





COMMENTARY

Kosovo and the EU: The Need for Visa Liberalization is Growing

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1. Background

1.1. Kosovo today

Just last year, Kosovo was celebrating its 10th anniversary of Independence, which it declared on February 2008 unilaterally from Serbia. Despite having a past marked by conflict, especially given the 1998 national-led uprisings in former Yugoslavia and subsequent 1999 NATO bombings, the country nowadays has undergone a process of reconstruction and presents itself as thriving for modernity and to find its place in the international arena.

Kosovo nowadays accounts with a GDP (PPP) of 19.6 billion dollars, of which 70% proceeds from the sector of services.¹ It also has the youngest population in Europe, with 50% of its population under the age of 35.² The young country represents an opportunity to the rest of the world, and particularly for the European Union, for economic investment given its potential growth and youth sector. But it also offers the chance to the rest of the world of maintaining diplomatic relations with an enclave in the Balkans, which has a very relevant geostrategic position being located between the EU, Turkey and Russia.

1.2. Finding a place in the international arena

Today, 193 countries in the world recognize Kosovo. Within the European Union, there are only five countries which still miss to recognize it: Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Spain, and Slovakia. This makes one of Kosovo's most demanding objectives to be increasingly recognized by the international community. For this reason, Kosovo currently maintains relations with many International Organizations such as the World Health Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, UNICEF or the OSCE, among others.³ It is also undergoing different processes with the aim of joining United Nations, NATO and the EU. One of the main impediments for this, is the lack of recognition of the country by Serbia. As a consequence, both countries have pursued different channels of dialogue to try to come up with a normalization agreement, that would allow Serbia to fulfill a key condition for its membership to the EU and Kosovo to be recognised worldwide.⁴

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kv.html>

² <https://www.politico.eu/interactive/in-pictures-kosovo-10th-anniversary-future-being-shaped-by-its-youth/>

³ <http://www.balkananalysis.com/kosovo/international-organizations/>

⁴ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20181120IPR19548/european-parliament-marks-eu-accession-prospects-for-serbia-and-kosovo>

1.3. Kosovo and the EU: a long friendship

The European Union has been a key factor in the reconstruction and stabilization of Kosovo since 1999. The Union is present in the country through its Special Representative (EUSR), and the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) mission in the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX).⁵ The EUSR's main task is to coordinate the EU presence in the country, and promote human rights, fundamental freedoms and European values in the country. EULEX's mandate consists in assisting the Kosovar authorities in the area of rule of law, specifically in the police, judiciary and customs.⁶

In 2014, the EU and Kosovo chief negotiators initiated the Stabilization and Association Agreement.⁷ The latter is part of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), that provides a framework of cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans, with the objective of promoting stabilization, the transition to a market economy, regional cooperation and preparation for EU accession in the area.⁸

1.4. Kosovo and the EU: today

Nowadays, Kosovo is one of the seven candidate countries that have been offered the prospect of membership to the European Union. According to European law, "Any European country that respects the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law may apply to become a member of the EU. If the country is sufficiently advanced in fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria, accession negotiations start: the applicants have to implement the body of EU law before they may become a member state."⁹ Kosovo is on its way to fulfill these Criteria, and has been making different efforts to show so. An example of Kosovo's commitment to the European Union and will for its inclusion to it has been shown in the process to obtain visa liberalisation for Kosovars. As part of its Thessaloniki agenda in 2003, the European Union made a political commitment to liberalise the short-term visa regime for the Western Balkans, including Kosovo. The process officially started in 2012 between the EU and Kosovo through the Visa Liberalization for Kosovo Roadmap, which set different benchmarks that the country had to reach if

⁵ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kosovo/1387/kosovo-and-eu_en

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1476698477996&uri=CELEX%3A22016A0316%2801%29>

⁸ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kosovo/1387/kosovo-and-eu_en

⁹ https://europa.eu/newsroom/highlights/special-coverage/enlargement_en

it wanted to obtain so.¹⁰ Currently, all the countries belonging to the Western Balkans have obtained visa liberalization except for Kosovo. And not because of its own fault.

2. State of Play

2.1. Visa Liberalization: EU fails to finish the process

On July 18, 2018, the European Commission confirmed that Kosovo had met the 2 outstanding visa liberalization requirements on the ratification of the border demarcation agreement with Montenegro and a strengthened track record in the fight against crime and corruption, thus fulfilling all benchmarks set out in the Visa Liberalization Roadmap for Kosovo.¹¹ The published report also confirmed that Kosovo continued to fulfil all other benchmarks set out in the Visa Liberalization Roadmap relating to readmission and reintegration, document security, migration and border management, public order and security, and fundamental rights related to the freedom of movement.¹²

In order to apply the visa liberalization, the European Parliament and European Council need to approve the Commission's proposal to lift the visa requirements for Kosovo's citizens. However, six months have passed by and neither institution has done so. This could have a negative impact on the pro-European sentiments of Kosovars, feeling that their efforts are not being taken seriously and dismissed. But it can also hamper the development of fruitful economic and diplomatic relations between Kosovo and the EU. This is why both the European Parliament and European Council need to approve the visa liberalization as soon as possible.

2.2. Kosovo's youth: hunger for Europe

In Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, the average age is 28. The potential that this youth offers for development both in Kosovo and the European Union keeps being limited by the visa requirement to enter the Schengen area. In order to travel to Europe, Kosovars need to collect multiple documents, request account statements and present themselves in the different European embassies of the countries they are wishing to travel.

Thus, the youth who wants to pursue an extensive education in Europe, or simply visit the Union, is inabilitated to do so for the most part. The Think Tank "Think Young", based in Brussels, raises awareness of the struggles for youth in Kosovo to explore Europe, to study abroad and have short

¹⁰https://cdn3-eas.fpfis.tech.ec.europa.eu/cdn/farfuture/O9Y2qhnc84pQhqNZdPIEfBgLeaLIDlopqiCJX7B1Ufw/mtime:1469526753/sites/eas/files/visa_liberalisation_with_kosovo_roadmap.pdf

¹¹ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-4562_en.htm

¹² *ibid*

term internships and working experience due to visa restriction.¹³ Up until today, Kosovo is considered the most pro-European country in South-Eastern Europe. People can find EU information centers and flags everywhere, but the wait for visa liberalization is making the EU more unpopular between Kosovars, who are increasingly turning to Turkey as an alternative.¹⁴ Visa liberalization is thus a necessary tool to exploit the potential of

Kosovo's youth, since it would allow to improve education, provide business opportunities and hence improve the country's economic situation. It is critical to recall that the latter has around 50% rate of unemployment among people whose age is between 15-24.

2.3. Economic benefits for the EU in Kosovo

There are different reasons for the European Union to invest in Kosovo: low taxes, rich resources and a supportive business environment. In fact, taxes in Kosovo are very low compared to neighboring countries; the country has a modern legal structure in accordance with the EU; the official currency is the Euro, which facilitates exchanges; and the population is 70% under the age of 35, which represents a huge potential workforce.¹⁵ In addition to this, the location of the country is of huge strategic importance, since it belongs to the Western Balkans and thus functions as an area of liaison between Turkey, Russia and the EU.

2.4. Europeanism in Kosovo

Since the end of NATO's military intervention against Serbia in 1999 and until the Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008, the EU has been closely involved in almost all aspects of governance in the former Serbian province. The EU formed an integral part of the UN administration (UNMIK) that effectively run the country; it has been Kosovo's largest aid donor and has coordinated (and financed) the most comprehensive network of training programs for the country's, initially hybrid (i.e. the Provisional Institutions of Self Government - PISG) and, now, official government.¹⁶ In addition the EU had been in charge of the country's custom services and privatization program, it exercised extensive regulatory powers over the economy and supervised the Banking and Payment Authority (Kosovo's embryonic Central Bank).¹⁷ Kosovo is also the only country, outside the Eurozone, to adopt the Euro as its official currency. Hence, Kosovars have since the very beginning been connected to Europe and have started to develop a European identity. For Kosovo's citizens Europe is not only a geographic notion. Europe is also the political structure in

¹³ <https://www.thinkyoung.eu/sustainable-kosovo>

¹⁴ <http://www.erstestiftung.org/en/europes-isolated-youth/>

¹⁵ <http://www.mei-ks.net/en/kosovo/investing-in-kosovo>

¹⁶ www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/.../transformeurope/.../Papadimitriou.doc

¹⁷ *ibid.*

which all aspirations and hopes of Kosovan people are based: the majority of them aim for Europe and it does not matter if they are right or left, communists or capitalists, socialists or democrats, poor or rich.¹⁸ However, the perception of Kosovars about Europe is being damaged by a feeling of being left out. This is why the EU needs to make significant steps to engage with Kosovars and fulfill their expectations to the extent that it can.

3. Recommendations

3.1. Approve Visa Liberalization

Kosovo has shown its commitment to the European Union since its independence and has comply with the requirements demanded, and thus should receive recognition for it through the lifting of Visa Requirements. It is essential for the European Parliament and European Council to approve the Commission's request of visa liberalization for Kosovo as soon as possible. This will prove Kosovars that the European Union complies with its promises and thus reinforce and maintain Europeism in Kosovo. More importantly, this will benefit Kosovo's youth and European investors, opening new opportunities in very different areas.

3.2. EU should benefit from Kosovo's Europeism

The European Union should continue to main its presence in Kosovo and reinforce pro-European sentiments in the country. Joining the European Union has been one of the main goals since the creation of the country, and thus the former should benefit from this in continuing its cooperation with the latter and promoting the values of the Union which are based on human rights respect, rule of law and a stable economy. Kosovo should thus be maintained as a potential candidate for EU enlargement.

3.3. Investments in the area should be maintain

The European Union is the largest donor providing assistance to Kosovo. The latter has received more than 2.3 billion euros in EU assistance since 1999 and close to €1 billion in support to international presence since 1999. In 2010, Kosovo received € 67.3 millions of financial aid under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). In the context of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), the EU has provided Kosovo with a mixture of trade concessions, economic assistance (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance Program) and treaties (Stabilization and Association

¹⁸ <http://www.mirovni-institut.si/data/tinymce/Projekti/EE-vklju%C4%8Devanje/adrianakabashi.pdf>

Agreements).¹⁹ The EU should continue in assisting the country economically, since it is beneficial for the stability of the whole region.

3.4. EU needs to maintain a strengthened role in discussions between Kosovo and Serbia

Since 2011, an EU-mediated dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo has been put in place with the aim of finding a common ground among both countries in their past conflicts and present aspirations. In March 2011, the EU launched a high-level dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, which has resulted in some 17 agreements so far.²⁰ The dialogue has evolved from 'technical' to 'political' in terms of the level and content of the talks but has been interrupted during government changes in both Serbia and Kosovo. In April 2013 and August 2015, it reached 'historic' highs with the signing of important agreements.²¹ In 2014, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission Federica Mogherini stated that she herself would personally facilitate this dialogue, whose ultimate goal is to promote cooperation between the two sides, helping them achieve progress on the path to Europe and improve the lives of their people.²² The European Union should continue to be an important player and mediator between Kosovo and Serbia, promoting talks between both countries in search of a normalization of their relations. In this way, the EU will be an important factor in assuring stability in the Balkan region.

3.5. Bring the whole EU together on Kosovo

The European Union has carried out different efforts to sustain the European integration process of Kosovo. In 2016, a European Parliament resolution on Kosovo's progress report urged all Member States which had not yet recognised Kosovo (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) to do so.²³ The Parliament has also affirmed that it is vital for the whole European Union to engage with Kosovo so that stability and security in the Western Balkans can be preserved.²⁴ The European Union should thus foster dialogue, bilateral agreements and collaboration between the five member states that do not recognize Kosovo and the latter. In this way, the potential inclusion of Kosovo to the Union will be facilitated in a future, and the countries will also be able to benefit from what Kosovo has to offer. What is more, the European Union will reinforce its image as a united body and will help ensure stability in the Balkans region.

¹⁹ https://ceas.europa.eu/delegations/kosovo/1387/kosovo-and-eu_en

²⁰ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2016/579079/EPRS_ATA%282016%29579079_EN.pdf

²¹ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2016/579079/EPRS_ATA%282016%29579079_EN.pdf

²² https://ceas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eu-facilitated-dialogue-belgrade-pristina-relations/349/dialogue-between-belgrade-and-pristina_en

²³ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2016/579079/EPRS_ATA%282016%29579079_EN.pdf

²⁴ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/parliament-calls-on-all-eu-countries-to-recognise-kosovo/>

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