

# The status of Kosovo

## On the EU path or destined for war?

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## Introduction

Located in the heart of the Balkans, the Republic of Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008. Since then, around 100 of the 193 UN member states formally recognize Kosovo, including the United States and much of Western Europe.<sup>1</sup> Despite the status of Kosovo as a sovereign state still not being consolidated due to it not being a UN member state, and some key players in the international arena, such as China and Russia, still refuse to recognize its sovereignty. The signing of the Ohrid Agreement in February 2023 was a historic milestone since it entailed the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>2</sup> However, the Agreement has yet to be implemented, and both parties have committed violations. The European Commission has repeatedly stated that the countries' EU aspirations will be determined by their ability to normalize relations, which entails Serbia formally recognizing Kosovo's independence.<sup>3</sup> Considering the escalation of Serbian military activities near the border, it is crucial for a sustainable solution that will formally define the status of Kosovo and prevent the escalation of conflict, which will destabilize the already fragile Western Balkans region.

## Background Information

Kosovo's Albanian majority wished to break away from Serbia and create an independent state due to the lack of self-determination and discrimination they faced from the Serbian government. An insurgency began in 1995 following the Dayton Agreements, and full-scale military conflict broke out between the Yugoslav forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in 1998 and lasted for approximately a year. The conflict caused the death of more than 10,000 civilians, mainly ethnic Albanians<sup>4</sup>, and the forced displacement of around 846,000 people<sup>5</sup>, of which 200,000 were Serbs and other ethnic minorities.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, war crimes, including ethnic cleansing, were committed by both ethnic Serbs and Albanians, further deepening the climate of mistrust and hatred. In July 1999, Kosovo was placed under the supervision of the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and Kosovo Force (KFOR), a NATO-led peacekeeping force, by the UN Security Council Resolution 1244. The resolution guaranteed Kosovo a high degree of autonomy while preserving Yugoslavia's territorial integrity.<sup>7</sup>

Kosovo officially declared independence on February 17th, 2008, a move which was not supported by its ethnic Serbian minority. Approximately 90% of Kosovo's population is ethnically Albanian<sup>8</sup>, however, significant communities of Serbs, Bosniaks, Gorani, Turks, and Croats also exist. In response to Kosovo's declaration of independence, ethnic Serb municipalities that wished to remain part of Serbia founded the

<sup>1</sup> Dusica Radeka Djordjevic, "Kosovo without New Recognition for Four Years – Has the Line Been Drawn? - Kosovo Online," Kosovo Online, 2020, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/kosovo-without-new-recognition-four-years-has-line-been-drawn-17-9-2024>.

<sup>2</sup> "Agreement on Normalizing Relations between Serbia, Kosovo 'Historic Milestone', Delegate Tells Security Council | UN Press," United Nations Press, April 27, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15268.doc.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski, "EU Rebukes Serbia, Kosovo for Limited Progress on Dialogue and Membership Reforms," Euractiv (EURACTIV, 2023), <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-rebukes-serbia-kosovo-for-limited-progress-on-dialogue-and-membership-reforms/>.

<sup>4</sup> Bekim Blakaj, "Kosovo Memory Book Database Presentation and Expert Evaluation" (Pristina, Kosovo: National Library "Pjetër Bogdani," 2015), [https://web.archive.org/web/20190111055051/http://www.kosovomemorybook.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Expert\\_Evaluation\\_of\\_Kosovo\\_Memory\\_Book\\_Database\\_Pristina\\_04\\_02\\_2015.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20190111055051/http://www.kosovomemorybook.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Expert_Evaluation_of_Kosovo_Memory_Book_Database_Pristina_04_02_2015.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Independent International Commission on Kosovo, "The Kosovo Report," June 21, 2006, <https://www.law.umich.edu/facultyhome/drwcsebook/Documents/Documents/The%20Kosovo%20Report%20and%20Update.pdf>. p. 43

<sup>6</sup> Fred Abrahams, "Under Orders: War Crimes in Kosovo" (Human Rights Watch, 2001). 454-56

<sup>7</sup> "BBC News | Europe | UN Resolution on Kosovo: Full Text," BBC News, June 17, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/371562.stm>.

<sup>8</sup> "Kosovo (Unrecognized State)," Minority Rights Group, November 2, 2023, <https://minorityrights.org/country/kosovo-unrecognized-state/>.

Community of Serb municipalities.<sup>9</sup> There are approximately 146.000 Serbs in Kosovo, and 10 Serb-majority municipalities, accounting for 7.8% of the country's population.<sup>10</sup> Ethnic Serbs are being discriminated against and marginalized within Kosovo, living in isolated communities while Serbia weaponizes them to further its claims in North Mitrovica, creating tensions with Kosovo.<sup>11</sup> In 2023, the EU-mediated Ohrid Agreement was signed to normalize relations between the two countries.<sup>12</sup> A glimmer of hope emerged as the normalization of ties seemed within reach. Nonetheless, the Ohrid Agreement has yet to be implemented fully, and both sides have committed violations of the Agreement. Serbia voted against Kosovo's bid to join the Council of Europe, and Kosovo continues to reject the legitimacy of the Community of the Serb municipalities, to name a few of these violations.<sup>13</sup> The continuous discrimination of Serbs in North Kosovo has weakened the willingness of the two parties to cooperate, leading to a breakdown of communication channels and the onset of the ongoing North Kosovo crisis.

## Current State & Geopolitical Implications

In April 2023, municipal elections were held in Kosovo, however, they were boycotted by ethnic Serbs, which led to ethnic Albanians being elected as mayors in Serb-majority municipalities. The low voter turnout deemed the results illegitimate and sparked mass protests and clashes with Kosovar police forces in North Kosovo. The West condemned Kosovo for inciting violence against ethnic Serbs and disrespecting minority rights.<sup>14</sup> On February 1, 2024, the Kosovar government prohibited using the Serbian dinar in North Kosovo and forced Serbs to use the euro instead, a decision that the EU criticized.<sup>15</sup> Despite the ban, Kosovo Serbs continue to use the dinar as their currency. This action further escalated tensions between the two countries since ethnic Serbs in North Kosovo rely on Serbian-led parallel institutions and financial assistance.<sup>16</sup> Since then, Kosovo's government has forcibly closed down all parallel institutions in North Kosovo. In August, Prime Minister Kurti issued the reopening of the Ibar Bridge, connecting North and South Mitrovica. Serbia and the EU questioned this decision, considering the lack of Serb political participation in North Mitrovica's administration, claiming it could escalate ethnic conflicts between the two municipalities.<sup>17</sup>

On 29 November 2024, ethnic Serbs attacked the Iban Lepenac water canal, endangering Kosovo's electricity supply. The EU condemned this attack, and the EEAS asked for the perpetrators to be brought to justice.<sup>18</sup> On 9 February 2025, national elections were held in Kosovo. Kosovar PM Kurti blamed Serbia for

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Hand, "Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo to Be Formed - InSerbia News," InSerbia News, April 30, 2019, <https://inserbia.info/community-of-serb-municipalities-in-kosovo-to-be-formed/>.

<sup>10</sup> Minority Rights Group, "Serbs in Kosovo," Minority Rights Group, March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/communities/serbs-3/>.

<sup>11</sup> Florian Bieber, "The Serbs of Kosovo," in *Civic and Uncivic Values in Kosovo* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789633860748-011>.

<sup>12</sup> "Agreement on Normalizing Relations between Serbia, Kosovo 'Historic Milestone', Delegate Tells Security Council | UN Press," United Nations Press, April 27, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15268.doc.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Telegrafi, "EU Says Serbia Is Violating the Kosovo Agreement with Its Behavior in the Council of Europe," Telegra, March 7, 2025, <https://telegra.com/en/It-says-that-Serbia-is-violating-the-Kosovo-agreement-with-its-behavior-in-Kosovo/>.

<sup>14</sup> Talha Ozturk, "Kosovo Serbs Boycott Extraordinary Local Elections in Serb-Majority Municipalities," Anadolu Ajansı, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/kosovo-serbs-boycott-extraordinary-local-elections-in-serb-majority-municipalities/319849>.

<sup>15</sup> Reuters Staff, "Kosovo Serbs Carry on Using Dinars as Government Allows Transitional Phase," *Reuters*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kosovo-serbs-carry-using-dinars-govt-allows-transitional-phase-2024-02-01/>.

<sup>16</sup> AP News, "Kosovo's Block on the Serbian Currency Raises Alarm in the EU and US," AP News, February 4, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/kosovo-serbia-eu-currency-euro-dinar-tensions-ec08ef271341cd9bd669ede62f0ca9f7>.

<sup>17</sup> Prishtina Insight, "EU Warns Kosovo as Mitrovica Bridge Stando Goes on - PrishtinaInsight," PrishtinaInsight, August 16, 2024, <https://prishtinainsight.com/eu-warns-kosovo-as-mitrovica-bridge-stando-goes-on/>.

<sup>18</sup> Kosovo: Statement by the High Representative on the Water Canal Attack in Zubin Potok," European Union External Action Service (EEAS), November 30, 2024, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/kosovo-statement-high-representative-water-canal-attack-zubin-potok\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/kosovo-statement-high-representative-water-canal-attack-zubin-potok_en).

interfering in the 2025 national elections using evidence from independent and EU observers.<sup>19</sup> These accusations further escalated tensions between Serbia and Kosovo and deteriorated the EU-Serbia relations.

The recent developments in North Kosovo pose a significant geopolitical challenge for European security and foreign policy. Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia could destabilize the volatile Western Balkans region. To prevent that, the EU has stepped up its engagement with countries in the region, minimizing the possibility of a full-scale conflict similar to the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s.<sup>20</sup> However, challenges persist, the most significant being the EU integration of the Western Balkans, which has been slower than anticipated. The slow process of EU accession has tempted several countries in the region to simultaneously pursue closer ties with adversary powers like China and Russia. The slow progress in Serbia's EU accession talks and the steady democratic backsliding in the country have pushed the country closer to the anti-Western bloc. For instance, Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin attended the BRICS+ Kazan Summit (October 2024), suggesting that the country might be seeking closer cooperation with the alliance.<sup>21</sup> It also needs to be noted that Serbia remains one of the only European countries refusing to sanction Russia because of the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> The new Trump administration is another significant geopolitical aspect that could significantly alter the situation. Donald Trump's "America First Policy" and business interests in Serbia could shift the American policy in Kosovo, similarly favoring Serbia as Trump's switching America's policy in Ukraine.<sup>23</sup>

Considering that both Serbia and Kosovo aspire to follow the EU path, it is important to speed up dialogue between the two countries and normalize their relations. Normalization would bring Serbia closer to the EU, limiting Russian and Chinese influence in the Western Balkans. Most importantly, it would bring more stability to a region suffering from ethnic conflicts and unresolved disputes.

## Policy Solutions

The 2023 EU-mediated Ohrid Agreement on the path of normalization between Kosovo & Serbia was supported by the international community as a crucial first step towards consolidating Kosovo's status. Even though it provides a decent framework for normalizing ties between the two parties, no measures were taken to guarantee its implementation. Although both sides have, on various occasions, violated the Agreement's provisions, little has been done to punish them other than verbal condemnations by the EU. It could be argued that punishing either country could divert it from the West, as has already happened with Serbia. A system of incentives should have been applied instead to reward the country that implemented the agreement with EU funding and quicker negotiations towards EU integration.

A potential policy solution that has been proposed is a land swap. More specifically, North Kosovo would be reincorporated into Serbia, while Kosovo would gain the Albanian majority Preševo Valley. The

<sup>19</sup> Memaga Caglić, "Tensions Rise as Kosovo Accuses Serbia of Electoral Interference," EU Balkan News, March 14, 2024, <https://balkan.eu.com/tensions-rise-as-kosovo-accuses-serbia-of-electoral-interference/>.

<sup>20</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "The Western Balkans: Controlled Instability?," *Armed Conflict Survey 2024*, December 12, 2024, <https://www.iiiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2024/the-western-balkans-controlled-instability/>.

<sup>21</sup> Tatyana Kekic, "Serbia Eyes BRICS Partnership as Top Officials Attend Summit in Kazan," Intellinews, October 23, 2024, <https://www.intellinews.com/serbia-eyes-brics-partnership-as-top-officials-attend-summit-in-kazan-349731/>.

<sup>22</sup> Jana Juzová, "Serbia: The Dilemma between European Accession and Alliance with Russia," *Geographical Overview | Western Balkans* (Prague, Czech Republic: EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, 2024), p. 198-201 [https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Serbia-between-EU-Accession-Alliance-Russia-Juzova\\_IEMedYearbook2024.pdf](https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Serbia-between-EU-Accession-Alliance-Russia-Juzova_IEMedYearbook2024.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Fron Nahzi, "Trump's 'America First' Agenda Risks Leaving Kosovo Isolated," Balkan Insight, February 13, 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/02/13/trumps-america-first-agenda-risks-leaving-kosovo-isolated/>.

two territories are similar in size and population, which makes this territorial exchange simple in theory. Supporters of this policy argue that it would adhere to the UN principle of self-determination. It remains a viable solution as long as the people residing in these two areas consent to this land swap. Both Serbs in Mitrovica and Albanians in Preševo are marginalized, meaning that it would be beneficial for them to belong to their keen state.

However, this policy is also problematic for several reasons. Considering the historical background of the Balkans, where ethnic minorities have been instrumentalized in pursuing the national interests of the keen state, a “border correction” in Kosovo could trigger a domino effect within the Balkans.<sup>24</sup> Neighboring countries, including Bosnia Herzegovina and North Macedonia, have expressed their concern over this policy, which could potentially fuel instability within their own ethnically diverse states.<sup>25</sup> Experts like Paddy Ashdown and Federica Mogherini<sup>26</sup> have stressed that “moving borders like this will not solve divisions; it will deepen them”.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, a border change will not solve the deeper problem, and nationalist groups in each country could potentially exacerbate it. Another issue with this policy is the isolation of Serb communities that reside in Southeastern Kosovo and do not share a border with Serbia. These communities have actively expressed that such a policy could potentially abandon them, which will lead to their further marginalization within Kosovo.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, it is clear that neither the current Ohrid Agreement (2023) nor the proposed land swap constitutes a viable policy solution for a sustainable normalization between Kosovo and Serbia. Therefore, more innovative solutions must be found to solve this long-standing dispute.

## Possible Future Direction & Recommendations

To normalize relations between the two countries, a step-by-step process focused on trust-building mechanisms is required. One necessary component is that both states publicly apologize for and acknowledge the war crimes they committed during the Kosovo War and make necessary changes in national history books. This would be a crucial first step to building more trust between Serbs and Albanians.

Instead of correcting existing borders, people in each country need to learn how to navigate multi-ethnic societies and show tolerance to other religions and cultures. A significant second step would be granting autonomy to the Serbian municipalities and other minority groups within Kosovo to guarantee the preservation of their unique culture. Serbia could do the same for the Albanians of Preševo Valley. This is in line with the EU’s minority rights, which are an essential component of the accession process for both states.

Simultaneously, Kosovo and Serbia should sign more economic cooperation agreements and lift all trade barriers. More economic integration would create interdependence, disincentivizing future conflict

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<sup>24</sup> Kairat Abdrakhmanov, “Instrumentalization of Minorities vs. Instruments of Minority Rights. Conflict Prevention through Integration Based on Respect for Diversity and Minority Rights,” *Peace Human Rights Governance* 7, no. 1 (May 2023): 143–47, <https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-phrg-2023-1-6>.

<sup>25</sup> Beáta Huszka, “A High Risk, High Reward Gamble: What Are the Benets of a Kosovo-Serbia Land-Swap?,” *Blogs LSE*, November 14, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2018/11/14/a-high-risk-high-reward-gamble-what-are-the-benets-of-a-kosovo-serbia-land-swap/>.

<sup>26</sup> Paddy Ashdown was an international High Representative in Bosnia and Federica Mogherini is the former EU foreign policy chief

<sup>27</sup> Guy Delauney, “Kosovo-Serbia Talks: Why Land Swap Could Bridge Divide,” *BBC News*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45423835>.

<sup>28</sup> Guy Delauney, “Kosovo-Serbia Talks: Why Land Swap Could Bridge Divide,” *BBC News*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45423835>.

and creating regional stability. Economic cooperation would also bring the people and businesses of the two countries together to pursue common interests and achieve growth, further building trust among them.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the escalating tensions in Kosovo should be a key priority for EU policymakers, considering the importance of preserving stability in the Balkans. Given the rising influence of foreign powers in the Balkans and a more isolationist US foreign policy, it is crucial for all parties involved to agree upon an effective normalization process. The lack of confidence and cooperation between the two countries hinders the normalization process, which is why future agreements need to be built on trust-building mechanisms.

Consolidating Kosovo's status as a sovereign state will create the necessary momentum for settling more unresolved disputes in the Balkans and beyond. This is especially important for the Balkan countries since it will prove that disputes can be resolved peacefully and multi-ethnic societies can function properly and prosper. But to be successful, policymakers need to incorporate trust-building processes into the equation.

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