

# THE KOSOVO-SERBIA DIALOGUE

## BETWEEN ACHIEVEMENTS, SETBACKS, AND UNKNOWNNS



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# The Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue Between Achievements, Setbacks, and Unknowns

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## Authors:

Jeta LOSHAJ, Ramadan ILAZI, Shpetim GASHI, Katarina TADIĆ

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## Design and layout by:

Brand Vision Shpk

Contact: +383 45 559 923

Email: [brandvision.rks@gmail.com](mailto:brandvision.rks@gmail.com)

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## About the authors:

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### **Jeta Loshaj**

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Is a Researcher at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), She holds a Master's degree in Russian and East European Studies from Indiana University Bloomington and a bachelor's degree in public policy and international Relations from RIT Kosova. Jeta's professional background includes an internship at the German Parliament and a role as an associate for Kosovo at the Council for Inclusive Governance. Her research interests are centered on international relations, with a particular focus on Russian influence in the Western Balkans and Kosovo's multi- and bilateral relations with the region, the EU, and the USA. She has published several papers and op-eds on these topics. Fluent in Albanian, English, German, and Russian, Jeta brings a multifaceted perspective to her work at KCSS, contributing to the organization's research and project initiatives. Until now Jeta have produced several publications, focusing primarily on Russian malign influence in Kosovo and Western Balkans, deconstructing narratives that threaten interethnic coexistence in Kosovo; and prospects of Kosovo's integration to NATO.



### **Dr Ramadan Ilazi**

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Currently serves as the Head of Research at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), where among others, he is a team leader in the framework of the Horizon Europe-funded SMIDGE project, which investigates the rise of extremist narratives among middle-aged individuals in Europe. He is also a member of the International Republican Institute's Western Balkans Task Force on Threats to Democracy. In this role, he has co-authored a paper on Kosovo's vulnerabilities to malign foreign influence. From 2015 to 2016, Ramadan was Kosovo's Deputy Minister for European Integration, where he contributed to the development of the national plan for implementing the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union and the European Reform Agenda (ERA) for Kosovo. He has also consulted for organizations such as OECD/SIGMA on public administration reform in Kosovo. Ramadan holds a PhD in Politics and International Relations from the Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland, and a Master of Letters degree in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. His recent book, "The European Union and Everyday Statebuilding: The Case of Kosovo," published by Routledge Studies in Statehood, critically examines the EU's role and agency in statebuilding interventions.



### **Shpetim Gashi**

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Is Vice President of the Council for Inclusive Governance and Founder of the V-Dem Regional Center for Balkans. He focuses on democracy, political development, and ethnic conflict. He holds an MA in International Affairs from Columbia University and a BA in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts Boston.



### **Katarina Tadić**

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Has almost fifteen-year-long experience of working in the civil society sector in Serbia and Western Balkans region. She has specifically worked on democratisation, civil society development and civic engagement in the region. She graduated from the Faculty of Political Sciences and thanks to the Chevening scholarship, Katarina completed a master's degree in Policy Research at the University of Bristol. She also holds a double degree from the University of Bologna and University of Sarajevo in the European Regional Master's Programme in Democracy and Human Rights in South East Europe (ERMA). Katarina is currently working as a Program Manager at the European Fund for the Balkans in Belgrade, where she manages a program focused on supporting local movements and grassroots organizations across the Western Balkans within the Engaged Democracy Initiative. You can follow her @katarinatadic\_

# Executive Summary

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## The Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue Between Achievements, Setbacks, and Unknowns

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The normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia remains one of the most complex issues in the Western Balkans. Initiated in 2011 by the then EEAS Counsellor Robert Cooper and continued by Catherine Ashton the first meeting between the Prime Ministers of Serbia and Kosovo took place in October 2012. Though mostly focused on the technical level and faced with a lot of pushbacks internally, this initiative marked a significant milestone that led to reaching multiple agreements. These agreements serve as a basis for fostering what is called the Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue to date.

While the tasks for reaching full normalization of relations between the two countries are challenging and multifold, it required the involvement of the EU to serve as the main facilitator to enhance a communication channel between the counterparts which previously had no sustainable platform to negotiate or even communicate directly. Indeed, the EU still serves as the main bridge of communication between the parties. However, with the EU as a facilitator, and sometimes also with the (in)direct involvement of the US, much of the work remains at the hands of the counterparts themselves, namely the Governments of Kosovo and Serbia. For the two countries to move forward with EU accession, the progress on the Dialogue, among other issues, is a precondition to unlock that path. While the parties remain periodically invested in the process, which has been marked by waves of progress and oftentimes regress, as is perceived today, the process has stagnated and is characterized by uncertainty, particularly under the present geopolitical circumstances. There are a lot of blame games by the counterparts on who is more committed to the Dialogue, who is making more or fewer concessions,

and a lot of questions on the objectivity, seriousness, and capacity of the EU to handle the negotiations. To provide a balanced approach on how the Dialogue is perceived and what the dynamics of the last four years have been, this paper includes a combination of two analyses by two experienced analysts from Kosovo and from Serbia.

Both analyses tackle a range of issues and address questions such as: what are the internal and external factors affecting the Dialogue dynamics, what have been the main achievements and setbacks in the past four years, what are the main tradeoffs for the parties to negotiate, and what are the challenges to overcoming the current stalemate. For the purpose of providing an analysis that merges both perspectives, this first part of this paper is split into five chapters that seek to deconstruct the overall picture of the Dialogue.

- a) The Dialogue as seen from Kosovo's and Serbia's viewpoints.
- b) The main achievements and setbacks of the past four years.
- c) Challenges and internal and external factors affecting Dialogue dynamics.
- d) EU's (and the US's) role in restarting and maintaining the Dialogue.
- e) Expectations for the way forward.

The second and the third parts include separate analyses by the Kosovo and the Serbia experts, respectively.

# Part I: A Merged Assessment on the Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue Dynamics

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## The Dialogue from Kosovo's and Serbia's Perspective

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Kosovo's strategy under the Kurti Government during 2021–2025 has had a somewhat different approach compared to the previous governments. Prime Minister Kurti's approach has been labeled as assertive, not only towards Serbia, but even towards the EU and the US due to the Government's decision to move forward with certain decisions without, what was perceived by these actors, as lack of coordination and consultation. For instance, the Government focused on **establishing country-wide sovereignty**, particularly in the north, which until before the Kurti II Government, was perceived as being entirely controlled by Srpska Lista (de-facto by Belgrade). The Government's view is that Kosovo has already made too many concessions towards Serbia. One example of this was the implementation of what PM Kurti announced as reciprocal measures towards Serbia. This included a deal on car plates, banning the Serbian dinar, and the closing of Serbian parallel institutions across the country. And, the decision that caused the biggest pushback was the situation with the mayors in the four northern municipalities in May 2023. After the Kosovo–Serbian mayors withdrew from their mayoral positions in the north due to the Government's reciprocal measures, snap elections were announced. Four new mayors of non-Serbian ethnicity took offices after elections took place, which despite the low turnout (3%) were considered legal though not legitimate because the SL boycotted and urged the citizens to boycott too.

Moreover, apart from Kurti Government's focus on **reducing Serbia's influence in Kosovo**, efforts to secure Kosovo's place in the international community, particularly through NATO and the EU continued to be prioritized. The Dialogue has stalled due to several developments that took place over the last four years, including a terrorist attack<sup>1</sup> by a group of Serb militants, in Banjska in September 2023, which took place only

a couple weeks after Kosovo's PM Kurti and Serbia's President Vučić had met in Brussels. They have not met ever since. An additional major issue that keeps the Dialogue stalled is Kosovo's reluctance to move forward with establishing the ASM (Association of Serbian–Majority Municipalities). In Kurti Government's view, the ASM would cement Serbia's influence and decision-making power in Kosovo. The Government insists that the ASM should not have any executive powers and that Kosovo receives something in return if it were to be established: either de-facto recognition from Serbia or a good reward from the EU, such as candidate status. While neither option seems likely and all the situation has led to is having the EU impose punitive measures towards Kosovo alone and a stagnation in the Dialogue, Kosovo's primary objective now is to navigate its international relations and maintain control over its territory, regardless of Serbia's stance or the consequences the EU's measures have had.

On the other hand, Serbia's strategy in the EU-led dialogue for normalization of relations with Kosovo appears to be one of strategic participation but without genuine commitment. The Government under Vučić uses Kosovo as a tool to maintain internal control and to extract international support for its broader geopolitical ambitions. While appearing to engage in the Dialogue, Serbia remains focused on delaying full normalization, preventing Kosovo's international recognition, and balancing between Western diplomacy and Eastern ties. This approach capitalizes on EU and US inconsistencies and regional instability, with no clear resolution in sight.

There are a few of strategies that Serbia has used in the Dialogue with Kosovo during the past four years. The first one is manifested through its balancing of geopolitical interests. Serbia's involvement in the EU-led normalization dialogue was not optional for Serbia, since the latter sponsored together with the EU the resolution at the UN General Assembly in 2010 that recognized the ICJ opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence that demanded a

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1. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/kosovoserbia-speech-high-representativevice-president-borrell-ep-ple-nary\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/kosovoserbia-speech-high-representativevice-president-borrell-ep-ple-nary_en)

dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. However, in the process Serbia largely utilized the process for advancing its own interests of progressing on European integration process rather than meaningful engage in the normalization of relations.. Despite engaging in talks, Serbia's actions indicated a more performative commitment, designed to maintain a facade of constructive diplomacy without fully implementing or adhering to the agreements. Moreover, Vucic has been reluctant to giving up its **nationalist rhetoric and internal control**. The withdrawal of Serbs from Kosovo institutions in 2022 and continued support for parallel institutions highlight Serbia's strategy of maintaining a tight grip on Kosovo Serbs. Furthermore, Serbia's strategy with the EU and the US can be labeled as

transactional. Serbia seeks to maintain support from both powers without fully aligning itself with their values, namely the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, as was noted with refusing to sanction Russia for the invasion of Ukraine. Vučić leverages Serbia's position as an important regional actor to extract economic and political concessions, as was most recently seen with the lithium deal signed with the EU. The latter's inconsistent approach, particularly its tolerance for Serbia's democratic backsliding, allowed Vučić to avoid real consequences for non-implementation of normalization agreements and its stance towards Russia.

## The Main Achievements and Setbacks of the Past Four Years

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### ACHIEVEMENTS

Listing the number of achievements that have been reached over the last four years appears to be complex because while they started with promising pledges, they failed to deliver even before the implementation process was about to start. One example is the **Agreement on the Path to Normalization (Feb 2023)** that took place in Brussels. Both parties reached a verbal agreement on the future steps for normalization, endorsed by all EU member states. While it marked progress, ambiguity surrounding its implementation persists. Just a month later, the parties went to Ohrid, North Macedonia and discussed an **Annex Agreement (March 2023)**, which seemed like it would have been an important milestone for both parties. Serbia would recognize Kosovo's national symbols and passports (de-facto recognition by Serbia), whereas Kosovo would grant "self-management" to the Serbian community. While it appeared to be a win-win for both parties, the agreement was not signed and now remains only as part of the regular statements of the EU who emphasize that both parties should start implementing it. For the EU the agreement is seen as legally binding, although in practice this does not seem to mean anything, as Serbia's opposition to Kosovo's bid for CoE membership, in clear violation of the APN agreement, went unchallenged by the EU. Nonetheless, there are at

least three important achievements as part of the EU-led normalization process.

**THE FIRST ONE is the Recognition of Vehicle License Plates (December 2023)**. In December 2023, Serbia announced it would recognize the validity of vehicle license plates issued by the Republic of Kosovo starting January 1, 2024. This move was reciprocated by Kosovo, facilitating free movement and reducing administrative barriers for citizens of both countries.

**THE SECOND ONE is the Cooperation on Missing Persons (May 2023)**, where both sides committed to identifying missing persons from the Kosovo War, with progress made in establishing a joint commission led by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

**THE THIRD ONE is the Implementation of the Constitutional Court decision on the issue of the land of the Visoki Decani Monastery (March 2024)**. Kosovo returned contested land to the Serbian Orthodox Church in line with a Constitutional Court decision, addressing a long-standing property dispute. This decision was applauded by the EU and Kosovo hoped it would unlock the support it needed from some EU countries for membership in the Council of

Europe. However, this act did not bring a reward for Kosovo which, in Kosovo Government's perspective, adds to the argument that Kosovo keeps making concessions without much in return. However, from the Kurti Government's perspective, gaining strategic control over the north of Kosovo is nevertheless an achievement. Under Prime Minister Kurti, Kosovo managed to effectively fight elements of organized crime in the north, and significantly increase Police control over the area. This has been done, despite resistance from Serbia, Kosovo Serbs in the north and even the international community, who demanded consultation and coordination.

In each case, while the results remain low, both the Agreement on the Path to Normalization and the Implementation Annex Agreement can still be framed as achievements because they serve as the groundwork for the parties to restart the Dialogue once they decide to show readiness on the matter. Indeed, as emphasized by the two expert analyses as part of this paper, the Ohrid Agreement might have been a turning point that would have left both parties satisfied and on equal footing.

### SETBACKS

As previously mentioned, the initiatives that were meant to score successful achievements include elements of setbacks as well. Despite the initial optimism, the Ohrid Agreement collapsed soon after it was "reached." Furthermore, the high-level engagement remains limited even in the points where the parties had agreed upon, such as the issue on missing persons. Under facilitation by the EU, last year Kosovo and Serbia agreed to form a **joint commission on investigating the fate of the 1612 missing people** from the war. The first meeting was to take place in January 2025 in Brussels. The two parties went to Brussels but the joint meeting failed because Serbia's Dialogue Representative, Petar Petkovic boycotted the meeting due to Kosovo's act of closing additional Serbian-backed parallel institutions. While the purpose of this meeting was supposed to be only inaugural at this point, it showcased the level of sensitivity of the parties to immediately refrain from cooperating on the few issues they have agreed upon.

The expert analyses also enlist the **Serb resignations from the institutions in northern Kosovo** (2022) as a setback. A mass resignation of Serbs from Kosovo's state institutions in northern municipalities led to significant setbacks in integrating Kosovo Serb officials into Kosovo's justice system, further escalating tensions.

Another setback was the **boycott of the 2023 Local Elections**: The Serb-majority municipalities boycotted the 2023 elections, resulting in a low turnout and the election of ethnic Albanian mayors, a move that underscored Serbia's tight control over northern Kosovo. However, it is expected that they will not boycott the scheduled upcoming local elections in autumn of this year, just like they participated in the parliamentary elections that took place in February of this year. The last setback, and perhaps the most concerning one is the rise of Security Unpredictability and Potential for Violence: A rise in security incidents, including violent clashes and confrontations, particularly the Banjska terrorist attack in September 2023, highlighted the fragile nature of the normalization process and the potential for further violence. Violence was noted also with the inauguration of Kosovo Albanian Mayors in the four Serb-majority municipalities in the north of Kosovo, which led to major clashes between Serbian protesters and KFOR. Finally, an attack on Kosovo's critical water infrastructure in November 2024 in Zubin Potok that would have cut water supply for at least 700.000 inhabitants is the most recent example of the scale of security concerns Kosovo is faced with. Attacks with hand grenades on post-offices and other institutions that occur periodically should also serve as a warning about how the situation might further develop if not monitored proactively.

The way the events evolved throughout the past four years indicate that the parties might have indeed lost momentums for advancing towards complex, but important issues that will need to be overcome in the future. As of now, there is no clear picture as to when, how, or if the Dialogue will restart, and what the new setting with the new EU Special Representative on the Dialogue will be. More on this important element is provided in the following chapters.

## Challenges and internal and external factors affecting Dialogue dynamics

The reasons why the Dialogue has stalled over the past four years is due to several challenges that are mostly inherited from history, but are also highly affected by today's political developments both within the region and beyond. Beyond the historical context and the deep ethnic divisions that persist between the societies within Kosovo but also between Kosovo and Serbia, this analysis groups the challenges in two parts: the internal challenges and the external ones.

**THE INTERNAL CHALLENGES** include the situations within Kosovo and Serbia and the **political resistance** that exists within both countries towards making concessions on the Dialogue. For instance, there is deep political division within Kosovo, with a significant portion of the population rejecting the ASM,<sup>2</sup> which remains a disputed issue, for which some analysts claim is due to the disinformation surrounding it, which has led to misunderstanding ASM and the decision of the Constitutional Court of Kosovo in 2015. Many Kosovar Albanians view the ASM as a threat to Kosovo's sovereignty, while Serbs see it as vital for protecting their community. This division complicates Kosovo's ability to make more concessions in negotiations than it already has. Likewise, in Serbia, there is a persistent perception that any indication the country might compromise on Kosovo could trigger significant political backlash. Although the likelihood of an extreme reaction is low because, in the past, despite similar periods of heightened nationalist rhetoric and public outrage before key agreements with Kosovo, such as the 2013 Brussels Agreement, no major political upheaval or violent backlash actually occurred. This pattern suggests that politicians in Serbia want to avoid appearing weak on Kosovo and use destabilization as a factor to counter pressure from EU to compromise. An additional challenge is that proceeding on the Dialogue would momentarily be technically difficult due to the **governmental transitional phases** in both countries. Kosovo is in the process of forming a new Government after the February elections. This Government, according to analysts, is not foreseen to

last long because of the difficulty in forming a stable coalition, which, even if formed, might be dispersed in 2026 when the time to elect the new President comes. Likewise, Serbia's current Government has withdrawn due to the mass student protests that have lasted for over five months now. With such preoccupations of both countries internally, it is difficult to expect any major breakthrough in the Dialogue this year. In terms of elections, it is important to mention that Serbia has interfered in the Kosovo elections in the north, which yet again reiterates Vucic's efforts to maintain control over the population in the north. The expert analyses also highlight the **weakening of civil society and electoral integrity in Serbia**. The growing electoral fraud, political repression, and mass protests in Serbia indicate a decline in the country's democratic health. Civil society, which once supported European integration and democratic reforms, is now increasingly skeptical of the government's commitment to resolving the Kosovo issue. This growing political instability has undermined the legitimacy of the Dialogue process.

**THE EXTERNAL CHALLENGES** include the geopolitical context in and -outside of Europe that affect the Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue. The first one is the February 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Due to Serbia's alliance with Russia and the latter's maximalist territorial ambitions towards its neighbors, as well as the fresh memory of war in the Western Balkans, there was fear that the Russia-Ukraine situation would replicate in the WB region as well. Indeed, the war did have a share of ripple effects in the region. Initially, it was perceived that the war would expose Serbia as the Kremlin's proxy in the region. However, fearing more pushback from the EU, Serbia played carefully by selling weapons to Ukraine through third parties and continuing to refuse to sanction Russia. Additionally, the war in Ukraine affected the effectiveness of the EU to engage in the Dialogue. While Germany and France pushed for the Ohrid Agreement fearing the implications of the war in Ukraine, the expert analyses argue that the EU lacked capacity for bold moves in the Dialogue to make the counterparts agree to implement the Ohrid Agreement. Another important external challenge is the **potential US disengagement** not only from the Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue, but also

2. <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-kosovo-may-2024/>

from the entire WB region. While the EU's role is primary in the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue, many pundits point to the US as the party with the imposing power to push matters forward. Therefore, a possible decline in US engagement, particularly under the second Trump presidency, could weaken Kosovo's position, leaving it more dependent on EU support. This shift would reduce the influence of the US in negotiations and may embolden Serbia, which has historically had closer ties to Russia. Additional elements include the **divisions within the EU**. Kosovo's path to EU and NATO membership is blocked by five EU member states that do not recognize its independence. These EU holdouts

set conditions that Kosovo must reach an agreement with Serbia, but there are no guarantees of recognition even with a deal, which is what makes both parties reluctant to move forward with the Dialogue.

Given these internal and external challenges surrounding the dialogue, add to that the lack of trust and commitment to the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements between the two counterparts and the EU, the circumstances suggest that any new deal could face similar challenges in the Dialogue and no significant breakthrough can be expected anytime soon.

## The role of the EU (and the US) In Facilitating the Dialogue

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As mentioned in the beginning, the EU's former Foreign Policy Chief, Catherine Ashton launched the so-called political phase of the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. After Ashton, the person to resume the position and therefore the Dialogue was Federica Mogherini (2014-2019). Perceptions in Kosovo are that Mogherini's performance left much to be desired. During the new EU Foreign Policy Chief, Borell, a dedicated EU special representative to lead the dialogue, Miroslav Lajcak was appointed in the hopes that the process would receive proper attention and dedication from the EU, at least. The appointment of the latter, according to some analyses, was received with question marks in Kosovo due to his former position as Foreign Minister of Slovakia – a country that refuses to recognize Kosovo's Independence. Nonetheless, Lajcak helped deliver the Agreement on the Path to Normalization of Relations and the Ohrid Implementation Annex, albeit neither has been signed, a major weak point. However, according to the two expert analyses, the **EU has had a weak and inconsistent commitment to the Dialogue**. From Kosovo's perspective, despite the latter's concessions and the ongoing negotiations, the EU has not provided a clear path forward for Kosovo's full recognition or membership, contributing to a sense of frustration and stagnation in Kosovo's foreign policy ambitions. This, according to the analysts, has led to diminishing EU's leverage and credibility, particularly due to its inconsistent approach towards Serbia.

The EU's leverage over both Kosovo and Serbia

has diminished, especially as Serbia has moved further away from EU democratic standards. Serbia's consolidation of autocratic rule, marked by increased authoritarianism under Vučić, has complicated the EU's ability to apply pressure. To some extent, **the EU prioritized stability and geopolitical interests over democratic reforms** in Serbia, which has undermined its credibility. The EU's reluctance to enforce democratic standards has led to a perception that it is more interested in maintaining economic and geopolitical cooperation with Serbia than in pushing for democratic reforms and genuine dialogue with Kosovo. Finally, the EU's approach has been characterized as **transactional**. Serbia's rich lithium deposits, for example, have made it an important player in Europe's interests, and the EU has been willing to turn a blind eye to Serbia's democratic erosion in exchange for economic cooperation. This pragmatic yet unprincipled approach has caused a loss of trust among pro-democracy factions in Serbia and has eroded the EU's position as a neutral mediator. The EU's failure to hold Serbia accountable for human rights violations and undemocratic practices has allowed the status quo to persist, making it harder to reach a comprehensive peace agreement with Kosovo.

The EU's mediation role has thus shifted from being a proactive peacebuilder to a more passive observer of slow and often ineffective dialogue. As of January 2025, there is a new EU Foreign Policy Chief, Kaja Kallas, and the newly appointed Dialogue Special

Representative, Peter Sorensen. Analysts argue that it is too soon to speak of the expected approaches and results of Kallas and Sorensen. During a recent interview Kallas stated that she acknowledges the fact that the Dialogue has stalled, and that, if necessary, **new instruments** might be introduced for the Dialogue to restart. While there was no other statement beyond this one, Kallas's comment rose curiosity in the region as to what those new instruments may entail.

The **United States**, while not as centrally involved as the EU, has played a significant role in supporting Kosovo and influencing Serbia's approach to the normalization dialogue. However, according to the two expert analyses, like the EU, the US has often opted for a pragmatic, transactional relationship with Serbia, which has had mixed results. Under both the Trump and Biden administrations, the US has generally sought to maintain strong ties with Serbia, focusing more on **economic and security cooperation than on political or democratic issues**. Serbia's growing military cooperation with the US, such as the purchase of American-made weapons and air defense systems, signals a shift toward more pragmatic diplomatic ties, even as Serbia continues to strengthen its relations with Russia and China. The US has been a strong supporter of Kosovo's independence,

although it has not consistently applied pressure on Serbia to recognize Kosovo. This hands-off approach has allowed Serbia to maintain its stance on Kosovo's non-recognition, particularly since the US under both Trump and Biden administrations has focused more on securing Serbia's cooperation in regional security and economic agreements rather than on pushing for a resolution of the Kosovo issue. The 2020 Washington Agreement, which emphasized economic cooperation over political recognition of Kosovo, is a clear example of this approach. According to the analyses, the return of Trump to the White House could further this transactional approach, possibly diminishing the US's role in stabilizing the region and further emboldening Serbia's leadership to continue its balancing act between the West and Russia.

Therefore, the EU and the US have played critical roles in facilitating the normalization Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, yet their influence has been characterized by inconsistencies, strategic compromises, and shifting priorities, which have significantly impacted the progress and outcomes of the dialogue. It remains to be seen what the new approaches of both Kallas and Sorensen, as well as Trump will be towards the Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue.

## Forecasting Dialogue Dynamics

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Based on the above-elaborated elements, it appears that assessing the Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue dynamics remains complex, and forecasting them even more so. The developments of the past four years alone leave several questions unanswered and therefore, a lot of unknowns and uncertainties. To mention a few: it remains questionable who ultimately has the power to unfreeze the Dialogue. The unclarity of the entire process to begin with, and reluctance from the counterparts, namely Prishtina and Belgrade to restart the Dialogue seems to persist. If that persistence continues, it opens the other question of whether Brussels or the White House will push more rigorously for resumption and perhaps conclusion of the Dialogue with a legally binding agreement as stipulated in the APN. It also remains questionable if the EU, as emphasized in the expert analyses, will continue to be assessed as a crisis management facilitator, as it currently is assessed, or if the new leadership will take a harder stance towards the parties. If that will be the case, it remains to be discovered what the

new instruments that Kallas has mentioned will be. An additional question would be if these new instruments would stick to the technical agreements as has been the case so far, or if they will allow for political breakthroughs.

Perhaps it will be up to the parties to reflect if the limbo and all the unaddressed issues will suit them in the long-run. As Europe faces changes in dynamics and turmoil in many fronts, both internally and externally, and mostly depending on how the war in Ukraine ends, it is of crucial importance to address the question of whether the Dialogue will receive the desired attention it aspires or will the attention it has received so far from the EU further decline. On the matter of the war in Ukraine, it is also worth-mentioning that the way the EU has handled the Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue sends a message for Kyiv as well. Namely, the question arises as to how the EU can convince Kyiv that it can help the country resolve its issues of the war with Russia, when for a decade it has not succeeded in delivering

a conclusion to the Kosovo-Serbia dispute – two countries in the EU's own courtyard. Therefore, a decline in both EU and US engagement in the Dialogue and the WB region would only enable further space for foreign malign influence, which already exists in, but would risk of further deterioration with enablers and proxies of the Kremlin such as Vučić in Serbia and Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska entity. Therefore, unless the Kosovo-Serbia

Dialogue is addressed, but without bypassing the crucial elements that have hindered the process to date, the process will remain with all its setbacks and uncertainties for the foreseeable future, thereby making the region more prone to instability.



Written by: Shpetim Gashi

## Part II: The Kosovo Standpoint on the Dialogue with Serbia

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### THE NORTH FIRST

### Kosovo's Brussels Dialogue Strategy

#### Introduction

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The Brussels dialogue, once a platform for practical solutions, has become a bitter courtroom drama. Each side prosecutes its case rather than seeking common ground. “They act like prosecutors, not negotiators—pointing fingers instead of finding solutions,” a Brussels official bluntly observed. Normalization—the talks’ original goal—has become lost in conflict.

Against this tense backdrop, this analysis examines Kosovo’s strategy in talks with Serbia from 2021 to 2025. It highlights three key policy choices: Kosovo’s determination to assert control over the north, its refusal to negotiate internal matters with Serbia or the EU, and its push to expand diplomatic influence beyond Brussels. By analyzing the government’s tactics, risks, and challenges, this paper reveals how Kosovo’s choices reshaped its relationships—not just with Serbia, but also with the EU, the US, and its own Serb community.

Under Prime Minister Albin Kurti, Kosovo adopted a tougher stance—frequently clashing with the US and EU, and triggering sharp reactions from Serbia and Kosovo Serbs. Kurti saw little reason to keep negotiating. Kosovo had already secured critical victories: its own telephone code, energy independence, recognition of travel documents, and control over northern border crossings. Serbia had little

left to offer; Kosovo had few concessions left to give. The Brussels dialogue, in its original form, had run its course. Whatever it could normalize, it already did.

Instead, Kurti moved to reshape reality on the ground. His goal was twofold: make north’s partition impossible and strip the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) of any meaningful power. It was a high-stake policy—one that could either cement Kosovo’s sovereignty or plunge it into deeper conflict. Kurti was betting NATO troops in Kosovo would remain on his side, backing his police forces as they asserted control.

Geopolitics shifted sharply in Kurti’s favor. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine put Serbia—long viewed as a Kremlin ally—in a difficult position. Belgrade scrambled to avoid being branded as Moscow’s proxy, while Europe’s rising anger at Russia deepened its suspicion of Serbia. Though Belgrade quickly adjusted, publicly backing Ukraine and quietly supplying it with weapons, Kurti saw his moment.

Kosovo moved swiftly. It blocked Serbia’s referendum, banned its elections on Kosovo’s territory, and tightened control in the north. Serbia’s hands were tied. Kosovo Serbs, without direct support from Belgrade, were too weak to derail Kurti’s strategy, though they did

fiercely protest. The US and EU warned Kosovo against unilateral moves but stopped short of blocking Kurti. As Kurti had hoped, NATO forces ended up quietly supporting Kosovo's actions in the north. His risky bet paid off.

The backlash was immediate—and fierce. Protests erupted. Violence flared. The crisis engulfed the north. In four Serb-majority municipalities, home to 40,000 Serbs, officials resigned in defiance. Over five hundred Serb police officers abandoned their posts. Mayors and assembly members soon followed. Hundreds of Albanian police officers swiftly filled the void.

Snap elections were held, but Serbs boycotted them. Turnout was below three percent, nearly entirely Albanian. New mayors took office with shaky legitimacy, but the law backed them. Serbian flags fell. Kosovo's flags rose. Territory once contested now belonged to Pristina. But the territory only—not the Serb population. Yet here in our corner of the Balkans, land has always mattered more.

The EU and US quickly struck back, accusing Kosovo of taking "unilateral steps" and sparking instability. The government stood firm. "Internal decisions are

unilateral in every country." The EU responded with mild sanctions, freezing financial aid and suspending official visits. Kosovo was defiant: "Sanctions will pass. The north will remain ours."

Then violence erupted. Around sixty armed Serbs crossed from Serbia. Gunfire broke out. One Albanian police officer and three armed Serbs lay dead. The crisis temporarily shifted momentum in Kosovo's favor, easing international pressure to withdraw police forces. But the EU sanctions remained. Kurti accepted short-term pain for a long-term prize—permanent control of the north.

The geopolitical landscape is shifting again. A volatile Trump presidency, eager for quick deals and open to border adjustments, could weaken Kosovo's position. Recognition by the five EU holdouts remains blocked. Crucial memberships—such as the Council of Europe—now hinge directly on creating the ASM. Ironically, it was not Serbia's allies but Germany and France that halted Kosovo's Council of Europe bid. Kosovo's toughest challenge is crafting an ASM acceptable to all sides.

## Many deals, few results

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Kosovo and Serbia remain locked in a deadlock. Kosovo demands full recognition. Serbia rejects any deal that grants it. The Brussels dialogue has resolved many practical issues but failed to deliver a comprehensive settlement. Each side sees compromise as defeat. Each side chases total victory. Yet neither can walk away from the dialogue—their international standing depends on staying at the table.

So, talks drag on. Old agreements gather dust; new ones feel impossible. For Kosovo, the Brussels dialogue itself has become part of the problem. It offers no clear goal, no deadline, and most crucial, no path to recognition. It doesn't solve crisis—it merely contains them.

Frustration with the dialogue intensified after Kurti's Self-Determination Movement came to power. Kurti insisted that recognition must be central. Serbia flatly refused. The EU stayed firm: the goal was normalization, not recognition. But for Kosovo, normalization without some

form of recognition—from Serbia or from the five EU holdouts—was meaningless. It expected the EU to deliver. "Serbia has little to offer," a Kosovo official said. "But the EU has everything we need."

Kosovo shifted its focus. Instead of negotiating solely with Serbia, it turned directly to the EU. The Brussels dialogue became one of the few places Kosovo could press its case. Locked out of the EU enlargement process, Kosovo wanted more than vague promises. It demanded firm guarantees—not just a distant path toward membership. "The EU's collective recognition is what we need," a Kosovo official said. Serbia's recognition is secondary."

But even if Kosovo met every condition, there was no guarantee of progress. While its neighbors moved forward toward EU membership, Kosovo stayed stuck—its status candidate application gathering dust in Brussels. The EU refused to offer promises. "That's up to the 27 member states," an EU official stated. "Each has

its own interests.”

Then Russia invaded Ukraine—and everything changed. Fearing instability at its doorstep, the EU became more assertive. Germany and France stepped forward, pressing hard for a deal to settle core disputes. Both sides resisted at first. But under mounting EU and US pressure, they gave in. These were not the usual Brussels negotiations. The EU abandoned its slow, cautious diplomacy, adopting instead a blunt, take-it-or-leave-it approach. Serbia was warned clearly: refuse, and its path to EU accession would stall. Kosovo faced an equally sharp choice: reject the deal and risk isolation. The stakes had never been clearer.

Under intense pressure, both sides accepted the agreement in 2023. In Ohrid, North Macedonia, what seemed impossible days earlier—when Kurti and Vucic traded insults, comparing each other to Putin and Hitler—suddenly became reality. The Ohrid deal closely mirrored the 1972 German Basic Treaty; more than

seventy percent of its text was identical. It was carefully designed to let each side claim victory. For Kosovo, it meant de facto recognition—equal status, territorial integrity, and another step toward the EU. For Serbia, it kept Kosovo within its legal framework—no formal recognition, no constitutional changes. Both sides moved, but neither fully conceded.

Serbia pledged to build “normal, good-neighbourly relations” and recognize Kosovo’s passport and national symbols. In return, Kosovo promised its Serb community “self-management” through the disputed ASM. But the deal unraveled almost immediately. Serbia disowned it in a letter to the EU. Kosovo swiftly suspended it: “No signature, no implementation.” With Ohrid stalled, the Brussels dialogue fell back into its familiar rhythm—talks without results, negotiations without end. Ohrid briefly promised a breakthrough; instead, it joined the long ledger of failed diplomacy.

## Kosovo’s five-pillar strategy

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Kosovo still sees Serbia’s recognition as valuable—but no longer essential. Its real priority now is securing a permanent place in the West: recognition from the five EU holdouts, membership in NATO, joining the Council of Europe, and a clear path to the EU. For Kosovo, any concession in dialogue with Serbia must deliver concrete results. Even without recognition from Serbia, the Brussels talks must at least unlock Kosovo’s EU integration.

“We can live without Serbia’s recognition. We can’t live without the EU and NATO,” a Kosovo official said. The strategy is clear: bypass Serbia’s recognition. Rather than waiting for Belgrade, Kosovo is trying to press forward on its terms. The dialogue is no longer just diplomacy—it’s a tool to strengthen ties with EU non-recognizers and speed Kosovo’s Western integration. This approach is complicated. “This bypass won’t be easy,” another official admitted. Still, Kosovo’s course is set. Its future, the government insists, cannot depend on Serbia’s recognition.

An opportunity came from the five EU holdouts. They set conditions: no recognition without a deal with Serbia—but the deal did not require Serbia’s formal recognition. Kosovo saw an opening. It engaged directly with these

countries, bypassing the slow Brussels process. Spain recognized Kosovo’s passports. Romania and Slovakia accepted Kosovo’s license plates. Greece moved closer to formal recognition. Step by step, Kosovo chipped away at barriers blocking its path. “We proved Serbia’s recognition isn’t the only way forward,” an official confidently. But the recognitions never came.

Today, the Brussels dialogue is no longer just about Serbia—it is about securing Kosovo’s place in the West. This strategy rests on five pillars.

### DISMANTLING SERBIAN STRUCTURES

For Kosovo, dismantling Serbian structures is more than a legal or administrative task—it is a battle for full sovereignty. These institutions represent Belgrade’s last hold on Kosovo. Removing them means severing Serbia’s influence. But for Kosovo Serbs, this is not about governance—it is about survival. They see dismantling these structures as a direct threat to their identity, rights, and link to Belgrade. The real flashpoints ahead are education and healthcare. Integrating these sectors into Kosovo’s system, without first creating the ASM, could ignite fierce resistance.

### DE FACTO RECOGNITION FROM SERBIA

Kosovo knows formal recognition from Serbia will not happen soon—if ever. Instead, it pursues de facto recognition: concrete actions that reinforce its sovereignty. Serbia has already accepted Kosovo's ID cards, custom stamps, international dialing code. But Kosovo wants more. True de facto recognition, according to Kosovo officials, means Belgrade giving up territorial claims, accepting Kosovo's institutions, and treating Kosovo as a de facto independent entity. Serbia refuses to cross this red line. Kosovo lacks leverage to force Serbia's hand, yet it sees every small concession as a meaningful victory.

### RECOGNITION FROM THE FIVE EU HOLDOUTS

Spain, Romania, Greece, Slovakia, and Cyprus remain Kosovo's biggest roadblocks to EU and NATO ambitions. Kosovo is working to break their resistance, prioritizing the four NATO members. At Ohrid, diplomats hinted some of these countries might recognize Kosovo if it reached a deal with Serbia. No promises were made, but even the possibility was enough to push Kosovo forward. Kosovo fears Serbia joining the EU first and permanently blocking its path. To prevent this, Kosovo is pressing Brussels for guarantees: no EU seat for Serbia without recognizing Kosovo. But the EU will not—or cannot—make that promise. For Kosovo, it remains a race against time.

### PRIORITIZING NATO AND EU ACCESSION

Kosovo has recalibrated its strategy. It now engages directly with NATO and major EU states, viewing them—

not Serbia—as the decisive players in the Brussels dialogue. Kosovo remains willing to form the ASM, but only if it unlocks NATO membership and EU candidacy. A demand unlikely to be met.

### EXPANDING INTERNATIONAL FOOTPRINT WHERE RUSSIA CANNOT BLOCK

Kosovo is pursuing membership in international bodies where Russia cannot veto—such as the Council of Europe, UNESCO, Interpol. UN membership remains impossible due to Russia's veto. Kosovo's strategy is clear: embed itself so deeply into the international system that recognition from Serbia—or anyone else—becomes irrelevant.

So far, Kosovo's strategy has produced mixed results. In earlier negotiations—Rambouillet in 1999, Vienna in 2007—the US and EU firmly backed Kosovo as the underdog. That era is now over. Today, Washington and Brussels remain neutral, favoring pragmatism over idealism. They no longer see Kosovo as fragile. Instead, they expect it, as a functioning democracy, to stand on its own.

This shift complicates domestic diplomacy. Negotiating without Serbia's recognition was risky for Kurti—a risk the opposition quickly exploited. They reminded voters Kurti once promised never to negotiate without recognition. Yet, despite criticism, opposition parties stayed cautious, avoiding political risk themselves. The government made no attempt to draw them in. Without political unity, even significant agreements can unravel before they start. In Kosovo's volatile political landscape, the line between breakthrough and breakdown is razor-thin.

## CHALLENGES AHEAD

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### KOSOVO WILL RESIST FORMING A STRONG ASM

Kosovo has dismantled many Serbian structures meant for the ASM and has no intention of granting it meaningful powers. At most, Kosovo might propose a symbolic version—something Serbia and Kosovo Serbs would reject. Instead, Kosovo will likely try to integrate Serb-run education and healthcare into its own system, requiring clinics and schools to register under Kosovo

law. This would sharply escalate tensions and draw international criticism.

The ASM has stalled since 2013, agreed to but never clearly defined. Kosovo Serbs view it as political empowerment, while Albanians fear it is a trojan horse designed to fracture Kosovo's sovereignty. Serbia refuses a weak ASM; Kosovo rejects a powerful. The

result: a decade long stalemate. For Kosovo Serbs, control over education and healthcare is not just administrative—it is a battle for identity.

Most Albanians strongly oppose the ASM. In 2015, over 200,000 signed a petition against it, viewing it as a threat rather than minority protection. Albanians believe the Ahtisaari Plan already gives Serbs disproportionate influence—guaranteed seats, executive posts, and local autonomy. Serbs are entitled to positions at every level of Kosovo's institutions, though their actual power remains limited. Their ten guaranteed seats in 120-member parliament slightly exceeds their electoral strength—they would win seven seats on their own—but still fuel Albanian fears that the ASM would deepen this perceived imbalance. For many, it is not about minority rights but about sovereignty. The ASM is seen as a structure that could cement Belgrade's influence inside Kosovo, creating a permanent political divide.

Now the ASM is more than a local dispute—it has become a major international demand for Kosovo. The pressure is mounting. If handled strategically, the ASM could ease tensions and unlock diplomatic progress. If mishandled, it risks becoming another fault line—shaping Kosovo's future far beyond its borders.

### **RECOGNITION WILL BE OFF THE TABLE**

Serbia will not recognize Kosovo. Not now, not in the foreseeable future. The issue is frozen, and no level of diplomatic pressure will change that. Over time, Kosovo and the West will stop chasing this unattainable outcome and turn to what can be achieved. The real fight is elsewhere: securing Kosovo's place in key international institutions and deepening Western integration.

### **PARTITION WILL BE OFF THE TABLE**

The Trump administration, driven by its transactional approach, might revisit the idea of partition—just as it did during its first term—but this prospect is weak. Kosovo has established control over the north, and no major European power supports partition. The EU, more assertive than before, firmly opposes partition and is set to tighten its influence in the Western Balkans, further sidelining US influence in the region.

### **DIALOGUE WILL FOCUS ON CRISIS MANAGEMENT, NOT RESOLUTION**

Preoccupied with Ukraine, the EU lacks the will for bold moves on Kosovo and Serbia. Germany and

France will insist on implementing the Ohrid deal but will not push for new agreements. Brussels will watch closely, but only to keep tensions from boiling over. Neither Kosovo nor Serbia is likely to fully honor the Ohrid's commitments—whether on the ASM or mutual recognition of symbols. The fragile peace will hold, but a lasting resolution remains a distant prospect.

### **US ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION IS LIKELY TO DECLINE**

The Trump administration would be preoccupied with domestic battles and higher-stakes global issues, leaving the Kosovo-Serbia dispute on the back burner. While lower-level officials may still show interest in the Washington Agreement, serious follow-through is doubtful. Infrastructure projects—highways and rail links between Pristina and Belgrade—require major funding, but with the Development Finance Corporation office in Belgrade closed and no appetite in Washington for low-return investments, progress will stall. Meanwhile, Kosovo and Serbia, watching the US's erratic involvement in Ukraine, may prefer to keep their distance. A separate US-led negotiating process is unlikely—the US is disengaging, the EU would resist, Kosovo would hesitate, and Serbia, wary of Washington's unpredictability, may not want it either

### **US TROOPS MIGHT LEAVE, BUT KFOR WILL REMAIN**

Even if the US withdraws its 500 troops, European forces will fill the gap, and KFOR will remain strong enough to prevent escalation. The US presence is small—just 10 percent of KFOR—but its influence is outsized. For Kosovo, American troops are the ultimate security guarantee; for Serbia, they are a safeguard for Kosovo Serbs. Their absence could shift perceptions, but not dramatically. Besides, a full withdrawal is unlikely. The mission is low-cost, relying largely on National Guard units, and Washington understands that even a small footprint cements its influence in the region.

### **EU SANCTIONS COULD SOON BE LIFTED**

The EU will likely lift sanctions after the local elections in October—possibly sooner if tensions ease in the north—when Serb candidates regain control of local institutions. For the EU, sanctions were always a means to an end, not a long-term strategy. Once stability is restored, they will quietly be removed.



Written by: Katarina Tadić

## Part III: The Serbia Standpoint on the Dialogue with Kosovo

### EU-led dialogue for normalization between Kosovo and Serbia

Over the past four years, the normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia has failed to deliver a significant breakthrough. The two sides remain far from reaching a comprehensive peace agreement that would prevent tensions, consolidate the position of the Serb community in Kosovo, and resolve Kosovo's statehood dispute. Despite an EU-mediated normalization agreement in February 2023, the dialogue has largely remained at a standstill.

High-level meetings between Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić in Brussels have been rare, and so-called technical-level discussions have yielded few tangible results. The process, once seen as a path to long-term stability, has instead become a series of setbacks and unfulfilled commitments.

Nevertheless, over the past four years, the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has achieved several notable milestones which simultaneously turned into challenges due to the lack of implementation and internal political dynamic in Kosovo and Serbia:

**1)** Agreement on the Path to Normalization (February 2023): In February 2023, both parties reached a verbal agreement titled the "Agreement on the Path to Normalization between Kosovo and Serbia." This agreement was endorsed by all 27 European Union member states, marking a significant step in the EU-facilitated dialogue,

yet allowing for significant ambiguity in its implementation.

- 2)** Implementation Annex Agreement (March 2023): Following the initial agreement, in March 2023, Kosovo and Serbia verbally agreed on an annex outlining the implementation steps for the normalization process. The Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, said that his country had agreed on 'some kind of [a] deal' to normalise relations. 'We have agreed on some points, not on all points. This is not the final deal'. In the meantime, the Annex has become part of the negotiating chapter 35 with Serbia and thus legally binding as long as Serbia stays on the EU accession track. In Serbia, the agreement was perceived largely as a performative gesture of the regime to ensure the international support and play a constructive side in the Dialogue externally, while saying he was pressured to accept it internally.
- 3)** Cooperation on Missing Persons (May 2023): In May 2023, both sides agreed to cooperate closely on identifying grave sites and ensuring access to accurate information to locate and identify missing persons from the period between January 1, 1998, and December 31, 2000. Further progress was made in December 2024, when the joint commission has been agreed upon that will provide support to the working group, chaired by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

- 4) Recognition of Vehicle License Plates (December 2023): In December 2023, Serbia announced it would recognise the validity of vehicle license plates issued by the Republic of Kosovo starting January 1, 2024. This move was reciprocated by Kosovo, facilitating free movement and reducing administrative barriers for citizens of both countries.
- 5) Return of Contested Land to Visoki Dečani Monastery (March 2024): In March 2024, the government of Kosovo returned 24 hectares of contested land to the Visoki Dečani monastery of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), complying with a directive from the Constitutional Court of Kosovo. Even though this was not part of the dialogue, this act addressed a long-standing property dispute affecting the relationship between the SOC and the government in Prishtina.

However, as said, some of the achievements over time proved to be setbacks since the implementation challenge is persistent. Specifically, the Ohrid Agreement was followed by a series of incidents and developments that further deteriorated the relations between Kosovo and Serbia in the past four years.

- 1) In 2022, Serbs resigned en masse from their positions in state institutions in four Serb-majority northern municipalities of Kosovo. Mayors of Serb-majority municipalities, councillors, MPs, judges, prosecutors, judicial staff and Kosovo Police officers have all quit their jobs. The withdrawal was dictated from Belgrade and the reason was Kosovo Government's decision to re-register vehicles with Serbian-issued license plates. This was a significant setback in terms of the integration of Kosovo Serb judges, prosecutors and administrative staff into the Kosovo justice system achieved by October 2017. It then led to further tensions and a boycott of local elections in 2023, held just one month after the Ohrid Agreement was signed. As a result, with a very low turnout of merely few percents new ethnic Albanian mayors were elected in four municipalities in northern Kosovo. This withdrawal highlighted Vučić's tight control over northern Kosovo, revealing that integration was never genuine but rather dictated and managed from Belgrade.
- 2) Implementation Challenges Post-Ohrid Agreement (March 2023): Ohrid agreement can be seen both as an achievement and as a setback. Despite

committing to the Agreement in March 2023, the implementation of its provisions has faced considerable hurdles. Both parties have been accused of not fully binding to the agreed terms and further escalations took place shortly after it was signed. From this perspective, this Agreement is a rather another failed attempt to normalise relations than a successful milestone.

- 3) Closure of Serbian-Backed Institutions in Northern Kosovo: Throughout 2024, at least 59 Serbian institutions and services were closed throughout Kosovo during operations conducted by the Kosovo Police. Kosovo authorities have intensified efforts to eliminate what they term „parallel structures.“ The Kosovo Police led coordinated raids, drawing sharp criticism from international actors, including the United States, for potentially harming the Serbian minority's access to essential services, ranging from local administrative bodies to postal services and centers for social work.
- 4) Escalation of Tensions and Security Incidents: The period witnessed a rise in tensions, culminating in security incidents that brought Pristina and Belgrade alarmingly close to physical confrontation. These developments underscored the fragility of the normalization process and highlighted the deep-seated mistrust between the two parties.

However, the most serious incident that happened in the given period is in the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo which on 24 September, 2023 became the site of a significant and violent incident that has had profound implications for the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia.

A group of heavily armed ethnic Serb gunmen clashed with Kosovo police officers in Banjska, resulting in the death of Police Sergeant Afrim Bunjaku and injuries to two other officers. In the ensuing conflict, three of the attackers were also killed. The assailants, led by Milan Radoičić—a prominent Kosovo Serb politician with close ties to Serbia's ruling party—retreated to a local monastery, leading to a prolonged standoff with law enforcement. Following the incident, authorities seized a substantial cache of weapons and military equipment which BIRN later proved had originated from Serbia.

The Banjska attack has been widely interpreted as a severe setback to the ongoing efforts to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia. In the aftermath, Kosovo's government accused Serbia of orchestrating

the attack, alleging state support and involvement. This accusation was officially denied by Belgrade. The incident further strained the Brussels-mediated dialogue.

In Serbia, Vucic consistently denied the involvement of Serbia and faced with the pressure from abroad, Radoičić was brought to questioning 10 days after the attack in Banjska occurred. Detained in Belgrade, Radoicic was released after a day and was forbidden to leave Serbia and go to Kosovo, and his passport was confiscated.

Legal proceedings have been initiated in Kosovo, with 45 individuals indicted on terrorism-related charges connected to the attack, including Milan Radoičić, who remains in Serbia, which has refused to extradite him.

One and half years later, there was no serious pressure on the Serbian government to make Radoicic face justice and conduct a proper investigation. On the contrary, in the meantime Radoicic has continued

acquiring luxurious properties in Belgrade with close ties to Vucic and his closest circle.

Yet, this incident has underscored the fragility of the normalization process, highlighting deep-seated tensions and a potential for violence in northern Kosovo. Also, the attack in Banjska gave an excellent excuse to Kurti and his Government to take over northern Kosovo and increase police presence. Overall, it had negative implications for the position of Kosovo Serbs further deteriorating their relations with the Government in Prishtina. In addition, Banjska shows that the “stability” promise of Vucic’s regime is a false one. Both scenarios – one in which he did not know about the attack and the second in which he orchestrated it – are damning and they show that either 1) he lacks control over criminal networks tied to his government indicating his weakness or 2) he is responsible for inciting violence through these groups, but it ultimately backfired on him.

## The political situation in Serbia

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The political situation in Serbia cannot be separated from its relations with Kosovo and the EU-mediated dialogue. Over the past four years, Serbia has experienced increasing repression and political instability, marked by the growing authoritarianism of President Aleksandar Vučić. These years have been sobering for those who once believed Vučić might be willing to resolve the Kosovo issue or steer Serbia definitively toward the West. It has become evident that his primary motivation for engaging in dialogue with Kosovo was to secure EU and US support internationally, while internally transforming Serbia into a Russian-style autocracy.

Domestically, political polarisation, the criminalisation of the economy and society, illegal detentions, widespread surveillance, and the systematic capture of state institutions have severely eroded democratic governance. These developments are more consequential for the Kosovo dialogue than the process itself. A government that resorts to repression and institutional control is neither a democratic state nor one genuinely committed to peacebuilding in the region.

At the same time, the EU’s diminishing leverage and

the declining credibility of the accession process have reduced the urgency to resolve Kosovo’s status. Combined with Serbia’s domestic challenges, this has shifted the focus of civil society organizations (CSOs) away from the dialogue. The process remains as opaque and non-participatory as it was at its inception. Furthermore, Serbia’s most credible CSOs no longer view the government as a trustworthy interlocutor and have even formally [ceased](#) cooperation with state institutions, refusing to legitimize institutional repression and abuse of power.

Between 2021 and 2025, Serbia held three parliamentary elections, one presidential election, and several cycles of local elections. With each election, democratic freedoms were progressively stripped away, raising serious questions about the legitimacy of the government.

The electoral process was increasingly marred by irregularities, culminating in large-scale fraud during the December 2023 elections. The most egregious violations included:

- > Organized Transport of Voters (notably from Republika Srpska)
- > Procedural Violations by election officials
- > The “Bulgarian Train” Method (a well-documented vote-rigging technique)
- > Attacks on Election Observers
- > Unauthorized Voting Stations

These issues led to widespread criticism from both domestic and international observers. The OSCE reported that the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) maintained a “systematic advantage,” ensuring an uneven playing field. Even the repeated local elections in Belgrade in June 2024 failed to significantly alter the power dynamics.

Alongside political instability, Serbia has witnessed several waves of mass protests, leading to unprecedented levels of civic mobilization.

- > **2021-2022 ENVIRONMENTAL PROTESTS:** Large-scale demonstrations erupted against the government’s support for Rio Tinto’s proposed lithium mining project, forcing a temporary halt to the initiative.
- > **2023 TRAGEDY AND PROTESTS:** In a shocking incident, a mass shooting at a primary school in central Belgrade resulted in the deaths of [XX] people, sparking national outrage and demands for stricter gun control and government accountability.
- > **MID-2024 ANTI-LITHIUM PROTESTS:** The protests reignited after the government

attempted to revive the lithium mining project.

- > **2024 NOVI SAD CANOPY TRAGEDY:** A public catastrophe occurred when a collapsed canopy killed 15 people, which triggered student protests is currently posing the greatest challenge to Vučić’s rule in 12 years. The government’s response—arbitrary detentions, arrests of activists, and smear campaigns against critics—further fueled public anger.

With increasing repression on one side and growing civic mobilization on the other, the significance of the Brussels dialogue and the Kosovo issue in public debates has diminished. Neither the ruling regime nor right-wing parties can easily exploit nationalist sentiments regarding Kosovo to consolidate power as they once did. The distinctive character of these protests are in the inability of the Government to control the narrative. The distinctive feature of these protests is the government’s inability to control the narrative. Despite repeated attempts to use familiar tactics—exploiting historical symbolism, framing the protests as secessionist demands (Vojvodina), expelling individuals under the pretext of espionage, and accusing students of being foreign agents—this time, their efforts have failed.

However, this shift should not be misinterpreted as Serbian society being prepared to accept Kosovo’s independence. Rather, the severe democratic deterioration over the past 13 years has altered the political landscape, making internal struggles over governance, corruption, and civil liberties the dominant issues.

## The role of the EU

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Over the past five years (2020–2025), the relationship between Serbia and the European Union (EU) has become increasingly complex and transactional, marked by stalled accession talks, political tensions, and geopolitical balancing.

Once considered a frontrunner for EU membership, Serbia has made little concrete progress in aligning

with EU democratic standards, judicial independence, and media freedom. On the contrary, the country has undergone significant democratic backsliding—a term that barely conceals the reality of Serbia’s shift toward authoritarian governance, as repeatedly noted in reports by international organizations.

At the same time, the EU itself has diminished

enthusiasm for enlargement, burdened by its own internal challenges and enlargement fatigue. This has made the accession process increasingly unconvincing to Serbian citizens, as EU leverage over Serbia weakens.

The EU-mediated dialogue with Kosovo has turned into a symbolic performance rather than a serious effort to resolve long-standing issues. While Serbia continues to engage in talks, this participation is largely strategic—designed to secure EU funding and maintain diplomatic ties, rather than achieve any meaningful progress.

Tensions in northern Kosovo, particularly between Serbian communities and Kosovar authorities, have occasionally strained Serbia-EU relations. However, the overall dynamics have become increasingly transactional. The EU, rather than holding Serbia accountable for democratic backsliding, has turned a blind eye to anti-democratic trends in exchange for economic and geopolitical cooperation.

The most striking example is the EU's appeasement of Vučić's regime over the past year, largely driven by Serbia's lithium deposits, which are crucial for Europe's green transition. This pragmatic yet unprincipled approach has further eroded public trust in the EU, reinforcing the perception that Brussels prioritizes economic benefits over democratic principles.

Adding to the contradictions, pro-government media in Serbia have actively fuelled anti-EU narratives, portraying Brussels as biased toward Kosovo and hostile to Serbian sovereignty. This creates a paradoxical situation:

- > **The EU remains an ally of Vučić's regime, despite the fact that his government is intrinsically anti-European and anti-Western. His core political base will never shift toward EU integration, yet Brussels continues to accommodate his rule.**
- > **At the same time, the EU is losing the very segment of Serbian society that has traditionally supported European integration—those who advocate for democracy, rule of law, and human rights. By failing to insist on these fundamental values, the EU alienates its natural allies in Serbia.**

Instead of fostering democratic change, the EU's approach has emboldened authoritarian tendencies, weakened its credibility among pro-European Serbians, and reinforced Serbia's geopolitical balancing act between the East and the West. If this trend continues, the EU risks not only losing its influence in Serbia but also further undermining its own credibility as a values-based political entity in the Balkans.

The EU's increasingly transactional and inconsistent approach toward Serbia has had a profound impact on the Belgrade–Prishtina dialogue, further diminishing its credibility and effectiveness. Instead of acting as a neutral mediator with clear principles, the EU's reluctance to enforce democratic standards in Serbia and its weakened leverage have contributed to a stagnating process with no clear resolution in sight. In Serbia, Vučić's government uses nationalist rhetoric to maintain control, while the failure to engage civil society and opposition voices in Serbia, who support EU values and a democratic resolution, further undermines the legitimacy of the entire process.

## The relationship with the US

With Donald Trump in the White House, Serbia's leadership under Aleksandar Vucic will likely aim to pursue a pragmatic and transactional relationship with Washington, prioritizing economic and security cooperation while seeking to minimize pressure on key geopolitical issues. Saying that, a little will actually change. The previous Biden administration also did not pressure Serbia on democratic backsliding and Kosovo, quite the contrary. As described, in the past four years the dramatic increase of repression and election fraud did not provoke serious reactions from Washington, instead they opted to play business as usual and appease Vucic. The US stance coupled with the EU approach was detrimental to prodemocratic forces in Serbia.

Vučić previously had better personal relations with

Trump's administration, and Trump's foreign policy

approach which favours deal-making over ideological commitments, means that his administration prioritizes economic agreements over political ultimatums regarding Kosovo. The example is Washington agreement, focused on economic cooperation rather than political recognition of Kosovo. A new Trump administration might revive a similar strategy, giving Serbia room to delay Kosovo recognition while securing U.S. economic and diplomatic goodwill.

However, Vucic relationship with Trump will not necessarily be straightforward. The Balkans have a little geopolitical importance for Trump and its relevance and treatment may depend on the global geopolitical situation.

Trump has historically maintained a softer stance on Russia, which could benefit Serbia by even further reducing pressure to impose sanctions on Moscow, an issue that even the previous administration was quite tolerant with. Similarly, Trump's "America First" policy may suggest less emphasis on countering China, allowing Serbia to expand existing economic cooperation with Beijing without facing significant U.S. backlash. However, if Trump's administration perceives Serbia's ties with Russia or China as a direct challenge to some U.S. interests, Serbia could still face diplomatic or economic consequences.

Similarly, Serbia has gradually increased military cooperation with the U.S., including purchasing American-made weapons and air defence systems. A

Trump administration could continue or even expand this cooperation, particularly in counterterrorism and regional security. Trump's weaker stance on NATO and possibility to end NATO protection in Europe could mean reduced U.S. engagement in the Balkans, giving Serbia more autonomy in shaping its regional strategy but also reducing Washington's role as a stabilizing force. However, if that happens and Trump withdraws diplomatic and security focus from the region, Serbia might face stronger European pressure, particularly from Germany and France, which take a tougher stance on democratic reforms.

Also, Trump's administration would likely prioritize economic diplomacy, encouraging American investment in Serbia, particularly in energy, infrastructure, and trade. However, if US sees that Serbia aligns too closely with China's economic projects, particularly in strategic industries and technology, Trump's administration could impose restrictions or tariffs in response.

Trump's policy shifts based on political and personal considerations, meaning Serbia cannot fully rely on consistent U.S. support. While Trump's pragmatic and transactional approach may provide short-term benefits for Serbia, risks remain. Trump's unpredictability, transactional approach, and potential geopolitical shifts would require Serbia to navigate its foreign policy carefully. Vučić would have more diplomatic flexibility, but Serbia's long-term position would remain uncertain.

# Conclusion

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The normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia remains fraught with challenges, with limited progress despite high-profile agreements and international mediation. While some milestones—such as the 2023 Agreement on the Path to Normalization and cooperation on missing persons—offered hope, their lack of full implementation has turned them into sources of further tension. Political instability in Serbia, coupled with increasing repression under President Vučić, has only exacerbated the situation, making genuine dialogue increasingly difficult. The Banjska attack in 2023 underscored the fragility of the process, exposing deep-seated mistrust and the potential for further violence.

Internationally, the EU's inconsistent approach, prioritizing stability over democratic principles, has weakened its leverage, while the U.S. has largely opted for a transactional relationship with Serbia, showing

little commitment to addressing democratic backsliding. With the return of Donald Trump to the White House, Serbia may find even greater diplomatic flexibility, but this shift could also diminish Western influence in the Balkans, further complicating the region's stability.

Ultimately, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue remains stalled, not just because of unresolved disputes but due to a broader geopolitical landscape in which democracy and accountability are often side-lined in favour of short-term strategic interests. Without significant international pressure and a genuine commitment to democratic governance in Serbia, the prospects for a comprehensive normalization agreement remain uncertain.

# The Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue Between Achievements, Setbacks, and Unknowns

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## Authors:

Jeta LOSHAJ, Ramadan ILAZI, Shpetim  
GASHI, Katarina TADIĆ

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## Design and layout by:

Brand Vision Shpk  
Contact: +383 45 559 923  
Email: [brandvision.rks@gmail.com](mailto:brandvision.rks@gmail.com)

## About KCSS

Established in April 2008, the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) is a specialized, independent, and non-governmental organization. The primary goal of KCSS is to promote the democratization of the security sector in Kosovo and to improve research and advocacy work related to security, the rule of law, and regional and international cooperation in the field of security.

KCSS aims to enhance the effectiveness of the Security Sector Reform (SSR) by supporting SSR programs through its research, events, training, advocacy, and direct policy advice.

Advancing new ideas and social science methods are also core values of the centre. Every year, KCSS publishes numerous reports, policy analysis and policy briefs on security-related issues. It also runs more than 200 public events including conferences, roundtables, and debates, lectures – in Kosovo, also in collaboration with regional and international partners.

A wide-range of activities includes research, capacity-building, awareness raising and advocacy. KCSS's work covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to security sector reform and development; identifying and analyzing security risks related to extremism, radicalism, and organized crime; foreign policy and regional cooperation; and evaluating the rule of law in Kosovo.

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