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CASE STUDY

EUPopLink Country report - Kosovo

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]

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v1 **First published:** 06 Aug 2026, **6**:278
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.24526.1
Latest published: 06 Aug 2026, **6**:278
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.24526.1

Abstract

This is a country report about the nexus between populism and Euroscepticism within the EUPopLink COST Action. The report is based on the case study research design. It focuses on the case of Kosovo. It relies on secondary sources. The study finds out that Kosovo is among the most pro-EU integration country in the Western Balkans. In regard to populism, there are significant populism developments, with the populist party in the government. The ideological position of the populist party is dominated by a type of valence populism. The actual high level of pro-EU integration and low and soft Euroscepticism might be challenged and transformed into a sort of significant one. This is conditioned, among others by two developments. On the one side, the issue of the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia facilitated by the EU, and on the other side the slow progress of the EU enlargement process in the region.

Keywords

Populism, Euroscepticism, Kosovo

This article is included in the COST Actions gateway.

This article is included in the Linking Euroscepticism and Populism (EUPopLink) collection.

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ?

	1
version 1 06 Aug 2026	? view

1. **Nika Gigauri**, GIPA – Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, Tbilisi, Georgia

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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Author roles: Smajljaj A: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: This project received funding from the European Union's Framework Programme for Research & Innovation as part of COST Action [CA23102 and Linking euroscepticism and populism: causes and consequences], as supported by the COST Association (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

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How to cite this article: Smajljaj A. **EUPopLink Country report - Kosovo [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]** Open Research Europe 2026, **6**:278 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.24526.1

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1. Introduction

This report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026)" (you can find both documents and their full citation details in the EUPopLink ORE Collection: https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/collections/eupoplink).

The Kosovo public has a high level of trust in the European Union. The majority are in favor of joining the EU (Standard Eurobarometer 2025). It shares the highest pro-EU score among the Western Balkans, with Albania and Montenegro. Almost the same degree of pro-EU integration support is found in the political rhetoric among political actors, including political parties. The EU integration has become a buzzword in daily politics. It appears that the pro-EU integration rhetoric among political actors is driven by society's high demand to join the EU. No political actor dares electorally to openly go against European integration. Moreover, political parties often use pro-EU integration narratives to legitimize their conduct and overshadow their shortcomings.

Such a pro-EU attitude among society is merely utilitarian (Damjanovski, I., Lavrič, M., & Naterer, A. 2020), structured around the hope that EU integration provides better conditions for a brighter future (Krasiniq 2023). Nevertheless, such a pro-EU attitude cannot always be taken for granted, particularly in an age of highly unpredictable politics. A number of political developments and factors can alter the dynamics of pro-EU and increase Euroskepticism in Kosovo. This is driven by the current populist governing political party in Kosovo on one side and the EU on the other. In fact, there was a slight decline in the pro-EU stand from 2018, as it was 84% (Nuttall 2017) to almost 80% in 2025 (Standard Eurobarometer 2025).

Enlargement fatigue from the EU side and reform accession fatigue from the accession countries are the most important drivers of Euroskepticism in the region (Kolozova 2024), where Kosovo is not an exception. The EU's non-recognition of Kosovo as a state is an additional factor of Euroskepticism linked directly to Kosovo. It pinches influences directly on Kosovo society but also complicates the EU accession process of Kosovo, providing further space for Euroskepticism development. The exclusive role that the EU has in Kosovo-Serbia dialogue puts the EU in a questionable position, especially since the dialogue does not deliver or parties to the dialogue strategically use the EU as a blaming target to hide their failures in the dialogue. This amounts to a driver of Euroskepticism, especially when often labelled by the Kosovo government that the EU representative is taking sides in favor of Serbia (Associated Press, 18.09.2023). From the Kosovo side, the governing political party *Levizja Vetevendosje* (Self-determination Movement) introduced a more sovereignist approach in politics, particularly on the issue of dialogue with Serbia and the northern part of Kosovo. Such an approach is not in line with the EU approach in the region, bringing both parties to a disagreement, which led to the sanction of Kosovo (Financial Times, 14.06.2023). This clash of policies between the EU and the Kosovo government fuels further Euroskepticism since the governing party enjoys wide public support.

2. Populist political actors

Until recently, Kosovo's party system has experienced populism mostly in the form of political rhetoric, featured as often using the term people in their discourse. This is the case for the establishment of political parties that dominated the party and political system until the 2021 elections, when the current populist party managed to defeat all of them. On the other hand, *Levizja Vetevendosje* (Self-Determination Movement) political party currently represents the main populist party in the country. *Levizja Vetevendosje,* while in opposition, came to power through a populist approach, blaming the other parties for the way they governed. However, it actually governs in the same way that the other parties did in previous governments.

The profile of *Levizja Vetevendosje* is very structured around the disobedient and rebellious personality and character of its leader, Albin Kurti (Smajljaj 2020). The movement started initially as a youth organization in civil society. In 2005, Kurti, with some other close supporters, decided to establish *Levizja Vetevendosje,* as a movement. Since then, the movement has consolidated and structured across the country. In more than a decade, it managed to have the largest number of registered members compared to other parties. Initially, it boycotted elections, seen as unlegitimate, but later joined them and gradually increased the number of votes. The political party *Levizja Vetevendosje* (The Self-determination Movement) in the 2021 elections received more than 50% of the votes (interestingly, in a multiparty system and in a proportional country-wide single electoral district). It managed to defeat all traditional parties and form a government without a coalition. Until then, unpredictable development in Kosovo politics (Table 1, Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve, https://kqz-ks.org/).

Levizja Vetevendosje as an anti-establishment party (Yabanci 2015) has grown consistently, opposing all the main national decisions in the political developments in the two decades after the war in 1999, taken by the other political parties and the international community present in Kosovo. It is important to highlight that this opposing attitude did not

Table 1. Votes for the LVV from 2010 to the last elections (Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve, https://kqz-ks.org/).

	Votes	Percentage	Seats
2010	88652	12.69	14
2014	99397	13.59	16
2017	200135	27.49	32
2019	221001	25.49	29
2021	438335	50.28	58
2025	396787	42.30	48

Source: Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve (https://kqz-ks.org/)

bring many votes to *Levizja Vetevendosje.* It was their expanded cause that brought them massive votes. Creating a narrative that everything in the country has been destroyed by the establishment parties, blaming them for state capture, corruption, nepotism, clientelism, and so on, and portraying its leader Albin Kurti as a saviour of the country is what brought to *Levizja Vetevendosje* a massive vote.

In terms of ideology, *Levizja Vetevendosje* combines the elements of right-wing nativist populism with left-wing populism in economic terms. It promotes a high level of redistribution and opposes the privatization process, among others. The massive votes *Levizja Vetevendosje* received through valence populism, targeting corruption, nepotism, state capture, and clientelism found in previous governments. Therefore, within the dominant valence type of populism that helped *Levizja Vetevendosje* change its establishment, there also conflates a nativist ethno-national populism with left-wing populism. The radical right of *Levizja Vetevendosje* is grounded in its manifesto, political behavior, and political attitude. Its ethno-nationalist nativism is structured around the unification of the Albanians into a single state (Manifesto i Vetevendsojes). It is not clear if the aim is the unification of Albania with Kosovo, or if it includes Albanians in other neighboring countries as well. This attitude has accompanied them even while in government, though not at the dynamics as during the time in opposition. Yet, while the government is taking other forms, it is further driving the interethnic division in the country. Interethnic relations have deteriorated since they came into government, also due to government actions targeting illegal institutions in Kosovo used by the Serbian community, supported by Serbia. The Kosovo government considers this violation of the sovereignty of Kosovo by Serbia. In economic terms, *Levizja Vetevendosje* promoted left-wing policy. Since the very beginning, they have opposed privatization. As they came to power, they prioritized redistribution policies and practices (Reporteri 17.03.2022). However, the success story of *Levizja Vetevendosje* is linked more directly to valence populism than to the other two types within the profile of *Levizja Vetevendosje.* The narrative against the establishment is constructed in a valence way, blaming the establishment parties for state capture, corruption, clientelism, nepotism, and so on. Thus, *Levizja Vetevendosje* represents an interesting and unique case in which diverse and exclusive types of populism exist within the same political party. This can be explained by the context in which it was developed. The historical context, coupled with abstract ideological elements of the political party, goes hand-in-hand, constituting the ideological profile of *Levizja Vetevendosje.*

However, in terms of international cooperation with the EU and international political parties, *Levizja Vetevendosje* is affiliated with the Party of European Socialists (PES, Socialists and Democrats). It has observer status. It also cooperates with Socialist International. Even the symbols of *Levizja Vetevendosje* are red. There is no cooperation or affiliation between *Levizja Vetevendosje* and Eurosceptic political parties. This might also be because Eurosceptic parties are usually not considered supporters of Kosovo statehood, which complicates things further if any affiliation is foreseen.

3. Positions on 'Europe' and the populism-euroscepticism nexus

Kosovo is not a member of the EU. It stands last in the queue of EU accession among the Western Balkan countries. It bids for EU membership in 2022 to obtain candidate status (The Straits Times, 16.12.2022). The timeline for processing the application remains uncertain because of the lack of recognition of Kosovo as a state by the five members of the EU, which is necessary. From such a position in the integration process, Euroskepticism in Kosovo can be conceptualized mostly from an enlargement perspective. Euroskepticism is hardly expected to take the form of opposing EU polity or institutional structure. Euroskepticism is mediated by the enlargement and accession processes. The issues of decision-making and institutional structures in the EU are not issues of concern that are contested in the Kosovo milieu. However, in the case of Kosovo, Euroskepticism can be influenced by the direct involvement of the EU in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and the role of the EU in the region in political and security terms.

All political parties in Kosovo have a positive attitude towards EU integration. The European integration maxim dominates the political rhetoric. Such an elan for European integration is not reflected in the speed and content of the reforms undertaken by the governments as required to join the EU. Such symbolic adherence to European integration is also driven by uncontested public support for joining the EU (Krasniqi 2023). Therefore, no party dares to openly go against European integration and EU membership. However, the enlargement fatigue of the EU can drive Euroskepticism, especially accompanied by Russian-backed fake news and propaganda about EU policy towards the region and Kosovo (Greene et al. 2021). The lack of recognition of Kosovo as a state, as a necessary condition to move into the process, might have an effect on the increase in Euroskepticism. This is in line with the discourse on delays in enlargement and the overextension of the enlargement process.

Furthermore, there are indications and potential for further development of Euroskepticism in terms of the disagreement between the EU and the current Kosovo government, run by the populist party *Levizja Vetevendosje,* on a few crucial pending issues, having a security dimension of regional concern. The actions of the current Kosovo government towards the northern part of Kosovo, driven by the sovereignist approach, were condemned by the EU. As a result, the EU took action to sanction Kosovo (Financial Times, 14.06.2023). Sanctions were widely perceived as a biased position of the EU towards Kosovo compared to the EU's position towards Serbia. This helps develop Euroskepticism through ethno-nationalist concerns. Surprisingly, the EU was very much appeasing to Serbia on the issue of the terrorist attack in Banjska in 2003, supported by Serbia. The EU did not impose any sanctions on Serbia, as in the case of Kosovo (N1, 19.12.2023). An additional source of Euroskepticism is the EU's direct role in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. In power, and even before that, *Levizja Vetevendosje* did not trust the dialogue with Serbia as a way of settling the contest. By contrast, it opposed dialogue as a whole. However, since they were in power, they did not prioritize it. Such an attitude is not welcomed by the EU, which sees dialogue as the only way to resolve issues. Moreover, the current government has often blamed the special envoy of the EU for the dialogue, taking sides in favor of Serbia (Euronews Albania, 18.09.2023). This further decreases trust in the EU owing to its sensitive relations with Serbia. In this regard, there is an increasing discourse on drawing a line between the current EU position towards Kosovo and the historical narrative on the role of Europe and the issue of Albanians in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This might trigger further Euroskepticism on the demand side, pushed by the supply of the populist party currently in government, and enjoying wide public support. Despite these developing narratives supplied by the current governing party *Levizja Vetevendosje,* the status of Euroskepticism in Kosovo can be framed as a soft one, at the stage of implied rather than explicit Euroskepticism, with the potential for increase, especially since it has been very much electoralized. In other words, the ethno-nationalist nativism of the populist party in government is breeding an increasing narrative against the EU that can easily be formed into significant Euroskepticism. A level of Euroskepticism that might not prevent EU accession but is sufficient to be used by the EU's competing rivals in the region to dominate.

4. Responses to euroscepticism and consequences

The traditional parties in Kosovo, which experienced the worst loss in the 2021 elections, are under pressure from the general public opinion and cannot easily differ from the dominant narratives, though they might not agree with the substance of the current narratives developed by *Leviyja Vetevendosje* in power. The position of traditional political parties towards the populist governing party and its narrative, including a dose of Euroskepticism, oscillates between accommodative and adversarial responses. Driven by getting votes and being part of a number of agreements mediated by the EU that might be politically costly, they join the rally of blaming the EU as a face-saving mechanism for the compromises they made earlier in terms of agreements with Serbia, which costed them politically in terms of votes. At times, they take different positions, trying to undermine the legitimacy of the current populist government and pointing the finger towards the current government, which, with such a discourse, undermines the international support of the country, which is of vital importance even for its existence. Yet, being cautious not to move far from popular opinion and current atmosphere, as this might penalize them further in the elections. If the EU's enlargement process continues to be reluctant to respond to the popular demand for EU integration, and with the rising ethno-nationalist discourse in the region, there are obvious consequences for further development of Euroscepticism.

5. Conclusion

Kosovo society and party systems continue to take a powerful pro-EU stance. However, the current populist government of *Levizja Vetevendosje,* it has amplified an ethno-nationalist nativist narrative, demonstrated by its actions in the northern part of Kosovo. This led to a clash with the EU, which issued sanctions against Kosovo. Furthermore, the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and the EU's role in this regard is breeding Euroscepticism in Kosovo. Nonetheless, the reluctance of the EU to speed up the process of enlargement is also fuelling the increase in Euroscepticism, from a current soft and implied one, to a potentially significant one.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not require.

Data availability statement

The report does not require data.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ?

Version 1

Reviewer Report 08 September 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.26571.r79751

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This country report examines the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism in Kosovo, focusing particularly on Levizja Vetëvendosje (LVV) and the tensions that have emerged between the Kosovo government and the European Union around sovereignty, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, and developments in northern Kosovo. Drawing on secondary academic and public sources, the report argues that Kosovo remains strongly pro-European but that a form of soft or implied Euroscepticism may be developing through the interaction between LVV's populist and ethno-nationalist politics and dissatisfaction with aspects of EU policy. The case is relevant to the wider EUPopLink framework and the report contains the main elements required of a country study. I consider it suitable for indexing after minor revision. The revisions I suggest below mainly concern analytical precision, transparency about how the evidence is used, and the strength and wording of a number of claims.

1. The manuscript characterises LVV at different points through “valence populism,” left-wing populism, nativist or ethno-national populism, and the radical right. These categories are not necessarily incompatible, but at present their relationship is not sufficiently explained. In particular, the claim that LVV contains a “radical right” component is stronger than the preceding evidence alone establishes. The authors could briefly specify the criteria being used for each category, preferably in relation to the EUPopLink theoretical framework already cited. This does not require a new theoretical discussion; a few sentences distinguishing the different dimensions would prevent the classifications from appearing interchangeable.

2. The sections on populism and EU-related attitudes are individually informative, but the nexus between them is at times asserted rather than shown. The evidence presented appears to suggest that LVV's sovereignist and ethno-national framing, rather than its valence-based anti-establishment populism as such, is the element most directly connected to criticism of the EU. If this is the intended interpretation, it should be stated explicitly. Where the discussion refers to government narratives, it would also help to provide one or two concrete examples showing how these narratives are articulated in practice. It would also be useful to explain whether criticism of the EU's handling of the Serbia dialogue constitutes Euroscepticism in itself or becomes

Eurosceptic only when it is incorporated into a broader narrative questioning the EU's neutrality, legitimacy, or reliability. This distinction is especially important in a country where support for EU membership remains very high.

3. The argument that traditional parties oscillate between accommodative and adversarial responses to LVV is interesting, but this section is relatively compressed. Claims that opposition parties sometimes participate in blaming the EU as a “face-saving mechanism” are analytically significant and would be stronger with one or two concrete examples or citations to existing material. Alternatively, the language could be qualified so that it is clearly presented as an interpretation rather than as a uniformly established pattern across the opposition. This is a limited addition, but it would strengthen the section considerably.

Is the background of the case’s history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Political Science, Party Politics, Political Ideologies, Populism and Euroscepticism.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.