

CHAPTER 9

The Ambivalence of Kosovo–EU Relations in the Last Decade

The Perspective of Kosovo’s Political Elites

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Abstract

This chapter provides a theoretical and conceptual background that sheds light on EU–Kosovo relations from a core–periphery analytical perspective. Within this research purview, the study focuses on the examination of the three main areas of interaction – politics (identity), economy, and security – manifested in the framework of contractual relations within the process of Kosovo’s integration into the EU. The study highlights the ambivalent attitudes of political elites in Kosovo, who, while resisting or contesting different aspects in relation to the EU, are still actively engaged in the EU integration process. Moreover,

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based on empirical data from original semi-structured interviews with representatives from the aforementioned elite, this chapter explores how the EU is perceived and contested in Kosovo within evolving circumstances in profoundly changed contexts, most recently the war in Ukraine.

Keywords: Kosovo, EU, core, periphery, contestation, ambivalence, political elite

Introduction

In 1999, the EU launched its enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans via the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), which through consistent conditional policies has encouraged structural changes in these countries in terms of politics, economics, and security. This process marked the beginning of the EU's efforts to export its norms, standards, values, political influence, and financial and technical assistance to the countries of this region, expecting acceptance and convergence in turn. Dominating this process was the core–periphery relationship wherein the EU maintained its hierarchical core–periphery relationship with the countries concerned (Kinsella, 2012; Featherstone & Kazamias, 2000).

However, since the EU has encountered an evolving geopolitical context during the last decade, which has been characterized by successive crises such as the Eurozone crisis, Brexit, the migration crisis, and especially the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the dynamics of interaction between the EU and these countries has reached dimensions of ‘complex interdependence’ (Simionov & Pascariu, 2017), diluting the core–periphery boundary. In these circumstances, this interaction needs to be conceptualized not only using quantitative indicators, which can show how the decisions of the EU as a core shape its periphery, but also in subjective and political terms, which show how the EU is perceived, imitated, debated, and contested by political elites in various peripheral spaces, where expectations of its transformative power and capacity have changed during this decade.

In the case of Kosovo, the EU integration process has unique aspects that are divergent from that of other Balkan countries. Specifically, the EU has applied a much more rigorous approach regarding visa liberalization procedures for Kosovo, and it is even argued that some of its member states, such as France, have imposed ‘double standards’

(Marciacq et al., 2022). Additionally, not having a consensual position on the status of Kosovo (with five EU member states – Spain, Greece, Slovakia, Romania, and Cyprus – still not recognizing its independence), the EU has continued to treat this country in a unique way, even in terms of contractual relations within the SAP. This approach has drawn an exclusionary line around Kosovo, inching it further the EU's periphery, and significantly influencing how local political elites view the EU and the country's process of integration with it. This observation requires more in-depth research, and the current study aims to fill in this gap.

In what follows, we will approach various forms of EU contestation in Kosovo using Wiener's definition of this concept as a form of 'raising objections and critically engaging with its norms, policies, and practices' (Wiener, 2018, p. 2) but also as 'a way to express the differences of experience, expectations, and opinion' (Wiener, 2014, p. 11). In this conceptualization, regardless of the objections and challenges presented by the different practices of contestation of the EU, this contestation should result not in non-compliance with EU norms, or simply in a reversal of EU-driven reforms (as the literature on de-Europeanization suggests), but in a series of ambivalent reactions to the EU (Wiener & Puetter, 2009, pp. 7–10).

The chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section, a literature review covers Kosovo–EU relations in political, security, and economic terms during the last decade. The second section investigates the methodology for conducting, coding, and interpreting empirical data from semi-structured interviews with Kosovo's political elites. In the final section, we interpreted the coded data using four main categories: Kosovo as a periphery of the EU; the ambiguity of the EU's foreign policy on Kosovo; the role of the EU in facilitating the dialogue for the normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations; and EU–Kosovo relations through the lenses the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

Kosovo–EU Interactions in the Last Decade: A Literature Review

Some researchers (Požgan et al., 2020; Hoti et al., 2022; Gehring et al., 2017; Shepherd, 2009) have argued that the EU, despite facing successive crises during the last decade, has not diminished its presence

and role in the countries of the Western Balkans, as one of the regions on its periphery. Despite the lack of military capacities and internal divergences, and the fact that its progressively increased presence has resulted in rivalry with third parties such as Russia, China, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates, it has continued to act in this region and especially in Kosovo as a great transforming power. However, since the aforementioned studies are based mainly on a conventional top-down approach, exploring the ability of the EU to drive dynamics and structural changes in its periphery, some researchers remain interested in more studies that apply a bottom-up approach, which also emphasizes the way the EU is perceived, accepted, and contested in different places and times in its periphery.

However, while the literature justifying the importance of studies on how the EU is perceived in its periphery is growing significantly (Yabanci, 2016; Belloni, 2016; Stojić, 2017; Müller et al., 2021; Mahr, 2018), some scholars, such as Elbasani and Musliu, emphasize that the existing studies continue to remain marginalized, largely ignoring the perceptions of local actors towards the presence of the EU in the countries of the Western Balkans (Elbasani, 2018; Musliu, 2021). Researchers such as Mutluer and Tsarouhas (2018) and Baracani (2019) have highlighted the absence of studies dealing with the Kosovo political elite's perceptions of the EU, while at the same time arguing for the empirical relevance of the perception of local actors in Kosovo regarding the performance of the EU.

Political Cooperation (Identity): The Europeanization of Kosovo through the Accession Process

In political terms, relations between Kosovo and the EU have been unique and complex since 2003, when Kosovo's aspirations for EU integration were recognized at the Thessaloniki Summit (European Commission, 2003). However, between then and now the path of Kosovo's integration with the EU has been very challenging, either because of the asymmetry¹ between them or because of the EU's policy in the region, which could be construed as incoherent (Yabanci, 2014, p. 123; Palokaj & Tuhina, 2016, p. 16). Some researchers point out that Kosovo–EU relations can be divided into two periods: the first period includes the years 2003–2008 when Kosovo's progress towards the EU was hindered as a result of the unresolved political status of

the country; the second period starts from 2008, when recognition of Kosovo's independence was constantly rejected by five EU member states (Qehaja, 2014, p. 90; Bashota & Hoti, 2021, p. 3; Musliu, 2021, pp. 29–32).

The declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008 created new momentum for redefining its relations with the EU. The concrete step came through the feasibility study process for Kosovo in 2012, where it was emphasized that Kosovo met the basic standards of an EU member state – paving the way for the negotiation of the Stabilization Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU. At the same time, dialogue began on visa liberalization for Kosovo (Qehaja, 2014, p. 93; Sonnback & Zogjani, 2021; Yabanci, 2016). In this context, it has been widely appreciated that although through the SAP the EU remained consistent in the Europeanization process of Kosovo, the fact that there was no consensual position among its member states on the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state characterized this process as ambiguous and complex. As argued by Qehaja (2014) and Baracani (2019), such circumstances led the EU to adopt a neutral position towards the status of Kosovo to find a creative institutional and legal solution to overcome the divisions within its member states. Even though it remained neutral towards Kosovo's independence, the EU² indirectly continued to support Kosovo in building the capacities of its main state institutions, as in the areas of rule of law, modernization, and functionalization of customs, as well as the fight against corruption. However, as some other scholars have argued, for the political elite in Kosovo, such an approach³ creates uncertainty over the future of the integration process, since they consider that EU member states have a decisive role in this aspect (Mutluer & Tsarouhas, 2018, p. 432; Baracani, 2019, p. 20).

Another challenge in EU–Kosovo political relations within the SAP is the way that Kosovo has been treated by the EU regarding visa liberalization (Hoogenboom, 2011, p. 10). In fact, this issue has very clearly highlighted the incoherence of the EU's foreign policy actions. This is because, even though in supranational institutional lines such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, Kosovo's capacity to fulfil all conditions has been positively assessed by the visa roadmap, the intergovernmental institutional line dominated by the Council of the European Union and member states has subsequently decided on additional conditions. In fact, unlike other Balkan

countries, Kosovo has fulfilled 50 additional criteria (Group for Legal and Political Studies, 2015; Dugolli & Bashota, 2016). As a reaction to this approach, public opinion and political elites perceive the EU as selective and applying double standards to Kosovo (Eurasia Press and News, 2011; Marciacq et al., 2022). This is one of the critical points for contesting the way that the EU followed Kosovo's effort for visa liberalization. However, despite the Eurosceptic spirit on this topic, the Kosovar political elite and public opinion continue to remain in complete convergence with the EU regarding the country's European integration (Prishtina Institute for Political Studies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2023).

Despite the lack of clarity in its integration policy, it has been shown that the entire political establishment has continued to remain pro-European, valuing the country's integration into the EU as the main priority of its political agenda (Democracy for Development, 2020, p. 31) and appreciating this integration as a potential source of economic and developmental benefits, offering 'a more stable and strong society' (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022, p. 47; Democracy for Development, 2020, p. 31).

As Economides and Ker-Lindsay (2015) have argued, unlike the political elites in Serbia, which have followed a more instrumental approach in the Europeanization of their country, in the case of Kosovo the local political elites have shown more convergence and solidarity with the EU on the path to Europeanization. In fact, since the declaration of independence, as argued by Musliu (2021), Kosovar political elites have focused on the creation of a European state *par excellence*, further trying to reach the status of 'ideal' European state by invoking symbols – presenting a state flag like that of the EU, naming the national anthem 'Europe', and signifying the promotion of diversity and internationalization with the 'Young Europeans' campaign (Musliu, 2021, pp. 28–29). In thus performing Europeanization, the political elites have made an effort to internalize European rules, conditions, and standards and behave according to them. Thus, Europeanization appears as a stepping stone to democratization and modernization during the process of state-building in Kosovo (Sonnköping & Zogjani, 2021; Musliu, 2021).

Finally, one of the most reliable indicators that Kosovo is in convergence with the policies of the EU regarding Europeanization and integration is the formal application by the government of Kosovo in

December 2022 for status of a candidate country, although without fulfilling all of the obligations set out in the SAA. The prime minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, said that: ‘we want no back door, no fast-track. We want to build the EU in our country with our people’ (Reuters, 2022). However, experts in Kosovo–EU relations have emphasized that the application does not clarify Kosovo’s European perspective if its independence remains unrecognized by the five EU member states (Palokaj & Tuhina 2016, p. 11). Attitudes of the political elites of the opposition camp regarding the application have an even more critical tone. As a Kosovar member of parliament from the opposition has pointed out, ‘Kosovo’s application for this status was not made at the right time and in coordination with the allies within the EU, and the application was made more to take pictures for social media by the ruling political elite’ (RTV 21, 2023).

Kosovo–EU Relations in Terms of Security Cooperation

Kosovo–EU relations in terms of core–periphery relations can also be articulated in terms of security. In this context, the peripheral position of Kosovo in relation to the EU consists of two dimensions. First, Kosovo had an immediate need for support from the EU to strengthen one of the most basic components of its empirical statehood: the consolidation of the rule of law. In this regard, through its Mission for the Rule of Law (EULEX) the EU became one of the main contributors to internal security in Kosovo. Second, since the ongoing agreements with Serbia remain open-ended, they impose the need for EU involvement in facilitating dialogue for the normalization of relations between the two countries, in which case the EU would have to engage in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in its backyard.

The relations of the EU with Kosovo, also in terms of security, were settled in a new context just one day after the latter declared independence on 17 February 2008. First, the EU reached the peak of its involvement in Kosovo through the deployment of the EULEX, the largest civilian mission of conflict management and destabilization within the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (Greiçevci, 2011; Stefanova, 2011, p. 155; Lika, 2023, p. 15). EULEX had the approval of all member states, with a mandate ‘to monitor, mentor, and advise on all areas related to the rule of law and carry out certain executive functions’ and, ‘ensur[e] the stability of Kosovo, the wider Western Balkans

region, and Europe as a whole' (European Union External Action Service, 2012). In practice, EULEX's mandate was much more comprehensive. Even formally, the EU states that 'EULEX skills and expertise are also being used to support the key objectives in the visa liberalization process, the Stabilization and Association Process and the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue' (European Union External Action Service, 2014).

As Qehaja and Kursani have pointed out, to realize these functions, EULEX adopted a 'chameleonic pragmatism', through the invented paradigm of status neutrality, a paradigm eventually accepted by Serbia as well as by the five countries that do not recognize Kosovo independence. Although, as Qehaja and Kursani have pointed out, this approach has been perceived by local political elites in Kosovo as unclear and complex, nevertheless EULEX has managed to create a presence in most of the territory of Kosovo and, gradually, to fully come into service (Kursani, 2013, p. 6; Qehaja, 2014, p. 100). To define the common rule-of-law objectives and advance the agenda for the liberalization of visas and SAA, EULEX, together with the EU Office and the government of Kosovo, created the Joint Rule of Law Coordination Board (JRCB) in November 2012. However, after only three summits this initiative lost its momentum and produced few concrete results (van der Borgh et al., 2016, p. 28).

Regarding EULEX's performance, the evaluations among researchers vary, ranging from very positive to those showing poor performance. For example, Zupančič et al. (2018) and Güner (2021) note the positive performance of the mission in macro terms. They point out that EULEX's performance has led to the creation of an environment conducive to sustainable peace within the framework of reforms in the rule-of-law sector, and to efforts to create inter-ethnic bridges of communication. Among other things, the role of EULEX is to be admired in the field of implementation of several agreements for the normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations reached under the facilitation of the EU (Zupančič et al., 2018; Güner, 2021). Brussels itself considers that EULEX has done a considerable job in realizing its main objectives, showing that 'from 15 June 2018 to 14 June 2020, EULEX's justice monitors attended 784 court sessions in 214 criminal and civil cases, including high-profile cases, war crimes cases, gender-based violence cases, hate crimes, corruption cases, and cases previously dealt with by EULEX' (European Union External Action Service, 2020).

On the other hand, some researchers have taken a more critical view, emphasizing that EULEX has not been sufficiently effective. Kursani (2013) points out the inability of the mission to adapt to the local context and mentality. One of the reasons it has incited frustration among the population and the local political elite is the dichotomy between the initial over-ambitious statements and the tangible results that the mission has achieved on the ground (Kursani, 2013, pp. 4, 17). Other researchers have also highlighted the weaknesses of the mission regarding the rise of local ownership in the perception of the population and political elites (van der Borgh et al., 2016, pp. 25, 28; Yabanci, 2014, p. 129). Within the political framework, according to Qehaja, in the eyes of the population and the local political elite, the European perspective on Kosovo remains uncertain, despite the presence of the EU's largest mission there (Qehaja, 2014, p. 101). Some political elites from opposition parties have, in the last decade, contested the legitimacy of EULEX, especially in terms of the perception of it as a continuation of the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), labelling it a 'EULEXperiment' and 'UNMIKistan' (Musliu & Orbie, 2016).

Second, the involvement of the EU in a proactive approach to facilitating the dialogue for the resolution of protracted disputes between Kosovo and Serbia shows that the promotion of security and stability in its periphery is an important priority of its foreign policy agenda (Bashota & Hoti, 2021, p. 5; Kartsonaki, 2020, p. 104). Indeed, as Bashota argues, the unresolved problem of Kosovo highlighted the fragility of the EU for effective actors in its security perimeter during the 1990s, which would have been the time for an EU success story in the field of peace negotiation (Bashota, 2019). Moreover, Kursani has argued that such a high prioritization of this negotiation process by the EU highlights three issues:

- (1) The EU views the dialogue as the only path for solving major problems in relations between Kosovo and Serbia, (2) these relations are key for regional stability, and most importantly, (3) there is no 'Plan B' should the dialogue fail. (Kursani, 2013, p. 5)

During this process, the EU made it clear to both countries that advancement in European integration depended directly on the progress achieved during this dialogue (Stefanova, 2011, p. 155). Visoka and Doyle's (2016) assessment is that the EU applied a pragmatic approach by initially designing a technical negotiation format, before

moving to a political one. According to them, this was done to deconstruct issues with high political sensitivity in technical terms and, in later stages, to move towards a comprehensive solution to the disputes between the two parties. These researchers emphasize that this approach reflects the EU's history of conflict resolution, i.e., a type of 'neo-functional peace' (Visoka and Doyle, 2016, p. 863).

During this negotiation process of more than a decade, 38 agreements of a technical and political nature were reached, the most important of which was that of 19 April 2013, 'Agreed Conclusion: The First Agreement Governing the Principles for Normalization of Relations', also known as the Brussels Agreement (Balkans Policy Research Group, 2020). Through this agreement, the frameworks for normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations and the basic parameters for the establishment of an association/community were established, through which the integration of ten municipalities with a Serbian majority into the institutional life of Kosovo would take place (Bashota & Dugolli, 2019, pp. 127, 131). All of these agreements, especially the Brussels Agreement, were evaluated as historic achievements for the EU (Balkan Insight, 2013). In this context, the EU continued to consider dialogue the key to the integration of Serbia and Kosovo into the EU. Through the new enlargement strategy for the Balkans presented in 2018, entitled 'A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans', the European Commission emphasized that:

Without effective and comprehensive normalization of Belgrade–Pristina relations through the EU-facilitated dialogue, there cannot be lasting stability in the region. A comprehensive, legally binding normalization agreement is urgent and crucial so that Serbia and Kosovo can advance on their respective European paths. (European Commission, 2018)

However, this dialogue has been criticized from time to time for a lack of transparency for the public in Kosovo and Serbia (Friedrich Eber Stiftung, 2012), and the fact that almost all agreements were formulated with ambiguous language and without monitoring mechanisms for their implementation (Bashota & Dugolli, 2019). The most sensitive point in the stages of implementation was the establishment of the association/community of the municipalities with a Serbian majority foreseen by the Brussels Agreement and by the agreement for its

implementation of 25 August 2015. The efforts of the governing coalition (the Democratic Party of Kosovo and the Democratic League of Kosovo) encountered resistance from the opposition camp, as the Self-Determination Movement (Vetëvendosje!), the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), and the Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA), during 2016–2017, strongly opposed the establishment of this entity. This confrontation between ruling parties and the opposition camp led to an extreme polarization among political parties, political elites, civil society, and Kosovar opinion in general (Bashota & Dugolli, 2019, pp. 135–136; Troncotă, 2017; Balkans Policy Research Group, 2020).

Another development that has produced frustration within a faction of the political elite in Kosovo and among EU member states during the 2018–2019 period was the way the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, facilitated the process of eventually reaching final agreement between the parties. After the inclusion of the ‘controversial idea’ of the former president of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, and the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, about the possibility of ‘correcting the borders’ or even ‘exchanging territories’ between the two countries as part of the agreement, the negotiation process did not reach the point of receiving the support of all member states, especially Germany (Krasniqi, 2020, pp. 17, 18; Balkan Insight, 2018). This situation led to involvement of the US, Germany, and France but without the tangible development of a comprehensive agreement.

Kosovo–EU Economic Relations

In economic terms, EU–Kosovo relations can be examined in a stricter hierarchical discourse of centre–periphery interaction. Cooperation in this field highlights the asymmetry of Kosovo’s peripheral position in relation to the EU with respect to their commercial partnership and Kosovo’s considerable dependence on the EU for economic, financial, and technical assistance (European Parliament, 2018). As Bashota, Bytyqi, and Podrimqaku (2014) and Bashota, Sela, and Ismaili (2014) argue, a relations imbalance has been established since 1999, when the EU led the component of the reconstruction and economic development of Kosovo within the framework of UNMIK. As a post-conflict society, Kosovo was highly dependent on international assistance, largely guaranteed by the EU. As Baracani (2019, p. 20) has estimated,

the immediate need for the establishment and functionalization of state self-governing capacities in Kosovo prompted the EU to allocate the largest amount of aid to this country, making Kosovo 'the recipient of the largest amount of EU aid per capita in the world since 1999'.

The EU continued to support Kosovo during and after its independence, especially in the context of the realization of its agenda for European integration and the strengthening of empirical statehood. As estimated by the EU itself, in the period 2007–2020, through funding mechanisms such as the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation (CARDS) programmes and the Pre-Accession Instruments (IPA I and IPA II), the EU supported Kosovo with a contribution of about €1.5 billion. Such assistance, in addition to support for the country's European future, is aimed at reconstruction; sustainable economic reforms; and reforms in the public administration sector, the rule of law and order, and education, agriculture, and culture (European Union Office in Kosovo, 2021). The EU continues to support Kosovo in the agri-food sector and the fulfilment of the economic criteria that emerge from the SAA, through the financial assistance of a provision of €63.96 million within the IPA III programme (European Union Office in Kosovo, 2022).

Studies show that there are many differences regarding perceptions of the EU's performance in terms of financial support and economic development of Kosovo. According to research on the ground, 73 per cent of Kosovo citizens believe that EU membership will be beneficial for Kosovo (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022, p. 47). On the other hand, some civil society voices have been more critical regarding the allocation of financial resources within the Pre-Accession Instruments, noting that 'these funds are generally allocated to consulting and construction firms of the EU and not local ones' (Mutluer & Tsarouhas, 2018, p. 427). Civil society also has critical assessments of the way it is treated by the EU. As Yabanci (2016) pointed out, the people's perspective rests on the idea that more than a cooperative approach, the EU applies a pedagogical approach to civil society. Seeing it as 'weak and not fully equipped', the EU is not very committed to considering local society's opinion regarding the development of the country's European integration agenda, which orients the EU to disproportionate cooperation with the government while the bottom-up contribution remains deprecated and the voices of society at large are marginalized (Yabanci, 2016, pp. 10–11). Also, as Papadimitriou and Petrov (2013)

have suggested, it is difficult to claim that the EU has fully achieved its objectives in the economic development of Kosovo, as it did not live up to its pledges of donations and of supporting the country in strengthening the rule of law as a necessary precondition for the attraction of foreign investments.

Another way the EU has evinced its support for Kosovo is in the solidarity it shows for society and local institutions in amortizing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies estimate that Kosovo remained the country most affected of the Western Balkan states by the effects of the pandemic (OECD, 2023; Group for Legal and Political Studies, 2020a), pushing the country's government to undertake economic recovery measures (Group for Legal and Political Studies, 2020b). In these circumstances, the EU planned a powerful financial scheme to support the most vulnerable groups in society and to ensure the macro-financial stability of the country (Shasha, 2021). Specifically, in financial terms, EU assistance for Kosovo amounted to €7.03 million for the purchase of 700,000 doses of vaccines, while in technical terms, direct support was offered through the donation of medical equipment and articles necessary to fight the pandemic (European Union Office in Kosovo, 2021).

Methodology

In our case study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with local political elites (eight deputies of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo) to investigate how they understand and conceptualize the position of Kosovo as an EU periphery; how they evaluate the performance of EU instruments in supporting Kosovo on its European integration path; the role of the EU in the development and normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations; and the definition of the vision, mission, and goals of the EU towards Kosovo in light of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine.

The interviewees were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: first, most of them are members of the European Integration Commission of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo; second, they are representatives of the governing party, opposition parties, and parties from non-majority communities; third, in order to have diverse and proportional representation in the sample, MPs were selected to ensure that some were from a young, less-experienced demographic

and others were older and more experienced. Lastly, an effort was made to achieve a gender balance, with four female and four male deputies. The interviews were conducted in the months of February, March, and April 2023 in Pristina in the form of audio recordings under conditions of complete anonymity.

Analysing the Data

The semi-structured interviews were manually analysed using thematic analysis with pre-established categories (see [Table A9.1](#) in the Appendix). Through the ‘coding’ of the interviews (see [Table A9.2](#) in the Appendix), an inductive method for analysing the interviewees’ responses was established.

Kosovo as an EU Periphery

Conceptually, Kosovo’s peripheral position results from the way that the EU approaches the country from at least two directions. First, as Kosovo is the smallest country in the Balkans (and among the smallest in Europe) it does not in itself constitute any strategic or economic importance for the EU. Second, it is a well-known sentiment, not only among the political class but also among citizens, that the EU in its relations with Kosovo applies double standards, be they of a political, economic, or even security nature. In this context, it is worth mentioning the neutrality over the status of Kosovo, the application of a visa regime only for citizens of Kosovo, and the lack of unity within the EU membership over recognition of the independence of the country, according to one MP from a minority party in the ruling coalition (i3).

Analysing some of the main characteristics of the relations between the EU and Kosovo within the framework of the SAA, the commitment of both parties (the EU and Kosovo) is revealed in their expectations of approximation to each other. One of these characteristics is the low level of intensity and commitment of the EU to realizing its agenda in Kosovo. Members of both the government and the opposition are dissatisfied when it comes to the EU’s consistency and eagerness in dealing with Kosovo’s issues related to the SAP.

The incoherence of the EU, according to one opposition MP (i6), consists in the continuous establishment of new and special conditions for Kosovo which have not been applied to other Balkan countries.

MPs also consider the institutional fragility of Kosovo as a challenge to the country's path towards the EU. According to another opposition MP (i5), this institutional fragility consists of a lack of strengthening empirical statehood, namely in the form of fragility of the rule of law and slow economic development. There was a perception of time having been wasted by Kosovo in its fulfilment of contractual obligations due to two factors: the institutional crisis resulting from the blocking of the ratification of the demarcation agreement with Montenegro; and the decision to apply a 100 per cent tax to products imported from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. There have been ups and downs in cooperation between Kosovo and the EU, and the MPs who were interviewed agree that stability is a key issue in the EU's focus on Kosovo–Serbia relations. Specifically, the EU focuses a lot on the achievement of the Brussels Agreement of 19 April 2013 because of this interest in stability and because the integration policy was supported by dialogue, as one of the MPs in the ruling coalition emphasized (i1). The EU has long been at the forefront of efforts to reach a comprehensive agreement between the parties. However, these efforts have often encountered obstacles both within and beyond the EU. EU enlargement fatigue, the deliberate non-implementation of agreements by Serbia, and ad hoc actions such as the imposition of tariffs on Serbian imports from Kosovo have all undermined said efforts. As a result, as a MP from the opposition points out (i4), neither side is currently negotiating in good faith.

The Ambiguity and Disunity of the EU's Foreign Policy on Kosovo

Another important issue that highlights the peripheral position of Kosovo in the EU is the non-recognition of its independence by five EU member states, as well as the performance of EULEX in strengthening the sector of the rule of law. Some MPs share the opinion that there is a mistrust among Kosovo's political elites towards the EU that results from its inability to play an active role in foreign policy. According to one of the MPs in the governing coalition, 'such a thing was observed when we discussed with high representatives of EU institutions regarding the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by its five member countries, in which case the main response of theirs has been that these are internal problems of the member countries, that is,

problems that Kosovo should deal with bilaterally' (i3). Furthermore, according to one of the MPs from an opposition party, acting in a unilateral manner in foreign policy has caused the EU to lose credibility as an actor in its facilitating role in the dialogue with Serbia, and even as an actor of reliability that can offer a clear perspective on Kosovo's incorporation into the European family (i5). This type of perception is supported by field studies emphasizing that internal political developments in the EU have led to its inability to implement a stable and cohesive policy when it comes to Kosovo, as can be seen in the case of visa liberalization (Berisha, 2021).

Likewise, MPs from both the opposition parties and the government coalition view the performance of EULEX in Kosovo with a large dose of scepticism. According to them, EULEX has greatly influenced the 'psychology of the political elite' so that it is perceived as a kind of 'guarantor' and supporter of Kosovo's institutions; it is perceived that it has exercised these roles to a larger degree than it has managed to help in the improvement of these institutions' performance. It is further implied that corrupt affairs within EULEX have discredited its presence in Kosovo and have lowered the hopes of the elites and the local population for tangible results on the ground regarding the strengthening of rule of law (i7). This inefficiency of EULEX is explained, for one deputy, by the fact that 'the experts that the EU has deployed to Kosovo have not always been the best, and that in itself highlights a discourse of treating Kosovo as a second-rate country!' (i6). MPs from parties both in government and in opposition accuse EULEX of being one of the causes that led to the creation of the Special Court because it did not handle alleged war crimes properly (i1, i4). In this regard, studies on the performance of EULEX have focused on the disproportion between the initial commitments of the mission and tangible results on the ground. Concretely, the citizens of Kosovo welcomed EULEX from the beginning, hoping that it would catch the 'big fish', fight high-level corruption and organized crime, strengthen the independence of the judiciary, and bring Kosovo closer to the EU. But EULEX shows poor performance in these areas (Balkans Policy Research Group, 2019).

*The Role of the EU in Facilitating the Dialogue for the
Normalization of Kosovo–Serbia Relations*

The data shows that some of the MPs appreciate the role of the EU as a facilitator of the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue but at the same time highlight its limited power to force the parties to advance with tangible results on the road to full normalization. According to them, this is due to the lack of unity among EU members that would allow them to maintain a common stance in this process. In the perception of some deputies, Germany is the only country that has followed a clear and consistent line in the relation to the dialogue. Germany's consistent and pragmatic approach, according to one of the MPs in the government coalition (i1), is appreciated by Kosovo in general for the fact that it has been clear to both Serbia and Kosovo that they cannot be integrated into the EU while problems in relations between the two countries stand open. In almost all studies on the dialogue, the EU is repeatedly asked to be more proactive, to increase the emphasis on supervision of agreement implementation and reporting, and to enact more frequent and rapid intervention (Friedrich Eber Stiftung, 2012).

In addition to the lack of unity within the EU, one of the MPs from a minority party (i6) sees the lack of inclusion in the dialogue of the representatives of the local Serbs of Kosovo, as well as the lack of power of Kosovo to 'blackmail' the EU through an alternative strategic orientation, as did Serbia, with its strategic ties with Russia. One MP expressed the hope that the Ohrid Agreement of 18 March of 2003 will propel the EU to put pressure on the five member countries to recognize the independence of Kosovo and to advance its agenda to normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations (i7). On the other hand, the MPs agree to some extent that without the involvement of the US, it will not be possible to reach a final agreement for the normalization of relations with Serbia. According to them, EU–US cooperation brings more credibility and hope for this process.

Some MPs are inclined to perceive the EU as an actor that has taken an unfair approach to Kosovo regarding visa liberalization. They assess the application of double standards for Kosovo compared with other Balkan countries as proof of Kosovo's placement at the outermost edge of EU's periphery. According to one deputy (i6), 'the issue of visa liberalization for Kosovo is the shame of the EU'.

*EU–Kosovo Relations through the Lenses of the COVID-19
Pandemic and the War in Ukraine*

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to institutions around the world, including in Kosovo. Kosovo initially based its preventive measures on existing legislation. In August 2020, the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo approved the Law on the Prevention and Fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Territory of the Republic of Kosovo. As for the perception of the deputies of the cooperation between the EU and Kosovo in the fight against COVID-19, they emphasize that the EU viewed Kosovo and other Balkan countries as peripheries, and thus did not prioritize them for support as it did its member states. This led the countries of the region, including with Kosovo, to find solutions by purchasing vaccines from other producers, such as China or Russia. One MP (i7) perceived the biggest factor in lack of support from the EU at the beginning of the pandemic to be the inability of the government to address the EU with clear requests about what it needed as emergency aid for Kosovar health institutions. This opinion is supported to an extent by a report on the management of COVID-19 in Kosovo, which states that the beginning of the pandemic was characterized by politicized management (Elshani et al., 2023).

The political elite highlighted the influence on Kosovo–EU relations of the geopolitical changes following the war in Ukraine (i5). Changing priorities due to the war, with the risk of decreased interest in Kosovo on the part of EU, meant that the crisis also brought some challenges for Kosovo (i6).

However, according to an MP from the opposition, it could be said that the EU has only adjusted its dynamics in trying to normalize Kosovo–Serbia relations, intending to prevent an eventual extension of the conflict in the Balkans (i8). According to a deputy from the minority community, it is in the EU's interest to end all conflicts in its periphery because several conflicts at the same time would put the EU in a very delicate position: 'We are convinced that the EU would strongly push Kosovo and Serbia towards reaching a comprehensive agreement' (i3).

Meanwhile, regarding the degree of convergence of Kosovo in relation to the EU over the war in Ukraine, one member of parliament emphasizes that Kosovo has fulfilled all the demands and calls of the EU to be by its side in condemning Russian aggression. He states that

‘even though Kosovo is a small country, within its capabilities, it has shown loyalty to the EU and the US’ (i2).

Regarding the implications that the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have had for the EU’s approach to Kosovo, the political elite generally shows a tendency towards understanding and sensibility with the EU. The establishment attributes the perception of the EU’s response to Kosovo’s fight against the pandemic as ineffective in the face of the complexity of the situation. On the other hand, even regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine on EU–Kosovo relations, political elites in Kosovo continue to feel the presence and commitment of the EU in supporting Kosovo on its path to European integration.

Conclusion

Since the EU’s incorporation into the SAP, relations between Kosovo and the EU have taken on a new dimension. Initially, the lack of definition of Kosovo’s final status and, after the country declared independence in 2008, the absence of a unified EU position on recognizing that independence, contributed to the complexity of relations. Due to the EU’s disunity, Kosovo is not provided with a reliable perspective on its path to European integration. In addition, the country’s limited institutional capacity to meet the criteria within the EU’s agenda casts a shadow over its prospects for integration.

Nevertheless, despite having faced a series of crises over the past decade, the EU has maintained its developmental drive in Kosovo, while the political elite of Kosovo has maintained its ambivalent stance towards the EU. Despite contesting and criticizing the EU’s treatment of Kosovo, they have continued to demonstrate full commitment to convergence with the EU, keeping the issue of integration in the country a top foreign policy priority. In terms of centre–periphery interaction during this period, the local political elite’s perception of Kosovo’s peripheral position has been dominated by the narrative that the EU treats Kosovo as a second-rate country, enforcing extra parameters that were not applied in the case of other countries of the Balkans. It could be inferred that some countries have privileged access to the EU that is unavailable to Kosovo. Despite this, Kosovo’s political elites have not developed any contestation line toward the EU in the form of a coherent political strategy. Moreover, the dispute stems from repeated dissatisfaction with the way that the EU has treated Kosovo in certain fields.

In this regard, a deputy from the government coalition emphasizes that:

taking into account the fair and unfair approach of the EU towards Kosovo, we continue to see the EU with an eye of optimism since, at least, we are included in the vision of Europe, even though we have no role in the processes of its internal politics ... Even if we are sometimes frustrated and react by expressing dissatisfaction with the EU, we do so because we perceive and judge that the EU is not treating us fairly, and consistently, however, we remain committed to the integration of the country into the EU. This is our approach, and this is our primary work. (i2)

In the context of the new geopolitical dynamics caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there is a perception among a large part of the political elite that the EU has only returned its attention to expansion towards the Balkans and Kosovo intending to maintain peace and stability in this region. So, due to the political sensitivity of the region, the EU operates with more political fragility, especially as there is now a potential to offer a clearer perspective for the countries of this region and Kosovo. Kosovo, in its condemnation of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, has shown complete convergence with the approach of the EU, even though the EU has not been too enthusiastic about evaluating Kosovo's position, perhaps due to the small role that Kosovo plays in the international arena. The EU remains most interested in how Serbia is reacting to the crisis in Ukraine.

Notes

- 1 The most visible side of the asymmetry consists in the powerful position of the EU, which, through the top-down model, manages to transfer rules and become attractive through the distribution of rewards for the countries of the region (Elbasani, 2013).
- 2 Even including the five countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence.
- 3 As Palokaj and Tuhina have argued regarding the process of Kosovo's integration into the EU, the most significant aspect of this uniqueness consists in the fact that the SAA was signed not between EU member states and Kosovo but between EU institutions and Kosovo, even emphasizing that this agreement offers Kosovo a 'European perspective' instead of 'European integration' (see more at Palokaj & Tuhina, 2016).

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Appendix

Table A9.1: The main categories of the interpretation of coded data

Category	Interpretation
1. Kosovo as an EU periphery – The contractual dimension of EU–Kosovo relations within the SAA – Kosovo's challenges in realizing its EU integration agenda	The interest of the European Union Applying double standards
2. The ambiguity and disunity of the EU's foreign policy about Kosovo – Non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by the five EU member states – EULEX's performance in strengthening law and order sectors	Non-EU foreign policy Treating Kosovo as a 'second-rate country'
3. The role of the EU in facilitating the dialogue for the normalization of Kosovo–Serbia relations – The position of the EU regarding the visa regime for Kosovo	EU mediation as a facilitator but without binding power EU–US cooperation brings more credibility and hope
4. EU–Kosovo relations through the lenses of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine – The current state of Kosovo–EU relations	The conditions are right for a comprehensive Kosovo–Serbia agreement The EU's perception of Kosovo as its periphery consists not in its exclusion from EU support but rather in the fact that the country has not been a priority for it

Table A9.2: Anonymous interviews cited

Inter- viewee	Age	Gen- der	Birth- place/ ethnicity	Political party/ ideology	Type of inter- view	Date of interview	Name of the inter- viewer
i1	50	M	Kosovo Serbian	Progressive Democratic Party/centre left	Audio	24 Feb 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i2	26	F	Kosovo Albanian	Vetëvendosje!/ centre left	Audio	24 Feb 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i3	31	M	Kosovo Egyptian	New Demo- cratic Initiative of Kosovo/cen- tre left	Audio	8 Mar 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i4	58	F	Kosovo Albanian	Alliance for the Future of Kosovo/centre right	Audio	22 Mar 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i5	37	M	Kosovo Albanian	Democratic Party of Kosovo/centre right	Audio	28 Mar 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i6	30	M	Kosovo Albanian	Vetëvendosje!/ centre left	Audio	30 Mar 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i7	37	F	Kosovo Albanian	Democratic Party of Kosovo/centre right	Audio	30 Mar 2023	Bardhok Bashota
i8	38	F	Kosovo Albanian	Democratic League of Kosovo/centre right	Written	7 Apr 2023	Bardhok Bashota