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# INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC FACTORS SHAPING KOSOVO'S EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the complex and dynamic relationship between Kosovo and NATO. It argues that Kosovo's prospects for NATO membership are shaped by an array of contradictory and often confusing international and domestic political forces. It draws on theoretical sources, media reports, and descriptive statistical data to the factors shaping expectations for NATO membership. The study relies on theories and concepts from the established and evolving literature on alliance formation and expansion to explain how states aspiring for membership in security organizations must navigate a pattern of political and security hurdles in their quest for membership accession. It then explores Kosovo's case for NATO membership by examining whether Kosovo has met key political and security benchmarks and devotes significant attention to the settlement dispute with Serbia, the roles played by the U.S. and E.U., and identifies alternative paths for Kosovo's membership in NATO.

**Keywords:** NATO; Euro-Atlantic integration; Kosovo; Serbia; Western Balkans.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Kosovo and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is complex. While the United States (U.S.)-led NATO mission in Operation Allied Force in the former Yugoslavia in 1999 was instrumental in establishing Kosovo's sovereignty, it did not result in a formal agreement between Kosovo and NATO. Given the lack of a peace settlement with Serbia, NATO-led international peacekeeping Kosovo Force (KFOR) operations have remained unchanged since the passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999). NATO implemented capacity-building measures in 2008 after Kosovo declared independence and continued cooperation with the Kosovo Security Force (KSF). NATO transitioned KFOR to a "deterrent presence" to protect minority communities and secure cultural and religious sites (Morina 2018). In the absence of mutual recognition and normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, KFOR operations continue resulting in a contradictory and puzzling relationship. KFOR allows Kosovo and NATO to develop a security relationship, but its presence inhibits the initiation of bilateral relations between Kosovo and NATO.

The current approach sees Kosovo's prospects for membership in NATO depending, to a great extent, on settling the dispute with Serbia (Choi 2017). However, the E.U.'s "status neutrality" gives the five non-recognizers, Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain power to deny Kosovo a path toward integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions. NATO members Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain and non-NATO Cyprus do not recognize Kosovo yet even though the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in 2010 that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate international law (ICJ 2010: 403). Even more, Kosovo visa liberalization for years has been denied for years. But research demonstrates that shifts in the positions of the four NATO-recognizers would transform the process and raise the chances for Kosovo to attain NATO membership and enter the Partnership for Peace (Joseph et al., 2022). This study addresses the following research question: what are the most important domestic and international impediments to Kosovo's integration within the NATO alliance?

## ALLIANCES AND STATES

States often find it is in their best interests to boost security through integration and cooperation with multilateral organizations designed to mitigate threats and ensure peace. Under threat, states are likely to seek membership in security alliances or security communities to defend themselves against threats and facilitate the attainment of their security goals (Rothstein 1968). States accede to alliances if they are under threat of retaliation if they do not

align, receive more rewards for joining than paying the cost of not joining, obtain promises from alliance members, or gain public support (Johnson 2017; Riker 1962).

Smaller states seek membership in alliances since they rely on other states for protection. Major powers want to align with smaller states because of the military and political benefits that come with less powerful states in the alliance. Major powers want smaller powers in an alliance structure to restrain them from threatening others or engaging in military actions that could undermine peace and stability (Rothstein 1968: 50). Smaller powers can help maintain regional balances of power, resolve conflicts and grievances, provide specialized niche functions to benefit allies, make it difficult for external powers to intervene in the affairs of alliance members (Rothstein 1968). Fang et al. (2014) contend that security alliances can restrain smaller states from engaging in risky behavior and can prevent interstate conflict.

This could lead existing alliance members to fear aspiring members, driving them to defect or realign. Alliance security dilemmas can cause trepidation, with some states thinking they will be abandoned in a time of need or entrapped into meeting alliance commitments under specific conditions. Snyder (1991) contends that alliances involve managing tradeoffs between abandonment and entrapment, especially for smaller states. If a state is highly dependent on an alliance or if an aspiring member is desperate for membership to boost its security, then they will lack flexibility, autonomy, and bargaining and negotiating strength in the process.

Smaller powers have a greater likelihood to free ride on more powerful states' balance of power behavior. Christensen and Snyder (1990) argue that the extent of free riding behavior and "buck passing" rests on the degree with which states perceive themselves to be vulnerable to threats. If alliance members and states seeking membership are more vulnerable, the greater the chance these states will align with fewer conditions. If states have a choice, they will prefer to allow others, especially major powers, to pay the cost of balancing behavior (Mearsheimer 2014). Alliance members assess use of military resources for security provision into account before admitting new members (Dorussen et al., 2009).

According to Walt (1987) states balance or align against threats or bandwagon or align with threats based on domestic political agendas, policy instruments, economic and military aid, foreign policy preferences, and the structure of the international system. Balancing is more common than bandwagoning since states form and enter alliances to contend with threats, as opposed to power (Walt 1987). When threatened, strong states tend to balance while weaker states are likely to bandwagon. The level of threat is measured in terms of offensive capabilities, intentions, and geographic proximity.

Walt (1987: 40-45) also emphasized ideology, foreign assistance, and penetration as motivators to align. The more similar the domestic ideologies of states, the greater the likelihood they will align with one another. Furthermore, the greater the amount of foreign assistance provided by one state to another will increase the likelihood the two will align. In addition, the structure of alliances is shaped by penetration or the level of access in another political system (Snyder 2007). Henke (2019) extends Walt's argument by observing that multilateral security arrangements do not develop instinctively. The prospects for Kosovo's integration with NATO reveal the extent to which cross-cutting interests constrain negotiations among members and competing positions prevent the settlement of the lasting dispute between Serbia and Kosovo.

## KOSOVO'S PROSPECTS FOR INTEGRATION WITH NATO

Since the Washington Treaty founded NATO in 1949, its membership has expanded from 12 to 30 members with the most recent admission of North Macedonia in 2020 and Kosovo seeking to join the alliance. NATO guarantees the stability and security of its member states through political and military support, collective defense with its Article V provision, crisis management operations and interoperability, and its Strategic Concept on cooperative security.

### Kosovo's Security Progress

Along with E.U. integration, NATO membership is a priority for Kosovo. During the process of transforming the KSF, In July 2012, Kosovo's then-Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi requested membership in NATO's Partnership for Peace program (PfP), which requires potential members to meet political and military criteria. Political criteria include building cooperation and partnership with NATO as a step toward Euro-Atlantic integration and the military criteria involves Kosovo participating in joint exercises with PfP members in academic and training programs, field exercises, and humanitarian and peacekeeping operations.

Kosovo made progress in reforming its security sector and promoting civil and military relations (Cady 2003: 76). Gajić (2017: 8-13) contends that security sector reform is part of a larger democratization effort in Kosovo. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) mandated that postwar peace and stabilization operations be conducted by KFOR, demilitarized the KLA, assigned the return of refugees to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), provided civil administration to the U.N Interim Administration in

Kosovo (UNMiK), delegated democratic reforms to Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and gave and development duties to the E.U. (Ker-Lindsay 2009).

During the international administration period, security sector reforms began after March 2004 riots led attacks on Serbian religious sites and forced displacement of Kosovo-Serbs. Local police were given responsibility for civil leadership of security institutions, although UNMiK remained in command. With the expectation that Kosovo would assert its independence, the E.U. provided political guidance to Kosovo's emerging national executive authorities (President and Prime Minister) and parliament and the OSCE was given the added task of implementing rule of law initiatives (Gajić 2017: 11).

After independence and the approval of the 2008 Constitution, Kosovo's security, safety, intelligence services, civil emergency, and border control were placed under its domestic authorities (Gajić 2017: 11-12). The U.N. Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (the Ahtisaari Plan) committed Kosovo to protecting non-majority communities based on the norms of multi-ethnicity and good governance and initiated international supervision (Perritt 2009). The process of Kosovo's independence was overseen by a joint U.S. – E.U. International Civilian Office (ICO) and security governance was implemented through the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (ICO 2012).

In 2009, the KPC was replaced with the new Kosovo Security Force (KSF), a lightly-armed brigade that assisted local authorities and responded to natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies outside the country (Qehaja and Vrajolli, 2011: 25–26). The KSF was brought in line with NATO operational rules and tasked with protecting minorities in public administration and security institutions. Investigations of crimes against humanity were transferred to the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) under the E.U.'s Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) (Gajić 2017: 11).

In 2018, Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj announced that Kosovo would transform the KSF into a combat-ready armed force within ten years (Živković 2019). This would allow Kosovo to access NATO's Building Integrity Program, Public Diplomacy Division, and the NATO Science for Peace and Security program. However, KSF transformation split the U.S. and NATO over the issue of protections for the Kosovo-Serb community.

There have been some notable breakthroughs in opening bilateral relations between Kosovo and NATO. In 2015, then-Prime Minister Isa Mustafa requested from NATO the initiation of a cooperative and collaborative exchange on political, technical, and security functions. This included regular political dialogue between Kosovo and NATO, the creation of

a Kosovo liaison office at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, assistance with the development of exchange programs for enhanced cooperation and updating of NATO's civilian and military personnel in Kosovo. It also included advancement of public diplomacy programs established at think tanks, universities, and civil society organizations, and increased access to specific NATO programs like Science for Peace and Security and Building Integrity (KIPRED 2016). This resulted in a new cooperative framework referred to as "NATO-Kosovo Enhanced Interaction" that enabled Kosovo to serve as an informal partner country (Kruijver and Xhambazi 2020).

**Table 1: Defense Expenditures (2020): Western Balkans Nation-States**

| Nation-State | Annual Defense Budget | Percentage Increase (from 2019) | Defense-to-GDP (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Serbia | $1.1 billion | 1.75% | 2.1% |
| Albania | $222 million | 12.7% | 1.5% |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | $168 million | 1.8% | 0.9% |
| North Macedonia | $158 million | 8.2% | 1.2% |
| Montenegro | $102 million | 32.5% | 2.1% |
| Kosovo | $79 million | 21.5% | 1.1% |

SIPRI (2021); World Bank (n.d.)

Kosovo has also increased its defense budget. From 2010 to 2020, military spending increased from $39 million to $79 million (SIPRI 2021; World Bank n.d.) and expenditures as a percentage of GDP increased from 0.7% to 1.1% (SIPRI 2021; World Bank n.d.). However, Kosovo is behind most Western Balkans states. As of 2020, the two states in the region meeting NATO's 2% defense to GDP guideline are NATO member Montenegro and non-NATO Serbia.

Furthermore, NATO has encouraged aspiring states to develop "niche" security capabilities (Morelli et al., 2009) to help them boost potential security contributions to the alliance. The KSF has developed specializations in demining and search and rescue missions. In 2019, the KSF's Urban Search and Rescue units, engineers, and police forces provided relief and recovery operations in Albania following an earthquake near Durrës (Robinson 2019). Also, given that Kosovo was heavily mined by Serbia, its civil authorities in partnership with KFOR safely removed lethal devices and was declared mine-free by the U.N. in 2001. As Today, Kosovo is a leader in demining and could serve as a training center for device removal (Robinson 2019).

NATO has also encouraged aspiring members to participate in formal security partnership programs as a precondition for NATO membership. Fourteen NATO members

were at one time participating members in Partnership for Peace ((PfP), Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia). Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia were invited by NATO to join PfP in 2006 and Malta reactivated its PfP membership in 2008. In 2012, Kosovo made PfP participation a strategic goal and formally requested membership in 2012 (Živković 2019).

One report (Joseph et al., 2022) shows that if the four NATO non-recognizers were to alter their opposition, steps could be taken that may boost Kosovo's case for NATO membership. Kosovo's inclusion within PfP and NATO membership is much more significant than Kosovo's membership in the E.U. and the U.N. given the pressing need for stability and security in both Kosovo and throughout the Western Balkans region. If the NATO non-recognizers drop their opposition to Kosovo, Kosovo's membership in NATO and Partnership would not be conditioned on normalization of relations with Serbia, thereby providing both the U.S. and Kosovo with necessary leverage in negotiations with Serbian leaders.

The U.S. can work with the Greek government on a friendship treaty modeled on the Prespa Agreement, which led Greece to drop its opposition to Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2020 in exchange for the name change to North Macedonia. Moreover, the U.S. could press Spain and Slovakia to return their forces to KFOR, support Romania and Slovakia in their efforts to quell Hungarian separatists, challenge the legality of non-recognition, expand informal contacts between Kosovo and Spain, provide support for Kosovo to enter Interpol and PfP, and provide a framework for a comprehensive E.U. agreement on recognition for Kosovo (Joseph et al., 2022). NATO's continuing mandate from U.N. Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) and the four NATO non-recognizers are significant obstacles, but these efforts could boost Kosovo's NATO membership and inclusion within Partnership for Peace (Joseph et al., 2022).

Concrete steps are needed to enhance dialogue and normalization. A recent Wilson Center report (Global Europe Program 2021) puts forth practical steps and recommendations for both Kosovo and Serbia to follow and a joint E.U. – U.S. approach. The report recommends that Prime Minister Albin Kurti keep his promise to combat corruption and deliver on progressive reforms and greater democratization efforts. This includes protecting non-majority communities living within Kosovo's borders. Serbia must likewise protect minority communities, drop its global derecognition campaign, and view Kosovo as an equal player in the normalization process. Open dialogue also means

protecting the cultural sites and civil rights and property rights of Albanians living in Serbia and Serbs living in Kosovo.

**Political Conditions and the Serbia – Kosovo Dispute**

Kosovo's case for NATO membership could be determined by the settlement of the dispute with Serbia. A successful and peaceful resolution of the dispute could end the controversy of Kosovo's sovereignty and independence. With the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) and the U.N initiated Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement, known as Ahtisaari Plan, protections were provided to Kosovo's Serb majority municipalities in existing majority Albanian areas and Kosovo's Serbs were given autonomy over education policy, protections of Orthodox Church and cultural sites, representation in Kosovo's parliament, veto power over vital legislation, extensions of financial support from Serbia, and Kosovo's security forces were capped at 2,500 lightly armed personnel. After Serbia requested an advisory opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 from the International Court of Justice, the court ruled that Kosovo's declaration did not violate international law (UN A/RES/298).

The International Crisis Group (2021) identified three options that could settle the dispute and yield mutual benefits and limit costs for Kosovo and Serbia. The first is to induce Serbia with development assistance and foreign investment to de facto recognize Kosovo through normalization of diplomatic relations. The second is to grant minority communities in Kosovo and Serbia the right of self-government with Kosovo providing social and economic support to Albanians in Serbia and Serbia doing the same for Serbs in Kosovo. However, Kosovo would have to adopt a federal system like in Bosnia and Herzegovina where ethnic and religious divisions became entrenched and manipulated by external powers. Kosovo and Serbia have not fully implemented the 2013 Brussels Agreement, which called on Kosovo to create an Association of Municipalities with Serb majority and Serbia to fulfill its promises to Albanians living in Preshevo Valley (Hartwell 2021). The third is adjusting borders to reach a political resolution and clear the way for Kosovo to pursue membership in the U.N., NATO, and the E.U. and Serbia to join the E.U. In 2018, former Kosovar President Thaçi and Serbian President Alexander Vučić received backing by the Trump Administration to exchange territory (Walker and MacDowall 2018).

However, the E.U. and the Biden Administration oppose border modifications. Germany and others have blocked efforts to approve border changes because it could trigger nationalist sentiment, fuel separatism, rekindle ethnic violence, or displace civilians (Jenne and Cook 2018). In February 2022, U.S. Special Representative for the Western Balkans Gabriel

Escobar announced U.S. opposition to altering Kosovo's territorial integrity (Bytyci 2022). If Kosovo and Serbia agree to land swaps, then Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Hercegovina might declare independence and align with Serb municipalities in Kosovo to join Serbia. This could fuel separatism in Albanian communities in North Macedonia (Dragoilo and Bami 2020; Rossi 2018). Such a rebalance might provoke fears of a "Greater Serbia" or "Greater Albania" (Bislimi et al., 2020).

Border tensions remain a significant hurdle. In September 2021, a dangerous border dispute emerged over vehicle license plates that was initiated after Kosovo required drivers from Serbia to provide proof of registration in a response to a similar policy enforced by Serbia. One year later, tensions flared again when Kosovo refused to recognize Serbian identity documents and license plates given that Serbian government authorities still did not recognize Kosovo's identity documents. Some in Kosovo's Serb minority resisted by blockading entry/exit points of entry, which prompted NATO to promise to use KFOR troops to secure Kosovo and patrol the border with Serbia. The crisis was defused after E.U. foreign policy head Josep Borrell brokered an agreement to eliminate entry/exit documents for Kosovo identification holders and Kosovo agreed not to require them for Serbian identification holders. Then, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić visited northern Kosovo, expressing her commitment to dispute resolution and normalization after France and Germany appealed for a peace settlement (Van Zandt 2022).

These agreements and signals, however, do not resolve the much larger dispute over normalization of relations. Powerful impediments remain, including Vučić's rejection of Kosovo's sovereignty and Kurti's position that Serbia cannot maintain a policy that rejects his country's independence (Emmott 2021). The process of E.U. accession for both Kosovo and Serbia is stalled as is Kosovo's intention to join NATO. The lack of progress provides malign actors, namely Russia, to continue exploiting the dispute for harmful purposes. Inter-community relations with minority groups based on inclusion, open dialogue, and equity must be the centerpiece in the process of normalization of relations with Serbia based on mutual recognition and transparency.

Public opinion in Kosovo and Serbia reveals the difficulties and contradictions about making concessions. Although 50% of Serbians support dialogue with Kosovo, 90% believe it will not benefit Serbia, 75% believe it will not promote a peaceful settlement of the dispute, and 48% believe Kosovo will return to Serbia with autonomy (Bjeloš and Elek 2020). The contradictory results reflect a confusing combination of nationalism and peaceful resolution. Given the COVID-19 pandemic and focus on combating Kurti announced his agenda will not

prioritize dialogue with Serbia in 2021 (Bandović 2021). In the absence of honest and genuine attempts to resolve the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, Kosovars and Serbians will not be prepared to make tough concessions, normalization of relations will be further delayed, and fatigue with Euro-Atlantic integration will set in.

Despite the lack of bilateral relations with NATO and the role of the four non-recognizers within it, Kosovars support Kosovo's NATO membership and approve KFOR operations. Kosovo Security Barometer (KSB) polls in both 2014 and 2017 found that public support in Kosovo for NATO membership was 89% in both years (KCSS 2014 & 2017). KFOR's more than two-decade presence in Kosovo has not only improve security, but it also helped build trust in NATO and improved political discourse in the country about Euro-Atlantic integration (Vrajolli & Kallaba 2012: 12). In both KSB polls in 2014 and 2017, just 9% of Kosovar Serbs support NATO membership for Kosovo (KCSS 2014 & 2017). The lack of public support correlates with the 5% of Serbians who support NATO membership for Serbia compared with the 80% who oppose it. However, 50% of Serbians support membership in the E.U. compared to 36% who opposed it (EWB 2020).

For years, Serbia has sought E.U. membership at the same time it has moved closer to China while maintaining close ties with Russia. Serbia's strategy has been to seek compensation for the loss of Kosovo in 1999 and territorial exchanges or greater autonomy for Kosovo's Serbs as remuneration (Joseph 2020b). Although Vučić (quoted MacKinnon and Gramer 2020) stated, "if you ask the majority of people in Serbia, they will prefer a frozen conflict to any single solution," Serbians may be willing to settle with Kosovo. A 2020 survey showed that only 33% of Serbs believe Kosovo is a priority in comparison to concerns about the standard of living (84%) and political corruption and crimes (68%) (Jasnić 2020). After Vučić was re-elected in 2022, he made it clear that Serbia was not going to take sides in Russia's war in Ukraine while also continuing to flirt with the E.U. camp and the Russia-China camp (Higgens 2022). A poll demonstrated that, for the first time, most Serbs were not interested in acceding to E.U. membership (Savic 2022). If Serbia does not join the E.U., then it has nothing to lose with its derecognition campaign against Kosovo. But the prospect of E.U. membership may no longer be a realistic option to get Serbia to commit to comprehensive agreement with Kosovo.

Strong domestic support for NATO membership in Kosovo alone is no guarantee that formal integration processes will be initiated. Consider the different experiences of other Western Balkans. In North Macedonia, there was relatively strong support for NATO membership, but not as high as in Kosovo. In 2014, one poll showed 77% of North

Macedonians supported NATO membership (KCSS 2014 & 2017). North Macedonia joined PfP in 1995 and was granted MAP in 1999, but the naming dispute with Greece delayed membership until 2020. In Montenegro, which became a sovereign country in 2006, a 2014 poll showed that just 35% supported NATO membership compared to 45% in opposition, Montenegro still joined in 2017. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a 2012 poll showed 66% supported NATO membership compared to 26% in opposition. However, just 37% in Republika Srpska support NATO membership compared to 52% in opposition. Bosnia and Herzegovina joined PfP in 2006, engaged in Intensified Dialogue with NATO in 2008, and was granted MAP in 2010 (KCSS 2014 & 2017). While NATO is viewed as a partner to enhance Kosovo's stability, there have been suggestions that, if integration keeps getting delayed, then public opinion could shift toward a bilateral security compact with the U.S. (Joseph 2021).

The history of the Western Balkans accession to NATO membership shows that integration processes are complicated with NATO members following different paths to membership. Although Slovenia's MAP took 5 years (1999 – 2004), it took Croatia 7 years (2002 – 2009), Montenegro 8 years (2009 – 2017), Albania 10 years (1999 – 2009), and North Macedonia 21 years (1999 – 2020) given the naming dispute with Greece and maligned Russian influence (Bechev 2020 & 2019; Kuczyński 2019). Montenegro's MAP may be the most interesting since it became independent and joined PfP in 2006, was granted MAP in 2009, and acceded to NATO in 2017. Montenegro successfully navigated the integration process despite opposition from pro-Serb political parties and maligned Russian interference (Bechev 2019; Kuczyński 2019).

**United States and U.S. – E.U. Coordination**

Since the 1999 NATO intervention, the U.S. has been Kosovo's most important ally. The U.S. Department of State carries out diplomatic efforts in support of Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration and supports dialogue with Serbia and normalize diplomatic relations. It also maintains capacity building programs to resist Russian aggression and interference in the Western Balkans and mitigate rising Chinese influence (U.S. Embassy 2020; USAID 2020). The U.S. also maintains roughly 500 troops in Kosovo deployed with KFOR at Camp Bondsteel (Morelli 2018).

From 2008 to 2021, the U.S. obligated $663 million in foreign assistance to Kosovo compared to $196.3 million to Serbia with the largest funding categories including government and civil society, operating expenses, business, energy, and education (foreignassistance.gov/ n.d.). While the U.S. provided Serbia with less foreign assistance, current aid levels support

government and civil society, business, operating expenses, health, and energy. U.S. foreign assistance programs to Serbia mitigate Russian influence and steer Serbia toward regional cooperation. E.U. assistance is much greater, focusing on financial institutions and infrastructure in Serbia and judicial institutions and peace and conflict efforts in Kosovo with significantly more funding provided to Serbia (E.U. Aid Explorer).

**Table 2: U.S. Foreign Assistance and E.U. Assistance to the Western Balkans, 2008 to 2021**

| Nation-State | E.U. | Top Sectors | U.S. | Top Sectors (2021) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kosovo | 3.7 billion | Legal & Judicial; Security; Admin; Peace & Conflict; Intl. Peacekeeping; Higher Ed | 663 million | Government & Civil Society; Operating; Business; Energy; Education |
| Serbia | 9.8 billion | Financial; Roads & Transport; Admin; Transport Equipment; Business<br>Multisector; Higher Ed | 196.3 million | Government & Civil Society;<br>Operating; Health; Energy |
| Total | 13.5 billion | | 859.3 million | |

Sources: "EU Aid Explorer," https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/content/explore/recipients_en;
Foreign Assistance: https://foreignassistance.gov/

In 2016, the Obama Administration supported Kosovo's entry into the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), obligating Kosovo to align its internal laws and E.U. guidelines and sustain dialogue with the European Commission (Morelli 2018: 13). USAID established the Kosovo Credit Guarantee Fund, which includes U.S. government assistance and private donations, to expand Kosovo's private sector (Morelli 2018). Kosovo also benefits from the Generalized System of Preferences that funds health, technology, construction, energy, and business projects (USTR n.d.). The U.S. also supports Kosovo's membership in the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, World Customs Organization, and the International Olympic Committee.

In addition, the Congressional Albanian Issues Caucus led by former U.S. Representative Eliot Engel (D-New York) fought Serbian ethnic cleansing campaigns in the 1990s and pushed for the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo. Engel lobbied the Bush Administration to recognize Kosovo's independence in 2008 and was one of the first foreign elected officials to address Kosovo's parliament (Chan 2008). Also, U.S. Senators Gary Peters (D-Michigan) and Joni Ernst (R-Iowa) restarted the Albanian Issues Caucus.

The Trump Administration launched diplomatic efforts to quicken the pace of reconciliation with Serbia. In March 2018, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Wess Mitchell visited Prishtina to bolster U.S. support for Kosovo. Then in October 2019, President Donald Trump appointed U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell as Special Envoy for Kosovo – Serbia Peace Negotiations (Eddy 2020) to assist Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Palmer as Special Representative for the Western Balkans (Gramer 2019). While some believed Grenell's appointment reflected a renewed U.S. interest in the Western Balkans, others believed Trump was departing from longstanding U.S. goals in the region (Gramer 2019).

Moreover, Kurti's decision to impose 100% tariffs on Serbian goods in response to Serbia's refusal to end its global derecognition campaign based on reciprocity angered the Trump Administration and splinted Kosovo's political system. Kosovo's then-President Thaçi met with Serbia's President Vučić at the White House in March 2020 (RFE/RL 2020) and welcomed the Trump Administration's willingness to take a more proactive role in facilitating dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Moreover, Thaçi and governing partner, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), opposed reciprocity toward Serbia and U.S. diplomats pressured Kurti to remove tariffs without applying reciprocity (Joseph 2020c). As Thaçi stated (Prishtina Insight 2020): "all of Kosovo's leaders are replaceable, but the US's role is irreplaceable … We need to move from this frozen state of the status quo to membership in NATO, the EU, and other organizations."

To pressure the Kurti government into dropping the tariffs, the Trump Administration froze Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) development initiatives in Kosovo during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This came on top of foreign assistance cuts his administration made in 2017 and 2018 (Morelli 2018). Then in early March 2020, U.S. Senator Rand Paul threatened to support a reconsideration of the U.S. military presence in Kosovo if Kurti did not end the tariffs (Bytyci 2020). In late March, Kurti's government collapsed after Kosovo's parliament approved a no-confidence vote (Kosovo Assembly, LDK Parliamentary Group; Kingsley 2020).

With Kurti sidelined, new Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti relaxed the tariffs and aligned with the Trump Administration. Grenell, Palmer, and Kosnett (U.S. Embassy 2020) issued a joint statement that the "tariffs are harming the people of Kosovo by hindering regional cooperation against COVID-19 — including by delaying the entry into Kosovo of needed supplies — and hindering economic growth." In response, the U.S. released new assistance to Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania (State 2020).

A more accommodating government in Kosovo allowed Grenell to organize the Washington Agreement. Hoti and Vučić agreed to economic normalization, which included air, rail, and highway connections between Prishtina and Belgrade. Kosovo would also normalize ties with Israel and establish an embassy in Jerusalem and Serbia would move its own embassy in Israel to Jerusalem (Salama 2020). The Washington Agreement also called on Kosovo not to seek membership in international organizations for one year and for Serbia to pause its global de-recognition campaign (AP/TOI 2020; Riechmann 2020).

The Washington Agreement deepened divisions (Joseph 2020c). Grenell's actions circumvented E.U. leaders, removing them from the dispute resolution process that it had overseen since the 2013 Brussels Agreement. While the Washington Agreement achieved modest commercial agreements, Trump departed from diplomatic approaches taken by the Bush and Obama administrations, which deferred normalization to the E.U. (Simic 2020). Whereas the Trump Administration had been frustrated with the slow pace of the bilateral negotiations and sided with Thaçi, the E.U. favored a more careful, trust-building approach and endorsed Kurti's use of tariffs to pressure Serbia (Kingsley 2020). In the past, the U.S. was effective when it coordinated and collaborated with the E.U.

By interfering in Kosovo's domestic affairs, Trump denied Kurti his constitutional right to lead the negotiations with Serbia and forced Kosovo to make unnecessary concessions. These moves alarmed many in Kosovo who view U.S. aid and in American troops as essential to security and stability (Kingsley 2020). Trump's maneuvers also led Russia to demand that it play a greater role in dispute resolution. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov argued that any agreement between Kosovo and Serbia should not reduce Russia's influence in the Western Balkans and would have to receive Russia's consent (Carney 2020).

Then, Thaçi was indicted along with other Kosovo Liberation Army commanders in June 2020 for crimes against humanity by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office with the sit in The Hague (Walker and Borger 2020). He was arrested in November 2020 and sent to The Hague to appear before the tribunal (Krasniqi 2020). This undercut the significance of the talks and boosted the return of Kurti and Vetëvendosje (Self-determination), a progressive social-democratic Kosovo-Albanian nationalist oriented political party, and its coalition partner Guxo (Be Brave) initiated by now President Vjosa Osmani - Sadriu.

Also, the Washington Agreement did not address Serbia's drift away from Euro-Atlantic integration. In the past, Serbia cooperated with NATO through PfP and maintained military exchanges and training programs with NATO and applied for E.U. membership in

2009. At the same time, Serbia widened security ties with Russia and allowed China's Huawei to develop its 5G network and surveillance system (Freedom House 2020). Serbia accepted Chinese COVID-19 vaccines and distributed them to Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo's Serb communities (Petrov 2021). Joseph (2020a) argues Serbia serves China as a "strategic anchor" in Europe. Even though the E.U. ($1.8 billion) is the largest provider of foreign assistance to Serbia, most Serbs now think China ($7.8 million) is Serbia's top donor (Hartwell and Vladisavljev 2020).

Grenell's approach ran counter to more than thirty-years of U.S. foreign policy strategy of promoting integration of the Western Balkans in Euro-Atlantic institutions (Belfer 2020). Russia and China took advantage of the permissive environment and widened the transatlantic gulf during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ushkovska 2020). This raised the risk of further democratic backsliding in the region and inhibited a peaceful settlement of the Serbia – Kosovo dispute. Moreover, China's massive, high-profile infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans, funded with opaque "corrosive capital" investments, undermine governance, weaken rule of law, boost authoritarian influence, and blunt progress toward Euro-Atlantic integration (Conley et al., 2021).

The Biden Administration promised to rebuild the transatlantic alliance and strengthen Euro-Atlantic institutions while shifting to a more reliable and predictable strategy of multilateral cooperation in the Western Balkans (Balfour and De Waal 2021). In February 2021, the E.U. resumed supervision of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue in coordination and collaboration with the Biden Administration, which shifted its foreign assistance strategy in the Western Balkans with executive orders blocking property and suspending entry into the U.S. of corrupt actors who engaged in practices that undermine civil society and democracy. Biden also empowered American diplomats to sanction corrupt actors who obstruct regional agreements and the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (Maksimović 2021). The renewed strategy is designed to combat rising authoritarianism and political corruption and blunt the influence of China and Russia in the region (Belfer 2020). Biden's transatlantic outlook and U.S. coordination with the E.U. could reinvigorate the process of dispute resolution and return Kosovo to a path toward integration with NATO (Bloch and Goldeiger 2020).

Kosovo's strategic goal and most pressing concern is recognition of its sovereignty, at least by all E.U. member states, and maximization of security through NATO membership. Transitional justice also remains an important goal. While Kosovo will continue to be dependent on E.U.-led mediation with Serbia, it prefers to keep the U.S. involved in

negotiations and wants the Biden Administration engaged in the dialogue (Hartwell 2021). U.S. – E.U. coordination also means protecting the territorial integrity of Kosovo and Serbia.

**CONCLUSION**

While Kosovo's prospects for NATO membership and inclusion within PfP relate to the settlement of the dispute with Serbia, the U.S. and E.U. retain considerable leverage in the process. The E.U. and U.S. provide Serbia with aid and assistance programs and recognize its legitimate interests to care about Kosovars of Serb ethnicity. While Serbia is not interested in NATO membership, E.U. membership would help it develop a shared agenda that could benefit Kosovo's Serbs. This might incentivize Kosovo to make concessions to Serbia by recognizing its connections to Kosovo's Serb communities and provide a foundation for reciprocity in other areas. The U.S. and E.U. should recommend that Kosovo provide enhanced protections for its Serb communities and that Serbia offer Albanian representation in its parliament without redrawing borders (Joseph 2020a). In addition, Serbia must end its global derecognition campaign and Kosovo should explicitly condemn suggestions that it develop a union with Albania (Joseph 2021).

With NATO membership, Kosovo would gain security, stability, and credible status as a Euro-Atlantic partner. Settlement of the dispute with Serbia would initiate bilateral relations with NATO, which means Kosovo would be open to greater international investment. Geopolitically, NATO membership for Kosovo would limit Russia's options in the Western Balkans and check and balance China's rising economic ambitions in Europe. Moreover, NATO membership for Kosovo is an important step toward E.U. membership.

The U.S., with its longstanding commitment to a Europe whole and free, can discourage separatism by working with Greece to finalize agreements with Albania on maritime rights and support Romania and Slovakia's campaign against Hungarian paramilitaries (Joseph et al., 2022). Moreover, the Biden Administration can reaffirm America's position in the U.S. – E.U. – NATO Dialogue on Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and Human Rights, which would signal transatlantic opposition e.g., to Catalonia's secession from Spain and Scotland's attempt to separate from the United Kingdom.

Euro-Atlantic institutions have invested considerable time, energy, and money into promoting stability and security in the Western Balkans. Ensuring Kosovo's sovereignty is essential to that legacy (Global Europe Program 2021). Kosovo, Serbia, the E.U., and the U.S. should commit themselves to the normalization process by enforcing previous

international agreements and ensuring stability. Anything else would widen opportunities for Russia and China to extend their influence throughout the Western Balkans.

With the U.S. and E.U. in alignment, Kosovo's NATO membership can be realized through the affirmation of territorial integrity and sovereignty, which inter alia can blunt the rising tide of authoritarianism and annexation in the wake of Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea. Furthermore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is a reminder that ethno-nationalist violence is about rejecting the identity, the right to exist, of others and an attempt to thwart Euro-Atlantic integration. This can be accomplished through multilateral cooperation, capacity and trust building, and assistance and development measures that will result in greater integration and stability in the Western Balkans.

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