



KCSS
Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

BUSTING MYTHS ABOUT KSF TRANSITION INTO A DEFENCE FORCE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It has been close to three years since Kosovo's institutions moved forward with the decision to start the process of transition of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) from a disaster relief mandate into a defence force. However, this move by the Kosovo's leadership driven by massive public support was viewed with scepticism by some of the traditional allies of the country who feared that the decision would lead to instability. So, did the instability occur as a result of this decision? A short answer is - no.

Looking back at the process, it is clear that the consequences some feared of the transition of the KSF into a defence force for Kosovo were exaggerated - to say the least - and it seems the decision was, nothing less or more than a regular technocratic move of the Kosovan institutions. Some, might even argue that actually the process of transition of the KSF mandate has helped societal cohesion in Kosovo and as such strengthened stability of the country. In other words, fearmongering discourse about the KSF transition showed to be ungrounded and the decision proved more benefits than expected to date.

KEY FINDINGS:

● *The process of transition of the KSF mandate is moving ahead according to the plan. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has followed rigorously the process of transition as set forth in the Comprehensive Development Plan of building defence capabilities. There was no intention of other ambitions or "jumping" from the original plan;*

● *Since 2018, the KSF intensified its efforts of serving as a force for good, both internally and externally. In the latest development, it provided tangible contribution during the earthquake disaster in Albania in November 2019 and it deployed first ever overseas mission in Kuwait as part of US IOWA contingent in March 2021;*

● *The KSF transition did not translate into any escalation in the relations between Kosovo and Serbia and so far its development trajectory did not contribute in the destructive narrative in the relations between both countries*

● *The sceptics of the transition of the KSF have faltered, while those in support of the new mandate have been empowered.*

INTRODUCTION

The transition of Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a defence force represents one of the milestones for Kosovo's state-building process and it is an essential achievement for the ambitions of the country to join the NATO alliance. For the Kosovars, who survived an ethnic-cleansing campaign during the 1990s, having a defence force holds a particular emotional significance. The KSF's growth and development has been often a 'bumpy' road, both as a result of internal challenges as well as external limitations stemming from the country's trajectory to independence.

The transition of the KSF into a defence force was also necessitated by another transition which started with the stage that the country is currently in, of phasing out the supervision of Kosovo's independence, that requires local security capacities to take on a new role and replace the international missions. Therefore, it was unrealistic to expect that as a newly established state, Kosovo will not seek a process of modifying KSF's initial mandate from purely disaster relief into a traditional defence force.

The process of stepping up the KSF capacities that would shape into a defence mandate have been gradually and carefully developed, with the help of Kosovo's bilateral partners. The approval of law package in December 2018 that granted KSF the defence mandate, a decade after the Kosovo declared its independence, only marked the successful conclusion of a longstanding process. Accordingly, this paper holds that the KSF's upgrade into a defence structure represented a genuine sovereign right of Kosovo and is fully in line with country's commitments to peace and security. With a purely defensive infantry capabilities composed of 5,000 active members - to be achieved in the period of 10 years (by 2028) - KSF's stated goal is to become a force for good serving all communities in Kosovo. Its capabilities are projected to have a cross cutting positive impact, in particular, when the KSF assumes the responsibility from a phasing out of NATO led force (KFOR) in the country, when the objective circumstances allow. This development, however depends on the realistic prospects for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the entire Western Balkans.

Another criticism from the sceptics of the KSF transition included its potential impact on the EU-led dialogue for normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. However, the reality is that the KSF's transition by no means hampered the process of normalisation of relations between the two countries. As the chief spoiler in Kosovo's state-building process, Serbia attempted unsuccessfully to instrumentalise the mandate and profile of the KSF to the detriment of Kosovo's positionality in the international society. Serbia assumes that the defence mandate for KSF formally marks conclusion of Kosovo's state-building process which it staunchly contests. As long as it cannot challenge its involvement from the legal and practical point, Serbia tends to inflict the insecurity element surrounding KSF therefore causing some level of uncertainty among fractions of international community. As the time progresses and over 2.5 years after its transition, KSF neither produced nor is expected to instigate any negative ramifications with respect to regional security.

THE CONTEXT AND KSF'S DEVELOPMENT TRAJECTORY

Following a decade of international administration, Kosovo declared its independence in 2008 in close coordination and with the blessing of the main Western powers and in accordance with the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement prepared by UN's Special Envoy for the future status process for Kosovo, Martti Ahtisaari.¹ The International Steering Group supervised the independence of Kosovo until 2012.² However, this historic moment did not mark the end nor the beginning of the Kosovo's struggle for full consolidation of its statehood.

The struggle for statehood and independence by Kosovars has been formidable. Since the decision of the major powers for drawing the borders in the Balkans in 1913 as a result of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, Kosovo was left under the ruling of Serbia and consecutively Yugoslavia. During different regimes, its population – majority of which are Kosovar Albanians – have been subject to systemic racism, discrimination and segregation as it remained the most under-developed part of the former Yugoslavia.³

The process of the dissolution of Yugoslavia peaked in early 1990's as a result of the eruption of nationalism led by the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic and increased efforts for dominance by Serbia vis-à-vis other Yugoslav units.⁴ The oppression of civilians in Kosovo culminated into armed conflict between Serbian military/paramilitary forces and Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).⁵ The large-scale ethnic cleansing campaign against Kosovar Albanians, and the fear of potential genocide in Kosovo forced NATO to intervene militarily in 1999, after the Serbian government rejected the Rambouillet Peace Agreement negotiated in France.⁶ Following the signing of the ceasefire agreement between the International Security Forces (KFOR) and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the process of withdrawal from Kosovo of Yugoslav military, police and paramilitary forces started as well as the deployment into Kosovo, under UN auspices, of international civilian and security presences.

As already noted, international administration of Kosovo lasted until 2008 when the country declared its independence following an exhausted dialogue with Serbia in the framework of

1 Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (S/2007/168/Add.1), available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Kosovo%20S2007%20168.pdf>

2 Statement by the President on the End of Kosovo's Supervised Independence, available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/10/statement-president-end-kosovo-s-supervised-independence>

3 Mark Weller, *Contested Statehood: Kosovo's Struggle for Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

4 See the Kosovo Report: Conflict, International Response, Lessons, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/6D26FF88119644CFC1256989005CD392-thekosovoreport.pdf>

5 Ilazi R. (2020) Peacemaking and Peace Agreements on Kosovo. In: Richmond O., Visoka G. (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-11795-5_37-2;

Clark., H. (2000). *Civil Resistance in Kosovo*. Pluto Press

6 Alex Bellamy, *Kosovo and International Society* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

UN's sponsored negotiations on the future of the status for Kosovo mediated by President Martti Ahtisaari. The state of Kosovo became recognised by over 100 countries and became member of dozens of international organisations. However, lack of agreement with Serbia, is hindering the efforts of the country to become fully fledged member of the international community and the United Nations (UN), due to veto power of Russia and reluctance of China. Kosovo is considered a potential candidate for membership in the European Union (EU) and it has signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2016;⁷ it maintains some interaction with NATO, albeit limited to technical issues.

Kosovo's further progress for Euro-Atlantic integration is hampered, among others, by the lack of recognition from the five EU member states.⁸ While Kosovo has made significant progress towards domestic consolidation of its statehood, especially with respect to exercise of sovereign control of the territory, notwithstanding challenges in the northern part of the country, reaching a comprehensive legally binding agreement with Serbia, as the EU requires, would greatly advance both domestic and international consolidation of the statehood of Kosovo. The potential agreement is expected to pave the way for Kosovo's recognition from Serbia as well as integration in the international society, including the UN, EU and NATO, while for Serbia it will mark a major milestone for accession process into the EU as well as reconciliation

Undeniably, one of the key prerogatives of every state thereby Kosovo, is its uniformed structure which combines both the symbolic but also practical feature in terms of exercising core state functions. Traditionally armed forces represent the coercive dimension hence "[every] state... claims the monopoly of the use of force in a given territory."⁹ Having in mind that Kosovo statehood passed through a unique and rather consultative trajectory, the framers of the comprehensive proposal which led to Kosovo's independence carefully designed the security sector architecture so to meet its generic statehood demands while simultaneously considering regional dynamics in order not to trigger extensive reaction, especially from Serbia, which was persistently opposing the creation of Kosovo's state. The UN-led talks on the future of the Kosovo's status conceived a proposal thinking it would eventually make it less contested by Serbia so the core elements of every state – such as armed forces – could be framed 'softly', projected in limited strength and serving primarily a civilian mandate.

The Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement by UN's Envoy Ahtisaari included the establishment of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) as a lightly armed formation of up to 2,500 members that would assist other central authorities in disaster relief and de-

7 SAA, Stabilisation and Association Agreement between EU and Kosovo, Brussels 2016, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:4314927&from=EN>.

8 To date, Kosovo is still not recognized by: Spain, Slovakia, Greece, Romania and Cyprus (the latest only EU member). The reasons for refusal to recognition are different with Spain being the strongest non-recogniser due to its fear of independence of Catalonia as well as Cyprus having similar concerns over Turkish Northern Cypriot Republic. The three other countries are referred to as "soft non-recognisers" due to maintaining some relationship with Kosovo yet still not formally recognising the country mainly due to special relationship with Serbia.

For more on recognition of Kosovo see James Ker Lindsay and Ioannis Armakolas, *The Politics of Recognition and Engagement: EU Member State Relations with Kosovo* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

9 Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958) 95.

mining.¹⁰ In terms of the model, the KSF was something in-between an army, and police.¹¹

The KSF was not meant to have institutional correlation with the successor of KLA guerrilla formation – Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC). Its goal was reaching full operational capability within the first period of five years (2008-2013) thereafter a review could take place in order to potentially change its mandate. This period largely matched with the period of international supervised independence which was concluded in 2012.¹² In 2013, the NATO Atlantic Council declared KSF has reached full operational capacity¹³ turning thereby into a green light for Kosovo Government to commence a review which later proposed KSF's transformation into a traditional defence force.¹⁴ In December 2018, after more than four years of strategic review, law modification and political coordination both internally and externally, Kosovo Assembly approved the package with overwhelming majority which granted a defence mandate to KSF and led to establishment of a new Ministry of Defence.¹⁵

10 United Nations, Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement, New York 2007 <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4a54bc360.html>.

11 Florian Qehaja, International or Local Ownership? Security Sector Development in Post-Independent Kosovo (Washington DC: Westphallia Press, 2017).

12 The Economist, "Another step" <https://www.economist.com/eastern-approaches/2012/09/13/another-step> (accessed 27 April 2020).

13 NATO, "Kosovo Security Force now self-sustainable" Brussels 2013 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_101890.htm.

14 Kosovo Government, "Strategic Security Sector Review" Prishtina 2014 http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/Analiza_e_Rishikimit_Strategjik_te_Sektorit_te_Sigurise_se_RKS_06032014.pdf.

15 Prishtina Insight, "Assembly ups mandate of Kosovo Security Force" <https://prishtinainsight.com/assembly-ups-mandate-of-kosovo-security-force/>.

OPPOSING ACTORS AND RELUCTANT VOICES

The KSF mandate was carefully designed by local actors in consultation with Kosovo's bilateral partners, namely the United States. Its *raison d'être* was to become a force for good in exercising a traditional defence mandate in protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kosovo. KSF's strength would be of 5000 active members and 3000 reserve component that could be fully operational in the period of 10 years through a clear strategic development plan.¹⁶ The designers made it clear the new force would be subject to civilian and democratic control and all of the investments would be based for defensive infantry capabilities and territorial self-defence with the purpose of helping other authorities in Kosovo and participating in peacekeeping missions abroad.¹⁷ Overall, the new mandate of KSF implies a legitimate force with limited capabilities thereby no projection to challenge regional stability and fully based on Kosovo's financial capacity.

While the rationale on KSF's defence mandate could be barely challenged both from the security and institutional perspectives, it was the macro political dimension that prevailed and constantly hampered the pathway leading to conclusion of such mandate. This was a result of three interrelated issues. First, because the new mandate inferred a key prerogative of the statehood it was fiercely opposed by Serbia and some of its supporters, by applying political as well as hybrid instruments (ex. disinformation campaign) to discredit its progress. Second, Serbia instrumentalised Kosovar Serbs by using veto threat to any decision leading to new mandate of KSF whereas Serbian members of KSF have been forced to unwillingly resign. Third, part of the international community expressed reservations on the impact vis-à-vis normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia by considering the decision as premature.

Serbia's staunch antagonism to a defence mandate for KSF has been consistently manifested in the discourse of its diplomatic and political establishment. It dates back from the times of conflict when the creation of Kosovar resistance movement – which lately turned into KLA guerrilla formation – would serve against its mere interest of exercising absolute control over Kosovo. After the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008, Serbia launched a diplomatic offensive in spoiling the progression of statehood trajectory while particularly attempting to portray KSF as "force for bad" in the region. Serbia singled-out KSF (though there were other instruments and issues raised simultaneously) due to it perceiving as nucleus of a prospective defence force that would contribute to completion - at least internally - of Kosovo's statehood architecture. Although KSF's initial mandate was limited into disaster relief under supervision of NATO presence with a strength of maximum 2,500 members (equivalent to a lightly-armed semi infantry brigade), the Serbian National Security Strategy declared KSF

¹⁶ Balkan Insight, "Kosovo votes to turn security force into Army" <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/14/kosovo-votes-ksf-transformation-into-army-12-14-2018/>.

¹⁷ Korrespondenti, 2018.

a direct threat to Serbia and the region.¹⁸ In addition to targeting KSF transformation through political and diplomatic channels, Serbia went as far as ‘securitising’ KSF as part of organised disinformation campaign which became so relentless around the period of its transition up to the point that Belgrade based portals including Russian outlet in Serbia “Sputnik” produced war-motive pieces¹⁹ claiming that new mandate of KSF is a declaration of war on Serbia and Kosovar Serbs in Kosovo. There were 30 media pieces around the period of KSF transition which referred to the outbreaking of war,²⁰ trying therefore to artificially spark tensions in Kosovo.

In addition to diplomatic indulging activities, Serbia’s strategy in instrumentalising Kosovar Serbs to challenge and undermine the KSF was focused around MPs of political party “Serbian List”, a branch of Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of Serbian President Alexander Vucic, currently ruling in Serbia. This party makes up all of total 10 reserved seats for Serbs in Kosovo Assembly: this as a result of structural pressure towards Kosovar Serbs in voting solely for “Serbian List” against political pluralism among Serbian political spectrum in Kosovo.²¹ “Serbian List” used veto threat in blocking the Constitutional amendments initially aimed at embedding the KSF changes constitutionally in order to also change its name into ‘Armed Force’. Based on Kosovo’s system any constitutional amendments requires approval of the so-called “double two-third majorities” (meaning qualified majority of the entire parliament as well as qualified majority of minority communities which Kosovar Serbs makes the biggest proportion).²² Simultaneously, Serbia systematically pressured Serb members of KSF to massively resign in order to discredit its multi-ethnic composition which happened to be built in the last decade.²³ As a result, 50% of Serbs members collectively resigned in 2018 due to immense structural pressure.²⁴

Serbia’s spoiling activities to prevent KSF’s transition were robust but ineffective. For instance, Belgrade could not utilize the political party “Serbian List” to block the voting of the legislation for the KSF new mandate, because it did not require constitutional amendments..²⁵ However, Serbia has been effective with respect to creating unbearable environment for the Kosovar Serbs who were part of the KSF, as evidenced by collective resignation from the KSF of the Kosovar Serbs. Serbia’s strategy was to undermine and challenge the proclaimed multi-ethnic character of KSF, and as such weaken its legitimacy before the international community. As the time passed by, filling the vacant position for Serbian minority members in KSF units proved

18 Government of Serbia, “National Security Strategy of Serbia” Belgrade, 2009 http://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadrzaj/dokumenta/strategije/Strategija%20nacionalne%20bezbednosti%20Republike%20Srbije.pdf.

19 EUvsDisInfo, “700 false news stories in Serbian tabloids in 2018” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/700-false-news-stories-in-serbian-tabloids-in-2018/>.

20 EUvsDisInfo

21 Balkan Insight, “EU Observers criticise pressure on Kosovo Serb voters” <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/08/eu-observers-criticise-pressure-on-kosovo-serb-voters/>.

22Balkan Insight, “Kosovo May Form Army Bypassing Serb Veto” <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/03/07/kosovo-s-thaçi-bypass-serb-boycott-to-form-army-03-06-2017/>.

23 Shpat Balaj and Taulant Boshnjaku, “Multiethnicity destruction tendencies - Massive resignations of Serbian members from the Kosovo Security Force and Serbia’s Role” KCSS Prishtina, 2018 <http://www.qkss.org/en/Policy-Papers/Multi-ethnicity-destruction-tendencies-Massive-resignations-of-Serbian-members-from-the-Kosovo-Security-Force-and-Serbia-Role-1133>.

24 Ibid, 5.

25 Robert Muharremi, “Kosovo Security Force is an Army: Legal Arguments” KCSS Prishtina, 2016 <http://www.qkss.org/en/Policy-Papers/Kosovo-Security-Force-is-an-Army---Legal-Arguments--649>.

to be a difficult task due to continuing intimidation of both candidates and their families, including threats and physical violence.²⁶

On the other hand, there were dissonant messages deriving from the international community on the decision of KSF transition. While number of countries considered this process as a 'normal technocratic exercise' and a sovereign right, some reservations have been expressed not whether but rather when such decision should take place. These concerns unfolded on the timing of KSF law package adoption which arrived at Kosovo Assembly at the peak of tensed relations between Kosovo and Serbia, by the end of 2018. It especially coincided with Serbia's campaign to block Kosovo's membership in INTERPOL which led to Kosovo in turn imposing 100% tariff on Serbian goods.²⁷ In particular, NATO's General Secretary statement implied that the decision is "ill-timed" due to fear it could add to instability of the time²⁸ although the statement could not be ultimately interpreted as statement of NATO Atlantic Council as long as bulk of NATO members saluted decision or transmitted their messages of support in the meeting of UN Security Council which took place in December 2018.²⁹

Despite reluctant voices at the outset of the process, NATO continued its support to the newly Ministry of Defence through the presence of NATO Advisory and Liaison Team. The reluctance among some member states gradually started to vanish by the time political tensions between Kosovo and Serbia decreased and the long process of KSF transition is undergoing through its planned pace. Other international organisations considered this process more of a 'NATO domain' so they refrained from commenting also because it had political in addition to practical connotation. Most importantly, the strong messages revealing fear for deterioration of security situation proved not grounded now one quarter after transition of KSF into defence force.

26 Prishtina Insight, "Threats against KSF Serb members continues" <https://prishtinainsight.com/threats-serb-members-kosovo-security-forces-continue/>.

27 BBC, "Kosovo hits Serbia with 100% tariff amid INTERPOL row" <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-46287975>.

28 NATO, "Statement by NATO General Secretary on the adoption of the laws on the transition of Kosovo Security Force" https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_161631.htm?selectedLocale=en.

29 Balkans Insight, "Thaci and Vucic spar at UN over Kosovo Army" <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/18/thaci-vucic-clash-at-un-over-kosovo-army-12-17-2018/>.

PREVAILING SOVEREIGN RIGHT

The KSF's transition into a defence cell should have been viewed from the outset as an organic 'output' in the Kosovo's state-building process. Consolidating all instruments of a state, including armed forces, represent genuine underpinning of every country as long as its development is in line with financial and human resource capabilities and with the end goal of serving international peace and security. Truly, KSF's development has been subject to different filtering of NATO presence (KFOR) as well as Kosovo's bilateral partners. This implied a force in line with NATO requirements, upholding liberal values and serving the long-standing interest for safe and secure environment. The institution was constantly targeted by Serbia as a mean to confront the very existence of Kosovo's state despite KSF's transition not denoting nor expected to incite any practical ramification at the expense of Kosovar Serbs or risking normalisation agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. The improved relations between Kosovo and Serbia is a pure political and diplomatic process which is expected to be concluded through facilitation of EU and US with the goal of mutual recognition and obvious prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration. KSF's existing and prospective capabilities do not have a proclaimed weight in order to eventually counterbalance the relations. KSF's evolvement into defence force should be strictly viewed through the lens of Kosovo's sovereign right, institutional need and the organic transition in every post international administration setting which requires fully local institutional take over as a sign of local maturity. There are four overarching arguments in favour of this, as listed below:

First, there is a strong public support towards KSF as institution and its transition into a defence force. The policy over KSF transition implied - by far - one of the most consultative and inclusive processes with no objection across all parts of society. According to public opinion survey and seeing the trends in the period of five years (2013-2018), KSF was considered one of the most trusted institution in Kosovo, being repeatedly placed above Police and KFOR.³⁰ This gave extensive legitimacy to the process of its development based on bottom up policy but also having in mind that every successful strategy should genuinely rely on the need for securing and maintaining public support.³¹ While public opinion could have based their impression on the symbolic and general pattern of trust towards armed forces in post-conflict settings, it connoted a sufficient indicator for a process which is locally driven. This showed one of the rare demand-driven policies unlike a myriad of cases in post-conflict settings and especially in Kosovo 'experimenting' externally driven models.³²

Second, KSF's defence mandate does not resonate oversized institution with financial and human resource implications for Kosovo's limited resources. The idea for embarking into a

30 KCSS, "Kosovo Security Barometer" 2012-2018. For more please see www.qkss.org

31 RCDS, *Getting Strategy Right (Enough)*, (Defence Academy of the United Kingdom: London, 2017) 8

32 Qehaja, 2017.

traditional mandate was to strictly create defensive capability which would produce, and export security thereby pose no threat, neither theoretically nor practically to the communities and the neighbours. Indeed, the neoliberal voices calling on refrainment from maintaining armed forces could not sustain as an argument in the regional constellation of Western Balkans. In particular, Serbia's increased armament and purchase of heavy weaponry from Russia and China³³ triggered the traditional "security dilemma" in which the excessive armament of a neighbouring country is ultimately translated into insecurity in other countries. Along this argument, Serbia spends increasingly in the defence sector with current 1.91% of its GDP,³⁴ comparatively higher than other countries in the region (see below). These actions reinforced the arguments of Kosovo and made the entire political and societal spectrum speaking with a single voice on the need to have some form of self-defence structure.

Third, KSF capabilities would be in all reckonings comparatively lower than of its other neighbouring countries namely Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia (all NATO member states). KSF budget currently accounts 0.8% -0.9% of Kosovo's GDP³⁵ unlike GDP's of Albania (1.26%), Montenegro (1.65%)³⁶ and North Macedonia (1.2%). Also, in terms of human resources the force is expected to have by 2028 up to 5000 active members which when examined through the lens of territory and number of populations is fairly lower than Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia. These figures challenge any claim aiming to portray KSF as an enormous initiative: its stated goals subscribe to the liberal values and Euro-Atlantic principles despite existing difficulties to have fully-fledged pathway to NATO integration due to non-recognition of four of its members.

Finally, KSF is expected to gradually take over the responsibilities from the NATO peacekeeping mission which anyhow is downsizing in the last period. It already made a step forward of turning into a security provider from a sole security consumer as a result of first deployment of its troop to oversees mission through the cooperation with US Iowa National Guard.³⁷ This argument is not only grounded on the increased state maturity but also on the widely shared assessment that everlasting presence of international peacekeeping missions is not a viable solution.³⁸ Consequently, the timing of KSF getting full operational capability by 2028 would potentially coincide with the withdrawal of KFOR troops (or eventual remaining of symbolic presence) as well as possible legally binding agreement between Kosovo and Serbia paving the way for normalised relations. Thereby KSF's capabilities are expected to be achieved on time leaving no institutional void in the field of security and defence. In this way, this would mark a milestone also for international presence that invested for decades in Kosovo in order to achieve long-lasting institutional sustainability.

33 Reuters, "Serbia faces risk of US sanctions over Russian arms deal" <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-usa-sanctions/serbia-faces-risk-of-us-sanctions-over-russian-arms-deal-idUSKBN1X1199>.

34 The World Bank, "Military expenditures (% of GDP)" <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?view=map>.

35 Ibid.

36 World Population Review, "NATO spending by country" <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/nato-spending-by-country/>.

37 RFERL, "Kosovo peacekeepers sent in a first mission abroad" <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-peacekeepers-first-mission-abroad-kuwait/31141764.html>.

38 Timothy Donais, *Peacebuilding and Local Ownership: Post-conflict Consensus Building* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The foundations of KSF echoes democratic and liberal values which are embraced by every aspirant country for NATO integration. Its transition into a defence force is proclaimed to be based on good ends – investing in a force expected to serve all communities in-country and also export security through contribution in international peacekeeping. The decision to grant KSF a defence mandate should not have been viewed differently to a normal technocratic exercise of every country aiming to create vital instruments of the state. It rests within the sovereign right and institutional need while it is also rooted in overwhelming public support which represented one of the rare public policy decision implying cross-societal support. It also marked one of the exceptional decisions in the post-conflict setting of Kosovo which was locally owned and in line with liberal peacebuilding requirements for phasing out of international presence when such conditions are met.

Serbia's singling out of KSF has not been based on its force projection - now or in the future - but rather on the overall obsession of Serbia with the evolvement of the institutions in Kosovo which represent the core elements of the state. The attempts to securitise KSF as an instrument of 'insecurity' has never been grounded and were greatly exaggerated. Serbia's diplomatic campaign to discredit the KSF transition was used as bargaining chip in the dialogue and negotiations that followed. It triggered disinformation campaign causing artificial anxiety among Kosovar Serbs and also provoked reluctance among part of international community which considered KSF's change of mandate as "ill-timed" and premature. As the time evolved, the decision proved to be right as long as the force is projected to serve security as a public good. Indeed, as the transition process commenced recently, one could not foresee potential institutional weaknesses but those could be present around its governance rather than posing a threat to regional security or relations between Kosovo and Serbia.

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