

Kosovo's European perspective and its challenges

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Abstract

This paper analyses Kosovo's European perspective and its challenges towards integration into the European Union. The study also examines the role of the European Union during the Kosovo War (1998-1999) and in the post-Kosovo War reconstruction process, as well as the negotiation process for normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. It is highlighted that the EU does not hold a united position in relation to Kosovo, since 22 countries have recognised Kosovo while five countries refuse to do so. This made Kosovo's relationship with the EU more complex, but also more interesting to study.

The paper is based on the theory of liberal intergovernmentalism, analysing Kosovo's opportunities and challenges on its path to the EU. The pluralism of ethnic community interests and the differing positions of EU member state governments are explained in light of the concepts of this theory using a descriptive, comparative and explanatory approach.

Keywords: Australia European Union, independence, integration, Kosovo, recognition

Introduction

In the early 1990s, the Soviet Union and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia dissolved. Fifteen new countries emerged from the dissolution of the USSR, while seven new states were created from the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Shortly after gaining independence, all of these countries began integrating into the European Union. How can it be explained that these states, which initially fought for independence, suddenly claim to develop new relations with other countries in a supranational community by transferring some elements of their sovereignty to the multinational organisation?

The case of Kosovo illustrates this contradiction. While its independence movement was rooted in the aspirations of Kosovo citizens for self-determination, its ambitions for European integration reflect an orientation towards national and regional security, a desire for rapid economic prosperity, and alignment with Western democratic values and norms.

This paper examines Kosovo's relationship with the European Union and the process of Kosovo's integration into the EU by addressing the following research question: How did Kosovo's relationship with the European Union originate and evolve, and what challenges does the EU integration process face?

Kosovo's arduous struggle for independence and the pro-European social and cultural orientation of Kosovar society paved Kosovo's path to EU membership. The rapid reconstruction after the Kosovo War (1999), the establishment of democratic institutions, the market-oriented reform of the economic system, the Stabilization and

Association Agreement between Kosovo and the EU, and visa liberalisation are evidence of positive developments on the path to EU membership.

But Kosovo also faces serious political challenges. Kosovo's way to the European Union is largely influenced by the lack of unity within the EU Member States regarding Kosovo's statehood. The biggest challenge is the non-recognition of the independence of the Republic of Kosovo by five EU Member States. A serious problem for Kosovo is its relationship with neighbouring Serbia and the status of the Serb minority in Kosovo. EU countries are monitoring relations between the two countries with concern in the context of regional security in Southeast Europe.

The paper argues that Kosovo's integration into the EU is in the national interest of Kosovo. According to the EU ambassador to Kosovo, an EU survey has confirmed that 92% of respondents support Kosovo's integration into the EU (Orav, 2025). Although the main reasons for the pro-EU orientation of Kosovo society are economic and development interests, social interests and cultural identification with Europe are no less important. The paper highlights the importance of the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia on the path towards the EU.

Following the introduction, this paper discusses the theoretical and methodological framework, followed by a description of the initial contact between the European Union and Kosovo. It then deals with the role of the European Union during the Kosovo War and the different positions of the EU countries on Kosovo's independence. The dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia is analysed based on the EU mediation process and Kosovo's progress reports are reviewed. The final part of the paper addresses the security challenge in northern Kosovo and concludes with a conclusion.

Theoretical framework and methodology

The paper examines Kosovo's path integration into the European Union, drawing on the theory of liberal intergovernmentalism. This theoretical framework is used to explore the integration dynamics since the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki (on 21 June 2003).

Liberal intergovernmentalism, developed by Andrew Moravcsik, has become one of the most widely used theories for analyzing regional integration from an interdisciplinary perspective. Moravcsik models episodes of EU policy innovation in the EU as “a three-stage process in which states first define preferences, then engage in interstate bargaining, and finally design common institutions” (Moravcsik, 2018, p. 1649).

Liberal intergovernmentalism is based on “the premise that rational individuals and private groups with autonomous and differentiated interests are the fundamental actors in international politics” (Moravcsik, 1993, p. 483). In the case of Kosovo, interest groups hold pluralistic views on both the political and ethnic levels. However, the absolute majority of Kosovo citizens, including their interest groups, support the process of Kosovo's membership in the European Union.

Liberal intergovernmentalism presents a valuable opportunity to analyze the phenomenon of Kosovo's EU integration. In this context, the EU's political practices in relations with Kosovo are described, analyzed, and explained. Based on this theory, it is explained that Kosovo's political elite has, in most cases, responded pragmatically to

the EU's demands. However, there were also cases in which the political parties had difficulty accepting the requests due to the reaction of internal social groups (e.g., the EU demand for the creation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities).

Liberal intergovernmentalism emphasises that states wishing to join the EU must be willing to delegate parts of their sovereignty to EU institutions. Kosovo has experience delegating parts of its sovereignty to the UN via UNMIK¹ and military and security powers to KFOR.² Even after Kosovo's independence, parts of its rule-of-law authority were assumed by the EU (EULEX).³ This enabled Kosovo to coordinate its policies with the EU and establish coordination and cooperation relationships with it.

Liberal intergovernmentalism views European politics as a two-tiered phenomenon: the primary actors are the heads of state and government, while on the other side are interest groups within national societies that seek to assert their interests vis-à-vis the European Union. To a considerable extent, the EU institutions primarily pursue goals previously defined by the governments of the Member States. Moravcsík's concept has been criticised by Alec Stone Sweet and Wayne Sandholtz for misunderstanding the role of the EU institutions. In their view, EU institutions are not merely reactive actors that respond to the demands of the heads of state and government of the Member States but also develop a certain degree of autonomy and influence within the Member States (Sweet & Sandholtz, 1997, p. 314). In the case of Kosovo, this is reflected in the European Parliament's resolutions on the recognition of Kosovo and in the European Commission's initiatives to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and the Visa Liberalisation Agreement, despite the fact that some Member States have not recognised Kosovo's statehood.

This paper employs a descriptive, comparative and explanatory approach. In this context, a historical description of Kosovo's relations with the EU has been provided, EU reports and statements have been analyzed, and Kosovo's agreements with the EU have been examined. A good part also deals with the dynamics behind the EU strategy towards the region.

The data used in the paper was sourced from studies on European integration, official documents from Kosovo, the EU and international institutions, as well as articles from Kosovo and international media.

First direct contacts between the European Union and Kosovo

The violent abolition of Kosovo's autonomy on 23 March 1989, led to numerous protests by Albanians and police violence against them, escalating the conflict. During the demonstrations on 27 March 1989, 29 people were killed, approximately 200 injured, and 254 arrested (Minorities at Risk Project, 2004).

On 13 April 1989, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation in Kosovo which expressed "its indignation at the repression by the militia and armed forces and at the numerous arrests" (Zeitler, 2000, p. 149). The resolution demanded the release of political prisoners and a guarantee of rights for Kosovo Albanians. The

¹ United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo.

² KFOR is a NATO peacekeeping force in Kosovo since 1999. It is considered as a third security responder after the Kosovo Police and the EULEX.

³ The EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo.

Yugoslav Federal Parliament denied any violations of Albanian rights in Kosovo. For this reason, a delegation of the European Parliament was invited to visit Yugoslavia (European Parliament, 2009, p. 2).

The visit of European Parliament members took place from 28 May to 1 June 1989. The delegation was led by Julian Grimaldos (Spain), and consisted of members of the European Parliament including Giorgio Rossetti (Italy), Frode Kristoffersen (Denmark) and Lieselotte Seibel-Emmerling (Germany). The visit was intended as a fact-finding mission following the violent removal of Kosovo's autonomy on 23 March 1989.

The European Parliament delegation met with senior officials of the Federation of Yugoslavia for two days in Belgrade. On 30 May 1989, they also visited Kosovo. In Prishtina they met with two representatives of the Kosovo's intellectual elite, Ibrahim Rugova and Rexhep Qosja (Политика, 1989, p. 1). This marked the first official visit of a European Parliament delegation to Kosovo and the first direct contact between representatives of the European Parliament and Kosovo representatives. From the perspective of intergovernmental liberalism, this meeting presents an opportunity to advocate for the national interests of Albanians with a key European actor.

On the day of the EU Parliament's delegation visit to Kosovo, massive demonstrations against the abolition of Kosovo's autonomy took place in Prishtina and Podujeva. Demonstrators chanted the slogan "Europe, help!" Police violently repressed the demonstrators. Many were injured, and one person was killed in Podujeva. The European Parliament's delegation cut short its visit. The head of the delegation declared that "the necessary conditions for the carrying out their tasks were not in place" (Zeitler, 2000, p. 150).

The visit of the European Parliament delegation on 30 May 1989, raised hopes among the citizens of Kosovo that Europe understood their demands. Sympathy for the European Community grew among Kosovo Albanians. However, the European Parliament did not have the expected influence on the European Community's institutions. For ten years there was peaceful, non-violent resistance in Kosovo until the Kosovo War began in 1998.

The EU's role during the Kosovo war 1998-1999

In March 1998, war broke out between the Kosovo Liberation Army and the Rest-Yugoslav police and army. The positions of the EU Member States in the Kosovo conflict were not entirely unified, as their interests also differed. Nevertheless, they managed to agree on engagement in the Kosovo conflict, due to being aware of the consequences of their hesitation in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since Austria held the EU Council Presidency in the second half of 1998, the Austrian Ambassador to Belgrade, Wolfgang Petritsch, was appointed EU Special Envoy for Kosovo on 5 October 1998. Petritsch, together with the American representative Christopher Hill, worked intensively to achieve a peaceful solution within the framework of transatlantic coordination (Petritsch, Kaser & Pichler, 1999, p. 231).

Petritsch and Hill worked intensively in three different directions: persuading Milosevic and his people to make peace, convincing the representatives of the Albanians in Kosovo to engage in dialogue and working on a draft agreement. The EU

Council published a declaration on 26 October 1998, in which both conflict parties were called to agree to comply with the Milosevic-Holbrooke Agreement, to respect UN Resolutions 1199 and 1203 and to be open to dialogue (Petritsch, Kaser & Pichler, 1999 p. 245). Several draft agreements, worked out by Petritsch and Hill, were rejected by both sides at the end of 1998.

After the massacre of 45 Kosovo Albanians in Reçak (15 January 1999), EU diplomacy showed its best side. At first, the EU Troika, consisting of representatives from the current EU presidency (Germany), the preceding presidency (Austria), and the upcoming presidency (Finland), protested against the violence of the Serbian police and then quickly worked on a conference to resolve the Kosovo issue. The EU Troika conveyed their governments' protest to the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry, condemning "in the strongest possible terms the actions of the Serbian security forces against the civilian population and was demanded the investigation of the events in cooperation with the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague" (Petritsch, Kaser & Pichler, 1999, p. 262).

The framework for the peace negotiations was established by the Contact Group (USA, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia). The negotiations took place from 6 to 23 February 1999, in Rambouillet (France), under the chairmanship of French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. The proposed peace agreement for Kosovo was ultimately rejected by the Serbian regime under Slobodan Milosevic (Weller 1999: 453). In response, NATO attacked Serbia, which lasted from 24 March to 10 June 1999. The liberation of the Kosovo took place on 12 June 1999 with the entry of NATO-led forces into Kosovo (Hacke, 1999, p. 49)

Despite being dependent on NATO for security matters, the EU managed to remain an important actor in the negotiation process toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Many EU Member States were also members of NATO. After the NATO attacks on Yugoslavia began on 24 March 1999, the EU's role was marginalised, while NATO's role came to the fore.

Kosovo's European perspective

The Kosovo War led to an organisational restructuring of EU institutions. The EU decided to create a dedicated area of EU foreign policy, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Another effect was increased awareness of the importance of integrating the Western Balkan countries with the goal of conflict prevention and, simultaneously, promoting transformation towards peace and democracy in Europe. As a result, concrete steps were taken to integrate these countries into the EU.

After the war (June 1999), Kosovo changed its political and economic system and remained under UN administration, without achieving full independence. Article 17 of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 of 10 June 1999, defines the role of the EU as developing a comprehensive approach to economic development and promoting democracy, economic prosperity and regional cooperation (UN Security Council, 1999, p. 5).

In line with the concept of liberal intergovernmentalism, many areas of institutional action, including economic and political ones, were delegated to the EU. The EU

assumed leadership of the fourth pillar within the UNMIK administration in Kosovo, which was responsible for reconstruction and economic development. Between 1999 and the end of 2003, the European Union provided Kosovo with approximately €1.6 billion in financial assistance (Kramer & Dzihic, 2006, p. 31). Reconstruction therefore progressed very successfully: Within five years, houses, roads, bridges, and schools were built.

Before independence, Kosovo's state institutions became familiar with the Copenhagen EU accession criteria. They tried to base their decisions on them, by fulfilling the political criteria (democracy, human rights, protection of minorities), the economic criteria (functioning market economy and competition) and the membership obligations (*acquis communautaire*).

At the 1999 Zagreb Summit, the EU offered all Balkan states, including Kosovo, the Stabilization and Association Project, subject to certain conditions. The stabilisation and association process provided the Western Balkan countries with the opportunity to determine the pace of rapprochement through individual reform steps.

At the joint Thessaloniki Summit between the EU and Southeastern European countries on 21 June 2003, the prospect of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU was opened. However, additional preconditions were imposed by the Member States, including cooperation with the ICTY, the return of refugees, respect for human rights, respect for national minorities, good neighborly relations, etc. Although Kosovo was not yet an independent state in 2003 and was administered by UNMIK, the EU declared that Kosovo would also have a clear European perspective (EU Commission, 2003).

The EU reiterated its position that Kosovo had a clear "European future" in 2005. The announcement clarified that the European Commission "will continue to contribute to ensuring that Kosovo's European perspective becomes a manageable reality" (European Commission, 2005, p. 10). It was agreed that Kosovo would be part of the progress of the Western Balkans within the framework of the Stabilization and Association Process. The Commission also cited the European Union's political and financial commitment (approximately €1.6 billion) to Kosovo between 1999 and 2005.

In connection with EU integration and the unresolved political status of Kosovo, the Council of the European Union declared on 21 February 2005: "The Union will therefore have an important role to play when the status of Kosovo is being examined, to ensure that it is fully compatible with the process of European integration" (Council of the European Union, 2005).

The EU has played a significant role in shaping Kosovo's democratisation process. It has been directly involved in the state-building and democratisation processes, exerted diplomatic and political pressure for the implementation of power-sharing provisions, and mediated between the two communities through negotiations in Brussels (Baliqi, 2019, p. 67).

The EU and other international actors were successful in Kosovo's rapid economic reconstruction. With the help of the EU, the market economy system and the privatisation process were established. The EU also played a very important role in regulating the lives of the Kosovar population through investments in housing, water supply, transport, energy, and demining. The EU's influence was significant in the area

of the rule of law (police), while only relative successes were achieved in the area of justice (Greqevci, 2022, p. 44). The relative success in the area of justice is mainly attributed to by the lack of coordination among international actors and the resistance of local actors in this field. A successful process of reconstruction and democratic institutionalisation was followed by Kosovo's independence.

The position of the EU States on the independence of the Republic of Kosovo

Kosovo declared independence on 17 February 2008. The next day it was recognised by two major EU countries, France and the United Kingdom, as well as by the US, Albania, Turkey and Costa Rica. The attitude of the EU countries was not uniform. Therefore, the Council of the European Union only took note of the declaration of independence of the Republic of Kosovo (17 February 2008), that the resolution commits Kosovo to the principles of democracy and equality of all its citizens and noted that Member States would decide in accordance with their national practices respecting the international law (Council of the European Union, 2008a, p. 2). The Council affirmed the position that Kosovo was a *sui generis* case.

While the European Commission and the Council of the European Union maintained a neutral position, it was the European Parliament that repeatedly called for the recognition of the Republic of Kosovo by all European Union Member States. In its latest resolution on Kosovo, adopted on 6 July 2022, the European Parliament stressed that

the independence of Kosovo is irreversible; welcomes the fact that Israel recognized Kosovo on 4 September 2020; regrets, however, the fact that five EU Member States have not yet recognized Kosovo and reiterates its call for them to do so immediately and reaffirm Kosovo's EU perspective (European Parliament, 2022).

Member States are divided into two camps: 22 EU Member States that recognise the Republic of Kosovo and five countries that have not. The largest group of states, 22 of them, including Germany, France, and Italy, immediately recognised Kosovo's independence due to geostrategic interests and the need for greater security. Five Member States—Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain—did not recognise the Republic of Kosovo.

Based on the three components of liberal intergovernmentalism theory (national preferences, intergovernmental negotiations, and institutional arrangements), the factors influencing the non-recognition of Kosovo can be explained by internal factors, such as fears of setting a precedent for the independence movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country in Spain, demands for greater autonomy for the Hungarian minorities in Romania and Slovakia, and the unresolved Northern Cyprus conflict. In contrast to the other four countries, Greece pursues a pragmatic rapprochement policy toward Kosovo, which is also reflected in the opening of liaison offices in Prishtina and Athens.

Following the independence of the Republic of Kosovo, the EU has repeatedly reaffirmed that Kosovo has a clear European perspective. The Council welcomed the planned restructuring of the international civilian presence in Kosovo, which will

enable an enhanced operational role for the EU in the area of the rule of law, as well as Kosovo's commitment to the principles of democracy and equal rights for all citizens, to the protection of Serb and other minorities, and to the protection of religious and cultural heritage (Council of the European Union, 2008b, p. 15).

Although five EU Member States have not recognised the Republic of Kosovo, the EU has made a significant contribution to stabilising the situation in the newly established Republic of Kosovo. At a donor conference organised by the European Commission on 11 July 2008, €1.2 billion was allocated to finance socio-economic development in Kosovo, of which €508 million came from the EU. To close a funding gap, the Donor Conference made an important contribution to Kosovo's development (European Commission, 2008).

Germany was the largest investor in Kosovo in 2022, investing €194.5 million (International Trade Administration 2024). The EU is also the most important trading partner: exports to the EU (mainly base metals and base metal products) amounted to €311.8 million, or 33.9% of total exports, while imports from the EU reached €2.4 billion, equivalent to 42.4% of Kosovo's GDP (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2024, p. 38).

EULEX was the EU's rule of law mission in Kosovo. Approximately 2,000 police officers, prosecutors, and judges were involved in upholding the rule of law following Kosovo's independence. The Kosovo Parliament accepted EULEX's mandate. Its role has evolved in response to the changing situation on the ground. Initially, it had a monitoring, support, and advisory function. After 2020, the Kosovo judicial authorities assumed more responsibility for the rule of law, while EULEX now plays only a monitoring, rather than an executive, role.

From the perspective of the liberal intergovernmentalism theory, it can be concluded that EU policy towards Kosovo was shaped by the interests of individual states. These were guided by rational calculations of interests, which were also influenced by interest groups within the Member States and the European institutional mechanisms. Despite Kosovo's non-recognition by five Member States, EU institutions have consistently emphasised the EU's European perspective. They supported the reconstruction process, the establishment and development of democratic institutions, Kosovo's economic development, and the judicial system. The asymmetry in the recognition process reveals the structural limits of the influence of EU institutions.

The EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia

As early as March 2008, the Serbian government made clear its plan to bring the Republic of Kosovo's declaration of independence before the International Court of Justice. On 8 October 2008, at Serbia's instigation, the UN General Assembly referred the following question to the International Court of Justice (ICJ): "Is the unilateral declaration of independence by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo in accordance with international law?" (United Nations, 2008, p. 1).

On 22 July 2010, the International Court of Justice in The Hague published its Advisory Opinion with a clear answer to the above question:

The Court has concluded above that the adoption of the declaration of independence of 17 February 2008 did not violate general international law, Security Council resolution 1244 (1999) or the Constitutional Framework. Consequently, the adoption of that declaration did not violate any applicable rule of international law (International Court of Justice, 2010, p. 7).

The opinion of the International Court of Justice was followed by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 64/298 of 9 September 2010, which took note of “the opinion of the International Court of Justice on the compatibility of Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence with international law” and welcomed the EU’s willingness to facilitate a dialogue between the two parties (United Nations 2010).

The dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia began immediately after the adoption of Resolution 64/298. The European Union successfully persuaded both sides to initiate the negotiation process for the normalising relations between the two countries. The negotiation tactics pursued had a strong rational basis: First, acceptable solutions were negotiated and found for practical issues such as customs stamps, land registry, telecommunications, transport, trade, university degrees, and border management.

The negotiations were mediated by Catherine Ashton, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Kosovo was represented by Hashim Thaci, Prime Minister of Kosovo, and Serbia by Ivica Dacic, Prime Minister of Serbia. The Brussels Agreement, signed on 19 April 2013, is considered the first step toward normalising relations. It is a simple text of just two pages and 15 paragraphs. Paragraph 14 states that neither party will block the other’s integration into the EU or encourage others to do so (Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, 2013, p. 3).

The agreement was supported by a majority of MPs in the Parliament of the Republic of Kosovo, which ratified it as an international treaty on 27 June 2013. Serbia, however, did not submit the agreement for parliamentary ratification because it did not recognise it as an international treaty. A case before the Serbian Constitutional Court regarding the unconstitutionality of the agreement signed by Prime Minister Ivica Dacic failed. The Serbian Constitutional Court considered the case a political, rather than a legal, issue (Ustavni Sud Republike Srbije, 2014).

Three days after the agreement, the European Commission recommended the Council of the European Union to open discussions on a Stabilization and Association Agreement between the Republic of Kosovo and the EU and to initiate negotiations on Serbia’s EU membership. On 28 June 2013, the Council of the EU approved the path to the Stabilization and Association Agreement with Kosovo (Council of the European Union, 2013, p. 20).

The agreement of 19 April 2013 had two significant effects: the integration of Serb-majority municipalities into the administration of the Republic of Kosovo and the establishment of the Kosovar legal system in the north of the country. The agreement created a new negotiating climate, followed by new agreements in the justice, energy, and telecommunications sectors, the approval of Kosovo’s international telecommunications prefix +383, and the participation of Serbs in the 2013 elections.

As a result, representatives of the Serbian minority were integrated into Kosovo’s state institutions. Still, the possibility of creating an association of Serbian municipalities in Kosovo sparked fierce debate within Kosovo’s society. A new agreement was signed on

25 August 2015 specifying details of the Association of Serbian Municipalities. The opposition and civil society criticised the agreement as an attempt to create a new administrative entity contrary to the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, a mono-ethnic entity, "a new Republica Srpska in Kosovo." Massive protests against the agreement took place in many cities of Kosovo.

In this situation, the President of the Republic of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga, referred the agreement to the Constitutional Court to determine whether it was compatible with the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo. The Constitutional Court found in 2015 that "the principles, as elaborated in the Association/Community of municipalities with a Serbian majority in Kosovo - General principles/Main elements", are not entirely compatible with the spirit of the Constitution" (Gjykata Kushtetuese e Republikës së Kosovës, 2015, p. 39). The court also found that the Association exceeded the constitutional standards of Kosovo for local self-government.

The Kosovo government was forced to respect the Constitutional Court's decision. The Serbian government insisted on establishing the Association in accordance with the Agreement, i.e., with mono-ethnic content and executive powers, a kind of intermediate administrative level in Kosovo. The Kosovo government, on the other hand, insisted that the Association could only be established as an NGO without executive or administrative powers.

Interest groups in Kosovo and Serbia hold opposing views on Kosovo's status. The lack of willingness to compromise represents a serious obstacle: "The unwillingness of Kosovars and Serbs to compromise has, without a doubt, complicated the EU's work in Kosovo" (Tzifakis, 2013, p. 51). The Serbian government has used the dialogue to lobby against Kosovo's independence. It succeeded in preventing Kosovo's admission to UNESCO in 2015 and Interpol in 2018. Kosovo has attempted to increase the number of recognitions and admissions to international organisations through dialogue.

The EU has supported the process but failed to establish enforcement mechanisms. Depending on the national positions of the Member States, the EU has acted as a mediator with limited enforcement power to keep the dialogue on track. Despite some practical successes, the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia remains a significant challenge for the region and the EU.

Kosovo and Serbia face the same difficulty: To join the EU, they must recognise each other. Then German Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared in Prishtina on 12 June 2022 that Kosovo and Serbia cannot become EU members without mutual recognition (Scholz, 2022). In this case, Serbia could pose an obstacle to EU integration for both itself and Kosovo.

The myth of Kosovo has become an integral part of Serbian culture, religion and historiography. According to public opinion polls, when presented with the choice between Kosovo and the EU membership, the majority of Serbian citizens opt for Kosovo over EU membership (Marković, Jovanović & Matijević, 2019, 174). In the first phase of the dialogue on the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, Serbia was positively assessed for accepting the dismantling of its parallel structures in northern Kosovo, for adopting a pragmatic stance towards the integration of Serbian police officers into Kosovo's police structures and for its commitment to solving problems through dialogue.

Since 1999, the EU has been working to transform Kosovo's internal social structures. The political elites were attracted by utilitarian offers (visa liberalisation, EU investments, financial aid, prospect of EU membership) and simultaneously pressured by conditionalities (suspension of financial aid, suspension of infrastructure projects, postponement of visa liberalisation). The Stabilization and Association Agreement and visa liberalisation contributed to Kosovo's political elite developing a utilitarian awareness of the EU integration process. The European Commission recognised Kosovo's status as a potential candidate for EU membership, despite opposition from five EU countries that did not recognise Kosovo.

Thanks to dialogue, Kosovo was able to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement, as well as secure visa liberalisation. However, its application for EU membership, submitted in 2022, was not even discussed due to the non-implementation of the establishment of an Association of Serbian municipalities.

The progress reports on Kosovo

The Stabilization and Association Process was presented by the EU Commission in 1999 as an ambitious vision for the region within the framework of regional cooperation with the Western Balkans. The instruments were subsequently presented at the summits in Zagreb (November 2000) and Thessaloniki (June 2003).

Kosovo signed the SAA Agreement on 27 October 2015. With Kosovo's signature, all non-EU countries in Southeast Europe have now signed the SAA Agreement, including North Macedonia 2001, Albania 2006, Montenegro 2007, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2008, Serbia 2008, and Kosovo 2015.

The European Commission presents an annual progress report for the Republic of Kosovo, as well as for the other candidate and potential candidate countries in Southeast Europe. The 2022 report notes that Kosovo demonstrated political stability following the 2021 elections. Positive developments include the 2021 local elections, which were overall well-organised, transparent, and competitive; the commitment to combating gender inequality; the pluralistic and vibrant media environment; progress in migration management; the government's commitment to fully implement the Venice Commission Opinion on the vetting process for judges and prosecutors; the substantial increase in tax revenues and the low public deficit in 2021; and the good-neighbourly relations with Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia (European Commission, 2022, pp. 4-7).

The European Commission announced in its 2023 Kosovo Progress Report that visa liberalisation for Kosovar citizens would enter into force on 1 January 2024. It commended Kosovo and Serbia for reaching an agreement on the path to normalisation of relations in Brussels on 27 February 2023, and for adopting the annex for its implementation in Ohrid, North Macedonia, on 18 March 2023. Kosovo and Serbia were criticised for not yet having started implementing their respective obligations under the agreement. Kosovo was praised for its stance, which, in line with EU countries, condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine (European Commission, 2023, p. 3).

The signing of the SAA Agreement was of great importance for Kosovo. It establishes its state legitimacy in relation to the EU. Through it, a framework has been created for

reforms in the political, economic and institutional fields that lead to EU membership. For the EU, the SAA agreement with Kosovo was of strategic importance, as it contributed to the dissemination of European values and encouraged political and economic reforms, while promoting regional cooperation in Southeastern Europe.

Kosovo has formally applied for European Union membership by the end of 2022 (RFE 2022). In April 2024, Kosovo adopted the National Program for European Integration 2024/2028. The program is comprehensive. It is based on the Copenhagen criteria and divided into three blocks: political criteria, economic criteria, and European standards – alignment of Kosovo's legislation with the EU acquis:

It foresees short-term reforms for 2024 and medium-term priority objectives for fulfilling the obligations arising from the SAA and other EU integration mechanisms, through the approximation of national legislation with the EU acquis and the implementation of the approximated legislation (Qeveria e Republikës së Kosovës, 2024, 9).

From the perspective of liberal intergovernmentalism, progress reports are an instrument of intergovernmental influence. While the Kosovo government defines its state interests, the EU promotes progress through negotiations. The EU utilises its mechanisms to support Kosovo's integration process but lacks the authority to impose its positions.

Kosovo has guaranteed minority representation rights in its constitution and adopted a flag and national anthem that do not contain symbols of the Albanian majority population. Despite pressure from the EU, the Kosovo government has not implemented the creation of an association of Serb-majority municipalities. This issue has dominated the negotiation process since 2011.

Kosovo was the last Southeast European country to be granted visa liberalisation. The obstacle to visa liberalisation was the heated debate between the government and the opposition in 2016 over the ratification of the border agreement between Kosovo and Montenegro. When the border agreement with Montenegro was ratified in 2018, several EU countries made new demands. Spain, the Netherlands, France and Belgium requested the application of the ETIAS system as a prerequisite for visa liberalisation. As a result, visa liberalisation was postponed for several more years. Thus, Kosovo was the last potential candidate for European Union accession to receive visa-free travel to the Schengen area, effective on 1 January 2024.

Kosovo's identification with Albania is deeply rooted in a shared ethnic, linguistic, and cultural foundation. This often leads to misunderstandings in EU political and governmental decision-making circles. This is also encouraged by some parties and social groups that advocate for the unification of Kosovo and Albania. However, the governments of Kosovo and Albania have been careful to reconcile the hopes of those social groups with the demands of the EU institutions for pragmatism and regional stability: "Both governments have adopted a strategic approach that emphasises their independence and sovereignty" (Abazi, 2025, p. xvi).

The problems that continue to hinder Kosovo's path to EU membership include overcoming the legacy (the historical burdens left behind after conflict), including the prosecution of war crimes, the search for missing persons, the return of refugees, and the establishment of a rule of law in Kosovo (Axyonova & Kartsonaki 2024, p. 9).

Kosovo is also expected to combat corruption. But one of the biggest challenges for Kosovo remains security in the north of Kosovo.

The security challenge in the north of Kosovo

Security in northern Kosovo remains fragile. In the predominantly Serb municipalities of North Mitrovica, Zvečan, Leposavić, and Zubin Potok, radical Serbian groups are carrying out actions against the government and state institutions of Kosovo. The Serbian political parties in Kosovo are affiliated with Serbian state institutions. Over many years, they have also built a parallel system that has been severely weakened in the last three years.

By 2022, the Kosovo Government had taken complete control of northern Kosovo. EULEX and KFOR support it. Ethnic Serbs in northern Kosovo used license plates issued by the Serbian authorities, even though Kosovo declared its independence in 2008. In 2022, the Kosovo government demanded that all residents, including Serbs in the north, replace their issued license plates with official Kosovo license plates as part of the enforcement of state sovereignty and legality. Representatives of the Serb minority in Kosovo refused. Following the license plate conflict in November 2022, ethnic Serb mayors, judges, and police officers in the north resigned. They organised violent protests. The problem was initially resolved through EU negotiations. However, in May 2023, violent clashes broke out between Serbian demonstrators and KFOR troops in northern Kosovo. Thirty KFOR soldiers were injured (The Guardian, 2023).

The protests began when ethnic Albanian mayors occupied municipal buildings. They had won elections in the municipalities of Leposavić, North Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, and Zvečan on 23 April 2023, with a turnout of only 3.47%, following a boycott by Serbs (European Western Balkans, 2023).

On 24 September 2023, Serbian militants attacked the Kosovo Police in Banjska, northern Kosovo. Kosovo Police Sergeant Afrim Bunjaku was killed. After his murder, the attackers were stationed at the Banjska Monastery. Kosovo Police responded, killing three of the attackers and arresting eight people (Zhinipotoku, 2023). Kosovo and the EU classified the attack as a terrorist attack.

EU High Representative Josep Borrell spoke to Prime Minister Kurti on 24 September 2023 and condemned the hideous and cowardly terrorist attack on Kosovo police officers: “He condemned in the strongest terms today’s aggression. High Representative Borrell expressed his condolences to the family, colleagues, and loved ones of the police officer who lost his life in the line of duty, and wished speedy recovery to the injured police officers” (European Union External Action, 2024).

The deputy chairman of the Serb List, Milan Radoičić, claimed responsibility for the attack. The US State Department called for his arrest: “We have a clear position on Mr. Radoičić. He has claimed responsibility for the attack in Banjska through his lawyers. He is a criminal who must be held accountable” (Radio Free Europe, 2024).

Three consecutive attacks occurred in November 2024. On 26 November 2024, a hand grenade attack occurred on the police station in Zvečan, and on 28 November 2024, an explosive device was thrown near the Zvečan municipal building. Another incident

occurred on 29 November 2024, when the main Ibër Lepenc canal was damaged by explosives near the village of Vrage in Zubin Potok. This canal supplies water to several cities in Kosovo and is used to cool thermal power plants and generate electricity.

These cases testify to the fragility of the situation but also lay the foundation for more intensive negotiations to normalise relations between Kosovo and Serbia as a prerequisite for both countries' accession to the EU.

Conclusion

Kosovo's citizens demonstrate a high level of readiness for integration into the European Union (Orav, 2025). This pro-European orientation is rooted in Kosovo's history, culture, geography, and politics. It has intensified particularly since the support provided by Western countries during the 1998/99 Kosovo War. Kosovo Albanians feel that Europe views them as part of the European identity. Therefore, it is a logical consequence that Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti declared: "Europe is our destiny. Europe is our future" (Radio Free Europe, 2022).

The case of Kosovo illustrates that the states that emerged after the collapse of the USSR and the SFRY are striving for EU integration in order to achieve economic development, greater prosperity, and identification with the political values of freedom and democracy.

Over the past 35 years, from the first direct contact between Kosovar representatives and EU representatives (1989), interaction between Kosovo and the EU has intensified, and institutionalised. Kosovo's perspective on EU integration has opened significantly. The EU was directly involved in the negotiation process to end the war and rebuild Kosovo.

Kosovo continues to face numerous challenges because it is not recognised by all EU countries. Kosovo's relations with neighboring Serbia are also problematic. Because the Serb minority in northern Kosovo has a clear preference for the Serbian state. The Serbian government in Serb-populated areas of Kosovo has invested in maintaining its parallel system, significantly hampering the integration of Serbs into Kosovo's institutions.

Kosovo's experience with transferring part of its sovereignty to European Union institutions has been an advantage on its path to the EU. Kosovo has reformed its economic and political system with the help of the EU. It has established a market economy and implemented a privatisation process, which has been accompanied by continuous economic growth. However, despite the EU's direct engagement, only relative results have been achieved in transforming the judicial system (Greqevci, 2022, p. 44).

Security in northern Kosovo remains a further challenge on Kosovo's path to EU membership. In the municipalities of North Mitrovica, Zvečan, Leposavic, and Zubin Potok, Serbian radical groups have caused a series of incidents over the past three years, resulting in four deaths (one Albanian policeman and three Serb attackers) and the injury of several KFOR soldiers.

Kosovo officially applied for European Union membership in December 2022. In January 2024, the EU lifted the visa requirement for Kosovar citizens (European Commission, 2024). In April 2024, Kosovo adopted the 2024/2028 National Program for European Integration. The program is based on the Copenhagen criteria and aims to meet the political and economic criteria, archiving European standards to ensure convergence with the EU *acquis Communautaire*. The length of time it will take for Kosovo to receive candidate status and join the EU depends mainly on the EU Member States, the EU institutions, and the way the Kosovo government addresses the challenges on the path to integration, as outlined in this paper.

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