



THE EMERGING CRACKS IN KOSOVO'S EURO-ATLANTIC CONSENSUS

**Erratic geopolitics and the future
of liberal-democratic norms**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context: The Euro-Atlantic consensus is tested

- Public opinion polls have consistently shown that Kosovars have the highest rate of support for NATO and EU accession in the Western Balkans, making this one of the rare issues that enjoys broad social and political consensus.
- By anchoring its agenda fully towards Euro-Atlantic integration and subjecting itself to the transformative power of Western conditionality, Kosovo has been able to consolidate both its statehood and its democracy.
- In addition to its vital state building contributions and diffusion of liberal democratic norms, the international presence in Kosovo has created conditions that facilitate corruption and undermine democratic norms, including accountability and local ownership.
- Further cracks have emerged in the Euro-Atlantic consensus due to Kosovo's international limbo and frustrations with the obstacles in accessing EU and NATO membership, making Kosovo's geopolitical orientations more erratic.
- Kosovo's turn towards a more sovereigntist posture may be a sign of state maturity and a normal response to objective challenges, yet emerging cracks in the Euro-Atlantic consensus risk an increase in erratic geopolitics and threaten liberal-democratic norms at home.
- Troubling signs have become visible over the past few years. Kosovo has effectively stopped absorbing the EU's normative framework and elite discourse increasingly treats liberal-democratic norms as contradictory to democracy (popular will).
- With the external driver of reforms weakened the question now for Kosovo is: how much of Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic sentiment reflects domestic support for the liberal democratic values that are intrinsic to them?

Key dynamics: Unpacking the Euro-Atlantic Consensus

- Like most of Eastern Europe, Kosovo experienced a degree of backlash against Western conditionality, in part due to its high dependence, feeding resentment and leading to questions about the values and interests underpinning the Euro-Atlantic consensus.
- While the transformative power of Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic consensus and its Western conditionality is acknowledged, the emerging cracks in the consensus result from the lack of an earlier organic debate of what it means in practice, and the lack of genuine consent.
- Kosovo's increasingly confrontational relations with its Western partners are, therefore, a result of both a drive to regain agency in an asymmetric power relation, and of established elites feeling threatened by Western-sponsored reforms.
- Disagreements within the Euro-Atlantic community on a range of strategic issues, including the Western Balkans, have, in the past few years reflected locally and overlapped with domestic polarization, causing a momentary split into pro-EU and pro-US camps.
- While the U.S continues to be seen as an honest supporter, the image and credibility of the EU in Kosovo has deteriorated significantly due to its formal neutrality on Kosovo's status and perceived lack of membership potential, particularly after delayed visa liberalization.
- The current thaw in relations with the EU is one of the main reasons why the Euro-Atlantic consensus in Kosovo is showing cracks, as it pushes Kosovo to find new avenues in its foreign policy while domestically reducing the power and sway of EU conditionality.
- While the dominance of Euro-Atlantic integration and a strong sense of realism constrains Kosovo's geopolitical options, to the point that most see

no alternate path to EU and NATO membership, some believe Kosovo should refocus its foreign affairs and consider alternative options.

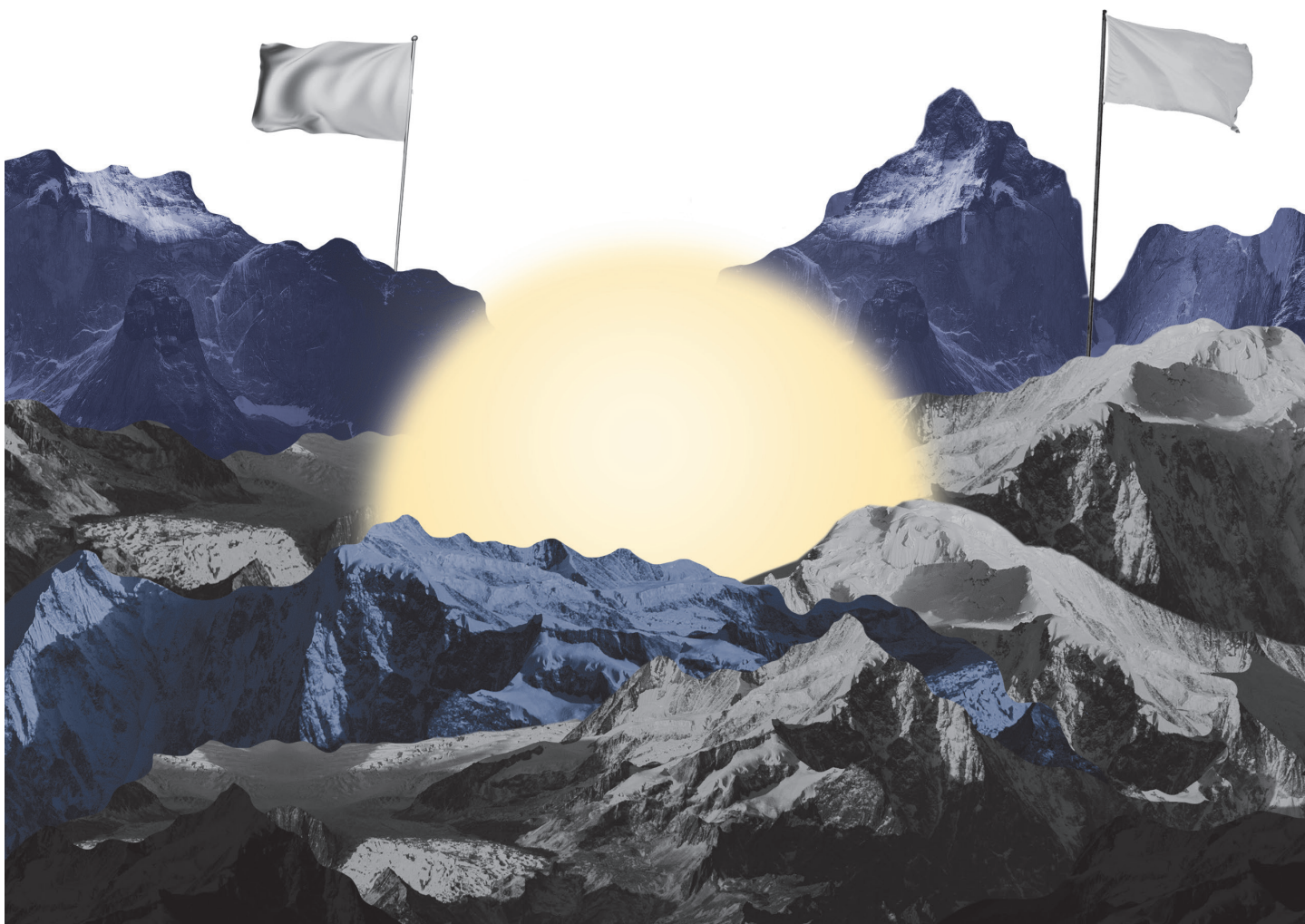
- The most resonant and most vocally articulated geopolitical alternative at the regional level is the potential unification with Albania, which polls suggest has nominal public support, yet the debate over this prospect is nuanced and will depend primarily on external factors.
- The growing frustration among Kosovars with the slow pace of Euro-Atlantic integrations is providing fertile ground for exploitation by non-Western actors who seek to change ethnic and religious loyalties and nurture illiberal agendas.
- The Euro-Atlantic consensus faces a challenge stemming from a decline in the moral authority of the political and intellectual elite that built and sustained it for the past three decades – an idea loses power when there is no trust in the salesman.
- Within the domestic power struggles, political elites have increasingly embraced a discourse that undermines Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path by externalizing responsibility, failing to explain or defend decisions, and building unrealistic expectations.
- Kosovo's politics have increasingly been characterized by a zero-sum understanding of political competition, resulting with the use of scorched earth tactics. This high polarization over time has undermined consensus on topics of strategic interest for the Euro-Atlantic agenda.
- Serbia and Russia have a vested interest in undermining Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path and actively use various tools at their disposal to further amplify an already high level of organic domestic polarization and to paralyze decision-making, especially at strategic moments.
- Instead of nurturing a climate of consensus, media and civil society have played an increasing role in amplifying polarization by embracing populist discourse and divisive narratives.

Key narratives and actors in the information environment

- There is an increasingly widespread and resonating narrative within mainstream media, commentators, and one part of the political scene in Kosovo, that the EU is, to some degree, unreliable, untrustworthy, biased against or even anti-Kosovo.
- While the negative perception of the U.S was largely limited to concern within one section of Kosovo's political spectrum regarding the Trump Administration, the debates around "anti-Americanism" extend beyond those specific concerns.
- Media outlets close to the Serbian government have been observed to be engaging in sporadic disinformation and the utilization of strategic moments and psychological warfare, stoking domestic polarization or complicating Kosovo's relations with Western partners.
- Russia's strategic messaging towards Kosovo Albanians seems to focus on projecting Russia's strength and veto power over Kosovo's future, amplifying calls by leaders for Kosovo's unification with Albania and – indirectly – promoting Russian-Turkish cooperation.
- Turkey supports Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path but Turkish-affiliated media is limited to actively promoting Turkey's own geopolitical pursuits, transmitting anti-Western discourse indirectly. Yet Kosovo's recent warm ties with Israel have opened a new cleavage.
- While criticism of the model of state secularism by more religious parts of society as well as complaints of Islamophobia continue to feed the broader debate over identity and the place of religion in society, these debates are increasingly less common.
- The social media ecosystem (especially on Facebook) has turned into a jungle of anonymous pages, many spreading polarizing content and fake news, often in seemingly organized campaigns. The popularity of Covid-19 conspiracies, in particular, showed latent suspicions of Western agendas.

Conclusions: Three Key Takeaways

- The Euro-Atlantic consensus in Kosovo is showing signs of fragility due to public disillusionment, but also shows potential for reinvigoration from a reclaimed sense of agency – a sovereigntist attitude which, if taken to the extreme, carries its own risks.
- The key cause in the emerging cracks in Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic consensus is the lack of a NATO and EU accession perspective – particularly the EU's failure to speak with one voice on the subject of Kosovo, and to deliver on key commitments, weakening its normative power.
- Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic consensus has been inadvertently undermined by the highly polarizing discourse shaped by populist politics, as well as the failure of civil society and the media to nurture a consensus on strategic issues.



2. CONTEXT: EURO-ATLANTIC CONSENSUS IS TESTED.

The values and interests behind a geopolitical orientation

1. Public opinion polls have consistently shown that Kosovars have the highest rate of support for NATO and EU accession in the Western Balkans, making this one of the rare issues that enjoys broad social and political consensus. Kosovo has been a regular outlier in the region (together with Albania) for its staunch Euro-Atlantic orientation and public support for EU and NATO accession.¹ The term "Euro-Atlantic integration" is one of the most frequently used in public discourse, in an instinctive, almost religious way, as a marker of an undisputed pro-Western political aspiration.² It is the issue for which there is perhaps the widest social consensus (with the exception of Kosovo Serbs, who are wary of NATO).³

The "discursive hegemony" of Euro-Atlantic integration is the product of dominant historical narratives and their overlap with the tangible benefits Kosovo has seen from its alliance with the West. Mainstream Albanian public discourse in the post-Communist era saw integration with Western institutions (and abandonment of East⁴), as a kind of a return of Albanians to their rightful place in history after the Ottoman and Communist eras.⁵

The Euro-Atlantic geopolitical orientation was an elite-driven project that preceded NATO intervention against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999. During the 1990s, under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova, Kosovo Albanians organized a parallel system of governance that mimicked Western democracies, including the organization of national elections, a plurality of political parties, and a diverse Parliament.⁶ Kosovo's peaceful resistance movement against Serbia looked toward NATO and the West for support. Later, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), formed mostly out of former Marxist-Leninist groups, also turned toward the West.⁷ This backbone of Kosovo's pro-Western orientation was

critically solidified by the 1999 NATO intervention as well as the Western-supported independence in 2008. Due to this historical legacy, the public sees NATO and the EU as positive and integral to the security and fate of Kosovo.

2. By anchoring its agenda fully towards Euro-Atlantic integration and subjecting itself to the transformative power of Western conditionality, Kosovo has been able to consolidate both its statehood and its democracy. The '90s were an "Era of Interventions" by the West-led international community.⁸ Most of these interventions were based on "the assumption that the surest foundation for peace, both within and between states, is market democracy, that is, a liberal democratic polity and a market-oriented economy."⁹ This represented, according to Roland Paris, "a modern version of the mission civilisatrice."¹⁰

Kosovo entered the post-war era with limited self-governance experience from the Yugoslav era, and an even more limited tradition of actual democracy. The country's institutional framework and administration had to be rebuilt from scratch, whereas its democratic space (including free media and civil society) had to evolve from the nascent improvisational stage of the '90s. Due to the West's influence in Kosovo, and with the blessing of local political elites, Kosovo's institutions and its democratic space were unquestionably modeled on Western systems of governance. Norms were transmitted through the provision of considerable development assistance. Even the drafting of Kosovo's Constitution was a tightly controlled, top-down process with heavy international involvement.¹¹

The role and weight of Western actors as agenda setters has gradually diminished. Kosovo moved from direct international administration by the UN Mission in Kosovo, or UNMIK (between 1999-2008); to supervised independence after

2008 (by the International Civilian Office); and finally, to the current stage where, like the other parts of the Balkans, it runs its own affairs but is influenced by Western conditionality.¹² This strategic and pragmatic relation with the West has enabled Kosovo to consolidate institutions and advance its democracy and pluralism.¹³ In return for its cooperation, Kosovo gained recognition and secured membership in many multilateral institutions, overcoming objections by Serbia and influential players like Russia and China.

The growth of stumbling blocks

3. In addition to its vital state-building contributions and diffusion of liberal democratic norms, the international presence in Kosovo also created the conditions that facilitated corruption and undermined key democratic norms, including accountability and local ownership. The outsized Western role, for a period, suppressed local democratic agency and created unhealthy dependencies. This was the central point of criticism against Kosovo's state building process by the Self-Determination Movement (*Lëvizja Vetëvendosje*, VV), which was founded in 2005 and is currently the largest political party in Kosovo.¹⁴

The outsized external Western role in Kosovo's political development helps clarify the early resistance and opposition to the process of norm diffusion led by UNMIK, which saw itself as a modernizing and Westernizing mission. This state-building process was seen as inherently flawed and external to the local context. VV argued that "UNMIK administrators and heads of institutions devised by it do not represent the people. They represent the oppression of the people. UNMIK is a model of domination."¹⁵ In addition, UNMIK was referred to as anti-democratic and, in particular, as supportive of undemocratic rule in reference to local leaders.¹⁶ Recent investigations seem to legitimize this criticism of UNMIK, with the legacy of the mission extending beyond the UNMIK era. A Transparency International report states that "the international presence in Kosovo from 1999 also explains in part the conditions that have facilitated state capture. These conditions include the misuse of foreign aid, privatization under questionable procedures,

the legitimization of unaccountable politicians, and corruption by international partners."¹⁷ This phenomenon has been explained in the Western Balkans as 'stabilitocracy,' denoting prioritization of the stability-related interests of Western actors over meaningful democracy-building and fostering of local agency.¹⁸

4. Further cracks have now emerged in the Euro-Atlantic consensus, due to Kosovo's international limbo and frustrations with the obstacles in accessing EU and NATO membership, making Kosovo's geopolitical orientations more erratic. Thirteen years after declaring its independence, Kosovo may have reached its limit with respect to the consolidation of its statehood in the international arena without a legal divorce agreement with Serbia. The main reason for this limit is the inability of Kosovo's key Euro-Atlantic partners to overcome Serbian resistance, which is backed by Russia and China at the UN Security Council.¹⁹

From Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic perspective, securing recognition from all EU and NATO member states is a key strategic objective. Yet there are currently five EU and four NATO member states that do not recognize Kosovo as a sovereign and independent entity. Furthermore, membership in the EU and NATO has been presented to Kosovo as dependent on an agreement with Serbia, which seems to require compromises that Kosovo is unable to accept.²⁰

The heightened domestic political polarization over the past decade in Kosovo has made it more challenging for the government to deliver on key EU and NATO commitments.²¹ Some have been more willing to subscribe to a sovereigntist agenda that sees with suspicion the advice or interests of the Western partners of Kosovo.²² During the Trump administration, Kosovo was confronted with what seemed to be conflicting agendas from its main Western partners, leading to further polarization. As a result, Kosovo's foreign policy has become more erratic while its political elites are becoming more ambivalent and less enthusiastic about the achievement of Euro-Atlantic objectives. This is visible in discourse that is critical of --and even rhetorically hostile to-- the EU, openly critical of U.S

policy in the region, vocal in support of projects like unification with Albania, and open to deeper ties with non-Western countries.²³

Current and potential problems

5. Kosovo's turn toward a more sovereigntist posture may be a sign of state maturity and a normal response to objective challenges, yet emerging cracks in the Euro-Atlantic consensus risk an increase in erratic geopolitics and threaten liberal-democratic norms at home. The vast majority of Kosovars remain staunchly pro-Western, viewing, for example, the U.S and Germany as the friendliest countries by a wide margin.²⁴ Yet the underlying causes for cracks in the Euro-Atlantic consensus remain. Chief among them is the lack of a common position in the Euro-Atlantic alliance vis-à-vis Kosovo. Lack of clarity on EU and NATO perspectives create a deep sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future. The transformative power of the EU conditionality policy has been eroding across the Western Balkans, as a result of enlargement fatigue in the EU and membership fatigue in the region.²⁵

In Kosovo's case, the EU was weakened even further because of unfulfilled commitments, mainly the failure to deliver visa liberalization. The decaying Western influence can be attributed to growing discontent among the general public regarding what they see as the West's increased unfair demands, but also what is perceived as a balancing act with a hostile Serbia. This creates an enabling environment for latent illiberal currents to more seriously challenge the merits of the Euro-Atlantic consensus in advancing Kosovo's goals and interests. This change could result in a more multifaceted foreign policy, but also a turn against values enshrined in Kosovo's legal framework, created as part of the joint Euro-Atlantic state-building effort.

6. Troubling signs have become visible in the past few years. Kosovo has effectively stopped absorbing the EU's normative framework, while elite discourse increasingly treats liberal-democratic norms as contradictory to democracy (which they understand as majoritarianism or governance by popular will, without full consideration of other aspects such as rule of law and minority rights.). The

main strategic document informing policymaking in Kosovo is the National Program for Implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), a legally binding document for all public institutions.²⁶ In addition, the government adopted several instruments to prioritize achievement of EU targets for reforms in rule of law, economy and public administration.²⁷ Nevertheless, the implementation of agreed reforms,²⁸ especially public administration ones,²⁹ has stagnated.

There has also been growing local discontent with EU efforts to strengthen the rule of law in Kosovo, such as the European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) in Kosovo mission.³⁰ The norm diffusion process is seen as an improvisation of modernization, often at the expense of the actual needs of society. There is growing dissent over the practice of agreeing to sign on to any policy or law insisted on by the EU³¹ without effective analysis and reasoning as to the necessity of the policy or law. Procedures in place to increase public participation, resulting in limited response from authorities, feed a climate of apathy.³² The zeitgeist is that the international community and local elites are seen as primarily interested in building a liberal façade in Kosovo.³³

7. With the external driver of reforms weakened, the question now for Kosovo is how much of the Euro-Atlantic sentiment actually reflects domestic support for the liberal democratic values that are intrinsic to it. It is unclear what the Euro-Atlantic consensus actually means, and therefore it needs further explanation.³⁴ Does the overwhelming pro-EU and pro-NATO sentiment also mean strong support for key norms and values vital for successful integration in the respective organizations? Or is the consensus a result of the political and security dependency of Kosovo, is it more cheerleading than being practical?³⁵ The speeches of Kosovo's leaders in front of foreign audiences often have a sense of 'cheerleading' to them.

Kosovo's political elites have tended to prioritize international consensus over internal consensus. In the post-war period, Kosovo was twice served ready-made constitutions by international mechanisms.³⁶ In both cases, the strong Euro-Atlantic consensus undermined the friction and resistance

stemming from a lack of local ownership. Values and norms could be diffused because they provided a framework for a future. As explained by a former senior Kosovo diplomat: “the future is the most important layer of identity – even more important

than your past. Where you see yourself in the future makes you change yourself today.”³⁷ What future do Kosovars see ahead of them and how is that shaping their present?

3. KEY DYNAMICS: UNPACKING THE EURO-ATLANTIC CONSENSUS

The local backlash against Western conditionality

8. Like most of Eastern Europe, Kosovo has experienced backlash against Western conditionality –perhaps more so because of its higher dependence– which feeds resentment and leads to questions about the values and interests underpinning the Euro-Atlantic consensus. Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes argue that democratic backsliding in Eastern Europe arose from the resentment of having to mimic the institutions and values of the West.³⁸ They argue that the incompatibility of the Western model with reality, and thus the failure to replicate it, has caused psychological stress and insecurity. For many people, seemingly impossible or never-ending conditions created a perception of foreign imposition, and sparked a need for recognition and dignity, which the American scholar Francis Fukuyama finds to be a defining feature of politics in our “age of resentment.”³⁹

Kosovo experienced an even heavier dose of Western conditionality than others in the region, due to its unique state-building process. That conditionality focused less on governance standards than on the country's relations with Serbia. For example, in 2008, Kosovo's 90 percent Albanian population begrudgingly accepted (in exchange for recognition of independence), the Ahtisaari Plan compromise, which granted ethnic minorities extensive rights, including neutral state symbols and veto powers. Late in 2015, Kosovo reluctantly accepted the creation of a Specialist Chambers for War Crimes that scrutinized the country's top leaders.

These types of conditions sparked a nationalist backlash. Anti-establishment movements like VV, which never subscribed to the otherwise uncontested pro-Western consensus, criticized elites for excessive submissiveness and loss of subjectivity.⁴⁰ Moreover, the discrepancy between many of the liberal democratic norms enshrined in the legal framework and the country's dominant societal and cultural values became evident in time. One example is the question of LGBTI rights, which are highly protected by the legal framework, but do not come close to enjoying majority support.⁴¹ A former high government official notes: “Western hegemony is the only way in which we embraced those norms. We needed it. It is evident from the way in which we implemented laws how we would have done things on our own.”⁴² It is also evident from the backlash.

9. While the transformative power of Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic consensus and its Western conditionality is acknowledged, emerging cracks in the consensus result from the lack of an earlier organic debate of what it means, in practice, and the lack of genuine consent. Local experts view Kosovo's acceptance of the terms of its relations with the West as representing both a genuine strategic pro-Western orientation and a pragmatic approach to securing benefits. “Elites found it useful to complete the state-building and to hold on to power, the citizens feel safer and more prosperous,” says a high-ranking civil servant.⁴³

Yet many warn that the reason why the cracks are emerging is that the consensus was never properly understood in terms of its practical implications.

"The consensus was nominal and emotional, more than a product of an internal debate on what it means. If you ask an official to unpack and deconstruct it what it means, then this is where the cracks emerge. This is not unique to Kosovo," says a former high-ranking government official.⁴⁴ Another former official admits that Western liberal hegemony over Kosovo "did have transformative effect- it created the basis, principles and values. But it never went beyond institutions and civil society- if you go to the neighborhood café you do not see the European project."⁴⁵ The former official quoted above questions whether this can even be called a consensus: "It was as much organic as it was imposed. It was never elaborated or deliberated. We were very dependent and had no autonomy over it. Consensus never went through a process."⁴⁶ The antagonism and grievances we are witnessing today are, at least in part, the result of such frustrations coming to surface.

10. Kosovo's increasingly confrontational relations with its Western partners are therefore a result of both a drive to regain agency in an asymmetric power relation, and of established elites feeling threatened by Western-sponsored reforms. For a considerable part of the past two decades, Kosovo adopted a constructive approach, working with Western partners to achieve common goals in Euro-Atlantic integration, even making delicate, complicated decisions, including the establishment of the Specialist Chambers for War Crimes. This relation seemed to work for as long as Kosovo's agenda in the international arena advanced.

Yet in the past few years, Kosovo has increasingly rejected or refused to implement Western-sponsored initiatives intended to open Kosovo's EU and NATO path, particularly those initiatives related to the dialogue with Serbia, because of a climate and perception in Kosovo that the country is conceding too much.⁴⁷ "What has changed is the willingness to say NO first before we come to a YES," says a former high-ranking Kosovo official.⁴⁸ Another official notes that "when we come to the commitments, this is where the cracks emerge. We lost four years with the demarcation issue (with Montenegro). It was decisive for visa liberalization and transforming the mandate of the Kosovo Security Force. You

can't say that you are for Euro-Atlantic integration and dictate the conditions."⁴⁹ Kosovo has also effectively stopped implementing its European Reform Agenda (ERA) and obligations as part of the SAA. This is largely attributed to the general perception of the EU's failure to meet its commitments, but it is also a convenient excuse for political elites feeling threatened by rule of law reforms, particularly those related to Kosovo's work in improving its track record on fighting corruption.⁵⁰

Transatlantic divides, reflected locally.

11. Disagreements within the Euro-Atlantic community on a range of strategic issues, including the Western Balkans have, in the past few years, reflected locally and overlapped with domestic polarization, causing a brief split into pro-EU and pro-U.S. camps. NATO (security) and the EU (political and economic) are the core pillars of the architecture of the Euro-Atlantic community. The strategic priorities of both are similar, yet over the past years as Western multilateralism was in crisis,⁵¹ they have reflected the interests of their dominant member states. NATO's primary focus on security issues, and the decisive weight of the U.S., have caused friction with the EU's political and economic interests, in which the role of Germany and France is decisive. While being supporters of membership in both, Kosovars have a more favorable view of NATO, and not simply because of the dominant U.S. role. This is, says a senior member of Kosovo's foreign service, "in principle, because of emotional ties, but also because NATO offers a security umbrella at a time when you have a neighbor that does not recognize your independence. Also, the products of NATO are tangible, from freedom to Camp Bondsteel, the main U.S. Army base under the KFOR (Kosovo Force). The relation with the EU is abstract. It is difficult to understand SAA and see immediate results."⁵²

As long as the transatlantic community's policy on the Balkans was synchronized, this preference did not matter much. It began to matter when there was a clear divergence in policy and approach to the Western Balkans between Kosovo's two key strategic partners - Germany and the U.S. under former

President Donald Trump— especially on the thorny issue of “border correction.”⁵³ For the first time in twenty years, the generally homogenous pro-Western political scene in Kosovo started to align with individual Western actors, and split into nominatively pro-U.S. and pro-EU camps. This deepened and underscored an already high level of polarization. “The moment we were forced to choose between allies is when we failed the most,” says a former high-ranking government official.⁵⁴ That external context has now changed, after the U.S. elections, yet it did leave a lot of debris and scars, including emerging anti-EU and anti-U.S. grievances and narratives (see next section of the paper).

12. Kosovo continues to see the U.S. as a more honest supporter than the EU, whose image and credibility have deteriorated significantly because of its formal neutrality on Kosovo's membership status, and particularly after delayed visa liberalization. Kosovo remains firmly in the European orbit in terms of economics,⁵⁵ is supportive of EU integration, and views Germany, in particular, as friendly and supportive.⁵⁶ However, despite being the largest contributor of development assistance to Kosovo⁵⁷, the EU is losing the battle for hearts and minds. The EU's reluctance to grant membership to Kosovo, the lack of recognition by five EU members, as well as the asymmetric treatment as compared to Serbia, have seriously undermined the credibility of the EU in resolving the dispute with Serbia.⁵⁸ The fact that Kosovo remains the only country in Europe denied visa liberalization with the EU, despite fulfilling conditions years ago,⁵⁹ is a source of grievance, and 64 percent of Kosovars view it either as a form of discrimination or a sign of prejudice.⁶⁰ These decisions and actions have tapped into the historical suspicion with which Albanians view Europe.⁶¹

This includes the widely held belief that in 1999, without U.S. leadership, Europe would not have intervened on Kosovo's behalf.⁶² The United States, on the other hand, despite reservations regarding the Trump Administration⁶³, continues to be seen as advancing Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic perspective. “The U.S. was decisive in insisting on expanding the mandate of the Kosovo Army and overcame European resistance, while the Washington agreement secured Israel's recognition,” says a high-ranking

government official. “At a strategic level there are no big differences on what they expect to see and what they project. The difference is in speed. U.S. is faster track, more result oriented, EU is process oriented,” the same official adds.⁶⁴ This widespread perception is the reason why all of Kosovo's political parties, including the incoming VV-led government, condition the dialogue with Serbia on U.S. involvement.^{65,66}

13. The current thaw in relations with the EU is one of the main reasons why the Euro-Atlantic consensus in Kosovo is showing cracks, as it pushes Kosovo to find new avenues in its foreign policy, while domestically reducing the power and sway of EU conditionality. Despite what seemed like a momentary division of Kosovo's political scene into pro-EU and pro-U.S. camps, observers generally view VV's alignment with the EU during the Trump-era as aiming to achieve tactical short-term purposes.⁶⁷

An important part of Kosovo's new establishment continues to rely on Germany, and some of its efforts in pushing Kosovo's agenda forward have been praised. This includes the recent German-facilitated effort enabling Kosovo to join the European Network of Transmission System Operators.⁶⁸ Yet other than that, and keeping in mind the poor prospects of any solution in the dialogue with Serbia, mainstream thinking in Kosovo focuses on bilateral ties with EU member states.

“Kosovo's show of agency is producing results in causing reactions. Kosovo needs to break the negative EU position on Kosovo and create small bodies of alliances within the EU,” says a former government official.⁶⁹ This path, and reliance on the U.S., influenced Kosovo's recent decision to open an embassy in Jerusalem, as part of its recognition by Israel, marking the first instance in which Kosovo took a decision that goes against the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.⁷⁰ EU reactions against the move and claims that it is an obstacle to Kosovo's EU perspective were met with considerable cynicism.⁷¹ Now that the Biden administration is expected to adopt a more cooperative approach to transatlantic affairs that might entail restoring EU leadership, it is uncertain how much Kosovo can rely on such a bilateral strategy. “The frustration with the EU is

growing and things can continue in that direction. I just don't see that it will affect the direction where Kosovo is going. What is the alternative?" a civil society activist asks.⁷²

The lure and sway of alternative projects

14. While the dominance of Euro-Atlantic integration and a strong sense of realism constrains Kosovo's geopolitical options, to the point that most see no alternate path to EU and NATO membership, some believe Kosovo should refocus its foreign affairs and consider alternative options.

From a realist foreign policy perspective, Kosovo's staunch Euro-Atlantic aspirations and its monolithic alliance structure has served the country well in its efforts to reach its current status in world affairs. Yet now there is a sense that the demand for further concessions to Serbia, in the last stage of consolidating Kosovo's statehood, is an attempt by the West to take a more balanced approach. A Kosovo Serb civil society activist observes the reaction of some Albanian peers: "Citizens are no longer seeing the West being as supportive of Kosovo as in the past but seeing the nuances there"⁷³ A Kosovo Albanian colleague believes "EU members often overlook Kosovo, [because] Serbia is a more important trade partner,"⁷⁴ noting that this situation, and Serbia's own maneuvering between global powers, has sparked thinking about alternative geopolitical pathways, which "are surely not mainstream, but there."⁷⁵ The new government has been called upon to rethink Kosovo's foreign policy and adopt a more multifaceted foreign policy.⁷⁶ These voices call for a rebalancing of the consensus: "In a multipolar world it is important to have various anchors. Not to have neutrality, but to send a message to the West that there are agencies and interests. Friendships between states are not organic but instrumental. The consensus benefits from a critical mass that questions it," says a former government official.⁷⁷ Yet the dominant sense is one marked by realism. Another former high-ranking government official said: "We would have an alternative if we were 80 million big and powerful. A 'third path' and sovereigntist agenda is impossible, it may work for a while, but it would leave us isolated."⁷⁸ A third-take, by yet another former high-ranking official, emphasizes that Kosovo is

limited not because it doesn't want to explore other options "but because these other options don't want us."⁷⁹

15. The most resonant and well-articulated geopolitical alternative at the regional level is potential unification with Albania, which polls suggest has nominal public support, yet the debate over this prospect is nuanced and will depend primarily on external factors. A recent poll by the Open Society Foundations in both Kosovo and Albania showed that, "if given the chance to vote in a referendum, 75 percent of Albanians in Albania and 64 percent of Kosovo Albanians would vote in favor of national unification."⁸⁰ Yet a deeper reading of the poll results show that, while in essence the YES answer is meaningful as an articulation of a political aspiration, it is also somewhat reflexive and expressive of a symbolic sense of unity. The answer stumbles into many BUTs as it gets translated into political reality, including lack of clarity of what unification actually means, and what it will cost to get it.⁸¹

Kosovo has, over the years, developed a strong sense of state identity and the permanence of that statehood is seen within the framework of a polycentric understanding of what it means to be Albanian. Albania also has a primary interest in EU integration. Nevertheless, in the last elections, most of the political parties in Kosovo, excluding the LDK, promoted the idea of national unification as a desired alternative, or as a Plan B for Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Some, like the PDK's Enver Hoxhaj, have called it a Plan B⁸², while others consider it a Plan A (in the case of Albin Kurti) so long as "it is done through peaceful means."⁸³

The way in which the issue will evolve over the next years depends on whether Kosovo manages to consolidate its statehood and move closer to the EU, and if not, whether there will be external constraints from Euro-Atlantic partners to the unification project. "If there is a right-wing wave in the EU that disrupts the region's accession, then we will go towards national unification with Albania as part of a new border rearrangement in the Balkans," says one local civil society activist.⁸⁴ Domestically, one thing is for sure: economic and political currents have caused tectonic shifts in the region over the past century, yet Albanian identity and its historical

narrative has shown to be remarkably resilient as a basis for solidarity and political action. The integration of the two countries at the cultural, social and economic level is advancing at a rapid pace.

16. Kosovars' growing frustration with the slow pace of Euro-Atlantic integration is providing fertile ground for exploitation by non-Western actors, who seek to change ethnic and religious loyalties and promote illiberal agendas. The West has ignored the potential of the Western Balkans to become a geostrategic chessboard.⁸⁵ The EU's failure to deliver a divorce agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, a decade after it started the process in 2011, has the potential to be exploited by external actors in order to widen the cracks in the Euro-Atlantic consensus on Kosovo.

In this context, two key actors are of relevance: Turkey and Russia. Turkey is an important political, economic and geostrategic ally of Kosovo, and has provided significant support to the country, including in securing recognition of its independence from other countries and bringing in investments.⁸⁶ Kosovo has also been very generous and gracious with Turkey, granting contracts to Turkish companies in large infrastructure projects and strategic assets. However, Turkey's support is seen with concern because of potential strings attached to the cooperation. The primary concern in Kosovo rests with the potential of breeding a variant of political Islam that would contest the liberal democratic norms and values associated with EU accession – effectively redefining what it means to be an Albanian Muslim in Kosovo.⁸⁷ Senior officials in Kosovo are concerned that this is already happening, “slowly and without noise.”⁸⁸ Serbia's ties with Russia place the Western Balkans, including Kosovo, in a worrisome situation of dependency, undermining the EU's agency in the region. The Serbian community in Kosovo sees the Russian influence in the country as coming from Belgrade, limited to identity and symbolism, and not detrimental to Kosovo's pro-Western path.⁸⁹ A civil society activist described the situation for local Serbs in Kosovo as “a stranded population on the receiving end of what Belgrade wants.”⁹⁰ An outgoing Kosovo government official views the resolution of the dispute with Serbia as the key to preventing the malign influence of non-Western authoritarian actors in Kosovo.⁹¹

Elite failures and unrealistic public expectations

17. The Euro-Atlantic consensus faces a challenge stemming from a decline in the moral authority of the political and intellectual elite that built and sustained it for the past three decades – an idea loses power when there is no trust in the salesman. Kosovo's pro-Western orientation in the '90's was built on widely accepted narratives, but it was an elite-driven process. The vision formulated and repeated by former President Ibrahim Rugova was that “We will be a member of the European Union, NATO and in permanent friendship with the United States of America.” The post-war political elite, on all sides of the spectrum, turned “Euro-Atlantic integration” into a central phrase in their discourse, as religiously repeated as the “brotherhood and unity” doctrine of the Yugoslav regime.

However, as dissatisfaction with the establishment and with corruption grew (culminating in the spectacular loss to VV in 2021), so the phraseology of Euro-Atlantic integration began to feel empty and detached from reality. Trust in political elites and institutions declined, and cynicism over pro-Western discourse, seen as self-serving, increased. Perceived Western support for the establishment also allowed some to question the motives and intentions of Western partners, and to interpret the relationship as one of vassalage serving only the interests of the West. The local understanding of the term “consensus” increasingly meant that the West supported local elites and tolerated their corruption, so long as they played along with the security agenda of the West, primarily the dialogue with Serbia.⁹² This association of the Euro-Atlantic consensus with elite corruption and Western pressures allowed some to question the consensus, and relations with the West, as a whole. “Political elites are to blame, we look up to them and now people don't listen. Low economic development, isolation... these are weaknesses that are abused.”⁹³

18. Within domestic power struggles, political elites have increasingly embraced discourse that undermines Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path by externalizing responsibility, failing to explain or defend decisions, and building unrealistic expectations.

The Euro-Atlantic consensus is now seen within the framework of elite personal interests and political competition, not as it was in the '90s⁹⁴, nor as a post-war vision for the country.⁹⁵ A civil society activist explained, "For political elites there are more elements to the consensus. The whole process of integration unlocks funds and support of international community."⁹⁶

Political elites in Kosovo have tapped into the potential for the Euro-Atlantic narrative to boost their credibility and to externalize responsibility. For instance, the establishment in 2015 of the Specialist Chambers for War Crimes was entirely credited to external pressure.⁹⁷ In addition, the rise in populist discourse increasingly frames domestic interests as counter to the Euro-Atlantic agenda. For example, pressured by opposition protests and accusations of treason, Kosovo's leaders have failed to communicate or defend key agreements opening Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path, including the Brussels Agreement with Serbia⁹⁸ and the border demarcation with Montenegro, the result being highly misunderstood and unpopular agreements.⁹⁹

The inability of the political elite to explain and defend the Euro-Atlantic agenda is illustrated by the unrealistic expectations in public perception about what it means for Kosovo's citizens. A public opinion poll by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), shows that 38 percent of Kosovars expect that by 2025 the accession of the economy of Kosovo to the EU will have happened.¹⁰⁰ For over 38 percent of Kosovars, EU integration means freedom to travel and for 46 percent, the freedom to study or work in the EU.¹⁰¹ This unearths the reality that for many citizens, the Euro-Atlantic consensus does not mean a process of transformation for the country, but rather an opportunity to escape. As explained by a senior official from the former Ministry of European Integration of Kosovo, "Political discourse has created a mismatch between what the EU actually is and how it is promoted to the public."¹⁰²

Domestic and external forces undermining consensus on strategic issues

19. Kosovo's politics have increasingly been characterized by a zero-sum understanding of political competition, resulting with the use of scorched earth tactics. This high polarization over time has undermined consensus on topics of strategic interest for the Euro-Atlantic agenda. Kosovo's modern political culture was significantly shaped during the nine years (1999-2008) of the international administration and governance of the country. During this period, as some scholars have argued, democracy in Kosovo was shaped in a form of *consociationalism*, prioritizing peace between elites through complex power-sharing formulas that undermine local agency, by excluding non-elites from the decision-making process.¹⁰³ This is because other stakeholders, including civil society, were seen as detrimental to governmental stability. For instance, public discussions of government corruption were largely ignored, because meaningful actions to curb abuse of public office in Kosovo were seen as a potential disruptor of the peace between local and international elites. However, local political elites were seen as spoilers in need of management by the international community, rather than meaningful partners in the state-building process. This created friction over access to power and influence over decision-making processes among local elites and between local and international elites. Drafting and adopting the Constitutional Framework for Kosovo in 2001 illustrates this point, as the international community clashed with the local leaders.¹⁰⁴ These frictions prevented efforts to streamline and control local agency. Yet since that local agency could no longer be constrained, a twofold process of polarization and fragmentation emerged. On one hand rising distrust among key political parties and leaders has driven polarization; on the other hand, the failure to consolidate statehood internationally has fractured the country's foreign policy consensus and fueled competing visions for the future of Kosovo (i.e., unification with Albania).

Unlike in 2006, when Kosovo had a 'unity team' set up by former President Rugova to deal with final sta-

tus negotiations in Vienna, the climate of the past decade was not conducive to consensus. Efforts in 2017 by then-President Hashim Thaçi to establish a unity team to deal with EU-led negotiations for normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia ultimately failed.¹⁰⁵ Opposition groups have increasingly used scorched-earth tactics and processes relevant to Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path (such as the Brussels dialogue) as political tools against the government. Another example is the 2016/17 tension caused by the ratification of the border demarcation with Montenegro, an EU condition for visa liberalization for Kosovo.¹⁰⁶ High political polarization and instability has meant that between 2019 and 2020, Kosovo had three different prime ministers from three different political parties.

Often the expectation was that the international community would step into nurture consensus, yet as noted by a senior political actor in Kosovo, "Kosovo needs to understand that it is no longer 1999,¹⁰⁷ meaning that Kosovo is no longer a high priority for the international community, and it cannot behave in a manner where the consequences for of its irrationality are managed by international partners."

20. Serbia and Russia have a vested interest in undermining Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path, and use various means to further amplify an already high level of organic domestic polarization and to paralyze decision-making, especially in strategic moments. Both Serbia and Russia are seen as having an interest in disrupting the Kosovo's functionality based on the Ahtisaari model. They seek to paint a picture of Kosovo as a highly dysfunctional state that is inhospitable to non-Albanian communities.

For Serbia, which rejected the Vienna-negotiated deal in 2008, Ahtisaari was not a compromise.¹⁰⁸ Serbia wants more, either the partition of Kosovo along ethnic lines, or the addition of a layer of territorial autonomy for Kosovo Serbs. For Russia, the goal is not only to highlight the failure of the Western model of state-building interventions, but also to preserve the status-quo and obstruct or discredit NATO expansion and EU integration.¹⁰⁹ When these goals are threatened, for example in the EU-facilitated dialogue, Serbia and Russia use various tools at their disposal, including psychological warfare (see

Case Study in Annex 2), to further amplify domestic polarization and complicate consensus over Kosovo's strategic interests. The leverage that Serbia has through its control over Kosovo Serb MPs and their veto powers in Kosovo's parliament only add to the complications. While the strong Euro-Atlantic consensus in Kosovo provides a foundation for resilience against such subversive influence, political instability, weak government capacity, and low media literacy are detrimental to the state's efforts to respond to the Serbian and Russian threats.¹¹⁰

21. Instead of nurturing a climate of consensus, media and civil society have played an increasingly detrimental role in amplifying polarization by embracing populist discourse and divisive narratives. Political elites are not the only ones who have failed to articulate the responsibilities of the Euro-Atlantic consensus to the public. Civil society and media also share the burden of helping explain the Euro-Atlantic consensus.¹¹¹ Yet the climate of political polarization has discouraged civil society's consensus-building role. Public opinion makers and civil society activists are often seen by decision-makers as in competition with the government over who is the more populist.¹¹²

A key issue that saw civil society in Kosovo hold an increasingly populist stance was the Brussels agreement on the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities in Kosovo (ASM). Civil society leaders were among the first to oppose such an agreement, often echoing arguments with high doses of ethno-nationalist populism. Civil society in Kosovo became suspicious of an EU-sponsored agreement, framing it as the 'Bosnianization of Kosovo.'¹¹³ In Kosovo, this concept is used to denote the prospects for the final agreement with Serbia to include a similar institutional arrangement, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for the Kosovar-Serbs, such as granting the northern part of the country autonomy. This is widely feared in Kosovo, because of the potential of turning the country into a dysfunctional state. In this sense, the issue of the ASM illustrates the limits of the Euro-Atlantic consensus in Kosovo. Even though it might have some support in some circles of the West, it is viewed with suspicion by political and civil society leaders.

4. KEY NARRATIVES AND ACTORS IN THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

The mainstreaming of domestic narratives highly critical of the EU and the U.S.

22. There is an increasingly widespread narrative within mainstream media, commentators and part of the political scene in Kosovo that the EU is, to some degree, unreliable, untrustworthy, biased against or even anti-Kosovo. Over the past few years, this has been particularly visible due to frustrations with the delay in granting Kosovo visa liberalization, the perceived asymmetry of treatment with Serbia in EU-facilitated dialogue and, most recently, the indictments by the Specialist Chambers. This sentiment, while expressed in the media with opinions that reflect those of establishment parties, particularly the PDK, resonates even in the most pro-Western circles, and emerges regularly in a variety of contexts, including EU support for COVID-19 relief.

The failure of the EU to successfully deal with the visa regime is increasing anti-EU sentiment. Failure to fulfill key conditions adds to grievances, like the controversial demarcation with Montenegro, which led to mass protests, a government downfall, and recent widely circulated stories of Kosovars in border regions saying they're being forced to leave their homes. There is a deep mistrust regarding the EU dialogue with Serbia, due to the EU's status neutrality and doubts over the impartiality of mediator Miroslav Lajcak, which began even before he took the role.

The EU position is often aligned with the U.S. and its direct calls for Kosovo's "mutual recognition" (i.e. Serbia recognizing Kosovo's independence). When Lajcak arrived for his first visit in 2020, the media mood was cynical and sour— a headline read: "We don't need empty speeches, we need visa liberalization and mutual recognition with Serbia!" In the first meeting between Kosovo PM Avdullah Hoti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in Brussels,

some pointed out the protocol of Lajcak sitting next to Vucic: "Kosovo unequal in Brussels meeting: Lajcak sits on Serbia's side." A February 2021 incident¹¹⁴ with Lajcak's office map, which seemed to include Kosovo as part of Serbia, illustrated the mistrust, as referenced in the frequent headline: "Lajcak brings Kosovo back into Serbia."

The most forthright display of anger against the EU was expressed upon the announcement of the indictments against former KLA leaders by the Specialist Chambers. The announcement of the indictment against former President Thaçi was generally portrayed by more pro-U.S. and pro-establishment outlets as being instigated by powers within the EU to prevent the White House from hosting a senior level meeting between Kosovo's and Serbia's leaders. There was speculation this meeting would produce a new agreement between the two countries for normalization of relations. According to this narrative, by pushing Kosovo to establish the Specialist Chambers, the EU was too easily swayed by unfair accusations that were promoted by Russia and Serbia, not for the purpose of pursuing justice and truth about the war, but rather to tarnish Kosovo's image as an independent state, and to tie the international community to a state that is governed by 'criminals.'

Many mainstream media highlighted the fact that Russian RT transmitted Thaçi's arrival at the Hague live - "Russian propaganda agencies are live from the Hague today." A statement by the Russian MFA on the first indictments by the Specialist Chambers fed into the narrative-- headline: "Russia welcomes arrests, says NATO's intervention in Kosovo was wrong." Russian activity praising the indictments is seen (e.g. by PDK) as an attempt to change the historical narrative on what happened in Kosovo in 1999, now supported by what PDK Deputy Abelard Tahiri condemned as "pseudo justice supported by the EU."

For more representative samples of quotes on these narratives, see Annex 1.

23. While the negative perception of the U.S. was largely limited to concerns within part of the political spectrum over the Trump administration, debates around “anti-Americanism” extend beyond this specific concern. The belief that the 2020 fall of the Kosovo government over the dialogue with Serbia, mediated by the Trump administration, was directly caused by U.S. envoy Richard Grenell and that it was a “Trump coup,” is a common narrative among parts of the political elite. The narrative suggests that Kosovo PM Albin Kurti’s, trip to Washington D.C was a *fait accompli* where he would face ‘knives on top of maps’ (referring to Kosovo’s partition). VV officials often accused Grenell of being “pro-Serb,” marking the first time that any Kosovo leader or party expressed such an antagonistic attitude towards a U.S. government official.

Conflict with Grenell and its apparent connection with the downfall of Kosovo’s VV-LDK-led government on one hand and Kurti’s opposition to the Washington Agreements in 2020 on the other are taken as an example by the pro-establishment media of a deeper-seated anti-Americanism among VV and Kurti in particular. This perceived anti-Americanism was one of Kurti’s biggest problems in the February 2021 elections. Media outlets regularly outlined his history of statements critical of U.S. political figures and policies, while political leaders consistently accused Kurti of straining relations with the U.S and favoring the EU. The idea that Kurti is at core an anti-American, opposed to the ideas of all U.S. administrations, has been in part fed by Grenell. The charge is regularly denied by VV officials; Kurti draws a difference between Grenell and America: “*To me Grenell is from America, but America is not Grenell..* An official from VV dismissed accusations of Kurti’s alleged anti-American stance, asking rhetorically: “*How can the leader of the most pro-American nation, who won more votes than anyone in this country’s history, be anti-American?*”

Disinformation and psychological warfare originating in Serbia and Russia.

24. Media outlets close to the Serbian government have engaged in sporadic disinformation and in psychological warfare at key moments, stoking

domestic polarization and complicating Kosovo’s relations with its Western partners. The Serbian government’s use and control of tabloids and bot networks¹¹⁵ for domestic propaganda purposes is a known phenomenon in the Western Balkans. There is considerable evidence to suggest that this control is implemented strategically at critical moments to influence political debates and outcomes in Kosovo, and to exploit a wide range of vulnerabilities.

One such sophisticated case of psychological warfare occurred between September and October 2020, during a potential breakthrough in the EU-led Kosovo-Serbia talks. It is presented in detail in **Annex 2** of this report. As the dialogue entered a potentially decisive point, there was an escalation of polarizing rhetoric by Serbian leaders, as well as an increase in divisive narratives originating from media outlets close to the Serbian government, as well as Russian-affiliated ones. Another more consistent example is Serbia’s campaign against Kosovo’s recognition and membership in international organizations, and the Serbian state narrative, which often correlates with Kosovo-U.S. tensions on issues such as the removal of the tax on Serbian goods, the continuation of dialogue with Serbia or, more recently, the commitments of the Washington Agreements. This was evident, for example, throughout the first part of 2020, when the VV-LDK coalition was torn over the question of how to manage relations and talks with Serbia.

During this period Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic issued a flurry of threatening statements on Serbia’s campaign to have countries revoke their recognition of Kosovo’s independence (mostly sourced from Serbia’s Tanjug and Beta Agency wire services), seemingly coordinated with warnings about further withdrawals of recognition reported in Russian state-owned news outlet Sputnik’s Serbia service. On 28 February 2020, then-PM Kurti announced “the partial and gradual removal of the tax [on Serbian goods],” a move criticized by the U.S. but welcomed by the EU. This story was sourced originally from Tanjug soon after Sierra Leone withdrew their recognition of Kosovo. Even after the most recent election, in 2021, as several figures from VV hinted that they are not bound by commitments of the Washington Agreements,

Kosovo media published a story from the Serbian tabloid Novosti, which claimed that Serbia has five countries ready to withdraw recognition of Kosovo "if it breaks the Washington agreement." This was followed the next day by a statement from Serbia's Foreign Minister with the same message.

25. Russia's strategic messaging towards Kosovo Albanians seems to focus on projecting Russia's strength and veto power over Kosovo's future. It amplifies calls for Kosovo's unification with Albania and, indirectly, promotes Russian-Turkish cooperation. Content originating or sourced from platforms affiliated with the Russian government in Kosovo, though present, is not widespread, and has no soft power appeal among Kosovo Albanians. Much of this Russian strategic messaging reaches Kosovo via intermediaries or republications from Serbian media using Russian sources (for example Novosti). Interviews with the Russian ambassador to Belgrade for Sputnik Serbia or Politika, or any statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov or President Vladimir Putin is widely covered. These usually occur at strategic moments in Kosovo-Serbia relations and have common themes, like Russia's support for Serbia, the need for Russia's stamp of approval on any proposed solution, the central importance of the ASM and expressions of frustration that the ASM hasn't yet been formed, as well as Putin's frequent comparisons of Kosovo with Crimea.

Another interesting dimension for Russian communications are the negative reactions to whichever Kosovo or Albanian leader is seen as embracing the idea of unification between Kosovo and Albania. In September 2020, after a joint Kosovo-Albania government meeting, the target was Edi Rama. During Kosovo's recent elections, when former PM Ramush Haradinaj promised a referendum on unification with Albania, he was targeted by the Russian MFA, the most frequent media headline reading: "*Russian Embassy says Greater Albania is a provocation and political blackmail.*" After Kosovo's elections, the incoming PM Albin Kurti was also targeted by the Russian MFA for his statement of preference for a union between Kosovo and Albania. Another more limited avenue through which Russian-friendly narratives reach Kosovo is via Turkish-affiliated media,

which is primarily focused on areas of cooperation and agreement between Turkey and Russia. Such topics of interest include, for example, military technology, Russian support for Turkish positions on foreign affairs, expression of sympathy for the plight of Muslims, or Russian-Turkish cooperation on COVID-19.

Anti-Western narratives play on religious identity.

26. While Turkey supports Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path, Turkish-affiliated media does not always reflect this support. Instead, it often actively promotes Turkey's own geopolitical pursuits even, or especially, when those pursuits clash with Western efforts – thus transmitting anti-Western discourse indirectly. Further, Kosovo's recent warm ties with Israel, contrasting with frosty Turkey-Israel relations, have opened a new cleavage in the Turkey-Kosovo relationship. Anti-Western narratives do not appear in Turkish media coverage of domestic news in Kosovo, and do not influence Kosovo's development. They appear simply within the context of promoting Turkey's viewpoints, specifically regarding tensions with Europe, such as those in the eastern Mediterranean, the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, and other conflicts involving Muslim identity. Over the past year the Albanian-language Anadolu Agency and social media accounts promoting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have frequently targeted French President Emmanuel Macron over his statements on Islam and amplified Erdogan's antagonistic rhetoric against Europe, fueling a narrative of Muslim victimization in Europe.

Among the most antagonistic social media accounts, there is regular discussion of Western plots against Turkey. These accounts present Erdogan as the only leader able to confront Western political terror. Turkish-affiliated social media accounts promote Turkey's leadership role in the Muslim world, and amplify Turkey's closeness to Albanians in the region. Several domestic authors also play an active role in promoting Turkish geopolitical objectives.

Kosovo's recent recognition by Israel and the decision to open an embassy in Jerusalem – a controversial decision, especially for a Muslim-majority coun-

try- has opened the first real geopolitical schism with Turkey and sparked a harsh reaction. Kosovo's warming relations with Israel, and Turkey's call for Kosovo to reverse its decision on the location of its embassy, have also sparked notable anti-Turkey narratives from pro-American, pro-secularist or nationalist media, with pundits taking a strong pro-Israel stance. The most common themes include complaints about Turkey's increasingly strong ties to Serbia (including investments and weapons supplies), but also the perception that Turkey is promoting its own religion and cultural agenda in Kosovo.

27. Though criticism of state secularism by more religious parts of society, as well as complaints of Islamophobia, continue to feed the broader debate over identity and religion in society, these debates are increasingly less common. Debates over the role of Islam in a democratic society regularly emerge and involve high profile figures from the religious conservative, secularist and liberal camps. Some escalate to harsh rhetoric or threats. A retweet of an article related to the infamous Charlie Hebdo cartoons of Mohammed, by Kosovo's ambassador to France, prompted widespread indignation (including from popular imams) and the emergence of an mob-like atmosphere (including threats). Yet most are civic discussions on the role of religion in the state, with anti-Western sentiments only stretching to what is perceived as the imposition of certain values by the West.

In July 2020, the introduction of a new Civil Code was widely framed as paving the way for same-sex marriages and was praised by the U.S. Embassy. It drew criticism from the Islamic Community of Kosovo, which was widely discussed on social media. Grievances were also expressed about the introduction of COVID restrictions on mosque attendance. Yet unlike the pre-Syria period, when radical imams were highly present in the public sphere with statements on political and social affairs, more recently they have stayed in the background and some have even expressed support for measures such as closure of mosques during COVID. Incidents like the attack in Vienna, the perpetrator of which was an Albanian, even drew condemnation from popular religious conservative sites. There is a wide array of websites and anonymous Facebook pages with

religious content that occasionally comment on themes of victimization, but the perception is that whatever radical and violent extremist element exist, it has either subsided or has gone underground into closed online communities.

The dark hole of social media pages amplifies polarization and conspiracies.

28. The social media ecosystem (especially on Facebook) has turned into a jungle of anonymous pages, many spreading polarizing content and fake news, often in seemingly organized campaigns. The popularity of COVID-19 conspiracies, in particular, show latent suspicions of the Western agenda. The growth of a social media fake news industry in Kosovo¹¹⁶ and neighboring North Macedonia¹¹⁷ has been well documented by researchers. While most polarizing content on social media may be driven by click-bait, which are business models which feed on emotional and polarizing content, others are organized and have political motivations to manipulate the information environment.

In late 2019 the online media ecosystem in Kosovo witnessed the growth of a large number of new social media accounts engaged in active information operations, such as Facebook pages (the dates of creation are identifiable through Facebook's page transparency function) that had all the appearance of media platforms, yet distributed content (e.g. photos, news), disinformation or outright fake news with broadly consistent politically polarizing and partisan narratives.¹¹⁸ Such pages existed prior to 2019, yet a rapid rise in the number of these types of accounts was observed after the elections in October 2019, and especially in the tense period leading up to the government's collapse on March 24.

By mid-April, at least 80 Facebook pages with similar features, all distributing polarizing or partisan content were identified to have opened (the majority have since gone inactive).¹¹⁹ This seemingly inauthentic disinformation network of pages with anonymous administrators (in Kosovo, North Macedonia or abroad) subsided after the fall of the government. The case illustrates the ease by which the social media infrastructure can be used, either by external or domestic actors, to manipulate the informa-

tion environment. This was later proven, with the well-documented spread of COVID-19 conspiracies on social media, which included everything from 5G to projects for global population control. The prolif-

eration of such conspiracies to mainstream media, including those claiming COVID vaccines cause homosexuality, illustrate the destabilizing potential of this information ecosystem.

5. CONCLUSION: THREE KEY TAKEAWAYS

29. The Euro-Atlantic consensus in Kosovo is showing signs of fragility due to public disillusionment. But it also shows potential for reinvigoration, which comes from a reclaimed sense of agency; a sovereigntist attitude which, if taken to an extreme, carries its own risks. Kosovars remain staunchly pro-Western, yet confidence in the state building project of the international community has faded. There is growing disillusionment with the Euro-Atlantic consensus, at least in the way in which it was understood over the past twenty years, due to unmet expectations. While the West is credited for diffusing essential liberal-democratic norms that enables political pluralism, and media and civil society to thrive, there is also widespread criticism of its role in facilitating elite corruption.

The Euro-Atlantic consensus has been delegitimized, not just by its failure to deliver results in Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path (see next point), but also because it is seen as too top-down and dismissive of local agency in the decision-making process. According to some local politicians, activists, and analysts, the prominent role of external (primarily Western) actors in Kosovo's society and governance threatens Kosovo's claim to its own sovereignty; these "sovereigntists" support a much less prominent role of external actors in Kosovo's internal affairs. Influenced by this thinking, the new political elite that emerged after the February 2021 elections prioritizes accountability to a domestic audience and may redefine what the Euro-Atlantic consensus means. Kosovo's increasing independence should be seen as a healthy sign of state maturity and a normal response to objective needs. If the current resistance to Western oversight starts to morph

into resistance to democratic reforms, however, that could spell trouble.

30. The key cause of the emerging cracks in Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic consensus is the lack of a NATO and EU accession perspective - particularly the EU's failure to speak with one voice on the subject of Kosovo and to deliver on key commitments, weakening its normative power. The EU has failed to resolve the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia and maintains a position of status-neutrality vis-à-vis Kosovo, the consequences of which are felt in Kosovo. In this sense, while the five non-recognizing member states of the EU seem to be effective in undermining the remaining twenty-two member states, it is not clear if the latter has an interest in pushing forward a more robust policy of engagement with Kosovo. For instance, with respect to visa liberalization, it is France and the Netherlands (among others) who have opposed a positive decision on Kosovo, derailing the process. In doing so they have not only undermined the credibility and agency of EU institutions in the eyes of Kosovars, but also, at an emotional level, have made Kosovars feel unwanted. For Kosovars it has become clear that Euro-Atlantic integration process has become increasingly political, rather than merit-based. Furthermore, Kosovars have increasingly felt frustrated with what they see as the unwillingness of the international community, especially the EU, to counter Serbia's efforts to undermine Kosovo's statehood. The lurking concern is that the Euro-Atlantic path has stopped working in Kosovo's favor.

31. Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic consensus has been inadvertently undermined by the highly polarizing discourse shaped by populist politics, as well as the failure of civil society and the media to nurture consensus on strategic issues. Public opinion in Kosovo has many misperceptions about the Euro-Atlantic agenda, the strategic motivations of various actors— especially malign authoritarian ones— and the complex geopolitical reality that has left Kosovo in limbo. This is largely the result of populist and polarizing narratives which have caused politics to become inward-looking and unable to reach consensus on issues of strategic interest. Yet a key

role in this paralysis has been played by civil society and the media, especially vis-à-vis the national decision-making process on key demands stemming from the EU integration process (i.e., border demarcation with Montenegro, Brussels dialogue, etc.). When the time came to nurture a climate of consensus and inform the public about the facts and what is at stake, the media, for the most part, jumped on the ethno-nationalist or populist bandwagon. Instead of informing the public and explaining the Euro-Atlantic agenda and its importance, most chose to undermine it.



6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For the government

32. The country's new leadership should reestablish coherence, rationality and credibility in Kosovo's foreign policy, and return to a strategically cooperative approach with key Western allies – jointly pursuing an agenda that would promote Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic perspective.

- Engagement in EU-facilitated dialogue with Serbia remains the best way to change the position of the four NATO and five EU non-recognizers currently blocking Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path. The new leadership needs to have a strategic discussion with partners in setting up, or adjusting, the framework of this stalled process by outlining the principles and parameters of an acceptable outcome.
- If the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue fails to achieve results, Kosovo should prioritize strategic bilateral agendas with key Euro-Atlantic allies – primarily the U.S., Germany, the U.K. and Turkey – in order to advance Kosovo's international standing, boost defense and security arrangements (possibly through mutual defense treaties), secure investment and support democratic reforms. At the regional level, this also includes structured cooperation and agenda-setting with Albania on issues of joint interest. At the EU level, Kosovo should seek to deepen ties with countries sharing a similar Euro-Atlantic outlook, especially the Baltic and former Eastern block countries in the Three Seas Initiative.
- Kosovo should adopt a more multifaceted approach to foreign policy and overcome isolation by expanding the range of bilateral relations with non-Western countries. Yet it should be wary of the potential that such ties could have in creating strategic dependencies, especially those that would undermine Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic orientation and democratic values.

33. The new political elite satisfied a public demand for agency and accountability. It should now use its legitimacy to rebuild trust in democracy and Euro-Atlantic values. The domestic focus on justice and jobs is critical to this end, but it should also have ties to NATO and EU accession.

- Meeting public expectations on the rule of law and the economy will be a momentous task, yet it is the essential ingredient in restoring the public's trust that democracy and the Euro-Atlantic orientation can deliver results. This domestic agenda must center around strengthening the fragile independent institutions essential to checks and balances. Kosovo should avoid any new forms of majoritarian or illiberal rule that would derail it from Euro-Atlantic path.
- The new government's agenda must be locally owned, yet also have ties to specific reforms leading to NATO and EU accession. Kosovo needs to work unilaterally to ensure it is prepared when the integration window opens. In terms of NATO accession, for example, the military criteria are well aligned with the Comprehensive Transition Plan of the Kosovo Security Force currently being implemented with the support of bilateral partners. In terms of EU accession, the SAA provides a framework, but Kosovo could take a step further in building its own road map and "simulating" an accession path. Working to convince skeptical member states on visa liberalization should be an immediate step.

34. The new government must radically reshape public discourse on the Euro-Atlantic agenda. It must explain its objectives, build realistic expectations and nurture wider consensus on strategic issues. It must take responsibility and resist engagement in polarizing narratives.

- The new government needs to do a better job than previous ones in communicating Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic agenda. Clarity and realism are needed, especially in terms of what it is possible to achieve under current circumstances, and what is at stake from processes like the Kosovo-

Serbia dialogue. Most importantly, this agenda must be detached from abstract rhetoric and must be clearly linked to direct benefits to citizens.

- The new government has a clear mandate, but it also needs to nurture consensus on matters of strategic interest related to Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path. Ideally it should seek to reach a broader pact on issues of strategic interest that would isolate it from every-day political divisions. It could do this by creating or taking part in platforms where it would engage with the opposition, civil society, media and other stakeholders.
- The new government should not hesitate to invest political capital in defending its positions on issues of strategic interest to the Euro-Atlantic agenda, explaining the merits of conditionality, and it should take responsibility by treating the reform agenda as one that is foreign imposed.
- The new government should not shy away from expressing strong, principled positions on issues, but it needs to avoid engaging in rhetoric that deepens ethnic or other political divisions. Resilience and counter measures are needed in the face of disinformation or psychological warfare campaigns originating in Serbia and Russia that seek to derail Kosovo's agenda. The government should pro-actively address the legitimate concerns of ethnic minority communities and increase its receptiveness to concerns among the Albanian majority.

For civil society and media

35. Civil society groups will have to play a leading role in the delayed social process of unpacking the values behind the Euro-Atlantic consensus, by defending and promoting them and by narrowing the gap between the values that are formally enshrined in the founding documents of the state and promoted by institutions, and the system of beliefs and values that society supports. This does not imply that there is an inherent conflict between the two, but rather the need to raise further awareness about Kosovo as an open, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic state.

- Civil society groups supporting democracy and human rights need to reconnect with the grassroots and expand the constituency of people who care or see common interest in Euro-Atlantic values. Various rights-based groups and movements- from those focusing on gender, the environment, workers' rights, ethnic minority rights or entrepreneurs with a vested interest in the rule of law- need to better understand how their interests align with Euro-Atlantic integration, so that they can be its advocates.
- Civil society groups should not see their role as diffusing norms (i.e., advocating the government adopt particular policies that might be neither feasible nor priorities) often imposed by external actors- who are serving momentary donor interests or getting coopted by government agendas. The process of reform must begin by local agency and by connecting the grassroots with legislative and decision-making processes. To this end, existing and future forms of public consultation and participation need to be revisited and reinvigorated.

36. In the new political climate, pro-democracy civil society groups will have to become the key guardian of Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic agenda by maintaining demands for accountability, nurturing consensus on strategic issues, improving ethnic relations and challenging society's increasingly inward-looking mindset.

- As establishment parties in the opposition have lost considerable public trust, civil society will have to play a key role in preventing the emergence of any new form of majority rule that tramples upon the rights of fragile independent institutions. Transition of power has often been associated with the loss of the civil society capacity of the new government. What this means is that when a new government is formed in Kosovo, it has become the norm to recruit people from civil society to serve in public roles, such as minister, adviser to the prime minister, etc. In principle, this should be a normal and potentially positive development, because it can prod a government to be friendly

to issues promoted by civil society, such as transparency and accountability. In practice, however, it has had the effect of weakening the capacity of non-government organizations. Also, it has damaged the credibility of civil society organizations in the eyes of the public (i.e., they are now sometimes viewed as simply a stepping stone to government). Credible actors need to lead the way by holding the new government accountable, especially on governance standards.

- Civil society must not repeat the mistakes of the past decade, when it fed into the chorus of populist and polarizing discourse on strategic issues. It needs to help shape the political consensus to support the 75 percent of Kosovo's citizens who are not satisfied with the current status quo in Kosovo-Serbia relations and want a solution.¹²⁰
- Civil society groups need to challenge Kosovo society's increasingly inward-looking perspective and play a more effective role in explaining the importance and meaning of regional, European or global developments, as well as the threat presented by malign authoritarian actors.
- The government can do its part in creating a climate conducive to improved ethnic relations, but it will be up to civil society to take a leading role both in the domestic dialogue with Kosovo Serbs, with Serbia, and with the wider region.

37. Kosovo's leading media elites and commentators need to understand their vital role in countering the polarization undermining consensus on strategic issues, better informing the public about the external environment and improving filters to foreign disinformation.

- In key moments over the past decade, Kosovo's otherwise plural media scene failed to rise above, and even amplified, the toxic level of political polarization on issues of strategic interest, including through disinformation. The editors and commentators shaping discourse need to be aware of their responsibility to the public interest, and the need to balance criticism and consensus-building for Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic agenda.

- Kosovo's media need to do a better job of informing the public on the reality of Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic agenda. This includes not allowing domestic political actors and their motivations to shape the narrative on the external environment, but independently presenting the complexity of the narrative, building more realistic expectations, explaining the motivations of Western allies, and raising awareness about the role of malign authoritarian actors. The capacity, quantity, and quality of journalists covering foreign affairs and democracy needs to be boosted.
- The chaotic information environment flooded with commercially or politically motivated disinformation, will require editors to play a more assertive role as guardians of truth. A key area of focus should be managing the flow of disinformation and psychological warfare campaigns from malign actors with an interest in derailing Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path. Editors and commentators should strengthen filters and deconstruct external attempts to manipulate the information environment for political ends.

For the international community

38. The U.S. and EU are decisive players in advancing Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic perspective-. They must invest serious political weight to the EU-facilitated dialogue, by defining a framework, clarifying incentives, and restoring credibility.

- The EU-facilitated dialogue needs a new framework and a clear timeline that is unambiguous about the end goal of mutual recognition. Nothing will happen in this process if the U.S. does not elevate the issue at the highest levels and throw its serious political weight behind the EU process. The mood in Kosovo and Serbia, as well as in key European capitals, is one of complacency with the status quo, which is Russia's strategic objective in undermining the region's Euro-Atlantic path. The West should not wait until the security situation deteriorates.
- The ability of the EU and U.S. to achieve this goal requires a fresh look at the incentives (economic and political) for Euro-Atlantic integration

and clarity over the political pathway for the Western Balkans toward the EU, which is central to changing the dialogue. Financial or political carrots should be a) clearly communicated to local audiences and actors in Kosovo and Serbia and b) attached to and conditioned with constructive behavior in the dialogue.

- There is an overwhelming local perception that the EU has failed to reward Kosovo for delivering its side of the bargain, especially on visa liberalization, while its neutral status and increasingly asymmetric treatment of Serbia has deepened mistrust. The EU's role and credibility as a facilitator has been seriously damaged. The EU Commission must take a more pro-active role with member states to secure support for delivering on commitments.

39. If the dialogue fails, despite Kosovo's cooperation, Euro-Atlantic partners need to provide support to advance Kosovo's international standing and defend it from the hybrid attacks of those undermining its stability and independence.

- Support to membership in the Council of Europe and other multilateral organizations is a good place to start, but the facilitation of communication and advancement of ties with the five EU and four NATO non-recognizers is essential to changing the momentum regarding the Euro-Atlantic agenda.
- Under Title II of the SAA agreement, the EU commits itself to promote "Kosovo's participation in the international democratic community, should objective circumstances so permit." While objective circumstances are open to interpretation, there is plenty of room for EU institutions to deliver on this commitment. The first important step is to begin a high-level political dialogue with Kosovo on foreign policy alignment and priorities, in the form of a Special Group on international cooperation.
- Kosovo's lack of a path to join NATO due to the failure of four of its members to recognize Kosovo's sovereignty is a source of concern, considering the militarization in the region. The current KFOR mandate provides a deterrent, but

several bilateral NATO partners should consider establishing mutual defense treaties.

- The challenges that disinformation, domestic or foreign-sourced, present to Kosovo's stability are greater than its capacity to counter them. The EU, U.S. and bilateral partners should help strengthen Kosovo's capacity to defend and deter hybrid attacks from Serbia and Russia, both domestically and abroad.

40. Continued support of Kosovo's civil society and media, as well as strict conditionality on governance reforms, is essential in sustaining democratic progress and preventing new forms of illiberal governance. But there also needs to be an appreciation of civil society agency, a reduction in its use as a tool for outside actors, and increased work with grassroots organizations.

- In the face of a global authoritarian tide and malign influence, democracy promotion has made a welcome comeback as a priority for both the U.S. and EU. That priority should be reflected in the Western Balkans, too. In Kosovo, the West should not make the mistake of falling into complacency after a transition of power, especially considering the growing number of citizens questioning the Euro-Atlantic consensus and the fragility of institutions. Continued support for critical voices and media will be essential in continuing calls for accountability, in sustaining achievements, and expanding democratic space.
- The EU must clarify the European prospects of the Western Balkans and regain credibility in Kosovo for the conditionality policy to become effective again. The EU has, in many ways, been a historical ally to pro-democracy civil society groups against the overwhelming power of political interests. Any new framework of incentives that is established, including economic ones, must retain clear conditionality tied to governance reforms, but they should also reward delivery on reforms.
- The international community should strive to improve cooperation with other local actors throughout Kosovo, as well diversify the portfolio of engagement beyond the capital.

While advocacy organizations' support is important, bringing to the table grassroots organizations that deal with other community-based issues is also extremely relevant. Secondly, the international community should not treat civil society as a tool for their bidding. It has become embarrassingly transparent how certain NGOs are used to complete particular tasks for the EU. The international community

should sensitize itself to a new reality of local agency and consolidated local capacity.

- The international community should put special focus on supporting media capacity in reporting on and analyzing global and European affairs, to present a more realistic understanding of the Euro-Atlantic challenges and the threat from malign actors.



ANNEXES

ANNEX 1

• ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES OF DOMESTIC GRIEVANCES WITH EU

Visa liberalisation

"Which. Accession. Perspective? We can't even travel to EU" – Petrit Selimi¹ reaction to Carl Bildt².

"Sick of EU double standards!" – Adriatik Kelmendi³, Klan Kosova CEO, reacting to U.S envoy Grenell

Dialogue with Serbia

"The EU has lost its instrument of influence in the Balkans (accession) and thus cannot guarantee any agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. It is time for us to repeat Hobbes: Agreements without the guarantee of the sword are empty phrases!" – Blerim Latifi⁴

"Thank you Europe for being dishonest and picking a fight with the U.S. in Kosovo, with us as a human shield." – Berat Buzhala⁵, on the EU during the "Grenell affair."

"If Albanians need to thank Grenell for anything, then they should thank him for his role in waking Europeans up, especially the Germans, who have been sleeping for a decade and looking at the Balkans with indifference, holding an increasingly neutral position to Serbia's policies in the region and blocking Kosovo's visa liberalization." – Enver Robelli⁶

"The statement was welcome, but had three faults: it did not rule out border changes; it did not foresee mutual recognition as the end goal; and it did not say anything about the EU leverage to guarantee implementation" – Meliza Haradinaj, Kosovo's Foreign Minister, on a French-German statement on the dialogue.

"This is not status-neutral, this is pro-Serbia. Where do we go from here, EU?" – Agron Bajrami⁷, chief editor of Koha, reacting to Miroslav Lajcak's office map

Specialist chambers

"What was started by a Russian-paid mercenary (i.e., Dick Marty), supplied with information from Belgrade, now has the stamp of pseudo justice sponsored by the EU." – Abelard Tahiri⁸, former PDK minister, condemning the EU initiated Specialist Chambers for alleged pro-Russian and pro-Serbian bias.

¹ Petrit Selimi is a former Deputy-Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Kosovo government.

² Carl Bildt is a former Prime Minister of Sweden (1991 to 1994)

³ Adriatik Kelmendi is a journalist and director of the national TV station Klan Kosova in Kosovo.

⁴ Blerim Latifi is a professor of political philosophy at the University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina" in Kosovo. He also served as adviser to former Speaker of the Kosovo Assembly Mr. Kadri Veseli.

⁵ Berat Buzhala is a political analyst, former editor-in-chief of Gazeta Express (www.gazetaexpress.com) and a former member of the Kosovo Assembly.

⁶ Enver Robelli is a journalist for Tages Anzeiger, a Swiss German-language newspaper published in Zurich. He regularly reports and comments on developments in the Balkans and especially Kosovo.

⁷ Agron Bajrami is editor in chief of Kosovo's largest printed newspaper Koha Ditore (www.koha.net).

⁸ Abelard Tahiri is a member of the Kosovo Assembly and member of the presidency of the Democratic Party of Kosovo. He also served as chief of cabinet to the Prime Minister Hashim Thaci and was Minister of Justice in the Kosovo government from 2017 until 2019.

"The indictment by the Europeans is not just against the KLA, it is against the Republic of Kosovo and its guardians." – Valon Syla⁹, editor of Metro.

"The Specialist Chambers has been created not for justice, but to blackmail the political scene in favor or reaching a compromise favorable to Serbia." – Bujar Dugolli¹⁰, university professor.

"The charges are written in Cyrillic and translated in English."-- Halil Matoshi¹¹, adviser to Ramush Haradinaj.

ANNEX 2

• CASE STUDY: PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE CAMPAIGN

Context

The last weeks of September and the first half of October 2020 marked the last concerted effort by the EU to reach a breakthrough in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue with the outgoing government. The Association of Serbian-majority Municipalities (ASM) was one of the thorniest and most debated issues. In late September, several voices on the issue, from EU member states and NATO, seemed to signal support for Kosovo's concerns over ASM. On October 2, Kosovo's PM Hoti repeated that the "ASM is a closed chapter." The EU's envoy Miroslav Lajcak seemed to make amends with (and was surprisingly endorsed by) Kosovo's former president Thaçi, a vocal opponent of ASM. Between October 13-15, Lajcak stayed for a visit in Pristina and Belgrade to move things forward.

Around the same time, **in the approximate period between September 28–October 16** there was a widely reported and visible escalation of polarizing rhetoric by Serbian officials (particularly Vulin, Drecun and Dacic), as well as an increase of content with divisive narratives originating in media outlets perceived as close to the Serbian government and those that are Russian-affiliated. This escalation may have had several objectives, but one clear impact in Kosovo was that it made it more difficult for a very fragile Kosovo government to engage in dialogue.

• NARRATIVES TARGETING KOSOVO

Narrative 1: The revival of war grievances and stoking ethnic tensions.

On September 30, several platforms in Kosovo transmitted a statement by Serbian MP Milorad Drecun from governing SNS (given to TV Happy in Serbia on September 28), in which he claims that *"Serbia had given the Specialist Chambers at the Hague key information on the structure of the KLA."* The statement feeds into the narrative in Kosovo of the Specialist Chambers as a Serbian court, and fuels grievances with the EU.

On October 2, many platforms in Kosovo transmitted a statement by outgoing Serbian FM Ivica Dacic (given originally for TV Happy in Serbia on September 29) condemning Serbs for *"uncovering the whereabouts of the graves of Albanians in Serbia."* This highly provocative statement was made at a time when missing persons were one of the topics in the negotiations underway in Brussels. Missing persons is frequently used as an argument by opposition parties in Kosovo conditioning the dialogue in Brussels.

On October 2, wide coverage was also given to an official statement by the Minister of Defense of Vulin, on the Ministry of Defense's website, in which he calls Albanians by an ethnic slur. In a polemic with Albanian PM Rama, Vulin was covered by Kosovo media, repeating the slur on two more occasions ([here](#) and [here](#)).

⁹ Valon Syla is a Kosovo journalist and editor of Metro news-portal in Kosovo.

¹⁰ Bujar Dugolli is a dean of Faculty of Philology in the University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina." He was a Minister of Trade and Industry in Kosovo's government from 2004 until 2008.

¹¹ Halil Matoshi is a former political adviser to the Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj.

The ethnic slur (ruled by a Serbian court to be hate speech) is reminiscent in Kosovo of the Milosevic era. This series of statements provoked reactions in Kosovo and grievances toward the EU.

On October 3, there was wide media coverage of a letter sent to Quint Ambassadors by Kosovo's MFA asking them to condemn the statements by Dacic and Vulin. Kosovo officials were quoted saying that the "silence was deafening," while prominent commentators noted that "the Quint would not hesitate to react brutally if anyone from Kosovo's leadership made a politically incorrect statement." Prominent journalists called Dacic's statements "insane, inhumane and cruel," whereas Parliament Chairwoman Vjosa Osmani was widely covered for saying that "*Serbia was led by genocidal minds.*"

On October 10, A statement by former Serbian leader Nenad Canak, made on October 5th in a TV appearance on Serbia's TV Happy, in which he claims Serbia's Interior Minister told the country's leadership in 2001 that "*he was not able to sleep, because he had discovered 16 mass graves in Serbia*" received wide media coverage (including in a viral video). Canak goes on to explain that, under the instruction of former Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, it was decided to not make the information public immediately. The statement is seen in Kosovo as proof that Serbia continues to hide the remains of Albanians considered missing. By the time the statement by Nenad Canak emerged, it sparked a reaction by the then key opposition leader Albin Kurti. He used the statement to suggest that Kosovo and Serbia cannot have peace for as long as Serbia hides Albanian mass graves, indicating how this discourse has impacted the climate of the dialogue.

On October 15, many Kosovo Albanian platforms re-published a story originally published in Serbian pro-government tabloid Novosti. The source was a highly suspicious video allegedly depicting a Serbian priest removing the Albanian flag from Kosare. Kosare, on the border of Kosovo and Albania, was the location of a famous battle between the KLA and Yugoslav Army in 1999. Many Albanian online platforms carried the story, with the most frequent headline being, "*Serbian priest provokes: removes Albanian flag from Kosare for the first time since 1999.*" The Novosti "story" about the Serbian priest removing the Albanian flag in Kosare went viral on social media, with commentary primarily blaming the government for failing to prevent the event and sparking a reaction by War Veterans Associations.

Narrative 2: Serbs might exit Kosovo institutions if ASM is not created.

On October 14, the Kosovo Serb portal Kosovo Online published a piece, originally sourced from Sputnik Serbia, in which it claims that if ASM is not created now, Serbs are ready to abandon institutions and cause the collapse of the Kosovo government, a move that would complicate Kosovo's position. **On October 15**, Kosovo Online published a piece originally sourced by Serbian Novosti, in which it makes the same argument, that Serbs might abandon institutions if Kosovo does not create ASM.

• NARRATIVES TARGETING DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

Narrative 3: Kosovo Serb children are under attack!

During this period, there was a highly unusual increase in the number of suspicious reports of attacks against the Serbian minority.

On September 29, Serbian state agency Tanjug reported (and many Kosovo Serb platforms like Kosovo Online transmitted) a story about an alleged attempt to kidnap a 9-year-old Serbian child in the village of Plemetin. According to a testimony by the boy's father, that was given more detail the next day by Kosovo Online, a group of four people in a car tried to grab the boy, but he managed to run away. Kosovo Albanian media, including the credible Koha, reported the story differently. Koha's report transmits a statement by Kosovo police which calls the reporting in Kosovo Serb media "incorrect and ill meaning." The police statement suggests that, after an investigation (including security camera checks) and contradictory testimonies, it concluded that the reported incident was not credible.

On October 8, the Kosovo Serb platform Kosovo Online published a story about an attempt to kidnap a young Serbian girl in the village of Babin Most by unknown assailants. Similar to the story in Plemetin, the unknown assailants reportedly tried to drag the girl into a car, but she managed to run away, with her fathers' testimony being the only account. Twenty minutes after Kosovo Online posted the story, the same story was published (with the identical text) by Sputnik Serbia with the headline, "New incident in Kosovo!" However, the incident from Babin Most was not reported by the independent Kosovo Serb portal Kossev, nor by any Kosovo Albanian platforms.

On October 5, Kosovo Online published a Sputnik Serbia article warning that Kosovo Albanians were planning attacks against Kosovo Serbs, titled: "Why are bullets flying over the heads of Serbian kids again?"

On October 8, only a few minutes after the alleged Babin Most incident, Kosovo Online published a statement by Marko Djuric calling the incident "a campaign of instilling fear among Kosovo Serbs south of the Ibar river."

On October 9, Kosovo Online published a piece from the Serbian tabloid Novosti claiming that "more attacks are being planned against Serbs as part of an operation called 'Honor.'"

On October 10, the Chairman of Parliamentary Committee in Kosovo, Milorad Drecun, was quoted by Kosovo Online as saying that "there are continued attempts to threaten the existence of Serbs in Kosovo."

Narrative 4: The threat of Greater Albania.

During this period, statements by Edi Rama and Avdullah Hoti were interpreted to imply Western tolerance for Greater Albania.

On September 29, Kosovo Online carried a Sputnik Serbia piece attacking Albanian PM Edi Rama for pan-Albanian aspirations for posting a picture of what it says is a canyon in North Macedonia, and claiming it is in Albania (there is a canyon with the same name is in southern Albania).

On October 2, after the joint meeting between the governments of Albania and Kosovo in Tirana, Kosovo Online highlights in its headline three statements by Edi Rama feeding the narrative of Greater Albania. "We will remove borders, Durres will be Kosovo's port; We will jointly celebrate 150-year anniversary of Prizren League." A few hours later, Sputnik Serbia also highlighted the same themes. "We will remove borders, Durres will be Kosovo's port."

On October 2, Kosovo Online amplified a statement from the page of the Ministry of Defense by pro-Russian Defense Minister Vulin in his polemic against Edi Rama with the headline, "Only united Serbs can prevent Greater Albania."

On October 4, the chief editor of Kosovo Online was quoted as saying that the "continuation of greater Albanian politics in Kosovo can lead to the unfreezing of the frozen conflict."

On October 6, Kosovo Online re-published an identical piece by Sputnik Serbia carrying a response by Serbian Minister of Defense Vulin against Albanian PM Edi Rama, in which, among other things, he is accused of creating Greater Albania.

On October 8, Kosovo Online published an analysis calling Kosovo's PM "a professor of economics wearing the jersey of the Prizren League." Based on a few statements that Hoti made in the joint government summit with Rama, Kosovo Online concludes that Hoti is part of Rama's plans for Greater Albania.

Narrative 5: NATO is evil, the EU is weak and unfair, Russia and Trump are positive.

During this period, NATO and the EU were portrayed negatively, while Trump and Russia were the good guys.

On September 29, a Sputnik Serbia report (covered also by other platforms like Novosti) alleged that Kosovo Serbs had raised the Russian flag in Zvecan, a fortress in north Kosovo. **On October 7**, Kosovo Online re-published a piece from Sputnik Serbia about a Russian initiative to rebuild a church, headline "Russians start rebuilding of church which literally rescues Serbs."

On October 1, Kosovo Online re-published statements by Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic, originally sourced from Serbian Tanjug, in which he claims that the "EU has lost authority by not implementing what was signed."

On October 4, a few Kosovo Albanian platforms reported an interview with the chief editor of Kosovo Online Milos Garic for Serbian Public broadcaster RTS in which he notes, the "EU has no good intentions and desire for compromise. It's a policy of treating Serbia as equal to other countries and not allowing it to have a leading role in the region." Garic adds that, "If Brussels fails, odds are that the issue will return to Washington."

On October 5, Kosovo Online re-published a statement by Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic, originally sourced from Serbian Tanjug, in which the headline highlights a complaint that the "Brussels agreement has not been implemented even after seven years."

On October 16, Kosovo Online re-published a piece from Sputnik Serbia with statements by Milorad Drecun, saying that if the EEAS letter by Mogherini that Isa Mustafa presented to the public is correct, "the EU has backstabbed us".

On October 16, Kosovo Online published an interview with former Yugoslav Foreign Minister (from the Milosevic era) Zivadin Jovanovic, in which the headline notes that "Lajcak is implementing German policy on Kosovo." He adds that, "America has more influence over Pristina than the EU. The EU is guilty of losing time over nothing and carries responsibility because of its lack of power."

On October 6, Kosovo Online published a statement by Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic, originally sourced from Serbian Tanjug, but based on statements made on public broadcaster RTS, with a headline suggesting that "it's in Serbia's interest for Trump to win elections."

On October 10, Kosovo Online re-published a piece from the Serbian daily Novosti on an upcoming lawsuit to be brought in Serbian courts against NATO for alleged bombing with uranium bombs during 1999. The same story is also covered by Sputnik Serbia.

On October 1, Kosovo Online re-published a Sputnik Serbia piece criticizing KFOR General Marcel Risi's statement on ASM, headline "NATO harshly intrudes in Kosovo's status."

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**THE EMERGING CRACKS IN KOSOVO'S
EURO-ATLANTIC CONSENSUS**

**Erratic geopolitics and the future
of liberal-democratic norms**

By Agon Maliqi / Dr. Ramadan Ilazi