Kosovo's external relations and their impact on peace and stability in the Balkans

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Abstract

Before the conflict between Kosovo and Serbia, the Balkan region or the formally considered countries of South East Europe were at different stages of political development. The reasons for this development varied from country to country, but ethnic conflict, political instability, and a timid approach to structural reform characterized several of them. Consequently, unlike the current time, the Balkan region was immensely in political conflict and the notion of peace and stability was scarcely recognized. Hence, the aim of this paper is to briefly analyze the cause of the conflict in order to comprehend the now formed stability in the Balkans and the impact of Kosovo's external relations in achieving this stability. The paper further sets out options and the relevance of the EU in maintaining this stability following the conclusion of agreements made in regards to Kosovo's relations to other respective states. These options are set in the context of the overall experience of the EU enlargement process, the specifics of the Western Balkan integration process, and the particular situation of Kosovo. Conclusively, the paper deals with the ways and process of building capacities to implement healthy relations with other States in order to promote stability and considers the main actors and structures that are necessary in achieving these relations.

Introduction

 It is widely reputable that in the period of the 90s, the Balkan region was immensely in political conflict and the notion of peace and stability was barely ascertained, considering the ethnic cleansing attempts that occurred within the region.

In order to better comprehend the now formed stability and the impact of the external relations to this matter, this paper will provide a brief background of the facts that sparked the conflict between the countries within the region. From this perspective, a brief coverage of the facts will be submitted on the period of time when Kosovo was considered an essential part of Yugoslavia, the misconduct of the Serbian authorities' toward the Kosovar Albanians and the initiative of the Serbian security forces to conduct a massive military operation against the Kosovar Albanians[1], which ultimately incited the dispute in the Balkans.

Following a failed attempt to negotiate a settlement between the parties, NATO in March 1999 decided to intervene militarily against Yugoslavia. After NATO's airstrike and military intervention, the former President of Serbia finally capitulated by agreeing to withdraw all security forces from Kosovo, which ended the Serbian administration of Kosovo.

Subsequent to the situation, the paper tackles the post-war stability which led to Kosovo declaring its independence on 2008, becoming so Europe's newest state. In addition to the circumstances, the international community was divided when it came to Kosovo's Declaration of Independence. While some considered it necessary for the international peace and stability, others on the other hand considered it a fragile solidness and stimulation for creating further tension in the Balkan region, which questions raised by the international community this paper tackles briefly, as an asset to the peace in the Balkans.

Conclusively, the paper examines the specific relations of Kosovo with Serbia and other States, the EU role in the process and the continuing evolution and development of key issues relating to the overall stability and solidness of the Balkan region.

Kosovo: Historical and Legal Framework

> A. *Kosovo's status under the Yugoslavian reign*

Throughout the period of World War I, Kosovo became part of the recently created Kingdom, consisting of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 – formally renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929.[2] When Serbia took control of Kosovo in 1912, its majority population was Albanian. However, due to the Serb settlement policy, the number of Albanians initially

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[1] Rohan, Albert. 2018. "Kosovo's path to Independence", *European Council on Foreign Relations.*
[2] Vidmar, Jure. 2009. "International Legal Responses to Kosovo's Declaration of Independence", *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law,* Vol. 42, No.3.

diminished, but the settlement policy proved to be ineffective and the Albanian population increased over time.[3] Meanwhile, at the time Albania itself was controlled by Italy.

The spark of the conflict flourished during the end of World War II, since in the 1946 Yugoslavian Constitution, Kosovo was formally defined as an autonomous province within the Republic of Serbia, but had neither independent organs nor legislative initiatives for the exercise of its autonomy.

B. The rise of the conflict between the two ethnicities

At that time, even unification of Kosovo with Albania was considered – an idea that should be comprehended in the spacious context of Tito's plans to embody Albania into Yugoslavia. This plan failed after Tito's break with Stalin in 1948, whereas Albania remained on a pro-Soviet course. As a consequence, Yugoslav authorities mistrusted Kosovar Albanians and suspected them as potential anti-Yugoslav and pro-Albanian. In this environment, repression of Kosovar Albanians was severe.

In addition to physical violence, discrimination was visible in public life, as ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins occupied the majority of positions in public service in 1953.[4]

Most of the literary works support the idea that during this period of time, the conflict and the violation of human rights commenced, indicating that a new wave of instability in the Balkans was coming, however the majority of them consent that the peak of the conflict occurred during the rise of the so called Serbian nationalism.

C. The rise of Serbian Nationalism

The rise of Serbian nationalism was largely a reaction to events in the autonomous province of Kosovo, a region that was foully seen as the Serbian heartland, but that was originally home to an Albanian majority – of more than 90 percent of the population[5].

Under the 1974 Constitution of Yugoslavia, Kosovo's legal status was increasingly improved, seeing that Kosovo now had legislative initiative, possessed its independent organs within its territory and, accordingly enjoyed political subjectivity within Yugoslavia. However, at the same time Kosovo was still constitutionally defined as an autonomous province within the framework of Serbia, in which the latter retained certain competencies in regards to Kosovo.

Since Kosovo's autonomy was established within the federal constitutional order[6] of Yugoslavia, Serbia could not alone interfere with this status. From this perspective, the Serbian Assembly prepared constitutional amendments in 1989 that were aimed in limiting the government which was exercised independently by the autonomous organs of Kosovo and the same be transferred to the organs of Serbia. Later on, these amendments would result into something bigger and that is – the disseverment of both Kosovo's Assembly and government.

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[3] Latawski, Paul and Martin Smith. 2003. "*The Kosovo crisis and the evolution of post-Cold War European Security*", Manchester University Press, 2013.

[4] Bruce MacDonald, David. 2002. *"Balkan Holocausts?"* Oxford University Press, 2002.

[5] Ibid, p. 77.

[6] Trajkovska, Ksenija. "The Rising Nationalism in The Time Of Slobodan Milosevic".

In consideration of the foregoing, what gave a boost to the notion of Serbian Nationalism was the rise of Slobodan Milošević, the former President of Serbia. Milošević became aware of the mystical importance and emotional feelings the territory of Kosovo raised among Serbs.[7] He assuredly succeeded by emphasizing the idea of reducing Kosovo's autonomy and making Kosovo part of his plan in creating the 'Greater Serbia', which included Kosovo in it. By 1989, Milosevic's political control over Serbia and Kosovo was unquestioned, as was the emanation of Serbian nationalism.[8]

Considering the deceitfulness, the tensions escalated with a lot of casualties and a war which would at a later date be considered by the international community as genocide and crimes against humanity, with victims being the Kosovar Albanians.

D. The dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY)

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY)[9] at the time was faced with a crisis that required a high level of political maturity and responsibility. Despite the efforts made by the international community, Yugoslavia fell apart in a brutal way – amidst immense human loss and torment, mass exodus and mass murder, war crimes and crimes against humanity.[10] As a consequence, the dissolution of SFRY further intensified the tension within the Balkans that was formed by Serbia.
It is generally perceived that Yugoslavia, ultimately, fell apart because of the different perceptions of the nature of the state. In this regard, we are confronted with two approaches in how the country should have been organized and governed.

On the one hand, Serbs interpreted Yugoslavia as "the extended Serbia", as "their State", nurturing so the notion of Serbian Nationalism. On the other hand, other nations,Slovenes and Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins and Bosnians defended their concept of an association of equal nations.[11]

Confronted with different view on how they perceived the notion of a State, during the period of the early 1990s, four republics declared independence (only Serbia and Montenegro remained federated at the time), but the unsolved issues of ethnicity caused bitter inter-ethnic Yugoslav wars. The wars primarily affected Bosnia and Herzegovina, neighboring parts of Croatia, and later on, Kosovo.

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[7] Ibid, p. 7.
[8] Bruce MacDonald, David. 2002. *"Balkan Holocausts?"*, Oxford University Press, 2002.
[9] Laurent, J. Cushman and Amb. Thomas Melady, 2011. "The Seven States of the Former Yugoslavia: An Evaluation", *The Council of American Ambassadors. "Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia and Serbia with the provinces: Kosovo and Vojvodina", p. 5.*
[10] Biserko, Sonja. "The Dissolution of Yugoslavia: Roots of the Conflict", *Humanity in Action.*
[11] Ibid.

E. The genocide committed against Kosovars and the role of international mechanisms in ending the occurrence of violation of human rights

Throughout the beginning of conflict, the delusional myth of Kosovo was touted as a key shibboleth of Serbian identity.[12] Kosovo symbolized the awakening of Serbian values and spirituality, further keeping in mind that these ideas continuously nourished the concept of Serbian nationalism.

Noticeably, the Albanian response to Serbian nationalism and the strengthening of Milosevic political position in Serbia was non-violent. A moderately political life began to develop in Kosovo, despite the intermittent pressure from the Serb authorities.[13]

By the late 1990s, however, non-violent protests occurred which manifested itself in the emergence of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). As the dispute between the parties became violent, it led increasingly to deaths, displacement of Kosovar Albanians and destruction of property. According to statistical evidence, by the end of the year 1999 more than 1 million Kosovars were deported violently out of their homes.[14]

In the context of this situation, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1199 in September 1998, calling for withdrawal of FRY security forces and emphasizing the need to ensure that the rights of all inhabitants of Kosovo are respected. It also issued a warning about a looming 'humanitarian catastrophe' resulting from the violence conducted by Serbs against the Kosovar Albanians. [15]

In an effort to increase pressure on the Milosevic government in Belgrade, NATO threatened airstrikes in order to induce his compliance with the terms of the UN Resolution. Following a failed attempt to negotiate a settlement at Rambouillet in France, NATO decided to intervene militarily against Yugoslavia in March 1999.[16]

After almost three months of NATO airstrikes, the Serbian leadership agreed to withdraw its security forces and accept a NATO-led peacekeeping force and a UN international administration mission in Kosovo[17]. These points were incorporated into Security Council Resolution 1244, which was passed shortly thereafter. On the question of the future status of Kosovo, the Resolution was deliberately ambiguous. Kosovo's future thus, remained uncertain.

F. Post-war stability condition in the Balkans and the path to the independence of Kosovo

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[12] Aleksandar Pavlović in conversation with Florence Levinsohn: *"We have to persevere or else we are lost. It's similar to the problem the Jews had. Kosovo is our Jerusalem. We'd rather defend it as it is, rather than have just one Wailing Wall. Kosovo is a place of Serbian national identity that we cannot give away, just as Israel can't give away Jerusalem."*

[13] Weller, Marc. 1999. *"The Crisis in Kosovo 1989-1999",* Documents and Analysis Publ., 1999.

[14] PBS, "Facts and Figures." Online available:
https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/etc/facts.html.

[15] United Nations, Security Council. "Resolution 1199". Online available:
http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1199(1998).

[16] Rohan, Albert. 2018. "Kosovo's path to Independence", *European Council on Foreign Relations*

[17] "Un Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). Online available: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/78/Vidmar-cr_final_final1.pdf .

Immediately following the war in Kosovo, the joint efforts of the international community were successful in maintaining the fragile peace which befell the Balkans after the war, especially considering the fact that the conflict was deep-rooted between the two countries.[18]

Resolution 1244 which was adopted by the Security Council, pursuant to the ending of the conflict in Kosovo, was silent and uncertain about the future territorial status of Kosovo, but instead called for a political process leading toward a final settlement. Furthermore, after attempting to set a plethora of "Standards for Kosovo"[19] and negotiate towards the final status of Kosovo, former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari was appointed by the United Nations as a representative on Kosovo's status talks.

The explicit objective was to achieve an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina on the future status of Kosovo. From beginning to the end of the negotiations, the views of two sides remained diametrically opposite. After more than a year of unproductive negotiations and occasional outbursts of ethnic violence, the UN Secretary-General addressed a document to the Security Council named 'The Ahtisaari Plan', in which he recommended independence for Kosovo supervised by the international community.[20]

Although the Ahtisaari Plan was beneficial to Serbs due to several reasons[21], Serbia rejected it and Russia prevented the UN Security Council from ultimately endorsing it.

At the time, delaying the solution of Kosovo's final political status would have created an unsafe environment in the region, thus only a third alternative remained: a unilateral declaration of independence by Pristina. In the light of the events, with its Independence Declaration of 17 February 2008[22], Kosovo finally realized its centuries-old dream of statehood.[23]

G. *The declaration of Kosovo's independence and the international community's reaction*

Although the independence of Kosovo came with some heave handicaps, today Kosovo has been recognized by more than half of the United Nations Member States. [24]

As the initial wave of recognitions diminished to a trickle, the former President of Serbia, Tadic, was given the opportunity to articulate the Serbian position. The highlight of his speech was

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[18] Narten, Jens. 2017. "In Need of Self-Reflection: Peace building in Post-War Kosovo from a Systems Analytical Perspective", *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations.*

[19] United Nations, Security Council. "Presidential Statements" Online available: http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/statements/2003.shtml

[20] United Nations, Security Council. "Secretary General Document" Online available:http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2007/168 .

[21] "The creation of the new Serbian-majority municipalities, guaranteed seats in the government and parliament and other relevant institutions were to enable the Serbian community and smaller minorities to have influence on Kosovo's decision-making, the protection of the Serbian heritage etc."

[22] Kosovo Assembly. 2008. The full text of the Declaration of Independence is available on the Kosovo assembly website: http://www.assemblykosova.org/?krye=news&newsid=1635&lang=en

[23] J. Borgen, Christopher. 2008. "Kosovo's Declaration of Independence: Self-Determination, Secesion and Recognition".Online available: http://www.tjsl.edu/slomansonb/2.4_KosSecession.pdf.

[24] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "International recognitions of the Republic of Kosovo". Online available: http://www.mfa-ks.net/?page=2,224.

mainly the said illegality of Kosovo's decision and it ended with a strong statement that Serbia would never recognize Kosovo, as an independent State.[25]

It is considered that Kosovo's independence helped in maintain the stability among the region of the Balkan, however the consistent attempts of Serbia in questioning the independence of Kosovo is what sparks the tension, to this present day.

Considering the facts of the situation, there are a plethora claims that the declaration of independence of Kosovo is intensively legal[26], however there are a few other claims, that are supported by States such as Serbia, that proclaim Kosovo's independence as not legal[27] and not in accordance with international law.

a. The legal framework

Since sovereignty of a State does not exist as an absolute concept anymore, due to the fact that it is directly linked to respect of basic and elementary human rights, Serbia's claims were not fully supported. The General Assembly of the United Nations, in the year of 1960 proclaimed the right to self-determination of all colonial peoples, which was closely linked to democracy and especially to the concept of basic human rights[28], giving rise to a new and modern concept of the international order in regards to self-determination. Accordingly, the introduction of the concept of human rights altered the notion of sovereignty. People and minorities which are constantly oppressed and which do not have essential human rights in the territory possess the right to external self-determination.[29] The crimes against humanity, the history of ethnic cleansing and the extended international administration within the territory of Kosovo combine together to make Kosovo a *sui generis* case, a case of its own.[30] The recognizing States[31] consider Kosovo's independence to be in complete accordance with the new order of international law. This idea was furthermore supported by the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice in regards to Kosovo declaring its independence.

Building Stability: Anticipations and Policy Challenges for the Balkans

In the past 19 years, the complexity of the peace processes in the Western Balkans has shown that the absence of violence does not indicate an absence of problems. The latter demands long-

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[25] Almqvist, Jessica. 2009. "The Politics of Recognition, Kosovo and International Law".

[26] J. Borgen, Christopher. 2008. "Kosovo's Declaration of Independence: Self-Determination, Secession and Recognition".

[27] Weller, Marc. 2009. *"Contested Statehood: Kosovo's Struggle for Independence"*, Oxford University Press.

[28] Uros Lipuscek. 2008. "The Principle of State sovereignty and the Right to self-determination: The Case of Kosovo".

[29] Ibid, p. 12.

[30] Statement by Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, *"US Recognizes Kosovo as an Independent State,"* US Department of State Press Statement No. 2008/117, 18 February 2008.

[31] All the recognition texts are published on the following website: Online available: http://www.kosovothanksyou.com/ .

term political, security based attempts and economic efforts on the side of the affected post-war societies and international's community intervention forces.[32]

Nonetheless, in the Western Balkan region, plenty of new concepts and practical ideas have been developed and tested in regard to international interventions in crisis and post-war situations. Among them, beside the international community's presence restoring the stability in the region, are the re-building of States and their institutions, civil-military cooperation, the concept of restoring multiethnic societies in post-war areas and most importantly, restoring regional cooperation and improving the relations between States. This generally comprehensive approach has guaranteed the absence of war on the one hand. However, on the other hand, there are still serious problems Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia face while trying to implement effective and functional state institutions and establishing a peaceful multiethnic society.[33] Continuing on this line, the main challenges which affect Kosovo at the current time are the process of normalizing its relations with Serbia, certain bursts of ethnical difficulties and accession to the EU.

A. The impact of the European Union (EU) in promoting peace and stability in the Balkans

At present, the Western Balkan region has experienced more than 15 years of peace. The region has become relatively stable, with no political or ethnic conflicts, free elections and the domination of the concept of the rule of law. In the meantime, the international community has invested significant amounts of financial assistance, political support and human resources in the Western Balkans, in order to avoid situations which led to the conflict during the late 90s. [34]

Despite the initial steps taken, reconciliation after the violent conflicts of the 1990s has still not been fully achieved and there is a long road ahead for the Balkan region in regards to adjustment. Past violence has left deep scars in terms of human loss and mass exodus and has delayed the region's ability to overcome historical altercations through technical and political debate.[35]

Whereas, bilateral agreements, particularly between Serbia and Kosovo remain overburdened by unfairly historical fixed ideas and threaten to carry over tensions to the level of regional cooperation as well. In order to tackle these issues, European integration is almost universally recognized as the key strategy for achieving the goals of peace and prosperity in the Western Balkans.[36] Even the European Commission identified the prospect of EU membership as 'the ultimate conflict prevention strategy' and committed itself to maintain and increase its proactive presence in the region. It is evident, through past lessons in the South Eastern Europe, that integration breeds stability, prosperity and trust. Thereby, the EU role in the process of maintaining peace in the Balkans should be highlighted through integration since the former is the ultimate way to prevent further conflict and build stability.

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[32] Pucher, Johann. 2010. "15 Years of Peace Building in the Western Balkans – Lessons Learned and Current Challenges".

[33] Ibid.

[34] Kmezić, Marko. 2015. Directorate-General for External Policies, European Parliament. "The Western Balkans and EU Enlargement: Lessons learned, ways forward and prospects ahead".

[35] Ibid.

[36] Belloni, Roberto. 2009. "Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies", Volume 11, No. 3, 2009.

However, it should be recognized that accession into the EU is neither easy nor short. It is a lengthy and difficult process embodying reforms that some of the Balkan countries cannot easily perform and requires, among others, regional cooperation, specifically for Kosovo and Serbia.

In the light of EU accession for both countries, the Union should make the prospect for membership more visible through stronger political and financial support. In this regard, just like Serbia, Kosovo should also have clear and credible EU integration process. Due to Kosovo's complicated history, it is esteemed that the process was undisputedly slower compared to Serbia, however starting with visa liberalization and access to the citizens of Kosovo into EU countries without complicated procedures, would be a good indication of fair integration prospects.

Accordingly, the EU accession needs to be more consistent and transparent. Transparency and certainty in the EU enlargement process will reinforce civil society support, restore faith and stimulate popular pressure for reform and public accountability, which in turn, will strengthen democracy in Kosovo and Serbia. A strengthened democracy within a country is directly linked to more cooperative relations among the Balkan region.[37]

Comprehensively, the EU accession must remain an important part of Balkan engagement. Against this background, there is a slow pace of enlargement for which the EU must take concrete steps in increasing its investment in Balkans economies and setting higher political standards for all of the Balkan leaders, in order to maintain the post-war stability in the region.

Kosovo's Relations with Serbia as a Main Factor to Peace and Stability

The international community's attempts at resolving Kosovo's final political status, which started in the early year of 2005 under the leadership of Martti Ahtisaari, ended with Kosovo's declaring its independence in 2008. Since then, Serbia has been denying the fact that Kosovo is an internationally recognized independent State. In addition to that, Serbia also continues to support "parallel structures" in northern Kosovo— where the Serbs are in the majority—that might in turn keep this area out of the control of the authorities in Pristina. Furthermore, Serbia has been resisting the integration of Kosovo into regional and international institutions. On that basis, Serbia managed to block Kosovo's membership in UNESCO in 2015, which further undermined relations between Belgrade and Pristina. n response to the circumstances, the EU has now made clear that Serbia's progress towards the EU accession depends on Belgrade improving its relations with Kosovo. Serbia can join the EU in the near future, given the circumstances, only if it has developed by that time essentially normal and stable relations with Kosovo.[38]

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[37]Christi, Ikv Pax. 2012. "Kosovo Alert: Improving the transparency of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and EU accession process".

[38] Lehne, Stefan. 2012. "Kosovo and Serbia: Towards a Normal Relationship", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Online available*:* http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kosovo_and_Serbia.pdf

Despite the EU efforts[39], at the present time the chances for an inclusive arrangement of relations between Kosovo and Serbia are slowly decreasing. Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, the issue of the Northern part of Kosovo and the incessant provocations put a huge strain in the reconciliatory process between the two countries and even weakens the stability in the Balkans. By now, it is clear that without effective and comprehensive normalization of Belgrade-Pristina relations, there cannot be lasting stability in the region. In regards to these relations, there is certainly a lot to normalize and such regulation must have a starting point. So, the question remains, how will these relations improve in reference to the durability of the formed condition of peace and stability in the Balkans?

A. *Potential solutions that would result in normalizing the relations between Kosovo and Serbia*

While it is evident that both Kosovo and Serbia officially support the notion and process of reconciliation. However, not much has been done in that direction. In order to tackle the issue in the core of the conflict, it must be generally understood that the normalization process will require a lot of time, commitment and political maturity by both countries.

At the present stage of the situation, the recognition of Kosovo's independence by Serbia is a far reaching goal, which will not be able to occur without dealing with the substantial differences foremost. Accordingly, a brief set of suggestions cloaked under the notion of "small steps", but relevant in their substance, must be taken towards the normalization of the relations between both States that aim to have long-term effects on the peace and stability in the Balkans.

First, the crucial issue of reconciliation is revealing earlier constructed hate language based on inconsistent historical evidence. This will require strength, maturity and recognition of any violations and crimes committed on behalf of such descriptions. The only way to achieve this, at the present, depends from the pressures of the European Union and the way in which the leaders in both countries present this objective of normalizing the relations to their publics. A great start in achieving this crucial objective was the initiative of Kosovo in implementing a document entitled *"Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation in Kosovo: A review of the institutions and initiatives"[40]*, whose main aim is to promote general reconciliation in Kosovo.

Secondly, there can never be a normalization of these relations if representatives of civil society are constantly excluded from the dialogues conducted between Kosovo and Serbia. As a consequence, distrust is caused among citizens of both Kosovo and Serbia in regards to the normalization of these relations. For that reason, it is crucial to comprehend that without transparency and the inclusion of the civil society, no long-term results can be achieved in improving the overall relations between the countries. Thus, it must be ensured and affirmed,

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[39] The Belgrade-Pristina Technical Dialogue' .Online available:
http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kosovo_and_Serbia.pdf
[40] The full text of the document entitled " Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation in Kosovo: A review of the institutions and initiatives" can be found in the link below:
http://www.ks.undp.org/content/dam/kosovo/docs/TJ/ALB_TJ%20Summary%20of%20Institutions%20and%20Initiatives.pdf

that the future dialogues, preferably in the embodiment of a legally binding agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, will be transparent unlike the previous conducted dialogues. Besides transparency, there need to be negotiators engaging in public debate as much as possible to explain the reasons, progress and outcomes of the dialogue and these leaders should actively seek the opinion of citizens in Kosovo and Serbia. Comprehensively, the future dialogues need to be an open process, as only an open process will make the dialogue a success.

As a third potential alternative in order for the good neighborly relations to be practically implemented, the leaders of the region must take full ownership and avoid any statement or action which would spark inter-ethnic tensions and must seek to consistently counter nationalist narratives. Accordingly, deconstructing and delegitimizing extremist narratives and ethnical hate ideologies is an increasingly necessary alternative to improving the relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Likewise, a primary focus and priority should be given to the role of education. Investing in the younger generation must be a priority for both Kosovo and Serbia in order to teach them genuine values, achieve tolerance among the States and give the youth a perspective for the future and certainly not the past. However, this step does not indicate in any way that history and statistical evidence should be erased. In the contrary, the historical facts of the conflict between Kosovo and Serbia must be explained in accurate historical evidence and not an elusive one.

Additionally, an important issue that needs to be readdressed is the travel documents and their recognition as valid documents by Serbia. At the current time, Serbia recognizes most of Kosovo's travel documents due to the dialogues back in the period of 2011-2013, however Serbia to this present day does not recognize Kosovo's passports. A small, but certainly relevant step would be that the parties in the future dialogues readdress the issue and recognize each other's documents. In this direction, the same would be applied for the parties to recognize or to bear with each other's State's symbols. Another potential alternative towards the normalization process of the countries' relations is the official recognition of the war crimes. A plethora of citizens consider that a formal apology and Serbia's recognition of their own actions would officially commence the normalization of the States' relations. The consequences of the conflict between the countries were severe for a lot of families, thus it is considered that the start of genuine relations between the two, would be accepting the outcomes of Serbian officials actions in the period of the 90s. While both states, Serbia and Kosovo have made progress in improving their political relations –a long road remains coming. As both sides move forward in their European integration processes, it is critical that the leaders of the countries renew their commitment to resolve outstanding challenges and initiate negotiations on new topics. In this regard, a potential solution towards a normalization of the relations between Kosovo and Serbia would be Kosovo's membership in international organizations and have Serbia not prevent Kosovo's accession into these organizations, including here the United Nations as well, in exchange for Serbia's decision in not recognizing Kosovo's independence.

Lastly, it is of great relevance to emphasize that the continued, meaningful normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina will demand a political courage, a more responsible and

responsive leadership on both sides and a close engagement with civil society actors to ensure the protection of citizens' rights and interests, which will later on have an impact on the overall peace and stability in the Balkan region.

Conclusions

It is evident that Kosovo is a key factor in the peace and stability in the Balkans. The tragic nature of Kosovo's history throughout the years makes it to be one.

Considering the fragile post-war stability created in the Balkans, the improvement of the Balkan countries relations should remain to be the focus of the international community. Taking this into account, it is important that the relations between Kosovo and Serbia improve by implementing future legally binding dialogues – dialogues in which the main focus should be the citizens of the civil society concerns in regard to a lot of the issues with respect to normalizing the relations between the States. Furthermore, the dialogues should aim to be transparent and more consistent, unlike the previous ones which failed to result in a long-term stability for the Balkans.

Since at the current time, the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by Serbia seems like a far reaching goal, it is essential to tackle the tensions between the countries gradually, in order to give certainty to the post-war formed stability in the Balkans. This gradual process of normalizing the relations between Kosovo and Serbia must embody certain steps, small in nature, but enormous in regards to their effects of the current situation in the Balkans, such as: prioritizing education, recognizing each other's travel documents in full, Kosovo's membership in international organizations, including the United Nations etc.

Furthermore, a strong leadership, the strengthening of democracy, regional cooperation between the South Eastern Europe countries as well as accession to the EU are argued to be crucial steps in improving the overall stability in the Balkans. In this regard, promoting the notion of integration within the EU equals with the notion of encouraging peace and stability within the Balkan region. Thereby, the EU plays a major role in improving the post-war stability in the region, especially if the accession to the EU process transforms into a more transparent and credible procedure for both Kosovo and Serbia. Certainly, intensified regional and international cooperation can help overcome tensions, political and ethnical problems between States and with strong commitment the overall normalization of the tensions within the Balkan region will be improved and consequently, the readiness of the States for deeper integration, not only at a regional level, but also for the integration of South Eastern countries to the overall international community as well.

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