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## Brothers no more? What the EU's diplomatic breakthrough on Kosovo means for Serbia-Russia relations

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*Serbia and Kosovo have both given approval to an EU-brokered agreement on normalising their relations. **Denisa Kostovicova** assesses the significance of the agreement and what a resolution to the Kosovo dispute would mean for Russia's power in the Balkans.*

Late in the day last Monday in Brussels, despite all appearances to the contrary, history happened. There was no fanfare and no grand gestures or signatures. But, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo's

Prime Minister Albin Kurti did accept the EU-brokered “**Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia**”.

This was a ground-breaking outcome. Agreeing to the EU's proposal, both the Serbian President and Kosovo's PM crossed their own red lines. The actual resolution of the Kosovo dispute is no longer beyond our imagination.

The history of Serbia and Albania's hot and frozen conflict over Kosovo is long. Following the end of the Kosovo War in 1999, the unresolved status of Kosovo, including after the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008, has remained a serious source of regional and European insecurity. On a number of occasions since 1999, and most recently in December 2022, Kosovo has come to the brink of violence.

At the same time, the failure of EU mediation efforts over Kosovo, and, in particular, the stalled implementation of its 2013 Brussels agreement, has exposed the EU's weakness. The EU's inability to sort out its own neighbourhood has dented its legitimacy as a conflict-resolution actor globally. Yet, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it appears the EU is no longer willing to tolerate either a security or reputational threat to its standing emanating from Kosovo.

## **Red lines no longer**

The preamble and 11 points of the EU-brokered agreement set out the principles for comprehensive normalisation of diplomatic relations that would improve the lives of ordinary people in Kosovo and Serbia, and remove an obstacle to both countries' accession to EU.

Notably, the agreement stipulates that “Serbia will not object to Kosovo's membership in any international organisation (Article 4)”. It paves the way for Kosovo to acquire UN membership, which Serbia, led by Vucic, had vehemently opposed and which facilitates Kosovo's functioning as an independent state in international relations. This is

regardless of whether Serbia formally recognises Kosovo's independence, which itself did not figure in the agreement.

Also, Article 7 affirms the parties' commitment to ensuring "an appropriate level of self-management for the Serbian community in Kosovo", including the possibility of Serbia's financial support to it. This had been a major bone of contention for Kosovo and Kurti had previously rejected it. He had likened the association of Serb-communities in Kosovo to Republika Srpska, the Bosnian Serb entity in Bosnia, alluding to its destabilising influence for democracy and stability in that country.

## Muted reactions

Nationalists in Serbia and Kosovo were quick to accuse Vucic and Kurti of treason over their acceptance of the agreement. However, their narratives did not drown out moderate voices on both sides that hailed the agreement as a significant milestone in mending the open wound of Serbian-Albanian relations. Contrary to all expectations, there was no major domestic outcry against the agreement either in Kosovo or in Serbia.

How was this achieved? Prior to the Brussels meeting, which came after weeks and months of negotiations led by the EU and supported by the US, the media frenzy in both countries was fixated on the act of signing the EU document, and its national symbolism. When, after the meeting, Josep Borrell, The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, tweeted that the two leaders agreed that "no further discussions are needed," and the agreement's implementation is the next step, people in both countries were confused.

The procedural trick of avoiding grand gestures and signatures, at this point, took the wind out of the opposition. The discussion quickly moved on to the implementation of the unsigned but accepted

agreement. This clouded the historical significance of that moment in Brussels. It provided political breathing space particularly for Vucic, while Kurti stated that he was ready to sign the document.

Without question, reaching consensus on the implementation plan and executing it will be fraught with many challenges that are only too well-known to EU and US diplomats. The appreciation of the geopolitical aspect of the EU and US's renewed engagement with the Kosovo dispute sheds light on conditions that made the agreement possible, and likely, on the upcoming implementation process.

### **Ukraine's blow to Russian hard power**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted the EU and US to reappraise security interests and risks. The Balkans has taken a prominent place in this exercise. The region has been the EU's weak underbelly, whose political and ethnic tensions Russia has deftly used to undermine the West's Euro-Atlantic integration project.

Russia's use of the unresolved status of Kosovo is a case in point. Russia aligned with Serbia's position and opposed Kosovo's independence, blocking its UN membership and emboldening Serbia's nationalists. Keeping Kosovo's status in limbo has slowed down both Serbia and Kosovo's EU integration process, turning it into a latent security threat.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine jolted the EU and the US into diplomatic action to resolve the Kosovo dispute, not least because they cannot afford a distraction from the Ukraine crisis. But, Russia's conduct during the war has also brought home some sobering truths to Serbia's capital, Belgrade.

To the alarm of Serbia's nationalists, Russia has used the example of Kosovo's declaration of independence to make an argument for secession of first Crimea, and then of Donetsk and Luhansk. Although

Russia has maintained its support of Serbia's position vis-à-vis Kosovo, in Serbia, doubts about Russia's diplomatic protection and reliance have emerged.

These doubts have been amplified by Russia's losses on the battlefield. The myth of Russia's military might, which had previously fed into Serbian adulation of its 'big brother', has been a key consideration in Serbia's playing of the EU and US against Russia in the geopolitical playground of the Balkans. Russia's military setbacks have shattered this myth and with the unequivocal backing of a weakened Russia now in question, the Serbian leadership has had to recalculate its risks, too, in choosing to engage with the EU and the US over the Kosovo dispute.

### **Ukraine's blow to Russian soft power**

At the same time, Russia's soft power has taken a blow among Serbs. To date, Serbia has maintained a neutral position in relation to the Ukraine war. It has resisted imposing sanctions on Russia, although it did vote for most UN Security Council Resolutions condemning Russia's invasion.

As there are no visa restrictions on Russian citizens, according to estimates over 100,000 Russians have left Russia for Serbia since the outbreak of the war. These young, Russian professionals (mostly in the IT sector) now work from Serbia remotely for their western companies. Their arrival gave rise to novel political dynamics at the grassroots that are reshaping attitudes to Russia and to the Ukraine war, and also figure in considerations of the Kosovo issue.

Whilst interacting with Russians in their daily lives, suddenly many Serbs are grappling with dissonance between their traditional image of Russians, as pro-war and pro-Putin, and their new Russian neighbours. They are cultured, well-educated, polite and, also, well-off – almost like westerners, say some puzzled locals. Russians' opposition to war and

to Putin is not freely volunteered, but it is unmistakably though obliquely stated both privately and in occasional interviews in the Serbian media.

Yet, other Serbs have come to outright resent the new arrivals from Russia because of their impact on the property market. The greater demand for housing has led rent to increase to levels that are unaffordable for ordinary Serbs. Serbia is also host to an estimated 20,000 refugees from Ukraine as well. Stories of their plight and suffering caused by the Russian invasion has also changed some Serbs' attitudes to the Ukraine war.

Serbia's capital, Belgrade, has been a site of rallies in support of Russia during the war, but has also seen pro-Ukraine events, many of which gathered Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Serbs. Similarly, their joint activism also continues virtually on social media on Facebook.

Russia's soft power has relied on building a traditional image of sameness and unity, underscored by Orthodox faith, and modelling authoritarian leadership. The war in Ukraine has changed that. "I thought we and Russians were like brothers. But, I was wrong," a Serb man told me recently in Belgrade. There are ripples of societal attitudes in Serbian society that perceive Russia as a disruptor, even among some previously staunchly pro-Russian Serbs. This undermines the perception from the bottom-up of Russia's role as Serbia's protector in relation to Kosovo.

## **No foregone conclusions**

Finalising the process of normalisation of Serbian-Albanian relations is not a foregone conclusion. The odds are still stacked against it. Past incentives, such as the promise of EU membership, no longer carry much weight. In a recent opinion poll by a Serbian conservative think tank, when asked whether respondents would support Serbia's accession to the EU on the condition of accepting Kosovo's

membership of the UN, around 78% of respondents said No, with just 9.4% saying Yes.

The big question remains whether Serbia's President can take public opinion with him through the implementation process. There are similar lingering questions, too, for Kosovo's PM. The ball now lies with the EU and US. Geopolitics has been in their favour, but vigilance must be of the highest order. Russia may yet look to reassert its malign influence in the Balkans given it is now face with the prospect of losing the Kosovo dispute, which has been an easy and effective political lever for undermining western interests.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: © European Union, 2023*

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