

From Crisis to Convergence: A Strategy to Tackle Instability in the Balkans at its Source

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Contents (with time-to-read noted)

Map of the 'EU 5' non-recognizing states in relation to Kosovo, Serbia and the Balkans

Executive Summary (8 minutes reading time, capsule summary; plus 15 minutes, full summary.)

- Capsule Summary
- How Convergence Differs from Current US and EU policy in the Balkans
- The Sequential Argument for Convergence

Introduction: The Case for Convergence over Kosovo (18 minutes reading time)

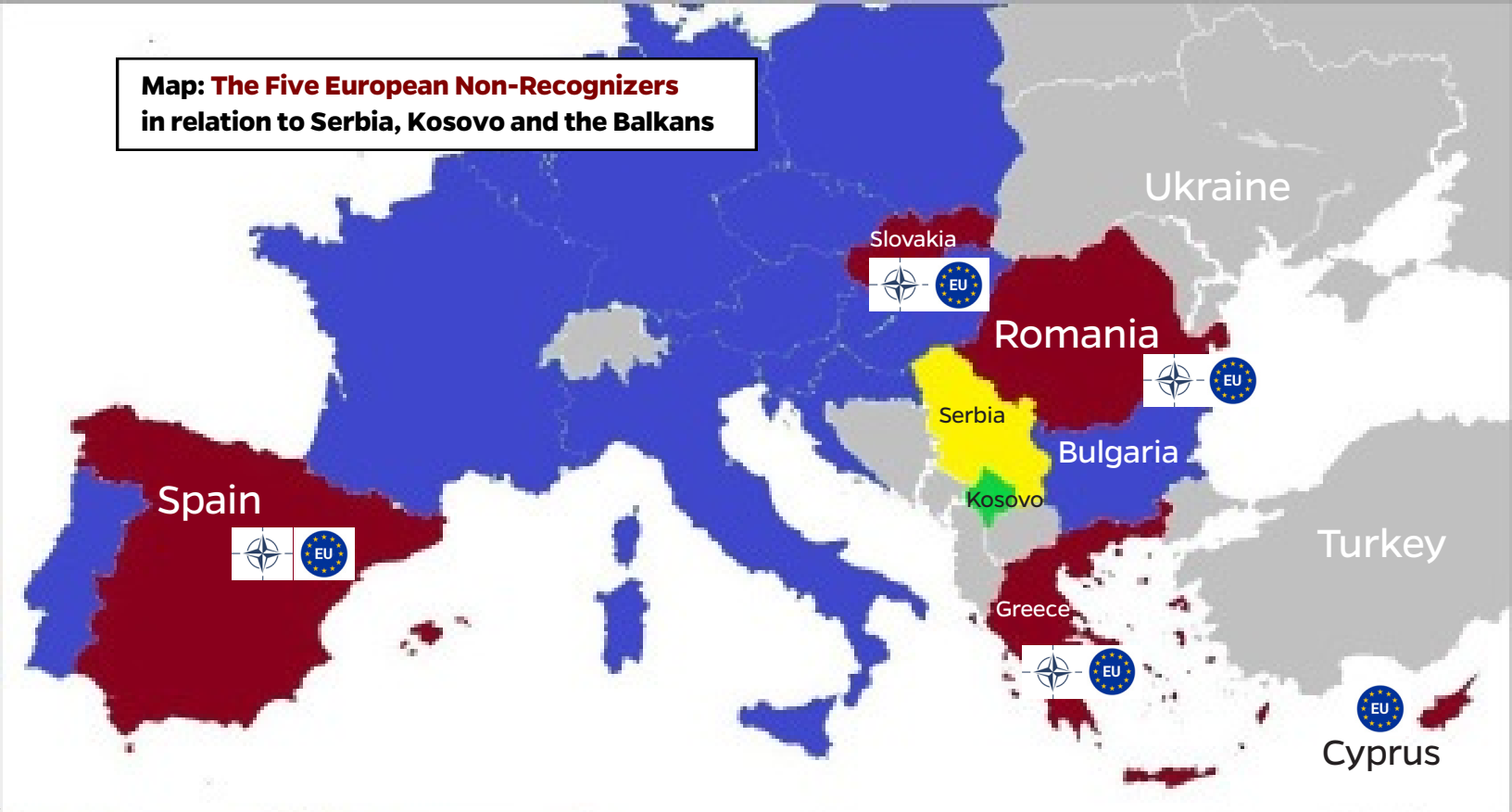
Part I: (Why) (94 minutes reading time)

Why the Balkans Defy Closure & Why Convergence Supplies It

Part II: (How) (49 minutes reading time)

How the Biden Administration Can Attain Convergence on Kosovo

Map: The Five European Non-Recognizers
in relation to Serbia, Kosovo and the Balkans



Executive Summary

This report offers a near-term strategy to reverse -- not just contain -- the alarming deterioration in the Balkans, and growing Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

At the core of the strategy is a straightforward contention: *the three-decade, violent dissolution of Yugoslavia can be brought to an end where it started, in Kosovo*. This claim extends to the still-unfolding crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Last week's strong, timely US [sanctions](#), even if applied to other corrupt and divisive figures in the country, will not cure Bosnia's decades-long, unsustainable paralysis.

On the other hand, recognition of the Republic of Kosovo by the four NATO members that do not recognize Kosovo -- Spain, Slovakia, Romania and Greece -- would transform the moribund EU-led Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, *and the entire region, including Bosnia-Herzegovina*.

Convincing these four states ('the NATO 4') -- and a fifth, Cyprus, which is a fellow member of the EU, but not NATO -- to recognize Kosovo is not so straightforward. It will require a determined effort by the Biden Administration, in tandem with key allies, to convince the non-recognizers to change their stance. Policymakers across the Atlantic will only invest in this endeavor if they are convinced of the necessity, wider benefits and viability of this approach -- and if they accept that their current approach will not work. That is the multiple aim of this report, and what accounts for its length.

Instead of pressing all the outliers to recognize Kosovo immediately, this report advocates a US-led strategy of non-recognizer 'convergence' with the majority EU and NATO stance, achieved by:

- *Establishing the centrality of a common Western position on Kosovo:*

Progress in the Balkans hinges on Serbia's acceptance of the Western order for the region; and Serbia's acceptance of the Western order hinges on the Kosovo position of the non-recognizing states.

In short, the European non-recognizers -- however positive their intentions, and however negative the intentions of some EU recognizing states -- are the key to regional stability.

- *Identifying and effecting steps below the level of recognition that erode Serbian leverage and signal to Belgrade and Pristina significant evolution of the position of the non-recognizers.*
- *Working principally with Greece, to advance the date of "inevitable" Greek recognition of Kosovo -- while working across the EU and the NATO Alliance to protect, not expose, Athens.*
- *Focusing on evolutionary steps towards Kosovo within NATO, which: reduces the number of needed non-recognizing states to four; leaves the least promising EU non-recognizer,*

Cyprus, out; brings the most supportive European state, the United Kingdom, in; and sends the strongest deterrent signal against Russian or Serbian adventurism in the region.

- *Implementing unilateral steps by the Biden Administration, including the appointment of a ‘Special Envoy for Kosovo Recognition’, coupled with an express US warning to sanction any leader in Albania or Kosovo who promotes any ‘union’ between the two independent countries.*

The necessity of convergence is also straightforward, if poorly understood. By creating a pathway to NATO membership for Kosovo, the leverage that Serbia wields over its neighbors and over the US and EU would be gone. In its place, equilibrium would allow Belgrade and Pristina to negotiate the only stabilizing settlement of their dispute: mutual recognition based on a fully sovereign, unitary and functional Republic of Kosovo, with full protections for the Kosovo Serb community.

The benefits of such a settlement range far beyond Kosovo. *First*, the more integrated the country’s Serb-dominated north, the less feasible is any ‘union of Kosovo and Albania’ or eventual partition, an enduring impediment to both ‘Greater Albania’ and ‘Greater Serbia.’ Instead of the fulcrum for destabilizing Russian and Chinese political influence, Kosovo would become a bulwark against ethno-territorial aspirations and ethno-national subversion that Moscow *and Beijing* promote. Growing unity within the Western alliance is also the best way to check [Hungary’s promotion](#) and [protection](#) of the illiberal Serbian regime led by President Aleksandar Vucic, including Budapest’s coordinated [meddling](#) in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Second, without the leverage to sustain its isolation of Kosovo, Belgrade’s strategic calculus will change. The Russian and Chinese vetoes of Kosovo at the United Nations Security Council will be of negligible value on what Belgrade deems its “[main political-security challenge](#).” No longer will the Vucic regime be able to prosecute its aggressive “non-recognition” campaign against Kosovo, or leverage Kosovo to advance ‘Serb World’, or dodge accountability for the regime’s assault on Serbian democracy. With no express demand from the West to recognize Kosovo – and no meaningful backing from Moscow or Beijing on Belgrade’s most important issue -- the regime will struggle to exploit convergence domestically, and struggle to explain to citizens how it squandered Serbian leverage.

The Western order for the Balkans which Belgrade has stubbornly resisted – and actively undermines – will finally become uniformly accepted. ***The pre-condition for Western strategy and consequential reform in the region will be satisfied.***

Third, Serbia’s embrace of the Western order opens the way for renegotiation of the flawed Dayton Agreement that entraps Bosnia-Herzegovina. With the Bosnian Serbs also consigned to the Western order, Croat separatism and Bosniak demographic opportunism will dissipate. To be sure, a Kosovo settlement does not resolve all of Bosnia’s vexing dilemmas; it fulfills the *prerequisite* for their resolution: *Serb acceptance of the permanence and viability of the Bosnian state.*

NATO 4 recognition of Kosovo will also enable Serbs and Montenegrins to devise a formula for co-existence in an unconflicted, Western-oriented Montenegro, unfettered by subversion from

Belgrade. Growing Trans-Atlantic convergence over Kosovo will galvanize a concerted approach to Bulgaria's destructive, unilateral blockade of EU negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania.

Instead of ineffective 'reengagement' across the region by Washington and Brussels, *convergence focuses squarely on the principal source of instability – Serbia's resistance to the Western order-- and supplies the means to overcome it.* Rather than simplistic appeals for EU enlargement and NATO membership, this report notes the differences between the two, and illustrates the pathway to both overarching objectives. Convergence removes a primary excuse – stagnation and turmoil in the region – for key enlargement skeptics in Europe.

The convergence strategy can be launched quickly, with steps below the level of recognition yielding swift, positive impact in the EU-led Dialogue and beyond. The term 'convergence' is deliberately benign and broad, deployable in any European capital from Brussels to Belgrade.

This strategy complements wider Trans-Atlantic objectives, including the urgent effort to deter a Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir [Putin](#) has repeatedly invoked Kosovo as the pretext and rationalization for Moscow's annexation of [Crimea](#). A unifying Western position on Kosovo rebuffs the baseless claim over Ukraine – while curbing parallel Russian destabilization of Bosnia-Herzegovina. As this report explains, the Kremlin's agitation in Bosnia is dependent upon Belgrade, not vice-versa. Convergence replaces enfeebled Western supplication of the Vucic regime, with Western leverage – denying Russia its strategic partner in the Balkans.

In the same way, convergence is an antidote for China's corrosive [political](#) and [economic](#) influence in the region. Beijing's vital strategic partnership with Belgrade is fused in part through [Kosovo](#). A unifying EU position on Kosovo restores the bloc's inherent competitive advantage over China. Though led by the Biden Administration, convergence empowers Brussels, enabling the EU to finally play its role in ending the three-decade-long Yugoslavia drama.

The inclusive '1 + 2 + 5' format of this project, with consultation among experts from the US, Serbia, Kosovo and the EU 5, ensures that the analysis is fair and the recommendations feasible. Following this Executive Summary, the Introduction sets out the narrative for the new strategy. Part I explains why convergence is necessary and transformative, and why alternatives will not work. Part II illustrates how the US can attain convergence working with its European partners and the non-recognizers.

How Convergence Differs from Current US and EU Policy in the Balkans

US and EU policies in the Balkans continue under convergence, including the bid to forge a regional common market. However, *convergence departs from the current US and EU posture in several ways:*

- By replacing notions about 'rewarding Belgrade' and 'pressuring or punishing Pristina' with a focus on *shaping the strategic foundation for a negotiated settlement.*
- By replacing fear and supplication of Belgrade, not with coercion, but Western strength, leaving Belgrade with no better option than to alter its strategic orientation.

Instead of abetting the Vucic regime's *charade* of democracy and reform, convergence allows the US and EU to hold Serbia accountable to the same standards as its neighbors.

Instead of averting Western eyes from the regime's "[institutional extraction](#)", and aiming sanctions only [at neighboring countries](#), the US and its robust European partners can address systemic corruption in Serbia as well.

Instead of enabling the regime to promote the interests of Russia, China and Hungary, convergence inclines Belgrade to strategic alignment with core Western institutions and values.

- By advancing progress in the EU-led Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina – including on the 'Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities' and on key US priorities like the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline – not through arm-twisting of Pristina, but by tackling the structural imbalance with Belgrade that is the real obstacle to progress.
- By advancing prospects for a stabilizing, regional common market achieved through the Regional Cooperation Council and Berlin Process, rather than by increasing Serbia's economic and political advantage through imbalanced, values-free 'Open Balkans.'
- By balancing unhealthy rapprochement between Albania and Serbia, which leads to compatible visions of 'Greater Albania' and 'Greater Serbia', with Greek recognition of Kosovo.

As [current](#) and [former](#) officials in Athens attest, this breakthrough would serve Greek strategic interests and not damage Cypriot ones. The Greek vision is, above all, premised on halting all forms of partition and 'union' – in full alignment with the American and majority European perspective.

Convergence advances the day of "[inevitable](#)" Greek recognition by placing it in wider context: movement towards a unified position on Kosovo within the Alliance by all four NATO non-recognizers. In turn, Greek recognition of Kosovo would inject urgency and momentum for recognition across the other non-recognizing states, puncturing dubious claims about 'international law' and a 'Kosovo precedent.'

The close partnership that Washington and Athens have established, grounded in aligned concern over Turkey, makes this avenue entirely feasible.

- By addressing the crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina, not through patching the Dayton framework, but by removing the main obstacle to a full and fair overhaul: Serbian pursuit of 'compensation' for 'the lost wars', and putative '[protection of Serbs](#)' in neighboring states.
- By solidifying Montenegro's Western orientation, not by hoping the new government will keep its promises, but by removing the main obstacle to consensus between Serbs and Montenegrins: subversion from Belgrade. Movement towards political consensus will advance wholesale reform, rule of law and the fight against corruption.

- By actively closing, rather than eliding, Western divisions in the Balkans at the moment that US, EU and Alliance credibility is being tested by Russia in the region, as well as in Ukraine.

The Sequential Argument for Convergence

The case for convergence rests on thirteen sequential propositions:

First, the United States and its European Union partners are voluntarily ceding corrosive, destabilizing influence to Russia and China in the Balkans.

Unlike in Ukraine, it is NATO that holds absolute conventional superiority in the Balkans. Unlike in other parts of the globe, China cannot match the EU's economic and trading dominance in South-East Europe. It is wholly within the power of the US and EU – unblocked by Moscow, Beijing or any regional actor -- to reclaim the strategic advantage, and restore the Balkans to the path of integration in the Western order.

Second, the primary threat to Western interests in the region is political: the ethno-national fragmentation that is synonymous with the Balkans.

Even the distressed economic condition of the region, which helps propel mass out-migration, is primarily a function of this core political challenge. *As long as core ethno-national questions remain open to exploitation, progress will be limited in:* halting democratic backsliding and growing the region's economies; *fighting corruption* and building respect for rule of law; and stopping the assault on the environment and advancing the digital agenda. *All of these efforts are vital; and all are constrained by the exploitation of ethno-national disputes.*

Ethno-national turmoil in the region hands an excuse for skeptical EU capitals to block enlargement, a further constraint on reform.

Third, the exploitation of ethno-national differences in the Balkans is a function of national power and strategic orientation, not the inadequacy of Western tools.

The US and EU have been surprisingly effective at arresting and resolving ethno-national conflict in the Balkans, *where the parties accept the supremacy of the Western order.* The Western order rests on respect for existing borders and the sovereignty of all states in the Balkans. Ethno-national grievances are addressed through the exercise of democratic rights, not ethno-territorial separation or repression (approaches promoted by Russia and China.) The NATO security and EU economic, institutional, legal, and values umbrellas – and the possibility to join the two foundational Euro-Atlantic organizations as full members – buttress the Western order.

Where this core pre-condition – acceptance of the Western order – has been met, Washington and Brussels have mediated fair, effective and sustainable solutions to Balkans stand-offs, leading to meaningful reform.

Fourth, one country – Serbia – does not accept the Western order for the region.

Serbia is the largest state in the Western Balkans Six. Ethnic Serbs live in substantial numbers across four different states outside Serbia: Bosnia-Herzegovina; Croatia; Kosovo; and

Montenegro. This means that democratic stability in the region is inherently tied to democratic stability within Serbia.

Rather than a morass of intractable grievances, the Balkans are mired principally because one country – and one regime – is fundamentally unaffiliated with and uncommitted to the Western order. The struggle to resolve Croat-Bosniak electoral differences in Bosnia-Herzegovina, while Republika Srpska takes steps towards secession, illustrates the futility of trying to negotiate a ‘separate peace.’

A revisionist Serbia that engineers an [“institutional reversal”](#) at home, and promotes “Serb World” in the region, is antithetical to the Western order.¹

Fifth, Serbia’s inability to accept the Western order is a function of Belgrade’s leverage over Kosovo.

The obstacle for Serbia is not the ‘endangered position’ of ethnic Serbs in neighboring countries who, like most minorities² in the region, face significant challenges. Rather, it is the leverage Belgrade holds over Kosovo – which cannot join the EU or NATO without tacit ‘consent’ from Belgrade – that impedes Serbia and the region.

Kosovo was an obstacle for all of Serbia’s democratic governments since the fall of the Serbian dictator, former President Slobodan Milosevic. For the illiberal regime led by current Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, leverage over Kosovo is the enabler -- insulating the regime from Western scrutiny for its regressive actions at home and subversive policies next door.

Sixth, the source of Serbian leverage is the refusal of five EU/ four NATO states to recognize Kosovo.

Whatever their intentions or motivations, it is the stance of the European non-recognizers that hands Belgrade its destructive leverage. This is best illustrated by the converse. Outright recognition of Kosovo by the NATO 4³ would give Kosovo an unblockable path to Alliance membership, eliminating Serbian leverage, without resort to coercion, sanctions or other forms of pressure.

Seventh, ‘convergence’ by the NATO four – even below outright recognition -- will erode Serbian leverage, without supplying an election benefit to the regime. The proof is in Belgrade’s non-recognition campaign.

More modest steps from the non-recognizers like bringing Kosovo into NATO’s *Partnership for Peace*, for example, or advancing Pristina’s bid to join *Interpol* would substantially erode Serbian leverage, boosting the prospects for the Dialogue. The proof lies in the intensity of regime opposition to benign steps like allowing Kosovo into *Interpol*, an organization devoted to fighting transnational crime.

¹ See remarks by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic on Pink TV, 30 November 2021 in ‘Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic: I am completely convinced we should not recognize Kosovo.’

² Bosnian Serbs are a ‘constituent people’, not a minority, under the Dayton Agreement for Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks enjoy the same status. Bosnian Serbs form, by far, the absolute majority in Bosnia’s Republika Srpska, where Croats and Bosniaks used to live in large numbers before the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the war.

³ Cyprus is not a member of the Alliance. Nicosia is also the least promising collaborator on Kosovo of the EU 5.

Rather than an expression of power, Belgrade's obsessive '*non-recognition*' campaign, reveals acute regime dependence on the Kosovo issue, unlike any predecessor government since Slobodan Milosevic. Curbing the Vucic regime's ability to isolate Kosovo, curbs Belgrade's leverage, transforming the prospects for negotiations over Kosovo, and within Bosnia-Herzegovina as well.

Convergence demands nothing new of Serbia; it represents only a loss of Serbian leverage – something that the regime will have to explain to the opposition and the public. The regime's demonstrable anxiety over recognition suggests that it will struggle to exploit convergence prior to or after national elections this spring.

Eighth, convergence will moderate the inflated expectations for a Kosovo settlement across the Serbian polity, opening the door to a dignified, stabilizing settlement.

Without absolute leverage over Kosovo, expectations within the Serbian polity as to what constitutes a dignified Kosovo settlement will moderate. Unable to deliver on 'Serb World', the regime will have an incentive to dial down the revisionist rhetoric. As it has done in the past, Serbia can move towards accepting present day reality, and responsibility for Serbia's war time policies.

With relative power in the EU-led Dialogue roughly equalized – and recognized -- Belgrade and Pristina could negotiate a dignified, stabilizing settlement that fully protects Kosovo Serbs within a unified, sovereign Republic of Kosovo, independent of Albania. With EU and US mediation, the parties could negotiate effective protections for the Kosovo Serb community, including an 'Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities', compatible with Kosovo's full functionality.

Ninth, convergence opens the way for a Kosovo settlement that impedes 'Greater Albania' and 'Greater Serbia.'

The more unitary the Republic of Kosovo, with the country's north and south intact, the less feasible is any "union of Kosovo and Albania." Kosovo would move from the catalyst for the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia to the keystone for democratic stability in the region.

By contrast, outright partition of Kosovo, would lead inevitably to the exodus of the Serb community in the south of the country, making "Union" a foregone conclusion. In turn, "Union" would spur 'Greater Albania' separatism in North Macedonia and Montenegro, reinforcing and legitimizing the pursuit of 'Greater Serbia' from Belgrade. The door to protracted instability, mass population movements and conflict across the region would be open for Russia and China to exploit. Convergence closes it.

Tenth, 'convergence' of the non-recognizer position with the EU and NATO majority will alter Serbia's strategic calculus, allowing Belgrade to accept the Western order.

Kosovo's clear pathway to NATO easily surmounts the pathway to UN membership blocked by Russia and China. UN membership is far less important for Kosovo, and is unnecessary for Pristina to join the Alliance. With Kosovo headed towards NATO membership, the value of Russian and Chinese political support for Belgrade would collapse.

Unable to fend off Western scrutiny, the regime's charade of 'balancing' between East and West would also collapse, introducing a new strategic calculus for Belgrade. Matched by new seriousness in Brussels on EU enlargement, Serbia could finally take its place in the Western order – a proud nation at peace with the other proud nations of the region.

Without the ability to revise the settlements of the 1990's, the incentive to revise the facts of the wars of the 1990's would dissipate, along with the veneration of war criminals from that era. The prospects for mediation across the region's stand-offs would improve.

Eleventh, Resolution of the longstanding crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina would become feasible, as would a breakthrough in Montenegro between Serbs and Montenegrins.

The war-time and post-war record demonstrates that Croat separatism in Bosnia-Herzegovina is dependent upon Serb rejectionism. Bosniak demographic opportunism would be constrained by renegotiation of the flawed Dayton Framework, which currently incentivizes Serb separatism, and its Croat variant. US sanctions on figures like Milorad Dodik -- even if extended to others -- are steps in the right direction, but will not achieve the pre-requisite for a Dayton overhaul: Serb acceptance of the permanence and viability of the Bosnian state.

The Montenegrin identity is fused with and dependent upon an independent state incorporated into Western institutions. Montenegro cannot achieve this without wholesale reform, which depends in large part on achieving a formula for coexistence between the country's two largest groups, Montenegrins and Serbs. This formula – and the reforms needed to undergird it – can only be obtained if the country is free from subversion from its much larger neighbor, Serbia. Convergence makes this condition possible.

Twelfth, the Biden Administration can partner with Greece, working within NATO, and seizing openings across the NATO 4, eventually bringing even Cyprus along towards convergence.

Beyond its pro-active, "constructive" policy towards Pristina, Athens has removed the main obstacle to Greek recognition of Kosovo: the feared impact on Northern Cyprus. Greek policy is driven by Greek interests in stability along its northern border region and the threat from Turkey. Athens and Washington are aligned over Turkey and on the core condition for regional stability: ending all forms of ethno-territorial fragmentation, whether through partition, union, land swaps or similar destructive devices.

Convergence advances Greek recognition by enveloping, not exposing Athens, in a wider appeal to all four NATO non-recognizers. The Alliance is the preferred vehicle for convergence as NATO:

- Leaves Cyprus out initially, a plus for both Nicosia and Athens.
- Brings the United Kingdom in, a plus for Washington.
- Holds the strongest appeal for Kosovo, a plus for the US and EU in obtaining forward movement.
- Is the strongest deterrent to Russian or Serbian adventurism.

Convergence builds on positive, pro-Western dynamics across the EU 5, except in Cyprus which does not see Russian influence as malign. Momentum across the other non-recognizers can moderate the hardline Cypriot stance on Kosovo, given that Nicosia typically shrinks from standing out as a lone obstacle. Nicosia could, for example, abstain instead of opposing Kosovo's application to join Interpol.

Thirteenth, there are ten ways the Biden Administration can advance convergence, plus two unilateral steps the US can take: appointing a Special Envoy for Kosovo Recognition, coupled with Washington's announced intention to sanction the promotion of any 'union' between Kosovo and Albania.

The two steps underscore Washington's strategic vision for the Balkans, one based on democratic co-existence, and opposed to ethno-territorial division in any form. Appointing a Special Envoy demonstrates to all parties, including the non-recognizers, the Administration's seriousness about convergence and its purpose: a dignified, stabilizing and permanent settlement of the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, and democratic closure across in the region.

Introduction: The Case for Convergence over Kosovo

1. Current US and EU policy in the Balkans cannot reverse the region's alarming slide.

Years of complacency grounded in the belief that the US does not have serious interests in the Balkans, and that the EU is serious about leading Western policy in the region, have given way to crisis. US and European officials have acknowledged the risk of renewed conflict in [Bosnia-Herzegovina](#), the potential for confrontation between [Serbia and Kosovo](#) amidst deadlocked negotiations, and anxiety over raw and unprecedented tensions in [Montenegro](#). The region's citizens continue to pour out of the region, [fleeing](#) a miasma of corruption, nepotism and maladministration, as the prospects for joining the European Union become increasingly [bleak](#).

Major priorities of the Biden Administration, such as containing Russian and Chinese influence, and reversing the slide towards autocracy, are at risk in the Balkans. Moscow and Beijing are simultaneously agents of regional deterioration, and beneficiaries of the West's inattention and ineffectiveness. The [Kremlin](#) has brazenly promoted political separation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, military confrontation in [Kosovo](#), and [subversion](#) of Montenegro's Western orientation. China's opaque, [debt-laden](#), often polluting 'investments' are the basis for years of corrosive sway from Beijing.

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have taken several major steps, including most recently sanctioning the separatist Bosnian Serb leader Milorad [Dodik](#), along with [other](#) cited corrupt and divisive figures in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In December, 2021, the Administration [sanctioned](#) a notorious Kosovo Serb organized crime group. Beginning shortly after the Administration took office, Biden and Blinken have issued a number of [pointed communications](#) to regional leaders. Seasoned, accomplished former officials have been appointed to key Administration positions related to the Balkans. Experienced US officials regularly shuttle to the region and to Brussels in a joint bid to contain serial crises in the region.

Unfortunately, these worthy efforts can at best mitigate, not reverse, the alarming slide. Even if the Administration and its EU partners manage to prevent a new conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, severe damage to the three-decade Western effort in former Yugoslavia has been inflicted. The Kremlin has already scored a victory, shaking belief in Bosnia's viability and the overall Western vision for the region.

The primary sanction applied to Dodik [last week](#) – blocking “all property and interests” of Dodik in the US – has already been in place since [2017](#) along with sweeping prohibitions against “engaging in transactions” or “providing material support” to Dodik.⁴ Undeterred, the Bosnian Serb Member

⁴ The new sanctions apply to “any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly [by Dodik or others cited]”, and block “all transactions [including contributions] by U.S. persons ... involving ... property of [Dodik or others.]” Dodik's media outlet, Alternativa Televizija

of the country's Presidency [dared](#) highly experienced, senior Administration [officials](#) who visited Bosnia to impose the threatened sanctions. The new sanctions may yield new impact, but still miss the mark: Belgrade's hostility to a functional, viable Bosnian state.

As a positive inducement across the Balkans, the Biden Administration has embraced the 'economic normalization' approach of its predecessor, the Trump Administration. *But there is no evidence that initiatives to reduce barriers to commerce like 'Open Balkans' can, by themselves, overcome the region's ethno-national stand-offs.* No less an economic authority than the [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#) has pointed squarely to political problems – the dysfunctional legacy of the Dayton Agreement -- as the primary cause of Bosnia-Herzegovina's economic malaise, to cite only one example.

Grounded in rapprochement between Albania and Serbia, 'Open Balkans' also opens up the compatible visions of 'Greater Albania' and 'Greater Serbia', a 'solution' for the region achieved by dividing Kosovo and unifying Kosovo and Albania. This would automatically destabilize North Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the resulting strife would be a triumph for the Kremlin – while depressing foreign investment and economic growth.

The largely values-free focus on economic cooperation also imposes political costs. President Biden has made "[proving democracy works](#)" one of his Administration's overarching goals.⁵ By regularly touting the "[economic leadership](#)" of the illiberal Serbian regime led by President Aleksandar Vucic, US officials are proving that autocracy works, legitimizing the regime's antidemocratic rule.

The Administration's worthy bid to get the European Union to step up to its responsibilities shows few signs of success. In EU capitals, rising tensions are taken as proof that enlargement for the Balkans is folly. At the EU's October 2021 [Balkans Summit](#) in Slovenia, recalcitrant member states had to be cajoled into even declarative commitment to keep the door open to EU accession for the region.

2. The way forward lies in recognizing why ethno-national questions in the Balkans remain open.

There is no reason for such deterioration in a region where the West holds the strategic advantage. Unlike in Ukraine, it is NATO that holds absolute conventional superiority in the Balkans. Unlike other parts of the globe, China cannot match the EU's economic and trading dominance in South-East Europe.

It is time for the US and the EU to recognize why a region that enjoys a unique set of advantages – and over which the West enjoys strategic superiority -- continues to stagnate and decline.

At the core of the longstanding Western struggle in the Balkans is a basic misunderstanding. The primary threat to American and European interests in the Balkans is *political* – the unresolved and reopened ethno-national questions from the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It is these questions that

(ATV), is named as such a banned entity. But under the existing, 2017 sanctions, any U.S. citizen already would have been undertaking significant risk by engaging with ATV or other Dodik entities.

⁵ Biden reaffirmed this point in his stirring [6 January speech](#) at the US Capitol: "We're engaged anew in a struggle between democracy and autocracy...."

most obstruct reform – standing in the way of rule of law, stymieing economic and social progress, even hindering action to combat the region’s appalling air pollution.⁶

The Balkans are synonymous with these bitter ethno-national disputes. While their roots lie in complex socio-historical factors, the *exploitation* of ethno-national differences in the region is a function of something more basic: *national power and strategic orientation*. Surprisingly, the US and EU have a good record in mediating recent and centuries-old conflicts in the Balkans -- *as long as the parties accept and embrace the supremacy of the US- and EU-led Western order for the region*.

In the bid to put out fires in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro, what policymakers have overlooked is that *these serial crises flow from one singular challenge: the inability of Serbia to find its place in the Western order*. Serbia was the largest republic in Yugoslavia, and is the largest state among the [Western Balkans Six](#). Ethnic Serbs live in substantial numbers across four different states outside Serbia: Bosnia-Herzegovina; Croatia; Kosovo; and Montenegro. This means that democratic stability in the region is inherently tied to democratic stability within Serbia. The demand for ‘compensation’, as opposed to democratic rights within fully sovereign states, is incompatible with Western strategy.

In other words, rather than a morass of intractable grievances, the Balkans are mired principally because one country – and one regime – is fundamentally unaffiliated with and uncommitted to the Western order. The obstacle for Serbia is not the ‘endangered position’ of Serbs in neighboring countries who, like most minorities⁷ in the region, face significant challenges. Nor does Belgrade need to be ‘weaned’ from the ‘captive influence’ of Russia and China. *Instead, Serbia – and the region and the West -- are all captive to Kosovo*.

To be precise, *the leverage that Belgrade wields over Pristina inflates the expectations of the Serbian public as to what a dignified Kosovo settlement looks like, insulates the Vucic regime from Western scrutiny, and enables the regime to obstruct and even revise the regional order*. In the most graphic example, it was Serbian leverage over Kosovo that drew [State Department](#) and [EU](#) support for the 2018 ‘[land swap](#)’ over Kosovo, an acknowledgement of Serbian leverage, an admission of Western weakness and an affront to the principle of democratic coexistence in the region. The land swap was tacit endorsement of the Kremlin’s vision of fragmentation, not democracy and shared EU perspective, as the answer to ethno-national differences.

While US and [EU](#) positions on the partition of Kosovo have changed, the structural imbalance has not. Fundamentally, Belgrade still owns the leverage over Kosovo – and the West. A Serbian regime which heaps lavish praise [on China](#) and [Russia](#) is the recipient of lavish praise from US officials: “the [leader](#) in the region”; “the [economic leader](#) in the region”; “a [political and economic leader....](#)” Instead of challenging Belgrade’s subversion, diplomats claim the Vucic regime “[plays a key role in regional stability](#).” While [assailing neighboring governments](#) over corruption, US and EU officials barely utter the word in Belgrade. Washington has slapped sanctions on prominent

⁶ See December, 2021 *Johns Hopkins SAIS Foreign Policy Institute and Balkan Insider* on-line [event](#), ‘*The Green Agenda in the Balkans, After Glasgow*.’ Expert panelists and environmentalists from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia cited overarching political issues as primary obstacles to tackling environmental degradation.

⁷ Bosnian Serbs are a ‘constituent people’, not a minority, under the Dayton Agreement for Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks enjoy the same status. Bosnian Serbs form, by far, the absolute majority in Bosnia’s Republika Srpska, where Croats and Bosniaks used to live in large numbers before the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the war.

figures around the region, including Serbs in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, but avoided the regime in Belgrade.⁸

Ironically, it is divisions within the EU – not divisiveness promoted by Russia and China – that hand Belgrade its paralyzing advantage. Breaking with the majority EU (and US) position, five EU countries do not recognize Kosovo: Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece and Cyprus. With this stance, the ‘EU 5’ block Kosovo’s independent path to the EU, and, more critically, to NATO. This creates the fatal imbalance between Serbia and Kosovo: *the status quo (no settlement) benefits the stronger, intransigent party, Belgrade, and punishes the weaker, Pristina, leaving the Kosovo dispute ‘un-ripe’ for resolution.* Whatever their intentions or motivations, the EU 5 position dooms the EU-led Dialogue over Kosovo, turning the West into weak supplicants of the Vucic regime across the board.

The ramifications of EU 5 non-recognition go beyond Kosovo. Because Belgrade is ‘needed’ to resolve the issue, US and EU officials turn a blind eye to the regime’s [“institutional”](#) corruption and methodical [evisceration](#) of [democracy](#) at home. Belgrade’s naked revisionism, the promotion of a [‘Serb World’](#) around the region, goes largely unchallenged. Brussels and Washington have become participants in a *charade* perpetrated by Vucic, supplicating an autocratic regime that manifestly is not interested in making [EU reforms](#), and is “strategically” aligned (ever more closely) with [Russia](#), [China](#) and [Hungary](#).

The charade extends to Bosnia-Herzegovina where Vucic theatrically [‘restrains’](#) the separatist Bosnian Serb leader Dodik, without altering the divisive trajectory of Republika Srpska. It is Belgrade, not Moscow and not Zagreb, that is the indispensable party in the bid to divide Bosnia-Herzegovina, or what is the same, to render the country permanently dysfunctional. Belgrade’s leverage over Bosnia-Herzegovina comes from its leverage over Kosovo. In the succinct words of a prominent former diplomat from an engaged EU country, “when Serbia says ‘Kosovo’, we hear ‘Republika Srpska.’”⁹

3. The time is right to finally end the Yugoslav Crisis, through US-led Convergence over Kosovo.

Fortunately, the core, debilitating condition is reversible. ‘Convergence’ by the European non-recognizers – particularly the four that are members of NATO¹⁰ – erodes Serbian leverage without coercion. Outright recognition of Kosovo by Greece, Spain, Slovakia and Romania would open an unblockable path for Pristina to join the Alliance. With the structural imbalance in the Dialogue gone, Belgrade and Pristina could negotiate a dignified, stabilizing settlement that fully protects Kosovo Serbs within a functional, unified, sovereign Republic of Kosovo, independent of Albania.

Kosovo’s clear pathway to NATO easily surmounts the pathway to UN membership blocked by Russia and China. UN membership is far less important for Kosovo, and is unnecessary for

⁸ In December 2019, the [US sanctioned](#) “Slobodan Tesic’s Material Support Network.” According to Treasury, the Belgrade-based Tesic, who is not a Serbian official, is “among the biggest dealers of arms and munitions in the Balkans.” Also sanctioned in addition to Tesic and others was Esad Kapidzic, director and secretary of Cyprus-based Finrost Limited. “Finrost moved money on behalf of Tesic, and was used by Tesic for a weapons contract with a foreign government in Africa.”

⁹ Prominent former diplomat from engaged EU country speaking recently under Chatham House rules.

¹⁰ Cyprus is not a member of the Alliance. Nicosia is also the least promising collaborator on Kosovo.

Pristina to join the Alliance. With Kosovo headed towards NATO membership, the value of Russian and Chinese political support for Belgrade would collapse. Unable to fend off Western scrutiny, the regime's charade of 'balancing' between East and West would also collapse, introducing a new strategic calculus for Belgrade. Matched by new seriousness in Brussels on enlargement, Serbia could finally take its place in the Western order – a proud nation at peace with the other proud nations of the region.

Given the challenge of persuading the EU 5 or even all 'NATO 4' members to recognize Kosovo, this report also explains the compelling value of their *actions below the level of recognition*. Enabling Kosovo to join NATO's *Partnership for Peace*, for example, or advancing Pristina's bid to join *Interpol* would substantially erode Serbian leverage, boosting the prospects for a negotiated settlement in the Dialogue, including on the stumbling block of the 'Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities.'

The proof lies in the intensity of regime opposition to benign steps like allowing Kosovo into Interpol, an organization devoted to fighting transnational crime. Rather than an expression of power, Belgrade's obsessive '*non-recognition*' campaign, reveals acute regime *dependence on the Kosovo issue, unlike any predecessor government since Slobodan Milosevic*. Curbing the Vucic regime's ability to isolate Kosovo, curbs Belgrade's leverage, transforming the prospects for negotiations over Kosovo, and within Bosnia-Herzegovina as well.

Without the ability to revise the settlements of the 1990's, the incentive to revise the facts of the wars of the 1990's would dissipate, along with the veneration of war criminals from that era. The long-needed overhaul of Bosnia's millstone, the Dayton Agreement, could begin. Relieved of subversion from Belgrade, Montenegrins and Serbs could also embark on the delayed process of state- and trust-building in an independent Montenegro, unconflicted about its Western orientation.

Because convergence targets the European non-recognizers – not Belgrade – President Vucic will struggle to portray himself as the 'defender of Serbs' whether in Kosovo or elsewhere. Instead, the opposition can rightly hold the autocratic Vucic accountable for misplaying his hand and squandering Serbian leverage. If Belgrade balks or walks (out of US- or EU-led initiatives including on the economy), it will prove that the regime's participation was just a charade, not the pathway to political breakthrough.

For several reasons, including widely-overlooked evolution in the Greek position on Kosovo, the Biden Administration is in a strong position to foster Western convergence over Kosovo. Athens and Washington have already forged a close [partnership](#) driven by shared concerns over Turkey. Senior Greek [officials](#) and prominent figures have made it clear that recognition of Kosovo serves Greek interests and does not damage Cypriot ones. [Spain](#), long-considered an unreachable hardliner, has just announced coming changes in its cold posture towards Kosovo.¹¹ Visible US-led and EU-embraced support for Slovakia and Romania on the shared revanchist threats they face from [Hungary](#) are among the ways that the Administration can win convergence over Kosovo from Bratislava and Bucharest.

¹¹ See remarks by Spanish State Secretary for the EU Juan Gonzalez-Barba beginning at 01:10 of the [conference video](#). Jadranka Joksimovic, Serbian Minister for European Integration, follows with anxious protest and fawning praise of Spain, underscoring Belgrade's abject dependence on the non-recognizers to sustain regime strategy.

Washington can engage key EU partners like the [Netherlands](#) that have made rule of law their overriding priority in the Balkans. Persuading the EU 5 to help bring Kosovo into Interpol, for example, exposes no EU capital, including The Hague and Paris, to domestic backlash. Nor, as this report explains, does Interpol membership for Pristina implicate EU 5 sovereignty or territorial integrity. The United Kingdom can help the US expand Kosovo's relationship with NATO, where London is still a leading member. The [British](#) have appointed a Special Envoy for the Balkans, Sir Stuart Peach, who until recently chaired NATO's Military Committee.

An outspoken advocate of US-led intervention in the Balkans in the 1990s, President Biden has a compelling interest to bring the US and EU together in this way. The unifying purpose of convergence today is not humanitarian, but strategic: to stem Russia's bid to fragment Europe from Ukraine to Spain; and to check the corrosion of democratic values and Western orientation caused by China. *Kosovo is the **fulcrum** for Russian and Chinese influence in the Balkan region. And 'convergence' recasts Kosovo as a fulcrum for democratic stability in the region.*

Convergence is complementary to US efforts on economic cooperation, and empowers (and does not displace) the EU role in the Balkans. No change is required in formalized US or EU policy on the EU-led Dialogue, nor is any direct pressure applied to Belgrade. By no means is convergence the only step that the US and EU need to take in the Balkans; convergence is, however, the only step that tackles the central obstacle to progress.

Part I of this report sets out **why** 'convergence' is necessary and how it would be effective.

Section 9 explains why the Vucic regime cannot be 'weaned' into the Western order, including through 'economic normalization.' This section also explains why the EU-led Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is mired, including by the stumbling block of the 'Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities.'

Section 10 explains the impact of convergence on the crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina, including why this approach terminates 'Greater Croatia' or, elsewhere in the region, 'Greater Albania.'

Part II sets out ten examples of **how** the Biden Administration, working with European partners and a key non-recognizing country, Greece, can foster convergence over Kosovo. Washington can also lead by example by appointing a US 'Special Envoy for Kosovo Recognition,' coupled with announced sanctions for the promotion of 'Union of Kosovo and Albania.'



Part I: Why the Balkans Defy Closure, and Why Convergence Supplies It

Contents

1. With US Leadership, a Breakthrough in the Balkans is Possible
2. The Key to Democratic Stability in the Balkans
3. The Western Order for the Balkans: Democratic Rights versus Ethno-national 'Compensation'
4. Kosovo and Serbian 'Compensation' in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Power & Vulnerability
5. The Swift Impact from Eroding Serbian Leverage Over Kosovo – within Serbia
6. The Indispensable Role of the European Non-recognizers
7. The Indispensable Role of NATO Accession – and Partnership for Peace – for Kosovo
8. How Western Convergence over Kosovo Alters Serbia's Strategic Calculus
9. Strategic Confusion: The Struggles over the EU-led Dialogue and 'Economic Normalization'
10. The Impact of Convergence on 'Greater Albania' and 'Greater Croatia', and the Crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina

1. *With US Leadership, a Breakthrough in the Balkans is Possible*

A breakthrough in the deteriorating Balkans – one that could dramatically reduce tensions, spur EU enlargement and economic growth, and curtail Russian and Chinese influence – is possible. A single policy innovation could address the crisis now playing out in Bosnia-Herzegovina, halt the threat to Montenegro’s Western orientation, and propel Kosovo to stability and security. The US and EU could finally address Serbia’s headlong slide into autocracy, giving Belgrade good reason to embrace the path of reform. The alarming flight of the region’s population, particularly the young and the skilled, could be begin to be checked.

This breakthrough rests wholly within the hands of the US, EU and NATO, and lies beyond the reach of any malign actor, local or external. Neither Moscow nor Beijing could block progress, once the West acts. In fact, the crux of the approach is not a direct intervention with the parties at all.

Rather, the pathway to long-sought stability in the entire region lies in *re-shaping the foundation for negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo*. The three-decade struggle over the dissolution of former Yugoslavia can be closed where it began – with *convergence across all EU and NATO member states over their stance on Kosovo*.

In practice, this means policy adjustments principally from the four EU-NATO member states that do not recognize Kosovo: Spain, Slovakia, Romania and Greece. A fifth EU non-recognizer, Cyprus, is both less promising a collaborator and less needed as one simply because Nicosia is not a member of the Alliance. The initial steps to create momentum for convergence – all of them short of outright recognition – are within NATO, the organization ideally suited to signal Trans-Atlantic resolve, particularly on Kosovo.

As the ‘NATO 4’ states converge with the US and the majority of European states that recognize Kosovo, even Cyprus could adjust its stance towards Kosovo, rather than stand out as an obstructionist – a posture that Nicosia generally avoids. Indeed, Cyprus’s patron, Greece, took a major stride in summer 2021 towards recognition of Kosovo by categorically distinguishing the Northern Cyprus case, giving Nicosia and all the European non-recognizing capitals a sound legal basis to reconsider their positions. Full recognition of Kosovo from European non-recognizers would seal the end of Greater Serbia -- and Greater Albania and Greater Croatia as well, finally ending the three-decade-plus Yugoslav crisis.

As ever in the Balkans, achieving convergence will require US leadership. The investment required of the Biden Administration is real, but far from herculean. Convergence requires neither instant recognition of Kosovo by the EU 5, nor their participation in any coercion of Belgrade – a reassuring attribute for Brussels and Washington as well. Instead, convergence mirrors the Biden Administration’s strategy towards China, described by National Security Adviser [Jake Sullivan](#) as “... *shape[ing] the international environment* so that it is more favorable to the interest and values of the United States and its allies and partners to like-minded democracies.”

This task is far more straightforward in the Balkans. The strategic environment shifts in the West’s favor as soon as a handful of EU and NATO member states converge their positions over Kosovo with that of the wider EU and NATO majority. For several reasons, including the

remarkable evolution in Greece's strategic outlook, the Administration is well-positioned to make the central argument: convergence over Kosovo is consistent with – and even necessary for – protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity, across anxious EU 5 countries¹² and across Europe.

The key to the new approach is less a matter of political will than it is strategic comprehension. Once policymakers grasp the true obstacle to democracy and stability to the Balkans – and the feasibility and benefits of surmounting that obstacle – then Washington and its key European partners can galvanize the will for convergence over Kosovo.

2. The Key to Democratic Stability in the Balkans

The crux of the argument is that the crises playing out in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro are connected to a central source, and cannot be resolved strictly piecemeal.

The struggle of US and EU diplomats to address Croat-Bosniak issues, alongside existential Bosnian Serb threats against the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, illustrates the futility of searching for a 'separate peace.' Sanctions, exhortations and mediation might contain the slide toward conflict, but the extensive reform that Bosnia-Herzegovina requires will remain elusive if addressed solely in isolation from the perpetual source of the region's instability.

The same is true for the EU-led Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. US and EU frustration with Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti is a by-product of the long stasis over Kosovo's status – an issue that the Dialogue, as presently structured, cannot resolve.

Montenegro's ability to remain a loyal NATO ally and a viable EU candidate depends on finding a formula for the country's Serbs and Montenegrins to live together in a fully independent, Western state – a goal that cannot be achieved unless Podgorica is allowed to chart its own destiny.

In fact, the morass of crises threatening the region flow from the same, unanswered challenge presented by the dissolution of Yugoslavia: defining the place of Serbs – and Serbia – in the Western order for the region. Serbia was the largest republic in Yugoslavia, is the largest state among the Western Balkans Six.¹³ Ethnic Serbs live in four different states outside Serbia: Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia. That means democratic stability in the region is inherently tied to democratic stability within Serbia. Democratic stability within Serbia brings the country into alignment with the Western order for the region, making resolution of ethno-national grievances possible without resort to partition or de facto partition (subversion.) The opposite is also true. Pursuit of the Vucic regime's 'Serb World', will render Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina unstable, and will burden relations with Croatia.

In other words, the core problem ***is that Serbia, along with its proxies in neighboring states with substantial Serb populations, does not accept the Western order for the region – and the***

¹² Athens' anxieties pertain to Turkey, to regional insecurity as a result of leaving the Kosovo issue unresolved, and to the Northern Cyprus question, not to any threat to Greece's borders via Kosovo.

¹³ "The Western Balkans are a group of countries that are targeted by the European Union enlargement policy. This group is originally constituted by Albania, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. Croatia joined the European Union in 2013, and hence is no longer targeted by the Western Balkan EU policy. Among the six remaining countries – also referred as the Western Balkan 6 (WB6) – four are candidate countries to enter the EU (Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia) and two (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) are potential candidates."

reason is Serbia's leverage over Kosovo. It is Belgrade's wholesale leverage over Pristina that keeps the Kosovo question open – and the Bosnia question, and the re-opened question of Montenegro's strategic orientation and even that country's territorial integrity. Speaking at a conference recently, a prominent former diplomat from an EU neighbor put the nexus this way: “when Belgrade says ‘Kosovo’, we hear ‘Republika Srpska’.”¹⁴

The key to democratic stability in the Balkans lies in eroding Belgrade's leverage over Kosovo:

- It is the wholesale power imbalance over Kosovo, a country that suffers from incomplete international recognition, that allows Serbia to demand ‘**compensation**’ over the loss of its former province – and to revise the ‘unjust’ outcome of the dissolution of Yugoslavia.
- It is Belgrade's ability to press for compensation – and the inability of the West to do anything about it – that distorts the entire Western posture towards Serbia, turning Washington and Brussels into weak supplicants of an anti-democratic and subversive regime.
- It is through an illiberal, ideologically-aligned Serbia that Russia and China advance their regional agendas.

In sum, Serbia's ability to demand for ‘compensation’ represents the structural obstacle to progress in the region. Corruption, maladministration, the chronic exodus of the young and skilled from the region are simultaneously severe contributing factors and symptoms of the region's deterioration. Yet none of these pathologies can be addressed effectively without tackling the ethno-national political questions. As explained in section 9 of this Part, not even ‘economic normalization’ is a substitute for the core political requirement: acceptance of the Western order across the region.

3. The Western Order for the Balkans:

Democratic Rights versus Ethno-National ‘Compensation’

The Western order rests on respect for *existing* borders and the sovereignty of all states in the Balkans. Ethno-national grievances, including those of minority Serbs¹⁵, are addressed through the exercise of democratic rights, not compensatory ethno-territorial separation (whether overt partition or de facto control of neighboring territories and states.) The NATO security and EU economic, institutional, legal, and values umbrellas – and the possibility to join the foundational Euro-Atlantic organizations as full members – supply the confidence to accept the Western bargain.

The surprising truth about the flagging thirty-year US, EU and NATO effort to stem the region's fragmentation is that it works – as long as the parties accept the Western order. The twenty-year-old Ohrid Agreement in North Macedonia, the full political and societal reconciliation achieved between Montenegro and Croatia, and the role that the independent Croatian Serb

¹⁴ Prominent former diplomat speaking recently under Chatham House rules.

¹⁵ Under the Dayton Agreement, Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks are each a “constituent people”; none is a minority. Minority in this case refers to the fact that Bosnian Serbs form a minority of the overall population in BiH.

polity plays in Croatia are proof that ethno-national and ethno-religious differences – even when scarred by recent fighting – can be overcome. Wide gaps of trust¹⁶, aggravated by corruption and maladministration, may still plague these countries, *but ethno-national differences no longer stand as insurmountable obstacles to progress.*

By contrast, the tense stand-off in Montenegro shows that sharing a religion, and having no recent history of fighting, is no guarantee of ethno-national harmony – where there is no consensus on the over-arching order. The independent identity of Montenegrins, and the country's sovereignty, rest wholly on incorporation into the institutions of the West. Without the Western anchor, Montenegrins can become a regional subset of the massively larger Serbian Orthodox population.

Montenegro's destiny, including its reform process, hinges on whether the two dominant groups, ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs, can devise a formula to live together in a sovereign, Western-oriented state. As long as Montenegro's far more powerful and larger neighbor, Serbia, actively seeks to undermine the Western order, Montenegro will never achieve the thorough reform it needs – no matter how sincere (or not) the current government in Podgorica may be about its agenda and its NATO and EU commitments.¹⁷

The point is that while the region's ethno-national tensions are rooted in complex socio-historical factors, the exploitation of those differences is a function of national power and strategic orientation. To illustrate, Bulgaria and Serbia are each locked in similar campaigns to subvert the identities of their smaller, co-religionist neighbors, the Macedonians and Montenegrins. The campaigns are propelled not by arcane, emotional questions of history, language and state church, but as a function of state power. In Bulgaria's case, power flows from Sofia's membership in the consensus-based European Union; in Serbia's case, power flows from Belgrade's grip on Kosovo, which allows Serbia, uniquely among other EU aspirants in the region, to rebuff and hinder the Western order.

But even the exercise of national power can be constrained by acceptance of the Western order. Like Bulgaria, Greece held wholesale leverage over then-Republic of Macedonia (or, 'FYRoM', as the country was also, humiliatingly, called.) In 2008, Athens blocked the Alliance's offer of NATO membership to Skopje. A decade later, former Greek Prime Minister Alexis [Tsipras](#) grasped that the growing Turkish threat required closer alignment with the US and its Western allies. Instead of demanding one-way 'compensation' from its northern neighbor, Athens engaged in serious, UN- and US-mediated negotiations with Skopje, ultimately ceding use of the all-important word, 'Macedonian' to newly-named North Macedonia. For its part, Skopje was led for the first time in a decade by a Western-oriented figure, former Prime Minister Zoran Zaev. The result of this shared

¹⁶ The dispute between Croatia and Montenegro over the Prevlaka Peninsula is still not resolved, yet poses no bar to open collaboration and warm relations between the two countries.

¹⁷ Many Serbian citizens, not just the country's leaders, have excoriated the long-time rule of Milo Djukanovic, President of Montenegro. The systemic corruption, cronyism and nepotism of Djukanovic's ruling Democratic Party of Socialists alienated many of Montenegro's citizens, not just Serbs, from Western institutions. But Djukanovic's Western orientation is what turned Montenegro on the path of reform in the first place, beginning in 2000 with the apology to Croatia for the bombing of Dubrovnik. Djukanovic's rule has depended on coalitions with other parties following competitive elections – which do not exist anymore in Serbia. Even Djukanovic's over-reach in the 2019 Law on Religious Property was the subject of effective mediation by the EU. In contrast, EU mediators have been ineffective in bridging differences between the ruling parties in Serbia and the opposition.

embrace of the Western security, economic, regulatory and values order for the region was the 2018 [Prespa Agreement](#).

The Western alignment of Albania and Croatia also impose strong constraints on their respective ability to promote ‘Greater Albania’ and ‘Greater Croatia,’ as explained in the final section of Part I.

Unfortunately, Belgrade, an ersatz EU candidate, is estranged from the Western order, while Sofia, a weak, corrupt and Russia-oriented EU member, exploits the Western order. Fundamentally, the West lacks leverage – or the will to mobilize it – over either capital.

4. Kosovo and Serbian ‘Compensation’ in Bosnia-Herzegovina¹⁸: *Power & Vulnerability*

The difference between the Bulgaria and Serbia cases is that the West is aware of Bulgaria’s abusive leverage over North Macedonia, while the Vucic regime has persuaded the US and EU that it is a ‘partner.’

In one sense, Belgrade’s manipulation of Western capitals is puzzling. The Serbian President has made the demand for compensation over Kosovo an express feature of policy. Following a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in June 2020, Vucic [stated](#), “In reply to a possible offer (to Serbia) to recognize Kosovo and that Kosovo enters the UN, *and we receive nothing in return*, except EU membership, our answer would be ‘no.’” Vucic’s equally explicit rejection of a compensatory offer of EU membership – which the EU cannot grant – reinforces the point. Belgrade insists on compensation for Kosovo, within in the region, not in Brussels.

The demand for compensation is a function of leverage, not the well-known provisions in Serbia’s [Constitution](#) asserting sovereignty over Kosovo or Belgrade’s dubious ‘legal claim’ over its former province.¹⁹ Without the absolute leverage it holds over Kosovo – the ability to block Kosovo’s path to wider international recognition – Constitutional, legal and even political obstacles evaporate. This centrality of Kosovo to regime power and objectives explains why Belgrade has made the isolation of Pristina its top policy priority. “The issue of *Kosovo is the main political-security challenge for Serbia*,” declared Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola [Selakovic](#) in a recent meeting with the Greek Army Chief of Staff Konstantinos Floros.

During 2021 alone, Belgrade’s bid to isolate Kosovo has taken senior Serbian officials on an odyssey from [Iran](#) to [Suriname](#), as well as across [Africa](#), mainly in the service of the ‘non-recognition campaign.’ In October, anxiety over the evolving Greek position on Kosovo, brought Ivica Dacic, the former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister and now Speaker of Parliament, to [Athens](#) in a bid to shore up support. Dacic was unequivocal about the stakes: “Our job is to keep that topic [non-recognition of Kosovo] active all the time and ask that kind of question *because it is of great significance to us*.”

¹⁸ For simplicity, this report uses ‘Bosnia-Herzegovina’ instead of the official ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina.’

¹⁹ Kosovo’s 2008 declaration of independence was adjudicated by the International Court of Justice in an [Advisory Opinion](#) issued in 2010. As noted in Part II of this report, Serbia’s continuing legal claim rests chiefly on the argument that the ICJ ‘narrowly’ ruled that Kosovo’s declaration of independence – not its statehood – violated neither international law nor the relevant UN Security Council resolution. As noted in Part II of this report, the ‘narrowness’ argument overlooks an array of questions.

The question is what is the real significance of Kosovo to the regime?

As the historio-mythic cradle of the Serbian nation, Kosovo has served varying roles for all post-Yugoslav Serbian governments. Former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic exploited Kosovo as an *opportunity* for the dictator to seize power in Serbia and spark the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia.

For the successor Serbian governments, Kosovo was an *obstacle* to the full embrace of the Western order. It was the Prime Minister Vojislav [Kostunica](#) who proclaimed, “Kosovo is ours”, and who engineered the change to Serbia’s Constitution in order to “defend Kosovo with all democratic and legal means.” In the wake of Kosovo’s 2008 independence, pro-Western President Boris [Tadic](#) turned to Moscow, engineering the sale of Serbia’s state oil company to Russia’s Gazprom the same year. Even the slain Serbian Prime Minister Zoran [Djindjic](#), a courageous and dedicated reformer, appeared to support the partition of Kosovo.

The difference from the current regime ruling Serbia is that all of the (post-Milosevic) predecessor governments envisioned Serbia as a democracy, and sought to preserve Serbian dignity on Kosovo while advancing Serbia’s integration into the West. Djindjic, for example, wanted to accelerate the resolution of the Kosovo issue to speed Serbia’s emergence from war into the Western democratic order. None of these leaders, including the hardline Kostunica, sought to take Serbia backwards, reviving the Milosevic ‘Greater Serbia’ agenda.

For Vucic, Kosovo is the crucial *enabler* for the regime to revise the Western order, allowing Belgrade to evade Western scrutiny, and eviscerate the fledgling, weak democracy that his predecessors left Vucic. Rather than a display of regime power, *Belgrade’s virulent ‘non-recognition campaign’ exposes its unique dependence on Kosovo.* As Foreign Minister, Dacic had explained that accumulating non-recognitions was essential to keep Kosovo out of the UN. Indeed, in October 2021, Serbian [media](#) boasted that the Belgrade-hosted convention of non-aligned countries offered up “120 votes [against Kosovo membership] in the United Nations ...!” as part of the “battle for Kosovo.”

In fact, this quest is unnecessary to protect the Serbian position. As Dacic, Vucic and other officials know, there can be [no vote](#) on Kosovo’s membership in the UN General Assembly until the Security Council approves Kosovo’s application, where Serbia has the ironclad veto of two Permanent Members, Russia and China. The Russian and Chinese blockade of Kosovo is no ‘favor’ to Belgrade, subject to whim; rather, freezing out Kosovo freezes Western strategy in Kosovo and the region, a core interest shared by Moscow and Beijing. If anything, Vucic has to worry that Russian President Vladimir Putin will continue to block Kosovo’s entry into the UN, even after a settlement.

Belgrade’s non-recognition campaign is both proof of the regime’s aggressive revisionism and its vulnerability. On the one hand, Serbia’s intention to block Kosovo in the UN even after a settlement – which is what Belgrade has implied – amounts to bad faith in the EU-led Dialogue. The non-recognition campaign also violates the spirit of Serbia’s commitments as an EU candidate and the letter of its [Berlin Process commitments](#). The campaign is worthy of Western

[sanction](#),²⁰ not the tacit legitimacy accorded the non-recognition campaign under the ‘Washington Agreement.’²¹

On the other hand, Vucic, Dacic, Selakovic all grasp that *without leverage over Kosovo, the regime’s multifaceted charade is not sustainable*. Without the means to confound the West, the regime no longer gets a free pass, and instead, finally becomes accountable to the same standards on its regional and domestic activities as its neighbors.

The same mix of Kosovo-based opportunism (revising the ‘unjust’ outcomes of the wars) and anxiety (over losing the required leverage) drives the Serb posture towards Bosnia-Herzegovina. Without any basis in law or fact,²² long-time Bosnian Serb leader Dodik [has repeatedly linked secession of](#) Republika Srpska to the independence of Kosovo. It is no coincidence that Dodik has, from the outset, zeroed in on [recognition](#) of Kosovo by third-countries (as opposed to Pristina’s declaration) as the animating factor for Republika Srpska’s own independence.

Unlike Kosovo, a separate Republika Srpska can exist only in connection, formal or informal, to Serbia. The war-time Republika Srpska was carved out through the purposeful, even genocidal attempted destruction of the multi-ethnic Bosnian state, as part of the ‘Greater Serbia’ project, not a serious vision for self-standing existence.²³ This is fundamentally different from the Kosovo case.²⁴ Kosovo did, can and does exist without a parallel attachment to Albania. Pristina’s independence emerged without ‘Greater Albania’ orchestration from Tirana.²⁵

No matter how much independent support Dodik receives from the Kremlin, neither Banja Luka nor even Moscow can effect a separatist agenda without the complicity of Belgrade. Vucic’s theatrical ‘[restraint](#)’ over Dodik’s repeated threats to secede is evidence: a demonstration of

²⁰ See Wilson Center [article](#) by Edward P. Joseph, *A Way Out of the Balkans Morass: Restoring US and EU Leverage in the Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue* for a parallel EU and NATO means of confronting Serbia’s non-recognition campaign and Kosovo’s promotion of union of Kosovo and Albania.

²¹ The Trump Administration brokered a “moratorium” in which Belgrade would suspend the campaign in exchange for Pristina halting new applications to join international organizations. Effectively, the US established an equivalence between the two utterly incomparable acts, effectively making Washington the guarantor of Kosovo’s international isolation.

²² Among the reasons why there is no link between Kosovo’s independence and the secession of Republika Srpska: first, Kosovo was never a part of Bosnia-Herzegovina, so Republika Srpska, which is in Bosnia-Herzegovina, has no standing to make any claim related to Kosovo; second, Serbia also has no basis to impute a linkage between Kosovo and Republika Srpska, as Belgrade is a signatory to the Dayton Agreement, which includes no reference whatsoever to Kosovo in the text or [UN transmittal documents](#). Nor was Kosovo part of the negotiations at or in the run-up Dayton, unlike for example, the status of Eastern Slavonia in Croatia. Third, Dodik has never offered to rescind the claim to secession of Republika Srpska, if Kosovo withdraws its independence. Fourth, unlike the Bosnian Serbs, Kosovar Albanians were never offered commensurate political rights within Serbia, as part of offers to restore Kosovo’s autonomy, nor do ethnic Albanians in the Presevo Valley enjoy special rights remotely comparable to those of Bosnian Serbs. The only parallel between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo is the war-time effort by Serbia to subjugate both countries, and regime effort to subvert the independence of both countries.

²³ The break-away Republika Srpska in Bosnia and its fraternal twin, Republika Srpska Krajina in Croatia, provided distance and deniability for former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, while advancing ‘Greater Serbia.’

²⁴ While Kosovar Albanians meted out disgraceful, even [organized](#) post-war [violence](#), the ferocity, scale and organization cannot be compared to war-time Serb actions in [Bosnia-Herzegovina](#) or [Kosovo](#). Inter-communal relations have improved since the 2008 declaration of independence. In its latest five-year ‘Community Rights Assessment [Report](#), released in June 2021, OSCE states: “Inter-ethnic relations have improved since the last reporting period. Significant divisions continue to exist between the Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb community, but social and institutional interaction has been enhanced and no cases of collective or major interethnic violence has occurred.”

²⁵ Weak Albania could do virtually nothing to support its ethnic kin in Kosovo during the years of Serbian repression under Milosevic. It was only accidentally, following the riots over the pyramid scheme in 1997, that arms flowed privately from Albania to the Kosovo Liberation Army.

Belgrade's authority over the Serb entity; and a charade meant to burnish the Serbian autocrat's credentials as a 'needed partner', without altering Bosnia's trajectory. Whatever their [differences](#) in ego and tactics, Vucic and Dodik are [aligned](#) on the strategy to keep Bosnia-Herzegovina divided and dysfunctional.²⁶ This is why US sanctions on Banja Luka alone, not Belgrade, have limited effect. (Vucic has [criticized](#) the sanctions Washington imposed last week on Dodik.)

5. The Swift Impact from Eroding Serbian Leverage on Kosovo

Convergence removes Serbian leverage by eroding the regime's ability to isolate Kosovo. As the non-recognizers join their fellow NATO and EU colleagues in opening Pristina's access to, for starters, NATO's Partnership for Peace or membership in Interpol – and ultimately to NATO and the EU themselves – Serbian leverage evaporates. Instead of Western pressure or threats, convergence means that Belgrade will no longer be unilaterally 'needed', either to 'resolve' Kosovo or to 'prevent' the dissolution of Bosnia-Herzegovina – while Belgrade does the opposite in both cases.

Even partial forward movement by the non-recognizers, particularly in NATO, would signal to Belgrade that the foundation for its charade is weak and that time is no longer on its side. The prospects for the EU-led Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina would be transformed, as would those for ending the crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Convergence would also finally expose the Vucic regime to scrutiny for its “electoral authoritarianism” at home, and its related promotion of Russian and Chinese interests, in the region and internationally. Convergence would swiftly diminish Moscow's and Beijing's ability to protect the Serbian position on Kosovo, drawing the curtains on Belgrade's charade of 'non-alignment.' Instead of its putative '[balance](#)' between East and West, Belgrade would be presented with the long-avoided reckoning over its strategic orientation.

Facing no sanctions over or demand to recognize Kosovo, Vucic would not be able to play the 'national defender' card. Instead, the Serbian President would be pilloried by the opposition for having squandered Serbian leverage over Kosovo. In turn, without the paralyzing expectations fueled by that leverage,²⁷ the Serbian public could begin to accept the need for painful compromise – as every one of its neighbors already has, including a much more powerful neighbor, Greece. This would be a true compromise – based on concessions that fully protect the Kosovo Serb minority in Kosovo – not a fake compromise based on dividing Kosovo, outright or akin to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Sooner than many imagine, the denial across Serbian media and [Serb polities](#) of the [genocide](#) perpetrated in Eastern Bosnia, and the [veneration](#) of Bosnian Serb war criminals would fade away – not out of conviction or pressure, but out of necessity. Without the leverage to revise the

²⁶ Reportedly, former Trump Special Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo Peace Negotiations, Richard [Grenell](#), met with the Serbian Ambassador to the United States Marko Djuric. Ambassador Djuric reportedly conveyed an offer from President Vucic to 'replace' Dodik with Republika Srpska President Zelka Cvijanovic. Cvijanovic herself has been at the forefront of Dodik's separatist agitation. In October, she issued a [decree](#) against the decision by the former International High Representative banning genocide denial. In December, Cvijanovic joined Dodik in strong advocacy of highly controversial [laws](#) to withdraw from Bosnian state institutions.

²⁷ A Serbian think-tank, the Belgrade Center for Security Policy (BCSP), has labeled the common Serbian position on in Kosovo (heavily influenced by the official narrative) as "[cognitive dissonance](#)": “[Serbian ...] citizens have a strong desire of returning Kosovo [to Serbia], but would not accept Kosovo Albanians having any prominent roles in public life in Serbia.”

outcomes of the wars, there would be no more profit for the regime in stoking the demand to do so. Continued promotion of 'Serb World' would become an exercise in dangerous self-parody.

As proven at other junctures in Serbia's post-war experience, pragmatic realism would triumph over illusory revisionism.²⁸ In place of compensation, Belgrade and Pristina could negotiate – with EU and US mediation – a dignified, stabilizing settlement.²⁹ As a consequence, Serbia – the government and the population at large – could finally accept the country's rightful place in the Western order, as a proud nation at peace with the other proud nations of the region, including all those where Serbs reside. The three-decade drama over the dissolution of Yugoslavia could end where it began.

6. *The Indispensable Role of the European Non-recognizers*

Many EU countries – and the five non-recognizers themselves – do not see the EU 5 as the principal obstacle to Western aims in the Balkans. To the contrary, it appears as if other EU capitals are the real problem, like Paris, which alone blocked North Macedonia from opening EU accession negotiations in 2019 after Skopje had taken heroic steps to comply with EU demands. Nor are the EU 5 countries -- Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece and Cyprus – the ones that deny Kosovo visa liberalization. Nor are the EU 5 leading the fight against EU enlargement.

Even on the issue of Kosovo itself, senior EU officials note that all EU 5 capitals support the Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina.³⁰ Formally, the EU 5 (except for Greece) share the Russian position on 'international law' concerning Belgrade's 'rights', and, like Moscow and Beijing refuse to recognize Pristina; informally, the EU 5 differ from Russia and China in seeking a settlement of the Kosovo issue.

Nonetheless, the good intentions of the EU 5 only obscure their negative role. It is the *effect* of the non-recognizers' stance, not their intentions, that blocks the EU-led Dialogue by creating the paralyzing structural imbalance. *Distilled to its essence, the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo pivots on the **status quo**:*

- The *status quo* – partial recognition, widespread isolation of Kosovo – is *abhorrent to Pristina*, inflicting severe political, economic and social costs and insecurity on the country, no matter which government is in power in Pristina.
- The *status quo* – an isolated and weak Kosovo – is *beneficial to Belgrade*, both insulating Belgrade from Western scrutiny over its domestic and regional agendas, and ensuring that

²⁸ As noted above, the record shows that the Serbian narrative on war crimes oscillates. When Serbia is aligned with the Western order, Serbian leaders have shown willingness to acknowledge the facts of the wars, and responsibility for the actions taken by war-time Serb figures. is subject to substantial change. In addition to the 2004 apology by former President of Republika Srpska Dragan Cavic, noted above, the Serbian Parliament in 2010 issued an apology for Srebrenica that tacitly recognized the genocide perpetrated there. According to the respected human rights lawyer, Natasa Kandic: "This state has [recognized the genocide](#) and accepted responsibility for it under the condition that it does not use the word 'genocide,' but rather, camouflaged it with a reference to the ruling of the International Court of Justice."

²⁹ As Vice-President, Biden went far to demonstrate US interest in positive relations with Serbia. In an August, 2016 visit to Belgrade, then VP Biden offered [condolences](#) for Serbs killed in the 1999 NATO air campaign. The US and EU have strongly backed the creation and effectiveness of the [Specialist Chambers](#) in the Hague, particularly as a means of justice for Serb victims of war crimes committed by ethnic Albanians.

³⁰ Private meeting of Edward P. Joseph with senior EU officials in October, 2021.

any Kosovo settlement – or settlement in Bosnia-Herzegovina or Montenegro – is on terms favorable to the regime. Indeed, having no settlement at all with Pristina, is the optimal outcome for Belgrade, as long it is not blamed for the deadlock.

In conflict management terms, the Kosovo dispute is not ‘ripe’ for resolution because there is no [‘mutually hurting stalemate.’](#) Serbia simply does not have the same interest in a negotiated outcome as Kosovo, because it is Pristina that bears the pain of the stand-off. Like the stand-off between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, it is one side that bears nearly all the cost of having no settlement. The fact that the weaker side – whether Pristina or Skopje – bears the cost is the leverage.

It is true that the *status quo* – no settlement – also imposes a cost on Kosovo Serbs. But Belgrade does not care about this cost; if it did, it would not tolerate organized crime in the north of Kosovo, as it does. Nor would President Vucic have negotiated Kosovo’s partition that citizens in the south of Kosovo, such as the longtime leader of the Serbian Orthodox community, [Father Sava Janjic](#), vocally opposed.

Because “normalization” of relations between Kosovo and Serbia is a requirement for EU membership, Western officials assert that Belgrade also has an interest in a settlement. As explained below, the reforms needed to join the EU are inimical to the regime’s character and its interest.

The reversal of this destructive dynamic – Serbia’s wholesale leverage advantage fueling exalted expectations and extortionate demands that debilitate the West, and leave Kosovo and the region in perpetual stagnation – is in the hands of the European non-recognizers. They, not Russia and China with their UN vetoes, control Serbian leverage. The utility of the Russian and Chinese vetoes largely evaporates with a change in stance of the non-recognizers.

At present, the EU 5 and NATO 4 block Kosovo’s path to much more important institutions: the EU and particularly, NATO. UN membership is not a precondition to joining either the EU or NATO (under either the EU’s Lisbon Treaty or NATO’s Atlantic Charter) but consensus is. EU candidacy status, the opening of accession negotiations with Brussels and accession as an EU member require a unanimous decision by all EU member states. Similarly, within the Alliance “the principle of consensus is applied at every committee level, which implies that [all NATO decisions](#) are collective decisions made by its member countries.”

On the EU side, full EU 5 recognition of Kosovo would provide Pristina with the same pathway to accession that Belgrade enjoys. The stalemate would no longer inflict serious costs on only one side; instead, there would be equilibrium in the Dialogue, as Kosovo emerged from Serb-, Russian- and Chinese-imposed isolation. The EU and US could finally play the role of honest broker as Serbia and Kosovo would each have an interest in a negotiated outcome, making the dispute ‘ripe’ for settlement. Serbia and Kosovo could ‘attain good neighborly relations’, and after completing required EU reforms, join the Union.

7. The Indispensable Role of NATO Accession- and Partnership for Peace – for Kosovo

For seven reasons, **NATO accession for Kosovo** is even more critical for Kosovo – and for the US and its allies – than either UN or EU membership. Even inclusion of Kosovo into NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP), would immediately stabilize the unstable Serbia-Kosovo disequilibrium.

First, a pathway to NATO membership provides Kosovo with what it needs most: security and international personality.

Kosovo’s immediate challenge is not ‘lack recognition from Serbia’; it is escape from the insecurity that Serbia’s isolation inflicts. At present, a cloud of uncertainty hangs over the country, burdening relations between the majority Kosovar Albanians and the minority Kosovo Serb community, as well as with neighbors like Bosnia-Herzegovina, with regional, European and international organizations, and with foreign investors. [Organized crime](#) thrives in the north of Kosovo, an area over which Pristina does not have effective control, exacerbating the organized problem in the south as well.

The insecurity inflicted by Serbia is not only political and economic. Serbia’s largest military base is in the Presevo Valley of Southern Serbia, bordering Kosovo. Serbia’s is undergoing a prodigious [military build-up](#). Belgrade’s September 2021 show of force, in response to Pristina’s special police deployment to the north, may not always be just show. Despite the presence of the KFOR mission, the incentive for a limited incursion in the north of Kosovo grows as Serbia’s springtime elections approach. The Russian Ambassador, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, can again be expected to provide voluble [support](#) for Belgrade, and to again issue a challenge to NATO.

NATO membership supplies security to Kosovo as a sovereign state, defended by its own Army backed up by the Article 5 guarantee. Instead of international limbo, Kosovo would enjoy the status, security and sovereignty of membership in the world’s most powerful military alliance, dwarfing the benefits of UN membership. Kosovo would no longer face existential uncertainty, aggressed by a larger and more powerful neighbor. Partition scenarios would be rendered moot.

The positive repercussions would be felt years before Kosovo joined the Alliance. As soon as the four non-recognizers lift their blockade of Kosovo’s pathway to NATO, Serbia’s policy of isolating and weakening Kosovo would be defunct. The intense, pervasive desire to join NATO across the Kosovar Albanian polity would accelerate the pace of reform, as Pristina raced to meet NATO membership criteria. Kosovo’s bilateral relations would expand, also expanding its ability to trade and attract investment.

Bringing Kosovo into [Partnership for Peace](#), a “programme of bilateral cooperation ... [with] NATO,” would be a significant interim step, not requiring recognition by the NATO 4. PfP membership would send a strong signal of the Alliance’s growing relationship with Kosovo, and inject a sense of confidence and resilience among citizens and officials alike. This would minimize the need for uncoordinated actions like the deployments of special police units to the north, boosting confidence among Kosovo Serbs as well, diminishing Belgrade’s wholesale grip on the

Serb polity. Precisely because it depends on the assent of the NATO 4, Kosovo's membership in PfP would erode Belgrade's leverage within the Dialogue, improving negotiating dynamics.

Second, a NATO pathway for Kosovo addresses an existing Alliance vulnerability, without compromising KFOR's mission.

As the September license plate stand-off demonstrated, NATO credibility is already on the line in Kosovo. Any steps towards convergence by the NATO 4, including bringing Kosovo into PfP or the redeployment of troops from Spain and Slovakia to KFOR, would boost Alliance deterrence.

KFOR's mission would continue unchanged by convergence. NATO states that the KFOR mandate "derives from UN Security Council Resolution [1244](#) and the Military-Technical Agreement between NATO, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia [['the Kumanovo Agreement'](#)]." Neither document specifically invokes the term 'status neutrality,' although NATO and KFOR officials have stated that the mission is "status neutral vis a vis the [institutions](#) of Kosovo."

In practice, KFOR has steadily increased its cooperation with those institutions, crossing a threshold in 2011 with the deployment of logistical support for Kosovo customs agents – backed by armored Kosovo special police units – at the border with Serbia. Belgrade [protested](#) the decisions as "outside the status neutral framework of the United Nations." A similar deployment by Pristina this fall, drew the noted furious Serbian, and Russian-backed, response. KFOR was again able to deploy, this time without Serbian protest.

In 2018, Kosovo passed a law establishing a national army, with a specific territorial defense mandate that went beyond the current mandate of the Kosovo Security Forces [KSF.] Former NATO Secretary-General Jens [Stoltenberg](#) stated that "the change of mandate [would force] ... the North Atlantic Council to re-examine the level of NATO's engagement with [KSF.]" Despite NATO's political reaction, active KFOR support to KSF has continued. The US has been a strong supporter of the new Kosovo Army. Most significantly, there has been no change in KFOR's trusting relationship with the Kosovo Serb community.

With Kosovo in PfP or even with NATO candidacy and a Membership Action Program, KFOR could continue initially to collaborate with the existing KSF support only, before eventually working with the Kosovo Army. The only true barrier to a growing relationship between the Alliance and Kosovo is the NATO 4.

Third, Russia cannot block renewal of the KFOR mandate.

Unlike the original IFOR and follow-on SFOR and EUFOR mandates in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the NATO KFOR mandate is neither time-limited nor subject to Security Council review. Moscow cannot leverage a veto threat over the KFOR mandate as Russia (and China) recently did over the [EUFOR mandate](#) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, extracting concessions related to the High Representative authority in the country.

Fourth, unlike the EU experience, there is precedent for NATO accession without UN membership.

Italy and Portugal (in 1949), and West Germany (in 1955), all joined the Alliance [before](#) they were members of the UN. The three precedents bolster Washington's appeal to its allies over Kosovo.

Given Russia's and China's staunch anti-NATO positions stemming from the 1999 air campaign, Putin's constant insistence on UN Security Council supremacy over Kosovo, and the shared Sino-Russian interest in blocking Kosovo today, it is in Alliance interests to jettison any notion of UN primacy.³¹

Fifth, NATO accession for Kosovo is more feasible than EU accession – and a catalyst for wider EU enlargement. Forward movement by the NATO 4 does not create complications for the fifth European non-recognizer, Cyprus.

Addressing Kosovo in NATO, as opposed to the EU, reduces the number of required non-recognizers from 5 to 4, as Cyprus is not a member of the Alliance. NATO's decision-making process is much less cumbersome than at the EU. Decisions can be taken at any time, as “there is [no voting at NATO](#)” and the “negotiation process [between members] is [generally] rapid...”

An invitation for Kosovo to join PfP is a decision of NATO governments, requiring no ratification by member parliaments.

NATO membership for Kosovo would catalyze the moribund EU stance on enlargement for the region. NATO has served as the de facto precursor for every country that has joined the EU since the fall of the Berlin Wall, except for Malta and Cyprus. Kosovo's entry, first into PfP, and eventually into the Alliance would stabilize the region, and restore the lost sense that the region's destiny is in near-term EU membership. As noted below, convergence would open the possibility for Serbian membership in NATO.

A positive decision for Kosovo at NATO, even on membership, is not a negative outcome for Cyprus. Nicosia's own pathway to NATO is blocked by Ankara. Turkey, unlike Russia, is a strong supporter of Kosovo, and competes with the US for influence in Pristina, Sarajevo and across the Muslim polities in the Balkans. Ankara recently announced its own bid to boost international [recognition](#) of Kosovo, despite Pristina's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, under the Washington Agreement. Turkey's unshakable alignment with Kosovo constrains Ankara from even attempting to exploit in Northern Cyprus, recognition of Kosovo by Athens or even Nicosia.

This means any abuse of convergence by Turkey would immediately damage its relations with Pristina and Tirana, as well as its influence in Sarajevo. Instead of 'neo-Ottoman' aspirations, Turkey will have aligned itself with Russia and Serbia, severely alienating the Western-oriented Muslim polities in the region.

Sixth, the time-frame for joining NATO is far shorter than to join the EU.

In contrast to the EU, NATO expressly states that “there is no fixed or rigid list of criteria for inviting new members to join the Alliance.” Instead, NATO sets out a broad list of expectations including, notably, “shared democratic values and thereby curbing the countervailing tendency towards disintegration along ethnic and territorial lines.”³²

³¹ The 2010 [ICJ](#) Advisory Opinion “... concluded that the [Kosovo] declaration of independence did not violate [UNS Security Council] resolution 1244.”

³² NATO's Enlargement Fact Sheet sets out broad criteria including “a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy” and “fair treatment of minority populations.”

Even on military criteria alone, the Alliance states that “new members will not be required to achieve full interoperability with NATO before joining the Alliance” Further, NATO membership is a stepping stone to EU membership. All states that have joined NATO after the fall of the Berlin Wall, have also gone on to join the EU. The two exceptions, Albania and North Macedonia, are awaiting their turn, having been blocked by Bulgaria.

Seventh, unlike the EU, NATO includes the US and the UK as members, an inherent advantage in advancing the case for convergence. Both [Washington](#) and [London](#) are already strong backers of Kosovo’s nascent army. The [British Special Envoy for the Balkans, Sir Stuart Peach](#), recently stepped down as Chair of NATO’s Military Committee. London can partner with Washington on Kosovo-related efforts within the Alliance.

8. How Western Convergence over Kosovo Alters Serbia’s Strategic Calculus

Once the NATO 4 agree to on a pathway to membership for Kosovo, the value of Russian and Chinese political support to Serbia collapses. No matter how many weapons or how much Moscow or Beijing fulminate against NATO, Belgrade will be left with few countermeasures, including to foment unrest, or to use force to separate the north of Kosovo.

First, there would be no triggering event. Instead of an aggressive, uncoordinated display of force by Pristina (as witnessed recently), convergence is driven by the four states that have been stalwart supporters of Belgrade. Two of them, Greece and Romania, are co-religionists. Their sovereign decisions to recognize Kosovo – unaccompanied by any demand whatsoever for Serbia to do the same – do not supply a pretext for violent or aggressive Serbian reaction. Two other Orthodox majority states, North Macedonia and Montenegro, have recognized Kosovo, without producing any severe reaction from Serbia. Each of the four NATO non-recognizers is more powerful than those two small, neighboring states.

Second, open use of force would be a brazen challenge to an increasingly united Alliance. Belgrade would have to carefully calculate the type of response it would get when its four crucial backers in the Alliance move closer towards recognition of Kosovo. An attack could result in at least one of them moving towards outright recognition, to name one contingency. The possibility of a kinetic confrontation with NATO could not be excluded either. The Alliance would have ample justification to respond, as even fomenting protests is a blatant violation of Serbia’s obligations.

Third, the same is true of any attempt to promote ‘spontaneous’ violent or even non-violent reaction in the North of Kosovo. Under the [Kumanovo Agreement](#) Belgrade may “not encourage, organise or support hostile or provocative demonstrations.” The Agreement gives the KFOR Commander “the final authority to interpret.” Belgrade thoroughly controls the Serb polity in Kosovo, a fact demonstrated in the local elections held in October 2021 which saw ‘Srpska Lista’ (the party list answerable to the ruling SNS party in Belgrade) sweep to first-round mayoralty victories in nine of ten municipalities.

Fourth, transferring the violence to Bosnia-Herzegovina, with preemptory moves in Republika Srpska or ‘spontaneous’ incidents would also carry significant political risk for Belgrade. Its

strategy up to now has been, like Milosevic, to act as if the Bosnian Serb leadership is independent from Belgrade, which can provide ‘helpful restraint’ over its worst intentions. That game is over in the case of outright escalation in Bosnia. NATO is still engaged in Bosnia-Herzegovina as EUFOR’s over the horizon support. Croatia and Montenegro border Bosnia, and both are NATO allies, hampering Serbian (and Russian) options.

Most importantly, violent or subversive reaction by Belgrade – not least over steps by European countries friendly to Serbia – does not suit President Vucic’s interests. It would represent deliberate isolation of Serbia from the West, a highly problematic choice for the Serbian President. The majority of Serbs do not want their country to become the Belarus of the Balkans.

A united NATO (and EU) position on Kosovo would make Vucic’s pretense of “balancing” ties between the West, and Russia and China, untenable. With [two-thirds](#) of Serbia’s trade based in the EU, surrounded by EU and NATO members and aspirants, becoming ‘*Belarus of the Balkans*’ is not a viable option for the regime. Without leverage over Kosovo, Vucic would become simply another corrupt Balkan leader, shorn of the West’s legitimizing praise. The dream of entering the EU as an ersatz democracy like Hungary would be finished, boosting genuine democratic forces in Serbia. In short, the Vucic charade would be over.

In its place, the superior option of embracing the Western order would come into focus. In time, Kosovo’s NATO membership would have a paradoxical effect on Serbia, encouraging Belgrade to also consider joining the Alliance and ditching its far less useful benefactors in Moscow and Beijing. NATO membership would benefit Serbia’s prodigious [arms industry](#), and increase the sophistication of its Army, building on existing NATO- and US-Serbian military cooperation. Instead of a regional threat, Serbia would become a full partner in the Western-led framework for security.

With Serbia moving towards NATO, [Russian influence](#) would be largely extinguished, while [China](#) would lose the benefit of having Serbia as its strategic partner and chief regional promoter. Serbia’s evolution to the West would expose any continuing recalcitrance on the part of the EU over enlargement to unsustainable glare. With Serbia gravitating towards the West, the burden on the US would finally be diminished. The Balkans would be transformed.

9. Strategic Confusion: The Struggles over the EU-led Dialogue and ‘Economic Normalization’

Instead of strategic clarity about the prerequisite for democratic stability in the Balkans, Western policy in the Balkans – including notably over Kosovo – continues to be clouded by strategic confusion.

Belgrade has successfully played a multifaceted charade on Brussels and Washington, leading policymakers to believe that the regime is a ‘partner’ that can be ‘weaned’ from ‘captive’ Russian and Chinese influence through supplication, economic collaboration, and dialogue, animated by the carrot of EU membership. In turn, the conviction that there is a pathway to partnership with Belgrade has contributed to mounting frustration with Pristina. Increasingly to Western policymakers, it appears that the defiant Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti is the impediment to progress, not the Serbian President.

Kurti has given policymakers ample reason for irritation by, among other things:

- categorically [rejecting](#) the ‘Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities’ that Pristina accepted under EU mediation in 2013 and again in 2015.³³
- promoting a different type of association – [‘Union of Kosovo and Albania’](#) – in flagrant contravention to the Western order, and the Kosovo Constitution, as noted above.
- suspending development of the Trans-Adriatic [gas pipeline](#) that would challenge Russian gas dominance in the region. Kurti has snubbed other economic projects, including the ‘Open Balkans’ initiative contained in the 2020 Trump-brokered ‘Economic Normalization’ deal (Washington Agreement), that the Biden Administration has embraced.
- blatantly failing to implement the May 2016 [Constitutional Court decision](#) on returning real property belonging to the Decani Monastery. (This is a failure of the current and predecessor governments.)
- not following through on the electoral promise of conducting an internal dialogue with the Serb community to address its concerns.

In September 2021, Kurti charged the atmosphere inside Kosovo and with Serbia by [deploying](#) armored special police units to the north, without adequate coordination with the NATO peacekeeping force, KFOR. Vucic [responded](#) by deploying fighter jets and armored vehicles, including tanks, near the NATO-protected border between Serbia and Kosovo. Belgrade’s forceful response to this event – and the [hyperbolic reaction](#) to a properly-coordinated special policy deployment by Pristina in October – is a reminder of the volatility of the situation in Kosovo, as well as in Bosnia-Herzegovina. With Serbian elections slated for next Spring, it is easy to imagine escalation scenarios that would suit Belgrade – and Moscow, and inflict damage on NATO credibility and unity.

Given Kurti’s’ recalcitrance, ‘convergence’ – galvanizing support for Kosovo among the five EU non-recognizers – looks like a ‘reward’ for bad behavior, when punishment seems appropriate. To wit, the EU’s top diplomat, Josep Borrell, the High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has [repeatedly criticized](#) Pristina. Other diplomats in Brussels and in some non-recognizing capitals have insisted that Pristina needs to demonstrate good will in the EU-led Dialogue before consideration of any change in posture towards Kosovo. There is speculation that Washington could even sanction Pristina, along with Belgrade, as part of a wider bid to reverse the alarming slide in the region.

While understandable, this perspective of Western policymakers is non-strategic on both elements: punishing Pristina and ‘weaning’ Belgrade through supplication and economic incentive. The former is unnecessary and the latter is futile.

What Western policymakers have failed to grasp is that the obstacle to a Kosovo settlement is not intractable divisions between Pristina and Belgrade, but divisions within the EU itself. It is the

³³ These pledges were incorporated into the EU-led 2013 [‘Brussels Agreement’](#) between Belgrade and Pristina, mediated by the former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton. The US supported the EU-led effort.

five EU non-recognizers – regardless of their intentions – that skew the dynamics underlying the Dialogue, guaranteeing its failure, and perpetuating regional stagnation.

9.1 Coercing Pristina into collaborating with Belgrade is unnecessary.

Any government in Pristina, including the Kurti government, can readily collaborate on the Western agenda with Serbia and with Kosovo Serbs, including in the north, and including on the long-stalled ‘Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities.’

The combination of Kosovo’s international isolation, the hostility it faces from Russia and China,³⁴ and the pervasive affection for the United States makes Pristina’s Western orientation unquestionable. The opposition is currently exacting a political cost on Prime Minister Kurti over his open differences with Washington.

By his own words, Kurti is every bit the Balkan ethno-nationalist who sees ‘Greater Albania’ as the ‘correction’ of an historical injustice against the Albanian people.³⁵ Kurti’s irresponsible and provocative promotion of ‘Union of Kosovo and Albania’ is worthy of Western sanction.³⁶ While his actions on inter-ethnic relations have been a disappointment, Kurti’s words also suggest that when it comes to the Serb polity, the Kosovo Premier’s animus is not with Kosovo Serbs but with Belgrade – the capital that imprisoned and beat him during the war, and brutally expelled the majority of the population.

In stark contrast to the democratic backsliding in Serbia and other countries in Europe, Kosovo is a functioning, multi-party democracy that is advancing. Elections of February 2021 saw the Kurti government elected on a ‘jobs and justice’ platform, and the emergence of a new, reform-minded political elite, including the country’s President [Vjosa Osmani](#). A primary focus of the new government is the fight against corruption, a [struggle](#) hindered by the legacy of nepotistic appointments of public officials and protracted court cases.

Evidence of the country’s growing maturity came in November 2020, when former President [Hashim Thaci](#) resigned to face war crimes charges in the Hague. Few Kosovars bothered to protest Thaci’s resignation, even though the former President was the long-time face of the Kosovo Liberation Army and Kosovo’s struggle for independence.

Most importantly, the overall trajectory of Kosovar Albanian and Kosovo Serb relations since Pristina declared independence in 2008 is positive. International organizations with extensive field presence like OSCE have documented substantial improvement in the relations between the minority Kosovo Serb community and the vastly larger Kosovar Albanian in the years since

³⁴ Kosovo is the only country in the region with virtually no Chinese ‘investment’ (opaque, debt laden projects). Even Albania has significant investment from China.

³⁵ In a February 2021 [interview](#) with the Croatian newspaper *Jutarnji List*, Kurti stated that the Versailles Conference left “one nation ... united, i.e. the Serbs, while the other two were divided: Albanians and Bulgarians.” Kurti added that, “As Kosovo, we cannot unite with Albania without changing the Constitution, which is very difficult. On the other hand, we do not have a referendum law. But the historical idea of the Albanian people on the one hand and the interest and the will and the interest is for national unification.”

³⁶ See Wilson Center [article](#) by Edward P. Joseph, *A Way Out of the Balkans Morass: Restoring US and EU Leverage in the Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue* for a parallel EU and NATO means of confronting Serbia’s non-recognition campaign and Kosovo’s promotion of union of Kosovo and Albania.

independence.³⁷ Unlike in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbs in Kosovo still live outside of compact territory; the majority of Kosovo Serbs still live south of the Ibar River ‘surrounded’ by Kosovar Albanians. In short, the ingredients needed for today’s Kosovo Serb-Kosovar Albanian *modus vivendi* to become tomorrow’s formalized settlement are in reach, except one: equalized power of the two parties in the Dialogue.

Western frustration with Pristina is addressed by alleviating Pristina’s isolation, not by punishment (other than for promotion of ‘[union](#).’) Convergence addresses Pristina’s strategic concern – its isolation – and the tactical disadvantage it faces in the EU-led Dialogue with Belgrade. Steps like bringing Kosovo into NATO’s Partnership for Peace are equalizing, swiftly and simultaneously boosting Pristina’s international personality while diminishing Belgrade’s leverage. Diminished leverage puts the goal of mutual recognition in sight, enabling the Kurti or any Kosovo government to negotiate even the contentious ‘Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities.’

By contrast, continuing to exhort (or even coerce) Kosovo to implement the ‘Association/Community’ is unlikely to bring results. The truth is that the EU made a mistake in 2013 and 2015 by front-loading this final status issue. *No country can finalize the status of a separatist minority that controls territory, without baseline assurance of its sovereignty and territorial integrity from the neighboring state promoting separation. None of the non-recognizing countries would entertain such a notion at home, not least Cyprus.*

Even Kosovo’s former Prime Minister, the mild-mannered Avdullah Hoti, struggled with the issue of the ‘Association/Community.’ Around the region, not just in Kosovo, the ‘Association/Community’ is seen as another Republika Srpska – a device not for building inter-ethnic trust, but perpetual dysfunction and ethno-territorial separation.³⁸ There are several ways for Kosovo Serbs to enjoy administrative association fully consistent with Kosovo’s functionality³⁹, but not while the Serb polity is under control of a hostile capital, leaving Kosovo under existential uncertainty.

At present, Kosovo faces uncertainty about even the nominal goal of the EU-led Dialogue. Brussels cannot even employ the term ‘mutual recognition’ between Belgrade and Pristina, because of the position of the EU 5. Pristina has no guarantee that even in the wake of a settlement with Pristina, the five non-recognizers will recognize Kosovo, even though the five have insisted on Belgrade’s prior assent as a pre-condition.

³⁷ In its latest five-year ‘Community Rights Assessment [Report](#), released in June 2021, OSCE states: “Inter-ethnic relations have improved since the last reporting period. Significant divisions continue to exist between the Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb community, but social and institutional interaction has been enhanced and no cases of collective or major interethnic violence has occurred. Relations among the majority Kosovo Albanian community and other non-majority communities have remained functional and positive.”

³⁸ The fact that the EU-led Dialogue operates on the principle that ‘nothing is agreed until everything is agreed’ does not change this point. That principle is only relevant where each party has an interest in a negotiated outcome. As Serbia does not, and as Serbia holds leverage over all parties including Brussels, Belgrade can pocket concessions on the ‘Association/Community’ and continue to avoid concluding a settlement.

³⁹ Concessions from Belgrade and Pristina could yield an ‘Association/Community’ that fits into Kosovo’s legal, administrative and Constitutional structure. Inter-municipal collaboration between Kosovar Albanian- and Kosovo Serb-majority municipalities could foster closer inter-communal relations.

Convergence – along with an express commitment by the EU 5 for full and immediate recognition in the event of a settlement – replaces uncertainty with emerging clarity and confidence. As the non-recognizers align with the EU majority on Kosovo, Pristina is able to emerge from Belgrade’s isolation, opening up resolution of the Association/Community stumbling block and the full agenda.

9.2 Continued supplication of Belgrade and promotion of its economic prowess alone (without tackling its leverage) is counter-productive.

The Vucic regime cannot be ‘weaned’ to support the Western agenda; the regime’s policies reflect its character, and are not ‘tactical choices’, subject to alteration through incentives. The regime can become a true partner by removing the basis for its multi-faceted charade, accomplished through Western convergence over Kosovo. Facing a unifying EU-NATO-US, the regime’s strategic calculus changes and it becomes possible for Serbia to accept the Western order.

First, the formative aims of the regime are revisionist, the formation of the regime’s leaders is anti-democratic, and the formative means for the regime’s power are corrupt.

According to University of Belgrade [Professor Dusan Pavlovic](#), the regime came into power in 2012 with the aim of “start[ing] an institutional reversal ... [in order] ... to go back to the 1990s, towards a more radical version of electoral authoritarianism.” The leaders of the new government, including Vucic, themselves were veteran “political agents from the Milosevic era.”

The purpose of ‘electoral authoritarianism’ is perpetual rule, achieved by amassing control over democratic pillars of oversight and control, such as the media, the court system and the political opposition. In order to subvert competing power centers, a regime needs resources. According to Pavlovic, the Vucic regime has methodically assembled the resources to subvert competing power centers through “institutional extraction,” the systematic and corrupt diversion of state revenue streams not solely for personal enrichment, but for coopting and controlling competing bases power of power. The ‘Belivuk Affair’ exposed this summer, has shed light on the regime’s relationship with organized crime elements, a product of its systematically corrupt rule.

‘Serb World’, the bid to revive and update Milosevic’s ‘Greater Serbia’ is the extension of the regime’s formative revisionism. Delegating the promotion of ‘Serb World’ to former Defense Minister, current Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin is a transparent tactic designed to sustain Vucic’s image a ‘partner’ of the West.

Mirroring its domestic strategy, the regime has attempted to monopolize the Serb polity in neighboring states, most extensively in Kosovo. Reversing the deference shown by his predecessors, Vucic has consolidated Kosovo Serbs in the north and south of the country in an obedient and uniform political entity known as ‘Srpska Lista.’

Reversing significant steps towards recognizing the Srebrenica genocide, Serb politicians across ‘Serb World’, including Kosovo and Montenegro, have vocally denounced application of the term, genocide. Instead of letting Serb war criminals be singled out for responsibility, Belgrade has promoted a climate for their rehabilitation and open veneration. Revisionism of the war narrative is essential to revising the settlements of that era.

In other words, the regime's authoritarianism, nationalism and corruption are not just tactics, they are its *raison d'être*.⁴⁰ The entire basis for 'weaning' – positive incentives – fails, *as long as the regime is insulated from scrutiny for its corrupt, autocratic rule*. The reforms demanded by the EU as the price for membership, for example, are inimical to the regime, no matter the prosperity associated with them. The regime cannot afford to openly spurn EU membership or partnership with the West. Its optimal position is what it has now: being needed by the West, thanks to its leverage over Kosovo.

Second, charade is an essential component of the regime's rule. Instead of 'weaning' the regime with praise, Brussels and Washington are validating the charade -- legitimizing regime rule.

The "illusion of democracy" is central to hybrid-regimes, as evidenced in the rule of Vucic's EU patron, Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary. Beneath the veneer, such regimes are actually "a [travesty of democracy](#) [where] ... elections are rigged, ... media are censored (or self-censor), judges and prosecutors are blackmailed and at risk ... if they apply the law impartially, and ... corruption runs rampant."

The particular challenge for regimes like Orban's and Vucic's is that they operate in a geo-strategic context dominated by the US, NATO and EU. Budapest has exploited its membership in the EU and NATO while propagating the values of Moscow and Beijing. Hungary's protection inside the EU helps Belgrade carry out its own charade, supplying the '[Euro Realism](#)' model that Vucic embraces.

According to Viola von Cramon, the Rapporteur for Kosovo in the European Parliament, the European Commission deliberately "[water\[ed\] down](#) the Serbian 2021 Progress report on the rule of law standards in particular." Von Cramon blamed EC Commissioner for Enlargement Oliver Varhelyi, a Hungarian and "[absolute loyalist](#)" of Prime Minister Viktor Orban. It was at Varhelyi's behest, according to von Cramon, that the Commission bent critical standards for Serbia – "a blatant example of how the European Commission became politicized for the interest of the *Orbán-Vučić axis*..."

The Vucic regime has managed to persuade Western officials that it is serious about its EU candidacy (as it draws extensive benefits from Brussels), and is an overall partner for the West. This has a triple effect of:

- Legitimizing the regime's anti-democratic rule.
- Demoralizing the democratic opposition.
- Reinforcing the leverage that the regime holds over the West.

Despite Vucic's adoring [praise](#) of Russian President Vladimir [Putin](#) and Chinese President [Xi Jin Ping](#), US officials have repeatedly hailed the regime as "the political and economic leader in the region." The US Ambassador to Serbia drew criticism from activists and the opposition after

⁴⁰ See, for example, Branislav Radeljic, "What Europeanization? Getting Away with Corruption in the Progressivists-Dominated Serbia," in Vladimir Djordjević and Vladimir Vučković (eds), *Balkanizing Europeanization: Fight against Corruption and Regional Relations in the Western Balkans*, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019, 129–150.

telling Interior Minister Vulin how well the Serbian police handled protests during the summer of 2020.⁴¹ US officials have repeatedly urged the opposition to participate in structurally unfair Serbian elections, undermining the only leverage that opposition leaders hold to extract concessions: the threat of another election boycott. Washington could simply have stayed silent, boosting European Parliament mediation between governing and opposition parties.⁴²

The Vucic regime's pervasive "institutional extraction" has been the beneficiary of deafening silence from the US. Meanwhile, officials do not hesitate to call out and even [sanction](#) Serbia's neighbors for corruption, a top Biden Administration priority. On a visit to the region this month, the US Special Envoy to the Western Balkans, Gabriel Escobar, lashed out at Bosnian officials, stating categorically that "the problem in Bosna-Herzegovina is not ethnic, but systemic [corruption](#)...."

EU officials also habitually praise the same Belgrade regime that routinely lambastes the EU – by far Serbia's largest donor and the bloc responsible for two-thirds of Serbia's trade – while lionizing the contributions of Russia and China. In the most notorious example, Belgrade slammed the EU for its stumbles at the outset of the pandemic and during the rollout of the vaccine, while shrewdly acquiring a host of vaccines and offering them around the region – all while accepting generous EU assistance.

The prospect that behind the scenes, officials are 'getting tough' with Vucic, giving the autocrat 'one last chance to prove himself', is dubious. As Brussels gave Serbia a pass on core rule of law standards, Washington reversed its publicly-declared position on excluding Serbia from the December 'Summit for Democracy. The about-face came immediately after the Administration relented on the exclusion of Kosovo, reinforcing the message that the West 'needs' Belgrade over Kosovo.' The 'Summit' afforded the autocratic Vucic an international platform to tout his government's "[full] commit[ment] to European values, [democratic principles](#) and the rule of law." In the regime's latest anti-democratic move, Serbia's Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin justified police response to recent [environmental protests](#) by likening the growing citizen movement to "[color revolutions](#)" – a stock phrase of the Kremlin.

Third, the Vucic regime is not interested in joining the EU, except on Hungary-like terms. Nor is the regime influenced by its military cooperation with the US and NATO.

In the eight years since it opened its EU [candidacy](#), the ruling regime now led by Vucic has opened only about half of the thirty-five Acquis Communautaire chapters required for membership. It has been two years since the regime has opened any new chapters. In comparison, [Montenegro](#) has opened thirty-three chapters in the nine-plus years since it opened its EU accession negotiations. In contrast with Belgrade's indifference, Tirana and Skopje remain desperate for the right to open their EU candidacies, despite serial EU betrayal. Kosovo remains committed to the EU and NATO paths despite the fact that its population has been denied the same rights to travel within the EU as its neighbors, even after having fulfilled the criteria for visa liberalization.

⁴¹ See articles in Beta News Agency published on 9 November 2020: *US Ambassador Asked to Clarify Alleged Statements on Serbia's 'Police Restraint'*; and *Serbia's Opposition to US Envoy: Where Did You See Police Restraint During Protest?*

⁴² The value of creating space for the democratic opposition in Serbia was illustrated this month when [demonstrations](#) against the environmentally dubious [Rio Tinto](#) lithium mining project caused the regime to, at least temporarily, drop the project.

Serbia continues to flout the EU's common and foreign security policy, most egregiously by its support for Russia over Ukraine, its hesitancy over Belarus, and its enthusiasm over China's actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. In addition to voluble public support for Moscow and Beijing from President Vucic, Serbia has repeatedly joined the likes of Venezuela, Syria and Iran in [voting against](#) a UN resolution calling for Russian withdrawal from Crimea.

The US and NATO have long-standing military cooperation with Serbia, which is a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace. The Ohio National Guard has [trained](#) with Serbian military counterparts for over 15-years. When US troops deploy to Serbia, they enjoy immunity that Russian troops, on extended deployment, do not receive. US and NATO officials sometimes boast that Belgrade has conducted more exercises annually with NATO members than with Russia.

Yet, when tensions erupted in the north of Kosovo in September 2021, Belgrade brought [Russian Ambassador](#) Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko near the border with Kosovo, to speak to Serbian troops and challenge NATO, as fighter jets and armor were deployed near the border. Serbia is undergoing a prodigious [military buildup](#) thanks to Russia, Belarus and, more recently, China.

Fourth, the regime is not 'balancing' between the West, and Russia & China. The regime is aligned with Moscow and Beijing. The alignment is stable, grounded in shared authoritarian values, and not merely a tactic to extract benefits like vaccines or Chinese 'investment.'

Contrary to reports of a 'rupture' between Moscow and Belgrade⁴³, Vucic has assiduously nurtured the relationship with the Kremlin, evidenced by the meeting in [Sochi](#) in November 2021 between the Serbian President and Vladimir Putin – Vucic's 19th meeting with the Russian leader. Belgrade continues to heap praise on [Putin](#), as well as on Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#), whose image features on billboards around Serbia. Belgrade has consistently accommodated Russia on [sanctions](#) and other major issues, particularly in President Vucic's mutually [supportive appearances](#) with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei [Lavrov](#).

The concept that Vucic is a 'new Tito', executing an updated 'non-alignment' policy is false. Tito promoted his own model; Vucic promotes the Hungarian model of authoritarianism aligned with Moscow and Beijing. To underscore the point, Belgrade gave [Lavrov](#) a prominent speaking slot at the 'meeting of the non-aligned' that Serbia hosted in October.

Belgrade has forged a stable understanding with the Kremlin on Serbia's relations with the West, including its 'interest' in joining the EU and, crucially, on Kosovo. Moscow evidently sees no threat from Serbia's position on Kosovo. Following a meeting with Lavrov in July 2020, Vucic declared that any solution to the Kosovo dispute would have to be acceptable to Moscow and Belgrade. Putin, and other Russian officials, Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko have repeatedly voiced support for Serbia's position on Kosovo, and for the EU's Dialogue.⁴⁴ This uncharacteristic [Russian support](#) for a Western-led diplomatic venture in which the Kremlin is not a party is

⁴³ Analysts have cited Belgrade's criticism of 'pro-Russian groups' during anti-government demonstrations in the summer of 2020, and Moscow's humiliation of Vucic after his sycophantic performance in former US President Donald Trump's Oval Office in September of that year as examples of a putative 'rupture.'

⁴⁴ See, for example, *Foreign Minister Selakovic: 'Serbia strongly committed to development of relations with Russia'*, FoNet News Agency, 13 March 2021.

perhaps the strongest proof that the Dialogue, as currently structured, cannot achieve its stated goal.

The Vucic regime has also forged a stable relationship with China. As Beijing's declared "[strategic partner](#)", Sino-Serbian cooperation goes far beyond large Belt and Road infrastructure projects. At its own behest, not Beijing's, Belgrade is avidly pursuing military, security, and even cultural cooperation. Following the Trump-brokered Washington Agreement, Belgrade suspended its 5G cooperation with [Huawei](#) -- while announcing [expansion](#) of Serbia's relationship with the Chinese technology giant. Vucic has openly defied his Washington Agreement commitment to "diversify energy supplies," completing a key section of pipeline for Russian gas, and winning a pledge from Putin in [Sochi](#) on gas pricing.

Fifth, the center-piece of 'weaning' -- 'economic normalization' -- cannot succeed without convergence.

At his first press conference, President Biden defined the central challenge for his Administration: "[proving democracy works.](#)" By frequently touting the economic prowess -- and "economic leadership" of the Vucic regime, Administration diplomats are proving that autocracy works.

Serbian economist, Professor Goran Radosavljevic believes that much of the ballyhooed growth of his country's economy under Vucic is a charade: "Distribution of billions of euros from the budget without meaningful economic criteria in the last two years, large growth of debt accompanied by non-transparent spending of that money, and huge subsidies for new jobs [aim to show the economic situation is better than it is.](#)"

Embracing the 'economic normalization' theory of the Trump Administration, Biden Administration officials have joined with President Vucic in enthusiastically [promoting](#) 'Open Balkans', the initiative to reduce trade and related barriers previously known as 'Mini-Schengen.' Economists affirm that cross-border economic integration could yield significant growth in a region that is hemorrhaging its young and skilled citizens.

What 'Open Balkans' cannot do, as presently configured, is produce 'trust', as proponents claim and as these examples refute:

- [Bosnia-Herzegovina](#) long ago removed barriers to movement of people, goods, services and capital internally, leading to no increase in trust.
- [Montenegro's](#) number one export and import partner is Serbia, the country with which Podgorica has the lowest levels of trust.
- By contrast, [Montenegro](#) and [Croatia](#) are economic competitors, vying for tourist revenue along the Adriatic Coast, yet they enjoy high-levels of trust (having resolved their core political issues.)
- Despite being among the top investors in what is now called [North Macedonia](#), [Greece](#) defied its economic interest by inflicting nearly three decades of trust-battering political isolation on its northern neighbor.

Without trust – obtained by overcoming bedrock political obstacles – it is not clear whether ‘economic normalization’ can even achieve economic results. No less an authority than the [EBRD](#) pointed squarely to a political obstacle – the gridlock of the Dayton Agreement – as the main source of longstanding economic malaise.

The fact that three countries – Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro – have spurned a benign, revenue-generating consortium suggests that it is not so benign.⁴⁵ ‘Open Balkans’ is widely seen as a device to increase Serbia’s comparative economic – and political – advantage. *Without a framework conducive to trust*, ‘Open Balkans’ opens the way for Serbian mercantilism, expanding Belgrade’s economic power at the expense of neighbors like Kosovo that run substantial trade deficits with Serbia, and cannot compete in production of higher value goods.

All six Western Balkans Six countries have already agreed on a [common regional market](#) in the inclusive ‘Berlin Plus’ format, at the Sofia summit in 2020. Political disputes, chiefly over Kosovo, stymie progress. Convergence over Kosovo supplies the political balance – and political confidence – needed to make much-needed regional economic integration feasible. With Serbia’s leverage over Kosovo eroded, all countries in the region can confidently reduce barriers, without fear that it will simply advance Belgrade’s malign agenda.

10. *The Impact of Convergence on ‘Greater Albania’ and ‘Greater Croatia’, and the Crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina*

The recent record of the Western-aligned leaders in Albania, Croatia and Kosovo at times makes their countries’ ethno-nationalist agendas appear no different from Serbia’s. Prime Ministers (and rivals) Edi [Rama](#) of Albania and Albin [Kurti](#) of Kosovo have both, again, openly promoted ‘Union of Albania and Kosovo’ – a violation of Kosovo’s Constitution, an affront to the Kosovo Serb community, and a step that would destabilize North Macedonia and Montenegro.

Last month, Croatian President Zoran [Milanovic](#) questioned application of the term genocide to Srebrenica, and made [bigoted](#) remarks about Bosniaks. Milanovic’s derisive comments are redolent of those also made in December, 2021 by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor [Orban](#), who questioned “how [the EU will] manage the security of a state [with] 2 million Muslims” Orban also led a high-profile December [visit](#) to Milorad Dodik in Banja Luka, pledging financial and political support to the separatist Serb leader.⁴⁶

Milanovic and Croatian Prime Minister Andrej [Plenkovic](#) each received Dodik, visiting without fellow members of the Bosnian Presidency, in prominent meetings in Zagreb in September, 2020. Angered by “manipulation” of the Bosnian electoral process, Zagreb has avidly supported Dragan [Covic](#), the leader of the Bosnian Croat HDZ party, who is in open collusion with Dodik. In a different vein, Croatian diplomacy, under Foreign Minister Goran [Grlic-Radman](#), offered an anodyne reform [proposal](#) for Bosnia-Herzegovina, in March, 2021.

For its part, the Bosniak polity, the main victim of the war, has repeatedly exploited changes to the electoral law that enable Bosniaks to elect the Croat member of the country’s tri-partite

⁴⁵ Macedonian President Stevo [Pendarovski](#) recently stated that ‘Open Balkans’ cannot survive without the participation of all six Western Balkans countries.

⁴⁶ In a reminder of Serbia’s authority over Republika Srpska, Orban’s plane first [stopped in Belgrade](#) before Banja Luka.

Presidency. Though legal, the practice is “clearly against the [spirit](#) of the Washington and Dayton Agreements.”⁴⁷ Seizing the demographic advantage undermines growing calls in Sarajevo to make Bosnia a ‘civic state,’ and triggers the foundational question about ‘control’ of the central government in a country comprising three main, divided groups along with citizens who identify with none of them. The insistence of Bosniak nationalists like the leader of the SDA party, Bakir [Izetbegovic](#), that “the unitary and civic model is the only one” that Bosnia can be based on, undermines the concept as an equitable way of implementing rulings by the [European Court of Human Rights](#).

Given all of the above, how does recognition of Kosovo by four NATO states address the complex stand-off in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and stymie naked appeals to Greater Albanian nationalism? Why is Serbian acceptance of the Western order crucial, if Albanians and Croats – who accept that order – openly ply their own ethno-national agendas?

The answer is that acceptance of the Western order does not extinguish nationalist agendas and aspirations; it constrains the ability of governments to advance and exploit them. For one, as members of NATO, any change to Albania’s or Croatia’s borders would require [approval](#) across the Alliance.⁴⁸ Albania and Croatia would face sweeping opposition within NATO, a consensus-based organization, to changing their respective borders.

In practical ways, Greater Albania and Greater Croatia are feasible only through – and dependent upon -- Greater Serbia. ‘Union of Kosovo and Albania’, for example, cannot be accomplished without the assent of Kosovo Serbs, who obey Belgrade. The first article of Kosovo’s Western-drafted [Constitution](#) expressly prohibits “union ... with ... any State or part of any State.” Amending the Constitution to permit union requires approval by two-thirds of the Kosovo Serb deputies in Parliament (holding seats “reserved and guaranteed” for the Serb community.)⁴⁹

On the other hand, Serbia has no Constitutional bar to pursuing secession or another form of ‘compensation’ in Kosovo. The Serbian [Constitution](#) defines Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia, imposing no similar constraint on what Belgrade may do to protect its territorial integrity. Ethnic Albanians in Serbia have no reserved right to block an amendment or action on Kosovo. By definition, secession of the Serb-controlled north implies rejection of restrictions in the Kosovo Constitution.

A settlement between Belgrade and Pristina that would effectively and fairly integrate the Serb-controlled north into the Republic of Kosovo (achievable with NATO 4 recognition) supplies a strong impediment to any union or confederation with Albania. In the Balkans, mixed populations

⁴⁷ In a [letter](#) criticizing Croatian interference and defending the Bosniak out-voting practice, three former [High Representatives](#) in Bosnia-Herzegovina wrote that the, “electoral rules ... provide a rare crossing-voting mechanism aiming to incentivize moderation over divisive, fear-mongering platforms.” The problem is that only one group – the Bosniaks – can take actual advantage of this mechanism. It is the absence of *reciprocity*, not the practice of cross-voting, that violates the spirit of any peace agreement.

⁴⁸ As Lulzim Peci observes, “Albania as a member of NATO, and Kosovo which is not its member ... [could] unite [only] ... if ... members of NATO [would extend] the [guarantees of Articles 5 and 6](#) of the North-Atlantic Treaty in the entire territory of this enlarged state.”

⁴⁹ ‘Union of Kosovo and Albania’ is a form of aggression against the Kosovo Serb community because it would force a small, isolated (in the south of Kosovo) and vulnerable minority to countermand the express wish of the majority on a strategic issue. ‘Union’ would make Serbs even a smaller minority, in a larger Albanian community which has no history of living with Serbs and no knowledge at all of their language.

complicate ethno-territorial consolidation, a fact which explains the severity of ‘ethnic cleansing’ from the war-time Republika Srpska in Bosnia.

The more integral Kosovo is, the greater the obstacle to any ‘union.’ The more equal that Belgrade and Pristina are in the Dialogue, the more likely the settlement will fully and fairly integrate the Kosovo Serb community. Conversely, the more Serbia retains leverage, the more fragmented the country and the region remain.

The link between territory and demographics explains the opposition to the Kosovo ‘[land swap](#)’ by the longtime leader of the Serbian Orthodox community in Kosovo, [Father Sava Janjic](#). Janjic understands that partition of the north of Kosovo would propel Serb flight from the south. This would make ‘Union of Kosovo and Albania’ inevitable, and open up centrifugal dynamics among ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia and Montenegro. Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski also grasped this link, which is why he (and other officials) have lambasted the ‘land swap.’

Proponents of the ‘land swap’ insisted that the because the border changes were ‘consensual’, there would be no regional contagion. But consent from Washington and Brussels would have removed the Western proscription on border changes, automatically opening up ‘non-consensual’ demands for territory or territorial autonomy in neighboring states.

A Dialogue with equalized – or at least less unequal – parties, could see Pristina accept a well-designed ‘Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities’ that detaches Kosovo Serbs from Serbia, and fosters economic and other association between Serb- and Kosovo Albanian-majority municipalities. Wider ‘economic normalization’ in this context – free of Serbian mercantilism – would propel relations between the two communities and the two states, and mitigate the impulse to join Albania.⁵⁰

As with Greater Albania, there is a comparable one-way, dependent link between Greater Croatia and Greater Serbia in Bosnia-Herzegovina. While Bosnian Serbs are consolidated in compact territory, contiguous (through the Brcko Corridor) with Serbia, Croats outside of Herzegovina are more dispersed. While Serbs have their own entity, Croats share the Federation entity with Bosniaks. Creating a Croat-own entity is highly implausible, if not impossible without sustained Serb pressure on Sarajevo. Croatia is too integrated in the network of Western institutions and bilateral relationships to sponsor a unilateral and futile assault on the US architecture for Bosnia-Herzegovina. Not even the war-time Croatian government led by former Croatian President Franjo Tudjman attempted to divide Bosnia-Herzegovina without Serbia.

In contrast, Serbia has been willing to act alone on Bosnia-Herzegovina, as it has on Croatia and Kosovo. It was Serbia that unilaterally removed Kosovo’s autonomy in 1989, before the fall of the Berlin Wall and before any declaration of independence by any party in former Yugoslavia. Belgrade ignited and sponsored the Bosnian Serb war effort, including the strategic link between breakaway, ‘cleansed’ Serb-held territories in Croatia and Bosnia. Serbia failed to exercise its authority over the Bosnian Serbs to [prevent genocide](#) in Srebrenica, according to the ICJ. At Belgrade’s direction, Croatian Serbs in 1995 summarily rejected the [autonomy plan](#) prepared and

⁵⁰ As challenging as it is, the single biggest step towards enduring stability between Serbia and Kosovo would be to generate some Serb returns to Kosovo’s south.

presented by the United States and Russia, along with the EU and UN, setting the stage for the tragic mass exodus of Serbs following Operations ‘Flash’ and ‘Storm.’

Unlike Zagreb, which forged a war-ending alliance with Sarajevo under US leadership, Belgrade has not partnered with Sarajevo, nor has Banja Luka.⁵¹ Bosnian Croats, the only one of the three main groups to alter its strategic alignment, have aligned with Sarajevo under Washington’s guidance.

While aided by collusion with Croats, the Serbian ethno-national agenda in Bosnia-Herzegovina does not depend on it. The 1995 Dayton Agreement legitimized the ethnically-cleansed (of Bosniaks and Croats) Republika Srpska, creating a proto-state in structural tension with the central government in Sarajevo. US, European and international officials compounded Bosnia’s ethno-territorial division after the war, with the disastrous 1996 transfer of Sarajevo – leaving the country’s capital, and the Federation of Croats and Bosniaks, bereft of Serbs and therefore bereft of any Serb interest in power-sharing.⁵² The two-entities, three-peoples asymmetry enshrined in Dayton permanently burdens relations between Croats and Bosniaks as well as between Serbs and Bosniaks.

In short, the viability of Bosnia-Herzegovina remains principally a Serb question, not a Croat or Bosniak one. The formula for resolving the country’s vexing dilemmas is not straightforward, but the prerequisite for a breakthrough is: removing Serbian leverage over Kosovo, thereby restoring Serbia’s place in the Western order. The record shows that all actors in the region, including the Bosnian Serbs, are amenable to mediation on even the most neuralgic issues, when the Western order has been uniformly accepted.

With his authority uniformly accepted, in 2004 the former High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Paddy Ashdown, goaded a Bosnian Serb leader into expressing contrition over Srebrenica. Instead of a perfunctory statement, the emotional televised speech by former Republika Srpska President Dragan [Cavic](#), was widely accepted even by Srebrenica survivors.⁵³

As Rifet [Hodzic](#), a native of Prijedor in Bosnia’s Republika Srpska and a former official of the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague, wrote, “This unprecedented act of public acknowledgement [by Cavic] stemmed from an [inquiry](#) into the events surrounding the fall of Srebrenica conducted and paid for by the RS. During these years, its public broadcaster RTRS regularly screened [SENSE Agency](#) reports from the ICTY trials. ... *Things were going in the right direction.*” [Emphasis added.]⁵⁴

⁵¹ An exception that proves the rule occurred in August 2009, when, according to analyst [Srecko Latal](#), “Bosniak and Serb ministers (mainly from the leftist Socialist Democratic Party, SDP) outvoted their Croat colleagues on changes to a key international development project, the Herzegovinian portion of the Trans-European Corridor Vc.” The SDP is a party with no influence in Republika Srpska. There are few, if any, examples of Bosniak and Serb alignment while, beginning with the war, there are examples of strategic alignment of Croats and Bosniaks.

⁵² No significant effort was made by any Western entity, or by former President of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegovic, to oppose the mass departure of Sarajevo Serbs, organized by the Bosnian-Serb leadership in Pale. The NATO implementation force, IFOR, assisted in the mass exodus of the Sarajevo Serbs.

⁵³ “Some of the [victims of Srebrenica](#), like Munira Subasic, appreciated [Cavic’s] gesture. ‘He really meant it when he said he was sorry...He was honest when he said he was sorry, and he lost out politically [as a result]’, she said.”

⁵⁴ More proof Serbia’s ability to reckon, sporadically, with the past: in 2010, the Serbian Parliament in Belgrade issued an [apology](#) for Srebrenica that tacitly recognized the genocide perpetrated there. According to the respected human rights lawyer, Natasa Kandic:

They can again go in the right direction in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but it will take more than strengthened US [sanctions](#) on Milorad Dodik (along with other officials.) As noted, sanctions imposed on Dodik in [2017](#) are already quite broad and have had little effect. While the new sanctions may yet yield impact given different political dynamics, the fact that Dodik repeatedly [defied](#) credible threats for new sanctions by [senior Administration officials](#) is not a good sign.

Neither the new US sanctions nor the crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which has been unfolding in current form since [July](#), seem to have exercised President Vucic. The Serbian President has directly [challenged](#) the sanctions on Dodik's television station and categorically ruled out applying sanctions on "the legitimate and legal representatives of the Serb people in the RS", adding that there is no urgency on the issue. Vucic, who sporadically pretends to '[restrain](#)' Dodik, also shrugged off US [sanctions](#) imposed last month on a notorious Kosovo Serb organized crime gang, reputed to be backed by Belgrade.

Efforts to divine 'the true relationship' between Vucic and Dodik miss the point: Vucic holds the same fundamental position on Bosnia-Herzegovina. Enduring progress in Bosnia requires relieving Serbia of the leverage it wields, courtesy of the divided European stance on Kosovo.

Instead, the US Embassy in Belgrade continues to supplicate the Serbian President. The US Ambassador to Serbia Anthony Godfrey late last month pressured Kosovo, a country to which he is not accredited, to meet what are effectively Serbian demands in the Dialogue. At a time of open threats against Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ambassador Godfrey reportedly called Pristina's failure to implement the agreed 'Association/Community', "the biggest obstacle to creating greater stability in the region."⁵⁵

Beyond vindicating Joe Biden's legacy in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Administration has no better option than to tackle the country's instability at its source. At a minimum, continued stagnation in Bosnia will continue to chase out the country's citizens, lead to renewed, Russian-spiked tensions, and inevitably revive European [calls](#), voiced in the spring of this year, to divide the country. Dissolution of Bosnia-Herzegovina would result in a land-locked rump state in South-East Europe that: EU states, with their [bigotry](#) against [Muslims](#), would never accept as a member; and that Turkey would dominate. After the Afghanistan debacle, the rump Bosnian state would be seen as another American betrayal.

Rather than struggle to hammer out 'compromises' that leave the Dayton contradictions intact, or invest in weaning a Serbian regime aligned with Western adversaries, Washington should persuade four European capitals, each a member of NATO, to alter their stance on Kosovo.⁵⁶

"This state has [recognized the genocide](#) and accepted responsibility for it under the condition that it does not use the word 'genocide,' but rather, camouflaged it with a reference to the ruling of the International Court of Justice."

⁵⁵ See 'U.S. Ambassador to Serbia Anthony Godfrey: We call on Kurti to adhere to the Brussels Agreement', Prva TV, 30 December 2021.

⁵⁶ Serbian acceptance of the Western order across the region will encourage Croatia to more fulsome reckoning with the past. In 2020, President [Milanovic](#) and Prime Minister [Plenkovic](#) made positive gestures, but Zagreb's effort is far from complete, particularly on the war in its neighboring country.



Part II: How the Biden Administration Can Attain Convergence on Kosovo

Contents

1. Overcoming the Challenges to Convergence
2. Four Main Appeals for Convergence
3. Greek-American Convergence on Kosovo and the Balkans
4. Ten Ways the Biden Administration can Achieve Convergence
5. Unilateral Steps by the Biden Administration: a 'Special Envoy for Kosovo Recognition' & Sanctions for 'Union of Kosovo and Albania'

1. Overcoming the Challenges to Convergence

The US faces three primary challenges in attaining convergence:

- *Inertia along with resistance across the EU 5, except in Greece, over longstanding Kosovo policy.*

In Spain and Cyprus, anxiety over a ‘Kosovo precedent’ for Catalonia and Basque country (for Madrid), and the implications for negotiations over Northern Cyprus (for Nicosia), drive strong resistance to recognition in each EU capital. In Slovakia and Romania, inertia is a function of outdated policy along with active threats of ethnic Hungarian decoupling driven by Budapest.

Cyprus, the only EU 5 member confronted with an actual (not potential) case of secession, is a particular obstacle. Nicosia’s preoccupation with Northern Cyprus situation and UN-led negotiations [], its disinterest in the Balkans, and the Cypriot perception of Russian influence as benign, reinforce the hardline position on Kosovo in Cyprus.

- *Detachment, disagreement and confusion within the EU.*

As a bloc, the EU is detached and conflicted over the Balkans in general, and Kosovo and Serbia in particular. Deep anti-migration sentiment in EU states like France, which holds elections this year, and the Netherlands drive hostility to enlargement. Key EU capitals like Paris are invested in their political and economic relationships with Belgrade (and the personal relationship between French President Emmanuel Macron.) The EU broadly holds sees Kosovo and Kosovar Albanians as a font of migration and criminality – and, increasingly, seeing the Kurti government as ‘the problem’ in the Dialogue.

The inverse perceptions of Serbia and Kosovo crystalized last month when the EU agreed to open accession chapters with Belgrade that it [did not earn](#) – while continuing to deny Kosovo the visa liberalization which it has earned.⁵⁷

The singular, obstructive role of the EU 5 – which consistently proclaim their support for the EU-led Dialogue – is poorly understood across the EU. The fact that both key EU officials on Balkans policy are from non-recognizing states presents an additional complexity. (High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell was Spain’s Foreign Minister; Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues, Miroslav Lajcak was Slovakia’s Foreign Minister.)

- *Washington’s own promotion of the Vucic regime as a ‘partner’ that can be ‘weaned’ through supplication and economic cooperation.*

⁵⁷ “In 2018, it was estimated that Kosovo met the two last [visa liberalization requirements](#). Furthermore, in July the same year, the European Commission confirmed that all criteria regarding the agreement on visa-free travel with the EU were met.”

The fact that US officials have largely continued not just to avoid criticism, but to [praise](#) the illiberal Serbian regime. While convergence is compatible with building a regional common market, the US must demonstrate to its EU partners that it has jettisoned supplication of the illiberal Vucic regime. The Administration's appointment of several highly capable officials to key Balkans-related positions is a sign of policy evolution.

Washington can overcome these challenges with a *strategy* comprising:

- Tailored *appeals* grounded in alignment of interest, not pressure, and emphasizing the necessity, viability and pragmatic nature of convergence.
- Momentum across the EU 5 generated in partnership with Greece which, in turn, will protect Athens and elicit the steps from Pristina needed for Greek recognition. Washington should work closely with Athens and Pristina to produce a "Friendship Treaty" that influential Greek [voices](#) have cited as the prerequisite for Greek recognition of Kosovo.
- Concrete steps related to Kosovo within NATO, below the level of membership.
- Unilateral steps from Washington: appointing a Special Envoy for Kosovo Recognition coupled with [sanctions](#) for leaders in Albania or Kosovo who promote any 'union' of the two independent countries. Such aspirations are a direct threat to US interests and Western strategy for the region.

2. Four Main Appeals for Convergence

To enlist support from key European recognizing states, as well from the non-recognizers, the Biden Administration can make the following appeals:

The moment is ripe for the non-recognizers to change their positions on Kosovo.

While Belgrade holds leverage over Pristina, Brussels and Washington, when it comes to the non-recognizers, the Vucic regime is the supplicant. Despite fawning praise from Belgrade, there is growing awareness in the EU 5 of the burden associated with carrying Serbia's water on Kosovo.

In September, 2021, Greece's longtime former lead diplomat on the Balkans, and former Ambassador to the US, Ambassador ad Honorem [Alexandros Mallias](#), wrote that [Greek recognition](#) of Kosovo is largely inevitable, "despite warnings from Serbian officials who have obviously forgotten that Greece has spent large amounts of diplomatic capital in the past to support Yugoslav and Serbian policies."

In other EU 5 countries, the stance on Kosovo has long since become anachronistic, a legacy of political forces and issues that are no longer salient. The three parties responsible for Slovakia's 2005 resolution against Kosovo's then-pending independence are no longer in Parliament. (One of the parties is no longer exists.) Neighboring Romania shares the Orthodox faith with neighboring Serbia, but there is limited pan-Orthodox solidarity these days linking Romanians to Serbs. To the contrary, Bucharest is highly focused on the ["aggressive"](#), multifaceted threat

Romania faces from Russia – Serbia’s strategic partner. Slovakia and Romania face a common revanchist threat from Serbia’s ally, Hungary.

Reports of significant [Russian assistance to Catalan separatists](#) increasingly align Spain and Kosovo Pristina as fellow victims of Kremlin-backed hostility. Pristina has consistently rejected any parallel between Catalonia and Kosovo, even pledging “[never](#)” to recognize a breakaway Catalonian state. On the other hand, it is Belgrade that facilitates the subversive Russian agenda in Bosnia, Montenegro and Kosovo – as Moscow targets Spain as well.

Often seen as the hardest-line non-recognizer, Spain is rapidly softening its position on Kosovo as Madrid seeks to play a larger role in EU affairs. At a conference in Madrid in November 2021, Juan González-Barba, State Secretary for the European Union, announced an imminent, public [change in Spain’s stance](#) towards Kosovo.⁵⁸ While Madrid has not changed its stance on recognition, Gonzalez-Barba pledged that Spain would jettison its “aloofness from Kosovo” and become “more involved in the region” through a set of policy decisions to be taken soon. The senior Spanish official made the announcement in the presence of Serbia’s Minister for EU Affairs, Jadranka Joksimovic, who reacted predictably -- with visceral anxiety and nervous praise of Spain.

With the exception of Cyprus, which does not view Russian influence as malign, geopolitics have made Washington a more important partner across the EU 5.⁵⁹ US-led movement by any of the non-recognizers creates momentum across all of them. Even Cyprus, the most detached from the Balkans and the most anxious over a Kosovo ‘precedent’, would be affected by convergence among the other EU 5 countries, particularly Greece. Unlike Madrid, Nicosia generally shrinks from taking an obstructive role and prefers not to stand out – a stance that convergence would make far less tenable. Recognition by Greece would be a game-changer across the EU 5, eviscerating flimsy arguments about “international law” or a “Kosovo precedent” that require deference to Belgrade’s position.

The Vucic regime would incur substantial risk if it entered into the domestic politics of the non-recognizers in a bid to counter American-led diplomacy over Kosovo. Attempting to mobilize anti-recognition sentiment in non-recognizing capitals could lead to a backlash, potentially accelerating outright recognition. The ‘loss’ of the European countries most closely aligned with Serbia on its signature issue would be a setback for the regime, not a weapon to exploit domestically.

Convergence aligns with the aspirations and positions of key EU members.

French President Emmanuel Macron’s vision for European ‘[strategic autonomy](#)’ is moribund as long as the EU depends on Washington to sort out serial crises in Europe’s South East corner.

⁵⁸ State Secretary Gonzalez-Barba’s remarks appear beginning at 01:10 of the video, followed immediately by Minister Joksimovic’s reaction.

⁵⁹ Cyprus needs the US over threats from Turkey, but Nicosia has not embraced Washington as Athens has. According to experts consulted for this project, Cyprus “balances” relations with the US and Russia, in part due to carry-over mistrust and resentment of US policy in the Cold War, blamed for the 1974 Turkish invasion.

Convergence makes it possible for Brussels can take its rightful leadership role in the Balkans, and perhaps more widely.

[France](#), along with the [Netherlands](#), has invoked rule of law as the reason to block the EU candidacies of North Macedonia and Albania. Even in an election year, Paris can join with The Hague and Washington to advance Kosovo's membership in Interpol – an organization that lies outside the EU and outside the concern of French or Dutch voters concerned about migration. Macron can explain to any French voters who care, that Interpol membership for Kosovo serves French interests. The French President can tell his friend, President Vucic, that helping Kosovo clamp down on transnational crime also serves Serbian interests.

The new [German](#) Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock is already seized of the [Russian threat](#) to Europe. Berlin – a leader on the Balkans under former Chancellor Angela Merkel – could be a strong Administration partner on convergence.

Having just appointed a highly experienced Special Envoy for the Balkans, Sir Stuart Peach, the [United Kingdom](#) can play a vital role in advancing convergence in NATO, where London is still a leading member. Peach is ideally suited to boost Kosovo's relationship with the Alliance, given that Air Chief Marshal Peach recently stepped down as Chairman of NATO's Military Committee. Across NATO member states in Europe, expanding the Alliance relationship with Kosovo is less neuralgic politically than are corresponding measures with respect to the EU.

Convergence is non-coercive and allows for continuity in Brussels and Washington.

Convergence is a corrective for the region, not a punishment of Serbia. As explained in Part I, convergence ***restores balance*** that does not exist, allowing Serbia to negotiate a dignified – not humiliating – final settlement with Kosovo, with wider, transformative ramifications. The focus is on *alignment* of sovereign EU and NATO states with each other, and on positive steps towards Kosovo – not negative ones towards Serbia. Effectively, the non-recognizing countries are *returning to the norm* of political alignment across the European Union and the Alliance.

Intentionally broad and benign, the term, 'convergence', can be deployed anywhere, including in Belgrade or in any non-recognizer capital. While the regime will fulminate over this threat to its stated number one priority, there is nothing inherently provocative about calling for 'closer policy positions across EU and NATO member states.'

Convergence allows for continuity. The EU will continue, with US support, to lead the Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. There is no need for EU officials like Borrell or Lajcak, to lead the bid for convergence. That task is primarily for US officials working with key European counterparts.

As the senior foreign policy officials in the EU and as former Foreign Ministers of a non-recognizing country (Spain and Slovakia, respectively), Borrell and Lajcak have a critical role behind the scenes. When consulted by EU member states, including Madrid and Bratislava, each senior EU official can informally convey the reality: *the EU-led Dialogue is going nowhere, the region is going downhill, and convergence would create the conditions for a transformative Kosovo settlement.*

For its part, the Biden Administration can continue, with greater confidence, its signature economic [projects](#) with Belgrade, including promotion of a [common regional market](#). Regional economic integration can only be achieved if all Western Balkans Six states participate – a prospect made possible by convergence. As Serbia’s leverage erodes, Pristina’s confidence increases. As Kosovo enters NATO’s Partnership for Peace or Interpol, Pristina’s reticence on a range of initiatives would abate. Shifts in Belgrade’s strategic calculus will likewise alter perspectives on economic collaboration in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro as well.

With the largest economy of the Western Balkans Six, Serbia has the most to gain from a common regional market – and the most to lose if it were to storm out in protest as the full EU and US converged their positions on Kosovo.

Convergence is stabilizing, curtailing both Greater Albania and Greater Serbia, and advancing resolution of the crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the stand-off in Montenegro.

As explained in Part I, convergence removes Serbia’s leverage over Kosovo, creating the possibility for the only stabilizing settlement: mutual recognition based on a fully sovereign, unitary and functional Republic of Kosovo, with full protections for the Kosovo Serb community.

This solution – made possible through convergence by the NATO 4 – impedes both ‘Greater Albania’ and ‘Greater Serbia.’ Without the leverage to sustain its isolation of Kosovo, Belgrade’s strategic calculus will change. The Western order for the Balkans which Belgrade has stubbornly resisted – and actively undermines – will finally become uniformly accepted. The pre-condition for Western strategy will be satisfied.

3. Greek-American Convergence on Kosovo and the Balkans

The threat from Turkey has pulled Athens and Washington into [close partnership](#), including an expanded defense cooperation agreement between the two capitals. Sophisticated Greek diplomacy in the Balkans offers the potential for a Greek-American condominium over Kosovo, potentially transforming the positions of all the non-recognizers.

With a border only two hours from Kosovo, no EU country, recognizer or not, has a greater interest in regional stability in the southern Balkans than Greece. The center point of alignment with the US lies in stemming further border changes in the region, whether partition, ‘union’, confederation or other Balkan territorial ploys, whether in Kosovo or Bosnia-Herzegovina. Athens has a shrewd grasp on how Belgrade leverages Kosovo for its revisionist aims in Bosnia and the region.

The Biden Administration should work carefully with Athens to build support within the Greek Parliament and public for recognition of Kosovo, by:

- Advancing the direct relationship between Athens and Pristina, laying the groundwork for a [‘Friendship Treaty’](#) between the two capitals that would be the precursor to recognition. An increasingly public and firm stance against ‘union’ by Washington would aid this effort. Finding ways to expand commercial contacts between Greece and Kosovo will also be productive.

- Removing irritants from the Greece-Albania relationship, without in any way compromising the direct relationship between Athens and Pristina, or in any way suggesting that Tirana holds the key to recognition.
- Protecting Athens, as it believes this is necessary, by not focusing exclusively on Greece, but reaching across the NATO 4, and working in multilateral fashion over Kosovo in the Alliance. Leaving Cyprus out of the initial convergence equation, should ease the Administration's approach in both Athens and Nicosia. The Administration can appeal to Madrid, Bratislava and Bucharest by citing the constructive steps taken by Greece already – including a seminal statement on international law and the implications of recognition for Cyprus by Greek Foreign Minister Nikolas [Dendias](#). In turn, movement by Spain, Slovakia and Romania can advance the day for Greek recognition.

Under Prime Minister Kiriakos Mitsotakis, Athens has taken an openly “constructive” position towards Kosovo, centered in a “high-level dialogue” with Kosovo. In July 2021, Mitsotakis [hosted](#) Kosovo Prime Minister Kurti in Athens. Belgrade has expressed open anxiety about potential Greek recognition of Kosovo, and senior Serbian officials have visited Athens, but there is no discernable change in the Greek position.

In a July, 2021 [interview](#) posted on the Foreign Ministry web-site, Foreign Minister Dendias effectively removed the longstanding obstacle to recognition – feared impact on Northern Cyprus. In one paragraph's words, Dendias cut through years of ‘legalistic’ hair-splitting by the EU 5 and Serbia. Instead, the Foreign Minister embraced the 2010 ICJ Advisory [Opinion](#) on Kosovo, discarding arguments that the Court affirmed the legality ‘only’ of Kosovo's declaration of independence, not its statehood.⁶⁰ Ignoring this dubious contention, Dendias cited the Court's Opinion to *distinguish Kosovo from the case of Northern Cyprus*. The Greek Foreign Minister noted that only the latter case, not Kosovo, was the “product of an illegal use of force condemned by the Security Council,” a key criterion in international law.

Along with this legal rationale, in his September, 2021 [article](#), widely circulated among [Serbs](#) and [Albanians](#), former diplomat Ambassador Mallias supplied the strategic rationale and the specific condition for what he termed as virtually inevitable Greek recognition of Kosovo. Mallias recommends “an explicit ... commitment [from Pristina] to exclude ... the exchange of territories and the change of borders with Serbia, and tomorrow the exclusion of the union of Kosovo with Albania.” In line with US interests, the former Greek Ambassador states that this “exclusion of a new border change, partition and exchange of territories (with Serbia) and a possible future union (with Albania) ... [is] the fundamental condition for the [stability of the] wider region.”⁶¹

In other words, a non-recognizing state, Greece, is rapidly transforming the perspective of Kosovo's independence from an alien, frightening and ‘illegal’ development to one that is stabilizing and reassuring. This has implications across the EU 5. Fears that Turkish Cypriots –

⁶⁰ In the case brought by the UN General Assembly at Serbia's behest, the Court [decided](#) that Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence violated neither international law nor the governing UN Security Council Resolution, 1244. As noted in this report, the Court's decision was based on the question put before it as drafted by Serbia.

⁶¹ Mallias's views on the utility of recognition, a “High Level Dialogue with Pristina” and a Treaty between Greece and Kosovo go back a decade to a [speech](#) he delivered in Tirana. The fact that sophisticated Greek diplomats have embraced his views illustrates his influence.

and Catalan and Basque separatists, as well as ethnic Hungarian separatists – will [exploit](#) Kosovo’s independence have been at the root of non-recognizer reticence on Kosovo even before independence.

Serbia and Russia have doggedly stoked these fears, predicting that Kosovo’s independence would be a [“deeply problematic precedent”](#) (former Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic), and that “recognition of [Kosovo’s] independence will ... create a [chain reaction](#) throughout the Balkans and other parts of the world” (Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.)

Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly invoked the Kosovo case over Crimea, both as [pretext](#) (ahead of the 2014 annexation) and as after the fact [rationalization](#). More recently, Moscow and Belgrade have accused Brussels of [“hypocrisy”](#) (Serbian President Vucic) and [“double standards”](#) (Russian President Vladimir Putin) because Brussels rejects independence for Catalonia while most EU states recognize Kosovo. The leaders of [Catalan](#) independence have at times invoked Kosovo as a precedent for their cause to secede from Spain. (Kosovo has rejected any comparison of its independence to Catalonia. Former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj stated that Kosovo would [“never” recognize Catalonia](#).)

The record shows that ‘the Kosovo precedent’ has had no real-world consequence. Few countries have accepted Putin’s rationale over Crimea, or of the 2008 ‘independence’ of South Ossetia (also publicly linked to Kosovo.) The two countries with the most risk of ethnic Albanian separatism, North Macedonia and Montenegro, both recognized Kosovo soon after its independence without any negative consequence.

[Palestinians](#) have at times claimed Kosovo as a precedent for its own independence, yet Israel recently recognized Kosovo.⁶² Kosovo’s independence played no part in the Kurdish Regional Government’s (failed) referendum on independence from Iraq in 2017, to cite another non-example of a ‘Kosovo precedent.’

In sum, Athens and Washington are closely aligned on Kosovo – and the overriding imperative to prevent fragmentation of the region. Policymakers in Athens grasp that the Serbian claim to Kosovo is incompatible with this imperative, as is any ‘union’ of Kosovo and Albania. Foreign Minister Dendias is on record embracing the authority of the ICJ Advisory Opinion on Kosovo – and relying on it to distinguish the case of Northern Cyprus. This represents a clear challenge to non-recognizer claims on ‘international law’ and fears of a ‘Kosovo precedent.’ While Greek policy has not yet formally changed, the Greek posture is with the majority [EU](#) (and US) position that Kosovo’s independence is *sui generis*.

The Greek government led by former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras proved to be a reliable partner in the negotiations and follow through for the Prespa Agreement with North Macedonia. The Mitsotakis government is even more closely engaged with Washington, driven by shared concerns over Turkey. The Administration should work with Athens in ways that build support, among political parties and the public, for near-term recognition of Kosovo.⁶³ Galvanizing

⁶² As part of the Washington Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, negotiated by the Trump Administration, Kosovo agreed to mutual recognition with Israel. Separately, Kosovo also agreed to put its Embassy in Jerusalem. Serbia accepted the same commitment for its existing Embassy and, although it has placed official offices in Jerusalem, it has not moved its Embassy there.

⁶³ The effort on Kosovo could spur greater, needed focus on advancing cooperation between Athens and Skopje.

movement across the NATO 4 can accelerate the prospects for recognition in Greece which, in turn, would catalyze closer convergence on Kosovo.

There are multiple ways that the Biden Administration can advance this symbiotic process, particularly (but not only) through NATO. The Administration can also take two unilateral steps to lead by example.

4. Ten Ways the Biden Administration Can Achieve Convergence

First, set an expectation of policy change by the EU 5 that is compelling and appealing, across Europe.

The appeal for ‘convergence’ – steps below the level of recognition – opens the conversation between the US and the individual EU 5 states, without shutting it reflexively over an immediate call for recognition of Kosovo. Washington’s mantra is *alignment*, not coercion: ‘convergence is what enables us to achieve our shared goal of a negotiated final settlement between Serbia and Kosovo, curtailing Russian and Chinese influence, and stabilizing the entire region.’

Second, encourage Slovakia and Spain to return forces to KFOR.

One of the most plausible and effective asks by Washington is simply for NATO allies *Slovakia and Spain to return a small contingent of their respective forces to KFOR*, rejoining Greece and Romania which never withdrew ceased participation. Slovakia and Spain each withdraw its participation in KFOR around the time Kosovo declared independence. The decision has present day ramifications. Slovakia recently refused to deploy elements to NATO’s high readiness joint task force (VJTF) on the recent [mission](#) to transport Afghan refugees (former employees of NATO and their families) from Kosovo to the United Kingdom.

The Biden Administration has a strong case to make to Bratislava and Madrid. First, the even-handed KFOR mission plays a vital role for Kosovo Serbs, who consistently praise the mission in surveys, along with Kosovar Albanians. KFOR again displayed its value in the recent crises in the north of Kosovo. KFOR actions on the ground supported the successful efforts of the EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajcak, to de-escalate the tense situation. Second, Serbian officials have repeatedly called for KFOR to be reinforced – and have never sought the removal of the mission. These explicit Serbian appeals provide an open, completely defensible avenue for Bratislava and Madrid to return their respective troop contribution to KFOR, as against any complaint from Belgrade or from domestic actors within Slovakia or Spain.

There is simply no credible way to link national KFOR deployments to tacit recognition of Kosovo. The same holds true for deployments to EULEX – a mission that Spain withdrew from. Madrid should also be asked to return civilians to the EULEX mission, focused on building rule of law within Kosovo.

At the same time, the fact that the rationale for the Slovak and Spanish decisions to withdraw from KFOR were tethered to independence will sending a clear and constructive message that these non-recognizers are prepared to reconsider their hardline positions.

Third, support Romania and Slovakia in their struggle against Hungarian revisionism and de-coupling.

Hungarian revisionism of the century-old Treaty of Trianon destabilizes Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine. Tellingly, Serbia appears to have much less to fear over separatism in the Vojvodina region from its main ally in the EU, Hungary.⁶⁴ The potential fragmentation of Slovakia and Romania (and Ukraine) would suit shared Hungarian and Russian agendas.

What's been missing is concerted Trans-Atlantic support for Bratislava and Bucharest over the noxious threat they face. Bucharest, with its larger ethnic Hungarian population is bitterly disappointed at being left exposed to provocations from Budapest – including the recent, provocative comparison to the annexation of Crimea – without any response from Brussels. The threat from Hungary is perceived as a real danger across the political spectrum in Romania, and from elites across society.

With a smaller population of ethnic Hungarians and a tradition of good relations between ethnic Hungarians and Slovaks, the separatist threat in Slovakia has typically been confined to nationalists on both sides. But Bratislava is increasingly concerned about Hungary's role in fomenting separatism, a point raised openly by Slovak Foreign Minister Ivan Korcok in his September 2021 meeting with his Hungarian counterpart, Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto. Slovakia and Romania share fully the justified conviction that their respective records on the ethnic Hungarian minority has been exemplary – a fact unacknowledged by their EU partners and exploited by Budapest.

In contrast to its predecessor, the current Slovak government led by Prime Minister Eduard Heger is significantly more pro-US, pro-NATO and anti-corruption -- and more detached from the Visegrad 4 grouping (that includes illiberal Poland and Hungary). Under the direction of the strongly pro-NATO Minister of Defense Jaroslav Nad, Slovakia is modernizing its Armed Forces, which includes the approved purchase of F-16 Block70 jet fighters from the US, with other significant procurement in the pipeline.

Romania's over-riding preoccupation is Russia. The pan-Slavic affinity for Russia that still has a hold in Slovakia is not matched by pan-Orthodox feeling either for Russia or Serbia in Romania. Under the Trump Administration, Bucharest concluded its biggest-ever economic deal with Washington, and welcomed the opening of a third US military base in the country.

In sum, Washington has a clear opening to engage Western-oriented governments in Slovakia and Romania – addressing their *latent* concerns about a parallel to Kosovo by helping them confront the *active* threat they face from Hungary. Washington can prompt its EU partners to join in fulsome backing of Bratislava and Bucharest on provocations and subversion from Budapest – underscoring the consistently strong Slovak-Romanian record of respect for ethnic Hungarian rights.

Fourth, engage Slovakia as a second lead partner on convergence, in addition to Greece.

With its strong record of engagement in the Balkans, and its constructive stance towards Kosovo, Slovakia is a second potential leader on convergence, with a calibrated approach by the Administration. Consecutive Slovak governments have declared the Balkans one of the main foreign policy priorities. Despite its non-recognition, Bratislava recognizes Kosovo documents,

⁶⁴ About 50,000 ethnic Slovaks also live in Vojvodina, where they have special language rights.

including the Kosovo passport, and issues visas in its Liaison Office in Pristina. Externally, Slovakia actually *supported* Kosovo's membership in Interpol in 2017, before reverting to an abstention in 2018. (Kosovo withdrew its 2017 candidacy at the last minute before the General Assembly of Interpol in China.)

The Slovak government strongly supports strengthening of economic ties with both Serbia and Kosovo, creating the opening for Washington. Slovakia has not allowed Kosovo to open up an office of interest in Bratislava, the way that Athens has done. Among the reasons is that Slovakia does not see the value in such a commercial office, given the lack of bilateral trade and business connections with Kosovo until so far.

Slovakia's non-recognition position is formalized in a Parliamentary resolution (No. 563/2007), requiring another resolution for the government to formally change it. While only one of the parties responsible for the resolution in 2007 is in Parliament now, the will to recognize Kosovo has not yet been mobilized.

The view is generally shared in Bratislava that Slovak recognition should follow after the final steps of the process of normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. The foreign policy-makers share also the view, that 'Kosovo needs to make a constructive gesture in the Dialogue before Slovakia will.' Like all EU 5 countries, Bratislava supports the Dialogue, led by former Slovak Foreign Minister, now EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajcak. (Current Foreign Minister Ivan Korcok was Lajcak's Deputy.)

Washington can elicit the requested 'gesture' from Pristina – on the 'Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities' – by eliciting Slovak support for Kosovo's membership in Partnership for Peace, and by returning Slovak troops to KFOR. Slovakia and Kosovo can expand economic contacts, working through chambers of commerce and other networks – as the US has been promoting in Belgrade – leading to the promised establishment of the Kosovo liaison office in Bratislava.

Fifth, challenge the 'legal' basis for non-recognition by appealing to international law expert, Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu.

Bucharest is largely constructive in its posture towards Kosovo, retaining its KFOR contingent (unlike Slovakia) and joining Bratislava in maintaining a liaison office in Pristina. As in Slovakia, the Romanian position on Kosovo is more of an outdated legacy (a carry-over from Bucharest's opening of airspace to NATO for the air campaign) than an active preoccupation. The Kosovo issue has not surfaced for years in Romanian politics.

What is palpable is the Romanian quest for status. The leadership and public have labored for years under the country's reputation for corruption. Bucharest has a limited voice in EU and global affairs, as a result.

As it bolsters Romania over the Hungarian threat, the Administration can show Romanians that they are valued allies by offering Bucharest a leadership role within NATO on Partnership for Peace for Kosovo. As the bulwark of defense against Russia, NATO is the appropriate locus to address Romania over Kosovo. Coupled with high level meetings at the State Department and White House, Romania can attain the status it craves, while working 'safely' on PfP for Kosovo,

alongside fellow Orthodox majority Greece, and fellow victim of Hungarian revisionist policies, Slovakia.

Conferring further status on Romania, the Biden Administration can appeal directly to Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu over the central contention of the non-recognizers: that “Kosovo’s independence violates international law.” Aurescu is a recognized expert in international law, and one of the few foreign ministers of EU members who has successfully argued a case before the International Court of Justice (resolving the dispute with Ukraine over Serpent’s Island.)

Aurescu could help Washington foster convergence between the EU 5 position, and the position held by the US and the majority of EU states: that ‘Kosovo’s independence is sui generis in international law.’ Athens has opened the door for Washington on this critical topic; Bucharest – with the aid of Aurescu’s expertise – can expand the opening across the rest of the EU 5. Just as Romania is infuriated by comparisons of the Treaty of Trianon with the annexation of Crimea, so Bucharest should reject the equally baseless claims by the Kremlin of a Crimea parallel with Kosovo.

The ‘legal’ position of the non-recognizers rests on the putative ‘narrowness’ of the 2010 ICJ Advisory Opinion. The Court’s answer was the result of the ‘narrow’ question was posed to the Court by the UN General Assembly in 2008, [at Serbia’s behest](#). Diplomats can engage with the Romanian Foreign Minister and international law expert on the array of legal questions that challenge the ‘narrow’ interpretation, such as:

- Why did Belgrade frame the question so narrowly?
- Why hasn’t Belgrade gone back to the Court with a wider challenge to Kosovo’s statehood, pursuing the avenue that North Macedonia used against Greece, for example?⁶⁵
- In the event of such a challenge, how likely is it that the Court would rule that Kosovo’s declaration of independence does not violate international law, but its statehood does? Wouldn’t the Court grasp that such a ruling would create a muddle in international law, forcing states to divine the difference between ‘legal declarations of independence’ and ‘illegal secessions’?
- Why have there been no serious imitations of Kosovo’s independence, contrary to the [warning](#) of former Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic, who told the UN General Assembly that challenging Kosovo’s independence in the Court was necessary “to prevent the Kosovo crisis from serving as a deeply problematic precedent in any part of the globe where secessionist ambitions are harboured”?

⁶⁵ Even though the ICJ’s jurisdiction in “contentious matters” extends only to “states,” there are several ways that Serbia could challenge Kosovo’s statehood without conceding that Kosovo is a state. The ICJ’s main concern is that the state parties “have access to the Court and have accepted its jurisdiction.” Belgrade could claim that Kosovo has access and has accepted the Court’s jurisdiction through UNMIK, a vehicle Serbia has routinely accepted.

- Why hasn't the United Nations, or the UNMIK Mission, challenged the ICJ's decision that Kosovo's declaration of independence does not violate UN Security Council Resolution 1244?

As Arescu knows – and as Belgrade knows and knew at the time the General Assembly request was sent to the Hague – any challenge to Kosovo's statehood would require the Court to consider the *facts* that led to Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, including Serbia's 1989 decision to unilaterally revoke Kosovo's autonomy under Yugoslavia before any movement toward independence in any republic or in Kosovo, and Belgrade's imposition of a decade of repression.⁶⁶

In sum, Washington has a good case to challenge the 'international law' argument for non-recognition – and potential allies in Athens and Bucharest to help make that case.

Sixth, build on the thaw in Spain's relations with Kosovo.

Five distinct features combine to make the Spanish position on Kosovo a formidable challenge:

- The fact that it faces an actual case of attempted secession in Catalonia, and that separatists in Barcelona have tried to exploit Kosovo's independence for their aims.
- Spain is willing to block EU decisions over Kosovo, even if Madrid is standing alone. For example, Madrid blocked the 2018 EU Western Balkans strategy, insisting that the draft terminology elevated Kosovo to the level of its partners, and amounted to recognition.
- Spain's distance and detachment from the Balkans.
- The traditional affinity for the Serbian cause, aided by Serbian flattery.
- The insistence, particularly within Spain's Foreign Ministry, that Kosovo's independence is a breach of international law.

The extreme measures Madrid has taken to avoid any remote hint of tacit recognition of Kosovo creates impediments for ordinary and commercial contacts between Kosovars and Spaniards. Even Cyprus recognizes Kosovo travel documents, but Madrid does not. To travel to Spain, a Kosovar has to apply for a visa at a Spanish Embassy, the nearest being in Skopje, and apply for a visa. And only under limited circumstances is the visa granted.

The harsh Spanish position has permeated culture and sports. In a March 2021 World Cup qualifying match, Spain referred to Kosovo as a "[territory](#)," and Kosovo's name was printed in lower case on the Spanish public broadcast of the match.

Until recently, Spanish diplomats have had the practice of leaving a meeting if a Kosovo official showed up. Although unrecognized Taiwan has a liaison office in Madrid, Kosovo does not – nor does Madrid have such an office in Pristina (unlike Greece, Slovakia and Romania.)

All this makes it imperative for the Administration to seize the [opportunity announced](#) by Spanish State Secretary for the European Union Gonzalez-Barba at a conference in Madrid in November.

⁶⁶ See points on the Serbian narrative noted in Section 10 of Part I of this report.

Driving this policy change is Spain's ambition to play a more significant role in EU affairs. Madrid is beginning to realize that Spain cannot be a driver of EU foreign policy while remaining disengaged from the Western Balkans. And Madrid cannot be engaged in the Western Balkans without engaging with all counterparts, including representatives of Kosovo.

'Convergence' – a broad, non-threatening concept – is a vehicle to meet Spanish ambitions without imposing demands that the Spanish government is not ready to meet. The point is to sharpen the implicit line between Madrid's *formal non-recognition of Kosovo* -- and its *informal contacts with Kosovo* which expand.

In addition to working with NATO allies on PfP for Kosovo, and sending a contingent of its own troops back to the KFOR mission, Spain could take three additional steps to advance the relationship:

- Devise a work-around to stamp the Kosovo passport, as Greek authorities managed for Macedonian nationals, prior to the 2018 Prespa Agreement with North Macedonia.
- Spain could follow the practice of Greece, Romania and Slovakia and open a liaison office in Pristina, expanding the quality and extent of dialogue with Kosovo.
- Madrid could allow Kosovo also to open a liaison office in Spain. Spain has allowed Taiwan to open such an office, without any prejudice to its stance on not recognizing Taipei.

Along with a more liberal visa policy, these steps would expand contacts between Kosovars and Spaniards, something that Spain and Kosovo could each encourage. Contacts in the commercial sector could create demand for easier issuance of an array of documents enabling business done. In the event that the EU finally grants Kosovo the visa liberalization it has long-ago qualified for, Spain could jettison the sheet of paper and recognize Kosovo's travel documents.

Seventh, bring Kosovo into 'Partnership for Peace' (PfP).

As explained in Part I, bringing Kosovo into NATO's Partnership for Peace will have a range of positive effects, including a significant deterrent effect. Because Cyprus is not a member of the Alliance, the diplomatic requirement for PfP comprises only four non-recognizers, not five.

Washington has a strong case for Kosovo's entry into PfP:

- Kosovo is deserving of a reward after its alacrity in welcoming [Afghan refugees](#) from the Alliance – one of the earliest countries to accept the urgent American appeal.
- Partnership for Peace in no way constitutes an offer of Alliance membership for Kosovo. Proof is supplied by the fact that Serbia participates in Partnership for Peace – and President Vucic has repeatedly pledged to Moscow that Belgrade has no intention to join NATO.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ TASS, "Serbia will not join NATO as long as Vucic remains president, says defense minister," 13 May 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1057929>.

- An offer of PfP would restore confidence among wildly pro-NATO Kosovars – and their regional neighbors -- in the overall Euro-Atlantic vision for the region. This would have immediate positive effect on the EU-led Dialogue, empowering Brussels and Washington in their entreaties to Pristina over the long-stalled ‘Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities.’
- The signal to Belgrade, Moscow and Beijing would be unmistakable. Washington would be generating options on Kosovo that none of the three can block.

The Alliance can offer PfP for Kosovo by emulating the EU’s work-around for granting Kosovo its Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA.) At non-recognizer behest, Brussels scrubbed the SAA document of any terminology that could suggest tacit recognition. The EU itself is a signatory of the SAA, along with Kosovo, a convention that NATO could also apply.

The [SAA](#) and the [Council decision](#) promulgating it include a short disclaimer easily adapted by the Alliance: “... the [Agreement] [Decision] is without prejudice to Member States’ position on the status of Kosovo” References to Kosovo in the SAA-related documents include an asterisk denoting: “This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.” Other organizations, including the Regional Cooperation Council apply the same asterisk formulation, as could NATO.

Eighth, bring Kosovo into Interpol.

The Biden Administration has a strong case to make for Kosovo’s membership in Interpol – and the EU 5 have a weak case for their current position.

According to a [report](#) issued in October 2021 by the IPSI think-tank, “the Balkans remain at the center of the global organized crime nexus...” Kosovo is often seen as a [center](#) of Balkans organized crime. [Borrell](#), the EU’s top foreign policy official, has stated that “[t]he EU is fully engaged ... in dismantling transnational criminal networks [in the Balkans] ...”

And yet thanks to intense opposition from Serbia, backed by Russia and tacitly by the EU 5, Kosovo has been kept out of [Interpol](#), an organization charged with “enabling police around the world to work together to prevent and fight international crime.” Besides eroding Serbian leverage, allowing Kosovo into Interpol would boost the country’s crime-fighting capacity. Kosovo Serbs would be among the beneficiaries of this step.

As noted above, Washington can enlist the support of Paris, The Hague and other EU capitals focused on rule of law in the effort to bring Kosovo into Interpol. Unlike the EU and NATO, Interpol is not a consensus organization, nor does any member have a veto as Permanent Members of the UN Security Council do. According to the [Interpol constitution](#), a member may raise an objection to an application, but resolving the objection is up to the organization’s Assembly. Membership requires a two-thirds majority in the Assembly, a threshold that a US, and EU converging over Kosovo, can muster.

Article 4 of the Interpol constitution requires a member to be a “country” but the organization has never defined the meaning of the word. Interpol has never amended Article 4, despite having

made other amendments to its charter and despite “several attempts to have Interpol officially define ‘country’ ... to mean ‘sovereign state.’” Kosovo has featured directly in these debates. Nonetheless, Interpol “continues to handle membership requests on a case-by-case basis.”⁶⁸

In other words, Interpol membership for Kosovo is not even a putative ‘precedent’ that separatists in Spain, Cyprus or elsewhere could exploit. Madrid, Nicosia can abstain from a vote on Kosovo membership in the organization, or even support Kosovo’s application as Slovakia once had done, without any ‘implicit recognition.’

Ninth, complement ‘economic normalization’ with Serbia with EU 5 commercial contacts with Kosovo.

As noted in several examples above, economic contacts between Kosovo and EU 5 countries can create the impetus for significant administrative and political change. With its close physical proximity to Kosovo, and a track record of private sector investment in the region, Athens is the natural partner in this endeavor. Facilitating ‘economic normalization’ between Kosovo and the non-recognizers is also a natural step for Washington. Opening up Pristina’s trade and related links with the EU 5 can complement US support for ‘Open Balkans’ and other initiatives begun under the Trump Administration that have been eagerly embraced by Belgrade – and looked at warily by Pristina, Sarajevo and Podgorica.

For example, Athens and Washington could work together to get Kosovo accepted in the ‘Green Card’ system, overcoming the obstacles that Greek businesses face in obtaining every day documents. This would facilitate investment in Kosovo across all EU countries. In turn, expanded commercial contacts between Slovakia and Kosovo would encourage Bratislava to allow Pristina to open a commercial representational office in the Slovak capital.

Kosovo’s economy would grow as result of expanded commercial contacts, increasing its ability and interest in trading with its neighbors, including Serbia. This would improve the prospects for building a true Regional Common Market among [all six](#) Western Balkans countries, instead of just three.

Closer economic and political links between Kosovo and the EU 5 would erode wholesale Serbian leverage in the EU-led Dialogue, increasing the prospects for a final settlement – the biggest single step towards realizing the region’s economic potential.

Tenth, obtain express EU 5 commitment for full and immediate recognition of Kosovo in the event of a settlement.

Each EU 5 capital insists that it fully supports the EU-led Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. It is time for the Biden Administration, working with key EU partners, to test that claim.

The central EU-led diplomatic effort in the Balkans – the Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina – labors under uncertainty due to the demands of the non-recognizers. While the US has consistently posited “mutual recognition” between Serbia and Kosovo as the bedrock goal, the EU employs the ambiguous term, [“comprehensive normalization.”](#) The difference is more than semantic. Ambiguity over the outcome of the talks favors one side, Serbia. As long as

⁶⁸ There is also no requirement for an Interpol member to be a member of the United Nations. Interpol’s own Constitution is not registered with the United Nations.

recognition is formally off the table, then the possibility remains for Serbia to retain leverage over Kosovo. [Vucic](#) has underscored this point, stating, “No one can guarantee what will happen at the end of the process....”

The EU 5 have compounded the uncertainty of the negotiations by refusing uniformly to commit to recognizing Kosovo even *after* a settlement. EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue [Lajcak](#) has openly acknowledged this in a similar vein: “No one can guarantee that” Kosovo will be recognized by Slovakia, Spain, Romania, Greece and Cyprus in the event that Pristina and Belgrade agree on terms for ‘comprehensive normalization.’

Given the abject deterioration in the region, EU 5 duplicity on this fundamental point is no longer tolerable. The EU 5 are undermining Lajcak’s determined efforts, effectively requiring Kosovo to make final status concessions without any certainty that Pristina’s own status will be finalized. Without clarity about the implications of a settlement, the EU 5 burden the talks – and keep open the possibility for Belgrade to continue to wield leverage over Kosovo even in the wake of a settlement.

The Biden Administration should couple its overall appeal on EU enlargement for the region, with a frank, concerted, and coordinated ‘ask’ of the EU 5 to expressly commit to recognizing Kosovo in the wake of a settlement. Such a commitment, premised on Serbia’s consent to ‘comprehensively normalize’ its relations with Kosovo, imposes no impact on any EU 5 national question.

6. Unilateral Steps by the Biden Administration: a ‘Special Envoy for Kosovo Recognition’ & Sanctions for ‘Union of Kosovo and Albania’

The Biden Administration can spur the bid for convergence by the simultaneous appointment of a new Special Envoy devoted to Kosovo Recognition, along with announcement of US sanctions for leaders in Albania or Kosovo who promote any ‘union’ of these two independent countries.

In addition to a [Special Envoy for the Balkans](#), Secretary Blinken has appointed another experienced State Department official with the highly specialized title of ‘[Special Envoy for Electoral Reform in Bosnia-Herzegovina](#)’. Similarly, a US-appointed ‘*Special Envoy for Kosovo Recognition*’ could advance the ten-point agenda set out above, galvanizing support for convergence in European capitals, within NATO, within Interpol and more widely.

The Special Envoy could also work with US and EU country Ambassadors in countries that have been persuaded by Belgrade to lift their recognition of Kosovo. [Ghana](#) is a promising example, given its close relationship with the US and the array of American programs in the country.

The appointment of a Special Envoy for Kosovo Recognition would underscore the American expectation of long-overdue change from the European countries that do not recognize Kosovo.

While virtually all US support carries some implicit conditionality, it is imperative – and in Kosovo’s interests – that Washington couple its efforts on convergence with the explicit threat of sanctions for promotion of ‘union.’ Western strategy in the Balkans rests on democratic coexistence within

existing borders. 'Union' defies Western strategy, rendering convergence an exercise in promoting ethnic Albanian interests over ethnic Serb ones.

Washington must make it just as clear now, as it did when it sponsored Kosovo's independence in 2008, that all forms of division and 'union' are unacceptable, and that those who promote it will be sanctioned. In so doing, the Administration will increase the appeal of convergence among all of its European counterparts, recognizers and non-recognizers alike. This step is particularly important in establishing credibility with Athens, which has perhaps the strongest interest across NATO and the EU in averting destabilizing border changes.⁶⁹

With pointed communications to regional leaders from Biden and Blinken, the appointment of highly capable officials, and its energetic diplomacy, the Administration has demonstrated its willingness to lead in the region. Tackling instability in the Balkans at its source, as this report proposes, will enable US policymakers to succeed, empowering the EU, blunting Russian and Chinese influence, and opening the pathway for the citizens of the region to realize their potential, in their homeland.

⁶⁹ In principle, Belgrade's aggressive non-recognition campaign and its own promotion of 'Serb World' are worthy of sanction as well. The difference is that the US is not engaged on a singular effort to promote Serbia's international standing as Washington would be undertaking with Kosovo.