

Kosovo and Serbia dialogue: Addressing the fears



Hashim Thaçi, the President of Kosovo, is due to meet with his Serbian counterpart Aleksandar Vučić on 7 September. [Bekim Çollaku](#), Chief of Staff to the President of the Republic of Kosovo, writes that the current limbo over Kosovo's status serves no one's interests, and that while a deal between Serbia and Kosovo might be opposed by some actors, there is nothing to fear from an agreed solution.

Following the announcement of the third meeting of the final phase of EU-led negotiations, due to take place in early September, public discourse on the issue has intensified. The dialogue, aimed at delivering a final peace deal between Kosovo and Serbia and thus enabling their respective European paths, is led by the two parties, but it belongs to everybody. All citizens – whether active in civil society, academia, the private sector or just ordinary citizens – have an important contribution to make. But it is also important not to lose sight of the complexity and stakes of a final deal. Talk of principles and red lines risks us all missing the forest for the trees. Given all that is at stake, a deal – any final deal – will be painfully difficult to reach. The only road to get there is by adopting a more pragmatic approach.

Kosovo and Serbia are longstanding adversaries, with a history of bloody conflict. Profound disagreement between the two is not something that belongs to the past, it is existent today and it permeates every aspect and every person on either side of the border. Agreeing to a compromise does not fit the nationalist narrative in either country and thus will not be favoured by sizeable portions of the populations for that reason. However, that does not tell the full story. In Kosovo, our young state was founded on some particular principles, like territorial integrity and multi-ethnicity. Thus, any movement which may look like it endangers these principles will be met with resistance. Some in Kosovo may be content with the current 116 recognitions and membership in a few international organisations and live in hope that more will follow without any deal. Then there are those who benefit from the current situation. Normalised, conflict-free relations between the two will not be beneficial to them, and that is why they will invest all energies to oppose a potential deal, whatever its content.

The current limbo serves no one's interests

To those that live in hope that the status quo will bring about change, the outlook is bleak. There has been no movement by the five non-recognising EU members towards recognition in the past ten years. Anyone following developments will know that Kosovo-Serbia relations in the current dialogue have plateaued and unless the core of the problem is tackled not much more will change. The EU has made it clear that neither Serbia nor Kosovo will join the EU before complete normalisation of relations and the Russian veto in the UN Security Council is blocking several important developmental processes in Kosovo. In Serbia, the financial investment to undermine Kosovo's independence and authority in the north of Kosovo is considerable with a high opportunity cost. And efforts to keep Kosovo out of international fora are only diverting attention from real internal questions relevant to the citizens there. Consequently, the frozen conflict has also frozen the prospect of EU membership for both countries.

No one should fear an agreed solution

The problems between the countries in the Balkans are rooted in divisions and disagreements and not the other way around. Lately, signals by both Kosovo and Serbia and comments by world powers, have led to wide-spread cautioning against any tinkering with border adjustments due to a possible domino effect in the region, which is dotted with territorially clustered minorities. However, a potential deal between Kosovo and Serbia involving border adjustments would be mutually agreed in a peaceful manner and it won't be along ethnic lines. It can only go through if it has sufficient popular support. The legacy of such a deal would be less about its content and more about the enforcement of mutual agreement as the cornerstone of international peace and stability. The lack of wars in the Western Balkans today is understood by many as a sign of stability. While there is some truth in this argument, everyone knows that existing disputes remain a powerful source of instability. As a matter of fact, the mother of instability is the lack of a final deal between Kosovo and Serbia.

What better time than now?

The circumstances have never been more conducive to finding a compromise. The power of the renewed and strengthened European perspective for the Western Balkans first announced by Juncker in his 2017 State of the Union and followed up by the Commission strategy in February and Council conclusions is a strong incentive to act now rather than wait and see. This renewed perspective has already borne fruit in the form of the Skopje-Athens agreement on the name issue. Kosovo and Serbia could be next. The momentum is there and neither country can afford to lose it now. Serbia and Kosovo have hard proof that advancement in the relations to one another will lead to gains on their EU paths. For Kosovo, progress on the dialogue has helped the conclusion of the EU-Kosovo Stabilisation and Association Agreement which entered into force in April 2016. For Serbia, it allowed the opening of accession negotiations in June 2013. Now the final deal is a chance to resolve all issues between the two states once and for all. This means leaving the past behind; replacing regional divisions and barriers with regional cooperation and openness.

But as often happens in life, opportunities come with an expiry date. The current Commission mandate runs out at the end of next year. Before that, the European parliamentary election campaign will take the attention away. And the outcome of the elections may give us a more inward-looking EU far less willing to progress the enlargement agenda.

Everyone will benefit from an agreement between Kosovo and Serbia

The more the region progresses towards the goal of EU membership, the better it is for us all because it simply means more stability, more sustainable peace, regional cooperation, more foreign investment and greater welfare. The countries of the region need to leverage whatever influence they have on their neighbours to support any potential deal agreed by the two sides because its success is vital for the long-term peace and stability of the Western Balkans as a whole. Everyone benefits from that.

For the EU too, it is very important to reach a final outcome of this engagement that has spanned two mandates of the EU institutions. Its ability to deliver on this point is not only a measure of its weight in the Western Balkans, but also something to measure its ability and influence as a global actor – one of Juncker's famous ten points.

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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: Federica Mogherini meeting Hashim Thaçi, Credit: [EEAS \(CC BY-NC 2.0\)](#)

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