Kosovo Government to produce a clear plan of action that they can see and use. While the Kosovo MFA insists that such a plan was circulated to the Quint in December 2015,[[48]](#footnote-48) British officials insist that they have not seen such a document. In any case, almost ten years since the declaration of independence, and because it believes that Britain can no longer take the central role in trying to persuade others to recognize Kosovo, London evidently feels that it is vital for Kosovo to be seen to be taking the lead from now on. Yet again, this is not to say that Britain is no longer prepared to play a role in trying to persuade others to recognize Kosovo, or secure Kosovo’s membership in international organizations when opportunities arise. Instead, the British Government wants to move towards playing a more supportive role. Kosovo needs to take the lead in recognition activities.

**British engagement with Kosovo**

Although the level of British efforts to encourage other states to recognize Kosovo may have diminished in recent years, there has never been a problem regarding general engagement between Kosovo and the United Kingdom. There are extensive cultural links between the two. In large part, this has been aided by the Kosovo diaspora in the UK, which has produced some huge cultural stars, such as Rita Ora and Dua Lipa. Both have made increasing awareness of Kosovo a central part of the wider activities. In July 2015, Ora was even appointed as an honorary ambassador of Kosovo at a ceremony in London attended by Kosovo President Atifete Jahjaga, former prime minister, Tony Blair, and General Sir Mike Jackson.[[49]](#footnote-49) There are also good political links. For example, there is a Kosovo All-Party Parliamentary Group in the British Parliament.[[50]](#footnote-50) Britain also takes a close interest in political reform in Kosovo.[[51]](#footnote-51) In March 2016, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall also visited Kosovo as part of their high-profile tour of the Western Balkans.[[52]](#footnote-52) Britain also offers scholarships to Kosovo university students as part of the Chevening Scholarship programme. Meanwhile, Kosovo has an established and active diplomatic presence in Britain.[[53]](#footnote-53)

However, there are important areas where more could be done to improve bilateral relations. For instance, economic and trade links between Britain and Kosovo remain severely underdeveloped. Indeed, trade between the two is negligible. The most recent trade statistics, covering 2016, show that Kosovo is ranked 181st worldwide as a source of imports into the UK and 185th as an export destination.[[54]](#footnote-54) However, this may not be down to any Kosovo specific factors. Rather, it appears to be part of a general reluctance by British businesses to engage with the Balkans, an area that remain much more unfamiliar than many other parts of the world where Britain has traditional links. That said, the British government has recognised the need to increase economic ties with Kosovo.[[55]](#footnote-55) Overall, Kosovo officials still believe that there is room for improvement in broader bilateral relations. As one senior Kosovo official put it, ‘even between the closest allies, there is always room for improvement.’[[56]](#footnote-56)

In many ways, the key question now is Brexit. How will Britain’s departure from the European Union affect its relationship with Kosovo? At this stage, it is hard to say. We know that the British Government is committed to the idea of ‘Global Britain’. It insists that leaving the European Union does not mean retreating from the world. Moreover, leaving the EU does not mean leaving Europe. Likewise, even amongst those who are most in favour of Brexit, there appears to be a realisation that close security co-operation between Britain and the European Union will remain important. From a positive perspective, this could well mean that Britain will remain an engaged actor in Kosovo’s future. Having done so much to support Kosovo this far, it will continue to play a role. Already, there are signs that the UK does want to be seen to be an active partner in Kosovo’s future. In October 2016, just a few months after the Brexit vote, the United Kingdom announced that it would be sending a contingent of troops to Kosovo to bolster the NATO presence there.[[57]](#footnote-57) Again, the ongoing security challenges emanating from the region, such as organized crime and religious extremism, also give London an added impetus to remain actively engaged. In this context, efforts to continue the consolidation of Kosovo’s place in the world should be an important part of this strategy.

Balanced against the positive arguments for continued British involvement, there are several factors that could lead the UK to become increasingly disengaged from the region. Despite the ongoing security interests in the region, there is no doubt that the level of British engagement in the Western Balkans has dropped since 2010. Nowhere has this been clearer than regarding enlargement. Having once been a champion of expansion, the rising prominence of the immigration debate saw enlargement slip down the political agenda.[[58]](#footnote-58) As a result, Germany has now emerged as the unassailable lead actor in the region. Meanwhile, despite Britain’s continued support for EU enlargement in the region, London may gradually retreat from what it will essentially see as a problem for the European Union to manage. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that Brexit will stretch the United Kingdom’s foreign policy to its limits. While those who support Brexit may speak confidently of a Britain that engage the wider world, it is likely that there will have to be a lot of prioritization. At the top of the pile will be those countries that offer the most in terms trading opportunities. Then there will be the Commonwealth. As noted at the start, Britain’s ties with the Balkans are rather shallow. There is not a large regional community in Britain. Nor does Britain have extensive economic and trading ties to the Balkans. Kosovo may have the closest political ties with the United Kingdom of all the countries in the region. However, in the big picture, it will have to compete for British attention is what is likely to be a radically different British foreign policy environment.

**Conclusion**

For the past two decades, the United Kingdom has been at the forefront of efforts to assist Kosovo. After spearheading efforts to persuade NATO to intervene, in 1999, Britain was also the first major country to openly advocate independence as the only viable final status for Kosovo. As a result, along with the United States, it was at the forefront of efforts to persuade countries to recognize Kosovo after the declaration of independence, in February 2008, and to secure Kosovo’s membership in a range of international organisations. It also actively supported Kosovo in the proceedings before the International Court of Justice, and was a strong supporter of EU-led efforts to promote the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. Nevertheless, in recent years, Britain has been less willing to lobby on behalf of Kosovo. In large part, this is because it has become increasingly difficult to persuade those countries that have not already recognised Kosovo to do so. This also affects Britain’s standing. Also, efforts to persuade countries to recognize Kosovo have also been undermined by developments within Kosovo itself, as well as significant changes in the international environment. However, all this should not be read to mean that Britain is no longer interested in helping Kosovo. Rather, it signifies a shift from being Kosovo’s proactive partner to be a more reactive ally. All this said, there are clearly areas where the level of bilateral relations can be enhanced. While Kosovo has a string place in British cultural life, the economic links between Britain and Kosovo are minimal. The question now is whether, in the context of Brexit, Britain will regard Kosovo as an important enough actor to merit its attention in what is likely to be a very challenging time for British foreign policy.

1. For a full analysis of the development of practices of recognition see Mikulas Fabry, *Recognizing States: International Society and the Establishment of New States Since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Andrew Holt, ‘Southern Rhodesia’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI)’, *The National Archives*, 11 November 2006. https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/blog/southern-rhodesias-unilateral-declaration-independence-udi/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See James Ker-Lindsay, ‘Great Powers, Counter Secession, and Non-Recognition: Britain and the 1983 Unilateral Declaration of the Independence of the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Volume 28, Number 3, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Janice Musson, ‘Britain and the Recognition of Bangladesh’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Volume 19, Number 1, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘Bosnia & Herzegovina - A New Strategic Approach’, Speech by Rt. Hon Phillip Hammond, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 5 November 2014 < https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/bosnia-herzegovina-a-new-strategic-approach > (Last accessed, 13 March 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. James Ker-Lindsay, ‘Britain, ‘Brexit’ and the Balkans’, *The RUSI Journal*, Volume 160, Number 5, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘EU leaders voice fears over 'fragile Balkans situation' as Theresa May vows to counter Russia’, *The Independent*, 10 March 2017. For more on Russian involvement in the Western Balkans see, Dimitar Bechev, Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe (Yale: Yale University Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Who Does the UK Trade With?’, Office for National Statistics, ONS Digital, 3 January 2018 http://visual.ons.gov.uk/uk-trade-partners/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a review of British foreign policy towards Kosovo in the lead up to independence and in the years immediately afterwards see, Nicholas Doyle with Engjellushe Morina, ‘The United Kingdom’s Foreign Policy Towards Kosovo: A Policy Perspective’, Group for Legal and Political Studies and Prishtina Council on Foreign Relations, October 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tony Blair, ‘Doctrine of the International Community’, Chicago, 24 April 1999 http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.number10.gov.uk/Page1297 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For an account of the status process, see James Ker-Lindsay, *Kosovo: The Path to Contested Statehood in the Balkans* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009) and Marc Weller, *Contested Statehood: Kosovo’s Struggle for Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Martti Ahtisaari, ‘Kosovan Questions: National, Regional, International’, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, 9 September 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Kosovo can win independence, says British diplomat’, *Reuters*, 6 February 2006. A few days later, Sawers gave an interview to B92 in which he appeared to backtrack slightly, noting that independence was an ‘option’. ‘Independence is an option’, *B92*, 31 January 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ‘EU wants ‘timely’ UN resolution on Kosovo’s status’, *AFP*, 18 June 2007. ‘EU ministers favor quick Kosovo solution’, *B92*, 19 June 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ‘UK to recognise independent Kosovo - PM’, 18 February 2008 http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090119045246/http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page14594. The others were Costa Rica, United States, France, Afghanistan, Albania and Turkey. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ‘A Balkan breakthrough’, Interview with the Ambassador of Kosovo to the United Kingdom, Lirim Greiçevci, *Embassy Magazine*, 25 April 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ‘Recasting Serbia’s Image, Starting with a Fresh Face’, *New York Times*, 15 January 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. ‘US embassy cables: Belgrade lays out Kosovo partition scenario to EU’, *The Guardian*, 9 December 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. James Ker-Lindsay, ‘Explaining Serbia's Decision to Go to the ICJ’, in Marko Milanovic and Michael Wood (editors), *The Law and Politics of the Kosovo Advisory Opinion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. UN General Assembly Resolution 63/3. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. International Court of Justice, ‘Request for an Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Question “Is the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the Provisional; Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo in Accordance with International; Law? Written Statement of the United Kingdom, 17 April 2009. http://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/141/15638.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. International Court of Justice, ‘Public sitting held on Thursday 10 December 2009, at 10 a.m., at the Peace Palace, President Owada, presiding, on the Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo (Request for advisory opinion submitted by the General Assembly of the United Nations)’, CR2009/32 http://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/141/141-20091210-ORA-01-00-BI.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. International Court of Justice, ‘Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect of Kosovo’, Advisory Opinion, 22 July 2010. http://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/141/141-20100722-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For a full evaluation of the case see Marko Milanovic and Michael Wood (editors), *The Law and Politics of the Kosovo Advisory Opinion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. UN General Assembly Resolution A/64/L.65/Rev.1, 9 September 2010. ‘Serbia, EU reach resolution compromise’, *B92*, 9 September 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. ‘Five minutes with Sir Robert Cooper: “The Brussels Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo was based on conversation, not EU pressure”’, EUROPP Blog, LSE, 6 February 2015 http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/02/06/five-minutes-with-sir-robert-cooper-the-brussels-agreement-between-serbia-and-kosovo-was-based-on-conversation-not-eu-pressure/ [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ‘First agreement on principles governing the normalisation of relations’ (otherwise known as the ‘Brussels Agreement’), Brussels, 19 April 2013. For an analysis of the Agreement, see Adem Beha, ‘Disputes Over the 15-point Agreement on Normalization of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia’, *Nationalities Papers*, Volume 43, Issue 1, 2015; Marko Prelec, ‘The Kosovo-Serbia Agreement: Why Less Is More’, International Crisis Group, 7 May 2013; Francesco Martino, Kosovo: Beyond the “Brussels Agreement”, Analysis No. 254, ISPI, May 2014; ‘Serbia/Kosovo: The Brussels Agreements and Beyond’, Workshop Report, SEESOX, University of Oxford, March 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. ‘Kosovo wins recognition from over half United Nations states’, David Lidington, Minister for Europe, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 21 June 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. ‘Kosovo fails in Unesco membership bid’, *AFP*, 9 November 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. ‘Pristina drops plans to apply for UNESCO membership’, B92, 5 October 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Antigua and Barbuda, Suriname, Singapore and Bangladesh. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. ‘South American country revokes recognition of Kosovo - FM’, B92, 31 October 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. ‘Government of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau revokes decision on recognizing Kosovo’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 21 November 2017. http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/statements/17193-government-of-the-republic-of-guinea-bissau-revokes-decision-on-recognizing-kosovo [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. ‘UK sent protest to Suriname for revoking Kosovo recognition’, *B92*, 20 November 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Serbian official, comments to author, November 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. ‘Confirmed: 10th Country Revokes Recognition of Kosovo’, B92, 7 November 2018. The countries concerned are: Grenada, Dominica, Suriname, Liberia, Sao Tome and Principe, Guinea-Bissau, Burundi, Papua New Guinea, Lesotho and Comoros. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. ‘US Won’t Oppose Serbia-Kosovo Border Changes – Bolton’, *Balkan Insight*, 24 August 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. ‘Angela Merkel: No Balkan Border Changes’, *Politico*, 13 August 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. ‘London and Berlin Against Border Correctio in Balkans;, N1, 10 August 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. European diplomat, comments to the author, September 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Robert Cooper, ‘Breaking Old Habits in the Balkans’, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 September 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. British official, comments to the author, February 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. British official, comments to the author, February 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. British official, comments to the author, February 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. British official, comments to the author, June 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. ‘Kosovo opposition release teargas in parliament – video’, *The Guardian*, 10 March 2016; ‘Tear gas used to disrupt Kosovo meeting’, *BBC News*, 9 August 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Kosovo official, comments to author, February 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Kosovo MFA, comments provided to the author, November 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. ‘X Factor judge Rita Ora named honorary ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo’, *Evening Standard*, 10 July 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. ‘Kosovo’, Register of All-Party Parliamentary Groups [as at 8 November 2017] < https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmallparty/171108/kosovo.htm > [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. ‘Supporting reform of political parties in Kosovo’, British Embassy Pristina, 21 March 2017 < https://www.gov.uk/government/news/supporting-reform-of-political-parties-in-kosovo > [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. ‘Details of The Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall's visit to Kosovo’, British Embassy Pristina, 23 February 2016 < https://www.gov.uk/government/news/details-of-the-prince-of-wales-and-the-duchess-of-cornwalls-visit-to-kosovo > [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. ‘A Balkan breakthrough’, Interview with the Ambassador of Kosovo to the United Kingdom, Lirim Greiçevci, *Embassy Magazine*, 25 April 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. ‘Who Does the UK Trade With?’, Office for National Statistics, ONS Digital, 3 January 2018 http://visual.ons.gov.uk/uk-trade-partners/ [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. As Baroness Anelay, a Minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated, in early 2017: ‘We are encouraging more UK investment in Kosovo. A UK trade mission to Kosovo is planned for later this year which will include small and medium-sized businesses. The trade mission will strengthen existing business links following a UK/US Kosovo Trade and Investment Forum held in London in November, as well as forge new business opportunities between the two countries.’ ‘Overseas Trade: Kosovo: Written question - HL5966’, House of Lords, 21 March 2017 < http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2017-03-09/HL5966/ > [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Kosovo official, comments to author, Pristina, February 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. ‘UK troops to bolster NATO mission in Kosovo’, Ministry of Defence, 23 October 2016. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-troops-to-bolster-nato-mission-in-kosovo [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. See James Ker-Lindsay, ‘The United Kingdom and EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans: From Ardent Champion of Expansion to Post-Brexit Irrelevance’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Volume 17, Number 4, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)