

Cooperation through change: Mediating the Balkan conflict – the role of good neighbors

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The research has been implemented in frames of WEASA alumni activities.

Introduction

The Balkan region, marked by its complex history and geopolitical intricacies, stands as a persistent hotspot of tension and instability, nowhere more evident than in the ongoing conflict between Kosovo and Serbia. The region, steeped in a history of rivalries and enduring ethnic tensions, has long stood as a focal point of instability. Despite recent endeavors at resolution and negotiation, the region continues to grapple with unresolved issues that demand urgent attention. This paper aims to delve into the multifaceted dynamics of the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, shedding light on the compelling need for the normalization of relations between these two nations.

A recent development in the diplomatic landscape is the Franco-German proposal, ostensibly offering a path toward reconciliation. However, the endorsement of this proposal has not been translated into concrete action, as both parties exhibit reluctance to fully commit to its terms. This raises significant questions about the efficacy of diplomatic initiatives and the genuine intent behind seeking a lasting resolution.

At the heart of the discord lies Serbia's steadfast refusal to acknowledge Kosovo's independence and the international status it aspires to attain. Concurrently, challenges persist in Kosovo's governance of Serb-majority areas and its relations with the Serb community, creating a complex web of contentious issues that has impeded substantive progress in conflict resolution. Moreover, the existence of conflicting historical narratives further complicates the path to reconciliation, amplifying the deep-seated divisions between the parties.

This research delves into the intricate geopolitical landscape of the Balkans, focusing on the enduring conflict between Kosovo and Serbia. Emphasizing the potential impact of soft power diplomacy, especially from neighboring NATO members Albania and North Macedonia, the study underscores the urgent need for normalizing relations between the two nations. The aim is to ultimately contribute insights into fostering dialogue, peace, and reconciliation in the region for sustained stability.

As recent negotiation attempts, typified by the Franco-German proposal, face implementation challenges, this research also adds a critical evaluation of the prospects of achieving a lasting and comprehensive resolution to the conflict. The unresolved tensions between Kosovo and Serbia accentuate the compelling need for genuine normalization, and the eradication of external influences, notably from Russia, in the Balkan region.

The Kosovo-Serbia conflict, originating from the tumultuous disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, emerges as a particularly intricate and persistent issue. This paper starts with a review of existing literature which provides valuable insights into the multifaceted dimensions of the conflict, shedding light on the intricacies of the regional landscape, the roles played by external actors, and the formidable challenges inherent in fostering a sustainable and enduring peace.

In addition to the literature review, this paper provides new insights into the debate. The authors carried out a survey which was distributed to experts and professionals from both Albania and North Macedonia with significant expertise in the geopolitical landscape. These experts were contacted through the networking channels of the authors, ensuring the inclusion of perspectives from individuals with an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted Kosovo-Serbia conflict.

Moreover, the research team conducted focused interviews with key officials from the prime minister's office of Albania, particularly those intricately involved in the negotiation of the Open Balkans Initiative. Additionally, interviews were conducted with representatives from the foreign ministries and defense sectors of both Albania and North Macedonia. These officials were selected for their active engagement and comprehensive understanding of the ongoing situation. Through these targeted interviews, the research aimed to extract valuable insights from individuals directly involved in decision-making processes related to the Kosovo-Serbia conflict. These interviews provided invaluable qualitative insights, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges, opportunities, and potential pathways toward resolution. Thus, the summary of these inputs enriches the papers' analysis with up-to-date and informed perspectives from those at the forefront of managing the complex issues surrounding the Kosovo-Serbia conflict. For a detailed exploration of the methodology employed, refer to the second part of this paper.

Limited Successes to International Diplomacy

Historical narratives have played a substantial role in shaping the perceptions and stances of both Kosovo and Serbia. Serbia's steadfast refusal to acknowledge Kosovo's independence and the international community's recognition of Kosovo as a sovereign state continue to be primary points of contention.¹ Furthermore, the governance and autonomy of Serb-majority areas within Kosovo are major stumbling blocks in the path to normalization. Competing historical narratives further exacerbate the situation.

International diplomacy, including the EU-brokered agreements, has had limited success. While these agreements have been lauded as breakthroughs, the underlying issue is that peace must emerge from genuine willingness on the part of the parties involved. Short-term political gains often take precedence over long-term stability and the European Union's perspective on the region, hindering progress. This literature review highlights the need for comprehensive, locally-driven solutions.

The presence of external actors, particularly Russia, has added another layer of complexity to the Balkan conflict. Recent sanctions imposed by the United States on Serbian officials linked to Russian destabilization efforts underscore the seriousness of this issue. Russia's recruitment of ethnic Serbs into its military in Ukraine intensifies regional tensions and further complicates the path to resolution.

¹ Caplan. R (1998), International Diplomacy and the Crisis in Kosovo, *International Affairs*, Volume 74, Issue 4, October 1998, Pages 745–761, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.00043>

The EU, a prominent mediator in the region, faces challenges in maintaining a balanced approach. The existing literature points to the importance of the EU's role in fostering stability and reconciliation in the Balkans. However, the EU's response, such as imposing sanctions primarily on Kosovo while failing to address Serbia's destabilizing actions, has been criticized for its lack of balance and undermining the EU's credibility as a mediator.² The Ohrid agreement, endorsed by the EU and the US, aims to provide substantial investments to persuade both Kosovo and Serbia to end their conflict. However, it falls short in specifying when Serbia and Kosovo might join the EU, a critical incentive for peace. The EU's stance on Kosovo is also fragmented due to the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by certain member states, thus undermining the prospects for stability in the Balkans.

The normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia is an urgent necessity. The international community, especially the EU, must maintain a balanced approach and ensure that both parties commit to the agreements they endorse. To break the cycle of violence and external interference, it is crucial to address the core issues, clarify the path to EU membership, and foster a common EU position on Kosovo.³ The upcoming meeting between Kosovo and Serbia is of paramount importance, but the road to success remains challenging, demanding unwavering commitment and concerted efforts to resolve this longstanding tension in the Balkan region.⁴

Regional Dynamics and NATO Member Engagement: The Role of North Macedonia and Albania

In the intricate web of Balkan geopolitics, the interactions among Kosovo, Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia, particularly within the realm of NATO, wield substantial influence in shaping regional dynamics. This section explores the potential roles of North Macedonia and Albania, both proud members of NATO, in fostering dialogue and peace within the Belgrade-Prishtina framework.

As NATO member countries, North Macedonia and Albania find themselves in a position to make meaningful contributions to diplomatic efforts addressing the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue.⁵ Their roles extend beyond the diplomatic realm, embracing active support for initiatives that champion dialogue, peaceful dispute resolution, and regional stability. Within the NATO family, these nations can utilize their positions to advocate for a diplomatic and cooperative approach, aiming to resolve tensions between Serbia and Kosovo. Through the channels of NATO, North Macedonia and Albania could throw their weight behind international efforts, emphasizing the critical

² Hannon, Carolyn Lee, "Assessing Peacebuilding Processes through a Human Rights Lens: an Analysis of Peacebuilding Efforts in Kosovo" (2023). Theses and Dissertations. 1746. <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/1746>

³ UNSC. (2023, April 27). *Agreement on normalizing relations between Serbia, Kosovo "Historic Milestone", delegate tells Security Council | UN press*. United Nations. <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15268.doc.htm>

⁴ Muczniak, M. (2023, July 18). *Normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo must come from within*. European Policy Centre. <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Normalisation-between-Serbia-and-Kosovo-must-come-from-within~527b3c>

⁵ *Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue*. EEAS. (n.d.). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-Prishtina-dialogue_en

importance of a peaceful resolution that respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all involved parties. In their roles as NATO members, both countries are well-placed to champion regional stability by advocating for dialogue, cooperation, and adherence to international norms.

In the face of escalating tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, a scenario that might lead to localized conflicts or border incidents, NATO, with member states Albania and North Macedonia on board, would roll up its sleeves for diplomatic efforts aimed at de-escalation.⁶ This would involve high-stakes negotiations, mediation efforts, and diplomatic channels working in tandem to encourage dialogue.⁷ Member states might intensify their regional presence, utilizing surveillance and intelligence gathering to keep a close eye on the evolving situation. As tensions rise, Albania and North Macedonia, caught in the delicate balance of their national interests, NATO commitments, and historical relationships, must navigate these complexities.⁸ Meanwhile, NATO would strive to maintain unity among its members, addressing internal divisions and emphasizing a collective approach to regional stability.

NATO's Role in Addressing Regional Destabilization: A Focus on North Macedonia and Albania

In the event of a conflict or humanitarian crisis, NATO, with the active participation of regional member states like Albania and North Macedonia, may find itself contemplating humanitarian interventions or peacekeeping missions. These missions would be grounded in a commitment to providing aid, protecting civilians, and stabilizing affected areas. NATO's involvement would be characterized by collaboration with international organizations and non-governmental entities, working together to address immediate humanitarian needs and move towards a sustainable resolution. In the context of a conflict-induced refugee crisis, NATO would coordinate with international organizations, non-governmental agencies, and member states, aiming to provide aid, establish safe zones, and facilitate the safe resettlement of refugees.

If the region witnesses a unilateral declaration or provocative actions by either Kosovo or Serbia, NATO, with the active involvement of member states Albania and North Macedonia, would gear up for intense diplomatic efforts. This might involve issuing statements condemning unilateral actions, urging restraint, and actively facilitating negotiations between the involved parties. Albania and North Macedonia, as NATO members, would be on the frontline of these diplomatic initiatives, collaborating with other member states to tackle the challenges posed by unilateral declarations and working towards a negotiated settlement.

⁶ Ellyatt, H. (2023, October 5). *A second war could easily erupt in Europe - while everyone's distracted by Ukraine*. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/10/05/serbia-and-kosovo-could-easily-slip-into-war-analysts-warn.html>

⁷ Taylor, P. (2022, December). *Seize the geopolitical moment The Western Balkans and European security*. Friends of Europe.org. https://www.friendsofeurope.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022_European_Defence_Study_Balkans.pdf

⁸ Ozturk, T. (2023, September 26). *Timeline: How tensions between Serbia and Kosovo escalated into deadly clashes over a year*. Anadolu Agency. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/timeline-how-tensions-between-serbia-and-kosovo-escalated-into-deadly-clashes-over-a-year/3000891>

In the grander scheme of NATO's engagement in the Balkans, collaboration with the United States and the European Union takes center stage. The US, as a key NATO member, becomes a cornerstone for strategic support and diplomatic influence to fortify efforts in maintaining regional stability. Simultaneously, the EU, with its economic and political clout, complements NATO initiatives by fostering economic cooperation and encouraging regional integration.⁹ Albania and North Macedonia, with their eyes set on potential EU membership, contribute to EU-led initiatives and work hand in hand with the U.S. within the broader international framework.

In the event of Russia's involvement or exertion of influence in the region, NATO member states, including Albania and North Macedonia, would find themselves at a crossroads. Meticulously considering the broader geopolitical context becomes imperative. NATO might step into diplomatic dialogues with Russia, seeking to mitigate tensions and prevent further escalation. Albania and North Macedonia, delicately balancing their NATO commitments and regional relationships, would play a crucial role in these efforts. Recognizing the intricacies of the situation, NATO might adopt a multi-track diplomacy approach, bringing in various stakeholders, civil society groups, and international organizations. Member states, including Albania and North Macedonia, would play an active role in these multi-track diplomatic efforts, collaborating with a diverse array of entities to address the root causes of tensions and foster sustainable peace. NATO, drawing on its influence, would craft a comprehensive strategy extending beyond traditional state-centric diplomacy.¹⁰

Navigating Accountability in Peace Negotiations

In the realm of peace talks and negotiations, a pivotal question emerges: to what extent should the host country bear accountability, and what role should it assume in the subsequent mediation and enforcement of the agreed-upon goals? The role of the host country in peace talks or negotiations can vary, and there isn't a one-size-fits-all answer. However, it's common for the host country to play a role in facilitating the process and providing a neutral and secure environment for the discussions to take place. The level of accountability or follow-up involvement depends on the specific agreements reached during the negotiation and the willingness of the parties involved.

In some cases, the host country may take on a more active role in ensuring the implementation of agreements, monitoring progress, and mediating disputes that may arise post-negotiation. This can contribute to the long-term success of the peace process. One example is the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1990s. Norway served as

⁹ *Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue*. EEAS. (n.d.). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-Prishtina-dialogue_en

¹⁰ Blessing, J., Kjellström Elgin, K., & Ewers-Peters, N. M. (Eds.). (2021). *NATO 2030 Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond*. <https://sais.jhu.edu>.

https://sais.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/NATO2030AndBeyondAccessibleVersion.pdf?mc_cid=b9653fbf19&mc_eid=8555e5617a

the facilitator for these negotiations, and although not directly involved in the follow-up process, the host country's role was crucial in bringing the parties together.¹¹

However, the level of involvement of the host country can vary, and it's not always a requirement for the host to continue playing a significant role after the negotiations. Sometimes, international organizations or third-party mediators take on the responsibility of monitoring and supporting the implementation of agreements. It's important to note that the dynamics of peace negotiations are complex, and the success of a peace agreement depends on various factors, including the commitment of the parties involved, the nature of the conflict, and the international context.

The question of whether the host country of a peace talk or negotiation should be accountable and play a follow-up role in mediation to ensure agreement goals are reached is complex and context-dependent. The role of the host country can vary based on factors such as the nature of the conflict, the parties involved, and the dynamics of the negotiation process. In many cases, the host country can play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and providing a neutral and secure environment for negotiations. However, the extent to which they should be involved in the follow-up and implementation of agreements depends on various factors. Some argue¹² that the host country should have a continued role in the post-negotiation phase to help monitor and facilitate the implementation of the agreements.¹³ This can include providing logistical support, acting as a mediator in case of disputes, and working with international organizations to ensure that commitments are fulfilled. On the other hand, there are concerns about potential biases or conflicts of interest that the host country might have, which could affect its ability to effectively mediate and follow up on agreements. In such cases, involving neutral third parties or international organizations may be more appropriate for overseeing the implementation process.

Recent literature in the field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding suggests that a comprehensive approach involving multiple stakeholders, including the host country, international organizations, and local actors, is often most effective. Collaborative efforts that leverage the strengths of various actors can contribute to more sustainable peace outcomes.¹⁴ Ultimately, the choice of whether the host country should be accountable and have a follow-up role depends on the specific circumstances of each negotiation. Striking a balance between local involvement and impartial oversight is crucial for successful conflict resolution and the long-term stability of agreements. The role of the host country in peace negotiations and post-agreement

¹¹ Hilde Henriksen Waage (2005) Norway's Role in the Middle East Peace Talks: Between a Strong State and a Weak Belligerent, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 34:4, 6-24, DOI: [10.1525/jps.2005.34.4.6](https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2005.34.4.6)

¹² The respondents from our research questionnaire attested that the country that is hosting the negotiations should take some responsibility for the negotiations

¹³ Mislin, A. A., Campagna, R. L., & Bottom, W. P. (2011). After the deal: Talk, trust building and the implementation of negotiated agreements. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 115(1), 55–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2011.01.002>

¹⁴ Kasmi, J., Khan, M (2021), Institutional Failure in Burundi: Causes of Conflict and Insurgency beyond Ethnicity *African Security Review* <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2021.1900885>

implementation can be influenced by factors such as its political stability, impartiality, and the level of trust the conflicting parties have in its ability to mediate.¹⁵ In situations where the host country's neutrality is in question, involving third-party actors or international organizations might be crucial.¹⁶

Achieving successful conflict resolution and sustainable peace requires a nuanced understanding of the dynamics involved in negotiations. Recent literature emphasizes the indispensability of a multi-stakeholder approach. The host country's role is pivotal, but considerations of its neutrality, political stability, and trustworthiness impact its effectiveness. Third-party involvement can mitigate biases however there should be a significance of local ownership. The interplay of local, national, and international actors remains critical for navigating the complexities of post-negotiation peace implementation.¹⁷

To address the deep-seated conflict between Kosovo and Serbia in the Western Balkans, it is crucial to go beyond traditional government-centric diplomacy. The root causes of the conflict, including extreme poverty, injustice, exclusion, and inequality, require a multifaceted approach that involves not just governments but also citizens, local NGOs, and various stakeholders. Empowering these non-governmental actors, especially women, is essential for creating a sustainable culture of peace.

Drawbacks of Different Diplomacy Styles

Track One Diplomacy: While Track One diplomacy, involving formal government officials and diplomats, is a recognized method, it has limitations. The formal involvement of states and international organizations can be hindered by the agenda-setting power of public officials, potentially leading to biased or corrupted resolutions. Additionally, during the peak of conflicts, communication tends to break down, undermining the effectiveness of this diplomacy style.

Moreover, the drawback to Track One diplomacy lies in the potential influence of powerful nations over international regimes like the UN, where technocrats appointed by these nations may act in ways that prioritize their interests rather than impartial conflict resolution (serving powerful nations' interests).¹⁸

Track two diplomacy, in contrast, involves unofficial interactions between stakeholders, aiming to develop strategies, sway public opinion, and provide conflict relief. While not politicized, the drawback lies in the limited ability of these actors to influence foreign policy due to their lack

¹⁵ Moore, C. W. (2014). *The mediation process practical strategies for resolving conflict*. Jossey-Bass.

¹⁶ Regan, P. M. (2002). Third-Party Interventions and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46(1), 55–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3176239>

¹⁷ Hampson, F. O., & Mandell, B. S. (1990). Managing Regional Conflict: Security Co-operation and Third Party Mediators. *International Journal*, 45(2), 191–201. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40202669>

¹⁸ Lerche, C. O., and A. A. Said. Concepts of international politics. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970.

of political power. Efforts may be confined to reconciliation rather than prevention.¹⁹ In contrast to track one diplomacy, track two diplomacy allows a broader scope for mediation involving diverse stakeholders like religious leaders and local rulers. However, it might struggle with conflict prevention due to limited political power. Compared to Track One diplomacy, Track Two has a broader scope for mediation, involving actors like religious leaders and local rulers who might not be part of government-based institutions but play crucial roles in conflict mediation.

Multi-track diplomacy or 'one-and-a-half diplomacy,' can complement traditional government-centric approaches. This approach involves both official representatives and unofficial actors, creating a dynamic where diplomatic initiatives are not stifled by bureaucracy. This multi-track diplomacy, combined with efforts from government, NGOs, international organizations, and various professionals in conflict resolution, can yield more lasting results in peace mediation and peacekeeping. However, such a venture requires coordination, resources, cooperation, and a holistic top-down and bottom-up approach in peacebuilding, with stakeholders actively involved in the peace process. The active involvement of stakeholders at multiple levels is essential to ensure a sustained and comprehensive peace process in the Kosovo-Serbia context.²⁰

Assessing Agreements and Political Will in Kosovo-Serbia Relations

There have been several agreements between Kosovo and Serbia, reflecting their efforts to address various issues and improve their relations. The first round of talks began in 2011 and was focused above all on the freedom of movement and rule of law, this stage named “technical dialogue” led to several purely technical agreements all addressing the most urgent issues, although most of them were never fully implemented, for the most part, because of the lack of political will from both sides. It is important to note that Serbia during those talks and all others after that was not obliged to recognize Kosovo.

Brussels Agreement

The first significant agreement was the Brussels Agreement, reached in April 2013, which aimed to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The agreement included provisions on the establishment of the Association of Serb Municipalities, energy issues, telecommunications, and the integration of police and judiciary structures in the northern part of Kosovo. Soon after the signing of the Agreement, the political climate changed and the efforts made by both sides under the auspices of the US and EU, with the coming to power of more hardline politicians were in a way taken hostage for political purposes.

¹⁹ Nan, A. S. 'Track one-and-a-Half Diplomacy: Contributions to Georgia-South Ossetian Peacemaking.' In R. J. Fisher (Ed.), *Paving the Way*. (2005): 161-173. Lanham: Lexington Books.

²⁰ Mapendere, J. 'Track One and a Half Diplomacy and the Complementarity of Tracks'. *Culture of Peace Online Journal* 2, no. 1 (2000): 66–81.

Washington agreement

Although talks under the auspices of the US and EU continued during the years, it took seven years after the Brussels Agreement for both sides to agree with a deal brokered by the US to normalize above all the economic relations. The deal encompassed that Serbia would not seek other states to withdraw the recognition of Kosovo, and for Prishtina to not apply for membership in international organizations. The provisions also envisioned free rail and road transit between the two states, and work with US banks for export-import and international development. Both sides also pledged to protect and promote freedom of religion, and to protect the religious sites, especially the churches belonging to the Serbian orthodox church.

Ohrid Agreement

The biggest breakthrough can arguably be with the Ohrid Agreement reached in March 2023 in Ohrid, North Macedonia. The Agreement which was facilitated by the EU was verbally agreed between Aleksandar Vučić and Albin Kurti although both sides later claimed the other is at fault for not implementing it or parts of it. This Agreement was different from all previous, for the most part, because it had specific provisions that could be interpreted as a partial recognition of Kosovo's independence. It included, that the two parties should develop normal, good-neighborly relations which was assumed as a partial recognition. Belgrade and Prishtina were supposed to mutually recognize the documents, national symbols, and passports, to respect each other's territorial integrity and the right of self-determination. It provided that Serbia will not object to Kosovo's membership in any international organizations, and for Kosovo to ensure the safety and property of the Orthodox church and an appropriate level of self-management for the ethnic Serbian community in Kosovo. However, the two sides are still not able to agree on the structure of the proposed association of Serb Municipalities. A draft statute for the municipalities was presented by the EU leaders in October this year. The leaders urged Kosovo to adopt the statute and form the association of Serb municipalities, they also asked for Serbia to deliver on the de-facto recognition of Kosovo's independence.

Survey on the Western Balkans

North Macedonia and Albania have consistently championed the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue, with the overarching goal of normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo. The shared commitment of both nations extends beyond mere diplomatic rhetoric, reflecting a genuine dedication to fostering regional stability and facilitating the integration of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Recognizing the intrinsic connection between resolving longstanding issues in the Serbia-Kosovo relationship and ensuring the overall stability of the region, North Macedonia and Albania stand united in their official stance.

However, what elevates this commitment beyond the realm of official policy is the resonance it finds within the broader population of these nations. A tangible manifestation of this collective sentiment is evident in the survey conducted specifically for the purposes of this research paper. The survey serves as a testament to the alignment between the official stance of both states and

the prevailing sentiments of the people residing within their borders. The findings of the survey provide empirical support to the assertion that the commitment to the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue is not confined to diplomatic corridors but permeates the societal fabric, underlining the significance attributed to regional stability and the resolution of longstanding issues in the broader geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans.

The survey employed a methodological approach designed to ensure comprehensive insights into the perspectives of a diverse respondent pool. The survey was distributed online to the target audience through a Google survey in a timeframe of about two weeks. This digital medium facilitated a widespread reach, enabling participants to engage with the survey effortlessly while concurrently fostering efficiency in data aggregation and analysis.

This survey primarily targeted young professionals and public officials, carefully chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics within the region's politics and diplomacy. The deliberate selection of this demographic aimed to capture a diverse range of opinions and experiences, enriching the study's insights into the political and diplomatic considerations in the Balkans. While acknowledging the small sample size of 77 respondents, which does not claim statistical representativeness, it is essential to emphasize that the survey provides valuable insights derived from a broad spectrum of respondents. These insights, despite the modest sample, significantly contribute to informing the conclusions drawn in this paper.

To ensure a geographically focused and contextually relevant dataset, the survey specifically targeted individuals from Albania and North Macedonia. The decision to concentrate on these regions was driven by their unique political and diplomatic significance. Survey distribution was executed through a dual strategy, involving dissemination within professional networks and through the organic sharing of the survey link among colleagues. This approach sought to establish a balanced representation of perspectives from individuals deeply involved in their respective fields, thereby enhancing the survey's credibility and relevance.

Analysis of Findings

In interpreting the survey results, the research is enriched by the expert analysis contributed by Andreja Stojkovski²¹, affiliated with the Prespa Institute and serving as the Special Representative for Civil Society of the OSCE 2023 Chairman in Office, providing invaluable perspectives on the surveyed citizens' sentiments. Stojkovski unveils a sense of agency among the respondents, with 82% expressing a confident familiarity with the region, reflecting a robust comprehension of the geopolitical landscape, providing a crucial layer of understanding to complement the researchers' analysis. The survey underscores the citizens' proactive stance,

²¹ Andreja Stojkovski assisted in interpreting and analysing the results of the survey, presented here. His role as a Special Representative for Civil Society of the OSCE 2023 Chairman in Office and his affiliation with the Prespa Institute underscores his expertise in providing valuable insights into the surveyed citizens' sentiments. We are grateful for his input.

with a majority (78.2%) advocating for the involvement of NATO members North Macedonia and Albania as facilitators in the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue.

A noteworthy revelation emerges in the perception of the prolonged conflict or its potential preservation as not merely a threat to regional peace and security but also as an opportunity for malign actors to exploit. An overwhelming 88.5% of participants voiced concerns about this, emphasizing the urgent need for resolution to preempt external exploitation. Stojkovski's analysis delves into the nuanced perspectives regarding actors benefiting from a frozen conflict. While 52.6% attribute such benefits to Russia and 23.1% to the United States, the minimal number associating the EU with these benefits underscores the positive role and mediation potential ascribed to the European Union.

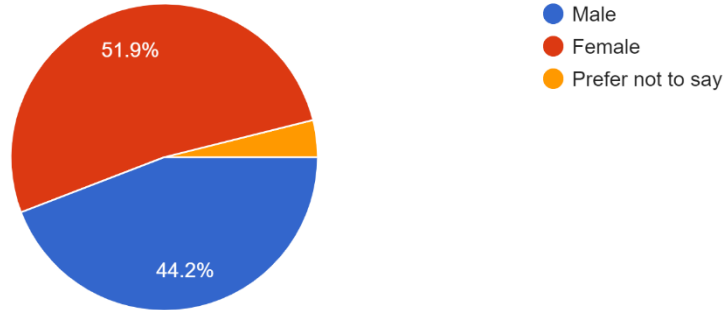
In terms of mediation and resolution, the survey indicates a prevailing trust in the EU's capabilities, with 62.8% of respondents believing in its constructive role in finding a permanent solution. Notably, an overwhelming 91% express confidence that such a solution would yield long-term benefits for the entire region. Stojkovski's expert analysis enriches the research by providing nuanced insights into public sentiment, offering a comprehensive understanding of citizens' aspirations, concerns, and perceptions regarding the pivotal role of regional and international entities in the ongoing dialogue and conflict resolution.

Insights from Survey Participants in North Macedonia and Albania

Out of the nearly 80 participants from North Macedonia and Albania, a notable majority possessed a high educational background, with over half falling within the age range of 25-34. While the survey encompassed respondents up to the age of 65 and older, it is intriguing to observe the prevalence of participants with a robust knowledge of the Belgrade-Prishtina issue, particularly within the specified age bracket. Additionally, a noteworthy gender trend emerged, with the majority of survey participants being female.

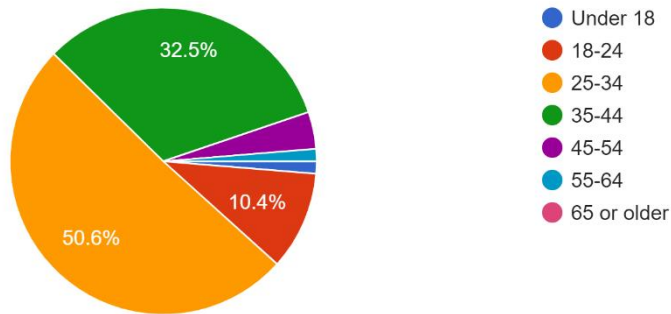
The responses captured a compelling dual sentiment among participants. On the one hand, there is a pronounced inclination to steer clear of conflict in the Balkans. Concurrently, there exists a readiness among participants to contribute to the healing of the region through diplomatic means, underscoring a collective commitment to fostering peaceful solutions. Notably, the survey reflects a shared dedication among respondents to uphold the right to self-determination, offering valuable insights into the nuanced perspectives of individuals invested in the resolution of the ongoing conflict.

Gender:
77 responses



Graph 1.

Age
77 responses



Graph 2.

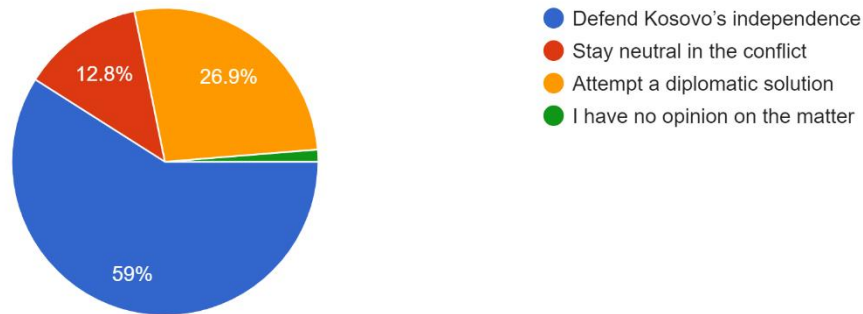
Shift in Perspectives: A Clear Euro-Atlantic Orientation

The survey outcomes underscore a noteworthy transformation in the stances of Macedonians and Albanians, particularly in the context of regional conflicts. The data reveals a diminishing acceptance of neutrality, with merely 12% advocating for non-involvement in the hypothetical scenario of a Serbian invasion of Kosovo. The majority, however, signaled a preparedness either to defend Kosovo's independence or actively seek diplomatic resolutions. This shift from the status quo is particularly conspicuous among the younger generations, who have come of age in the aftermath of the turbulent post-socialist era in the Balkans. For them, a clear Euro-Atlantic perspective has become a paramount aspiration, reflecting a departure from historical norms.

The survey participants' commitment to a peaceful Balkans becomes evident in their responses to the question of the role of Skopje and Tirana in facilitating dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina. A striking 80% of respondents emphasized the role of good neighborliness, urging both capitals to actively contribute to finding a fair and expeditious resolution. This inclination toward diplomatic solutions prevails, even considering the historical closeness between Macedonians and Serbs and the presence of Albanian communities in both Albania and Kosovo. The poll results underscore a prevailing desire for diplomatic initiatives facilitated by Skopje and Tirana, emphasizing a collective commitment to regional stability and conflict resolution.

What should be the position of NATO if Serbia invades Kosovo?

78 responses



Graph 3

What do you think should be the role of Macedonia and Albania as NATO countries in the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue?

78 responses



Graph 4

Navigating Accountability: Survey Insights on Vučić, Kurti, and Host Countries

The survey provides a lucid stance on accountability, indicating a consensus that both Vučić and Kurti should be held responsible for their actions, particularly in the context of the unimplemented Ohrid Agreement. Facilitated by the EU and verbally agreed upon by both parties, the Ohrid Agreement holds a significant place in the discourse surrounding accountability. However, opinions diverge when addressing the accountability of the country hosting the negotiations and its potential follow-up role. This aspect garnered the lowest level of consensus, with only 51.3% of survey participants expressing acceptance. Conversely, 20% opposed this notion, while more than 24% remained neutral with no expressed opinion. The outcomes suggest a degree of uncertainty among Macedonians and Albanians regarding the role their respective countries should assume in the resolution of issues in the Western Balkans. This hesitancy is reflected in the relatively low acceptance rate for the proposed accountability of host countries, indicating a need for further exploration and clarification of public sentiments on the matter.

Should the country in which a peace talk or a negotiation is held be accountable or should have a follow-up role in mediation and to ensure the agreement goals are reached?

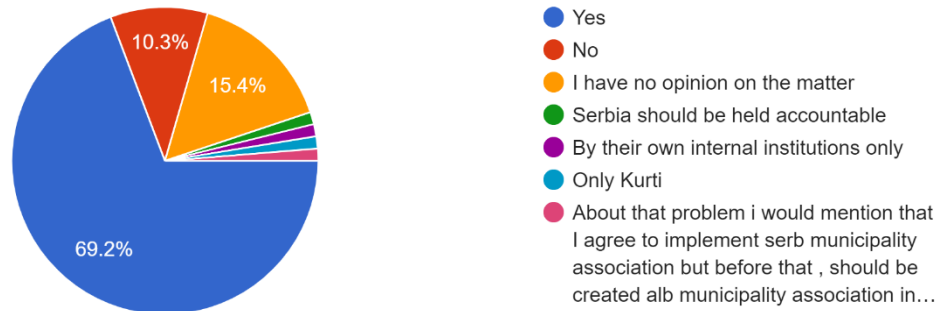
78 responses



Graph 4

Should Vucic and Kurti be held accountable for not implementing parts of the agreement in Ohrid, or any other agreement?

78 responses



Graph 5

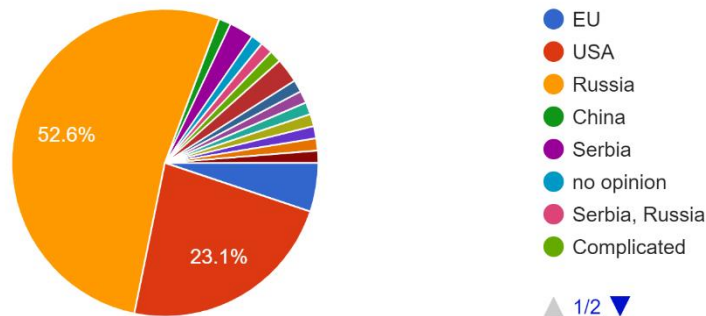
Unraveling Motives: Examining Potential Beneficiaries

The survey delved into the age-old question of "Cui bono" — to whom is it a benefit? The responses to this query presented a diverse spectrum of perspectives on who stands to gain the most from a potential conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. Unsurprisingly, Russia claimed the top spot, aligning with expectations given its historical involvement in the region. Notably, the United States emerged as the second contender in this analysis, indicative of a lingering influence from past geopolitical contexts.

The rationale behind Russia's position as the primary beneficiary stems from its strategic interests and historical alliances. Serbia, notably, has refrained from imposing sanctions on Russia, even amidst the broader European response to the war in Ukraine. Suspicions of Russian involvement in instigating tensions in northern Kosovo, exemplified by incidents like the Banjske attack, further underscore its vested interests in the region. As the conflict in Ukraine unfolds, Russia, currently on the defensive for a significant part of the year, could stand to gain substantially if another "hot spot" erupts in the Balkans. Serbia and Kosovo, positioned at the heart of potential tensions, serve as prime examples of geopolitical complexities that could be exploited for strategic gains.

Who do you think benefits the most from a conflict between Serbia and Kosovo?

78 responses



Graph 6

Navigating Fears and Hopes: The Regional Impact

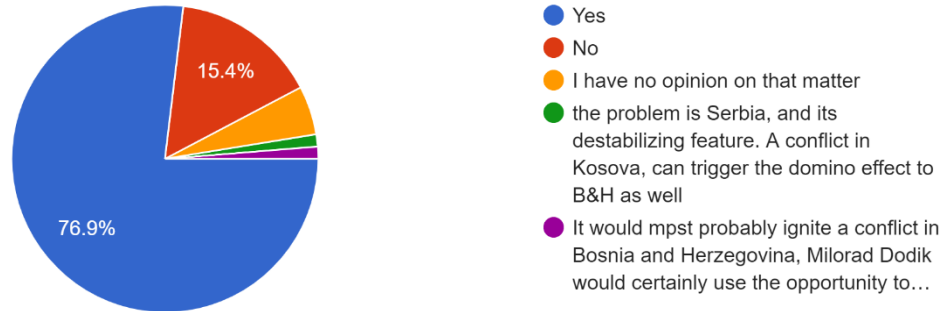
The prevailing sentiment among respondents is a widespread fear that a conflict in Kosovo has the potential to cascade throughout the region. This apprehension is intricately woven into the fabric of the survey results.

Is this fear justified? The answer is a nuanced “yes and no”. While both North Macedonia and Albania hold NATO membership, internal dynamics within North Macedonia introduce a layer of complexity. The significant Albanian community in North Macedonia inherently aligns with Kosovo's sovereignty and right to self-determination. Conversely, the majority of Macedonians exhibit a more passive stance concerning relations between Belgrade and Prishtina. Interestingly, Serbia emerges as the most favorable neighbor in numerous polls conducted in North Macedonia, surpassing even the allies such as the United States and the European Union. The absence of unresolved issues between Macedonians and Serbs, in contrast to relations with other neighbors, underscores the natural affinity between two peoples who shared the same country for five decades.

However, this amicable relationship does not diminish the pervasive fear that a new conflict could unleash a tsunami effect on the region. In the face of fear, though, hope emerges as a potent force. The final survey question illuminates this dichotomy, with over 90% of respondents expressing a strong belief that resolving the issues between Belgrade and Prishtina will usher in long-term benefits for the entire region. This dual nature of apprehension and optimism encapsulates the complex sentiments surrounding the Kosovo-Serbia conflict and its potential regional ramifications.

Do you think that if a conflict erupts in Kosovo, it can spread in the region and have far-reaching consequences?

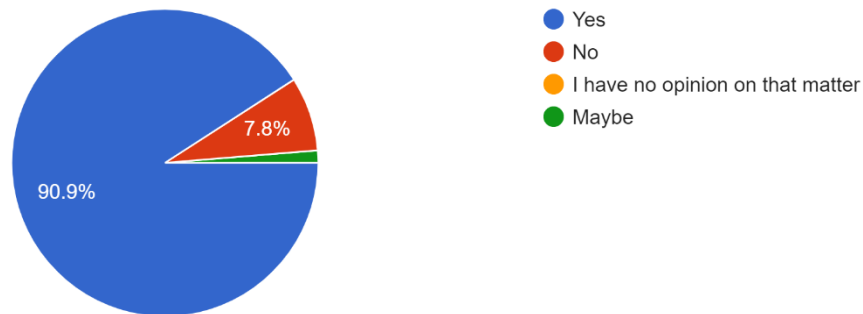
78 responses



Graph 7

Do you think that solving the issue between Belgrade and Kosovo can help the entire region in the long run?

77 responses



Graph 8

Conclusion: Charting Paths to a Resolution

The questionnaire results underscore a resounding desire among Macedonians and Albanians to play a role in facilitating an agreement between Belgrade and Prishtina. However, a significant dilemma emerges concerning the optimal approach to navigate this complex issue and determine the most effective path forward. The consensus among participants is that resolving this matter holds the potential to not only benefit the immediate stakeholders but the entire region, fostering a collective healing from the wounds of the past.

The call for a change in the status quo reverberates strongly, primarily driven by a palpable fear of a potential conflict spreading throughout the region. Notably, Russia emerges as a focal point, with survey participants expressing the belief that Russia stands to gain the most from a new Balkan conflict. This perception aligns with recent warnings from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, emphasizing the Kremlin's propensity to capitalize on geopolitical disturbances. The historical and cultural ties between Serbs and Russians amplify Russia's influence in the region, a factor that the Kremlin deftly exploits to advance its strategic objectives. Recognizing the potential vulnerabilities of NATO-aligned countries in the Balkans—North Macedonia, Albania, and the NATO-adjacent Bosnia and Herzegovina—the prevailing sentiment is that a disturbance in one country could cascade into others.

As NATO members, North Macedonia and Albania express a willingness to act if Kosovo faces an attack, although a diplomatic solution remains the preferred course of action. The survey illuminates the genuine willingness of Macedonians and Albanians to extend support to their neighbors, driven by sentiments of sympathy and love. Macedonians exhibit a strong affinity toward the Serbs, while Albanians express a kinship toward their brethren residing across the border. This underlying bond further amplifies the regional complexities, emphasizing the intricate dynamics at play in the pursuit of lasting solutions to the Kosovo-Serbia conflict.

The attainment of an agreement between the two principal parties, Kosovo and Serbia, hinges significantly upon the political will of each entity. However, beyond the immediate stakeholders, the influence of major global powers such as the US, EU, Russia, and China cannot be understated. These influential entities play a pivotal role in shaping tailored agreements reflective of their distinct economic and political interests. The geopolitical chessboard underscores the interplay of power dynamics, emphasizing the need for a delicate equilibrium to be struck in the pursuit of lasting peace in Southeast Europe.

Crucially, the preservation of peace in this region is not only a regional concern but holds paramount significance for the unity of the European Union. The unresolved Kosovo-Serbia issue, lingering in the backdrop, poses a potential threat to regional stability. In an era marked by escalating national and international conflicts, the necessity for concrete measures to define and assert the territorial sovereignty of both Kosovo and Serbia becomes increasingly urgent. Failure to address this issue in a timely manner may not only perpetuate existing tensions but may lead to unforeseeable and potentially catastrophic consequences. As this research illuminates, the stakes are high, and decisive actions are imperative to pave the way for a secure and harmonious future in the complex landscape of Southeast Europe.

To reconcile the conflict, addressing its root causes, such as extreme forms of poverty, injustice, exclusion, inequality, and lack of freedom, is imperative. Building a culture of peace requires not only denouncing war but also reinforcing efforts to construct an inclusive society with an acceptable quality of life. To prevent recurring civil wars, empowering citizens, local NGOs, and other stakeholders, including women, is crucial. Another solution involves reforming government

and institutions, creating non-military strategies, and allowing outside actors to contribute to peace and stability.²²

Civil society groups play a crucial role in enhancing public representation in negotiations. However, the diversity within civil society introduces complexities. It is not a monolithic entity but rather exists in various organizational forms, exhibiting different degrees of autonomy from the state. In certain situations, civil society can even function as a substitute for the state, stepping in when governmental structures fail to address the needs of the population. Nevertheless, the potential downside is evident – civil society has the capacity to devolve into an "uncivil" society marked by political militancy, or in some instances, seamlessly transition into insurgency. This risk is particularly pronounced in conflicts where gaining popular support for peace is neglected. Consequently, a critical question arises: which civil society groups should be involved in peace processes? Addressing this question is pivotal for ensuring the effectiveness and legitimacy of negotiations.²³

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²² Kew, D., & Wanis-St. John, A. (2008). Civil Society and Peace Negotiations: Confronting Exclusion. *International Negotiation*, 13(1), 11-36. <https://doi.org/10.1163/138234008X297896>

²³ *ibid*

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