

# Multilateral Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Evaluating International Mediation in the Kosovo-Serbia Dispute

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## Abstract:

This research investigates the role of multilateralism in addressing the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, emphasizing the involvement of international mediators such as the European Union (EU), the United States, United Nations (UN) and NATO. Using process-tracing methodology the study evaluates the evolution of international mediation efforts focusing on the Brussels Agreement (2013) and the Ohrid Agreement (2023). The study aims to identify both the successes and limitations of multilateral diplomacy in resolving this historically entrenched and geopolitically sensitive conflict. Through a comprehensive evaluation of multilateral negotiations, the paper assesses the impact of international diplomacy, third-party interventions, and the critical role of local ownership in fostering sustainable peace. The findings suggest that while multilateralism plays a crucial role in providing platforms for dialogue and fostering cooperation, the effectiveness of these efforts is often hindered by competing national interests, historical grievances, and the complex political dynamics within the Balkans. The study highlights that external mediation alone is insufficient for achieving sustainable peace, as the success of peace agreements depends on local ownership in peacebuilding processes, institutional reforms, and long-term commitment to implementation, as external actors alone cannot ensure sustainable peace. The findings underscore the necessity of an inclusive and long-term conflict resolution strategy, integrating local, regional, and global stakeholders to address underlying tensions, build trust, and implement institutional reforms for enduring peace in Southeast Europe.

**Keywords:** Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, Multilateral diplomacy, EU-facilitated agreements, Peacebuilding, Geopolitical rivalries, Conflict resolution, Sustainable peace, EU integration

## Introduction

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The Balkan region, characterized by its complex history and geopolitical complexities, has long been a focal point of tension and instability. Among its enduring conflicts, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue represents a critical case study in the challenges of post-conflict state-building, ethnic reconciliation, and the role of multilateralism in conflict resolution. Rooted in historical rivalries, unresolved sovereignty issues, and deep-seated ethnic tensions, this conflict continues to hinder regional stability and prospects for sustainable peace. Within this framework, the normalization of relations refers to an EU-mediated process aimed at fostering cooperation, reducing tensions, and establishing functional relations between Kosovo and Serbia – without requiring Serbia’s formal recognition of Kosovo – while advancing both entities toward EU integration (Axyonova & Kartsonaki, 2024). However, despite numerous diplomatic initiatives, including the EU-facilitated dialogue, achieving meaningful progress toward normalization remains elusive.

The Kosovo-Serbia dispute, marked by Serbia’s refusal to recognize Kosovo’s independence and Kosovo’s internal governance challenges in Serb-majority areas, remains a critical test for multilateral conflict resolution. The dispute’s complexity stems from conflicting historical narratives, sovereignty disputes, and Kosovo’s contested statehood, which collectively create barriers to reconciliation and a shared vision for peace (Caplan, 1998). In light of these complexities, this paper explores the role of multilateralism in resolving the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, focusing on the effectiveness of international mediators—such as the European Union (EU), United States (US), United Nations (UN), and NATO—in fostering sustainable peace. Specifically, it examines the impact of agreements like the Brussels Agreement (2013) and the Ohrid Agreement (2023) in facilitating dialogue and conflict resolution. While recent diplomatic efforts, such as the EU-facilitated dialogue, demonstrate the potential of multilateral frameworks to address these issues, their limitations are equally evident. Mediators grapple with balancing geopolitical interests, enforcing compliance, and reconciling divergent priorities—challenges that underscore the complexities of translating negotiated agreements into durable political solutions. By examining the interplay of these factors, this analysis evaluates whether multilateralism, as practiced by key international actors, can overcome entrenched divisions or risks perpetuating cycles of fragile, externally imposed stability.

Multilateralism, defined as the coordination of national policies among three or more states or international organizations to address common challenges, plays a pivotal role in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Multilateral frameworks, involving actors such as the EU, NATO, and the US, have been instrumental in providing platforms for dialogue and leveraging incentives such as EU integration process. However, the crisis of multilateralism – characterized by rising

nationalism, geopolitical rivalries, and the weakening of international norms – poses significant challenges to these efforts. For example, the EU’s role as a mediator has been scrutinized due to perceived biases stemming from internal divisions, particularly the involvement of member states that do not recognize Kosovo’s independence (Bargués, et al., 2024).

This paper contributes to the broader discourse of conflict resolution by critically examining the theoretical and the practical dimensions of multilateralism in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. It evaluates the effectiveness of the current multilateral efforts, the influence of external factors such as Russia, and the potential contributions of civil society and other multilateral actors. The analysis follows a qualitative case study approach, employing process tracing to examine the negotiation and implementation of key agreements. The study also draws on theoretical frameworks such as Zartman’s (2000) ripeness theory, Bercovitch’s (1996) mediation strategies and Richmond’s (2015) hybrid peacebuilding to analyze the interplay between external mediation and local ownership.

By integrating theoretical insights from conflict mediation and multilateralism with empirical analysis of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of both the challenges and the opportunities for achieving a sustainable resolution of the dispute. The paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review situates the study within existing debates on multilateralism and conflict resolution; second, the methodology section outlines the analytical approach and criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of multilateral efforts; third, the empirical analysis examines the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements; and finally, the discussion synthesizes the findings and reflects on their implications for theory and practice.

## **Literature Review: Multilateralism in the Kosovo-Serbia Conflict**

Multilateralism has been pivotal in addressing the Kosovo-Serbia conflict by providing a platform for dialogue among diverse actors and fostering collaboration toward sustainable peace. Defined by Keohane (1984) as the coordination of national policies among three or more states, multilateralism aims to create legitimacy, pool resources, and establish frameworks for long-term conflict resolution. This approach involves various actors, including states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations, working collectively to achieve common goals. Rooted in the belief that global challenges, including conflicts, are best addressed through collective action and cooperation, multilateralism contrasts with unilateralism, where a single state acts independently, and bilateralism, where two states engage directly (Caporaso, 1992). The fundamental rationale behind multilateralism is that by pooling

resources, expertise, and influence, the international community can more effectively manage and resolve conflicts.

In the Kosovo-Serbia context, multilateral efforts have involved key international actors such as the EU, the US, NATO, the UN, and regional stakeholders. While these efforts have achieved notable progress, they also face significant challenges, particularly in attempting to address the historical, political, and social complexities of the conflict. Multilateralism's strength lies in its ability to bring diverse actors to the negotiation table, fostering a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to conflict resolution. However, its effectiveness can be undermined by competing national interests, power asymmetries, and the lack of enforcement mechanisms. Theoretical perspectives highlight the role of multilateralism to establish norms and processes that transcend bilateral disputes. Ruggie (1992) emphasizes how multilateral frameworks facilitate structured dialogue, evident in agreements like the EU-mediated Brussels Agreement (2013) and the Ohrid Agreement (2023).

Zartman's Ripeness Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the enduring stalemate in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. According to Zartman (2000), conflicts are more likely to reach a resolution when they arrive at a mutually hurting stalemate (MHS), a point where both parties perceive continued confrontation as more costly than compromise. The failure of the Brussels and the Ohrid Agreement to produce a lasting resolution suggests that the necessary conditions of ripeness have yet to be met. The persistent deadlock can be attributed to deep-seated nationalist sentiments, geopolitical influences, and domestic political constraints in both Kosovo and Serbia. One proposed method to break such deadlocks is muscular mediation, a concept developed by Alan J. Kuperman (2021). This approach involves a powerful third party coercing conflicting parties into a settlement by imposing costs or military pressure, thereby accelerating the ripening of a conflict. While theoretically compelling, Kuperman (2021) warns that muscular mediation can backfire, particularly when it fails to address the underlying causes of the conflict or when it emboldens one party at the expense of the other. In the Kosovo-Serbia case, three adverse conditions could lead to unintended consequences: (1) if the coerced agreement threatens a vital interest of one party, (2) if that party has the potential to escalate violence against civilians, and (3) if the mediator lacks sufficient military presence to deter such escalation. Given Serbia's continued contestation of Kosovo's sovereignty and the potent nationalist rhetoric in both states, the EU's limited enforcement capacities coupled with NATO's restrained role in the region, raises concerns that coercion without a robust deterrent could incite further instability rather than resolve the conflict (Kuperman, 2021).

Furthermore, the EU's growing use of sanctions against Kosovo, including the suspension of financial aid, has raised concerns about the asymmetric nature of international pressure in the negotiations. While Kosovo has faced punitive measures for actions deemed obstructive to the peace process, Serbia has largely escaped similar consequences despite its refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, its support for Russia, and its ongoing regional provocations (A2 CNN, 2025). This selective approach raises questions about whether international mediators are truly impartial, as Kosovo is being held to stricter standards while Serbia enjoys greater diplomatic flexibility. Furthermore, speculation—particularly among sceptics in the Balkans—about a shift in U.S. policy regarding Kosovo's independence has emboldened Serbian leadership and undermined trust in international mediation efforts. This asymmetry raises concerns about which party truly enjoys the backing of major powers and whether the current framework can deliver an equitable resolution (Cafiero, 2025). Given the fragile security situation in the Balkans and the reactive role of international actors, a more comprehensive approach is required (Ben-Meir, 2025). This entails integrating muscular mediation within a broader framework that includes proactive diplomacy, sustained economic incentives, local ownership of the peace process, and stronger engagement with civil society. A comprehensive strategy that combines pressure with confidence-building measures, institutional reforms, and long-term regional integration mechanisms is essential for a durable resolution. Without such an approach, coercion alone risks deepening tensions rather than fostering sustainable peace.

The EU has been at the forefront of multilateral efforts, leveraging its enlargement policy to incentivize cooperation between the parties. As Weller (2009, p. 321) argues, the EU's emphasis on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law has provided a normative framework for the dialogue. Jacob Bercovitch's (1996) distinction between high-leverage and low-leverage mediators provides a valuable framework for understanding the EU's role as a high-leverage mediator in possessing significant resources, influence, and tools to shape the behaviour of conflicting parties. The EU's leverage in the Kosovo-Serbia conflict primarily stems from its enlargement policy and economic incentives, offering the prospect of EU membership as a powerful motivator for both parties to engage in dialogue and implement agreements. This conditionality tool provides the EU with considerable influence, as it aligns the interests of Kosovo and Serbia with broader regional stability and integration (Bercovitch, 1996). However, the EU's high-leverage status is not without limitations. Internal divisions among member states, particularly the refusal of five EU countries to recognize Kosovo's independence, undermine its cohesion and credibility as a mediator. This lack of unity weakens the EU's

ability to present a unified stance and enforce agreements. Ejodus and Subotić (2014) underscore how such divisions weaken the EU's cohesion and legitimacy as a mediator, complicating its ability to enforce agreements effectively. More broadly, multilateralism as a conflict resolution tool has faced increasing scrutiny due to rising nationalism, geopolitical rivalries, and the erosion of international norms (Axyonova & Kartsonaki, 2024). In the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, multilateralism faces significant challenges, yet it remains a vital mechanism for pursuing peace and stability.

External actors like Russia and China further complicate multilateralism in the Kosovo-Serbia conflict. Russia leverages its cultural and historical ties with Serbia to counter Western-led initiatives and reinforce Serbia's stance against Kosovo's independence. This geopolitical rivalry introduces competing narratives that challenge the neutrality of multilateral frameworks. Similarly, China's strategic interests in the Balkans align with Serbia, creating additional complexity in the multilateral process (Kasmi, 2024). The crisis of multilateralism is evident in the inability of international institutions like the UN and the EU to enforce compliance with agreements and resolutions. Geopolitical tensions, such as those between Russia and the West, further complicate the effectiveness of multilateral efforts.

Oliver Richmond's concept of hybrid peacebuilding (2015) provides a critical perspective on the balance between external mediation and local ownership, challenging the dominance of top-down, liberal peacebuilding approaches that prioritize institutional reforms and state-building over grassroots agency. Richmond (2015) argues that sustainable peace cannot be imposed from the outside but must emerge from the active participation of local actors who understand the historical, cultural, and socio-political dynamics of their context. In the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, the limitations of externally driven initiatives, such as the EU-facilitated agreements, underscore the need for more inclusive peace processes that incorporate local agency the capacity of communities, civil society, and marginalized groups to shape peace processes in ways that reflect their needs and aspirations. In the context of the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, Richmond's critique of liberal peacebuilding highlights the limitations of externally-driven initiatives, such as the EU-facilitated Brussels Agreement (2013) and the Ohrid Agreement (2023), which often prioritize technical and political solutions over the deeper socio-economic and cultural dimensions of the conflict.

While the EU and other international actors have played a crucial role in facilitating negotiations, their reliance on conditionality and top-down approaches has often sidelined local voices, particularly those of marginalized communities and civil society organizations. To address these challenges, scholars advocate for a more inclusive and adaptive multilateral

framework. Bieber (2019) and Kew et al. (2008) suggest integrating local actors, including civil society and marginalized groups, into the negotiation and implementation processes to ensure that agreements resonate with those directly affected. Moreover, balancing international oversight with local ownership is essential for building trust and ensuring the sustainability of agreements. The Kosovo-Serbia conflict illustrates the complexities and opportunities of multilateralism as a conflict resolution tool. While it has facilitated dialogue and partial agreements, its effectiveness is often hindered by geopolitical rivalries, internal divisions among mediators, and the exclusion of local stakeholders (Gashi et al., 2017). A more inclusive and context-sensitive approach to multilateralism, one that prioritizes reconciliation and balances international and local interests, is essential for achieving lasting peace and stability in the region.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the role of multilateralism in the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, with a particular focus on the Brussels Agreement (2013) and the Ohrid Agreement (2023). The case study method is well-suited for analyzing complex political phenomena, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of specific events, actors, and processes within their real-world context. By focusing on these two agreements, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the successes and limitations of multilateral mediation in the Balkans. The qualitative approach enables the researcher to capture the intricacies of diplomatic negotiations, the role of external actors, and the dynamics of local ownership, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies.

The analysis draws on a combination of primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive examination of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Primary sources include official documents such as the texts of the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements, statements from key stakeholders (e.g., the EU, US, UN, NATO), and reports from international organizations involved in the mediation process. Secondary sources consist of scholarly literature on multilateralism, conflict mediation, and peacebuilding, as well as policy analyses and commentaries on the Kosovo-Serbia dispute. This multi-source approach allows for triangulation, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings. However, the reliance on publicly available documents may introduce certain limitations, such as potential biases or gaps in the data, which are addressed through critical analysis and contextualization within the broader literature.

The study is guided by a theoretical framework that integrates insights from three key strands of literature. First, Zartman's ripeness theory (2000) is used to assess whether the

conditions for successful mediation were present during the negotiation of the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements. According to Zartman, conflicts are more likely to be resolved when they reach a "hurting stalemate", where parties perceive continued conflict as more costly than compromise. Second, Bercovitch's (1996) mediation strategies provide a framework for evaluating the approaches employed by international actors, including facilitation, formulation, and manipulation. This helps to analyze the effectiveness of different mediation tactics in fostering dialogue and agreement. For instance, the EU's role as a facilitator in the Brussels Agreement and its use of conditionality to incentivize cooperation can be examined through this lens. Third, Richmond's (2015) hybrid peacebuilding offers a critical perspective on the balance between external mediation and local ownership, emphasizing the importance of local agency in peace processes. This framework highlights the need to integrate grassroots perspectives into the peacebuilding process, ensuring that agreements are not only politically viable but also socially legitimate. These theoretical lenses enable a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between international and local actors in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.

The study employs process-tracing to examine the causal mechanisms linking multilateral mediation efforts to specific outcomes. Process-tracing involves identifying key events, decisions, and actors that shaped the negotiation and implementation of the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements. This method allows for a detailed analysis of how and why certain outcomes were achieved (or not) and provides insights into the dynamics of multilateral mediation in the Balkans. For example, process-tracing is used to explore the role of external incentives, such as EU integration, in motivating the parties to engage in dialogue, as well as the impact of geopolitical rivalries on the mediation process. By tracing the sequence of events—from the initial technical dialogue in 2011 to the signing of the Brussels Agreement in 2013 and the Ohrid Agreement in 2023—the study reveals the complex interplay of external pressures, domestic political dynamics, and local agency that shaped the outcomes of these agreements.

### **Challenges, Resilience, and Crisis of Multilateralism**

Multilateralism, as a framework for addressing global challenges, has long been proclaimed as a means of fostering collective action and equitable solutions. Its principles of inclusivity and shared responsibility are particularly relevant in the realm of conflict resolution, where disputes often transcend national boundaries and involve diverse stakeholders (Ruggie, 1992). However, the application of multilateralism in resolving complex disputes, such as the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, exposes both its inherent strengths and significant limitations. These challenges not only highlight the struggles of multilateralism in practice but also underscore its evolving nature in the face of geopolitical, institutional, and normative crises.



One of the primary challenges to multilateralism in conflict resolution is the conflicting national interests of member states, which can hinder collective action. In the case of Kosovo and Serbia, geopolitical rivalries and historical tensions have complicated the negotiation process. Powerful states often exert their influence within multilateral organizations, sometimes prioritizing their interests over impartial conflict resolution leading to biased outcomes that undermine the credibility of multilateral efforts. This dynamic has been particularly evident in the Western Balkans, where the strategic importance to the EU, the US, Russia, and China has led to a fragmented approach. Each actor's priorities shape their involvement, resulting in inconsistent and sometimes contradictory policies. For example, while the EU has sought to promote dialogue through its enlargement policy, Russia has leveraged its historical ties with Serbia to counter Western-led initiatives, reinforcing Serbia's stance against Kosovo's independence. Such competition dilutes the focus on sustainable peace and undermines the effectiveness of multilateral initiatives.

The bureaucratic complexity of multilateral institutions further complicates their ability to address conflicts effectively. Decision-making within such frameworks is often slow, as it requires consensus among a large and diverse group of stakeholders. Although designed to ensure inclusiveness, this process can lead to prolonged negotiations and delays in implementing critical interventions. In the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, procedural hurdles within the EU's mediation processes have frequently obstructed progress (Barbé & Morillas, 2019). Multilateral institutions also face challenges in aligning their bureaucratic frameworks with the realities of rapidly evolving conflicts. Additionally, the layers of administration, overlapping mandates, and competing priorities among member states can dilute the agility required for timely action, impeding the capacity to respond to emerging crises and risking the alienation of key stakeholders (Hannon, 2023). This inelasticity not only impedes the capacity to respond to emerging crises but also risks alienating the very stakeholder's multilateralism seeks to engage.

The erosion of international norms and institutions presents a broader challenge to multilateralism. The growing trend and the rise of unilateralism and nationalist movements have weakened respect for the principles of sovereignty, equality, and collective action that underpin multilateral diplomacy. In recent years, key institutions such as the UN and the EU have faced diminished influence, as member states prioritize domestic agendas over international cooperation. This trend is particularly evident in the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, where nationalist rhetoric and unilateral policies have undermined multilateral initiatives. The weakening of international law and norms of cooperation further complicates efforts to build trust among

conflicting parties, reducing the credibility of multilateral mechanisms (Buljubašić, 2022). Promoting impartiality and fairness in multilateral interventions is crucial, as it requires member states to commit to shared goals rather than prioritizing national interests.

Despite these significant challenges, multilateralism demonstrates a remarkable resilience through its ability to adapt and foster collaboration across diverse actors. The Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, mediated by the EU, illustrates the potential of multilateral mechanisms to bring conflicting parties to the negotiating table. The EU's use of conditionality, tied to the promise of European integration, has been a key factor in aligning the interests of both Kosovo and Serbia with broader regional stability (Gashi et al., 2017). Similarly, NATO's peacekeeping operations in Kosovo and the UN's contributions to governance and humanitarian assistance further highlight the coordinated efforts of multilateral actors in addressing various dimensions of the conflict. Moreover, the adaptive strategies within multilateral frameworks – such as integrating state and non-state actors—have enhanced the legitimacy and comprehensiveness of peacebuilding efforts (Bieber, 2019).

Nevertheless, the resilience of multilateralism is diminished by an ongoing crisis marked by the rise of nationalism and populism, which fundamentally challenges the principles of collective action and shared responsibility. Countries increasingly prioritize their sovereignty and domestic interests over regional or global stability, leading to a fragmentation of international cooperation (Luo, 2024). In the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, competing agendas among key factors such as the EU, US, and Russia illustrate how geopolitical rivalries complicate negotiations and undermine cohesive multilateral strategies (Kasmi, 2024). The erosion of international norms, including respect for sovereignty and adherence to international law, further diminishes the authority of multilateral frameworks. For instance, the refusal of some EU member states to recognize Kosovo's independence has weakened the EU's cohesion and legitimacy as a mediator (Ejdus & Subotić, 2014), while Russia's support for Serbia introduces competing narratives that challenge the neutrality of multilateral efforts.

While multilateralism faces significant challenges, its enduring resilience underscores its importance as a framework for addressing complex conflicts. Strengthening institutional capacities, streamlining decision-making processes, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders are essential for enhancing the effectiveness of multilateral efforts. The lessons learned from the Kosovo-Serbia conflict emphasize the need for a renewed commitment to the principles of inclusivity, impartiality, and adaptability. As the global community grapples with the crisis of multilateralism, its evolution and innovation remain crucial for maintaining peace and stability in an increasingly fragmented world. By balancing external mediation with local

ownership and addressing the root causes of conflict, multilateralism can overcome its limitations and contribute to sustainable peace in the Balkans and beyond.

### **Key Multilateral Efforts**

The roots of the current Kosovo-Serbia conflict date back to the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, a process that fragmented the multi-ethnic state and ignited a series of violent conflicts across the Balkans. Kosovo emerged as a critical flashpoint during this period, culminating in the Kosovo War (1998–1999), which triggered an attempt ethnic cleansing, war crimes, mass displacement, and NATO intervention (Domanovic, 2014). The war ended with the establishment of a United Nations administration in Kosovo and the withdrawal of Serbian forces (Bargués-Pedreny, 2016). Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 further complicated the situation. While over 100 countries have recognized Kosovo as an independent state, Serbia, along with several other countries, including Russia and China, does not. This lack of universal recognition has impeded Kosovo's ability to fully participate in international organizations and has created an ongoing tension between Belgrade and Pristina (Newman & Visoka, 2018).

The EU has played a pivotal role in mediating the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, leveraging its political and economic influence to foster dialogue, facilitate agreements, and promote regional stability. This engagement underscores the importance of multilateral frameworks in conflict resolution, demonstrating how regional organizations can mediate complex and protracted disputes. These mediation efforts are driven not only by humanitarian concerns but also by strategic interests, including the stabilization of the Western Balkans to secure Europe's borders and the advancement of the EU's enlargement policy. The prospect of EU membership has proven to be a powerful incentive for both Kosovo and Serbia, compelling them to engage in dialogue and work toward normalization (Hajrullahu, 2019). However, despite the EU's efforts, the process remains fraught with challenges, ranging from entrenched historical grievances to political resistance and geopolitical complexities.

A critical obstacle to the EU's mediation efficacy lies in its internal divisions: five member states (Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece, and Cyprus) do not recognize Kosovo's independence undermining the bloc's cohesion and credibility as an impartial mediator (Lefteratos, 2022). This fragmentation is worsened by the EU's bureaucratic complexity, which often delays decision-making and impedes agile responses to evolving conflict dynamics. The requirement for consensus among twenty-seven member states, coupled with overlapping institutional mandates, hinders the EU's capacity to enforce agreements or address crises swiftly (Visoka, 2018). These structural limitations highlight the tension between

multilateralism's inclusive ethos and the practical challenges of coordinating divergent national interests within a supranational framework. Despite these hurdles, the EU's sustained engagement—marked by milestones such as the Brussels Agreement (2013) and the Ohrid Agreement (2023)—demonstrate the potential of regional organizations to navigate complex disputes through a blend of incentives, normative pressure, and incremental diplomacy.

### ***The Technical Dialogue and the Brussels Agreement***

The dialogue process formally began in 2011 with a technical dialogue focused on practical issues, including freedom of movement, telecommunications, and the rule of law. While this phase succeeded in addressing urgent technical matters, it exposed significant gaps in political will from both parties, stalling substantive progress. The dialogue was designed to bypass the contentious issue of Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's independence, reflecting a deliberate strategy to advance discussions over addressing core political disputes. However, this lack of recognition has remained a persistent obstacle, limiting the scope for resolving political and territorial disputes. This early phase of negotiations thus underscored both the potential and limitations of addressing peripheral issues while avoiding the root causes of the conflict (Emini & Stakic, 2018).

The 2013 Brussels Agreement marked a pivotal shift, aiming to normalize relations by tackling sensitive political issues, including the creation of the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities, the integration of northern Kosovo into central institutions, and disputes over energy and telecommunications (Morina, 2022). Process-tracing reveals that the EU's leverage, derived from its enlargement policy, was instrumental in securing the agreement. However, the implementation phase exposed the limitations of external mediation, as nationalist rhetoric in both Kosovo and Serbia, coupled with geopolitical pressures from Russia, which reinforced Serbia's resistance to concessions. This dialogue also illustrates the tensions between external mediation and local ownership; while the EU and other international actors have played crucial roles in facilitating negotiations, their reliance on conditionality and top-down approaches has often sidelined local voices, particularly those of marginalized communities and civil society organizations. The agreement's focus on technical and institutional frameworks, such as integrated border management and municipal governance, often overshadowed grassroots concerns like economic inequality, political exclusion, and unresolved historical grievances. Contentions over the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities epitomized this disconnect, as debates over its scope and powers revealed entrenched mistrust and competing visions of sovereignty (Kartsonaki, 2020).

The Brussels process also highlighted tensions between external mediation and local ownership. While the EU and other international actors facilitated negotiations, their reliance on conditionality and top-down approaches frequently marginalized local voices. This exclusion undermined the legitimacy of agreements, as technical solutions proved insufficient to address socio-political fissures. Richmond's (2015) hybrid peacebuilding framework critiques such externally driven approaches, arguing that sustainable peace requires integrating local agency into mediation efforts. By empowering grassroots actors, including NGOs, women's groups, and youth organizations—peace processes can co-create solutions that reflect the lived realities and aspirations of affected communities. Applying this lens, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue could be reimagined as a hybrid model combining the EU's high-leverage tools, such as membership incentives, with multi-track diplomacy that bridges formal negotiations and community-level dialogue. Such an approach would foster reconciliation by addressing root causes like interethnic distrust and socio-economic disparities, while enhancing the legitimacy and durability of agreements. A nuanced balance of global norms and local realities is essential to transform the Balkans' cycle of conflict into a sustainable peace anchored in inclusivity and mutual recognition (Richmond, 2015).

### ***The Washington Agreement and Economic Diplomacy***

The United States contributed a new dimension to the dialogue with the Washington Agreement of 2020, which prioritized economic normalization as a pathway to conflict resolution. Building on the stalled progress of the 2013 Brussels Agreement, this initiative aimed to foster trust by enhancing bilateral trade, enabling free road and rail transit, and facilitating collaboration with U.S. financial institutions to boost export-import infrastructure (Semenov, 2021). Key provisions included Serbia's pledge to halt efforts to revoke international recognition of Kosovo and Kosovo's temporary suspension of bids to join new international organizations, reflecting a fragile compromise on sovereignty disputes. The agreement also emphasized mutual recognition of documents, protections for Serbian Orthodox Church sites, and guarantees for religious freedom—measures intended to address both material and symbolic dimensions of the conflict. While framed as a pragmatic strategy to build trust through shared economic interests, implementation has been marred by mutual accusations of non-compliance, reflecting the difficulty of disentangling economic initiatives from entrenched political tensions. The agreement revealed the limits of economic diplomacy in the absence of parallel progress on political issues (Gashi & Kelmendi, 2023). While the agreement's focus on shared economic interests initially offered a pragmatic pathway to de-escalation, its mixed outcomes reveal that economic incentives alone cannot surmount deeply rooted nationalist

narratives or reconcile divergent sovereignty claims. The persistent stalemate illustrates the limits of compartmentalized diplomacy and underscores the necessity of integrated strategies that synchronize economic, political, and symbolic concessions to achieve sustainable progress.

### ***The Ohrid Agreement and Partial Recognition***

The Ohrid Agreement, reached in March 2023 in Ohrid, North Macedonia, represents a notable milestone in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Facilitated by the European Union, the agreement was verbally accepted by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti. However, both parties have since accused each other of failing to implement its provisions (Bami, 2023). This agreement diverged from prior efforts by incorporating provisions interpreted as implicit recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty, including commitments to establish good-neighbourly relations, mutual recognition of documents and national symbols, respect for territorial integrity, and affirmation of the right to self-determination (EEAS Press, 2023).

Process-tracing reveals that while EU diplomatic efforts and economic incentives were instrumental in securing the agreement, its implementation has been hindered by delays, disagreements, and divergent interpretations of key terms. One of the agreement's most contentious provisions was Serbia's commitment not to block Kosovo's applications for membership in international organizations, with Kosovo expected to reciprocate by ensuring the protection of Serbian Orthodox Church property and guaranteeing an appropriate level of self-management for the ethnic Serbian community in Kosovo (Joseph, 2023). Despite these commitments, disagreements persist over the formation and scope of the Association of Serb Municipalities, a critical component of the agreement. The agreement stipulated that the two parties should develop normal, good-neighbourly relations—an arrangement interpreted as a form of partial recognition—by mutually recognizing documents, national symbols, and passports, respecting each other's territorial integrity, and affirming the right to self-determination. Despite these commitments, the parties have not yet agreed on the structure of the proposed Association of Serb Municipalities. In October 2023, EU leaders presented a draft statute for the association, urging Kosovo to adopt it and implement the necessary measures while simultaneously pressing Serbia to fulfil its obligations, particularly those seen as amounting to de facto recognition of Kosovo's independence. Kosovo views the Association as a threat to its sovereignty, while Serbia resists measures implying recognition of Kosovar statehood. These challenges, which underscore the broader difficulties of translating high-level commitments into concrete actions, reflect deeper systemic barriers: a lack of trust, competing sovereignty narratives, and domestic political resistance rooted in unaddressed historical

grievances (Gashi, 2021). This dynamic illustrates the complex interplay of diplomacy, sovereignty, and reconciliation in the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, highlighting the necessity of hybrid approaches that balance international norms with localized, context-sensitive solutions.

### **Process-tracing and The Role of Multi-Track Diplomacy**

Process-tracing is a qualitative research method used to analyze the causal mechanisms that link specific inputs—such as mediation efforts and diplomatic interventions—to outcomes like agreements and their implementation in multilateral negotiations. This method involves identifying and examining the sequence of key events, decisions, and actors that shape the trajectory of a negotiation process. By tracing these pathways, process-tracing provides a detailed understanding of how and why certain outcomes are achieved (or not), offering insights into the interplay of external incentives, domestic political dynamics, and geopolitical factors. The approach provides valuable lessons for designing more effective and inclusive peacebuilding strategies in the Balkans. It underscores the importance of local ownership, as sustainable peace requires genuine commitment from the parties to address the root causes of conflict. External mediators, regardless of their intentions, cannot impose peace from above; rather, they must empower local actors, including civil society, women's groups, and marginalized communities—to ensure that agreements reflect their needs and aspirations. For example, while the Brussels Agreement (2013) and the Ohrid Agreement (2023) were significant milestones in the EU-facilitated dialogue, their implementation has struggled due to a lack of local buy-in and ownership. Process-tracing reveals that the top-down nature of these agreements often sidelined grassroots voices, leading to a disconnect between the formal negotiation process and the realities on the ground (Visoka, 2018). This finding highlights the need for a more inclusive approach that integrates local perspectives into the peacebuilding process, ensuring that agreements are not only politically viable but also socially legitimate.

Furthermore, process-tracing highlights the critical need for multi-track diplomacy, which integrates formal negotiations (Track One) with grassroots initiatives (Track Two) to build trust and social cohesion. For example, the EU could complement its high-leverage tools with support for local reconciliation projects and community dialogue, fostering a more inclusive peace process. Track Two diplomacy, involving non-state actors such as academics, civil society organizations, and religious leaders, has proven effective in addressing the social and economic dimensions of the conflict, which are often overlooked in high-level negotiations. For instance, local NGOs in Kosovo and Serbia have facilitated community dialogue, cross-border cooperation, and reconciliation projects, fostered trust and addressed grievances at the grassroots level (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2020). However, these efforts are often constrained by

limited political influence and resources, as their effectiveness depends on the progress of Track One efforts. Without a conducive political environment created by formal agreements, grassroots initiatives risk being marginalized or co-opted by political elites (Lerche & Said, 1970). The EU could enhance its mediation role by pairing its high-leverage tools, such as the promise of EU membership, with sustained support for Track Two initiatives. Funding local reconciliation projects and institutionalizing community dialogue would align top-down incentives with bottom-up reconciliation, fostering a more inclusive peace process.

A critical challenge in peace processes is achieving the right balance between local ownership and impartial oversight. Over-reliance on external actors can undermine local agencies, creating a perception of imposed solutions. On the other hand, leaving implementation solely to local actors may perpetuate existing power imbalances and fail to address systemic issues. The Kosovo-Serbia dialogue provides a case study in balancing these dynamics (Visoka & Richmond, 2017). While the EU functioned as a facilitator, local actors, including civil society organizations, played an essential role in advocating inclusivity and accountability. By engaging NGOs, particularly those representing marginalized groups, the process gained legitimacy and ensured broader support for negotiated agreements. Empowering local actors to take ownership of peace agreements, while maintaining the impartial oversight of international mediators, can enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of peace processes (Haider, 2009). Mechanisms such as joint monitoring committees, which include representatives from host countries, international organizations, and local communities, can provide a practical solution to this challenge.

In the Kosovo-Serbia context, the success of multi-track diplomacy hinges on effective coordination among stakeholders, adequate funding, and sustained international support. The EU has sought to bridge these tracks by supporting civil society initiatives alongside its formal mediation efforts (Mapendere, 2000). However, internal divisions within the EU, such as the lack of consensus on Kosovo's independence among member states, undermine its capacity to function as a unified and impartial mediator. These divisions weaken the EU's credibility and complicate its ability to respond dynamically to evolving conflict dynamics (Ejdus & Subotić, 2014). Furthermore, external actors particularly Russia further complicate the landscape by supporting Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo, creating additional pressure points in the mediation process. The influence of these actors highlights the geopolitical dimensions of the conflict, where regional disputes intersect with global power struggles. This interplay underscores the importance of cohesive and strategic international engagement to counterbalance competing influences and sustain momentum toward resolution.



Geopolitical rivalries further complicate the mediation landscape. Russia's support for Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo and China's alignment with Serbian interests inject competing narratives into the process, undermining multilateral coherence (Kasmi, 2024). These dynamics highlight the necessity of strategic international engagement to counterbalance external interference and sustain momentum toward resolution. The Kosovo-Serbia conflict resists facile solutions due to its entrenched historical, political, and social complexities. While multilateral and multi-track diplomacy have yielded partial agreements, progress remains reversible without addressing both systemic issues—such as sovereignty disputes—and grassroots realities, including interethnic distrust and economic inequity (Gashi & Kelmendi, 2023). A durable resolution demands a comprehensive strategy that harmonizes international oversight with local agency, prioritizes socio-economic development alongside political normalization, and navigates geopolitical pressures through unified, adaptive diplomacy. The EU's ability to evolve beyond internal fragmentation and assert itself as a credible mediator will be pivotal in transforming diplomatic aspirations into enduring peace (Axyonova & Kartsonaki, 2024).

### **Regional Dynamics and NATO Member Engagement**

The Kosovo-Serbia conflict represents one of the most challenging unresolved disputes in the Balkans, rooted in a complex interplay of historical grievances, governance disputes, and external influences. Serbia's persistent refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence remains a core issue, directly challenging Kosovo's aspirations for full international recognition and integration. Compounding this is Kosovo's governance of Serb-majority areas, where demands for autonomy and resistance to integration have led to a fragmented political landscape (Kelmendi & Skendaj, 2023). These tensions are further fueled by competing historical narratives, which deepen mistrust and create significant barriers to dialogue and reconciliation.

The Ohrid Agreement, which promises substantial investments to incentivize normalization, exemplifies these challenges. While designed to offer economic incentives, the agreement fails to clarify critical issues such as a concrete timeline for EU accession—a key motivator for both Kosovo and Serbia. Moreover, the vagueness of its provisions, including the EU's imposition of punitive measures on Kosovo contrasted with its reluctance to hold Serbia accountable for destabilizing actions, aggravates perceptions of bias and weakens trust in the mediation process (Emini & Stakic, 2018; Hannon, 2023). Internal EU divisions—particularly the non-recognition of Kosovo by five member states—further erode cohesion and hinder the development of a unified strategy, illustrating the challenges of multilateralism in a fragmented institutional environment (Lefteratos, 2022).; Vucic & Đukanović, 2024).

Adding to these regional dynamics is the role of external actors, particularly Russia, whose influence exacerbates instability. Through actions such as recruiting ethnic Serbs for its military operations in Ukraine and supporting nationalist agendas in Serbia, Russia not only deepens divisions within the region but also undermines international efforts to mediate the conflict. U.S.-imposed sanctions on Serbian officials linked to Russian interference underscore the gravity of these challenges and highlight the interconnectedness of regional stability with broader geopolitical rivalries (Ellyatt, 2023). This geopolitical rivalry injects competing agendas into the region, challenging the neutrality of multilateral frameworks and complicating trust-building. In response, U.S. sanctions on Serbian officials linked to Russian interference highlight the interconnectedness of regional stability and global power struggles, underscoring the need for cohesive international engagement to counterbalance external destabilization.

NATO, with its established presence in the Balkans through the Kosovo Force (KFOR), plays a vital role in maintaining peace and security. Since its deployment in 1999 following NATO's intervention in the Kosovo War, KFOR has been instrumental in preventing the resurgence of violence and fostering a secure environment for political dialogue. NATO's continued presence underscores the importance of a robust security framework in supporting diplomatic efforts and ensuring the implementation of agreements (Taylor, 2022). Regional NATO members like Albania and North Macedonia, which also aspire to EU membership, serve as critical bridges between security and diplomatic initiatives. Their dual alignment allows them to advocate for conflict resolution norms within NATO while supporting EU-led economic and political integration, thereby reducing the risk of conflict recurrence (Kelmendi & Skendaj, 2023).

The potential for closer NATO-EU collaboration lies in their complementary strengths. NATO, with its security expertise and rapid response capabilities, is well equipped to address immediate threats, de-escalate tensions, and provide a stabilizing presence in conflict-prone areas. Simultaneously, the EU's economic and political influence can target the underlying causes of instability by promoting development, good governance, and regional cooperation. Joint initiatives such as coordinated peacekeeping missions, intelligence-sharing, and synchronized diplomatic efforts can enhance their collective impact. For instance, NATO's security guarantees could be paired with the EU's investments in infrastructure and social programs to create a more comprehensive approach to peacebuilding (Ozturk, 2023).

Ultimately, resolving the Kosovo-Serbia conflict demands a cohesive multilateral strategy that harmonizes security, political, and economic imperatives. The international community, particularly the EU and NATO, must move beyond fragmented and reactive measures, offering

clear pathways to EU integration, fostering collective responsibility, and ensuring that both parties adhere to their commitments. The involvement of regional actors such as Albania and North Macedonia, combined with robust coordination among NATO, the EU, and the U.S., is crucial for mitigating external interference and creating conditions for sustainable peace. Furthermore, collective protection measures—whereby economic, political, and security incentives are aligned—can break the cycle of violence and enable the normalization of relations, contributing to long-term stability in the Balkans. While significant challenges remain, the evolving framework of collective protection offers a positive avenue for achieving lasting peace. By prioritizing inclusivity, fostering coordinated responses, and leveraging the complementary strengths of regional and international actors, the international community can build a resilient and unified approach that not only addresses the immediate security concerns but also lays the foundation for enduring regional stability (Mucznik, 2023; Axyonova & Kartsonaki, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

The Kosovo-Serbia conflict remains a deeply complex issue, intertwined with historical grievances, ethnic divisions, and geopolitical rivalries. Diplomatic efforts, though significant, have faced persistent challenges, underscoring the limitations of external mediation when domestic political will and ownership are lacking. The unresolved Kosovo-Serbia dispute poses a potential threat to regional stability, undermining the EU's aspirations for cohesion and credibility (Ilazi, 2024). In an era of escalating global and regional conflicts, concrete measures to define and respect the territorial sovereignty of both Kosovo and Serbia are urgently needed. Failure to act decisively risks perpetuating tensions and inviting unforeseeable consequences that could destabilize the entire region (United Nations, 2024). The peace process has been marked by agreements that, while ambitious, have struggled with implementation due to entrenched resistance and competing national and international interests. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates multilateralism, multi-track diplomacy, and sustained engagement from both regional and global actors.

A cornerstone of stability in the Balkans lies in ensuring ownership of the peace process by Kosovo and Serbia themselves. Without genuine commitment from both parties to implement agreements and address the root causes of conflict, poverty, injustice, exclusion, inequality, and political stagnation, external facilitation alone cannot achieve sustainable peace. Local actors, including civil society, religious groups, and community leaders, must be empowered to play an active role in fostering reconciliation. These groups can bridge divides and address grassroots concerns, yet their involvement requires careful coordination to ensure they

complement rather than conflict with formal negotiation processes. The strategic inclusion of diverse yet constructive civil society actors is essential to ensure the legitimacy and effectiveness of negotiations (Kew & Wanis-St. John, 2008). Therefore, the strategic inclusion of diverse yet constructive civil society actors is essential to ensure the legitimacy and effectiveness of negotiations.

The role of external actors, including the EU, NATO, the US, and other international organizations, remains crucial in mediating and supporting the peace process. However, the EU's efforts are complicated by internal divisions, as a minority of its member states do not recognize Kosovo's independence. This lack of consensus undermines the EU's ability to function as a unified mediator, creating opportunities for external powers like Russia and China to exert influence in the region. Russia's strategic interests, bolstered by its cultural and historical ties with Serbia, highlight the vulnerabilities of NATO-aligned countries in the Balkans. This underscores the urgency of stabilizing the region to prevent external actors from exploiting its fragility for geopolitical gains.

The Ohrid Agreement of 2023 serves as a recent example of both the potential and limitations of diplomatic progress. While it introduced provisions that implicitly acknowledge Kosovo's sovereignty and aimed to address contentious issues such as mutual recognition and the rights of the Serbian minority in Kosovo, its implementation has been fraught with delays and disagreements. The ongoing stalemate over the Association of Serb Municipalities illustrates how unresolved tensions and a lack of trust hinder the translation of agreements into actionable outcomes (Vucic & Đukanović, 2024). This highlights the need for a more inclusive and adaptive approach to peacebuilding, one that balances external mediation with local ownership and addresses the socio-economic dimensions of the conflict.

Beyond the political dimensions, fostering a culture of peace in the Balkans demands attention to socio-economic factors that perpetuate conflict. Building a culture of peace requires a comprehensive approach that transcends denouncing war to actively constructing inclusive societies characterized by justice, equality, and freedom. Addressing root causes such as poverty, exclusion, and institutional weaknesses is imperative. Empowering local actors, including NGOs, women, and marginalized communities, is central to fostering resilience and preventing the recurrence of violence. Simultaneously, institutional reforms, non-military strategies, and the measured involvement of external actors can complement grassroots efforts, reinforcing stability and reconciliation.

Ultimately, resolving the Kosovo-Serbia conflict necessitates a holistic and inclusive approach that balances external facilitation with robust local ownership. Stability in the Balkans

is not merely a regional objective; it is a critical component of broader European and global security. By aligning economic, political, and security incentives, the international community can establish a framework of collective protection that safeguards vulnerable populations and deters potential aggressors. This collective protection, manifested through coordinated peacekeeping, joint diplomatic efforts, and inclusive, multi-track diplomacy, offers a positive pathway toward breaking the cycle of violence and achieving long-term stability. This positive trajectory offers hope: by investing in sustainable peace and fostering a spirit of inclusivity and shared responsibility, the international community can transform the Balkans from a perennial flashpoint into a model for reconciliation and coexistence. The international community, particularly the EU and NATO, must move beyond fragmented and reactive measures and strive for a unified, strategic approach that fosters collective responsibility. In doing so, they can help create an environment where both Kosovo and Serbia transcend entrenched positions, embrace a shared vision for the future, and serve as a model for reconciliation and coexistence in an increasingly interconnected world (Mucznik, 2023; Axyonova & Kartsonaki, 2024).

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