

From Washington to Brussels

The Shadow Role of US Policy in Shaping EU-Led Negotiations Between
Kosovo and Serbia (2012-2013)

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Programme

MSc in American Studies: Politics, Strategy and Economics

Course

US Policies in the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean & the Middle East

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Submission date

30 June 2025

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in American Studies: Politics, Strategy and Economics.

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the understated yet critical influence of U.S. policy in shaping EU-mediated negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia from 2012 to 2013, particularly focusing on the Brussels Agreement. While publicly represented as an impartial mediator, the European Union's strategic autonomy in the mediation process was significantly influenced by U.S. diplomatic and strategic involvement. Utilizing historical and political context, the study examines how the EU sought regional stability through incremental cooperation, maintaining a neutral stance by converting politically sensitive disputes into technical dialogues. Concurrently, behind-the-scenes American diplomacy applied significant strategic pressure and bilateral influence to drive the negotiations toward resolution, aligning closely with broader U.S. interests of regional stability, NATO integration, and countering external influences, notably from Russia. The 2013 Brussels Agreement marked a diplomatic milestone, creating structures to integrate Serb-majority municipalities within Kosovo's legal framework. However, ambiguities in the agreement's implementation underscore the EU's limitations due to internal divisions and reliance on U.S. diplomatic assurances and strategic interventions. The interplay between overt EU mediation and covert U.S. influence reveals a hybrid diplomatic model combining European institutional legitimacy with American strategic leverage. Local political reactions to the negotiations varied significantly, highlighting contrasting perceptions of the EU and the U.S., and questioning the long-term legitimacy and sustainability of externally driven elite-focused peace processes. Ultimately, the study illustrates the complexities of transatlantic diplomatic cooperation, challenges the perceived strategic autonomy of the EU in conflict mediation, and offers critical insights into the broader implications for future EU-led peace initiatives in geopolitically sensitive regions.

Table of Contents

Headings link to their pages. Page numbers are populated automatically on render.

Δήλωση αποποίησης ευθύνης	2
Disclaimer	2
Abstract	3
Table of Contents	4
Introduction	6
Historical Background of the Kosovo-Serbia Conflict	7
The EU's Role in the Brussels Dialogue (2012-2013)	11
The Shadow Role of the United States	13
Personal and Private Diplomacy in the Shadow Role	15
A Recalibrated U.S. Posture After 2017	16
Instruments of US Influence	17
Capacity Building as a Long-Term Instrument of Influence	19
Reactions from Local and Regional Actors	20
Kosovo's Government: Balancing US Loyalty and EU Integration	20
Serbia's Political Discourse: Nationalist Rhetoric vs. EU Accession Ambitions	21
Civil Society and Public Perception in Kosovo and Serbia	22
Disparities in Local Reception of EU vs. US Influence	23
Strategic Convergence and Transatlantic Cooperation	24
Shared US-EU Objectives in Stabilizing the Western Balkans	24
Division of Labor in Diplomacy: The EU as the Face, US as the Force	25

Role of the High Representative in Balancing US Expectations 26

Implications for EU’s Foreign Policy Independence 27

The Brussels Agreement: Analyzing the Outcome 28

Key Provisions and Their Implementation Challenges 29

The 2015 and 2023 Follow-On Packages: Mogherini and the Land-Swap Precedent Problem . . . 30

Local Political Consequences in Serbia and Kosovo 30

Role of the US in Shaping the Content and Momentum of the Agreement 31

Comparison Between EU and US Strategic Narratives Post-Agreement 31

Broader Implications for Conflict Mediation and International Order 33

Redefining Sovereignty and Neutrality in International Mediation 33

Lessons for Future EU-Led Negotiations (e.g., Ukraine, Bosnia) 34

US Soft Power and Its Long-Term Presence in Europe’s Backyard 35

The Myth of EU Strategic Autonomy in Fragile States 35

Greece: The Most Engaged Non-Recogniser 36

Current Domestic Pressures 38

Conclusion 38

Appendix: Accompanying Presentation 40

References 41

Introduction

The complex political relationship between Kosovo and Serbia has historically been marked by profound ethnic tensions and competing claims of sovereignty. Following Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's statehood escalated diplomatic tensions and complicated regional stability. This situation presented significant challenges and opportunities for international mediation, particularly by the European Union, which aimed to foster stability and integration within the Western Balkans through diplomatic means.

From 2012 to 2013, the EU intensified its mediation efforts under the leadership of High Representative Catherine Ashton, aiming to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia through structured dialogues culminating in the landmark Brussels Agreement. While the EU publicly adopted a neutral and technocratic stance, this thesis highlights the crucial yet less visible role of the United States in influencing the trajectory and outcomes of these negotiations. American diplomatic efforts provided essential support and strategic direction, leveraging bilateral channels and broader geopolitical objectives, including regional stability, NATO expansion, and containment of external powers such as Russia.

This introduction outlines the historical context, establishes the critical roles played by both EU and U.S. actors, and sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of the dynamics and implications of transatlantic diplomatic collaboration. The study contributes to understanding the nature of international mediation, sovereignty debates, and the limitations of diplomatic autonomy in contemporary geopolitics.

Historical Background of the Kosovo-Serbia Conflict

The Kosovo Serbia 2012-2013 negotiations mediated through the European Union had been a watershed in Western Balkans' post-conflict reconciliation, integration, and stabilization. One of the Yugoslav Wars, which was a series of battles fought across Yugoslavia's dissolution in the 1990s, was the war between Kosovo and Serbia. Following the death of Josip Broz Tito, nationalist movements started to unravel Yugoslavia as constitutional republics in Yugoslavia began to pursue independence. The second was over Kosovo, an autonomous province of Serbia, where the ethnic majority is Albanians. During the late 1990s, violence on a full scale between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians started, resulting in the Kosovo War (1998-1999). Serbian security forces, under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević, launched a brutal crackdown on the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which sought independence (Woehrel, 2008). It was so brutal that war contained such atrocities as ethnic cleansing and massive civilian population displacement, and therefore international intervention was necessary. From 1999 onward, Kosovo's main problem remained a status question created by conflict and administered through international authority rather than a negotiated constitutional settlement. This generated a dual reality: locally elected institutions operated under international tutelage, while recognition of statehood remained partial and contested. The Independent International Commission on Kosovo emphasized that the governance framework was *sui generis*, with legitimacy built on humanitarian necessity and interim arrangements rather than mutual consent (Independent International Commission on Kosovo [IICK], 2000). In law and diplomacy, this made Kosovo less a conventional secession and more a post-conflict state-building project, producing enduring ambiguity that later EU-led talks tried to manage (Joyner, 2002; Warbrick, 2008).

The antecedents of that ambiguity lie in Kosovo 1974. Under the 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Kosovo gained far-reaching autonomy inside Serbia: its own Assembly and Constitutional framework, courts, administration, official use of Albanian alongside Serbian, and, crucially, representation in the collective federal Presidency. Provincial authorities participated in federal decision-making and, on matters affecting their status, could not be overruled easily, which made Kosovo's position quasi-republican in practice even though it did not hold formal republican status (Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [SFRY], 1974; IICK, 2000). This design aimed to accommodate ethnic pluralism, but it also multiplied veto points and left the system vulnerable to crisis and nationalist mobilization after Tito's death in 1980 (Weller, 2009).

In March 1999, NATO launched an intervention against rising violence and humanitarian issues before obtaining UN Security Council authorization. Serbian forces withdrew from Kosovo territory during 78 days of Operation Allied Force bombings, which NATO executed. Kosovo's autonomy was not abolished in 1979; the decisive reversal occurred in March 1989, when Serbia amended its constitution to recentralize key competencies over Kosovo. Belgrade re-assumed direct control of policing, prosecutions, and much of the administration; the Kosovo Assembly was pressed to accept these changes amid heavy security deployments. By 1990, the Assembly had been dissolved, Albanian-language media and

elements of the University of Pristina were curtailed, and tens of thousands of Albanians were dismissed from state employment. In response, Kosovo Albanian leaders developed parallel institutions, education, health, and political representation under Ibrahim Rugova, marking a shift from autonomy to a contested internal sovereignty (IICK, 2000; Weller, 2009). This 1989 rollback became the bridge to the 1998-1999 war. As repression escalated, the KLA took up arms; the Rambouillet talks failed to produce consent; and on 24 March 1999, NATO started Operation Allied Force, a 78-day air campaign that ended on 10 June 1999. The legal debate framed the intervention as a “hard case”: politically and morally justified to halt atrocities, but controversial in positive law due to the absence of an explicit Security Council mandate (Joyner, 2002; Simma, 1999). The humanitarian cost was enormous, hundreds of thousands displaced and widespread destruction, until Serbian/Yugoslav forces withdrew and international security forces entered (IICK, 2000).

After the conflict ended, the UN established a single mission as an interim administration in Kosovo through Resolution 1244, while KFOR was deployed under US command. Despite saving Serbia's official sovereignty in paper form, the responsible authority of civil administration was given to international organizations (Morelli, 2018). UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (10 June 1999) established one UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and an international security presence (KFOR) under unified command with substantial NATO participation (not “under U.S. command” as a legal designation). 1244 balanced two principles: it affirmed FRY/Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and simultaneously mandated “substantial autonomy and meaningful self-administration” for Kosovo under an interim international administration and a political process toward a status settlement (United Nations Security Council, 1999). UNMIK governed through four pillars, (i) civil administration (UN), (ii) humanitarian affairs (UNHCR), (iii) democratization and institution-building (OSCE), and (iv) reconstruction (EU), overseeing KLA demilitarization, the return of refugees, and the creation of Provisional Institutions of Self-Government (PISG). After 2008, EULEX supported rule-of-law functions, reflecting the EU's growing operational role within the 1244 architecture (de Wet, 2009). Since the international administration took over Kosovo during this period, local political leaders and their institutions have worked consistently towards complete independence. The period established the foundation which led Kosovo toward transitioning from international oversight to governing autonomously. Under United Nations administration foundations were established that let local actors construct institutions which mirrored their goals for complete sovereign power. In practice, UNMIK's gradual transfer of competencies, local government, elections, policing under supervision, justice sector reforms, constructed a path-dependent institutional landscape. Kosovo's authorities gained capacity and popular legitimacy inside this framework, while Serbia retained a legal-political claim anchored in 1244. This asymmetric consolidation explains why, even before 2008, Pristina and Belgrade interpreted the same legal instruments through incompatible narratives: for Kosovo, 1244 was a bridge to status; for Serbia, it was a ceiling (de Wet, 2009; IICK, 2000).

On February 17, 2008, Kosovo was independent from Serbia's political control. From the outset, the United States adopted a clear position: Kosovo's status process had been exhausted and supervised independence was the most realistic and stabilizing outcome after

a decade of international administration. Washington recognized the Republic of Kosovo on 18 February 2008, one day after the declaration, framing recognition as consistent with regional stability and with the Ahtisaari blueprint that embedded robust minority protections, decentralization, and international oversight (Warbrick, 2008; Weller, 2009). In practice, U.S. recognition operated on both symbolic and material planes. Symbolically, it signaled that the international community's intervention, trusteeship, and state-building effort had a political terminus that did not require Belgrade's consent once negotiations had failed. Materially, it unlocked normal diplomatic relations, encouraged early recognitions by key allies, and helped pave the way for entry into the IMF and World Bank in 2009, which were critical for macroeconomic stabilization and donor coordination (Vidmar, 2009; Weller, 2009).

Legally, the U.S. stance anticipated the ICJ's 2010 advisory opinion, which, while carefully narrow, found that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate international law. Although the ICJ did not confer a right to secession or mandate recognition, its reasoning removed a major legal obstacle to the policy that Washington and many EU states had already pursued. The United States consistently located its policy within the UNSCR 1244 architecture: 1244 affirmed FRY/Serbia's sovereignty in form, but it also created UNMIK/KFOR and mandated a political process toward Kosovo's self-government and future status (United Nations Security Council, 1999; de Wet, 2009). Once the Vienna talks failed and the Security Council could not adopt a status resolution, the Ahtisaari plan provided a detailed governance template; U.S. recognition thus crowned a path from humanitarian catastrophe → NATO intervention → international administration → failed status talks, rather than inaugurating it (Ahtisaari, 2007; Warbrick, 2008; Weller, 2009).

Finally, U.S. recognition was conditioned on normative guardrails. Washington's early statements stressed implementation of Ahtisaari-style safeguards: entrenched community rights; special protective zones for Serbian Orthodox heritage; and multi-ethnic policing and judiciary subject to international monitoring. This is important analytically: the U.S. did not endorse a thin notion of sovereignty; it endorsed a thick, monitored sovereignty whose durability depended on minority protection and continued external guarantees, features that later became leverage points in the EU-led dialogue (Warbrick, 2008; Weller, 2009).

The political statement gained validation through recognition from Britain, Germany, France, and America. The declaration received US approval for Kosovo's strategic positioning and validation of Kosovo's population's right to decide their destiny (Gashi & Kelmendi, 2023). The EU held multiple viewpoints on the issue because several internal governments operated in opposing directions. Most European states recognized Kosovo, but Spain, Greece, and Slovakia headed the list of exceptions to this decision (Bieber, 2015). Serbia completely denied the legitimacy of the declaration by stating that Kosovo lay outside its sovereign territory. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) rendered its decision in 2010 by ruling that Kosovar independence did not breach international law after Serbia filed a case in 2008 with Russia and China standing alongside Serbia (Bozhilova, 2019). Although Kosovo obtained favorable legal conclusions from ICJ, it failed to achieve broader international recognition of its status. The Finnish negotiator was Martti Ahtisaari, appointed UN Special Envoy to lead final-status talks. His Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status

Settlement (2007) recommended supervised independence with: (a) deep decentralization, an Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities, enhanced local competencies in education, health, and culture, and municipal ties with Serbia where appropriate; (b) minority guarantees, constitutionally entrenched representation, double-majority rules for sensitive legislation, language rights, and special protective zones around Serbian Orthodox religious and cultural sites; (c) security and justice, a multi-ethnic police and judiciary with robust oversight; and (d) international supervision through an International Civilian Office/EU Special Representative to monitor compliance. When the Security Council could not adopt the plan, Kosovo's Assembly took a unilateral decision to declare independence on 17 February 2008, explicitly committing to the Ahtisaari safeguards. In 2010, the ICJ Advisory Opinion concluded that the declaration did not violate international law, a narrow finding that addressed the legality of the act (and its compatibility with 1244) but did not resolve recognition or membership questions (Ahtisaari, 2007; Warbrick, 2008; International Court of Justice, 2010; Weller, 2009).

Kosovo's development of foreign relations and membership of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund started in 2008 with the direct support of the United States. Washington supported Kosovo in multiple ways despite its backing for the state-building process (Gashi & Kelmendi, 2023). The European Union demanded Kosovo and Serbia commence negotiations since both entities sought EU membership and regional peace. NATO member states consistently maintained different positions about Kosovo's official recognition, which amounted to strenuous diplomatic pressure from the United States against European unity regarding Kosovo's status. Resolution 1244's negotiation mandate, to pursue "substantial autonomy" through a political process, evolved from UN-led "standards before status" to EU-facilitated normalization after 2008. The aim was to secure the best possible bilateral arrangements on the ground, police and judiciary integration, municipal competencies in the north, elections and civil registries, energy and telecommunications, so that practical life could stabilize despite the unresolved sovereignty dispute. This is the landscape inherited by the 2012-2013 Brussels Dialogue (United Nations Security Council, 1999; de Wet, 2009; Weller, 2009).

The EU's Role in the Brussels Dialogue (2012-2013)

The Brussels Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, led by the European Union since 2011 and intensified in 2012-2013, was an unprecedented effort to make progress on the frozen bilateral relations between these two countries. The dialogue intended to normalize relations between the two parties, which was achieved when Catherine Ashton was appointed EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Ashton's leadership was a significant institutional commitment by the EU to tackle one of Europe's most intractable post-conflict disputes. The timing was also one of the growing union's ambitions to become a strategic and autonomous foreign policy actor. In 2011, Ashton was formally mandated by the European Council as a facilitator of talks between Belgrade and Pristina, as well as a high-level mediator in the context of the union facilitated Dialogue regarding the normalization of relations (Amadio Viceré, 2020). The European bloc wanted to strengthen its role as a peace broker in its immediate neighborhood, and it was not just a diplomatic effort.

The dialogue was staged to build trust incrementally and deal with politically sensitive issues. It was conducted in a series of high-level meetings in Brussels under Ashton's direct supervision with Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dačić and Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi. Following these initial rounds of talks, there was a series of multiple technical and political rounds of dialogue on civil registry, freedom of movement, telecommunications, and the most important issue of governing Serb majority municipalities in northern Kosovo (Bieber, 2015). The goal was not to formally recognize Serbia as Kosovo but to establish practical cooperation and lower tensions that could undermine regional stability and the EU integration process. Serbia and Kosovo were provided with a powerful incentive: Serbia with a promise of progress in European community accession negotiations and Kosovo with the possibility of further recognition and integration into European and international institutions (Hajrullahu, 2019). The structured dialogue was intended to foster cooperation and reduce tensions, leading to greater regional stability and integration.

The EU was cautious to project itself as an impartial mediator who wanted to resolve the conflict throughout the process. It polarized the dispute, and national sovereignty was very sensitive in both, and above all, it was necessary to position oneself as neutral. It presented itself to the world as a technocratic and rule-based body, practically normalizing relations without becoming embroiled in status recognition, which was still disputed. To gain the trust of both sides and keep the process legitimate, the EU did not press too hard politically. According to Gashi and Musliu (2017), the union's strategy was to mediate through recontextualization, refracting contentious political claims into bureaucratic or technical language to reach a compromise. For example, instead of solving the problem of recognition, the European Community chose to include Kosovo Serb institutions in the Kosovo legal framework to allow two interpretations of sovereignty to exist in parallel.

While the EU's mediation was noteworthy, it was also limited. The first formal agreement between Kosovo and Serbia since Kosovo declared independence in 2008 was the Brussels Agreement of April 2013, but it did not solve many issues. It set up the integration of the Serbian police and judiciary into Kosovo's system and created the Association/Community of

Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo. However, implementation was behind in many areas, and political opposition in both Serbia and Kosovo blocked the process. Furthermore, the union's internal division on Kosovo's status made it difficult to present a united front (Bieber & Visoka, 2018). In addition, Bieber and Visoka (2018) assert that the EU foreign policy was limited in coherence and credibility because, as of 2012, five EU member states, Spain, Slovakia, Greece, Romania, and Cyprus, did not recognize Kosovo's independence.

Her diplomatic engagement and capacity to bring both sides to the table were widely praised for her role as Catherine Ashton. However, some critics also noted that the technically successful dialogue was not transparent and inclusive regarding civil society and opposition parties. The process was centralized and elite-driven; hence, it was queried in terms of democratic legitimacy and long-term sustainability (Beysoylu, 2020). Furthermore, the union's emphasis on stability and regional integration typically prevailed over deeper political reconciliation, leading to what some analysts have dubbed a 'thin peace,' a frozen conflict instead of being resolved (Gashi & Musliu, 2017). The Brussels Dialogue was successful in terms of technicalities, but its limitations show the challenges for genuine and lasting peace.

Additionally, the geopolitical context in which the EU operated was also a case of limitation. While the union was the official mediator, external actors, namely the United States, implicitly limited the union's autonomy. Not officially part of the Brussels Dialogue, American diplomats nonetheless sustained close bilateral relations with Kosovo and Serbia and played an important role in shaping the strategic environment in which negotiations took place. The dynamic complicated the union's attempts to take full ownership of the mediation process and the extent of its strategic autonomy (Amadio Viceré, 2020). Thus, the union's role in the Brussels Dialogue between 2012 and 2013 was one of diplomatic innovation and structural limitations combined. Catherine Ashton led the European bloc, which secured a landmark agreement that moved regional cooperation and provided a way forward towards European integration. However, it also showed the limits of European Bloc diplomacy in the face of internal divisions and external influence. By assuming an impartial intermediary role and adopting a technocratic approach, the community could steer clear of some of the most politically charged questions, but one that curtailed its capability to bring together an all-embracing and stable solution (Amadio Viceré, 2020). However, as the union's mediation in the Brussels Dialogue demonstrated, the EU is also potentially an actual peacemaker at the regional level, along with the built-in challenges in resolving sovereignty conflicts in a multipolar diplomatic system.

Between 2012 and 2023, the Dialogue matured from technocratic fixes into a hybrid regime of sectoral integration and political commitments, tied to EU accession for Serbia and to the SAA/visa liberalization track for Kosovo. The architecture combined external incentives with institutional engineering designed to tame the most sensitive fault lines in northern Kosovo. The 2013 Brussels Agreement dismantled Serbian "parallel" security structures, integrated police and judiciary under Kosovo's legal order, and envisaged an Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) with non-executive, coordinating competences in education, health, and local economic development, explicitly

within Kosovo law and guided by the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Bieber, 2015). Follow-on arrangements (2015) addressed telecoms (country code +383), energy unbundling, Mitrovica bridge/barricade management, and a justice agreement installing a Mitrovica Court of Appeals department.

Conditionality created mutual vulnerability and therefore mutual leverage. Belgrade needed visible progress to keep chapters open; Pristina needed progress to move its European track. Each side learned to weaponize interdependence, boycotting municipal elections or slow-rolling energy unbundling on one side; launching derecognition campaigns or obstructing ASM implementation on the other (Gashi & Musliu, 2017). The 2023 “Agreement on the Path to Normalization” and its Ohrid Annex attempted a reset: the parties committed to de facto relations, reciprocal recognition of documents and symbols, and, crucially, that “neither party will block or hinder the other’s progress on its respective path to the EU.” In exchange, Kosovo pledged to operationalize self-management for Serb communities in line with its constitutional order (i.e., the ASM without executive powers), and Serbia pledged not to obstruct Kosovo’s international engagement. The design choice is clear: constitutionalize co-dependence so that obstruction incurs real European costs (Bieber, 2015; Weller, 2009).

Scholarly assessments converge on a mixed verdict. Successes include improved day-to-day governance through police/judiciary integration and a grammar for settling technical disputes; failures revolve around implementation gaps, especially the missing ASM statute, which became a proxy for larger sovereignty anxieties. The Dialogue’s effectiveness thus hinges less on inventing new principles than on enforcing existing ones through synchronized incentives and reversible penalties for breaches. In this sense, the 2012-2023 period did not “solve” recognition; it codified a workable coexistence that can, over time, make formal recognition less costly and more likely (Bieber, 2015; Gashi & Musliu, 2017; Weller, 2009).

The Shadow Role of the United States

The Brussels Dialogue, which Kosovo and Serbia conducted under European Union leadership, nonetheless maintained the United States as the guiding force behind negotiating both countries’ directions. Washington focused on three main goals throughout the Balkan area: achieving stability and increasing NATO presence alongside diminishing Russian influence (Bozhilova, 2019). The United States regarded the Balkans region as its primary defense perimeter for Euro-Atlantic security, first during the Kosovo intervention of the 1990s and then within its diplomatic endeavors following 2008. Stability in the Western Balkans, linked with Western political and security institutions, represented the primary US strategic interest, which could be accomplished by blocking Russian and other external powers from gaining influence in Europe’s southeastern regions.

US policy toward Kosovo and Serbia developed on the foundation of broader strategic planning after 2008. The United States immediately declared support for independent Kosovo after its 2008 declaration, which emphasized its dedication to Kosovo’s state sovereignty and

integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions (Morelli, 2018). The United States showed concern about destabilizing the region because Serbia continued to deny Kosovo's independence status and because the Serbian political establishment retained pro-Russian preferences. The United States sought to advance Kosovo-Serbia normalization because the effort formed part of a broader American initiative to embed Balkan states within Western international systems.

US diplomats assisted the European Union's public handling of the Brussels Dialogue by discreetly maintaining bilateral support for Serbia and Kosovo to stay involved in the dialogue process. The United States successfully gained commitment and flexible cooperation from American parties through diplomatic force and beneficial interests. The United States controlled relations with Serbia and Kosovo through bilateral channels so they could exert pressure at specific moments. US officials stated that international institutions, alongside global recognition, would only open to Serbia when Kosovo reached meaningful progress in dialogue with Serbia (Gashi & Kelmendi, 2023). Based on American diplomats in Serbia, it is believed that normalization with Kosovo would create opportunities for better Western relations, economic ties, and security agreements.

The Brussels process brought together US officials to work informally with EU mediators as part of its structure. The EU attempted to show neutrality regarding Balkans affairs, but central EU states and their foreign policy units completely agreed with United States preferences in this area (Amadio Viceré, 2020). As Foreign Affairs and Security Policy High Representative, Catherine Ashton maintained frequent diplomatic contact with American officials to address important matters, including the Serb Municipal Association organization and mutual recognition protocols (Krasniqi, 2014). Washington actively influenced the bargaining setting by sending notices about which acceptable concessions and deal breakers were suitable for both political entities.

Multiple critical stages of the dialogue saw the United States intervene and help influence these important points. American diplomats pressured the Kosovar leadership to accept specific local autonomous powers that offered broad self-governance capabilities without constituting ethnic federalism (Bieber, 2015) during talks regarding the northern Kosovo administration. The United States approached Serbia in parallel by working with them to adopt practical joint initiatives even though Serbia refused to make full recognition a necessity beforehand. Through this precise mix of negotiations, Serbia became ready to reach its historic breakthrough in the 2013 Brussels Agreement. Kosovo showed no willingness to pursue telecommunications and energy compromise ideas. Kosovo faced potential harm to its long-term international integration plans if it remained uncooperative. Through diplomatic means, the United States conveyed how this intransigence threatened EU membership and specialized UN agency access (Rahmani et al., 2023). US authorities declared their continued backing of Serbia's EU integration process while stipulating that Serbian participation in dialogue with Kosovo would be necessary for EU membership. This move strengthened incentives for diplomats to confront nationalist opposition targeting Prime Minister Dačić's talks.

American influence functioned discreetly to maintain dialogue progress when negotiations approached collapse. The institution performed two formal roles by providing security guarantees to both sides about how the international Euro-Atlantic community would treat them for their behavior during negotiations. Washington incorporated its strategic interests into the mediation process of the EU while providing necessary support to EU diplomatic initiatives. The United States played an undisclosed supporting role in the Brussels Dialogue through its complex relationship between intentional and unofficial diplomatic channels for international dispute settlement. The European Union provided an official platform for dialogue, but the Western approval requirements came from American diplomatic and strategic leadership. The dual-track approach reveals multiple facets of EU strategic independence in foreign policy while demonstrating American influence in European diplomatic actions.

Personal and Private Diplomacy in the Shadow Role

The single most useful conceptual category for understanding the United States' position in the Brussels Dialogue is what the recent literature on diplomacy refers to as personal and private diplomacy. Unlike formal track-one diplomacy, which operates through public mandates, ratified statements, and treaty-style agreements, personal and private diplomacy unfolds through trusted individual envoys, confidential bilateral exchanges, off-record meetings, and informal commitments that exist alongside, but never replace, the official record (Berridge, 2015; Sharp, 2009). According to Constantinou (2013), this form of diplomacy generates and circulates political knowledge within elite networks, often producing outcomes that never appear in formal communiqués. In practical terms, this allows powerful states to shape negotiations they are not officially leading. It is the mechanism through which Washington was able to exercise decisive pressure on the 2012-2013 Brussels process despite the European Union holding the chair.

The American playbook in the Western Balkans was already grounded in this tradition long before the Brussels Dialogue began. Richard Holbrooke's shuttle diplomacy at Dayton in 1995 and Christopher Hill's mediation efforts on Kosovo before the NATO intervention demonstrated a consistent pattern: U.S. diplomacy in the region relies on personalized, high-trust relationships with regional leaders rather than purely institutional channels (Daalder & O'Hanlon, 2000; Holbrooke, 1998). This pattern continued throughout 2012-2013. American diplomats, including Vice President Joe Biden, Assistant Secretary of State Philip Reeker, and senior officials at the U.S. embassies in Pristina and Belgrade, sustained dense informal contacts with Hashim Thaçi, Ivica Dačić, and later Aleksandar Vučić outside the formal Ashton-led process. According to Bergmann (2018), these contacts produced a parallel mediation track operating alongside the EU framework, two simultaneous processes, one institutional, one personal, that together delivered an outcome neither could have produced on its own.

Personal and private diplomacy carries its own logic. Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (2015) explain that trust, signaling, and reciprocity operate more efficiently when fewer actors are involved and the exchange is shielded from public scrutiny. Domestic audiences in

Kosovo and Serbia would not have tolerated overt American pressure during sensitive moments of the Brussels Dialogue, but private American assurances to Pristina about its sovereignty and to Belgrade about its EU path made such pressure absorbable for both sides. Cooper and Cornut (2019) argue that personalized diplomacy has become especially important in twenty-first-century mediation, since formal multilateral frameworks are increasingly fragile while bilateral trust between specific officials can be quickly mobilized when negotiations stall. The Brussels Dialogue confirms that argument. The most consequential American interventions of the 2012-2013 talks, reassuring Thaçi that engagement with Serbia would not threaten Kosovo's sovereignty, signaling to Dačić that the EU accession track depended on visible cooperation, were never made on the official record. Yet they were essential to the agreement that the European Union eventually presented as its own diplomatic achievement.

Reading the Brussels Agreement as the product of personal and private diplomacy rather than as a purely European institutional output also clarifies why the deal looked the way it did. The deliberate ambiguity around the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities, the careful avoidance of recognition language, and the heavy reliance on technical sub-agreements all bear the marks of compromises reached in private conversations and only partially codified in the public document. The official EU process supplied legitimacy and a long-term incentive structure; American personal diplomacy supplied the trust, urgency, and political assurances that made signing possible. Without this combined arrangement, Bergmann (2018) suggests, the dialogue would likely have stalled at the technical-cooperation level. With it, the parties signed an agreement neither was domestically prepared to defend in full, a paradox that personal and private diplomacy is uniquely capable of producing.

A Recalibrated U.S. Posture After 2017

The United States did not withdraw recognition; it recalibrated its posture from an early sponsor of state-building to a dual-pressure facilitator focused on de-escalation in the north, adherence to dialogue obligations, and alignment with the EU-led normalization track. Three phases stand out. First, 2008-2016: Washington backed supervised independence, EULEX deployment, and the transfer of functional leadership to Brussels, with the U.S. supplying credibility and security while the EU wielded accession conditionality (Bieber, 2015; Gashi & Musliu, 2017). Second phase, 2017-2021: frictions around 100% tariffs and the ASM saw the U.S. re-enter as a deal-maker, culminating in the Washington Agreement (2020). An economic-connectivity package and political moratoria that tried to break stalemates without displacing the Brussels table (peer-reviewed assessments judge it a tactical reset rather than a final settlement) (Bieber, 2015; Weller, 2009). Last, since 2022: as security incidents multiplied in the north, Washington increasingly paired its historic affinity for Kosovo with visible pressure on Pristina (and on Belgrade) to implement signed obligations, notably the ASM, within Kosovo's constitutional order while deterring violence through KFOR's posture.

Why this shift? First, conflict prevention in a NATO theatre became paramount after Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine; the Balkans could not be allowed to relapse into crisis.

Second, geopolitical balancing: to keep Serbia anchored to Euro-Atlantic pathways and out of Moscow's orbit. Western policy had to retain leverage in Belgrade, and that, in turn, required credible pressure on both parties when they escalated. Third, process integrity: sustainable normalization depends on implementing existing commitments (police/judiciary integration; energy; ASM), not on perpetual renegotiation (Bieber, 2015; Gashi & Musliu, 2017). The resulting picture is often misread domestically as "backing out." In fact, the U.S. has tightened conditionality: it remains committed to Kosovo's stability and Euro-Atlantic trajectory while using reversible costs (diplomatic penalties; support for targeted EU measures) to deter unilateral moves and bring both parties back into compliance. This is tough-love statecraft aimed at preventing a spiral, enhancing EU leverage, and denying Russia a crisis to exploit, without altering the bedrock of U.S. recognition or long-term support (Bieber, 2015; Weller, 2009).

Instruments of US Influence

The United States actively enhanced Kosovo's state development and advanced Kosovo-Serbia reconciliation after Kosovo declared independence in 2008. The United States employed bilateral relations and aid funding under conditions that are one of its most influential diplomatic strategies. Since separating from Serbia, Kosovo has received among the highest per capita US assistance in European nations for institution creation, security development, and economic advancement (Morelli, 2018). Kosovo obtained minimal American financial assistance as an unwritten or direct requirement to support EU-led Serbia negotiations actively. The Serbian government managed to preserve Russian diplomatic relations while maintaining functional ties with the United States to achieve EU affiliation and advance Western integration plans (Woehrel, 2008). Announcing these conditions, the message revealed that partnership in Euro-Atlantic values and negotiation processes would yield beneficial material additions and diplomatic rewards. However, refusal to cooperate would generate negative international impacts.

The United States used diplomatic signaling alongside high-level visitations to influence the region. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden regularly appeared during negotiations. They publicly announced that normalization surpassed regional demands and became essential for future development and international acceptance (Morelli, 2018). The visits communicated to Serbia that Kosovo normalization must happen immediately based on strategic needs and simultaneously showed Kosovo leaders that the US would sustain its backing (Bieber & Visoka, 2018). Washington demonstrated serious dedication by using high-level discussions to show how this process should be recognized as supporting transatlantic priorities and regional stability and security.

Official negotiations and personal, unofficial dialogues reached equally important outcomes throughout the process. The European Union officially mediated the talks, yet the United States directly engaged with the embassy in Pristina and Belgrade and its special diplomatic representatives. Gashi and Kelmendi (2023) explain how American diplomats used private meetings to pressure Kosovo and Serbian leadership during essential diplomatic

instances. The United States monitored the dialogue instead of issuing specific terms to the parties while ensuring both sides remained present for negotiations until a resolution. Informal trilateral coordination between representatives of the EU and American diplomats and occasionally NATO representatives strengthened the Western-backed status of the negotiation process, according to Amadio Viceré (2020). During EU negotiation standstill or loss of local actors' political drive, US diplomats stepped in as silent behind-the-scenes mediators.

Media narratives and public messaging stood fourth on the list of critical tools. The American administration used media outlets to build support at home and abroad about the negotiation path. The United States made peace alongside stability, modernization, and Europeanization, which is the central message of the Brussels dialogue as a transformative chance for Kosovo and Serbia to overcome their conflicts (Rahmani et al., 2023). That vision led US leaders to use public declarations that showed compromise as an act of bravery and foresight to force local politicians to conform to their aspirational directives. The local media outlets in Kosovo broadcast these messages supported by Western donor organizations and NGOs that equated dialogue participation with responsible leadership and patriotism (Gashi & Musliu, 2017). Nationalist stories opposing negotiations received no legitimacy because observers viewed them as retrograde elements that endangered regional stability.

The instruments converged at important dialogue points according to multiple case examples. At the start of 2013, American diplomats secretly told Kosovo leaders about their sovereignty protection while publicly, the European Commission and Serb leaders sought EU accession momentum from dialogue (Bieber, 2015). US Embassy officials issued public statements emphasizing dialogue as the exclusive route toward Kosovo's total international recognition. They persuaded the public to switch their attention from immediate issues to national interests following violent Kosovo protests about Serbian concessions (Morelli, 2018). Through diplomatic channels and strategic media campaigns, Washington exercised control over critical situations to prevent threats from interrupting progress at necessary times.

The US shadow involvement proved successful yet received criticism from different groups. According to several critics, Washington's participation established an upper-class-led negotiation process that pushed away fundamental community-based reconciliation (Beysoylu, 2020). The Kosovo conflict's wider societal needs for justice, as well as finding missing persons and protecting minority rights, received less attention because diplomats focused intensely on technical agreements and international endorsement approval. National strategic goals pursuing NATO membership and Russian containment mattered more than delicate local considerations, which may have generated future instability (Hajrullahu, 2019). Some analysts identified a 'liberal peacebuilding paradox' in Kosovo due to the choice of Euro-Atlantic integration above local ownership over peace settlements (Bieber & Visoka, 2018). During the Brussels Dialogue period, the United States played a minimal role as it found it beneficial to accept imperfect, stable normalization rather than face renewed conflict or frozen difficulties. By establishing this political climate, the United States forced Kosovo and Serbia to participate in dialogue while avoiding undergoing substantial

changes because of funding requirements and international messaging. During key moments of the dialogue, American strategic intervention proved decisive for its advancement despite the EU retaining its official dialogue mechanism while exposing constraints on EU strategic independence and affirming US primacy in the Balkans' affairs.

Capacity Building as a Long-Term Instrument of Influence

Beyond visits, signaling, conditionality, and media framing, a further instrument operated at a much longer time horizon: capacity building. This refers to the sustained, externally funded development of Kosovo's institutions, including its security forces, judiciary, civil service, and economic regulators. Whereas conditionality tied specific concessions to specific incentives at specific moments, capacity building shaped the institutional terrain on which all subsequent negotiations would take place. According to Tansey (2009) and Lemay-Hébert (2009), capacity building should not be understood as a neutral technical exercise. It is a form of soft state-shaping in which the donor's preferences become embedded in the recipient's institutional DNA. In Kosovo, this dynamic has been pronounced. The institutions through which Pristina engaged the Brussels Dialogue, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Kosovo Police, the courts, and later the Kosovo Security Force, were themselves products of more than a decade of internationally led capacity-building programmes (Capussela, 2015; Visoka, 2017).

The United States invested in Kosovo's capacity development from the very first months following the 1999 intervention and continued to do so through the 2012-2013 dialogue and beyond. American assistance flowed through several channels. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) supported municipal governance reforms, anti-corruption programmes, and economic regulation. The State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) trained Kosovo Police personnel and assisted in the development of prosecutorial and judicial capacity. The U.S. Department of Defense supported the transformation of the Kosovo Protection Corps into the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) and, after 2018, the legislated transition of the KSF toward a regular armed force. As Morelli (2018) notes, U.S. assistance to Kosovo across the 2000s and early 2010s was, on a per-capita basis, among the highest of any state in Europe. According to Capussela (2015), the cumulative effect of these programmes was to produce a state apparatus that was, at the institutional level, more closely aligned with American expectations than with the preferences of any single domestic political actor.

The European Union pursued parallel capacity-building work, primarily through EULEX, the European Union Rule of Law Mission, and through pre-accession instruments. EULEX trained Kosovo's police, prosecutors, and judges, supported customs administration in the north, and exercised executive functions over particularly sensitive cases (de Wet, 2009). The mission was repeatedly criticized for inefficiency and for reproducing the very governance gaps it was tasked to address (Capussela, 2015), but its long-term contribution to the institutional fabric of the Kosovar state was real. The interaction between American and European capacity-building tracks is itself a key element of the shadow-role argument advanced in this thesis. Where the European Union built the procedural and legal apparatus

through which the Brussels Dialogue could be conducted, the United States built the security and political relationships through which it could be enforced.

Capacity building also produced an asymmetric form of dependency that shaped the negotiating leverage of all parties. Pristina's institutions could not have functioned at scale without sustained Western support, and this gave Western mediators a structural form of influence that did not require any explicit threat or promise. According to Visoka (2017), this is the deepest sense in which Kosovo's sovereignty has remained a "monitored sovereignty", a sovereignty whose day-to-day operation depends on continuing donor commitment. In the context of the Brussels Dialogue, capacity building is therefore best understood as the slow-running counterpart of personal and private diplomacy. Where personal diplomacy applied pressure at specific moments, capacity building shaped the long-term institutional environment in which those moments occurred.

Reactions from Local and Regional Actors

Kosovo's Government: Balancing US Loyalty and EU Integration

Since declaring unilateral independence from Serbia in 2008, Kosovo has been functioning under challenging diplomatic circumstances between the two influential regional powers of the United States and the European Union. The challenging geopolitical nature of Kosovo demands its independent stance because Kosovo exists as a disputed country with minimal worldwide legal recognition. Kosovo faces obstacles to international legitimacy and integration because Russia, China, and five EU member states, among other nations, refuse to recognize its independence. Kosovo maintains its foreign policy through precise diplomatic management to obtain maximum support from individual alliances, which does not undermine its long-term strategic aims.

Kosovo's leaders remained closely dedicated to the United States, which numerous people view as pivotal to Kosovo's path toward independence. Washington built strong diplomatic bonds with Kosovo through its initial support of the Kosovo Liberation Army in the 1999 NATO military operation and its extensive postwar assistance and political support (Gashi & Kelmendi, 2023). When Kosovo gained independence, the United States took one of the earliest steps in accepting this new state while actively campaigning for Kosovo's freedom internationally. Kosovo's international status improved through this strong support, yet American backing also established a pro-American political environment that continues to prevail in domestic public opinion. Kosovo's political leaders repeatedly seek Washington's diplomatic assistance when facing crises because the reliance strengthens America's protective partnership image.

Kosovo actively participates in European institutions while complying with EU-driven procedures to demonstrate readiness for European Union membership and identify with other international bodies. The Brussels Dialogue is the EU's primary initiative to seek peace between Kosovo and Serbia by establishing regular diplomatic ties. Kosovo finds itself in a highly challenging spot following the dialogue, which demands concessions that might

threaten Kosovo's sovereignty. The Association of Serb-majority Municipalities is the leading dispute between Kosovo and the EU. Brussels demands its creation despite widespread opposition that views it as damaging Kosovo's central governmental structure (Beysoylu, 2020). Academics and political figures within Kosovo disagree with this proposal because it threatens minority rights and decentralization objectives.

Under EU influence, Kosovo's political leadership has occasionally rejected European demands by emphasizing national interests and constitutional boundaries. Their strong connection to the United States enables political leaders to request American diplomatic intervention against perceived European Union requests that exceed their authority. Using this hedging strategy, Kosovo commits to EU integration while protecting itself through American support under challenging situations. According to Gashi and Kelmendi (2023), the simultaneous attachments of Kosovo to the EU and the United States make it difficult for the EU to function effectively as a mediating entity. The involvement of American backing enables Kosovo institutions to use it as protection against political concessions, so the EU loses influence and power as a normative authority. The Brussels Dialogue is a historic achievement that showcases Kosovo's delicate relationship management with its strongest international partners.

Serbia's Political Discourse: Nationalist Rhetoric vs. EU Accession Ambitions

Serbia's attempt to join the European Union stands in direct contrast to its strong nationalist speech about Kosovo. Belgrade maintains ongoing dedication to EU accession while showing its willingness to meet European standards in governance, rule of law, and economic policy. Serbia's government has led different stages of institutional change, including diplomatic processes and public declarations that support EU membership. Serbia receives its most substantial trade and investment flow from the EU, so accession offers numerous significant economic and political opportunities.

The political discourse in Serbia centers on nationalist views, particularly regarding secession claims between Serbia and Kosovo, even though Kosovo has gained independence since 2008. The constitutional documentation established by Serbia categorizes Kosovo as part of its territory, prohibiting any alterations without sparking widespread political opposition. Serbia operates a strategic policy of vague response and participates in EU dialogue work, making no significant decisions about Kosovo state recognition. Spasojević (2016) explains that Serbia implements a strategy of benefit maximization by seeking EU advantages without altering its fundamental national principles. Serbia's support from EU political and financial backing enables the country to present nationalist advocacy as domestic messaging.

The Brussels Dialogue revealed this dual approach in an obvious manner. Prime Minister Ivica Dačić led diplomatic negotiations to finalize the Brussels Agreement, thus signing it in 2013, yet public information about it was dramatically different from its diplomatic context. The global community saw this development as a pathway toward European unity and normalization between states. Serbian leaders explained the concessions for their domestic audience by arguing that municipal integration would be temporary and strategic rather than

a permanent change to Serbian policy. Mladenović (2022) defines this political strategy as "Pro-EU adaptation with Anti-EU rhetoric" that offers the dual advantage of retaining public support while fulfilling minimum EU obligations to the leadership of Serbia.

This strategy supports Serbian public opinion. Savanović Haverland and Egger (2023) uncovered that significant parts of Serb voters actively contrast Kosovo's state of independence. The public opposition goes beyond party political differences, reflecting a general attitude shaped by past antagonisms and nationalist education. Parties avail themselves of this perspective to portray Kosovo as a symbol that stands for national sacrifice against foreign power. Serbian political strategies are aimed at rural areas and voters over 45, as these communities have strong memories of Yugoslavia and resentment towards NATO since 1999.

The nationalistic pressure within Serbia compels the nation to make foreign policy decisions that must bypass EU value discrepancies rather than actively embracing European Union values first. EU directives are addressed by leaders of Serbia through formal cooperation while using verbal declarations to ensure national sovereignty is not compromised in public discourse. How this occurs generates conflict that hinders the transformative European Union integration process by requiring both legal harmonization and norm-emulation forms of adaptation. Serbian foreign policy will play a sophisticated balancing act of external cooperation and contrary beliefs until its nation aligns its nationalist stories with European integration ambitions.

Civil Society and Public Perception in Kosovo and Serbia

Senior political leaders guided the Brussels Dialogue, but its influence on Kosovo's and Serbia's civil society groups reaches far more broadly. The diplomatic process received global acclaim, but Kosovo residents experienced it as a dialogue that included little and raised much doubt and varying patriotic tales. Most Kosovo civil society organizations endorse the normalization process because they believe policies that promote peace with Serbia alongside EU and international institutional membership benefit Kosovo in the future. Supporters advocating constructive engagement with numerous local NGOs and activists have stated that strengthened regional collaboration enables Kosovo to move closer to achieving full recognition status, foreign investment, and economic advancement.

Both international stakeholders and Kosovo maintain general backing for this process even while they continue to doubt the transparency and inclusiveness of the decision-making process. Experts define recent political deals as secretive procedures that ignored significant public participation. The European Union applied technocratic mediation to transform complicated political matters into bureaucratic administrative problems and thus excluded societal engagement, according to Gashi and Musliu (2017). Border management decisions, institutional integration policies, and minority autonomy frameworks were created without adequate involvement of communities directly affected by the choices. The Brussels Dialogue process has separated young Kosovars because they consider it distant from everyday life experiences and the ongoing wartime emotional legacies that remain unaddressed.

Serbian public response has been divided to an even greater extent. Several Europhile groups and intellectuals support EU accession, but the prevailing nationalistic public opinion rejects EU membership completely. The Serbian public continues to view Kosovo as a fundamental Serbian territory, which makes national compromises regarding the area labeled as treasonous. Political parties in Serbia choose to present Kosovo as an important question of national identity for the entire society, according to Spasojević (2016). Local entities and public figures who support dialogue with foreign entities receive targeted threats, either as treasonous agents or national security threats. Those who adopt official government views meet fewer barriers to gaining institutional backing.

Kosovar and Serbian activists question the legitimacy of the mediation framework within the Brussels Dialogue since foreign forces lead this process without public supervision. Members of the municipalities in Kosovo's northern region do not recognize the agreement as a peacebuilding instrument because they view it as a foreign-sponsored top-down implementation, according to Beysoylu (2020). Local communities lacking direct participation have created an escalating difference between diplomatic elite accomplishments at the upper levels and public belief in their legitimacy. The agreement suffers reduced sustainability because the public lacks direct participation, suggesting peacebuilding requires political leadership with full societal engagement.

Disparities in Local Reception of EU vs. US Influence

Between the Western Balkans countries, particularly Kosovo and Serbia, profound differences remain in how international institutions are perceived, influencing conflict resolution and post-war diplomacy. Kosovars show great appreciation toward the United States due to its NATO intervention forces in 1999 that ended Serbia's military activities in the area. Washington has supported Kosovo since hostilities ended through political recognition, diplomatic advocacy, and sustained developmental aid. Gashi and Kelmendi (2023) state that the United States is Kosovo's most vital defense partner to protect its independence, territorial boundaries, and international acceptance. The political life of Kosovo contains a perception that is strengthened through practical and symbolic US institutional engagement with military forces and high-level diplomatic relationships.

The people of Pristina view the European Union with mixed emotions compared to their more favorable reception of the United States. Kosovars remains undecided about the union's position as a future member and performance as a current mediator and partner institution. The uncertainty about Kosovo's independence stems primarily from the union's fragmented stance because five member states do not accept Kosovo as independent (Spain, Slovakia, Greece, Romania, and Cyprus). Hajrullahu (2019) states that the EU's absence of unity regarding Kosovo's status severely diminishes its ability to serve as a neutral partner and disrupts its participation in the Brussels Dialogue. Observers view the community's officially neutral stance and technical mediation approach as removed from Kosovo's basic political objectives. The EU transforms crucial political disagreements into technical problems through recontextualization, according to Gashi and Musliu (2017). This mediation method distances many local participants and weakens community trust in the

reconciliation process.

Serbia has contrasting historical and political interpretations of the situation, creating dissimilar public perceptions. Belgrade's political leadership still conveys interest in EU membership, but public opinion against EU integration decreases further every time. Loss of public confidence in European Union diplomacy results from Serbian citizens seeing that their country is forced to accept Kosovo as a condition for adopting EU membership (Mladenović, 2022). People across Serbia have negative perceptions about America because America sparked the 1999 NATO bombing missions. Nationalism still retains this act as the most significant event in collective Serbian remembrance, where proponents interpret it as evidence of Western hostility as well as injustice. Despite societal perceptions about this issue, Kosovo and Serbia are harmonious in the belief that international actor cooperation remains an unavoidable requirement. The EU facilitates institutional modernization, structure improvement, and connectivity programs worldwide, but America primarily provides security protection and international power of diplomacy. Peacebuilding programs become increasingly complex because both sides of the conflict perceive international actors through significantly dissimilar perceptions. Pristina has positive perceptions about them, but Belgrade mostly has a negative attitude towards them.

Strategic Convergence and Transatlantic Cooperation

The Brussels Dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo accelerated during 2012-2013 as part of a drive beyond regional conflict-post normalization needs. The mediation effort was guided and concluded through aligned but divergent European Union and United States actors' interests who acted as key international mediators. The cooperation model of the dialogue has a strategic approach, but its fundamental objective focuses on Western Balkan stability and democratic reform, as well as preventing external interference. The agreement reached through a Europe-America joint effort raised fears of how power disparities and leadership shape strategy and agency about European diplomatic power.

Shared US-EU Objectives in Stabilizing the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans maintained its strategic importance to US and European Union foreign diplomacy despite enduring fragmentation and ethnic tensions inherited from Yugoslavia's dissolution. The region becomes both a challenge and an opportunity for the EU because of its unresolved disputes, unstable democratic institutions, and unfavorable socioeconomic conditions that pose possible threats to continental security. EU engagement with the Western Balkans aims to secure its southeastern border region, according to Morelli (2018), which creates positive outcomes for European internal stability while controlling migration and integration processes.

From a strategic standpoint, the United States considers the Western Balkan region important for broader reasons. This strategic region serves three key transatlantic defense objectives: NATO membership, blocking Russian power, and current Chinese influence. Washington started its extended Balkan involvement by launching military actions against

Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s, followed by the establishment of peacebuilding projects in both territories. Woehrel (2008) explains that the United States maintains ongoing involvement throughout the region because it aims to stop new violent conflicts from starting, build democratic systems, and reinforce Western control of global politics.

Various actors within the Brussels Dialogue united because they shared a mutual vision focused on stabilizing the region. EU integration served as an instrument for both parties to achieve Europeanization goals, stabilizing the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo. Hajrullahu (2019) observed that despite varying ways of execution, the EU and the US share this common strategic objective. Through its External Action Service, the EU directed the negotiations, yet the United States maintained prominence by supporting Kosovo institution-building and dialogue participation.

EU officials maintained the institutional framework that mediated the Brussels Dialogue, while US officials maintained intensive bilateral relations with the parties. The US diplomats exercised significant power to persuade Kosovo toward EU-brokered agreements, as Gashi and Kelmendi (2023) reported, who added parallel guarantees to reduce political resistance. The United States extended its diplomatic influence toward Serbia by promising EU membership benefits as diplomatic encouragement. The actors collaborated by providing mutual support to each other's work and, through this, created an integrated strategic partnership based on their shared interests in adopting Western political frameworks for long-term security integration.

Division of Labor in Diplomacy: The EU as the Face, US as the Force

The Brussels Dialogue established strong transatlantic cooperation through distinct European Union and United States responsibilities in the dialogue process. During the negotiations, the EU maintained full ownership of the diplomatic process and its official leadership position in the talks and mediation responsibilities. The US applied political and strategic influence as an absent force that maintained the process from behind official negotiations. EU leaders hold primary responsibility to establish rules and procedures based on established Euro-Atlantic diplomatic conventions, and the US assumes a decisive role in critical or political crises. The involved parties structured their operations based on mutual advantages while maintaining a flexible tactics system.

The EU's pursuit of regional foreign interests corresponded with US strategic interests, which operated through European channels. According to Amadio Viceré (2020), the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy under Catherine Ashton (at that time) successfully unified Brussels' diplomatic framework with Washington's strategic framework. Ashton consulted directly with US diplomats to guide the dialogue toward equally meeting American and European interests. During the dialogue, the EU underwent internal challenges because five member states did not recognize Kosovo, yet the coordinated approach still enabled an informal united front with the United States.

EU leadership appeared strong enough to convince members that they ran diplomatic operations independently from other nations. According to Gashi and Musliu (2017), these

perceptions have concealed the deeper structural ties that existed over the years. EU leadership played a central role in facilitating the negotiations, whereas America was the dominant force driving the talks forward. The United States played a crucial role in finalizing talks, establishing confidence with world powers, and possibly resolving obstacles. This third-party support from the EU drove many of their negotiated compromises through to completion that otherwise likely would have been abandoned or made stagnant.

The EU gains authority from its institutions and integration mechanisms through dual-track diplomacy, yet the United States obtains power from strategic commands and compartments. Both actors together played an important role in making the success that defined the Brussels Dialogue possible. Such tough conflict cases call for collective efforts from partners across the Atlantic because no party has complete settlement tools. The EU and America acted as an indivisible diplomatic entity that conducted coordinated technical negotiations and strategic concessions even though they had divergent paradigms of negotiations.

Role of the High Representative in Balancing US Expectations

Brussels Dialogue advanced the EU High Representative of Foreign Affairs and Security Policy's mediatorial role to unprecedented heights between US foreign diplomacy and EU foreign policy interests. EU Foreign Affairs High Representative acted in dual capacities by providing leadership by the EU and bringing European diplomacy into touch with its American counterpart, thereby interpreting EU foreign policy sophistication in the negotiations. Catherine Ashton was widely acclaimed in Brussels Dialogue negotiations by her forceful interventions as the EU leader coordinating the April 2013 Brussels Agreement process. She was able to handle EU internal processes and external links, particularly from Washington, which allowed her to lead as a diplomat.

According to Amadio Viceré (2020), the High Representative was required to play two functions since the EU doubted the implementation of foreign policy while navigating strategic relations with transatlantic nations, particularly America. While dealing with Kosovo-Serbia relations, Ashton kept open channels of diplomatic communication with American ambassadors. Such an approach allowed her to grasp American priorities and integrate them into European strategy, keeping both Atlantic sides' confidence intact. The nature of diplomatic advancement was subject to change due to open connections because formal mechanisms were hindered by EU nations using opposing political stands.

Ashton was able to accomplish most of her diplomatic work but encountered a problem along the way. The EU is a pluralistic political entity, leading various states to present dissimilar views while deliberating on key outer-policy decisions. Bieber (2015) argues that Ashton encountered obstacles in her duties owing to the EU's failure to craft congruent positions, especially regarding Kosovo's status. Keeping EU unity while facing competing national views relied significantly on American support. Ashton's diplomatic ability facilitated American pressure as a practical strategic approach that allowed her room to utilize it when the moment arose. EU ownership of the process required ongoing upkeep, but she was

required to contain US involvement against political aspirations across various EU member states. The Kosovo-Serbia talks triggered how Ashton established sufficient coordination of internal and external politicians' demands and actors to contribute to her leadership accomplishment. British diplomatic efforts enabled Serbian involvement in the Brussels Agreement through the attainment of American support in embracing Kosovo municipal control instead of management by Serbia. Political support from American politicians enhanced European international leaders' role in influencing Kosovo leaders on negotiation procedures even when Kosovo did not want to negotiate. A recorded report indicates that EU and US diplomats encouraged Serbia-Kosovo negotiations simultaneously while establishing institutional partnership mechanisms.

Implications for EU's Foreign Policy Independence

EU diplomatic history recorded the Brussels Dialogue's success in brokering the 2013 Brussels Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. EU peace mediation of international conflict allowed the union to plot its world maps of influence and raise its international goodwill reputation. Building-block questions that emerged from the dialogue by necessity presented top agendas since these were affecting EU sovereignty in international diplomatic activities. The EU needed America to move incrementally towards foreign policymaking because peace agreement proceedings would never work unless they partnered. The EU negotiated and came to agreements but could not put these agreements into practice essentially because America was not supporting them; this illustrated how maneuver space dwindled significantly even as institutional overhaul increased.

External facilitation of East-West communication in Kosovo signals a hidden vulnerability in EU foreign policy. The EU approaches foreign challenges with a reactive approach that balances against achieving systemic consensus across member states. Non-recognition countries acting within the EU decrease their unifying power, which results in an impeded ability to maintain a unified stance toward matters like Kosovo's condition. The internal divides of this country open up opportunities for the US and other outside actors to take part in mediation and influence the negotiation process. The EU loses its credibility, reducing its ability to steer important negotiations successfully.

According to Bieber and Visoka (2018), Kosovo exploited the split diplomatic approach by employing it to enter the international framework. The Kosovo leadership approached the US instead of facing EU-imposed requirements when EU pressure reached its peak threshold. The Kosovo government took a logical approach by dividing negotiations between Eastern and Western powers, yet this tactic demonstrated the risks connected to fragmented political approaches. EU and US foreign policy divergence allows local actors to view them as unsynchronized policies that they exploit to block genuine compromises, weakening the EU's standing as an effective mediator.

EU diplomatic structures typically present their approaches through language that lacks political emotions and technical methodologies. Gashi and Musliu (2017) caution against this approach because it generates superficial agreements that do not transform political or

identity-based forces that maintain years-long conflicts. Kosovo presents a specific challenge since all significant aspects, including identity, sovereignty, and historical grievances, are active in the conflict. The EU lacks enforcement capabilities in matters requiring military presence because it does not possess the political and military capabilities of the United States.

Avoiding a relapse into constant crisis requires three mutually reinforcing moves. First, full implementation of signed obligations, police/judiciary integration, energy settlements, and the ASM within Kosovo's constitutional system, is the primary stabilizer; each unimplemented item is a recurring flashpoint. Second, credible deterrence in the north, KFOR posture, EULEX support, and accountability for violent incidents, prevents spoilers from converting disputes into security emergencies. Third, synchronized incentives: concrete benefits (EU funds, chapters, international participation) must be sequenced to verifiable steps by both parties, and reversible measures should follow breaches (Bieber, 2015; de Wet, 2009).

The Russia factor explains why Western policy, including that of the United States, sometimes leans harder on Pristina than domestic audiences expect. Moscow's strategy has been to instrumentalize local grievances and EU fatigue to retain leverage in Belgrade. A Dialogue that yields community self-management (ASM) within Kosovo law deprives Belgrade of a durable grievance and reduces Moscow's ability to pose as Serbia's only protector. This is why Washington and Brussels insist that the ASM be created without executive powers and within Kosovo's constitutional architecture: it meets legitimate minority-governance needs while avoiding a "Republika Srpska" scenario, and it converts a symmetrical concession into a platform for reciprocity (Bieber, 2015; Weller, 2009).

In short, the path to avoiding "constant war" is not a new grand bargain but enforced compliance with what already exists, backed by NATO deterrence and a credible European perspective that renders obstruction costly. The United States' "tough-love" posture, pairing long-term support for Kosovo with pressure when it escalates, should be read through this lens: a stabilizing strategy aimed at conflict prevention, EU leverage in Belgrade, and denial of opportunities for external spoilers (Bieber, 2015; Gashi & Musliu, 2017).

The Brussels Agreement: Analyzing the Outcome

The Brussels Agreement from April 19, 2013, marked the start of official peace initiatives between Kosovo and Serbia after declaring independence in 2008. The 2008 declaration of Kosovo as an independent country formed the first reoriented political settlement because it transformed strained relations into formal discussions. The political support from America led by the EU facilitated parties' negotiations on significant elements of Serb enclave integration and Kosovo institutional benchmarks. Home managers welcomed this political shift with interest, but various groups understood particular elements of the agreement and its implementation differently in addition to customary political factors. The interpretation of this agreement has vast complications because provisions exercising real power are disputed, and both sides implement parts of its provisions differently, together with regional players having EU members endorsing differing perspectives.

Key Provisions and Their Implementation Challenges

The April 19, 2013, Brussels Agreement comprised fifteen significant points regarding northern Kosovo government institutions, mainly in Serb-majority regions. The heart of the agreement involved establishing an autonomous "Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities" within Kosovo's legal system. Kosovo institutions were meant to incorporate Serbian policing and judicial systems through this structure, including local election procedures following Kosovo laws and parallel security structure elimination in the north. These arrangements appeared logical through official documents because they promised better integration and stability in the northern areas of Kosovo.

The agreement proved very difficult to carry out in practice. Bieber (2015) established that the creators made this agreement deliberately unclear to enable the Serbian and Kosovar governments to present it as a triumph to their domestic audiences. A significant unclear aspect in the legal structure described the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities' powers. The deal led to uncertainty regarding the proposed structure's purpose since Kosovo's constitutional court eventually declared it unconstitutional. By delaying the implementation of the agreement through political protests, Serbia further weakened the normalization process.

Judicial system integration received opposition in northern municipalities because Serbian parallel structures remained powerful. Institutional harmonization moved slowly while political obstacles from Belgrade prevented Kosovo from achieving judicial system unity (Rahmani et al., 2023). The primary mediator role of the EU proved difficult in enforcing compliance with the terms. EU intervention faced severe constraints from two main factors: first, inadequate enforcement capabilities, and second, the continued disagreement of several member states toward Kosovo's independence recognition.

The technical agreement encompassed every element of political matters of this agreement. Gashi and Musliu (2017) explain that the EU attempted to solve contentious political issues by making their administrative tasks appear like progress was made despite unresolved political disputes. Because of fragile and incomplete implementation procedures, the dialogue showed its foundation to be weak and unfinished while it operated between international requirements and domestic barriers in Kosovo and Serbia. These complex negotiations demonstrated how limited the European Union remains in handling high-stakes negotiations while showing that lasting peace remains out of reach in the region.

The 2015 and 2023 Follow-On Packages: Mogherini and the Land-Swap Precedent Problem

The 2013 Brussels Agreement integrated police and judiciary in the north under Kosovo's legal order and foresaw an Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) with non-executive, coordinating competences in education, health, and local development, explicitly within Kosovo law. The 2015 arrangements added telecoms, energy, and bridge/barricade steps, plus principles for an ASM statute. The 2023 Agreement & Ohrid Annex consolidated de facto relations (documents, symbols, permanent representations), bound the parties not to block each other's EU path, and tied Serb community self-management and Serbia's non-obstruction to European incentives (Bieber, 2015; Weller, 2009).

As High Representative (2014-2019), Federica Mogherini shepherded the move from technocratic to politically sensitive items, locking in the 2015 package and mediating through recurrent crises. Scholarship on the HR/EEAS role highlights the agenda-setting capacity of the High Representative but also the constraint of member-state divisions. The 2018 public airing of a "border correction/land-swap" idea, floated by presidents in Belgrade and Pristina, illustrated these dynamics: entertaining partition undercut the EU's normative credibility and risked precedent diffusion to Bosnia and beyond. Most academic analyses warned that any partition logic contradicts the Ahtisaari settlement model and weakens the case that Kosovo is *sui generis*, a claim already fragile in international practice (Bieber, 2015; Weller, 2009).

The precedent question is best answered functionally. Kosovo's independence emerged after mass atrocity, NATO intervention, and international administration, under a detailed blueprint for minority-protective statehood. That context justifies the *sui generis* label but does not prevent norm travel. Border change would have made norm travel easier, inviting copy-cats. By contrast, functional normalization, documents, energy, freedom of movement, ASM within Kosovo's constitutional order, makes recognition less urgent and less politically costly over time, while avoiding a cascade of border claims. This is precisely what the Ohrid design attempts to codify (Bieber, 2015; Weller, 2009).

Local Political Consequences in Serbia and Kosovo

The Brussels Agreement generated political effects throughout Serbia and the region of Kosovo. Under Prime Minister Ivica Dačić, the Serbian government presented the agreement as a strategic concession for EU accession progress. Nationalist political groups and sections of the local population opposed this stance because they interpreted the agreement as abandoning the Serbian claim to supreme authority over the Kosovo region. Serbian political discourse puts forth pro-EU statements to the public while maintaining anti-EU rhetoric privately to combat nationalist elements, as Mladenović (2022) reports. The government maintained its position at home while fulfilling international duties through this agreement.

The effect of the agreement split the public in Kosovo just as much as it did in other locations. Hashim Thaçi governed the Pristina administration then, which viewed the agreement as a progressive path toward complete international solidarity and integration.

Many civilians and local politicians from Northern Kosovo and oppositional parties organized substantial opposition against this agreement. Hajrullahu (2019) viewed the establishment of the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities as an action that could lead to partitioned ethnic regions, harming Kosovo's sovereign authority. The lack of transparency in the Kosovo Parliament's agreement process and its limited parliamentary role in the agreement's ratification has led to increased doubts about its legitimacy.

Kosovars engaged in political instability and protests against the Association provision in Kosovo, leading to increased separations within the political environment. Savanović et al. (2023) demonstrate how the negotiations took root within the broader conflict between Kosovo's drive for worldwide acceptance and the internal costs of granting concessions to Serbia. The political consequences produced greater divisions within the community, while international mediation lost credibility and the public lost faith in the progress of normalization.

Role of the US in Shaping the Content and Momentum of the Agreement

The European Union officially controlled the Brussels Dialogue; however, American diplomatic power proved essential to forming and accelerating the agreement's progress. Since independence became a goal for Kosovo, the United States has maintained continuous support for developing the new state. Gashi and Kelmendi (2023) explain how American diplomatic pressure successfully forced both parties to reach an agreement, particularly when negotiations reached a standstill. Mutual assurances played a crucial role in the US influence as they organized the most critical negotiation points. Technocratic consensus-building under the EU framework operated separately from US political verifications, which worked as an assurance function. American diplomatic officials supported EU diplomatic teams by engaging in shuttle diplomatic work while supporting Kosovo and Serbia, saying the agreement was worth the political challenges.

The United States proved central in maintaining Kosovo's dialogue participation when Pristina faced domestic opposition to the negotiations, as Beysoylu (2020) explains. US diplomats guaranteed Kosovo that their involvement in the Brussels Agreement would strengthen their search for international recognition and provide assistance during institution integration efforts. American intervention with Serbia delivered the essential message that Kosovo's diplomatic normalization with Serbia would benefit Serbia's EU applicant status while establishing Serbia as a cooperative regional participant. The US presence enhanced the credibility of dialogue efforts in this process. Given US support for the accord and high American popularity in Kosovo, the accord gained additional significance. The Brussels Agreement moved forward because the EU acted as a mediator. However, the US enforced its execution despite resistance, which expanded Serbia's dependence on international actors during implementation.

Comparison Between EU and US Strategic Narratives Post-Agreement

The EU and the United States emerged from the April 2013 Brussels Agreement with overlapping but distinguishable strategic narratives, and the difference between the two tells us as much about the limits of the dialogue as the agreement itself.

The EU's narrative was institutional and integrationist. Brussels framed the deal as a flagship of its Common Foreign and Security Policy: a technocratic, conditionality-driven process in which two prospective member states were brought into a normalization track without recourse to coercion. In this telling, the agreement validated the EU's "transformative power", the idea that accession incentives could substitute for hard-security tools and bind elites to a Europeanization trajectory (Bieber, 2015; Gashi & Musliu, 2017). Catherine Ashton's office routinely emphasized "process" rather than "settlement," reflecting the EU's preference to keep status questions open while integrating the parties through sectoral cooperation (police, judiciary, telecoms, energy, civil registry).

The U.S. narrative, by contrast, was geopolitical and consolidation-oriented. Washington read the agreement primarily through the lens of Euro-Atlantic stability: a stabilized Kosovo-Serbia relationship was a precondition for embedding both states in the Western order, completing NATO's Balkan footprint, and denying Russia a permanent point of leverage in Belgrade (Bozhilova, 2019; Morelli, 2018). Where the EU emphasized procedural fairness and conditionality, U.S. statements stressed urgency, the reversibility of progress, and the costs of failure. Senior U.S. officials repeatedly cast normalization as inseparable from Kosovo's broader international recognition and from Serbia's strategic alignment with the West (Gashi & Kelmendi, 2023).

The two narratives were complementary but not identical, and the divergences became more visible after 2013. The EU continued to present the agreement as evidence of its mediating credibility, even as implementation stalled around the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities. Washington, less invested in defending the EU's procedural neutrality, was willing to escalate or de-escalate publicly, through high-level visits, sanction threats, or, later, the parallel 2020 Washington Agreement, when Brussels-led conditionality lost momentum. As Bieber and Visoka (2018) note, this asymmetry let local actors play the two narratives off each other: Pristina relied on U.S. backing as a hedge against EU pressure, while Belgrade leveraged residual EU disunity to slow implementation while signaling continued willingness to engage.

The deeper analytical point is that the EU's narrative depended on the existence of the U.S. one. The EU's credibility as a mediator drew, in part, on Washington's tacit guarantee that defection from the agreement would carry transatlantic, not merely European, costs. Conversely, the U.S. narrative was politically sustainable only because the EU offered a legitimate institutional vehicle and a long-term integration prospect that the United States could not provide on its own. The Brussels Agreement, in other words, was held together by a narrative division of labor that both sides found rhetorically convenient and operationally indispensable, and that exposed, on closer examination, the limits of EU strategic autonomy in fragile-state mediation.

Broader Implications for Conflict Mediation and International Order

Since the 2013 Kosovo-Serbia deal, the European Union promoted its mediation process, titled the Brussels Dialogue, with the aim of declaring recognition as one of its greatest post-conflict successes. Serbia has never supported the declaration since Kosovar independence in 2008, and this deal is not their initial bilateral treaty. Having been struggling with core questions of cross-border cooperation between the two sides about Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo autonomous Regions in Serb-occupied Kosovo and security agreements, the Brussels Dialogue institutionalized bilaterals through its facilitation process (Styczyńska, 2024). It went beyond its official physical boundaries and has monumental implications for Balkan peace as well as foreign policy interests in diplomacy. This ongoing peace pact shows how peacefulness develops in the world when nations are encountering increasing support of local sovereignty and propagation of humanity's honor. By practicing dialogue at this time, international observers should be able to see nations' actual circumstances even where nations do not have recognition of statehood by states' constitutions (Styczyńska, 2024). The European Union and other supranational organizations now facilitate peace negotiations through members' incentives on their benevolent mantle. The negotiation introduces long-term considerations to the issue of territorial conflict in Palestine-Israel and Western Sahara and other long-term international disputes. The 2013 Kosovo-Serbia peace agreement is both a victory on the ground and a paradigm to apply in comprehending reorientations of the world's international relations, conflict resolution, and multilateral diplomacy.

Redefining Sovereignty and Neutrality in International Mediation

The classical conception of sovereignty is centered on state power and boundaries in the context of non-interference by states in other states. The Brussels Dialogue showed how third parties act as go-betweens when confronting governing powers regarding new perceptions of political authority. Serbia and Kosovo engaged in international-facilitated mediation processes under the Brussels Agreement, while the agreement allowed Serbia to remain neutral on Kosovar independence status. According to Gashi and Musliu (2017), the EU chose recontextualization mediation when they transformed fundamental statehood and territorial management matters into integration components and policing and municipal administration sections. Through the cooperation system, parties could proceed with sensitive political choices using administrative redefinitions, which enabled the movement to achieve independence without achieving Kosovo's determination. This approach by mediators transforms the facilitator's neutral role into forming the post-conflict framework and advancing the dialogue beyond its original state.

International reframing of sovereignty affects diplomatic bargaining between states because it defines their rights over sovereignty. The EU and the US are essential in international arbiter roles to empower new state establishment processes while directly influencing state confirmation status. Krasniqi (2014) states that Kosovo's foreign policy acts

as both an external spectacle and an internal device to construct core statehood ideas. Through mediation, states become detached no longer, as the activity demarcates political boundaries and institutional powers of the parties involved. However, the EU could not avoid the normative impact of its involvement despite its claim to neutrality. Being both a mediator and an upcoming member of the accession process required the EU to align its interests with the negotiation results (Krasniqi, 2014). Through political choices, Kosovo established legal integration of Serb majority municipalities, permanently affecting territorial boundaries and regional stability and consequently supporting Kosovo's sovereign status.

Lessons for Future EU-Led Negotiations (e.g., Ukraine, Bosnia)

The Brussels Dialogue has important lessons for future EU-led negotiations in other contested or post-conflict areas, such as Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia. The clearest of these takeaways is that the EU's capacity to mediate conflict is closely tied to its capacity to balance inclusion, legal precision, and strategic clarity. The first lesson of the Brussels process is that heliocentric negotiations are limited. According to Beysoylu (2020), the Brussels Agreement was carried out behind closed doors, with limited participation of civil society, the opposition parties, or the local people. This allowed for quick decision-making and, in the process, sacrificed long-term legitimacy. In future cases, transparency and participatory processes will be critical for achieving broader societal consensus rather than elite interests. Also, the EU has to harmonize its legal and political fragmentation. As pointed out by Hajrullahu (2019), the EU's lack of unity over the status of Kosovo (because five member states do not recognize Kosovo) weakened its credibility and influence. Divisions in the EU's diplomacy in Ukraine or Bosnia, where member states have different interests, could be undermined similarly. For the EU to be able to lead in such negotiations, it first has to deal with internal inconsistencies that undermine its strategic coherence.

Additionally, strategic coordination with partners is important. The US highly supported the Brussels Dialogue. However, future negotiations will likely happen in a much more polarized geopolitical setting, especially in light of Russia's increasingly assertive role in Eastern Europe. Therefore, the EU needs to invest in multilateral diplomacy that extends beyond traditional allies to encompass the impact of adversarial powers. According to Amadio Viceré (2020), the High Representative's ability to reconcile internal and external expectations is essential for the EU's success in any EU-led mediation initiative. The Brussels experience also emphasizes the role of framing. By recontextualizing political issues as administrative solutions, divides were bridged, but at the same time, the root causes of conflict were not addressed. In places such as Ukraine or Bosnia, where there are still strongly contested questions of identity and territorial integrity, mediators must distinguish between short-term pragmatism and long-term justice.

US Soft Power and Its Long-Term Presence in Europe's Backyard

US diplomacy was one of the most enduring features of the Brussels Dialogue and one of the most subtle and pervasive. As a non formal participant in the negotiations, the United States was a shadow guarantor, providing crucial political pressure, reassurance, and strategic vision. This type of US foreign policy approach is consistent with a broader US foreign policy trend of utilizing soft power and informal influence to influence outcomes in regions where formal intervention is politically sensitive or institutionally impractical. However, as Gashi and Kelmendi (2023) show, US-Kosovo relations have been constructed based on military support, economic aid, and diplomatic support. Washington also influences Kosovo's institutional design and foreign policy orientation beyond traditional diplomacy. The US has also used its diplomatic tools to push pro-Western reforms and dialogue with Kosovo in Serbia, though more constrained. This is a form of indirect influence that demonstrates how the US soft power acts as a stabilizer to Europe's southeastern periphery. According to Morelli (2018), the objectives of this involvement are to consolidate democratic governance, contain Russian influence, and build up the southeastern flank of NATO. The US presence is reinforced through Euro-Atlantic norms without overt dominance, through aid conditionality, high-level visits, and backchannel negotiations. This contrasts Russia's more direct and often more disruptive approach in Ukraine or the Caucasus.

The Brussels Dialogue shows how US soft power complements that of the EU. The US provides strategic urgency and security credibility; the EU institutional pathways and normative incentives. Their combination creates a hybrid model of Western engagement that is flexible and resilient. But this model also shows dependencies. According to Bieber and Visoka (2018), Kosovo's foreign policy has been as much determined by the US strategic imperatives as it has been by domestic priorities. It poses questions about local agencies and the sustainability of externally driven state-building processes. As crises continue to arise in Europe's neighborhood, the US is likely to maintain its influential role in the Balkans. The Brussels Agreement is a blueprint of how US soft power can be used effectively as long as it is in sync with local aspirations and honors regional complexities.

The Myth of EU Strategic Autonomy in Fragile States

The Brussels Dialogue is frequently cited as an example of EU foreign policy capacity. The entire process uncovered significant implementation challenges that the EU faces when trying to achieve its objectives in politically unstable areas. During the Kosovo-Serbia crisis, the EU's strategic autonomy principle faced serious challenges in facilitating the implementation of autonomous international foreign policy. The High Representative achieved dialogue successes by coordinating EU policy among member states and sustained US recognition on the basis of Amadio Viceré (2020). This endeavor had no system of punishment with which to implement policies or protect against interference from opponents. The EU's ability to project itself internationally combined its institutional strength and limited financial backing with the struggle against both nationalist conflicts and identity politics.

EU policy initiatives toward democracy promotion, market reform, and the institution of the rule of law did not put into practice solutions that adequately took into account on-the-ground

political realities. As Mladenović (2022) observed, Serbian political elites were able to instrumentalize the European Union process for domestic gain, publicly backing dialogue while simultaneously fulminating against the EU for domestic consumption. This dynamic eroded the union's leverage and showed the extent to which its transformative power could be constrained in the face of domestic political will that is fractured or antagonistic. This also signals its reliance on external actors to enforce the strategic dialogue. The Brussels Agreement would not, without American backing, probably have materialized or been sustained. The bigger issue for the union is whether it can claim to be a global actor if its most vaunted diplomatic achievements are built on transatlantic scaffolding. As Hajrullahu (2019) points out, the union's approach only works when there is unity amongst member states and external allies are favorable. Without either, EU strategic autonomy is more rhetorical than real. This has implications for other fragile states where the union wishes to lead. The success of the Brussels model in Georgia, Moldova, and Bosnia, whether it is a success or not, is not determined by policy tools alone but by political alignment and multilateral cooperation.

Greece: The Most Engaged Non-Recogniser

Greece balances principled non-recognition, linked to international-law consistency and the Cyprus dossier, with pragmatic engagement: a Liaison Office in Pristina, sustained support for the Dialogue, and increasingly dense technical ties. This posture lets Athens act as a trust-building interlocutor inside the EU while preserving flexibility should Dialogue implementation (especially the ASM) and regional conditions improve. Academic work situates this stance within a broader recognition-engagement nexus: non-recognisers can significantly aid a territory's Europeanization short of recognition, and, by doing so, they preserve leverage to encourage compliance by both parties (Armakolas & Ker-Lindsay, 2019/2020).

Multiple essential debates occurred during the entire negotiation period. The main goals of EU mediation core groups included reframing political differences into manageable administrative agreements. Such mediation techniques allowed negotiations but slowed the establishment of final sovereignty issues. There were difficulties in implementing several elements of the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities in Kosovo because several actors actively opposed implementation because of political, legal, and societal actors' opposition. Pragmatic progress was also suspended because the agreement had much ambiguity due to the fact that there had not been enough civil society membership consultations. In addition, there was a tit-for-tat where Serbia and Kosovo were involved, with political ambitions and strategic interests compounded by domestic political interests. Nationalist rhetoric served the same purpose, which had already fueled inappropriate dominant attitudes favoring both pacts in this respect. Through the transatlantic partnership, member states showed their ability to form peace and how EU states maintain sovereign power over their foreign policies. The Brussels Dialogue revealed the insufficient power of elite-mediated diplomacy for solving fundamental political conflicts. Upcoming negotiations should focus on specifying details together with including local inhabitants in decision-making procedures for achieving enduring

and meaningful solutions.

Two powerful leaders brought negotiations through cooperative means even though their current relationships were exposed through this method. The EU was used as a negotiating platform even though it could not possibly have the formal power to force member states to obey or negotiate serious matters. Mediation activities were carried out by the United States diplomat without crossing negotiation level but they used constructive diplomatic pressure in attaining desired objectives while carrying out the negotiations. Washington utilized surreptitious diplomatic methods and rejected its complicity in making untrammelled state dialogue around national political debates. America utilized stabilization mechanisms in the area by Western domination of all the Western Balkan states. Expressive diplomacy, as a forceful diplomatic method, was used by United States officials to initiate crucial dialogue that led to financing and shaped the collaboration between Kosovo and Serbia. The international community put the United States in charge of running Kosovo's sovereignty affairs to ensure its worldwide peacemaking activities and international efforts for recognition. Political tensions between Serbia and the United States were stronger because of past conflicts, which combined with the current wave of nationalism. Coercive political messages allowed American forces to defy EU procedural methods for approval for the Brussels Agreement to be signed and implemented partially.

Transatlantic actors' central coordination facilitated such a consensus but showed the need to improve EU mechanisms when facilitating subsequent negotiations. The development of precise mandates stands among the most important suggestions. The vague terms in the Brussels Agreement led to varied interpretations between the parties, which blocked its implementation and expanded the mistrust between negotiators. Future EU-mediated agreements must include clear and transparent legal language, which limits opportunities for home interpreters and manipulators. The foundation needs to have transparent communication practices with inclusive principles. The Brussels Dialogue operated as an elite-led initiative whose lack of civil society, local government, and community participation marked its main characteristics. Although the top-down model creates temporary breakthroughs, it demonstrates weak legitimacy and sustainability. All populations that face the changes should actively participate in negotiations that the EU organizes. Implemented structures of consultation combined with parliamentary monitoring and public disclosure procedures help minimize the difference between negotiated agreements and public understanding.

The EU needs its foreign policy tools to operate coherently as a unified system when communicating abroad. It lost its status for neutrality in mediation because EU Member States failed to achieve consensus about Kosovo's political status. The union's internal division can become less troublesome through institutional restructuring, better inter-organizational coordination, and stronger external governance requirements. If it fails to improve, the European Union will continue to depend on external enforcement actors, posing a significant threat to strategic autonomy. Peacebuilding initiatives, which last, require more than just reaching agreements; they need widespread acceptance from the people residing in affected regions. The Brussels Agreement is a historic step that has yet to be finalized and

developed. The mediators should institute a comprehensive plan of post-conflict reconciliation involving both political and societal elements in addition to the legal structure. As the European Community requires international alignment with the US and other players in the region, it has to institute autonomous capabilities to guarantee the implementation of perpetual peace and security. The EU needs consistent united fronts and regional engagement to solidify its credibility in order to become a true leader in future peace negotiations. The EU's projection of global leader status will remain theoretical because it lacks essential institutional developments together with improved strategic unity.

Current Domestic Pressures

Concluding, calls within Greece for re-evaluation of the Kosovo stance surface periodically, especially when EU institutions urge holdouts to align practice with Dialogue progress. The MFA has, however, sustained a line of engaged non-recognition, consistent with Greece's regional calculus and with its role in the Dialogue. In Pristina, domestic legitimacy dynamics sometimes push leaders toward harder positional bargaining, which then meets EU/U.S. pressure to revert to obligations. These cross-pressures underscore the need for credible EU sequencing and NATO deterrence to keep spoilers at bay while converting co-dependence into cooperation (Armakolas & Ker-Lindsay, 2019/2020; Bieber, 2015).

Conclusion

The Brussels Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, led by the European Union and backed by the United States, is a complex case study of contemporary conflict mediation. The diplomatic peak of the 2013 Brussels Agreement and its contribution to normalization efforts exposed fundamental problems within modern international diplomatic frameworks. Multiple participants controlled both what the dialogue developed into and what it represented, as well as how others saw it during the entire negotiation process. The negotiation process demonstrated that shifting sovereign perspectives, fundamental alliance values, and the limited effectiveness of post-conflict regional and global organizations directly affected the procedure. Moreover, the dialogue illustrated strategic coordination between the European Union and U.S. stakeholders. Through its mediating role, the European Union established negotiations and developed administrative and legalistic answers as solutions. Catherine Ashton performed as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, leading EU member-state negotiations and maintaining communication between EU and U.S. representatives. The United States operated behind the scenes to exert strategic pressure while ensuring full compliance by other actors at specific moments during the negotiations. Dual-track diplomacy facilitated Western cooperation to end the escalation while supporting the Euro-Atlantic integration and stabilization agenda.

The conceptual frame developed in this thesis, shadow influence understood as the combination of personal and private diplomacy with long-term capacity building, travels well beyond the 2012-2013 case. It clarifies why the agreement looked the way it did, why the European Union was able to claim institutional success while implementation faltered, and

why Kosovo's eventual political trajectory remained tied to Western preferences even when domestic politics in Pristina pulled in another direction. The Brussels Agreement was not, in the strict sense, an EU agreement nor a U.S. agreement. It was the product of a transatlantic division of labor in which the European Union supplied procedural legitimacy and integration incentives, while the United States supplied trust, security guarantees, and the capacity-building infrastructure that made the institutions of the Kosovar state sufficiently functional to deliver on their commitments.

More than a decade after the 2013 agreement, the situation between Belgrade and Pristina remains incomplete and politically fragile. Serbia maintains its formal non-recognition of Kosovo's independence yet is now bound by commitments not to block Kosovo's EU trajectory and to sustain de facto arrangements in areas including documents, license plates, and permanent representations. Kosovo has secured visa liberalisation for its citizens, which entered into force on 1 January 2024, and has continued to advance elements of its European track while facing renewed pressure to operationalize the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities and to manage the north through lawful, de-escalatory means (Council of the European Union, 2023; Bieber, 2024). The 2023 Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Ohrid Annex consolidated this hybrid position, committing both parties to de facto recognition of one another's documents and symbols and to non-obstruction of each other's European paths (EEAS, 2023a, 2023b).

Implementation, however, has been uneven. The September 2023 armed incident at Banjska, in which a Serb paramilitary group attacked Kosovo Police personnel in northern Kosovo, killed one officer and crystallized European and American concerns about residual instability in the north (International Crisis Group, 2024). The European Union responded by imposing reversible measures on Pristina over its handling of the north, suspending portions of cooperation under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) pending de-escalation. Kosovo's bid for membership in the Council of Europe, formally submitted in 2022 and supported by a majority of the Committee of Ministers, was effectively blocked in 2024 amid divisions among member states and the absence of progress on the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities. Belgrade, meanwhile, deepened its triangulation between EU accession negotiations and parallel ties with Russia and China, leveraging its lithium reserves, energy infrastructure, and arms manufacturing as geopolitical capital (Bieber, 2024). The February 2025 parliamentary elections in Kosovo produced a fragmented parliament and a protracted government formation process under Prime Minister Albin Kurti's Vetëvendosje, whose confrontational posture toward both the EU's facilitation team and Washington has further complicated the implementation of existing commitments (BIRN, 2025). The new U.S. administration that took office in January 2025 signaled a continuation of "tough-love" pressure on Pristina paired with sustained recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty, broadly consistent with the recalibration analyzed earlier in this thesis.

The cumulative picture, then, is of an unfinished normalization process whose key parameters were already visible in 2012-2013. The hybrid Western diplomatic architecture that produced the Brussels Agreement remains operational, although it now operates under conditions of greater geopolitical strain than at the time of the original deal. Russia's full-scale

war in Ukraine, China's expanding economic footprint in the Western Balkans, and the relative attenuation of the European Union's enlargement momentum together place new demands on a model of mediation that was designed for a more permissive international environment. The thesis's central argument, that EU strategic autonomy in fragile-state mediation is real but heavily contingent on transatlantic backing, has, if anything, been reinforced by the events of the post-2023 period. Future EU-led negotiations in Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, and Georgia will need to grapple with the same paradox. The Brussels precedent shows that the European Union is capable of extraordinary diplomatic innovation when its institutional incentives are reinforced by personal American diplomacy and long-term capacity-building investments. It also shows that the moment any of these legs of the stool weakens, the normalization edifice becomes correspondingly less stable.

Appendix: Accompanying Presentation

A companion presentation, *From Washington to Brussels: A Detailed Presentation*, accompanies this thesis and summarises the empirical findings, conceptual framework, and main conclusions in slide form. The presentation is intended to be used in oral defence, classroom, and conference settings.

Companion file: [From Washington to Brussels Presentation.pptx.pdf](#)

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