



**WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:
DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING
AND EXTERNAL ACTORS' INFLUENCE**

Understanding the Key Players and Influence of External Actors in Kosovo

Shpat Balaj

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Author: **Shpat Balaj**, Researcher, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies,
shpat.balaj@qkss.org

Proofreading: **Abdala Chabayta**

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The Prague Security Studies Institute, Pohořelec 6
118 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic

www.pssi.cz

Abstract

This report delves into the examination of external influence in Kosovo and how these influences manifest themselves. Focusing on key players such as Türkiye, Russia, China, Arab states of the Persian Gulf, the European Union, and the United States, the report evaluates their political, economic, and social impacts in Kosovo. The report contends that the historical context in which Kosovo emerged as a state has determined how external influence is perceived in the country.

The West's support for Kosovo's democratization and state-building efforts has resulted in the internalization of Western influence in Kosovo's institutions. However, the countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence pose a political challenge to the country. The study sheds light on the influence that countries such as Türkiye and the Gulf States wield in Kosovo, primarily regarding ideology and identity.

Introduction

This analysis focuses on the key players who exert influence in Kosovo, the forms of this influence, and the areas where it is most noticeable. The report analyzes these influences and explains their political, economic, and social effects on the country. The paper mainly focuses on the influence of Türkiye, Russia, China, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf (further referred to as the Gulf states/countries), as well as the influence of the European Union and the United States. The report begins with a short overview

of the current situation regarding external influence and how it manifests in Kosovo. Additionally, the report offers four separate chapters for each player that is examined, including the US and EU, Türkiye, Russia, and the Gulf States. Furthermore, it also discusses the influence and attitudes of Serbia towards Kosovo and how the influence of other countries, such as Russia and China, on Serbia also enables the permeation of their influence in local communities.

Methodology

A combination of research methods, including desk research, media monitoring, interviews, and data analysis, were used to conduct this study. The desk research included the analysis of current primary and secondary sources, such as journal articles, media reports, and investigations, reports from local, regional, and international organizations, interviews with other researchers and journalists, opinion pieces, and official reports of international organizations active in Kosovo and the region. Throughout the course of

the study, media monitoring was used as a research tool to examine whether external influences were apparent in the narratives of the Albanian and Serbian-speaking media. Additionally, five structured interviews with experts, institutional officials, and relevant stakeholders were conducted for the needs of this report.

Background

The external influence in the country is mainly determined by the historical setting in which Kosovo emerged as a state. Following a series of events that began with Belgrade abolishing Kosovo's autonomy in 1989, the Kosovar leadership during the 90s adopted a strategy of nonviolent resistance as an alternative to preventing war and submission towards Serbian violence while also seeking to garner international support. However, the Yugoslav and Serbian forces' initiation of a military operation against Kosovars ultimately resulted in the creation of the Kosovo Liberation Army, which engaged in armed resistance. After a failed attempt at negotiation in Rambouillet, France, in 1999, to stop the conflict, NATO launched a military operation against Serbia, forcing Serbian security forces to leave Kosovo. As a result, the UN set up an interim administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) and initiated a political process to decide its future status. This process resulted in the "Ahtisaari Plan,"¹ which was a comprehensive proposal submitted in 2007 to determine Kosovo's status. This led to the declaration of independence in 2008, which received international recognition and is now recognized by 101 UN member states, 22 EU member states, and 26 NATO member states.

Western countries continue to support state-building and democratization efforts through different mechanisms, such as the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX). The country has been historically aligned with EU and NATO countries, and in its pursuit of EU and NATO membership, it has further opened itself to Western influence. As a result, the Western influence is internalized in the language and narration institutions have adopted to determine their national goals and vision. Meanwhile, the countries that challenge the independence of Kosovo are on the other side of the influence. So far, two significant actors have played a role or used Kosovo as part of their own narratives: Russia and China, both of which pose a political challenge to Kosovo and the West due to their positions on the Security Council. Furthermore, other countries, such as Türkiye and the Gulf States, have a footprint of influence, mainly in terms of ideology, identity, and religious-related issues. However, Türkiye's influence extends beyond ideological dimensions as a result of their persistent support for Kosovo's statehood and good cooperation with the country's institutions. However, Türkiye's contentious posture in international relations in recent years has also highlighted the negative repercussions in Kosovo.

EU and US Influence in Kosovo

Kosovo's political orientation is strongly Western-centric. The Government of Kosovo envisions the country with a strong political foundation in the community of liberal democracies, which translates to good ties with the US, rejection of authoritarianism, and being a modern European state founded on the rule of law (The Government of Kosovo 2021). The pro-Western orientation is also evident among the Kosovars, with 92 percent supporting the country's integration into the EU and 80 percent believing that the republic has no alternative to EU membership.²

The current literature on foreign influence in Kosovo primarily focuses on non-Western actors. Rustemi et al. (2019) argue that the unequal focus in the research on the influence of external actors is there to deflect blame for the potential failures of the international community in the country. There are two facets of Western influence in this respect that could have a rather negative effect on the country. First, a number of European nations do not recognize Kosovo's independence for various reasons³, (in) directly contributing to strengthening the anti-Kosovo narrative that Russia and China primarily promote on

1 The Ahtisaari Plan, formally known as the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (CSP), was a status settlement initiative introduced by former Finnish President, Martti Ahtisaari. The plan aimed to address a multitude of issues associated with the status of Kosovo.

2 The data were extracted from Western Balkans Security Barometer database. For more information, please see securitybarometer.qkss.org.

3 The EU member states that do not recognize Kosovo's independence include Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece.

numerous international forums. In this regard, according to a former political advisor to the President of Kosovo interviewed for this report, the failure of EU member states to recognize Kosovo's independence has had a major impact on its international standing and has contributed to maintaining a tense political and security environment in the Balkans. The outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine further aggravated the situation.

Secondly, the political leverage that the US and the EU have in the country is such that it affects day-to-day political decisions, as argued by an expert in international relations in an online interview conducted on November 10, 2022. While this approach helped improve the accountability of Kosovo's institutions and their capabilities to some extent, it has also occasionally resulted in actions that have weakened the political consensus. An illustration of this is the toppling of the first Kurti government on March 25, 2020, following the motion of no-confidence initiated in the Kosovo parliament by the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), the coalition partner of Kurti's government.⁴ This came in response to the sacking of the Minister of Interior, a member of the LDK party, as it was seen as a violation of the coalition agreement. In addition, LDK accused the government of harming relations with the United States due to the government's conflicting stance with international actors over the economic tariffs imposed on Serbia at the time (Shehu 2020). The fall of the "Kurti 1" government has received criticism for taking place

amid a pandemic, which diverted attention from effective pandemic management (Bami 2020). The international community has shown a split stance on the no-confidence vote. While the US Ambassador to Kosovo expressed satisfaction with the Assembly session regarding the no-confidence vote, the representatives of Germany and France called on the LDK to revoke the no-confidence motion against the Kurti government (Shehu 2020). A significant member of the LDK later alleged that the US Special Envoy to the Western Balkans exerted immense pressure on their party to initiate the motion of no-confidence against the government (Kanali 10 2021). A foreign official's role in directly affecting the Assembly to oust a government was discussed for the first time, potentially revealing another aspect of Western influence in Kosovo.

To conclude, while the political sway of the US and the EU has helped improve the accountability of the institutions, it has, on occasion, resulted in actions that fractured the political consensus within the country, bringing about changes to its political landscape. The allegations of foreign pressure in political decisions have revealed a potentially concerning aspect of Western influence in the country. On the other hand, the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by five EU member states diminishes the EU perspective, which is deemed vital to regional security, as it enables dialogue in the region based on EU values of cooperation and compromise (Morina, 2023).

4 According to Article 100 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, a motion of no confidence can be initiated against the government by a proposal from one-third of all the deputies of the Assembly of Kosovo. For the motion of no confidence to be considered accepted, it must be adopted by a majority vote of all 120 members of the Assembly. If the motion of no confidence is successful, the government is considered to be dismissed and must resign from their positions. The „Kurti 1“ government was dismissed with 82 votes in favor, 34 votes against, and 1 abstention.

The Influence of Türkiye in Kosovo

Türkiye continues to be a strong supporter of Kosovo's statehood. The substantial support provided to international organizations and assistance in gaining recognition in majority-Muslim countries are examples of Türkiye's relations with Kosovo. However, the alignment of Türkiye's position in international relations with the West may not always be consistent. In certain instances, its domestic issues have resulted in adverse impacts in Kosovo, affecting how its influence is perceived and manifested.

The Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, shows a tendency to extend his domestic political objectives and matters to Kosovo, thereby exerting influence on local authorities and leaders. An example of this is the arrest and deportation of the alleged "Gülenists"⁵ in 2018, which concurrently represents one of the most outrageous interferences by a foreign state in Kosovo. Paradoxically, the country's authorities executed the dramatic arrest of six teachers from the "Mehmet Akif School" and arranged their swift deportation to Türkiye in March 2018 (Insajderi 2018). According to Ramush Haradinaj, the former prime minister of Kosovo, this action was taken by certain Kosovo security sector segments without the knowledge of the government. As a result, the former Minister of Internal Affairs and the former director of the Kosovo Intelligence Agency were dismissed (KOHA.net 2018). Given the influence of the former President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, in the security apparatus, his established relationship with the Turkish President has been viewed as a means of exerting control over the security institutions in this case (Madhi 2020).

On the other hand, the divergent views of Türkiye with the West have affected the practical cooperation of local institutions with Türkiye in some cases. As highlighted by a senior official from Kosovo's Ministry of Defense in a face-to-face interview conducted on October 04, 2022, the offer of support from Türkiye in terms of capacity building and provision of necessary equipment for the Ministry and the Kosovo Security Forces is sometimes received with careful consideration by the authorities. The interviewee further contended that the presence of certain trepidations

surrounding Türkiye's support could result in a cautious approach from Kosovo's authorities, which often involves seeking endorsement from the NATO Advisory and Liaison Team (NALT) representatives in the Ministry of Defense for accepting the assistance from Türkiye.

The presence of Turkish investments in Kosovo by companies has sparked discussions regarding potential corruption, reflecting another aspect of Turkish involvement in the country (Rey 2018). For instance, the construction of the "Ibrahim Rugova" highway, the most expensive public project after the independence fully financed by public funds, was entrusted to the Turkish company Bechtel Enka, known for its high costs, lack of transparency, ties to the Turkish President, and allegations of corruption (Brunwasser 2016). The investor and the institutions have not provided sufficient information on the process of execution of this project, which has led to criticism of the project's lack of transparency in the contract agreements.⁶ Another significant project that surfaced the potential influence of Türkiye is the building of the largest mosque in Prishtina, funded by Diyanet. In a public competition with over 200 original concepts, the mosque's design was chosen as a classical Ottoman-style mosque based on the 16th century "Selimiye" Mosque in Türkiye, which has called into question Türkiye's influence in local cultural and religious affairs (Edwards and Colborne 2019).

As this chapter explains, Türkiye's influence in Kosovo is subject to controversy. The case of "Gülenists" demonstrates how Türkiye's domestic interests often take precedence and shape the relationship between the countries, even if they are at odds with those of Kosovo or the West. In this respect, the fact that Türkiye's position sometimes contradicts that of the EU and the US creates the impression that Turkish influence is not always favorable, even if the effects of such influence are not necessarily negative. On the other hand, the transparency issues surrounding various economic projects involving Turkish companies have also raised questions about corruption and the extent of Turkish influence in the country.

5 The term „Gülenists“ refers to individuals who are affiliated with or support the Gülenist movement, which is a global cultural and educational organization founded by Fethullah Gülen. The Turkish government has classified the movement as a terrorist organization and has attributed the failed coup attempt of 2016 to it.

6 As an illustration, the GAP Institute, a Civil Society Organization in Kosovo, publicly expressed concern towards the Ministry of Infrastructure of Kosovo regarding the lack of access to documentation related to infrastructure projects executed by Bechtel Enka, including the „Ibrahim Rugova“ highway. See, for example: <https://www.institutigap.org/Lajme/584>

How Regional Dynamics Influence Kosovo: The Case of Serbia

Serbia's denial to recognize the independence of Kosovo has resulted in continuous obstruction by Serbia in the country's path toward international recognition. Furthermore, Serbia influences the local Serbian community in Kosovo as well, mostly through the utilization of its influence in the dominant Serbian political party in the country, Srpska Lista. The obstructionist attitude towards Kosovo's progress in the international arena, combined with the impact on the Serbian community in Kosovo, has contributed to the maintenance of the status quo in the relations between the two countries. Serbia's resistance to Kosovo's participation in international organizations remains a major obstacle to Kosovo achieving its foreign policy goals. With support from Russia, Serbia has been actively hindering Kosovo's efforts to join INTERPOL, despite the fact that Article 14 of the Brussels Agreement between Kosovo and Serbia obliges both parties not to impede each other's progress (Travers 2018). Similar to its opposition to the INTERPOL application, Serbia actively lobbied for rejecting Kosovo's membership to UNESCO to prevent it from bolstering its international position (Foley 2021). Moreover, in 2017 Serbia launched a "checkbook diplomacy" campaign to ensure the derecognition⁷ of Kosovo in exchange for various economic or diplomatic rewards (Foley 2021, 16).

In addition to its influence over Kosovo through international players and processes, Serbia significantly impacts the Serbian community in Kosovo through the local Serbian political representatives in the Kosovo Parliament. A practical illustration of Serbia's brazen meddling in the country is the most recent dispute between both countries surrounding the license plates of vehicles issued by Serbia for Serbian citizens in Kosovo. In June 2022, the Kosovo Government decided to require all vehicles with license plates issued by Serbian authorities and bearing the acronyms of Kosovo cities to switch to the official Kosovo license plates (Hyseni 2022). Following this decision, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić facilitated meetings with political representatives of the Kosovo Serbian community, who warned of the placement of road barricades and other forms of resistance to the decision (Radio Evropa e Lire 2022a). The start of implementing the decision by the Government of Kosovo through issuing warnings to those using the Serbian-issued plates led to a mass resignation of Kosovo Serbs from institutional positions (Bami and Stojanovic 2022). Following these organized resignations, contracts were signed between the Serbian government and those who had left the country's institutions. These contracts ensure financial compensation from the Serbian state to those who resigned from the institutions and regulate various legal obligations regarding employment, pensions, and health insurance (Radio Evropa e Lire 2022b).

⁷ For more on the theory and practice of derecognition, please see: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781351131759-25/derecognition-states-g%C3%ABzim-visoka>

The Russian Influence and its Regional Enablers

Russia has a certain amount of influence in Kosovo, but not a very significant one, at least not on the ground. This is mostly because of several factors, such as the proximity of Kosovar society to the US and the EU and their perception of Russia as an unfriendly country. Furthermore, Kosovo is independent of Russian gas and oil, and there is an absence of ethnoreligious ties to Russia (Vllasi 2020). During an interview conducted on November 9, 2022, in Prishtina, a former Ambassador of Kosovo to an EU country contended that although these factors may hinder Russia's direct impact on the ground, the consequences of its influence over the country are noticeable globally. The interviewee bases his argument on the fact that Russia has attacked the sovereignty of Kosovo at every available opportunity over the past three decades, whether at the UN Security Council or by backing Serbia in its international campaigns against the country. Moreover, Russia has used Kosovo as a precedent to justify military interventions, border changes in post-Soviet states, and confer state recognition on contested territories in Ukraine and Georgia (Ingimundarson 2022).

In an online interview, a former political adviser to the President of Kosovo emphasized that another factor enabling Russian influence in the country is the presence of media outlets such as Sputnik Serbia. A report by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2020) shows that except in other Bosnian, Croatian,

Montenegrin, and Serbian-speaking countries in the region, the content of Sputnik Serbia is consumed by the local Serbian community in Kosovo as well. Furthermore, in a face-to-face interview conducted on November 9, 2022, a former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in Kosovo highlighted another method by which Russia extends its influence in Kosovo. In this respect, Russia uses Russian staff in international organizations in the country, like the UN and OSCE, who can observe, report on, and in some cases, intervene in the internal developments in Kosovo. An illustration of this is the 2019 arrest of a Russian UNMIK employee who, according to Kosovo Police officials, played a direct role in setting up barricades to thwart a Kosovo Police operation against organized crime in the Serbian-majority municipalities in the north of Kosovo (Fana 2019).

Finally, the mirroring of the Russian influence is also carried out through the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and its proximity to the Russian Orthodox Church. In this instance, the narrative of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church primarily takes advantage of the perceived failures of the West to protect the local Serbian community and their heritage. This enables them to portray Russia as an alternative and a defender of Orthodox culture and traditions, thus giving them more leverage in exercising influence (Heler n.d.).

Chinese Influence in Kosovo

Until recently, China maintained a rather neutral stance towards Kosovo, but this has changed with the expansion of its economic ties with Serbia. China and Serbia share a common stance in their opposition to the independence of Taiwan and Kosovo, respectively. This alignment is evident in their voting behavior at various United Nations bodies, where Serbia consistently supports China's position and vice versa (Kraemer 2022). Similarly to Russia, Kosovo adopted a closed attitude towards China mainly due to its close ties to Serbia and refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence. Nowadays, China does not directly influence the development of Kosovo (except for several attempts). However, the rapid expansion of Chinese influence in the neighboring countries raises prospects for Chinese interest in the country in the near future.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the so-called "Vaccine Diplomacy" was one strategy deployed by the Chinese government to boost the country's visibility in the region, enabling it to project its influence. Most countries in the region received vaccines from China, but Kosovo declined them. Vaccines produced in China were made available by the government of Albania at the request of the government of Kosovo at the time. However, the vaccines were refused because Kosovo authorities would not administer vaccines originating from countries that do not recognize its independence (RTK Live 2021). Conversely,

the Government of Serbia made the Chinese vaccines accessible to the Serbian community residing in the north of Kosovo without the consent of Kosovo authorities. This move was deemed dangerous and a political provocation by the Kosovar authorities, as Serbia served as an enabler of China's "vaccine diplomacy," thus affirming the potential of China to indirectly extend its influence in Kosovo (Ilazi and Avdimetaj 2021).

Similarly, Serbia quietly funded a project to equip Serbian-majority municipalities in the north of Kosovo with unregulated Chinese monitoring technology (Djurdjevic, Heil, and Cvetkovic, 2022). In order to monitor certain schools in the north of Kosovo, the government of Serbia partnered with a U.S.-blacklisted company from China to purchase surveillance cameras and similar technology (Ibid). Moreover, the fact that Chinese corporations have submitted bids for important projects in the country, like a coal-based power plant and road infrastructure projects, is another indicator of China's propensity for involvement. Although they were unsuccessful in this regard, due to the distance of the society and institutions of Kosovo from China and Chinese companies, this indicates a tendency to gain knowledge of the economic landscape of Kosovo as an initial step for potential wider involvement in the future (Shopov 2022).

The Arab States of the Persian Gulf and Kosovo: Little or No Influence at All?

Similar to the West and Türkiye, the relationship of certain Gulf states with Kosovo is determined by their stance on the statehood of Kosovo. In addition to having established diplomatic ties, countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates are also involved in the country through investments, primarily in the fields of health and education, as well as the restoration of religious sites. (Ray 2018). However, the influence of these countries is frequently viewed as contradictory to Kosovo's secular nature, and there is a concern that the Gulf-founded institutions can spread radical Islamic doctrines in the country (Peci and Demjaha 2016). This negative aspect of their influence mostly derives from their lack of knowledge of the specific societal context of Kosovo. In this respect, according to a former Ambassador of Kosovo to an EU country, they overlook the significance of religious balance in Kosovo as well as the secular nature of the society and institutions by viewing the Muslim majority in the country through the prism of the Muslim population in the Gulf countries.

When Albanian imams from the region, including those from Kosovo, started studying in the Gulf countries in

the 2000s, the influence of these countries became more evident. As a result of their exposure to various ideological camps, upon their return, the imams also started to divide ideologically among themselves and form circles that share various viewpoints within a religious structure (Kursani 2015). These ideologies are given room by the pluralism Kosovo fosters. However, they become more pronounced and harmful because the institutions do not develop any counter-narratives to address these issues, according to a Former Political Adviser to the President of Kosovo. Saudi Arabia has significantly influenced the introduction of more conservative religious beliefs and practices and the widespread dissemination of these beliefs and practices. This resulted in a small percentage of the Kosovars joining violent extremist groups in Syria and Iraq.⁸ However, this issue needs to be understood and addressed with regard to other factors that influenced religious radicalism in Kosovo, which are not necessarily related to the influence of the Gulf countries, such as the socio-economic factors, political environment, and specific issues faced by religious communities, etc. (Kursani 2015).

⁸ See, for example, Kursani, Shpend, "Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq" (2015), and Peci, Lulzim, and Agon Demjaha, "What Happened to Kosovo Albanians: The Impact of Religion on the Ethnic Identity in the State-building Period" (2016).

Conclusions

The nonparticipation of Kosovo in international organizations makes it more vulnerable to foreign influence. However, the involvement of the EU and the US in the ongoing democratization of local institutions makes the country more resilient towards the foreign influence that aims to undermine such democratization efforts and hinder Kosovo from moving closer to the EU and NATO. Such influence is mostly the result of attempts by countries like Russia and China to challenge the West and utilize Kosovo as a precedent for political gains. This approach suits Serbia as well, which, as a result, serves as a gatekeeper for these countries to project their influence in Kosovo, particularly among Kosovo's Serbian community. Serbia utilizes the

political power of actors such as Russia and China to block Kosovo's inclusion in international organizations and gain broader international recognition. In this context, the stance of five EU countries also contributes to this matter, as their refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence indirectly supports the anti-Kosovo narrative. Moreover, issues present in religious communities in Kosovo and the questioning of local institutions' capability to preserve the local communities' cultural and religious heritage provide opportunities for external actors such as Türkiye, the Gulf countries, and the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Church to exert their soft power over the various local communities that share religious and cultural ties with them.

Policy Recommendations

- ✘ Any possible solution between Kosovo and Serbia must result in recognition of Kosovo by Serbia and five EU countries that have not recognized the country's independence yet and foresee an accelerated membership in organizations such as NATO to prevent Kosovo and the region's stability from being undermined by foreign influences.
- ✘ A dialogue mechanism should be established between the institutions and the Kosovo Serb community in order to address issues of mutual concern and ensure their meaningful participation in decision-making processes.
- ✘ The institutions in Kosovo should implement targeted education campaigns, media literacy programs, and partnerships with local NGOs and civil society organizations to reduce the impact of propaganda in local communities.
- ✘ Kosovo's government should develop a comprehensive communication and awareness-raising strategy that would aim at strengthening the resilience of the community, institutions, and non-governmental actors towards the effects of foreign influence.
- ✘ The institutions of Kosovo and local religious communities must ensure ownership in the preservation of the religious and cultural heritage of the country's local communities, as well as the facilitation of religious freedom, to preserve a multi-religious society. State and religious affairs must remain clearly separated in this regard. Greater efforts must be made to cut off the connections between various religious and divisive political agendas.
- ✘ Kosovo institutions must ensure transparency and accountability in economic projects involving foreign investors to avoid the projection of foreign influence in political, economic, and cultural projects.

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