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Russia's Kosovo Fixation



Backed by the US and the EU, the Serbian government is preparing for reconciliation with Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008. Serbian authorities wish to accelerate the process of EU integration, which implies a departure from a current policy aimed at hindering the formation of a Kosovan statehood, amongst other things.

Serbia's intention to finalize the "Kosovo issue" is a thorn in the side for the Russian government, which has consistently strived to undermine integration processes in the Balkans. Russia's aim has long been to prevent Serbia from drifting further from its cultural and economic influence. At present, Russia is practically excluded from the Kosovo settlement process. But that has not stopped the Kremlin from influencing the situation through anti-Albanian propaganda and by obstructing Kosovo's integration into international organizations. Fresh attempts to destabilize the region, which is still heavily scarred by ethnic conflict, cannot be ruled out, especially against the backdrop of Russia's current frosty relations with Brussels and Washington.

"The Kosovo issue" has flared up again after the [US administration announced](#) that the acceleration of the Balkan states' accession into both the EU and NATO was desirable. Russian attempts to undermine the perception of the region as "[a sphere of exclusive Western interests](#)" have also raised a few eyebrows. Serbia and Albania are preparing to enter a decisive stage in their dialogue; expectations are high that it could lead to

the normalization of relations. This is one of the EU's key requirements. Both Serbia, which has been conducting accession negotiations since 2014, and its breakaway province (with its own potential candidate status) aspire to become EU member states.

The [EU anticipates](#) that Serbia may join by 2025, whereas the Serbian authorities hope to [finalize membership negotiations](#) between 2020-2022. Serbia, however, may encounter an impasse on its path towards EU membership should Brussels deem relations with Kosovo to be insufficiently normalized. This would be irrespective of progress made in other areas. Failure to fulfil the provisions of [Chapter 35](#) enough to derail progress. This chapter requires a "comprehensive" normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and anything short of that could mean the European Commission rules not to open or close other chapters, effectively stalling accession.

Unable to alter the reality in Kosovo - that is, the development of the state with the support of the US and major European countries - Serbia seems willing to make concessions for the sake of EU integration. Speeches made by President Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia over recent months have indicated that agreements based on "[painful compromises](#)" are in the offing. "This should be a viable solution that excludes conflict," he [said in one speech](#), "and takes into account that Albanians residing in Kosovo enjoy the support of most Western countries on their way to fulfilling their national idea."

A final settlement on relations between Serbia and Kosovo, who were on opposing sides of a brutal armed conflict in the late 1990s, could make the process of EU integration more predictable. However, overcoming the Kosovan conundrum will be far from easy. Acute differences remain between both sides. There is also a reported [lack of progress](#) in actually implementing adopted agreements. And there is one additional factor which clouds the issue: the opacity of Moscow's Balkans policy.

In the past, Moscow participated in the development of the [UN Security Council resolution 1244](#) which played a key role in Kosovo's post-war stabilization. The adoption of this resolution completely deprived the Serbian authorities of military and police control over Kosovo. Russia later became one of the authors of the "[Guiding Principles](#) (...) for a settlement of the status of Kosovo". These principles did not allow for the territorial shifts in Kosovo nor a return to the pre-March 1999 situation i.e. as things stood prior to NATO's intervention.

After the UN Security Council failed to [settle the Kosovo issue](#) and Western countries switched to the implementation of [Ahtisaari's plan](#) on ensuring the independence of Kosovo through an international presence, Moscow was effectively stripped of its leverage. Currently, when Belgrade and Pristina hold talks on the normalization of Kosovo's status via the EU, no role is envisaged for Russia. But this does little to prevent the latter from interfering in the process. Moscow can, and is, impeding Kosovo's integration into the international community by preventing the country from joining the UN, UNESCO and other organizations while [persistently discrediting the local political elite](#).

Should Belgrade refrain from blocking Kosovo's independence as part of normalizing relations with Albania, there will be no need for Moscow to attempt to marginalize the self-declared republic. However, the Kosovo issue is not only just about relations between Russia and Serbia (Moscow positions itself as the main defender of Serbia's territorial integrity). It is also an important element of the Kremlin's confrontation with the West. Russia's authorities are using the Kosovo issue to [justify the annexation of Crimea](#) and their policy of undermining the sovereignty of countries in the immediate neighborhood. Moreover, complexities in the post-war settlement in Kosovo are taken advantage of to [criticize its "Western patrons"](#) and undermine the credibility of EU and NATO efforts in the Balkans.

Russia's assessment of the situation in Kosovo is harsher and more pessimistic than that of Serbia. In recent months, Moscow has spoken of a "[worsening security situation](#)" and threats of "[ethnic cleansing against Serbs in the Balkans](#)". At the same time, the Serbian leadership confirms that [no murder on ethnic grounds](#) has been committed in Kosovo within the last four years. Pro-Kremlin media releases describe how the US and NATO are attempting to [instigate new conflicts](#) in the Balkans while implementing the "[great Albanian scenario](#)". Albania is allegedly capable of provoking chaos in the region [within a few hours](#). Apparently, "Great Albania" could be [created within the European Union](#) with the assistance of EU member states. According to the Russian media, EU integration will not ensure the Serbs' worst fears never materialize nor will it deliver effective protection. These ungrounded assertions provoke fear and inter-ethnic enmity. Of course, such "hot

news” is spreading across the Balkans even without the help of Russian propagandists. Still, the fact that Russia develops information sites and funds disinformation campaigns is par for the course.

Russia has not reacted officially to statements by the President of Serbia on his readiness to reach a final settlement with Kosovan Albanians. Still, the Russian factor influences talks on this issue. Pro-Russian political forces in Serbia call for an end to negotiations with the Kosovan Albanians and for the issue to be referred back to the [UN Security Council](#) or else appeal to “[freeze the conflict](#)”. Following the referendum on the independence of Catalonia, unrecognized by the European Union, a new argument [shared by the Kremlin’s United Russia](#) has been added to the arguments of Serbian patriots: the EU cannot be regarded as an impartial intermediary to the negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia.

In addition, the idea of “delineating” or “dividing” Kosovo into Serbian and Albanian territories has entered the information space once again. The Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, who leads the Serbian socialist party, asserted that Moscow would support this idea should it be presented as [Serbia’s official position](#). Dačić should know that issues related to Kosovo’s status and territorial changes are not being discussed as part of the current settlement process. The “division” scenario has been simply impossible since NATO troops entered Kosovo in 1999, and the proclamation of Kosovo’s independence along with the signing of the Brussels agreement on the [principles governing the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina](#).

Russian diplomats have refrained from making statements on this issue; the proposal on the “division” of Kosovo has lost significance since the agreement on principles which precluded this option on an international level. So Serbian society has been given a false signal about the possibility of arriving at “more favorable solutions” thanks to cooperation with Russia. This is yet another gift to propagandists who peddle the image of a “great superpower” capable of changing the regional reality. In addition, they are trying to flare up tensions in the Balkans and complicate the adoption of important political decisions. The question is whether Russia will limit itself to blatant anti-Balkan and anti-Western propaganda or launch destabilizing actions in Serbia and the north of Kosovo alongside radical groups which [have ties to Moscow](#).

Russia’s policy is increasingly perceived by the Balkan states on their way to the EU and NATO as an approach to “[disrupt NATO, divide Europe](#)”. The region’s role might expand against the backdrop of the confrontation between the Kremlin and the West. Yet the problem is, peace-keeping missions in the region are far from being fully successful. Support for anti-Western conservative forces and propaganda which enhances interethnic intolerance, increases levels of distrust between stakeholders involved in post-war reconstruction and reforms are regarded as [destabilizing efforts](#) by Moscow’s opponents.

In this context, initiatives undertaken by the Russian-Serbian [Humanitarian Center in Niš](#) raise concerns. As opponents of Russian influence suspect, the center has [non-humanitarian ambitions](#). The center’s fate has become uncertain following accusations that the Russian authorities planned an [operation aimed at overthrowing the government of neighboring Montenegro](#) on Serbian territory in 2016.

Today, experts are unable to predict what foreign policy measures Russia will adopt after the 2018 election: will the Kremlin continue to act on impulse in the face of high risks (Georgia, Ukraine or Syria) or will it reduce the level of conflict potential and abandon “secret special operations”? At the same time, no one expects Moscow to stop undermining European and Euro-Atlantic integration. As pro-Kremlin think tanks put it, the Balkans states are [front-line targets](#).

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