



How the EU reshapes the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue through language



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Every escalation in the north of Kosovo is followed by the same response by the EU, including calls for restraint, appeals to “both sides,” and a return to dialogue. This has been established as the EU’s idiosyncratic language towards Kosovo, and it is widely acceptable. What requires more of our attention, however, is the way that language reshapes the reality it describes.

The EU-facilitated Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, referred to only as the Dialogue from now on, was mandated by a [UN General Assembly resolution in 2010](#) as a process of “normalizing relations” between the two countries. “Normal relations”, however, were never properly defined in words and visualized for the citizens. This allows for many reinterpretations of the main goal of the Dialogue depending on the local, regional and broader international political context.



The EU, quite early in the process, decided that Kosovo and Serbia would “normalize relations” by keeping their eyes and goals focused on their accession to the European Union. In the process of accession, it is the EU that decides when a country is progressing or not. Consequently, it is vital to analyze the language that the EU uses about the Dialogue to better understand its nature as facilitator in this process or as mediator in other potential conflict mediation scenarios.

Facilitation is a form of mediation which enables and fosters communication between the two mediated parties but rarely intervenes in what the agreements between them consist of, which is the reason why the [EU established the Dialogue as a facilitated process](#). Yet, whenever tensions rise in the north of Kosovo, the EU goes beyond the role of facilitator and claims that of an authority who decides the next steps and parties’ priorities to de-escalate the situation. The Dialogue has increasingly been used as a tool to contain conflict rather than one to resolve it. There are three main methods of [linguistic transformations](#) that the EU uses consistently to control the narrative of the Dialogue, which are explored below.

To start with, the most recurring transformation in the EU’s discourse about the Dialogue is legitimation, which happens mostly when the EU spontaneously includes in the framework of the Dialogue elements that were not originally part of it. For example, its increased authority in the process over time has been legitimized, even though theoretically the EU is only a facilitator between the parties. Because the EU has categorized the Dialogue as an element that can stall one of the parties’ accession processes to the Union, it has also acquired more authority in the Dialogue.

Furthermore, the EU legitimizes Serbia’s control over Kosovo Serbs. This is noted in the EU’s discourse especially since November 2022 when Kosovo Serbs resigned from their positions in Kosovo institutions and their low turnout in local snap elections of April 2023 in Serb-majority municipalities in the north of Kosovo. Both the withdrawal from institutions and the boycott of elections by Kosovo Serbs have been reported in the [2023 Country Report for Serbia](#) as a backslide of its compliance to Dialogue agreements, thus legitimizing that these acts were decided by Serbia rather than by the individuals.



Deletions are the second type of transformation that the EU uses to control the Dialogue narrative. Elements most often removed from the EU discourse are the context behind tensions and actors involved. To illustrate, after the early local elections in the north, the [EU Spokesman stated](#) that “it is imperative that we urgently *restore* a situation where Kosovo Serbs participate actively in local governance, policing and judiciary in the north of Kosovo” (emphasis of the author). The verb “restore” indicates that Kosovo Serbs did participate in public institutions once, but no longer do so, and the reason is unmentioned. The statement makes this situation a collective problem, a shared responsibility of multiple actors, unnamed, through the pronoun “we”, to make Kosovo Serbs part of institutions even though they had resigned themselves and boycotted the snap elections. Subsequently, as a measure to ensure the participation of Kosovo Serbs in public institutions, the Government of Kosovo introduced new vacancies for judiciary positions and Serbian Kosovo Police officers. While greeting this decision, the [EU also considered](#) it was not the best way forward.

The third linguistic transformation used by the EU, to alter the Dialogue’s meaning and implications, is rearrangement. For example, the EU often rearranges the sequences of actions taken and responses triggered, providing a distorted version of reality. After a meeting on August 27th, 2022, the [EU High Representative congratulated](#) Serbia with a cheerful tone for having reached an agreement within the framework of the Dialogue. He said that “Serbia has agreed to abolish the entry/exit documents for Kosovo ID holders, and Kosovo agreed to not introduce them for Serbian ID holders,” and considered this the EU’s success.

The Government of Kosovo was criticized many times for taking escalatory and unilateral steps with the decision to reciprocate Serbia’s practice of requesting entry/exit documents at the border crossing points, but it was that decision which led to Serbia’s abolishing this practice. The EU’s genuine success would have been a scenario in which Serbia abolished the practice without Kosovo deciding to reciprocate. The success, as the EU claimed it, happened only because of their presentation of actions in a rearranged sequence.



The presented examples give a glimpse of how the EU uses transformations such as legitimations, deletions and rearrangements in the Dialogue narrative to best fit its interests. They show how the Dialogue, very subtly, is often used as a tool of leverage towards parties instead of serving like the reconciliation process it was mandated to “normalize relations” between Kosovo and Serbia. On a more general sense, exploring how and why the EU recontextualizes a negotiation process between two parties sharing bitter history reveals important implications about the EU as mediator in other conflicts, as well as about its character as a political actor with growing ambitions in the wider international sphere.