The spillover effects of Ukraine crisis in Western Balkans: How can Kosovo push through the Dialogue with Serbia?

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THE SPILLOVER EFFECTS OF UKRAINE CRISIS IN WESTERN BALKANS: HOW CAN KOSOVO PUSH THROUGH THE DIALOGUE WITH SERBIA?

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A little bit over two months have passed since Russia initiated an unprovoked attack on the sovereign country of Ukraine. The international system and the world, in general, were shocked by this Russian invasion. On the 24th of February 2022, Europe woke up to a different geopolitical reality. Consequently, a more uncertain and unpredictable situation arose throughout the European countries and, an unprecedented development for the modern times. In response to the crisis, the Western countries allied against Russia by imputing economic sanctions and in providing military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Yet, the war continues, and Russia is resisting despite the Western’s response.

The implications of the Ukraine war vary from security to economy, and Europe is the one to face them the most. The problem unveiled the tremendous reliability of Europe on the energy, gas and oil resources of Russia, many trade exchanges in the manufacturing and other branches, adding to that the Russian influence on different countries of the region through political, economic, and security means.

In this vein, Western Balkans remains a pure example of how Russia has gained the sphere of influence from the West in several countries. Due to political patronage, state capture, and authoritarianism, the efforts of Western Balkans countries to join the European Union (hereinafter EU) were not sufficient, and the EU, on the other hand, failed to enhance the enlargement process. However, this is not the case for Kosovo and Albania, which fall into the West's extensive influence.

Currently, the Russian influence in the region remains robust. Russia's economic impact and investments have been focused on energy and have capitalized on systems of party patronage. Also, Russia has strengthened its military ties with Serbia by selling weapons, air defense, and planes. Through its orthodox faith, Russia has imposed soft power on other countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro and has constantly opposed the independence of Kosovo. In Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro, segments of political structures demonstrated close ties with Russian leadership, and those ties are a matter of their political survival.

Regarding Kosovo – Serbia dialogue, Russia's position against Kosovo undermines the process for normalization of relations. Russia sees the Western Balkans as a buffer zone where it can preserve its influence. In Bosnia, Russian leadership maintains close ties with Milorad Dodik, the president of the Serbian Republic of Bosnia. In Montenegro, Russian intelligence FSB and GRU operatives were among those arrested for a failed coup attempt in 2016, projected to stop Montenegro's accession to North Atlantic Treaty Organization- NATO. Thus, Russia has demonstrated in all these cases that it has the potential to destabilize the region.

Furthermore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated the cleavages between pro-Western and pro-Russian voices in the Balkans. NATO members such as Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Croatia fell quickly in line with EU sanctions. As a highly pro-western country and NATO aspirant, Kosovo followed the line of the EU. On the other hand, Serbia and Bosnia refused to join sanctions against Russia. In both countries, the influence of Russia is still skyrocketing in these times of crisis, and the fear that the war in Ukraine could
breed instability in Bosnia is high. Likewise, potential for instability is accurate in Kosovo, with the interference of Serbia in the northern part of Kosovo. In Montenegro, the former government is highly pro-Russian, which risks destabilization.

**Is there a new opportunity for Kosovo in the Dialogue?**

Kosovo has been part of the normalization of relations dialogue with Serbia since 2011. Kosovo joined the Dialogue by trumpeting Western values and claiming its orientation toward the geopolitical sphere of the West. However, the Ukraine war has heightened concerns over Kosovo's security, while the Dialogue is at a standstill. In response to the new situation, Kosovo's leaders have been vocal in their calls for a faster path toward NATO membership and a permanent NATO base. In addition, Kosovo has pledged to bring defense spending up to 2% of the GDP and, in light of the current developments, even established a 'security fund' where citizens can directly contribute to the armed forces. These steps unveil the potential for escalation in Kosovo due to the solid ties Serbia maintains with Russia. Therefore, the measures from Government of Kosovo are on the line with NATO members and European countries.

Given the current situation, Kosovo holds a favorable position in the international arena with unconditional support for the West's actions against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, Serbia is sandwiched between the pressure of the West to maintain a position in line with the EU and, on the other, maintaining strong ties with Russia due to its historical and ideological background. Yet, Serbia has not been challenged to choose one over the other; however, the pressure is accurate. To date, no sanctions were imposed by the Serbian government, nor are they expected.

In this realm, Kosovo's government enjoys some genuine opportunities to enhance its position in the international arena and push forward in the Dialogue with Serbia. The annexation of Ukraine exposed that when countries construct their state boundaries as temporary ones (as Russia and Serbia see them), the risk for escalation to an armed conflict is permanently high. Moreover, the crisis exposed the vast influence of Russian politics in the Western Balkans region, reinforcing the urge for the Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia to conclude with an overarching agreement that would ease the tensions and secure the EU perspective of both countries.

Given this complex situation, the only solution is mutual recognition, as it always was. Any other modality does not ensure normal relations between the two nor provides stability for the region. The crisis in Ukraine could serve as an example of how controversial scenarios like border rearrangements and mono-ethnic association of municipalities are not solutions for the Kosovo – Serbia dialogue, per se. Thus, Kosovo's government should be proactive in hastening the process and framing it towards recognition. The status quo is not in favor of Kosovo; therefore, proactive engagement with the EU, the United States, and the United Kingdom are crucial to exploring final agreement possibilities. The volatile political situation in the Balkans requires immediate action. In this context, the EU and the United States need to double their efforts to avoid further possible destabilization in the Balkans. The EU and NATO should assist the Western Balkans countries in preventing the malign Russian influence in the region.
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