


Albania and Kosovo as Stability Factor in the Region

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Abstract

Albania and Kosovo, with shared historical and cultural ties, have the potential to act as stabilizing forces in the Balkans. Their commitment to democratic governance, economic development, and regional cooperation strengthens regional stability. Albania's NATO membership and EU candidacy, alongside Kosovo's aspirations to join these organizations, further integrate them into Euro-Atlantic structures. This study examines their cross-governmental cooperation, signed agreements, and border controls, assessing their impact on political stability. By analyzing key memorandums and cooperative efforts, the paper highlights the benefits and challenges of their collaboration, offering recommendations for enhancing bilateral relations and regional stability.

Keywords: Albania, Kosovo, Balkans, Democratic Governance, Economic Development, Regional Cooperation, NATO Membership, Border Control, Case Study, Counterterrorism, Military Cooperation, Regional Security, Regional Stability.

Introduction

Context and Background

The Balkan Peninsula, often referred to as the "powder keg of Europe," has historically been a region of geopolitical significance. Situated at the crossroads of East and West, the Balkans have witnessed pivotal events, from the spark that ignited World War I to the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. In this complex region, Albania and Kosovo emerge as key players, whose stability is essential for both regional and European security. Albania, strategically located along the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, is a gateway between the Mediterranean and the Balkans, making it a key NATO ally and a vital partner for the EU in Southeastern Europe. Meanwhile, Kosovo, one of the youngest states, holds strategic importance. Bordered by Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania, Kosovo's unresolved independence and recognition issues influence regional dynamics, making it a focal point for international stakeholders.

The roles of Albania and Kosovo in the Balkans are underscored by their contributions to regional stability. Albania's efforts to align with Western institutions and its active participation in regional cooperation initiatives demonstrate its commitment to peace and security. Kosovo, despite challenges related to statehood, plays a crucial role in balancing power in the region. Their

relationships with neighboring countries and international bodies are central to understanding Southeast Europe's security architecture.

As the region grapples with the legacies of past conflicts and contemporary geopolitical challenges, Albania and Kosovo's stability is paramount. Their actions impact not only their futures but also the stability and security of the region. This paper explores how Albania and Kosovo contribute to the Balkans' stability and the challenges they face.

The strategic positions of Albania and Kosovo make their stability vital. Albania, with access to the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, serves as a corridor for trade and energy routes between Europe and the Middle East. As a NATO member, Albania contributes to regional security. Kosovo's unresolved status and tensions with Serbia have implications for broader European security. Diplomatic failures in Kosovo could lead to wider instability in Europe. Recent developments further highlight the need for stability in Albania and Kosovo. Albania's progress toward EU accession is complicated by political instability, yet it has aligned with EU standards, particularly in regional cooperation and security. Its role as a NATO host and peacekeeping contributor underscores its importance as a stable partner in the Balkans.

In Kosovo, progress in institution-building and international recognition is overshadowed by significant challenges. The ongoing dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, facilitated by the EU, has yet to yield a comprehensive agreement, leaving the region in uncertainty. Flare-ups in northern Kosovo, where ethnic Serbs resist integration, reveal persistent instability. External actors like Russia, supporting Serbia, add complexity with potential European security implications.

The broader geopolitical context, marked by great power rivalry, underscores the importance of stability in Albania and Kosovo. Powers like Russia, China, and Turkey seek influence in the region, but Albania and Kosovo, as pro-Western states, are key bulwarks against this encroachment. Their stability prevents the region from becoming a battleground for competing interests, which could have far-reaching consequences for European and global security. In conclusion, Albania and Kosovo's stability is critical for European and global security. Their roles as stabilizing forces, their strategic importance, and their influence on the broader security landscape make them indispensable in the quest for peace in Southeast Europe. This paper explores the factors contributing to their stability, the challenges they face, and the implications for the region and the world.

Research Questions

In exploring the roles of Albania and Kosovo as stabilizing forces in the Western Balkans, it is essential to address the complex dynamics that influence their contributions to regional security. The multifaceted nature of stability in the region necessitates a comprehensive analysis of both internal and external factors that shape the political, economic, and security landscapes of these countries. To this end, the following research questions have been formulated to guide this study:

- How do Albania and Kosovo contribute to regional stability in the Western Balkans?
- What are the main internal and external challenges to stability in Albania and Kosovo?
- How does Albania's integration into NATO and the EU impact its role as a stabilizing force in the region?
- What are the key factors influencing Kosovo's ability to maintain stability, given its unresolved status and international recognition issues?
- How do external actors influence the stability of Albania and Kosovo, and how do these countries navigate these influences?

Methodology

In order to reach the conclusions and analyze the data presented in this study, a qualitative approach was employed, incorporating a series of detailed and structured methods. The purpose of utilizing these methods is to provide an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the roles of Albania and Kosovo in contributing to regional stability in the Western Balkans. Specifically, this approach enables a thorough examination of Kosovo's ongoing process of integration into the European Union, considering the unique challenges, opportunities, and the distinct political and social context within which this process occurs. By focusing on qualitative data, this study aims to capture the nuanced dynamics and complex interactions that shape the stability and security of these nations, offering insights that are both contextually rich and analytically rigorous.

Presentation of the Main Findings of the Study

Albania's Integration into NATO and its Impact on Regional Stability

Since Albania's accession to NATO in 2009, the country has become a more stable and predictable partner in the Western Balkans. Albania has played an active role in NATO-led operations, particularly in peacekeeping missions across the region. Additionally, its membership has enhanced cooperation with neighboring countries, including Kosovo, in addressing security threats such as organized crime and cross-border terrorism.

Supporting Evidence

- Albania's involvement in NATO's regional initiatives, such as joint military exercises and peacekeeping missions, has created a security buffer in the Western Balkans.
- Albania's support for Kosovo's independence aligns with its commitment to promoting security and stability in the region.
- Kosovo's Unresolved International Status and Regional Tensions

Result: Kosovo's incomplete international recognition continues to create diplomatic and security tensions in the Western Balkans. Despite recognition by over 100 countries, Kosovo's status is contested by Serbia, Russia, and several EU members, creating a roadblock to its full integration into global institutions like the UN and further complicating its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Supporting Evidence

- Kosovo's lack of UN membership limits its ability to engage fully in international security cooperation.
- The EU-mediated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia remains stalled, prolonging political instability and preventing a durable peace agreement.
- Albania-Kosovo Relations as a Stabilizing Factor

Result: The strong diplomatic, political, and economic ties between Albania and Kosovo have emerged as a stabilizing factor in the region. Albania has been a vocal advocate for Kosovo's international recognition, while both countries have signed agreements related to cross-border security, economic integration, and infrastructure development.

Supporting Evidence

- Albania has consistently supported Kosovo in regional and international forums, such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), to further Kosovo's integration into international frameworks.
- Joint economic and infrastructure projects, including highway developments between the two countries, have facilitated greater economic and logistical cooperation, reducing border tensions.
- Interpretation of Results and Comparison with Existing Literature
- Albania's Integration into NATO and its Impact on Regional Stability

Interpretation: Albania's accession to NATO has bolstered its position as a stabilizing force in the Western Balkans. The

country's active participation in NATO missions and regional security initiatives has enhanced its diplomatic clout and provided security guarantees that have helped prevent conflicts in neighboring states, including Kosovo.

Comparison with Literature

The findings are consistent with who argue that Albania's NATO membership aligns its security policies with Western standards, making it a critical player in ensuring regional peace. These scholars emphasize that Albania's involvement in multilateral security efforts has diffused ethnic tensions and provided a stabilizing effect in the region [1]. Additionally, highlights Albania's role in fostering cooperation between post-Yugoslav states, aligning well with the results of this thesis that show Albania acting as a regional anchor [2].

Significance and Implications

Albania's role as a NATO member not only enhances its security but also contributes to the overall stability of the Western Balkans. This membership ties Albania more deeply into Euro-Atlantic security structures, encouraging other states in the region, such as Kosovo, to pursue similar goals. The findings highlight Albania's ability to mediate regional conflicts and create an environment where cooperative security measures can be implemented, leading to broader peace and stability in the region.

Kosovo's Unresolved International Status and Regional Tensions

Interpretation: Kosovo's unresolved international status remains a major obstacle to both its internal stability and the stability of the broader region. Without full recognition, Kosovo faces challenges in asserting its sovereignty and participating fully in international security mechanisms. This diplomatic deadlock with Serbia and other states that do not recognize Kosovo continues to fuel regional tensions.

Comparison with Literature

This interpretation aligns with who argue that Kosovo's status is a central issue in Balkan geopolitics [3, 4]. Weller emphasizes that the lack of recognition hinders Kosovo's state-building process and its participation in international organizations like the UN, while Tzifakis points out that external actors such as Russia and Serbia complicate Kosovo's path toward full sovereignty. These scholars also argue that the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue remains key to resolving regional tensions, which the results of this study confirm.

Significance and Implications

The unresolved status of Kosovo has broader implications for regional security. Kosovo's inability to secure full international recognition creates a permanent source of instability, particularly in its relations with Serbia. The failure to resolve this dispute risks the potential for future escalations, not only in Kosovo but also in neighboring countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, where unresolved ethnic and territorial issues remain. The findings suggest that without a comprehensive resolution to Kosovo's status, the Western Balkans will remain vulnerable to both internal conflicts and external interference.

Albania-Kosovo Relations as a Stabilizing Factor

Interpretation: The strong diplomatic and economic ties between Albania and Kosovo have significantly contributed to regional

stability. Albania's continued advocacy for Kosovo's recognition on the international stage has strengthened Kosovo's position, while their economic cooperation has improved infrastructure and cross-border relations.

Comparison with Literature

support these findings, arguing that Albania's diplomatic support for Kosovo has not only helped Kosovo's efforts for international recognition but also reinforced their bilateral relations [5]. The authors highlight the importance of strategic economic and political cooperation between the two countries, which parallels the results found in this study. Additionally, emphasize that this relationship is critical in balancing regional power dynamics, particularly in relation to Serbia, which continues to challenge Kosovo's sovereignty [6].

Significance and Implications

Albania-Kosovo relations are crucial to fostering stability in the Western Balkans. Their partnership has created a united front in diplomatic, security, and economic matters, thereby increasing their leverage in regional negotiations. This cooperation not only benefits both countries but also acts as a counterbalance to other regional powers like Serbia. The results imply that continued strengthening of these relations can further enhance stability, reduce tensions, and promote regional integration.

Internal Governance Challenges in Albania and Kosovo

Interpretation: Both Albania and Kosovo face internal governance challenges that limit their effectiveness as stabilizing actors in the region. Corruption, political instability, and weak institutions undermine their abilities to implement necessary reforms, hindering their paths toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

Comparison with Literature

The findings correspond with Soeren Keil (2016), who argue that internal governance challenges, particularly in Albania and Kosovo, inhibit these countries from achieving their full potential as regional stabilizers [7]. Vurmo points out that corruption and state capture in Albania prevent meaningful reform, while Keil notes that Kosovo's weak governance structures, exacerbated by its unresolved status, contribute to its internal instability. These governance challenges align with the findings in this study, which highlight how domestic issues spill over into broader regional dynamics.

Significance and Implications

These internal challenges have significant implications for regional stability. Both countries' inability to address corruption and governance issues weakens their legitimacy as reliable partners for the EU and NATO. Moreover, these problems create vulnerabilities that external actors, such as Russia, could exploit to destabilize the region further. The findings suggest that meaningful reform in governance is critical for both Albania and Kosovo to solidify their roles as stabilizing forces in the Balkans.

External Influence on Albania and Kosovo's Stability

Interpretation: External actors, particularly the EU and the US, play a vital role in shaping the stability of both Albania and Kosovo. The EU's conditionality has driven much of Albania's reform agenda, while the US remains a key supporter of Kosovo's

vo's independence. However, external actors like Russia, who oppose Kosovo's independence, continue to destabilize the region.

Comparison with Literature

This interpretation aligns with the findings of who discusses how external actors influence Kosovo's state-building process, and who emphasizes the role of the EU in Albania's democratization and governance reforms [4-8]. Both scholars highlight that while Western influence promotes stability through reforms and integration, opposition from actors like Russia complicates these efforts, particularly in Kosovo.

Significance and Implications

The findings suggest that external actors will continue to play a pivotal role in the region's stability. EU conditionality has the potential to foster reforms in Albania, but only if internal political will aligns with these external pressures. In Kosovo, the strong support of the US is a stabilizing factor, yet Russian opposition, along with Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo, remains a destabilizing influence. These dynamics highlight the complex interplay of external forces in the region's future stability [9].

Conclusion

This study has examined the roles of Albania and Kosovo as stability factors in the Western Balkans, focusing on their contributions to regional security, diplomatic efforts, and internal challenges. Several key conclusions have emerged from the analysis:

Albania's NATO Membership and Regional Stability

Since joining NATO in 2009, Albania has transformed itself into a reliable and strategic partner in maintaining security and stability in the Western Balkans. NATO membership has not only strengthened Albania's national defense capabilities but has also integrated the country more deeply into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. This integration has allowed Albania to play an active role in joint military exercises, peacekeeping missions, and regional security initiatives, all of which contribute to enhancing stability in the Balkans.

Albania's participation in NATO-led operations has significantly increased its diplomatic and military cooperation with neighboring states, including Kosovo. Through initiatives such as joint military exercises, Albania has helped foster better coordination among the Balkan states, creating a regional buffer against potential threats. These exercises, along with Albania's involvement in international peacekeeping efforts in conflict zones outside the Balkans, demonstrate its growing capabilities and willingness to contribute to global security efforts. The country's active involvement in NATO's regional initiatives has positioned Albania as a key player in preventing the re-emergence of ethnic conflicts and cross-border tensions that historically have plagued the region.

Moreover, Albania's NATO membership has bolstered its diplomatic standing, enhancing its credibility in regional and international forums. By aligning itself with NATO's security standards, Albania has attracted increased attention from Western allies, which view it as a stabilizing force in a historically volatile region. Albania's membership also serves as an anchor for other Western Balkan countries, particularly Kosovo, which

looks to Albania's example as it seeks deeper integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Albania's NATO membership also has a significant impact on its domestic politics and governance. The country's alignment with NATO's security frameworks has driven significant reforms in its defense sector, improving transparency, accountability, and professionalism within the military. This has had broader implications for Albania's internal stability, as the military has become a more reliable institution within the country's political system. As Albania continues to consolidate its role in NATO, its contributions to regional security will remain crucial, not only for Albania but for the broader stability of Southeast Europe.

Kosovo's Unresolved Status and Regional Tensions

Kosovo's unresolved international status remains one of the most significant destabilizing factors in the Western Balkans. While Kosovo has made notable strides in state-building and strengthening its institutions since declaring independence in 2008, the lack of full international recognition—especially from key global powers such as Russia, China, and several European Union (EU) members—continues to hinder its full integration into the global security and diplomatic frameworks. This incomplete recognition has far-reaching implications, not only for Kosovo's ability to function effectively on the international stage but also for the overall stability of the region.

One of the primary consequences of Kosovo's unresolved status is its inability to gain membership in key international organizations such as the United Nations (UN). Without UN membership, Kosovo remains excluded from full participation in global diplomatic and security initiatives, limiting its capacity to engage in international peacekeeping efforts, security dialogues, and multilateral organizations that promote stability. The absence of UN recognition also affects Kosovo's legal standing in international law, which further complicates its relations with countries that do not recognize its independence, such as Serbia. This diplomatic isolation leaves Kosovo vulnerable to external influence, particularly from countries that oppose its independence, thus creating a persistent source of regional instability.

Tensions with Serbia, which continues to contest Kosovo's independence, remain a central challenge. Despite multiple rounds of dialogue facilitated by the EU since 2011, the Kosovo-Serbia relationship has not seen a comprehensive normalization agreement. The stalled dialogue has not only prolonged political instability but has also exacerbated ethnic tensions within Kosovo, particularly in the northern regions where a significant Serb minority resides. These tensions are often fueled by nationalist rhetoric from both Belgrade and Pristina, contributing to an atmosphere of uncertainty that undermines efforts to create lasting peace. Incidents of violence, protest, and unrest in northern Kosovo are clear reminders that the unresolved status of Kosovo continues to be a flashpoint for potential conflict.

Moreover, the involvement of external actors, particularly Russia's support for Serbia's stance on Kosovo, further complicates the situation. Russia's influence in the region, through its political and economic backing of Serbia, prevents the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia and adds another layer of tension to an already fragile regional environment. This ex-

ternal interference, combined with Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo, perpetuates a cycle of instability that extends beyond Kosovo's borders, affecting the broader Western Balkan region.

In conclusion, Kosovo's unresolved status not only limits its international integration but also remains a primary source of regional tensions. Without a comprehensive solution to the Kosovo-Serbia dispute and greater international recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty, the Western Balkans will continue to face risks of instability. Kosovo's ability to fully contribute to regional peace and security is constrained by these unresolved diplomatic and territorial issues, making it an ongoing challenge for the region's stability.

Albania-Kosovo Relations as a Stabilizing Force

The strong and evolving diplomatic and economic ties between Albania and Kosovo have emerged as a critical stabilizing factor in the Western Balkans. Historically bonded by cultural, linguistic, and ethnic ties, the two countries have developed a robust partnership that significantly contributes to the stability of the region. This relationship has been particularly instrumental in enhancing their collective ability to address common regional challenges, such as security threats, political instability, and economic development.

One of the cornerstones of the Albania-Kosovo relationship is their commitment to joint initiatives aimed at fostering economic cooperation. Projects such as infrastructure development, particularly the construction of major highways connecting the two countries, have not only bolstered trade and economic growth but have also improved the movement of people and goods across their shared borders. This increased connectivity has facilitated greater economic integration, which in turn strengthens both countries' resilience to economic shocks and contributes to the overall stability of the Western Balkans. The development of transport links and energy infrastructure between Albania and Kosovo is a clear example of how economic collaboration serves as a stabilizing force, promoting both prosperity and peaceful relations.

In addition to economic cooperation, the two countries have made significant strides in enhancing cross-border security through agreements aimed at addressing common security threats, including organized crime, human trafficking, and terrorism. By coordinating their law enforcement efforts and sharing intelligence, Albania and Kosovo have been able to better manage these security risks, thereby contributing to the broader peace and security of the region. This cooperation is further bolstered by Albania's membership in NATO, which provides a framework for military collaboration and strengthens Kosovo's own security capabilities. While Kosovo is not yet a NATO member, Albania's advocacy for Kosovo's deeper integration into Euro-Atlantic structures demonstrates their shared strategic vision for regional security.

Another key element of Albania-Kosovo relations is Albania's consistent and vocal support for Kosovo's international recognition and integration into global organizations. Albania has been a strong advocate for Kosovo's independence on the international stage, lobbying for its recognition in various forums, including the United Nations and the European Union. This diplomatic

backing is essential for Kosovo as it continues to seek broader recognition and legitimacy within the international community. Albania's support not only reinforces the bilateral relationship but also strengthens Kosovo's ability to assert its sovereignty and participate more fully in regional and global institutions. Albania's diplomatic efforts, including pushing for Kosovo's membership in organizations such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and other regional bodies, further solidify their mutual commitment to regional stability.

The close diplomatic, economic, and security ties between Albania and Kosovo also act as a counterbalance to other regional powers, particularly Serbia. Given Serbia's ongoing refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, the unified stance of Albania and Kosovo serves as a critical factor in ensuring that Kosovo remains a viable and stable actor in the region. This relationship has helped mitigate some of the destabilizing pressures exerted by external actors, allowing both countries to present a united front in their dealings with neighboring states and international organizations.

In conclusion, the Albania-Kosovo relationship is a key stabilizing force in the Western Balkans. Their partnership not only strengthens their own security and economic prospects but also contributes to the broader goal of peace and stability in the region. By continuing to enhance their economic and security cooperation and by advocating for Kosovo's international recognition, Albania and Kosovo are playing a pivotal role in shaping the future of the Balkans. Their relationship serves as a model of how bilateral cooperation can promote regional stability in a historically volatile region.

Internal Governance Challenges

Both Albania and Kosovo face significant internal governance challenges that undermine their capacity to act as effective stabilizing forces in the Western Balkans. Issues such as political instability, widespread corruption, and weak institutional governance are pervasive in both countries, and they not only hinder domestic progress but also create vulnerabilities that external actors can exploit, further threatening regional stability. These challenges present significant obstacles to the full realization of their potential as key contributors to peace and security in the region.

In Albania, political instability has been a recurring issue, often fueled by intense political rivalries and a lack of consensus between ruling and opposition parties. Political crises, boycotts of parliamentary proceedings, and frequent protests have disrupted the functioning of democratic institutions, undermining public trust in the political process. This instability has also delayed critical reforms needed for Albania's European Union accession process, particularly in the areas of judicial reform, electoral integrity, and anti-corruption measures. These unresolved internal issues not only strain Albania's political landscape but also weaken its position as a stabilizing actor in the region. The country's inability to address these challenges effectively can lead to policy stagnation, further complicating its efforts to contribute to broader regional stability.

Kosovo, as a young and still-developing state, faces even more pronounced governance challenges. The country has struggled

to build strong, effective institutions in the face of ongoing political turbulence and fragile statehood. One of the most significant issues in Kosovo is corruption, which pervades various levels of government and weakens the rule of law. Corruption impedes the functioning of key institutions, including the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, which are essential for maintaining domestic order and ensuring justice. This erosion of institutional trust has broader implications for Kosovo's ability to secure the confidence of both its citizens and international partners. Moreover, Kosovo's unresolved status as a partially recognized state adds another layer of complexity, limiting its capacity to implement governance reforms and attract foreign investment, which are crucial for stability.

Both Albania and Kosovo also suffer from weak institutional governance, which manifests in a lack of capacity to implement effective policies and reforms. In Albania, the judiciary has historically been seen as inefficient and subject to political influence, hindering the rule of law and creating obstacles to fighting organized crime and corruption. In Kosovo, institutional weaknesses are evident in the slow progress of state-building efforts and the difficulty in maintaining effective governance, particularly in the northern regions where ethnic tensions persist. These institutional weaknesses undermine the ability of both countries to enforce laws, manage resources effectively, and provide essential services to their populations.

The governance challenges in both countries provide fertile ground for external actors to exploit vulnerabilities. In Albania, external powers such as Russia and Turkey have sought to exert influence by taking advantage of the political instability and corruption that weaken the state. In Kosovo, Serbia continues to leverage Kosovo's internal governance issues, particularly in areas where the ethnic Serb population resists integration into the Kosovar state. Additionally, Russia's support for Serbia's position on Kosovo exacerbates regional tensions and creates further obstacles to stability. The influence of external actors, combined with internal governance weaknesses, presents a significant risk to both Albania's and Kosovo's roles as stabilizing forces in the region.

In conclusion, the internal governance challenges faced by Albania and Kosovo are critical issues that limit their ability to contribute effectively to regional stability. Political instability, corruption, and weak institutional governance undermine the legitimacy of their governments, reduce public trust, and create opportunities for external actors to destabilize the region. Addressing these domestic issues through comprehensive reforms, particularly in the areas of anti-corruption, judicial independence, and institutional capacity-building, is essential for both countries to solidify their roles as key contributors to peace and security in the Western Balkans.

Influence of External Actors

The influence of external actors plays a pivotal role in shaping the stability and security dynamics of both Albania and Kosovo. The European Union (EU), the United States, and Russia are among the most influential external actors, each with differing agendas and levels of engagement in the Western Balkans. The support of the EU and the U.S. has been largely positive, driving reforms and fostering stability, while Russia's involvement,

particularly in Kosovo, often serves to fuel tensions and obstruct progress toward regional peace.

For Albania, the EU and the United States have been critical partners in its post-communist transformation, particularly in its quest for Euro-Atlantic integration. The EU's conditionality for accession has been a driving force behind many of the reforms Albania has implemented, particularly in the areas of judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and governance. This process, while slow and fraught with challenges, has helped Albania progress toward a more stable and democratic system. Similarly, the United States has supported Albania's NATO membership, viewing the country as a key ally in the region, especially in the context of broader Western efforts to contain instability and counter malign influence in the Balkans. Both the EU and U.S. have played essential roles in fostering Albania's stability, aligning it with Western security frameworks, and encouraging it to contribute to regional peace.

In Kosovo, external actors have an even more direct influence, largely due to its unresolved status as a partially recognized state. Western support, particularly from the United States, has been crucial in Kosovo's quest for international recognition and state-building. The U.S. remains Kosovo's most steadfast ally, providing diplomatic, financial, and military support since its declaration of independence. The EU has also played a significant role, especially through its mediation of the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, aimed at normalizing relations. The EU's rule of law mission in Kosovo (EULEX) has been instrumental in assisting Kosovo's institutions, particularly in the areas of judicial reform and governance, both essential for maintaining stability. However, despite these efforts, Kosovo's unresolved international status continues to pose significant challenges, particularly in its interactions with Serbia and in its quest for broader recognition.

On the other side, the influence of Russia and Serbia continues to exacerbate tensions in the region, particularly with regard to Kosovo's status. Russia, a key ally of Serbia, has consistently opposed Kosovo's independence, blocking its membership in the United Nations and other international organizations. Moscow's position aligns with its broader strategy of exerting influence in the Balkans to counter Western dominance. Russia's support for Serbia not only fuels political and ethnic tensions but also serves to stall the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, which is crucial for achieving long-term stability in the Western Balkans. This external opposition from Russia emboldens Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's sovereignty, leading to periodic flare-ups of violence and protests, particularly in northern Kosovo where ethnic Serbs resist integration into the Kosovar state.

Serbia's continued rejection of Kosovo's independence, backed by Russia, remains one of the most significant barriers to regional peace. Belgrade's refusal to engage meaningfully in the EU-facilitated dialogue has led to a protracted stalemate, with both sides unwilling to compromise. This dynamic is further complicated by Russia's broader geopolitical ambitions in the region, as Moscow seeks to maintain its influence in the Balkans by leveraging its support for Serbia's position on Kosovo. The unresolved status of Kosovo provides an entry point for external

actors like Russia to destabilize the region by fueling nationalist rhetoric and obstructing peace initiatives.

In conclusion, while Western support for Albania and Kosovo has been essential in driving reforms, fostering governance, and promoting peace, the influence of Russia and Serbia remains a destabilizing factor. The competition between Western and Russian influence in the region continues to shape the political landscape, particularly in Kosovo, where the unresolved status remains a significant source of tension. As long as these external actors continue to play opposing roles, the stability of both Albania and Kosovo will remain fragile. A resolution to Kosovo's status and further integration of both countries into Euro-Atlantic structures are essential to reducing external interference and ensuring long-term peace in the Western Balkans.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations are proposed to enhance the roles of Albania and Kosovo as stabilizing forces in the region:

Strengthening Bilateral Cooperation

Albania and Kosovo should continue to deepen their bilateral cooperation in areas such as security, border management, and economic development. Strengthening collaboration on shared security concerns, such as organized crime, human trafficking, and terrorism, is crucial for both countries to safeguard their borders and ensure regional peace. Joint border management initiatives, enhanced by shared intelligence and coordinated law enforcement efforts, will allow both nations to address these threats more effectively. This cooperation not only bolsters their own national security but also contributes to the broader stability of the Western Balkans.

Joint infrastructure projects between Albania and Kosovo are another key area for further development. Major projects, such as the highway connecting the two countries, have already had significant economic benefits by facilitating trade and improving connectivity. Expanding these infrastructure efforts, particularly in energy and transport, will further integrate the economies of Albania and Kosovo, making them less vulnerable to external economic shocks. This economic interdependence will not only strengthen their bilateral relations but also reinforce their positions as stabilizing actors in the region.

In addition to security and economic collaboration, Albania and Kosovo should also work toward harmonizing their policies in areas such as trade regulations, digital infrastructure, and environmental protection. By aligning their policies in these areas, both countries can create a more cohesive framework for cross-border cooperation that will enhance their ability to address shared challenges and seize joint opportunities. This increased policy alignment, combined with ongoing efforts in security and infrastructure, will ensure that Albania and Kosovo remain united in their efforts to promote peace and stability in the Western Balkans.

Enhancing Diplomatic Efforts for Kosovo's Recognition

Kosovo should continue its diplomatic efforts to secure full international recognition, focusing particularly on gaining the support of the five European Union member states—Spain, Greece,

Slovakia, Romania, and Cyprus—that have not yet recognized its independence. Diplomatic outreach to these countries is crucial for Kosovo's aspirations of EU integration and broader international legitimacy. Targeted diplomatic strategies, such as engaging in bilateral dialogues, offering economic or security cooperation, and emphasizing Kosovo's commitment to regional stability, could help bridge political divides and foster stronger relationships with these EU members. Gaining their recognition would not only solidify Kosovo's standing within Europe but would also open the door for greater participation in key international institutions, such as the United Nations and the EU itself.

Albania can play a pivotal role in this process by continuing to advocate for Kosovo in international forums, utilizing its diplomatic leverage as a NATO member and EU candidate. Albania's close ties with both Western allies and regional actors make it a key intermediary in pushing for Kosovo's recognition on a global scale. Albania can also strengthen its diplomatic coordination with Kosovo, forming joint initiatives aimed at lobbying for international support and increasing visibility for Kosovo's statehood. By positioning itself as a steadfast ally and advocate for Kosovo, Albania can help accelerate Kosovo's path to full recognition and integration into the international community.

Furthermore, both countries can leverage regional organizations and forums such as the Western Balkans Six (WB6) and the Berlin Process to build diplomatic momentum. Engaging neighboring countries in these initiatives not only fosters regional cooperation but also creates an environment where Kosovo's sovereignty is normalized within the broader framework of regional integration. By aligning their diplomatic efforts and presenting a united front, Albania and Kosovo can strengthen their case for broader international recognition, ultimately contributing to long-term regional peace and security.

Addressing Internal Governance Challenges

Both Albania and Kosovo must prioritize comprehensive reforms that target corruption, strengthen institutional governance, and ensure long-term political stability. Corruption remains one of the most pressing issues undermining the effectiveness of both governments, eroding public trust, and stalling necessary development initiatives. Addressing corruption requires a multifaceted approach, including enhancing transparency, strengthening anti-corruption agencies, and fostering a culture of accountability within public institutions. Judicial reforms, in particular, are critical for ensuring that laws are enforced impartially and effectively, which will help restore confidence in the rule of law and promote greater political and social stability.

Institutional governance reforms should also focus on improving the capacity and efficiency of public administration in both countries. Streamlining bureaucratic processes, increasing professionalism within government bodies, and reducing political interference are essential steps in building institutions that are responsive to citizens' needs. Both Albania and Kosovo need to invest in modernizing their governance systems, ensuring that public services are delivered effectively and that citizens have access to fair and transparent government procedures. Such reforms will not only stabilize their domestic political environments but also improve their prospects for EU accession, as strong governance is a key requirement for membership.

International organizations, including the European Union, NATO, and the United States, can play a significant role in supporting these governance reforms by providing technical assistance, expertise, and monitoring progress. The EU's rule of law and good governance mechanisms, particularly through its enlargement and accession framework, offer valuable resources for institutional development. NATO, with its emphasis on defense sector reforms and enhancing the professionalism of security institutions, can also contribute to building more resilient governance structures. Through sustained collaboration with these international partners, Albania and Kosovo can make substantial progress in addressing their internal governance challenges, creating a more stable and democratic environment that supports their roles as stabilizing actors in the Western Balkans.

Promoting Regional Dialogue and Conflict Resolution

The EU-mediated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia must be reinvigorated with a renewed commitment to finding durable, long-term solutions to the unresolved disputes that continue to destabilize the region. The normalization of relations between these two nations is essential not only for their own futures but also for the broader stability of the Western Balkans. The dialogue should move beyond short-term fixes and focus on addressing the core issues, such as mutual recognition, the status of Kosovo's northern territories with a significant Serb population, and the establishment of mechanisms that ensure the rights of minorities are protected on both sides. A comprehensive and binding agreement that addresses these concerns is crucial to preventing the recurrence of tensions and conflict.

External powers, particularly the EU and the United States, should take a more proactive role in facilitating and sustaining the dialogue. The EU, as the primary mediator, needs to maintain consistent pressure on both Kosovo and Serbia to engage in meaningful negotiations and to follow through on commitments made during talks. The United States, with its strong influence in Kosovo and diplomatic leverage with Serbia, can complement the EU's efforts by encouraging both parties to remain commit-

ted to the process and by offering incentives for progress, such as economic aid or increased political support on the international stage.

Moreover, other regional actors and international organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations, could also contribute by providing platforms for dialogue, technical expertise in conflict resolution, and monitoring compliance with any agreements reached. By fostering a cooperative, multi-stakeholder approach, external powers can help ensure that the dialogue produces lasting solutions, reducing the likelihood of future conflicts and enhancing long-term peace and stability in the region.

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