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Kosovo and France Bilateral Relations: Between Change and Continuity

Enika Abazi

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KOSOVO'S FOREIGN POLICY AND BILATERAL RELATIONS

Edited by
Liridon Lika



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Kosovo's Foreign Policy and Bilateral Relations

**Edited by
Liridon Lika**

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Between Change and Continuity

Enika Abazi

Introduction

France was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Kosovo in 2008. In a letter sent to the President of the Republic of Kosovo Fatmir Sejdiu, the President of the French Republic Nicolas Sarkozy had recognized Kosovo as a sovereign and independent state, with immediate effect, in full accordance with the statement by European Ministers for Foreign Affairs issued the same day in Brussels. Two years later, when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Kosovo had not violated international law by declaring independence from Serbia (ICJ, 2010), in its written statement to the ICJ, France again reconfirmed its position:

By an irrevocable decision, France recognized the State of Kosovo on the day after the declaration of independence, as did more than 55 Member States of the United Nations, including 22 Member States of the European Union. By this act, France not only confirmed Kosovo's standing as a sovereign and independent State and the definitive conclusion of a political process begun in 1999, but also wished to open for the future with a now independent Kosovo, as it has with all the States of the region, a new page in its relations with the Balkans after the tragic events of the 1990s.

(French Republic, 2009, p. 2).

After this recognition, the questions to answer remain: How did the relations between France and Kosovo evolve after that? What are the factors that shaped and continue to shape the state of interactions? How have the parties' interests evolved over time? And finally, whether and to what extent: the interactions contribute to the successful and positive development of the consolidation of Kosovo's independence, the normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations, and the enhancement of relations between the two countries to a higher level. In this chapter, attention will be given to the questions raised and the causes behind attitudes, behavior and foreign policy actions and France's commitment on collective action, as much as on Kosovo's statehood at the international level.

It is almost common practice to use history and geography to understand historical trends and nature of relations between states, as it often defines current relations. However, in the case of relations between France and Kosovo, one should take into account the fact that Kosovo did not declare its independence until February 2008. Obviously, an omission of historical considerations can be invariably to the detriment of the overall analysis. To avoid the void, in the classical sense, France's role and interests on the Albanian question in the Balkans and its traditional alliances in the region can provide insights that can help to understand the present. However, due to the limitations of space, and the aim of the chapter, the history section does not profess to be a detailed history of the French diplomacy regarding the Albanian or the Kosovo question at the beginning and the end of the last century; the aim of the chapter being the contemporary relations between Kosovo and France as political entities. Thus, the historical narrative will be short, and not diachronic. It attempts merely to correlate in their logical sequences the most significant events of old and recent history, to expose the evolution of a bilateral relationship. In addition to the relations between sovereign states organized around leaders and diplomatic apparatuses, in the chapter, the equation of bilateral relations is conceived as being broader, and takes into account the relations established between peoples, between civil societies, exchanges of products and services, the communication of ideas, games of reciprocal influences between cultural traditions, expressions of sympathy or antipathy, networks of solidarity and the like.

France's policy, regardless of variations, remains a logical outcome of long-term trends and established tradition of its foreign policy in the Balkans; yet, there is new perspective as well that reflects upon increasing interdependence at the international level and growing in importance of the EU in European affairs. As pointed out by Anne-Sophie Paquez, "the Kosovo crisis has revealed and accelerated the development of a new French foreign policy centered around the constitution of a European defense and referring to a new paradigm: the defense of human rights" (Paquez, 2003, p. 7). A trend in French policy that is reinforced with the Emmanuel Macron presidency, however without producing major ruptures in France's traditional alliances and interests. On the Kosovar side, relations with France occupy a modest place.

This chapter is based on a qualitative and comparative methodology that combines a historical and analytical understanding of the interaction between change and continuity in relations between France and Kosovo, before and after the recognition of independence, with a rigorous treatment of the key contemporary events from a *longue durée* perspective. Contemporary France–Kosovo relations have a historical dimension, in the sense that the framework is governed by a heritage forged over time. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the decisive aspects and correlate significant events of old and recent history in their logical sequences and outcomes. The specifics of

policies will be discussed taking into account the Balkan regional context and the competing interests of different international and regional powers. For an understanding of France–Kosovo relations, this chapter will also look at the density of established linkages between states and the non-state actors, the leverage that both countries have in affecting decision-making at international level, without neglecting the role of political elites and “gatekeepers” who hold the key to lower and/or increase the weight of pressure.

Thus, the chapter will put into perspective the bilateral relations between France and Kosovo in an attempt to discern the new elements and those that, on the contrary, are part of a long history. It will then be a question of trying to prioritize the most decisive elements in order to grasp their content. The chapter has three parts in addition to the conclusions. The first part of the chapter focuses on historical contextualization of the France–Kosovo relations. The *longue durée* approach is used to point out recurring patterns in contemporary politics, and to facilitate the understanding of the ruptures with the past. The second part analyzes intellectual tradition and public opinions, to understand the main trends, old and new, that affect politics, and their possible changes. The third part brings close attention to contemporary economic, cultural and political linkages, being those developed in a multilateral or bilateral context. The Conclusion section briefly deduces ideas from the previous parts rather than recapitulating them, with the purpose of opening the way to future inquiries on the topic.

Historical Contextualization of Politics

Because of a sort of Pax Ottomana that lasted a long time (five centuries), bilateral relations between France and Kosovo cannot be perceived in classical terms as it is done in traditional foreign policy analysis. It is worth mentioning, however, that France is a centuries-old actor in the Balkans and that the French experience with Kosovo in the contemporary period has a historical dimension, in the sense that a heritage forged over time affects France’s say in the latest current affairs. Two events are important in this regard: the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, which have marked Kosovo’s very political existence. At the end of the Balkan Wars, with the agreement of July 29, 1913, at the Conference of Ambassadors in London, Kosovo’s territory and population, regardless of the large majority of Albanian ethnicity, was put under Serbian domination (Puto, 1987, pp. 278–280) although, according to Noel Malcolm, “Kosovo had never been legally incorporated into the Serbian state” (Malcolm, 1998, p. 264). At the end of the wars of Yugoslavia in 1999, Kosovo got away from what was left of the Yugoslav Federation – the Serbo–Montenegrin Federation. Thus, Kosovo was established as a state in the context of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244 provided a framework for the resolution of the conflict by authorizing the deployment of an international civilian and military

presence – the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). In February 2008, Kosovo declared independence and on July 2010, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Kosovo had not violated international law by declaring its independence from Serbia two years earlier (ICJ, 2010). In these historical moments, France has been pivotal in various ways that need to be discerned.

However, one should know that there are some historical facts that only make sense if a Braudelian *longue durée* perspective is applied (Braudel, 1958). The state's external action results from a multitude of potential factors, at once diverse and interrelated, some of them deeper-seated than others. In general, most of the identifiable factors interact with foreign policy in a non-linear relationship, while many causal factors are unknown, and most importantly, many of them are highly dependent on the international system, the regional structures and transnational dynamics and movements. Events that are imprisoned in the *courte durée*, however, explosive they may be, serve to fill the consciousness of contemporaries, but do not last long (Braudel, 1958).

The events that determined the fate of Kosovo at the beginning and again at the end of the twentieth century are loaded with profound historical meanings that go beyond particular empirical moments. The subordination of Kosovo to Serbian domination in the beginning of the twentieth century is linked to a series of events and underlying realities, so closely related, as it is difficult to not interpret them in a European context committed to the preservation of balances in the concert of Great powers. Accordingly, France experienced the Kosovo case under the optics of its historical alliances in the Balkans and the prerogatives of a great power that needed to be discovered.

Although by proxy, Serbia remains sensitive to France–Kosovo relations, and Serbian influence on French politics, public and political debates, especially in regard to the normalization of relations with Kosovo, cannot be ignored, for an understanding of conjectural factors that mark bilateral relations between France and Kosovo. Kosovo's most important challenge today remains the normalization of relations with Serbia, while Serbia tries to prevent it by using all its means, and above all its historical alliances, which are renewed any time in different formats. A short observation on the matter is needed.

From a *long durée* perspective, France has prioritized relations with Serbia in its alliance policies in the Balkans. Since Napoleon III (1848–1870), France assumed a leading role in the resolution of the Eastern Question¹ with a plan supporting the nationalist movements of Christian Monarchies in the Balkans, among which Serbia was a main pillar (Batakovic, 2010a; Sotirovic, 2011, p. 95). This idea was informally suggested since 1861 (Jelavich, 1991, pp. 152–153). Napoleon III canceled his Balkan plan in mid-1862, because of the lack of preparation of the Balkan states and because of the British support for the intact preservation of the Ottoman Empire (Sotirovic, 2011, p. 97). Regardless of this decision, French support for Serbia continued in the Eastern Crisis (1875–1878), on several occasions (defense of the status

quo after the military defeat of 1876, the Serbian railroad, rectification of the borders in favor of Serbia during the Congress of Berlin in 1878). French support showed beyond doubt to be effective for Serbia. Between the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 and the *coup d'État* that overthrew the Obrenovic dynasty in 1903, the French influence, despite the lesser interest that the Third Republic showed in the Balkans, made itself increasingly felt – not only on the level of political ideas (Batakovic, 2010a, pp. 20–21). At that time, the French government came to be directly involved in the process of arming the Serbian monarchy (Jelavich, 1991, pp. 152–153; Sotirovic, 2011, pp. 96–97). France turned out to be “a powerful motor for the political aspirations of Serbia” and due to French and Russian support, Serbia ended “up as the great victor of the two Balkan Wars of 1912–1913” (Batakovic, 2010b, p. 26), which allowed it to seize Kosovo as spoils of war. As Herbert Henry Asquith, the British Prime Minister proclaimed on November 9, 1912, “the victorious shouldn’t be deprived of such an expensive victory” (quoted in: Kolev and Koulouri, 2005, p. 98).

Referring to the notes and discourses of Raymond Poincaré, President of France (1913–1920), it becomes clear that recognition of the new Albanian state without Kosovo was a concession made to Austria “on the part of Serbia as well as on the part of Russia and France” (Poincaré, 1926b, p. 172). In the background, Germany’s entry into the concert of Great powers and its extraordinary progress after the Franco-German war (1870–1871) introduced new elements “into the diplomatic situation, which led to the creation of antagonistic alliances to counter its role in the Balkans and elsewhere” (Seymour, 1916, p. 2). By its choices, France’s diplomacy acted to preserve the double status quo in Europe and the Balkans (Poincaré, 1926b, p. 218 and p. 253), and any threat to it ought to be considered a “*casus belli*” (Poincaré, 1926b, p. 82). A clear boundary line for spheres of interests was drawn with Austria–Hungary and limits were shown to Russia and Germany (Poincaré, 1926b, pp. 115–118). France remained an attentive observer and anticipator of the events regarding the Albanian question, because as Gabriel Louis-Jaray points out,² “events can occur which can again modify the European balance” (Louis-Jaray, 1914, p. 56). From the French point of view, Albania was the fruit of a diplomatic intervention by Austria–Hungary, which divided Europe – which [France] allowed to happen to maintain the balance in the concert of Great powers (Poincaré, 1926b, p. 116 and p. 281). Thus, French policy in this case, and of the other European powers as well, was not very far from the Concert of Europe of 1815. The Albanian borders that left Kosovo out resulted from the competition of Great powers, and took into account the strategic and historical susceptibilities of the Serbian and Greek allies, and, above all, of the balance of the powers concerned, rather than the principle of nationalities.

The leaders’ statements, ambassadors’ conferences and parliamentary debates mentioned above would not represent the full meaning and importance of the events. Conjectural factors around the Kosovo case reveal the

eminent role of different ideas engaged in politics, having to do with the European project, cultural, religious, and civilizational divisions. After all, politics “is not event-driven, nor condemned to be” (Braudel, 1958, p. 728). France was invested in different international conferences, treaties and diplomatic exchanges, like the Conference of London (1912–1913) and Bucharest (1913), in which the fate of Kosovo was decided. From the French point of view, Kosovo’s subordination to Serbia was simply an event among others that were used as a means “to maintain France’s rank in the concert of the Great European powers, in which France was instrumental in settling principles and rules (Poincaré, 1926b, p. 371). For Poincaré, “Europe’s community of action” (Poincaré, 1926a, p. 316) was a means to “support without failing [...] the cause of peace and civilization” (Poincaré, 1926b, p. 371), eliminate “isolated steps” that were “a real threat to peace” (Poincaré, 1926a, p. 316), and “exercise collective surveillance over the march of events in the Balkans” (Poincaré, 1926b, p. 281).

If the policies along the twentieth century can be compared, a centuries-old trend could be observed in terms of alliances and France’s interest in the Balkans, and how these interests were operationalized in the political field. At the end of the twentieth century, with the reunification of Germany and its unilateral recognition of the independence of Croatia and Slovenia, the fears of a renewed Germanic influence in a *Mitteleuropa* devoid of Soviet tutelage returned, pushing France to bet on a Serbian, and hence Yugoslavian, counterweight. During François Mitterrand’s presidency (1981–1995), to keep Germany under control, France actively pursued the policy of a “European solution to a European problem,” investing itself with determination in the establishment of the European Community Conference on Yugoslavia (ECCY) and the Arbitration Commission of the Conference on Yugoslavia (commonly known as the Badinter Arbitration Commission) in 1991, the creation of a Group of Contact, followed by the quest for a “European Confederation” (Mitterrand, 1989), to deal with the Yugoslavian crisis and its dissolution later on. From the French point of view, Kosovo was “an internal problem” of Serbia, for which “no intervention was envisaged” (Mitterrand, 1990).

For the Badinter Commission, established after the French proposal, the solution to the Yugoslavian crisis was to be “found in the disassociation of the concept of nationality from that of territory” (Pellet, 1992, p. 180). Opinion no. 2 of the Badinter Commission clarified the legal position of minorities within the existing Yugoslavian Republics, among others the Albanians in Kosovo, and ruled that they were entitled to minority rights and guarantees under international law, including “the right to their nationality,” but had no right to become independent from Serbia (Pellet, 1992, p. 184). This decision was in compliance with another customary opinion of *Uti Possidetis Juris* that implies the respect of existing frontiers of the Republics at the moment of independence. Under these provisions, the status of Republic for Kosovo has not been recognized. The Kosovo case was treated within the parameters of

“a new paradigm: the defense of human rights,” which was going to be the benchmark of the new French foreign policy in the years to come (Paquez, 2003, p. 7).

Another principle settled by the Badinter Arbitration Commission was the expression of “the true will of the entirety of [any Yugoslav] republic’s population” to the confirmation of any demand for independence. On July 1990, Albanian delegates of the Kosovo Assembly declared Kosovo an “independent and equal entity within the framework of the Yugoslavian Federation and as an equal subject with its counterparts in Yugoslavia” (Academy of Science of the Republic of Albania, 1993, p. 329). Again, in a referendum organized in Kosovo in September 1991, a proportion of 99.87% voted on independence (Maass, 1991; Silber, 1992; Terrett, 2017, p. 189; Troebst, 1998). In spite of the declared “true will” of the majority of the population, this principle was not applied in the case of Kosovo.

France’s engagement in the promotion of a new order based on respect for human rights and nationalities through a consensual multilateral framework did not imply a rupture with its historical alliances in the Balkans, particularly with Serbia. During the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and after a series of conferences and treaties that were signed to design the new map of the Balkans, Poincaré was clear that “a policy of European union was in no way incompatible with the maintenance of alliances” (Poincaré, 1926b, p. 281). Thus, the idea of a “European Union,” articulated in French policy by Poincaré, was reinstated by Mitterrand in the 1990s under the name of “European Confederation,” in both periods as a means of maintaining France’s leading role in the concert of the Great powers of the old continent. Yet, one century later, Mitterrand left no doubts about the importance of traditional alliances. In an interview for *Le Monde*, he declared: “France has not been and will not be anti-Serbian” (Mitterrand, 1993). This position was also confirmed by Roland Dumas, his Foreign Affairs minister,³ who said “we continue to privilege our alliance with the Serbs” in the Balkan region (Dumas, 1996, p. 356). These observations are key to understand the bilateral relations not as a snapshot, but as a process that supplies a collective knowledge, the mental map that guides political action, and beyond (Wendt, 1999). This collective knowledge may survive for a long time, pass from one generation to another, and can be observed over consistent instances of support and obstacles in the *longue durée*. Attachments constructed upon collective knowledge may conceal old ways of thinking and acting that sometimes resist any opposite logic and turn into an international representation, which are “able to transform the present because they gain contingency by rendering the historical connection between the past and the present unintelligible” (Abazi and Doja, 2016, p. 595).

Therefore, despite the obvious changes during the 80 years between the Balkan Wars of the 1910s and the 1990s, there was some consistency in French alliances and affinities in the Balkans, till the upheaval brought by the Kosovo war (1998–1999). In the course of the Yugoslavian wars and the peace

negotiations, France remained loyal to its traditional alliances. On every occasion, French President Mitterrand assumed *l'amitié franco-serbe* and his willingness to support both peace efforts and Slobodan Milosevic⁴ although the “hero’ of Dayton” (Silber, 1996) was “the butcher of the Balkans” (Nielsen, 2001). Milosevic was brought to trial in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), accused of crimes against humanity and other criminal offenses, including murder, deportation and persecution of the population in Kosovo in the 1990s (Judah, 2002). Nevertheless, the declaration of the French President referred vaguely to the “people” and ignored whom he was talking about. He was marked saying: “the Serbian people who have a long tradition of friendship with the French people, today find themselves before a historic choice in favor of peace, which they must have the courage to accomplish. France, through my voice, and in the name of our shared history, warmly encourages them to this” (Mitterrand, 1990). France believed that peace plans and efforts could only be successful if Milosevic and Serbia were retracted out of international isolation and invited in the negotiation deals, a position that was stated on several occasions by Mitterrand (1994).

Obviously, the question of Kosovo could not be dealt with Milosevic being considered a peace broker in the process of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Still, as long as there was no war in Kosovo there was not any urgent need to deal with the question (Caplan, 1998). The Kosovo issue was left out from the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina known as the Dayton Accords. The agreement was formally signed in Paris on December 14, 1995, as a kind of recognition of the French contribution to the conflict settlement, although the deal was achieved in Dayton at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, the United States (US), since November 21, 1995. The only leverage that compelled cooperation with Serbia regarding Kosovo was the “outer wall of sanctions,” a concept advanced in a Statement issued by the US Department of State on November 23, 1995 (two days after the agreement was reached). It conditioned the full diplomatic recognition of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) (Serbia and Montenegro) and its full membership in different international institutions under the provision that Serbia respected “human rights in Kosovo” (Phillips, 1996, p. 231). However, trade sanctions against FRY (Serbia and Montenegro) were suspended with the UNSCR 1022 of November 20 1995, and completely lifted by the UNSCR 1047 of October 1, 1996, without any progress in the record of human rights in Kosovo (Abazi, 2004, 2012).

Despite the upheavals that have changed the map of the Balkans from the beginning to the end of twentieth century, with Kosovo being the latest, France’s interests and consequently its external action have not undergone fundamental modifications. The interweaving dynamics of interaction between international and domestic variables into the politics of alliances and their role in bilateral relations could help to elucidate the situation. The analytical framework of political and cultural linkages seems more appropriate than a classical foreign policy analysis to disclose the reality of bilateral

relations (Abazi, 2019). A linkage approach would offer an understanding of “any recurrent sequence of behavior that originates in one (national or international) system and is reactivated in another” (Rosenau, 1969, p. 45).

To this end, more attention will be paid in the next section to public and political debates in France, before and during the conflict in Kosovo in 1998–1999. Although foreign policy objectives and consecutive actions are enabled by complex structural factors that reflect long-term trends impregnated in history, they are often driven by short-term causes sparked by triggers that come usually from domestic structures. Several scholars agree on the interplay between international and domestic structures in foreign policy (Katzenstein, 1976, p. 45; Moravcsik, 1993, p. 9; Putnam, 1988, p. 427), yet the question is “when” and “how” preference-ordering choices show their “relative weight” in foreign policy. Moving beyond conjectural factors in the understanding of choices for external action, it will also be useful to look at social structures of organization, the coherence and consistency of relations that have impregnated collective knowledge and the representations that have profiled public and political debates with relation to Kosovo.

Intellectual Tradition and Public Opinions

The understanding of France’s experience of Kosovo in the context of the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 cannot be separated from the broader framework of the political, economic, social and cultural conditions in which nation-states emerged across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). These conditions created a burning feeling of national resentment and a climate extremely favorable to the production of all-encompassing ideological solutions, which led the local intellectual elites to consider nationalism a viable strategy for overcoming their problems (Greenfeld, 1992). As an ideology, nationalism started with German romantic resentment in reaction to the universalism underpinning French enlightenment, thus giving birth to Pan-Germanism. Paradoxically, the German reactions induced a similar resentment, giving birth to Pan-Slavism (Sundhaussen, 1973). In the process, widespread interest was generated in the exaltation of one’s own national culture and history together with the ideals of nation and state-building. Such movements have been institutionalized in the Balkans, as it is in the case of Albania (Doja, 2015), during periods when the need was felt for a project that could specify tasks of “national” importance. This would confirm that there really existed a nation, and that in its pretensions to independent statehood, the nation had a continuity of territorial possession and a historical legality or at least cultural legitimacy (Abazi, 2016, pp. 205–206).

In this historical context, since the time of Napoleon III, Serbian nationalist ideas that inspired the war of liberation from the Ottoman yoke became popular among influential French intellectuals like Alphonse de Lamartine, Jules Michelet, Victor Hugo and Léon Gambetta, and they continued to be influential in French political and public debates regarding the future of the peoples

of the Balkans. In his speech in the French House of Representatives on the success of the Serbs in the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, Poincaré declared:

What was for a long time a dream has become a reality. The thought that had haunted in 1844 the famous Serbian patriot Ilija Garasanin, the one that had inspired, after 1860, Prince Michel Obrenovic, the one who had seduced in the West men such as Lamartine, Michelet, Victor Hugo, Gambetta (whose magnificent letter I read yesterday, dated 1874 on this question), this thought has now penetrated the conscience of the people themselves and it pushed them to sudden undertakings, in the name of justice and freedom.

(Poincaré, 1926b, pp. 410–411).

The discussions in the French House of Representatives glowed with the same enthusiasm. More importantly, French Representatives like Jean Jaurès and Édouard Vaillant, “were in favor of government policies [...] on the future of the Balkan countries [...] and agreed that Albania had to be neutralized” (Poincaré, 1926b, pp. 406–407).

Ilija Garasanin (1812–1874), Prime Minister and minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia (1861–1867), exposed two-sided influential ideas presented in his *Nacertanije* (Program) of 1844. On the one hand, his ideas inspired both the Serbs in their fight against the Ottoman yoke and many renowned French intellectuals, writers and politicians. On the other hand, the program was a leading inspiration for Serbian nationalism based on territorial “extension” and ethnic “homogenization” at the expense of Albanians. It represented a wretched solution for Albanian claims for justice and freedom.

Garasanin recognized the existence of “a separate Albanian ethno-linguistic nationality,” but he believed that an independent national state for Albanians could not make sense because Albanians were not “mature enough” to hold the responsibility of self-government of their own independent state, therefore, “the best solution” was to divide the territory of [...] Albania between Serbia and Greece” (Sotirovic, 2011, p. 93). In fact, these ideas became the motto for the extermination of Albanians during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 witnessed in the *Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars* (Carnegie Endowment, 1914). The report described massacres committed by Serbian and Montenegrin troops against civilians in Gjakova, Peja, Plava, Gucia and the ex-vilayet of Kosovo, aimed at the “entire transformation of the ethnic character of regions inhabited exclusively by Albanians” (Carnegie Endowment, 1914, pp. 150–151). Again, Garasanin’s ideas in the 1990s would inspire Milosevic in his politics against the Albanians in Kosovo (Judah, 2002).

The Slavophil trend in France’s academia and politics has older roots. The first chair of Slavic Languages and Literature was inaugurated in 1840 by the Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz (1840–1852), and later occupied by Louis L  ger (1885–1923), and was represented by great French personalities

(Collège de France, 2022). This intellectual tradition was later enriched after the Balkan Wars by the contribution of Serbian intellectual émigrés in Paris. One of the most meaningful examples is that of Jovan Cvijic (1865–1927), Serbian geographer and ethnologist, president of the Serbian Royal Academy of Sciences and rector of the University of Belgrade. His work offered arguments in the legitimation of Serbia’s territorial claims and geopolitical interests in the Balkans, representing a great contribution to the doctrine of the Greater Serbia. He published several volumes, many in French, taught at the Sorbonne and published his works in France. Defending the Serbian thesis, in his well-known book *La péninsule balkanique. Géographie humaine* (1918). Cvijic writes about the Kosovo Albanians:

The Albanians, devoid of national consciousness, and of any organization, were not bound by any common interest. Every man living for himself became a brigand. If he was not respected, he killed, just as he could be killed by his adversary at the first favorable opportunity. Only this reciprocal fear was able to sustain the anarchic Albanian society of Kosovo and Metohija.

(Cvijic, 1918, p. 152)

The same ideas will be the central theme to the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (1986) marked by ethnicization and self-victimization, using Kosovo as the focus to initiate the expansion of the borders of Serbia.

The book of Cvijic (1918) would influence many of the academics participating in the *Comité d’Études* (Study Committee). A kind of think tank created in 1917, it gathered different experts and academicians from the fields of geography, history, economy and language to study the organization of peace in relation to the principles of nationalities and the interests of France. The Albanian question is part of its publications. The chapter dedicated to the Albanian question was presented by Jean Brunhes and entitled *Indépendance politique et limites possibles de l’Albanie* (Brunhes, 1919). All five parts of his report have a guiding thread – Albanian unity – which is expressed through race (ethnicity), language, social organization and civilization and political organization. The author demonstrates that “the great double depression of the Prizrend and Metohia basin with Djakova and Ipek, and even a large part of Kosovo, are populated today by many more Albanians than Serbs” (Brunhes, 1919, p. 523). However, Brunhes’ recommendations coincide with the opinions of French decision-makers and the general trend in favor of the Serb cause. Against his own arguments, he concludes “it seems to us completely inappropriate and contrary to the superior interests of peace in the Balkans to modify once again the borders” of 1913, without ignoring “that this is a very big sacrifice imposed on Albanians” (Brunhes, 1919, p. 523). The discussions on this presentation reveal profound differences with Brunhes’ arguments and reveal not only the ignorance of

the Albanian question and Kosovar issue, they are above all influenced and prejudiced. It is worth mentioning some of them. The Hellenist Hubert Pernot who contests the quality of the ethnographic data concerning southern Albania and declares himself in favor of the attribution of Gjirokastra to Greece pretending that “the Albanians assimilate easily” and “the inferiority of civilization of the Albanians compared to the Greeks should make one hesitate to include Greeks in an Albanian State” (Brunhes, 1919, p. 528). The geographer Emmanuel de Martonne expresses doubts about the viability of an Albanian state given the deep divisions between northern and southern Albania. The latter, and especially around Korça, “we have some chance of seeing the development of a real national life. Unfortunately, these countries are naturally subject to Greek influence, or to Italian influence” (Brunhes, 1919, p. 529). The linguist Antoine Meillet employs questionable linguistic arguments, cut off from the historical context, which condemns him to a highly partial analysis: he considers the Albanian language an artificial creation as was the state established by the Conference of Ambassadors in London of 1912–1913. Responding to the arguments invoked by Brunhes in his presentation, Meillet affirms that “the fact of keeping an old language is not a proof of national vigor, but rather the index of a backward life” (Brunhes, 1919, p. 528). In another work he expressed himself: “The Albanian [...] has never been used to express an original civilization. It was written very late; the first texts we have are from the seventeenth century. It therefore has, strictly speaking, no history” (Meillet, 1918 [1928], pp. 227–228). The intellectual production and exchanges on the common battles have contributed to feed the Serbian narrative until today, including academic publications in French (Batakovic, 2010a). Serbia was seen in France as a pillar of the South Slavs “in the piedmont of the Balkans” (Léger, 1905, p. 47). These ideas triumphed during the Great Wars in 1919 and in 1945, and were claimed again in the 1990s during the wars of dissolution of Yugoslavia.

In comparison, the influence of Albanian intellectuals was almost insignificant. Studies on Albanians seem to have suffered from this conjuncture since the beginning of the twentieth century. Gabriel Louis-Jaray would acknowledge:

The works in French [about Albanians] are rare and date at least a quarter of a century: they are those of Hecquard, *Description de la Haute-Albanie ou Guégarie* (1859), of Dozon, who published in 1878 a *Manuel de la langue chkipie* and in 1881 of the *Contes albanais*, finally of Degrand, who was consul of France in Scutari and published with Walter (1893) his *Souvenirs de la Haute-Albanie*. The other books or brochures are history or controversy books, or are second-hand.

(Louis-Jaray, 1914, p. Appendice).

One year before Francis Delaisi, another publicist interested in Albania, takes up the theme of an unknown country making the most radical affirmation

concerning the state of knowledge about the country: “the Sahara is better known and Tibet barely more mysterious” (Delaisi, 1913, p. 110). It is worth mentioning that in 1912 the post-mortem work of Émile Legrand (1912): *Albanian bibliography of all the works published from the 15th century to 1900*, was published. Apparently, it did not receive the interest of the press, decision-makers or the public opinion. The situation is not much different nowadays. The description on the back cover of the book *Histoire de l’Albanie et des Albanais* of Georges Castellan tells the potential readers: “The Albanians were revealed to the French by the NATO bombardments on Kosovo [1999]” (Castellan, 2002).

The number of studies on the Albanian question is limited. Despite a modest mobilization of different intellectuals before the peace conferences at the beginning of the twentieth century to highlight the rights of small peoples, as was the case with the Albanian question (Aubry and Apollinaire, 1917; Bourcart, 1922; Lamouche et al., 1914; Meillet, 1918 [1928]), the results proved to be quite disappointing and their expertise could appear useless as it failed to help political leaders to frame a fair new map of the Balkans, and of Albania in particular. The main problem with writings on the Albanian question is that they are not integrated into the historiographic and academic circuits and their authors fail to offer a holistic picture of the Albanian or Kosovar questions, being focused on one specific question, like language (Meillet, 1918 [1928]), geography (Bourcart, 1922), culture and civilization,⁵ and the like. These studies neglected certain fundamental sources, like German, Italian and Austro-Hungarian ones, and therefore did not sufficiently frame the subject they dealt with in inter-entities’ relations framework. This situation can be explained by rival propaganda of its neighbors, Serbians and Greeks, coupled with the sympathies of French public opinion and the interests of French decision-makers on the later ones. And, partly with the situation of the Albanian diaspora, which has been and is almost insignificant and remains so even nowadays as such, considering the small number of Kosovo Albanians living in France. Even in 2011, only 10 000 Kosovo citizens lived in France, compared to 250 000 living in Switzerland and 200 000 in Germany (French Senate, 2011). Consequently, the Albanian question had a minimal impact on French public opinion and even more on French decision-makers.

Extended exchanges between Serbian and French intellectuals and ruling elites went hand in hand with France’s interests in the Balkans (Sretenovic, 2009, p. 34), witnessing a kind of connivance between ideas, power and politics. French sympathies continued during the Cold War and enriched in the process of close relations with former Yugoslavia for nearly half a century. French public opinion and France’s elites admired the Yugoslavian role in the non-alignment movement, breaking free from Moscow’s influence and looking toward the West (Madelain, 2015). The cultural and scientific cooperation of French intellectuals and artists with the urban centers of Yugoslavia have further contributed in this direction. The intensity of intellectual

linkages was unbalanced, with priorities given to big cities like Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana to the detriment of other cities in the less developed parts of Yugoslavia, like Prishtina in Kosovo. The intermingling of political tradition with frequent cultural exchanges nurtured the false idea that Serbia and Yugoslavia are tantamount the same thing. In this context, little place is left for the “other,” and for Albanians in Kosovo, almost no interest.

These intellectual, public and political interactions seem to have marked French experience of Kosovo in the early 1990s. In the public space, analyses and debates on the dramatic events that took place in Kosovo were merely present in France. From 1991 onward, a few Albanian intellectuals started to be known in France. Among them, Ismail Kadare, the renowned Albanian writer, translated into French and several other languages; Ibrahim Rugova, the Secretary of the Union of Writers of Kosovo and thereafter the First President of the Republic of Kosovo; Muhamedin Kullashi, chargé d'affaires and then first Ambassador of independent Kosovo in France. In French academic and political circles, as elsewhere, they tried to explain that the Yugoslavian crisis of the 1990s was not a simple constitutional crisis but a systemic populist-nationalist movement, with ethnic cleansing consequences for Kosovo, and dating before the crisis of the 1990s. A reality that was evidenced later internationally (Clark, 2000; Daalder and O'Hanlon, 2000; Kohl and Wolfgang, 1992; Troebst, 1998).

Ismail Kadare had a particular place in the encounter of the French public opinions with the Albanians, including familiarizing with the Kosovo question. The knowledge about the latter was not only scarce, but extremely partial in France (Kadare, 1991). From 1997, French public opinions would look to Ismail Kadare for keys to understand the Serbian–Albanian conflict in Kosovo (Madelain, 2015, p. 393). Although his writings later encountered some criticism and skepticism in French academic circles,⁶ not so much for the lack of reliable sources and rigor that characterizes academic works, but for their artuality supposed to be “filled mainly with a nationalism against the Yugoslavs and especially against the Serbs” (De Rapper, 2011, p. 45).

In winter 1992, a Kosovo Committee was established in France in support of the Kosovo cause, and Ismail Kadare was a member. The Committee functioned for a long time by improvised meetings, gathering a number of French editors, journalists and intellectuals close to the journal *Esprit*, including Olivier Mongin, Antoine Garapon and Pierre Hassner, who acted and wrote to defend the Kosovo cause (Renterghem, 1999). The Kosovo Committee intensified its activity in the aftermath of Milosevic actions in Kosovo during 1998–1999, when a more radical Serbian undertaking oppressed the Albanian population in Kosovo, going from the ethnic cleansing of institutions to the ethnic cleansing of territory, with expulsion and atrocities against civilians.

This situation prompted a massive commitment of French intellectuals, philosophers, writers, artists and academicians along a significant citizen engagement. In their diversity, supporters of the Kosovo cause backed French participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

military intervention against Serbia. The Kosovo Committee activity supported the “policy of steadiness” of the West against the regime of Milosevic and demanded NATO military intervention to be deployed on the ground. Its call to condemn the massacre of Prekaz was signed by 300 prominent French intellectuals that prompted the largest rallies dedicated to Kosovo in France, held on March 7, 1998 in the Place of Trocadero, also known as the “Human Rights Square” in Paris. The would-be ambassador of Kosovo in France framed the importance of the event “where friendship and solidarity were woven between Albanians and the French, from ordinary citizens to high-ranking intellectuals” (Kullashi, 2021, p. 136).

After the Bosnian momentum that had increased the sensitivity and awareness of French public opinion toward ethnic cleansing, the continuation of Milosevic’s territorial policies of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo seemed to test the last drop in people’s patience. In April 1999, a proportion of 70% of the French population supported NATO military intervention against Serbia and 77% said they were concerned by the Kosovo conflict (Subtil, 1999). The great interest and mobilization of civil society during the Kosovo war in France was considered an “exceptional phenomenon” by Red Cross (Broussard, 1999). The participation of French civil society in aid to Kosovo in 1999 is estimated at €7.6 million out of a total of €61.4 million (Babaud, 2005, pp. 32–33). Various forms of civil society initiatives took place, such as collection of donations by the National Federation of Farmers’ Unions (FNSEA), “Milk for Kosovo,” “SOS Kosovo,” “Radios for Kosovo,” “100 trucks for Kosovo,” “Regional boats for Kosovo,” “Women for peace” etc. (Broussard, 1999).

Public mobilization is estimated to have a “relative weight” with regard to political decision-making in democratic countries. Under the spell of this mobilization in France, President Jacques Chirac, who differed from Mitterrand, changed France’s policy toward Kosovo and supported NATO military intervention against Serbia as part of the multilateral effort, although France was not part of the alliance military structure. In his televised address, President Chirac mentioned that Milosevic’s actions in Kosovo were a “barbarism,” while paying careful attention to separate the Serbian leadership from the Serbian people, “for whom,” he said, “we only have esteem and friendship” (Chirac, 1999).

France stayed tuned with the other Euro-Atlantic partners and was one of the main sponsors of the Interim Agreement for Peace and Self-Government in Kosovo that was eventually concluded in Rambouillet (France), and explicitly envisaged the deployment of a NATO-led force. After the refusal by Milosevic to authorize the deployment of the NATO-led force and the continuation of the ethnic cleansing campaign against Albanians in Kosovo, France joined the United States and Great Britain (GB) in the NATO’s bombing campaign against Serbia. Remarkably, the French National Assembly was not consulted, but only informed by the Prime Minister Lionel Jospin two days after the air strikes had started. French involvement was important, not

only on the diplomatic level but in the military participation on the ground as well. France deployed 97 aircrafts of all kinds, including 76 combat aircrafts out of a total 786 engaged, which placed it in the second rank of contributors to the “Allied Force” operation, behind the United States. It provided 10.9% of total aircraft input, 21.8% of transport and support missions and 20.2% of reconnaissance missions. It also provided nearly 30% of Combat Search and Rescue alerts (CSAR) (French Senate, 1999).

Under Sarkozy’s presidency (2007–2012), France stood alongside the United States in recognizing Kosovo’s declaration of independence on February 17, 2008, and provided a favorable opinion to the ICJ on this declaration. As a result, in his advisory opinion, the French ambassador to the Court signed “the Court should conclude that the declaration of independence of 17 February 2008 is not contrary to any rule of international public law, observing that the declaration was not in violation of international law” (Chirac, 1999).

Regardless of institutional positions, from the beginning to the end of the military intervention, and after the declaration of independence of Kosovo, several French personalities remained stuck to their opinion against NATO military intervention in Serbia. Two main arguments based on a rhetoric revolving around “principles” can be distinguished. One of the arguments was formulated around the idea that NATO military intervention qualified as an act of “imperialist powers” aiming at imposing their “imperialist rule” against “Serbia as a sovereign state” (Halimi and Rimbart, 1999). The other argument was constructed around the complete denial of the crimes of the Serbian state against Albanians in Kosovo, which came to be considered as “lies and slanders” propagated to justify US-led NATO military intervention, described as “aggression” against Serbia. These claims are old (Collon, 2000; Halimi and Rimbart, 1999; Lévy, 2000), but reemerge in the French media (Dérens and Geslin, 2019). Under these conditions of public opinion changes, political decisions, though they are not irreversible, can be moderated. Once the military intervention was over and the alternation of power in Serbia was assured after Milosevic’s fall in October 2000, the French position turned to pragmatism regarding the Kosovo case. On the main question, that of the future status of Kosovo, France maintains formally a less “committed” position than the United States, while public opinions converge on the substance to work for a compromise between the desires for independence of the Albanians and the interests of Serbia in Kosovo.

Despite observable changes, the 80 years between the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, until the intervention in the Kosovo war, there is some consistency in France’s alliances and sympathies in the Balkans. The conflict in Kosovo was an opportunity for France to assert its role among the Great powers, essential to the management of an international conflict. The Kosovo case was also an opportunity for France to assert itself as a leading European player in a multilateral military operation, in line with its objective to promote the strengthening of European defense and security capability, within NATO (European Security

and Defense Identity), or within the EU (Foreign Security and Defense Policy). Due to several factors, including “a pro-Serbian lobby within French diplomacy, the army and political circles,” participation in the “NATO offensive without a proper strategic ambition like its European partners,” and a return of attention to “the democratic transformation of Serbia since 2000,” followed by a policy of “blockage of the process of European rapprochement by files long frozen in Kosovo and Montenegro,” France’s presence in Kosovo and in the region brought the gradual “effacement of France in the Balkans” (Dérens, 2010, p. 5). With the Macron presidency, the quest of France for a greater role on the Western Balkans and on the Serbia–Kosovo dialogue is back. In his visit to Belgrade in June 2019, Macron was explicit:

France will be fully committed to supporting and building with Germany, and within the framework of European mediation, not only the resumption of dialogue but a demanding dialogue aimed at finding a concrete solution in the coming months. In any case, I am personally committed to it.

(Macron, 2019a).

Contemporary Political, Economic, and Cultural Linkages

Between the two historical periods, the analogies cannot provide for the absolute truth, but a *longue durée* approach allows one to develop critical thinking, especially on the nature and intensity of bilateral political, social and economic relations, without neglecting the multilateral context. In this respect, France–Kosovo relations cannot be conceived outside the national interests on both sides. On the one hand, France’s historic alliances and interests in reaching a sort of autonomy *vis-à-vis* international institutions without questioning their existence, and on the other hand, Kosovo’s needs to further consolidate its independence with a United Nations (UN) permanent seat and reach a normalization of relations with Serbia resulting in mutual recognition.

France’s action in Kosovo since June 1999 has been bilateral, and above all multilateral, within the context of international organizations and the EU. The French financial commitment in Kosovo reflects this situation. For the whole of 1999, France’s military and reconstruction expenditure was about 4 billion francs, respectively 2.4 billion and 1.6 billion francs (French Senate, 1999). A proportion of 60% of French reconstruction aid (603 million francs) was provided within a multilateral framework: participation in actions undertaken by the EU (426 million francs), in the financing of UNMIK (134 million), voluntary contributions to humanitarian aid organizations (25 million) and support to the World Bank (WB) program (18 million). However, surprisingly the aid is formally categorized as provided by the French government to Serbia (French Government, 1999).

The commitment of the French armed forces during the conflict was rewarded economically in the period of reconstruction. Under the logic of

“return on investment,” developed in the doctrine of French civil-military actions, French business groups were intensely engaged in reconstruction projects in Kosovo. In August 1999, one month after the ending of military operations, the *Maison des entreprises* was founded in Prishtina and tasked with finding business opportunities in the context of post-war reconstruction. French companies obtained approximately 30% of the market share for reconstruction projects in Kosovo (Bourdillon, 1999). Instrumental to this share was the UN Representative in Kosovo, Bernard Kouchner, co-founder of Doctors Without Borders/*Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) and French Minister of Health under the Mitterrand Presidency, before becoming Minister of Foreign and European Affairs under the Sarkozy Presidency.

Many large French groups participated in these reconstruction projects, including: Alcatel/Monaco Telecom for the establishment of a mobile telephone network (Kosovo Post and Telecommunications financing), *Électricité de France* (EDF) for the restoration of Kosovo’s electricity network (Army Emergency Relief (AER) financing), Freyssinet for the rehabilitation of numerous bridges and roads (French Development Agency (AFD), AER, WB-International Monetary Fund (IMF) financing), Veolia-Waterforce for the rehabilitation of the Mitrovica water service (European Commission Task Force for Kosovo (TAFKO) financing), the Fund for Research and Aid to the Private Sector (FASEP), Schneider for electricity distribution (Department for International Development (DFID), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), FASEP financing), etc. (Gaïa, 2001). They obtained numerous contracts granted by the EU on emergency projects for the rehabilitation of water and electricity, heating infrastructures (100 million euros credit), medium-term projects (restricted tendering system) for reconstruction of schools, roads, etc. (10 million euros), and other projects piloted by the UN administrator in Kosovo, mainly on housing reconstruction (60 million euros) (Babaud, 2005, pp. 31–71). But, as the Chairman of the Movement of the Enterprises of France (MEDEF) Defense Liaison Committee pointed out in front of a parliamentary commission of the French Assembly, “[t]he results obtained in Kosovo are the result of a handful of individuals who have learned the lessons of previous crises and who have made a personal commitment with strong convictions to promote French action. Due to a lack of real mandates, their action has been limited in the field and cannot be sustainable in the medium term” (Babaud, 2005, pp. 17–18).

In the following decade, France’s priorities and ambitions slackened away from the Balkans and its engagement in Kosovo reached the lowest point (Dérens, 2010). The low intensity of trade linkages between the two countries, at least until 2019, is witness to the state of affairs. Kosovo is France’s 158th-ranked supplier and 150th-ranked customer, while France is the 17th-ranked supplier and the 13th-ranked customer for Kosovo (DG Trésor, 2020). French exports to Kosovo, which had been relatively stable since 2009, increased only in 2019 to reach €20.5 million (with an increase of +51%). The leading export item remains transport equipment

with an increase of +9.9% (€14.0 million), which represents 59.5% of all exports to Kosovo (DG Trésor, 2020). Most of this comprises the export of private cars, particularly second-hand vehicles (98.5% of car exports). The second largest export category is chemicals, perfumes, and cosmetics (€3.5 million), with an increase of +449%, which represents 14.7% of French exports to Kosovo in 2020 (DG Trésor, 2020). This is mainly new export of polyether alcohols (€2.8 million or 11.8% of French exports). Another notable exception is the year 2014, during which French exports increased by +66% due to the sale of a second-hand helicopter (DG Trésor, 2020). In the first category of imports from Kosovo to France are metallurgical and metal products (€2.7 million), with an increase of +141.3%, or a proportion of 38.0% of total imports. They slowed down in 2018 and rose by 39% in 2019 to €4.4 million. The imports are constructions in iron, cast iron or steel (€1.5 million or 20.4% of total imports), as well as towers and pylons in iron or steel (€1.0 million; 14.3% of imports) (DG Trésor, 2020). The second largest import items are rubber and plastic products (€1.5 million; +100.4%, 20.4% of total imports). These are mainly plastic doors and windows (€0.75 million; 10.5% of imports) and plastic articles (€0.52 million; 7.2% of imports). Chemicals, perfumes and cosmetics grew by +240.4% (€1.0 million) and now represent the third import category (14.3% of the total), followed by textile products, clothing and leather (€0.7 million; -42.1%) (DG Trésor, 2020). The French economic presence in Kosovo remains weak in absolute terms, but tends to increase in relative terms in the recent years. The increase is stimulated by the strategy for the Western Balkans adopted in Paris, one day after the Berlin Summit organized by France and Germany on April 29, 2019. The strategy underlines the goal for France to enhance economic cooperation with the region, and consequently with Kosovo (MFA of the Republic of France, 2019).

Several French companies are operating in Kosovo including the Lyon Airport, associated with the Turkish engineering firm Limak in managing and operating Prishtina airport, Mazars Egis Route Interex (a subsidiary of Intermarché), and the National Bank of Paris (BNP Paribas) through its Turkish subsidiary Turkish Economy Bank (TEB). Other French investment projects are currently being studied: the development of a 90 MW wind farm by Akuo Energy, and the construction of the Prishtina wastewater treatment plant financed by a concessionary loan from Directorate General of the Treasury (DG Trésor) in the framework of the new French strategy for the Western Balkans published in 2019. A Francophone business club in Kosovo (KOCAP) was launched in March 2017. The first Francophone Investment forum was held in Prishtina on October 26, 2018. AFD concluded bilateral agreements with Kosovo and other Western Balkan countries. Its intervention instruments include concessional loans, sovereign and non-sovereign loans, guarantees, disaster risk loans, subsidies, budget support, project preparation assistance and peer-to-peer cooperation (Marciacq and Le Quiniou, 2022, p. 25).

Cultural linkages are developed at the institutional level and exchanges take place between different institutions of higher education. They focus mainly on French language learning and education. *Alliance Française* has a branch in Prishtina and Kosovo became an associate member to the International Organization of the Francophonie (OIF) in 2014. In the same year, the University of Prishtina joined the network of Francophonie Universities, and a French International School (FIS) opened in Prishtina. Different cultural projects involve activities in cinema, music, cultural heritage, and the promotion of the French language and civilization in Kosovo. Kosovo Francophone National Initiative (IFN) 2019–2022 launched a French language learning program for Kosovar officials and diplomats. It is a 50% co-financed program between the Government of Kosovo and the Organization of the Francophonie (MFAD of the Republic of Kosovo, 2021).

During the Macron presidency, awareness has grown in Paris about the need to “geographically reinvest in the Western Balkans” (Macron, 2019b), and a new strategy for the Western Balkans (2019) seems to be the first step. However, the strategy does not mention EU accession, thus casting doubt on its intentions with regard to the European perspectives offered to Kosovo, as to the other countries of the Western Balkans. Kosovo signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU on October 22, 2015, which entered into force in 2016. Yet, unlike previous SAAs, Kosovo is exclusively between it and the EU, while member states are not part of the agreement, given that not all EU member states recognize Kosovo independence.⁷ The lack of Kosovo’s recognition by five EU member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) remains a source of systemic vulnerability that France is trying to normalize by re-engaging over the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue.

This engagement seems unbalanced, however, given that France had signed, as early as 2010, a “strategic partnership agreement” with Serbia, aimed at promoting the development of economic relations between the two countries. This strategy was supported by a parliamentary friendship group with Serbia, chaired by Jean-Pierre Dufau, socialist deputy from the Landes, which has proved to be quite active in the French National Assembly (Dérens, 2010, p. 10).

In addition, France’s recent re-engagement in Kosovo, despite its progress at a promising pace, has so far produced mixed results. While responding to real needs and opportunities, it is perceived in Kosovo as provisional rather than decisive, and partial rather than complete. The exchanges of Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti in June 2021 with President Macron, during his first visit to France, reveal this ambiguity. Macron is marked asking Kurti “what Kosovo is ready to give Serbia in exchange for recognition” (Ourdan, 2021) and at the same time opening the door to Kosovo’s entry into the EU. He is marked saying “when the time comes and when the conditions are fully met,” and Kosovo would fulfill “profound transformations

in economic, social and environmental matters, but also and above all concerning the functioning of democratic institutions, the rule of law and governance.” But also “to resolve the dispute between it and Serbia” (Maillot, 2021). An ambiguous pattern that characterizes the attitude toward the resolution of disagreements hinder the consolidation of Kosovo’s independence since the end of the war (Doja, 2001). And within that, France continues to block EU visa liberalization for Kosovo, in opposition to the very recommendations of European institutions. Although both countries maintain regular political dialogue, no French president has yet visited Prishtina, while two US presidents, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, and Joe Biden (the current president of the United States) while he was vice-president, have visited Kosovo officially. Instead, French President Macron visited Belgrade on July 15, 2019, and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic returned the visit to Paris on February 1, 2021.

As with Poincaré and Mitterrand during their respective presidencies at the beginning and the end of twentieth century, Macron deemed it appropriate to declare to his Serbian guest in 2021: “I particularly want to highlight the place that Serbia occupies for France,” while Vucic was equally quick to warmly state: “France is an important country for us and a traditional true friend of Serbia” (Vuksanovic, 2021). Moreover, these visits were accompanied by important projects in the field of defense and economy. For some commentators, “the visit signifies that Serbia, strategically the most important country in the Balkans, has embraced France as its main great power backer in the West,” despite the fact that “Vucic’s main backer in the West has been Germany led by Angela Merkel” (Vuksanovic, 2021).

Although Kosovo has entered as a political actor in international relations, it has yet to find its great power backer in the EU, beyond the unquestionable alliance with the United States.

Conclusion

The pervasive essentializing discourses surrounding French and Kosovar experiences of each other appear unusual and difficult to grasp, if one schematically employs traditional categories developed in both scholarship and politics when dealing with this question. In turn, an examination from a *longue durée* perspective, linked to a careful examination and contextualization of past and present experiences, may produce a more sophisticated understanding. While analyzing the role of history, economy, society and politics in Kosovo–France bilateral relations, the aim of this chapter was to frame the argument in such a way as to focus on a critical reassessment of different accounts and move away from the close association of empirical facts in bilateral relations. Against the discursive practice of accounts that might have created a distorted perception of these relations and which may have been used as a justification for certain policies of neglect or pragmatism

toward the pressing challenges of Kosovo, the chapter argues instead for considering France–Kosovo relations in the *longue durée* context of bilateral relations that reveal changes and continuities.

In methodological terms, a comparative analysis of ideas was engaged rather than a search for exclusive empirical proof. This chapter adopted a critical approach to conceptions of history and politics by focusing on political processes and power relations that define events and their place in bilateral relations. The aim of this chapter was not to write the history of France–Kosovo bilateral relations, but instead to examine in what way collective representations might have defined both the French imagination of Kosovo and its empirical translation. Eventually, this approach might not be exhaustive and certainly a number of questions remain open. However, if this chapter has managed to provoke at the very least a non-stereotyped discussion throughout a set of reflections on what essentializing collective knowledge can do, it will hopefully constitute an encouragement for further, deeper enquiries in this direction.

Notes

- 1 The Eastern Question concerns the diplomatic problems posed by the slow disintegration of the Ottoman Empire from late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries and the competition for the control of former Ottoman territories. Any internal change in the Ottoman territories caused tension between the European powers, each fearing that the others would take advantage of the political disorder to increase their own influence. In the Balkans, during this period European opinion oscillated between maintaining the status quo associated with the relative stability provided by the maintenance of the Ottoman Empire in the region, or supporting the birth of new Balkan states steeped in instability. These problems arose periodically during the Greek revolution of the 1820s, the Balkan crisis of 1875–1878, the Bosnian crisis of 1908, and the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. In the course of this period, the Balkan provinces emerged as independent states under the tutelage of one of the Great European powers (Anderson, 1966; Castellan, 1999).
- 2 Gabriel Louis-Jaray was a Doctor in Law (Lyon 1909), Master of petitions to the Council of State, secretary general of the France-America commission, and director of the *Cahiers de politique nationale*.
- 3 Roland Dumas French lawyer and Socialist politician who served notably as Foreign Minister under President François Mitterrand from 1984 to 1986 and from 1988 to 1993. He was also President of the Constitutional Council from 1995 to 1999.
- 4 Slobodan Milosevic was the president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1997 to 2000.
- 5 The book *Pena të arta franceze për shqiptarët: (1332–2007) antologji, udhëpërshkrime, portrete, letërsi, art, kulturë (French Golden Pens for Albanians: (1332–2007) anthology, roadmaps, portraits, literature, art, culture)*, of Fotaq Andrea (2007) summarizes over 150 French authors of all historical periods, schools and literary currents writing about Albania.
- 6 Some of his novels translated into French pay particular attention to the case of Kosovo: *L'année noire (Viti i mbrapshtë)*, *Le cortège de la noce s'est figé dans la glace* (Krushqit janë të ngrirë) (Fayard, 1987, 1990, 1992), *Trois chants funèbres pour le Kosovo* (Tri këngë zie për Kosovën) (Fayard, 1998), *Il a fallu ce deuil pour se retrouver: Journal du Kosovo* (Ra ky mort dhe u pamë: Ditar për Kosovën) (Fayard, 2000).

- 7 In comparison to the other SAAs, the SAA with Kosovo is the only one that is not concluded by the EU and its Member States but by the Union alone (Van Elsuwege, 2017). The Council decision on the conclusion of the SAA unequivocally states that: “none of the terms, wording or definition used in this Decision and the attached text of the Agreement, nor any recourse to all the necessary legal bases for the conclusion of the Agreement, constitute recognition of Kosovo as an independent State nor does it constitute recognition by individual Member States of Kosovo in that capacity where they have not previously taken such a step” (EU Council Decision, 2016).

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