

The Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue as an Opportunity for the EU to Showcase Geopolitical Relevance



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The European Union (EU) has struggled to assert influence in the Ukraine peace negotiation process, exposing the limits of its geopolitical weight in an international order increasingly shaped by hard power. The Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, however, offers a more immediate test related to the EU’s ability to stabilise its own neighbourhood.

Currently the process is effectively stalled. The 2023 Brussels Agreement and its Ohrid Implementation Annex were claimed as diplomatic **breakthroughs**, yet they remain largely unimplemented. In the meantime, distrust has deepened, rhetoric has hardened, and security tensions have intensified.

While the stalemate reflects both domestic constraints and wider geopolitical factors, the EU must deliver in its own backyard if it wants to be considered as a geopolitical actor on its own merit.

EU MEDIATION AMID DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS

A set of factors have had a constraining effect on the dialogue process, including domestic drivers in member states, as well as both Kosovo and Serbia.

The rise of Eurosceptic and openly anti-enlargement political forces within many EU member states has undermined the credibility of the Union's enlargement policy. The Kosovo–Serbia dialogue has long rested on the implicit promise that meaningful progress would bring both parties closer to EU membership. However, the resonance of this promise has diminished over time.

The experience of North Macedonia may help to illustrate why. After resolving a decades-long name dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement (2018), widely praised as a model of political compromise, North Macedonia faced new obstacles in its accession path, including bilateral vetoes unrelated to formal criteria.

For many in the Western Balkans, this indicated that even difficult and politically costly concessions may fail to guarantee forward movement, so long as enlargement remains vulnerable to bilateralisation and (mis)use of veto. For parties in the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, such dynamics reduce the incentive to undertake what are often perceived as risky compromises, reinforcing doubts regarding EU's ability to deliver on its promises.

The potential accession of the two frontrunners Albania and Montenegro - notably the only Western Balkan countries without major open bilateral disputes - would inject a new boost to the enlargement idea in the region.

Further, recent domestic conditions in both Kosovo and Serbia, such as electoral cycles, lack of mutual trust, and harsher rhetoric, have also impacted the normalization process.

Since late 2024, Serbia has been hit by a wave of recurring student protests. It has been hinted that Serbia could hold [early national elections in 2026](#), potentially toward the end of the year, although no official date has been announced. With elections approaching, Vučić is likely to continue to use the current domestic situation to postpone meaningful participation and evade further commitments in the dialogue.

What must also be stated is that in Serbia the [anti-Western rhetoric has deepened](#). The rising anti-Western rhetoric has made the potential absorption of a Western-brokered normalization agreement by the political elites and the citizens in Serbia increasingly difficult.

Kosovo finally overcame a year-long political deadlock and elected a new government in February 2026. Brussels seemingly hopes that Kurti's strong election result could provide the political capital necessary to manage domestic costs of implementing the Association on Serbian Majority Municipalities (ASMM). In reality, Kurti's posture indicates that implementation can proceed only if it is accompanied by clearer guarantees and formalisation of commitments, illustrated by the repeated request that the agreement [be signed by the leaders](#). In case such incentives and guarantees are absent, Kurti's mandate may be deployed defensively to reinforce resistance against moving forward on the self-management clause for the foreseeable future.

Broader elements are also at play, including the EU's mediation approach in recent years. Following the Ohrid Agreement, Brussels applied asymmetric negative conditionality, whereby Kosovo faced financial measures in response to developments in the Serb-majority northern municipalities in 2023, while consequences imposed on Serbia for non-compliance were comparatively limited, especially after the Banjska attack in September 2023. Despite Vučić publicly distancing himself from the Ohrid Agreement shortly after accepting it, and Serbia's lobbying against Kosovo's Council of Europe (CoE) membership, the EU's response lacked firmness.

As the restrictive measures are being removed, it is hard to argue that they positively altered actor behavior, increased trust, or contributed to implementation. If anything, the EU's punitive approach seemingly reinforced skepticism and perceptions of imbalance among local actors in Kosovo, while further easing pressure on Serbia to comply.

The arrival of a new EU mediator offers an opportunity to build on these lessons and recalibrate the approach. The most important lesson might be that to inject new

momentum into the process, the EU mediation strategy must rely on the principle of symmetric conditionality.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

As the international order becomes fragmented, the EU is facing challenges that are testing its depth, unity, and long-term vision. The outcome of the Pristina–Belgrade dialogue will be an indicator of the EU’s adaptability in shifting geopolitical conditions.

To increase the chances of success, the EU should consider revising dimensions of its mediation strategy. Applying symmetric conditionality seems crucial to restore confidence in the process.

Equally important is restoring credibility to enlargement itself. In lack of a predictable and merit-based accession pathway, the core incentive structure underpinning the dialogue would continue to weaken.

Institutional innovation may also be necessary. Creating an [Enlargement Dispute Resolution Mechanism \(EDRM\)](#) to channel accession-related disputes into time-bound arbitration under the European Commission, ideally endorsed by the European Council, is worth considering. Such a mechanism would clarify that bilateral issues which fall within the scope of the EU acquis will be managed by the European Commission in the context of the formal accession process. Ideally, [the EDRM](#) would raise the political costs for any member state or candidate country departing from the newly established code of conduct.

None of these steps are straightforward. Nevertheless, the risks of misperception on the ground amid intensifying militarisation, increasingly aggressive discourse, and third-party expansion in the region are all potential costs.

The EU is thus faced with two choices – assert its geopolitical actorness to shape the future of the Western Balkans, or risk watching its geopolitical relevance and the region’s stability face potential erosion.