



Discussion paper:

# KOSOVO'S THREE NON-RECOGNISERS FROM THE EU: GREECE, ROMANIA AND SPAIN

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Has the EU enlargement momentum changed anything with the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

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**F**or states, external sovereignty is a significant component of international legitimacy and is often secured through recognition by other states. Following its declaration of independence in 2008, Kosovo has been recognised by many countries worldwide and by the majority of European Union (EU) member states. Despite this progress, Kosovo has not gained recognition from some member states of the union, such as Spain, Greece, and Romania. Their persistent non-recognition poses a significant diplomatic challenge for Kosovo, given that the country has been seeking to advance its membership in international organisations.

This paper raises the question of “which domestic and geopolitical factors have sustained the non-recognition of Kosovo by selected EU member states since the outbreak of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and whether the renewed momentum behind EU enlargement has influenced this process.” to see whether the accelerated EU enlargement initiative influenced this process in the meantime. It closely

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examines current conditions through content and discourse analyses to identify domestic and geopolitical explanations for the selected EU countries' non-recognition of Kosovo. I particularly focus on three cases, Greece, Romania, and Spain, to represent how their approaches differ even though they all sustain a non-recognition policy. Such a comprehensive analysis will not only help understand the obstacles to recognition but also the prospects of diplomatic steps.

The central argument of this analysis is that the lack of international recognition of Kosovo from the selected EU countries, Greece, Romania and Spain, is driven by domestic concerns with a particular emphasis on their own territorial integrity and internal secessionist voices. In addition to these domestic concerns, geopolitical dynamics further reduce the likelihood of recognition, as Greece, Romania and Spain fear that recognising Kosovo would deteriorate their relations with Serbia and jeopardise regional peace. Overall, this picture shows that recognition remains unlikely in the near term, despite some bilateral informal engagements between Kosovo and these three states. The text proceeds as follows: First, domestic and geopolitical constraints in those three states will be demonstrated separately by referring to their historical approaches to Kosovo since 2008. In the end, there will be a conclusion based on comparing the cases and estimating possible future scenarios.

## Greece: Sympathetic non-recogniser

Greece is known for being soft towards Kosovo as a non-recogniser. Despite its non-recognition, Greece maintains robust informal relations with Kosovo. Even some argue that this might mean an unofficially announced de facto recognition (Ker-Lindsay & Armakolas, 2020, p. 4).

Greece, as an important actor in the Balkans, has had complicated political relations across the region. In light of long-standing disputes with Türkiye, Greece's political memory is painfully marked by the danger of territorial disputes, most recently by Türkiye's 1974 military operation in Cyprus. Further evidence of this complexity is that Greece had political disputes with Albania and North Macedonia, Kosovo's two neighbours. In the presence of such a complex picture, Greece's hesitance for recognition of Kosovo is mostly driven by some of the internal risks for minorities, the situation in Cyprus and its historical friendly relations with Serbia.

The presence of a Slav population in the North of the country, bordering North Macedonia, has been a source of fear of an immense secessionist risk. In an effort to finally diminish the secessionist risk and resolve the issue, Greece and Macedonia agreed to Macedonia's name change to North Macedonia in return for North Macedonia's membership in NATO. This meant that the name of another country, Greece, no longer encompassed the territories of another country.

Greece's assumption of an escalation of the dispute in Cyprus also influences its preferences. While Greek Cypriots are known as harsh opponent to the recognition of Kosovo, making a decision by neglecting the opinions of their ethnic kin seems to be unlikely.

When it comes to its relations with Serbia, it is vital to recall that Greece was closely aligned with Milosevic's Serbia during the 1990s when Serbia's policies were aggressively expansionist. It is known that the NATO intervention in Kosovo was overwhelmingly opposed in the Greek public (Armakolas, 2020, p. 128). Far-right and far-left parties are still known today for

their clear stance against the recognition of Kosovo under any circumstances (Armakolas, 2020, p. 142). Following the end of the hostilities in Kosovo with the NATO intervention, Bill Clinton's visit to Athens was protested by thousands of Greeks. In contrast, Greece's policymakers acted more independently of public demand and pursued a more US-friendly policy by approving the NATO intervention.

On the other hand, Greek officials do not avoid being photographed with officials from Kosovo. For instance, former Kosovo President Vjona Osmani held several meetings with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in 2022 to discuss the conclusion of the visa liberalisation process and Kosovo's membership in the Council of Europe. In the margins of the Women, Peace, and Security Forum, Osmani met with the Greek Minister for Education, Religion and Sports to discuss women's role in key decision-making mechanisms. At the 2024 summit of the European Political Community, Osmani met with Mitsotakis alongside her delegation in front of the press.

In parallel, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti also hosted the former Foreign Minister of Greece, Nikos Dendias in 2021. During his visit, Kurti expressed Kosovo's wish to Greece to join other EU recogniser countries.<sup>2</sup> In the Delphi Forum, Kurti touched upon Kosovo's reiteration to Dendias of its request for recognition by Greece, noting that bilateral relations are "great" and "excellent".<sup>3</sup> In 2022, the Munich Security Conference brought the parties

together again. At another official meeting in 2023, Kurti stressed that the 10 meetings with Greece in two years demonstrate how strong the bilateral relations are.<sup>4</sup> Throughout 2024, Kurti's meetings with Mitsotakis followed a similar path, focusing on further upgrading the relations. However, Mitsotakis clarified at a press conference with President Vucic in Belgrade in 2024 that Greece's position on Kosovo's status remains unchanged, and that the only solution is through diplomatic engagement between the parties.<sup>5</sup> In a recent vote in the Council of Europe on Kosovo's membership, only one of the five Greek deputies voted against.

To sum up, Greece is seen as the most engaged country with Kosovo among the non-recognisers in the EU. However, it seems satisfied with the current relationship format, which involves a high level of dialogue and partnership without recognition. Given the region's misgivings about border changes, Greece seems likely to maintain its current position in the near future. Greece's positive political and societal agenda towards Kosovo, conveyed through its senior diplomats at the Greek liaison office in Pristina, demonstrates how soft Greece's non-recognition of Kosovo is. However, the future evolution of the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade will be decisive for Greece's actions.

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<sup>2</sup> Kurti, A. [@albinkurti]. (2021, June 4). [Post]. X. <https://x.com/albinkurti/status/1400831486400647173>

<sup>3</sup> Kurti, A. [@albinkurti]. (2022, April 9). [Post]. X. <https://x.com/albinkurti/status/1512830656342114307>

<sup>4</sup> Kurti, A. [@albinkurti]. (2023, April 29). [Post]. X. <https://x.com/albinkurti/status/1652282966079414273>

<sup>5</sup> "Position on Kosovo, unchanged"/ Mitsotakis in Belgrade, Vučić: Greece and Serbia, brotherly relations. (2024, February 12). *BalkanWeb*. <https://www.balkanweb.com/en/Mitsotakis-in-Belgrade-Vucic-Greece-and-Serbia-brotherly-relations/>

## Romania: Cautious non-recogniser

Romania's decision on the non-recognition could be placed between hard non-recognisers and soft non-recognisers. Even though Romania supported the NATO intervention in 1999 and deployed security forces in Kosovo, it followed a distinct strategy from its Western allies by refusing the statehood of Kosovo. While it has never shown a noticeable interest in engaging with Kosovo compared with the other soft non-recognisers, it does not oppose any dialogue, unlike the hard non-recognisers.

Several factors drive this policy. First and foremost, Romania maintains that it acts in accordance with international law. In other words, Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence violated international law. Additionally, Romanian governments regard the ICJ's decision on the legitimacy of Kosovo's statehood as exceptional and therefore argue that it cannot serve as a precedent for other secessionist cases (Csörgő, 2013). Second, it is feared that the recognition of Kosovo is likely to open Pandora's box over other territorial issues in the Balkans, such as in Moldova's Transnistria region. In parallel, Romania also fears the potential consequences of such a decision for its Hungarian minority in Transylvania and its nationals in Serbia. Lastly, Romania's economic engagement with Serbia is substantial. Therefore, it might not want to damage its bilateral relations with Serbia (Ivan, 2020, pp. 173-176).

The fluctuation in Romania's stance on Kosovo over time is evident. Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 was overwhelmingly refused in the Romanian parliament by 357 deputies, except the deputies

from the Hungarian minority party, the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) (Güner, 2021). The UDMR called for the government to recognise Kosovo. In 2011, Romanian President Basescu cancelled his visit to Warsaw, where Central and Eastern European leaders met with US President Obama, after learning about Kosovo's involvement in the meeting.

However, the continuation of the EU-led dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has softened Bucharest's approach. Excluding Romania's initial refusal to involve Kosovo in the IMF and the World Bank, Romania has not taken any other decisive action to hinder Kosovo's participation in international platforms or to block Kosovo's attempts to upgrade its relations with the EU. For instance, in March 2012, 17 of the 33 Romanian members of the EU parliament voted in favour of Kosovo's EU integration. More positively, Romania's Former Prime Minister Ponta announced that Romania was considering recognising Kosovo's independence for the first time in 2013. However, President Basescu, who had greater say in foreign policy, openly disagreed with him (Ivan, 2020, p. 179). When Ponta lost the presidential elections in the following year, the optimism for recognition disappeared. Nevertheless, this did not hinder Romania's softening approach towards Kosovo, and it eventually organised eight multilateral meetings in which Kosovo was also unofficially invited. In 2015, Romania did not vote against Kosovo's bid to join UNESCO. In 2018, the EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia, Romania, was also attended by Kosovo and in his 2018 meeting with President Vucic, Former President Klaus Iohannis expressed Romania's willingness to further engage in seeking a fair and satisfactory solution for all on the Kosovo issue.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> President of Romania. (2018, March 8). *Joint press statement of President of Romania, Mr. Klaus*

*Iohannis, and President of Serbia, Mr. Aleksandar Vucic.*

In its EU Council presidency in 2019, Romania also hosted Kosovar officials in multiple settings.

In 2023, the Kosovo and Romania national football teams played a match for a place in the European Championship. The game was suspended for some time due to “Kosovo is Serbia” chants by Romanian fans.<sup>7</sup> This shows how frequent ethnic political issues can prevail. In another match between the two national teams, the Kosovo team left the field after similar chants from Romanian fans. While Prime Minister Kurti supported the team's decision, Romania's former Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu criticised Kurti for mixing politics and sports.<sup>8</sup>

Very recently, former President Osmani met with her Romanian counterpart and had an informal conversation on the sidelines of the US's Board of Peace initiative. All the Romanian deputies voted for Kosovo's membership in the Council of Europe in 2024. Additionally, Romania has been present in the EU-Western Balkans summits since 2022 alongside Kosovo.

Despite the low likelihood of Kosovo's recognition, exchanges in the fields of science, culture, and media between the two nations have continued through a liaison office in Pristina since 2004. Romania also recognises Kosovo documents and allows Kosovo citizens to travel to Romania without a visa. Before the EU visa liberalisation for Kosovo citizens, they could apply for a visa at the Romanian Embassy in Skopje.

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<https://klausiohannis.presidency.ro/en/media/joint-press-statement-of-president-of-romania-mr-klaus-iohannis-and-president-of-serbia-mr-aleksandar-vucic>

<sup>7</sup> Al Jazeera. (2023, September 13). *Romanian fans declare 'Kosovo is Serbia', halting football match.* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/13/romania-n-fans-declare-kosovo-is-serbia-halting-football-match>

## Spain: Uncompromising non-recogniser

Despite its overall harmony with the EU institutions, Spain diverges from its other allies as the “hardest non-recognisers” of the Kosovo statehood. Over the last decade, Spanish officials have consistently and intentionally avoided direct and indirect contact with their counterparts in Kosovo, even on multilateral platforms. Two primary reasons drive this policy choice. Firstly, Spain perceives Kosovo's declaration of independence as incompatible with international law, specifically with the terms of the UN Security Council Resolution 1244. Secondly, the frozen secessionist disputes in Catalonia and the Basque region worry Spain, as the recognition of Kosovo could be contagious and strengthen Spain's two internal secessionist demands. Therefore, neither recognition nor engagement in talks with Kosovo has been an objective.

In March 2009, it was reported that Spanish Prime Minister Rodríguez Zapatero promised Serbian President Boris Tadić that Spain would not recognise Kosovo (Ferrero-Turrión, 2020, p. 225). Former Spanish Foreign Minister, José García-Margallo, overtly stated that the reason for the non-recognition is associated with Spain's primary principles regarding its domestic autonomous regions – Catalonia and the Basque region (p. 224). In the meantime, secessionist Catalan political parties brought

<sup>8</sup> CE Report. (2024, November 18). *PM Ciolacu: It is totally unacceptable to mix politics and sports like the PM from Kosovo is doing.* <https://www.cereport.eu/news/romania/80198#:~:text=PM%20Ciolacu:%20It%20is%20totally%20unacceptable%20to,vain%20to%20turn%20the%20culprit%20into%20a>

the issue of Kosovo before parliament, calling on the government to recognise Kosovo.

The withdrawal of the Spanish troops from the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) in 2009 is seen as a disengagement from Kosovo. Spain also joined Serbia in questioning the legality of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence to the ICJ through a motion in the UN General Assembly in 2011. Upon the ICJ Advisory Opinion that favours the legitimacy of Kosovo's independence, Spain shifted its approach in explaining why Kosovo cannot be a sovereign state. For Spanish officials, Kosovo was not a viable economy, which is a prerequisite for being a functional state. While claiming that the ICJ's decision was solely advisory and therefore not binding, the focus should be on the new initiative by Brussels that brings Kosovo and Serbia into dialogue. Moreover, Kosovo's attempts to participate in multilateral cultural and sports organisations such as UEFA and FIFA were strongly opposed by Spain.

A limited level of moderation in Spain's position was observed during its EU Presidency in the first half of 2010. The organisation of a Balkans summit in Sarajevo and the inclusion of Kosovo in such a meeting were considered positive developments for the Kosovo side. With the conservative PP (People's Party)'s election victory in Spain in 2011, the hard-line position on Kosovo reappeared. The long-lasting demonstrations by Catalonians and the unilateral independence referendum in Catalonia escalated the stakes for Spain. They signalled that any positive attempt towards Kosovo, regardless of its scope, would encourage internal secessionist movements. Back then, Foreign Affairs Minister Josep Borrell said at a huge meeting in Barcelona after the referendum, "Catalonia is not a colony, it is not occupied, it is not a state like Kosovo. It is not an

occupied state" (Ferrero-Turrión, 2021, p. 352). Even though Spanish officials cautiously distinguish between the Kosovo and Catalonia cases, it has always been a visible concern for Spain that developments in Kosovo might affect Spain's domestic dynamics.

The change in government in Spain in 2018 from a conservative party to a social-democratic party has not yielded noticeable policy changes in Kosovo, but only a rhetorical difference. Spanish Foreign Minister Joseph Borell, who is known for strongly opposing Catalonia's independence, softened Spain's tone over the years and attempted to highlight that Kosovo and Catalonia are different cases. He argued that there would be no obstacle to Spain recognising Kosovo if it agreed with Serbia on a peaceful secession (Ferrero-Turrión, 2021, p. 353). Besides that, Spain issued visas for Kosovo sportsmen and sportswomen, with a separate document, when they were present at the 2018 Olympics and allowed them to use national symbols, which required compatibility with the Olympic protocols. In contrast, during the Karate World Championship in Madrid that same year, Kosovar players were not allowed to read their national anthem or display their national flag (Güner, 2021).

The EU-Balkans summit in Sofia in 2018 took place without an official representation from Spain. Spain has also been in favour of proceeding with EU enlargement on a case-by-case basis, rather than integrating the whole region at once. That was seen as a strategy to exclude Kosovo. It is also argued that, on the Spanish side, the non-recognition of Kosovo by some EU member states is essential to mollify Serbia and to keep it incorporated into the EU integration process (Ferrero-Turrión, 2020, p. 355). With the Schengen visa liberalisation, Spain also agreed to grant this right to citizens

of Kosovo. However, Spanish officials made it clear that the recognition of Kosovo passports should not be understood as a step toward recognition (Rexhepi, 2025).

In official documents of the EU and Spanish institutions, when Kosovo is mentioned, there has always been an explanation of its status, clarifying that the mention of Kosovo's name in such documents should not be taken as implying Kosovo's statehood.

The absence of official contacts between Spain and Kosovo severely limits the possibility of engagement. There have been some limited interactions between Spanish journalists and Kosovo politicians/journalists; however, these have remained confined to the media, civil society, or Kosovo's one-sided endeavours. Besides its open intention to avoid recognition, Spain has also reduced contact with Kosovo to a minimum. Under the current conditions, Spanish diplomats are strictly forbidden to meet with Kosovo officials or organise any event related to Kosovo. Spain is expected to promote a multicultural, multiethnic state model to counter secessionist voices in the medium term. Spain authorises its embassy in Skopje to conduct official work related to Kosovo, Kosovo citizens, or Spanish citizens who travel through Kosovo.

It might be important to examine the rhetoric on Kosovo when Spanish Prime Minister Sanchez

visited Belgrade in 2022. During his meeting with the Speaker of the National Assembly, Sanchez reportedly expressed Spain's full support for Serbia on Kosovo and said it would always advocate for Serbia's territorial integrity.<sup>9</sup> Afterwards, during a press conference with Serbian President Vucic, Sanchez said that the principle to respect international law unites both nations. Sanchez made this statement while discussing the Kosovo issue.<sup>10</sup>

During its presidency of the EU Council in 2023, Spain declared that EU enlargement is a key part of Spain's agenda. On the official website of the Spanish Presidency, Kosovo is covered as a country under the enlargement title. It is noted that Kosovo applied for candidacy status in 2022, and that the EU has not made a decision on it.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Sanchez did not avoid meeting and shaking hands with Prime Minister Albin Kurti on occasions when social-democratic and socialist party leaders from Europe met.

In the 2024 vote in the Council of Europe on Kosovo's membership, the Spanish deputies overwhelmingly rejected it. Only one of the nine deputies voted yes, and that was the one from the Basque region of Spain.

Spain's participation in the EU-Western Balkans summits has also been controversial. While Sanchez joined the meetings in 2023 and 2025,

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<sup>9</sup> National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. (2022, July 30). *National Assembly Speaker meets with Spanish Prime Minister*. [https://www.parlament.gov.rs/National\\_Assembly\\_Speaker\\_Meets\\_with\\_Spanish\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_45155.537.html](https://www.parlament.gov.rs/National_Assembly_Speaker_Meets_with_Spanish_Prime_Minister_45155.537.html)

<sup>10</sup> The Diplomat in Spain. (2022, July 30). *Sánchez supports dialogue in Kosovo but "respecting the territorial integrity" of Serbia*. <https://thediplotainSpain.com/en/2022/07/30/sanc>

[hez-supports-dialogue-in-kosovo-but-respecting-the-territorial-integrity-of-serbia/](https://www.presidentia.gov.es/sancchez-supports-dialogue-in-kosovo-but-respecting-the-territorial-integrity-of-serbia/)

<sup>11</sup> Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. (2023). *Enlargement and the social dimension: Priorities of the Spanish Presidency*. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20240624193921/https://spanish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/ampliacion-presidencia-espanola-consejo-ue/>

Spain was not represented in the 2022 and 2024 summits.

Kurti sat with the Spanish media a few times. In one of the interviews conducted in April 2026, he states that Kosovo's relations with Spain under Sanchez have become more positive, citing visa liberalisation and the recognition of Kosovo's documents. However, he adds that Spain's non-recognition of Kosovo is a major problem for its EU accession and calls on Spain to recognise Kosovo, a move that should have been made earlier. Kurti also argues that Spain's internal problems are not comparable to Kosovo's, claiming that Serbia committed a genocide in Kosovo.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, cameras recorded an informal chat between former President Osmani and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan at an organisation in Skopje in 2024. Osmani asks for Türkiye's efforts to bring Spain closer to recognition of Kosovo.<sup>13</sup>

With a softer tone, Spain still hesitates to engage in dialogue with Kosovo. While Spain no longer boycotts the EU-Western summits, Kosovo's officials are seeking to bring in a mediator between the two countries to open dialogue channels.

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## Conclusion

Even though the enlargement of the Western Balkans after Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine has become a priority for Brussels, this

has brought little change in Kosovo's recognition by the non-recognising EU countries. Greater mutual presence at multilateral meetings, visa liberalisation, and some unilateral engagements by Kosovo did not yield satisfactory outcomes for Kosovo's status. However, the number of settings that bring the Balkan states and EU countries together has increased, thereby increasing Kosovo's visibility.

This paper examined three non-recognising EU states and their approaches towards Kosovo, with a focus on the period after 2021. It concluded that Greece's stance towards Kosovo is the most engaging, whereas Romania's and Spain's determined disengagement from Kosovo appears unchanged. Presumably, all three countries await the successful conclusion of the Brussels dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo in order to recognise Kosovo without further escalation of their domestic and geopolitical constraints. Overall, recognition of Kosovo by any of the three countries is likely to be weak in the absence of improvements in relations between Belgrade and Pristina. At the same time, Kosovo's initiatives to fortify the bases for future recognition through improving informal bilateral relations, increasing visibility in multilateral settings, and securing assistance from third actors to achieve more recognition will play a very complementary role.

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<sup>12</sup> Sahuquillo, M. R. (2026, April 19). *Albin Kurti: "España debe reconocer a Kosovo, es el momento de la valentía política"*. El Periódico. <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/internacional/2026>

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<sup>13</sup> TRT Balkan [@TRTBalkanAL]. (2024, June 13). X. <https://x.com/TRTBalkanAL/status/1801262126209585295>

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