

Ukraine War May Change Balkan Calculations, for Greece Too

Eleni Stamatoukou | Athens | BIRN | March 9, 2022 08:28

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, experts say the EU and US will want to shore up the stability and Euro-Atlantic orientation of the Western Balkans against any Russian meddling. So might Greece finally recognise Kosovo?

A call by Kosovo for accelerated accession to NATO reflects heightened concern over the stability of the Western Balkans following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but its prospects depend on a host of factors.

Kosovo is not recognised by Serbia or by Belgrade's big-power backer, Russia. But nor do five members of the European Union or four members of NATO – Greece, Spain, Slovakia and Romania – recognise the former Serbian province as a sovereign state, making accession almost impossible.

Some analysts, however, see a slight shift in Greek policy towards Kosovo; from its decision last summer to upgrade Kosovo's Economic and Commercial Affairs Office in Athens to an 'Office of Interests', to its irritation at Serbia's perceived facilitation of Turkey's growing economic and diplomat influence in the Western Balkans.



Foreign Minister of Kosovo Donika Gervilla-Schwarz (R) and Greek Foreign Minister Nikolaos Dendias (L) react during a joined press conference following their meeting in Pristina, Kosovo, 04 June 2021. Greek Foreign Minister Nikolaos Dendias is on a one-day official visit to Kosovo. EPA-EFE/VALDRIN XHEMAJ

Russia's actions in Ukraine may bring increased pressure on Athens to cement the Western orientation of the Western Balkans, building on its historic 2018 deal with North Macedonia that effectively cleared a path to Skopje's NATO and EU accession, analysts say.

Majority-Albanian Kosovo has little to offer Greece in exchange for recognition, they add, but their common neighbour, Albania, does.

"Foreign policy, international and transnational relations are very cynical, they are not emotional," said Vassilis Nedos, diplomatic and defence editor at the Greek newspaper Kathimerini. "If Greece gets something from Albania, I think that there will be a development."

But, Nedos cautioned, "Every Greek government is very careful on Kosovo," citing the issue of Cyprus and the status of Turkish-backed northern Cyprus, which considers itself independent but is not recognised by any state.

Recognition of Kosovo, "would mean that Greece would recognise a breakaway part of a sovereign country," he told BIRN, adding "however Greek diplomacy is aware of the fact that the Kosovo case is "by contrast" to Cyprus, as mentioned clearly in the 141 decision (22 July 2010) of the International Court of Justice in Hague about the declaration of independence of Kosovo. This decision clearly cites 1251 Resolution of the UN Security Council where it is highlighted that the UNSC confirms the basic standards of a Cyprus issue solution (one unified state)".



Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (L) greets his Albanian counterpart Edi Rama (R) before a working dinner in Athens, Greece, 15 September 2020. EPA-EFE/COSTAS BALTAS / POOL

Nervousness over Russian meddling in the Balkans

NATO went to war with Serbia in 1999 to end a brutal counter-insurgency campaign in Kosovo. A ward of the United Nations for almost a decade, Kosovo declared independence in 2008 with the backing of the major Western powers. But its international integration has been slowed by Serbia's refusal to recognise and the backing it enjoys of Russia and, to a degree, China.

On February 27, Kosovo's defence minister, Armend Mehaj, said the country wanted a permanent US military base on its territory and for NATO to accelerate accession. Parliament followed up on March 3 with a resolution calling on the government to begin membership negotiations with the alliance.

Ioannis Armakolas, principal investigator at the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy and assistant professor of comparative policy in southeastern Europe at the Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies of the University of Macedonia, northern Greece, said it was "understandable" that Kosovo might feel threatened by events in Ukraine in light of Serbia's ambiguous stance.

Given it is negotiating to join the EU, Serbia is expected to align its foreign policy with that of the 27-member bloc, which has imposed tough new sanctions on Russia. But Belgrade has refused, not least because it relies on Russia's Security Council veto to stop Kosovo from winning a seat at the UN.

"Russia will be tempted to use its proxies and friends in the Balkans to create problems in the EU's so-called 'inner backyard,'" said Armakolas.

But Serbia is not the only problem. "Without a solution to the problem of the non-recognition of Kosovo by four NATO member states, any hopes for fast accession to the Alliance are not very realistic," he told BIRN.



Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic (R) and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (L) shake hands after their meeting in Belgrade, Serbia, 16 February 2022. Prime Minister Mitsotakis is on an official state visit to Serbia. EPA-EFE/ANDREJ CUKIC

EU, US want to cement Balkan orientation and stability

Greece and Serbia have historically close ties, rooted in their shared Orthodox Christian faith and collaboration during the Balkan Wars of 1912.

Alexandros Papaioannou, spokesman for the Greek foreign ministry, told BIRN that Athens “will not change its position on Kosovo.”

But it has moved previously to deepen ties, notably in upgrading the status of Kosovo’s representation in Athens via an Office of Interests.

Nedos, of Kathimerini, described the decision as a “goodwill move” on the part of Athens.

“It’s not recognition but an attempt to develop its relationship with Kosovo,” he told BIRN. “It shows that there can be a discussion on issues that of course concern politics but not such that would legitimise the presence of Kosovo’s diplomatic staff in Greece.”

Might Albania, then, hold the key to changing Greece’s calculations?

“While Athens can grant Kosovo recognition, which is valuable for Pristina’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations, at the same time Pristina cannot give much in return,” said Nedos. “For this reason, the possible recognition of Kosovo goes more through Tirana and much less through Pristina.”

Greece and its northern neighbour, Albania, [have](#) a number of outstanding issues between them, notably demarcation of their maritime jurisdictions and the rights of minority Greeks in southern Albania. Albania is also an important source of migrant labour for the Greek tourism and agriculture sectors.

Greece has long hoped that Serbia and Kosovo will reach an agreement and give in to EU and US pressure to ‘normalise’ their relations, but there is no sign of a deal anytime soon. Meeting Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic in Belgrade on February 16, Mitsotakis [ruled out](#) any change in the Greek position on Kosovo, but stressed that Athens wants to see Belgrade and Pristina settle their relations.

That was before Russia sent its military into Ukraine. “This situation is likely to change as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine,” said Armakolas.

“The EU and the US need to make confident moves to stabilise the Western Balkans and integrate them into Western institutions. Any further delays will increase Russia’s appetite to exploit uncertainty and status issues to sow discord and drive a wedge between the region and the EU/US,” he told BIRN.

“A decision by Greece to recognise Kosovo will be a boost for the pro-Western and pro-democratic forces in the region. But I am not certain that this view is yet shared by decision-makers in Athens.”