

State Building Challenges and the European Integration Process: The Kosovo Case

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Kosovo, a new state which is in the process of international recognition of its statehood, after the 1999 war, and until the declaration of independence in 2008, has faced a number of challenges during its efforts to build the democratic system and order. Following the declaration of independence and a considerable number of international recognitions, Kosovo's new democratic institutions are taking their responsibilities for the country's integration into the European Union. This paper provides one overview of state building challenges and the European integration process of the Republic of Kosovo. Kosovo has its old and new history, which was decided by the great powers in London, Berlin, Paris, in Yalta and Potsdam, and later in Dayton and Rambouillet. The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical roots of the independence movement among Kosovo Albanians, until the declaration of independence on February 17, 2008, and the state-creating challenges of the Kosovo state. Like other Western Balkan aspiring members, Kosovo's politicians and its population are fully committed to the process of European Integration. Being the last state from the Balkan Peninsula, Kosovo signed with EU a Stabilization and Association Agreement. EU membership is on the horizon, but Kosovo expects great work to achieve its objective.

Key words: Kosovo, Albanians, peace-building, state-building, challenges, EU, integration,

1. Introduction

As part of the Albanian territories, Kosovo was noted throughout history with its political and juridical subjectivity. During the centuries of the Middle Ages, Albanians were consistently conquered by the most powerful empires. Following the London Conference of 1913, with the unjust division of Albanian territories, Kosovo and other Albanian territories remained under occupation (Hall, 2000, pp.1-21). After World War II, Kosovo remained a forcefully part of Yugoslavia in its continued war for equality with other republics. According to the former Yugoslav Constitution (1974), Kosovo was one of the eight federal units comprising the multiethnic Yugoslav Federation. It had guaranteed borders and representation on all of the federal levels and state presidency, with a right to veto (Vickers, 1998, pp.178-181). Kosovo had its own Constitution and legislative, executive and court bodies, including the Constitutional Court.

Kosovo's federal status was an expression of the right of the people of Kosovo to self-determination and succession, possible to be implemented in conditions

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of disintegration of former Yugoslavia. Preventing the people of Kosovo by force in its right to self-determination, Serbia continued to keep Kosovo as its colony. In 1989, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic drastically reduced Kosovo's special autonomous status within Serbia, and started the oppression of the ethnic Albanian population (Judah, 2008, pp.64-75). In order to resist Serb occupation and realize freedom and the right to self-determination, the people of Kosovo chose the road to peaceful resistance in order to complement it later with an armed resistance as well (O'Neill, 2002, pp. 21-33).

Being a new state with a troubled political history, Kosovo is in the process of transitioning to a genuine democratic and contemporary order, whose trajectory naturally has its own characteristics and has been overwhelmed with enormous challenges. But what are the main debates in this transition process? History has proven that, political ideals of the people can change over time and develop further along with the general changes in the society. Such an ideal evolution has also occurred in the postwar Kosovo society. From the ideas of building the state, emerged the ideas about the nature of the state. Now, in the independent Kosovo, the "state" institution has become a focal point for tackling various challenges in the political, economic, and social spheres.

1.1. Structure

This paper consists of several sections, which are related to the research question and the raised hypotheses. The main research question of this paper is: Which are the State Building Challenges and the European Integration Process in Kosovo? While the main hypothesis of this research is: "Does Kosovo's independence contribute to the peace and stability in the Western Balkans"? After the introduction in the first section, in the second section of this paper is written, about the historical efforts of Kosovo Albanians to Build a New Nation in Kosovo. Section three of this paper, discusses the Constitutional position of Kosovo Albanians in Former Yugoslavia, as well as their efforts for freedom and independence. The fourth section of this paper is devoted to the efforts of the international community to find an acceptable solution to the Kosovo problem, as well as Martti Ahtisaari's proposal for the future status of Kosovo. The fifth section addresses the State Building Challenges in Post-Independence Kosovo, while the sixth section of the paper discusses Kosovo's, EU Integration Agenda. The last section is the concluding section, which contains the final conclusions of this paper.

1.2. Literature and Methodology

There are several research methods that are needed to be used to develop in-depth and clear research with concrete results. This study approach coincides with the use of different methods, depending on the need to address the subject we explore, and the conditions and the environment in which we must find ourselves to achieve our goals. This research paper is written on the basis of a rich scientific literature, which consisted of various text books, scientific journals, institutional reports, newspaper articles and various research works. This paper is a source of reliable data for all of

those who are interested in knowing more about the political, economic and cultural developments in Kosovo. The working methodology for the preparation of this research paper consists of different adequate methods, which are used for the research purposes in the social sciences. The descriptive method is used to describe the legality of different processes, events and circumstances, while the comparative analysis method is used to compare the data that was found in different sources. Beside these, the other methods which are used to prepare this paper are: Theoretical Analysis Method which is used to explain, predict, and understand the events and developments that are dealt with in this paper, and the statistical method is used to analyse, interpret and report the research findings. I have also used the historical methodology to collect the historical information, and the synthesis method, to verify the facts and processes used in this paper. The Critical Method have also been used to evaluate and ascertain the reality of different challenges and developments.

2. Building a New Nation

The dissolution of the former Yugoslav Federation, beginning with the collapse of the constitutional concept of the position of Kosovo in 1989 (Radan, 2001, pp.154-159), with the independence and international recognition of the four federal units, as well as the beginning of the war on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, opened new political processes which are characterized by the dissolution of the federal state and the creation of new and sovereign states. After the beginning of the break-up of former Yugoslavia, the Albanian people also started the State-Creating Processes of Kosovo. The process of building Kosovo's statehood was a legitimate process, which was based on the legal right of the people of Kosovo for self-determination, and it had been legitimized through the following acts: Declaration of Independence of Kosovo, issued by the Kosovo Parliament on July 2, 1990; Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo passed by the Kosovo Parliament on September 7, 1990, and the Referendum on independence held in September 1991 (Bahcheli, Bartmann and Srebrnik, 2004, p.85). The building of the state of Kosovo developed through establishing independent and democratic institutions of Kosovo. With the first multiparty parliamentary and presidential elections in Kosovo which were held on 24 May 1992, institutions of a legitimate democratic governing deriving from the Constitution of Independence (1990) were established. Since the holding of national elections, Kosovo had its full state structure, its President, Parliament and Government. Because of obstacles that occupation imposed these institutions carried out their activities according to possible alternatives.

After the declaration of the Republic of Kosovo, the federal authorities were now faced with a very delicate situation. Granting Kosovo republican status would mean detaching it from Serbia and conceding that it had the right to secede from the federation. "The special position that Kosovo held in Serbian mythology meant that any move towards a republican status for Kosovo might trigger a backlash of Serbian Nationalism" (Glenny, 1999, p.624). After 1990, Serbia destroyed all legitimate institutions in Kosovo, and with the help of police violence, occupied all public

institutions in Kosovo. “ Practically, Serbia toward Albanians in Kosovo implemented an ethnic segregation on an apartheid scale, by limiting and violating all individual and political freedoms and by providing the rule of the Serb minority to the Albanian majority” (Woodward, 1995, p. 341). As a response to the Serbian violence, Albanians chose the path of non-violence, expressing their opposition to the occupation through the political means. They did not participate in Serbian elections and political processes which Serbia imposed aggressively in Kosovo. “Instead they formed their own independent institutions, which were stretched in the field of finance, foreign relations, education, health care, economy and social issues”(The Kosovo Report, 2000, pp.42-50). The peaceful resistance of Albanians and the idea of resistance of occupation through building institutions of independence and by internationalizing the issue of Kosovo, created for the Albanians an image of democratic and state-forming people.

The internationalization of the question of Kosovo and of Albanians, developing international relations of Kosovo and ensuring support to self-determination and the state of Kosovo were among the most important dimensions of the process of building statehood for Kosovo. “A consequent and priority engagement of Kosovo in the international plain and early concern by the United States of America and by the relevant European Countries pulled Kosovo out of an internal issue framework, which had been wrongly confirmed to it by the Badinter Commission within the European Conference on former Yugoslavia disintegration in the Hague in 1991” (Grant,1999, pp.149-166). But that Commission had not succeeded in giving a response to the formal request by the Government of the Republic of Kosovo for recognizing Kosovo’s right to a state and succession that had dispatched in December 1991.

3. Struggle for Independence

“ Failure to include Kosovo in Dayton Peace Conference which took place from 01-21 November 1995, and formally signed in Paris (France) on 14 December 1995, was an international setback of Kosovo’s position” (Nardulli, Perry, Pirnie, Gordon IV, and McGinn, 2002, p. 13). Disturbed by the unwillingness of the International Community to include the issue of Kosovo at the Dayton Conference and convinced that the peaceful resistance is not going to succeed in rounding up the process of liberation, because of the failure by the international community to implement a preventive diplomacy, the people of Kosovo began their preparations for the armed struggle against Serbia. The armed war was led by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The just and decisive war by the KLA gave to it an international legitimacy thus becoming the main decision-making factor in the process of the solution of the Kosovo crisis. This war was waged in extremely difficult and unfavorable circumstances because of an unjust superiority of the enemy Serb forces which were created through abuse and confiscation of former Yugoslav Army potential and upon an unjustifiable tolerance by the international community. But the Serbian genocide in Kosovo manifested in various forms of violence and massacre of Albanians, restored the interest of the international community in Kosovo and the need for a quick political solution to the conflict.

In an effort to find a solution for Kosovo the so-called Contact Group organized the international peace conference on Kosovo, which was held at Rambouillet and Paris in the period between 6-23 February, and 15-18 March, 1999 at the time when the crisis in Kosovo had attained and escalated to a bloody war threatening to extend outside the borders of Kosovo as well. "A negotiated settlement, it seemed, was still possible under the Rambouillet Accord. It was hoped that something could be worked out along the lines of a U.S.-backed, three-year interim autonomy agreement. A referendum would then be held a year or two later" (Rezun, 2001, p. 49). But neither side signed the accord. It took another Conference which started on 15 March, 1999 in France to discuss civil and military implementation of self-rule.

"After two weeks of consultations with their people and the fighter in the battlefields, the Kosovo Albanians accepted the deal " (Giacomo, 1999, p. 9) The Serbian delegation refused to sign the proposal, demanding that the accord rule out independence for Kosovo or the status of a republic within Yugoslavia. The signing of Rambouillet Accords by the Kosovo delegation and the international factor, regardless of the fact that it was not signed by the other party, meant signing an alliance of Kosovo with USA and the West. The Rambouillet Conference opened up the possibility for NATO's intervention in the Kosovo crisis and for stopping the war and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

After the failure of the Rambouillet Conference, the wheels were in motion for NATO to begin bombing Yugoslavia. "Alliance military and diplomatic officials worked feverishly behind the scenes to finalize plans for a limited series of aerial attacks designated to bring Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic back to the negotiating table" (Norris, 2005, pp.1-5) After Milosevic's refusal to return to talks, NATO began the first of its air strikes against Serb air defenses and another military targets on March 24, 1999. " That 78-day NATO air war, called the Operation Allied Force, largely prompted by humanitarian concerns, was a response by the United States and NATO to the steadily mounting Serb atrocities that were being committed against the ethnic Albanians who made up the vast majority of Kosovo's population" (Lambeth, 2001, pp. 5-17) The war has ended with the full NATO victory, the liberation of Kosovo and the capitulation of Serbia. Faced with the loss of war, Serbia accepted its capitulation and signed the so-called Kumanovo Agreement, which laid down technical and military details, for the withdrawal of Serbian police and military forces from Kosovo." The Serbs had to withdraw completely and the KLA had to be demilitarized" (Clark, 2001, p. 402). Following the deployment of NATO forces in Kosovo, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1244, which placed Kosovo under UN administration.

"The resolution mandated the former Secretary General, Kofi Annan, to establish an interim administration in Kosovo, supervised by the United Nations" (Daniel, 2001, p. 23+) The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) was established on June 10 1999. Its main objectives were to establish law and order and to

promote the process of a growing autonomy and self-governance in Kosovo. "International administration in Kosovo, defined by resolution 1244, was of a temporary nature and aimed at creating adequate democratic conditions for resolving Kosovo's final status" (Siani-Davies, 2003, pp. 88-95). But, despite the broadened mandate to assume full responsibility, no final roadmap was ever established for the future of Kosovo. Resolution 1244 was more concerned with the consequences of the crisis than with its source. In legal and political terms, it has sanctioned the status quo situation that existed before the collapse of the constitutional position of Kosovo, defined by the 1974 Constitution. So it has defined a balancing solution, by not recognizing the institutional occupation of Kosovo by Serbia which followed after 1990, and by not recognizing and accepting the political declaration of the people of Kosovo for independence expressed by a referendum in 1991. UNMIK was forced to navigate skillfully between two dangers: that of the independence of Kosovo and the sovereignty of the Yugoslav Federation. But later, faced with a local resistance that was growing from day to day, UNMIK began appealing to the international decision-making institutions, to initiate a process for resolving Kosovo's status in accordance with UN Resolution 1244.

4. The International Community and Ahtisaari Plan

The process towards the final status of Kosovo was very difficult. In the years after the war, various international negotiations as well as less formal mediation efforts proved unsuccessful in resolving Kosovo's status. "Violent ethnic rioting in March 2004 compelled the international community to step up these efforts" (Weitz, 2011, p. 131) After 15 rounds of talks between the Kosovo and Serbian delegations in Vienna, on March 10, 2007, the proposal for the future status of Kosovo was delivered to both parties by U.N. Kosovo mediator Martti Ahtisaari. The Ahtisaari package, which proposed a supervised independence for Kosovo, was backed by U.S. and European Union Officials, and it was accepted by the Kosovo's ethnic Albanian leaders, but the Serbian delegation angrily rejected the original Ahtissari formula. After the failure of the International Community to find an acceptable solution to the Kosovo problem, On the first visit by a US president to Albania on June 1997, George W. Bush focused on the fate of the majority ethnic Albanians across the border in Kosovo and voiced impatience at Russian and Serbian blocking tactics, which were holding up a vote on the issue at the security council. President Bush declared that "he had made up his mind that Kosovo should be an independent country" (Traynor, I. (2007)

By the end of December 2007, the European Union, United States and Russia, were still unable to find a solution to the final status of Kosovo. Nevertheless, on February 17 2008, the representatives of the people of Kosovo solemnly proclaimed the Independence of Kosovo. On the same day, Kosovo's state leaders asked the European Union to send to Kosovo, the European Rule of Law Mission. The EULEX Kosovo mission is the most ambitious civilian mission the EU has undertaken to date. "Mandated by the European Council in February 2008 to strengthen the rule of law in Kosovo, EULEX is not only the largest such EU civilian mission, it is also the first

integrated mission, with staff for police, rule of law, and customs and border patrol” (European Council Action, (2008). In June, 2008, as Kosovo’s constitution took effect, at the same, Serbs in Northern Kosovo established parallel government institutions.

5. State - Building in Post-Independence Kosovo

Kosovo has largely been peaceful since 2008, but this small, poor and ethnically fractured land, remains in deep crisis and challenged by a powerful mix of political, economic and social problems. Even ten years since independence, International actors are still playing crucial role in the decision making process, and the newest country in Europe is facing numerous challenges in building sustainable and functioning institutions. Kosovo is still facing the challenges of extending sovereignty in the north, populated by a Serb majority, where Serbia's influence remains strong. On the external agenda, Kosovo has not yet rounded up its international subjectivity, by not shortening the possibility of its membership in the United Nations. And as far as safety issues are concerned, Kosovo continues to depend on NATO’s KFOR for its protection from external threats.

“ The lack of a national army might be considered a challenge to the assumption that Kosovo is a sovereign state, fuelling the argument that Kosovo’s statehood remains contested” (Armakolas, Demjaha, Elbasani, Schwandner-Sievers, Skendaj and Tzifakis, 2017, p.19). Serbia's interventions in the north, holding parallel structures of power, and aggressive diplomacy against the state of Kosovo had pushed the EU in 2011 to start a dialogue between Pristine and Belgrade, aiming to normalize relations between the two countries. The dialogue is still ongoing, but the conclusion of the normalization process does not seem to be near. “Earlier, Kosovo had won the first international battle against Serbia at the International Court of Justice, which on 22 July , 2010 announced the verdict that the declaration of Kosovo's independence was legitimate and in harmony with International Law “ (International Court of Justice (2010). The relationship between Kosovo and Serbia is crucial for the region’s stability and progress towards European Integration, but despite this, Serbia continues to disregard the state of Kosovo and challenge it with all the possibilities. Though it lost control over the territory, Belgrade continues to claim sovereignty over Kosovo and Serbian leaders have vowed never to recognize Kosovo’s independence. Now the question may be asked... Why does Serbia has a problem with Kosovo?

“ The conflict over Kosovo is one of the most complex problems in the Balkans, whose causes are deeply rooted in history. It is also a classical example of a territorial conflict, in which historical and mythological arguments, clash with ethnic realities” (Mehmet and Aslihan, 2010, p. 167). The essence of the Serbian and Albanian problem is a problem related to the geographical area in which the state of one or the other party should be established. The Serbs maintain that in the Middle Ages, the area around Kosovo was the cradle of their culture and its church, as well as the political center of their region. Their defeat by the Ottoman Turks in the battle of Kosovo in the year 1389 plays a central role in the Serbian myth-formation. “What actually happened in the Battle of Kosovo is a matter of dispute. But its importance to

all the people of the region is undeniable: Bosnians, Serbs and Albanians all commemorate it in their folk songs. Yet it was only the Serbs who turned the defeat on Kosovo Field into a powerful national myth” (Magas, 1993, p. 8).

Like the Serbs, the Kosovo Albanians bring their own historical arguments. They are the descendants of the Illyria and thus the natives of this country. As the oldest people in the Balkans, they would have already lived a long time in Kosovo before the Slavics entered the region at the end of the 6th century. In his book “History of the Balkans”, Georges Castellan states that “the oldest peoples on the Balkan Peninsula are undoubtedly Greeks and Illyrian-Albanians. Speakers of Indo-European languages, they were the first to move southward, in the middle of the second millennium BC” (Castellan, 1991, p.21). According to the British historian Noel Malcolm, “Kosovo Serbs have different backgrounds; some of them have been displaced in Kosovo from Dalmatia, from Bosnia and North Serbia. Malcolm argues that Serbian expansion in Kosovo begins seriously only in the early XII century” (Malcolm, 2001, p. 11) It should be noted that, the Serbian nationalism, particularly during the last decades of the XX century, resurfaced in the most horrendous, barbaric and bloody way, against Albanian people, particularly against Kosovo and Albanians in the former Yugoslavia. The Serbian nationalism has continuously been characterized by territorial allegations against ethnic-Albanian regions. The ideology of Serbian nationalism arose not only on the false Serbian myths about Kosovo but, first emerged and acted, according to pan-Slavic doctrines, and used by the Serbian people and the state of Serbia. While speculative Serbian historiography, considers Kosovo” as the heart of Serbia”, to the European and western historiography it is very clear:” Kosovo has not been within the Serbian territory of Raska, which has been far away in its northwest” (Malcolm, 2001, p. 26), but despite proven ethnic and historical facts, the Serbian myth for Kosovo, continues to be the basis of expansionist politics of the Serbian state.

As far as internal policies are concerned, in the last three years, Kosovo is at the cutting edge of decision-making. Tense government reports with opposition parties, have seriously jeopardized the decision-making, even on issues considered as national interest. As an initial example with the demarcation issue with Montenegro and other issues such as visa liberalization, for which the government and the opposition failed to find a political consensus. Apart from the ineffective functioning of the institutions, the lack of rule of law, especially in the fight against organized crime and corruption remain criteria that are still unfulfilled at a satisfactory level, as evidenced by the European Union. “In Transparency International's latest report about the Corruption, Kosovo is ranked 85th among 180 rated countries” (Transparency International Report, 2017) Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe, but most of them do not see a clear perspective in their country. With an economic growth of about 4%, Kosovo is failing to reduce unemployment and poverty.

According to the official figures, “the unemployment rate in Kosovo amounts to 26.2%” (Kosovo Statistics Agency, 2018) whereas, every year, 25 to 30 thousand

young people enter the labor market. Meanwhile, the unofficial figures speak for a much higher unemployment rate. In the absence of efficient functioning of the judicial system, Kosovo may face unpredictable situations this year, due to the start of the Special Court's work. "This court is expected to deal with several alleged crimes committed by former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army against political opponents and the Serbian civilian population during Kosovo's 1998-99 war" (Higgins, and Hopkins, 2018, p.4)

6. EU Integration Challenges

Ever since its declaration of independence in 2008, Kosovo has made European integration one of its key foreign policy objectives. Being the last state from Balkan Peninsula, in 2015, Kosovo signed with EU a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (European Commission, 2015) EU membership is on the horizon, but Kosovo expects great work to achieve the objective. Kosovo's politicians and its population are determined to fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria and other conditions that candidate countries must meet before they can become members of the European Union, but Kosovo as a new country has many challenges ahead. To understand the fulfillment of political criteria, the European Commission publishes Yearly Progress Reports on Kosovo. Let us present some of the key findings of the European Commission Progress Report on Kosovo 2018, like political criteria, public administration reform, judicial system, fight against corruption, fight against organized crime, human and fundamental rights, freedom of expression, migration, economic criteria, EU legislation, bilateral relations, normalization of relations with Serbia and European standards.

6.1. The European Commission Report on Kosovo 2018

As concerns the political criteria, Kosovo held early elections in June 2017, and a new Assembly and government took office in September. However, according to the Progress Report "the new ruling coalition has had limited success in bringing forward EU related reforms and building consensus on key strategic issues for Kosovo"(Kosovo Progress Report, p.5). The continuing political fragmentation and polarization have adversely affected the role of the Assembly and have impacted the effectiveness of the government. Unacceptable actions by a number of parliamentarians during the reporting period, such as the use of teargas, have disrupted parliamentary proceedings. However, the ratification of the border/boundary demarcation agreement with Montenegro in March 2018 was an important breakthrough. The Progress Report finds that "Parliamentary and municipal elections, held in 2017, were generally competitive and well administered in most places in Kosovo. However, patterns of intimidation within many Kosovo Serb communities, targeting particularly candidates not belonging to the Srpska Lista party, raised concerns" (Kosovo Progress Report, 2018, p. 5).

The Progress Reports emphasise that, "there is some level of preparation in the area of public administration reform. Some progress has been made especially with the review of agencies and (semi)independent bodies. The continued politicization of the

public administration remains a concern, and adversely affects the efficiency and professional independence of the public administration” (Kosovo Progress Report, 2018, p. 9).

Regarding the judiciary, the Progress Report concludes that, “Some progress has been achieved in implementing the 2015 justice package laws. The integration of Kosovo Serb judges and prosecutors and their support staff across Kosovo into the Kosovo judicial system was a big achievement of 2017. The judiciary is still vulnerable to undue political influence and rule of law institutions need sustained efforts to build up their capacities. The administration of justice remains slow and inefficient” (Kosovo Progress Report, 2018, pp. 13-17).

As far as the corruption problem, the Progress Report finds that, “Kosovo is at an early stage/has some level of preparation in the fight against corruption. Kosovo has made some progress as regards the track record on the investigation and prosecution for high level corruption and organized crime cases, including final convictions”(Kosovo Progress Report, 2018, p.18). The report finds that progress was also made on preliminary confiscation of assets although final confiscations remain low. Corruption is widespread and remains an issue of concern. Concerted efforts are needed to tackle this problem in a comprehensive and strategic manner. According to the Progress Report”Kosovo is at an early stage in the fight against organized crime. Some progress was made with the track record on high level corruption and organized crime cases” (Kosovo Progress Report, 2018, p.20) While there is more preliminary confiscation of assets, there are still few final convictions, financial investigations and final confiscations of assets. “ Law enforcement agencies struggle to effectively fight organized crime in the north of Kosovo” (Ibid) .

The Progress Report states that , some positive efforts were also taken in the fight against terrorism, including through measures to tackle violent extremism and radicalization and in preventing citizens from joining conflicts abroad. But, “ Kosovo authorities need to be more effective in their efforts to fight money laundering and the relevant law should be brought in line with EU and international standards” (Kosovo Progress Report, 2018, p.31).

The legal framework of Kosovo, broadly guarantees the protection of human and fundamental rights in line with European standards. However, according to the 2018 Progress Report, additional efforts are needed regarding enforcement. Implementation of human rights strategies and legislation is often undermined by inadequate financial and other resources, particularly at a local level, limited political prioritization and lack of coordination. The Progress Report, concludes “that more needs to be done to effectively guarantee the rights of persons belonging to minorities, including Roma and Ashkali and displaced persons, to ensure gender equality in practice, and to advance the protection of cultural heritage” (Kosovo Progress Report, 2018,pp.20 -22).

The Progress Report finds that, “Kosovo has some level of preparation in the area of freedom of expression and there has been no progress during the reporting

period” Kosovo Progress Report, 2018, p.22) Freedom of expression is enshrined in the constitution and Kosovo benefits from a pluralistic and lively media environment. However, the Progress Report finds that, threats and attacks against journalists have continued. According to the report,” The Assembly showed limited commitment to finding a solution for sustainable funding of the public broadcaster, leaving it vulnerable to political pressure” (Kosovo Progress Report, p. 23).

As far as Economic criteria are concerned, “Kosovo has made good progress and it is at an early stage of developing a functioning market economy” (Kosovo Progress Report, p. 38).

The business environment has improved and the government adhered to the fiscal rule on budget deficit; however, war veterans' benefits continue to pose a challenge for public finances. According to the Progress Report, “the informal economy remains widespread”. The increase in the labour force participation rate was not matched by gains in employment so the unemployment rate increased further. “ It particularly affected women, the young, and unskilled workers. Despite strong export growth the high trade deficit reflects a weak production base (Kosovo Progress Report, pp. 38-43). The Progress Report data shows that no progress was made on improving the quality of education and addressing skills gaps in the labor market.

According to the Progress Report, Integration with the EU is hampered by the slow implementation of the SAA. Kosovo continued its efforts to maintain good and constructive bilateral relations with other enlargement countries. The Progress Report finds that,” Kosovo is represented in most regional organizations that fall within the scope of the Arrangements on Regional Representation and Cooperation agreed between Belgrade and Pristine in 2012” (Kosovo Progress Report, 2018, p.48) Regarding the normalization of relations with Serbia, The Progress Report concludes that, “Kosovo has remained engaged in the dialogue. However, Kosovo needs to make further efforts and contribute to the establishment of circumstances conducive to the full normalization of relations with Serbia (Kosovo Progress Report, p. 49).

As regards alignment with European standards, the Progress Report emphasizes that, “Kosovo is at an early stage. Legislative alignment has continued in some areas but implementation is weak”. Some progress was made in the area of free movement of goods and services, public procurement and competition as well as in improving the business environment. According to the Report ”some progress was made in the area of taxation and customs”. Some progress was also made in collecting revenue and simplifying administrative procedures, but “ Kosovo should step up the fight against the informal economy and tax evasion” (Kosovo Progress Report, pp.49-55) . Progress Report finds that, “the energy sector continues to face serious challenges, and no progress has been achieved to address environmental issues”. The Progress Report also expresses concerns about the “Attempts by members of the Kosovo Assembly in December 2017 to abrogate the Law on Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office, and murder of Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanović in January 2018” (Kosovo Progress Report,pp-56-58)

Fifteen years after the Thessaloniki promise that the future of the Balkans is within the European Union, the same was confirmed at the EU-Western Balkans summit which took place in Sofia, Bulgaria, on 17 May 2018. At the summit EU leaders reaffirmed their unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans (EU-Western Balkans Summit, 2018). But, as seen from the Progress Report data, Kosovo still faces numerous challenges in its path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. As it stands, Kosovo is a "potential candidate" to the European Union. The next step would be to achieve the much-coveted "candidate status", which would eventually pave the way for the subsequent formal stages of the accession process. The greatest problem in terms of Kosovo's EU integration perspective remains the fact that five EU Member States - Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia, Spain and Romania have not recognized Kosovo's independence. As a result, "Kosovo's membership perspective remains elusive, and the European Commission refers only to 'Kosovo*,' with the asterisked footnote containing the text agreed upon during the Belgrade–Pristine negotiations" (Kmezic, 2015, p.8) Moreover, Kosovo is the only Western Balkan state whose citizens still require a visa to travel to the EU.

7. Conclusions

Kosovo has had a painful history in the last century, just like most of other territories in the Western Balkans Region , and this story has not been written until the end. In the last decade of the 20th century, it became known because of the conflict with the Serbs, as a conflict that took on broad international dimensions (NATO's Intervention: March 24 - June 12, 1999). Despite all historical problems and injustices of the past, today the state of Kosovo is a normal reality. Since its declaration of independence from Serbia on 17 February 2008, the state of Kosovo has been recognized by over 100 countries worldwide. Despite the fact that Serbia still does not accept the new reality in Kosovo, I strongly believe that the Kosovo's Independence will contribute to the building of neighborly relations between Kosovo and Serbia, and to the final end to the century – old hostility.

EU institutions are supporting the Euro-Atlantic perspective of Kosovo and Serbia, to build a lasting peace and stability throughout the South East Europe region, but the issue of recognizing Kosovo's international subjectivity is still not closed. Therefore the Kosovo state institutions must take seriously all of the challenges that the country has. The Kosovo government should pursue a constructive foreign policy, which is based on the national security within the Balkan region, and then create the conditions that Kosovo needs to become a part of the European Community, and address the social problems that have gripped the country.

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