

Kosovo-Serbia by 2027: Four Most Likely Scenarios

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ABOUT THE DOCUMENT

Kosovo-Serbia by 2027: Four Most Likely Scenarios is a result of several brainstorming exercises by 13 policy experts and civil society activists from Kosovo and Serbia. These scenarios were drafted without prejudice by participants from Serbia and Kosovo - Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs - and serve as a document on how they view the current state of affairs. Their purpose is to predict a potential future of Kosovo-Serbia relations and thus provoke a debate on the key assumptions necessary to bring those relations to the best possible place and warn of those that would lead them in the opposite direction.

The document was written and edited during four separate brainstorming sessions organized in April and May 2022, during which the need to advocate against the status quo became the main feeling in the room. Some participants also expressed disappointment that no scenario, including unconditional recognition of Kosovo by Serbia, was considered realistic. The border change scenario was considered impossible during the first brainstorming session when only three scenarios were considered the most plausible but became unavoidable as discussions progressed.

The document is written as a part of the National Endowment for Democracy-funded project that intends to improve the implementation of the Brussels agreements by proposing new approaches, including new topics, involving new actors, and developing alternative public policies for further improvements in the process of normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia.

INTRODUCTION

A group of 13 keen political analysts from Kosovo and Serbia, brought together by the New Social Initiative, a Kosovo-based non-governmental organization, developed four scenarios in April 2022 about a potential peace agreement by 2027 between Kosovo and Serbia: 1) *Peace Without Recognition*, 2) *Seesawing Stalemate*, 3) *Uncharted Waters*, and 4) *Border Adjustment with Recognition*. The outcomes of the scenarios are based on several assumptions, drivers and policy shifts, and actions forecasted to be undertaken during the five years by the four main stakeholders in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue—Serbia, Kosovo, the EU, and the US. **A key driver of all scenarios is the scope and scale of the EU and US engagement.** The stronger the transatlantic engagement, the better the nature of a solution, while on the other hand, minimal engagement produces minimal results. International disengagement leads to the eruption of small-scale violence in Kosovo's Serb-majority north and along the Kosovo-Serbia border. If left unattended, the small-scale conflict would quickly escalate into full-scale violence that could turn either into a protracted conflict or peace talks and a subsequent agreement.

The scenarios foresee no role for Russia and China in an eventual peace process.

SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE SCENARIOS

SCENARIO A, PEACE WITHOUT RECOGNITION,

foresees the resolution of the Kosovo-Serbia dispute through a peace agreement whereby Serbia relinquishes its claim on Kosovo—a de facto recognition—and Kosovo offers additional safeguards for its Serb community. This solution would balance Kosovo’s outright recognition demand and Serbia’s de jure recognition sensitivity. Though the benefits of the agreement would not be easily measurable, at least not in immediate and quantifiable ways, the publics, as well as the core constituencies of Serbia’s and Kosovo’s governing parties, would support it, making it easier for the governments to implement it in conformity with the agreed terms and timeframes. The US’s and the EU’s determination, primarily driven by geopolitical and security interests, to pacify the region is the key driver for peace. In this scenario, Washington and Brussels upgrade their roles in the Kosovo-Serbia dispute from facilitators of talks to mediators and, if necessary, arbitrators and guarantors of an eventual peace agreement. This is one of the likely scenarios.

SCENARIO B, SEESAWING STALEMATE,

foresees that Kosovo and Serbia preserve the decade-long seesawing stalemate—going back and forth between gains and setbacks—that they settled into soon after the Brussels agreement in 2013. The parties would continue participating in the Brussels dialogue, maintaining a semblance of normalcy, but with unimpressive results. They may reach new agreements or upgrade old agreements every six months or so but would also just as frequently suffer further setbacks. In this scenario, peace between Serbia and Kosovo would be preserved, but domestic economic and political prospects would deteriorate, and a final peace agreement becomes an increasingly distant prospect. Serbia’s chances for EU membership and Kosovo’s prospects for advancing its statehood internationally would suffer substantially. This is another likely scenario but would become unsustainable by, or soon after, 2027.

SCENARIO C, UNCHARTED WATERS,

foresees a stall in the Dialogue, disowning the Brussels agreements, and return to sporadic hostilities, including armed ones, which could have devastating consequences and turn into a large-scale conflict. This scenario is the most unpredictable one, with three, all bad, possible directions or mini-scenarios: a) controlled violence, b) uncontrolled violence that could lead to full-scale and protracted conflict, and c) what begins as low-scale violence quickly escalates into a full-scale conflict that prompts strong EU and US intervention which leads to a peace agreement, either negotiated or imposed. This is a less likely but plausible, frightening scenario.

SCENARIO D, BORDER ADJUSTMENT WITH RECOGNITION,

foresees that the parties have unsuccessfully exhausted all efforts to reach peace. The key assumption for success in this scenario is consensus among all parties on border adjustment, which makes the scenario less likely. It assumes that the people in Kosovo want a solution and have become more willing to a compromise involving territory. Serbia prefers this option and can guarantee that it will recognize Kosovo in exchange, thus concluding the Serbia-Kosovo conflict once and for all. The US and the EU, including EU’s skeptic members, exhausted by the two-decade-long peace management operations and encouraged by Kosovo’s and Serbia’s commitment not to seek further border changes in the region, facilitate such a process and support a ‘border change’ deal. This scenario includes a determination by other countries in the Western Balkan region to support the deal and acknowledge that this is the region’s last ‘border adjustment.’ This is the least likely scenario, but it could become a reality with the right preconditions in place.

Scenario A:

Peace Without Recognition



SCENARIO A: PEACE WITHOUT RECOGNITION

The path to this scenario is complicated but feasible. It assumes that the EU and the US undertake bolder efforts to address the remaining security risks in Europe's backyard, focusing on the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. It is ambitious but also rational to expect the US and the EU to include the Kosovo-Serbia dispute in their evolving transatlantic security strategy in light of Russia's rogue behavior and close this lingering, two-decade-long dispute in Europe.

Since the EU lacks the internal policy cohesion on the Kosovo-Serbia dispute needed for leading an effective negotiation process, the US, under this scenario, would play an increasingly determining role, largely behind the scenes, in mediating and arbitrating a solution.

The EU, though, would remain the official convener of the talks.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ELEMENTS

- Serbia relinquishes its claim on Kosovo through a legally binding agreement whereby it recognizes all of Kosovo's institutions and documents, stops the de-recognition campaign, and does not oppose Kosovo's membership in international organizations.
- Kosovo forms the Association/Community of the Serb-Majority Municipalities (A/CSM) in a way that satisfies the Serb community in Kosovo, Belgrade, and the 2016 Constitutional Court's interpretation of the 2015 Agreement on the principles of the A/CSM. Furthermore, Kosovo offers additional safeguards for the Serb cultural and religious heritage sights. The Serb community also fully integrates into Kosovo's political and economic system.

- Serbia closes Chapter 35—which essentially conditions Serbia's EU membership aspirations with a comprehensive normalization agreement with Kosovo—and benefits from the EU's pre-accession mechanisms, substantially improving its prospect for EU membership.
- Serbia increasingly aligns with the EU's foreign policy on Russia, including imposing some sanctions—even though the Serbian sentiment remains largely critical of the West—as Russia's President Vladimir Putin becomes increasingly isolated and unreliable, and parting ways with a weak Putin is not as big of a risk for President Vucic anymore. Consequently, Russia is no longer an important actor in the negotiation process, even indirectly. Though it retains some capacity to spoil the process through rogue elements in the region, Russia cannot affect the negotiations' direction and the agreement's content.
- **The five EU non-recognizing members—Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain—recognize Kosovo soon after the agreement is signed.** The five countries offer either public guarantees during the negotiations or private commitments through confidential channels facilitated by the US that any agreement, with or without *de jure* recognition, with Serbia's signature on it, is good enough for them because they would argue that their domestic separatist movements can no longer use Kosovo's independence as a precedent to advance their independence aspirations since the agreement would transform Kosovo's *unilateral secession* from Serbia into a *negotiated settlement*.
- Kosovo joins a number of multilateral organizations and United Nations specialized agencies such as Interpol and UNESCO—assuming cultural heritage guarantees satisfy Belgrade's demands—but not the UN because of Russia's international isolation and its likely veto. Kosovo also enters official accession talks with NATO.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ASSUMPTIONS, DRIVERS, POLICY SHIFTS, AND ACTIONS

- The EU and the US consider the Western Balkan disputes as significant sources of instability for Europe and address them accordingly within their new and stronger security policy taking shape after the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Under this scenario, they play a determining role in mediating and, if necessary, imposing solutions both in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The US and the EU become bound by shared threats just as much as by shared values. And the Kosovo-Serbia dispute is a major threat in their backyard and one on which the EU and the US could easily build consensus on a course of action. The EU officially would keep the leading role in the negotiation process while the US increases its engagement in shaping and pushing solutions behind the scenes. The EU and US policies also include strong penalties for non-cooperators and their close associates and family members, including financial sanctions and diplomatic isolation.
- **Geopolitical risks prompt Serbia and Kosovo to moderate their demands and soften their positions, increasingly seeing an agreement as a necessity rather than a choice.** Both Serbia and Kosovo and their leaders are vulnerable to the dispute. Kosovo agrees to settle for an agreement without explicit recognition as its maneuvering space narrows in the fast-shifting geopolitical space in which Serbia's eventual pro-EU repositioning may put Kosovo on the receiving end of the EU and US pressure. Belgrade becomes more willing to settle for a non-territorial solution—abandoning the 'border adjustment' policy—following the war in Ukrainian as the international appetite for border changes decreases substantially.
- Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's party continues to weaken, and he becomes more susceptible to the EU and US pressure. He would use the agreement to improve his standing abroad as a man of peace without risking irreversible alienation of his core party backers. The EU and the US would also make sure that the terms of the peace agreement are not harsh enough—excluding explicit recognition—to undermine President Vucic's political power. Mr. Vucic remains the main Western partner, as the opposition parties in Serbia continue to be either openly anti-West or

ambiguously pro-West. If diplomacy is ineffective, the EU and the US could also employ blackmailing measures to which President Vucic is highly likely to respond positively.

- In the context of Russia's rogue security policy, the five EU non-recognizers align their foreign and security policies with the US and the EU policies and argue their Kosovo recognition decision on European security terms rather than on internal precedent threats. Their recognition substantially decreases Serbia's bargaining power over Kosovo and narrows President Vucic's maneuvering space.
- **Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic reduce ethnic-motivated public resentment by constructing more amicable rhetoric highlighting the benefits of a peaceful solution and good neighborly relations.**
- The negotiation process and the subsequent agreement have bipartisan political support in both Kosovo and Serbia, but especially in Kosovo, where Prime Minister Kurti is more vulnerable to a deal with Serbia, as he has helped bolster an anti-Serbia sentiment to come to power and an agreement without recognition with the country he blames of genocide may be seen by the public and his core party supporters, as an unprincipled policy reversal.
- In this scenario, both sides have nonnegotiable conditions: Serbia refuses to recognize Kosovo *de jure*. In contrast, Kosovo refuses to offer a higher level of autonomy through the A/CSM to its Serb community. Therefore, this scenario foresees an agreement that includes *everything but recognition*. Serbia relinquishes its aspirations to reincorporate Kosovo or part of it into Serbia, and Kosovo offers additional safeguards and rights to its Serb community through a milder version of the A/CSM. The outcome appeals to large enough sections of the population, thus deterring any domestic instability, such as protests large enough to bring down governments.

Scenario B: Seesawing Stalemate



SCENARIO B: SEESAWING STALEMATE

This scenario foresees that Kosovo and Serbia preserve the seesawing stalemate they settled on soon after the Brussels agreement in 2013. They would continue to engage in the Brussels dialogue facilitated by the EU but without concrete results or breakthroughs. The Dialogue remains too narrowly focused, moving further from macro to micro level. The approach transforms Kosovo-Serbia relations into a process that fixes the core problems that plague the relations. In this scenario, leaders are reluctant to upset the status quo, fearing it may cost them politically.

The EU and the US believe preserving this stable peace is the best they can do considering the circumstances. They remain busy with Russia's rogue security policy, so the entire Western Balkans takes a back seat in US-EU's foreign policy.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ELEMENTS

- There will be a political process, but very little is being *processed*. The Brussels dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia facilitated by the EU continues to use a similar approach, addressing small disputes that occur intermittently, such as security threats in the north, or upgrading some agreements, such as car plates or travel documents. **The Dialogue aims to preserve stability rather than to seek a solution.** Though the Kosovo and Serbia leaders have no intention of reaching a solution, they engage in the Dialogue so that they do not alienate the international community or risk looking destructive. In the long run, this scenario is unsustainable, but it could survive in the next five years.
- Kosovo's statehood internationally remains in limbo. It receives no new memberships in international organizations, no new recognitions, including by the five EU non-recognizers, and some countries may withdraw their recognitions during this period. Kosovo's bid for EU candidate status also fails.

- Serbia's prospects for EU membership remain weak, with very little progress on EU chapters. Serbia's rule of law and freedom of speech also continues to deteriorate.
- Serbia preserves some semblance of geostrategic balance between the US and the EU and Russia and China, applying some symbolic sanctions on Russia—just enough not to upset the EU—but it largely follows a non-aligned foreign policy. China continues to grow its influence through loans and construction projects in Serbia.
- Relations between Serbia and Kosovo and between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo remain tense but stable, with ethnic divisions and distrust still omnipresent.
- Public frustration with economic stagnation grows in Kosovo and Serbia, and sparks of potential social unrest appear before 2027. Eventual domestic public frustration followed by social unrest could upset and undermine the seesawing stalemate, especially if the leaders managed to translate social frustration into ethnic hatred and channel it for political gain.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ASSUMPTIONS, DRIVERS, POLICY SHIFTS, AND ACTIONS

- The dispute looks unsolvable to all sides—Pristina, Belgrade, Brussels, and Washington—so they engage in containing the risk factors rather than resolving them. Kosovo and Serbia remain barricaded behind their maximalist positions: Unconditional recognition versus no recognition under any circumstances. **Contradicting principles and demands persist: Serbia officially wants EU membership and stability but does not give up on Kosovo. Kosovo officially wants peace with Serbia but simultaneously promotes hostile rhetoric against Serbia.**
- The US and the EU continue to believe the stakes in this dispute are low, so their engagement remains minimal and so do the subsequent results. They focus on holding onto the Brussels dialogue gains and preventing potential escalation rather than pushing for a solution.
- The dispute remains in constant flux, unpredictable, with risk factors brewing underneath, potentially leading to conflict in the long run but looking peaceful on the surface.
- Serbia's President Vucic believes prolongation of the Dialogue is in his interest.
- Kosovo's Prime Minister Kurti continues to distrust President Vucic and, therefore, will not take any initiative—even if he believes the stalemate is not in Kosovo's interest—to suggest real negotiations and upset the stalemate.
- Serbia and Kosovo's public remain unfavorable to a compromise solution and blame each other's leaders for the non-implementation of what has already been agreed upon. The narrowness of the Serbia and Kosovo positions will prevent the publics from even trying to understand the importance of a peace deal.

Scenario C: Uncharted Waters



SCENARIO C: UNCHARTED WATERS

Scenario C, Uncharted Territory, is the most unpredictable one, with no clear direction in the next five years. There are a few mini-scenarios within this scenario: a) controlled violence, b) uncontrolled violence that could lead to full-scale conflict, and c) what begins as low-scale violence quickly escalates into full-scale conflict and prompts strong EU and US intervention which leads to a peace agreement.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ELEMENTS

- **Kosovo and Serbia use the Dialogue as a tool to provoke and escalate tensions, transforming the Brussels dialogue from a firefighting tool into a fire-fueling mechanism.** Leader's motivations for triggering violence could be different: Serbia's President Vucic may hope large-scale tensions could lead to partition, Belgrade's preferred option. At the same time, Kosovo's Kurti may believe uncontrolled violence could trigger decisive EU and US action against Serbia and lead to a solution in Kosovo's favor.
- Serbia and Kosovo disown the Brussels agreements and reverse the implementation of the already implemented agreements, including travel documents and car plates, essentially closing the border. The decade-long gains are reversed within weeks. Kosovo and Serbia become isolated internationally and increasingly nationalistic at home. This could lead to mini-scenario A, *controlled violence*.
- Serbs in Kosovo's north withdraw from all of Kosovo's institutions—courts, police, central and local institutions—and reestablish their parallel institutions. Kosovo sends its police to counter these actions. The Serbs respond by organizing an armed 'rebellion,' prompting Kosovo to send Kosovo Security Forces to quell the rebellion, turning the north into an active conflict zone between Kosovo's security police and armed Serbs. Though the stakes of an open conflict with Kosovo are too high, given the presence of the NATO forces, Belgrade gives in to Serbian public pressure.

It sends its army to the north, openly clashing with Kosovo's forces. All this happens so quickly that NATO troops have no time to prevent the conflict and are reluctant to get in between the two sides shooting at each other. This leads to mini-scenario B, *full-scale conflict*.

- The EU and the US reduce their engagement, tired of daily violent incidents, reengage once the situation is out of control and impose a solution on both sides. As the full-scale conflict between Kosovo's forces on one side and Serbia's forces and armed Serbs in the north on the other begins, KFOR intervenes and takes over the security in the north, driving out of the north both Serbian and Kosovo forces. This could lead to mini-scenario C, *an imposed peace agreement*, prompting the EU and the US to impose a solution on both Pristina and Belgrade.
- Russia would have a hand in this conflict in the north, most likely by bypassing the Serbian government and working directly with certain radical groups of Serbs in Serbia and Kosovo's north.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ASSUMPTIONS, DRIVERS, POLICY SHIFTS, AND ACTIONS

- Kosovo and Serbia leaders build uncertainty, confusion, and distrust. There is a resurgence of hate speech in Serbia and Kosovo. Kosovo and Serbia leaders, becoming increasingly isolated from the West and facing economic depressions at home, rely on populist rhetoric for their political survival and continue to exploit and channel ethnic grievances for political gain. Casting themselves as protectors of national interests becomes a message that finds strong sympathy among their party backers and populations.
- With uncertain and unstable prospects, Kosovo and Serbia have become economically weaker and politically unstable. Political competition at home becomes aggressive, with democratic norms and political freedoms suffering substantially. The food and energy crisis deteriorates, inflation skyrockets, and economic growth stagnates, leading to major social unrest in Kosovo and Serbia. The young, educated, and creative people leave in large numbers, and the hard, authoritarian nationalists ascend. Social unrest threatens the power of Serbia's President Vucic and Kosovo's Prime Minister Kurti, and as a result, they trigger ethnic confrontation to prolong their stay in power through scapegoating.
- **The outcomes of the Dialogue convince both sides a negotiated solution is unreachable.** Low-intensity conflict in Kosovo's north ensues, undermining the prospects for sustainable peace altogether. Confrontations also escalate along the border between Kosovo and Serbia.
- The EU and the US will increasingly see Kosovo and Serbia as unreliable and begin to disengage.
- KFOR becomes reluctant to intervene to prevent increasing incidents between Serbs and Albanians in the north, believing that the low-scale violence would not escalate beyond control and so it does not intervene until it becomes too late.
- One assumption in this scenario is that however great the hatreds and grievances and however much Serbs and Albanians resent each other, they would remain sufficiently rational not to engage in an all-out, self-destructive war.

Scenario D: Border Adjustment with Recognition



SCENARIO D: BORDER ADJUSTMENT WITH RECOGNITION

Scenario D, *Border Adjustment with Recognition*, is a last resort scenario only if all the parties feel they have exhausted all other options. The key assumption of this scenario is that a territorial deal needs the consensus of all four actors—Pristina, Belgrade, Washington, and Brussels—and it happens peacefully. The agreement would need a kind of popular validation through parliamentary consensus or referendum.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ELEMENTS

- Pristina and Belgrade agree in principle on the border correction. Behind closed doors, Washington and Brussels approve the exchange of Kosovo's Serb-majority north with Serbia's Albanian-majority Presevo valley and work towards preparing the international community for the deal.
- **Serbia recognizes Kosovo de jure and does not lobby against Kosovo's membership in international organizations, including the UN. In exchange, the EU accelerates Serbia's EU membership bid.**
- The five EU non-recognizers recognize Kosovo, and Kosovo proceeds with its Euro-Atlantic integration. Serbia, on the other hand, closes all EU chapters and makes the final move to join the EU.
- Serbia and Kosovo legally commit not to seek further border changes in the region: Kosovo renounces its ambition to join with Albania, while Serbia renounces its ambition to incorporate Republika Srpska into Serbia.
- Kosovo's constitutional modifications include reducing the number of reserved seats for the Serb community and eliminating the legislative double majority.
- The EU and the US offer economic assistance to Kosovo and Serbia.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ASSUMPTIONS, DRIVERS, POLICY SHIFTS, AND ACTIONS

- **Kosovo and Serbia show no willingness to negotiate a solution. The Brussels dialogue goes nowhere. All options have been exhausted, and all sides feel tired and grudgingly agree to this unconventional scenario.**
- Frustrated by poor economic prospects, an increasing number of Kosovo's Albanian population supports the exchange of territory options. It openly lobbies for it, with more and more Albanians embracing the option.
- This remains the only scenario under which the Serbs in Serbia consent to officially recognizing Kosovo and vote in favor of the required constitutional changes.
- Frustrated by the lack of progress in the Dialogue, the EU and the US support the option.
- It could also happen that the three sides—US, EU, and Serbia—agree on the option first and then push it on Kosovo.
- The agreement does not undermine regional stability, and no further border changes occur following the deal. Unification and territorial ambitions in Kosovo and Serbia remain, but the international community contains these ambitions.

CONCLUSION

Suppose we strip the Kosovo-Serbia conflict to the essentials. In that case, we find two primary features: a) Serbia de facto acknowledges that Kosovo is a separate entity, but it wants something in return for signing the divorce papers, and b) Kosovo wants a legal divorce with Serbia in the form of *de jure* recognition, but it does not want to give anything in return, insisting on unconditional divorce. As currently framed, the conflict cannot be resolved, at least not the fundamental element of the dispute, Serbia's non-recognition. A prerequisite for a solution is a new rhetorical construct that redefines the current terms, demands, and issues of the conflict. And compromise is an effective arrangement through which this issue can be handled. None of the four scenarios predict that Serbia will recognize Kosovo unconditionally, with all four including a trade-off between Belgrade and Pristina.

Scenario A, *Peace without Recognition*, is more favorable than the other three as, even though it neglects the key issue of *de jure* recognition, it advances the relations between Kosovo and Serbia to a higher level, possibly creating the conditions for *de jure* recognition at a later stage. Scenario B, *Seesawing Stalemate*, is less preferable than Scenario A but more preferable than Scenario C, as it at least prevents an outbreak of hostilities. Still, it is unsustainable beyond the five years covered by the scenario, after which violence could appear. Scenario C, *Uncharted Waters*, is frightening, but it is also an unlikely, though not unimaginable, option. This scenario would take Kosovo and Serbia back to the 1999 open conflict. Scenario D would come into play only after all other options have been exhausted and all parties feel tired of lengthy fruitless negotiations. This scenario requires the consensus of all sides and happens peacefully, with an exchange of territories but not of populations.

The scenario development discussion highlighted that a solution requires that the Kosovo and Serbia leaders put aside daily politics, build and stick to long-term visions for their countries, and take some short-term political risks for long-term national gains, which include economic prospects, EU

prospects, and stability. In other words, a peace agreement can be reached only if negotiations and a subsequent peace agreement largely address the future of the Serbia-Kosovo relations rather than being dominated by the past. **A Kosovo and Serbia at peace with each other is not unthinkable.** There were several periods in which Serbs and Albanians lived at peace. Returning them to a similar or even better state of relations is possible.

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