

# Ukraine – Kosovo – EU: old dilemmas and challenges of the Ukrainian – Russian war

 Olexiy Moroz 

Ivan Franko National University at Lviv, Ukraine

## Abstract


*Attitudes toward Kosovo's independence divide the international community. Kosovo chose joining the EU as its strategic goal, which coincided with the intention of the European Union to integrate the entire region of the Western Balkans. However, achieving this goal is impossible without a political settlement between Serbia and Kosovo. The article analyses the role of the EU as the main mediator in the Kosovo and Serbia negotiations. It was noted that Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine prompted the EU to intensify efforts to promote the European integration of Kosovo and Serbia. The attitude of Kyiv to the Kosovo problem was also in the focus of attention. It is shown that Ukraine avoided recognizing the independence of Kosovo primarily because of the potential negative impact of such a step on the position of Ukrainian diplomacy in countering the territorial encroachments of Moscow. However, the war with Russia weakens the significance of this argument.*

**Keywords:** European Union, Kosovo, Serbia, Ukraine, war, Russia

## Introduction

The problem of the international legal status of Kosovo appeared before the world community as part of the controversial political legacy of the former SFRY. In the 1990s, the underground “Kosovo Liberation Army” began an armed struggle (Permitt, 2008) for the separation of the region from the union state of Serbia and Montenegro, which since the beginning of 1998 turned into a war with the government. A UN Security Council resolution adopted in September 1998 called on Belgrade to cease fire in Kosovo. The sharp escalation of the conflict prompted NATO to launch a military operation against Yugoslavia on March 24, 1999 (“Allied Force”), aimed at forcing the Serbian leadership to negotiate. In June 1999, Yugoslav forces withdrew from the territory of Kosovo. UN Security Council Resolution No. 1244 of June 10, 1999 provided for the preservation of Yugoslavia’s sovereignty over Kosovo, but the region was placed under the direct administration of the UN Mission in Kosovo and the international peacekeeping force in Kosovo (KFOR). This meant the beginning of

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 Olexiy Moroz, Associate Professor, Department of International Security and Strategic Studies at Ivan Franko National University at Lviv, Ukraine; e-mail: olexmoroz@ukr.net.

the existence of Kosovo as a de facto independent state entity. In this status, Kosovo has become one of the nodes of sharp contradictions in the Balkans, disagreements regarding which have regional, pan-European and global projection.

In February 2008, Kosovo's declaration of independence divided the international community. It put Ukrainian diplomacy in front of a dilemma: to stand in solidarity with the main Western partners or to demonstrate firmness in protecting the principle of the impossibility of unilaterally changing the existing state borders. The choice of Kyiv in favour of non-recognition was primarily due to the danger of an inconsistent position for the efforts of Ukrainian diplomacy to regain Ukrainian control over Crimea and other territories occupied by Russia. Another factor was the potentially devastating impact of the recognition of Kosovo's independence on relations with Serbia. At the same time, a common element of the foreign policy of Ukraine, Serbia and the international activity of Kosovo is the desire of these countries for European integration and the implementation of the comprehensive programmes to move toward the EU membership. The European Union is today the main mediator in the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, a counterweight to Moscow's powerful influence in Serbia, and also provides great support to Ukraine in resisting Russian aggression. Another common element is the Russian factor. The purpose of the article is to outline the main factors that determined the positions of the above-mentioned international actors on the eve of the war, and to answer the following questions. First, how did Russia's large-scale war against Ukraine affect the relations in the Serbia-EU-Kosovo triangle? Secondly, could this war radically affect Kyiv's position regarding the recognition of Kosovo's independence? In accordance with this, the structure of the article was built.

The general methodological framework of the proposed article is determined by the constructivist concept of international relations, within which, according to Kuzyk (2013), "the nature of interaction between the actors of international relations is determined primarily by the model of behaviour that is formed by a certain system of identities and transformed over time". The "interest" of international actors, as the initial element of an entire dynamic space of international relations, depends crucially on their self-identification, is shaped by different socio-cultural relations within certain states, and therefore is not universal. According to the constructivist paradigm, "anarchy" in the international system is the result of its perception by participants in international relations, and therefore can potentially be eliminated. In this context, today, the "interests" that Moscow voices as an explanation for the attack on Ukraine are completely devoid of pragmatic content, have nothing to do with the "security" interests of Russia (the world's largest nuclear power), which could be rationally defined within the frameworks of international law, and are entirely determined by the ideological specifics of the Russian regime.

Along with this, we have taken into account the provisions of the neoliberal theory of international relations, which indicates the independent (autonomous from the founding states) role on the international stage of international organizations,

their ability to limit “anarchy” in international relations. At the same time, it should be emphasized that events of recent times demonstrate a great influence on the behaviour of certain international actors of deeply irrational factors, such as essentially chimerical versions of historical events, religious motives, irrational components of human psychology.

## **1. The European Union and the independence of Kosovo - starting positions**

The de-facto exit of Kosovo from the power of Belgrade prompted the European Union to define the principles of the Union’s policy towards this entity. The formation and practical implementation of EU approaches to relations with Kosovo took place within the broad framework of the Union’s general strategy for the Western Balkans. The term covers Albania, Kosovo and several countries that were formerly part of Yugoslavia - today they are independent Serbia, Montenegro, the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Croatia. Note that the “Western Balkans” in the foreign strategy of the EU did not include Slovenia, also a former “Yugoslav republic”, which managed to avoid long bloody conflicts with neighbouring countries and within the state (Kravchenko, 2023). Slovenia became a full member of the EU and a member of NATO in 2004. Another country of the region, Croatia, was able to join the EU in 2013.

The region of the Western Balkans forms a tangle of interconnected interethnic, interconfessional and interstate contradictions. The old term “Balkanization”, although not devoid of the flavour of the era of colonial empires, still largely reflects the specifics of the region, where state borders and a whimsical ethnic confessional map too often do not coincide with each other.

However, it is important to emphasize that the leading EU countries from the very beginning of the appearance of the topic of relations with the countries of the Western Balkans on the agenda of the Union’s chose as their goal their integration into the EU. The strategic security considerations were of decisive importance, that without reforms according to the standards of the European Union in the political, economic and legal spheres of public life and further integration with the EU, the Western Balkans will remain a zone of instability and danger on its very borders. According to Martynov, “the final entry of all Balkan national states into the European Union should finally close the “Balkan window” of the vulnerability of a united Europe” (Martynov, 2021).

Brussels considered the advancement of the Western Balkans countries to the EU as a process defined by the same requirements for potential candidates, but it provides for distinct and undefined deadlines for completion, as well as flexible tools and implementation algorithms. EU focused its efforts on Kosovo primarily on ensuring its internal political and economic stabilization, economic development and the rule of law (Nezaj, 2015). The Union implemented relevant measures through the CARDS program (The Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development

and Stabilization), which since 2007 has been replaced by the IPA program (The Instrument of Pre-Accession assistance) (Nezaj, 2015). Among the set of EU measures for economic support to Kosovo, the program supporting small and medium-sized businesses was of great importance, which significantly contributed to economic growth and reduction of unemployment in the country (Mexhuani, 2023). EU assistance proved to be critically important for ensuring the viability of Kosovo's economy after the de-facto separation from Serbia. In 2004, the EU opened its representative office in Kosovo.

## **2. Brussels and the declaration of independence of Kosovo. The beginning of the European integration process of Kosovo**

The desire of the majority of the population of Kosovo for independence from Serbia found the support of the United States and its main allies. On February 17, 2008, the Assembly (legislative body) of Kosovo declared the state independence of the region (Serbian deputies did not participate in the vote).

The decisive step of the Kosovars put the countries of the world in front of the need to determine their position in relation to the new international and political realities. The collision between the principle of respect for state sovereignty and the inadmissibility of changing state borders with the use of force, on the one hand, and the right of nations to self-determination, on the other, forced a contradictory choice.

Shortly after its declaration, Kosovo's independence was recognized by the United States and a significant majority of NATO member countries, including all the most influential members of the alliance. The attitude towards Kosovo's independence today clearly divides the international community. It is the only partially recognized state in the world that has wide recognition and support from the majority of NATO and European countries.

It should be noted that the European Union does not make decisions on the recognition or non-recognition of one or another state, this is the prerogative of each individual sovereign country. At the same time, the fact that not all EU member states recognized Kosovo's independence (although the vast majority did) did not become an obstacle to the development of relations between Kosovo and the Union in the economic, cultural, legal and political spheres. In fact, among the most influential EU, countries there was a consensus on the need for Kosovo's rapprochement with the European Union with the further prospect of its integration. At the same time, it was clear to both parties that this prospect was not imminent.

An important moment in the development of relations between Kosovo and the EU was the involvement of the Union in international efforts to restore law and order and the administration of justice in this region, the system of which was actually destroyed during the armed uprising. The necessary measures were implemented with the cooperation of the EU and the UN. According to the decision of the UN Security Council, European Council, and after the invitation of Kosovo

Head of State, since April 2009, the EU Rule of Law Mission (European Union Rule of Law in Kosovo (EULEX) began appointing its own prosecutors and judges in Kosovo (Bazov, 2020, p. 435). Since August 2015, under the auspices of the UN and with the participation of the Parliament of Kosovo, the Specialized Judicial Chamber of Kosovo and the Specialized Prosecutor's Office of Kosovo, located in the Hague, began to operate. Over the years, EULEX has played a critical role in supporting the justice system in Kosovo (Mexhuani, 2023). Charges of crimes against humanity and a number of others were brought, in particular, to the former president of Kosovo Hashim Thaci, arrested in November, 2020 (Krasniki, 2020). In the spring of 2023, Thaci and three other former Kosovo Albanian officials stood trial in Hague on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including about one hundred killings in detention facilities (Kryzhanivska, 2023, April 3).

The first benchmark on the path of strategic political rapprochement between independent Kosovo and the EU was supposed to be the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), which provided for the strengthening of ties between the EU and Kosovo and the implementation of a number of reforms in the country. As a result of long-term negotiations, on October 27, 2015, the agreement between Kosovo and the EU was signed, and on April 1, 2016, it entered into force. At the same time, from the very beginning, the process of Kosovo's rapprochement with the European Union turned out to be related to the issue of relations between Brussels and Serbia, which itself declared its intention to join the EU. The aspiration of both Kosovo and Serbia to become EU members gave Brussels a rather effective lever of influence on both conflicting parties, a tool to encourage them to dialogue on controversial issues, and since March, 2011 let to start meetings of Serbia and Kosovo representatives (Esch, 2011).

After long negotiations, which took place through the mediation of the EU, on April 19, 2013, Belgrade and Pristina signed an agreement on the principles of normalization of relations in Brussels, which settled some of the disputed issues. In particular, the agreement provided for the integration into Kosovo's legal system of municipalities with a Serbian majority, which received certain guarantees regarding the work of the courts and the police. The Serbian and Albanian parties undertook not to block or encourage third parties to block the other party's advancement to the EU. However, the implementation of this agreement turned out to be a too difficult task, met with opposition from nationalistic forces, primarily in Serbia, but also in Kosovo.

### **3. Serbia and the Kosovo problem: EU or Moscow?**

During early 2000s, Serbia joined a number of financial and economic EU initiatives aimed at the stabilization and improvement of socio-economic and financial situations in the Western Balkans region, such as the Process of Stabilization and Association (PSA), the Stability Pact for countries South-East of Europe, mentioned in the framework of CARDS program. Only during 2002-2004,

the European Union provided financial assistance of almost 1 billion euros (Maistrenko, 2019). In July 2008, the SAA was signed between the EU and Serbia, under which Belgrade undertook to implement the reforms necessary for joining the Union. In 2008, Serbia adopted the National Program for EU Integration, and in 2013, the National Program for the Implementation of EU Requirements for the period 2013-2016.

Sociological surveys show that the majority of the country's population supports the prospect of its European integration. According to the 2018 survey, about 55% of the country's citizens were in favour of Serbia's membership in the EU (Maistrenko, 2019). At the same time, according to sociologists, during the 2000s, the share of Serbs who supported the European integration of the country gradually decreased. For example, in 2003, the supporters of EU membership amounted to about 70% (Maistrenko, 2019).

But only 20% of Serbs are ready to recognize Kosovo's independence today. Against the background of the painful perception by Serbian society of the separation of Kosovo, Serbia in the 2000s became the terrain of an ever-growing Russian influence. From the outset, Putin's regime has been hostile to the prospect of the Western Balkans' integration into the EU, instead viewing the region as a territory that can be used to exert pressure on Europe and other geopolitical players. According to the definition of the Polish researcher Szpola, the goal of the Russian policy towards the Western Balkans was to "impede the integration of the Balkan countries with the Euro-Atlantic structures and maintain an area of instability and frozen conflicts in the close neighbourhood of the EU" (Szpola, 2014).

To consolidate and strengthen its influence in Serbia, Moscow resorted to using a wide range of economic, political and cultural tools. Its basis was the enormous capabilities of the Kremlin in the oil and gas sector, the dependence of many European countries, including Serbia, on supplies of Russian hydrocarbons, primarily natural gas. In 2008, the "Gazprom" company, controlled by government, concluded an agreement with Belgrade on Serbia's participation in the Kremlin's new oil and gas project – "South Stream", and also acquired a controlling stake in the Serbian oil and gas company NIS, which gave it control over oil and gas infrastructure of the country. Investing in certain projects in Serbia, providing funds to cover the needs of the Serbian budget, active cooperation in the military sphere (against the lack of reforms in the security sector of Serbia, necessary for its movement to the EU) became factors that promoted the Russian influence and strengthened Moscow's presence in Serbia (Maistrenko, 2019).

Russia succeeded to create in Serbia a wide network of allies, agents and "clients" that permeates almost all spheres of the country's life. Along with numerous and well-financed representative offices of Russian "research" and "cultural" centers (such as the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, the A.M. Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Support Fund, the Strategic Culture Fund, and many

others), Russia is widely represented in various forms in the mass media operating in Serbia (Szpola, 2014).

Moscow sponsors Serbian far-right political parties and organizations in particular, such as 'Dveri', 'Nashi', the 'Third Serbia' political party, etc. The Russian Federation also actively works with Serbian minorities outside Serbia, primarily with Republika Srpska as part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose president, Milorad Dodik, openly speaking from a separatist position, seeks the separation of the Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Szpola, 2014). The current leader of the Bosnian Serbs also shows support for Russia and its president, with whom he met, in particular, last May, and the Serbian autonomy led by him prevented Bosnia and Herzegovina from joining European sanctions against Moscow (Evropejska Pravda, 2023, May 23).

The Russian "humanitarian center" in the city of Nish is actually a cover for espionage activities. It was involved in the organization of an unsuccessful coup in Montenegro in October 2016 (Orlyk, 2019). It can potentially be used by the Russians as a military base, especially since Russian servicemen are already stationed there.

The Serbian researcher Milich defined the network of Russian structures as "Putin's orchestra", working in Serbia to preserve Russian influence and at the same time to undermine its European integration aspirations (Maistrenko, 2019). Consistent long-term and well-financed efforts of this "orchestra" brought the Moscow regime its fruits. As Szpola noted, thanks to them, "a large part of Serbian society began to believe that Russian interests coincide with the interests of Serbia" (Szpola, 2014). At the same time, the country's progress towards European integration is dangerous for a considerable part of the Serbian elite. The introduction of European legal standards and European principles of economic activity in Serbia may undermine the position of Serbian oligarchs who made fortunes during the crisis situation in the country, and for many of them may even threaten prison terms. They can be no less dangerous for former military and law enforcement officials involved in war crimes (Szpola, 2014).

Therefore, in the context of relations with the European Union, the situation in Serbia and its position in international affairs are tense and evidently contradictory. Official Belgrade recognizes the integration into the EU as its strategic goal, has been cooperating with Brussels for many years within the framework of programs aimed at promoting European standards, and receives various and considerable financial support from the EU. At the same time, the European *conditio sine qua non* for Serbia's accession to the European Union – a full and indefinite settlement of relations with Kosovo – is met with strong opposition from nationalist forces in Serbia. Against the background of the strong pro-Russian sympathies of a large part of the Serbs, an extensive and well-institutionalized network of Russian agents of influence in the country works to oppose the country's European

integration, seeking to leave Serbia under Moscow's influence and use the country for anti-European and anti-Western activities in the Balkans.

This situation narrows the “corridor of opportunities” for the current Serbian leader A. Vučić, who tries to maintain demonstrably friendly relations with Moscow, but at the same time has repeatedly emphasized that Serbia should become a member of the EU. The actions of Vučić during his tenure as president testify to his efforts to find a solution to the Kosovo problem, but at the same time to avoid a critical confrontation with the very influential chauvinist forces in the country.

Attempts to move forward along this track proved to be very difficult and marked by repeated “rollbacks” and stalling of negotiation efforts. It seems that after assuming the presidency in 2017, Vučić made an attempt to finally solve the Kosovo problem through the implementation of the concept of territory exchange between Serbia and Kosovo. It was reported that in 2018, Belgrade and Pristina had been conducting confident negotiations for several months, and at the beginning of autumn they were very close to concluding an agreement. Such an agreement would have been welcomed in Washington at that time, as J. Bolton, the national security adviser of the US President at the time stated, and it could also have been supported by Brussels (Zernetska, 2019). It's likely that the approval by Washington would remove direct objections from Berlin and London, which were generally critical of the concept of territorial exchange as capable of undermining efforts to create viable multi-ethnic states in the Balkans. However, A. Vucic's efforts not to appear too lenient in the eyes of the uncompromising part of Serbian society, as well as the actions of Albanian radicals, led to the breakdown of the negotiations (Zernetska, 2019).

#### **4. Russian invasion in Ukraine and Western Balkans**

The full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine generated strong destructive “waves” in the entire space of international relations, and the Western Balkans were no exception. As a result, it gave a new impetus to the process of EU expansion as the main factor in maintaining stability in the region (Orlyk, 2022).

On December 6, 2022, a summit of the EU and the states of the region was held in Tirana, for the first time on the territory of a Western Balkan country. In the declaration adopted by the summit, the EU unanimously confirmed its commitment to the perspective of membership of the Western Balkan states in the Union, called to accelerate the process of rapprochement through the implementation of the necessary reforms, primarily aimed at overcoming corruption and fighting organized crime. It also emphasized that Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine and the new threats it has created for the EU and the whole world make the strategic partnership between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans even more important, and that Russia alone is responsible for the current economic and energy crisis. The EU offered the countries of the region a special platform for joint procurement of natural



and liquefied gas and hydrogen, as well as a package of grant energy support in the amount of 1 billion euros (European Council, 2022).

The declaration also stated that the continuation of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is critical for the stable development of the entire region, and that the participants of the summit expect concrete progress from both sides towards a comprehensive and legally binding agreement on the normalization of relations between them, calling on the parties to refrain from provocations and rhetoric incompatible with dialogue (European Council, 2022).

At the summit, the “Action Plan for the Western Balkans” was presented to combat illegal migration to the EU through the countries of the region, which is one of the serious factors of destabilization of the situation in it. It provides for joint measures to strengthen border control, procedures for granting asylum, fight against people smuggling, return of migrants to their homeland, etc. (European Commission, 2022). The summit in Tirana demonstrated that the Western Balkans “remain a geostrategic priority of the EU, and the success of their integration will be an indicator of the readiness of the European Union to act in new strategic conditions” (Orlyk, 2022). A part of this strategy is the European integration of Serbia, but a full-fledged settlement of the country’s relations with Kosovo is a necessary condition for it.

The summit in Tirana also presented a new EU plan for the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, which included, in particular, a clear schedule for the parties to take certain steps. It has been informally reported that Brussels hopes to reach a final agreement in less than a year (Bytici, 2022, December 6). At the same summit, Serbian President A. Vučić and Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani declared their commitment to continuing the dialogue under the auspices of the EU.

The summit gave new impetus to Kosovo’s move towards the EU. On December 15, 2022, Pristina submitted an official application for EU membership. On April 18, 2023, the European Parliament, acting in accordance with the previous decision of the Council of the EU, approved without a vote the decision on visa liberalization (“visa-free”) with Kosovo from January 1, 2024 (Evropejska Pravda, 2023, April 18).

In February 2023, a meeting between A. Vučić and A. Kurti took place in Brussels, at which the above-mentioned new European plan for conflict resolution was discussed in detail. On March 18, 2023, after a long conversation during a meeting in Ohrid (Republic of North Macedonia) between A. Vučić, A. Kurti and Josep Borrell, the head of the EU foreign policy department, it was announced that the parties had reached an agreement on the implementation of the previously agreed plan. Kosovo agreed to immediately begin implementing steps to strengthen the self-governance of municipalities with a Serbian majority (Radio Sloboda, 2023, March, 19). It was a gentleman agreement between the two leaders, because Belgrade avoids signing official documents with Pristina, emphasizing the unequal status of the parties in negotiations.

In April 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recommended the admission of Kosovo to this organization. The official speaker, the representative of Greece, Dora Bakoyannis, emphasized that this decision will not be a recognition by the Council of the state sovereignty of Kosovo, as this is the prerogative of individual states (Greece does not recognize the independence of Kosovo). The decision of the Assembly, supported by 131 deputies (29 were against, and 11 abstained), caused sharp protests from the Serbian representatives, who called it a brutal violation of the principles of international law. Serbian officials claimed that Kosovo's accession to the Assembly would mean that the Association of Serbian Municipalities would never be established. President A. Vucic also stated that Kosovo's accession would give Pristina the opportunity to sue against Belgrade again regarding the events of 1999 (Cantone, 2024). However, the next step, which was expected in May of the same year, was not taken (Shuka, 2024). Another obstacle was the reluctance of Kosovo's authorities to create at least a limited Serbian autonomous unit on its territory. In this, they see a threat of repeating the situation with Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Republika Srpska undermines both the effectiveness of the central government and the international ability of the state (Cantone, 2024; Shuka, 2024). Instead, the EU is putting pressure on Kosovo, demanding the creation of the above-mentioned association as a condition for further progress toward accession. Therefore, the declaration of state independence of Kosovo, recognized by the overwhelming majority of EU countries, became a prerequisite for the development of comprehensive cooperation between the European Union and Pristina, the direct participation of the EU in the administration of justice in this country, and the financial and economic support of Kosovo by Brussels. Kosovo is steadily moving towards integration with the European Union. Russia's attack on Ukraine prompted the EU and Kosovo to intensify their efforts in this direction, which contributed to a significant real advancement of the process. However, Kosovo's unsettled political relations with Serbia still remain a major obstacle to its successful completion.

## **5. Ukraine and the problem of Kosovo's independence: rigid legitimacy as a pragmatic policy?**

The declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008 put the Ukrainian diplomacy in front of a dilemma: to show solidarity with the main Western partners or to demonstrate firmness in protecting the principle of the inviolability of existing state borders. Previously, the Ukrainian government declared its readiness to recognize the sovereignty of Kosovo if the relevant decision is adopted by the UN Security Council (UNIAN, 2007, July 3). Kyiv's first reaction was evasive; President V. Yushchenko, in particular, stated that Ukraine will determine its position after consultations with its strategic partners (including the Russian Federation), and emphasized that the formula and model for settling the status of Kosovo cannot be a

precedent (Korrespondent.net, 2008, February 19). In October 2008, the Ukrainian delegation abstained during the voting in the General Assembly regarding the request to the UN International Court of Justice on the legitimacy of Kosovo independence.

Finally, Ukraine refused to recognize the independence of Kosovo, guided by the principles of consistent legitimacy in relation to the existing borders. At the same time, Kyiv took part in peacekeeping efforts regarding Kosovo, which were carried out under the auspices of the UN, in particular, in the activities of KFOR.

The beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014 added a new variable to the complex equation of Ukrainian-Serbian relations. Official Belgrade then declared that it did not recognize the seizure of Crimea by the Russian Federation and supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. At the same time, Serbia resolutely refused to join any sanctions against Russia or to “cool down” its relations with Moscow in any other way. For the Serbian diplomacy, the non-recognition of the Russian annexation of Crimea became an important argument against the international recognition of Kosovo’s independence - they say that if the international community did not recognize the Russian sovereignty over the Ukrainian Crimea, why should different approaches be applied to Serbia and Kosovo? On the other hand, after the Russian occupation of Crimea, the potential recognition of Kosovo’s independence could create an obvious vulnerability in the position of Ukrainian diplomacy in countering Russian encroachments on Ukrainian territories.

Ukraine’s position was confirmed during President Petro Poroshenko’s visit to Serbia on July 3-4, 2018. Both sides then also stated that there were no problematic issues in their relations (Zernetska, 2019). At the same time, President A. Vučić, explaining Serbia’s position regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine, stated: “Indeed, we have our own political position, which is not neutral. We respect and support the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, including Crimea as a constituent part of this state. But we did not introduce any sanctions against Russia due to numerous political, economic, historical and other reasons [...] I hope that Europe will understand the specificity of the situation in which Serbia is. We don’t want to get involved in any clashes, fights or anything like that. Serbia is not part of these problems” (Zernetska, 2029).

After February 2022, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine exacerbated the contradictions related to the possible recognition of Kosovo’s independence, but at the same time created the prerequisites for a potential revision of the Ukrainian position. On the one hand, the great war with Russia leaves relevant for Ukrainian diplomacy the old main argument in favour of non-recognition of the separation of Kosovo from Serbia - such separation contradicts the principle of the inviolability of internationally recognized state borders. However, in the situation when the largest countries of the West, as well as some democratic countries of Asia, which have recognized the independence of Kosovo, provide Ukraine with critical military and financial support in resisting Moscow’s invasion, the fact that Kyiv’s position on the

Kosovo issue appears to be in solidarity with Moscow's position, looks increasingly illogical.

This inconsistency is to a certain extent intensified by the position taken by Belgrade regarding the Ukrainian-Russian war. For a number of reasons defined above, there is a strong pro-Russian sentiment in Serbia, due to which many Serbs, apparently contrary to logic and facts, blame Kyiv and NATO, primarily the USA, for Russia's attack on Ukraine.

At the same time, official Belgrade takes a relatively cautious position regarding Russian aggression. In 2022-2023, Serbia supported all three key resolutions of the organization at the UN, which condemn the Russian aggression and talk about the need to restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine. After the start of the full-scale war, Serbia also provided some humanitarian aid to Ukraine, accepting Ukrainian refugees. President Vučić publicly stated that he does not recognize the Russian occupation of a part of Ukrainian territories. But Serbia still supports friendly relations with Russia.

Instead, Kosovo (as well as Albania) took a consistent pro-Ukrainian position and sharply condemned Moscow's aggression from the very beginning of the Russian invasion. In March 2023, Kosovo joined the sanctions previously imposed by the US against a Russian private military company known as the "Wagner Group", whose mercenaries are actively involved in Russia's war against Ukraine (Horokhovska, 2023, March 23). As the Prime Minister of Kosovo A. Kurti stated, "Wagner" militants "threaten and undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine", and the sanctions, therefore, are an act of solidarity with our country. Another reason could be the activities of "Wagner" in the region of the Western Balkans, harmful to Kosovo. In particular, the President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani, stated that PMC agents were working with Serbian paramilitary groups to smuggle weapons into Kosovo (Horokhovska, 2023, March 23) (The Serbian authorities deny the presence of Wagner in the country).

In 2019, Ukraine took a small step aimed at expanding the framework of relations with Pristina, recognizing Kosovo passports and instructing the Ukrainian diplomatic institutions to work with them (Radio Svoboda, 2020, September 24). At the same time, Ukrainian officials emphasized that it is about humanitarian considerations and the need to normalize the trips of Kosovo residents to Ukraine, and that our state does not recognize the service or diplomatic passports of Kosovo (European Truth, 2020, September 26).

The adoption by Serbia and Kosovo of an agreed plan for the normalization of relations became a prerequisite for advancing the process of Kosovo's accession to the Council of Europe. In April 2023, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe endorsed the initiation of Albania's accession process to the organization. The representative of Ukraine abstained, which caused a sharp reaction from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, who stated that such a vote contradicts

Ukraine's position on the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence (Kramar, 2023, April 25).

Moscow have long been using the issue of Kosovo in their speculations aimed at justifying the annexation of Crimea, drawing parallels between its capture by Russia in the spring of 2014 and the recognition of the independence of the Albanian territories of Serbia. These arguments cause irritation in Belgrade; on the other hand, the current leaders of the Serbian state also compare the annexation of Crimea with the recognition of the independence of Kosovo, saying that the recognition of the latter by Ukraine would be the same as the recognition of the occupation of the Ukrainian peninsula by Russia (Portnikov, 2023, August 24).

Recently, calls to join those democratic countries that have recognized Kosovo's independence, are being heard more and more frequently in Ukraine. Supporters of this step emphasize that in the conditions of a full-scale Russian invasion, taking into account the pro-Ukrainian position of Kosovo and its friendly Albania, aggressive anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Serbia and the position of official Belgrade, Ukraine's position in the attitude towards the independence of Kosovo in the same camp as Moscow, China, etc. is unacceptable and unjustified (Kralyuk, 2023, July 23). The Ukrainian MP Oleksiy Goncharenko, who on his own initiative in October 2022 made a speech in the parliament of Kosovo, submitted to the Verkhovna Rada a bill on the recognition of Kosovo's independence (it was not considered).

The argument against recognizing the independence of Kosovo today for the Ukrainian authorities is primarily the danger that such a step will make the position of diplomacy vulnerable in its struggle for the territorial integrity of our country. In particular, Oleksandr Merezhko, head of the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Foreign Policy, spoke about this in September 2022 (Kralyuk, 2023, July 23). However, he made it clear that the situation as a whole requires a certain deeper legal analysis; therefore, he did not reject the possibility of revising the Ukrainian position.

One possible interpretation of Alexander Merezhko's signature on the open letter from deputies of several European national parliaments is an attempt to gauge potential reactions. In the letter, they called upon the leaders of the EU, the USA, and the UK to adopt a unified and consistent policy towards Serbia and Kosovo (Tsybulnyk, 2023, August 11). It attracted considerable attention and caused lively discussion. Reacted to it the president of Serbia, who again emphasized the potentially grave consequences for Ukrainian-Serbian relations of possible recognition by Kyiv independence of Kosovo (Tsybulnyk, 2023, August 11).

Today Ukraine, Serbia and Kosovo recognize the full-fledged integration into the EU as their strategic goal and interact with the Union within the framework of a number of integration-oriented programs. At the same time, the political circumstances and situation from progress towards joining the EU for these countries are radically different. In Ukraine, the political structures that acted against the European integration course of the country, after the full-scale invasion were actually

eliminated. Paradoxically, the war has prompted the EU to more clearly define its stance on Ukraine's future accession. However, the powerful inertia of the European political elite in its attitude toward Ukraine not being a component of European historical and cultural inheritance remains an obstacle for Kyiv on this path.

At the same time, Brussels is interested in the joining of Serbia and Kosovo to the European Union. The intentions of both Serbia and Kosovo to join the EU determined the role of the Union as the main mediator in the long negotiation process. However, if Kosovo unconditionally aspires to this, in Serbia there serious anti-European / anti-Western moods, diligently fed by Moscow.

## Conclusions

After February 24, 2022, Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine, which began in 2014, turned into an open full-scale offensive. This development exacerbated the old dilemma of the Ukrainian diplomacy regarding the independence of Kosovo. At the same time, it greatly increased the internal contradiction in the position of Belgrade, which is trying to move along two incompatible paths at the same time. The war prompted the European Union to significantly intensify its efforts to support the advancement of the Western Balkan countries towards EU integration. In this context, Brussels also increased the pressure on Belgrade and Pristina, trying to get real progress from them in reaching a sustainable understanding. However, the old contradictions still remain insurmountable, and the positions of the parties are unchanged. In our opinion, in a war situation, the strict legitimacy of the Ukrainian diplomacy in determining the country's position regarding Kosovo has largely lost its importance for the protection of Ukraine's territorial integrity by diplomatic means. The recognition of Kosovo's independence would put Ukraine on a par with the vast majority of European countries. However, the inevitable destruction of relations with Serbia, which may be the result of such a step, seems unjustified by its rather virtual bonuses. The settlement of relations with Kosovo is a mandatory condition for Serbia's European integration. In turn, only the European choice is capable of removing the country from the "gravity zone" of corrupt and anti-democratic regimes. In general, Russia's attack on Ukraine exacerbated the entire complex of contradictions related to the relations between Ukraine, Serbia and Kosovo. However, the most likely option for the development of events today seems to be the continued preservation of the status quo and the refusal of all parties to take radical steps.

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