# NIGHT OWL SESSION REPORT

2024

NEW SOCIAL INITIATIVE

KCSS Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

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# Diplomats' perspective

Despite ongoing challenges and crises, the progress achieved by the US and EU in the Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia should not be underestimated. The Agreement on the Path to Normalization, born out of sustained international pressure, emerged from a prolonged crisis. While major breakthroughs in its implementation are unlikely before the upcoming elections in both the US and Kosovo, it remains crucial to keep the dialogue active. The EU's primary leverage continues to be the integration process, with the Growth Plan serving as a key incentive for enlargement. The connection between the Dialogue and the Growth Plan cannot be emphasized enough, as the implementation of the former unlocks the benefits of the latter.

US-EU cooperation has been central to the Dialogue. While the EU facilitated negotiations, US support has ensured that both sides remain committed. The shared goal is peace and stability in the region, alongside Kosovo's eventual integration into the EU and NATO. Normalization is a prerequisite for this, making the Dialogue indispensable. A critical concern is the potential for destabilization, as no one wants to see a Russian-style invasion. The ideal outcome would be the eventual withdrawal of KFOR, signifying Kosovo's full security independence.

This summary reflects the views expressed in an informal discussion organized by the NSI during the Kosovo Peace and Democracy Summit. In a rare departure from the usual format of NSI's informal discussions, which generally exclude diplomats, US and EU diplomats served as introductory speakers.

However, civil society and political party representatives largely challenged the points raised. While the Agreement on the Path to Normalization may be considered a success, there is insufficient attention to the fact that its implementation can be delayed to the point of obsolescence. Beyond close coordination between the US and the EU on the Dialogue–coordination which has not always existed in the past–both parties still lack a strong policy response to the ever-deteriorating situation in northern Kosovo. Similarly, as echoed in other events during the KPDS, the Growth Plan, while a significant incentive, does not appear to be a true game-changer. Civil society organizations expressed skepticism regarding its potential to drive economic growth beyond limited short-term successes. They questioned the capacity of governments to balance regular reform efforts with the priorities of the Growth Plan, and noted that while some aspects may raise competitiveness among countries, the spirit of regional cooperation might be undermined.

Finally, although diplomats acknowledged the potential for escalation as a considerable concern, other participants noted that the recent deterioration in relations signals a serious situation. While the crisis is not as severe as in Ukraine, the political situation is nonetheless troubling. With local elections delayed until October next year, swift results are needed to prevent further destabilization. The prospect of a more cooperative government in the near future offers some hope, but if this does not materialize, the same unresolved issues will dominate the next discussions.

## Normalization Deficiencies and the Role of the ASMM

Many participants emphasized the unspoken acceptance of deficiencies in the normalization process. For instance, the shift from trilateral to bilateral meetings raises questions about the EU's approach. Why isn't the EU applying more pressure to advance the process? The Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASMM), which should have been a pivotal mechanism for integration, remains unimplemented. While Dialogue is still seen as the best path forward, frustrations–particularly within the Serbian community–are mounting, and participants urged for more policy action to address these grievances.

Diplomats recognized that the ASMM represents an intermediary step towards a legally binding normalization agreement. The path forward is clear–what remains is the commitment to follow through and implement it. However, the gradual erosion of the ASMM's intended role is evident. While efforts are being made to encourage the return of the Serbian community to Kosovo's institutions, both sides remain resistant. The realities on the ground must be acknowledged as the Dialogue resumes under European Commission oversight.

On the other hand, other interlocutors warned that the political vacuum is being used to dismantle the reasons for creating the ASMM, with Kosovo facing international condemnation while Belgrade maintains strong international support. "Kurti's sequencing plan is being implemented on the ground, and it seems unlikely that Dialogue will resume anytime soon," a policy analyst said.

## Sovereignty vs. Coordination: Kosovo's Government Stands Firm

Diplomats highlighted the international community's sensitive position regarding Kosovo's sovereignty. While legal measures have been implemented, their negative consequences largely stem from the absence of a proper transition period. As a US diplomat explained, this presents a paradox: while the US recognizes Kosovo as a sovereign country and cannot oppose actions that align with its Constitution, such as the Central Bank's regulations on cash operations, there should have been a longer transition period and better communication to inform stakeholders about these changes. There remains strong support for Kosovo's vision of a democratic, multiethnic society under the Ahtisaari Plan, but actions such as the instrumentalization of the police contradict this ideal. Full sovereignty over the entire territory is needed, ensuring that all citizens are integrated into the system and actively contributing.

An EU diplomat added that the facilitators find it challenging to convince the Kosovo government of the Dialogue's positive aspects. While the EU has implemented punitive measures, these have remained in effect longer than anticipated, and each time the EU considers lifting them, new unilateral actions by the Kosovo government emerge. Unfortunately, these sanctions disproportionately affect ordinary citizens rather than those in power.

## Trust and the Erosion of Autonomy

A Kosovo Serb participant underlined the deep-seated distrust between communities, despite efforts to downplay the extent to which political tensions affect ethnic relations. Kosovo Albanians increasingly believe that even those Kosovo Serbs integrated into the system will always remain loyal to Belgrade. Meanwhile, Kosovo Serbs view autonomy and self-governance as untenable, easily undermined by future Kosovo governments. Trust has been lost, and it remains unclear if it can be restored.

Another Kosovo Serb representative pointed to distrust toward dialogue facilitators. He reminded diplomats of their previous requests for Albanian mayors in Serb-majority northern Kosovo to operate from alternative locations and refrain from political decisions due to legitimacy concerns, yet this has not occurred. In such conditions, Kosovo Serbs are unwilling to accept the "reality on the ground" and are further isolating themselves, refusing to participate in political processes without real incentives. This, he predicted, will only deepen the divide between communities.

## The Way Forward: Hope for Facilitators, Frustration for Locals

Diplomats found that the multiple crises are at least resolving the long-standing issue of Serbian institutions in Kosovo, which many perceive as illegal and parallel. However, some participants disagreed, noting that certain institutions do not have their "equivalents" within the Kosovo system. The current situation has also increased Kosovo Serb dependence on Serbia, with more Kosovo Serbs now receiving salaries from Serbia than ever before. One participant from northern Kosovo expressed skepticism over hopes for integration, noting that those Kosovo Serbs who remain in or are newly employed by Kosovo institutions are viewed with suspicion by both sides. Many leave soon after employment due to pressure from Serbia, while those who stay are labeled as Serbian spies by Kosovo authorities. Even with full participation of Kosovo Serb political representatives, elections are unlikely to bring significant change, as Serbian MPs already exist in the system.

With the Kosovo government refusing to take full responsibility for minority protections, this remains an international responsibility. Without stronger engagement, the situation will only worsen, affecting both Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic ambitions and its access to the first grant from the Growth Plan. Ongoing punitive measures are damaging Kosovo's perception of the EU, and without a clear plan forward, discussions will continue to revolve around which Serbian institutions might close next or what the next unilateral action might be.

## Multiethnicity and Kosovo’s Future

The concept of multiethnicity, as outlined in the Ahtisaari Plan, has fallen short of its intended realization. Rather than fostering multiethnic cohesion, the Dialogue has largely centered on political maneuvering, neglecting people-focused solutions. Kosovo's commitment to building a truly multiethnic state is continuously tested, and the achievement of a sustainable, democratic, multiethnic society remains essential for the country's long-term stability. Failure to realize this vision will only entrench existing divisions and further impede the region's progress.

Kosovo Peace and Democracy Summit (KPDS) is an annual event dedicated to fostering dialogue, collaboration, and sustainable solutions for peace, democracy, and regional stability.

This event & report are co-funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Opinions expressed in the report do not necessarily represent those of the donors.