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The (Geo)Politics of Democracy in Kosovo

Ramadan Ilazi

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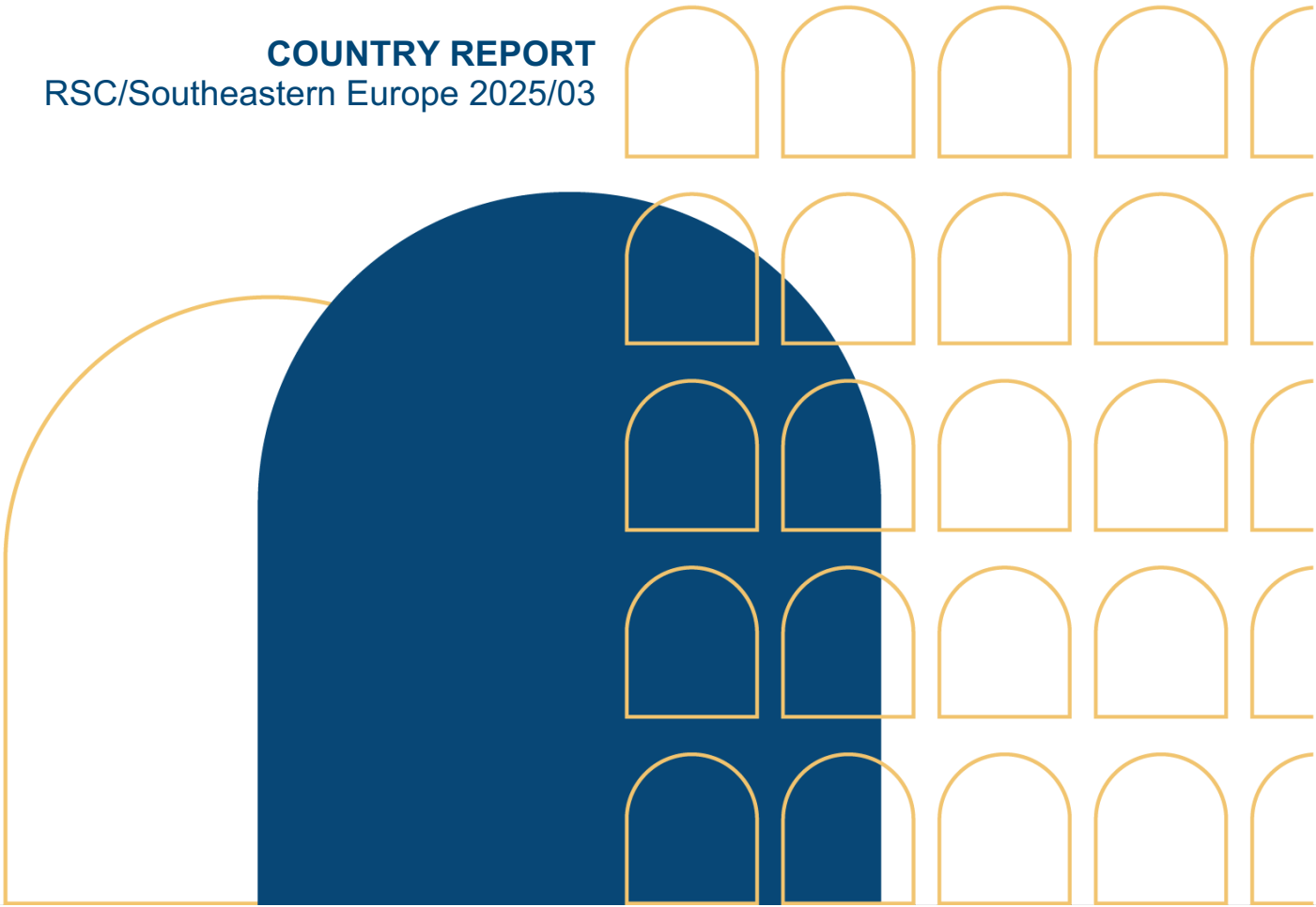

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The (Geo)Politics of Democracy in Kosovo

Ramadan Ilazi[1]

1. Introduction

Kosovo, often viewed as a vibrant transitional democracy, finds itself at a critical juncture on its path toward integration into the European Union (EU). Despite a dynamic civil society and a relatively pluralistic media environment, Kosovo's democratic institutions face escalating challenges. Recent years have witnessed a decline in democratic norms, with increased political polarisation, targeted attacks on media and pressure on civil society that threaten democratic progress. As the only Western Balkans (WB) country without formal candidate status for EU membership, Kosovo remains deadlocked in its European integration path, further complicated by ongoing disputes with Serbia, with the EU-mediated normalisation dialogue remaining effectively stagnant for years now, and a lack of recognition from five EU member states. These factors have left Kosovo's democratic consolidation vulnerable, exacerbating the barriers to meaningful integration with the EU. While many analyses have focused on Kosovo's internal governance issues and democratic shortcomings, less attention has been paid to how these democratic vulnerabilities intersect with external geopolitical pressures.

This report argues that Kosovo's democratic decline is not solely an outcome of internal challenges but is significantly shaped by the strategies and actions of external geopolitical actors, primarily Serbia and, to some extent, Russia, and to a lesser extent, Türkiye and Gulf States. Serbia exerts direct political influence within Kosovo, especially over and through the Kosovo Serb community, and exercises substantial control over the 'Srpska Lista' (Serbian List, SL) party and parallel institutions, particularly in the north, which actively destabilise the governance and democratic integrity both within Kosovo and in the region. Russia, closely aligned with Serbia's objectives, amplifies these destabilising efforts through disinformation campaigns and diplomatic obstructions, preventing Kosovo's participation in international fora and promoting narratives attempting to delegitimise its sovereignty.

These strategies operate through well-defined mechanisms and channels, including media influence, parallel governance structures, and diplomatic manoeuvres. For instance, Russian media outlets like Sputnik Srbija and various pro-Serbia Telegram channels promote narratives that depict Kosovo as unstable and rife with regional security threats. These narratives not only resonate with Kosovo's Serb population but also strengthen Serbia's securitised, "masculine" narrative of protector-versus-threat, a concept Dutta and Abbas illustrate as a core element in populist security discourse, framing leaders as protectors who respond to existential

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threats.[2] In Kosovo, this dynamic serves the efforts to fragment Kosovo's governance, erode its democratic cohesion and obstruct EU-driven rule-of-law reforms. Yet, the geopolitical dimension of these influences and their impact on Kosovo's democracy remain underexplored in the current scholarship.

This report, therefore, examines how external actors, especially Serbia, are systematically eroding Kosovo's democratic institutions and hindering its EU integration. The analysis identifies these actors, the strategies they employ, the specific mechanisms through which they operate, as well as the resulting impact on Kosovo's democratic integrity. The report emphasises Serbia as the fundamental external actor shaping developments in Kosovo and examines Serbia's tactics in greater detail, reflecting its unique role and sustained influence. The report is organised as follows: first, it reviews Kosovo's status as a democracy and EU integration challenges; second, it analyses Serbia's specific strategies and mechanisms of influence; third, it examines the auxiliary role of Russia and other actors, including those within the region. The report concludes by discussing the implications of these influences for Kosovo's democratic resilience and future prospects.

2. Geopoliticising the State of Democracy

Kosovo is considered as a "transitional or hybrid regime" by Freedom House's Nations in Transit 2024 report.[3] Compared to other Western Balkan countries, Kosovo is regarded as having a robust, pluralistic media landscape and an active civil society, though, in recent years, media and civil society have found themselves a growing target of government attacks.[4] BTI 2024 Country Report assess Kosovo's political system as characterised by "dysfunction and instability." [5] Based on the existing EC assessment, Kosovo scores an average of 1.67 (on a scale from 1 to 5), across the six clusters of the EU accession negotiation chapters, which means that the country is at an early stage of preparation in most of these policy areas. Kosovo ranks the lowest of the WB countries in several critical EU acquis chapters, including Chapters 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (Justice, freedom and security).[6] Independent assessments show that Kosovo has stagnated in implementing the EU reform targets, without making any meaningful progress in the past three years.[7] Similarly, the Freedom House reports show that Kosovo did not make any progress in 2022 and 2023, scoring in both years 60/100 and remaining partly free.[8] Accordingly, the overall perception and understanding of Kosovo's vibrant and active civil society, a cornerstone of its democratic capital, stands in stark contrast

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[2] Dutta, Sagnik, and Tahir Abbas, "Protecting the People: Populism and Masculine Security in India and Hungary," *Journal of Political Ideologies* (April 2024): 1–23.

[3] Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2024: Kosovo Report*, accessed 13 January 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/kosovo/nations-transit/2024.

[4] Association of Journalists of Kosovo, "Kosovo Marks an Alarming Decline of 19 Places in the Reporters Without Borders Index," 3 March 2024, accessed 13 January 2025, https://agk-ks.org/en/news/kosova-shenon-regres-alarmant-per-19-vende-ne-indeksin-e-reportereve-pa-kufij/.

[5] BTI Transformation Index, *Kosovo Country Report 2024*, accessed 13 January 2025, https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/RKS, para. 46.

[6] European Policy Institute of Kosovo (EPIK), *Kosovo 2023 Score Card*, accessed 13 January 2025.

[7] The European Stability Initiative (ESI), "Scorecard 2024 - What the Commission assessments reveal," 31 October 2024, https://www.esiweb.org/publications/scorecard-2024-what-commission-assessments-reveal

[8] Freedom House, *Kosovo: Freedom in the World 2023*, accessed 13 January 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/kosovo/freedom-world/2024; Freedom House, *Kosovo: Freedom in the World 2022*, accessed 13 January 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/kosovo/freedom-world/2023.

to independent assessments, such as from BTI, that show the dysfunction and instability of its political institutions. While civil society fosters democratic values and ensures public accountability, these efforts are undermined by the structural weaknesses of Kosovo's governance. As highlighted in the BTI 2024 Country Report, this institutional fragility weakens Kosovo's democratic resilience and exposes it to external geopolitical influences, particularly from Serbia and Russia. These actors exploit ethnic tensions, political polarisation, and bilateral disputes to obstruct Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration.

The securitisation of the normalisation dialogue has further compounded these challenges, as the Kosovo government increasingly frames its relations with Serbia through a security-focused narrative. Critics of the government's approach are often branded as traitors or accused of supporting Serbia, fostering a climate of fear that stifles dissent and suppresses open debate. This hardline stance not only deepens societal divisions but also erodes Kosovo's democratic foundations, weakening institutions and silencing the pluralism essential for a genuine normalisation and reconciliation. Such actions have led some to warn that Prime Minister Kurti's approach signals a troubling shift toward autocratic tendencies.[9]

Serbia continues to exert considerable influence in Kosovo, particularly through the Serbian community in Kosovo, and control over the Serbian List (SL) political party in Kosovo and parallel institutions in the north of the country. As the European Commission report on Kosovo explains, the "mass resignation of Kosovo Serbs from government institutions" in 2022, and their continued refusal to participate in political processes, create tensions and undermine Kosovo's stability and democratic standards, especially with regard to the protection of the Serb minority. The Banjska terrorist attack in September 2023, where a heavily armed group led by Serb kingpin Milan Radoičić attacked Kosovo police and killed a police officer, further escalated tensions and illustrated Serbia's disruptive role in Kosovo.[10] Russia and Serbia have both been engaging in disinformation campaigns aimed at destabilising Kosovo.[11]

Serbia's political control over the political life of Kosovo Serbs has created a political impasse that prevents the full integration, especially of the Serb-majority municipalities in the north, into Kosovo's system. This has resulted in tensions and instability in the north, where Kosovo's authority is contested by Serbia-backed structures.[12] In this context, particularly Kosovo's refusal to implement obligations deriving from agreements of the EU-led Brussels dialogue for normalisation of relations with Serbia regarding the creation of an Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities remains the key stumbling block to its potential progress in the European integration process towards obtaining the candidate state status for membership. The EC notes that the lack of progress in the Kosovo – Serbia dialogue remains a major obstacle to advancing its EU membership application, which Kosovo submitted in December 2022.

[9] Ensar Suma, "Trajektorja Autokratike e Qeverisë Kurti [The Autocratic Trajectory of the Kurti Government]," *Sbunker*, 1 October 2024, accessed 13 January 2025, https://sbunker.org/en/analize/trajektorja-autokratike-e-qeverise-kurti/.

[10] Perparim Isufi and Milica Stojanovic, "Kosovo Serb Kingpin Radoicic Takes Responsibility for Weekend Shootout," *Balkan Insight*, 29 September 2023, accessed 13 January 2025, https://balkaninsight.com/2023/09/29/kosovo-serb-kingpin-radoicic-takes-responsibility-for-weekend-shootout/.

[11] Ramadan Ilazi, Ardit Orana, and Jeta Loshaj, "Kosovo in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse," *Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS)*, 13 November 2024, accessed 13 January 2025.

[12] The Civil Society Report on Human Rights in Kosovo in 2023, May 2024, https://newsocialinitiative.org/civil-society-report-on-human-rights-in-kosovo-in-2023/

The continued operation of Serbia's illegal, parallel institutions in the north of Kosovo undermines the rule of law and weakens Kosovo's sovereignty.[13] Freedom House observes that these institutions act as state institutions eroding Kosovo's capacity to function as a unified democracy. The influence of external actors, particularly Serbia, has severely weakened the credibility and effectiveness of Kosovo's democratic institutions. While many analyses on Kosovo focus on rule of law failures, less attention has been given to the geopolitical impact of Serbia, Russia, Türkiye, and the Gulf States.[14] These actors, but especially Serbia and Russia, not only exacerbate ethnic tensions but also actively use disinformation campaigns, political boycotts and military posturing to undermine Kosovo's security, democratic consolidation and Euro-Atlantic integration. Kosovo's democratic backsliding is not solely the result of internal political challenges but is also heavily influenced by external interference that seeks to destabilise the state.[15]

3. Identifying the Geopolitical Actors

The key external actors influencing Kosovo include the EU and the United States (U.S.), Serbia, Türkiye, Russia, China and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf (Gulf States). The EU and the U.S. have a strong Western-centric influence, supporting the consolidation of the state-building process in Kosovo as well as democratisation efforts.[16] Türkiye exerts significant influence through cultural ties, religion and support for Kosovo's statehood, though its domestic politics sometimes negatively affect Kosovo. Russia and China challenge Kosovo's position as an independent state in the international scene, with Russia also influencing through media and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Gulf States have limited influence, mainly through investments, but there are concerns over their role vis-à-vis Kosovo's secular nature through religious ties. Serbia directly influences Kosovo through the Serb community within the country and indirectly by partnering with Russia and China to hinder both Kosovo's international recognition and internal functionality as a state.

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[13] Parallel institutions refer to administrative, educational, healthcare, and security structures established and funded by Serbia in the Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo, which are particularly strong in the four Serb-majority municipalities in the north of Kosovo. These institutions function outside Kosovo's legal framework and are used by Serbia to exert influence and maintain control, often in opposition to Kosovo's sovereignty and rule of law. Despite their illegality, they remain a vital source of social and financial support for the local Serbian population.

[14] See for instance: Rok Zupančič, Nina Pejič, Blaž Grilj, and Annemarie Peen Rodt, "The European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo: An Effective Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building Mission?" *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017): 599–617; Group for Legal and Political Studies (GLPS), *Reflecting on the third year of Kurti II: Setbacks and achievements in rule of law, public administration and foreign policy,* April 2024, https://www.legalpoliticalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/GLPS-PolicyAnalysis-Three-Years-of-Kurti-II-1.pdf.

[15] Agon Maliqi, "Getting Back on Track: Unlocking Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic and Development Perspective," *Atlantic Council*, 11 December 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/getting-back-on-track-unlocking-kosovos-euro-atlantic-and-development-perspective/; Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi, "From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration: Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape," *New Lines Institute*, 17 April 2024, https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2-Kosovo.pdf.

[16] Charles King, "U.S. Foreign Policy in Kosovo: A Brief Introduction from Bush to Biden," Democracy for Development (D4D), November 2021, https://d4d-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/D4D_PB_U.S.-Foreign-Policy-in-Kosovo_ENG.pdf; Vincent L. Morelli, "Kosovo: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, 13 August 2018, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46175/5; Bilge Yabanci, "The (Il)legitimacy of EU State Building: Local Support and Contention in Kosovo," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 3 (2016): 345–73. Adam Fagan, "EU Assistance for Civil Society in Kosovo: A Step Too Far for Democracy Promotion?" *Democratization* 18, no. 3 (2011): 707–30.

Kosovo society is overwhelming pro-EU and pro-West. As shown by the 2024 survey of the International Republican Institute (IRI), 75 per cent of Kosovars believe that their country is heading in the right direction under the EU guidance, 89 per cent would vote "yes" in a referendum on EU membership, while 88 per cent of citizens believe that Kosovo's future is best served by full NATO membership – the highest in the region, surpassing even current NATO members like Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro.[17] In terms of who is winning the hearts and minds of the Kosovans, the IRI survey shows that they overwhelmingly (80 per cent) view the United States as their main partner, followed by Albania (6 per cent), Germany (5 per cent), Türkiye (3 per cent) and Great Britain (1 per cent). On the other hand, 83 per cent of Kosovars perceive Serbia as the most significant threat, followed by Russia (8 per cent)[18]. The IRI poll data is also corroborated by local surveys, such as the Security Barometer by the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS).[19]

Following the decision of 15 December 2022 of the European Council to grant candidacy status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo is now the only country covered by the enlargement policy that is a potential candidate country. Since 2015, when Kosovo signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), the only highlight in Kosovo's EU integration process, almost a decade later, was the start of the implementation of the decision for visa liberalisation as of 1 January 2024, 12 years after the European Commission (EC) launched the visa liberalisation roadmap for Kosovo. Kosovo's European integration path has so far been unique and very different compared to other WB countries. Kosovo faces two particular major challenges in the hopes of becoming an EU member: lack of normalisation of relations with Serbia and the fact that five EU member states (Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania and Greece) do not yet recognise Kosovo's statehood. This situation keeps EU – Kosovo relations vague and in limbo. The SAA stipulates in many of its provisions that deeper integration of Kosovo into the EU depends on whether "objective circumstances allow," which is to say, when Kosovo gains full recognition from all EU member states.

In Kosovo's capital, one can see major streets named after prominent U.S. leaders, such as former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. This strong support stems from the U.S.'s role in ending the war in Kosovo and supporting the country to achieve statehood.[20] The U.S. is a major security supporter of Kosovo, being the largest contributor to NATO's KFOR mission, while since 2011 the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) has enjoyed a strong partnership with the Iowa National Guard. During February 2024, the U.S.-Kosovo Bilateral Defence Consultations (BDC) were held in Prishtina, focusing on the role that the U.S. plays in supporting the KSF's 10-year plan to become a professional, multi-ethnic, NATO-interoperable defence force.[21] The U.S. has also been strongly supporting Kosovo financially and economically. In April 2024, Kosovo and the U.S. Government Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) launched the MCC-Kosovo Compact

[17] International Republican Institute (IRI), *Western Balkans Regional Poll*, February–March 2024, https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/.

[18] Ibid.

[19] See https://securitybarometer.qkss.org/

[20] Matthew Rhodes, "Kosovo: America's 'NATO State' in the Balkans?", in Ernst M. Felberbauer, Predrag Jureković, and Frédéric Labarre, eds., *Cutting or Tightening the Gordian Knot?,* Austrian Ministry of Defence, 2009, https://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/10_pfp16_100.pdf.

[21] Readout of U.S.-Kosovo Bilateral Defense Consultations, February 23, 2024, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3686105/readout-of-us-kosovo-bilateral-defense-consultations/.

programme, worth U.S. $202 million to transform the energy sector.[22] Kosovo also benefits from the U.S. Generalised System of Preferences programme, which allows Kosovo to export 3,500 products to the U.S. with zero tariffs.[23] How the U.S. views a particular issue in Kosovo has always been of crucial importance for any Kosovo government, who always heeded the U.S. advice. However, this has been recently changing, and relations have deteriorated under the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, with the U.S. openly criticising the actions of the Kosovo government and U.S. officials saying that the current state of partnership is not meeting their expectations.[24]

Türkiye has strong relations with Kosovo, supporting its statehood and often helping secure new recognitions, particularly among Muslim-majority countries.[25] What is interesting to note is that Türkiye did not take a prominent role during the Kosovo War compared to the highly proactive stance it had taken during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and this hesitancy was partly due to its fear of drawing parallels with its own internal conflict with the Kurdish minority.[26] In the wider context, Türkiye's foreign policy goal is to have a leadership role in the WB, positioning itself as a regional power, utilising cultural and economic ties, and promoting itself as a protector of Muslim communities, a message that can resonate strongly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and among some segment of the society in Kosovo.[27] For Kosovo, this translates into Turkish investments in religious and cultural sites. Türkiye has funded the building of a new grand mosque in Prishtina, which has sparked fears among Kosovars of neo-Ottomanism[28]. A particular growing sector of cooperation between Kosovo and Türkiye is security. Kosovo has a military framework agreement with Türkiye, and has purchased significant military products from Türkiye, including Bayraktar TB2 drones[29]. Türkiye – Kosovo military cooperation has increased in the context of deteriorating relations of the Kosovo government with the West. According to official Turkish data, Turkish investments in Kosovo were estimated at €296 million in 2022, making Türkiye the seventh-largest investor in the

[22] Prime Minister Office of Kosova, "The Government of the Republic of Kosovo and the Government Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) launched the largest energy program in the country", 30 April 2024, Prishtina, https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/blog/the-government-of-the-republic-of-kosovo-and-the-government-millennium-challenge-corporation-mcc-launched-the-largest-energy-program-in-the-country/

[23] The US Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Kosovo: Bilataral Relations Fact Sheet," Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 28 July 2021, https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-kosovo/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20is%20the,promote%20regional%20security%20and%20cooperation.

[24] Radio Free Euroepe/Radio Liberty Kosovo Service, "U.S. Ambassador Says Partnership With Kosovo 'Not What We Would Hope'," *Radio Free Europe,* 13 August 2024, https://www.rferl.org/a/us-ambassador-kosovo-jeffrey-hovenier/33077301.html

[25] Afrim Hoti, Bardhok Bashota, and Bekim Sejdiu, "Relations Between Turkey and Kosovo: Factors and Dynamics," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022): 145–163.

[26] Sylvie Gangloff, "Turkish Policy Towards the Conflict in Kosovo: The Preeminence of National Political Interests," *Balkanologie* 8, no. 1 (2004): 105–122.

[27] B. Demirtaş, "Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Balkans: A Europeanized Foreign Policy in a De-Europeanized National Context?" *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* XX(X) (2015): 1-17.

[28] Maxim Edwards and Michael Colborne, "Turkey's Gift of a Mosque Sparks Fears of 'Neo-Ottomanism' in Kosovo," *The Guardian*, 2 January 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jan/02/turkey-is-kosovo-controversy-over-balkan-states-new-central-mosque.

[29] "Kosovo buys Turkish Bayraktar drones," *Reuters,* 16 July 2023, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/kosovo-buys-turkish-bayraktar-drones-2023-07-16/

country and employing approximately 10,000 Kosovars.[30] Türkiye's influence in Kosovo is complex and has, at times, come at the expense of democratic norms. A key example is the 2018 deportation of alleged "Gülenists," which was carried out in a joint operation between Kosovo's and Turkish intelligence agencies, reportedly without the knowledge of Kosovo's Prime Minister. In response, the Prime Minister dismissed both the director of Kosovo's intelligence agency and the Minister of Interior. A parliamentary commission was later established to investigate the case, concluding that the deportation was illegal.[31] Türkiye's goals regarding Kosovo do not seem to be in conflict with Kosovo's interests, such as its aspirations for EU and NATO membership. However, Türkiye's longer-term objectives may be linked to promoting political Islam, as it openly supports political parties in the WB that advocate for conservative values with strong Islamic foundations.[32]

The Arab States of the Persian Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, recognise Kosovo's independence and engage through investments in health, education and religious site restoration. However, their influence raises concerns due to the potential impact on Kosovo's secular society. The spread of conservative religious ideologies funded by these states has been linked to increased religious radicalism, although this is a complex issue affected by multiple factors, including socio-economic conditions and the political environment.[33] The Gulf States' lack of understanding of Kosovo's societal context can inadvertently undermine the country's secular institutions, highlighting the need for nuanced engagement that respects local traditions and governance structures.

China has no influence in Kosovo, but it affects Kosovo's interests primarily through its strong relations with Serbia.[34] Like Russia, China does not recognise Kosovo's statehood and aligns with Serbia's position; however, unlike Russia, China refrains from taking a pro-active role against Kosovo. Despite its political support for Serbia, China maintains trade relations with Kosovo; in 2023, imports from China were estimated at €650 million, representing approximately 11 per cent of Kosovo's total imports that year. China's relationship with Serbia is part of Beijing's broader agenda to extend its influence globally, and especially in the EU, through initiatives like China's 14+1 initiative and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). During the Third Belt and Road Forum in 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping reinforced relations with Serbia, affirming China's commitment to support Serbia on the question of Kosovo's statehood. China's relevance for Serbia is increasing. In response to these dynamics, Kosovo has turned towards Taiwan, another marginalised state backed by Washington but challenged by a more powerful neighbour[35]. Kosovo's outreach to Taiwan is a strategic move deployed vis-à-vis China, but also meant to diversify its diplomatic alliances and cooperate with countries facing similar struggles. Kosovo Parliament has established a Kosovo-Taiwan Friendship Group,

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[30] Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Relations between Türkiye and Kosovo," https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkiye-and-kosovo_.en.mfa

[31] Blerta Begisholli, "Kosovo 'Broke Law' When Deporting Turkish 'Gulenists'," *Balkan Insight*, 5 February 2019, https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/05/kosovo-broke-law-when-deporting-turkish-gulenists-02-05-2019/.

[32] Maria Eleni Koppa, "Turkey, Gulf States and Iran in the Western Balkans: More Than the Islamic Factor?" *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020): 251–263.

[33] Isa Blumi, "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Talibans Are Coming," Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), June 2005, Prishtina, https://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Political_Islam_Among_the_Albanians-_Are_the_Taliban_coming_to_the_Balkans_137060.pdf. [link archived]

[34] Ramadan Ilazi and Teuta Avdimetaj, *Beyond Economic Considerations: New Frontiers of Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans*, 15 December 2021, https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/beyond-economic-considerations-new-frontiers-of-chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans.

[35] James Baron, "Kosovo and Taiwan Eye an Alliance of Outsiders," *Foreign Policy*, 20 September 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/20/kosovo-taiwan-united-states-alliance-serbia-china/.

which is chaired by the former Prime Minister of Kosovo, and they visited Taiwan in April 2024[36]. Taiwan's strategy in the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) is part of its broader ambition to engage with emerging markets and to establish a presence in the WB, viewed as a strategic frontier in Europe. Kosovo's growing dissatisfaction with Chinese influence, similar to that of other CEECs, presents an opening for Taiwan.

Since the 1990s, Russia has taken a proactive and antagonistic stance toward Kosovo, rooted in its close ties with Serbia. Russia has consistently positioned itself as Serbia's key ally and opposed Western actions related to Kosovo. A notable example is when NATO/KFOR entered Kosovo following UN Security Council Resolution 1244; Russia deployed its own military units independently, without coordination with NATO. This led to the "Prishtina Airport Incident", a tense standoff between NATO and Russian troops, with the British NATO/KFOR commander on the ground refusing an order from the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, the American general Wesley Clark, to expel the Russian forces, saying he did not want to start a third world war.[37] Although Russia maintains a Liaison Office in Kosovo, it has no direct relations with Kosovo's institutions. Instead, it exerts influence through its strong presence in Serbia and close ties with the Serbian Orthodox Church, extending its reach to the Serb community in Kosovo. Russia's objectives are to undermine Kosovo's statehood, portray it as a weak or failed state plagued by corruption and organised crime, and ultimately prevent both the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia and Kosovo's international recognition and consolidation.[38] By obstructing the Kosovo – Serbia dialogue and preventing Kosovo's international consolidation, Russia aims to weaken the credibility and influence of the West (EU, NATO) in the Balkans[39].

Serbia remains the most important and influential actor affecting Kosovo's internal and external interests. Serbia does not only refuse to recognise Kosovo's independence, but it actively works to block its international recognition and functionality as a state internally. Serbia's influence extends into Kosovo primarily through the Serbian community and political parties like SL, which are considered by the majority of the Kosovar citizens as a direct arm of Belgrade and operating under Belgrade's directives. This was apparent in November 2022, with the mass resignation of Kosovo Serbs from institutional positions over protests against the actions of the Kosovo government such as its decision to prohibit the use of illegal vehicle license plates produced in Serbia with names of Kosovo cities. These developments demonstrate Serbia's capacity to destabilise Kosovo's internal governance. Serbia's strategic, political and economic partnership with Russia and China further amplifies its ability to challenge Kosovo on the international stage, using these alliances to bolster its position against Kosovo's sovereignty. After Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, Serbia has increasingly turned to China for international support, particularly within the UN, as aligning with Russia has become a growing burden for Belgrade.[40]

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[36] Republic of China (Taiwan), Legislative Yuan, "President Han meets cross-party parliamentary delegation from Kosovo", 18 April 2024, https://www.ly.gov.tw/EngPages/Detail.aspx?nodeid=45579&pid=240306

[37] Serbeze Haxhiaj, "British Brigadier Recalls 'World War Three' Moment in Kosovo," *Balkan Insight*, 12 June 2024, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/06/12/british-brigadier-recalls-world-war-three-moment-in-kosovo/.

[38] Jeta Loshaj, Between Continuity and Change: Russian Influence and Security Challenges in the Western Balkans Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine, FES, January 2024, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kosovo/20922-20240122.pdf.

[39] Lulzim Peci and Bekim Sejdiu, "Russian Influence in the EU Facilitated Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue," Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), January 2024.

[40] Ramadan Ilazi and Stefan Vladisavljev, "The Implications of China-Serbia Relations for Kosovo," *The Diplomat*, 28 December 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/the-implications-of-china-serbia-relations-for-kosovo/.

While the EU and U.S. aim to integrate Kosovo into Euro-Atlantic structures, their influence can sometimes strain local political dynamics. Türkiye offers significant support but brings its own challenges due to its domestic politics and support for political Islam. Russia and China work to undermine Kosovo's statehood, leveraging their veto powers in the UN Security Council. The Gulf States may inadvertently affect Kosovo's secularism and social cohesion. Serbia's direct and persistent efforts to influence Kosovo's internal and external affairs remain a significant obstacle to the country's stability and international integration. Understanding these actors' motivations and strategies is crucial for Kosovo's aspiration to consolidate its statehood internally and externally.

4. Systematising the Channels of Influence

External actors in Kosovo use various mechanisms to exert influence, and it is often difficult to differentiate between formal and informal conduits. This section identifies these forms of influence by examining the role of Russia, Serbia, China, Türkiye, and the Gulf states, drawing on their bilateral relations with Kosovo and how each employs distinct strategies to further its interests.

Russia's influence extends through both formal diplomatic and informal cultural channels. The formal aspect includes high-level diplomatic ties and support for Serbia's political position in international fora. Informally, Russia taps into Orthodox Christian networks and Serbian nationalist sentiments, promoting a narrative that positions Moscow as a protector of Slavic and Orthodox interests in the Balkans.[41] Often these cultural affiliations "provide Russia with a platform to propagate its influence" in ways that resonate deeply with the Serb community in Kosovo.[42] A particular objective of Russian influence in the WB is to prevent the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. As noted by Maksim Samorukov: "In the eyes of the Kremlin, Russia has very little to gain and potentially everything to lose if the Kosovo conflict is resolved."[43]

Russia uses a myriad of channels to exert influence in the WB, with Serbia serving as a central hub for Russian activities in the region. Regarding Kosovo, Russia employs several channels, with four main mechanisms standing out: first, at the community level, Russia uses Telegram as a tool for disinformation and shaping opinion and perceptions, targeting specifically the Kosovo Serb community;[44] secondly, the Russian Liaison Office in Kosovo, which Kosovars largely view as an intelligence-gathering outpost; third, Russia also leverages its presence in international missions in Kosovo, such as the United Nations (UN), to try to influence developments or narratives about Kosovo; and fourthly, at the international level, Russia uses

[41] Branislav Stanicek and Anna Caprile, *Russia and the Western Balkans: Geopolitical Confrontation, Economic Influence and Political Interference*, European Parliamentary Research Service, April 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf

[42] Agon Maliqi, "Getting Back on Track: Unlocking Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic and Development Perspective."

[43] Maksim Samorukov, *A Spoiler in the Balkans? Russia and the Final Resolution of the Kosovo Conflict*, Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, November 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/11/a-spoiler-in-the-balkans-russia-and-the-final-resolution-of-the-kosovo-conflict?lang=en&center=russia-eurasia.

[44] Gentiana Paçarizi and Uran Haxha, *Telegrami: Parajsa e Kanaleve Pro-Ruse, Tema e Kosovës Mobilizon Nacionalistët Serbë Pro-Rusë*, Anti-Disinformation Network Balkans, 3 October 2024, https://antidisinfo.net/sq/telegrami-parajsa-e-kanaleve-pro-ruse-tema-e-kosoves-mobilizon-nacionalistet-serbe-pro-ruse/.

its veto power in the UN Security Council as a critical mechanism to ensure that Kosovo remains outside global institutions like the UN. By blocking Kosovo's recognition, Russia keeps Serbia dependent on Moscow's diplomatic support and hopes to make the WB region part of its sphere of influence and use it in its political battle against the U.S.-led international rule-based order in general and the West and NATO in particular.

In 2022, Serbia and Russia signed an agreement on consultation on foreign policy matters, which brought Serbia closer to alignment on foreign policy matters with Russia rather than with the EU.[45] For instance, in 2024, Serbia's alignment with the EU's common foreign policy was estimated at 47 per cent, while all the rest of the WB are aligned at 100 per cent.[46] In 2019, during a police operation in the north of Kosovo, Kosovo police detained a Russian UN employee, alleging that he was part of the road blockades placed by local Kosovo Serbs to prevent the police operation. Kosovo's President stated that the Russian UN employee was "camouflaged under a diplomatic veil to obstruct the police operation."[47]

Sputnik Srbija and RT Balkan, operating from Belgrade, are Russia's primary media outlets targeting the WB. Sputnik Srbija is the most popular Russian state-sponsored media platform in the region, disseminating disinformation and anti-Western narratives that aim to destabilise Kosovo and diminish or undermine its Euro-Atlantic integration aspiration. Sputnik Srbija published over 1,900 articles focused on Kosovo within a year, many of them portraying Kosovo as the primary source of instability in the region.[48] This extensive coverage highlights how media is a central tool for Russian influence. Pro-Russian Telegram channels like "Bunt je stanje duha," "Bunker," "Srpska Sparta Info," and "Koridor" actively mobilise Serbian nationalist sentiments by promoting the idea of a "Greater Serbia." These channels use the issue of Kosovo as a central theme to rally members, highlighting the "spiritual and historical" connection to Kosovo and calling for the return of the Serbian army to Kosovo.[49] Such mobilisation is evident in the organisation of physical actions such as violent protests and border blockades. Telegram channels coordinated the blocking of border crossing points between Kosovo and Serbia in September 2024, encouraging participation from Serbs in Serbia and other neighbouring states.[50] This is a concrete example of how Russia can affect developments on the ground in Kosovo through online mobilisation, demonstrating the tangible impact of these narratives.

China's influence in Kosovo is very limited or non-existent, although the country constantly tries to expand it. There are two main channels of such influence: the Chinese Liaison Office in Prishtina and trade. Even though China aligns fully with Serbia and negatively influences Kosovo's interest for international recognition. Its Liaison Office in Prishtina – which operates under the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade – often engages with Kosovo institutions. For

[45] Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost, and Baptiste Henry, "Little Substance, Considerable Impact: Russian Influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro", Clingendael Report, August 2023, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/little-substance-considerable-impact.pdf.

[46] "Alignment with EU foreign policy in the Western Balkans: Serbia at 47%, other countries at 100%," European Western Balkans, 19 September 2024, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/09/19/alignment-with-eu-foreign-policy-in-the-western-balkans-serbia-at-47-other-countries-at-100/.

[47] Quoted in Shaun Walker, "Russian UN Employee Detained by Kosovo in Armed Raid on North," *The Guardian*, 28 May 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/28/russian-un-employee-det

[48] Atlantic Council of Montenegro, *Russia's Narratives Toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija.* NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. April 2020.

[49] Gentiana Paçarizi and Uran Haxha, Telegrami: Parajsa e Kanaleve Pro-Ruse, Tema e Kosovës Mobilizon Nacionalistët Serbë Pro-Rusë.

[50] Ibid.

instance, the Chinese Liaison Officer in Prishtina met with the Mayor of Prishtina, and with the President of the Kosovo Olympic Committee.[51] What is important to note in the official photographs from these meetings is the prominence of Kosovan national symbols, like the flag, which does not seem to be an issue for China. This approach, of engaging with public institutions not from the central government but at the local level and with formally non-political institutions, such as the Olympic committee, allows China to bypass potential resistance from the Kosovo government and create avenues for influence at the local level, that may lead to some kind of economic and/or cultural footholds.[52] The Mayor of Prishtina also visited Taiwan, in March 2024, also signing an agreement with the city of Kaohsiung to establish sister relations with Prishtina.[53]

Chinese products like Xiaomi and Huawei smartphones are widely present in the Kosovo market. China has made some unsuccessful efforts to establish other channels of influence in Kosovo, especially in the economy sector, such as by making a bid in the competition to build a new power plant in Prishtina or sell Huawei equipment to the Kosovar telecommunications company. However, existing research points to a rise in the number of visits made by Kosovan companies to trade fairs and other forums in China.[54] When it comes to trade relations, "Kosovan companies mainly import raw products from China, such as metal, plastic and other products".[55]

Türkiye maintains its influence in Kosovo through a combination of cultural, political, economic, and security-related channels. It has historically invested in the restoration of Ottoman-era mosques and cultural heritage sites, leveraging shared Islamic heritage to reinforce its presence.[56] Türkiye's influence operates through both formal and informal channels. Formally, it engages with Kosovo through security cooperation with the Ministry of Defence and KSF, trade partnerships, collaboration with the Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK), and political engagement via the Kosovo Turkish Democratic Party (KTDP), which represents the Turkish minority. Additionally, Turkish influence is present within the Kosovo government through members of the Turkish community, and Türkiye also maintains strong cooperation with Kosovo's intelligence agency. Informally, Türkiye utilises religious and cultural networks to deepen ties with Kosovo's Muslim community, strengthening its influence beyond official state channels. The Prague-based Centre for Security Analyses and Prevention highlights Türkiye's approach, stating that "Turkey's deep involvement in religious and educational institutions

[51] Kosovo Olympic Committee, "Presidenti Ismet Krasniqi, priti udhëheqësin e Zyrës Ndërlidhëse të Kinës në Prishtinë, Cheng Lei [Meeting of the President of the Kosovo Olympic Committee with the head of the Chinese Liason Office in Prishtina Cheng Lei]," 16 August 2023, https://noc-kosovo.org/presidenti-i-kok-ut-ismet-krasniqi-priti-udheheqesin-e-zyres-nderlidhese-te-kines-ne-prishtine-cheng-lei/

[52] Valona Tela and Arton Konushevci, "Çka bën Zyra e Kinës në Prishtinë?" [What is the Chinese office doing in Prishtina], *Radio Free Europe*, 12 May 2024, https://www.evropaelire.org/a/kina-prania-kosove-zyra-nderlidhese-/32941567.html

[53] Focus Taiwan, "Kaohsiung, Kosovo's capital Pristina become sister cities," 22 March 2024, https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202403220010.

[54] European Council on Foreign Relations, "Mapping the Chinese Rise in the Western Balkans," https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/kosovo/#:~:text=Chinese%20government%20money.-,Trade,3.796%20million%20exported%20to%20China.

[55] Barbara Matias, "How Kosovo is Positioned in Geoeconomics as the New Global Paradigm of Power Politics – Relations with the EU, Russia, China and the US," *Group for Legal and Political Studies (GLPS)*, August 2023, 9.

[56] Alida Vračić, "Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans," *SWP Research Papers*, 2016, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2016RP11_vcc.pdf.

creates a sense of shared identity and solidarity" among Muslims in Kosovo, which serves as a soft-power tool.[57]

Türkiye presents an intriguing case when examining foreign influence in the WB. While some EU perspectives categorise Türkiye alongside other actors perceived as malign influences in the region, Türkiye is also a NATO member and plays a significant role in maintaining stability in Kosovo. It is one of the main contributors to the KFOR mission and even took command of KFOR, marking a historic first for Türkiye in leading a NATO mission.[58] This situation underscores the complexity of balancing strategic NATO commitments with Türkiye's independent regional ambitions. Additionally, the IRI WB Poll for 2024 shows that after U.S. President Joe Biden, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is the second most favoured foreign leader, with 82 per cent of Kosovo citizens viewing him favourably. This high level of positive perception of President Erdogan complicates the lens through which Türkiye's role in Kosovo is assessed, as it underscores Türkiye's significant influence and soft power appeal, contrasting with both some domestic Kosovar and EU narratives that view its role in the country with scepticism. Such scepticism is primarily driven by Türkiye's support for political Islam in the WB, particularly its backing of political parties that advocate for conservatism with Islamic blend in public policies. This influence raises concerns among some EU actors, but also internally in Kosovo, who view Türkiye's engagement as potentially at odds with Kosovo's secularism. For instance, Türkiye reacted strongly when the Kosovo government, upon receiving recognition of its statehood from Israel, decided to open its embassy in Jerusalem.[59] Turkish NGOs, religious leaders and business entities act as Türkiye's primary agents in Kosovo. In this context, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) is the main agent of soft power influence in Kosovo from Tukey. From 2005 until 2020, TİKA has implemented more than 650 projects in Kosovo, across different sectors, but most heavily focused on social welfare. During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, TIKA, in cooperation with the Islamic Community of Kosovo, usually sponsors in public Iftars events in municipalities of Kosovo.[60] Increased security cooperation between Türkiye and Kosovo in recent times has become an important conduit for Turkish influence in Kosovo, as well.

The Gulf States are generally perceived in Kosovo as the primary source behind the spread of violent extremism.[61] This perception is supported by media investigations, such as a report by Deutsche Welle, which traces the origins of fundamentalist Salafism in the WB to Saudi-sponsored preachers and mosques established in the 1990s.[62] The Gulf States predominantly use informal channels. Religious funding and training initiatives embed their influence within local communities. However, these countries also engage in formal economic partnerships. The Kosovo Assembly has established the Kosovo-Saudi Arabia Friendship Group, comprising

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[57] Martin Laryš and Tomáš Kolomazní, "Geopolitical Interests in Western Balkans: Kosovo," Centrum pro Bezpečnostní Analýzy a Prevenci (CBAP), 2020.

[58] "Turkey Takes Command of NATO Peacekeepers in Kosovo," *The Defense Post*, 11 October 2023, https://thedefensepost.com/2023/10/11/turkey-command-nato-peacekeepers-kosovo/.

[59] "Turkey Condemns Kosovo's Opening Embassy in Jerusalem," *Anadolu Agency*, 15 March 2021, https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-condemns-kosovos-opening-embassy-in-jerusalem-163145.

[60] "Turkish Aid Agency Hosts Iftar in Kosovo," *Anadolu Agency*, 29 March 2024, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkish-aid-agency-hosts-iftar-in-kosovo/3177932

[61] Arlinda Rrustemi, Rob de Wijk, Connor Dunlop, Jovana Perovska, and Lirije Palushi, "Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans," The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 30 September 2019, https://hcss.nl/report/geopolitical-influences-of-external-powers-in-the-western-balkans/.

[62] Boris Georgievski, "Could Balkan Nations Become Hotbeds of Islamist Extremism?" *Deutsche Welle*, 30 May 2017, https://www.dw.com/en/could-balkan-nations-become-the-new-hotbeds-of-islamist-extremism/a-39045256.

six parliamentarians, and they hosted Saudi counterparts in Prishtina earlier this year.[63] Economic cooperation was a central focus, with proposals for direct air routes and the formation of a joint working group between the two countries. The Kosovo side proposed the establishment of a Saudi Chamber of Commerce in Kosovo to facilitate business relations and advocated for lifting the visa regime for Kosovo citizens visiting Saudi Arabia.

Clerics trained in the Gulf and Gulf-funded NGOs are the main agents disseminating conservative teachings. These actors build networks that connect local communities to Gulf interests, shaping religious practices in ways that align with their geopolitical agendas. The Gulf States' influence is robust in local communities but limited at the state level. The durability of their presence depends heavily on their ability to provide finances.

Serbia uses both formal diplomatic channels and informal networks to exert influence in Kosovo, particularly in the Serb-majority areas of the north. Serbia's parallel governance structures play a crucial role here. These structures, supported financially and politically by Belgrade, provide services like healthcare, education and municipal administration independently of Pristina's authority. This dual governance not only challenges Kosovo's sovereignty but also ensures that Serbian influence remains entrenched within these communities.

As noted, Serbia is the primary external influence in Kosovo, exerting significant leverage through its connection with the Serb minority in Kosovo and sponsoring parallel institutions that largely govern the everyday life of this community, especially in the north of the country. Serbia's influence operates through informal and illegal channels, as it does not recognise Kosovo's institutions. However, the distinction between formal and informal channels is blurred in Serbia's case. Despite not formally recognising Kosovo, Serbia engages with Kosovo's leaders in the EU-led dialogue for the normalisation of relations in Brussels. This dialogue serves as Serbia's main formal channel for influencing developments in Kosovo. Through this process, Serbia often dictates the pace and progress of negotiations. When Serbia cooperates constructively, it facilitates the integration of Kosovo Serbs into Kosovar society and institutions, contributing to a more cohesive, rule-of-law-based and functional state where minorities are integrated in line with fundamental democratic norms, as was the case with the 2013 "First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations", commonly referred to as the "Brussels Agreement",[64] that started the process of integration of the Serb-majority municipalities in the north of Kosovo.

Another significant channel of formal influence for Belgrade in Kosovo is the SL political party, which politically represents the Kosovo Serbs in the Kosovo Assembly, consistently winning all 10 of the seats guaranteed for them. SL has a monopoly within the Serbian community in Kosovo, having effectively eliminated political pluralism and fundamentally undermined democratic principles. Those who challenged SL"s dominance, such as Oliver Ivanović, a local politician in northern Kosovo, were met with violence; Ivanović himself was assassinated.[65] Behind SL in Kosovo is the Serbian government but also figures like Milan Radoičić, a local

[63] "The Kosovo-Saudi Arabia Friendship Group Hosted a Meeting with the Saudi Arabia-Kosovo Parliamentary Committee of the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia," Kosovo Assembly, 22 May 2024, https://www.kuvendikosoves.org/shq/punesimi/per-publikun/lajmi/grupi-i-miqesise-kosove-arabi-saudite-priti-n-35248/#.

[64] "First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations," Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, 19 April 2013, https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/blog/first-agreement-of-principles-governing-the-normalisation-of-relations-april-19-2013-20-04-2013/.

[65] Xhorxhina Bami, "Kosovo Serb Politician Murdered for Political Reasons, Brother Says," *Balkan Insight*, 20 April 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/20/kosovo-serb-politician-murdered-for-political-reasons-brother-says/.

strongman wanted by Kosovo institutions as the main organiser of the Banjska attack in September 2023.[66]

From Kosovo's perspective, Serbia's informal channels include Serbian-sponsored institutions such as municipalities, schools, healthcare centres and social services. These institutions are deemed illegal by Kosovo but remain key agents of Serbian influence, both within the Serb community and also presenting a challenge to the rule of law and democratic governance. These Serbian-run services have kept the Serb community in Kosovo, especially the four Serb-majority municipalities in the north, largely isolated from the rest of the country since 1999. While Serb-majority areas in the south of Kosovo have gradually and to some degree integrated in the Kosovo system through the decentralisation process,[67] progress in the north was much more difficult, but some positive developments started in 2013 with the Brussels Agreement. Religious institutions like the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo are perceived by the Kosovars as often serving as agents for the Serbian government's political agenda against Kosovo.

Having outlined the mechanisms and channels through which external actors exert influence in Kosovo, it is crucial to assess the outcomes of these interventions on the country's transitional democratic context. In the following section, I will examine specific cases where these actors have adversely impacted Kosovo's democratic institutions, processes and values, or have the potential to do so in the near future.

5. Outcomes of Externalities in Transitional Contexts

Serbia actively works to undermine the functionality of Kosovo as a democratic, independent state. Türkiye, however, could potentially become a similar influence if its current trajectory of close strategic cooperation with Kosovo's security sector expands, coupled with possible support for new political parties rooted in Islamic conservatism. Meanwhile, Russia also adversely impacts Kosovo's democratic framework, primarily by obstructing the consolidation of Kosovo's statehood, especially in the international arena. Gulf States, mainly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have some presence in Kosovo, so they can also have an adverse effect; however, these actors are manageable by Kosovo institutions, in the sense that their work can be countered, due to the weak channels that these actors have to exercise influence, unlike Serbia, Russia and potentially Türkiye. Both Serbia and Türkiye have constitutionally recognised ethnic minorities in Kosovo, which secures their representation in the Kosovo institution, which are vital mechanisms for the political representation of these communities, but also often can be used by these countries as conduits for exerting influence.

Since Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, its vision has been to establish a democratic, multi-ethnic state that ensures inclusive governance, as outlined in the Ahtisaari Plan.[68] This vision hinges – among others – on the active participation of all communities, including the Serbs. However, Serbia's refusal to recognise Kosovo's independence, coupled with its

[66] Perparim Isufi and Milica Stojanovic, "Kosovo Serb Kingpin Radoicic Takes Responsibility for Weekend Shootout."

[67] Samet Dalipi and Krenar Shala, *The Role of Decentralization on Security Improvement and Peace-building in Kosovo*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Kosovo, October 2016, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kosovo/13856.pdf.

[68] UN Security Council, *Comprehensive Proposal For the Kosovo Status Settlement*, 2 February 2007, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Kosovo%20S2007%20168.pdf

significant support for a parallel system in Kosovo, undermines these democratic principles, and weakens Kosovo's ability to function as a fully integrated state. Kosovo Serbs heavily depend on Serbian financial support, including for pensions and other social welfare, but also the majority of Kosovo Serbs are employed in the Serbian parallel system in Kosovo. In this context, Serbia's active financial and institutional support for a set of parallel structures is one of the primary mechanisms through which it exerts influence within Kosovo. In 2021 alone, Serbia allocated €91.8 million to maintain Serbian institutions in Kosovo, which cover sectors such as health, education and local governance.[69] A substantial portion of this – €43.7 million – goes directly to funding parallel municipal bodies which continue to function outside Kosovo's jurisdiction. These structures not only prevent Serbs in Kosovo from fully integrating into the Kosovo system but also perpetuate a divided governance model, undermining both the authority of Kosovo's state institutions and their ability to function democratically.

Sometimes, Serbia uses the financial dependence of Kosovo Serbs as a leverage to impose compliance. In areas such as Novo Brdo, Serbian officials reportedly threatened loss of jobs or pensions for those who did not support Belgrade-backed candidates, sending a clear message that only allegiance to Belgrade would ensure political security and economic support. There is also a widespread practice of "double-hat", namely cases when Kosovo Serbs serve simultaneously in Serbian institutions in Kosovo and in Kosovo public institutions. This was, for example, the case of Mayors of Serb-majority municipalities of Leposavić and Zubin Potok served in these positions both under the Kosovo system and Serbian parallel structures.[70] While this sort of dual allegiance enabled some level of integration of Kosovo Serbs in the north of the country, it has also hindered efforts to foster a cohesive democratic society in Kosovo.

The EU-led dialogue for normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia has aimed to integrate Kosovo Serbs, especially in the north of Kosovo, and dismantle the Serbian parallel structures by facilitating the integration of the Serb community in the Kosovo system. This was the key objective of the 2013 Brussels Agreement, which led to some tangible results towards disbanding the Serbian parallel institutions and starting the process of integration into the Kosovo system of the local government, security, and judiciary in the north of the country. However, these achievements were largely undone in 2022, when Kosovo Serbs collectively resigned from Kosovo's institutions in protest against actions by the Kosovo government in the north, signalling the fragility of these integration efforts and the ongoing challenge posed by Serbia's influence.[71] One potential option that could resolve this situation with the presence of Serbian-funded parallel institutions in the north of Kosovo is if the government of Kosovo establishes the Association/Community of the Serbian-majority Municipalities (ASM), which it had agreed to do so in the 2013 agreement and which Kosovo's Constitutional Court has ruled is Kosovo's obligation.[72]

Serbia's influence over the political representation of Kosovo Serbs also often undermines democratic norms of the functionality of public institutions by rendering local Serb leaders beholden to Belgrade rather than the constituents they represent within Kosovo. Through the

[69] "Serbia's Millions for Strengthening Parallel Structures in Kosovo," *Koha.net*, 13 July 2021, https://www.koha.net/en/arberi/milionat-e-serbise-per-fuqizimin-e-strukturave-paralele-ne-kosove

[70] Ibid.

[71] Xhorxhina Bami and Milica Stojanovic, "Serbs Stage Mass Resignation from Kosovo State Institutions," *Balkan Insight*, 5 November 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/05/serbs-stage-mass-resignation-from-kosovo-state-institutions/.

[72] Milica Andric Rakic and Ramadan Ilazi, *Establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities in Kosovo: Challenges and Opportunities,* Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, September 2020, https://en.bfpe.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2021/03/Andric-Rakic-and-Ilazi-Establishment-of-the-ASM.pdf.

formation of the SL party in 2017, Serbia has consolidated its political influence, ensuring that only candidates loyal to Belgrade can effectively compete in Kosovo elections. As a result, one area where Serbia has important influence is in Kosovo's legislative process within the national Assembly. The 10 seats guaranteed to Kosovo Serbs (always occupied by SL) in the 120-seat Assembly have often been used as leverage for Belgrade's interests. One example includes the Kosovo government's unsuccessful attempt in 2018 to amend the constitution to change the mandate of the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF). The constitutional change required a double majority vote, but SL members, acting on advice from Belgrade, withheld their support. This impasse forced the government to adjust the KSF's mandate so it could become a regular army through regular laws, which undermined to some degree the importance of the act of transformation of the role of the KSF.[73] The incident reinforced the perception among Kosovo citizens that Belgrade was interfering in decisions of national interest, fostering negative sentiments toward the influence exerted through the Srpska List. Serbia has also actively targeted with harassment campaign the Kosovo Serbs who joined the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF).[74] A member of the Kosovo Assembly has described Srpska List's representatives as a "remote-control bomb," indicating that Belgrade could, at any time, use its influence to "block important decisions and possibly bring down the government" in Kosovo.[75]

Russia actively undermines Kosovo's democracy by leveraging disinformation channels, such as Telegram, Sputnik Srbija and RT Balkans, to mobilise the Serbian community in Kosovo against Kosovo's statehood. This weakens social cohesion and inspires ethno-political radicalisation.[76] For instance, Russian media outlets like RT and Sputnik amplify narratives portraying Kosovo as a "criminal enclave," aiming to heighten ethnic tensions and foster distrust between the Serb community in Kosovo and Kosovar institutions. It is important to note, however, that in recent years, the Kosovo government itself has implemented measures in northern Kosovo that have further antagonised the Kosovo Serb community. Additionally, Russia exerts influence through its role in the UN Security Council, where it consistently blocks Kosovo's membership in international organisations – and efforts that would otherwise advance democratic protections for Kosovo's citizens and promote accountability within its institutions. Furthermore, Russia's particular influence in preventing normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia sustains an atmosphere of interethnic tension, creating space for populist and nationalist agendas that can potentially destabilise Kosovo.

One concrete example of Russia's adverse effect on Kosovo's democracy occurred following the September 2023 Banjska attack – condemned by the European Parliament as a terrorist attack – in which a Kosovo police officer was killed during an armed standoff with Serb paramilitaries.[77] Moscow actively talked about something of a similar event happening in

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[73] Die Morina, "Kosovo MPs Back Laws Giving KSF More Powers," *Balkan Insight*, 18 October 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/18/kosovo-approves-the-draft-laws-on-ksf-transformation-10-18-2018/.

[74] Perparim Isufi and Behar Mustafa, "Serb Members of Kosovo Security Force Threatened," *Balkan Insight*, 19 February 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/02/19/serb-members-of-kosovo-security-force-threatened-02-19-2018/.

[75] Quoted in Marko Prelec and Naim Rashiti, *Serb Integration in Kosovo After the Brussels Agreement*, BPRG, 19 March 2015, p. 13, https://balkansgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Serb-Integration-in-Kosovo-After-Brussels-Agreement-2.pdf.

[76] Ramadan Ilazi, Ardit Orana, Teuta Avdimetaj, Bledar Feta, Ana Krstinovska, Yorgos Christidis, and Ioannis Armakolas, "Online and Offline (De)Radicalisation in the Balkans," Working Paper 5, PAVE Project Publications, 2022, https://www.pave-project.eu/user/pages/07.publications/PAVE_870769_D5.1_publication_layout.pdf.

[77] Resolution on the Recent Developments in the Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue, Including the Situation in the Northern Municipalities in Kosovo, European Parliament (2023/2880(RSP)), 19 October 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-10-19_EN.html.

Kosovo before Banjska happened, indicating they had prior knowledge, while the immediate response after the attack included amplifying Serbian accusations against Kosovo, framing the incident as a consequence of policies pursued by Kosovo's government.[78] Russian media constantly cast Kosovo's institutions as hostile to Serbs.

After Serbia, Türkiye is perhaps the only other state actor with comparable influence capabilities in Kosovo. Kosovo's Turkish minority, recognised as a constitutive group of Kosovo's statehood, is guaranteed two seats in the Kosovo Assembly, and political representatives of this community have consistently held ministerial posts in the Kosovo government, which provides Türkiye with a political entry point when it needs it. In addition to the Turkish community, religious channels have also been playing a significant role in facilitating Türkiye's influence in Kosovo. In recent years, Kosovo has further strengthened strategic cooperation with Türkiye, including by purchasing Bayraktar drones and other military-grade equipment, underscoring the depth of this bilateral relationship.

However, unlike Serbia, Türkiye strongly supports Kosovo's independence. While Türkiye's actions do not directly undermine Kosovo's functionality as a state, there have been some instances when Turkish involvement has raised concerns about democratic standards, particularly regarding the rule of law, political freedom and the secular nature of Kosovo's institutions. One of the most controversial demonstrations of Türkiye's adverse influence on Kosovo's democracy was the deportation of six Turkish nationals from Kosovo, allegedly linked to the Gulen movement, in 2018.[79] This extradition took place without due process, sparking outrage in Kosovo and leading to the dismissal of the director of the Kosovo Intelligence Agency, who was later convicted of abuse of official duty and sentenced to four years in prison.[80] This scandal not only strained public trust in Kosovo's institutions but also raised concerns about Kosovo's vulnerability to external political pressure.

There has also been controversy over a Turkish-financed grand mosque in central Prishtina. It has divided Kosovo's citizens into opposing groups, with concerns over the role of foreign influence in shaping public and religious spaces in the country.[81] The construction of the mosque has led to protests from both supporters and opponents. Some residents expressed concerns about transparency and questioned the motives behind Türkiye's investment.[82] This sentiment indicates concern that foreign-financed religious projects may come with political or ideological strings attached, potentially influencing Kosovo's cultural landscape and priorities. The mosque's construction has also sparked debates about Pristina's urban and cultural needs. Opponents argue that the neighbourhood would benefit more from cultural infrastructure than from another mosque.[83] This clash reveals an underlying tension in Kosovo between those who believe the country should foster a secular and urban identity and those who believe that Kosovo needs to respond to religious infrastructure needs. Fundamental to

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[78] Ramadan Ilazi, Ardit Orana, and Jeta Loshaj, *Kosovo in the Russian Foreign Policy Discourse*, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) and KAS-Kosovo, November 2024.

[79] Labinot Leposhtica, "22 Police Staff Implicated in 'Gulenist' Deportation Case," *Prishtina Insight*, 15 August 2019, https://prishtinainsight.com/22-police-staff-gulenist-deportation-case/.

[80] "Kosovo's Former Intelligence Chief is Convicted for Secret Deportations to Turkey," *Associated Press,* 19 July 2023, https://apnews.com/article/kosovo-turkey-deportations-intelligence-coup-gulen-b3e9f9f481987dd2fe7c3b7e710fffc0.

[81] Maxim Edwards and Michael Colborne, "Turkey's Gift of a Mosque Sparks Fears of 'Neo-Ottomanism' in Kosovo."

[82] Xhorxhina Bami, "Turkish-Financed Mosque Sparks Rival Protests in Kosovo," *Balkan Insight*, 22 July 2020, https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/22/turkish-financed-mosque-sparks-rival-protests-in-kosovo/.

[83] Ibid.

this concern is the growing anxiety about Türkiye's role in strengthening religiosity in Kosovo, which can affect its national identity and direction. Supporters of the project, however, emphasise the importance of religious freedom and argue that a country with around 90% Muslim population should naturally have adequate mosques. The debates surrounding the mosque highlight the deeper societal divide over the role of religion in society and how it can be co-opted in the context of foreign influence. While Türkiye's support aligns with Kosovo's interests, its primary focus on investment in religious infrastructure raises questions about foreign influence over local priorities and the balance between secular and religious spaces in Kosovo's democracy.

A concerning phenomenon emerging in Kosovo, amid growing perceptions of security threats from Serbia—fueled by the lack of normalisation of relations and the Kosovo government's uncoordinated actions in the north—is what can be described as "populist securitisation." This involves invoking a "politics of fear, urgency, and exceptionality" to construct security narratives centred on enmity and existential threats to the state.[84] This framing is actively promoted by government proponents, who often label critics of their approach—particularly regarding the north of Kosovo and relations with Kosovo Serbs—as acting against the national interest or being pro-Serbian. Such rhetoric reflects a rising nationalism that undermines the norms of liberal democracy. Ultimately, this approach harms Kosovo, by damaging its image and reputation, and reinforcing perceptions of inherent instability. By doing so, it constrains Kosovo's democratic development and integrative potential, jeopardising its progress toward broader regional and international goals.

6. Key Highlights

As discussed in the introduction, the concept of 'masculine security' articulated by Dutta and Abbas offers a powerful lens to understand the dynamics at play. Serbia's portrayal of Kosovo as an existential threat and its securitised narrative within the Serbian political discourse align closely with this framework, emphasising a protector-versus-threat dichotomy. This framing is not only a tool for consolidating domestic power but also for justifying destabilising actions within Kosovo. Conversely, elements of this securitised rhetoric have been mirrored in Kosovo's own populist narratives, particularly in its approach to the north. By invoking a similar politics of fear and urgency, both states risk undermining democratic cohesion and fostering societal divisions, as 'security' becomes the overriding narrative at the expense of inclusivity and reconciliation

This report provided an analysis of the impact of external geopolitical actors on Kosovo's democratic development and EU integration trajectory. The findings highlight four critical dimensions: identification of key external actors, their strategic and tactical approaches, mechanisms and channels they use, and observable adverse effects on Kosovo's democratic institutions and values. These insights also facilitate comparability with other WB countries, setting the foundation for typologies of external influence and informing future policy recommendations.

1. **Key External Geopolitical Actors**: The primary external actors influencing Kosovo are Serbia and Russia, with additional, albeit more limited, influence from Türkiye, the Gulf States and China. Serbia is identified as the central actor, wielding a sustained influence on Kosovo's political landscape, particularly through the Kosovo Serb

[84] Sagnik Dutta and Tahir Abbas, "Protecting the People: Populism and Masculine Security in India and Hungary."

community. Russia acts in coordination with Serbia, using disinformation and diplomatic measures to delegitimise Kosovo on the international stage. Türkiye, while supportive of Kosovo's statehood, exerts cultural and religious influence that occasionally aligns with political Islam, which can challenge Kosovo's secular values. The Gulf States and China have more focused, economic-oriented presences but nonetheless affect Kosovo's socio-political landscape through targeted investments and bilateral partnerships.

2. **Strategies and Tactics in Different Geopolitical Contexts**: Each actor employs distinct strategies in global, regional and national contexts. At the global level, Serbia leverages its partnerships with Russia and China to obstruct Kosovo's international recognition and limit its participation in international organisations, such as the UN. Russia's alignment with Serbia further amplifies this approach, using veto power and international media channels to bolster Serbia's anti-Kosovo stance. Regionally, Serbia capitalises on ethnic and cultural affiliations within the WB to foster a sense of unity among Serbian communities in Kosovo and to bolster nationalist sentiments that resist Kosovo's state-building efforts. On a national scale, Serbia uses SL, the dominant political party in the Kosovo Serb community, to maintain a strong political foothold and influence local governance in Kosovo's northern municipalities.

3. **Mechanisms, Channels, and Agents of Influence**: The influence of external actors in Kosovo operates through a variety of mechanisms and channels, which include media, political agents, economic investments and parallel institutional structures. Russia relies on media outlets like Sputnik Srbija and specific Telegram channels to shape public opinion within Kosovo's Serb community and to spread narratives that undermine Kosovo's legitimacy. Serbia employs SL as a proxy to influence political developments while also supporting parallel institutions in northern Kosovo, which operate as a "state within a state." Türkiye utilises both formal mechanisms, like military and economic cooperation agreements, and informal networks through religious and cultural institutions to establish influence within Kosovo's Muslim community.

4. **Detrimental Effects on Democratic Institutions and Values**: The influence of these external actors has had a detrimental effect on Kosovo's democratic institutions and values, particularly where external actors leverage divisions to undermine Kosovo's statehood and unity. Serbia's control over parallel institutions in the north, coupled with its ability to mobilise boycotts and political resistance through the SL, weakens Kosovo's institutional cohesion and democratic governance. Russia's disinformation campaigns and diplomatic stances further exacerbate Kosovo's isolation, presenting its internal democratic issues as symptoms of a "failed state." While Türkiye's influence primarily centres around cultural engagement, incidents such as the deportation of Turkish nationals in 2018 without due process highlight the challenges Kosovo faces in balancing external alliances with democratic norms.

The findings underscore the need to contextualise Kosovo's experiences within broader regional dynamics, given that similar patterns of external influence can be observed across the WB. This comparative aspect will enable the development of a typology of external influences and outcomes in subsequent project stages, informing policy recommendations to strengthen Kosovo's resilience against detrimental external pressures and promote more robust democratic governance across the region.

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