

Resolving relations with Kosovo is a key obstacle to Serbia joining the EU.

by Blog Admin

Serbia was awarded EU candidacy status at the beginning of this year. [Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik](#) and [Alexander Wochnik](#) write that while recognition of Kosovo's independence is not a formal requirement for Serbia's membership of the EU, the ruling Serbian Renewal Party has used the Kosovo issue as a way to gain support among the country's conservative voters. It may be a difficult task to balance Serbia's EU ambitions against its commitment to Kosovo.



When Tomislav Nikolic, leader of the conservative Serbian Renewal Party (SNS), was elected as president in May 2012, reaction from global media and opinion leaders was one of [alarm](#). Headlines seemed to suggest that Nikolic would return the Balkans to an era of nationalism and strife. Specifically, the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections – in which the SNS formed a coalition with smaller conservative parties – did not seem to bode well for the resolution of Serbia's Kosovo deadlock and its progress towards EU membership.



Even though Serbia had been awarded EU candidacy just before the May 2012 elections, the key priorities of the SNS, as listed in their party programme, indicate that this particular government may not make much progress towards normalising relations with Kosovo, and obtaining EU membership. As its key priorities, the party [lists](#) among others, 'maintenance of territorial sovereignty' (i.e. non-recognition of Kosovo independence), assisting Serbs outside of Serbian borders, a strong state and stronger relations with Russia and China. Importantly, the programme does not oppose Serbia's EU membership, but advises it will take place only if Serbia enters as a 'whole state' together with Kosovo.

Kosovo and the EU have dominated Serbia's foreign policy agenda since the fall of the undemocratic Slobodan Milosevic regime in 2000. The pair, as we wrote in a [recent article](#), have been stitched together into an either/or issue by the Serbian political leadership, rather than by the EU itself. The EU, where five member states – Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Romania and Slovakia – do not recognise Kosovo's independence, never made recognition of Kosovo's independence a condition for Serbian membership. The EU does, however, demand 'good neighbourly relations' and a normalisation of the Serbia-Kosovo relationship. But, many key political leaders in Serbia, including Nikolic, have made public statements that give an impression that EU membership is directly dependent on recognition. For instance, in a [recent interview](#), Nikolic stated: 'If they give us an official condition, Europe or Kosovo, we will give up the European path'. Despite the regime change in Serbia, the policy and discourse on Kosovo remains the same. Change of this policy was difficult even for the far more democratic and pro-EU Boris Tadic, and seems virtually impossible now that Nikolic and the SNS are in power.



Credit: Petar Milošević (CC BY-SA 3.0)

An important dimension to the Serbia-Kosovo-EU triangle, is

that this is a way for Nikolic to (re)gain political legitimacy, particularly amongst Kosovo Serbs and the more conservative voters. If we take a closer look at the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2012, two things are clear – that Nikolic won by a small margin in the second round, and his ‘Let’s get Serbia Moving’ coalition won only 24 per cent of the popular vote. Nikolic and the SNS party won the most seats in rural areas, but also in Northern Kosovo, where Serbs vote in Serbian elections (deemed unlawful by the Kosovo government). In fact, Northern Kosovo is one of the very few places in which Nikolic and the SNS are wildly more popular than Tadic and the Democrats. Serbs in North Kosovo, as Nikolic knows, feel isolated, and many do not wish to be a part of Kosovo, as they recently indicated in a locally-organised referendum (in which 99 per cent of the eligible voters declared that they do not recognise the authority of Kosovo). Kosovo Serbs do not form a large block of voters, but they are a convenient political cause for the SNS to take on. Moreover, issues of Kosovo and Kosovo Serbs are more resonant in rural, smaller-town Serbia – the core support base of SNS – where EU membership is perhaps a bit more abstract than in urban Belgrade. This is the crux of the issue: how far will Nikolic go to maintain his support amongst Kosovo Serbs – as well as the more traditionally or conservatively minded electorate?

Importantly, what does this mean for Serbia’s accession from the EU’s perspective? In general, the climate for EU widening is not favourable. The economic and financial crises have instead put the emphasis on EU deepening. In most member states it is difficult to sell to the public the idea of more member states that would tap Brussels’ structural and cohesion funds at times when the southern euro periphery states need to be bailed out or austerity measures agreed on. Under Merkel, the most important member state, Germany, has not been enthusiastic about further enlargement.

When Merkel visited Serbia last year, she criticised former President Boris Tadic for supporting ‘parallel’ structures in Kosovo – a system of public services and administration operating in North Kosovo, and funded by Serbia. Merkel advised that a Serbia-Kosovo dialogue is expected, reminding Serbia of Germany’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence. Since the EU does not have a joint position on the recognition of Kosovo, huge emphasis is placed on the success of the bi-lateral talks which are aimed at easing technical cooperation and movement of people between Kosovo and Serbia.

Those negotiations commenced during the Tadic administration and after several rounds of talks some progress was made on issues such as civil registry, car licence places and recognition of university diplomas. The talks, aimed at technical issues, and specifically avoiding questions of status, are intended to normalise relations in such a way that they can facilitate cooperation and movement of people between Kosovo and Serbia, and hence contribute towards good neighbourly relations. The negotiations, however, are somewhat downplayed by the Nikolic administration, which has just entered their first round of talks. For instance, the Minister for EU Integration, Suzana Grubjesic recently stated that the upcoming round of talks is ‘only the beginning’ and one should ‘expect nothing special’.

Normalising Serbia-Kosovo relations may be one of the reasons that the Council approved Serbia’s candidacy status in March 2012. It may have also been a bid to help Tadic’s re-election, and to boost confidence in the EU amongst the Serbian population. What emerged instead was a new government which promises further Serbia-Kosovo deadlock, and may pose serious challenges to further cooperation and a smooth transition towards membership. If this is the case, perhaps the EU needs a new plan: it will be a difficult task to balance Serbia’s EU ambitions against required reforms and its commitment to Kosovo.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/EUSerbia>

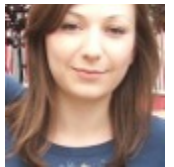
About the authors

Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik – *Aston University*

Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Aston



University. Before joining Aston, Jelena held visiting fellowships at the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki and the European Union Institute for Security Studies. Her research interests include Serbia-Kosovo relations and transitional justice. She is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for European Studies, Harvard University.



-

Alexander Wochnik – *Aston University*

Alexander Wochnik is a PhD candidate at Aston University. He is researching the influence of societal actors on foreign policy making in Germany and Poland. He also researches reconciliation policy and in 2012 held the Harry and Helen Gray Reconciliation fellowship at the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS) at Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC.



Related posts:

1. [Five minutes with Mimoza Kusari-Lila, Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Trade & Industry, Kosovo – “Kosovo will never become part of Serbia again” \(16.7\)](#)
2. [After a shock victory in Serbia, Tomislav Nikolic now faces a dilemma over Kosovo and EU accession. \(22.9\)](#)
3. [Last week Serbia was granted candidate status for joining the EU, which may offer a way forward for Serbia's future relationship with Kosovo. But rocky times may still lie ahead \(28.3\)](#)