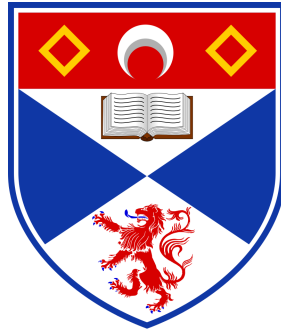


Russia and the Serbia-Kosovo Dispute



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Background	3
Introduction	4
How does Russia get involved?	4
Why does Russia get involved?	7
How are local actors reacting to Russian involvement?	9
What impact does this have on the Serbia-Kosovo dispute?	11
Conclusion	12
Works Cited	14

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Background

The war in 1998-1999 between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (at the time comprising Serbia and Montenegro) and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), was the last in a series of wars that resulted in the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The war was fueled by long-standing Serb-Albanian ethnic tensions, repressive measures by Serb authorities towards Kosovo's majority Albanian population, and the desire of the Albanian majority for the independence of Kosovo – which had been an autonomous province within Serbia until Serbian President Slobodan Milošević revoked this status in 1989. In mid-1999, after an intensification of attacks on Kosovo Albanian civilians, against the backdrop of armed unrest between the KLA and Serbian forces in preceding years, NATO intervened in a 78-day bombing campaign of Serbia and Montenegro with the stated goal of “forc[ing] a halt to the systematic and brutal repression and expulsion of Kosovo's people” by Milošević's forces.¹ The intervention formally ended with the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement by the International Security Force (KFOR: Kosovo Force) and the governments of both the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and the Republic of Serbia (Serbia). Under the agreement and through United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244, Kosovo was placed under international administration; its institutions were to be overseen by the international community and its security was ensured by a NATO force – KFOR. The majority of Kosovo's population is ethnic Albanian (a 2011 census put this figure at 92.9%), except for northern Kosovo, a region to the south of Serbia that was (and still is) predominantly ethnic Serb (and which boycotted the 2011 census).² Post-1999 Kosovo's status and governance were very much in limbo; Kosovo Albanians sought independence from FRY while Serbia still considered Kosovo as part of its territory – under a highly supervised structure which included the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), among many other international organisations.

Following several years of UN-led mediation efforts on Kosovo's final status, Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2008, a move so far recognised by 117 countries but not acknowledged by Serbia or by two key external actors in the Western Balkans: Russia and China. Since 2011, most of the UN's former duties in Kosovo, including the facilitation of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, have been assumed by the European Union (EU). The EU-facilitated peace process has produced two significant deals between Serbia and Kosovo that each tried to lay a path for normalisation between both sides: the 2013 Brussels Agreement (signed by both) and the 2023 Ohrid Agreement (verbally accepted by both).

The main issues at stake between the parties are the recognition of Kosovo by Serbia and the creation of an Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić stated just before Ohrid in 2023 that “we will recognize neither the factual nor de jure independence of Kosovo”.³ Meanwhile, the Association of Serb Municipalities (agreed in Brussels in 2013) remains unimplemented by the Kosovo government.

¹ Clinton White House, “Winning the War and the Peace in Kosovo,” National Archives, 1999, <https://clintonwhitehouse5.archives.gov/WH/EOP/NSC/html/nsc-07.html#:~:text=Confronted%20with%20a%20massive%20humanitarian.>

² Minority Rights Group, “Kosovo (unrecognized state),” minorityrights.org (Minority Rights Group, 2018), [https://minorityrights.org/country/kosovo-unrecognized-state/.](https://minorityrights.org/country/kosovo-unrecognized-state/)

³ RFE/RL's Balkan Service, “Serbian President Rules out ‘Factual or de Jure’ Recognition of Kosovo,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, March 12, 2023, [https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-vucic-kosovo-fatual-de-jure-recogntion/32314013.html.](https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-vucic-kosovo-fatual-de-jure-recogntion/32314013.html)

Introduction

The Serbia-Kosovo dispute constitutes a fault line between many major powers, with several key external actors projecting their influence into it. NATO guarantees Kosovo's security, the EU facilitates the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue and is the main economic actor in the Western Balkans, the US is Kosovo's closest major ally and is the key "supporter" of the EU-brokered dialogue, China is increasing its economic presence in the Western Balkans, and Russia – the focus of this research – is an ever-present player too.

Russia is historically close to Serbia and has consistently supported Serbia in the dispute, including in its objection to Kosovo's independence. In practice, this has meant that Kosovo cannot get accepted as a member of the UN because of Russia's veto power in the UNSC. Russia states that it will accept any resolution of the dispute acceptable to Serbia. But beyond this general description of its position, there is much to explore in terms of Russia's interests, goals, means and influence in the dispute and in the diplomatic efforts to address it, particularly since its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

This essay will argue that, particularly since the invasion of Ukraine, cracks have emerged in the relationship between Russia and Serbia and the Kosovo Serbs, but that Russia is still a key player in any resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo dispute and for now prefers the maintenance of the status quo. The paper will thus proceed in four parts, namely, how Russia involves itself in the dispute, the reasons for its involvement, the reactions of local actors in Serbia, Kosovo and northern Kosovo, and the resulting impact Russia has on the Serbia-Kosovo dispute and peace process.

In examining the topic, the essay will draw from both existing literature and interviews conducted with eight experts in Kosovo's capital Pristina, in the divided city of Mitrovica, and online where necessary, between June and August 2024.

How does Russia get involved?

With the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue facilitated by the EU, Russia no longer enjoys the kind of formal oversight over the day-to-day process itself that it had when the UN was in the lead. Nevertheless, Moscow is able to impact the process indirectly through its influence in Serbia and the Serb population in Kosovo. Within this, there are four key elements of Russian involvement.

First and foremost, Zweers, Drost, and Henry argue that Russia's main source of influence over Serbia's government is its ability to use or threaten the use of its UNSC veto to prevent Kosovo's membership of the UN and its full recognition.⁴ Moscow was vocal in its criticism of NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999 – an action which took place without UNSC authorisation – even if it was powerless to stop it. Memories in Serbia of 1999 are still fresh from what many Serbs see as an illegal US-led intervention under what they say were false or overblown allegations of ethnic cleansing. Russia also refused to recognise Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, arguing that this contravened UNSCR 1244 which affirmed the sovereignty of the FRY, of which Serbia is a successor state. Russia also makes

⁴ Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost, and Baptiste Henry, "Little Substance, Considerable Impact: Russian Influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro" (Clingendael Institute, August 2023), <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/little-substance-considerable-impact.pdf>, p. 19.

allegations of persistent violence against the Kosovo Serbs by the Kosovo government and has repeatedly publicly questioned the performance of the EU and KFOR in Kosovo – acting as a counterweight to the West’s (and particularly the US’s) strong pro-Kosovo stance.⁵ Moreover, Moscow maintains that UNMIK’s remaining duties should not be further diluted, amidst calls from some states, such as Albania, to end the mission’s mandate.⁶

Second, perhaps as important as this UNSC veto is Russia’s deployment of “soft power” to exert influence and attract cooperation through cultural appeal, political values and diplomacy – particularly via the media and by appealing to a common Slavic-Orthodox identity.

In the media, Russian influence comes partly from direct involvement but more so from pro-Russian narratives disseminated by local Serbian sources. Russian news stations based in Serbia are limited to Sputnik Srbija – the Belgrade-based branch of the Russian-run news agency Sputnik – and RT Balkan, a website launched by the Moscow-aligned news outlet Russia Today, and which has mentioned plans to have a TV channel in Serbian by 2024.⁷ Popular in both Serbia and also among Kosovo Serbs, Sputnik has been noted as pushing narratives of Western imperialism against Serbia and reinforcing fears of a “Greater Albania” which could potentially include Kosovo.⁸ However, this content is most effectively disseminated by local Serbian sources, which have greater popularity and a wider reach. Local media, radio stations and tabloids that support Vučić’s government circulate Sputnik’s content and opinions – which are often provided at minimal or no cost – and often sell better when they include pro-Russian content.⁹ Such websites publish articles promoting not only anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiments, but also promoting the unification of the Serb diaspora across the Western Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and northern Kosovo.¹⁰ Such narratives include heightening fears of a conflict between Serbia and Kosovo.¹¹ For instance, during a recent uptick in tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, social media users from across Europe spread disinformation that a “war” had started or was close to starting between Kosovo and Serbia.¹²

Russia’s other important source of soft power is its historic Slavic and Orthodox links with Serbia and Serbs. The Serbian Orthodox Church is important in the context of Serbia-Kosovo, as it administers

⁵ Lance Davies, “A ‘Hybrid Offensive’ in the Balkans? Russia and the EU-Led Kosovo-Serb Negotiations,” *European Security* 31, no. 1 (2022): pp. 14-15,

⁶ United Nations Security Council, “Security Council, 78th Year : 9312th Meeting, Thursday, 27 April 2023, New York,” United Nations Digital Library, 2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4010384?ln=en&v=pdf>, p. 21.

⁷ Vuk Vuksanovic, Srdjan Cvijic, and Maksim Samorukov, “Beyond Sputnik and RT: How Does Russian Soft Power in Serbia Really Work?” (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, December 2022), <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/beyond-sputnik-and-rt-how-does-russian-soft-power-in-serbia-really-work/>, pp. 10 and 13.

⁸ Sophie Eisentraut and Stephanie de Leon, “Propaganda and Disinformation in the Western Balkans” (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, March 2018), <https://www.kas.de/be/analysen-und-argumente/detail/-/content/propaganda-and-disinformation-in-the-western-balkans-how-the-eu-can-counter-russia-s-information-war>, p. 3.

⁹ Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, “Russia’s Game in the Balkans,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 6, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/02/russias-game-in-the-balkans?lang=e>, p. 8.; Vuksanovic, Cvijic, and Samorukov, “Beyond Sputnik and RT”, p. 10.

¹⁰ Stronski and Himes, “Russia’s Game in the Balkans”, p. 8.

¹¹ Asya Metodieva, “Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans” (Washington DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2019), <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russian%2520Narrative%2520Proxies%2520in%2520Balkans.pdf>, p. 14.

¹² Xhorxhina Bami, “Social Media Disinformation Spreads Panic about Kosovo-Serbia ‘War,’” *Balkan Insight*, August 1, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/01/social-media-disinformation-spreads-panic-about-kosovo-serbia-war/>.

parishes in Kosovo and is vocal on issues in politics and culture, with ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, which is broadly supportive of Russian foreign policy.¹³ Indeed, Moscow has donated funds for reparations to damaged Serb Orthodox churches in Kosovo, building its image as the ‘protector’ of this religious and ethnic identity.¹⁴

Third, Russian investment in Serbia’s energy sector and Serbia’s reliance on Russia for natural gas gives the Kremlin important sources of leverage to ensure that Serbian foreign policy does not overly contradict Russian interests. For instance, in 2008, just a few months after Kosovo declared independence, Russian energy giant Gazprom and its subsidiary Gazprom Neft paid €400 million for a majority stake in Serbia’s largest oil and gas company, Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), with a later Deloitte assessment finding that the “fair market value” of this stake was around €1.12 billion.¹⁵ The timing of the deal, and the below-market-value price paid, were interpreted by analysts as Serbia repaying Russia for its support of the non-recognition of Kosovo.¹⁶ Serbia is also involved with Russian energy through TurkStream, a pipeline completed in 2018 that reduces reliance on Ukraine for natural gas, sending gas in two branches from Russia, one to Turkey and the other to Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary. Underlining the implicit or explicit linkage, Serbia’s inclusion in the project was, as Bechev notes, agreed at a meeting between Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Russian President Vladimir Putin in which Kosovo was also on the agenda.¹⁷

The economic significance of Russia for Serbia is a large factor in pro-Russian narratives in Serbia, but this might be overstated. These ties have so far survived international sanctions from the war in Ukraine – Vučić signed a three-year contract for Gazprom to continue to supply gas to Serbia with Putin a few months after the invasion – but Serbia has pursued greater diversification in its energy suppliers, including a recent gas deal with Azerbaijan.¹⁸ Moreover, a recent assessment by Serbia’s statistical office puts Russia outside the top five countries in terms of total share of imports or exports with Serbia.¹⁹ Therefore, Russia’s UNSC veto and soft power methods have become more significant for its leverage in Serbia.

Fourth, some analysts also point to the potential direct involvement of Russia in Serbia’s intelligence and security services and in northern Kosovo. In this regard, some observers focus attention on the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre, which opened in 2012 in the Serbian city of Niš. Both Russia and Serbia maintain that the centre’s sole purpose is to provide for emergency relief operations in

¹³ Dimitar Bechev, “Russia’s Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans” (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019), p. 22.; Zweers, Drost, and Henry, “Little Substance, Considerable Impact”, p. 21.

¹⁴ Ritsa Panagiotou, “The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union : Perceptions, Reality, and Impact on Enlargement,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 29, no. 2 (July 2020): p. 224.

¹⁵ Radio Slobodna Evropa, “Serbian Oil and Gas Privatization: Investigation Promised,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, August 19, 2014, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/serbia-oil-and-gas-privatization-investigation-promised/26539837.html>.

¹⁶ Stronski and Himes, “Russia’s Game in the Balkans”, p. 5.

¹⁷ Bechev, “Russia’s Strategic Interest and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans”, p. 3.

¹⁸ Reuters, “Serbia’s Vucic Says He Agreed a Three-Year Gas Supply Contract with Putin,” *Reuters*, May 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbias-vucic-says-agreed-3-year-gas-supply-contract-with-putin-2022-05-29/>; Dimitar Bechev, “Russia’s Energy Clout in the Balkans Is on Borrowed Time,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 1, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/12/russias-energy-clout-in-the-balkans-is-on-borrowed-time?lang=en>.

¹⁹ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, “International Trade in Goods,” www.stat.gov.rs, August 30, 2024, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/oblasti/spoljna-trgovina/spoljnotrgovinski-robni-promet/>.

Serbia. Indeed, during the Coronavirus pandemic, the centre donated thousands of pieces of protective equipment to Serbia.²⁰ However, some Western diplomatic circles claim that the centre serves a dual purpose as an intelligence outpost.²¹ One interviewee strongly agreed with this assessment, referring to the centre as a “military base” and further claiming Russian involvement in September 2023 when thirty Serb paramilitaries faced off against Kosovo police in the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo.²² The circumstances surrounding this remain unclear and little concrete evidence is publicly available. Nevertheless, Stronski and Himes argue that no matter the facility’s purpose, it “gives Moscow a potential collection and operational platform to monitor events in Serbia and (...) Kosovo”, although so far Serbia has refused to grant the facility diplomatic status.²³

Russia thus has a wide range of potential means of influence over the course of the Serbia-Kosovo issue, most of them indirectly through influence in Serbia and on the population of north Kosovo. But this does not mean that Russia is all-powerful, that it always has its way, or that developments always align with Russia’s preferences. Indeed, many analysts argue that Russia’s influence in the Western Balkans is “overstated” and some even refer to Russia as a “bogeyman”.²⁴

Why does Russia get involved?

Russia is involved in the Serbia-Kosovo dispute for three key reasons.

Most importantly, in maintaining influence over the dispute’s resolution, Moscow seeks to counter further EU and, particularly, NATO expansion of influence in the Western Balkans. Indeed, Panagiotou argues that Russia only became strongly opposed to EU accession in the Balkans once this process seemed connected to eventual NATO accession.²⁵ Some scholars have argued in the past that Russia sought to provide an alternative to the EU economically or as a mediator.²⁶ However, particularly since the war in Ukraine, many see Russia as a “spoiler” in the Balkans, as it seeks to prevent steps that would lead to the integration of among others, Serbia and Kosovo into both organisations and counter

²⁰ Vuk Vuksanovic, “From Russia with Love?: Serbia’s Lukewarm Reception of Russian Aid and Its Geopolitical Implications,” *JSTOR* (London: LSE Ideas, June 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep45283>, p. 4.

²¹ Maja Zivanovic, “EU Denies Funding Humanitarian Centre in Serbia,” *Balkan Insight*, July 6, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/07/06/eu-usa-opening-humanitarian-centre-in-serbia-media-07-06-2017/>; Metodieva, “Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans”, p. 4.; Zweers, Drost, and Henry, “Little Substance, Considerable Impact”, p. 36.

²² Interview with researcher, Pristina, June 27, 2024.

²³ Stronski and Himes, “Russia’s Game in the Balkans”, pp. 14-15.

²⁴ Vuk Vuksanovic, “Russia in the Balkans: Interests and Instruments,” in *Europe and Russia on the Balkan Front*, ed. Giorgio Fruscione (Milan: Ledizioni, 2023), p. 32.; Interview with international official, Pristina, June 27, 2024.; Interview with journalist, online, June 26, 2024.; Florian Bieber, “A ‘Zeitenwende’ in the Balkans after the Russian Attack on Ukraine?,” in *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, ed. Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Fiesole: European University Institute, 2023), 30–38, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/7552>, p. 33.; Bojan Elek and Maja Bjeloš, “Is Kosovo a Fuse for the Balkan Powder Keg?,” in *Europe and Russia on the Balkan Front*, ed. Giorgio Fruscione (Milan: Ledizioni, 2023), p. 92.

²⁵ Panagiotou, “The Western Balkans between Russia and the European Union”, p. 222.

²⁶ Vsevolod Samokhvalov, “Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response,” *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 2 (2019): 189–210, <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2019212.12>, p. 201.; Metodieva, “Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans”, p. 19.

Western agendas therein.²⁷ Others put this more simply, as a ‘tit-for-tat’ strategy with the EU, especially in the light of its ‘meddling’ in Russia’s ‘backyard’ by opening EU accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and giving candidate status to Georgia.²⁸ No matter how this argument is formulated, it is clear that maintaining the status quo – with the Kosovo dispute effectively ‘frozen’ – keeps a barrier to either side pursuing further Euro-Atlantic integration, and for Russia has the added benefit of pulling some of the West’s focus and resources away from Ukraine and other conflicts Russia is involved in.

Second, Russia seeks to prevent the legitimisation of the 1999 NATO intervention and the ‘Kosovo precedent’. In theory, for Russia, recognition of Kosovo’s independence would set a precedent for separatist movements within Russia, such as in Chechnya, to do the same.²⁹ In practice, such concerns have not stopped Putin from citing the Kosovo precedent himself to justify several independence moves, including the recognition of breakaway provinces Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia (2008), the annexation of Crimea (2014), and most recently his recognition of the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk from Ukraine (2022).³⁰ On Crimea, Putin has even painted Russia’s action as an attempt to prevent a Yugoslav-style situation from occurring.³¹ Thus, while the Serbia-Kosovo dispute remains unresolved, Putin is able to use Western justifications surrounding Kosovo and Yugoslavia generally to support his own actions when it suits, while condemning the West’s history of ‘overstepping’ when it does not.

Third, since the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow’s relationship with Belgrade provides it with a symbol both domestically and internationally that Russia is not completely isolated in Europe.³² Within Russia, Putin has historically used foreign policy moves to gain popularity and legitimacy.³³ Outside of Russia, Putin must convince the West that Russian influence over Serbia is strong enough that any agreement would require Moscow’s approval – and thus ensure that Russia would secure something in return for readiness on its part to drop its objection to the recognition of Kosovo – most likely in the post-Soviet space where Putin’s main interests lie.³⁴ In the meantime, Russia plays it safe to keep its options open on Serbia-Kosovo, asserting that it will accept any agreement also accepted by Serbia, while also stating that it must be involved in any mediation of an agreement.³⁵ This helps ensure that Serbia’s approach is consistent with the Kremlin’s interests.

²⁷ Bechev, “Russia’s Strategic Interest and Tools of influence in the Western Balkans”, p. 3.; Maksim Samorukov, “Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties after the War in Ukraine” (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, April 2023), <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/surviving-the-war-russia-western-balkan-ties-after-the-war-in-ukraine>, p. 9.; Vuksanovic, “Russia in the Balkans,” p. 36.; Zweers, Drost, and Henry, “Little Substance, Considerable Impact”, p. 13.; Paul Stronski, “Russia in the Balkans after Ukraine: A Troubling Actor,” Carnegie Politika (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2022/09/russia-in-the-balkans-after-ukraine-a-troubling-actor?lang=en>; Interview with researcher, online, August 8, 2024.

²⁸ Interview with journalist, online, June 26, 2024.; Zweers, Drost, and Henry, “Little Substance, Considerable Impact Russian Influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro”, p. 13.

²⁹ Maria Giulia Amadio Viceré, “The Future Is Back: The EU, Russia and the Kosovo-Serbia Dispute” (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2019), <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip1919.pdf>, p. 3.

³⁰ Valur Ingimundarson, “The ‘Kosovo Precedent’: Russia’s Justification of Military Interventions and Territorial Revisions in Georgia and Ukraine,” *JSTOR* (London: LSE Ideas, 2022), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep45248>.

³¹ Maxim Samorukov, “Why Is Russia Hooked on the Kosovo Conflict?,” *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 59, no. 2 (February 2019): p. 68.

³² Samorukov, “Surviving the War”, p. 5.

³³ Viceré, “The Future Is Back”, pp. 8-9.

³⁴ Vuksanovic, “Russia in the Balkans,” pp. 35-36.

³⁵ Samorukov, “Surviving the War”, p. 11.

How are local actors reacting to Russian involvement?

Serbia and Kosovo unsurprisingly have vastly differing reactions to Russian involvement. However, their positions are not static and have become more nuanced since the war in Ukraine.

Within the Serb population, Russia is generally viewed quite favourably. Interestingly, when asked in a poll by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy whether Serbia should impose sanctions on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, 44.1% said no because Serbia also lived under sanctions during the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, 24.3% said no because Russia is Serbia's "greatest friend", while 11.8% said no because of Russia's support on Kosovo.³⁶ Moreover, the vast majority of those who saw the war in Ukraine as the West's or Kyiv's fault (and not Russia's) saw Kosovo as a key foreign policy priority.³⁷ These statistics reflect the reality for Moscow when it comes to attracting Serbian support: it is in a sense 'pushing at an open door', especially given increasing disenchantment with the West – a poll in 2018 found that 66% of Serbia's population did not think that Serbia would accede to the EU before 2030, if ever.³⁸ And herein lies the key: the "popularity of Russia in the Serbian public is not based on what Russia is, but what it isn't – the West."³⁹ Indeed, with regards to Kosovo, it is memories of Western treatment from the 1990s onwards that are a highly significant factor in explaining current support for Russia in Serbia.

The reality of Serbia's relations with Russia takes on a more complex character when we focus on Serbia's political leadership. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić stated in an interview three days before the invasion of Ukraine: "That is why our position is so difficult: Serbia has embarked on the European path, Serbia has always supported Ukraine's integrity, but on the other hand, some eighty-five percent of people will always side with Russia whatever may happen."⁴⁰ Vučić's foreign policy since the invasion of Ukraine reflects this reality. On the one hand, Serbia is one of the only European states not to introduce international sanctions on Russia and which maintains economic and diplomatic ties with Russia. On the other hand, Serbia joined a UN resolution condemning Russian infringement of Ukrainian territorial integrity and approximately €800 million in Serbian ammunition has gone to Ukraine via third parties.⁴¹ The invasion itself has shown Vučić that Russia is an unreliable partner, as its recognition of the Donbas threatens to undermine Serbia's position on Kosovo. Yet his domestic popularity is strongly tied to good relations with Russia. This manifests itself in a broader balancing act by Serbia between Russia, the West,

³⁶ Vuk Vuksanovic, Luka Steric, and Maja Bjelos, "Public Perception of Serbian Foreign Policy in the Midst of the War in Ukraine" (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, December 2022), https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/WBSB-2022_Serbia-Report-1_Dec-2022_%281%29.pdf, p. 7.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁸ Interview with journalist, online, June 26, 2024.; Beáta Huszka, "The Power of Perspective: Why EU Membership Still Matters in the Western Balkans," *JSTOR* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21645?seq=3>, p. 6.

³⁹ Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, "After the Beginning of a War in Ukraine, Citizens of Serbia Still Have Positive Attitudes towards Russia", *bezbednost.org*, December 15, 2022, <https://bezbednost.org/en/after-the-beginning-of-a-war-in-ukraine-citizens-of-serbia-still-have-positive-attitudes-towards-russia/>.

⁴⁰ Russia News Agency, "85% of Serbians Will Always Support Russia Whatever May Happen - President Vucic," TASS, February 21, 2022, <https://tass.com/world/1407763>.

⁴¹ Milica Stojanovic, "Serbia Backs UN Resolution Condemning Russian Attack on Ukraine," *Balkan Insight*, March 2, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/02/serbia-backs-un-resolution-condemning-russian-attack-on-ukraine/>; Alec Russell and Marton Dunai, "Serbia Turns Blind Eye to Its Ammunition Ending up in Ukraine," *Financial Times*, June 22, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/136ed721-fd50-4815-8314-d9df8dc67fd6>.

and China, as it “stand[s] on three chairs”.⁴² Indeed, in recent years Vučić has increasingly cultivated a stronger relationship with Beijing, which offers economic investment, a UNSC veto on Kosovo, and is more reliable in its behaviour. Therefore, it is incorrect to assume that Vučić and local Serb politicians are ‘Russian puppets’. Instead, local leaders are concerned with instrumentalising Russian support or the potential of Russian support both to gain legitimacy within their electorate (where pro-Russian sentiment is common) and to increase their own bargaining power with the West, which is perhaps best described as “influence by invitation”.⁴³ Thus, while their objectives may sometimes overlap, each pursues their own interests, sometimes to the detriment of the other.

Attitudes in Kosovo itself differ as well. Pristina and the ethnically Albanian majority of Kosovo (excluding northern Kosovo) have very limited contact with or leverage over Russia. Russian scholars Arlyapova and Ponomareva point out that to many in Russia and Serbia, Kosovo is viewed as a vehicle for American interests, as it has since 1999 been a close ally of Washington, pursuing a path towards greater integration into Euro-Atlantic organisations.⁴⁴ But here too, local actors in Kosovo pursue their own interests, even if they do not necessarily align with the West. In particular, Kosovo’s government under Prime Minister Albin Kurti has taken several steps in 2024 to assert greater control over northern Kosovo, moves which have been criticised by the US and the EU.⁴⁵ However, even with Western backing, Pristina’s path to the EU still must go through Belgrade, and by extension Moscow (so long as anti-Western sentiment remains strong in Serbia and local leaders can benefit from holding pro-Russian stances).

On the other hand, northern Kosovo faces the reality of being caught between the governments of both Kosovo and Serbia, who both claim it, while its population endures living standards below those of either side. While the EU is the main source of international funding to northern Kosovo, the Serbs there see Russia as the protector of their interests against Kurti and the Kosovo government. But this may be slowly changing: a survey in 2023 found that 56.9% of Kosovo Serbs see Russia as the best defender of their interests internationally, down from 64.3% in 2022.⁴⁶ One interviewee mentioned that inhabitants of northern Kosovo are apathetic to international involvement in general given a lack of change in their situation, while another noted an increasing awareness amongst Kosovo Serbs that Russia pursues its own interests with regard to Kosovo.⁴⁷ Thus, it seems that despite the historic support Russia has enjoyed in this region, it is being increasingly realised that Moscow might not be as good of a friend as it is often portrayed.

⁴² Interview with Researcher, Pristina, June 27, 2024.

⁴³ Filip Ejodus, interview by Jeta Loshaj, October 10, 2023, in Jeta Loshaj, *Between Continuity and Change: Russian Influence and Security Challenges in the Western Balkans since Russia’s Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine* (Kosovo: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, January 2024), p. 21.

⁴⁴ Elena S. Arlyapova and Elena G. Ponomareva, “Cracks and Fault Lines: Foreign Policy Orientations of Western Balkan Capitals in the Context of the Ukrainian Crisis,” *MGIMO Review of International Relations* 16, no. 3 (April 2023): 153–79, <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2023-3-90-153-179>, (translated by myself), p. 170.

⁴⁵ RFE/RL’s Balkan Service, “U.S., EU Criticize Kosovo’s ‘Uncoordinated’ Moves in Serb Areas,”

RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, May 21, 2024,

<https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbs-us-eu-reaction-dinar-dialogue/32957814.html>; Guardian staff reporter,

“Protest from US after Kosovo Closes Serbian Offices” (The Guardian, August 31, 2024),

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/31/protest-from-us-after-kosovo-closes-serbian-offices>.

⁴⁶ Stefan Surlić, “Trend Analysis: Attitudes of Serb Community in Kosovo” (NGO Aktiv, December 2023), <https://ngoaktiv.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Analiza-trendova-2023-eng-1.pdf>, p. 29.

⁴⁷ Interview with NGO worker, Mitrovica July 2, 2024.; Interview with researcher, Mitrovica, June 27, 2024.

What impact does this have on the Serbia-Kosovo dispute?

We must therefore ask ourselves, how does Russian influence (mainly on Serbia and northern Kosovo) affect the Serbia-Kosovo dispute and the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, especially today in the light of the war in Ukraine?

Writing in 2023, Panagiotou saw two different potential interpretations of the effect of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the resolution of EU accession, a key end goal of the Serbia-Kosovo process. The 'positive' interpretation is that Ukraine has woken up the West and in particular the EU, to the need for further EU accession in the Balkans, such as in its conferring of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in late 2022 and its opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, all states on the periphery of the dispute.⁴⁸ This vision would encourage the EU to redouble its efforts in reaching a deal on normalisation between Pristina and Belgrade, significantly undermining Russian influence in Serbia via the dispute.

On the flip side, the 'negative' interpretation sees that EU accession prospects will become collateral damage of the war in Ukraine.⁴⁹ This process would be 'put on ice' in the Balkans as the international community focuses on Ukraine, echoing a belief among Western officials in the past that the West should turn away from Kosovo to more pressing concerns as the dispute had stabilised.⁵⁰

The progress of the peace process since then seems to more closely reflect the latter; the stalling of the EU-mediated dialogue has maintained the status quo. Many interviewees pointed to the lack of political will from both sides to implement a deal.⁵¹ At the most recent round of EU-facilitated talks in Brussels in June 2024, Vučić and Kurti did not meet face-to-face, with Kurti refusing to come to the negotiating table until Serbia fulfils three preconditions – preconditions Vučić is unlikely to accept.⁵² For his part, Vučić is highly reluctant to be bound by any agreement without full assurance that it will be supported domestically in Serbia and internationally by Russia. He backtracked his agreement to an initial document in the leadup to the Ohrid talks in 2023 following condemnation by the far-right in Serbia, and ultimately did not sign the Ohrid Agreement itself.⁵³ This lack of progress is also interpreted as an issue of 'sequencing' – neither side wants to be the first to implement changes.⁵⁴ Either way, there is not much optimism for swift progress.

The war in Ukraine has so far had a minimal impact on the peace process.

With regard to Russia, the war has somewhat reduced its involvement in the Serbian economy and discredited it as a potential mediator in the peace process.⁵⁵ However, Moscow's popularity in Serbia is still strong enough that Vučić cannot discount its importance. Speculation that Vučić would find it

⁴⁸ Ritsa Panagiotou, "The Impact of the Ukraine War on the Western Balkans: What Is at Stake?," in *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics* (Fiesole: European University Institute, 2023), 165–75, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/75524/OM-03-23-131-EN-N.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, pp. 168-169.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁰ Davies, "A 'Hybrid Offensive' in the Balkans?," p. 13.

⁵¹ Interview with journalist, online, June 26, 2024.; Interview with researcher, Pristina, June 27, 2024.; Interview with NGO worker, Mitrovica, July 1, 2024.

⁵² Xhorxhina Bami and Milica Stojanovic, "Serbia's Vucic, Kosovo's Kurti Fail to Meet after 'Preconditions' Disagreement," *Balkan Insight*, June 26, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/06/26/serbias-vucic-kosovos-kurti-fail-to-meet-after-preconditions-disagreement>.

⁵³ DW, "EU Says Serbia, Kosovo Stop Short of Deal to Normalize Ties," *DW*, March 19, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-says-serbia-kosovo-stop-short-of-deal-to-normalize-ties/a-65038453>.

⁵⁴ Interview with international official, Pristina, June 26, 2024.; Interview with researcher, Pristina, June 27, 2024.

⁵⁵ Zweers, Drost, and Henry, "Little Substance, Considerable Impact", p. 46.; Samorukov, "Surviving the War", p. 9.

harder to walk a tightrope between the West and Russia seems to have been proven wrong for now, as the EU and the US have been more sympathetic to Serbian stances since the war, especially in light of its ammunition ending up in Ukraine and the potential opening of what would be the largest lithium mine in Europe in Serbia (a key component for electric vehicle batteries), while Kosovo claims that the EU is applying double-standards against it.⁵⁶ However, as this essay was being finalised, French President Emmanuel Macron warned Serbia, at the signing of a deal to purchase 12 Rafale fighter jets from France, that its “balancing game” is an “illusion”.⁵⁷

And despite Russia losing any credibility as a potential intermediary in the dialogue, some interviewees criticised the EU’s inability to hold parties to their commitments and to deliver on their promises, such as the significant delay in visa liberalisation for Kosovo to Schengen countries.⁵⁸ Such perceptions allow Moscow to focus fewer resources on the Western Balkans. In the meantime, Russia can hedge its bets by maintaining a very strong anti-recognition stance, as Vučić cannot afford to be seen domestically as less concerned with Serbia’s territorial integrity than Moscow.⁵⁹

Thus, while both Serbia and Kosovo pursue their own interests, their future is still heavily dependent on outside players for the resolution of their dispute. Belgrade and Pristina’s paths to EU accession and Pristina’s path to UN recognition require full normalisation between both sides, and for now will need to go through Moscow as well.

Conclusion

Ultimately, while the war in Ukraine put a question mark over continued Russian influence in the Serbia-Kosovo dispute, its role has not changed significantly. Moscow has become more reliant on soft power as a tool of involvement – using the media and diplomacy to entrench the image among Serbs of Russia as the protector of the Slavic-Orthodox identity – as international sanctions have somewhat decreased its presence in the Serbian energy sector. Aside from getting involved to preserve its geostrategic interests, or to at least undermine the West’s, Putin has also increasingly relied on its relationship with Serbia to show both the Russian people and foreign partners that Russia is not alone in Europe. Serbia’s population has historically supported Russia and Kosovo Serbs view it as a protector of the Slav-Orthodox identity, but this image has been hurt by Russia’s undermining of the Kosovo precedent. This argument holds little sway with Serbian leaders whose dealings with Russia are better characterised as mutually beneficial cooperation, where each side pursues its own interests even if they don’t align with the other’s. Indeed, Belgrade has increasingly hedged its bets by growing its ties with

⁵⁶ Florian Bieber, “Serbia’s Staged Balancing Act,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (Georgetown University, August 7, 2023), <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/08/07/serbias-staged-balancing-act/>; Milica Stojanovic, “European Union Agrees Controversial Lithium Mining Project with Serbia,” *Balkan Insight*, June 19, 2024,

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/07/19/european-union-agrees-controversial-lithium-mining-project-with-serbia/>;

Interview with researcher, Mitrovica, June 27, 2024.; Interview with journalist, online, July 3, 2024.

⁵⁷ Euronews with AP, “Serbia Inks €2.7bn Deal with France for 12 Rafale Fighter Jets,” *Euronews*, August 30, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/08/30/serbia-inks-27bln-deal-with-france-for-12-rafale-fighter-jets-in-move-away-from-russia>.

⁵⁸ Interview with NGO worker, Mitrovica, July 1, 2024.; Interview with journalist, online, July 3, 2024.

⁵⁹ Vuksanovic, Cvijic, and Samorukov, “Beyond Sputnik and RT”, p. 9.

China, an alternative for the Kosovo issue if Russia is to fall behind. Thus, while Serb politicians can continue to garner popular support through their links with Russia and Moscow does not strike a bargain with the West in exchange for recognising Kosovo, Moscow will continue to act as a spoiler, and the resolution of the remaining issues in the dispute remains unlikely.

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