

Stability, Cooperation and Integration: The Future of Serb-Albanian Relations

Written by Gëzim Krasniqi

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/03/02/stability-cooperation-and-integration-the-future-of-serb-albanian-relations/>

GëZIM KRASNIQI, MAR 2 2015

The relationship between Albania and Serbia is peculiar in great many ways. This is due to a number of factors related to nationalism, ideology, culture and, most importantly, the Kosovo issue. However, beyond the historic factors and current political disagreements, the key problem in relations between the two countries remains what Charles Taylor refers to as 'non-recognition' and 'misrecognition' (Taylor, 1992).

To begin with, these two countries are matchless in a wider European and even international context for managing to maintain a frozen, distant and, at times, tense relationship, irrespective of the fact that they bordered each other for almost a century. Bar a short period of cooperation in the mid-1920s between Albania's leading politician, later on King, Ahmet Zogu and Nikola Pašić, the long-serving Prime Minister of Serbia and then the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, as well as the 'honeymoon' between the Albanian and Serbian/Yugoslav partisan and communist leaders in the period 1944-8, the relationship between Albania and Serbia remained bleak.

This was conditioned by a number of important factors. The first factor is related to the incompatibility of the Serb and Albanian nation-building projects. More precisely, the two nationalist projects overlapped over territory, most notably, the territory of Kosovo. As a result, Kosovo became a thorn in the flesh of relations between the two countries. Yet, it is worth noting that the predominant state elites in Albania throughout the 20th century were state-centred and had no ambitions, let alone elaborate political projects, to incorporate Yugoslav Albanians into a united and larger Albanian state. The idea of national unification of all Albanians in one state was primarily supported and promoted by the nationalist leaders of Albanians in Yugoslavia. Typical of irredentist nationalists that cannot achieve their goal on their own without the support of the kin-state or other external states, the Kosovan nationalist leaders would recurrently turn to Albania for support. Yet, although Albania was seen by many Yugoslav Albanians as their kin-state, Albania's position towards its ethnic-kin was rather cold and distant.

The role of Albania as a kin-state can be viewed in two perspectives: political and cultural. Politically, the Albanian position towards its ethnic kin in the neighbourhood changed over time and was generally susceptible to internal and regional political dynamics. In two crucial moments in the twentieth century, the dominant elite in Albania put regime and/or ideological interests above the ethnic interests: in the aftermath of World War I the state-centred elites around Ahmet Zogu allied with royal Yugoslavia in fighting the 'Kosovan irredenta'. Similarly, at the end of World War II, the victorious Albanian communist regime aligned with the Yugoslav partisans against the various Kosovan nationalist groups. Culturally, the very existence of the state of Albania provided a cultural point of reference for non-dominant Albanian communities in the region. The development of an Albanian education system in Yugoslavia, which often mirrored that of Albania, played a crucial role in the development of a national culture among Albanians in Yugoslavia.

Yet, Kosovo continued to be the key point in relations between Albania and Serbia despite the emergence of a separate Kosovo Albanian political and cultural elite in socialist Yugoslavia and Kosovo's separate political path to a state, independent both from Albania and Serbia. Unfortunately, it continues to be even today, best illustrated by the diplomatic spat between Albania's and Serbia's prime ministers at the press conference in Belgrade in November 2014.

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In addition to nationalism and the Kosovo issue, ideology has been an important factor in the relations between Albania and Serbia. Most notably, ideology was a crucial element in the relations between the two countries during the Cold War. The cutting of ties between Albania and Yugoslavia occurred following the latter's expulsion from the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) in 1948. This paved the way for the two countries to engage in a long lasting ideological propaganda war, with both regimes defending their respective brand of socialism, as well as waging witch-hunting campaigns against the 'pro-enemy' elements in the respective countries. Despite the fact that Albania would occasionally intercede verbally on behalf of the Albanian minority in Yugoslavia, its anti-Yugoslav stance was essentially ideological. At present, although ideology seems to be of lesser importance, the two countries have diverging positions regarding NATO and relations with Russia. Whereas Albania is a NATO member and aligned its foreign policy with that of the United States and the main EU countries, Serbia opposes NATO membership and insists on keeping closer ties with Russia. Nevertheless, Serbia's two pronged approach – EU integration and good relations with Russia – is unlikely to turn into a major ideological impediment between Albania and Serbia. At least for the time being.

The third element, and probably the most important, that makes this relationship peculiar is the issue of non-recognition and misrecognition. This is directly related to cultural and linguistic differences, isolation and lack of contact and exchange and, most importantly, ethno-national indoctrination and prejudices infused by political elites, media and even scholars. Even quarter of a century after the fall of communism and opening of borders, contacts and cultural exchange between Albania and Serbia is almost non-existent. Therefore, existing ignorance, resentment, prejudices and stereotypes remain intact. The anti-Albanian hysteria in the Serbian media that followed after the 'flag brawl' at the football match between Serbia and Albania in Belgrade in autumn 2014 and the subsequent exchange of accusations between politicians is a clear indicator of that.

Beyond the 'flag brawl' and the 'diplomatic spat' from last year, the two states seem to have broken the ice in terms of political cooperation. Albania's Prime Minister, Edi Rama, visited Belgrade (twice) in 2014, where he met his Serbian counterpart, Aleksandar Vučić. This was followed by other high level meetings at various international fora. Political dialogue between two countries is to take a new height this year, with Vučić planning to visit Tirana in spring 2015. Most importantly, the two countries seem determined to cooperate in terms of economic exchange and cooperation as part of the new EU initiative on the Western Balkans (launched in Berlin by the German Chancellor in August 2014) and the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP).

Regardless of these promising signs, the road ahead towards closer cooperation and improvement of relations seems bumpy, not least because of the issue of Kosovo. In reality, there is no reason for Kosovo to become the 'golden apple of discord' that hinders cooperation between the two countries. First, Kosovo has its own legitimate institutions independent from Albania and Serbia. Second, Kosovo's leadership is committed to the principle of good neighbourly relations and cooperation in the context of the process of EU integration. Third, despite closer cooperation between Kosovo and Albania, since the early 1990s, Albania's leaders, least of all the current prime minister, have shown little ambition to speak on behalf of the Kosovo Albanians. Most importantly, Kosovo and Serbia are engaged in a separate process of political dialogue under the auspices of the EU, which would eventually lead to the normalisation of relations between the two countries.

By being positioned between Serbia and Albania and being a country of both Albanians and Serbs (as well as other ethnicities), whose equality as citizens is guaranteed by the law, Kosovo can become a bridge between Serbia and Albania in terms of economic and cultural cooperation and exchange, provided there is political willingness. Notwithstanding, Albania and Serbia are doomed to cooperate closer in the future for a number of reasons. First, the recent history of the Balkans has proven clearly, and at a terrible human and economic cost, that cooperation, dialogue and exchange is a far better path to follow than political distancing, resentment and conflict. Second, Albania and Serbia represent polycentric nations, whose ethnic kin form substantial parts of population in several countries in the region and possess more than one polity/state – Kosovo and Republika Srpska, respectively. As such, they represent the main pillars of regional stability. Hence, bigger responsibility rests on them in terms of stability and cooperation in the Western Balkans. By intensifying cooperation, exchange (political, cultural, economic and so on), the Albanian-Serbian relationship can turn into a beacon of stability, cooperation, integration and progress in the region. Last but not least, the process of EU integration, which is a political goal of both countries,

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provides a venue and an incentive for closer cooperation and integration.

Yet, although practically the process is very complex and has multiple dimensions, where not all of them are related to politics and elites, the future of the relations between Albania and Serbia depends on a crucial precondition: mutual recognition as equals. In practical terms, this means relinquishing the idea of regional hegemony in favour of regional cooperation, ethnic and/or cultural superiority in favour of dialogue, and an ethnocentric understanding of the state in favour of one which posits the state as a means to wellbeing and prosperity for free and equal citizens.

References

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