

Building Trust under Difficult Conditions – Kosovo/Serbia and the View of the Neighbours

Predrag Jureković (Ed.)

Study Group Information





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Foreword

Predrag Jureković

This volume is composed of articles from the 47th workshop of the Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe”. The workshop was conducted in Prishtina/Priština and Mitrovica, Kosovo, from 19 to 22 September, 2024. Under the overarching title “Building Trust under Difficult Conditions – Kosovo/Serbia and the View of the Neighbours” experts from Kosovo and Serbia, from other countries in Southeast Europe and other parts of Europe, international organizations and major stake holder nations met under the umbrella of the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes and the Austrian Ministry of Defence, represented through its National Defence Academy and the Directorate General for Defence Policy. The workshop was conducted in cooperation with local partners, the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED) and the NGO Aktiv.

Since 2011, the EU has been trying to reduce tensions through a dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština, both at the bilateral level and in Kosovo itself. The initiation of a technical dialogue to facilitate the everyday lives of Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs has been followed by a high-level political dialogue since 2013, with the aim of “fully normalizing” political relations. The results of the dialog so far have been very ambivalent. The technical dialogue has at least succeeded in making everyday life more bearable for Kosovar citizens of different nationalities in the areas of freedom of movement, documents and telecommunication.

On the other hand, no decisive breakthrough has been achieved in the political negotiations over the past 12 years. Neither the economic agreement brokered by the US administration under Donald Trump (Washington Agreement, September 2020) nor the latest EU plan, which was based on a Franco-German initiative (“Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia”, February 2023) with its Ohrid roadmap for implementation (March 2023), have been able to prevent the increase in ten-

sions in bilateral relations and the general deterioration in the security situation, particularly in the predominantly Serb-inhabited north of Kosovo. The security crisis in northern Kosovo reached a preliminary climax in September 2023 with an attempted military coup by a paramilitary force made up of Kosovo Serbs around the Banjska monastery. Although the destabilization attempt failed, it tragically claimed lives. The commander of the paramilitaries, the former deputy leader of the Kosovo Serb party Srpska lista, went into hiding in Belgrade. Belgrade's role in the destabilization attempt remains unclear to this day.

Generally, there is no basis of trust between the current key players in Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština. The fragile Serbian community in Kosovo is on the one hand the collateral victim of this ongoing conflict between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština and on the other hand has itself become an “instrument” of the current key actors in Belgrade for their policy against the Kosovar government.

In view of the appointment of the new EU Commission following the EU parliamentary elections and the new foreign policy priorities of the US government under the Trump II administration, the question arises as to the substance and direction of further Western mediation efforts in the Kosovo-Serbia “dialogue”. Regardless of this, what are the possibilities of building trust between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo at the societal level in a currently contaminated political process between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština? Finally, how does the open conflict between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština affect Kosovo's and Serbia's relations with the other Western Balkan states and the domestic political situation in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia?

These are some of the key questions that the authors of this Study Group Information address in their contributions. The authors of the first part of this publication assess the current political developments in the context of the “dialogue” between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština on the normalization of their relations. This is followed in the second part by contributions describing the opportunities and concrete initiatives, in particular of the civil society, to enhance trust and cooperation between Kosovo-Albanians and Kosovo-Serbs. The contributions in part III examine the impact of Kosovo-Serbia relations on domestic developments in the neighboring countries and

their relations with Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština. The recommendations of the Study Group members are summarized at the end of this publication, in part IV.

The editor would like to express his thanks to all authors who contributed papers to this volume of the Study Group Information. He is pleased to present the valued readers the analyses and recommendations and would appreciate if this Study Group Information could contribute to generate positive ideas for supporting the still challenging processes of consolidating peace in South East Europe.

Special thanks go to Julia Dullnig, who supported this publication as facilitating editor.

Abstract

The “dialogue” between Belgrade and Prishtina / Priština, which has been supported by the EU since 2011, has made everyday life easier for Kosovar Albanians and Kosovar Serbs. On the other hand, no breakthrough has yet been achieved in the process of normalizing political relations. Belgrade is insisting on its territorial claim to Kosovo, while the Kosovar government is pursuing a tough course of integration of the predominantly Serb-inhabited north of the country.

Under these difficult political conditions, there are narrow limits to confidence-building between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs. Nevertheless, the contributions to this Study Group Information show that civil society initiatives on both sides in particular are making substantial efforts to support cooperative developments and the dismantling of enemy stereotypes.

However, the impact of the still very tense relations between Belgrade and Prishtina / Priština on neighboring countries, both on domestic political developments and on their relations with Kosovo and Serbia, should not be underestimated either, as several contributions in this volume show.

PART I: Current Developments in the Belgrade-Prishtina/Priština Political “Dialogue”

Hurdles in the Belgrade-Prishtina/Priština Political “Dialogue”

Sonja Biserko

There is currently no genuine political dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina. The last development clearly indicates that Belgrade is not genuinely committed to normalizing relations with Kosovo or to pursuing its EU membership.

To understand the reasons, one must first consider the broader international context, which has cast a long shadow over the Western Balkans.

For years, EU enlargement has been a low priority, lowering the EU’s engagement in the Western Balkans. This weakened the European perspective in the region, and has allowed other actors, such as Russia¹ and China,² to fill the strategic vacuum. It has also impacted the dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade.

Although the Brussels Agreement of 2013,³ which provided unconditional support to the incumbent government, particularly to President Aleksandar Vučić, Belgrade has revived its regional aspirations, now branded as the “Serbian World,”⁴ reminiscent of Russia’s concept of the “Russian World,” which asserts Belgrade’s responsibility for promoting and guaranteeing the political interests of Serbs living outside its borders.

Instead of pursuing constructive dialogue, Vučić, Hashim Thaçi, and Edi Rama engaged in a partition deal that would have given Belgrade control of Kosovo’s north. It was nearly finalized before Chancellor Angela Merkel⁵

¹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en/www.helsinki.org.rs/doc/HB-No164.pdf.

² <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/doc/HB-No170.pdf>.

³ <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/specijal/en/120394>.

⁴ <https://reunir-horizon.eu/serbian-world-a-threat-to-european-integration-and-stability-of-the-western-balkans/>.

⁵ <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-no-balkan-border-changes-kosovo-serbia-vucic-thaci/>.

halted it in 2019. The Biden administration later introduced a new approach with increased focus on the region.

However, it was Russia's aggression against Ukraine that swiftly brought the West back to the Western Balkans, now primarily driven by security concerns.

Russia's invasion has made EU and NATO expansion an imperative. However, EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia have made little progress, and whilst Bosnia and Herzegovina has now been granted candidate status, its ethnic leaders have been unable to find basic consensus. The Western Balkan countries have also been offered funding under a new €6 billion growth plan, which is conditional on implementing reforms. The EU hopes this initiative will promote economic convergence between the EU and the Western Balkans.

President Vučić has taken advantage of the Western re-engagement to pursue his own agenda, particularly in Kosovo. Since the creation of Srpska lista he has systematically manipulated Kosovo Serbs, leading to their withdrawal from Kosovo institutions,⁶ a boycott of Kosovo elections,⁷ and a refusal to participate in the census.⁸

By excluding Kosovo Serbs from the Kosovo context, Vučić has deepened the crisis, claiming that Serbs are being discriminated against and shifting all blame onto the Kosovo government.

The EU continued to simulate dialogue, and with US support, managed to conclude two more agreements: Brussels II⁹ and the Ohrid Agreement¹⁰ in early 2023. However, neither has been implemented. Meanwhile, Belgrade

⁶ <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/05/serbs-stage-mass-resignation-from-kosovo-state-institutions/>.

⁷ <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbs-special-elections-boycott/32375661.html>.

⁸ <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/04/05/kosovo-starts-census-as-serb-parties-call-for-boycott/>.

⁹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en.

¹⁰ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-implementation-annex-agreement-path-normalisation-relations-between_en.

has continued to play its game among the four competing powers – the U.S., EU, Russia, and China – all the while hoping for Donald Trump’s return to the White House, which it perceives would allow it to finalize the partition plan.

Enjoying a privileged position in the eyes of both the West and the East, Belgrade believed it could attempt once again to partition Kosovo. This time, after two years of preparation, a special operation in the village of Banjska¹¹ was launched, though it fortunately failed.

Milan Radoičić, vice president of Srpska Lista – the Belgrade-controlled party in the North – organized a paramilitary group, with 45 members now indicted by Kosovo for the terrorist attack in Banjska.

The Banjska incident served as a wake-up call for the West, prompting its increased security involvement in the region.

Western engagement in the region currently operates on two parallel levels. The first is an effort to bring Serbia closer to the West through economic and military agreements, perceived as part of Serbia’s strategic integration into the Western sphere. This is best illustrated by the recent visits of Chancellor Olaf Scholz¹² and President Emmanuel Macron¹³ to Belgrade. In September 2024, Serbian Foreign Minister Marko Djurić signed an agreement with the US on strategic cooperation in the field of energy in Serbia.¹⁴

The second level involves a heightened NATO presence in the region, with an increase in NATO forces and the construction of new bases in Albania and Romania. Serbia is now surrounded by NATO countries, and vigilance from NATO, the CIA, and other security services has intensified. The visit

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66905091>.

¹² <https://apnews.com/article/germany-serbia-lithium-scholz-vucic-114befbdbab762c829b98616e94b99a0d>.

¹³ <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/08/29/serbia-signs-deal-to-buy-french-fighter-jets-as-macron-visits-belgrade/>.

¹⁴ <https://www.state.gov/united-states-and-serbia-sign-agreement-on-strategic-cooperation-in-energy/>.

of the CIA director,¹⁵ along with NATO's deputy secretary general,¹⁶ though not publicly addressed in Serbia, clearly had a preventive focus.

Serbia's military cooperation with NATO is far more intensive than its cooperation with Russia, signaling its increasing alignment with the West both economically and in terms of security. Several global media outlets have analyzed President Vučić's ability to balance between various, often opposing, international actors. Some have argued that the recent agreements with Macron and Scholz represent a 'European moment' for Serbia, though skepticism remains regarding the strength of democratic and pro-European forces in the country.

Kosovo has always been, and remains, a high priority for the West, particularly due to security concerns and the region's inherent fragility, which Russia continues to exploit skillfully. The primary focus of Western engagement in the region is on security oversight, aimed at preventing any escalation. Serbia remains central to this focus for many reasons and continues to be the main focus of Western attention.

Many analysts in the West believe that Vučić has skillfully capitalized on international circumstances, successfully balancing between the so-called four pillars of Serbia's foreign policy-EU, US, Russia, China. However, the question remains how long he can continue this balancing act. He already faces a dilemma over whether to attend the upcoming BRICS summit in Russia.

Where Do We Stand Now

Kosovo has solidified its territorial integrity, largely due to Vučić's disastrous policy regarding Kosovo. His approach over the last three years indicates that his latest attempt at partition has failed, leaving him with no further means to manipulate Kosovo through Serbian institutions in the North. Kosovo Serbs find themselves in a vacuum, without a credible leader to guide them towards Prishtina. For twenty-five years, they believed they could live in Serbia, convinced that partition was merely a matter of time. They enjoyed

¹⁵ <https://n1info.rs/english/news/former-serbian-ambassador-cia-chief-came-to-serbia-to-warn-of-consequences-for-destabilization/>.

¹⁶ https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/news_228309.htm?selectedLocale=en.

privileges without paying bills, yet were simultaneously under intense pressure from Srpska Lista. There was little room for Serbs who sought a connection with Prishtina; the assassination of Oliver Ivanović sent a chilling message to all Serbs, while others faced threats.

In his latest public address,¹⁷ Vučić attempted to convey that there has been no withdrawal from Kosovo and that Serbia will continue to provide special provisions, primarily through the legalization of salaries received from Serbia. These salaries are reportedly to be distributed in offices that will be opened near the border.

Given that the entire territory of Kosovo is under the control of the Kosovo state, both the government and the opposition, along with the media and civil society, have a moral and ethical obligation to offer the Serbian community adequate solutions that align with the Kosovo Constitution and laws, which define Kosovo as a multiethnic and pluralistic state.

If this does not happen convincingly, it is likely that rumors about the moving of Serbs to Sandžak will come to fruition. Unfortunately, this would mirror experiences we have already seen in Croatia.

In this context, an honest dialogue is essential to facilitate the implementation of signed agreements, but at the same time, the policy of appeasing Serbia, which remains the main factor of instability in the region, must be abandoned. International community should help Prishtine to integrate northern Kosovo unbiased and fairly, and should reinvigorate its leadership of the dialogue between the two governments.

¹⁷ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/09/18/vucics-kosovo-speech-is-a-dangerous-delusion/>.

The Unravelling of the Status Quo: The Kosovo-Serbia Political Dialogue at Its Lowest Point in History

Bodo Weber

Introduction

The EU-led political dialogue, started in 2012 and aimed at sustainably ending the status dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, that is having Serbia formally accept Kosovo's status as an independent state as the basis for normal, bilateral relations, and full, so-called integration of Kosovo Serbs into the Kosovo state as equal citizens based on its multiethnic institutional system, currently finds itself at the lowest point in its history. The February 2023 Basic Agreement, and the implementation annex allegedly agreed the subsequent month at Ohrid, have basically remained unimplemented. What's more, there is ample reason to insist that there in essence never has been any agreement, beyond the then EU negotiators, former EU foreign and security policy chief Joseph Borell and Special envoy for the dialogue negotiations Miroslav Lajčák, having declared the deal to be struck.

Even worse, while there thus has been no progress in the dialogue agreement implementation since 2023, we have seen an accelerating dismantling of the previous bad *status quo* through an escalatory spiral between Belgrade and Prishtina, playing out primarily over and in the north of Kosovo. It started with Kosovo Serbs in the north leaving Kosovo institutions, police, judiciary and executive municipal bodies (mayors and councillors) in November 2022 upon order from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, and majority ethnic Albanian Kosovo police (including special police) moving in to fill the void. The move undid most of what had been implemented of the only dialogue agreement preceding the Basic agreement, the 2013 April Agreement. Escalation dynamics peaked in violent clashes between Serb protesters and Kosovo police and KFOR troops in Zvečan in May 2023, provoked by the seating of Albanian ethnic mayors, the result of Kosovo Serbs boycotting extraordinary local elections in the north in April, again upon order from Belgrade and its extended political arm in Kosovo, the Serbian List (SL) party, and the failed terrorist attack in the Orthodox monastery of Banjska in

September the same year, led by SL Vice President Milan Radoičić, the leader of the organized crime network acting in the Serb-majority municipalities, and merged with the SL-one-party system. The final, current stage in the unravelling of the *status quo*, that is ongoing for several months, is the unilateral, i.e. outside the dialogue-framework, of almost all Serbian state institution on Kosovo state soil, particularly in the north by Prishtina authorities.

The EU-Led Political Dialogue: From Historical Breakthrough to a Lasting, Bad Status Quo

How did the dialogue, that started with a historical breakthrough embodied by the 2013 April Agreement, end up at such a low point?¹

Since its launch in 2012, the political dialogue has gone through several phases. Seizing leadership, the then-German chancellor Merkel set the framework of the original (2012–14) dialogue by insisting the era of border changes in the Balkans was long past, linking Serbia’s EU membership aspirations with accepting the fact of having lost Kosovo. An incremental approach was chosen, with Belgrade gradually having to accept Kosovo as an independent state, and removing its state institutions from the ten majority Serb-inhabited municipalities in Kosovo, and Serbia in parallel progressing on its EU path (as well as Kosovo, though at a slower pace). The 2013 April Agreement led to the historic first integration of Serbian police and judiciary into the Kosovo state in the north, and the establishment of local authorities following the first municipal elections in the four northern municipalities under Kosovo law. Then Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dačić explained to his citizens Serbia had to face the reality Kosovo was gone. That approach, however gradually, slowed to a crawl, becoming deadlocked after 2015 over the issue of the competences of the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM), left open in the April Agreement, i.e. the establishment of the ASM, the last major unimplemented element of the April Agreement. To rescue the dialogue the EU in 2017 announced the beginning of a new phase, negotiations on a final, comprehensive, legally binding agreement. Western negotiators, however turned that phase

¹ A shorter version of this history of the political dialogues has been published here: Bodo Weber, “Why the German-French initiative on Kosovo-Serbia won’t add up,” February 27, 2023, DPC Blog, available at: <http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/why-the-german-french-initiative-on-kosovo-serbia-wont-add-up/>.

into its opposite, by colluding with the then Serbian and Kosovo leaders, (now President) Vučić and his counterpart Hashim Thaçi in pushing for an ethno-territorial partition, “land swap” deal (billed as “adjustment of the administrative line” by Belgrade and “border correction” in Prishtina). Negotiations for the first three years were led by the then EU foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini and her team. She basically privatized the EU’s dialogue policy. After the end of her mandate, in 2019, the Trump administration under special envoy Richard Grenell continued until they hit the wall, culminating in a photo op deal in September 2020 in Washington that dealt with none of the major outstanding issues. But only after the Trump administration had toppled the first Kurti government in Kosovo due to its resistance against a land swap deal, the first toppling of a democratically elected government on European soil by a US administration took place in the 21st century. The incoming Biden administration renounced the idea of the land swap, as did the EU. A two-year *intermezzo* under the newly-appointed EU special representative Miroslav Lajčák followed, focusing on seemingly less contentious bilateral issues, which led nowhere.

What led to the failure of the dialogue over its first decade and despite its initial dynamics was the lack of a long-term strategy.

The initial historical breakthrough of the original, 2011–14 dialogue framework that saw Serbia signing on to a *de facto* recognition of Kosovo in the 2013 April Agreement, and its leaders signaling that they are fully aware Kosovo is lost and are ready to accept that reality in return for EU membership, with the dialogue endpoint known to all participants, full formal recognition of Kosovo by Serbia ahead of the country’s entry into the EU, got lost due to the lack of a masterplan defining the intermediate steps towards that endpoint. This led to the loss of strategic direction by the EU and the wider West over time, with Belgrade and then also Prishtina making use of the strategic vacuum to undermine the dialogue (implementation) and issues left open, namely the determination of the substance of the ASM, turning into unsurmountable obstacles. The dialogue got stuck in a bad *status quo*: The EU’s, wider West’s trading democracy for the dialogue, particularly with Belgrade, initially not entirely unreasonable, without a strategic framework ultimately left them empty handed on both ends, leading to a tragic, unplanned symbiosis between Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Vučić regime that turned authoritarian-autocratic. Merkel’s September 2021 farewell visit to Belgrade symbolized the failure of that

trading, that had led to the failed Western appeasement policy towards the Vučić regime. In Kosovo, the integration of Kosovo Serbs, i.e. the transition of Serb state institutions got stuck with the non-implementation of the April Agreement, leading to a parallelism of Serbian and Kosovo state municipal institutions, particularly in the north, that formed the basis of a corrupt patronage system led by the merger of the *de facto* one-party system of the Serbian List with the criminal underground from the north.

The German-French Initiative

After the new German government led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz entered office in early 2022, the Chancellery decided to (re)engage in the Kosovo-Serbia issue, aiming at shifting the political dialogue back to the core status issue, i.e. getting it back on track. This led to the so-called German-French initiative, that resulted in the 2023 Basic and Ohrid agreement, whereby the core framework elements were authored by the Chancellor's office, in coordination with Paris, and EUSR Lajčák, who were working out the details.

At the core of the initiative, and subsequent agreement, is the shift away from the previous (officially termed) negotiations on a final, comprehensive, legally-binding agreement towards some sort of intermediate agreement modeled along the 1972 two Germanys treaty. The main elements of the agreement included *de facto* recognition of Kosovo by Serbia and Serbia to stop blocking, actively working against Kosovo's membership in international organizations and of its EU integration path. In return, Kosovo was to unblock the establishment of the ASM and to guarantee special protective status to the Serb Orthodox Church (SPC) in Kosovo. A vague promise in the shift of position among the five EU Non-recognizers was included as part of the reward for Prishtina.

Such an initiative was ill-designed, and thus doomed to failure from the outset, for several reasons: First, there was only a verbal, non-public, vague promise to Prishtina of at least some of the five non-recognizers changing their position. Second, insisting on putting the ASM up-front, i.e. removing it from the framework of a final agreement with formal recognition of Kosovo by Serbia, left the West only with weak guarantees for Prishtina against a future misuse of the Association as a tool for regional, ethno-territorial

autonomy, and ultimate secession. Even more so as the issue of the Belgrade budget money-based patronage system in the majority-Serb municipalities, controlled by the Serbian list and its organized crime proxys, remained untouched. Third, the initiative lacked what led to the failure of all previous dialogue initiatives and agreements – a long-term strategy, a masterplan defining the remaining steps from the proposed intermediate agreement to the endpoint of the dialogue. Fourth, the Basic and Ohrid agreement did not solve, not even try to address, the issue of the 2022 departure of Serbs from Kosovo institutions in the north.

The fifth and final reason represents the root cause of the ill design – the entire initiative was based on the continuation of the already profoundly, provably failed appeasement policy of the EU (and wider West) towards the Vučić regime, i.e. Belgrade. Berlin, the key western player in this issue lacked sufficient political will to deal with the dialogue on its own terms. Thus, instead of fixing the damage inflicted on the EU's (and US') reputation and its relationship with Prishtina inflicted by the land swap episode, the Union further pushed away the Kurti government, already an uneasy partner.

The pro-Belgrade bias of the initiative on the one hand signalled Western weakness to Vučić, and on the other hand cornered Kurti, whose proclaimed defense of liberal democratic values against the West increasingly turned autistic, and previously moderated elements of his dogmatic political thinking and acting were exploding. This set into motion an escalatory dynamics between Kurti and Vučić unprecedented in the history of the dialogue, and led to the total ruining, breakdown of relations between the West and Kosovo, equally unprecedented in the history of independent Kosovo.

It basically killed the dialogue (for the time being?), left Kosovo's EU integration path blocked, and led to the last-minute collapse of Kosovo's Council of Europe membership bid. Kosovo Serbs became victims of the failure of the German-French initiative, too, caught in between Belgrade, Prishtina and the West, for the first time alienated from all three sides, and its socio-economic existence seriously threatened by Prishtina's unilateral forced closure of Serbian state institution on Kosovo soil.

Time for a Fundamental Reset

Since at least autumn 2023, ultimately since the failed Banjska terrorist attack, the political dialogue finds itself – again – in an interregnum. All relevant actors involved are at least tacitly aware that the German-French initiative has ultimately failed. But they are continuing to pretend that there still is a normalization plan, as the initiative's authors are unwilling to admit failure, while the EU traditionally is not prone to admit mistakes.

The ongoing change in key personnel, in Brussels with the incoming of the EU's new foreign and security policy chief Kaja Kallas and EUSR Lajčák presumably on his way out, and in Berlin with a new German government to enter office after early parliamentary elections scheduled for February 2025, provides a window of opportunity for a serious U-turn in the dialogue: What is needed is a fundamental reset of the dialogue, a return to negotiations, this time real ones, on a truly final and comprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, with formal *de jure* recognition of Kosovo at its core. Such negotiations at the earliest point in time need to address the issue of, and conditions for the return of Serbs to Kosovo institutions in the north, as well as the consequences of the forced closure of Serbian state institution.

Such a reset, however, can only be based on a fundamental U-turn in the EU's Serbia, i.e. Vučić policy. One that puts an end to the failed appeasement policy and replaces it with one based on liberal democratic values and a clear messaging on Kosovo, applying the Union's full leverage over Serbia, starting with its economic influence and power.

Such a reset/U-turn by the EU is even more pressing in the context of the incoming, second Trump administration. The EU needs to remind itself that the Western Balkans is the Union's own courtyard, where, unlike in other parts of the world, it can shield itself away from malign US influence – if it develops sufficient political will to do so. This would include neutralizing the US's influence in Kosovo, its blackmailing potential in threatening to pull out the US's troop contingent in KFOR by leading EU member states like Germany offering to Washington to replace US troops with their own ones.

No Quick Fixes for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue

Ian Bancroft

Differing Conceptions of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue

Different conceptions of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue have existed since technical negotiations began in 2011. For Serbia, the dialogue is primarily about safeguarding the position of the Kosovo Serb community. For Kosovo, it is about consolidating its international status and securing recognition of independence by Belgrade.

For Serbia, establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/CSM) has remained a key redline. One of the main pillars of 2013 Brussels Agreement, the A/CSM was intended to have ‘full overview of the areas of economic development, education, health, urban and rural planning.’ It would provide a vehicle for transparent financial support to the Kosovo Serb community from Belgrade, thereby providing a vital mechanism for integrating the remaining competencies under the purview of the Republic of Serbia, especially health and education.

Over a decade on, Pristina continues to vigorously oppose its creation, despite the 2015 verdict of Kosovo’s Constitutional Court¹ reaffirming that the Kosovo government was legally obliged to proceed with its formation. Instead, the Court’s verdict has been used to stymie all talk of its creation. A false narrative has emerged in Pristina that the A/CSM is akin to Republika Srpska, the predominantly Serb-populated entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and therefore a threat to Kosovo’s functionality. This framing contributes to an environment in which very little constructive discussion about the A/CSM is possible, though several civil society initiatives have outlined concrete proposals for steps forward. Kosovo’s prime minister,

¹ Please refer to the Constitutional Court’s verdict on the General Principles and Main Elements of the Association/Community, available at – <https://gjk-ks.org/en/decision/concerning-the-assessment-of-the-compatibility-of-the-principles-contained-in-the-document-entitled-associationcommunity-of-serb-majority-municipalities-in-kosovo-general-principlesmain/>.

Albin Kurti, in particular, has invested a considerable amount of political capital in opposing the A/CSM.

These fundamental differences in the conception of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and its overriding purpose have led to disagreements over the sequencing of implementation of the respective Articles on the Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia. Pristina insists that those elements pertaining to so-called 'de-facto recognition' of Kosovo's independence should come prior to any other steps, whereas Belgrade continues to insist on the establishment of the A/CSM as a prerequisite for further steps. It is an impasse that EU mediation efforts at have failed to bridge.

These competing conceptions have had tangible ramifications on the ground. Kurti's government have taken unilateral steps against specific institutions funded and operated by Belgrade (including the Post Office, Interim Municipal Councils, the Pension and Disability Insurance Fund, and Social Welfare Centres), whilst banning the use of the dinar. Belgrade, meanwhile, has taken proactive steps to prevent, for instance, Kosovo's membership in the Council of Europe, which key member states ultimately conditioned on tangible steps towards the establishment of the A/CSM.

There are signs that these respective conceptions could become more problematic for dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. When commenting upon the issue of reopening the Main Bridge in north Kosovo, Kosovo's president, Vjosa Osmani, asserted that anyone engaged in dialogue about the bridge would be violating 'the sovereignty and the Constitution of Kosovo, and it is in no way in Kosovo's interest to include this in the dialogue with Serbia'. First, this entirely ignores the fact that the Main Bridge was already a part of dialogue, and remains so as long as the two agreements governing its reopening remain unimplemented (including, for instance, the demarcation of the municipal boundaries between Mitrovica North and South). Second, it implies that other issues pertaining to the institutions of Pristina should be beyond the bounds of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. It constitutes an attempt to unilaterally redefine the very content of dialogue.

One tangible consequence of this impasse is that there is little to no progress on the reintegration of Kosovo Serb police, judges, prosecutors, and others into the institutions in north Kosovo. The territory continues to be policed

by Special Operations Units (SOUs) wearing tactical uniforms and equipped with long-barrelled weapons. One of the key precepts of the Brussels Agreement was the creation of policing structures in north Kosovo that broadly reflected the local demographics. With the initial successes of integration now firmly undone, there is a need for clear roadmap, including a vetting process, that would allow Kosovo Serbs to return to their posts.

Unfavourable Domestic Political Conditions in Serbia and Kosovo

Given these differing and arguably widening conceptions of the purpose of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, there is a tendency to look towards opposition parties for a potentially more constructive path. With elections approaching in Kosovo in early-2025, this prospect will be discussed with greater vigour in the coming months. Many opposition voices have expressed their concerns about how Pristina's unilateral actions have damaged Kosovo's relations with its leading international partners, especially the United States of America and the European Union; the latter having enacted a package of measures that include suspending economic assistance and high-level visits.

With respect to the opposition in Serbia, the recent general elections have reaffirmed a tendency for opportunism where Kosovo is concerned. Several opposition parties publicly criticised the 'Franco-German' deal, including those ostensibly fervent supporters of Serbia's EU membership. This includes the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSP) – led by former Belgrade mayor, Dragan Đilas – a leading member of the 'Serbia against Violence' ('Srbija protiv nasilja') coalition, whose members took different positions on the issue of Kosovo. It is an untenable contradiction; to forego the deal on which EU member states agree and to essentially argue that a better alternative could be negotiated.

More fundamentally, the opposition's role remains defined by fragmentation and ineffectiveness. After over a decade in the wilderness, there is a distinct lack of vision and capacity. They are unable to mount serious and sustained positions vis-à-vis the government's approach to Kosovo and Kosovo Serbs. This is without considering the impact of more extreme parties on the political spectrum, such as the ultra-conservative 'National Gathering' ('Nacionalno okupljanje') coalition and the National Democratic Alternative (Nacionalno demokratska alternativa, NADA) coalition, both of whom advocate for Kosovo's reintegration into Serbia.

Finding a More Positive Path Forward

While there is much talk about renowned momentum for EU enlargement within Brussels, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine refocused the Union's geopolitical considerations, this sense is not felt throughout the Western Balkans. Granting candidates status for Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina does not translate into a belief that the door is open to the Western Balkans Six, especially in the absence of internal EU reforms that would facilitate the incorporation of potentially nine new member states. The weakening of the EU perspective – supplemented by a failure to uphold promises made to Kosovo on visa liberalisation (the granting of which was long delayed despite conditionality having been fulfilled) and North Macedonia following the Prespa Agreement – has had a profound and damaging impact on the EU's leverage.

This has been further compounded by other geostrategic considerations emanating from Brussels and the European Green Deal. A recent comprehensive agreement with Serbia on lithium mining, batteries, and electric vehicles means the country is now a key strategic partner for the EU. For Serbia's opposition, the deal constitutes a betrayal that they claim will only reinforce the position of incumbent president, Aleksandar Vučić. There is a sense that resource considerations have subverted the conditionality of the *acquis communautaire*. With vast lithium deposits in Republika Srpska, there are concerns about the impact this may have on EU policy towards already fragmented Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Given the prevailing incentive structures in the Western Balkans, there is little prospect that new personnel will lead to substantive progress in the dialogue whilst the rhetoric and optics may change, at least initially, the fundamental obstacles will remain. The toolkit for inducing compromise has been greatly reduced, as politicians in Belgrade and Pristina understand perfectly well. A new Commission will bring some wishful thinking but will quickly find itself bogged down by the considerations of individual EU member states.

This is not to say that proposals for how dialogue can be conducted differently should be considered. From a political perspective, the EU needs to be

more assertive in clarifying what implementation of a specific agreement entails and where responsibility lies for moving the process forward. Recent moves to open the Main Bridge in Mitrovica are a case in point. While the EU appeared to be contradicting its position vis-a-vis the reopening of the bridge, there was little public discussion about the content of the agreements and the need to demarcate the municipal boundaries between Mitrovica North and South. While such details can get lost amidst the heightened rhetoric, the EU's role as clarifier-in-chief is more imperative than ever.

Furthermore, there is a profound need for various civil society coalitions to contribute to an enabling environment in which compromises can be negotiated and implemented. Central to this idea is a reinforcement of the idea of how the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue benefits – and can further benefit – citizens' daily lives. This requires a media component that takes an in-depth look at the consequences of dialogue, beneficial or not, and does not simply relay statements from Belgrade and Pristina. A new narrative needs to be forged about why dialogue is imperative, not least to confront emerging arguments in favour of maintaining a frozen conflict.

The Belgrade-Pristina dialogue could, historically at least, be articulated in terms of two distinct tracts – 'political' and 'technical'. When relations were strained – as they regularly were, even prior to the government of Albin Kurti – some progress on the latter issues was still possible. Once upon a time, an insurance surcharge was required for vehicles entering Kosovo, and vice-versa, until an agreement quietly entered into force in mid-2015, substantially cutting costs for drivers who regularly made the journey. The savings were quietly celebrated as an act of common sense.

To this end, and in the absence of any progress on (re)integration, attention should shift to how positive ties can be nudged forward in the absence of a revitalised enlargement perspective and a more conducive political environment between Belgrade and Pristina. An approach grounded in the four freedoms that underpinned and defined Europe's own integration – flows of goods, capital, services, and labour – could provide a new basis for deepening connections – human-to-human and business-to-business – within and between Kosovo and Serbia.

Whilst each issue has a political dimension, some are less contentious than others. A simple first step would be to open two new crossing points in north Kosovo and east Kosovo to alleviate some of the waiting times and transport costs that presently hamper movement; obstacles that affect Serb, Albanian, and other communities alike. Were the voices of such communities at the forefront of considerations, then it is an issue around which consensus would be easily forged given the mutual benefits. A long-standing agreement to open two new Common Crossing Points (CCP) should be implemented immediately. The proposed CCP in Kapia e Sfirçës/Svirce – between the Kosovo municipality of Kamenicë/a and the Serbian municipality of Medvegjë/Medveđa – would substantially reduce the travel distance for the ethnic Albanian community and others. The Rajetići/Izvor crossing point, meanwhile, would improve links between Mitrovica in Kosovo and Novi Pazar in Serbia.

Various obstacles abound, but substantive progress on the economic front is possible, especially with the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans coming on-tap. A recent policy paper, entitled 'Improving Kosovo-Serbia Economic Relations', by the Pristina-based Institute for Social Policy 'Musine Kokalari' and the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade, lays out tangible recommendations for fostering trade and economic ties. It addresses underlying structural issues and the prevailing political problems that inhibit trade.

The paper also proposes improving flows of labour and services by removing double taxation, ensuring the portability of social rights (such as pensions, healthcare, and social insurance), and establishing free labour market access as per the Open Balkan Initiative agreement entered into by Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. These are tangible and eminently sensible proposals in the spirit of European integration. Underpinning these constructive ideas is a return to the levels of cooperation which existed between the respective Chambers of Commerce of Serbia and Kosovo.

In Conclusion

The Belgrade-Prishtina Dialogue has reached a fundamental deadlock. The incentives that once drove compromise have all but evaporated, with no clear EU membership perspective to motivate further progress. There is very little

constructive debate about establishing the A/CSM, let alone the reintegration of Serbs in north Kosovo. As such, the security situation in the north remains tense and the prospects of further outbreaks of violence cannot be entirely excluded.

Whilst a potential new dialogue team is unlikely to be a panacea for the challenges faced, it is imperative to consider how dialogue can be conducted differently. The EU must be explicit about what it considers to be within the bounds of dialogue, countering narratives that seek to exclude or marginalise specific issues. In addition, it must act as the clarifier-in-chief when previous agreements are brought into question or essentially ignored. Constructive ambiguity has its limits, and they are being rapidly approached.

Given this prevailing reality, it is also necessary to consider how ties between Kosovo and Serbia can be solidified in the absence of progress in the dialogue. An approach grounded in improving flows of goods, capital, services, and labour can strengthen economic and trade ties; ideally supplemented by a renewal of relations between the respective Chambers of Commerce. In addition, grassroots civil society coalitions are required to contribute to an enabling environment in which additional compromises can be negotiated and implemented.

Ultimately, without the formation of the A/CSM, in some shape or form, there can be no normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. It is the necessary step to unlock the integration processes that have long been at the heart of the Brussels Agreement. Preventing a vision for how integration would look after the A/CSM is formed may help dilute some of the doubts and concerns, legitimate or not, of those in north Kosovo, Pristina, and elsewhere.

PART II: Opportunities for Building Trust and Cooperation within Kosovo

While the West Fails or Refuses to Cut the Gordian Knot: Can Democratic Grassroots Movements in Kosovo¹ and even between Belgrade/Pristina Help to Peacefully Coexist?

Michael Schmunk

“Now what belongs together will grow together!”.
Willy Brandt, Speech of the fall of the Berlin Wall.²

“Peace will not come on its own. Being located in Europe won’t bring peace by itself. Europe can live and prosper despite the frozen conflict between Kosova and Serbia. My generation could leave this problem unresolved for the next generation, if it was likely that the European body could somehow solve the problem by itself.”
Veton Surroi, The Macchiato Cow.³

High Time to Name the EU’s Western Balkans’ Taboos and Failures

This essay – though, on a macro level, overarching the larger theme of EU’s Western Balkans enlargement denial policy – focuses not only on the toxic relationship between two of the applicant states from the region (Serbia and Kosovo), but, as it could also be done with Bosnia and Hercegovina, primarily on the ethnic micro level frictions within one of the accession candidates itself: the post-war political playing field of a seemingly divided Kosovo, more than ever key to what will happen to the entire Western Balkans (European) future and to the EU’s capability to provide a geopolitical answer for its flank in South East Europe.

¹ This essay was completed in November 2024. The spelling of the Albanian and Serbian geographical terms in this text follows without any prejudice the English notation.

² Brandt, Willy (former Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany): *Speech of the fall of the Berlin Wall*, at Rathaus Schöneberg, Berlin, 10 November 1989, www.willy-brandt.org/willy-brandt/bedeutende-reden.html.

³ Veton Surroi: *The Macchiato Cow*. (Family stories, biological urges, myths and imagined communities: a road to peace with Serbia). Original title: *Lopa e Macchiatos*. KOHA, Pristinë, 2018.

From Belgrade's perspective – Serbia never acknowledged neither its former province's declaration of independence, nor the loss of this territory – at least the Kosovar area north of the Ibar, the regional river of destiny, has never been lost, no matter what Pristina or the international community and international courts may think. Things, though predictable, got bad from the very beginning, ending, somehow, in favor of Serbia and the Kosovo Serbs of the North – a development miserable if not unacceptable for the, at least on paper, sovereign, central government of the "*Amsselfeld*": Serbs may have lost Kosovo, but Kosovo Albanians did not win it either.

It has been Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti's appearance on the geopolitical playing field in 2020/2021 that began to make a difference by establishing and enforcing "Pristina's sovereignty" also in the North. However, this understandable move did not make Albanian-Serb relations easier. Expectably, rather, this met Belgrade's and Northern Mitrovica's fierce resistance, less that of the regular Serb populations – rather that of extremist nationalists and separatists, politicians and militant functionaries, among them mercenaries, whom some observers qualified as "terrorists". Latest since the brutal killing of moderate Kosovo-Serb politician Oliver Ivanović⁴ in 2018,⁵ through the so-called Banjska attack in 2023⁶ to the attack against the water supplies of Lake Gazivoda in 2024,⁷ it has become obvious that one of Serbia President Vučić's sinister destabilization strategies aims at unsettling and panicking Serbs in the North.⁸ For quite some time, Belgrade managed to even antagonize both the EU and the U.S. against Kurti,⁹ claiming that he had been overshooting the target (replacing the dinar in Kosovo

⁴ Oliver Ivanović – Wikipedia.

⁵ Serbian and Albanian speaking Oliver Ivanović was assassinated by still unknown killers in North-Mitrovica on 16 January 2018 – the traces lead both to the criminal Northern Serb Milan Radoičić and into Belgrade. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milan_Radoi%C4%8Di%C4%87; Oliver Ivanović was a valuable member of this Study Group.

⁶ Again, Milan Radoičić has been suspected to be involved, see Banjska attack – Wikipedia.

⁷ See Adelheid Wölfl: Anschlag auf Wasser- und Stromversorgung im Kosovo, Prishtina beschuldigt Belgrad. In: Der Standard, 30 November 2024.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Even from his own ranks, Prime Minister Albin Kurti drew severe criticism by alienating, as some of his domestic opponents saw it, Kosovo's closest allies and political defenders. See, among others: Vjosa Osmani, President of the Republic of Kosovo, address to the Assembly of the Republic of Kosova, 22 November 2024,

by the Euro; closing Serbian post offices; enforcing the Kosovar license plates rules, the composition of the Kosovo police in the north, etc.) with a kind of hostile stubbornness unacceptable to both Belgrade and Northern Kosovo. After a long period of time, again, it seemed that among Westerners, in particular among Kosovo's best partners and friends, the narrative of a Serbia as the "main anchor of stability" and the only gate towards a unified, prosperous region gained new momentum, maybe even more than ever before, since Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. Vučić, the "ingenious tactician" of power and seesaw politics in the Western Balkans,¹⁰ has successfully managed to even convince the most influential EU capitals (Berlin!) that Serbia under his autocratic rule happens to be the central power no one will be able to get around.¹¹ Vučić, masterfully and cynically, during his whole rulership, succeeded in presenting himself "without alternatives"¹² to any other power and ruler in the region. The EU, as a part of her either incapable or cowardice or selfish – or a combination of all of this – appeasement policy seems to still underestimate Vučić's political dangerousness for Europe (or simply pretends to be naïve). In the West, in particular in the EU, Vučić seems to be able to get away unpunished with nearly everything. When it comes to Brussels' reactions or, more frequently, non-reactions to Vučić's Serbia, one feels reminded of the "Three wise monkeys". The renowned historian and political scientist, Herfried Münkler, in a recent interview, in the context of the foreseeable collapse of the rule-based international order, put Vučić into one row together with Putin, Erdoğan, Xi Jinping, and other autocratic rulers who see in the use of violent land grabbing a central geopolitical tool.¹³

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0Vo5sLH3Ec> . Osmani, a kind of political coalition partner of Kurti's Vetevendosje Movement, accused Kurti of having violated Kosovo's most valuable asset, its Western partnerships and alliances.

¹⁰ See Thomas Brey: *Der Wandlungskünstler. Porträt Aleksandar Vučić*. In: *Internationale Politik* 79 (2024) 5 (September/Oktobre 2024), p. 9–11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*; Former German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who had a good relationship with Vučić, is said to have frequently characterized Serbia's role in the Western Balkans and for the EU enlargement process this way – "without alternatives" was one of her favorite political terms, also used abundantly in her autobiography: *Angela Merkel (with Beate Baumann): Freedom. Memoirs 194–2021*. Cologne, 2024.

¹³ Herfried Münkler: *Wir sitzen besonders in der Patsche*. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 1st December 2024, p. 2.

Kurti and the Kosovo Albanians, by contrast, suddenly found themselves on the downward slope. Kurti and his government felt trapped in a diplomatic disaster; Vučić, on the other side, celebrated a political coup, though not completely able to hide his blood-stained hands. Following Trump-style foreign policy, he even managed to fortify his momentary “victory” by negotiating successful “deals” with France (16 Dassault Rafale fighter aircrafts) and Germany/EU (framework agreement on lithium-mining in the Jadar Valley, West Serbia). All these developments have shown to Kurti that EU, U.S., and other Western political support is by no means given anymore. It seems that, in particular in the EU, also with a view to an eventual enlargement, the (geo-)political weights have shifted again in favor of Serbia. For Paris and Berlin, for example, there will be no enlargement without Serbia, if any enlargement at all – a *conditio sine qua non*, so to say. Kosovo, in this context, however, seems to play no role whatsoever – rather it is regarded as a troublesome stumbling block – which, objectively seen, is rather unfair: Kosovo, as a *de jure* sovereign state,¹⁴ has every right to call the community of states to respect its sovereignty, without any cuts. However, more consultations and compromises in this context, especially with its friends and supporters, would have been helpful und conflict preventing.

As it appears today, the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina remains more disconcerting than ever, hostile, uncompromising, hopeless.

Admission of Failure: The True Face of the EU: Bilateral “Deals” Rather than Six New Unreliable Cantonists?

1. Against this sobering, gloomy background, nearly all Western Balkans experts, and many national and international politicians agree that at the end of 2024, the EU enlargement process has come to an agonizing standstill – if not complete failure, caused both by the performance of some applicants from the region, and by the deep inner disunity and incapability of the Union. The EU-led dialogue (Borrell/Lajčák) between Serbia and Kosovo has been moribund – many “agreements” brokered by the EU (Brussels II; Ohrid, etc.) turned out to be neither fully agreed nor even close to being signed. Rather, both Belgrade and Pristina have never

¹⁴ See the Kosovo Decision of the International Court of Justice, The Hague, 22 July 2010.

stopped provoking each other, not even backing-off outbursts of violence. It has been about the widening and implementation of “national” full sovereignty (Pristina) in the northern parts of Kosovo against non-recognition and a de-facto secession (Serb communities of Northern Kosovo). The International Community, in particular the EU and the U.S., seem to have run out of ideas and answers anymore – if they ever had any realistic and promising ones – and if there has ever been credible political will to get it done, in particular in the light of Putin’s brutal, illegal attack on Ukraine. Worse, despite the so-called “Thessaloniki-Promise” (2003), a significant number of the EU member states (among them not only the non-recognizers of Kosovo’s independence) have managed for two decades by now to show their colors and reveal their true position regarding enlargement. Rather, the EU Commission, keeping permanently an eye on the respective majorities within the 27, consequently with their foot on the break, returned to its helpless (some have called it dishonest) policy of permitting, if not approving de-facto stabilitocracies, thereby fundamentally undermining its own “basic values” – the same values it has made the priority criteria (Copenhagen) to be fulfilled by the enlargement aspirants. German Chancellor Scholz’ and French President Macron’s recent “deals” (Trump style) with Serbian President Vučić, and also the EU’s more or less non-reaction to the outcome of the Serbian elections end of 2023 have been demonstrating that in major EU capitals, Brussels and Washington the belief in cutting the Gordian knot between Belgrade and Prishtina has disappeared, knowing though that this has been the central political key to a successful integration of the WB6 in the end.

2. Despite French President Macron’s enforced reform of the Brussels bureaucracy’s accession process, the enlargement procedures have remained, not unintentionally, a largely intransparent legal-technical thicket of reform agendas, progress certificates, ticking-off articles, paragraphs and clauses of the “acquis communautaire”, and questionnaires to be answered de facto under oath. In this regard, the Commission acts on behalf of the member states as the legal-technical lord privy seal. The national government of the 27 and governments (who, upon recommendation of the Commission), and their parliaments (they have to decide in the end, which applicant will be admitted) leave this business more or less to the bureaucrats and technocrats in Brussels. This privilege of the final *political* say on each new membership admission has put the 27 member states in

a very comfortable position, leaving the dirty work up to that point to the EU. There have never been truly political criteria whom to take in and whom to keep out. No one in the EU, Germany included, has ever been prepared and politically willing to fight hard which seems to cause more trouble than providing advantages and progress for the 27 full members.

3. a) Categorically, the mantra regarding admission has always been: admission will be **“merit-based”**, meaning, only those candidates that have fulfilled all Copenhagen legal-technical criteria, will be submitted to the exclusively political decision processes (European parliament; finally, the national parliaments). Those applicants who have finished the legal-technical admission process first, successfully (Commission findings), will also enter the political decision process first (the so-called “regatta principle”). But when and how will central EU political interests come into play; European and global geopolitical ones? What, for example, with Serbia? Belgrade has always been told officially that, even in the case of complete fulfillment of the full spectrum of conditionality (Copenhagen criteria, etc.), it must, to complete its application, prove that it established (together with Pristina), a mechanism of a sustainable, irreversible cohabitation with Kosovo (which would have to include a certain form of recognition of Kosovo as an independent state). Serbian President Alexandar Vučić, though, has made it very clear, time and again, that Serbia will never ever recognize *its* province “Kosovo and Metohija” to be an independent, sovereign state. But, what then? What will then happen to Kosovo if it does not show any preparedness to enter such a (agreement based) cohabitation with Serbia, in particular with regard to the political participation of Kosovo Serbs (above all, from the North) and the full protection of Serb cultural heritage? Also, will Serbia ever make it credibly and sustainably clear that it belongs irreversibly to the European, and not to the “Russian sphere”? Will the EU make this a political *conditio sine qua non* for Serbia’s eventual accession? What is the answer of the EU and its member states to Vučić’s and Dodik’s recent provocation of the “One Nation, One Assembly” – “Serbia and Srpska” declaration of 8/9 June

2024, the concept of a “*Srpski svet*” (“Serbian world”),¹⁵ challenging European borders and its balance of power. Can we really trust the EU that in the case of Belgrade delivering a technical reform in agreement with Copenhagen, it would still not be admitted because of the non-fulfilment of the political conditionality reconfirmed by departing High Representative Borrell?¹⁶

What if North Macedonia would successfully conclude the accession process, but not find any agreement with Bulgaria that threatens a Macedonian membership with its veto? What if, hypothetically, Bosnia and Hercegovina would somehow manage to comply with nearly all Copenhagen criteria, but not succeed in convincing the Republika Srpska to give up its Belgrade supported blockage of the central Bosnian state, with which the EU alone can conclude an accession agreement according to international law? Of course, the EU and its member states know very well about these, for the foreseeable future, almost insurmountable political obstacles to a WB6 enlargement. Thus, not only a few of the member states feel very comfortable not being forced to take any admission decision in the foreseeable future.

¹⁵ Referring to the doctrine of a *Russkij svet* (“Russian world”) – having in mind, above all, ethnic Serbs living in Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and Croatia becoming unified with splendor and glory in one country named “Greater Serbia”. See, in more detail, Grégoire Soria-Metais: Belgrade hosts the first All-Serb Assembly. In: New Eastern Europe, 8 July 2024, Belgrade hosts the first All-Serb Assembly – New Eastern Europe; Nataša Stanojević: The entire text of the Declaration adopted by the first All-Serbian Assembly: In: ISAC Fund, Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub, Belgrade, 13 June 2024, Analysis of the News: “The entire text of the Declaration adopted by the first All-Serbian Assembly” – ISAC Fund; Adnan Ćerimagić/Madja Ruge: Trump’s tinderbox: US Politics and the next war in the Balkans. In: European Council on Foreign Relations, ECFR 557, Berlin, 29 October 2024; <https://ecfr.eu/publication/trumps-tinderbox-us-politics-and-the-next-war-in-the-balkans/>.

¹⁶ “You cannot maintain the ties with the Russian Federation or try to do business as usual and expect that your country will be part of the EU. It is one thing or the other. (...) Serbia is a very important political and trade partner of the EU, but sooner or later it will have to align its foreign policy with the EU. Otherwise, the EU integration process of Serbia will be in jeopardy”. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, on the occasion of the presentation of the 2024 Enlargement Package, Brussels, 30 October 2024. Remarks on the 2024 Enlargement Package.

b) Taking into consideration the political mood on the crucial member state side, the EU decided, against the background of the Union's "Acquis Communautaire", already on 22nd June 1993, the so-called "Copenhagen criteria" as the central conditionality for accession aspirants. This 35 chapters long catalogue of technical and legal requests not only turned out to be the appropriate instrument to commit potential membership candidates to the established values, norms and standards of the Union, but also to provide – timewise and politically-strategically – both a filter and a buffer to hide behind if necessary avoiding being accused of simply buying time and accepting the formation and strengthening of stabilitocracies in the region.¹⁷

4. The **original, prevailing EU “merit-based” perspective** of the sequence of the necessary admission steps,
 - conclusion of “Stabilization and Association Agreements” (SAAs),
 - submission of a membership application,
 - being granted candidate status,
 - opening of formal membership negotiations,
 - confirmation of the EU Commission that all norms and standards, known as “Copenhagen” accession conditions, have been fulfilled,
 - to the final decision of the Council of Ministers (following the approval of the 27 member states’ parliaments)

seems to have been unrealistic if not failed – not to mention the above listed additional if not core *political* preconditions, and the unchanged profound disunity among member states, when it comes to the indispensable inner reforms and the Union's general capacity to absorb and handle additional members.¹⁸ Nevertheless, like in a sworn Monastic community,

¹⁷ See for more: Michael Schmunk: The West and “stabilitocracy”: Did the EU and the U.S. shelve enlargement by trying to cast out the devil by the Beelzebub? In: Predrag Jureković (Ed.): Overcoming Stabilitocracy in South East Europe. Austrian National Defence Academy, Study Group Information, Vol. 13/2024, Vienna, August 2024, pp. 99–118.

¹⁸ See, among others, Michael Martens' critical analysis regarding the EU's remaining enlargement capacities: “Die Grenzen des Wachstums. Neue Vollmitglieder kann die EU nicht mehr verkraften – neue Wirtschaftspartner schon. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 4 June 2024, p. 8: „With a full veto power Serbia in the EU, for example, Moscow barely would have to be afraid anymore of European sanctions (against Russia)”. To develop Marten's basic idea further: Even more so, Serbia, in such a case, could

the Commission and its member states hold on to their “admission Bible”. Only recently, the old and new EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, wrote a blunt job instruction to the incoming EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, telling her, among other things, that the enlargement process will remain “fully merit-based” and that “each candidate must be assessed on its own progress towards meeting all (accession) criteria”.¹⁹ There could not be a clearer signal: Nothing will be changed – do not dare to present a new enlargement approach for the Western Balkans. In a nutshell: For the foreseeable future we do not have and we do not want, especially with a view to the political blockades, a phase of a newly designed admission strategy.

5. Since it has become clear that, at least for a long time – some even say, forever, the originally planned enlargement sequence would not work, alternatives process-wise and status-wise have been discussed, both in the political, and in the think tank world. Does “enlargement” principally mean “full” membership, which is to say: including all political rights and privileges, in particular the instrument of a national veto? Or, rather, as a first step if not fundamentally, enlargement for new members, from the Western Balkans, WB6) and from Eastern Europe (Ukraine; Moldova; Georgia), would comprise “everything” (e.g. Common Market benefits; access to funds; the so-called four freedoms, etc.) – **everything below an imaginary “red line”** separating political from economic and social rights and privileges? This transitional alternative – for a limited period of time, with reduced rights, no full political privileges (yet) – was discussed seriously, especially in think tanks, with a whole set of good proposals. However, Brussels discarded this approach in principle. The EU came to the conclusion that, above all, such an “accession” model would abridge the Commission’s powers in an unacceptable way and also lower the conditions for an eventual membership of the applicants. Some, in this context, tried to suggest to the candidates to think about accepting (for good) a kind of a **second-class membership**: lots of economic benefits, though no political **say** – something some applicants had already been

prevent the other applicants of the WB6 (BiH! Kosovo!) from ever becoming full EU members.

¹⁹ Ursula von der Leyen: Mission Letter to Marta Kos, Commissioner-designate for Enlargement. Brussels, 17 September 2024; 1a2d0ad0-270d-441b-98c8-b6be364d8272_en.

worried about. The same seems to have happened to another variation of the accession process: the so-called **step-by-step approach**. With every successful step in the Copenhagen criteria fulfilment process, the applicant “moves forward”, gaining new rights and privileges, access to additional funds, facilities, etc. – comparable to relevant board games. As it seems to be the case today, also this model does not find full support neither in the region nor in the EU. What does that mean for the EU’s enlargement project in general, and for Serbia and Kosovo in particular? Will we have to worry about a new period of an even further diluted enlargement policy? As a tacit, helpless acknowledgement from Brussels and the member states: the original enlargement idea is dead? Or, with a view to Trump and his Republican team, will there from now on be instead of the enlargement project a **policy of “deals”** when it comes to European and American relations with the Western Balkans, similar to the *“Lithium-Deal”*? What about the planned investment *“deals”* (buildings) of the incoming Trump administration (Belgrade; Albanian coast)?

6. For many years now, there has been the proposal to understand “enlargement” for the WB6 as *the* EU (geo-political) project of this century – with Ukraine now playing in a similar, but different league. Enlargement of the EU by integrating the WB6 should be primarily a political, latest since 2022 a geo-political project, not so much an economic-social project. This project has its origin in the outcome of the relatively recent Balkan wars, where parts of Serbia, this cannot be forgotten, played a non-acceptable role, harming, hurting and killing many humans of their neighboring countries, in particular in Croatia, BiH and Kosovo. The people of Bosnia-Herzegovina and of Kosovo nearly lost these wars militarily, and could barely survive, only with military and humanitarian help from the outside (the intervention of the NATO led ‘coalition of the willing’). It comes as no surprise that both countries, with the massive destruction of their infrastructure and their economies, but also due to the internationally imposed peace treaties and regulations (Dayton Agreement; UN-SC-Res. 1244), originally meant to primarily end the bloodshed, rank as the lowest in the list of the WB6 applicants. To a major degree their potential membership in the EU depends on Serbia, on a democratic Serbia willing to jointly move forward in the direction of cooperation and co-habitation, leaving autocratic and revanchist regimes as the one of Vučić (and Dodik) behind – there are many, in particular young democratic people in Serbia

(and in the Serbian populated parts of BiH and Kosovo), who fight for nothing else but this, longing for reconciliation, eventually. Leaving these two countries out, if enlargement ever happens, would be historically-politically unjust and wrong. It would rather perpetuate instability and conflicts in the region. This is why some experts have been advocating an enlargement process, where courageously all WB6 would become EU members all together, at once. I have been supporting such an **“En-Bloc”** admission for quite some time. Such a simultaneous **“Big-Bang”** solution²⁰ would be the best for the region and for the EU – and probably for the West in general. It is only about 17 million people, who, in many ways, have already been interlinked with the 27. Some of the still unsolved technical-legal problems could be handled within the Union – for the political ones in and between the WB6 the EU has to come up with creative ideas and apply pressure when needed.

How to Crush the Gordian Knot? From Human-Political Indifference to Pro-Active Pragmatic Trust-Building

1. After 25 years by now, both regionals and internationals rightly suspect that on the level of governments and international organizations, trust-building and reconciliation will be on hold also for the next decade(s) to come. More than ever before, a Plan B to reverse this gloomy development seems to be unavoidable, new political terrain has to be resolutely explored and tested. The era of stalling the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue both on enlargement relevant issues and on the status and integration of Kosovo Serbs north of the Ibar river must come to an end. Up till now, the EU, in particular, has followed a policy of tiptoeing around the key problems between the two problematic accession aspirants Serbia and Kosovo. Rather than further distracting the WB6 from their main objective by overwhelming them with all kinds of countless financial benefits (rarely evaluated) – SAA pre-accession funds, financial assistance for a wide range of infrastructural projects, budget support, good conduct funds, flagship projects, growth plans, etc. – the EU should eventually enable, support and (literally) protect processes and projects trying to

²⁰ Ulf Brunnenbauer: Die EU setzt Doppelstandards. In: Die Tageszeitung (taz), 14 Oktober 2024; <https://taz.de/Osteuropa-Experte-ueber-Westbalkan/!6042295/>.

establish a sustainable cohabitation between “regular” Kosovo-Albanians und Kosovo-Serbs. Furthermore, this seems to be necessary between those “regular” Serbs and Kosovars, who, in their countries, have been fighting for a long time for a win-win-situation that would make a real difference for their everyday life, their security and their prosperity.

2. Against this rather disillusioning background, whether at all – and if yes – a process of reconciliation could be fruitful already at this stage, a realistic and thus constructive answer can only be: let them, Northern Kosovo-Serbs and Northern Kosovo-Albanians start first with a process of trust-building, uninfluenced by Pristina and Belgrade, mediated by NGOs from both sides – which have been existing for quite some while – having established already a preliminary basis following on from the “cohabitation” of the time before the war.

This does not exclude at all the long-term objective of a sustainable reconciliation – true “reconciliation” between two or more parties of a violent conflict though is a very ambitious project, which, as recent history, let us say, the more or less last 100 years, tells us, has been rather the exception than the rule.²¹ Above all the reconciliation cases between France and Germany, The Netherlands and Germany, and, to a certain degree between Poland and Germany are considered as exemplary. The case of Ireland and Northern Ireland has been still on the test bench, whereas the relationship between Italy and Austria (South Tirol) last but not least can be qualified as irreversibly stabilized and reconciled. This, of course, cannot be said yet with regard to Azeri-Armenian relations (Karabakh) – and many, many more worldwide, among them most prominently deeply divided Korea and Cyprus.²²

²¹ See, among others, Michael Schmunk: The solution of frozen territorial conflicts – One size does not fit all. History tells us what might work and what not. In: Frederic Labarre/George Niculescu (Eds.): Concrete steps to break the deadlocks in the South Caucasus. 20th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus, Study Group Information 2/2020, Vienna, March 2020, pp. 21–37.

²² That so many divisions between a *northern* and a *southern* part suggest the need, some may say, the people’s longing for unification and reconciliation (e.g. North and South Cyprus; North and South Korea; Northern Kosovo; Northern Ireland; Northern Sudan) belongs to the world of randomness. In nearly all cases, the existence of northern and southern parts of a country is due to the division during or after a violent conflict, indicating

3. This idea is not a new one, of course, not the reinvention of the wheel. Rather, what is urgently needed, is the concentration of a maximum of efforts to examine and test what a “cohabitation”, a coexistence at least, mid of the 2020’s, means and practically needs, above all on the grassroots level. That nearly all EU and U.S. ex-cathedra mediation efforts between Serbia and Kosovo, between Kosovo-Albanians and Kosovo-Serbs failed, last but not least the various Brussels brokered²³ “agreements” and “deals” (Borrell), between Belgrade and Pristina, e.g. “Brussels I”, “Brussels II” and “Ohrid”, has been proven this over the last decades. Now it is high time to try something fresh: a fundamental policy change bottom-up, with as much operational freedom as possible, and only with a minimum of outside (international) interference – if at all. In general, the parties of disagreement and conflict, in this case finally the citizens concerned, flanked by NGOs, should create a framework where the public spheres (“*Öffentlichkeiten*”)²⁴ of Kosovo-Albanians and Kosovo-Serbs overlap again or for the first time, culturally and politically. These areas of overlapping public spheres have to be created and developed consensually – and protected jointly – with ethnically mixed security forces waiting at the sidelines on standby, to be called in by all parties involved and citizens concerned to assist and mediate when needed. Security will be key to have a chance to establish such “islands of cohabitation”. These “forces” must be composed either of mixed public or private mediation and security specialists acceptable to everyone. Rather as an exception, neutral international elements and experts, could be involved if desired. The funding of such security elements and mediators, both domestic and international, should be provided out of a joint international budget (EU; U.S.; UN; OSCE, etc.). This should also be true for the funding of all kinds of further logistics necessary.
4. It is known that Prime Minister Kurti declared to be ready for such an approach, such an experiment. He has also offered to arrange, behind closed doors and under Chatham House Rules, talks about models of

territorial provisionality and political uncertainty. See, among others, Ian Bancroft: *Dragon’s teeth. Tales from North Kosovo*. Stuttgart, 2020, p. 16.

²³ The main brokers, among others, were Josep Borrell and Miroslav Lajčák.

²⁴ See Jürgen Habermas: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Frankfurt a.M., 1962.

“good-neighborly coexistence” of Kosovars and Serbs, of Kosovo-Albanians and Kosovo-Serbs, with only a respectful listener role for himself. So far, nothing of the sort has been heard of President Vučić – it should be worth a try. Also, Prime Minister Kurti has frequently underlined that his police forces had to rush to protect Kosovo-Serbs from north of the Ibar river from attacks of extremist Serbs from Serbia and from within North Kosovo: “It has been a mistake to impute that all Kosovo-Serbs and Serbs in Serbia proper are Kosovar haters.”

5. Life starts with housing. The Kosovar state or private business with a public contract should create apartments of high standards, of standards attractive enough for residents to eventually overcome reservations about the principal condition to live together in the same building with members of the opposite ethnic group (as it used to be the case, when pre-war Yugoslavia still existed). The readiness to join such a mixed housing community should be rewarded financially, relatively low rents, subsidized by the state. (Bi-)multilingual, mixed *Kindergartens* (pre-schools), regular schools, vocational schools and universities of standards comparable to the highest European educational standards (with excellent career outlooks) should easily bring students from all parts of Kosovo together, maybe even joined by students from Serbia and Albania. All these schools,²⁵ training centers and universities ideally should be provided with high reputations abroad, and their degrees be accepted at least in the EU and the U.S. Arrangements with private direct investors, finally, guaranteed e.g. by the EU or the foreign country should provide highly attractive

²⁵ Recently, the following happened in Italy. In the mainly German speaking Autonomous Province of Bolzano-South Tyrol (*Alto Adige*), Italian speaking Italians decided not to follow the tradition anymore to send their children into Italian speaking schools in Bolzano. Rather they started sending their children into the Goethe-School in the center of Bolzano, German speaking – by far the school with the best educational reputation. The German School tried to separate the non-German speaking students from the large majority of the German speaking ones, putting them into special “Italian” classes, a practice which was declared illegal: the law asks for integrated education only. Lesson learned: If Kosovo-Serbs from the North will, in a couple of years, ask for putting their children into an (integrated) Albanian one (or vice versa), then we have made it! See Matthias Rüb: Eine deutsche Förderklasse entzweit Südtirol. Eine Grundschule in Bozen darf Kinder ohne Deutschkenntnisse nicht separieren. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 14 October 2024, p. 8.

jobs in Kosovo/North Kosovo under the condition to work jointly with colleagues from the opposite ethnic group.

These are only a few preliminary ideas for projects, where Serbs and Kosovars could learn again to share a good life together – building step by step trust, last but not least by questioning narratives propagated by their parent generation. All those in Kosovo not part or not yet ready for such an “experiment” should at least acknowledge these approaches as a “revolutionary” flagship project for a common future and support (and protect) it from the sideline. This inter-ethnic “laboratory” in and for the Western Balkans should be recognized as the best option for all people in Kosovo – in particular for those, who want to stay, and not be deceived and negatively instrumentalized by radical militants, who, in the end, have nothing else to offer but violent conflict and a non-prosperous life. Ideally, this grassroots driven strategy to regain human trust could, if successful, be spread into Serbia proper, where not only a few young, hopeful Serbs have been waiting equally long for their share of a human rights based, democratic, free and prosperous future.

Kosovo – Confidence-building not Yet Completed

Lulzim Peci

Introduction

Since 2011, the European Union has facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština, aiming to resolve tensions and normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Over the years, these efforts have oscillated between moments of cautious optimism and setbacks, leaving the region in a fragile state of uncertainty. While there have been some tangible improvements in everyday life for Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, the overall progress in high-level political negotiations has been limited.

After repeated clashes between the Kosovo Police and the local Serb community in 2021 and 2022, the regional commander in northern Kosovo, a Kosovo Serb, refused on November 2, 2022, to enforce penalties against drivers with Serbia-issued plates. He was immediately suspended. In response, from November 5 to 9, 2022, all Serbs in north of Kosovo resigned from their posts, including mayors, municipal councilors, judges, police officers, Srpska Lista ministers, and civil servants, whereas the Srpska Lista Assembly members suspended their activities. These developments effectively stalled or reversed the progress made since the First Agreement on Normalization of April 2013. In line with Kosovo law, the central authorities initially scheduled by-elections for December 2022 in the four northern municipalities. However, based on international advice, these elections were postponed to April 2023 to allow time for a new dialogue agreement and encourage Serb community participation.

Despite the reached Agreement on the Path to Normalization (PNA) in February/March 2023, the Serb political parties and population in northern Kosovo massively boycotted the April 2023 by-elections. Nevertheless, the elections went ahead, with Kosovo Albanian mayors elected on a 3.5% turnout. These obscure developments seriously challenged political and security situation in this part of Kosovo. Furthermore, the September 2023 terrorist at-

tack in Banjska, which intensified the security crisis in northern Kosovo, underscored the urgent need for innovative and sustainable confidence-building measures (CBMs) that go beyond political stalemates and tackle deeper societal challenges.

Against this background CBMs are intended to reduce the risk of conflict escalation by fostering transparency, dialogue, and mutual understanding between conflicting parties. CBMs can be categorized into two broad types: security-oriented measures (such as military cooperation, arms reduction, and border agreements) and societal measures (which focus on reconciliation, interethnic dialogue, and shared civil society initiatives). Kosovo-Serbia relations reflect both the promise and limitations of CBMs, particularly in contexts of ethnic tensions where historical grievances and competing nationalisms persist. The underlying challenge is not just about finding technical solutions to disputes, but about transforming deeply entrenched narratives and power structures.

This article will examine the state of interethnic, political, and security relations in Kosovo, assess ongoing and potential CBMs between the Albanian majority and Serbian non-majority, and analyze cooperative initiatives led by NGOs and civil society organizations. I will also explore the key preconditions necessary for CBMs to succeed and the “killing assumptions” that could undermine their effectiveness.

The Current State of Interethnic, Political, and Security Relations in Kosovo

Kosovo’s political landscape remains deeply divided along ethnic lines, with both internal and external factors influencing the prospects for peace and stability. The EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has sought to normalize relations between these two countries, as well as mitigate ethnic tensions within Kosovo itself. While the technical aspects of the dialogue – focused on freedom of movement, documentation, and telecommunications – have yielded some improvements, high-level political negotiations have time after time faltered.

In this context, we must critically examine the narratives promoted by different political actors in both Kosovo and Serbia. These narratives, deeply

embedded in the fabric of our societies, shape identities, influence politics, and determine the course of societal relations. The prevailing lenses through which the past and interethnic relations are viewed are not just divisive – they are profoundly dangerous for our future.

In Kosovo, the dominant narrative of Albanian victimhood often overlooks the suffering of Serbs and other ethnic communities. However, this narrative frequently marginalizes the Kosovo Serb community, sometimes portraying them as outsiders or remnants of a past oppressor. On the other hand, the Kosovo Serb community's narrative is shaped by a deep sense of insecurity and a lack of hope for their future. They often view themselves as a besieged population, politically and institutionally unrepresented, caught between the aspirations of the Serbian government and the reality of living in an independent Kosovo.

In Serbia, the narrative is even more restricted, concentrating exclusively on the suffering of Serbs while denying the massive crimes committed against Kosovo Albanians by the Belgrade's state apparatus. This narrative is compounded by the portrayal of Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia, with its independence seen as a loss that must be rectified. These narratives, infused with the glorification of individuals convicted of war crimes, perpetuate a culture of impunity. Such individuals are often celebrated as heroes, distorting historical accountability and undermining the very principles of justice that are essential for lasting peace. These distorted narratives, which are similar across the region, do more than just obscure the past – they actively hinder the prospects for meaningful reconciliation and interethnic cohabitation, stifling liberal democratic values in all countries of the region.

In addition to these longstanding challenges, two key developments have significantly altered the dynamics of Kosovo-Serbia relations in recent years: the emergence of the controversial idea of “border corrections” and the geopolitical impact of the war in Ukraine. The notion of “border corrections” between Kosovo and Serbia first gained serious attention in 2018 when high-level officials from both countries appeared to entertain the possibility of a land swap as part of a broader peace agreement. Under this plan, Kosovo would transfer majority-Serb areas in the north, to Serbia in exchange for some settlements of the majority-Albanian Preshevo Valley in southern Serbia.

Proponents of this idea, including Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi at the time, argued that such a land swap could serve as a “final solution”, creating ethnically homogeneous regions, and consequently “removing” a major source of tension. International actors, including EU Foreign Policy Chief Frederica Mogherini and some Western governments, initially expressed openness to the idea. However, the proposal met with widespread opposition within both Kosovo and Serbia, as well as among key European players such as Germany, which feared the destabilizing potential of border changes in a region still scarred by ethnic conflict.

The primary argument against border corrections is that such a solution risks reigniting ethnic nationalism across the Western Balkans, potentially encouraging similar movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. The breakup of Yugoslavia was marked by violent ethnic cleansing, and altering borders along ethnic lines could embolden separatist movements across the region, undoing decades of international efforts towards building liberal democratic states and societies.

In Kosovo, the proposal faced strong opposition from the Albanian majority, who viewed it as a dangerous concession that would undermine the country’s territorial integrity. For the Serbian community in Kosovo, especially those living in enclaves outside the northern region, the prospect of border changes raised fears of marginalization or abandonment by Serbia. Moreover, the ambiguity surrounding the practical details of the land swap – such as the fate of mixed-ethnic areas and the protection of non-majority rights – created additional uncertainty and distrust. However, it remains a latent issue that could re-emerge, particularly if diplomatic efforts to resolve the Kosovo-Serbia dispute continue to stall. Should the idea resurface, it would likely provoke renewed tensions both within Kosovo and across the broader Western Balkans.

The war in Ukraine, which erupted in 2022 following Russia’s invasion, has had significant repercussions for the Balkans, particularly in the context of Kosovo-Serbia relations. The conflict has not only shifted the geopolitical landscape in Europe but has also underscored the urgent need for stability in the Western Balkans, a region historically susceptible to external influence

and ethnic conflict. Russia has long supported Serbia in its refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, using the Kosovo issue as a means of exerting influence in the region. Moscow's close ties with Belgrade, both politically and militarily, have provided Serbia with a powerful ally in international forums such as the United Nations, where Russia has consistently blocked Kosovo's bid for full recognition. The war in Ukraine has further complicated this dynamic, as Serbia has found itself caught between its traditional alliance with Russia and its formal aspirations for EU membership.

The Franco-German initiative, which led to the "Agreement on the Path to Normalisation" in February 2023 and the Ohrid roadmap in March, can be seen in part as a European response to the shifting geopolitical realities created by the Ukraine war. The initiative was driven by a renewed sense of urgency to stabilize the Western Balkans in light of the broader instability in Europe. For France and Germany, the war in Ukraine highlighted the risks of unresolved conflicts in Europe's periphery, including the Kosovo-Serbia dispute. The Franco-German proposal sought to achieve normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia without requiring formal mutual recognition following the German-German model. Instead, it was focused on two pillars de-facto recognition and the establishment of the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities. The initiative was also framed as a way to integrate both countries more closely into European structures, as part of a broader strategy to counter Russian influence in the region.

However, like previous diplomatic efforts, the Franco-German initiative has faced significant obstacles. Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti has insisted that both parties must formally sign the agreement before moving forward with implementation, while Serbia has formally withdrawn from key parts of the deal related to mutual recognition of territorial integrity. This political impasse, exacerbated by the lingering influence of Russia and the broader instability created by the Ukraine war, has prevented meaningful progress.

The Banjska incident underscores the fragility of security in northern Kosovo, where the Serbian community remains resistant to integration into Kosovo's political and legal structures. This resistance has been exacerbated by Belgrade's influence, which continues to undermine Prishtina's authority in this part of Kosovo. The ambiguity surrounding Serbia's role in the attack

has deepened the mistrust between the two sides, further complicating efforts to build trust and cooperation.

In light of these developments, the need for sustainable confidence-building measures (CBMs) in Kosovo is more urgent than ever. CBMs must address not only the immediate security concerns in northern Kosovo but also the deeper interethnic mistrust that fuels the conflict. Practical measures that protect non-majority rights, could help create the conditions for a meaningful cooperation between the Kosovo Albanian and Serbian political actors and communities. At the same time, CBMs must be accompanied by a clear political commitment from both Belgrade and Prishtina to implement the “Agreement on the Path to Normalisation”. Without addressing this issue, future efforts at normalization will likely fail.

Key Preconditions for Confidence-Building Measures

For CBMs to be effective in Kosovo, several key preconditions must be met, drawing on liberal peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction concepts. These preconditions involve political commitment, security guarantees, inclusive participation, mutual recognition of identities, international support, and addressing historical grievances.

Political Commitment from Belgrade and Prishtina

Perhaps the most critical precondition is political commitment from both sides. Without genuine political will, any CBM risks being viewed as a superficial gesture. Political leaders on both sides need to prioritize peace over nationalist electoral interests. While Kosovo and Serbia may have achieved a form of “negative peace” (the absence of direct violence), they have yet to establish “positive peace,” which would involve justice, cooperation, and reconciliation.

Security Guarantees in Northern Kosovo

Ensuring the safety of all communities and inter-border security, particularly in volatile areas like northern Kosovo, is crucial for the success of CBMs. On one hand, security confidence measures to foster trust and ensure polit-

ical participation and re-integration of the Serbian community in the Kosovo's rule of law institutions in this part of the country. On the other hand, inter-border security must ensure trust building and cooperation between security institutions of Kosovo and Serbia.

Inclusive Participation in the Peace Process

CBMs must be inclusive, involving not only political elites but also local communities, civil society organizations, and other relevant stakeholder, by nurturing grassroots engagement in building lasting peace and cohabitation. In Kosovo, this means involving both the Albanian and the Serbian communities in peace initiatives to ensure that CBMs resonate at the community level.

Mutual Recognition of Identity and Rights

For CBMs to succeed, both sides must respect each other's political, cultural, and national identities. Kosovo Serbs, in particular, need assurances that their rights will be protected within Kosovo's legal and political framework. Similarly, Kosovo Albanians need same assurances in the Serb majority municipalities.

The Shift from Facilitation to Mediation: A Critical Imperative for International Support

International involvement, particularly by the European Union (EU) and the United States, has been crucial in guiding the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. However, the distinction between facilitation and mediation is critical to understand if these efforts are to evolve into a more effective conflict resolution strategy. Facilitating talks, as the EU has done since 2011, is focused on providing a platform for dialogue, encouraging both sides to communicate, and helping negotiate specific agreements. This has led to technical improvements – such as agreements on freedom of movement, telecommunications, and energy – but has not succeeded in resolving the deeper political and ethnic tensions. Moving from facilitation to a more assertive mediation role is now essential if the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue is to break through its current deadlock.

Historical Acknowledgement and Transitional Justice

Addressing historical grievances, including war crimes and displacement, by revising the nationalistic narratives is vital for long-term reconciliation. Transitional justice mechanisms, such as truth commissions can help societies confront their pasts and build a foundation for future peace.

Killing Assumptions that Undermine Confidence-Building Efforts

In efforts to foster trust and cooperation through CBMs, several pervasive assumptions often threaten to derail progress. These “killing assumptions” can critically undermine peace building initiatives if left unaddressed:

Assumption of Unilateral Compliance: Effective confidence-building depends on reciprocity. Expecting one side to adhere to CBMs without corresponding actions from the other is unsustainable and counterproductive. Mutual commitment is essential for these measures to succeed.

Ignoring Local Dynamics: National-level agreements, such as those between Belgrade and Prishtina, do not automatically translate into trust at the grass-roots level. Overlooking local dynamics – especially in areas like northern Kosovo, where ethnic tensions are particularly entrenched – can severely limit the effectiveness of CBMs. Local conflicts often have their own drivers, which require targeted solutions.

Assumption of Homogeneity within Communities: Both the Albanian and Serbian communities are far from monolithic. Treating them as uniform entities fails to account for the diverse perspectives, needs, and internal divisions that exist within each group. Ignoring these complexities can alienate key voices and weaken the legitimacy of CBMs.

Belief in a Quick Security Fix: Stabilizing the security situation requires addressing the deeper political, social, and economic grievances that fuel conflict. Simply increasing police presence or implementing superficial security measures will not resolve the root causes of instability. Sustainable peace demands a holistic approach.

Ongoing Confidence-Building Measures and the Role of NGOs

Despite the challenges outlined above, there are several ongoing CBMs that offer a pathway toward reconciliation. These measures have been implemented at both the political and grassroots levels, often supported by civil society organizations and NGOs.

Formal Confidence-Building Efforts

The Brussels Agreement (2023), which aimed to bring to the pre-final level of normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, remains a cornerstone of CBMs, not only between the both countries, but also between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs. One of the most important aspects of this agreement was the creation of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities, designed to give Kosovo's Serb-majority areas a greater local self-government within Kosovo's institutional framework. While its full implementation remains a contentious issue, the Association could reduce the sense of uncertainty and insecurity felt by many Kosovo Serbs.

The Role of NGOs in Confidence Building

At the grassroots level, recently NGOs and civil society organizations have played a critical role in fostering trust between Kosovo's Albanian and Serbian communities. A key example of such an initiative is the Kosovo Civic Alternative, a coalition of prominent civil society activists committed to fostering democratic values, human rights, and peace across ethnic lines. The Alternative works to provide policy inputs for the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, to bridge the gap between the Albanian and Serbian communities by promoting civic participation and offering a neutral space for inter-ethnic civic and political dialogue.

Another notable initiative is the Multi-Ethnic Caravan for Peace and Cohabitation, led by KIPRED and NGO Aktiv. The Caravan aims to promote dialogue, understanding and cooperation between different ethnic and religious communities, and to contribute to the strengthening of inter-ethnic coexistence in Kosovo. The Caravan meets with mayors and religious leaders across Kosovo, and advocates for improving relations and coexistence between ethnic communities.

Environmental cooperation has emerged as a promising area for building trust. Joint efforts to tackle shared challenges, such as pollution and environmental degradation, offer a common purpose that transcends ethnic divisions. A notable example is the joint protests of Kosovo Albanians and Serbs against environmental degradation in the municipality of Štrpce/Shtërpçë, demonstrating how environmental concerns can unite communities. Another example is the involvement of both Albanian and Serbian youth in environmental initiatives, such as cleaning the Ibar/Ibër River in Mitrovica. These activities foster cooperation and show that collaboration is achievable when the focus is on mutual concerns.

Despite their important role, NGOs in Kosovo face numerous challenges, including limited funding, political pressure, and the growing influence of hardliners in both the Albanian and Serb communities. However, their ability to engage with local populations in ways that state and international actors often cannot, positions them as key drivers of sustainable confidence-building efforts.

Looking ahead, the role of NGOs in CBMs will likely continue to expand, especially as formal negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo face periodic stalemates. The potential for greater collaboration between state actors, international organizations, and NGOs offers a promising avenue for strengthening interethnic relations and advancing peace in Kosovo.

Conclusion

Kosovo's journey toward peace, stability, and interethnic cooperation is a complex and challenging one. While the EU-facilitated dialogue has made some progress in addressing technical issues, high-level political negotiations remain stalled, and the security situation in northern Kosovo remains fragile. In this context, confidence-building measures offer a vital pathway toward fostering trust and cooperation between the Albanian majority and Serbian minority.

However, for CBMs to succeed, key preconditions – such as political commitment, mutual recognition of identities and historical acknowledgment of the past and transitional justice – must be met. At the same time, dangerous

assumptions, such as expecting immediate political normalization or assuming unilateral compliance, must be avoided.

The role of NGOs and civil society organizations in fostering grassroots cooperation is crucial, providing models for collaboration that can inspire broader societal change. By focusing on practical issues, shared concerns, and direct interaction, these initiatives offer hope for a future where ethnic divisions no longer define Kosovo's political and social landscape.

Restoring Dialogue for Peace in Kosovo

Miodrag Milićević

The recent years have provided ever reducing opportunity for building trust in Kosovo. Major political processes have been stalled, the gains achieved previously have been reversed, and tectonic shifts have occurred in the north of Kosovo, all of which has brought trust between the local Kosovo Serb community and the Kosovo institutions back to zero. This overall trend requires a full reversal for any meaningful trust-building in and related to Kosovo. For this to happen, fundamental shifts are needed in the manner in which the Kosovo leadership of recent years has acted, hopefully followed by a more constructive rhetoric and approach by Belgrade.

In terms of trust-building in this context, the key issue is contained in the relations between the Kosovo Serb and Kosovo Albanian community, and importantly between the Kosovo Serbs and the Kosovo authorities. This is not to say that Serbs – or Albanians for that matter – are more important human beings than other communities in Kosovo or the region. It is a simple matter of historical circumstances, coupled with their reverberations in the present day. It has to do with Kosovo previously being under Yugoslavia and Serbia, it has to do with the Kosovo conflict occurring primarily in the Serb-Albanian ethnic dimension, it has to do with the coming to terms by Kosovo Serbs with living under the jurisdiction of Kosovo institutions, and it has to do with Serbia's position on Kosovo and the Belgrade-Pristina relations in general.

The UNMIK Years

For these reasons, the principal point of trust-building in Kosovo is under the umbrella of relations between the majority Kosovo Albanians – and the Kosovo institutions which the Albanian community naturally dominates – and the Serb community there, spread across different regions south of Ibar and in the compact bloc in the four municipalities north of the river. It is for the same reason that this ethnic dimension has been one of the primary points of focus for the post-conflict international engagement in

Kosovo, from UNMIK, to Ahtisaari, to the International Civilian Office, and beyond. In light of this focus, trust has been increasing over the post-conflict years through different milestones of institution-building in Kosovo. During the UNMIK years, the foundation for multiethnic institutional functioning was laid and – albeit with setbacks, most notably the riots of March 2004 – the initial positive steps were made. Serbs participated in some landmark elections, assumed their positions within the Assembly of Kosovo and in other institutions, trade with Serbia picked up, and inter-ethnic social contacts were enhancing, primarily south of the river Ibar.

The Ahtisaari Years

The next milestone was the Ahtisaari process of Kosovo's status definition. Again, due to the obvious priority related to Serb-Albanian relations, the Ahtisaari process was largely about defining the position of Serbs in Kosovo in all relevant categories of life, from institutional representation at central and local level to the protection of the Serbian Orthodox Church. With Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, trust-building was stalled for a period of time due to Serbia's opposition and the (consequent) disassociation of Kosovo Serbs from the institutions of Kosovo, mostly out of the desire to not legitimize Kosovo's statehood.

However, positive interactions were resumed and a next level of trust building was possible a few years after 2008, primarily through the creation of new Kosovo Serb-majority municipalities south of Ibar. In those early years, the leadership of Kosovo heeded to the advice of international partners, by and large provided through the International Civilian Office set up to supervise Kosovo's independence at the time, and acknowledged the importance of integrating Serbs into the socio-political life. The Serb community south of Ibar responded positively, voting in sufficient numbers in a Kosovo local elections and participating in the creation of new municipalities. Further elements of integration ensued, with Kosovo's car plates and IDs being taken up by the community, with special institutional bodies and police protection being created for the Serbian Orthodox Church sites, and with a much increasing inter-ethnic social interactions. Thus, restaurants in the Kosovo Serb municipality of Gračanica became – and remain to this day – frequented by Kosovo Albanians, multiple levels of interaction occurred in the Gjilan/Gnjilane region and

among the Kosovo Albanian visitors and local Serbs in the mountain resort under the Kosovo Serb-majority municipality of Štrpce/Shtërpçë. Serbia-Kosovo trade further expanded, along with a raising interaction among Kosovo- and Serbia-based businesspeople, providing an additional level of normalization and trust-building.

The Dialogue-Provided Upgrade

The north remained outside this overall spectrum and its situation was addressed through the next process milestone, the EU-facilitated Kosovo-Serbia Normalization Dialogue initiated in 2011 upon a unanimous decision by the UN General Assembly. The Dialogue provided a fundamental upgrade to trust and relations, primarily in the north of Kosovo but also across the other areas where Serbs live. Over its first years, especially in the context of the landmark First Agreement of principles governing normalization of relations of April 2013, the Serb community north of Ibar integrated into the Kosovo Police, later in the judiciary, participated in Kosovo elections and formed Kosovo-law municipalities. In parallel, numerous other points of Dialogue agreements were being implemented, ranging from acceptance of Kosovo IDs by Serbia to the return of cadastral records, the acquisition of Kosovo's telephone code, and many more. All of this provided for the next-level social interaction, enhanced in the south but also broadening in the north of Kosovo. Trade with Serbia was further enhanced. For illustration, between 2005 and 2018, Serbian imports to Kosovo amounted to around €3.6 billion, making Serbia Kosovo's main trading partner at the time. Kosovo's exports to Serbia for the same period were €250 million, reaching approximately 12% of Kosovo's foreign trade in 2017.¹ The Kosovo and Serbia chambers of commerce engaged in substantial cooperation, largely without external stimulation, thus providing a strong example of positive interaction. At the same time, Kosovo Albanian Diaspora began using Serbia for their seasonal transit from Western Europe to Kosovo, including through crossing points in the north. Regular meetings were being held between the Kosovo and Serbia border police commands, whereby even joint patrolling

¹ See a report by the *Musine Kokalari Institute* at: <https://musineinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/18-Permiresimi-i-marredhenieve-ekonomike-Kosove-Serbi-ENG06.pdf>.

of the border zone was organized along with KFOR, providing a side example of the overall feeling of normalization within Kosovo and between Serbia and Kosovo.²

The Crisis and Reversal of Dialogue Gains

The gains achieved through the Dialogue were upheld over the subsequent years, despite events that could have provided significant set-backs – until late 2022, when Kosovo Serbs in the north announced the full departure from Kosovo institutions. This action was taken upon consultation with Belgrade and in response to numerous crises occurring on the ground over that and previous year. The following period did not help. The situation further deteriorated with the repeated local election in April 2023, which was boycotted by the local Serbs and which produced ethnic Albanian mayors for the four northern municipalities. Over 2021 and 2022, a significant presence of Kosovo Police special units mounted up across north Kosovo, conducting recurring security interventions and regular policing along with Kosovo Albanian officers from the south. In May 2023, the Government of Kosovo led by PM Albin Kurti dispatched special police to install the newly elected mayors in the municipal buildings, drawing significant condemnation by the international community. In the ensuing protests by the local Serbs, KFOR provided a buffer around the municipal buildings and approximately 90 of its soldiers were hurt by the protesters. This, too, was condemned internationally. The next blow to trust and relations then occurred in September 2023 through the attack in Banjska village against Kosovo Police by a group of Serb paramilitaries, later established to be led by Milan Radoičić, then the *Srpska Lista* vice-president and a local strongman. A Kosovo Police officer was killed in the attack, along with three attackers in the subsequent firefight. The Kosovo government has labelled the attack as terrorist and has accused Belgrade of orchestrating it, which has been denied by the Serbian authorities. Another major incident occurred in December 2024, when a portion of the Ibar-Lepenac canal in Zubin Potok (north Kosovo) was blown up by explosives in an apparent attempt to disrupt Kosovo's water and energy supply. The Kosovo government again accused Belgrade, which was again denied, and perpetrators remain unknown.

² The practice was called off by Serbian police following the arrest and subsequent deliberate humiliation of the then head of the Serbian Government's Office for Kosovo and Metohija (now foreign minister of Serbia), Marko Đurić, in March 2018.

The situation created in the north through the period between 2021 and 2024 has remained to this day, with the unprecedented level of security control by Pristina relying primarily on the special police units and with the local Serbs outside the socio-political life of the north or the central Kosovo institutions. The Serb community perceives the situation extremely negatively, as a form of a hostile take-over of the north by the Kurti government, exhibiting little consideration for the interests and wellbeing of the local Serbs. Pristina's triumphalism is obvious, exhibited through frequent visits by the interior minister, Xhelal Sveçla,³ opening of Kosovo Albanian businesses in the north, massive visits by ethnic Albanians to lake Gazivode⁴ and Mitrovica North, Facebook photos of special police officers featuring national and/or nationalist Albanian symbols, the abolition of the Serbian Dinar⁵ and the resulting inability for Kosovo Serbs to receive salaries and pensions from Serbia, and the recurring police raids on business and private households. Accounts of excessive policing are also mounting, as well as other reported forms of harassment, including sexual harassment of local Serb women.⁶ Traffic tickets and other forms of police and judicial correspondence are often issued only in Albanian. All this is accompanied by a rejection by the Kurti government to enter any form of meaningful dialogue with the Kosovo Serb community or to respond to their grievances in some other way. PM Kurti has effectively declared *Srpska Lista* – the largest Kosovo Serb party – unwanted and is refusing any form of communication with it. The systematic closing of the Serbian institutions in Kosovo by the Kurti's government has also provided a significant contribution to the overall conclusion by the local Serb community. The policy is not only symbolic, it has far reaching economic and service-delivery impact on Kosovo Serbs, but also a number of other non-Albanian communities that have been receiving services from these institutions, such as Kosovo Roma for example.

³ <https://kossev.info/kosovo-online-news-kosovos-interior-minister-visits-north-mitrovica-unaware-of-incident-outside-new-missini-locale/>.

⁴ <https://kossev.info/en/samoopredeljenje-posle-skokova-u-vodi-gazivode-nam-zavestalinasi-precikosovo-online-najnovije-vesti/>.

⁵ <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbia-dinar-ban-kurti/32868947.html>.

⁶ <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/society/increasing-number-women-north-mitrovica-report-sexual-harassment-26-10-2024>.

Given the protracted period of time in which all this is happening and the continued attitude of the Kurti government, it is apparent to the vast majority of Kosovo Serbs that these actions are not random responses but a consolidated policy for north Kosovo that aims to subjugate the local population rather than engage in democratic integration. In the background, most of this has been made possible by the crisis in the EU-facilitated Normalization Dialogue. Following two years of turbulence, another landmark agreement was achieved in early 2023, but it remains unimplemented. The overall conclusion by the EU and the involved international community is that the parties are not committed to the process.⁷ It is now clear that the Kurti government has chosen the path of *fait accompli* in the north instead of negotiated solutions produced by the Dialogue. The Serbian government has also sharpened its rhetoric and has given a number of signals that it does not consider itself bound by the full scope of the 2023 agreement. However, with the key initial point of implementation being the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities, which the Kurti government simply refuses to accept, Belgrade remains in a slightly better negotiating position and is receiving somewhat less international pressure and condemnation. In any case, both parties need to significantly shift their approach back to meaningful dialogue and implementation of commitments.

Key Takeaways

Considering the history of trust-building in Kosovo in its primary dimension – Serb-Albanian and Kosovo-Serbia relations – one major conclusion is clearly presented. Trust-building is by and large top-down. This is to say that major upgrades at societal level are only possible if mainstream political processes are geared towards this and are delivering. All the milestones listed above occurred in the context of major political imperatives to do so, from UNMIK to Ahtisaari and the Normalization Dialogue. Naturally, civil society has had its own impact on grassroots trust-building, multiplying the political results and providing for their wider reach. Adversely, as we witnessed in recent years, a crisis in a major political processes such as the Normalization Dialogue has brought along a substantial deterioration at all levels, now gradually spilling onto people-to-people contact. Under such circumstances, civil society and

⁷ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44cb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf.

international organizations remain committed, but their ability to generate positive social impact remains limited and open to major setbacks. This conclusion is not likely to change in the period ahead and for that reasons all efforts must be focused on reinstating positive political processes.

Recommendations

In light of all of the above, there are several crucial points of action that must be undertaken to reverse the extremely negative trends of the recent years and provide for renewed normalization and trust-building. In the absence of such interventions in the period ahead, there is a risk of further deterioration of inter-ethnic relations and the corresponding increase of the conflict potential and adverse effects on regular citizens.

1. First and foremost priority is the reinstatement of essential Normalization Dialogue, under renewed EU/international push and with clear guiding principles, priorities, and timeframes for implementation of the commitments undertaken, now contained in the 2023 Path to Normalization Agreement. Without the Normalization Dialogue delivering as before, there can only be further deterioration on the ground. No amount of positive grassroots initiatives, if at all possible, would be able to reverse the negative trends ongoing.

2. Along with the point above, but also in general, it is imperative that the manner of communication by the political elites in Belgrade and Pristina is substantially changed. This should encompass the full elimination of offensive, incendiary, and other forms of narratives that enhance the other side's enemy image and instigates nationalism in Serbia and Kosovo.

3. Point 1 and 2 above are not possible on their own. They require resolute action by the EU and the wider supporters of the Normalization Dialogue. Thus, part of instigating this change would be joint press conferences by the Belgrade and Pristina delegations following each Dialogue round in Brussels as a means of demonstrating mutual respect and commitment to the process. These conferences would provide for a jointly defined Dialogue narrative, thus offering a framework for further public communication in line with the lines set thereby and eliminate widespread misunderstandings and "constructive ambiguities".

4. Within Kosovo, all efforts must be made to restore political dialogue among the key stakeholders and to return it to where it belongs, the Assembly of Kosovo. This presumes the return of Kosovo Serb representatives to the Assembly, probably through the February 2025 elections, but also the willingness of the Kosovo government for direct discussions with the legal and legitimate parliamentary representatives of the Serb community. It is a primary democratic principle that one side should talk to whoever the other side elects as representatives.⁸ Restoring normalization in north Kosovo should be a key priority of any such political dialogue.

5. The points above would be crucial for providing impulses for the restoration of trust and positive interaction along the key axis of Albanian-Serb relations. With these conditions secured, major new opportunities would ensue for civil society and grassroots trust-building, where again international attention should be placed both in terms of donor funding and requesting political support and non-obstructionism from Belgrade and Pristina for such initiatives. Defining key civic and local interests of Albanians, Serbs, and others who live in Kosovo, and acting upon them through joint grassroots action would enhance political gains and assure long-term trust among communities and between communities and institutions. Basic societal consensus and understanding over real citizen priorities has generally been absent and has further reduced through the recent crisis years. This should be the civil society focus providing the fulfillment of mainstream political conditions.

6. With the above points fulfilled, conditions would also be ripe for the reduction and ultimate withdrawal of special Kosovo Police units from the north. If the Kosovo government does not wish to negotiate this point at political level, it can be taken as a separate and logical consequence of overall normalization. With the Dialogue proceeding as anticipated, with an internal political dialogue that is restoring trust and engagement of Kosovo Serbs with the institutions (including renewed participation in Kosovo Police), security conditions in the north would normalize and thus eliminate the need for extended security control.

⁸ Comment: *If the Kosovo Albanian delegation was able to engage directly with associates of Slobodan Milošević at Rambouillet in 1998, then it follows that the Kurti government should be able to communicate with Srpska Lista, a registered party in Kosovo, as well as any other parties that secure representation in the upcoming elections.*

Civil Society, and the Interplay of Politics and History in Building Trust and Cooperation in Kosovo

Ramadan Ilazi

Introduction

The challenges of fostering trust and cooperation in Kosovo are deeply intertwined with the broader political and historical dynamics between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. As Kosovo navigates its post-conflict trajectory, efforts to build a cohesive society often face significant obstacles, including entrenched competing narratives about the past, the limitations of grassroots initiatives in the absence of political progress, and the pervasive influence of political rhetoric on interethnic relations. This paper explores these dynamics by arguing that while community-level efforts are essential for fostering trust, their success depends on addressing the broader structural and political factors that shape interethnic relations in Kosovo.

The first argument centers on the importance of civil society as a key driver of interethnic cooperation in Kosovo. Despite the challenges posed by political stalemates, civil society organizations have created meaningful platforms for dialogue, countered divisive narratives, and promoted economic cooperation that transcends ethnic divisions. These efforts have demonstrated the transformative potential of grassroots initiatives in bridging divides and fostering reconciliation.

The second argument focuses on the vulnerabilities stemming from competing narratives about the past. The unresolved historical grievances between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs, particularly concerning the 1990s war, continue to polarize communities and hinder trust-building. Addressing these conflicting narratives is critical for breaking the cycle of mistrust and creating a foundation for shared understanding and cooperation.

The third argument highlights the inherent limitations of community-level efforts in the absence of progress in political normalization between Kosovo and Serbia. Grassroots initiatives cannot fully succeed when political elites

engage in inflammatory rhetoric or fail to advance constructive dialogue. The broader political context directly shapes the success or failure of Track II peacebuilding efforts, making progress in Track I diplomacy indispensable for sustainable reconciliation.

This paper is organized into three sections, each corresponding to these key arguments. The first section examines the role of civil society in fostering interethnic cooperation, providing examples of successful initiatives and their impact. The second section delves into the historical divide, exploring how competing narratives about the past perpetuate mistrust and offering strategies for addressing this challenge. The third section discusses the critical interplay between community efforts and political dynamics, emphasizing the need for alignment between Track I and Track II approaches.

The rationale for this paper lies in its focus on the interconnectedness of grassroots and political dynamics in Kosovo's peacebuilding process. While much attention has been given to political negotiations and international diplomacy, there is a need to highlight the symbiotic relationship between high-level political progress and community-level reconciliation efforts. By examining this interplay, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles and opportunities for fostering trust and cooperation in Kosovo and to offer practical recommendations for aligning efforts at all levels of society.

Civil Society as a Peacebuilding Actor in Kosovo-Serbia Relations: A Beacon of Cooperation in Tense Times

The tense and often volatile relations between Kosovo and Serbia have created significant challenges for interethnic relations within Kosovo, particularly between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. As political negotiations continue to stall and escalate rhetoric dominates public discourse, civil society in Kosovo has emerged as a crucial peacebuilding actor, stepping in where state institutions and international mechanisms have struggled. Civil society organizations (CSOs) provide a platform for dialogue, build grassroots resilience, and foster cooperative initiatives that counteract the divisive impacts of political conflicts.

The current impasse in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue has exacerbated tensions, leaving little space for constructive engagement at the political level. This situation has made civil society's role in peacebuilding even more critical. CSOs operate beyond the limitations of political agendas, focusing on tangible improvements in intercommunal relations. Through projects like the Community Forums for Public Interest (CFPIs) under the FIERC initiative, civil society has provided a neutral platform where Kosovo Albanians and Serbs can come together to address shared challenges, such as unemployment, public service delivery, and youth empowerment.

In the absence of meaningful progress at the state level, CSOs have taken on the responsibility of fostering dialogue and trust. The forums facilitated by FIERC, for example, have directly engaged over 3,000 individuals across six multiethnic municipalities, creating spaces for regular, constructive dialogue. These forums allow communities to focus on practical, shared interests rather than divisive national narratives, demonstrating that cooperation is not only possible but also beneficial.

The ongoing political tensions have amplified the spread of divisive narratives and disinformation, further polarizing communities. Civil society has responded by actively countering these narratives, emphasizing shared values and mutual interests. For instance, FIERC's motivational video campaigns have reached tens of thousands of people with messages promoting coexistence and understanding. These efforts are essential in an environment where political leaders often use inflammatory rhetoric to solidify their support bases, inadvertently alienating minority communities.

By challenging stereotypes and promoting a narrative of unity, CSOs help build societal resilience against the manipulation of ethnic tensions. Their work not only reduces the immediate risk of interethnic conflict but also lays the groundwork for long-term reconciliation by fostering empathy and understanding across communities.

Civil society's emphasis on grassroots engagement has been instrumental in demonstrating the practical benefits of interethnic cooperation. Economic initiatives supported by CSOs, such as vocational training programs and support for multiethnic start-ups, address shared challenges like unemployment and lack of opportunities. These programs provide a platform for individuals

from different communities to work together, breaking down barriers and building trust through collaborative action.

Economic cooperation is particularly significant in the current context, where political tensions have hindered broader regional integration. By focusing on community-level economic projects, civil society offers a viable alternative to the stalemates at the national level, creating pockets of stability and progress that can serve as models for wider application.

Civil society also acts as a crucial bridge between communities and institutions. Surveys conducted as part of the FIERC project reveal that citizens perceive local governments as more effective than central authorities in fostering interethnic relations. This indicates a significant opportunity for CSOs to collaborate with local governments, leveraging their grassroots networks to inform and enhance municipal initiatives. For instance, partnerships between civil society and municipalities in Prizren and North Mitrovica have demonstrated the potential for joint cultural and educational programs to improve interethnic relations.

The ability of civil society to operate independently of political constraints gives it a unique advantage in peacebuilding. Unlike state institutions, which are often beholden to nationalist agendas or external pressures, CSOs can focus solely on the needs and aspirations of the communities they serve. This neutrality makes them trusted intermediaries in contexts where mistrust between communities and institutions is high.

Moreover, civil society's flexibility allows it to respond quickly to emerging challenges, such as escalating political tensions or sudden outbreaks of violence. This adaptability is critical in a context where political processes are slow-moving and often reactive rather than proactive.

To maximize its impact, civil society must be further empowered and supported. This can be achieved through enhanced funding mechanisms, capacity-building initiatives, and stronger partnerships with both local and international actors. For example, international organizations could provide targeted support for civil society projects that promote interethnic dialogue and economic cooperation, while local governments could formalize cooperations with CSOs to ensure the sustainability of successful initiatives like CFPIs.

Furthermore, integrating civil society efforts into broader national and regional strategies for reconciliation and development could amplify their impact. This would not only strengthen the role of civil society as a peacebuilding actor but also ensure that its initiatives contribute to a cohesive, long-term vision for Kosovo's future.

In the current context of tense Kosovo-Serbia relations, civil society has become an indispensable peacebuilding actor. By fostering dialogue, countering divisive narratives, promoting economic cooperation, and bridging gaps between communities and institutions, CSOs provide a pathway for reconciliation and progress. Their work demonstrates that even in the face of political impasses, meaningful cooperation and trust-building are possible at the grassroots level. As Kosovo navigates this challenging period, the continued support and empowerment of civil society will be critical to sustaining peace and fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Competing Narratives of the Past: The Key Vulnerability Hindering Trust and Cooperation in Kosovo

One of the most significant vulnerabilities obstructing greater trust and cooperation in Kosovo is the deep-seated division between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs regarding competing narratives about the past. These conflicting historical perspectives, particularly concerning the events of the 1990s and the war in Kosovo, perpetuate mistrust and inhibit the development of a cohesive and inclusive society. Addressing these narratives is essential for fostering reconciliation and building a shared vision for the future.

At the heart of the divide lies the fundamentally different ways in which Kosovo Albanians and Serbs view the conflict in the 1990s and its aftermath, including the state of Kosovo. For many Kosovo Albanians, the war is remembered as a struggle for liberation from oppression and violence, marked by the atrocities committed by Serbian forces, such as the Reçak/Račak massacre. For Kosovo Serbs, however, the period is often framed within a broader narrative of victimization the loss of territorial sovereignty. These competing perceptions are reinforced by political leaders, media outlets, and educational systems on both sides, creating entrenched narratives that leave little room for compromise or mutual understanding.

The failure to address war crimes and human rights violations exacerbates these divisions. Many Kosovo Albanians feel that justice has not been fully served for the crimes committed against their community, while Kosovo Serbs perceive themselves as collectively blamed and excluded from the reconciliation process. This dynamic perpetuates resentment and mistrust, undermining efforts to build cooperative interethnic relations.

The competing narratives about the past manifest in political rhetoric and everyday interactions, deepening the ethnic divide. For instance, Kosovo Albanians often associate Kosovo Serbs with the policies and actions of Belgrade, while many Kosovo Serbs feel alienated by the rhetoric of Kosovo's political leaders, which they perceive as conflating Serbia with the Serbian community in Kosovo. This mutual distrust creates a zero-sum perception of justice and reconciliation, where gains by one side are seen as losses for the other.

The division is also evident in the cultural and symbolic realms. Disputes over historical monuments, commemorative practices, and the representation of history in educational curricula further entrench competing narratives. These conflicts prevent communities from engaging in honest dialogue about their shared history and the steps needed to move forward.

Civil society in Kosovo has played a pivotal role in addressing these competing narratives, often stepping into spaces where political leaders have failed to act. By fostering dialogue, promoting inclusive historical perspectives, and encouraging mutual recognition of suffering, CSOs have laid the groundwork for reconciliation.

One approach has been through grassroots dialogue initiatives that bring together Kosovo Albanians and Serbs to share their personal experiences of the conflict. These initiatives humanize the "other" and provide a platform for empathy and understanding. For example, civil society-led projects have facilitated storytelling sessions and workshops where participants discuss their perspectives on the past, helping to break down stereotypes and build mutual trust.

CSOs have also been instrumental in promoting transitional justice as a pathway to reconciliation. By advocating for the prosecution of war crimes, sup-

porting the identification and memorialization of missing persons, and documenting human rights abuses, civil society has worked to ensure that justice is pursued in a way that acknowledges the suffering of all communities. These efforts are crucial in shifting the focus from blame to accountability and healing.

While civil society has made progress, addressing competing narratives about the past requires stronger institutional support. Educational reforms, for instance, are vital for creating a more balanced and inclusive representation of history. This could involve revising school curricula to include multiple perspectives on the conflict and encouraging joint educational initiatives that bring students from different ethnic backgrounds together.

Government and international actors also have a role to play in supporting reconciliation efforts. This includes facilitating dialogue between political leaders from both communities, ensuring that transitional justice mechanisms are adequately resourced, and promoting initiatives that foster shared cultural and historical understanding. The establishment of a truth-telling commission, for example, could provide a platform for both communities to engage in a structured and impartial process of addressing the past.

Youth perspectives reveal the enduring challenge posed by competing narratives about the past, a key barrier to trust and cooperation in Kosovo. Survey report by the Debate Center NGO in 2021, showed that 67% of young respondents prioritize justice for war victims over reconciliation, this sentiment underscores the deep divide in how the Kosovo war is remembered. The data also reflects skepticism toward Serbia's accountability, with 67% of youth expressing doubt about the sincerity of any apology from Serbia, while only 5% believe Kosovo should apologize for Serbian civilian victims without a prior Serbian apology. Despite this, young people also emphasize the importance of addressing unresolved issues, with 92% believing that the fate of missing persons must be part of normalization efforts. This demonstrates that, while narratives of victimhood dominate, there is a recognition among youth that shared historical grievances must be addressed collaboratively to break the cycle of mistrust.

Overcoming the vulnerability posed by competing narratives about the past is a long and complex process, but it is essential for building trust and cooperation in Kosovo. By addressing these divisions, Kosovo can create a foundation for reconciliation that acknowledges the past while focusing on a shared vision for the future.

Civil society will continue to be a critical actor in this process, but its efforts must be complemented by political leadership, institutional reform, and sustained international support. Together, these efforts can help transform competing narratives into a shared understanding that enables Kosovo to move beyond its historical divides and towards a more cohesive and inclusive society.

The Limits of Community-Level Efforts: The Dependence on Political Normalization Between Kosovo and Serbia

While community-based efforts to build trust and foster interethnic cooperation are invaluable, they cannot substitute for the broader political normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The success of grassroots initiatives often hinges on the broader political context, and when relations between political elites deteriorate – marked by inflammatory rhetoric or the breakdown of dialogue – it undermines the progress made at the community level. Without meaningful advancements in Track I diplomacy, Track II efforts at the grassroots are left vulnerable, and the fragile trust built in communities can quickly erode.

Community-driven peacebuilding initiatives thrive in an environment where political stability and dialogue set a supportive tone. When political elites in Kosovo and Serbia engage in negotiations or even symbolic gestures of reconciliation, it provides a conducive atmosphere for grassroots initiatives to gain traction. However, when political rhetoric becomes aggressive or when dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia stalls, it creates an atmosphere of mistrust and uncertainty that trickles down to the community level.

For instance, the escalation of tensions surrounding issues like license plate policies, or inflammatory statements by political leaders, often results in heightened interethnic animosities in communities. Civil society leaders have noted that when political discourse turns hostile, it fuels suspicion and fear,

making it significantly harder for local actors to sustain interethnic cooperation initiatives. The perception that the political context is deteriorating can embolden hardliners at the community level, who may seek to undermine grassroots peacebuilding efforts.

The impact of violent political rhetoric extends beyond the immediate relationship between Kosovo and Serbia's governments. When leaders from both sides resort to confrontational language, it signals to their respective communities that cooperation and reconciliation are not priorities. This rhetoric reinforces competing narratives about victimization and blame, polarizing communities further and eroding the trust necessary for grassroots efforts to succeed.

For example, when political leaders equate Serbia with the Kosovo Serb community, or when Belgrade frames Kosovo Albanians as a threat to Serb identity, these narratives are internalized at the local level. As a result, individuals who were once open to dialogue and cooperation may retreat into their ethnic silos, viewing cross-community engagement as risky or counter-productive.

Track I diplomacy – the official, high-level negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia – provides a critical framework for stability and sets the tone for grassroots engagement. Without progress at this level, community-based initiatives often lack the structural support and legitimacy needed to endure. For example, while civil society initiatives like the CFPIs have successfully brought together Kosovo Albanians and Serbs to address shared concerns, their impact remains localized and limited without the broader backing of a stable political environment.

Moreover, when political leaders demonstrate a commitment to dialogue and reconciliation, it empowers civil society and grassroots actors to expand their initiatives. It sends a message to communities that cooperation is both valuable and aligned with national priorities. Conversely, the absence of political progress creates a vacuum that extremists and hardliners can exploit, undermining both Track I and Track II efforts.

The political elites in both Kosovo and Serbia bear a significant responsibility for creating an environment that allows grassroots peacebuilding to flourish.

This includes refraining from inflammatory rhetoric, engaging constructively in dialogue, and prioritizing normalization over short-term political gains. At the same time, international actors involved in facilitating the dialogue must emphasize the importance of Track I and Track II synergy, ensuring that political agreements translate into tangible benefits for communities.

For example, any agreements reached in the Brussels dialogue, such as those related to economic normalization or local governance, should include provisions for community-level implementation. This creates opportunities for civil society to work in parallel with institutional actors, turning high-level agreements into real-world improvements in interethnic relations.

Youth perspectives demonstrate the significant influence of political normalization efforts – or their absence – on grassroots initiatives. A report from Debate Center NGO from Kosovo from 2021, indicates that while 54% of young respondents believe in the need for a process to deal with the past, only 23% see reconciliation between Albanians and Serbs as viable at present. This reflects a broader sentiment that progress at the community level is often undermined by high-level political dynamics. Violent rhetoric and revisionist policies from political elites reinforce divisions and erode trust, even among the youth, who are otherwise open to cooperation. The skepticism towards both local and international institutions in establishing truth (1% and 4% trust, respectively) further highlights the dependence of grassroots efforts on constructive political leadership. Without meaningful progress in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, community-based initiatives risk stagnation, as the broader political climate heavily influences perceptions and willingness to engage.

Community efforts to build trust and foster cooperation are vital, but they are inherently limited by the broader political dynamics between Kosovo and Serbia. Without progress in Track I diplomacy, grassroots initiatives will struggle to achieve sustained impact, as they are deeply influenced by the tone set by political leaders. Violent rhetoric and the absence of meaningful dialogue not only hinder Track I normalization but also jeopardize the fragile gains made at the community level.

To ensure lasting progress, there must be a concerted effort to align Track I and Track II processes. Political elites must recognize that their actions and

rhetoric have a direct impact on the success of community peacebuilding. By fostering a political environment that supports dialogue and reconciliation, they can create the conditions necessary for grassroots initiatives to thrive and for Kosovo to move towards a more inclusive and cooperative society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Fostering trust and cooperation in Kosovo requires addressing deeply interconnected challenges at both the grassroots and political levels. This paper has argued that civil society plays a vital role as a driver of interethnic cooperation, that competing narratives about the past remain a significant vulnerability, and that progress at the community level is contingent on constructive political dialogue and normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Achieving sustainable reconciliation demands coordinated efforts from civil society, the Kosovo government, and the European Union, each contributing within their spheres of influence. The following recommendations outline how these actors can collaboratively address the challenges identified:

Recommendations for the European Union

- **Strengthen Support for Track II Initiatives:** Increase financial and technical support for civil society organizations working on interethnic dialogue, transitional justice, and economic cooperation. This should include long-term funding mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of grassroots initiatives.
- **Link Track I and Track II Efforts:** Ensure that high-level agreements made in the Brussels Dialogue are paired with specific, community-focused implementation plans. Facilitate partnerships between local governments and civil society to translate political agreements into tangible benefits for communities.
- **Encourage Narratives that Recognize the Atrocities of the Past:** Actively promote initiatives that foster a better understanding of history through truth-telling projects. The EU can play a convening role in facilitating discussions about the past to encourage shared narratives.
- **Monitor Political Rhetoric:** Use its influence to discourage inflammatory rhetoric by political leaders in both Kosovo and Serbia, conditioning financial and political incentives on constructive and inclusive public discourse.

Recommendations for the Kosovo Government

- **Integrate Civil Society into Peacebuilding Process and Normalization Dialogue:** Establish formal mechanisms for involving civil society in the normalization dialogue and on policies related to interethnic relations and reconciliation.
- **Educational Reform:** Revise school curricula to include multi-perspective histories that promote mutual understanding and empathy between communities. This would help address competing narratives and lay the foundation for long-term trust.
- **Promote Transitional Justice:** Accelerate efforts to address unresolved war crimes and human rights abuses by supporting judicial processes and memorialization efforts that respect all victims, irrespective of ethnicity.
- **Lead by Example:** Encourage political leaders to adopt inclusive language and engage in symbolic gestures that demonstrate commitment to interethnic cooperation, such as attending cultural or religious events of different communities.

Recommendations for Civil Society

- **Expand Grassroots Dialogue:** Scale up initiatives like the Community Forums for Public Interest (CFPIs), ensuring that they reach more municipalities and involve a wider range of stakeholders, including youth, women, and marginalized groups.
- **Address Competing Narratives:** Facilitate storytelling workshops, cultural exchanges, and dialogue sessions that allow communities to share their experiences and develop a more nuanced understanding of each other's perspectives.
- **Focus on Economic Cooperation:** Prioritize projects that promote interethnic economic partnerships, such as joint vocational training programs, multiethnic start-ups, and community-based economic development initiatives.
- **Advocate for Institutional Change:** Use research and advocacy to push for greater government accountability and reforms that support interethnic cooperation, such as equitable public service delivery and anti-discrimination measures.

The road to sustainable trust and cooperation in Kosovo is complex, requiring multifaceted and coordinated efforts. Civil society must continue its critical work at the grassroots, but its success depends on an enabling political environment fostered by the Kosovo government and supported by the European Union. By aligning Track I and Track II approaches, addressing competing narratives, and promoting inclusive policies and actions, Kosovo can move closer to building a society that transcends divisions and thrives on shared aspirations.

PART III: Impact on the Region

Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue: Its Implications for Bilateral Relations and Domestic Affairs of Albania

Altin Gjeta

Introduction

Kosovo and Serbia have for a long time been plunged into an embroiled relationship over national and minority rights, self-determination and statehood. The root of the conflict in Kosovo can be traced back as far as the medieval period to the historical disputes between Serbs and Albanians in the Balkans.¹ According to the British historian Noel Malcolm the source of the conflict can be found at the beginning of the 20th century when Kosovo was conquered by the Serbia-Montenegro kingdom, ‘policies of which created a systemic hostility and hatred on a scale that the region had never seen before’.² Nevertheless, the modern-time conflict is largely linked to the oppressive policies of the Milošević’s regime over Kosovo Albanians during the 1980s which culminated with the revocation of Kosovo’s autonomy in 1989.³ This was followed by peaceful resistance and nation building efforts by Kosovo Albanians in the beginning of the 1990s which later escalated into armed conflict with the emergence of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as the war-solution approach faction to the Milošević’s Serbia organised violence in Kosovo.

The NATO military intervention in March-June 1999 ended Milošević’s campaign of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and put the province under UN administration leaving the question of the final status to a later stage. The Vienna round talks between 2005–2007 failed to achieve a breakthrough on the question of Kosovo’s future status,⁴ compelling the UN Secretary General envoy late Marti Ahtisaari to propose the supervised independence of

¹ Tim Judah. *Kosovo: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

² Noel Malcolm. *Kosovo: A short story*. Harper Perennial (1999): xvi.

³ Gëzim Visoka. *Shaping peace in Kosovo: The politics of peacebuilding and statehood*. Springer, 2017.

⁴ Marc Weller. “The Vienna negotiations on the final status for Kosovo.” *International Affairs* 84, no. 4 (2008): 659–681.

Kosovo as the only solution to the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo.⁵ Following the Ahtisaari Plan and backed by Western powers Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia on 17 February 2008. Though it adopted high minority standards in its constitution, Serbia rejected Kosovo's independence and stuck to the UNSC 1244 resolution which makes reference to Serbia's territorial integrity and referred the case to the International Court of Justice. The ICJ ruling that the declaration of independence by Kosovo did not violate the international law⁶ and the apparent refusal of Serbia and Kosovo Serbs in the north to recognise Kosovo's state authority triggered the UN General Assembly to approve the Resolution 64/2982⁷ which tasked the European Union (EU) to facilitate a process of dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. According to the EU, the dialogue aims to:

Achieve a comprehensive legally binding normalisation agreement between Kosovo and Serbia addressing outstanding issues in order for both parties to progress on their respective European path, create new opportunities and improve the lives of their citizens. An agreement between the parties, the statement adds, is beneficial also to the security, stability and prosperity of the entire region.⁸

The dialogue has been going on since 2011 and it is estimated that 39 agreements have been signed so far.⁹ Initially the dialogue was held at the technical level and focused on issues concerning both parties and particularly the aim was to improve people's lives on the ground. It was also considered as a strategic approach by the EU to build confidence between the parties on technical level and then proceed to much more contentious political issues. The ensuing high-political level dialogue facilitated by the then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission of the EU, Catherine Ashton, and then Federica Mogherini, produced two major agreements between Kosovo and Serbia. The 2013 Brussels

⁵ Ahtisaari, M. '*Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement*'. UN doc. S/2007/168. 26 March 2007.

⁶ ICT ruling, Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo. <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/141>.

⁷ See United Nations Resolution. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n09/479/71/pdf/n0947971>.

⁸ See EU External Action, Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue_en.

⁹ Ramadan Ilazi, Reassessing the Kosovo-Serbia normalization dialogue: it is time for a RESET? KCSS. (2024) https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/Is_It_Time_for_a_Reset1.pdf.

agreement officially called ‘*First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations*’ was hailed as historic by the EU.¹⁰ This was followed by the Brussels 2015 agreement under Mogherini auspices which was also considered as a landmark deal.¹¹

However, the lack of implementation, marred by ambiguity¹² and increased tensions between Kosovo and Serbia over the establishment of an Association of Kosovo Serbs majority municipalities (ASM), frequent tensions in the north and an orchestrated aggressive de-recognition campaign towards Kosovo’s independence pursued by Serbia, indicated that little progress was made in the normalisation of relations between the two countries. In this light, the EU and US stepped-up their efforts to find a lasting solution and ‘forced’ Belgrade and Prishtina to sign a comprehensive agreement in February 2023, named ‘*The Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations*’.¹³ This was followed by the Ohrid Anex in March 2023 that outlined implementation measures.¹⁴ Yet, instead of normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia, the 2023 Brussels agreement and the Ohrid Anex seem to have stuck the parties over sequencing and the creation of the ASM. Heightened tensions in the north and the Banjska attack in September 2023 added more to increased distrust between Prishtina and Belgrade and hardened more inter-ethnic relations. The EU’s ambivalence and relative diminish of its leverage over the parties, ambiguity of agreements’ provisions, lack of trust between the parties and the rise of nationalist rhetoric on both sides have been exposed as the main factors contributing to the mixed records and failures of the EU-facilitated dialogue.¹⁵

¹⁰ For more information see EU Externa Action. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_13_347.

¹¹ DW. Serbia and Kosovo sign ‘landmark’ energy, telco agreements. 26 August 2015. Serbia, Kosovo sign ‘landmark’ energy, telco agreements – DW – 08/26/2015.

¹² Dušan Reljić. EU Facilitated Dialogue: Another exercise in constructive ambiguity. CEPS. <https://www.ceps.eu/download/publication/?id=9047&pdf=CEPS%20Commentary%20Dusan%20Reljic%20EU%20Facilitated%20Dialogue.pdf>.

¹³ See EU External Action, Belgrade-Prishtina Dialogue: Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-prishtina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en.

¹⁴ See Ohrid Annex. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-prishtina-dialogue-implementation-annex-agreement-path-normalisation-relations-between_en.

¹⁵ See for more Ramadan Ilazi. The EU dialogue needs a reset. https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/Is_It_Time_for_a_Reset1.pdf.

But beyond relations between Kosovo and Serbia, what are the wider implications of the persistent dispute between Kosovo and Serbia for peace, stability and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans? The region's democratic and Euro-Atlantic progress seems to be bound to the EU-facilitated dialogue success.¹⁶ More specifically, what are the consequences of the Kosovo-Serbia dispute to the respective countries' bilateral relations with Albania and to the latter's domestic affairs? In contrast to other Western Balkan countries, Albania constitutes an interesting and unique actor in this puzzle as it is the kinstate of Albanians both in Kosovo and Serbia. Its historic relations with Serbia have been conditional on the state of Kosovo and Albanian's rights in general in former Yugoslavia. Therefore, its posture in the region is deemed consequential for peace and stability. In this respect, this paper investigates the impact of Kosovo-Serbia dispute on Albania's domestic politics and its relationship with Kosovo and Serbia. The analysis of the political processes both at the heart and the margins of the EU facilitated dialogue show that the initial progress in normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia improved Albania-Serbia bilateral relations at the state level, while gridlocks did not affect the rapprochement between the two governments. To the contrary, flareups between Prishtina and Belgrade impacted negatively Kosovo-Albania relations and exacerbated more political polarisation in Albania.

Albania-Serbia Rapprochement

Albania and Serbia have had a complicated relationship during the past century, though contrary to the general perception they did not fight each other in a war. Both were subjugated to the Ottoman Empire rule for a long time, but Serbia started the nation and state building ahead of Albania in the beginning of the 19th century. Albania dragged out of the Ottoman rule only at its crumbling stage in the wake of World War I. This put Serbia into a stronger position in the Balkans and eventually annexed Kosovo during the first Balkan War in 1912. Kosovo became kind of a myth in the national sentiment of Serbians after it lost its influence over Serbian population living

¹⁶ Donika Emini. *Stabilitocracy in Practice: An Analysis of the EU's Policy towards the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue*. Westminster: 2023. <https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/item/w6z50/stabilitocracy-in-practice-an-analysis-of-the-eu-s-policy-towards-the-kosovo-serbia-dialogue>.

in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This obsession over Kosovo is what Vulović and Ejodus call the ‘Kosovo as Serbia’s object-cause of desire’ syndrome.¹⁷ As Albania came very weak out of the WWI, it did not do anything in particular to claim Kosovo back, though nationalist factions in the country kept advocating for Kosovo’s liberation in the interwar period. After the end of World War II (WWII) Kosovo remained under Yugoslavia and the newly established communist regime in Albania was very close to the then Yugoslav communist leader Tito. Enver Hoxha, the communist leader of Albania did not raise the issue of Kosovo and there seem to have been a gentlemen-like agreement between the parties to not touch on that topic.¹⁸ Though communist Albania broke relations with Tito’s Yugoslavia in 1948, for the whole of its remaining time in power, Albania remained mostly silent on Kosovo.

After the 1990s when the communist regime was toppled in Tirana, that policy changed, and Albania was the first to recognise the independence of Kosovo after its peaceful resistance leadership issued such a declaration in 1992. The war in Kosovo, and the subsequent processes leading up to the declaration of Kosovo’s independence in 2008 and statehood consolidation were supported by Albania in the background by endorsing the line of leadership in Prishtina and advocating for Kosovo in the international stage. Following Kosovo’s independence and ICJ ruling, Albania welcomed the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Its policy has been backing political leaders in Kosovo to find a lasting solution that serves peace, security and EU integration of the whole Western Balkans. Though Kosovo did not bring the countries into a hot conflict, it was considered a stumbling block in Albania-Serbia relations for decades. The high political dialogue between the two countries was limited even after Milošević departed from the helm of Serbia to the Hague in the 2001. The conservative Democratic Party in government between 2005 and 2013 held a more intransigent posture towards Serbia due to its more nationalist and conservative tone in general.¹⁹ The

¹⁷ Marina Vulović and Filip Ejodus. ‘Object-Cause of Desire and Ontological Security: Evidence from Serbia’s Opposition to Kosovo’s Membership in UNESCO.’ *International Theory* 16, no. 1 (2024): 122–51.

¹⁸ Konrad Clewing and Oliver Jens Schmitt. *Fragile Statehood, Strong Statehood: Albania’s Path through a Century of Extremes, and How to Write about the Communist Past*. (2024): KAS Berlin.

¹⁹ Odeta Barbullshi. The Limits and Ambiguities of the Albanian “National Question” in Post-communism: Political Parties, Albanian Nationalism, and External Actors.’ *East European Politics and Societies* 30, no. 03 (2016): 551–570.

public opinion in Albania has also been mostly negative towards Serbia due to the historical issues between the two countries.²⁰ A survey in 2020 showed that only 1/3 of Albanians see bilateral relations with Serbia as good. Though there was an increase in trade in the middle of 2010s, it remained low compared to Albania's trade with the EU member states.²¹

The return of the Socialist Party in power in 2013 and a series of developments in the realm of EU enlargement such as the Berlin Process and EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, seem to have become a harbinger of change in bilateral relations between Tirana and Belgrade. The positive momentum in the EU mediated dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade was an added impetus of this positive direction. In 2014, the prime minister of Albania had an official visit in Serbia, the first of this level to take place in more than 70 decades.²² Kosovo came up as a contentious issue in leaders' joint press conference, nevertheless the visit was followed by a closer relationship between Edi Rama of Albania and Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia. In 2015 Aleksandar Vučić, the then prime minister of Serbia became the first ever Serbian leader to officially visit Albania.²³ The increased level of communication between the two governments is reflected in trade as well, seeing a jump in exchange volume from 103 million euros to 181.4 million euros in around 300 million euros. According to the Institute of Statistics of Albania, during the period 2010–2023, imports from Serbia increased by 104%, while Albanian exports to Serbia for the same period expanded by 500%.²⁴

The break downs in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue after 2015 Kosovo's constitutional ruling on the formation of ASM and Serbia's campaign to bloc

²⁰ See Alba Cela. *Albanian Serbian Relations in the eyes of the Albanian public opinion* 2015. Albanian Institute for International Studies, Tirana, 2015, f. 22.

²¹ Albert Rakipi. *Marrëdhëniet e reja Shqipëri-Serbi, cilat janë implikimet për Kosovën?* Europa, 21 dhejtor 2016. https://europa.com.al/index.php/2016/12/21/marredheniet-e-reja-shqiperi-serbi-cilat-jane-implikimet-per-kosoven/#_ftn4.

²² Balkan Insight, *Albania PM Makes Historic Visit to Serbia*. 7 November 2014. <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/11/07/albania-pm-to-hold-historic-visit-to-serbia/>.

²³ Euronews Albania, *Aleksandar Vucic becomes first Serbian leader to visit Albania*. 27 May 2015. <https://www.euronews.com/2015/05/27/aleksandar-vucic-becomes-first-serbian-leader-to-visit-albania>.

²⁴ Politico.al. *Albania wins the regional competition for trade in 2023, only Serbia beats us*. 26 January 2024. <https://politiko.al/english/e-tjera/shqiperia-fiton-garen-rajonale-per-tregtine-me-2023-na-mund-vetem-serbia-i500640>.

Kosovo's accession in international organisations and convince other states to de-recognise Kosovo does not seem to have fundamentally harmed the improved relationship between the government of Albania and Serbia. In contrast to Albania's policy in the past, Edi Rama's government maintained a more 'international' approach to Kosovo at times of rifts between Prishtina and Belgrade. Prime Minister Rama has sided with the international community's calls on Kosovo to implement the ASM and be more constructive in the EU mediated dialogue.²⁵ In the meantime, the government of Albania and Serbia signed several agreements in the framework of Berlin Process²⁶ and the personal relationship between Rama and Vucic has been getting closer to previous tradition.

In this positive spirit, in 2019 Albania and Serbia initiated a controversial movement to establish a regional cooperation framework called 'Open Balkan'. The initiative's objective was to facilitate the free flow of goods, services, capital and people, which according to the initiators would strengthen regional cooperation, peace and stability in the Balkans.²⁷ Both Rama and Vučić promoted the Open Balkan initiative and multiple summits were held between Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, the three Western Balkans countries that joined the framework and signed several agreements. Though the initiative failed due to other Western Balkan countries' refusal to join, adding that the initiative was a personal endeavour of Rama and Vucic for political benefits, and the war in Ukraine made EU return its focus on the region,²⁸ the relationship between Serbia and Albania remained stable.

Presumably it is hard to make a direct causal link between the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and improvement in Albania-Serbia state level relations during the last decade, the evidence above shows that the heightened tensions

²⁵ Albanian Daily News. *Rama urges Kosovo to implement deal despite Serbia's actions*. 17 October 2023. <https://albaniandailynews.com/news/rama-urges-kosovo-to-implement-deal-despite-serbia-s-actions>.

²⁶ Ardian Hackaj. *The Berlin process 2014–2024: rationale, governance, outcomes and next steps*. ICD 2024. <https://cdinstitute.eu/2024/04/02/berlin-process-10-years-rationale-next-steps-outcomes/>.

²⁷ Top Channel. *PM Rama starts the Balkan tour in Skopje; defends 'Open Balkan'*.

²⁸ See Open Balkan, a failed step in the right direction, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/Open-Balkan-a-failed-step-in-the-right-direction-232590>.

between Kosovo and Serbia and the lack of tangible progress in the dialogue did not have a negative effect on Tirana-Belgrade relations. In the recent decade, Albania has made a break with its traditional arms-length policy towards Serbia as long as Kosovo's right to exist as an independent and sovereign state is jeopardised by Belgrade. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this improved relationship between Albania and Serbia is more on the state level than on societal level. The negative views between Albanian citizens and Serbians remain pervasive. The failures in the EU mediated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia seem to have contributed to this negative attitude in Albania. Both Serbian and Albanian media outlets have added to the persistence of these negative perceptions between the two nations. The narratives emanating from Banjska attack show that 'the Kosovo-Serbia dynamic remains deeply entrenched in historical narratives, media biases, and divergent political aspirations, perpetuating a cycle of tensions, mistrust, and unresolved conflict in the intricate Balkan landscape.'²⁹

Cracks in Albania-Kosovo Relations

The relationship between Albania and Kosovo constitutes a special place in peoples' memory and national sentiment. The pervasive public sentiment in Albania is that Kosovo was lost due to great powers' machinations at the expense of Albanian national interest in the Balkans. The same attitude is prevalent in Kosovo as well.

Both countries consider the verdict of the London Conference (1913) on the creation of what ended up becoming a truncated Albanian state, as a historical injustice, as what was slated to become the current Republic of Albania was bound to leave out the territories of Kosovo and other Albanian-speaking areas accounting for over a half of the Albanian nation, and arguably the most well-to-do and economically active part of it.³⁰

Except for a short period cohabitation under the German occupation during the WWII, for the rest of 20th century, Kosovo and Albania moved into two

²⁹ Sarah Daknis. *The Long Fight: How Serbian and Albanian Media Narratives Sustain Conflict in the Balkans*. Fordham University. 2024. p. 39. https://research.library.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1148&context=international_senior.

³⁰ Duro Foto. 'Bashkëpunimi në fushën e mbrojtjes midis Shqipërisë dhe Kosovës'. QKSS/IDM, Prishtinë, (2015): pp. 1–28.

different directions. Kosovo remained under Serbia's rule, while Albania experimented with a kingdom, communist regime and democratic transition after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

While during the communist period Albania was rather silent on Albanian's rights living in Yugoslavia, the post-communist policy has been more supportive at the diplomatic and practical level.³¹ Albania, relative to its power in international relations, was the biggest advocate for national rights of Albanians in Kosovo and its independence. The declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008 opened a new chapter in bilateral relations. High-political level cooperation, cultural exchanges, trade and societal relations reached new unprecedented levels. All governments' programs in Tirana have made references to brotherly relations with Kosovo and support for consolidating its statehood and Euro-Atlantic integration. Post-independence Kosovo governments have held a more nuanced approach, underscoring the Kosovo's statehood credentials.³²

Albania welcomed the EU facilitated dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade and its official policy has been supporting the leadership of Kosovo to advance its statehood internationally. The dialogue was seen a vehicle for sustainable peace and acceleration of the EU integration of the whole region. The positive outcome of initial agreements between Serbia and Kosovo under EU auspices resonated to very good interstate relations between Albania and Kosovo. The two governments have held so far around seven joined meetings where numerous agreements on trade, cultural exchanges, education, agriculture and foreign policy are signed.³³ At the societal level, the perceptions on both sides of the border are overwhelmingly positive. The majority of Albanians in Albania would even be in favour of a potential unification with Kosovo, a survey found in 2021.³⁴

³¹ Krasniqi, Afrim. 'Kosovo and Albania, a Special Relationship: Retrospectives and Challenges Toward the Future'. In *Kosovo's Foreign Policy and Bilateral Relations*, pp. 55–75. Routledge, 2023.

³² For a wider discussion see Krasniqi, Afrim. *Kosovo and Albania, a Special Relationship*, pp. 59–62.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Euronews Albania. *Barometer: 80% of Albanians support unification with Kosovo*. 21 November 2021. <https://euronews.al/en/barometer-80-of-albanians-support-unification-with-kosovo/>.

However, the cracks in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia started to influence the mood at the political level between Tirana and Prishtina. Though Albania has officially supported Kosovo in the dialogue, its government started exhibiting what some call the patronising approach towards Prishtina.³⁵ The imposition of 100% tariffs by Kosovo on Serbian goods, and the emergence of an allegedly land swap plan as a solution to the long-time dispute between Kosovo and Serbia strained relations between Tirana and Prishtina. In this regard, Albanian historian Afrim Krasniqi asserts that:

During 2019–2020, political relations between the two countries were in deep crisis, also due to the impact of the debate on the so-called project on Kosovo’s partition. President Thaci in Kosovo and prime minister Rama in Albania were repeatedly accused of supporting the project, while the entire political spectrum in both countries vehemently opposed it.³⁶

The subsequent Open Balkan initiative of Albania and Serbia added more to this bitterness between Albania and Kosovo. In 2022 Kosovo’s president criticised Albania’s prime minister for going on with the Open Balkan initiative, which Kosovo saw as unnecessary as long as Berlin Process foresees a common regional market (CRM), CEFTA is in place, and lastly Serbia’s participation is considered as dangerous for peace and stability in the region. Vjosa Osmani, the president of Kosovo would put her criticism this way:

I do not know why Albania would accept such an initiative where Kosovo will not be treated as a sovereign state and where an important role is played by Vučić, the leader of a state that on a daily basis tries to destabilise Kosovo and violate its sovereignty.³⁷

The rift between the two governments grew as tensions in the northern Kosovo Serbs majority municipalities increased. While the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia was virtually going off rails, a Franco-German plan to bring the parties together on the table and reach a comprehensive

³⁵ Artan Fuga. Shqipëria qasje paternaliste të gabuar ndaj Kosovës. *Koha Jone*, 26 dhjetor 2020. <https://kohajone.com/kosova/artan-fuga-shqiperia-qasje-paternaliste-te-gabuar-ndaj-kosoves/>.

³⁶ See Afrim Krasniqi. *Kosovo and Albania, a Special Relationship*. p. 68.

³⁷ Alice Taylor. Kosovo president criticises Open Balkan, Serbia, and Albanian indifference. *Euroactive*, 7 April 2022. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/kosovo-president-criticises-open-balkan-serbia-and-albanian-indifference/.

agreement was put forward.³⁸ Albania's prime minister supported the plan and was vocal in this respect. He argued that the [plan] 'is the right way and is a *de facto* recognition of the right of Kosova to live in its own, to be in its own and to decide in its own and is a *de facto* recognition of Serbia as a neighbour with whom Kosova must deal with and to have normal relations. So, it's fantastic' he concluded.³⁹ Edi Rama even came up with a draft statute for the ASM and sent it to the German chancellor and French president for consideration.⁴⁰ However, Rama's comments and his proposal for a successful way out of the dialogue with Serbia were not received well in Prishtina where many saw his moves as blatant interference in the internal affairs of Kosovo.⁴¹

These events led to a deterioration of bilateral relations between the leaders of Albania and Kosovo never seen before. The government of Albania cancelled the 2023 joint governments meeting scheduled to be held in Kosovo, citing concerns with Kosovo's handling of tensions in the northern Serb majority municipalities. Premier Rama would declare that the joint meeting cannot go according to the plan 'in the circumstances of Kosovo's aggravated relations with the entire Euro-Atlantic community', referring to international criticism of Kosovo's handling of developments in northern Kosovo Serb majority municipalities.⁴² This was followed by Kosovo's prime minister refusal to meet Edi Rama in Prishtina while he was on an

³⁸ Alexandra Brzozowski and Alice Taylor, Franco-German plan to resolve the Kosovo-Serbia dispute. *Euroactive*, 9 November 2022. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/leak-franco-german-plan-to-resolve-the-kosovo-serbia-dispute/>.

³⁹ Chatham House. In conversation with Edi Rama, prime minister of Albania. 23 March 2023. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/members-event/conversation-edi-rama-prime-minister-albania>.

⁴⁰ Alice Taylor. West tight lipped on Albanian PMs draft for Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. *Euroactive*, 9 June 2023. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/west-tight-lipped-on-albanian-pms-draft-for-association-of-serb-municipalities-in-kosovo/>.

⁴¹ Sanie Yusufi. Rama's proposal is considered interference in the internal affairs of Kosovo. *Koha Ditore*, 8 June 2023.

⁴² Xhorxhina Bami and Gjergj Erebara. Fraternal Discord: Rama's Cancellation of Meeting With Kurti Strains Kosovo-Albania Ties. *Balkan Insight*, 15 June 2023. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/15/fraternal-discord-ramas-cancellation-of-meeting-with-kurti-strains-kosovo-albania-ties/>.

official tour in the region.⁴³ Many commentators argue that this reflects an underlying personal power struggle between Kosovo's premier Albin Kurti and his Albanian counterpart Edi Rama.

Both leaders are influential figures within their respective countries, facing comparatively weak oppositions. They both have raised international profiles that are somewhat unusual for representatives of such small countries.⁴⁴

Either a personal power struggle or more policy-oriented division, it is undeniable that the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia has caused cracks in the bilateral relations between Tirana and Prishtina. Kosovo's increasing resistance to coordinate its actions in the northern part with its international partners, namely the US and the EU, its determination to dismantle Serbian parallel structures in the northern Kosovo Serbs majority municipalities and hence strengthen internal statehood has pitted its premier Albin Kurti against international community. Albania's open criticism towards Prishtina is viewed as paternalistic and sided with Belgrade – while Kosovo struggles to perform its statehood independently. The mixture of these processes in the background of the EU facilitated dialogue have contributed to the emergence of factions at the state level between Albania and Kosovo unseen in the past. However contingent, it does not serve the dialogue and implementation of 2023 Brussels agreement, and consequently the EU perspective of the whole region.

Fuelling Political Polarisation in Albania

The territorial gain of Kosovo to Serbia in 1912 became a national 'grief' among the population in Albania. Notwithstanding this, the political elite has been more divided than united around the question of Kosovo. During King Zog's rein, the Committee of Kosovo, a group of Kosovo Albanians king's opponents tried to push back on what they called king's silent policy on Kosovo. Then at the boiling point in WWII, communists fought, imprisoned,

⁴³ Bubulina Peni. PM Kurti Insists on Biannual Governments Meeting Before Meeting Albanian PM. *Prishtina Insight*, 7 July 2023. <https://prishtinainsight.com/kurti-insists-on-annual-governments-meeting-before-meeting-rama/>.

⁴⁴ Mentor Beqa. Rama-Kurti Feud Reveals Deeper Rift Between Albania and Kosovo. *Balkan Insight*, 19 July 2023. <https://www.idm.at/how-kosovo-albanian-serb-conflict-raised-the-political-polarization-between-albania-and-kosovo/>.

and executed members of the nationalist faction in Albania which advocated for unification with Kosovo. After the fall of the communist regime in 1992, Albanian political elite seemed to unite more around the national rights of Albanians in Kosovo.

While the international community got deeply involved into peace and state building in Kosovo, Albania's foreign policy fully aligned with internationalists' approach. In this vein, Albania supported the initiation of the EU facilitated dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade. Its official policy has focused on endorsing the leadership of Kosovo and collaborating constructively with all actors for peace and stability in the Western Balkans. However, the ups and downs in the EU facilitated dialogue, the shift of the Western powers' security policy from liberal norms to more realist great power politics mode⁴⁵ to the dialogue and international relations in general in the aftermath of Donald Trump's election, covid 19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, unravelled the general consensus around Kosovo and Serbia in Albanian politics.

The ruling of the Constitutional Court of Kosovo which found parts of the EU 2013 facilitated agreement on the formation the ASM in violation of constitution,⁴⁶ the growing tension in the northern part of Kosovo and Serbia's aggressive de-recognition campaign of Kosovo's independence plunged the dialogue into stalemate. These developments coupled with West's growing preference for ethnic solutions in the Balkans and accommodation of Serbia into the Western camp seemed to favour radical solution to Kosovo-Serbia dispute.⁴⁷ Against this backdrop, the so-called land swap plan emerged. The idea of territorial exchange was virtually supported by both Kosovo's president Hashim Thaci and Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia as way to end Kosovo's long-

⁴⁵ Matthew Kaminski. Will America or China Win the Serbian Proxy War? *Politico.eu*. 9 June 2024. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/09/06/serbia-europe-proxy-war-00177604>.

⁴⁶ Fatos Bytyci. Kosovo court rules some parts of EU-brokered deal are illegal. *Reuters*, 23 December 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/kosovo-court-rules-some-parts-of-eu-brokered-deal-are-illegal-idUSKBN0U622V/>.

⁴⁷ Shaun Walker and Andrew MacDowall. US-backed Kosovo land-swap border plan under fire from all sides. *The Guardian*, 3 September 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/03/us-backed-kosovo-land-swap-border-plan-under-fire-from-all-sides>. See also Marcus Tanner. UK's Former Serbia Ambassador Defends Kosovo Land Swap. *Balkan Insight*, 6 September 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/06/uk-s-former-serbia-ambassador-defends-kosovo-land-swap-09-06-2018/>.

disputed status.⁴⁸ The plan seemed to have the support of EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini who said that there was a "real chance" the two leaders could "reach an agreement that addresses all open issues between Belgrade and Pristina" with a "comprehensive, legally binding agreement to normalise relations between the two sides".⁴⁹

Albania's premier Edi Rama was allegedly one of the supporters of the land swap idea between Kosovo and Serbia.⁵⁰ This unusual Albania-Serbia 'consensus' on Kosovo was seen by the opposition in Albania as personal policy of the prime minister. Edi Rama's cozy relationship with Serbia's president Aleksandar Vučić was attacked ferociously by the former prime minister and influencing political figure, Sali Berisha. He accused both Kosovo's president Thaci and Albania's prime minister Rama of treason, and for stabbing Kosovo on the back.⁵¹ The Open Balkan initiative added more to this increased polarization between the government and opposition over Kosovo and EU dialogue direction in general. Later, Sali Berisha attacked not only Rama and Hashim Thaci on conspiring against Kosovo's sovereignty, but also threw accusations towards EU and US diplomats involved in the EU dialogue for siding with Serbia.⁵²

The Democratic Party in opposition run by Sali Berisha for three decades has appealed more to the Albanian national interests in the Kosovo. Its policy has thus been more welcome in Kosovo where it is perceived as more supportive to Kosovo's statehood due to historical reasons.⁵³ Rama's criticism towards Kosovo's government handling of the crises in the northern Kosovo and its relations with Western partners has been painted as a move against national

⁴⁸ Valerie Hopkins. Kosovo land-swap proposal triggers Balkan unease. *Financial Times*, 6 September 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/a891aa20-b056-11e8-8d14-6f049d06439c>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Exit.al. 'Former Serbian MFA: Rama, Vučić, and Thaçi Work on Kosovo-Serbia Land Swap with Blair, Soros, and Lewandowski'. 28 January 2019. <https://exit.al/en/former-serbian-mfa-rama-and-lobbyists-blair-soros-and-lewandowski-are-working-on-kosovo-serbia-land-swap-says/>.

⁵¹ Lapsi.al. 'Berisha sulmon Thaçin: Njeriu më i rrezikshëm i kombit shqiptar pas atij që shpalli 'Vorioepirin'. <https://lapsi.al/2019/04/29/berisha-sulmon-thacin-njeriu-me-i-rrezikshem-i-kombit-shqiptar-pas-atij-qe-shpalli-vorioepirin/>.

⁵² See interview of Vudi Xhymshiti with Sali Berisha. 'Kosovo's Sovereignty Under Siege' Sali Berisha Speaks to THE FRONTLINER, 20 May 2024.

⁵³ See Afrim Krasniqi. *Kosovo and Albania, a Special Relationship*.

interest by the opposition in Albania. In 2021 the opposition took its supporters and people to the streets to protest Serbia's president Vucic visit in the margins of the Open Balkan summit in Tirana.⁵⁴ Arguably the opposition in Albania is chipping into nationalist rhetoric, among other things, also for political benefits. Yet, it is evident that the inability of the EU facilitated dialogue to conclude with tangible progress in normalising relations between Serbia and Kosovo has deepened the existing political polarisation in Albania. The growing dissent in Albanian politics towards the EU facilitated dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade – which has traditionally played a constructive role in the region and supported Kosovo's leader choices – will have hindering implications for a successful positive epilogue of the dialogue.

Conclusion

There were high hopes that EU facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia would solve not only outstanding issues between the two parties, but improve regional cooperation, facilitate sustainable peace and democracy in the Western Balkans. This in turn would accelerate the EU accession process of the region, improve lives of its citizens and contain Russian malign influence in the region. The initial progress in normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia did indeed bring about some of these desired consequences. Several agreements at the technical and political level facilitated integration of Kosovo Serbs into Kosovo's institutions, Serbia was granted the candidate status by the EU and Kosovo signed the Association and Stabilisation agreement with the EU, thus opening the green light for the future EU membership of both countries.

Albania supported the EU dialogue, and its official policy has focused on endorsing Kosovo's leadership position. In this regard, the initial positive outcome of the dialogue was received well by Tirana and the more liberal government of prime minister Edi Rama showed readiness to communicate more intensively with Belgrade than previous post-communist cabinets. Edi Rama's regional policy '*zero problems with neighbours*' and full alignment with the US and

⁵⁴ Euronews Albania. *Protesters take the streets as Vucic arrives in Tirana for Open Balkan meeting*. 21 December 2021. <https://euronews.al/en/prime-ministers-office-heavily-guarded-ahead-of-berishas-protest/>.

EU foreign and security policy pushed his government closer to Serbia.⁵⁵ The multiple crises in the EU dialogue do not indicate to have changed this course.

In contrast to this, the rise of tension between Kosovo and Serbia, the stalemates in the dialogue and increased Western partners' pressure on Kosovo to be more conducive to their demands, have shaken the relationship between Tirana and Prishtina. Albania grew increasingly more paternalist and critical towards Kosovo's handling of the dialogue in general and to what prime minister Rama called *deterioration of relations* with Kosovo's Western partners. During this time Albania engaged in controversial initiative such as the Open Balkans, covertly endorsing potential solutions like the land swap plan or submitting a draft statute of ASM to Germany and France without any prior consultation with Kosovo. This strained relations between political leadership on both sides and eventually brought interstate relations at the lowest level in history. Though personal power struggle between Kosovo's primer Albin Kurti and Albania's leader Edi Rama may have played a role in this, disagreements over the EU dialogue and potential solutions have had their toll on interstate relations.

Lastly, these differences between Kosovo and Albania and gridlocks in the EU mediated dialogue travelled also to domestic politics in Albania. The already highly polarised political scene in Tirana was further galvanised by Albania's approach to the dialogue and Kosovo's leaders' decisions vis-à-vis Western powers. The more conservative opposition in Albania saw government's actions towards Kosovo and its policy in the region as a conspiracy against Kosovo's sovereignty. Particularly, Albania's rapprochement with Serbia was casted as playing against Albanian national interest in the region, was attacked in the Parliament and in the streets through protests. This increased nationalist tone in the background of EU mediated talks and limited tangible progress in Kosovo-Serbia relations instilled more division in Albania.

⁵⁵ Altin Gjeta. Të korrat e doktrinės 'zero probleme me fqinjët'. *Syri.net*, 13 shtator 2020. <https://www.syri.net/op-ed/367039/te-korrat-e-doktrines-zero-probleme-me-fqinjet/>.

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Effects of the Kosovo-Serbia Context on Their Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina

Senad Šabović

This article examines how the strained Kosovo-Serbia relationship affects the bilateral relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia and BiH and Kosovo. It provides a short context of the Kosovo-Serbia state of affairs and proceeds to outline the correlations between this context and that of BiH relations with Serbia and Kosovo, both at governmental and societal levels.

The Current Kosovo-Serbia Context

Although these relations remain strained, due to Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's statehood, the recent years have brought a new level of tension. Launched in 2011, the European Union (EU)-facilitated Normalization Dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo produced significant results in its early years, approximately since 2015. In the following years, the Dialogue has either stalled or moved along at a slow pace and with reduced implementation commitment by the parties. In 2023, another landmark agreement was reached but it remains largely unimplemented. The situation leading to the agreement was marked by recurring tension, predominantly in Kosovo's flashpoint region north (inhabited by ethnic Serbs). Hoping to overhaul this pattern and restore a normal flow of normalization, the EU and partners pushed for the 2023 agreement and its implementation. Instead of next-level normalization, the following period has brought more instability, culminating in the September 2023 deadly attack at Banjska in northern Kosovo, in which Serb paramilitaries engaged Kosovo Police killing one officer and losing three of their own in the ensuing fighting. The situation on the ground has been coupled with increasing sharp political and public rhetoric and concerns over regional stability have been stepped up. It appears to be a universal conclusion of the international community that the parties – Kosovo and Serbia – are not sufficiently committed to the success of the Dialogue, i.e. implementation of its agreements. At the time of writing, nothing on the

horizon suggests that this situation will change significantly, certainly not before the February 2025 Kosovo elections and the full consolidation of the new EU and United States (U.S.) administrations.

The Kosovo-Serbia Normalization Dialogue is extremely important not only for stability and progress in the two countries, but for the region as a whole. Its positive or negative effects are felt across the Western Balkans, with BiH being on the forefront. The following sections present the key dimensions in this regard.

BiH-Serbia Relations Through the Context of Kosovo-Serbia Normalization

Several elements exist that connect the Kosovo context with Serbia-BiH relations. Given the heritage of the 1990s war and the lingering issues related to BiH's entity of Republika Srpska (RS), the Sarajevo-Belgrade relations remain complex in general. What is convenient in this regard is the fact that, due to RS's objections, BiH has not recognized Kosovo as an independent country. This position is appreciated in Belgrade, whereby the opposite course of action would provide for an additional level of complexity as regards relations with Sarajevo. In addition, due to the extremely strained relations between RS and the Federation within BiH, the country is not really in a position to comment more broadly on regional affairs. This is also convenient, as a more vocal Sarajevo would be so in favor of Kosovo and this would place an additional dispute dimension between the BiH state entities and between Sarajevo and Belgrade. Due to BiH and Kosovo being quite apart and without a mutual border coupled with non-recognition – including administrative non-recognition (such as car plates and related) – trade between BiH and Kosovo is limited, reducing Sarajevo's engagement on Kosovo, appreciated by Belgrade. The strict visa regime by BiH – in place because of RS – for Kosovo's citizens is another element that pleases Belgrade and thus helps in terms of Kosovo not straining Bosnian relations with Serbia. Given these factors, it can be concluded that the current state of affairs between BiH and Serbia is not additionally strained by the Kosovo issue, although it remains clear that the potential effects, such as some form of *de facto* recognition of Kosovo's statehood by Sarajevo, would be substantial.

BiH-Kosovo Relations Through the Context of Kosovo-Serbia Normalization

The situation is quite different when it comes to BiH-Kosovo relations. First off, the relationship is technically inexistent since BiH does not recognize Kosovo due to the RS blockade in this regard. As a result, no diplomatic relations exist, not even in some lower form, such as liaison offices (even though this exists with Serbia). Notably, this results in strong administrative boundaries that negatively affect trade and people to people relations.

The single most frustrating element in this context is the visa regime. BiH has for years had an extremely complicated visa procedure for Kosovo. Visas are granted extremely exceptionally, the procedure is burdensome, and in fact it is the BiH government, the actual Council of Ministers, that has to approve every single visa request in the final instance. There are countless reports of visas not being granted to Kosovars who otherwise would get Schengen visas and regularly travel to developed countries. And while Kosovo has an extremely understanding outlook at BiH's general posture towards its statehood, the visa regime is seen in Pristina as excessive and there is an expectation that Sarajevo does more in this regard.

As regards Kosovo, it is indeed noteworthy that its successive leaderships, institutions, and society, have a very tolerant, understanding, posture towards BiH, reflected in their views and actions towards Sarajevo but also the Bosniak community in and around Kosovo (in the Sandžak area spreading across Serbia and Montenegro and bordering Kosovo from both ends). Several arguments exist in support to this claim. One is that for years Kosovo had not reciprocated Sarajevo on the visa regime. Its borders remained open for BiH citizens for a long time, until the then Kosovo government felt compelled to introduce visas for BiH in 2014 given no movement on the issue in BiH. It was a reluctant decision, made primarily in hope of moving the process along toward expedited mutual abolishment of visas. The more recent context provided another case in point, whereby the current Kosovo government announced in October 2024 that it will unilaterally lift visas for BiH citizens as of 1 January 2025. This was made in the context of the Summit held in Berlin on 10th anniversary of the Western Balkans 6 process. Furthermore, Pristina rarely – if ever – calls BiH out over its non-recognition or relative passivity

regarding Serbia's positions and actions related to Kosovo. Likewise, meetings between Pristina's and Sarajevo's officials on the margins of various summits are cordial and there a call for more cooperation with BiH is a standard talking point of Kosovo's officials.

As noted above, all Kosovo governments have demonstrated this posture, but it is the current government led by Prime Minister Albin Kurti that has elevated the forthcoming attitude towards BiH (naturally towards Sarajevo, rather than Banja Luka) to a higher level. PM Kurti shows an even greater amount of fondness for BiH and sympathy for its war-time suffering, he often speaks to BiH media, and he has even initiated a memorial day in Kosovo for the Srebrenica genocide. In addition, it is precisely during Mr Kurti's tenure that the Kosovo Bosniak community got the highest-ranked government post in Kosovo's history: that of the deputy prime minister, held by Emilija Redžepi. As also mentioned above, it was PM Kurti that unilaterally opened Kosovo's borders for BiH citizens in the context of the October 2024 Berlin Summit under which a series of agreements were made that should among others facilitate visa-free travel for Kosovo's citizens in BiH. The free travel to Kosovo decision remains in place despite subsequent reports from BiH that RS President Milorad Dodik continues to oppose opening BiH borders for Kosovo's citizens despite the Berlin agreements, further demonstrating PM Kurti's openness towards BiH/Sarajevo.

Additional Considerations and Possibilities

It is clear that if processes such as the EU-facilitated Dialogue produce positive results they would not only alleviate the Kosovo-Serbia context but also other regional issues, particularly regarding BiH. There are, however, additional considerations beyond the formal processes to note. There is a strong expectation in Pristina that, despite the stalled mainstream processes, Sarajevo could do more to reduce the visa burden for Kosovo's citizens. This may include a shorter and easier procedure, but inspiration could perhaps be sought in Montenegro's Djukanović-era, which unilaterally recognized Kosovo's passports, IDs, and car plates, even while in a state union with Serbia and while none of these items had been recognized by Serbia. Thus, Kosovars were able to enter Montenegro – still in a state union with Serbia – if they had direct land or air access to this republic. The BiH Federation entity

could thus consider a similar policy. Further, some administrative recognition could ensue under a similar logic and with a stronger drive in Sarajevo to argue in this direction with RS. Public messaging and engagement would also be important. The recent visit to Pristina by Sarajevo Mayor Benjamina Karić and its positive attention in Kosovo is a case in point.

All this would strengthen Kosovo's commitment to a continued positive relationship with BiH, including its treatment of Kosovo Bosniaks and those of Sandžak, who frequently visit or transit Kosovo. The treatment of ethnic Bosniaks by the Kosovo government and general public has been extremely positive and it has not been undermined in any way by BiH's non-recognition or visa regime. The Bosniak community in Kosovo is fully integrated in Kosovo's institutional and social fabric and has been so since the beginning of Kosovo's post-war build up. The community was among the first of Kosovo's minority communities to embrace Kosovo's liberation from Serbian control and its new set up. Due to this fact, but also the deeper historical connections between Albanians and Bosniaks, the response by Kosovo's society and institutions has been to provide full integration to the community, numbering approximately 28,000. Thus, since the early days of the post-war set up in Kosovo, the Bosniaks have participated in its political life and do so to this day. There are reserved seats in the Kosovo parliament for the community, reserved local government positions in municipalities where they live, and they have regularly participated in successive Kosovo governments at cabinet level.

The positive social treatment extends to the neighboring Sandžak region Bosniaks. For example, in the early years after the conflict when the majority Albanian population did not appreciate the presence of Serbian car plates, the exception were the car plates of Novi Pazar (the Sandžak informal capital) along those known to be driven by ethnic Albanians from the Presheva/Preševo valley in south Serbia. As regards Sandžak, the Bosniaks living in the Montenegrin part of this region enjoy the full benefit of this treatment in Kosovo, compounded by the extremely positive posture of Djukanović-era Montenegrin government and the welcome Kosovo's refugees received in Montenegro during the Kosovo war (with a large proportion being in Bosniak-majority municipalities).

Conclusion

The complex dynamics of Kosovo and Serbia's strained relationship has broad implications beyond their borders, significantly influencing the interactions with BiH. While BiH's ties with Serbia are shaped by the war legacy and sensitivities surrounding RS' position, its relationship with Kosovo remains minimal, constrained by political and administrative barriers stemming from non-recognition. Despite these challenges, Kosovo has shown a notable openness towards BiH, particularly through Prime Minister Albin Kurti's efforts to foster goodwill, as reflected in policies benefiting Bosniak communities and the gesture of visa relaxation. However, the path to regional stability and improved inter-state relations depends on the sustained implementation of EU-facilitated agreements and constructive diplomatic engagements. Both formal and informal measures – such as easing visa procedures or recognizing certain administrative elements – could foster more positive interactions. Ultimately, achieving meaningful normalization across these intertwined relationships will require greater commitment from all parties involved in advancing cooperative measures despite internal divisions.

A View from Montenegro on the Kosovo-Serbia Relations

Blagoje Gledović

Overview of the Context and Relations

In the light of the question of how relations between Serbia and Kosovo have impacted developments in other Western Balkan countries, and to provide a view from the perspective of Montenegro, it is first of all useful to give an overview of the relations between Montenegro and Kosovo in recent history and at the time Kosovo declared independence.

Montenegro recognised Kosovo in 2008, some eight months after Kosovo had declared independence. The decision to recognize Kosovo was taken by the government and did not enjoy public support. Furthermore, a huge majority of the population was against it. Even one of the former prime ministers of Montenegro who held office in the last government of the Djukanović era, in an interview on Kosovo television in 2018, stated that over 85 percent of citizens were against the decision at the time when it was officially taken.¹ But at that moment, ruling structures and government officials were explaining the decision by characterising it as brave, showing leadership, and an orientation towards the future, for the sake of good neighbourhood relations and the future of Montenegro in European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Needless to say, this decision was followed by political tensions, protests² and the worsening of relations with Serbia. It came just over two years after the referendum in which Montenegro regained independence, and which ended the union between Montenegro and Serbia, a final relic of former Yugoslavia. So it could be argued that the ‘emotions’ regarding the recent ‘break-up’ were still strong, but that was not the only reason for negative emotions.

¹ RTS: Marković: Protiv priznanja Kosova bilo 85 posto građana, ali imali smo viziju (4 February 2018).

² DW: Anti-Kosovo Protests (14 October 2008).

Since the recognition, official political relations between the governments of Montenegro and the Republic of Serbia and among the political elites deteriorated massively. The decision of Montenegro to recognise Kosovo's independence was often regarded as a betrayal and as directed against Serbia, at a time when the country was in a very difficult situation and its territory sacked. This kind of narrative was predominant. A former foreign minister of Serbia who held office at the time (and later was president of the UN General Assembly) even said, just before the decision regarding the recognition of Kosovo was announced, that this would be "a stab in the back of Serbia" and its diplomatic efforts to solve the issue of Kosovo in a peaceful way.³ This kind of political and public narrative was also disseminated among ordinary citizens in Serbia, many of them outraged, including those with historical origins and family ties in Montenegro. The recognition was followed by the expulsion of the Montenegrin ambassador from Serbia,⁴ who was the first ambassador to Serbia after Montenegro regained independence in 2006 and officially established diplomatic relations with the neighbour.

However, after the recognition, Montenegro and Kosovo officially established diplomatic relations⁵ and overall bilateral relations since then have progressed significantly. Political relations have advanced, and economic cooperation has increased, including the free exchange of goods and services on a regular basis. At the same time, a free travel regime is in place. Citizens of both Montenegro and Kosovo can therefore travel without visas. In terms of economic cooperation, this is reflected in the exchange of goods (trade), direct investments and economic activity in the area of tourism. As an example, according to data from the Chamber of Commerce of Montenegro, the value of goods exchanged in 2017 was 26.7 million euros, which was an increase of 18.1 per cent compared to the year 2016.⁶ Relations between business communities and chambers of commerce are also good, as trade and tourism make up an important part of economic relations due to geographic proximity and good conditions for 'economic communication' in the private sector.

³ Politika.rs: Crnogorsko priznanje Kosova nož u leđa Srbiji (6 October 2008).

⁴ DW: Serbia Angered by Kosovo Recognitions (10 October 2008).

⁵ Timesofmalta.com: Montenegro and Kosovo establish diplomatic ties (16 January 2010).

⁶ More at vijesti.me: PKCG: Privrednici Crne Gore i Kosova nijesu konkurencija (1 July 2018).

Relations between the public administrations are also good, with a number of bilateral agreements and arrangements concluded and some currently in the pipeline. At the same time, bilateral cooperation is also encouraged by the EU and both Montenegro and Kosovo were included in the European Union cross-border cooperation projects and initiatives, including those under the framework of the EU funds and IPA instruments. This cooperation between countries dates from 2010 to date. For instance, a new agreement between Montenegro and Kosovo for the IPA III cross-border cooperation programme 2021–2027 was signed in 2024.⁷ As outlined in the programme document materials, the programme is funded by the European Commission and aims to support cross-border cooperation with a view to promoting good neighbourly relations, fostering EU integration and promoting socio-economic development through joint local and regional initiatives.⁸

When it comes to political relations, various governments of Montenegro and official structures have continuously voiced support for Kosovo's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations and offered political and administrative assistance. This was primarily a narrative for the public in Montenegro, but it was also used for external communication and in official meetings. This line of communication has more or less remained in place until today, with additional opinions that relations between Montenegro and Kosovo are friendly and that the economic ties should be strengthened further.⁹ At the same time, many officials from Montenegro have supported an EU-led dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina and possible solutions under a framework which suits both sides.

In terms of overall bilateral relations to date there were some issues and challenges that have come up, such as the recognition of the Montenegrin minority in the Kosovo constitution¹⁰ or the demarcation of the land border. These aspects, however, have (so far) not affected the overall good bilateral relations.

⁷ Signing of the bilateral agreement between the Republic of Kosovo and Montenegro for the Cross-Border Cooperation Program IPA III 2021–2027 – Integrimi Evropian (rks-gov.net).

⁸ Full document: IPA III Cross Border Cooperation Programme 2021–2027 Montenegro – Kosovo (www.gov.me).

⁹ Vijesti.me: Milatović: Prijateljski odnosi sa Kosovom, jačati ekonomske veze (26 July 2023).

¹⁰ Balkan Insight: Kosovo to Recognize Montenegrin Minority (2 November 2012).

Montenegro also supported applications for the membership of Kosovo in UNESCO and INTERPOL. These decisions were also in line with the official policy towards Kosovo, but, at the same time, decisions were taken in terms of what membership in these international structures actually means for Kosovo and regional relations. Since the policy of good neighbourhood relations remains one of the foreign policy priorities of Montenegro, which were proclaimed after independence in 2006, the policy of Montenegro towards Kosovo and of maintaining good bilateral relations corresponded with that goal. In these terms, a clear position of the governments and ruling structures *vis-à-vis* Kosovo has been in place for years.

Coming back again to the time of Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo's independence, it could be argued that there is enough evidence to state that the Montenegrin decision, taken at that particular moment in time, despite it possibly appearing tough, unpleasant and unpopular, was also brave decision-making, displaying leadership and producing, in the long term, positive outcomes. It was no doubt a difficult chapter, which needed to be closed sooner rather than later in order to avoid it becoming a greater burden in future. Despite the fact that it was interpreted as an unfriendly gesture towards Serbia, there are no objective reasons to believe that this had been intended. Furthermore, it became evident that this policy was pragmatic but also long-term oriented, as there would be no rational reason to do otherwise and thereby create a difficult situation in future relations with Kosovo. The absence of a clear position and policy in this case would not have been a sustainable situation by any means.

However, although the time that has passed from the decision to recognise Kosovo until today has obviously and to a certain extent watered down the relevance and importance of this issue to the general public, it has never been accepted among certain political parties, especially those Serbian or pro-Serbian political elites who continue to oppose and relativize the existence of an independent Kosovo. Given the fact that according to the 2011 census in Montenegro, almost one third of the population declared themselves to be Serb, Kosovo *per se* as well as the relations with Kosovo have remained one of the controversial issues. As it is often the case in the Western Balkans, this issue has been politically exploited in many situations and used for daily political purposes and during the electoral campaigns of parties which get the majority of votes from Serbs. The thinking behind this is always the same –

use ethnic, religious and nationalistic topics in order to reach a higher turnout and secure the votes of those who might be considering to abstain.

In that regard, the issue of relations between Serbia and Kosovo and their normalisation have remained important from the perspective of domestic politics and political relations in Montenegro. It goes without saying that a solution in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue would have a positive impact on the region and on internal processes in Montenegro.

Recent Political Developments and Possible Scenarios

In the recent political chronology of Montenegro, there are two specific points that became relevant *vis-à-vis* the question of relations and position towards Kosovo.

First, in 2020, after almost thirty years of rule by one political structure, the elections led to political change when the opposition, predominantly comprised of Serbian or pro-Serbian parties, won the majority against Djukanović's long standing Democratic Party of Socialists and its coalitions allies. Among the main questions raised at that moment was the issue of Montenegro's future foreign policy course and priorities and its orientation towards the West. This sparked different discussions on the part of the public related to numerous decisions taken by previous governments, including the issue of the recognition of Kosovo. Since that time, the question has often been asked whether the recognition of Kosovo will or may be revoked.

However, the formation of the new government in 2020 was based on a political agreement of major political party stakeholders which included declared guarantees that the previously assumed international obligations will be respected and that foreign policy priorities shall not be revised.¹¹

In July 2024, there was a reshuffle of the government, which included the Bosniak Party but also the pro-Serbian party coalition, including the New

¹¹ More at vijesti.me: Ovo je tekst finalnog sporazuma o formiranju nove vlasti (19 October 2023).

Serb Democracy headed by the speaker of Parliament as well as the Democratic People's Party.¹² Although they were in the majority that won the 2020 election, the two latter political parties did not have a chance before to be a part of the executive and hold ministries in the government.

Again, many questions were raised in public in connection to what will be their policy towards a range of issues, including Kosovo.¹³ The reason for that can be explained with the fact that these particular political parties and their leaders were already well known to the general public in terms of their declared policies and positions on a range of issues. For instance, they never altered their official policies and positions against the recognition of Kosovo and their political leaders had a clear track record of stating that they would never recognise Kosovo.¹⁴ For those who remember, the current speaker of the Parliament, Andrija Mandić (then leader of Serbian People's Party SNS) went on hunger strike in 2008 as a protest after Montenegro's government decided to recognise Kosovo.¹⁵

One can never foresee which actions these parties will take at certain points and in circumstances when decisions have to be taken. Despite all the fears, prognoses and interpretations, however, Kosovo's independence is a reality and there are no grounds to believe that the presence of these parties in the ruling majority and their participation in the government could, by default, lead to the recognition of Kosovo being revoked or cause any kind of radical worsening of the relations with Kosovo. The numbers also show that parties which do not support the independence of Kosovo do not have enough seats in government and no majority in Parliament for potential decisions which would mean a change of course *vis-à-vis* Kosovo. Also, from a legal perspective and concerning the decision-making process, it would not be easy to ensure support for radical decisions. It must also be mentioned that the current government, apart from the Bosniak party, also includes representatives from Albanian parties. These two structures, which are in Parliament and

¹² Thewesternbalkans.com: Montenegro's parliament approves government reshuffle (25 July 2024).

¹³ Kosovo-online.com: Will Montenegro change its stance towards Kosovo after the entry of Serbs into Spajic's government? (3 August 2024).

¹⁴ Adria TV: Knežević: Nikada nećemo priznati lažnu državu Kosovo (12 December 2023).

¹⁵ Blic: Mandić štrajkuje glađu ispred Skupštine Crne Gore (14 October 2008).

support the government, identify themselves as controllers and guardians of inherited policy in line with Montenegro's Western orientation as a NATO member state, as well as its commitment to European and Euro-Atlantic values. In addition, the President of Montenegro, Jakov Milatović, who was elected in 2023 with sixty percent of votes publicly stressed that the recognition of Kosovo will not be withdrawn and that it is a *fait accompli*.¹⁶

However, it is logical to believe that the issue of Kosovo will remain controversial in Montenegrin politics and be used, from time to time, as a tool for the consolidation of voter support and to help with a political agenda. In addition, there is the probability that this topic also has the potential to further burden internal political relations, and possibly have an impact, though to a limited extent, on official relations with Serbia.

Way Forward?

This chronology of relations and political situations is useful to explain the fact that the relations between Kosovo and Serbia have had an impact on domestic political and thus societal relations in Montenegro. This particular context, or its repercussions, will probably remain present and influence the future until a solution is found, or there is a normalisation or a positive end to the dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina. Along with other 'case studies' and examples in the region, it is clear that this issue has a wide regional impact and that both its further existence or positive resolution will have negative or positive implications on inter-regional relations.

However, it is important to underline that, despite all the aspects related to the Kosovo-Serbia issue, this cannot be allowed to become a risk for political stability at any point. All political structures in Montenegro should pursue a neutral position towards the Kosovo-Serbia issue and voice support for the efforts of both sides towards full normalisation. The most important interest for Montenegro is to become a member of the European Union and meet the necessary criteria as soon as possible. It goes without saying that this is a task that citizens charge all the elected parties and politicians in the country

¹⁶ Danas.rs: Milatović: Priznanje Kosova, članstvo u NATO i sankcije Rusiji su završene stvari (6 August 2023); Euractiv: Montenegro won't withdraw recognition of Kosovo as the EU calls for calm (6 April 2023).

with, because, according to all relevant polls, almost eighty percent of people support membership of the European Union.¹⁷ This record support is a clear message on what the priority is, compared to all other topics and issues. To reach this goal, political stability is of paramount importance and it can only be maintained by the responsible behaviour of domestic political structures. This also includes resistance to and resilience *vis-à-vis* any influence from external actors, including those from the Western Balkan region.

The negative ramifications of Kosovo-Serbia relations which are attributed to official structures in Serbia employing the unresolved and frozen situation with Kosovo to negatively influence the region, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro with their considerable share of Serb population, remain some of the biggest challenges for the Western Balkans and its future, especially as it relates to its integration in European and Euro-Atlantic structures. As a result, the Western Balkans is still considered “Europe’s Achilles Heel”¹⁸ in terms of stability and security. That is why the behaviour and stance of official political structures in the Western Balkans in connection with certain issues must not be disregarded by Western power centres, especially as the former may undermine stability and democratic processes in the long term. Nationalist tendencies, dangerous rhetoric and the exploitation of religious, ethnic and historic(al) topics worsen security and stability and are primarily employed to stay in power. This creates a constant limbo, which impedes the development of the region and its integration processes and hinders consolidation and reconciliation initiatives. In the end, EU integration is perceived as the ‘only way out’, so that Balkan history does not repeat itself. No matter how many steps forward a particular country takes concerning its EU agenda, one issue can obliterate everything and lead to irreversible damage.

The normalisation of Kosovo-Serbia relations would therefore – without any doubt – significantly relax regional and domestic relations in the entire region. The new European Commission should reconsider its current approach regarding the EU-led Belgrade and Pristina dialogue. This needs to

¹⁷ EEAS (europa.eu): Record high public support for Montenegro’s EU membership (15 June 2023).

¹⁸ IPS Journal (ips-journal.eu): The Western Balkans remain Europe’s Achilles’ heel – Foreign and security policy (4 August 2022).

become one of the priorities of the European External Action Service and the new foreign and security policy chief. A more adequate model and a new team should be chosen to manage this issue. It should be tasked with finding a more appropriate way of how to do the business in terms of the EU's general role in this dialogue.

At the same time, respecting the rule of law and democratic principles must remain guiding policy approaches for the European Union and the United States when it comes to their positions regarding the role of political leaders in the region. There is no time and place anymore for any kind of short-sighted approach and short-term appeasement policy. The rule of law requirement must not be amended in aid of geopolitically pragmatic approaches or the economic interests of huge companies in the region. A further prolongation of the *status quo* between Belgrade and Pristina would pose a threat of destabilisation and create a hotspot in the region, which can flare up at any time, causing significant problems and a *de facto* return to the end of the 1990s period.

Both Serbia and Kosovo must engage constructively in finding solutions and showing that normalisation is happening every day in all aspects of life. This is a question of the future of both societies rather than a political game to stay in power for as long as it is possible. This requires politicians who are brave and have the future in mind, who are willing to change the game and risk their political capital in order to leave a legacy for future generations.

Mapping the Shifting Landscape of the Kosovo Issue in North Macedonia

Cvetanka Aleksandrovska Miladinova

Introduction

As the then-Republic of Macedonia emerged as a newly independent state following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, it found itself geographically and politically positioned in a highly unstable region. While the country achieved its independence peacefully and avoided the violent turmoil that was triggered by the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the subsequent Kosovo conflict had significant impact on North Macedonia's internal stability. Situated right across the border of the conflict and hosting a substantial ethnic Albanian minority, North Macedonia was particularly affected by the 1999 Kosovo War, which led to a large influx of refugees and also contributed to the 2001 insurgency – a conflict often seen as a spill-over of the Kosovo War.

The Ohrid Framework Agreement, which ended the 2001 insurgency, introduced critical reforms to address ethnic Albanian grievances, including language rights, proportional representation, and greater decentralization. These changes fundamentally altered North Macedonia's political landscape, solidifying the political mobilization of its Albanian community and reshaping interethnic relations.

While much focus has been placed on the spill-over effect of the Kosovo War on North Macedonia, the role of Serbia in this dynamic should not be overlooked. Historically, Serbia has maintained a strong influence over the political developments in the region, and its relationship with Kosovo remains deeply contentious. North Macedonia, as a neighbour to both Kosovo and Serbia, has had to balance its diplomatic and political relationships with both states, often walking a fine line to avoid alienating either side. On the one hand, North Macedonia recognized Kosovo's independence in 2008, signalling a desire to align with the broader international consensus and its own Albanian community. On the other hand, maintaining stable relations

with Serbia remains crucial, and the most recent IRI Western Balkans Poll shows that Serbia is considered Macedonia's friendliest state among citizens (International Republican Institute, 2024).

This paper will provide an overview of the evolution of the Kosovo issue in Macedonian domestic politics, dividing the examination into two key periods. The first period, from the 1990s to 2008/9, explores how the Kosovo issue was intensely present in Macedonian politics, influenced by the 1999 war, refugee crisis, the 2001 insurgency, Kosovo's declaration of independence, and subsequent recognition. The second period, from 2009 to 2024, will address the reduced prominence of the Kosovo issue in domestic politics and examine North Macedonia's perspective on the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, including how periodic resurgences of the issue and North Macedonia's relations with Kosovo and Serbia have evolved.

The Kosovo Issue in Macedonian Domestic Politics (1990s–2008/2009)

The 1999 Kosovo War and Refugee Crisis

As the conflict between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and Serbian forces intensified, thousands of Kosovo's inhabitants were displaced from their homes, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. The total number of refugees that entered North Macedonia in the spring of 1999 (approximately 360,000 by some estimates (United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2001)), was far exceeding the initial estimates and placing immense strain on its resources (Gjorgiev, 2020). Approximately 170,000 refugees were accommodated with host families, while an additional 133,000 were housed in camps (where conditions were substandard according to refugee testimonies) at the height of the crisis in May 1999. North Macedonia's infrastructure, already fragile, was quickly overwhelmed by the need for shelter, food, water, sanitation, and healthcare services (Donev et al., 2002).

While ethnic Albanians advocated for strong relief efforts for the refugees, many ethnic Macedonians were hesitant and wary, fearing the influx would lead to considerable demographic shifts and destabilisation. At its peak, the

refugee population accounted for 15% of North Macedonia's total population, causing widespread anxiety, particularly among ethnic Macedonians who were concerned about a potential "Albanization" of the country (International Crisis Group, 1999). Politically, this strain tested the ruling coalition of VMRO-DPMNE, the Democratic Alternative, and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). Tensions emerged as the government sought to manage the crisis, sometimes closing borders to limit refugee inflows, with the DPA expressing frustration over being side-lined in refugee-related decisions (ibid).

Rumours that the KLA was using North Macedonia as a base for operations further stoked fears, as did reports of KLA recruitment among refugees and local Albanians. These concerns contributed to a growing sense of insecurity among ethnic Macedonians (International Crisis Group, 1999). Economic hardship exacerbated these challenges. Many Macedonians withdrew their savings from local banks, stashing foreign currency abroad, further indicating the widespread instability (Gjorgiev, 2020). However, despite initial concerns about a potential long-term demographic impact of the refugee influx, after NATO's intervention ended in June 1999, the bulk of refugees started returning to Kosovo immediately. At the end of the year, about 10,000 refugees remained (United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2000). Still, these developments, coupled with media portrayals of the crisis, created an atmosphere of uncertainty, deepened the existing gap between the two biggest ethnic communities in the country, and had political and social implications that lasted long after the refugee wave subsided.

The 2001 Insurgency in North Macedonia

The political crisis that unfolded intensified in late 2000 and early 2001, making it increasingly difficult for North Macedonia to avoid the turmoil that had already swept through the former Yugoslavia both because of its own internal weaknesses and ethnic tensions, and because of problematic regional dynamics. Internally, North Macedonia's institutional framework struggled to manage the political aspirations of its Albanian minority. The Albanian community had already boycotted the 1991 referendum and was particularly dissatisfied with the Constitution's definition of North Macedonia as the nation-state of the Macedonian people, relegating Albanians and other minor-

ities to 'nationalities'. This constitutional language, along with limited recognition of their political, cultural, and linguistic rights, reinforced their sense of exclusion. Despite the formation of coalition governments that included Albanian political parties, these arrangements did little to address their grievances. Issues such as the recognition of Albanians as a nation in the Constitution, the use of the Albanian language as the second official language of the state, the use of Albanian symbols, and the establishment and funding of Albanian-language higher education institutions became sources of continued tension (Ackermann, 2001, pp. 123–125).

The regional instability added fuel to these domestic tensions. The influx of Kosovo Albanian refugees during the 1999 Kosovo crisis, as well as reports of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) using Macedonia as a base, heightened fears among ethnic Macedonians. Furthermore, the perception that the international community was more sympathetic to the demands of Albanians, both in Kosovo and within North Macedonia, deepened the ethnic divide (Vankovska, 2007, p. 155). The emergence of the National Liberation Army (NLA) further complicated the political landscape. The NLA, which shared ideological and personal links with the KLA, drew support from the broader regional Albanian nationalist movement. Both groups aimed for greater autonomy for Albanians, and some members of the NLA had previously fought in Kosovo, transferring their struggle to North Macedonia after Kosovo's conflict ended. This connection between the two groups reflected a spill-over effect from the Kosovo conflict, with the NLA challenging not only the Macedonian state but also the established ethnic Albanian political parties in North Macedonia, which were seen as having failed to secure sufficient rights for their community (Ackermann, 2001, p. 125). The spill-over effect of the Kosovo conflict thus became fully apparent when ethnic Albanian militants, under the banner of the NLA launched an insurgency in the northern part of Macedonia, seeking greater rights and representation for North Macedonia's ethnic Albanian population and framing their demands within the broader regional fight for ethnic Albanian autonomy. The crisis, which brought the country to the brink of civil war, was not merely a result of local grievances but was also influenced by the broader regional dynamics. As a result, the Macedonian government was forced to confront the immediate security threat posed by the insurgency and the deeper issue of inter-ethnic tensions that had long simmered beneath the surface.

The Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), signed in August 2001 under significant international pressure, effectively ended the conflict by introducing key constitutional reforms aimed at addressing the grievances of Macedonia's ethnic Albanian population. The OFA established a system of power-sharing that extended the use of minority languages (where they are spoken by over 20% of the population), ensured proportional representation in public institutions, and promoted decentralization. Over the past two decades, the OFA has been regarded as a successful conflict resolution model in the Balkans, having facilitated North Macedonia's transition into a more inclusive, multi-ethnic democracy. However, its implementation has faced challenges, particularly concerning the equitable representation of smaller minority groups, the practical use of the Albanian language, and political clientelism. While the agreement is still considered a significant achievement in fostering interethnic cooperation, ongoing issues around transparency, inclusivity, and the treatment of smaller communities remain (Kacarska, 2023, pp. 51–55).

Kosovo's Independence and Recognition

On October 9, 2008, the Macedonian government officially recognised Kosovo's independence, a decision proclaimed just hours after Montenegro did the same (Karajkov, 2008). Formal diplomatic relations, however, were established only after the Agreement on physical demarcation of the border was signed a year later, on October 17, 2009 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia, n.d.). The recognition came following intense pressure from both domestic and international actors, especially the Albanian political forces in North Macedonia. The decision to recognise Kosovo was warmly welcomed by Macedonia's Albanian community and celebrated by Albanian political parties (ibid). Political parties like the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) had pushed for recognition since Kosovo's independence was declared, and their support for it was a central theme in their political platforms ahead of the June 2008 parliamentary elections. DUI, which became a coalition partner of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE after the June 2008 elections, made the prompt recognition of Kosovo one of its key priorities (Kursani, 2017).

While North Macedonia recognised Kosovo in October 2008, a poll conducted earlier that year, in March 2008, showed significant domestic contestation over the issue. Nearly 90% of ethnic Albanians thought that North

Macedonia should recognise Kosovo immediately, while nearly 50% of ethnic Macedonians thought that North Macedonia should recognise Kosovo only after the border demarcation, and 33.9% of ethnic Macedonians thought that the country should never recognise Kosovo (Daskalovski & Taleski, 2008, p. 46). Thus, while for many ethnic Albanians, the recognition of Kosovo's independence was a natural and necessary step, for ethnic Macedonians, the recognition was met with significant reluctance and concern. Many ethnic Macedonians feared that recognizing Kosovo could encourage secessionist sentiments within the Albanian-majority regions in North Macedonia, exacerbating interethnic tensions that had persisted since the 2001 conflict (Stroschein, 2013, p. 883).

Despite these domestic divisions, international pressure, particularly from the United States and the European Union, played a decisive role in pushing the Macedonian government toward recognition. The decision was coordinated with Montenegro and was seen as important for maintaining regional stability. The United States, in particular, expressed strong support for North Macedonia's move, with officials highlighting that the recognition would ease the region's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions (Karajkov, 2008). However, the deterioration of relations with Serbia due to this decision was immediate. Serbia responded by expelling the Macedonian ambassador, while Macedonia chose not to reciprocate, allowing Serbia's ambassador to remain in Skopje. While the then-Macedonian government, led by Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, acknowledged the potential for short-term tensions with Serbia, it framed the recognition as a decision made in the country's long-term national interest. The focus remained on strengthening regional stability and advancing Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations (ibid).

Although relations with Serbia were strained after recognition, the long-term impact was seen as limited. Serbia's ambassador to Skopje urged North Macedonia to reconsider its decision, but there was an understanding among both Serbian and Macedonian officials and experts that Macedonia had little choice but to follow through with the recognition given the international context and domestic pressures (Karajkov, 2008). In June 2009, the Macedonian ambassador returned to Belgrade, marking a period of normalisation. At a Central European leaders' meeting in Novi Sad, Serbian President Boris Tadić and Macedonian President Gjorgje Ivanov reaffirmed their commitment to cooperation despite differing views on Kosovo (Vučković, 2014, p. 367).

The Kosovo Issue's Reduced Presence in Macedonian Domestic Politics and North Macedonia's Perspective on the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue (2009–2024)

Overview of North Macedonia's Bilateral Relations with Kosovo and Serbia since 2008/9

The Kosovo issue was particularly significant in the 1990s and 2000s because of its impact on interethnic relations within North Macedonia, especially between the Albanian and Macedonian communities. After the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001) and the recognition of Kosovo (2008), ethnic tensions linked to Kosovo have decreased, with fewer spill-over effects from the dynamics between Kosovo and Serbia into North Macedonia. The most pressing issues related to Kosovo, such as its independence, recognition, and the border demarcation, were resolved by 2009. These developments reduced the political urgency around the Kosovo issue in Macedonian domestic politics. The conflict between Kosovo and Serbia remains relevant in a regional stability context, but not as a contentious domestic issue in North Macedonia.

In the early 2010s, relations between North Macedonia and Kosovo were formal and somewhat cautious. This cautiousness was due to North Macedonia's interest in maintaining good ties with Serbia as well, and because of some interethnic incidents that took place in North Macedonia during that period. However, economic relations between the two countries were becoming increasingly strong (Spasovska Gadzovska, 2012). Over time, political relations between the two countries warmed significantly. High-level meetings became more frequent, with both sides affirming their commitment to deepening ties. By the late 2010s, officials from both governments consistently described their relationship as “exemplary for good neighbourly relations”, highlighting the absence of major political disputes, growing economic cooperation, and their shared goals for Euro-Atlantic integration (A1on, 2017; Kanal5, 2022). Additionally, both countries have worked together within regional frameworks to promote stability and development, while maintaining a unified stance on broader geopolitical issues (ibid).

Relations between North Macedonia and Serbia have traditionally been described as friendly, but occasional political rhetoric has led to moments of

tension (Trošić & Arnaudov, 2023, pp. 150–151). Nevertheless, there are no major political or economic issues between the two countries. One key point of divergence is their stance on Kosovo, where North Macedonia's recognition of Kosovo and support for its integration in international structures contrasts with Serbia's position. Despite this, their bilateral relations have remained stable, underpinned by deep historical ties and pragmatic cooperation. Economic relations between the two countries have thrived, with North Macedonia being an important trading partner for Serbia, ranking among the top destinations for Serbian exports. The "Open Balkan" initiative has further enhanced cooperation, as both countries seek regional integration and development (ibid).

A Latent Issue with Sporadic Returns

Political shifts and election dynamics in North Macedonia periodically bring the Kosovo issue back into domestic political discourse, particularly within the context of ethnic Albanian parties. For example, in the recent pre-election period, Albanian political parties – first the then-opposition 'Vlen' bloc, followed by the 'European Front' led by the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) – expressed opposition to the "Open Balkan" initiative, urging North Macedonia to reconsider its participation (Sloboden Pecat, 2024; Telma, 2024). This stance mirrored Kosovo's own position of non-participation in the initiative and appeared to be an effort to appeal to Albanian voters who are sympathetic toward Kosovo (Telma, 2024).

One prominent 'Vlen' bloc leader, also a presidential candidate, raised concerns about potential Russian influence allegedly increasing in North Macedonia via what he described as already strong Serbian influence, which he argued had only intensified through the "Open Balkan" initiative. He further linked this influence to a perceived rise in Albanophobia and Bulgarophobia within the country (360 Stepeni, 2024).

During the same period, Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti openly endorsed the 'Vlen' bloc, which later joined the new government coalition, adding a regional dimension to the elections (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023). Kurti's public support of 'Vlen' led to discussions within North Macedonia about whether his involvement signaled a deeper push to consolidate influence over ethnic Albanian political movements across the Balkans (Lokalno,

2024). While some analysts viewed Kurti's support as direct interference in domestic politics, others argued that this alignment reflects regional cooperation on issues of common concern and fostering stronger ties among Albanians across national borders (ibid).

North Macedonia's View on the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue

North Macedonia has consistently supported the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, advocating for a peaceful resolution that ensures stability in the region. The country's official stance has emphasized the importance of reaching a mutually acceptable agreement that fosters peace, stability, and progress for both countries and the broader Western Balkans region (Kanal5, 2022). Officials have expressed concern over nationalist rhetoric and the escalation of tensions, particularly in northern Kosovo, and warned against actions that could lead to further destabilization. They have stressed the importance of calming inflammatory rhetoric and encouraged both sides to take advantage of European mediation efforts, such as the Franco-German proposal, to move forward with the normalization process (360Stepeni, 2023). As such, North Macedonia views the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue as essential for regional stability and fully supports efforts to reach a sustainable and lasting agreement.

Following the recent electoral victory of VMRO-DPMNE, concerns have surfaced regarding potential shifts in North Macedonia's foreign policy orientation. Yet, the consociational power-sharing system established in the country limits radical changes in the country's position on Kosovo. Given the significant influence of Albanian parties in government, any major departure from the established supportive stance on Kosovo seems unlikely. Therefore, North Macedonia's position on the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue is expected to remain aligned with the broader EU-mediated vision for peace and regional stability.

Conclusion

The 1999 Kosovo War and refugee crisis, as well as the 2001 insurgency in North Macedonia, highlighted the direct impact of the Kosovo issue on the country's internal security and interethnic relations. Furthermore, the recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008 exposed divisions within North

Macedonia. The ethnic Albanian population in North Macedonia has consistently advocated for closer ties with Kosovo, while the ethnic Macedonian majority has at times been more cautious.

Once viewed as a destabilizing issue due to the potential impact on North Macedonia's own ethnic dynamics and territorial integrity, Kosovo's relevance in Macedonian domestic politics has waned. Today, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue is framed primarily as a diplomatic concern for regional stability and European integration, with North Macedonia consistently supporting EU-led efforts to mediate a peaceful and mutually acceptable resolution. The country's leadership has maintained a stance that prioritizes peace, stability, and the broader goals of the Western Balkans' European integration.

However, the Kosovo issue has not vanished entirely from Macedonian political life. Instead, it has morphed into a latent topic, readily available for political exploitation when advantageous. As North Macedonia continues on its path toward Europeanization, this occasional resurfacing underscores the persistent vulnerabilities within the region. Political actors can still mobilize the Kosovo question to ignite ethnic tensions, especially in contexts that resonate with historical grievances or national security concerns.

In conclusion, North Macedonia's approach to the Kosovo issue remains consistent, driven by both internal and external factors. The evolving political context, while significant, is unlikely to result in a drastic shift in Macedonia's position on Kosovo, as the country continues to prioritize regional peace and stability while balancing domestic political interests.

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PART IV: Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

Regional Stability in South East Europe Study Group

Executive Summary of Recommendations

With Regard to Strategic Goals

- ***EU:*** Defining a clear end goal for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, with concrete rewards and sanctions tied to compliance.
- ***EU/US:*** Providing financial and political support for key civil society organizations on the Kosovo-Albanian and Kosovo-Serb side who are committed to confidence building and including them in the official dialogue process.
- ***EU/NATO/US:*** In order to relax the security situation in northern Kosovo providing support for joint border patrols consisting of Serbian and Kosovar police and KFOR.
- ***EU/US:*** Supporting the establishment of a joint Kosovo-Albanian and Kosovo-Serbian Investment Support Office in northern Kosovo to attract western investments.
- ***Kosovo government:*** As part of a de-escalation package for the north reintegrating Serbs into the Kosovo Police and local officials as well as guaranteeing fair conditions for the repeat of local elections.
- ***Serbian government:*** Refraining from exerting influence that leads to a deterioration of interethnic relations in northern Kosovo and other neighboring countries.
- ***Kosovo government/Serbian government:*** Enabling the creation of a permanent mechanism for confidence building between Kosovo and Serbia, using key NGOs from both countries for this purpose.

- ***Albanian government:*** Playing a proactive role in reducing political resentment between Belgrade and Pristina.
- ***Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina/Kosovo government:*** Abolishing visa requirements for each other's citizens.

Situation Analysis:

Kosovo-Serbia Relations and Regional Security Challenges

The security situation in Kosovo remains highly volatile, shaped by unresolved ethnic tensions, historical grievances, and the complex geopolitics of the Western Balkans. At the heart of the current impasse is the stalled EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, which has failed to produce meaningful outcomes in recent years. Despite numerous attempts to mediate, international efforts have been largely ineffective, leaving both parties entrenched in their positions. This stagnation risks further destabilizing not only Kosovo but also the broader region, where ethnic tensions and political interference continue to undermine peace and security.

The dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, led by the European Union under Josep Borrell and lastly Miroslav Lajčák, has reached a standstill. While agreements like the Brussels Agreement (2013) and the Ohrid Annex (2023) were touted as steps forward, they have largely failed in their implementation. Both Pristina and Belgrade have used the dialogue as a platform to strengthen their domestic political narratives rather than genuinely resolve disputes. Kosovo's repudiation to implement the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities and Serbia's refusal to de-facto recognize Kosovo's independence have turned the process into a zero-sum game.

The failure of the dialogue to deliver tangible results has fostered a dangerous vacuum with flourishing nationalist rhetoric and ethnic polarization. The rise in tensions highlights the risks of inaction. Without a clear and enforceable roadmap the likelihood of further violence and instability is high, threatening both local security and broader regional stability.

Northern Kosovo remains the most sensitive and volatile part of the country. The resignation of Kosovo Serbs from municipal governments and rule

of law institutions in protest against Kosovo's government measures has exacerbated an already fragile security situation that culminated in the grave security incident in Banjska in September 2023. These unilateral actions by the Kosovo government, such as increasing police presence without securing broad local support, have been perceived as provocations by the Serb community. The lack of a coordinated, inclusive approach to governance in the North has not only alienated the Serb population but also has pushed EU to introduce political and financial measures against Kosovo in June 2023.

KFOR, the NATO-led peacekeeping force, continues to play a critical role in maintaining a fragile peace. However, the long-term reliance on KFOR is unsustainable as it underscores the inability of local institutions to handle security independently. There is an urgent need to have law enforcement perceived legitimate by all communities. Failure to do so could deepen ethnic divides and perpetuate the cycle of instability.

Serbia's role in the destabilization of Kosovo and the region cannot be understated. Serbia's support for nationalist movements across the Western Balkans poses a direct challenge to peace and security in the region, as it seeks to leverage these groups to enhance its political influence. By undermining democratic processes and interfering in the internal affairs of neighboring states, Serbia risks reigniting ethnic tensions that could destabilize the entire Western Balkans. This is of particular concern in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Republika Srpska entity, encouraged by Belgrade, has increasingly pursued separatist policies that threaten the fragile peace established by the Dayton Accords.

The war in Ukraine has shifted international priorities, pushing the Western Balkans to the periphery of strategic interests for both the EU and the US. This reallocation of focus risks creating a geopolitical vacuum that could be readily exploited by external actors, particularly Russia and China, seeking to expand their influence in the region. As Western engagement wanes, there is a growing perception of neglect among the populations of the Western Balkans, with the prospect of EU integration appearing increasingly elusive.

Simultaneously, this policy drift has unintentionally strengthened autocratic forces in the region, where leaders are leveraging ethnic divisions to entrench

their political control. This dynamic signals a significant departure from the US and EU's former commitment to "democratic enlargement," suggesting a pivot toward a more pragmatic, realist geopolitical approach, with stability taking precedence over democratic reforms and rule of law.

Policy Recommendations

For the EU, NATO and US:

- ***Strategic Vision and Accountability in the Dialogue Process:*** The EU should establish a clear end goal for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, with concrete rewards tied to compliance. High-level diplomatic engagement should continue, with the appointment of new mediators to avoid the loss of momentum.
- ***Prevent autocratic rule and ethnic divisions*** by sanctioning political leaders who incite tensions, undermine democracy, and interfere in internal governance across the region.
- ***Adherence to CFSP:*** The new EU Commission must reconsider its approach to the Western Balkans, linking progress in EU chapters with adherence to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Non-compliance should lead to halts in accession progress.
- ***Supporting Grassroots Trust-Building Projects:*** Financial and political support should be provided to local NGOs, particularly joint Kosovo-Albanian and Kosovo-Serb initiatives. Promote the role of NGOs and civil society in trust-building and reconciliation efforts. Their participation should be institutionalized within the larger Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.
- ***Strengthening Transitional Justice Mechanisms:*** The EU and US should promote initiatives that address historical grievances through acknowledgment of past atrocities, and public apologies. These efforts should be integrated into the dialogue to build long-term peace.

- ***Security and Rule of Law Support:*** Enhancing the capacity of local law enforcement and supporting joint border patrols consisting of Serbian and Kosovar policemen and KFOR should be prioritized to reduce tensions and ensure the safety of all citizens.
- ***Attracting investments:*** With the support of top international experts and funding from the EU and the US, an Investment Support Office, comprising both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, should be established in the Mitrovica region, with a special focus on northern Kosovo to attract Western investments to the area.

For Kosovo and Serbia:

- ***Reintegration of Kosovo Serb community members in the Kosovo Police and Public Officials:*** Kosovo should prioritize the reintegration of Kosovo Serb community members in the Kosovo Police and local officials in the north of the country. A transparent vetting process based on international standards, accompanied by a comprehensive de-escalation plan, which includes fair conditions for a repeat of the local elections in the north of Kosovo, is needed to prevent further violence and rebuild a democratic governance.
- ***Learning from successful (re)integration models:*** The successful implementation of the 1995 Erdut Agreement for the peaceful and gradual reintegration of eastern Slavonia into the Croatian state contains – like other peace treaties – elements that could also be useful for the integration of northern Kosovo into the Kosovar institutions. The Kosovo government could cooperate with the UN and EU presence in Kosovo to this end.
- ***Addressing Security in Northern Kosovo:*** Serbia should cease its partially destabilizing interference in northern Kosovo as well as in the other neighboring countries and work with Kosovo institutions to enhance local security. Joint efforts in security, including border patrols with Kosovo Police and KFOR, could reduce ethnic tensions and increase trust.

- ***Historical Reconciliation Initiatives:*** Both sides should engage respected and independent historians to develop a shared historical narrative and integrate this into educational curricula, fostering reconciliation among younger generations.
- ***Promoting mutual understanding:*** The Kosovo government should organize language courses in both Albanian and Serbian in order to foster mutual understanding between young Albanians and Serbs.
- ***Establishment of permanent mechanisms for confidence building and shaping a new generation of political leaders:*** Key civil society organizations from both Kosovo and Serbia should get involved on a regular basis to support trustbuilding between Albanians and Serbs and a new generation of leaders capable of working together cooperatively for the future of all citizens of Kosovo.

For Neighboring Countries:

- ***Good Neighbor Relations:*** Countries like Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia should promote regional cooperation, encourage dialogue, and support the implementation of EU-led agreements.
- ***Enhancing Regional Security and Economic Cooperation:*** The EU and neighboring countries should promote regional platforms for economic cooperation and security, helping to create more interconnected and resilient systems that benefit all Western Balkans states.
- ***Albania*** could play a proactive role in reducing political resentment between Belgrade and Pristina due to its current good relations with Serbia and its fundamental political support for Kosovo.
- ***Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*** should abolish visa requirements for each other's citizens to promote increased economic cooperation and strengthen people-to-people ties.
- ***Montenegro*** should maintain its pro-EU foreign policy and engage constructively with its neighbors, avoiding inflammatory rhetoric and controversial historical narratives.

List of Abbreviations

A/CSM	Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities
ASM	Association of Serb-majority Municipalities
BiH/BIH	Bosna i Hercegovina / Bosnia and Herzegovina
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CBMs	Confidence Building Measures
CCP	Common Crossing Points
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CFPIs	Community Forums for Public Interest
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CRM	Common Regional Market
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
DPA	Democratic Party of Albanians
DUI	Democratic Union for Integration
EU	European Union
EUSR	European Union Special Representative
FIERC	Fostering Inter-Ethnic Cooperation and Reconciliation
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ID	Identity Document
INTERPOL	The International Criminal Police Organization
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
IRI	International Republican Institute
KFOR	Kosovo Force
KIPRED	Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
NADA	Nacionalno demokratska alternativa / National Democratic Alternative
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs	Non-governmental Organization
NLA	National Liberation Army
OFA	Ohrid Framework Agreement
PM	Prime minister
PNA	Path to Normalization Agreement

RS	Republika Srpska
SAA	Stabilization and Association Agreement
SL	Serbian List
SNS	Srpska napredna stranka / Serbian Progressive Party
SOU _s	Special Operations Units
SPC	Serb Orthodox Church
SSP	Party of Freedom and Justice
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNMIK	United Nations Mission in Kosovo
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
U.S./US/USA	United States of America
VMRO-DPMNE	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity
WB6	Western Balkans (Six)
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II

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The unresolved conflict between the governments of Kosovo and Serbia still poses a security risk for the Western Balkans 26 years after the end of the war. Even with EU mediation, confidence-building measures are proving difficult. The domestic and foreign policy of some neighbors is also affected by the tense relationship between Belgrade and Prishtina/Priština.

Local civil society initiatives contribute substantially to improve ethnic relations in Kosovo under difficult security and political conditions. This makes it all the more important – as the contributions in this volume show – to support their activities.

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