

Belgrade–Pristina dialogue

The rocky road towards a comprehensive normalisation agreement

SUMMARY

Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are key elements of the EU accession process for all Western Balkan countries. The dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, initiated in 2011 and facilitated by the EU, achieved some initial success, such as the Brussels Agreement of 2013. Following a flare-up of border tensions in July 2022 and a Franco–German initiative in November 2022, in February 2023 the EU presented and brokered a proposal for an Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia. While the two parties only gave their tacit consent, the agreement provided positive momentum for negotiations and a blueprint for normalisation. In March 2023 in Ohrid, Kosovo and Serbia agreed on the implementation annex to the agreement.

Despite these positive results, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said his country had agreed on 'some kind of deal' to normalise relations. 'We have agreed on some points, not on all points. This is not the final deal', he stated in Ohrid, highlighting the two sides' different perceptions of the normalisation agreement. For Kosovo, it symbolises the recognition of its statehood by Serbia, while for Serbia, it appears to have more economic relevance. Serbia also insists that the process must comply with its Constitution, which considers Kosovo an integral part of Serbian territory, and with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999). The outcome of the political dialogue will influence Serbia's EU accession process, as the commitments made in Ohrid will be incorporated into the 35th negotiation chapter ('Other issues') and will likewise serve as a condition for Kosovo's promised EU path.



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Introduction

Kosovo,¹ with a population of 1.8 million, is predominantly ethnically Albanian (93 %). In 2008, it unilaterally declared independence from Serbia. Five EU Member States (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) have not recognised this status, despite the [advisory opinion](#) of the International Court of Justice delivered on 22 July 2010, which concluded that 'the declaration of independence of Kosovo adopted on 17 February 2008 did not violate international law'. United Nations Security Council (UNSC) members China and Russia have not recognised Kosovo's statehood either, thereby blocking the country's accession to the United Nations (UN). Joining the UN requires a UNSC vote in favour and a two-thirds UN General Assembly (UNGA) majority, which Kosovo lacks as well. It has, however, acceded to some international organisations such as the [World Bank](#).

Belgrade–Pristina dialogue

Alongside other Western Balkan countries, Kosovo has been offered a 'European future', a commitment reiterated at the EU–Western Balkans summits in [Thessaloniki](#) (2003), [Sofia](#) (2018), and [Zagreb](#) (2020), and more recently in [Brdo](#) (2021) and [Tirana](#) (2022). At these meetings, EU leaders reaffirmed their 'unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans' ([Zagreb Declaration](#)). In addition to the [Copenhagen criteria](#), two specific conditions apply to the Western Balkan countries since Croatia's accession to the EU: **regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations** as the basis for resolving bilateral problems, including the Belgrade–Pristina dispute.

Although Belgrade and Pristina engaged in the [EU-mediated dialogue](#) in March 2011, a year after the adoption of UNGA [Resolution 64/298](#), achieving 'comprehensive normalisation' of their relations – an essential precondition for both Serbia's and Kosovo's progress towards EU membership – remains out of reach despite some encouraging developments.² In 2013, as part of the dialogue, Serbia and Kosovo consented to the **First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations** (the [Brussels Agreement](#)). Kosovar Albanian political scientist Krenar Gashi pointed out that the agreement contained [legal ambiguities](#) affording both parties flexibility in implementing its provisions. However, only the Kosovar Assembly ratified the Brussels Agreement as an 'international agreement'; Serbia did not. In 2018, after Kosovo unilaterally imposed 100 % tariffs on all Serbian goods, the two parties suspended the dialogue. Despite these difficulties, the international community has tried to defuse the conflict, in particular through the involvement of the EU and the United States (US). Antagonistic actions on both sides continued throughout 2019. Zahir Tanin, Head of the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) [observed](#) in February 2019: 'There has been a tendency to disrupt rather than de-escalate the situation'.

On 2 April 2020, [Miroslav Lajčák](#) was appointed EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues. The EUSR's policy objectives were set out in his [mandate](#): 'First and foremost, achieving comprehensive normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, which is key to their respective European paths'. Lajčák's appointment was welcomed as a sign of a relaunch of the dialogue. In July 2020, after a 20-month break, the dialogue resumed following a partial lifting of the tariffs by Kosovo. On 16 July 2020, the then High Representative/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), Josep Borrell, [hosted](#) a high-level meeting with the then Kosovo Prime Minister, Avdullah Hoti, and the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić. This was the first dialogue meeting since [November 2018](#). It took place after the 10 July 2020 virtual summit hosted by the French President, Emmanuel Macron, and the German

Chancellor, Angela Merkel, in support of the relaunch of the dialogue. At the Foreign Affairs Council meeting of 12 October 2020, HR/VP Borrell [said](#) that '[if there is political will,] reaching an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina is a matter of months, not years'.

Following the [Franco-German initiative](#) of 2022, EU-facilitated negotiations culminated in the submission on 27 February 2023 of an 11-point 'EU proposal', titled [Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia](#), in which it charted a path to normalisation (this agreement, together with the [Implementation Annex](#) to it, are referred to as the Ohrid Agreement). However, on 10 March President Vučić [reiterated](#) his view that Serbia 'will not agree to Kosovo joining NATO, nor will it recognise Kosovo in any way'. However, he confirmed that Serbia 'must remain in the negotiation process'. Following a 12-hour discussion at their meeting of 18 March in Ohrid in the presence of the EU and US delegations, President Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, [agreed](#) on the implementation annex to the EU proposal.

On 1 September 2024, Ambassador [Aivo Orav](#) took office as Head of the EU Office in Kosovo/ European Union Special Representative in Kosovo. In January 2025, the Council of the European Union appointed [Peter Sørensen](#) as EUSR for the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues. His mandate remains unchanged: to work towards comprehensive normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia, promote good neighbourly relations and reconciliation in the Western Balkans, help the region overcome the legacy of the past, enhance the EU's visibility and effectiveness through public diplomacy, and ensure the consistency and effectiveness of EU action in the Western Balkans.

2023 Ohrid Agreement

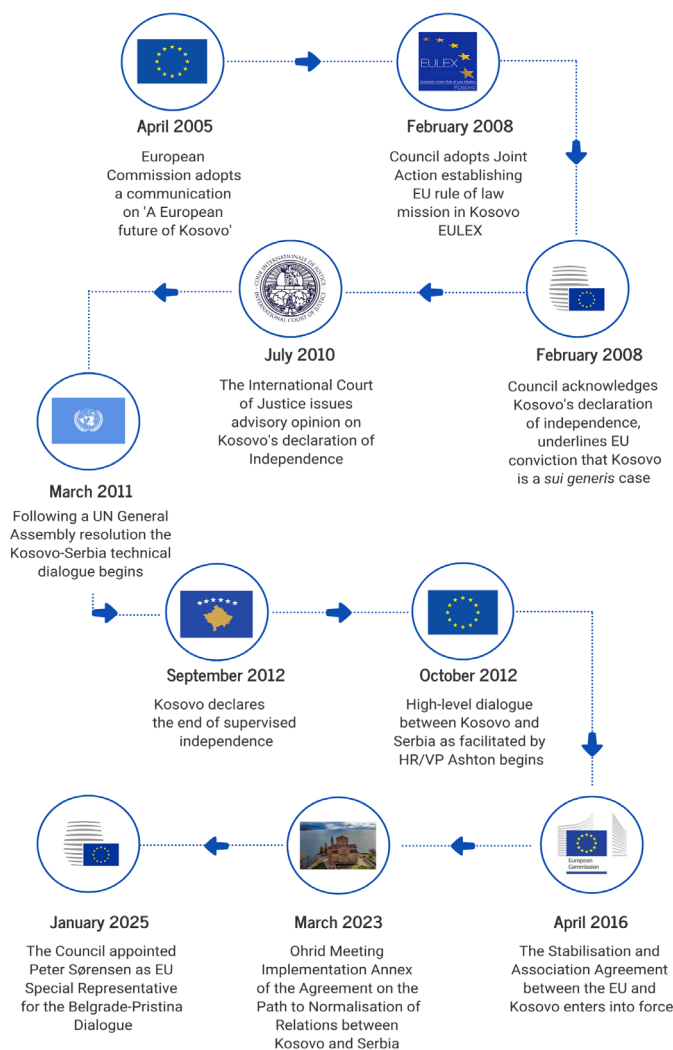
Despite the relative [euphoria](#) at the meeting in Ohrid, particularly on the side of the EU delegation – with the HR/VP [announcing](#) that 'Kosovo and Serbia have agreed on the Implementation Annex of the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between them' and that 'the Parties have fully committed to honour all Articles of the Agreement, and implement all their respective obligations expeditiously and in good faith' – President Vučić [told](#) the press dryly that Kosovo and Serbia had reached 'some kind of deal'. 'We have agreed on some points, not on all points. This is not the final deal', Vučić added. He further specified that for his country to advance towards EU membership, it would need to implement the Ohrid Agreement as part of the requirements under [Chapter 35](#) ('Other Issues') of the country's EU accession negotiations, which include, among other things, normalisation of relations with Kosovo.

Furthermore, at a forum held on 30 March 2023 by the Vienna Diplomatic Academy, Kosovo's President, Vjosa Osmani, [stated](#) that Western powers had coerced her government into accepting [Article 7](#) of the 'basic agreement'.³ 'Kosovo did not want article 7 in the agreement ... it has not been the right choice to push Kosovo in this direction', President Osmani explained.

These diverging reactions to the agreement in Ohrid were already discernible at the 27 February 2023 [meeting](#)

and were further reconfirmed by the two sides' stances towards the EU proposal: Kosovo was ready to sign the agreement, while Serbia was not (the ultimate solution was for the sides to 'tacitly agree').

Figure 1 – Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and EU-Kosovo relations: Key steps



Source: Author's timeline, 2025.

Critics, among them Professor [Daniel Serwer](#), have observed that the Ohrid Agreement seems to be more process-focused, without ensuring a true commitment from the parties involved, given that they did not sign it and it does not hold validity under international law. Furthermore, the parties did not assume any reciprocal commitments or set a deadline for implementation. According to Professor Serwer, 'A process-focused agreement without signatures leaves a lot to future negotiations. This one is more smoke and mirrors than substance. It is more likely to generate further confusion than peace'. Furthermore, the Ohrid 'deal' was not ratified by the Kosovo Assembly or the Serbian Parliament, and it was not registered in the [UN Depository of Treaties](#).

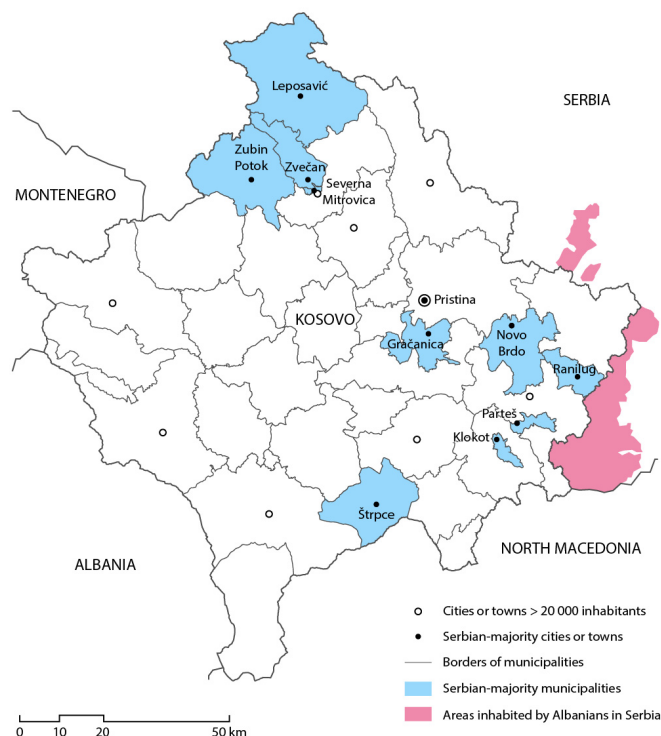
The different attitudes towards the Ohrid Agreement reflect the longstanding difficulty in finding common ground for working on a comprehensive and legally binding normalisation agreement. Obstacles in this regard include the two sides' differing notions of what normalisation means: for Kosovo, as former Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti [stated](#) in October 2020, that 'the dialogue will be concluded with mutual recognition'. [Bernard Nikaj](#), a former Kosovo ambassador to Brussels, wrote that the solution offered by the EU is the 'only one available for both Kosovo and Serbia and if they don't take it they will start to fall faster into the abyss of either Russian and Chinese influence in the case of Serbia or near-complete global isolation in the case of Kosovo'. In February 2023, Prime Minister Kurti [stated](#): 'we do accept the EU Proposal for normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, and consider it a good basis for further discussion and a solid platform for moving forward'.

However, as [stated](#) by President Vučić on 12 March 2023, the 'factual or de jure' recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty, as implied by Point 4 of the 'EU proposal' is unacceptable to Serbia. Recognising Kosovo's independence and sovereignty under international law is a red line for Serbia. Belgrade's position rather suggests that it is seeking economic normalisation facilitating trade and investment. As [Marko Đurić](#), Serbian Ambassador to the United States and former chairman of the Serbian Government Office for Kosovo and Metohija stated, Belgrade's position remains rooted in the [Serbian Constitution](#) and [UN Security Council Resolution 1244](#): 'Do not dream about the story of Kosovo's independence. Let us discuss practical issues, cooperation, and that is what we will absolutely do'. The preamble to the Serbian Constitution still refers to 'the Province of Kosovo and Metohija' as 'an integral part of the territory of Serbia'. Article 203 of the Constitution requires a referendum for amendments to a number of its provisions, including the one on Kosovo being an integral part of Serbia. Within the former Yugoslav Federation, Kosovo was an autonomous province of Serbia, the latter being one of the six 'republics' that made up the federation. Following the [rise to power](#) of nationalists, Kosovo's autonomy was revoked in 1990 and placed under Belgrade's direct control.

As [pointed out](#) by experts, two years on, the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement is still pending. The EU-facilitated verbal deal to implement the 'normalisation' of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, reached in Ohrid, continues to hang in the balance as the Kosovo–Serbia political dialogue remains nearly fully paralysed. This paralysis seems to continue, partially due to the current internal political deadlock in Kosovo. Prime Minister Kurti was unable to secure an approval vote for his cabinet by the Kosovo Assembly following the February parliamentary elections and was forced to call [snap elections](#), which are scheduled for 28 December 2025.

The association/community of Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo

Figure 2 – Serb municipalities in Kosovo



Source: EEAS and the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, 2025.

In March 2023, Vučić [reiterated](#) the need for the Kosovo authorities to establish an association/community of Serb-majority municipalities (A/CSM) as a forum for dialogue with the country's Serb minority, in line with what Pristina had pledged in a decade-old agreement also mediated by the EU.⁴ Analysts [believe](#) that the establishment of an A/CSM is a necessary prerequisite for the achievement of the Belgrade-Pristina political dialogue. They furthermore argue that the unconditional application of the [Brussels Agreement of 2013](#) would lead to the return of Serbs to Kosovar institutions, from which they had [resigned](#) in November 2022. This view was also supported by then HR/VP Borrell, who [stated](#) on 7 November 2022 that: 'The Kosovo Assembly has ratified the Brussels Agreement and Kosovo's Constitutional Court ruled that the association/community needs to be established. Therefore, its establishment is a binding legal obligation for Kosovo. Continued failure to implement this obligation undermines the principle of rule of law and damages Kosovo's reputation and credibility'. 'If there will be no Association for Serb-majority municipalities, then there will be no [normalisation] agreement at all', [said](#) Lajčák in Belgrade on 14 March 2023. 'In Europe, there are models of self-government of minority groups or people. It is nothing dangerous, no one should be afraid of it. It is normal in Europe that we have a legal guarantee, rules, that the minority community feels safe', Lajčák added.

Although the establishment of an A/CSM was the most important element of the 2013 and 2015 agreements,⁵ Kosovo still refuses to implement any related provisions. The European Commission,

in its 2022 [report on Kosovo](#), stated that the 'Kosovo government needs to uphold its previous commitments and commit to the full implementation of all past Dialogue agreements ... Kosovo authorities have failed to take action to establish the association/community of Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo and Kosovo is urged to engage constructively in its establishment with no further delay or obstruction'. The dual name ('association/community') has [created](#) additional problems: Serbia sees it as a governing entity to be established under the Brussels Agreement of 2013, while for Kosovo it is merely an inter-municipal association similar to the existing one involved with helping local governments coordinate and share expertise.

More recently, in its [2025 report on Kosovo](#), the Commission recalled that: 'Both Kosovo and Serbia are expected to implement all of their respective obligations stemming from the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex, as well as all past Dialogue agreements, in line with the official recommitment made in September and October 2024 respectively. This includes the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities (A/CSM). Kosovo is expected to start the process leading its establishment, while Serbia is expected to start delivering on its obligations from the Agreement in parallel by initiating the recognition of Kosovo's documents, symbols and institutions. The Agreement is valid and legally binding for the parties and any formalities, including related to its adoption or "formalisation", should not stand in the way of making progress in its implementation.'

Owing to the two sides' different interpretations of the agreement, [proposals](#) for the setup of the future institutional structures have ranged from a much-feared Kosovar version of Bosnia's Republika Srpska to a loosely organised association or an NGO. However, the A/CSM cannot go beyond Kosovo's constitutional and legal order. As [noted](#) in the Brussels Agreement, the status of the A/CSM 'must be agreed' by the parties to the dialogue and later by Kosovo's Constitutional Court. This agreed procedure therefore excludes any of the extreme and feared outcomes, in particular one where an association of Serb-majority municipalities would develop into an autonomous region over which the central government would have no real control. These fears pushed Kosovo's President, Atifete Jahjaga, to ask the Constitutional Court to assess the compatibility of the A/CSM with the spirit of the Constitution ([Case No KO130/15](#)). In its 23 December 2015 [judgment](#), the court considered that 'the Principles laid down in the chapter on Objectives [of the Association/Community] do not meet entirely the constitutional standards'. Among other issues, the court noted that 'the Principles regarding the organizational structure of the Association/Community raise concerns regarding respect for the diversity of communities resident within the participating municipalities, and the reflection of this diversity in the staffing and structures of the Association/Community as required by the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo'.

Despite clear political reluctance to support establishment of the A/CSM, Kosovar legal scholars such as Florent Muqaj and Përparim Gruda are of the [opinion](#) that doing so is an international obligation that Kosovo 'must fulfil'. Any delay on Kosovo's part involves the risk that the association would take on a form other than that originally envisaged by the two parties. A [statement](#) by Kosovo Prime Minister Kurti that forming an association of Serb-majority municipalities is possible, but only after reaching an agreement with Belgrade on mutual recognition, clearly highlighted the paradoxical nature of the situation.

Risks and future challenges

Following Serbia's [accession negotiations](#), which began in January 2014, and the signing of Kosovo's [Stabilisation and Association Agreement](#) in October 2015, which offered realistic prospects of EU membership to both parties, real commitment to dialogue became more urgent. Despite obstacles and challenges, there is strong support for the EU to continue working towards a 'full and comprehensive agreement'. Resolving the above politically sensitive issues is an extremely challenging task, but the opportunity to do so is also huge, not only for Serbia and Kosovo but also for the region as a whole. Normalisation could help both countries navigate through difficult historical memories and move towards a new EU future. The EU and the two parties have already made progress, mainly through the adoption of the 2023 Ohrid Agreement and the 2013 Brussels Agreement, as well as through official recommitments made in September and October 2024.

Furthermore, in 2019, Serbia and Kosovo agreed to join the [Mini Schengen initiative](#)⁶ (an economic zone between Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo, which that year had a combined gross domestic product of around US\$80 billion). Apart from the political dialogue, Serbia and Kosovo have also signed around 20 bilateral agreements, including on common transport, energy investment and the mutual recognition of university diplomas. According to scholars, the [implementation](#) of the Mini Schengen initiative could demonstrate that the region has reached an advanced level of political maturity by implementing EU policies without having EU membership. Moreover, the countries that are already part of the initiative agreed, through the Berlin Process, to establish a common regional market. The [International Crisis Group](#) notes that the international community and the EU must 'help curb the potential growth of frustration with the status quo, especially among Kosovars, that over time risks being destabilising'. Some experts have raised concerns that, facing a deadlock in negotiations with Belgrade, Pristina can also seek closer economic and political ties with Albania.

In Serbia, [painful memories](#) continue to linger and [wounds remain open](#), with opinion polls [showing](#) that **81 % of Serbs oppose recognising Kosovo's independence** even if it would accelerate their EU integration. [Research](#) conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy in November 2020 found that only 8 % of Serbs at the time believed that the aim of the dialogue with Pristina should be the 'recognition of Kosovo within current borders'; 48 % of respondents believed that the dialogue should be aimed at returning Kosovo to Serbia 'with wider autonomy'.⁷ In 2020, Serbia [was also asking](#) whether joining the EU is a realistic objective. President Vučić's stance is clear: 'We don't see the real alternative to that path ... But, you know, we have been on that path for 20 years already. I think, apart from Turkey, not a single country has been waiting so many years.' A 2020 analysis by the US [International Republican Institute](#) showed that only 29 % of Serbs supported an exclusive EU/Western foreign policy orientation and 36 % would support a balanced Western/Russian orientation. In Kosovo, 88 % of respondents favoured a pro-EU/Western oriented foreign policy.

The war in Ukraine has not changed pro-Russian sentiments in Serbia. A poll shows that Putin is the 'world leader' most [admired](#) by Serbs. Additionally, **95 % view Russia as a true ally, while only 11 % see the EU that way**, despite the EU being Serbia's main financial supporter, according to Eurostat. The same poll finds that 68 % of Serbian respondents believe that NATO, not the Russian Federation and Vladimir Putin, initiated the war in Ukraine, with 82 % opposing the sanctions imposed on Russia. The latest Commission report took full note of the internal situation in Serbia, which can be summed up using the [words](#) of an analyst: 'This year's report on Serbia marks a notable shift in tone. It is sharper, more sceptical and less optimistic, reflecting the country's democratic backsliding and growing estrangement from Brussels.'

Position of the European Parliament

Parliament fully supports the enlargement policy and the merit-based approach to accession negotiations. It is in favour of the accession of both Kosovo and Serbia, once applicant countries meet all preconditions. Parliament's [recommendation](#) of June 2020 on the Western Balkans recalled the need for enlargement as a positive EU agenda that must be accompanied by strong and tangible incentives. Parliament stressed that the 'enlargement process fosters and strengthens capacities to resolve bilateral disputes and strives for reconciliation between societies in the region'. As EU co-legislator and budgetary authority, Parliament also supported the [economic and investment plan for the Western Balkans](#) adopted in October 2020, which is to mobilise some €9 billion in investment to boost the region's economic and social development.

According to Parliament's [recommendation](#) on the new EU strategy for enlargement adopted in November 2022, enlargement policy is 'the most effective EU foreign policy instrument and one of the Union's most successful policies'. It is a strategic investment in stability and prosperity on the European continent. The recommendation includes 'step[ping] up the EU's constructive engagement with the authorities of both Serbia and Kosovo to achieve a comprehensive legally binding normalisation agreement.'

In its [resolution](#) of July 2022 on the 2021 Commission Report on Kosovo, Parliament stated that 'the independence of Kosovo is irreversible' and underlined that 'progress in normalising relations with Serbia based on mutual recognition is a necessary precondition for both countries to advance on their European path'. In its [resolution](#) of July 2022 on the 2021 Commission Report on Serbia, Parliament reconfirmed its 'unequivocal support for the EU-facilitated Belgrade–Pristina dialogue'. It also expressed concerns that public support for EU membership in Serbia has been significantly lower than in the rest of the region, and that according to the latest polls, a majority of Serbians are against joining the EU.

More recently, in its [resolution](#) of 7 May 2025 on the 2023 and 2024 Commission Reports on Kosovo Parliament reiterated its firm belief that Kosovo's future lies in the EU and that all efforts to bring Kosovo out of the 'grey zone' are in the interest of both Kosovo and the EU, especially given current geopolitical dynamics in the region, rapid major shifts in world politics and growing competition with authoritarian regimes. It also reiterated the importance of constructive engagement by both Kosovo and Serbia to achieve a comprehensive legally binding normalisation agreement, based on mutual recognition and in accordance with international law. Finally, Parliament called on both Kosovo and Serbia to implement the Brussels and Ohrid Agreements, including the establishment of the association/community of Serb-majority municipalities.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the International Court of Justice's opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence.
- ² The UNGA had welcomed 'the readiness of the European Union to facilitate a process of dialogue between the parties' and clarified that 'the process of dialogue in itself would be a factor for peace, security and stability in the region, and that dialogue would be to promote cooperation, achieve progress on the path to the European Union and improve the lives of the people'.
- ³ According to the article, 'Both Parties commit to establish specific arrangements and guarantees, in accordance with relevant Council of Europe instruments and by drawing on existing European experiences, to ensure an appropriate level of self-management for the Serbian community in Kosovo and ability for service provision in specific areas, including the possibility for financial support by Serbia and a direct communication channel for the Serbian community to the Government of Kosovo. The Parties shall formalise the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and afford strong level of protection to the Serbian religious and cultural heritage sites, in line with existing European models.'
- ⁴ See also [Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo – General Principles/Main Elements](#).
- ⁵ Twelve of the 15 points of the 2013 Brussels Agreement specified the creation of an 'Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities' and covered the governance of Kosovo's Serb-controlled northern region. Only one point was explicitly about bilateral relations, and all it said was that neither party would block the other's progress toward EU membership. There are no doubts with regard to the establishment of the association, as the agreement stated that 'there will be an Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo'.
- ⁶ The majority of Kosovar politicians are against this initiative, as they perceive it as a reconstitution of the 'Yugoslav space'.
- ⁷ Analysis reveals that Serb citizens are only partially informed about the content of the Belgrade–Pristina negotiations and that a majority think that overall, the process is not transparent enough. Despite this, half of them support the dialogue, although 90 % feel that it has brought no tangible benefit and 75 % think its effect is almost nil. Citizens seem to believe that the dialogue has the potential to resolve the outstanding issues but feel it has been wasted on dealing with secondary issues that bring no positive results.

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eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

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