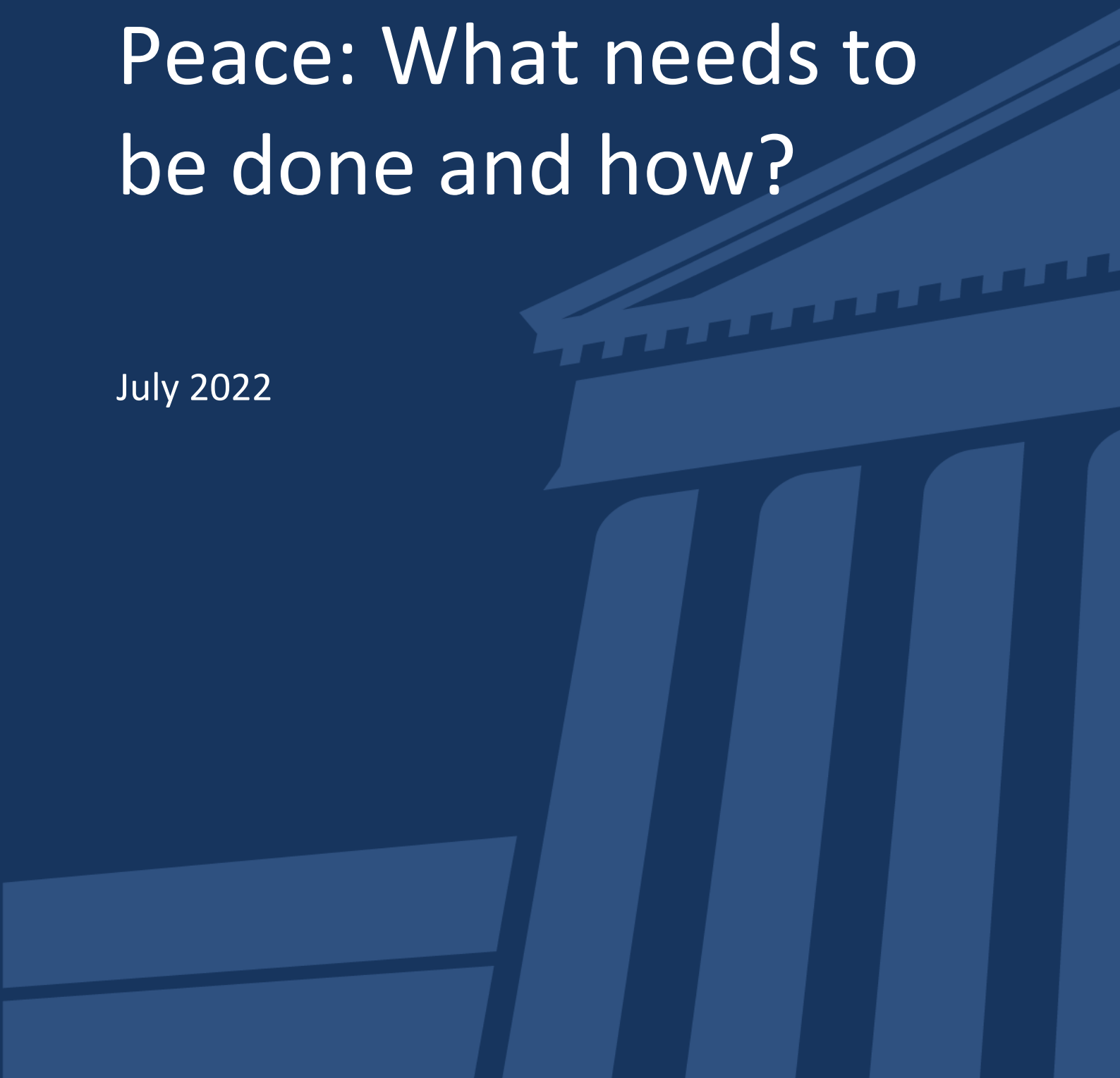


Kosovo's Agreement with Partnership for Peace: What needs to be done and how?

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KOSOVO'S AGREEMENT WITH PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE: WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE AND HOW?

INTRODUCTION

Ties between NATO and Kosovo have run deep and been of extreme importance since the Yugoslavia wars in 1999, even before independence. Since the establishment of the Republic of Kosovo, NATO has been present in the country by means of its Kosovo Force (KFOR) peacekeeping mission, still standing today albeit with more limited mandate and personnel. In parallel to this engagement, the Kosovar government has been clear and vocal regarding its primary objective, a core part of its foreign policy strategy, of seeking Euro-Atlantic integration, namely acceding to the EU and NATO.

This Policy Analysis looks into NATO-Kosovo relations and possibility of formalizing, in this case by the instance of Kosovo joining NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) framework. For context, we present NATO's varied forms of formal partnership framework before converging on the PfP in more detail. Secondly, the Analysis looks at a potential NATO partnership from the Kosovar perspective, on why and how the Government has actively sought alignment by means of transforming its security forces and building its armed forces in accordance to NATO standards. Finally, the Analysis considers if the outbreak of war in Ukraine may play in Kosovo's benefit when it comes to achieving a formal partnership with the Western military Alliance. The paper will conclude to show that Kosovo has a long road to pave until reaching all accepted criteria for NATO accession and, as such, the Government should put heavy efforts into lobbying for other forms of proper, formal partnership with NATO, therein still elevating bilateral relations and Kosovo's security guarantees.

I. NATO PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORKS AND KOSOVO'S ABSENCE

The NATO aerial bombing of Kosovo in 1999 set the tone for Kosovo's strong sense of allegiance towards the Western military Alliance. In the aftermath of the war, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 established the UN Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the deployment of the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) peacekeeping mission. KFOR's original mandate was to deter renewed hostilities and securitize the region in order to achieve public safety and order, as well as to demilitarize the Kosovo Liberation Army. Since Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, KFOR adjusted its mandate and has been progressively transferring duties to the Republic of Kosovo's national security institutions, such as for border control. Nowadays, KFOR's mission remains widely accepted across all political parties in the country, and has been acutely in recent years cut in anticipation of a forthcoming total independence of Kosovar institutions from the NATO security mission. As things stand, 22 years into its launch, KFOR personnel numbers have decreased from 50,000 in its original mandate to 3,800 presently, encompassing 28 contributing nations¹.

Most recently in February 2022, on the onset of the war outbreak in Eastern Europe at the hand of Russia, the Assembly of Kosovo has formally announced its priority goal to heighten this longstanding relationship with NATO into one of formal partnership, rather than simply one of Kosovo as capacity-building beneficiary. Among the different NATO partnership framework, Kosovo it not a member of any, as detailed ahead.

¹ Balkan Insight, "Ukraine to Withdraw Troops from Kosovo NATO Mission", 8 March 2022, via: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/08/ukraine-to-withdraw-troops-from-kosovo-nato-mission/>.

The different NATO partnership frameworks

Since its foundation in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has grown from 12 Allied countries to now a total of 30 member countries. As it grew in its scope, so did NATO widen partnership tools and mechanisms to support cooperation with partner countries, be it in the immediate vicinity or globally more remote to NATO territory. NATO partnership frameworks can encompass strategic defense policies, programmes or tailor-made action plans made in collaboration with a country's Ministry of Defense or Ministry of Interior. Actions primarily focus on building hard capabilities and boosting resources and know-how on its best-practice-usage towards defense and security. Partnership with a given country is demand-driven and, as expected, cooperation on each issue within the broad security and defense area deepened depending on each country's needs and risk assessment matrix.

The Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) is an example of a NATO partnership, dating from 1994². It brings together NATO's neighboring countries to the South of European external borders, namely Mediterranean and North African countries, to ensure a more comprehensive approach to regional stability. Similarly, it ensures good understanding of NATO's non-imposing mandate among such key partner countries with shared transnational and transregional security challenges – i.e. maritime security, terrorist activities, conflict spillovers, illicit trafficking routes, and CBRN threats. Current participating countries in the MD framework are Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, therein bringing both sides of the Mediterranean together in MD discussions towards political dialogue and practical cooperation. An important point of the MD is that, regardless of such a regional grouping and much like other NATO partnership frameworks, each partner country is still taken individually in discussions, in consideration of each specific political, cultural and threat landscape.

In order to better bridge relations with Middle Eastern partners, the **Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI)** was launched in 2004, currently encompassing Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, with Oman and Saudi Arabia participating only selectively³. The main objective is to build a relationship of trust between NATO and these partners, and to exchange best practices on security matters of mutual interest, including but not limited to: defense planning on the fight against terrorism, the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and civil preparedness. In line with such cooperation, ICI members have already contributed to NATO-led operations or missions, such as the UAE's support to NATO operations in Afghanistan since 2003⁴.

Another NATO partnership mechanism is the so-called **Partners across the Globe** (or Global Partners) framework⁵, encompassing other partner countries from more remote regions that not in NATO's vicinity or with necessarily mutually-reinforcing challenges, yet regardless aligned with the Alliance's principles. The present nine partners in this framework are: Afghanistan, Australia, Colombia, Iraq, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand and Pakistan. In light of the complex and evolving threat backdrop in the transregional security and geostrategic landscape, engagement with global partners has become more and more important to combat global threats – i.e., cybersecurity, arms control, resilience-building, and overall insurance of a rights-based international order. These partners benefit from NATO capacity-building exercises towards building defense capacity and defense training and education. Once

² NATO, "Mediterranean Dialogue", accessed 25 May 2022, via https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52927.htm.

³ NATO, "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI)", accessed 25 May 2022, via <https://bit.ly/39e3cpi>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ NATO, "Relations with partners across the globe", accessed 25 May 2022, via https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49188.htm.

more in the case of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan, Australia, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand all made contributions to operations⁶. In addition to this formal global mechanism, NATO also engages with other third countries not part of existent partnership frameworks, given their importance to regional security dynamics – this is the case of China, Brazil, Ghana, India and Singapore, for example. This framework allows NATO to liaise with governments and defense authorities in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Finally, NATO has the **Partnership for Peace (PfP)** since 1994, as a major bilateral cooperation framework between the Alliance and partner countries located in the Euro-Atlantic region. It is a privileged level of ties given geostrategic proximity, “to increase stability, diminish threats to peace and build strengthened security relationships between NATO and non-member countries in the Euro-Atlantic area”⁷. Activities, capacity-building and military exercises offered under the PfP cover the vast NATO civil-military mandate, from defense reform to defense policy and planning, education and training and military cooperation, and also civil emergency planning and disaster response, to give some examples. It is indeed to be an effective and flexible partnership tool, with each individual partner country defining the scope and focus of the bilateral cooperation or activities in place with the Alliance. For instance, in 1999, several partner countries deployed peacekeepers as part of the NATO-led KFOR⁸.

The PfP is currently composed of 20 countries⁹ – including all Western Balkans, except Kosovo. Moreover, three of the five Western Balkan countries have, since joining the PfP, acceded into the Alliance as full-fledged members: Albania joined the partnership framework in 1994, and became a member in 2009; North Macedonia joined in 1995 and acceded to the Alliance 2020; Montenegro joined the PfP in 2006 and then the Alliance in 2017. In addition, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina joined the PfP in 2016 as partner countries. Even countries such as Belarus and Russia have signed the PfP Framework Document, in 1995 and 1994 respectively, as well as all five Central Asian countries which have been a part of this partnership mechanism since the 1990s, with only Tajikistan joining in the 2000s (in 2002). Since 2011, all cooperation activities and military exercises offered to PfP partners became open to all NATO partners, be it those in PfP, or those within the Mediterranean Dialogue, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative or global partners at large.

Notwithstanding the multiple different partnership framework launched by the NATO Alliance to better engage with and coordinate actions with partner countries, the Republic of Kosovo is not comprised under any partnership tool. As things stand, despite being a European country and being led by, arguably, the most NATO-favoring government in the region and beyond, Kosovo has been excluded from special engagement mechanisms. This, naturally, owes to the country’s limited statehood recognition and not due to military hesitations or remote location vis-à-vis NATO’s mandate.

II. KOSOVO JOINING NATO AS PRIORITY STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

The United States has been involved in boosting Kosovo’s energy sector for some time. Very much linked to longstanding ties to the Western military alliance since the 1990s, Kosovo’s government, regardless of its position along the left-ring political spectrum, has sought more formalized ties with NATO. Recognition as a NATO partner country and, eventually, a NATO ally, is

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ NATO, “Partnership for Peace programme”, accessed 25 May 2022, via <https://bit.ly/3moBZDe>

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ NATO, “Signatures of Partnership for Peace Framework Document”, accessed 25 May 2022, via https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_82584.htm.

therefore a key Kosovo strategic objective, connected to the country's foreign policy goals and quest for security guarantees.

Back in July 2012, Kosovo's then-Prime Minister Hashim Thaci submitted to NATO allies an official request for the Republic of Kosovo to join Partnership for Peace (PfP) framework. This submission was complemented by Kosovo's further request to join the US-Adriatic Charter, a bilateral association with the United States encompassing Western Balkans countries in order to aid countries' accession efforts into NATO. Kosovo has been an observer member of the Charter since 2012, also when it applied for membership, to no avail insofar. Moreover, Kosovo submitted yet another request, this one for the country's Kosovo Security Force (KSF) and the Kosovo police to be able to participate in NATO or EU-led operations abroad. To cite Thaci at the time the request was made almost 10 years ago, "Kosovo is dedicated to become an important factor of peace, stability, and security in the region, having already proven it through excellent co-operation with KFOR"¹⁰.

However, the NATO Alliance still comprises 4 non-recognizers: Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain, who have noted that they would block Kosovo's accession to any formal partnership mechanism. As is the case with other key international organizations, Kosovo's limited recognition as a sovereign state majorly obstructs its possibility for formal contractual relationships with NATO. A possible way-around, indeed as is used in EU-Kosovo relations, is to establish a contract with the EU as a block and legal personality (which it enjoys since the 19993 Maastricht Treaty). An example is the 2015 Stabilization Association Agreement (SAA) between the EU and Kosovo, which is between the Union and the partner country, unlike the other SAAs with the Western Balkans, which are between the EU and the Member States with the partner countries.

In spite of potential ways-around, Kosovar NATO membership or even formal participation in partnership mechanisms appears as a longshot. To put things into context, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and heightened defense risks in Europe, both Finland and Sweden – EU Member States but non-aligned NATO countries – have submitted letters of application to the Alliance¹¹. Despite both Nordic countries being key partner countries on NATO standards and practices, and having already contributed to Alliance operations by deploying troops during the Kosovo war and the mission in Afghanistan¹², this does not guarantee membership. In fact, as Kosovo knows all too well with regards to its own bids for membership to various international organizations – UN, Interpol, EU, etc. – full-fledged membership into regional or international mechanisms is more political than strategic. While Finland and Sweden would be obvious allies to acceded to NATO, Turkey has since voiced its decision to block their membership. The main reason at hand being Finland and Sweden's support to Syrian Kurdish forces, which Turkey sees as a part of the Kurdish ethnicity it labels as a terrorist group in the country since the 1980s. Truth be told, membership to NATO as a regional security and defense alliance will become increasingly difficult as geopolitical tensions escalate or change over time. Whereas Turkey can no longer oppose antagonist countries such as Greece from acceding, for this already happened decades before, destabilizing member countries such as the one led by authoritarian President Erdogan can indeed block the Alliance from expanding further.

¹⁰ The Journal of Turkish Weekly, "Kosovo seeks to join international organisations", 19 July 2022, via <https://bit.ly/3NYnMIW>

¹¹ NATO, "Finland and Sweden submit applications to join NATO", 18 May 2022, via https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_195468.htm .

¹² Slate, "Why Finland Joining NATO Is More Shocking Than Anyone Realizes", 16 May 2022, via <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/05/how-putin-drove-finland-into-nato.html> .

Linked to this is the fact that NATO membership must be decided upon in unanimity. One of NATO's defining modus operandi is that "Consensus decision-making is a fundamental principle which has been accepted as the sole basis for decision-making in NATO since the creation of the Alliance in 1949"¹³. The unanimous vote is used for all NATO decisions, not only those regarding new members, with majority vote not being an option. Furthermore, NATO working procedures define that "All members have an equal right to express their views and share in the consensus on which decisions are based"¹⁴. As such, Turkey's single blocking is sufficient to halt Finnish and/or Swedish membership. Similarly, one single vote against would block Kosovo's membership to the PfP or to full-fledged membership. To moreover hinder Kosovo's chances on joining NATO as an ally, it is still up for discussion if UN membership is a pre-requisite for NATO membership. While the original North Atlantic Treaty which founded the organization in 1949 does not specify as such, Serbian representatives has argued that joining the Alliance implies being a state, under international law standards, which in current geopolitical terms goes hand-in-hand¹⁵. For Kosovo to join the United Nations the key element is a constructive progression and eventual finalization of the Dialogue on Normalization of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia, seeking to reach a legally-binding solution and recognition of Kosovo's statehood by its neighbor. Indeed, the Dialogue is crucial for Kosovo's progression in the international stage since it relates Serbia's recognition and friendly ties between the two antagonist countries. In the Dialogue being EU-facilitated, it is naturally the key pre-condition for Kosovo to advance along its EU integration path – not just membership but even being promoted to official candidate country.

Finally, another criteria Kosovo would need to meet to join the NATO military alliance is for it to have its own Army. In Kosovo, the Army as such are the Kosovar Security Forces, formed after independence and, since 2018, have been in the process of transitioning from Armed Forces into a fully-fledged national army. While former Kosovar Prime Minister at the time, Ramush Haradinaj, believes Kosovo will more quickly join NATO rather than the EU (given the latter's poor track record on delivering, especially regarding visa liberalization), this is certainly not a guarantee. Unfortunately, Kosovo's chances of joining the NATO Partnership for Peace are low, let alone joining the Alliance and passing the unanimous vote. In the next section we look into if and how Kosovo meets the set criteria to join such partnership frameworks and more actively participate in and contribute to NATO operations and missions as formal Euro-Atlantic partner country.

If and how Kosovo meets criteria for NATO frameworks

On 1 January 2009, the Kosovar Security Forces (KSF) were officially founded after the country's independence the year before. The main aim of its establishment was to defend the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as support to civil authorities and security to citizens.

In 2018 a major development took place, when the Kosovar Assembly passed a law in 18 October 2018 to transform the Kosovo Security Force into the Kosovo Armed Forces (KAF), essentially a national army, throughout the next 10 years (with intended end-date in 2028). The vote was passed in the Parliament with after 98 MPs voting in favor out of the 120 total, with the other 22 remained comprising 11 blank votes and 11 votes against, the latter from the Serb

¹³ NATO, "Consensus decision-making at NATO", accessed 27 May 2022, via https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49178.htm

¹⁴ NATO, North Atlantic Treaty -1949, accessed 27 May 2022, via <https://bit.ly/3H8HQXf>

¹⁵ B92, "No NATO membership for Kosovo", 5 February 2013, via https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=02&dd=05&nav_id=84531.

minority group¹⁶. This was followed by another parliamentary vote, on 14 December 2018, approving the establishment of 5,000 active personnel and 3,000 reservists. The intent is to transition the KSF into a professional military force of domestic and sovereign nature in order to, at a later stage, be able to more effectively contribute to NATO military operations. This move to transform the KSF into the KAF has been on the country's agenda for many years, and is seen a principle, and final, step to assert the country's independence vis-à-vis security and defense institutions.

However, this politico-military move was not well received. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg noted that he "regretted" this domestic decision, especially since the current NATO mandate with Kosovo covers the KSF and any changes to that engagement should institutional changes occur would need to be ran through the North Atlantic Council with all allied countries¹⁷. As things stand, the NATO KFOR mission maintains 4,000 persons in Kosovo, seeking increasingly to reduce its mandate and mission over the coming years. Such a formal change in the national security mandate of Kosovo could imply changes in the country's established engagement with international organizations. Also, the UN showed discontent with the decision, looking particularly at the need to achieve good neighborly relations and regional stability to successfully conclude the Dialogue on Normalization of Relations. A UN statement noted that "The Secretary-General calls on all parties concerned to exercise restraint and refrain from actions that could raise tensions and cause a further setback in the European Union-facilitated dialogue for the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina"¹⁸. Indeed, the setback such a move could signify for the Dialogue was well-voiced by international actors. On its side, the Serbian government flagged this military-boosting decision of the Kosovar parliament as antagonizing Serbia and seeking to heighten tensions between the countries, instead of building trust among neighbors. Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic even alerted that her country could consider military intervention as a possible response to the army-creation move by Kosovo. Naturally, Serbia's response escalated the actual parliamentary decision and saw intimidation where the vote did not seek any. The aim of the KAF decision was for territorial integrity and not one looking at hostile external operations in neighboring countries.

All in all, international actors' reactions to Kosovo's decision to evolve its security forces into a military force was exaggerated in the implications it could have for regional stability and the (unconfirmed) destabilizing effect it would have for the Western Balkans region. As seems to be the case, organizations like NATO and the EU alike, wish for Kosovo to stay in its (secluded) lane – since the country does not have any leverage when at the negotiating table, international actors, and regional powers such as Serbia, expect Kosovo to follow blindly. Yet, the decision to transform the KSF into the KAF has not hindered any stability and peace efforts in the 4 years since it was enacted, only having boosted Kosovo's institutional standing as a sovereign state and decreased dependence on NATO troops for security.

Currently, the Kosovo Security Forces have around 2,500 members and 800 reserves, with their organization structure being based on the NATO military system and in line with its standards. Last year, in August 2021, Kosovar military capabilities were bulked up with the purchase of US-armed vehicles¹⁹. The move showed that Kosovo is not intent on moving

¹⁶ Reuters, "Kosovo votes to create national army over Serb objections", 18 October 2018, via <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-army-idUSKCN1MS26O> .

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Reuters, "Kosovo approves new army despite Serb opposition, NATO criticism", 14 December 2018, via <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-army-idUSKBN1OD16S> .

¹⁹ Balkan Insight, "Kosovo to Equip Security Forces With Armoured Vehicles", 18 August 2021, via <https://bit.ly/3Q2xnjZ>

unilaterally to gain muscle its national security forces into that of a regular army, with bilateral deals with individual NATO allies. Kosovar Defense Minister Armend Mehaj signaled that “One of my short-term operational objectives is to strengthen military capacity to conduct defense and international peacekeeping and stability operations”²⁰, of which this purchase contributes to. The transformation is, as now is currently underway despite international warning signs after the parliamentary vote, being supported by NATO capacity-building experts to train KSF personnel. The Iowa National Guard, for instance, appears as one of the closest allies the KSF has among the NATO member countries²¹. However beneficial such bilateral moves can be, such on-off partnerships do not compare to actual any type of formal partnership with the NATO alliance as a whole. While indeed it is good, even necessary, for Kosovo to move forward with bilateral agreements to build up its resources and personnel, it still lags behind when it comes to institutional ties. Linked to that, it still lags behind in terms of its chances to become a member country of the Partnership for Peace program, no matter how many criteria it meets or are up for discussion.

The case of the war in Ukraine tilting the balance

It is not bold to say that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has shaken Europe’s mainstream notions of defense and security. Territorial integrity and peace are now up in the air in Eastern Europe and who knows if the offensive will expand into other territories. Or, even, inspire other hostile national to follow suite and unilaterally and aggressively intervene into neighboring countries. The risky uncertainty President Putin’s foreign offensive created has brought some attention back to the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkans remain a region landlocked between EU Member States and neighboring the Schengen Area. Long have there been talks of the risks of this power vacuum, of a region that is not formally aligned as a whole in any regional organization, namely the EU and NATO. While some countries – Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia – have already acceded to the Alliance, the remaining ones stay unaligned and, as such, formally in limbo with regards to its security guarantees should their territorial integrity be hampered. Talks have grown in the West to reevaluate official policies towards states more to the East, and those which could be particularly exposed to foreign aggressive interference. Yet, in the case of Kosovo, the argument that it feels unprotected given that it is not a NATO ally or even recognized partner country, could easily be defeated. After all, Kosovo was neither of the two and still, in 1999, NATO intervened in the country to end the Serbian aggression. Notwithstanding this history of events in the 1990s, as the war in Ukraine is now showing, the stakes are higher now and the rules of the game have changed. Currently, the West appears to be (somewhat) passively looking on as the Ukrainian people are arguably facing a genocide at the hands of Russian military troops. NATO seems to have its hands tied in not wanting to intervene and militarily affront a nuclear state, and therefore war rages on. In this way, should Russia decide to expand its aggression further, or Serbia feel inspired by Russian state action and enter Kosovo, Kosovo could possibly be left, similarly to Ukraine, be left at the mercy of its own troops.

Kosovo stood out very clearly in its condemnation of Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. Albin Kurti’s government was quick to join in enacting international sanctions against Russia. The Minister of Defense of Kosovo, Armend Mehaj, was also quick to alert of Kosovo’s comparative vulnerability to unprovoked military aggression by hostile neighbor countries. In fact, in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, public authorities and private business alike pledged

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ National Guard, “Iowa National Guard strengthens bonds with Kosovo”, 5 October 2016, via <https://bit.ly/3aJohbK>

to donate the government's new Security Fund, with a view to build up state security resources and the KSF's capacity²². The Ministry of Defense requested a permanent US military base in be set up in Kosovo, as well as an accelerated accession process to NATO in light of the "immediate need to guarantee peace, security and stability in the Western Balkans"²³. Further seeking to show loyalty and alignment with the Western military alliance, Mehaj also highlighted that Kosovo would be ready to contribute and offer help to possible military operation in Ukraine, should this be in the Alliance's interest. Finally, on 3 March 2022 the Kosovar Assembly passed a vote requesting the government to "take all necessary steps to join NATO, the European Union, the Council of Europe and other international organizations"²⁴.

While it is true that the Western Balkans, and Kosovo in particular, came into the spotlight following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this does not necessarily or linearly mean that NATO as the Euro-Atlantic defense and security organization par excellence will welcome Kosovo with open arms. Major impediments persist in hindering the Republic of Kosovo's formal joining of, not even going as far as aiming for membership, but rather the Partnership for Peace framework. Kosovo's insofar limited statehood – namely among four out of the 30 NATO allies – would undeniably impede a positive unanimous vote by the North Atlantic Council from happening. No matter how vocal the Alliance has been, and surely will continue to be, in reassuring the un-aligned Western Balkans that it will sustain peace and stability operations should needs arise, the reality is that Kosovo remains shunned from formal partnership mechanisms. When looking at NATO bilateral capacity-building efforts, regional ties or global alliances, Kosovo remains in the shadows. Kosovo's participation in the PfP framework of NATO, which gathers all other Euro-Atlantic civil-military partners towards common challenges and aims, is very much blocked by the country's limited recognition and sensitive militarization status.

After all, for instance, despite Ukraine not having even started EU accession negotiations or let alone be considered an official or potential candidate country, after its impromptu bid for membership following Russia's invasion, Italy as one of the key EU/NATO Member States has come out supporting such accession. Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi noted that "candidate country status is objected to by almost all the major EU countries, if not all, except Italy"²⁵. In other words, even the granting of official EU candidate country to Ukraine faces key obstacles despite it currently being under attack by Russia and therein defending European values. In line with this, one should not expect support for Kosovo towards the country being granted a formal status as NATO partner country or join the PfP partnership framework to happen.

For this reason, what needs to be done is a strong focus on political lobby. Kosovo needs to keep pushing with the right domestic votes in Parliament, with the targeted foreign policy strategy for Euro-Atlantic integration, and with increasing bilateral alliances with other countries and/or defense and security organizations. Kosovo needs to push for stronger bilateral ties with NATO, even if that means not falling into mainstreaming groupings – its sole goal should be to get closer and more aligned, be that as it may, not necessarily to fall under a formal partnership

²² Balkan Insight, "Kosovo Politicians Pledge to New Fund to Boost Security Force", 2 March 2022, via <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/02/kosovo-politicians-pledge-to-new-fund-to-boost-security-force/>.

²³ Reuters, "Kosovo asks U.S. for permanent military base, speedier NATO membership", 27 February 2022, via <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kosovo-asks-us-permanent-military-base-speedier-nato-membership-2022-02-27/>.

²⁴ Reuters, "Kosovo parliament urges government to start NATO membership bid", 3 March 2022, via <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kosovo-parliament-urges-government-start-nato-membership-bid-2022-03-03/>.

²⁵ Agence Europe, "Draghi says 'big countries' in EU are against granting Ukraine candidate country status", 31 May 2022, via <https://agenceurope.eu/en/bulletin/article/12962/5>.

framework if that seems unrealistic given statehood limitations. The Republic of Kosovo needs to, as it certainly already does, acknowledge that the uphill battle it has to undertake before joining the PfP is more difficult and with much more obstacles along the way than for other countries. However, the political momentum is right to push for integration, to push for protection and to remind the NATO that Kosovo as a vulnerable Western Balkan state facing war in Eastern Europe is not a liability the Western military alliance should afford to have.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

NATO-Kosovo relations are strong, historic, foundational to the country and, yet, non-formalized. To date, Kosovo has yet to be approved as to join any of NATO's many different partnership frameworks. While NATO has made bilateral relations with countless countries across the globe official – through its Partnership for Peace framework gathering Euro-Atlantic partners, its Mediterranean Dialogue gathering southern neighbors, its Istanbul Cooperation Initiative gathering Middle Eastern partners, or even its Global Partners encompassing more remote partners – Kosovo is absent from all ties.

At the root of this absence is not Kosovo's unwillingness nor Kosovo's lack of interest in the country. The main and sole reason lies in the Republic of Kosovo remaining a state of limited recognition, particularly by 4 out of the 30 NATO allies. For this reason, and much like in other obstacles it faces, Kosovo has a long and arduous hill to climb, unlike other defense and security partner countries. At the end of the day, the set criteria to join the group of NATO Euro-Atlantic partners under PfP would encompass Kosovo, should the political will be there for both sides – after all, Kosovo and Belarus remain, to this day, PfP NATO partners despite new developments. The case of Turkey blocking Finland and Sweden's possible accession showcases just how political international or regional memberships are. It is not about criteria, it is all about political willingness and making sure each country's strategic interest is met. For this reason, Kosovo should, regrettably, not expect NATO to grant it formal PfP partner status. With the statehood issue not going away in the near future, Kosovo must acknowledge this and act accordingly.

Instead of pushing for NATO partnerships that most likely would be blocked by the four non-recognizers, or more, Kosovo should look to redefine its demands of strengthened ties with NATO - Kosovo should aim to establish dialogue or capacity-building opportunities with the Alliance under the different circumstances, perhaps on the basis of agreements with one single Allied country, or with a consortium of them. On its end, NATO could also invest in strengthening ties with Kosovo as an and aligned (albeit not formally) eager partner by playing a constructive role in the EU-facilitated Normalization of Relations Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, since its outcome would necessarily have implications for the NATO regional organization as well and it's in its own strategic interest to secure peace and stability in the Balkans.

As with what is in Kosovo's actual power to advance its Euro-Atlantic integration prospects, what it should focus on it on delivering on reforms and align to, in this case, NATO standards. For instance, it should invest in the present links to NATO through KFOR and its ongoing capacity-building activities, also to become able to eventually best contribute to NATO missions, operations or deployments, as the government so wishes. In parallel, it should continue to focus its soft power on avid statehood lobbying. In sum, Kosovo's target focus with regards to NATO integration and partnering should be on the political lobby front with each member country and different linked institutions. That is the most realistic bet at this stage thing that should be done in order to advance NATO ties and lessen barriers for further integration.

Policy Analysis

Policy Analysis in general is a policy advice paper which particularly aims to influence the key means through which policy decisions are made in both local and central levels of government. The purpose of Policy Analysis is to address, more in-depth, a particular problem, to examine the arguments related to a concerned policy, and to analyze the implementation of the policy. Through Policy Analysis, Group for Legal and Political studies seeks to stimulate wider comprehensive debate on the given issue via presenting informed policy-relevant choices and recommendations to the key stakeholders and parties of interest.



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