

KOSOVO VIEWS



B Balkan Views

April 2023

How Serbia's De-recognition Campaign is Hindering Normalization of Kosovo-Serbia Relations

The Kosovo Views" is a project implemented in partnership between the Balkan Forum and the Balkan Views. It aims to inform about the political developments in Kosovo through analyses of the most pressing and current topics that shape the political environment and decision-making in Kosovo.

Each month, "The Kosovo Views" will share up-to-date information by interviewing politicians, think-tankers, and experts on particular topics who will present their views on those topics.

"The Kosovo Views" serves as a platform that informs both a broader and the expert communities about the current situation in Kosovo.

Normalizing of Kosovo – Serbia relations is hindered by the de-recognition campaign of Serbia

Since 2008, Kosovo has been recognized by the United States, the United Kingdom, more than half of the UN member states and 22 out of 27 EU members. Data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo (as of March 2023) indicate that 117 countries of the world^[1] have recognized Kosovo's independence. The latest recognition is by Israel on February 1, 2021. Pristina warns about Belgrade's political administration de-recognition efforts to oppose the efforts of Kosovo officials to persuade non-recognizing countries to reconsider the recognition.

Currently, there is contradictory data regarding the alleged withdrawal of recognitions. According to media sources^[2] Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić stated in his annual media conference on January 4, 2023 that nine countries had withdrawn their recognition of Kosovo. The website of the Government of Serbia refers to a statement by Serbia's First Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić of August 26, 2019, when he announced that Togo was the 15th country to withdraw the recognition of Kosovo's independence^[3], while the current list of the countries that allegedly did so is officially 14^[4]. In an article dated January 16, 2023, Radio Free Europe quoted Togo's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Robert Dussey, confirming the withdrawal of his country from the recognition of Kosovo as a sovereign country^[5].

As mentioned above, since the declaration of its independence, Kosovo has faced an aggressive^[6] and destructive^[7] de-recognition campaign by Serbia, which has contributed to tense relations between the two countries, despite the ongoing EU- facilitated dialogue since 2011.

1 <https://mfa-ks.net/lista-e-njohjeve/>

2 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-otkrio-imena-zemalja-koje-su-povukle-priznanje-kosova/?cn-reloaded=1>

3 <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/144318/togo-15th-country-to-withdraw-recognition-of-kosovo.php>

4 <https://www.kim.gov.rs/lat/np101.php>

5 <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/togo-njohja-e-pavaresise-se-kosoves-/32225904.html>

6 <https://www.kas.de/documents/286052/0/Policy+brief+20-09-13+Kosovo+between+universal+non-recognition+an+d+der+ecogniti+ons+%28Alb+%29.pdf/31208b92-568e-bf59-a91a-977c9ec5cbe9?version=1.0&t=1610102495343>

7 Interview with the spokesperson/member of presidency of one of the largest political party in Kosovo.

On the one hand, Serbia's campaign aims to disrupt the political stability and weaken Kosovo's position in the international arena[8]. On the other hand, it seeks to strengthen its influence in Kosovo and its position in the EU-facilitated dialogue, experts from Kosovo believe[9].

Serbia believes it uses a sophisticated narrative and to that end, employs various strategies and arguments to persuade other countries not to recognize Kosovo's independence or to withdraw their recognitions. It exploits historical and legal arguments, diplomatic efforts, economic incentives and bribery[10], as well as cultural and religious[11] claims to support their strategy.

For example, Serbia systematically attempted to undermine the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, which clearly stated that the declaration of independence by Kosovo had not violated the international law or the UNSC Resolution 1244[12]. Moreover, Serbia argues that Kosovo's independence threatens the existence of the cultural and religious heritage of the Serbian people in Kosovo[13], all to persuade other countries that existence of Kosovo's independence violates the rights of Serbs and threatens them.

As a consequence, the efforts of the international community to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia face the obstacles posed by the Serbian campaign aimed at the de-recognition of Kosovo. This does not only undermine the process of normalizing relations but also decreases the faith of Kosovo and of the international community in the possibility of achieving progress; and it makes the normalization of relations less of a possibility. Therefore, to ensure trust and future prosperity of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, Belgrade should forthwith stop the de-recognition campaign against Kosovo. It not only harms the credibility of both states in the eyes of Western partners, but also severely decreases the already fragile and unstable relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Political experts from Kosovo are afraid that a continuation of Belgrade's de-recognition strategy could lead into hindering of the normalization process that is facilitated by the EU. To add to that, it severely damages the progress already achieved in the relations between Kosovo and Serbia.

Kosovo came out of a bloody war in 1999 which had a devastating impact on the people of Kosovo. More than 13,500 people were killed[14] (including over 1,600 still missing persons), 850,000[15] were forcibly expelled, about 20,000 were raped[16] and more than 100,000 private houses and public properties were destroyed. Its consequences still run deep and are felt substantially in Kosovo's society. Thanks to NATO, further destruction was prevented. In 1999, Kosovo was placed under the administration of the United Nations (United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo – UNMIK) until 2008, when Kosovo declared its independence.

8 Interview with a well-known journalist in Kosovo, founder and Editor-in-Chief of an online portal.

9 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-eu-proposal-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en

10 [https://www.kas.de/documents/286052/0/Policy+brief+20-09-13+Kosovo+Between+universal+non-recognition+and+derecognitions+\(Eng\).pdf/8245552b-5744-11b7-a1fb-429be14582c7?version=1.0&t=1610102495727](https://www.kas.de/documents/286052/0/Policy+brief+20-09-13+Kosovo+Between+universal+non-recognition+and+derecognitions+(Eng).pdf/8245552b-5744-11b7-a1fb-429be14582c7?version=1.0&t=1610102495727)

11 Interview with the Executive Director of a leading think-tank in Kosovo.

12 <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/141>

13 Interview with the Executive Director of a leading think-tank in Kosovo.

14 <https://www.icmp.int/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Kosovo-stocktaking-ENG.pdf>

15 <https://www.unhcr.org/afr/3ba0bbeb4.pdf>

16 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur70/7558/2017/en/>

North Kosovo remains in a limbo, as many issues continue unresolved

In a population of estimated 93% Albanian and 7% non-majority communities^[17], Kosovo's constitution^[18] and laws provide unprecedented guarantees for the rights of non-majority communities, including 20 reserved seats in a 120 seats national parliament and enhanced competencies for Serb-majority inhabited municipalities exclusively^[19]. Mayors of 10 municipalities (an estimated 26% of 38 Kosovo municipalities) are Kosovo-Serbs. While there has been significant progress with integrating Kosovo-Serbs in the political and institutional life, also as a result of the EU facilitated dialogue, Serbia continues to maintain influence in north Kosovo particularly by the control over political party Srpska Lista, which is under the direct influence of Belgrade and is financed by the Serbian Government. Srpska Lista regularly wins all Kosovo Serbian seats in the Parliament of Kosovo^[20]. Its influence is particularly visible in the four municipalities of north Kosovo, predominantly inhabited by Kosovo-Serbs.

The latest developments in the north of Kosovo are reminiscent of the events from the nineties of the past century and threaten to escalate into conflict.^[21] Political groups and formations have been used by Serbia to cause insecurity in this part of the country. Paired with the nationalistic discourse addressed to that part, the situation has caught citizens in an ambiguity between two states.^[22] That fact hampers the full integration of the Kosovo Serbs into the Kosovo society, which poses a problem for the stability of Kosovo. In the given current situation, Kosovo faces a continued threat of violence and rise of tensions in the north of Kosovo. This keeps Pristina focused on dealing with the issue of Serbian influence in its territory, which creates hostility and decreases trust towards Serbia at a time when the normalization of relations is of crucial and imminent importance.

Furthermore, the ongoing issue with the license plates^[23] that led to the erection of barricades in the country, thus generating a new political and security momentum in North Mitrovica^[24] leading to a mass resignation by Kosovo Serbs from the judiciary, police, and other administrative positions, continue to contribute to further tension buildup. As a consequence of these events, Srpska Lista political party confirmed that its representatives will not participate in the early local elections^[25] in the four municipalities of north Kosovo, scheduled to take place on April 23, 2023. Thus, Pristina faces another potential source of tensions, as without the participation of the Serbian party in the local elections, the stability in the north of Kosovo could be endangered.

Additionally, a possible failure of the French-German Plan on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, including disagreement over the establishment and competencies of the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities could be a potential flashpoint.^[26]

¹⁷ <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ks/methodology.html>

¹⁸ <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=3702>

¹⁹ <https://icld.se/app/uploads/2020/02/Kosovo-.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.paxetbellum.org/2022/09/13/tensions-in-northern-kosovo-and-the-role-of-kosovo-serbs/>

²¹ <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2023-kosovo-implementation-of-brussels-and-washington-agreements-path-to-enduring-peace-and-long-term-stability/5120?q=Kosovo>

²² Interview with the spokesperson/member of presidency of one of the largest political party in Kosovo.

²³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbia-license-plates/32230247.html>

²⁴ See 20.

²⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/serbian-list-confirms-boycott-of-local-elections-in-kosovo/>

²⁶ See 18.

In such scenario, tensions in Kosovo could arise, and again cause prolonged process of normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

At this point, the outlook for this part of Kosovo seems prone to volatile developments on the ground and in negotiation halls.

International missions continue to be perceived differently among Albanians and Serbs living in Kosovo

In Kosovo, EULEX and KFOR operate alongside each other. Their mandates differ: one being military and the other a civilian mission. Both KFOR and EULEX often work in tandem to enhance security in Kosovo. Also, there is some overlap in their duties in practice.

Mandated by UNSCR 1244, KFOR contributes towards maintaining a safe and secure environment in Kosovo for the benefit of all citizens[27]. EULEX was launched in 2008 as the largest civilian mission of the European Union, also operating within the framework of UNSC Resolution 1244. Its overall task is to support relevant rule of law institutions in Kosovo in line with the Kosovo legislation. EULEX continues to provide technical support to the implementation of relevant agreements of the EU-facilitated Dialogue on normalization of relations[28] between Kosovo and Serbia.

In regard to their position on the situation in north Kosovo, EULEX has stated that a return to the relevant Dialogue agreements regulating the integration of the Kosovo Police and judiciary is therefore essential.[29] Whereas KFOR has officially stated it remains vigilant to continue contributing to security in Kosovo.[30]

KFOR and EULEX are perceived quite differently by the local population in different parts of Kosovo, specifically, the Albanian majority and Serbian non-majority. KFOR maintains high public trust[31] and is generally more widely accepted as opposed to EULEX that has faced higher levels of contestation. The institutions of Kosovo view KFOR and EULEX as very important and collaborative for security issues, while local Serbs see these forces as more neutral compared to members of the Kosovo Police.[32]

The perspective of the Kosovo Albanian community, citizens and institutions towards KFOR is respectful, and as and KFOR is considered a key pillar of security in the country. However, the credibility of EULEX has gone down, as may be assumed by the fact that when the public opinion speaks about insecurity and threats, they think more in terms of KFOR.[33]

On the other hand, the Kosovo Serbs' views on EULEX and KFOR are mixed, usually dependent on their specific political affiliations. Some Serbs have criticized EULEX for not doing enough to protect the rights of the Kosovo Serb community, while others have deemed both KFOR and EULEX as protectors.[34]

26 See 18.

27 <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor/about-us/history/kfor-objectives>

28 <https://www.eulex-kosovo.eu/?page=2,16>

29 <https://www.eulex-kosovo.eu/?page=2,10,2707>

30 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_210449.htm

31 <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Kosovo%20Public%20Opinion%20Poll%20-%20May%202020.pdf>

32 Interview with a well-known journalist in Kosovo, founder and Editor-in-Chief of an online portal.

33 Interview with the spokesperson/member of presidency of one of the largest political party in Kosovo.

34 Interview with the Executive Director of a leading think-tank in Kosovo.

Thus, it could be suggested that these different views can be attributed to varied degrees of local trust in them as influenced by varied perceptions of their power and authority.

Unfortunately, the differing perceptions of Albanians and Serbs living in Kosovo are a cause for hostility against the steps and actions undertaken by EULEX and KFOR, especially of the Serbs living in the northern municipalities in the country. Therefore, it is imminent that EULEX and KFOR take proactive steps to increase the trust of local Serbs. When achieved, this would firstly improve the cooperation between local Serbs and the international missions with a presence in Kosovo, which in turn could lead into their enhanced presence in the rule of law levels, improved cooperation with foreign missions and lastly, into a stronger development of the rule of law in Kosovo, which still is one of the areas that the European Commission considers as a weakness in Kosovo's case.