

Countercurrent Dialogue in a State of Limbo

Women-Led Dialogue in Kosovo

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INTRODUCTION

Kosovo's path towards peace has been long, contested, and unfinished. The 1998–9 war ended through NATO intervention, not negotiation. Following a decade of international administration, Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence of 2008 has remained unrecognized by Serbia and a significant number of UN member states. A high-level, EU-facilitated dialogue, which aims to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia, was launched in Brussels in 2011. It produced agreements in 2013 and 2015 that were hailed as breakthroughs—yet their implementation has been slow, selective, and repeatedly interrupted. A further “Path to Normalisation” document agreed in 2023 has similarly stalled. Meanwhile, political tensions have flared up time and again, particularly in the majority Serb-inhabited north of Kosovo, with episodic security crises and a hardening of hawkish rhetoric on all sides.

The EU-facilitated Track One dialogue has taken place between high officials representing Belgrade and Pristina, with the local population—including the majority Albanian population, the Kosovo-Serb community, other minorities, as well as civil society at large—essentially excluded from the negotiations. The formal dialogue process has also almost entirely excluded women. While earlier Track One talks between Kosovo and Serbia, such as the final status negotiations in Vienna in 2006–7, included no women at all, the Brussels dialogue notably included Edita Tahiri as chief negotiator for Kosovo in the early years—but gender was never substantively integrated into the process.¹

¹ “Shaping Peace: Women's Inclusion in the Kosovo-Serbia Peace Process”. April 2024. Research Institute of Development and European Affairs (RIDEA) & Inclusive Peace; “1325: Facts & Fables”. 2022. Kosovo Women's Network, p.81.

Agreements reached in Brussels are frequently interpreted differently by both sides, announced in contradictory terms, lack transparency, and are not subjected to public consultation. As a result, many have grown disillusioned with the process and the ongoing stalemate. Despite this, there are ample examples of civil society and grassroots-led dialogue initiatives that keep working towards peace, both between Kosovo's different ethnic groups and between Kosovo and Serbia. Women from diverse backgrounds are well-represented in these informal initiatives, both as facilitators and participants.

This policy brief analyzes Track Two, women-led dialogues in Kosovo, focusing on how the women involved in peace work themselves understand and give meaning to these initiatives. It draws on field research conducted in September 2024 in Pristina and North Mitrovica, where we engaged 40 women respondents through six Focus Group Discussions and eight individual interviews. Participants included civil society actors, academics, dialogue practitioners, and activists from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds. The research was conducted at a particularly tense moment in the months preceding Kosovo's parliamentary elections and at the time of a governance crisis in Kosovo's north, following the resignation of Kosovo-Serb mayors from local institutions.

FINDINGS

1. A North-South Divide with Shared Frustrations: Agreements That Change Nothing on the Ground

The research revealed stark differences between the experiences of women in Kosovo's north and those based in Pristina, elsewhere in Kosovo, or in Serbia. At the time of research, the situation for women in Kosovo's north was particularly severe, with most respondents focusing on the increased presence of Kosovo police, the ban on the use of the Serbian dinar, and the closure of Serbian-run services, all of which had left communities gripped by uncertainty and fear. Women in the Focus Groups in North Mitrovica described daily life as marked by concerns for personal safety and livelihoods, as well as a fundamental inability to plan for the future. In this context, civil society organizations had reduced dialogue activities and other inter-ethnic initiatives, such as youth camps, due to increased mistrust and threats. Critically, participants described this as an actively deteriorating situation. Rising nationalism, hawkish political rhetoric, shrinking civic space, and the securitization of everyday life in the north have created conditions that are actively hostile to the dialogue work that women-led civil society has been doing for years.

Women in Pristina described a different but equally pervasive experience of limbo: a sense of being subject to opaque processes in Brussels, over which they have no influence, and whose outcomes they cannot trust. One respondent stated plainly:

"Women weren't asked about the war, and now they're not asked about the dialogue either."

“Women weren't asked about the war, and now they're not asked about the dialogue either.”² Across both contexts, the political process was widely experienced not as a tool for peace but as a source of additional threat. As one civil society leader put it: “the political concept of dialogue has been misused many times”.³

2 Focus Group Participant, Pristina, September 2024

3 Focus Group Participant, Pristina, September 2024

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Overall, there was also a common perception that those who had negotiated in Brussels did not have the needs of people on the ground in mind.⁴ One civil society representative in North Mitrovica described that communities are "living in uncertainty and fear: what will happen tomorrow when they sit down to negotiate again? What

consequences will that have for us?"⁵ Despite the stark differences in everyday realities, an impression is shared by respondents across Kosovo—Albanian and Serb, from Pristina and the North—that more than a decade of formal, Track One dialogue has produced agreements that have not translated into improved conditions of life. Furthermore, there is a widespread belief that if women were involved, this could have been different, as one respondent voiced: "I believe that the peace women bring would be much more lasting than the one achieved by male politics."⁶

2. Women-Led Dialogue as Countercurrent, Not Complement to the Formal Process

The conventional framing of the relationship between Track One (official negotiations) and Track Two (informal, civil society dialogues) assumes that they are separate channels that can, in principle, complement and feed into each other.⁷ What our research found in Kosovo is something troubling: Track One developments are actively undermining the progress that women-led grassroots initiatives have made at the societal level.

When political tensions escalate and rhetoric hardens, civil society organizations face immediate operational consequences: cancelled activities, frightened participants,

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withdrawal of funding, and personal threats against activists. When the formal process reaches agreements that are not, or only selectively implemented, the credibility of all dialogue suffers. The word "dialogue" itself has been so thoroughly associated with a failed political process that several participants said they now avoid using it: "In fact, what is now called dialogue is com-

pletely contradictory to the meaning of the word 'dialogue'. It has become utterly unrecognizable."⁸

The disconnect between informal, women-led dialogue initiatives and their achievements on the ground, and the male-dominated Track One process seems to be structural and longstanding: "Things have happened in social dialogue much more quickly and significantly, even parallel to the technical-political dialogue. But I think these two tracks have never really intersected. There has never been a space where the technical and political dialogue actually acknowledged or reflected on what the social dialogue has contributed from the ground up."⁹ The experience of watching hard-won dialogue work collapse overnight because of a political event was also mentioned:

4 Interview Respondent, North Mitrovica, September 2024

5 Focus Group Participant, North Mitrovica, September 2024

6 Focus Group Participant, Pristina, September 2024

7 Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. United States Institute of Peace; Palmiano Federer, J., & Hirblinger, A. (2024). Introducing Patchworked Peacemaking: Moving Beyond the Multitrack-Inclusion Nexus. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 19(2), 133–153.

8 Focus Group Participant, North Mitrovica, September 2024

9 Focus Group Participant, Pristina, September 2024

“you work so hard to see people working together, coming together, building a community across all the divides, and then over night something happens in Brussels and it just collapses.”¹⁰

In this context, what women-led civil society is doing is perhaps best described as “countercurrent dialogue”: working against the dominant political current to maintain spaces for connection, trust-building, and hope. As one research partner noted, many of these initiatives are not aiming to feed into the Track One process—they are trying to survive it. The lack of connection to Track One is not a failure; in some cases, it is a deliberate and protective choice.¹¹ This was especially evident with dialogue practitioners and activists who use an explicitly feminist framing for their work: these respondents were explicit about linking peacebuilding and women’s rights activism, since they identify patriarchy and nationalism as equally intertwined. As one respondent put it: “Everything makes sense when feminism and peacebuilding are one—but politics keeps them separate.”¹²

3. Safe Spaces in Civil Society, Artistic Dialogue, and Dialogue Across Borders

In contrast to their relative absence in official negotiations, women are very well represented in Kosovo’s civil society dialogue initiatives. From arts-based groups to inter-ethnic youth programs to human rights organizations, women are present and visible as leaders, facilitators, and participants. Women are drawn to civil society because politics is perceived as tainted. Several respondents also mentioned that women are more oriented towards relationships and community needs than towards political power, and that women are simply “the braver gender” when it comes to crossing ethnic boundaries. As one interviewee summarized: “In civil society you have the maneuvering space to work on certain issues with integrity that politics really doesn’t give you. Many women don’t have the appetite for politics. And in civil society you can maintain that, you can stick to your principles.”¹³

While some of these responses indicate somewhat essentialist understandings of gender, they can also be read as responses to the continuous, near-systematic exclusion of women from formal political dialogue. Additionally, women who do engage with formal institutions face additional costs, including threats, public defamation, and online harassment. The result is a systematic pattern: women do the hard, relational, thoughtful work of building dialogue across divides—and are then excluded from, or undermined by, the political processes that claim to be pursuing the same goals.

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who had never encountered them; the Feminist Spring School, which since 2014 has brought young women from Kosovo and Serbia together annually for a process of shared

Nevertheless, under the radar of official processes, women-led initiatives have continued to create and sustain spaces for dialogue. These take many forms: intergenerational meetings documenting women’s past activism; arts-based dialogue initiatives bringing together women across ethnic lines; theatre performances introducing stories of wartime sexual violence to audiences

10 Interview Respondent, North Mitrovica, September 2024

11 Fal-Dutra Santos, A. (2025). Building Trust Through Care: A Feminist Take on Inclusion in Multi-Track Mediation. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 19(2), 227–248.

12 Focus Group Participant, Pristina, September 2024

13 Interview Respondent, North Mitrovica, September 2024

learning and relationship-building; and the Dialogue Academy for Young Women, which has trained over 200 women in mediation, conflict resolution, and feminist leadership.

What unites these initiatives is their understanding of dialogue not merely as a process aimed at an agreement, but as a space for an experience of connection, safety, and possibility. As one facilitator from an arts-based organization described: “We always create a safe space (...) where you give power for someone to elaborate their ideas, you listen to the other side, even if you don’t agree. When you go out from that safe space, you have the feeling of hope that something might change.”¹⁴ The Feminist Spring School, which for most participants is the first space in which they have ever met activists from the other side of the Kosovo-Serbia border, offers a striking example. Young women who have grown up in environments that mostly promote images of the “Other” as threatening, describe the experience of meeting, talking, and simply spending time together as life-changing. This is not because the political questions are resolved—they are not. It is because the humanity of the other is centered in an experiential practice of joint learning and being.

These initiatives also navigate particular risks. Some women who work across ethnic lines reported facing social ostracism, risking professional marginalization, and may receive threats from nationalist forces on one or both sides. Nevertheless, the women we spoke to are proud of what they have achieved, in contrast to the formal dialogue: “What those two parties have agreed on, we have done five times more work”;¹⁵ while also lamenting the burden this places on them: “It shouldn’t have been the work of civil society”.¹⁶

4. Recovering a Silenced History of Women’s Peace Activism

A distinctive feature of women-led peace work in Kosovo is its temporal orientation towards the past. A vibrant feminist civil society has worked to document and amplify the roles women played in the anti-war and civil resistance movements of the 1980s and 1990s in Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia more broadly—a history that has been almost entirely written out of official accounts of the conflict, dominated as these are by narratives of heroism, national liberation, and martial sacrifice.¹⁷

This history is not merely of academic interest. In our Focus Group Discussions, young women from Kosovo and Serbia were visibly moved to discover that there had been organized feminist resistance to the war before they were born. As one young participant reflected: “I only recently learned that feminism protected me even before I was born.”¹⁸ This discovery of an unknown and silenced past is, for younger activists, a source of inspiration for their own engagement in dialogue, a counter-narrative to the dominant story that war and ethnic division are inevitable. Research in other

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contexts has identified this kind of archival and recovery work as “a reparative action” in its own right.¹⁹

14 Focus Group Participant, Pristina, September 2024

15 Focus Group Participant, Pristina, September 2024

16 Focus Group Participant, Pristina, September 2024

17 Klajiqi, E. (2025). Feminist Archival Activism in Kosovo: Between Forgotten Archives and Hegemonic Narratives. *Southeastern Europe*, 49(3), 287–316; Mujika Chao, I. (2020). Women’s Activism in the Civil Resistance Movement in Kosovo (1989–1997): Characteristics, Development, Encounters. *Nationalities Papers*, 48(5), 843–860; Mujika Chao, I., & Gusia, L. (2022). Unfinished Activism: Genealogies of Women’s Movements and the Re-imagining of Feminist Peace and Resistance. In S. Smith & K. Yoshida (Eds.), *Feminist Conversations on Peace*. Bristol University Press.

18 Focus Group Participant, Pristina, September 2024

19 Aharoni, S. B., Eyal, H., & Preser, R. (2025). “Smaller Goals Were Achieved”: Feminist Peace Archives in Israel and Communal Methods of Repair. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 5(1), p.4.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the European Union and international mediators:

- Ensure genuine gender integration in the Track One process: not merely the presence of women negotiators, but structured consultation with women's civil society organizations at all stages, and substantive inclusion of issues such as wartime sexual violence, reparations, and the gendered impacts of political decisions on daily life.
- Improve transparency: the lack of clear, consistent, and timely public communication about the content and progress of negotiations is a major driver of distrust and fear, particularly for communities in the north. Ensure a commitment is upheld that both parties issue a joint statement after every round of talks.

To donors and international organizations:

- Establish long-term, flexible funding for women-led civil society dialogue initiatives in Kosovo. Short-term, project-based funding forces organizations to constantly restart relationship-building and prevents the kind of sustained work that brings about genuine change.
- Fund security support for women peacebuilders: activists who work across ethnic lines face real threats, particularly in the north.
- Expand support for documentation and archiving of women's activism. Fund oral history projects, archival work, and intergenerational dialogue initiatives that center this history.
- Recognize the “countercurrent” function of civil society dialogue: in a context where the formal process lacks legitimacy and has actively generated insecurity, women-led dialogue is not a complement to Track One but an alternative to it. Support it on those terms, without requiring that it demonstrate linkage or contribution to the official process.

To the Kosovo and Serbian governments:

- Ensure genuine consultation, not performative and tokenistic inclusion: women-led organizations in Kosovo have been used for optics by governments on both sides and have been labelled as extremists or propagandists when they offer inconvenient criticism.
- Protect civic space: the shrinking of space for civil society, media, and dissent in both Kosovo and Serbia, though to different degrees, is making dialogue work more dangerous and less possible. Both governments should take concrete steps to protect the ability of civil society organizations to operate freely, including when they engage across ethnic and national lines.
- Address the gendered consequences of policies, in particular in Kosovo's north: decisions about security, governance, and funding have direct impact on women's access to personal documents, healthcare, economic security, and social services.

- Apply the Kosovo Law on Gender Equality, which stipulates equal representation of women, to all levels of administration, academia, and other public spaces, including at the highest levels of political negotiations.

To the media:

- Report on and expose the level of representation of women in negotiations, and increase coverage of women already in decision-making positions, without reproducing biased and misogynist stereotypes.
- Increase public awareness of women’s contributions to peacebuilding, including by reporting on women-led Track Two dialogues.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This policy brief is part of the project “Dialogue after Peace? A Gender Perspective on Track Two Dialogues in Colombia, Kosovo, and the Philippines”, funded by the Swiss Network for International Studies. The research inquired into women-led, informal dialogue initiatives in these three post-agreement contexts and examined how these contribute to sustaining and reimagining peace. Research in Kosovo was conducted in partnership with New Social Initiative (NSI) and Artpolis, Pristina, and with Prof. Vjollca Krasniqi of the University of Pristina. Six Focus Group Discussions and eight individual interviews were conducted in September 2024 with a total of 40 women participants in Pristina and North Mitrovica.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Milica Andrić Rakić is a researcher, activist, and journalist with twelve years of experience working in civil society and media. Her focus is on the rights of non-majority communities in Kosovo and the process of normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. She is the author or co-author of more than 20 reports, analyses, and policy proposals. Over the years, she consulted for organizations such as USAID Kosovo, the National Democratic Institute, the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, and the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade. As a journalist, she wrote for Deutsche Welle, BIRN, European Western Balkans, and KoSSev.

Zana Hoxha is a professional theater director, founder, and executive director of the Artpolis - Art and Community Center, an organization that promotes art and diversity through social dialogue and community integration. Combining art and activism, she uses theater as an advocacy tool for social rights that focuses on raising awareness of gender-based violence, human rights, and diversity. Zana is a Laureate of the “Future Leaders” program by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for her leadership

in gender equality, advocacy, social enhancement, and women's rights. She is a board member of the Kosovo Women's Network and a lecturer and trainer specializing in Forum Theater.

Vjollca Krasniqi is Associate Professor of Sociology and Gender at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Prishtina, Kosovo. Her research explores gender, nation, transitional justice, memory politics, urban studies, social history, ethnography, and oral history, with a focus on gender dynamics in post-socialist and post-war Kosovo. She has published extensively on these topics, contributing numerous book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals. She has participated and led numerous international research projects on gender, memory, human rights, and community-university engagement.

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