**Introduction**

Unfortunately, nowadays, many regions in the world are caught up in the whirlwind of war. Also, many regions and spots have a very high risk and potential for starting a war. Geographically, they are placed worldwide, starting from the Russia-Ukraine region and finishing with the China-Taiwan conflict.

We can categorize the Kosovo-Serbia conflict in the second group, i.e., in the regions which fortunately are not still officially a war, but at the same time with a very high tendency and potential for ‘igniting the sparks’.

The Kosovo conflict arose in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a result of tensions between the ethnic Albanian majority and the Serbian minority in the region. The conflict was marked by acts of violence and repression on both sides, with the Serbian Government using military force to suppress the Albanian separatist movement. The conflict escalated into a full-blown war, resulting in thousands of deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

The international community, led by the United Nations, intervened in the conflict to bring about a peaceful resolution. Diplomatic efforts were made to broker a ceasefire and negotiate a settlement between the warring parties. Eventually, NATO intervened militarily, launching a bombing campaign against Serbian targets to force them to withdraw their forces from Kosovo.

The conflict was eventually resolved through the international community’s intervention, and Kosovo was granted independence in 2008. However, the conflict has had lasting effects on the region, with tensions between Serbia and Kosovo continuing.

**Literature Review**

This chapter is dedicated to readers with an interest in exploring international politics and relations, particularly those focusing on political, economic, and security challenges within the Western Balkan countries, with a specific emphasis on Serbia-Kosovo relations. It is designed for use across various academic fields, including Political Science, Diplomacy, International Relations, Public Administration, Cultural Heritage, and more. The chapter represents a valuable contribution, offering a successful examination of all relevant aspects within these academic disciplines, with a specific focus on the concrete issue of Serbia-Kosovo relations.

The primary sources of information and data utilized for this chapter are derived from scientific papers, primarily published in reputable international journals, notably those associated with the Journal of Liberty and International Relations. Secondary sources include reports, analyses, policy studies, notes, and articles generated by European Union institutions, services, bodies, and agencies. Tertiary sources, the final tier of information, consist of specialized papers addressing cultural heritage issues in Kosovo. These papers have been published in international scientific journals and have also been presented at scientific conferences, subsequently being published as conference proceedings.

**Research Methodology**

The investigation into "Kosovo as the European Union Rubik’s Cube: Managing Regional Conflicts in the New International Context" employed a multifaceted and comprehensive methodological approach to systematically address the complex dynamics inherent in the regional conflicts within Kosovo. The methodology was crafted to capture the intricacies of political, historical, and socio-economic dimensions, aiming to provide a holistic understanding of the subject matter. The following key methods were utilized:

* Historical Analysis: Conducted an in-depth examination of historical events and developments related to Kosovo, tracing the evolution of conflicts and their impact on regional dynamics. This historical context provided a foundation for understanding the roots and trajectories of current issues.
* Descriptive Analysis: Employed descriptive analysis to provide a detailed account of the current state of affairs in Kosovo, including the political landscape, socio-economic conditions, and cultural factors. This approach allowed for a nuanced portrayal of the context in which conflicts emerge and are managed.
* Comparative Analysis: Undertook a comparative analysis to draw parallels and distinctions between Kosovo's situation and other regional conflicts. This method facilitated the identification of successful conflict management strategies employed in similar contexts and the adaptation of relevant lessons to the Kosovo scenario.
* Content Analysis: Utilized content analysis to scrutinize official documents, media reports, and academic literature pertaining to Kosovo and its regional conflicts. This method provided insights into public discourse, policy perspectives, and the role of various stakeholders in shaping the conflict narrative.

By integrating these methodological components, this research aimed to unravel the multifaceted nature of Kosovo's position as the European Union Rubik’s Cube, offering a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities for managing regional conflicts in the evolving international context.

**Instruments for Dealing with Regional Conflicts**

Dealing with regional conflicts of global importance requires a comprehensive approach that considers the various factors that contribute to the conflict. Diplomatic efforts were made to broker a settlement between the warring parties, culminating in the Rambouillet Accords 1999. When those efforts failed, NATO intervened militarily to force Serbia to withdraw its forces from Kosovo. The international community then established the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) to oversee the transition to independence.

Multilateral cooperation was also essential in resolving the Kosovo conflict. The intervention of NATO was supported by many countries in the region and worldwide. A wide range of countries also supported the establishment of UNMIK.

International law played a role in resolving the Kosovo conflict as well. The intervention of NATO was controversial from a legal perspective, as the United Nations Security Council did not authorize it. Russia and China have played a significant role in the Kosovo conflict since its inception, and their influence continues to be felt in the region today. While both countries have taken different approaches to the conflict, they share a common interest in maintaining stability in the region and safeguarding their respective strategic interests.

The case of Kosovo is a complex one that has involved various foreign influences over the years. One of the most significant foreign influences in the Kosovo conflict has been the role of the United States. The US played a crucial role in the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999, which helped bring an end to the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. The US has also strongly supported Kosovo’s independence and recognized the country as a sovereign state.

Russia and China, on the other hand, have been staunch supporters of Serbia in the Kosovo conflict. Both countries have refused to recognize Kosovo’s independence and have been critical of the international community’s role in the region. Russia, in particular, has used its veto power on the United Nations Security Council to block Kosovo’s attempts to gain membership in the UN. Nevertheless, by “having Russia as an ally, political leadership in Western Balkan countries is prone to be influenced by the Kremlin” (Zoric, 2020, p. 15).

The foreign influences in the Kosovo conflict have created a complex web of regional relationships and alliances. The EU has been heavily involved in the Kosovo conflict and has sought to promote stability and democracy in the region. However, the issue of Kosovo’s independence has divided EU member states and has made it difficult for the organization to take a unified approach to the conflict.

The involvement of foreign powers in the Kosovo conflict has also had significant implications for the region’s economy and security. Russia and China have sought to expand their influence in the Balkans, which has led to concerns about the region’s stability and potential for conflict. The EU has sought to counter these efforts by promoting economic development and regional cooperation, but the challenges posed by the conflict remain significant.

**Foreign Influences and Attitudes towards Kosovo Question**

The case of Kosovo and foreign influences highlights the complexity of conflicts in the modern world. The involvement of various foreign powers in the conflict has created challenges for the region and made it difficult for Kosovo to integrate into the international community fully. Despite these challenges, the EU and other international organizations remain committed to promoting stability and democracy in the region and will continue to work towards resolving the conflict.

Russia has historically been a strong supporter of Serbia and has opposed Kosovo’s independence. Russia’s position on Kosovo is primarily based on its territorial disputes, particularly concerning Chechnya and Crimea. Russia views Kosovo as a precedent that could encourage other separatist movements and has sought to prevent the international community from recognizing Kosovo’s independence. Russia has used its influence in the United Nations Security Council to prevent Kosovo from being granted full membership in the United Nations. It has also opposed Kosovo’s membership in international organizations, such as the Council of Europe and UNESCO. In addition, Russia has sought to strengthen its ties with Serbia, providing economic assistance and military cooperation.

China has taken a more neutral stance on the Kosovo conflict and opposed Kosovo’s independence. Like Russia, China is concerned about the potential for Kosovo to set a precedent for other separatist movements. China has also sought to protect its territorial integrity, particularly concerning Taiwan and Tibet. China has not taken an active role in the Kosovo conflict but has supported Serbia’s position. Moreover, Chinese financial involvement in the area has significantly increased. Or as the author Dr. Valbona Zeneli (2022) stressed, a recent report by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, released in December 2021, revealed the existence of 122 Chinese initiatives worth approximately $31 billion (equivalent to 27.6 billion euros). This constitutes nearly 40% of the overall foreign direct investment (FDI) in the five Western Balkan nations (excluding Kosovo), which totaled $80 billion in 2020, as reported by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

China has also opposed Kosovo’s membership in the United Nations and other international organizations. China has sought to maintain good relations with Serbia and Kosovo but has avoided taking sides in the conflict. In this context, it is vital to stress that: “China’s main interest in the Western Balkans is not particularly to the countries themselves, but to the region as a connection and entrance to the market of the European Union” (Ilik and Shapkoski, 2021, p. 113). Namely, “Chinese foreign policy is first and foremost determined by domestic priorities, such as the need to effectuate sustainable economic growth and to foster the political legitimacy of the Chinese communist leadership” (Ilik, 2020, p. 14). But also we must be aware that “the fragility of the EU’s unity pushed EU/European countries toward other foreign influences, in this case, China” (Ilik and Shapkoski, 2022, p. 100).

Russia and China’s influence in the Kosovo conflict has had several impacts on the region. First, their opposition to Kosovo’s independence has prevented the country from fully integrating into the international community. This has hindered Kosovo’s economic development and its ability to pursue its foreign policy objectives.

Second, Russia’s support for Serbia has strengthened Serbia’s position in the region. Serbia has relied on Russia for economic and military support, which has helped it maintain its territorial integrity and resist pressure to recognize Kosovo’s independence.

Finally, the involvement of Russia and China has made it more difficult for the international community to resolve the Kosovo conflict. Russia’s opposition to Kosovo’s independence has made it difficult for the United Nations to take decisive action in the region. China’s neutrality has also made building international consensus around a solution to the conflict more difficult.

While their regional interests differ, both countries share a common interest in maintaining stability and safeguarding their respective strategic interests. As the conflict in Kosovo continues, Russia and China will likely continue to play a role in shaping its future.

The EU has been involved in the Kosovo conflict since the early days of the conflict. The EU has deployed a large peacekeeping mission, the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), promoting stability and democracy in the region. Later, “during the rotating Presidency, the government placed the issue of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans, with several bilateral meetings taking place at a governmental level before and during the Romanian Presidency” (Cuglesan and Ilik, 2022, p. 468). This was an essential step because Romania is a Balkan country interested in including the Western Balkan countries in the EU. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that the EU has also been a significant donor to Kosovo, providing financial and technical assistance to help the country rebuild and develop.

However, the EU’s involvement in the Kosovo conflict has also created challenges for the organization. The issue of Kosovo’s independence has divided EU member states, with some recognizing Kosovo and others, including Spain and Slovakia, refusing to do so. This has created tensions within the EU and has made it difficult for the organization to take a united approach to the conflict.

Serbia has been trying to keep its policy on Kosovo separate from its ambitions to join the European Union (EU). However, the EU has clarified that Serbia’s progress toward accession depends on Belgrade improving its relations with Kosovo. Through the substantial use of incentives and conditionality, the EU recently helped to solve some of the acute problems in the north and to open the door to Kosovo’s participation in regional cooperation. The overall situation, however, remains unsatisfactory and potentially unstable. Building on its recent success, the EU should, therefore, launch a more ambitious dialogue involving Belgrade and Pristina and representatives from northern Kosovo. The aim of this dialogue should be achieving significant progress toward normal relations, which could be based on the following elements: Achieving reconciliation between northern Kosovo and the rest of the region by implementing measures for regional self-governance in the north; Securing international protections for Serb Orthodox monasteries; Establishing a comprehensive cooperation framework that encompasses contractual agreements, diplomatic representation, and respects the differing legal stances of the parties, similar to the Basic Treaty between the two Germanys in 1972; putting an end to Serbia’s opposition to Kosovo’s participation in international organizations and its quest for further recognitions. To initiate this process, the European Union should designate a high-ranking mediator to engage in discussions with the involved parties. Undoubtedly, navigating this process will present challenges to all parties involved. Nevertheless, the mutual desire of both Belgrade and Pristina to advance their ties with the EU should provide Brussels with the necessary leverage to drive this process forward (Lehne, 2012, p. 1).

Given its geographical location on the European continent, solving the Kosovo-Serbia conflict is highly important to the EU regarding security and stability. The drivers behind the EU’s substantial engagement in the Western Balkans (including a conditional promise of EU membership) are the long-term geopolitical benefits linked to a stable, prospering, and democratizing region closely integrated into the European project. The risks related to the non-resolution of the Kosovo-Serbia conflict have become very apparent with the return of great power rivalry in the Western Balkans that has contested the primacy of European leadership in steering the region’s trajectory. The EU has made this geopolitical resurgence possible by not vigorously pursuing its enlargement policy objectives and remaining passive in the face of a considerable deterioration of democratic standards across the region during the last decade. The related power vacuum has invited other powers, such as Russia and China, to step in (Bargues et al., 2022, p. 6).

**Possible Future Scenarios for the Serbia-Kosovo Dispute**

Several scenarios should be considered regarding the final resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo conflict. All these scenarios include the opinions and attitudes of both sides and appreciate the mutual efforts of all state and non-state actors, which can contribute to finalizing the conflicts that last for several decades.

The first scenario is a continuation of the *status quo*. According to this scenario, which to some extent is an irresponsible scenario, there would be no dialogue, with the two parties standing firm on their diametrically opposing positions on the critical issues related to Kosovo’s status and Serbia’s interference in Kosovo. Most probably, such a scenario would cement the current ethnic division and overlap of Kosovar and Serb institutions in Kosovo and, worse, could even risk the current level of (relative) stability and inter-ethnic political communication in Kosovo (RIDEA & BPRG, 2018, p. 23).

The international community does not support this scenario because it means burying the problems and can generate stagnation of the whole Western Balkans region regarding the accession process towards the European Union, but also generally stagnation of the overall development of the region.

The second scenario is the full normalization of the relations through a bilateral agreement/treaty. This is another eventual scenario to solve the issue, achieve full normalization, and bring stability to the region. In the opinion of a former senior Kosovo official on EU-facilitated dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, Kosovo has made clear that the final phase of dialogue should end up in mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia as the only way of establishing a lasting peace between both states and even both nations Albanians and Serbs. Likewise, according to an adviser to the President of Kosovo, the ideal option to end the dialogue would be for Serbia to recognize Kosovo, enabling UN membership, provided that we establish the Association/Community and eventually revise several provisions and rights, including the protection of cultural and religious monuments, for this way we preserve Kosovo’s borders and its multi-ethnic character. Last but not least, it is doubtful that a divided EU with five member states opposing Kosovo’s independence will be able to force Serbia to recognize Kosovo’s independence *de jure* and perhaps not even *de facto*. EU’s ‘status neutrality’ is a major disadvantage for Kosovo in any case and any future negotiating format or arrangement (RIDEA & BPRG, pp. 31-32)

The international community strongly wishes for this scenario, but it is not very likely due to the firm stance of Serbian officials on Kosovo’s recognition. They are not willing to entertain such a possibility. Ultimately, this scenario could only become feasible if certain Serbian officials were to shift their stance on Kosovo, but this might also entail the end of their political careers.

The third scenario is probably the worst scenario, not only in the eyes of the international community but also for Serbia and Kosovo. This scenario means an escalation of the conflicts in the northern part of Kosovo and tensions, which can bring to eventual war. Of course, this scenario can generate a ‘freezing’ of the EU accession negotiations both for Kosovo and Serbia, but also a potential for a regional conflict that can even harm the complete European continent.

Serbia and Kosovo aspire to EU membership – Serbia as a candidate country and Kosovo as a potential candidate. The EU insists that Serbia must normalize its relations with Kosovo before joining. Since 2011, with the help of EU mediation, the two neighbors have resolved some of the technical issues. However, disagreements prevent their regular day-to-day interaction in trade, energy supplies, and cross-border travel. One of the main stumbling blocks is the situation of Kosovo’s Serb minority. Around one in 12 Kosovars is an ethnic Serb, and nearly half are concentrated in the north. Despite efforts to integrate Serb-majority northern Kosovo into the rest of the country, Pristina still struggles to control the region. In 2013 and 2015, it agreed to establish an Association of Serb-majority Municipalities, but progress is now deadlocked (Russell, 2019, p. 1). It is important to stress that the Kosovo legal “infrastructure is a good basis for the protection of all minorities, whereas it pays more specific attention to the Serb minority. But the Serb community is divided in regard to their attitudes regarding their future in Kosovo” (Rrahmani, 2020, p. 146).

There are many possibilities for the result of the Serbia-Kosovo dispute mediated by the international community, particularly by the European Union. Many factors will determine the further negotiations and discussions. However, probably the most relevant will be the European Union and its member states with the application of the ‘soft power’ and the United States, eventually joined by China and Russia, with the application of the ‘hard power’.

**Serbian Cultural Heritage in Kosovo and Its Impact on the Possible Conflict Resolution**

The cultural heritage of a country is the product of all the various peoples who have inhabited the land from prehistory to modern times and is, therefore, varied and diverse, reflecting the ethnic character of its creators. The cultural heritage of Kosovo is no exception to that rule: its contents reflect the long history of the land, dating back to prehistoric times and extending – through antiquity, Illyrian and Roman times, the Middle Ages, including the Byzantine and the Serbian periods, followed by the Ottoman Empire – to modern times and our age. Serbian cultural heritage (henceforth: SRCH) in Kosovo and how this can be addressed in the context of an eventual agreement between Kosovo and Serbia on the normalization of their relations can serve as a guide to the nexus of complex and sensitive issues that are evoked by the title and which constitute an essential ingredient of the Kosovo reality today (Research Institute of Development and European Affairs – RIDEA, 2019, p. 1).

Although it probably implies some concept of extraterritoriality, the Serbian cultural heritage is an imminent part of the possible solution. This issue is the most profound ‘red line’ that the Serbian side can never cross.

Outstanding among the cultural heritage monuments in Kosovo are undoubtedly those belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church (henceforth SOC); they are so far the only cultural heritage in Kosovo represented on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The four monuments included on that list are the Visoki Decani monastery in Decan, the Peja Patriarchate in Peja, the Gracanica monastery near Prishtina, and the Bogorodica Ljeviska church in Prizren. Beyond its’ universally recognized aesthetic value, an additional factor that lends the Serbian religious and cultural heritage extraordinary importance is the significance it has for the Serbian nation, a nation that views religion, that is, the Serbian Orthodox Church, as an indispensable ingredient of its identity (Research Institute of Development and European Affairs – RIDEA, 2019, p. 2).

Discussing these sensitive issues, we should consider that we have three different sides in this conflict. First, we have the Serbian side, then the Kosovar side, and at the end, we have the side represented by the international community, which should be a neutral side. The Serbian side holds the position that the Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo, especially the Orthodox churches and monasteries, should be fully protected and under control by the Serbian state. The Kosovar side is categorically against any influence on the territory of Kosovo by the Serbian state, including the part of the cultural heritage.

The international community, including, in particular, those Western countries which came to understand that the settlement of the Kosovo issue should be based on the establishment of an independent state, understood at the same time the need to guarantee complete protection to the SRCH in the new state, which would be of the Albanian majority. Another factor that informed the attitude of the international community toward the SRCH was the fact that the Serbian monuments and sites in Kosovo (churches and monasteries) became prime targets of the shocking outburst of violence and destruction in March 2004. To sum up, the aesthetic value, the importance of the Serbian identity, and the vulnerability of the SRCH in Kosovo led the international community to bestow on it a status of exceptionality within the new Kosovo state. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that the Western powers, the strongest supporters of Kosovo protecting the SRCH, enjoy the same support as defending and strengthening Kosovo’s statehood. The fact that the SRCH monuments are not museum relics but living places of worship, which are inhabited by religious communities celebrating religious services daily and attract significant numbers of visitors from all over the world, has contributed to the extension of the concept of SRCH to encompass the presence of the SOC in Kosovo in all its facets, its position in the legal framework of the country as well as in society. The position of the SOC in Kosovo today can be seen from two angles: one pertains to its rights and privileges as the owner and manager of the SRCH and amounts to what could be called a status of exceptionalism; the other aspect covers a set of problems facing the Church as a civic entity, mainly about property issues, and as such belongs in the sphere of the rule of law, which applies to all citizens without exception. The status of the SRCH in Kosovo today is based, of course, on the provisions contained in the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (henceforth: CSP), also known as the Ahtisaari Plan1, especially in its Annex V, provisions which the Government of Kosovo solemnly pledged, on its independence day, that it would abide by and implement in total, a pledge inscribed in the most sacred text of the nation, the Declaration of independence. Thus, the commitment to respect and protect the SRCH should be rightfully considered as one of the principles of the state of Kosovo (Research Institute of Development and European Affairs – RIDEA, 2019, pp. 2-3).

A compromise should be made regarding the Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo. The pressure from the international community is enormous and constant, and it is a part of the strategy for the final resolution of the open questions.

Kosovo, the territorial, political, and cultural epicenter of the medieval Serbian state, still offers many testimonies to the centuries-old presence of the Serbs on this territory: 1,352 buildings belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church, 534 old Serbian cemeteries, remains of 96 old cities and fortresses, and the remains of 14 castles of medieval Serbian nobility make up a total of 1,996 Serbian toponyms on Kosovo’s present-day map (Gvoić, 2007).

Nowadays, Serbian monasteries in Kosovo and Metohija are surrounded with barbed wire and preserved from the part of the hostile Albanian population by the soldiers of international military missions. From the arrival of NATO troops in Kosmet in 1999 to 2003, a total of 112 churches and monasteries were burned, ruined, desecrated, and demolished. In two days’ riots, on the 17th and 18th of March 2004, another 36 Orthodox holy objects were destroyed. Among the destroyed holy objects was the 14th-century Cathedral of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviš, which had been converted into a mosque during Turkish rule and restored in 1950, only to reveal frescoes of exceptional beauty because of which it was put on the World Heritage list. Individual books that did not meet this fate and the library collections of Peć Monastery, Gračanica, and Dečani are no longer in Kosovo and Metohija but at the National Library of Serbia in Belgrade. In the process of digitalization of Serbian cultural heritage, the National Library of Serbia has digitalized the majority of manuscripts from the Peć Patriarchate and Visoki Dečani Monastery (Stokić Simončić and Vukadinović, 2009, p. 11).

In general, frequent breaches of legislation across Kosovo negatively affecting religious and cultural heritage sites have continued. Implementing the general legislative framework governing the protection of cultural heritage remains weak. Illegal construction is a significant concern, particularly within Special Protective Zones. Punitive measures against those in breach of laws need to be applied consistently, and illegal construction which has already taken place should be dealt with following the law. Kosovo authorities must demonstrate a more substantial commitment to protecting cultural heritage, particularly at the local level. The new Government needs to engage actively in this process (EU Kosovo Progress Report, October 2014, p.22).

Actually, from this Report, we can note that the public authorities in Kosovo do not take any measures for the fundamental protection of the Serbian cultural heritage but act indifferently and disinterestedly when there is destruction.

Therefore, Annex V of the Ahtisaari Plan, at its core, is seen as a compromising solution for a sustainable co-existence in a specific post-war context, with the following two key elements: (I) Recognition of the importance of the protection and preservation of Serbian Orthodox Church monuments and sites in Kosovo and (II) recognition of the importance that this is done within the Kosovo jurisdiction, thus, encouraging communication and cooperation between Serbian Orthodox Church and Kosovo.

Communication and cooperation were also required for practical matters such as sustainable planning and development in the surrounding areas of heritage monuments, that is, in their protective zones. The implementation of the CSP Annex V started with the adopting of a specific law in 2008, the Law on Special Protective Zones, deriving from Annex V, Article 4. The law requires the establishment of protective zones as spatial planning tools for controlled development in the surrounding areas of 44 heritage sites, mainly orthodox churches and monasteries, including the historic center of Prizren and the village of Velika Hoca/Hoҫё e Madhe. As stated in Article 4 of Annex V, the protective zones are to be established in order to “provide for the peaceful existence and functioning of the sites to be protected; preserve their historical, cultural and natural environment, including the monastic way of life of the clergy; and prevent adverse development around them, while ensuring the best possible conditions for harmonious and sustainable development of the communities inhabiting the areas surrounding such sites” (Hisari and Fouseki, 2020, pp.101-102).

What is particularly unfortunate in the case of Kosovo is that the destruction of cultural monuments did not end with the war. Almost five years after the end of the war, in March 2004, a tragic outburst of violence directed at the Serbian community caused, in addition to the loss of life, significant destruction of property, including some outstanding architectural monuments of cultural heritage belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Kosovo Albanian leaders have joined in the universal condemnation of the violence and the destruction wrought by the mobs in 2004. In the aftermath of the March 2004 riots, the then-Kosovo authorities and the international community drew up a plan for the reconstruction of 34 damaged Serbian heritage monuments. A five-member Reconstruction Implementation Commission (RIC) was set up under the chairmanship of the Council of Europe, with mixed Serbian and Albanian Kosovar membership, including in particular the Serbian Orthodox Church, owner of the monuments concerned. The whole process was funded primarily from the budget of the Government of Kosovo. When the mandate of the RIC ended in 2011, some 70% of the planned reconstruction had been completed, and the amount spent up until then by the Kosovo Government far exceeded the total amount initially budgeted for the whole reconstruction project. Since then, the resumption of the reconstruction process has not been possible. However, the Government has repeatedly made clear that it remains fully committed to completing the works from its budget and in cooperation with the owner of the monuments concerned, i.e., the Serbian Orthodox Church. According to the UN Security Council resolution, negotiations on Kosovo’s final status in Vienna in 2006 under the leadership of UN Envoy Martti Ahtisaari, according to the UN Security Council resolution, attributed primary importance to protecting the Serbian religious and cultural heritage in Kosovo. And the “Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement”, which resulted from those negotiations, devotes a central chapter (Annex V) to the issue. The reasons for this special treatment of the Serbian cultural heritage are, first, the realization of its vulnerability in light of the March 2004 riots and the recognition of its extraordinary aesthetic and historical value, which has elevated some of its monuments to the status of world cultural heritage. Although Serbia rejected the Proposal, Kosovo accepted it in its totality and, at its Declaration of Independence, on 17 February 2008, solemnly pledged to the world its commitment to its full implementation. The provisions of the Proposal became the foundation of the constitution of Kosovo and a chief source of its legislation currently in force. Annex V of the Ahtisaari Plan, as the Proposal is also known, spells out the rights, privileges, and immunities of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, as well as its duties and responsibilities. Most of those provisions have now been transposed into the Kosovo legal framework. Furthermore, a five-member body, the Implementation and Monitoring Council (IMC), has been set up to ensure full implementation of all Kosovo legislation about the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo (Moschopoulos, 2015).

A collective cultural identity has come to be seen as fundamental to our understanding of nationhood. It offers a sense of continuity with the past, presents cultural unity to the population, and provides communities with notions of collective destiny. Heritage protection, conservation, and restoration are thus seen as playing a vital role in any society – but particularly in one attempting to overcome the sense of displacement caused by conflict. However, as the case of Kosovo shows clearly if architectural heritage can be viewed as a powerful instrument in the building of nations, it can also be viewed as a tool and a target in their destruction. This is still a fine line that has to be trodden in the Kosovo of today (Morel, 2013, pp. 11-12).

Kosovo and Metohija are the cradle of both the Serbian state and Church, as well as the spiritual home of the centuries-old culture of the Serbian people. Around 1,300 churches, monasteries, and other sites comprising Serbia’s cultural heritage are located there. The tangible and non-tangible Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo and Metohija is an authentic and fundamental part of its national identity and a significant contribution to the cultural heritage of Europe and the world. The indivisible bond between the spiritual tradition of the Serbian people with Kosovo and Metohija is also evidenced in the etymology of the very name of Serbia’s most southern province. Metohija is a word of Greek origin meaning “the land under monastic administration”. The rich Serbian heritage in Kosovo and Metohija is of immeasurable importance to the cultural and national history of the Serbs and is crucial for understanding its past, present, and future. In the centuries of Turkish and Austrian rule, both of which followed in the wake of the historic 1389 Battle of Kosovo, it was this heritage that had a decisive impact on the spiritual and cultural life of Serbs. To this day, it remains the key feature of the Serbian national being and identity. Much like the French cultural heritage cannot be imagined without Paris’ Notre Dame Cathedral, neither can Serbia begin to comprehend its existence without the holy sites of Dečani, Gračanica, Zočište, and the Patriarchate of Peć, where Serbia’s Patriarch has resided since the 13th century. The many medieval buildings erected by Serbian rulers, members of the nobility, and high religious dignitaries testify that the Serb people have been present in these places for many centuries. It is essential to remember that today, many of these sites are still cultural and historical monuments and active places of worship and homes to monastic communities (Rastovac and Siamasvili, 2019, p. 1).

Serbian cultural and religious heritage status has not been the topic of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. There are at least three reasons why there was no discussion about sustainable and lasting respect for the cultural and religious identity of the Serbian people in Kosovo. The first is identity-related and, therefore, very sensitive since the Serbian side views the cultural heritage as the “cradle of national identity” and the Albanian side as part of the “overall historical and cultural heritage” of the newly formed state. This leads to another reason, which is status-related, where Belgrade, through the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and UNESCO membership, wants to maintain control and management of cultural heritage. At the same time, Pristina, through the legislative framework resulting from Annex V of the Ahtisaari Agreement, shows that the Serbian Orthodox Church was granted special protection status, which makes Kosovo a candidate for UNESCO membership and further on for full international recognition. Although avoiding talks about cultural heritage indicates that the parties have diametrically different negotiating positions that make it impossible to find a compromise, the third reason can be described as tactical. Since cultural heritage status is often mentioned as a “great compromise” for the final agreement, it is assumed that due to its sensitivity and complexity, this topic has deliberately not been on the negotiating table so far (Surlic and Novakovic, 2020, p.1).

Based on constitutional and legal guarantees for the representation of communities in public life, “communities are represented at the central level of Government, as legislative, executive and administrative bodies. At the local level, they are also represented in decision-making bodies, executive and administrative. This representation of the non-majority community is not the same for all communities. It is not the same in all institutions” (Myrtezani et al., 2015, in Murtezani and Kamberi, 2022).

Of course, the real problem is not the number of minority representatives in the institutions but their possibility to influence their decisions, especially for those related to the protection of cultural heritage.

Proactive public administration is an essential tool for accelerating the process of accession to the European Union. The continuous, regular, and targeted information can animate the general public and the specific target groups to be actively involved in the process. Also, they will stimulate the citizens to give suggestions, opinions, and contributions to improve the whole process (Karadjoski, Ilik, and Adamczyk, 2019, p. 88). But, still, security and political issues often overcome the administrative ones.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Kosovo conflict has long posed a formidable puzzle for the international community. Its intricate and interconnected issues make addressing one problem a potential source of new challenges elsewhere, creating a situation akin to a Rubik’s cube. This complexity has been particularly taxing for the European Union (EU), which has played a substantial role in the conflict while striving to foster stability and democracy in the region.

The Kosovo conflict can be likened to a Rubik’s cube, with multiple layers of problems that require resolution, and finding a solution that satisfies all parties proves to be exceedingly challenging. The conflict’s roots lie in the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, which gave rise to ethnic tensions between Serbs and Albanians. Despite Kosovo’s Declaration of Independence from Serbia in 2008, many countries, including Serbia, Russia, and China, do not recognize its sovereignty.

The EU’s involvement in the Kosovo conflict has prompted questions about its ability to project influence beyond its borders. While the EU endeavors to promote stability and democracy in the region, the complex and long-standing issues have hindered its efforts, leading some to question the effectiveness of the EU’s foreign policy and its capacity to address conflicts outside of Europe. The EU has engaged in a dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia to resolve outstanding issues between the two countries. Additionally, it has worked to promote economic development and regional cooperation in the Balkans, including through initiatives like the Berlin Process, which seeks to enhance economic integration in the region.

In summary, the Kosovo conflict remains a Rubik’s cube for the international community, and the EU’s participation in the conflict has introduced both opportunities and challenges, particularly in the context of the Ukrainian conflict. While the EU actively strives to advance stability and democracy in the region, the intricate and enduring nature of the issues makes it exceedingly difficult to find a solution that satisfies all stakeholders.

Notably, the cultural heritage in Kosovo holds profound value for both Serbs and Albanians, albeit from different perspectives. For Serbs, it is intrinsically linked to their national identity, while for Albanians, it relates to territorial affiliation and the broader value of cultural heritage in Kosovo. A potential solution for the future between Serbia and Kosovo, supported by the international community, could entail a compromise focused on cultural heritage.

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**Key Terms**

**Regional conflicts:** This refers to disputes, tensions, or hostilities that arise within a specific geographic area or region, rather than on a global or national scale. These conflicts typically involve various actors such as countries, ethnic or religious groups, political entities, or other stakeholders within the defined region. Regional conflicts can manifest in various forms, including political, ethnic, religious, economic, or territorial disputes.

**New international context:** this concept recognizes that the international landscape is not static but is constantly shifting and adapting to various factors. The "new" aspect suggests that there are emerging trends, challenges, opportunities, or changes in the international system that have a significant impact on how countries and organizations engage with one another.

**Cultural heritage:** This refers to the collection of tangible and intangible elements passed down from generation to generation within a society or community that hold cultural, historical, artistic, or spiritual significance. These elements represent the traditions, customs, practices, beliefs, values, and artistic expressions that are an integral part of a group's identity and heritage.

**Diplomacy:** This refers to the practice of managing international relations and negotiations between sovereign states or entities, typically carried out by official representatives or diplomats. It involves the art and skill of conducting dialogues, forging agreements, and resolving conflicts to promote understanding, cooperation, and the pursuit of common interests while safeguarding the respective interests of the involved parties. Diplomacy encompasses a range of activities, including negotiation, communication, and representation, and it plays a crucial role in fostering peaceful resolutions, preventing conflicts, and facilitating cooperation on global issues.

**Foreign influences:** This refers to external factors, pressures, or contributions exerted by entities outside a particular nation's borders that have an impact on its political, economic, social, cultural, or security dynamics. These influences can take various forms, including diplomatic interactions, economic partnerships, cultural exchanges, and geopolitical interventions.

**The Kosovo Question:** This refers to the ongoing and complex political, territorial, and ethnic dispute surrounding the status of Kosovo, a region in the Balkans. The question has historical roots in the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the subsequent conflicts in the region. The Declaration of Independence by Kosovo in 2008 further intensified the controversy, with some countries recognizing Kosovo's sovereignty while others, including Serbia, do not. The Kosovo Question is a significant and sensitive topic in international relations, with implications for regional stability and the broader concept of statehood and self-determination.

**Chinese influence in the Balkans:** This refers to the increasing impact and engagement of the People's Republic of China in the countries of the Balkan Peninsula. This influence can manifest in various forms, including economic investments, infrastructure development projects, diplomatic initiatives, cultural exchanges, and trade relationships.

**Russian influence in the Balkans**: This refers to the political, economic, cultural, and diplomatic impact exerted by the Russian Federation in the countries of the Balkan Peninsula. This influence can manifest in various ways, including diplomatic relations, economic partnerships, cultural exchanges, and geopolitical initiatives. Historically, Russia has maintained ties with several Balkan nations, and its influence is often observed in the context of regional politics and global power dynamics.

**Balkan:** This term refers to the geographic and cultural region in Southeastern Europe known as the Balkan Peninsula. It is often associated with a complex history of political and ethnic tensions, as well as a strategic geopolitical location. The region has been shaped by various historical events, including the Ottoman Empire's dominance, the Balkan Wars, and the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The term "Balkanization" is sometimes used metaphorically to describe the fragmentation or division of a region into smaller, often conflicting, entities.