

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe (RSSEE SG)

“Building Trust under Difficult Conditions – Kosovo/Serbia and the View of the Neighbours”

47th RSSEE SG Workshop
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Pristina/Mitrovica, Kosovo



PfP Consortium of Defense
Academies and Security
Studies Institutes



Executive Summary of Recommendations

- **EU:** Defining a clear end goal for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, with concrete rewards and sanctions tied to compliance.
- **EU/US:** Providing financial and political support for key civil society organizations on the Kosovo-Albanian and Kosovo-Serb side who are committed to confidence building and including them in the official dialogue process.
- **EU/NATO/US:** In order to relax the security situation in northern Kosovo providing support for joint border patrols consisting of Serbian and Kosovar police and KFOR.
- **EU/US:** Supporting the establishment of a joint Kosovo-Albanian and Kosovo-Serbian Investment Support Office in northern Kosovo to attract western investments.
- **Kosovo government:** As part of a de-escalation package for the north reintegrating Serbs into the Kosovo Police and local officials as well as guaranteeing fair conditions for the repeat of local elections.
- **Serbian government:** Refraining from exerting influence that leads to a deterioration of interethnic relations in northern Kosovo and other neighboring countries.
- **Kosovo government/Serbian government:** Enabling the creation of a permanent mechanism for confidence building between Kosovo and Serbia, using key NGOs from both countries for this purpose.
- **Albanian government:** Playing a proactive role in reducing political resentment between Belgrade and Pristina.
- **Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina/Kosovo government:** Abolishing visa requirements for each other's citizens.

Situation Analysis: Kosovo-Serbia Relations and Regional Security Challenges

The security situation in Kosovo remains highly volatile, shaped by unresolved ethnic tensions, historical grievances, and the complex geopolitics of the Western Balkans. At the heart of the current impasse is the stalled EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia,

which has failed to produce meaningful outcomes in recent years. Despite numerous attempts to mediate, international efforts have been largely ineffective, leaving both parties entrenched in their positions. This stagnation risks further destabilizing not only Kosovo but also the broader region, where ethnic tensions and political interference continue to undermine peace and security.



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The dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, led by the European Union under Josep Borrell and Miroslav Lajčák, has reached a standstill. While agreements like the Brussels Agreement (2013) and the Ohrid Annex (2023) were touted as steps forward, they have largely failed in their implementation. Both Pristina and Belgrade have used the dialogue as a platform to strengthen their domestic political narratives rather than genuinely resolve disputes. Kosovo's repudiation to implement the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities and Serbia's refusal to de-facto recognize Kosovo's independence have turned the process into a zero-sum game.



The failure of the dialogue to deliver tangible results has fostered a dangerous vacuum with flourishing nationalist rhetoric and ethnic polarization. The rise in tensions highlights the risks of inaction. Without a clear and enforceable roadmap the likelihood of further violence and instability is high, threatening both local security and broader regional stability.

Northern Kosovo remains the most sensitive and volatile part of the country. The resignation of Kosovo Serbs from municipal governments and rule of law institutions in protest against Kosovo's government measures has exacerbated an already fragile security situation that culminated in the grave security incident in Banjska in September 2023. These unilateral actions by the Kosovo government, such as increasing police presence without securing broad local support, have been perceived as provocations by the Serb community. The lack of a coordinated, inclusive approach to governance in the North has not only alienated the Serb population but also has pushed EU to introduce political and financial measures against Kosovo in June 2023.

KFOR, the NATO-led peacekeeping force, continues to play a critical role in maintaining a fragile peace. However, the long-term reliance on KFOR is unsustainable as it underscores the inability of local institutions

to handle security independently. There is an urgent need to have law enforcement perceived legitimate by all communities. Failure to do so could deepen ethnic divides and perpetuate the cycle of instability.

Serbia's role in the destabilization of Kosovo and the region cannot be understated. Serbia's support for nationalist movements across the Western Balkans poses a direct challenge to peace and security in the region, as it seeks to leverage these groups to enhance its political influence. By undermining democratic processes and interfering in the internal affairs of neighboring states, Serbia risks reigniting ethnic tensions that could destabilize the entire Western Balkans. This is of particular concern in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Republika Srpska entity, encouraged by Belgrade, has increasingly pursued separatist policies that threaten the fragile peace established by the Dayton Accords.

The war in Ukraine has shifted international priorities, pushing the Western Balkans to the periphery of strategic interests for both the EU and the US. This reallocation of focus risks creating a geopolitical vacuum that could be readily exploited by external actors, particularly Russia and China, seeking to expand their influence in the region. As Western engagement wanes, there is a growing perception of neglect among the populations of the Western Balkans, with the prospect of EU integration appearing increasingly elusive.



Simultaneously, this policy drift has unintentionally strengthened autocratic forces in the region, where leaders are leveraging ethnic divisions to entrench their political control. This dynamic signals a significant departure from the US and EU's former commitment to "democratic enlargement," suggesting a pivot toward a more pragmatic, realist geopolitical approach, with stability taking precedence over democratic reforms and rule of law.

Recommendations

For the EU, NATO and US:

- **Strategic Vision and Accountability in the Dialogue Process:** The EU should establish a clear end goal for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, with concrete rewards tied to compliance. High-level diplomatic engagement should continue, with the appointment of new mediators to avoid the loss of momentum.
- **Prevent autocratic rule and ethnic divisions** by sanctioning political leaders who incite tensions, undermine democracy, and interfere in internal governance across the region.
- **Adherence to CFSP:** The new EU Commission must reconsider its approach to the Western Balkans, linking progress in EU chapters with adherence to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Non-compliance should lead to halts in accession progress.
- **Supporting Grassroots Trust-Building Projects:** Financial and political support should be provided to local NGOs, particularly joint Kosovo-Albanian and Kosovo-Serb initiatives. Promote the role of NGOs and civil society in trust-building and reconciliation efforts. Their participation should be institutionalized within the larger Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.
- **Strengthening Transitional Justice Mechanisms:** The EU and US should promote initiatives that address historical grievances through acknowledgment of past atrocities, and public apologies. These efforts should be integrated into the dialogue to build long-term peace.
- **Security and Rule of Law Support:** Enhancing the capacity of local law enforcement and supporting joint border patrols consisting of Serbian and Kosovar policemen and KFOR should be prioritized to reduce tensions and ensure the safety of all citizens.
- **Attracting investments:** With the support of top international experts and funding from the EU and the US, an Investment Support Office, comprising both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, should be established in the Mitrovica region, with a special focus on northern Kosovo to attract Western investments to the area.

For Kosovo and Serbia:

- **Reintegration of Kosovo Serb community members in the Kosovo Police and Public Officials:** Kosovo should prioritize the reintegration of Kosovo Serb community members in the Kosovo Police and local officials in the north of the country. A transparent vetting process based on international standards, accompanied by a comprehensive de-escalation plan, which includes fair conditions for a repeat of the local elections in the north of Kosovo, is needed to prevent further violence and re-build a democratic governance.
- **Learning from successful (re)integration models:** The successful implementation of the 1995 Erdut Agreement for the peaceful and gradual reintegration of eastern Slavonia into the Croatian state contains – like other peace treaties – elements that could also be useful for the integration of northern Kosovo into the Kosovar institutions. The Kosovo government could cooperate with the UN and EU presence in Kosovo to this end.



- **Addressing Security in Northern Kosovo:** Serbia should cease its partially destabilizing interference in northern Kosovo as well as in the other neighboring countries and work with Kosovo institutions to enhance local security. Joint efforts in security, including border patrols with Kosovo Police and KFOR, could reduce ethnic tensions and increase trust.
- **Historical Reconciliation Initiatives:** Both sides should engage respected and independent historians to develop a shared historical narrative and integrate this into educational curricula, fostering reconciliation among younger generations.
- **Promoting mutual understanding:** The Kosovo government should organize language courses in both Albanian and Serbian in order to foster mutual understanding between young Albanians and Serbs.

- **Establishment of permanent mechanisms for confidence building and shaping a new generation of political leaders:** Key civil society organizations from both Kosovo and Serbia should get involved on a regular basis to support trustbuilding between Albanians and Serbs and a new generation of leaders capable of working together cooperatively for the future of all citizens of Kosovo.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo** should abolish visa requirements for each other's citizens to promote increased economic cooperation and strengthen people-to-people ties.
- **Montenegro** should maintain its pro-EU foreign policy and engage constructively with its neighbors, avoiding inflammatory rhetoric and controversial historical narratives.

For Neighboring Countries:

- **Good Neighbor Relations:** Countries like Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia should promote regional cooperation, encourage dialogue, and support the implementation of EU-led agreements.
- **Enhancing Regional Security and Economic Cooperation:** The EU and neighboring countries should promote regional platforms for economic cooperation and security, helping to create more interconnected and resilient systems that benefit all Western Balkans states.
- **Albania** could play a proactive role in reducing political resentment between Belgrade and Pristina due to its current good relations with Serbia and its fundamental political support for Kosovo.

These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 47th RSSEE workshop on "Building Trust under Difficult Conditions – Kosovo/Serbia and the View of the Neighbours", convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group "Regional Stability in South East Europe" in Pristina and Mitrovica, Kosovo, 19 – 22 September 2024. They were prepared by Miodrag Milićević (NGO Aktiv, Pristina and Mitrovica), Lulzim Peci (Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, Pristina) and Predrag Jureković (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna) on the basis of the proposals submitted by the participants. Valuable support in proofreading and layouting came from Julia Dullnig (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna).

