



DISCUSSION PAPER

The Future of Serbia-Kosovo Relations: Prospects for Normalisation

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Introduction

The Kosovo War was one of the most brutal conflicts in Europe since World War II. It was also a key post-Cold War moment that demonstrated the extent to which the balance of power in world politics had tilted towards the Atlantic. While the United States-led NATO forces bombed Serbian targets to force their withdrawal from Kosovo, Belgrade's main ally, Russia, was unable to do much more than watch.

Since 2011, the EU has been mediating a dialogue process between Serbia and Kosovo. For both sides, Serbia and Kosovo, the prospect of EU membership is the main motivation bringing them to the discussion table. However, as the EU closes its doors to new members due

to the pressure of the rising populism and far right, Europe risks losing its influence over these countries. As a result, hopes for a resolution to the decades long issue have been fading.

As the world order continues to transform towards multi-polarity, Russia and China have been increasing their visibility in the Balkans. The rising influence of Moscow and Beijing, who broadly support Serbia's claims vis-à-vis Kosovo, has the potential to change regional dynamics, thwarting integration with the EU and facilitating the continued stalemate in Serbia-Kosovo relations



Austrian Soldiers under KFOR mission near the bridge separating the Albanian and Serbian sectors in northern town of Mitrovica, Kosovo. Sasa Dordevic - AA

Serbia-Kosovo Relations After the Breakup of Yugoslavia

In the 19th century, Ottoman power began to fade away in the Balkans, and after losing the 1912-13 Balkan Wars, more than 500 years of Ottoman rule in the region came to end. Although Serbs comprised the majority of inhabitants during pre-Ottoman times, demographics shifted over time primarily due to Albanian and Turkic migration to the region during Ottoman rule.

After the end of World War II, Yugoslavia, under a new socialist regime, became a federation made up of six republics (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) and Kosovo became an autonomous province of Serbia. Albanian Kosovars faced great scale of repression during Yugoslav rule, especially after Slobodan Milosevic became the leader of Serbia in 1989. (Krasniqi, 2012, pp. 6-7).

In 1992, using the window of opportunity provided by the end of the Cold War and the Yugoslav Wars, the Albanian Kosovars declared independence. However, neither Belgrade nor the international community recognised their declaration. Tensions continued to simmer, transforming into a violent conflict by 1996 between Albanian Kosovars and Serbs (Woehrel, 2009, pp. 5-6).

The Milosevic regime in Belgrade, furious with the situation in Kosovo, launched a large-scale operation to reinstate its authority in the region. This move turned the conflict into a war, which lasted until NATO intervention in March 1998. The intervention forced the Milosevic regime to withdraw its army and police from Kosovo. Upon the withdrawal of Serbian forces,

the United Nations took over the administration of Kosovo. A military entity named the Kosovo Force (KFOR) was created under the leadership of NATO to provide security in the region (Morelli, 2018, p. 1).

The UN-led initiative to bring Belgrade and Pristina to the table for a resolution commenced in 2005. However, the parties failed to reach an agreement over the future of the region. Following the failure of negotiations, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in February 2008 (Lahne, 2012, p. 4).

Today, Kosovo is recognised by over 110 countries, including the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, and a majority of the EU member states (Russell, 2019, p. 6). However, Belgrade still considers Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia. Countries such as Russia, China, Spain and Greece are in support of Serbia's position. Although Kosovo has succeeded to become a member of some international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), it has failed to become a member of the United Nations.

Following Kosovo's declaration of independence, Serbia began an international campaign to isolate the region from international institutions. It also sought to prevent Kosovo's recognition as an independent state by putting pressure on other countries with which it was closely associated. At the same time, EU membership has been Belgrade's primary goal since the removal of Milosevic from office in 2000. However, Serbia's firm stance on Kosovo has strained ties between Belgrade and Brussels. The EU has put pressure on Serbia by making Serbia's membership

in the EU conditional upon normalisation of relations with Kosovo.

In 2011, EU-mediated talks between Belgrade and Pristina began to form a basis for the normalisation of relations. Given the deep division and mistrust between both sides, rather than focusing on sensitive political issues such as the recognition of Kosovo's independent status, the talks dealt primarily with technical points related to public well-being. This was a key step in keeping both parties at the table.

and transferring land records and civil registers from Serbia to Kosovo. These documents had been taken to Serbia during the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo in 1999 (Lahne, 2012, p. 10). One of the most significant issues dealt with during the talks was the agreement on integrated border/boundary management. Although implementation of the agreement had setbacks, the agreement symbolised the achievements made during negotiations, which had previously been unthinkable (Russell, 2019, p. 4).

Importance of Kosovo for Serb National Identity

Kosovo holds a very important place in the historical and national consciousness of the Serbian people. The region was the heartland of the medieval Serbian kingdoms. Many historical monasteries and churches, including the first Serbian patriarchate (highest church), still represent the Serbian past in the region. All of these have made Kosovo the centre of Serbian mythology and a pillar of Serbian national pride. Although centuries of migration have changed the demographics of the region, Kosovo continues to represent the so-called 'Jerusalem of the Serbs.'

Today, the Serbian Orthodox Church is the biggest defender of Serbian claims over Kosovo. With its significant influence over Serbian society the church continues to uphold the Kosovo myth in the minds of many Serbs. This has served to reinforce the roadblocks standing in way of the normalisation of Serbia-Kosovo relations. Any Serbian politician perceived as being conciliatory on the Kosovo issue would undoubtedly face tremendous pressure from both the Church and much of the Serbian public.

Since an attempt to force either side to solve more delicate matters, such as the statehood of Kosovo, would have led to an instant collapse of negotiations (Bieber, 2015, pp. 297-298).

Many issues in the negotiations focused upon daily life, such as recognition of diplomas, free movement of citizens, recognition of Kosovo's customs stamps, assigning an international telephone code to Kosovo,

By the end of 2012, the prime ministers of both sides had begun to take part in the negotiations, and the focus of the meetings shifted to political issues (Bejovic & Burazer, 2008, pp. 8-9). The first significant result of these talks was the mutual assignment of liaison officers. Yet, rather than having their own offices, these officers would work within the EU missions located in the capital cities of these countries (Morelli & Garding, 2018, p. 7).

In April 2013, Belgrade and Pristina reached a deal known as the Brussels Agreement. The agreement mainly focused on the Serbian minority in North Kosovo. According to the deal, an Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities would be formed. This Association/Community would be responsible for issues such as health, education, planning and other issues agreed upon by Pristina (Morelli & Garding, 2018, p. 7).

Moreover, a police force composed of Kosovar Serbs would be formed as part of Kosovo's main police force. The chief of this force in the north would be selected by Pristina from a list of nominees provided by the Association/Community. The judicial system in the north would also be unified with the Kosovo judicial system. Kosovar Serbian judges would work in the region under the auspices of the central government in Pristina (Morelli, 2018, p. 10). However, the establishment of the Association/Community still



has not been realised. As the Serbian government has continued to block Kosovo's accession to international organisations, the Kosovar side has stalled the implementation of measures which were agreed upon.

In August and September 2018, the EU-negotiated talks between Belgrade and Pristina were resuscitated as the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and his Kosovar counterpart Hashim Thaci floated the idea of a land swap. According to the presidents' plan, Kosovo would hand over the majority of the Serbian region in North Kosovo to Serbia, and in return the Albanian-majority Presevo Valley on the Serbia-Kosovo border would join Kosovo (Bytscy & Sekularac, 2018). However, domestic audiences from both countries radically opposed the idea of a land swap. Among those opposed was Kosovar Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj and his government. Haradinaj publicly criticised Vucic and Thaci's proposal (Manza, 2018). The domestic opposition was generally based on a sense of national pride and a reluctance to give the other side concessions.

International criticism of the land swap was based on fears that such a deal would harm the delicate balance of stability in the Balkans. While the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, supported the possibility of a land swap, many EU members, including Germany and the United Kingdom, opposed the idea. On the other side of the Atlantic, however, the US showed support for the proposal.

The main concern about the land swap idea was that it might cause a domino effect, leading to new conflicts in the region (MacDowall, 2018). During the 1990s, the Western Balkan states fought long wars, and the societies that have large numbers of minorities are far from reconciliation. In Bosnia

and Herzegovina, the Serb entity is still looking for a chance for independence and unification with Serbia. Nearly 20% of the population of Montenegro is composed of Muslim minorities, and 25% of Macedonian population are Albanians.

The optimistic mood for a resolution faded quickly when Serbia blocked Kosovo's accession to INTERPOL in November 2018. The Kosovar government retaliated harshly by imposing 100% tariffs on Serbian goods, a move that drew criticism from both the EU and the US (Koleka, 2018).

Tensions between Belgrade and Pristina further increased in December 2018 when the Kosovo government declared that it would turn the Kosovo Security Force into an army (Bytscy, 2018a). Pristina also announced that it would not lift tariffs on Serbian goods until Belgrade recognised Kosovo's independence. On the other hand, Belgrade refused to come back to the table unless the tariffs were lifted. Although international actors such as the US and the EU continue to pressure both sides to return to negotiations, the deadlock continues.

Immediate matters that are waiting to be solved for progress on the normalisation can be listed as follows. The Serbian side wants the Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities to be formed as agreed in the 2013 Brussels Agreement. Moreover, Belgrade also demands high tariffs imposed on Serbian goods be lifted as well as the termination of the Kosovar Army. For its part, Pristina wants Belgrade to put an end to its attempts to isolate Kosovo in the international arena. Kosovo also demands Serbia to acknowledge its independence, which is a red line for the Serbian side.

International Actors

The European Union

The European Union is the leading international actor involved in the dialogue process between Serbia and Kosovo. Leading members Germany and France are the main forces behind the EU's long assertiveness in finding a resolution to the issue. As a result of these efforts, talks between the two sides have been continuing with EU mediation since 2011.

The Western Balkans are the only region of Europe that is still in the process of integration with the EU. Like their neighbours, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo are aspiring to become members of the EU. Hence, the EU is using this ambition as leverage for both sides to continue the dialogue process, putting the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina as a pre-condition for membership.

Serbia became an official candidate in 2012. Although the EU has mentioned that Serbia could become a full member by 2025 (Rankin, 2018), the latest developments on both sides make the realisation of this unlikely difficult. On the EU side, Brussels is losing its appetite for accepting new members. The rise of far-right politics, anti-immigration movements and the slowdown of the economy in the EU have affected the Union's policies toward new members. For example, in October, the EU delayed its decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, even though the European Council had stated that these two countries were on track for reforms, and that talks should begin as soon as possible (Jozwiak, 2019). Serbia's aim to become a full member of the EU by is fast becoming a dream rather than a reality. Serbia's reform process has been slowing down, especially on issues such as media freedom and rule

of law (Istrate, 2019). The EU's reluctance to accept new members has only soured the situation.

Although most EU members recognise Kosovo, five of them do not recognise its statehood. This is the most important obstacle in the face of Kosovo's potential EU membership (Hehir, 2018). Even if this obstacle is surmounted, the Pristina government will have to realise a long list of reforms before it would be eligible for full membership.

In a 2019, leaders of the Western Balkan nations gathered in Berlin with German and French leaders to make a jumpstart in negotiations after relations began to strain between Serbia and Kosovo at the end of 2018. During the meeting, both sides expressed their willingness to play a positive role in putting relations back on track. However, these rhetorical statements failed to re-start the talks (Deutsche Welle, 2019).

After the meeting, Serbian President Vucic simply re-stated his government's official stance, namely that the tariffs should be revoked before the talks could begin. Kosovar President Thaci responded by saying that Pristina would not back down if Belgrade did not stop its aggressive actions against Kosovo (Balkan Insight, 2019).

The Berlin Summit ended without any concrete results. The only outcome of the meeting was that the leaders agreed to continue their search for dialogue and meet in Paris in July. However, later it was announced that the Paris meeting would be postponed to an unknown date, diminishing the hopes of reaching an agreement to normalise relations by the end of 2019 (Pajaziti, 2019).

The United States

The United States led the NATO intervention in 1999 to end the Kosovo War between Serbia and the Kosovars seeking independence. Since then, Washington has been the biggest supporter of Kosovo's independence in the international arena. Pristina sees US support as crucial for maintaining the country's independence and for integration into international institutions (Bytciy, 2018b).

US-Serbia relations plummeted during the 1990s as Washington stood against Milosevic's aggressive policies and led a NATO bombing campaign against the country. However, after Milosevic's fall in 2000, the new Serbian government turned its face toward the West. Since then, the US and Serbia have been steadily improving bilateral relations.

Although Serbia is the only country in the Western Balkans, which is not seeking NATO membership, Belgrade has joined NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Coun-

cil (Morelli, 2018, pp. 14–15). Belgrade's improving relations with NATO have also helped to improve US-Serbia ties since Washington's main policy toward the Western Balkans is to enhance NATO's presence in the region (Woehrel, 2009, p. 4).

Washington has generally kept a low profile during the dialogue process between Belgrade and Pristina, choosing to throw their support behind the EU mediated process (Morelli, 2018, p. 14). Since the 2018 land swap proposal however, the US has been more active in bringing Serbia and Kosovo to the table. Although the US opposed border changes in the Balkans for a long time, Washington has backed Presidents Vucic and Thaci in their proposal to use a land swap as the basis for normalisation. US President Donald Trump's former National Security Adviser John Bolton stated that Washington would not oppose the land swap if Belgrade and Pristina reached a settlement (Walker & MacDowall, 2018).

Russia

Russia has deep historical and cultural ties with the Balkans. The Orthodox-Slavic identity of much of the population in the region helped Moscow foster influence during the 19th and 20th centuries. However, today the Balkan nations have largely turned towards the West. The top priority of all the Balkan countries is integration with Western institutions and accession to the EU. This has inevitably diminished Moscow's influence in the region. However, this does not mean Russia has left the region completely to the West. Through a leveraging of its historical and cultural ties, Russia remains a significant player in the region.

Out of all the Balkan states, Russia maintains its closest ties with Serbia (Stojanovic, 2018). In addition to its strong bilateral relations with the Serbian government, Russia also maintains close ties with Serb nationalist and Eurosceptic groups in this country. The Kremlin also has deep connections with the Serbian Orthodox Church via the Russian Orthodox Church. In his latest visit to Serbia, one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's stops was the Saint Sava church in Belgrade where he was welcomed by a large crowd. (Matamoros, 2019)

Russia is a staunch supporter of Serbian claims over Kosovo. In 2007, prior to Kosovo's declaration of independence, the United Nations attempted to grant supervised independence to Kosovo. Russia blocked this process by threatening to use its veto power in the United Nations Security Council (Deutsche Welle, 2007). Russia's support for Serbia on this issue continues to impede international efforts to find common ground, prevents Kosovo's full integration into the international community and leaves the door open for revival of conflicts in the region.

Russia's relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska region is demonstrative of Moscow's destabilising role in the region. With Russian support, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik follows a secessionist policy. Moreover, 'Republika Srpska' hin-

ders Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration to the EU by blocking implementation of reforms using their considerable power in the complex administrative system of the country. Kremlin is not only supporting Republika Srpska politically but also transferring arms to the autonomous region. Russian support to the region's police force has been turning it into a de facto army. (Borger, 2018) Russian actions in the region continue to plant seeds for elevation of tensions and possible conflict. Thus, leaving further space to Russia on the future of Serbia-Kosovo issue has the potential to destabilise the two countries and possibly the region as a whole.

China

China is a new player in the Balkans. Although it is not one of the traditional international actors in the region, Beijing has increased its activities in the Balkan countries as a result of its efforts during the last decade to become more involved in the international arena. With its controversial Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy, Beijing has raised its economic and political profile in the region. Within the framework of this initiative, China is pouring money into its partner countries for infrastructure development projects. The goal is to enhance international trade as well as China's position in international arena (Cai, 2017).

Serbia is the top destination of BRI investments in the Balkans. Throughout Serbia, Chinese construction firms are building railways, roads, metros and power plants, all financed with Chinese loans. This interac-

tion has also opened the Serbian market to Chinese firms (Le Corre & Vuksanovic, 2019). Although these investments are helping to accelerate economic development in Serbia, they currently do not help advance the normalisation process between Serbia and Kosovo. Significantly, China does not recognise Kosovo as an independent country, and Beijing remains of the most vocal supporters of Serbia's claims over Kosovo (Ozturk, 2018). Therefore, China's rising power in the region has the potential to disrupt an already difficult normalisation process. Beijing's support might be regarded by the Serbian leadership as a chance to break the international pressure for dialogue. Maintaining the status quo benefits Belgrade as it blocks Kosovo's integration into the international community with support of Russia and China.

Turkey

Turkey, with its historical and cultural ties to the region, is one of the most influential countries in the Balkans. Muslim and Turkic minorities in the region have deep connections to Turkey and act bridges between their respective countries and Turkey. Ankara is aware that only by preserving peace and stability in the region can the security and integrity of these minority communities be secured. Hence, Turkey's main aim the Balkans strengthening rule of law and democracy and enhancing multilateralism in the region. Therefore, enlargement of the EU and NATO in the region is consistent with Turkish foreign policy. Despite this, French President Emanuel Macron has labelled Turkey as a revisionist force along with Russia and China, and indicated that Turkey is a rival of EU in the region (Charlish & Rinke, 2019). This argument appears groundless as Ankara has consistently voted in favour of Balkan countries membership to NATO. In numerous cases, Turkey has also shown support for the EU membership of these countries. For example, in his recent visit to North Macedonia, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that Ankara had, and will continue, to support Skopje's integration to the NATO and the EU (Mehmet, 2018).

Turkey was one of the countries that contributed to NATO intervention during the Kosovo War and was one of the first countries to recognise Kosovo's independence. Together with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo remains a top priority for Turkey in the region. The two counties also enjoy deep bilateral relations. Kosovar President Thaci described Turkey as a country that stood by Kosovo both in difficult and good times (Morina, 2016).

Turkey-Serbia relations have also gained a momentum in the past decade. Drawing attention to advancements in bilateral relations, Serbian President

Vucic stated that Turkey is a vital partner for Serbia (Ozturk, 2019b). Turkey mediated between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to resolve contentions between these two countries through a trilateral mechanism. Moreover, Turkey has sponsored the construction of a highway between the Belgrade and Sarajevo. Named as the 'peace highway', the project is designed to increase cooperation and connectivity between the two neighbours.

In line with its own relations with both Belgrade and Pristina, Turkey supports the European Union's mediation attempts to normalise relations between the two sides. In some instances, Turkey has also become active in resolving obstacles, which have occurred during this process. For example, when Serbia's top representative in Kosovo, Marko Djuric, was detained by Kosovar authorities in March 2018, Turkish President Erdogan stepped in and negotiated with Presidents Vucic and Thaci to prevent further tension in relations (Duran, 2019).

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Is Normalisation Possible?

On July 19, Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj resigned from his post after the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in the Hague summoned him as a suspect for war crimes alleged to have occurred in the 1990s (Fazliu & Begisholli, 2019). Haradinaj's summons by the special court served to aggravate the already high nationalist feelings on both sides, as memories of the war are still alive in both Serbian and Kosovar society.

Following Haradinaj's resignation, Kosovo held snap elections. The ruling nationalist coalition lost the election to the Vetëvendosje (Self Determination Party) and Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës (Democratic League of Kosovo). These two parties agreed to form a coalition government. However, their stance toward the negotiation process toward Serbia is not significantly different from that of their predecessors. During the campaign, both parties embraced a solid stance against giving any concessions to Serbia and argued that Belgrade should recognise Kosovo's interdependence. (Reuters, 2019)

EU membership is the biggest motivation for both Belgrade and Pristina to continue the dialogue process toward normalisation of relations.

Since both societies are highly politicised over this issue, all the political parties as well as civil society place great pressure on their governments. Therefore, international mediation and pressure is very important in finding a resolution to the decades-long issue. However, the EU, the main player in the dialogue process since 2011, has been losing its leverage over these two Balkan countries. On July 16, French President Macron paid a visit to the Serbian capital. During a joint press conference with Serbian President Vucic, Macron stated that France and Germany were ready to support Serbia and Kosovo in reaching a resolution. He added that he would invite the leaders to Paris for the follow-up meeting of the Berlin Summit (Ozturk, 2019a). However, a new date still has not been announced to bring the leaders together.

Macron further stated that the negotiation process was a test for Europe to show that if it is capable of concluding such an agreement (Ozturk, 2019a). Although the French President's statements in Belgrade have the potential to raise hopes for the region's prospects in respect to the EU, his country's attitude toward the enlargement of the Union in the Western Balkans has lessened Brussels' influence in the region's capitals. A short while ago, France together a number of followers in the EU blocked membership negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia despite the European Commission's recommendation to launch the talks (Barigazzi, 2018). As discussed above, the EU's attitude toward Serbia and Kosovo is not very different from its stance toward Albania and North Macedonia. The European Union denied granting Kosovo visa-free travel, despite Pristina's fulfilment of required reforms. Today, Kosovo is the only East European country that still awaits visa-free travel (Associated Press, 2018).

As mentioned, EU membership is the biggest motivation for both Belgrade and Pristina to continue the dialogue process toward normalisation of relations.

As Macron indicated during his visit to the Serbian capital, Brussels should act fast and reform itself to become an attractive for future members. Unlike ten or fifteen years ago, the EU is no longer the only power in the region capable of exerting influence as has been made clear by Russia and China's efforts to enhance their visibility in the region. The Western Balkans hold an important place for Russia's great power identity and Moscow has stepped up its activities in the region during the last decade. Serbian leaders are aware that any concessions on the Kosovo issue might trigger nationalist sentiments among the Serbian public, potentially costing them their political careers. Russia, knowing this, continues its efforts to support nationalist and anti-Western organisations in order to perpetuate the status quo. This in turn allows Moscow to exert influence over Serbia, and thereby the entire region (Samorukov, 2019).

Although China's economic presence is no match for Europe in Serbia at the moment, China's moves have the potential to change this situation in favour of Beijing in the near future. Between 2013 and 2017, Serbia's exports to China have risen by 700%, while exports to the EU rose only 50% ('Serbia Economic Indicators')

Moreover, China's activities in the region is not only limited to economic sphere. Deepening Sino-Serbian bilateral relations have opened the doors to Chinese influence in the Balkans. For example, Chinese technology company Huawei has reached an agreement with the Serbian state to build a one thousand camera surveillance system with facial recognition in the Serbian capital. This has raised major concerns from civil rights groups in both Serbia and the West who have highlighted the risks the system poses to human rights (Stojkovski, 2019). Considering the usage of these systems in China, concerns put forward by civil right groups have a legitimate basis.

The increasing influence of Russia and China in Serbia may distance Serbia from the EU. If Serbia loses its prospects to become an EU member, the West

may lose its influence over Belgrade, leaving Serbia to the spheres of influence of Moscow and Beijing. This would effectively end any hope at resolving the Serbia Kosovo issue.

As for Kosovo, the risk of growing Russian and Chinese influence is a non-issue since neither country recognises Kosovo's independence. However, if the EU fails to speed up Kosovo's integration, Eurosceptic and isolationist movements may find a place for themselves in Kosovo politics. This in turn would cause Kosovo to turn inward. Such a development may destabilise the Balkan nation located in the southern flank of the EU since it would worsen the economic and the political situation.

In order to counter this possibility, Brussels should stop regarding Turkey as a competitor and collaborate with Ankara, since, in reality, their respective interests overlap. Both Brussels and Ankara are on the same page in their vision for the region: to strengthen peace and democracy and normalise Serbia-Kosovo relations.

It should also be noted that Turkey's position it also represents a barrier to growing Russian and Chinese influence in the region. For example, Turkey has been the key partner of Bosnia and Herzegovina vis-à-vis the modernisation of this country's infrastructure. Thanks to Turkish investments such as Sarejovo-Belgrade highway, China has not managed to successfully exert influence in the Bosnian-Croatian region of Bosnia and Herzegovina as it has in the Serbian region.

Other Turkish investments can also be seen in other Balkan countries as well. Turkish state owned Halkbank has enlarged its operations to Serbia and North Macedonia. The Bank has 33 branches in Serbia (Ozturk, 2018) and 40 branches in neighbouring North Macedonia (Kostidis, 2019). Turkish airport operators are also another example of Turkey's economic visibility in the region. They operate main airports in Pristine in Kosovo, Skopje and Ohrid in North Macedonia.

The Way Forward

The period of 2011-2015 shows a good example of the dialogue process mediated by Brussels. Today, once again, at a time when the relations between the two countries are highly strained, bureaucrats rather than politicians may direct the dialogue process. There are still many technical issues that should be dealt with, and these non-political technical issues can be a new starting point for the negotiations.

Rather than seeking a quick resolution, small steps should be taken to bring trust into the process. For example, Kosovo can lift the 100% tariffs on Serbian goods, which also harms the Kosovar economy, and in return, Serbia could withdraw its open opposition to Kosovo's accession to certain international institutions such as UNESCO and INTERPOL. Kosovo's integration into international society through these institutions will, among other things, likely raise the status of the Serbian minority in this country, as well as strengthen their rights since it would help strengthen democracy and rule of law in the country.

It should be kept on mind that conflicts in the region during the 1990s led to a refugee flow to the Europe. For the EU, a stable and integrated Western Balkans is

not only important for the region's wellbeing, but for all of Europe as well. Revival of such conflicts would also cause displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Therefore, the European Union should accelerate these countries' integration and not only demand that they continue their reforms. Brussels should assist these countries with a clear road map. The EU should also keep its promise for visa-free travel for Kosovo, and begin the formal negotiation process with Albania and North Macedonia.

Resolution of the Kosovo-Serbia issue will not only test the EU's capability in conflict resolution, but it will give an indication as to the EU's prospects for the future. The world is once again entering into a multipolar era, as China and Russia rise as revisionist actors against the Atlantic-centred world order. What is bad for Europe is that the Western Balkans, at its doorstep, is one of the regions where Russia and China have decided to set their game against the Atlantic-oriented status quo.

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