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# Kosovo and Serbia need wide consensus to resolve conflict, expert says

By Karolina Zbytniewska | EURACTIV.pl

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Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel (C) listens to Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic (R), next to Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci, at an informal EU summit with Western Balkans countries in Sofia, on 17 May 2018. [EPA-EFE/VASSIL DONEV / POOL]



**The presidents of Kosovo and Serbia have floated the idea of a land swap to settle their disputes. The proposal, involving the predominantly Serb northern Kosovo and Preševo Valley in southern Serbia, has been welcomed by some and criticised by others for fear it might create further instability in the Balkans.**

*Srđan Majstorović. Chairman at the European Policy Centre, Belgrade, shared his views on the controversial proposal in an interview with EURACTIV Poland's Karolina Zbytniewska.*

**local frozen conflicts but also set a precedent for territories abroad, like Crimea.**

**Srdan Majstorović:** First, it would be foolish to a priori disqualify an agreement that the two sides might reach and if they are truly dedicated to its implementation.

However, a land swap idea could entail a lot of potential side effects that might influence future relationships not only in the region but in wider Europe. It might create a precedent for similar territorial conflicts with ethnic component playing a dividing rather than connecting role. The fact of reality is that the Kosovo case was supposed to be unique in international relations back in 1999. However, it was used and abused in a number of different cases.

As history teaches us, different acts can be used as a precedent in international relations. Kosovo's precedent was partially used and abused by secessionist movements in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and also in Crimea.

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## **Kosovo-Serbia talks to resume, overshadowed by land swap rumours**

An EU-mediated dialogue aimed at resolving the Kosovo-Serbia issue will resume in Brussels on Friday (7 September) but the latest speculation that the conflict might eventually be resolved by swapping territory has turned everything upside down. EURACTIV Serbia reports.

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**It could be also replicated much closer – here in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), where the Serb Republic entity repeatedly threatens to secede.**

Yes, and in Montenegro or Macedonia, or even further, wherever there is an unresolved territorial claim connected with the status of ethnic minorities.

**Who is behind this potentially unfortunate land swap idea? Kosovo's president, Hashim Thaçi, doesn't have too much power, even in his own country – and the local Kosovar politicians oppose the proposal.**

Honestly, I don't know whose idea this is. Which is a problem in itself – showing all the deficiencies of a “dialogue” that goes on between Serbia and Kosovo. It looks much more like a cosy agreement between two people.

**You mean Thaçi and Aleksandar Vučić [Serbia's president]?**

Yes. While the public has been completely excluded. And not only the public, but also parliaments and other political parties. This idea simply lacks democratic legitimacy.

But above all: a new delineation of borders will not resolve the problem that Serbs and Albanians face. This problem goes much deeper than just lines on the map. It's a question of trust in the face of the bloody events that took place less than 20 years ago. So, what is required badly is to leave emotions aside and figure out together, by means of a public debate and wide dialogue within the region, but also including international community, how to establish a democratic basis for the common future.

Political leaders in the region need to accept that the success of Serbia in the EU integration process – but also of Bosnia or Kosovo – should be supported by their neighbours as well. And in that sense, we would require much more democratic and visionary leadership from the politicians in the region. They should lead by their own example, not by disqualifying each other but trying to find consensus on how to move forward. Because we need to stay and live here together in centuries to come.

**Normalisation talks were moderated by the EU but now the EU is reluctant to actually comment on the present proposals, while Germany – a natural leader within the EU – is actually against any land swaps.**

The EU finds itself in a very peculiar situation. It moderates the dialogue between one candidate state – Serbia – and one country, or territory, that is not recognised by 5 EU member states. So, it is a difficult situation to balance the expectations from this dialogue process. The EU's Negotiating framework for Serbia's EU accession process requires that a legally binding agreement on normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo should be reached. This is a European way for resolving this very complex issue, and by leaving a lot of manoeuvring space for both sides and for the member states as well – both those recognizing and not recognizing Kosovo's statehood.

Those outside the region who support the land swap solution say that it will also resolve Serbia's and Kosovo's EU integration perspective. This is a somewhat oversimplified view because Kosovo's process doesn't rely on Serbia but much more on the positions of the five non-recognising member states. Just remember the EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia [17 May 2018], where Spanish prime minister did not want to participate because Kosovo representation was present there. Thus, this is a much more complex issue than between just two countries and requires a wider European consensus.

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## **EU Commission encourages border 'corrections' to settle Kosovo-Serbia relations**

Brussels should accept an agreement between Serbs and ethnic Albanians to settle their long-standing dispute over Kosovo, a top EU official said on Sunday (26 August), seeking to dispel fears that any redrawing of Balkan borders might reignite feuds in the volatile region.

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**Still, it might be a good first step.**

Of course, it is very important as a starting point for the two countries to come up with some normalisation arrangement, like "the two Germanys" option. Western Germany never officially recognised Eastern Germany but it did not object to Eastern Germany's participation in international organizations including the UN. However, Serbia is not that influential to persuade permanent members of the UN Security Council to vote for Kosovo's accession to the UN. Even if Serbia were to recognize Kosovo, I am not sure that China, Russia, India or other countries would follow. Not because of affection towards Serbia but rather because of concerns about the potential precedent that might be created and used in their respective territories.

**Serbia – a Germany of the Western Balkans.**

In some sense, there is a similarity. These people should ask themselves why they are afraid to participate in the regional market of less than 20 million, out of fear of Serbia's competition, but at the same time desire to accede to a market of 500 million people – don't you think it's contradictory? How can you be competitive there, if you fear competition in the market of just 20 million people? So, there are a lot of contradictions, intertwining between economic reasoning and political positions including retro-nationalistic talk of political elites. All Western Balkan countries are trading with the EU, this is our major trading partner, major investments come from the EU, and also the EU is the major donor in the region. This is why regional initiatives like the regional economic area should be pursued as a positive exercise and proof for the EU that we are able to work, live and collaborate with each other.

**Apart from economic and political concerns, there are also the people. Only 55% of Serbs would vote for the EU integration today. The lowest support level in the region. Many Serbs, also young ones, turn towards nationalistic ideologies and for many, the “mother” remains Russia. Why is it so?**

When we measure the ethnic vicinity of Serbians towards other peoples, then yes, Slavic nations are the closest to us. Russians but also Poles, Czechs, Slovaks. But when you check it against reality, with more pragmatic queries like “where would you like to work or study”, then the answer is Germany, Italy, Spain, Netherlands. Not Vladivostok or Novosibirsk.

**And do you think that Serbia's accession to the EU in 2025 is doable?**

Theoretically, it's still viable to catch up and finalize all the accession chapters until 2023 to join the EU in 2025. But it depends on a couple of issues. Firstly, Kosovo that influences the dynamics of Serbia's accession to the EU most. Secondly, the quality of reforms in the sphere of the rule of law – so chapters 23 and 24. For me as for a Serbian citizen these two chapters are a priority. Even more so as in previous waves of enlargements we saw that some countries harmonized their national systems with the *acquis* efficiently. But only on paper, failing in the actual application. This is why these two chapters are of such an importance. And finally, it will depend on what the EU is going to look like in the future.

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## **Kosovo-Serbia status remains biggest challenge in Balkans – EU envoy**

Normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia is “the most complicated process in the Balkans at the moment”, according to the head of the EU's office in Pristina. But both sides need steady encouragement from the international community to reach a final solution and progress towards EU membership.

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