

By Nicholas Kulish - The New York Times

THE public face of Serbia for years has been that of a wizened war criminal in the dock in The Hague. Now, as the once-outcast country presses for membership in the European Union, it is increasingly represented by the gap-toothed grin of its energetic young foreign minister, Vuk Jeremic, all of 34 and a graduate of Cambridge and Harvard.

It is not just appearances. He is a minister in the most westward-leaning government Serbia has ever had, one that is aggressively pursuing membership in the European Union and good relations with the United States. Yet at the top of his agenda stands the issue that brought so much trouble to Serbia: the breakaway province and self-declared nation of Kosovo.

To the consternation of powerful supporters of Kosovo's independence, including the United States, the Serbian obsession runs much deeper than a handful of ultranationalists from the generation of Slobodan Milosevic. Even young liberals like Mr. Jeremic, whose fluent English sounds more Bronxville than Belgrade, cannot let go of Kosovo, though it could endanger Serbia's chance to move beyond its recent troubled past.

"The fact that this kind of fervent, pro-European politician in Serbia happens to have this position on Kosovo confuses a lot of people," Mr. Jeremic said in an interview on the eve of the Orthodox Christmas here last week.

"This place, Kosovo, is our Jerusalem; you just can't treat it any other way than our Jerusalem," he said.

As if to underscore the point, his mentor and psychology teacher two decades ago at the First Belgrade High School, the current Serbian president, Boris Tadic, spent the holiday at the Visoki Decani monastery in Kosovo, under guard amid protests by local ethnic Albanians.

Mr. Jeremic quickly added that Serbia was not pressing its case through the use of arms, directly or in the form of paramilitary groups, but through institutions like the International Court of Justice, which will rule on the manner in which Kosovo declared independence. But the stakes are different, with vastly improved relations with the European Union and an end to Serbia's isolation on the line.

Mr. Jeremic is at pains to explain to Western audiences that Serbia's reputation from the Milosevic years had overshadowed the reality that it is now a democracy, and one whose voters twice chose pro-Western candidates in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2008 — despite the inflamed nationalist sentiment in the wake of Kosovo's secession.

He was appointed foreign minister at 31, too young and inexperienced in the eyes of many Serbs to be trusted with their most important national issue — the impending secession of Kosovo. Yet, he has fought hard for Kosovo, lobbying governments around the world against recognizing its independence and becoming along the way one of Serbia's most popular politicians.

Mr. Jeremic's stridency on Kosovo has led his opponents to charge that he was a closet nationalist, talking one line when he was abroad and quite a different one at home in the Balkans. "Personally, I don't think I'm a nationalist," he said. "I'm half Bosnian and half Serb."

Mr. Jeremic's great-grandfather on his mother's side was Nurija Pozderac, a prominent Muslim politician before World War II who joined Tito's Partisans to fight the Nazis and was killed in 1943. His paternal grandfather was an officer in the king's army and spent much of the war as a prisoner at Dachau. Once he was liberated by the Allies, he returned to Serbia on foot, Mr. Jeremic said.

HE described a normal childhood in Belgrade, including a close relationship with his psychology teacher, Mr. Tadic. But his father, who worked for the state-owned oil company, and his mother went into exile after running afoul of the regime, and Mr. Jeremic finished high school in London before moving on to Cambridge, where he studied theoretical physics.

His time at Cambridge, which coincided with the war in Bosnia, helped him to understand Serbia's image abroad in a very personal way. "It was hard to explain that you come from Serbia and you're not a children-eating radical," said Mr. Jeremic, who had family members fighting on both sides of the war in Bosnia.

Mr. Jeremic opposed the regime of Mr. Milosevic and was a founder of the Organization of Serbian Students Abroad in 1997, but it was during the NATO bombing of Serbia that he hardened his resolve to work for his country. He said he had high school friends who were also opposed to Mr. Milosevic's reign but were called up for compulsory army service at the time of the airstrikes in 1999. Once they were wearing their uniforms, they were "legitimate targets," as he put it ruefully, and some were killed.

He recalled thinking at the time: "This regime, this government, this guy, Slobodan Milosevic, he has to be removed, because he's going to get us all buried. If he stays, he's going to get us all buried."

Mr. Jeremic traveled to Serbia to support the student movement there, known as Otpor, the Serbian word for resistance. After Mr. Milosevic's ouster Mr. Jeremic followed Mr. Tadic through a succession of ministries as an adviser, taking a break for a degree from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, before himself becoming foreign minister.

With Serbia's scant resources and tattered public image, his options for fighting the diplomatic might of countries supporting Kosovo, like the United States, Germany and Britain, seemed limited. But Mr. Jeremic, who still looks and sounds a bit like an overachieving college class president, turned himself into a one-man road show, traveling to 90 countries in the two years since becoming foreign minister. Last year alone he spent 700 hours in the air, or roughly 29 days, much of that in a 30-year-old French-built Falcon 50 jet that was bought for Tito.

MR. JEREMIC sees his age, which many consider a weakness, as one of his assets. "When you're young, and when you come and they see you for the first time, a lot of them are just kind of surprised. They say, 'Who's this kid?'"

"That's actually a good thing because it opens up their minds. They're curious. They want to hear what you have to say to them because you're different," he said. An afternoon with Mr. Jeremic, whose wife, Natasa Lekic, is a news anchor on Serbian public television, is a pleasant but intense experience, not complete without a glass of Serbian Carigrad red wine and a stream of articulate defenses of the country's claim to Kosovo.

Smoking a cigar and sipping his wine, Mr. Jeremic refused to say what Serbia would demand if it managed to force Kosovo back to the negotiating table by winning its case before the International Court of Justice. He insisted that the mistake the United States and its allies made before Kosovo's declaration was dictating rather than discussing terms.

Their other big mistake, he said, was expecting Serbia simply to acquiesce to the loss of the province, cowed in the face of American and Western European recognition for Kosovo. "This energy we invested, you know, in going around the world, has surprised a lot of people," Mr. Jeremic said. "A lot of people didn't expect us to dare to try."