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[Under the Radar. The World's Forgotten Crises](#)

# One History, Two Narratives

Why the Kosovo Conflict Continues to Smoulder

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The tense situation in the region results from a century-long conflict between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians. For some, the Battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1389<sup>1</sup> was a painful defeat for Serbian national heroes against the Ottoman invaders; for others, it was just one of many events in their own history. For some, the NATO intervention of 1999 was a blessing and a starting point for achieving independence, while for others it was an act of aggression against a sovereign country in violation of international law. As is so often the case, black-and-white thinking is inadequate in this conflict. Rather, shades of grey best describe the responsibility for the current situation.

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### Historical Context

When asked about the difficult political conditions in the Western Balkans, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill is said to have remarked in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that the Balkans produce more history than they can consume.<sup>2</sup> The conflict in and around Kosovo has deep roots, too. Throughout history, the region has been the target of migratory movements and conquests. Slavic immigration into the region between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries marginalised and fragmented the Albanian settlement areas; at least this is how it was perceived by the latter. For the Serbs, on the other hand, Kosovo became the cradle of their nation and Christian Orthodox identity.

The Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389 was a regional turning point. With the defeat of the Serbs, the Ottoman Empire dominated the Western Balkans for several centuries. The majority of Albanians in Kosovo became Muslims, which created an additional social dividing line alongside the language. With the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the reorganisation of Europe at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 and the two world wars, Belgrade gained control of what is now Kosovo, even though the Albanian population remained in the majority. Both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Tito's socialist Yugoslavia saw themselves as a construct of the southern Slavs, as expressed

in the state name Yugoslavia (*Jug* means south in the Slavic languages). The term Yugoslavia therefore did not specifically include Albanians as non-Slavs.

Although Kosovo was granted the status of an autonomous region within the Republic of Serbia, it was politically dominated by Serbs until the 1990s. Similar to the situation in the other republics of Yugoslavia at the end of the 1980s, the Albanians in Kosovo also demanded more political autonomy.

Slobodan Milošević's takeover of the communist party leadership in Serbia in 1987 heralded a radical change of course. A policy of discrimination began against the still majority Albanian population in Kosovo, and the situation became increasingly tense. The Kosovo Albanians boycotted the Yugoslav institutions in the autonomous province of Kosovo and gradually built up a parallel institutional system, including in the field of education. The passive resistance movement, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and led by the writer and pacifist Ibrahim Rugova and his party Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës (LDK), called for equal rights and, for the first time, independence.

In the 1990s, this approach was superseded by a militant strategy owing to the increasing oppression of the Kosovo Albanians. This is

how the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) came into being. For the majority of Albanians, it was indeed a liberation army, while for the Serbian side, it was a terrorist organisation. Between 1996 and 1999, the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army, police and paramilitaries carried out an anti-guerrilla operation in Kosovo. For the Albanians there and most of the international community, this operation was reminiscent of ethnic cleansing during the Yugoslav wars of 1991 to 1995. War crimes were committed on both sides, with Serbia being the focus of the international community due to its history in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Croatia. According to the UN refugee organisation UNHCR, 850,000 Kosovo Albanians fled to Albania and Macedonia as a result of this armed conflict.<sup>3</sup>

NATO intervened on 24 March 1999 with three months of air strikes that were not covered by a UN Security Council mandate. The debates in NATO and the member states were controversial. The debate over the deployment of NATO troops and airforce in Yugoslavia was particularly heated in Germany. Apart from the lack of a UN mandate, the deployment of German armed forces in the Western Balkans was highly controversial in itself in view of the history of the Second World War. The intervention was intended to use military power to force Yugoslavia to halt its operation in Kosovo. After the genocide in Srebrenica in 1995, another war crime of this kind was to be prevented. The war in the then Serbian province of Kosovo ended with the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement between Yugoslavia and NATO on 9 June 1999. This provided for the immediate withdrawal of Serbian police and military forces from Kosovo. In fact, Serbia lost direct control of Kosovo that day. The United Nations established an interim administration (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK) for political stabilisation.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the Kosovo Force (KFOR) was deployed as an international peace-keeping force in the province. On 10 June 1999, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1244, which defined the mandates of KFOR and UNMIK and confirmed Yugoslavia's sovereignty over Kosovo.

More than 164,000 Serbs and 25,000 Roma<sup>5</sup> fled Kosovo through fear of persecution by the Kosovo Albanians.<sup>6</sup> In August 2009, there were still 209,000 internally displaced persons from Kosovo in Serbia, both from the 1990s and from subsequent anti-Serbian riots.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, more than 90 per cent of Albanian refugees had returned to Kosovo by August 1999. The situation there remained difficult and tense over the years. Shortly after the end of the war, a total of 48,000 soldiers were deployed, including 8,000 from Germany alone. Nevertheless, violent clashes between Serbs and Albanians occurred time and again. In this context, 2004 was a defining year for Serbia. During violent riots by Albanians against Serbian monasteries, civilians and institutions, KFOR was unable to control the situation. Twenty-seven people died. Fear and mistrust remained.

## Belgrade viewed Kosovo's declaration of independence as a violation of the UN Charter.

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### Developments since Kosovo's Declaration of Independence

On 17 February 2008, Kosovo declared itself independent with strong support of the US, the UK, Germany, France and other EU member states. However, for domestic political reasons, Slovakia, Romania, Cyprus, Spain and Greece still do not recognise Kosovo as an independent state.<sup>8</sup> An additional challenge for further international recognition is that Russia and China, two veto powers in the UN Security Council, are also refusing to recognise it. Both states are important allies for Serbia in its efforts to question Kosovo's sovereignty.

For the Kosovo Albanians, the long-cherished desire for their own state was fulfilled in 2008. Belgrade, on the other hand, saw the declaration of independence as a violation of the UN Charter. That same year, Serbia appealed to the International Court of Justice to clarify the

legality of the declaration of independence. On 22 June 2010, the Court ruled that it was compatible with international law.<sup>9</sup> However, it did not comment on whether Kosovo is an independent state. The status of the former Yugoslav region is therefore still unresolved for the Serbian government and opponents of Kosovan independence. In contrast, Pristina and its international partners believe that the recognition of more than 104 states has created new facts on the ground and thus confirmed Kosovo's sovereignty.

### **A dialogue process moderated by the EU was initiated in 2011 to solve the everyday problems of people on both sides.**

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For Serbia, the lack of a UN Security Council decision on the intervention, and the declaration of independence continue to blatantly violate international legal norms and resolutions, such as the UN Charter and UN Resolution 1244. This circumstance also favours the strengthening of anti-Western attitudes in Serbian society.

Given the many unresolved political issues and those that affect people's everyday lives on both sides, a dialogue process moderated by the EU was initiated in 2011. The aim of the first "technical" phase was to facilitate communication and interpersonal exchange. Operational issues such as conducting negotiations, moderation and the binding nature of agreements were clarified without addressing the issue of Kosovo's legal status. Successes were achieved in a short period of time, such as the restoration of trade relations. Two years later, a political breakthrough was achieved with the Brussels Agreement.<sup>10</sup> Despite fundamental political differences, both parties managed to agree on substantial steps towards normalisation. It should be emphasised that, at that time, EU membership over the medium and long term seemed within reach for both sides. The EU saw the

settlement of the conflict as a prerequisite for the European path of both parties. As a result, there was great interest on both sides in finding solutions.

Shortly after independence, Kosovo was a state with a decidedly pro-European and pro-Western population. On the other side, Aleksandar Vučić, the current President of Serbia, was a new political figure at the time and sought close ties with the European Union. Despite his background in the nationalist Serbian Radical Party, he had succeeded in founding a new pro-European political force, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Hashim Thaçi, one of the former leaders of the KLA and then President of Kosovo, had transformed himself from a guerrilla fighter into a modern European decision-maker with a sense for negotiation processes.

In essence, the Brussels Agreement provided a pathway for integration of Serbs into Kosovo institutions and for gradual dismantling of those Serbian institutions in Kosovo which had remained after 1999 in areas where Serbs were the majority, particularly in the North. Serbian police officers, judges and administrative officials were to work in Kosovan institutions from now on. Serbs were to participate in Kosovan elections and become part of the Kosovan political system. In return, an Association of Serbian Municipalities (ASM) was to be established with the intention of granting the Serbian population autonomy in certain matters.

With the integration of the Serbian police and judiciary into the respective Kosovan state bodies, one of the conditions of the agreement has been fulfilled. Furthermore, according to the Kosovan constitution, ten of the 120 seats in the Kosovan parliament are guaranteed for the Serb minority regardless of the election result. The fact that Kosovo has yet to establish ASM, which is one of the central demands of the Brussels Agreement, is the main reason for the existing mistrust among Kosovo Serbs towards the government in Pristina. In addition, the prospects of EU membership have become increasingly distant for both sides. The reasons for this lie





In action: NATO helicopters are seen landing on a bridge in Kosovo in June 1999. The Western alliance had previously carried out air strikes against Serbia lasting several months. Photo: © Antonio Bat, epa, picture alliance.

in the rise of nationalism in both Serbia and Kosovo, economic problems, the absence of reforms and a lack of interest on the part of the EU.

### **Serbian Majority Communities in Northern Kosovo**

The Serbian population in South Kosovo is organised in enclaves surrounded by Albanian villages and towns. By contrast, the Serbian population in northern Kosovo borders on Serbia. In four municipalities, Serbs make up

the absolute majority of inhabitants. Between the withdrawal of the Serbian security forces in 1999 and the Brussels Agreement, Serbian institutions, such as hospitals, schools, courts and local self-governments, continued to be present in northern Kosovo. The employees received their salaries from Belgrade. It was tolerated that Pristina provided the energy supply and that the Serbian population did not pay any bills. The Kosovan state was not present. After signing the Brussels Agreement, the key political representation of the Serbs in Kosovo, the Srpska Lista party, was founded with strong support

from Belgrade. The political parties of the Serbs that had existed until then and were opposed to the Brussels Agreement, were marginalised. The police, courts and political representation of the Serbs at local and national level were integrated into the Kosovan system.

## The unstable security situation in Kosovo is a risk for Europe.

In view of the standstill in the EU-led normalisation process, the US under Donald Trump proposed a territorial exchange to both parties in 2018. This was an absolute novelty, as the territorial integrity of Kosovo had not been questioned

by the US until then. This proposal was immediately rejected at EU level. The Washington Agreement was signed in 2020 by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the then Kosovan Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti, but was never fully implemented. It remains to be seen whether Donald Trump's administration will launch new initiatives in his second term.

### New Momentum for Dialogue Due to Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

In the wake of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, strategic interest in the Western Balkans and thus also in relations between Serbia and Kosovo has grown. The unstable security situation, particularly in northern Kosovo, was and continues to be a security risk for Europe. Large portions of its military, political and financial



Tense situation: In September 2023, police officers secure a street in the town of Banjska in northern Kosovo, known for its monastery. Serbian paramilitaries had previously engaged in a firefight with Kosovo security forces there. Photo: © Visar Kryeziu, AP, picture alliance.

resources are earmarked for supporting Ukraine. Western allies are concerned that Russia could use its good relations with nationalist segments of the Serbian population in Kosovo and parts of the security institutions in Serbia to destabilise northern Kosovo. A second active conflict in Europe would most likely overstretch the West's resources.

In light of these circumstances, the normalisation process between Serbia and Kosovo was resumed from summer 2022. In coordination with the US and other Western partners, Germany and France presented a further normalisation agreement based on the 1972 Basic Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Both the Kosovan Prime Minister and the Serbian President verbally agreed to accept the agreement on 27 February 2023.<sup>11</sup> The annex on implementation (Ohrid Agreement)<sup>12</sup>, signed a month later by Prime Minister Albin Kurti, but which Vučić only agreed to verbally, set out the details of the proposed Franco-German plan. That the EU was unable to convince both sides to sign the documents highlights both the mistrust between Vučić and Kurti and the West's limited opportunities to exert pressure.

## **In 2023, political tensions led to violent clashes.**

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The negotiating framework has changed fundamentally compared to 2011. While there was only talk of standards at the start of the normalisation process, “de facto recognition” and the implementation of all agreements already signed are now key conditions in the EU accession process of both states.<sup>13</sup> Domestic political resistance in Serbia continues to prevent decision-makers from implementing the Franco-German (or European) proposal. In turn, Kosovo began to adopt unilateral measures to strengthen its statehood in the north. Among other things, it banned Serbian licence plates on cars, taxes and utility bills were enforced in northern Kosovo, and Serbian banks and post

offices were closed. In addition, the police used force to install mayors who had been elected in local elections in 2023 with a voter turnout of 3.5 per cent. The Serbs did not take part in the elections because they felt discriminated against.

These political tensions led to violent clashes. In May 2023, dozens of soldiers were injured in clashes between Serbs and KFOR troops and Kosovan special police. On 23 September, a group of Serbian paramilitaries led by Milan Radojičić, who had been the political leader of the Serbs in Kosovo until then, engaged in a fire-fight with the Kosovo police that lasted for hours and resulted in the deaths of three Serbs and one Kosovo Albanian policeman. The government in Pristina assumes that this group was a vanguard of “green men” whose aim was to pave the way for an official intervention by the Serbian army. Serbia, on the other hand, denies this and claims that the armed Serbs acted with complete independence. According to the Serbian side, this escalation is solely due to the threatening situation for Serbs in northern Kosovo.

Radojičić and around 50 other attackers fled to Serbia immediately after the incident. Kosovo calls for the extradition of Radojičić and has intensified the increasingly repressive measures to push back Serbian influence in northern Kosovo. The exact circumstances of the incident in September 2023 remain unclear to the public. Since the incident, Serbia's relations with Kosovo have been largely constructive. Among other things, Serbia has now recognised Kosovan vehicle registration plates, which makes daily life easier on both sides.

### **Prospects for a Normalisation of Bilateral Relations**

Policymakers in both Serbia and Kosovo have insufficient interest in a sustainable solution to the conflict. Political compromises are seen as weakness on both sides. Neither society has a stable majority in favour of normalising relations in the sense that both sides would have to make far-reaching concessions. This complicates international efforts.

Due to their experience with NATO attacks, the majority of Serbian society is critical of NATO and the leading Western countries. Kosovo, on the other hand, fears that compromising could jeopardise its sovereignty. The existing Serbian institutions in Kosovo, the Srpska Lista and a future ASM are seen as possible bridgeheads for a Serbian invasion. In Kosovo, the comparison with Republika Srpska, one of the two state entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is repeatedly used to reject ASM. However, this discussion ignores the fact that Republika Srpska makes up 49 per cent of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Kosovo, on the other hand, Serbs only live on 15.6 per cent of the territory. What is more, on the basis of the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995), the Republika Srpska has more far-reaching executive powers than those envisaged for ASM. The international partners EU and US, which call for the establishment of ASM, also see no parallels with Republika Srpska and demand the implementation of what has been agreed in the treaty. Nevertheless, the fears in Kosovo that the ASM has the potential to be a gateway for separatism and functional paralysis of the Kosovar state are not just politically constructed lines of argument.

### Great expectations are being placed on the new European Commission.

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With the Russian war against Ukraine, geopolitical considerations have taken on a new significance. Serbia has voted in favour of Ukraine in all key United Nations votes to condemn the war. Yet, Belgrade is not participating in the EU's sanctions against Russia due to its own experience with sanctions and embargoes in the 1990s. Kosovo, on the other hand, supports the sanctions and has harmonised its foreign policy with the EU. Despite the widespread belief that Serbia is aligned with Russia in terms of foreign and security policy, Serbia has proven to be a reliable supporter of Ukraine in the military sphere. Through this support and a constructive

approach to the normalisation process, Serbia also received further support from the West. Conversely, Kosovo considers it unfair that the EU is sympathetic towards Serbia, which in Kosovo's view is an ally of Putin in Europe.

Pristina's application to join the Council of Europe in May 2024 also failed due to the uncompromising stance of the left-wing nationalist government under Albin Kurti, which was characterised by constant uncoordinated attempts to reduce Serbian influence in northern Kosovo. The longer the government under Kurti pursues this strategy, the less it will be trusted by its most important Western partners, the US and Germany.

On the other hand, the political leadership in Belgrade is convinced that Kosovo is using the war in Ukraine to change facts on the ground, especially in northern Kosovo, and to minimise Serbian influence there. Although understandable against the backdrop of its national interests, Kosovo's measures are characterised by increasing repression, as reflected in the establishment of new police stations, for example. Reports that properties belonging to monasteries or cemeteries have been expropriated in order to establish bases for the Kosovan police have been met with bewilderment.<sup>14</sup> This intimidates the Serbian population in many places. For the Kosovo Serbs, many of the actions of the government in Pristina are a repetition, in reverse, of the failed violent policy against the Albanians in the early years of Slobodan Milošević. Whereas the government in Pristina sees itself as a victim of Serbian reprisals and would like to see its statehood secured across the entire territory.

With regard to the future of the EU-led normalisation process, great expectations are being placed on the new European Commission. Recently, Pristina has expressed increasing reservations about Miroslav Lajčák, the EU's current chief negotiator in the normalisation process, and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell. Both were the main players in the Western mediation process. However, both come from EU member states that have not yet recognised Kosovo. As a



result, representatives of the Kosovan government repeatedly questioned the integrity of both top diplomats, which further hindered the progress of the normalisation process.

Accordingly, there is an expectation that the new Commission will provide new impetus to revitalise the talks. It is in Brussels' vital interest to once again attach greater importance to dialogue and make rapid progress. In this context, the outcome of the US presidential elections has been eagerly awaited both in Serbia and in Kosovo. Donald Trump's attempt to negotiate a deal in his first term in office has given rise to widespread hope in Belgrade and concern in Pristina about his second term in office. The progress of the bilateral relationship between Belgrade and Pristina will strongly influence regional cooperation in the Western Balkans in the future. If both sides block each other in regional forums for cooperation, such as the Berlin Process, then the entire regional cooperation will be undermined.

Despite many setbacks since the start of the talks between Serbia and Kosovo, there have been numerous improvements in the everyday lives of people on both sides. Belgrade and Pristina must recognise the realities so that stable peace can be achieved. The Serbs in Kosovo must accept that they are part of the majority Albanian-Kosovan society and that the country can no longer be part of Serbia. For their part, the political decision-makers in Kosovo, as well as the majority of the population, must show a genuine interest in working together. Only if Kosovo is realised as a multi-ethnic country will the Western Balkans as a whole be permanently stabilised.

*- translated from German -*

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