



IMAGE - Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet at the Kremlin, as pictured in this photo released by Kremlin.ru

## Balkans Breakthrough for Ukraine: Bring Serbia into NATO & the Kosovo Model into the Donbas

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In less than a year in office, President Trump has shifted no less than a half-dozen times<sup>1</sup> on the war in Ukraine before landing on his present stance of a ceasefire on the [current battlefield lines](#), a position accepted by Ukrainian [President Volodymyr Zelensky](#) and backed by the [European Union](#). Through these dizzying oscillations, Russian President Vladimir Putin has increasingly focused on a singular, near-term goal: territory.<sup>2</sup>

Putin has zeroed in on the vital Western Donbas, which Russian forces do not control – and may never control, given continued allied support to Ukraine. For his part, Zelensky has not categorically ruled out negotiating territory; instead, the Ukrainian President has insisted, “any issue of territories cannot be separated from [security guarantees](#).”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the modalities for protecting Ukrainian security – not the issue of territory per se – are the immediate obstacle to a ceasefire.<sup>4</sup>

Having (for now) ruled out providing Ukraine with [Tomahawk](#) cruise missiles, Trump says the sides must “[fight it out.](#)” Beyond the human toll of Russia’s “[savage strikes](#)”, protracting the status quo encourages Putin, who believes he can prevail in a war of attrition. Already holding “a [decisive edge](#) in ... manpower, firepower and mobilization capacity”, the Kremlin is buoyed by Ukraine’s [blatant](#) military [recruitment](#) difficulties. With Trump still reluctant<sup>5</sup> – and Europe largely incapable — of providing Kyiv with battlefield-altering support, is there any way to steer the parties towards a ceasefire?

Indeed, President Trump can break the stalemate by turning to the Balkans – a nearby theatre of competition in which the US and its allies hold strategic leverage. In two complementary ways, Washington can exploit Putin’s obsessive positions on Serbia and Kosovo, creating a viable path to a ceasefire in Ukraine while generating additional pressure on the Kremlin to accept it.

First, the US can employ the Kosovo model contained in UN Security Council [Resolution 1244](#) – the Russian-backed terms to halt the conflict with Serbia following the NATO intervention a quarter century ago. Instead of the amorphous, ineffective call for war-ending “[land swaps](#)” – or asking the abjectly mistrusting parties to come to a settlement on their own – the White House can propose that Kyiv and Moscow accept a Kosovo-style *interim* arrangement on the Donbas and other (agreed) contested territory.

Crucially for the US and its European partners, the 1244 approach introduces a viable *sequence* – addressing sovereignty over the Donbas straight away, before tackling security guarantees. With the overarching question of ‘who owns the Donbas?’ put to the side, Russia and Ukraine can afford to negotiate – item by item, aided by the US – on the modalities required for a durable ceasefire, including peacekeeping forces, continued military assistance for Ukraine, third-party administration of the Donbas, and other critical issues.

Second, Trump can introduce non-military pressure on Putin to accept this approach by offering Serbia (and Kosovo) membership in NATO, inflicting an immediate, unsettling blow on the Russian leader. This about-face for both Washington and Belgrade has suddenly become plausible given Serbia’s [unabated internal crisis](#) and Trump’s willingness to consider [unorthodox](#) solutions. The Administration’s newfound toughness on [Russia’s energy sector](#) suggests Washington is open to ways of squeezing the Kremlin as long as they do not involve ‘[escalatory](#)’ weapon systems in the Ukraine theatre.

### **The Kosovo-1244 Model Provides a Template for a Ukraine Ceasefire**

The Kosovo-1244 template allows each side to preserve its ultimate territorial claims over the Donbas, while offering substantial, immediate benefits to both Kyiv and Moscow. Crucially for Ukraine, resolution 1244 sidestepped the question of Kosovo’s sovereignty – envisioning a final settlement based ultimately on “[the will of the people.](#)” Establishing a purely “provisional ... transitional” UN administration, resolution 1244 opened a trajectory for Kosovo to eventually secede from Serbia, without declaring or denying Pristina’s independence from Belgrade. Zelensky is far more likely to accept such an arrangement, which allows the Ukrainian President to tell his citizens that Donbas is still part of Ukraine and that the people of Donetsk and Luhansk (and agreed neighboring oblasts) will ultimately decide which country has dominion over them.

Benefitting Kyiv, demographics in the Donbas and other contested territories are far more mixed than in lopsided Kosovo, where any referendum on independence was a foregone conclusion. Aided by the Administration, Ukraine and Russia can negotiate the terms for displaced persons and refugees to vote in final settlement referenda. As required under the [Ukrainian Constitution](#), final approval would rest on a referendum among all Ukrainian voters.

As in Kosovo, overall administration of the Donbas would pass to the United Nations, or possibly the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This would allow Zelensky to contemplate acquiescing – on an interim basis – to UN Administration of the *agreed* territory in Western Donbas. It is precisely the inclusion of this territory – which Russia does not control – that expands the prospects for negotiating viable security guarantees, i.e., a compromise.<sup>6</sup>

While putting additional territory at risk, Kyiv would gain overall security as well as near-term benefits in territory that Russia occupies. Ukraine would see a swift halt to the intensive [Russification](#) of annexed Donbas, including the seizure of property, imposition of Russian passports, and military indoctrination of children. As in the Balkans, the UN or OSCE would set up [property commissions](#), enabling displaced persons to assert their claims free from Russian barriers, fostering the mass return of refugees.

Crucially for Russia, the 1244 model would instantly sever Kyiv's exercise of even symbolic sovereignty over the Donbas and environs, including in agreed areas that Russia does not control – and has little chance of controlling. In Resolution 1244, the Security Council implicitly mandated that there was 'no going back' – no reversion of Kosovo to Serbian control. Indeed, in November 2005, Russia, the US, and the three other members of the Contact Group set ["Guiding Principles"](#) [stipulating](#) that "... Kosovo does not return to the pre-March 1999 situation."

Moscow, Kyiv, and Washington could apply this model today, agreeing upfront on a broad "no return to the pre-war situation" principle, while expressly contemplating partition, union of Donbas with Russia, or a new form of integration within Ukraine, as the people of that region decide. Going beyond constructive ambiguity, the parties would set out defined, potential end-states that encompass Moscow's position on sovereignty as well as Kyiv's. Ratified at the Security Council, this represents a powerful inducement for the legalistic Putin, who could tout domestically 'international recognition of Russian Donbas.'

With a political template for the Donbas in hand, the vital discussion on security guarantees – the false promise of the Putin-Trump [Alaska Summit](#) – can begin. Again, it is the inclusion of provisions favorable to Putin – twinned with increased US pressure on Moscow and more military support for Kyiv – that increases the prospects for a deal over security. After all, outside peacekeeping forces will blanket territory that Putin covets – and theoretically could control through a political process (or, through a breakdown of the ceasefire, a Russian scheme the US and its allies must staunch.) Like 1244, the US-brokered Security Council resolution will incorporate detailed, comprehensive security provisions, including on peacekeeping forces.

Putin can hardly complain about employing the 1244 model. The Russian leader has religiously demanded ["strict adherence"](#) to Security Council resolution 1244 on Kosovo, while repeatedly invoking the ["Kosovo precedent"](#) as justification to annex Ukrainian territory. Speaking before

the Duma in March 2014, Putin declared that the situation in Crimea “is [absolutely the same](#) ... as Kosovo’s secession from Serbia.” In the wake of his February 2022 invasion, an emphatic Putin told UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state was the “[precedent](#)” for Russia to recognize independent Donbas.

Putin is also on record conferring respect for the will of the people. Proposing annexation to the Duma in March 2014, Putin declared that Crimea had held “a [referendum](#) ... in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms.” In September 2022, Putin proclaimed that “referendums have been held ... the ballots have been counted and ... the people [of Donbas and neighboring regions] have made their unequivocal [choice](#) [to secede.]”

Right now, it doesn’t matter that the referenda were shams, that Putin’s words are cynical devices — or that the Russian leader’s aim remains turning Ukraine into a puppet-state. *What matters is urgently reviving US-led diplomacy by forcing Russia and Ukraine to respond to constructive American proposals for a ceasefire.* Putin’s devotion to 1244 and his endorsement of referenda create an opening. As Ukraine’s battlefield prospects improve with sustained US and European support, so will the prospects for diplomacy – grounded in the practical, face-saving UN model for Kosovo that the Russian President has championed for over two decades.

### **Advance the Kosovo Ceasefire Model by Bringing Serbia into NATO**

Putin’s bitter [grievance](#) over [Kosovo](#) also opens the door for a breakthrough with Serbia – one that can finally pull Belgrade from the Kremlin’s orbit and boost US leverage over Moscow. More than Slavic brotherhood, history, or anti-American antipathy, the Russo-Serbian relationship rests on staunch opposition by the Kremlin to Kosovo’s independence. Alongside China, Russia uses its Security Council veto to keep Kosovo out of the UN, in support of Belgrade’s hostility towards its former province. Isolating Kosovo remains Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić’s top foreign policy priority, underpinning Belgrade’s close relations with an array of malign actors, including [Iran](#), [Venezuela](#), and [Cuba](#), as well as [Russia](#) and [China](#). In a rare, open rebuke, Serbian media in April 2022 [accused](#) Putin of a “stab in the back” after the Russian President told Secretary-General Guterres that “the Kosovo precedent” allowed a seceding state to bypass the “[central authorities](#)”, impliedly either Kyiv or Belgrade. “[Putin] has taken ... the deciding step in [recognizing Kosovo](#) ... making it easier for Washington and the West to resolve it,” observed Srećko Đukić, former Serbian Ambassador to Belarus.

Unlike President Biden, who missed the golden opportunity<sup>7</sup> to sever Belgrade’s strategic partnership with Moscow at that time, President Trump can induce the decisive rupture by offering Serbia and Kosovo membership in NATO. Washington’s offer and Belgrade’s acceptance will have an immediate, transformative effect in and beyond the Balkans. Shattering its self-imposed taboo on joining the Alliance, the embrace of NATO by Serbia – Russia’s oldest, tightest friend in Europe – will deliver a swift, unsettling blow to Putin and a geopolitical setback for both Moscow and Beijing.

Unlike Belgrade’s dilatory EU membership [charade](#), the breathtaking commitment to join NATO – ending Serbian neutrality – is incompatible with Vučić’s multi-vectored foreign policy or his revival of Greater Serbian nationalism. For Belgrade, accepting membership in NATO – which bombed Serbia in the 1999 air campaign over Kosovo – means finally accepting the results of the



aggressive wars launched under President Slobodan Milošević. With the largest, most destabilizing country in the Balkans finally in the Western camp, Trump can take credit for bringing the entire 35-year drama over Yugoslavia to a close. No longer will the unstable Balkans serve as a playground for Russian hybrid warfare, Chinese economic subversion, or languish as a 'grey zone' for organized crime, drug trafficking, and other security threats. A dramatic about-face for Trump and an irreversible step when consummated, renewed expansion of the Alliance will resonate strongly with Kyiv, making its territorial concessions more feasible. The [Administration's security 'assurances'](#) will become more assuring to Ukraine, with the unequivocal US commitment to NATO demonstrated in the Balkans. Zelensky will take succor knowing that vital Serbian [ammunition](#) will flow directly to Ukraine, unimpered by threats from Moscow. The offer of membership to Kosovo and Serbia will underscore Alliance agency, demonstrating that NATO makes strategic decisions, whether about the Balkans or the Eastern Flank, free from external pressure.

Facing the worst [crisis](#) of his twelve-year rule, Vučić has good reason to accept the offer. Trump's astronomical popularity in Serbia – his [highest](#) in the world – makes the US President the one figure who can make NATO membership palatable in the country. The long-postponed [decision](#) by the Trump Administration to enforce Biden-imposed [sanctions](#) on Serbia's national oil company, NIS (Naftna Industrija Serbia), opens a striking new phase in Serbia's relations with Russia and the US. The Administration has made it clear that Belgrade must engineer a sale of the Russian ownership interest in NIS to non-Russian owners or [nationalize](#) NIS. Either way, Belgrade will see a major breach with the Kremlin and an opportunity to finally set its strategic orientation towards the West.

Belying negative government narratives, Belgrade has cordial [relations with NATO](#), both in Serbia and Kosovo, where the KFOR peacekeeping force retains popularity. Coincidentally, Belgrade has sent a new Ambassador to Washington, former Defense Minister Dragan Šutanovac, who has vigorously [advocated](#) that Serbia "accept reality" and advance its economic and security interests by joining NATO. Trump will sweeten the NATO membership offer with a hefty investment and defense package under the US-Serbia [Strategic Dialogue](#) launched by the [Biden Administration](#).

The decision to join NATO will inject a new dynamic in the [unyielding](#) national [protests](#) dogging Vučić, chiefly over government corruption and lack of accountability — issues which have long since eclipsed Kosovo among citizens. While hardline nationalists will assail Vučić over NATO, his base – as obedient as Trump's – will swallow their leader's decision, actively promoted by compliant national media. The prospect of serious reform required by NATO, along with revived EU accession, will attract significant parts of the opposition. Suddenly, the early elections and electoral reforms that Vučić has resisted will no longer appear so daunting.

With his flair for spectacle, Trump will invite the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo to the Oval Office – as he did in his [first term](#) – to sign membership commitments (conditioned on NATO-required reforms and accession process) and the seminal peace agreement that has eluded all of Trump's predecessors going back to President Clinton. *The Historic President Trump Agreement between Kosovo and Serbia* will also formally codify the dormant EU [Normalization Agreement](#) between Kosovo and Serbia, along with its [Annex](#). (The *Trump Historic*

*Agreement* could be executed separately by the Serbian and Kosovo leaders, as was the case with the 2020 [Washington Agreement](#).)

The offer of NATO membership alone – the alpha and omega for Kosovar Albanians – will convince any Kosovo Prime Minister, including the hardline caretaker Premier, Albin Kurti, to finally establish a measure of self-rule for Kosovo Serbs. Given a pathway to join NATO, Kurti or any Kosovo Prime Minister can satisfy Belgrade’s long-standing [demand](#) and sign the EU draft [statute](#) creating the “Association of Serb Majority Municipalities.”

Vučić will recoup the ‘Association’ without needing to formally recognize Kosovo, beyond the *de facto* recognition already [attributed](#) to Belgrade and Pristina. For all his government’s bluster, Vučić understands that the Serbian position on Kosovo has never been weaker. A series of audacious moves by Kurti in the Serb-dominated north have marginalized legacy Serbian institutions and undermined Belgrade’s hopes for partition.

Washington’s simultaneous offer of a NATO pathway for Kosovo leaves Vučić with little choice but to accept the Trump plan, including NATO membership for Serbia. Rejection by Belgrade will still see Kosovo (having established the long-sought ‘Association’ and having the full backing of the Trump Administration) on its way to NATO. This pathway to the Alliance terminates Belgrade’s [leverage](#) over its former province, rendering meaningless the Serbian ‘de-recognition campaign’, and Russian and Chinese obstruction of Kosovo’s membership in the UN. ([NATO membership](#) is vastly more significant for Kosovo than joining the UN.)

There are good reasons for the [mercurial](#) Trump, who once scorned tiny [Montenegro’s](#) accession to NATO, to change course on Kosovo and Serbia. Unlike in Ukraine, the burden and risks of expanding the Alliance in the Balkans – separated from the Russian landmass by a gauntlet of NATO countries – are virtually nil. NATO retains absolute supremacy across the region. Only three countries in the Balkans are not Alliance members: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia, the only one to rule out membership. In every other country, NATO accession has boosted stability, reduced net costs to the US, and increased American influence and investment prospects.

NATO expansion to Kosovo and Serbia would further *reduce* America’s security burden. NATO forces, including US troops, are already saddled with protecting Kosovo. Trump himself has [repeatedly](#) underscored the volatility of the situation, claiming at the [UN](#) General Assembly, at the [NATO Summit](#), and in the Oval Office that he stopped Serbia from “a [big time war on Kosovo](#).” A Serbia-Kosovo agreement grounded in NATO membership will instantly calm tensions, allowing NATO and US troops to reduce their presence right away, and eventually to leave altogether.

Republican members of Congress grasp the logic of NATO expansion in the Balkans. Brian Mast, the conservative Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has introduced [legislation](#) directing the State Department to “support ... Kosovo’s ... membership in NATO” and, “to encourage ... Serbia to reduce or cease strategic engagement with the Russian Federation and ... China”.

As Kosovo and Serbia prepare to become Allies in as soon as three years, formal recognition will become far less contentious. Like Greece and Turkey, Greece and North Macedonia, and Croatia and Montenegro, the transformative and tangible prospect of joining NATO – along with a reduction in tensions and an increase in trade – will assuage even Pristina and Belgrade.

With the help of the adroit NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte and his able Deputy, Radmila Šekerinska, former Macedonian Defense Minister, Washington can persuade the [North Atlantic Council](#) to offer the pathway to NATO for Kosovo and Serbia. Trump's diplomatic breakthrough with the feuding Balkan parties, along with some legal sophistry,<sup>8</sup> will win over even the four NATO Allies that do not recognize Kosovo. Long-awaited Greek recognition of Kosovo will likely follow the White House signing ceremony of the Trump agreement, boosting pragmatism in Romania, Slovakia, and Spain – none of which needs to immediately recognize Pristina.

By going outside the box in the Balkans, the Administration can achieve outsized impact in Ukraine. Drawing on Putin's convictions on Serbia and Kosovo, Trump can win valuable leverage over Moscow, viable concessions from Kyiv, and the serious consideration of the Nobel Committee.

#### Footnotes

[1] Trump repeatedly claimed he could [end the war](#) in a day; beginning around May of this year, the US President pushed for a [30-day ceasefire](#); Trump continued this [position](#) going into his August Alaska Summit with President Putin, before accepting the Russian leader's approach for a comprehensive settlement based on "[land swaps](#)" including all of the Donbas; after meeting President Zelensky again on the margins of the UN General Assembly session, Trump said Ukraine could "[win back](#) all of its territory", while advisors floated the prospect of increased intelligence sharing with Ukraine and provision of [Tomahawk](#) cruise missiles; following an October phone call with Putin, Trump reportedly pressed Zelensky again to cede territory, before settling on the current position of a [ceasefire on current battlefield positions](#). Also in October, Trump imposed [sanctions](#) on Russian oil companies, continuing to press European countries to halt imports of Russian energy, while granting an exemption to [Hungary](#) to do so.

[2] Last month, 2025, Russian Foreign Minister [Sergei Lavrov](#) made it clear that the overall Russian position on Ukraine has not changed. Lavrov underscored the need to "resolve core problems [and] eliminate primary causes [instead of] leaving large parts of Ukraine under Nazi rule." There is wide agreement among Russia scholars that Putin's aims go beyond simply securing portions of Ukrainian territory. While scholars posit a range of Russian aims, a common denominator is the core subjugation of Ukrainian sovereignty, e.g., "Left unsaid is what many observers considered Putin's real goal: the overthrow of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who he smeared as neo-Nazi, and the installation of a [puppet regime](#)."

[3] Trump envoy Steve Witkoff claimed that Putin had agreed to (NATO) "[Article 5-like protection](#)" for Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister [Sergei Lavrov](#) quickly disabused the notion of "security guarantees that follow the logic of isolating Russia [and] uniting the Western world with Ukraine..."

[4] Ceding territory in Western Donbas is both strategically and politically sensitive for Zelensky. A source privy to the [19 October meeting](#) between Zelensky and Trump stated: "Ukrainians see major

strategic value in the portion of Donetsk and Luhansk that they still hold — they believe giving up that territory would make the rest of Ukraine much more vulnerable to Russian offensives .... That source argued that giving up western Donetsk and Luhansk would amount to an act of ‘suicide.’” Under the 1244 model, Ukraine would decide on any additional territory that it would cede to a provisional third-party (UN or OSCE administration).

[5] President Biden also [hesitated](#) to provide Ukraine with a panoply of robust US military support, albeit for different reasons from Trump. As Rand expert Seth Jones stated in 2024, “If the objective is to start to beat back Russian forces or to get a stalemate, then what was given to Ukraine was [not sufficient](#).” Unlike Trump, Biden did not: question Ukraine’s role in starting the conflict; pressure Ukraine to cede territory; withdraw US intelligence to pressure Ukraine to accede to US peace terms; force European nations to pay for US-provided military support; perceive Putin as a friendly partner, or pursue a peace agreement on the basis of a perceived shared economic interest as a shared US-Russian goal.

[6] As noted above, ceding territory in Western Donbas is both strategically and politically sensitive for Zelensky. Under the 1244 model, Ukraine would decide on any additional territory that it would cede to a provisional third-party (UN or OSCE administration).

[7] In February 2022, Belgrade was at peak vulnerability to US and EU pressure as the West united over Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Instead of insisting that Serbia – an EU candidate – align with the common EU stance and apply sanctions on Russia, the Biden Administration did the opposite. The [US Embassy in Belgrade](#) “welcomed the reiterated stance of Serbia in support of Ukraine’s territorial integrity ....” With the Biden Administration’s indulgence, Belgrade continued this self-serving, duplicitous position – refusing to join EU sanctions on Russia while rhetorically supporting Ukrainian territorial integrity, because of the analogy to Kosovo. Within three months, a relaxed Vučić cut a three-year gas supply deal with Putin. It was not until January of this year that the departing Biden Administration imposed sanctions on [NIS](#), the Serbian national oil company controlled by Russia’s Gazprom Neft.

[8] Spain, the hardest line non-recognizer, proved its flexibility in January 2024 when it recognized the [Kosovo passport](#) under the European Commission’s visa liberalization decision. Madrid can again apply its blanket disclaimer — *“This does not imply ... recognition of Kosovo as an independent state”* — to a US-proposed NAC decision offering a membership path to Kosovo and Serbia. Spain can also use the NAC’s silence procedure to avoid formally endorsing the Alliance pathway to Kosovo, which is not the same as offering membership.