

Serbia's Hybrid Influence and the Limits of "Serbian World" Ambitions

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Executive Summary

The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s set the stage for a cascade of ethnonationalist conflicts that reshaped the Balkans, with profound implications for regional stability and European security. The breakup, driven by rising nationalist sentiments and economic disintegration, exposed deep-seated ethnic divisions and led to a series of wars that claimed over 100,000 lives and displaced millions. At the heart of this turmoil was the ascent of Slobodan Milošević, whose political trajectory gained decisive momentum through his opportunistic exploitation of Serbian grievances in Kosovo. His infamous 1987 speech at Fushe Kosoeve/Kosovo Polje, where he declared "niko ne sme da vas bije" ("no one should dare to beat you") to a crowd of aggrieved Serbs, marked the beginning of his consolidation of power, transforming him from a mid-level communist apparatchik into a nationalist icon. This rhetoric not only galvanized Serbian support but also ignited turbulent relations between Belgrade and Kosovo's Albanian majority, oscillating from outright conflict to moments of provisional, albeit fragile, constructive engagement amid escalating tensions.

The wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995) and Croatia (1991–1995) further amplified these dynamics, as Serbian ethnonationalists aggressively promoted the concept of a "Greater Serbia", an territorial revisionism vision of unifying all Serbs into a single state. Backed by Milošević's regime, paramilitary forces and the Yugoslav People's Army pursued territorial expansion, leading to ethnic cleansing campaigns, sieges, and atrocities that drew international condemnation and intervention. These conflicts entrenched narratives of victimhood and revanchism, laying the groundwork for subsequent instability in Kosovo and perpetuating cycles of mistrust across the region.

The conflict in Kosovo, erupting in the late 90s, has defined the last quarter-century of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, characterized by a volatile mix of armed confrontations, harsh diplomatic rhetoric, partition initiatives and sporadic incursions involving paramilitary elements. This period has witnessed evolving perceptions of sovereignty and security, shaped by successive authorities on both sides. Over the past twenty-five years, Serbia and Kosovo have undergone frequent rotations of governments, characterized by recurring elections, changes in leadership, and fluctuating coalition arrangements, reflecting persistent political fluidity in both systems. Despite these frequent turnovers intended to foster democratic maturation, the dominant trend has been political regression, marked by entrenched polarization, institutional paralysis and a failure to advance meaningful reconciliation.

In Serbia, the absolute dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) since 2012 has epitomized this decline, evolving from a ostensibly constructive partner in EU-mediated talks to an increasingly autocratic regime under President Aleksandar Vučić. This shift has dashed earlier hopes harbored by the EU and the United States for democratic consolidation and regional cooperation, instead yielding a concentration of power that stifles dissent and perpetuates nationalist agendas. Similarly, Kosovo's governing structures have exhibited parallel tendencies toward unilateralism, compelling the international community into reactive conflict management roles that undermine efforts to restore the Brussels Dialogue as the preeminent platform for normalization. Such actions contravene the spirit of collaborative

diplomacy, exacerbating mutual suspicions and hindering progress toward a sustainable agreement.

Serbia's influence in Kosovo remains deep, complex and contradictory. Over the past twenty-five years, Belgrade has at times acted as a destabilizing force, and at other moments as a pragmatic partner in reducing tensions, implementing agreements and facilitating Kosovo Serb participation in state institutions. Its role cannot be reduced to a single narrative. Economic dominance, social-service provision, Serbian-funded institutions, and political structures such as Srpska Lista continue to give Serbia substantial leverage inside Kosovo, especially in communities where Kosovo's own institutions have struggled to gain trust.

Kosovo's failure to integrate its Serb population, combined with Serbia's extensive funding of healthcare, education, pensions, and public employment, has created a dual reality in which Serbia functions as a de facto "backup state" for many citizens. Srpska Lista, while suppressing political pluralism, has simultaneously served as a vehicle for both resistance to Pristina's policies and for the integration of police, judiciary and civil protection members into Kosovo institutions when it aligned with Belgrade's interests. The Serbian Orthodox Church, the most trusted institution among Kosovo Serbs, fills the representational vacuum left by the absence of formal political channels.

The Brussels integration architecture, above all, the failure to establish the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities has fueled mistrust, institutional withdrawal and rising insecurity. The 2022 mass resignations of Serbs in four municipalities in the North of Kosovo, Kosovo's subsequent enforcement measures in the north, and the 2023 Banjska armed conflict exposed how little control Pristina, Belgrade, and the international community now exercise over events on the ground.

The wider strategic context has shifted. Serbia's relevance to European security, energy and industrial policy has grown, while Kosovo has become increasingly isolated amid deteriorating relations with key Western partners. Both Kosovo and Serbia are now in simultaneous political crises: Pristina is paralyzed by prolonged government formation and collapsing turnout, while Belgrade faces its strongest domestic challenge in a decade from the student protest movement. Neither leadership has incentives for compromise, and both benefit politically from a managed, unresolved conflict.

Mutual recognition is unattainable in the foreseeable future. Any realistic revival of the EU-facilitated Dialogue must acknowledge this openly, redefine "normalization," and refocus on stabilization, minority rights, functional integration, and political pluralism among Kosovo Serbs. Without a more assertive and strategic role from the EU, the current trajectory will continue to erode institutional order and leave space for recurring crises.

Introduction

This policy brief covers the influence both malign and non malign of the Serbian State in Kosovo. Or as it were in the Serbian world. As the state of Serbia generates a regional influence that spreads outside of the Balkans to the slavic world. In Kosovo, the Serbian world is still felt most clearly for both positive and negative reasons.

NGO Aktiv joined [“Building the “Serbian World”: Serbia’s Impact on Security and Stability in the Western Balkans”](#) as a Kosovo stakeholder. From this vantage point it forensically examined the role of Serbia from a variety of viewpoints through a workshop with experts, scholars and journalists.

What does Serbia mean in Kosovo?

Over the past 25 years, Serbia’s role has been mixed: sometimes destructive, sometimes quietly constructive, always strategic. After the 90s wars Serbia’s influence was deeply limited across Europe and globally. It was the aggressor and in Kosovo it was the end of the wars and the start of the Slobodan Milosevic’s regime destruction. However, it did not mean the end of Serbia’s influence in Kosovo, namely because of the significant minority of Serbs there. As reprisal attacks began, Serbia did little. But as the construction of Kosovo began, Serbia was significant.

It’s important to remember that Serbia remains one of the largest and richest of the states post- Yugoslav breakup and Kosovo is the poorest. Despite the state of non recognition between the states, Kosovo is dwarfed economically and militarily by Serbia. Thus Kosovo has NATO protection and has fought hard to reduce Serbian influence economically through tariffs and eventually trade bans.

But because of Serbia’s relative wealth and power in the region the international community in some cases must give it outsize attention, sidelining smaller states like Kosovo.

However, the lack of Kosovo Serbian integration leaves an open door through which Serbian funded employment, pensions and social services reach beyond the Kosovo Serbian community. Many in other minority communities and the Albanian community itself benefit through Serbian healthcare, pension and other services in Kosovo.

This essentially allows Serbia to act as a “back up” state. Because of Kosovo’s poverty many - particularly Roma - access social support from Serbia where it is higher than in Kosovo or in many cases both countries. Serbia also provides employment through the health and education sectors - in particular which are supported through state funds and guaranteed in the Kosovo constitution. This provides Kosovo Serbs not only with a connection back to Serbia but a lifeline in a country that largely rejects their presence. This gives Serbia a path politically into Kosovo.

Srpska Lista: A Trojan Horse in Kosovo’s Integration Architecture?

In the intricate landscape of Kosovo-Serbia relations, Srpska Lista (Serbian List, SL) emerges as a quintessential embodiment of Belgrade’s multifaceted influence, a political entity that simultaneously advances integration while perpetuating dependency and division. Established in 2013 as a unifying platform for Kosovo Serbs, SL was explicitly designed under the auspices of Belgrade’s ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by President Aleksandar Vučić, to consolidate control over Serb-majority communities. Modelled in the SNS’s image, it rapidly evolved into the de facto monopolistic representative for Kosovo Serbs, intertwining political allegiance with access to employment, social benefits, and an informal service economy sustained by Serbian state funding. This patronage system enforces electoral loyalty: non-adherence to SL often results in exclusion from Belgrade’s largesse, thereby

stifling political pluralism and fostering a bifurcated ecosystem where only those employed outside Serbian structures preserve a semblance of independent agency.

Yet, this dominance yields paradoxical outcomes. While SL undeniably suppresses electoral diversity among Kosovo Serbs effectively channelling votes into a singular, Belgrade-aligned bloc it also furnishes the community with a cohesive voice capable of countering Pristina's attempts at marginalization. As articulated by a participant in a recent policy workshop, SL¹ was "arguably created to frustrate Pristina's hopes of transforming the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a fully-fledged army²," leveraging unified Serb parliamentary representation to block initiatives perceived as eroding ethnic Serb rights. This defensive posture extends beyond security matters, safeguarding broader minority interests promised under international agreements but progressively undermined by Kosovo's authorities. Without Serbia's substantial financial and institutional backing, SL would lack the leverage to advocate effectively for these entitlements, highlighting the entity's role as both a bulwark against assimilation and a conduit for external influence.

The origins of SL underscore its initial promise within the Brussels Dialogue framework. Conceived as a precondition for northern Kosovo Serbs' participation in Kosovo's electoral processes, its formation marked a pivotal step toward integration after over a decade of post-conflict resistance. In its nascent phase, SL facilitated the normalization of Serb engagement in Kosovo's institutions, channeling community grievances into formal channels and contributing to a tentative stabilization of public life. This constructive dimension persisted in targeted instances where Belgrade's interests aligned with broader reconciliation efforts: SL has served as a vehicle for incorporating Kosovo Serbs into key sectors, including the integration of police officers, judges, prosecutors, and former civil protection personnel into Kosovo's structures. Such actions, often involving persuasion and pressure from Belgrade, have reduced outright rejection while enabling selective forms of functional cooperation.

However, these gains are overshadowed by systemic pathologies. SL's hegemony has engendered corruption and cronyism, with a narrow cadre of politically connected elites dominating private enterprises, public tenders and resource allocation within Kosovo Serb enclaves. This concentration of power breeds internal frictions, alienates potential reformers, and perpetuates economic dependencies that undermine Kosovo's sovereignty. In Kosovo's parliament, SL's consistent capture of all 10 mandated Serb seats amplifies Belgrade's direct imprint on Pristina's policymaking, enabling veto-like influence on minority-sensitive legislation. Nonetheless, this leverage is curtailed by Albanian-majority parties' aversion³ to SL⁴, which they view as an extension⁵ of Serbian nationalist discourse; instead, these parties cultivate alliances with smaller Bosniak, Roma or Turkish factions reliant on majority patronage, further entrenching ethnic silos.

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<https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/serb-list-entry-ksf-northern-kosovo-dangerous-provocation-kf-or-should-increase-its>

² <https://www.voanews.com/a/nato-us-warn-kosovo-against-move-to-form-army/3755434.html>

³ <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/12/03/new-election-bar-on-kosovo-serb-party-condemned/>

⁴ <https://euronews.al/en/vucic-kurti-considers-serbian-list-the-biggest-enemy/>

⁵ <https://www.euronews.com/2024/04/22/serb-majority-municipalities-boycott-vote-to-remove-albanian-mayors>

The international community, including the EU and key Western actors, has pragmatically instrumentalized⁶ SL to bridge implementation⁷ gaps. A salient example is the recent takeover of northern Kosovo's water utility⁸ by Pristina, which displaced Serb employees and necessitated their reapplication under Kosovo's framework. Here, SL intervened decisively, convincing affected staff to comply by guaranteeing supplementary payments from Belgrade, though many were ultimately rejected due to non-recognition of Serbian-issued diplomas⁹. This episode illustrates SL's dual utility: as a stabilizer in crisis moments, it enables reluctant cooperation; yet, it simultaneously reinforces parallel structures, complicating Kosovo's quest for unified governance.

Ultimately, Srpska Lista's trajectory reveals the inherent contradictions of Serbia's influence in Kosovo: a mechanism that bolsters minority protections and facilitates selective integration, while entrenching autocratic control, corruption, and institutional duality. For policymakers, this duality demands a recalibrated approach, fostering genuine political pluralism among Kosovo Serbs through targeted incentives for independent candidates, stringent anti-corruption measures and renewed enforcement of Brussels commitments like the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities. Absent such interventions, SL will persist as a Trojan horse, perpetuating stasis and vulnerability to escalation in an already fragile regional order.

The Serbian Orthodox Church: Pillar of Trust Amidst Encroaching Tensions

In the fragile ecosystem of Kosovo-Serbia relations, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) stands as an enduring bastion of cultural and spiritual identity for Kosovo Serbs, commanding unparalleled trust amid a landscape devoid of dedicated representational mechanisms. Recent surveys underscore this primacy: in Serb-dominated enclaves south of the Ibar River, approximately 80 percent of respondents identify¹⁰ the SOC as their most trusted institution, while over half in the northern municipalities share this sentiment. This widespread confidence translates into a strong communal desire, echoed by more than eighty percent of Kosovo Serbs, for the Church to assume a formal role in the EU-facilitated Dialogue, advocating for their interests where no specialized entity exists beyond Serbia's nominal oversight. Such representation could bridge critical gaps in minority rights protection, yet its absence perpetuates a vacuum that exacerbates vulnerabilities and hinders reconciliation.

However, the SOC navigates a precarious web of suspicions from multiple quarters, underscoring the politicization of religious institutions in post-conflict settings. Belgrade

⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/kosovo-serbs-parallel-institutions-02d1cbfbfde4cd8cff2e4be704cfc99b>

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https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en

⁸ <https://kossev.info/rizvanoli-potvrđila-preuzet-regionalni-vodovod-u-zubinom-potoku/>

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<https://balkaninsight.com/2025/10/07/imminent-end-to-kosovo-deal-on-serbs-diplomas-a-fresh-blow-to-integration/>

¹⁰

<https://ngoaktiv.org/en/news/press-release-kosovo-serbs-lack-trust-in-institutions-dialogue-and-politicians-findings-of-the-trend-analysis-2024-report-presented/>

views the Church¹¹ with wariness, perceiving its occasional independence as a dilution of nationalist cohesion, while Pristina regards it as an extension of Serbian state influence, fuelling accusations of identity-based territorial narratives. This mutual distrust has intensified hostilities, particularly over the SOC's perceived wealth, extensive land holdings, and stewardship of UNESCO-designated World Heritage sites, such as the medieval monasteries of Visoki Dečani, Gračanica and the *Patriarchate of Peć*. Kosovo's authorities have repeatedly sought greater control¹² over these properties¹³, framing them as national assets rather than ecclesiastical patrimony, in contravention of constitutional safeguards and international agreements like the Ahtisaari Plan. These obligations mandate Pristina to protect SOC properties, yet recurrent encroachments reveal systemic enforcement failures, eroding institutional credibility and heightening communal insecurities.

Escalating tensions have manifested in a series of provocative incidents that challenge the SOC's autonomy and Kosovo's rule of law commitments. In November 2023, self-proclaimed Albanian Orthodox cleric Nikolla Xhufka¹⁴—claiming leadership of a nascent "Orthodox Church of Kosovo"—led followers into the disused 14th-century Church of the Holy Trinity in Rakinica village near Podujevo, conducting services adorned with Albanian nationalist symbols. This act, repeated in subsequent unauthorized entries (including a third condemned by the OSCE¹⁵ in July 2025), prompted a delayed police response despite multiple SOC appeals, raising alarms about impartiality in law enforcement. Xhufka's subsequent arrest and release, culminating in a December 2025 trial for inciting discord, highlighted the episode's broader implications. As Kosovo's commentator Veton Surroi aptly observed¹⁶, such intrusions constitute not only ecclesiastical sacrilege but also violations of Kosovo's constitutional framework under the Ahtisaari Package, which underpinned its independence declaration. The SOC's ensuing expressions of concern over police relations further illustrate a deteriorating security environment, where obligations to safeguard religious sites appear selectively honored.

Compounding these challenges, additional provocations have fueled perceptions of a coordinated assault on SOC heritage. In July 2025, renegade Catholic priest Fr. Fran Kolaj organized an unsanctioned service at the ruins of the medieval Holy Virgin of Hvosno

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<https://balkaninsight.com/2025/11/12/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-the-serbian-orthodox-church-in-kosovo-waits-out-the-storm-2/>

¹²

<https://balkaninsight.com/sr/2024/03/07/spc-saopstila-da-je-kosovske-institucije-nisu-kontaktirale-zbog-spora-oko-zemljista-manastira/>

¹³

<https://balkaninsight.com/2025/11/12/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-the-serbian-orthodox-church-in-kosovo-waits-out-the-storm-2/>

¹⁴ <https://kossev.info/en/uspon-nikole-dzufke-izmedju-oltara-zastava-i-gradonacelnika/>

¹⁵

<https://kossev.info/en/osce-expresses-concern-over-third-unauthorized-intrusion-into-serbian-orthodox-church-in-podujeve-podujevo-kosovo-online-news/>

¹⁶

<https://kossev.info/en/faith-flags-and-false-prophets-the-controversial-campaign-of-kosovo-s-archbishop-xhufka/>

monastery¹⁷, delivering speeches deemed inflammatory by the SOC for stoking intolerance toward Orthodox Serbs and Muslims alike. This incident, conducted without ecclesiastical consent and in breach of Kosovo's Law on Special Protective Zones, amplified fears of cultural appropriation. Similarly, a 2024 debate on Kosovo's prominent TV Koha channel featured academics asserting Albanian origins for SOC properties, igniting rumors of Pristina's intent to establish an ethnic Albanian Orthodox Church. Given that the overwhelming majority of Orthodox adherents in Kosovo are ethnic Serbs, such a move would flagrantly infringe on SOC rights, deepen estrangement between the Kosovo government and its Serb citizens, and risk direct confrontation with Belgrade, which has thus far maintained relative restraint on these matters.

These developments collectively signal a troubling trajectory: the erosion of trust in Kosovo's institutions among Serb communities, coupled with Belgrade's strategic reticence, leaves the SOC as a de facto surrogate for political advocacy. Yet, this role exposes the Church to further politicization, potentially undermining its spiritual mandate. For the EU and international stakeholders, this underscores the imperative to integrate the SOC more assertively into the Brussels Dialogue framework, perhaps through dedicated consultative mechanisms on cultural heritage and minority rights. Absent such inclusion, alongside rigorous enforcement of existing protections and anti-provocation measures, the current dynamics will perpetuate instability, forestall normalization and invite recurrent crises that jeopardize the broader European integration aspirations of both Kosovo and Serbia. Policymakers must recognize that safeguarding the SOC is not merely a religious imperative but a cornerstone of sustainable peace in the Balkans.

The Brussels and Ohrid Agreements: Unfulfilled Commitments and the Erosion of Institutional Stability

The foundational architecture of Kosovo's multiethnic governance, enshrined in the Ahtisaari Proposal and the Kosovo Constitution, explicitly safeguards minority rights to education and cultural preservation for ethnic Serbs and other communities. The 2013 Brussels Agreement extended these protections to encompass healthcare, establishing a framework for Serbia-funded services that transcend ethnic boundaries, benefiting not only Serbs but also other minorities and even some Albanians. This arrangement fosters an atypical dependency dynamic, deepening Belgrade's influence within Kosovo's sovereign space while resembling a de facto reparations mechanism, a perspective echoed by certain US diplomats. Central to this was Kosovo's own proposal for the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM), formalized in the Brussels accords as a vehicle for integrating Serbian-parallel institutions into Kosovo's legal order, thereby promoting functional coexistence and reducing „parallel structures,,.

As the most consequential accord since the Ahtisaari Plan, the Brussels Agreement delineated a clear pathway for Serb integration into Kosovo's institutions, emphasizing mutual obligations in security, judiciary, and local governance. Yet, over a decade later,

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<https://kossev.info/catholic-priest-holds-unauthorized-ceremony-at-serbian-monastery-site-sparks-sharp-reaction-from-the-soc/>

implementation remains stymied: Pristina has steadfastly resisted establishing the ASM, citing constitutional concerns, while Belgrade has fallen short on commitments such as dismantling parallel security apparatuses and recognizing Kosovo's judicial authority. The international community, including the EU and U.S., has proven ineffective in compelling compliance, relying on sporadic mediation rather than enforceable mechanisms. This impasse not only perpetuates institutional duality but also cedes moral and political leverage to Serbia, as the absence of the ASM undermines Kosovo's state-building efforts and alienates Serb communities, handing Belgrade a narrative of victimhood amid unfulfilled promises.

The fallout from this stagnation crystallized in 2022, when disinformation campaigns—amplified by ethnonationalist rhetoric, precipitated the mass resignation of approximately 570-600 Serb police officers and 150 judiciary personnel, including prosecutors and judges, from Kosovo's integrated institutions. This withdrawal, orchestrated through Belgrade's proxy, Srpska Lista, and endorsed by Serbian authorities, triggered a profound crisis in northern Kosovo and Serb-inhabited enclaves (known as "Srpske Sredine"). Far from prompting de-escalation, Pristina interpreted the vacuum as an opportunity to assert sovereignty, deploying predominantly Albanian special police units, many non-Serb speakers and steeped in post-war narratives of Serbian criminality, to fill the gap. This shift violated Kosovo's constitutional mandate for ethnically reflective policing in minority areas, resulting in a force of over 8,600-10,000 officers nationwide, with Serb representation plummeting to around 200 overall and a mere 64 in northern stations out of 339 as of late 2024.

The ensuing militarization evoked chilling parallels to Milošević-era oppression of Albanians in the 1990s, where citizens were treated as inherent adversaries. Reports¹⁸ document pervasive harassment: armed checkpoints, arbitrary arrests, and violent incidents, including the fatal shooting of an unarmed Serb. A 2024 NGO (Joint CSO report further exposes the "ethnization" of the Kosovo Police¹⁹) with over 300 officers displaying Albanian nationalist symbols, such as the "Punisher" skull in red-and-black Albanian flag colors, double-headed eagle gestures, and Greater Albania emblems, on uniforms and social media, amassing millions of views and normalizing ethnic dominance. Incidents of targeted harassment against Kosovo Serb women, often by suspected Albanian officers, compound this, fostering a climate of fear and eroding trust, as evidenced by community polls rating northern police credibility at a dismal 1.36 out of 5.

Remarkably, Belgrade refrained from overt retaliation, opting for diplomatic restraint amid expectations of escalation. The international response, however, was equally subdued-limited to condemnations without substantive diplomatic or policy levers to realign trajectories. Pristina's subsequent measures, including periodic closures of Serb institutions and the 2024 ban on the Serbian dinar, elicited outcry but minimal action until the EU imposed "measures" in 2023, effectively sanctions, that curtailed Kosovo's funding and diplomatic access. Even

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https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/415610_KOSOVO-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf

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<https://ngoaktiv.org/en/news/ethnization-of-kosovo-police-erosion-of-ahtisaaris-basis-of-a-civic-and-multiethnic-institution/>

these have failed to compel de-escalation, underscoring the EU's diminished mediation efficacy.

The 2023 Ohrid Agreement exemplified this institutional frailty: ostensibly a "legally binding" reaffirmation of Brussels commitments with an implementation annex, it was rebuffed by Serbia's refusal to sign, reducing it to a symbolic gesture. Mere months later, the September 2023 Banjska a botched armed assault by a paramilitary group of primarily local Kosovo Serbs, resulting in the death of police officer Afrim Bunjaku and three assailants laid bare the erosion of control among all stakeholders. Srpska Lista vice-president Milan Radoičić claimed sole responsibility, with President Vučić denying Serbian state involvement, yet Belgrade's perceived complicity bolstered by Radoičić's escape to Serbia—fuelled accusations of orchestration. The episode, involving around 80 armed militants barricaded in the yard of Banjska Monastery, remains shrouded in misinformation, raising unresolved questions about motives and Belgrade's influence: does it signal waning Serbian power or its entrenched depth?

Pristina's attempts to capitalize on Banjska for political gain have faltered, while the international community's ambiguity, attributing responsibility to Serbia without commensurate pressure has frustrated Kosovo's leadership and obscured US and EU stances. This opacity, coupled with ongoing trials of 45 indicted suspects²⁰ on terrorism charges as of 2024-2025, highlights a broader failure: without revitalized enforcement of Brussels and Ohrid, including the ASM's establishment and ethnically balanced policing, the region risks perpetual instability. Policymakers must prioritize assertive diplomacy leveraging sanctions, incentives, and independent monitoring to break the cycle of regression, foster genuine integration, and safeguard European security interests in the Balkans.

The International Community: Distractions, Distrust, and Strategic Misalignments

As underscored throughout this policy brief, the international community's response to the Kosovo-Serbia impasse has been conspicuously muted, overshadowed by global crises including the protracted war in Ukraine, the escalating conflict in Gaza, and the 2024 return of the Trump administration which, upon inauguration in January 2025, precipitated seismic shifts in transatlantic security dynamics and European policy priorities. This diffusion of attention has compounded institutional lethargy, enabling a stasis that neither advances normalization nor mitigates recurring tensions. The EU and U.S., once proactive architects of Balkan stability, now grapple with fragmented focus, allowing ethnonationalist agendas in Pristina and Belgrade to flourish unchecked.

Compounding this is a palpable lack of alignment in Western foreign policy toward Kosovo, where divergent approaches, ranging from Washington's occasional assertiveness to Brussels' more conciliatory diplomacy, have inadvertently empowered both governments to perpetuate conflict-nurturing policies. This inconsistency manifests in selective enforcement: while the EU imposed measures on Kosovo in 2023 for unilateral actions, it has hesitated to apply commensurate pressure on Serbia for non-compliance, fostering perceptions of favoritism

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<https://kossev.info/kosovo-online-najnovije-vesti-kallxo-izneo-detajle-optuznice-radoicic-i-grupa-hteli-da-sever-kosova-pripoje-srbiji/>

and eroding credibility. Such misalignments not only prolong the Dialogue's paralysis but also signal to regional actors that escalation carries minimal repercussions, thereby incentivizing brinkmanship over compromise.

Serbia's strategic pivot exemplifies this dynamic. Engaged in NATO's Partnership for Peace program and having exported over €800 million²¹ in arms to Ukraine since 2022, Belgrade has positioned itself as a tacit Western ally amid Russia's aggression despite refusing to impose sanctions on Moscow. This utility is amplified by the prospective Jadar lithium project, poised to become one of the world's largest mines and supply up to 90 percent of Europe's lithium needs, as proponents assert, thereby reducing dependency on Chinese imports and bolstering the continent's electric vehicle supply chain. From a realpolitik lens, these assets render Serbia indispensable to European energy security and industrial policy, far outstripping Kosovo's geopolitical weight. Pristina's diminishing leverage—once buoyed by nationalist fervor—further tilts the balance, as Kosovo offers limited strategic pull beyond its role in regional stability.

Paradoxically, Belgrade has acquiesced on several contentious fronts, including the phase-out of Serbian license plates, the closure of parallel post offices, and the 2024 dinar ban, eschewing belligerence in favor of calculated restraint. Yet, its endorsement of election boycotts via Srpska Lista has inflicted self-harm on Kosovo Serb communities, accelerating demographic decline with an estimated ten percent exodus over the past four years. This erosion renders the Serb presence akin to an vestigial appendage: functionally marginal yet symbolically potent, its attrition undermines long-term integration prospects without eliciting proportionate international outcry.

Deep-seated distrust toward Pristina's leadership, particularly Prime Minister Albin Kurti and his Vetëvendosje party, has further strained relations. International frustrations with Kurti's unilateral decisions such as the abrupt enforcement of border measures, the dinar prohibition, and aggressive policing in Serb-majority areas have mounted, as these actions have demonstrably harmed Kosovo Serb communities through economic isolation, heightened insecurity, and institutional exclusion. Such moves have repeatedly interfered with the Brussels Dialogue, derailing momentum and compelling the EU into perpetual crisis management. An EU official's quip that "misinformation in Kosovo comes from the government, while in the rest of the Balkans, it comes from Russia" encapsulates this cynicism, highlighting a regime perceived as prioritizing sovereignty assertions over collaborative reconciliation. Kurti's assertion that his government has "depoliticized the integration of Serbs in Kosovo, not through backroom deals with shady actors, but through law, order, professionalism, and meritocracy" rings hollow to many observers, who counter that it masks a coercive integration strategy eroding rule of law and benefiting no stakeholder. Meanwhile, President Aleksandar Vučić's domestic preoccupations have exacerbated regional inertia. Facing massive, year-long student-led protests since late 2024 demanding democratic reforms amid allegations of electoral fraud and repression, Vučić has redirected energies toward countering dissent and consolidating power, often through inflammatory rhetoric that

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<https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/fajnensel-tajms-otkriva-srbija-indirektno-izvezla-municiju-u-ukrajinu-za-800-miliona-evra/>

insults European officials and accuses them of interference. This culminated in Serbia's unprecedented boycott of the EU-Western Balkans Summit²² in Brussels on December 17, 2025, where Vučić declared no Serbian representative would attend, framing it as a defense of national interests amid stalled accession talks. This absence, the first in over a decade, underscored Belgrade's growing defiance, yet elicited only mild rebukes from the EU, further illustrating Western reactivity over proactivity.

This pervasive distrust and strategic discord across all parties in Pristina, Belgrade, and the international community engenders a debilitating lethargy, where meaningful progress remains elusive without synchronized effort. The EU and U.S. have defaulted to reactive measures, mirroring their handling of Serbia's protests: issuing condemnations but shying away from transformative interventions. To reverse this trajectory, Western actors must forge a unified, assertive strategy leveraging incentives like accelerated EU accession for compliance, while imposing calibrated sanctions for intransigence. Revitalizing the Dialogue demands not only enforcement of existing accords but also proactive mediation to rebuild trust, integrate minorities, and counter disinformation. Absent such recalibration, the Kosovo-Serbia nexus will persist as a tinderbox, imperiling Balkan stability and European security at a time when distractions abound but resolve is imperative.

Role of Media: Segregated Narratives, Hybrid Influence, and the Erosion of Pluralism

In the polarized media landscape of Kosovo, outlets operate along deeply segregated lines—not merely linguistic but narrative-driven—perpetuating and exacerbating communal divisions while serving as instruments of external and internal power dynamics. This bifurcation reflects the broader ethnonationalist fault lines, with Serbian-language media heavily influenced by Belgrade's hybrid strategies and Albanian-language counterparts reflecting Pristina's dominant yet contested discourse. Both ecosystems face distinct yet overlapping pressures: funding dependencies, political interference, and professional vulnerabilities that undermine journalistic independence and foster disinformation. The result is a fragmented public sphere that hinders reconciliation, entrenches mistrust, and amplifies conflict narratives, ultimately impeding the Brussels Dialogue's objectives of normalization and integration.

Serbia's media influence in Kosovo exemplifies a sophisticated hybrid approach, blending overt state funding, covert ownership, and narrative control to extend geopolitical leverage while bolstering its preferred political proxy, Srpska Lista (SL). Belgrade finances a constellation of outlets, including local broadcasters acquired through the state-owned MTS telecommunications company, which legally operates in Kosovo despite Pristina's repeated attempts to curtail it. MTS has strategically purchased stations such as TV Hertz and the pre-existing state-linked TV Most, enabling the dissemination of pro-government messaging under the guise of local programming. This ownership model amplifies Belgrade's directives across Serb-majority areas, framing SL as the sole legitimate representative of Kosovo Serbs while stigmatizing political opponents. A notorious case is the orchestrated media campaign

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against the late Oliver Ivanović, the assassinated Kosovo Serb moderate politician and vocal critic of Belgrade's influence; prior to his 2018 murder, Serbian state-controlled outlets and pro-regime tabloids portrayed him as a traitor, fueling division and suppressing pluralism. Such tactics echoing hybrid warfare elements extend to online platforms like „Kosovo Online,, a trilingual portal that positions itself as a credible, balanced news source but operates under evident soft-power control of the Serbian government, with ownership ties to figures linked to the Serbian Progressive Party. Pro-government channels from Belgrade, including Happy, Pink Informer TV, remain readily accessible in Kosovo via cable and online streams, dominating Serb viewership and reinforcing nationalist tropes. These outlets frequently disseminate hate speech, undermine Kosovo's statehood, insult political opponents in both Serbia and Kosovo, and serve as tools to silence critical voices within Serbia, particularly civil society organizations and independent media such as N1 and Nova S, through sustained malign campaigns, defamation, and accusations of foreign influence or disloyalty.

The 2020 ban on imported Serbian tabloids and newspapers has shifted reliance to television and digital media, further consolidating Belgrade's narrative hegemony. This hybrid toolkit also weaponizes media to undermine Kosovo's sovereignty, as seen in coordinated campaigns that vilify Pristina's policies and elevate SL's boycott strategies actions that have alienated Kosovo Serbs from local institutions without eliciting proportionate international rebuke.

Conversely, Albanian-language media in Kosovo exhibit a more dynamic, albeit polarized, character: while major outlets like Koha, Dukagjini, Kanal 10, Klan Kosova, and RTV 21 bolstered by substantial resources dominate the space, they often maintain a critical stance toward the government, with some providing robust scrutiny of Vetevendosje policies, others offering measured support and smaller portals reflecting a spectrum of views. This pluralism has proven resilient, withstanding attempts by Prime Minister Albin Kurti and his administration to silence or marginalize critical voices through boycotts of certain channels, accusations of bias and broader pressures efforts that have drawn international concern but have not fully subdued the sector, as media resistance and public backlash have limited their impact. The broader mediasphere comprises numerous small portals staffed by young, underpaid journalists who lack the depth to unpack nuanced events, leading to occasional echo-chamber reporting that prioritizes ethnonationalist solidarity over balanced inquiry. Reciprocity is rare: while independent Serbian media like Kossev translate Albanian content for Serb audiences, Albanian outlets seldom extend similar courtesies, perpetuating informational silos. Pristina's officials exacerbate this by refusing Serbian-language interviews, ignoring queries in Serbian, and failing to provide translations, effectively sidelining Serb journalists and signalling disdain for minority communities.

Independent Serbian-language media such as Alternativna, Kossev, Radio Gorazdevac and Radio Kontakt Plus represent a vital counterweight, operating with lean newsrooms to deliver community-focused, impartial reporting. Yet, their sustainability is precarious: barred from viable advertising revenue due to limited reach and ethnic market divides, they rely on international donors. The February 2025 withdrawal of USAID funding has exacerbated a broader donor retreat, leaving these outlets vulnerable to co-optation or closure. Compounding this, they endure attacks from both sides: Pristina's online harassment and media vilification, often amplified by Albanian outlets targeting Serb NGOs; and Belgrade's

proxies, including SL's exclusion of independent journalists from press events (favoring only Kosovo Online and TV Most) and refusal to engage. Personal assaults on Serb journalists, ranging from threats to physical intimidation are alarmingly common yet underreported in Albanian media or journalism associations, highlighting a double standard that erodes press freedom across the board.

This segregated media ecosystem, plagued by low wages, inexperience, and political pressures, fosters a cultural divide with only a narrow corridor for open discourse, ironically, potentially more robust among Kosovo's independent Serb outlets than in Serbia proper, where media capture is near-total. Serbia's hybrid media tactics, by privileging SL and demonizing rivals like Ivanović, not only stifle pluralism but also perpetuate a cycle of dependency and resentment among Kosovo Serbs. For the international community, this underscores an urgent policy imperative: bolstering independent media through diversified funding, enforcing anti-disinformation measures within the Brussels framework, and conditioning EU accession support on media reforms. Without targeted interventions to bridge these narrative chasms such as mandatory multilingual access for officials and cross-community journalism initiatives the media's role will continue to sabotage reconciliation, entrenching instability and forestalling a normalized Kosovo-Serbia relationship essential to Balkan security.

Political Crises: Parallel Instabilities Undermining Normalization Prospects

Amid the entrenched Kosovo-Serbia impasse, both Pristina and Belgrade are ensnared in deepening political crises that erode governance capacity, alienate constituencies, and diminish incentives for compromise within the EU-facilitated Dialogue. These parallel upheavals characterized by institutional paralysis, leadership entrenchment, and demographic disengagement—not only perpetuate regional volatility but also cede ground to ethnonationalist agendas, forestalling sustainable reconciliation and European integration. A recalibrated international strategy, emphasizing conditionality and mediation, is essential to disrupt this cycle and restore momentum toward functional coexistence.

In Kosovo, nearly a year of internal political turmoil precipitated by Vetevendosje's intransigence and the opposition's failure to coalesce around viable compromises culminated in snap general elections in the last week of December 2025. Prime Minister Albin Kurti's movement secured a decisive victory, garnering approximately 51 percent of the vote and reinforcing its dominance. This outcome, while affirming Kurti's populist appeal, masks underlying fragilities: the inability to form a stable government for much of the preceding period has triggered EU fund withholdings and stalled U.S.-led preferential talks, particularly following escalations targeting Kosovo Serb communities. Vetëvendosje's electoral setbacks in October 2025 local polls—retaining control only of South Mitrovica among major municipalities while suffering humiliating defeats in Pristina and Prizren—further exposed its vulnerabilities. Looking ahead, the absence of cross-party consensus in electing a new President in March or April 2026 risks triggering yet another round of early elections, prolonging the crisis and exacerbating institutional dysfunction.

Kurti's isolation extends beyond domestic arenas, alienating regional and international allies through an ambitious "Father of the Nation" agenda aimed at unifying Albanian populations across Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro under Vetëvendosje-affiliated banners. This pan-Albanian strategy has backfired, provoking accusations of interference and fostering unlikely alignments—such as Albania's closer ties to Serbia via the now-defunct Open Balkan initiative, which sought to establish a mini-economic zone with North Macedonia. Success has been limited to North Macedonia, where it has inflamed intra-governmental tensions among ethnic Albanians. Domestically, this vision necessitated "conquering the north" of Kosovo, prioritizing assertive control over Serb-majority areas to neutralize Srpska Lista's influence and preclude the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM). Yet, this high-stakes gamble—marked by unilateral measures that harmed Kosovo Serb communities and disrupted the Dialogue—has incurred substantial costs: strained Western relations, economic isolation, and a return to institutional stasis, with Serb representatives reclaiming positions post-October 2025. In essence, Kurti's northern offensive has yielded pyrrhic gains, undermining Kosovo's broader stability and diplomatic standing.

Serbia, meanwhile, confronts its most formidable domestic challenge in over a decade, with year-long student protests since late 2024 destabilizing President Aleksandar Vučić's regime and diverting focus from external priorities like Kosovo. These demonstrations demanding electoral reforms, anti-corruption measures, and democratic accountability have compelled the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to prioritize power preservation over regional adventurism, even as some protesters invoke revanchist sentiments toward Kosovo. Vučić's disengagement from Kosovo affairs, despite rhetorical support, reflects this calculus: maintaining internal control trumps escalating commitments abroad. While public backing for aiding Kosovo Serbs persists, fiscal strains amid protests raise questions about sustained funding for parallel institutions. This strategic retreat—evident in concessions on issues like license plates and the dinar ban—signals a pragmatic deprioritization, potentially paving the way for future concessions, though Vučić is unlikely to formally relinquish claims.

These converging crises leave Kosovo Serbs in limbo: economically and politically tethered to Belgrade yet yearning for autonomous representation within Kosovo's framework. The fallout extends to Kosovo Albanians, whose governance reforms have stalled amid a fixation on coercive northern integration—a policy that has manifestly failed, as evidenced by plummeting voter turnout (48 percent in October 2025 local elections, dipping to 32 percent in runoffs, and hovering at 40-46 percent in February 2025 polls). This widespread apathy underscores elite accountability deficits, with the political class broadly indicted for prioritizing confrontation over progress. The December 2025 elections, while redrawing alliances, risk reverting to chaos absent inclusive governance, particularly with Srpska Lista's monolithic return amplifying Belgrade's proxy influence.

Ultimately, these intertwined crises highlight a critical juncture for international stakeholders: the EU and U.S. must transcend reactive diplomacy, imposing targeted incentives and sanctions to compel compromise, such as ASM implementation and minority protections while fostering cross-ethnic coalitions. Without such intervention, the current trajectory will entrench disengagement, empower extremists, and jeopardize the Balkans' fragile peace,

underscoring the imperative for a proactive, unified Western approach to salvage the normalization process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Serbia's "Serbian World" narrative manifest in its Kosovo influence through proxies like Srpska Lista, cultural anchors like the SOC, and hybrid media tactics, extends beyond borders as a strategic bid for regional primacy. Attempts to lead the WB economically via sided Open Balkan and politically through alliances with Albania, support for Republika Srpska in BiH and pro-Serbian parties in Montenegro, underscore Belgrade's aspirations, yet these have yielded mixed results amid EU accession disparities and internal crises. While Montenegro and Albania surge toward membership (targeting 2026-2027 closures), Serbia's democratic backsliding and Kosovo's unilateralism perpetuate a managed conflict that benefits neither side.

This trajectory risks Balkan fragmentation, imperiling European security amid global distractions. Policymakers must prioritize: (a) revitalizing the Brussels Dialogue with enforceable timelines for ASM implementation and minority protections; (b) countering hybrid influences through media pluralism funding and anti-corruption initiatives; (c) aligning WB incentives with EU reforms, leveraging Serbia's strategic assets (e.g., lithium, NATO ties) for compliance; and (d) integrating regional stakeholders, including the SOC, into confidence-building mechanisms. A unified, assertive Western approach, beyond reactive sanctions, can transform "Serbian World" from a divisive trope into a foundation for inclusive stability, advancing the WB's shared European future. Without such recalibration, the "Serbian World" will remain less a vehicle for regional cooperation than a mechanism of managed instability, one that undermines democratic consolidation, fragments the Western Balkans, and weakens the credibility of the European project itself.