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KOSOVO-SERBIA BY 2030: POSSIBLE SCENARIOS



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ABOUT THE DOCUMENT

Kosovo-Serbia by 2030: Possible Scenarios is the result of several brainstorming exercises by policy experts and civil society activists from Kosovo and Serbia. These scenarios were drafted by New Social Initiative (NSI), based on inputs from participants from Serbia and Kosovo - Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs – including foreign experts, and serve as a document on how NSI views the current state of affairs.

Their purpose is to forecast a potential future of Kosovo-Serbia relations and thus provoke a debate on the key assumptions necessary to bring those relations to the best possible place and warn of those that would lead them in the worst possible direction.

The document was written and edited following separate brainstorming Sessions and interviews organized since February 2026.

The document is written as part of the National Endowment for Democracy-funded project that intends to empower civil society and youth actors to effectively engage in the normalization of relations and regional cooperation initiatives involving Kosovo and Serbia, propose solutions, and advocate for their implementation.

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the New Social Initiative asked what Kosovo–Serbia relations might look like by 2027. The answer then rested on a single variable: the scope and scale of transatlantic engagement. The stronger the engagement, the better the outcome; minimal engagement would produce minimal results.

Four years later the variable has moved. The United States turned toward commercial diplomacy and stopped actively backing EU mediation in the Dialogue; the EU's leverage weakened accordingly, and no substitute appeared. But the deeper problem is not that engagement diminished. **It is that engagement of the kind that existed produced nothing.** It was strong in 2013 and produced the Brussels agreement. It was strong in 2023 and produced the Ohrid Annex. Neither was implemented. Whatever explains the last decade, it is not the quantity of international attention.

This report therefore rests on a different variable: **whether unilateral action carries a consequence.** Condemnation is not a consequence. Where a measure attracts a statement and nothing else, both governments learn that the next measure is also free, and the learning transfers immediately. Nearly everything that follows in these three scenarios — the Association that is never established, the agreements reversed by administrative decision, the community that leaves without an event occurring — follows from that single fact.

Around it sit two conditions that determine how much room the parties have. **The Euro-Atlantic environment decides what is possible; Belgrade and Pristina decide what happens.** A cohesive and credible EU and NATO make compromise affordable but do not compel it; a fractured or distracted one makes escalation cheap but does not require it. Between those two levels sit the actual choices, and this report is mostly about those.

Three scenarios follow. They are not the three most likely futures. They are the three most representative examples of possible directions: continuation, improvement, and collapse.

- **Scenario A, Peace by Neglect**, is the middle ground and the most likely single outcome. Nothing is resolved, nothing collapses, and the arrangement holds because its costs fall almost entirely on the actor least able to disrupt it.
- **Scenario B, Normalization in Installments**, is the best case. No new agreement is reached; the existing ones are carried out. It is the least likely of the three and the only one that leaves the region better than it found it.
- **Scenario C, Breakdown**, is the worst case. The framework disappears, an incident occurs where an incident is enough, and the Kosovo Serb community leaves within weeks rather than decades.

Each scenario ends with the conditions that would break it, and those conditions lead into one another. The failure conditions of Scenario B lead to Scenario A. The tripwires of Scenario A lead to Scenario C. And A and C share a destination: in both, the Kosovo Serb community ceases to exist as a community, and the dispute outlives the people it was fought over. **The difference**

between them is speed and visibility — which is why the slower one attracts no response and is therefore the more dangerous of the two.

None of the scenarios foresees Serbian recognition of Kosovo, and none foresees a change of borders. None depends on a named individual remaining in office; the 2022 report was built around two leaders and was overtaken by events within months of the period it described. And none assumes that Russia or China determines the outcome, though Scenario C is the one in which Russia has something to gain.

KEY DRIVERS

Seven variables shape all three scenarios. None of them is fixed, and each can move in either direction. What distinguishes the scenarios that follow is which way each key driver has moved by 2030.

WHETHER UNILATERAL ACTION CARRIES A CONSEQUENCE

Condemnation without instruments is not weak pressure; it is a form of permission that also protects the actor issuing it, because the condemnation itself becomes the evidence that something was done. Neither government is restrained, and each concludes that the other is the favoured one.

THE CREDIBILITY AND SHAPE OF THE EUROPEAN OFFER

Enlargement has functioned in this dispute as a promise rather than an instrument. Three things determine whether the offer does any work. Whether the horizon is **believed**, and whether the EU has rewards **other than membership** to grant, of which phased access to the Single Market is the only serious candidate.

The offer can also work in reverse. As Montenegro and Albania advance, the visible gap between them and their neighbours becomes either an incentive or a grievance, and **the difference is entirely a matter of whose fault the delay is understood to be.**

THE SECURITY CEILING

Every scenario in this report has a ceiling on violence, and that ceiling is NATO. It is not a background condition but an enabling one: implementation requires both governments to take steps that look like concessions, and neither can afford to while an unmanaged security risk exists that the other might exploit.

DOMESTIC POLITICAL INCENTIVES IN BELGRADE AND PRISTINA

In both capitals, an unimplemented obligation is an asset. It preserves a grievance, justifies inaction, and can be produced on demand to explain why nothing else can move. Neither government faces a constituency strong enough to make implementation cheaper than delay.

THE POSITION AND REPRESENTATION OF KOSOVO SERBS

The obstacle is not a shortage of declared support for Kosovo Serb agency. It is that an independent Kosovo Serb voice articulates what the community actually needs, which is consistently more than Belgrade will settle for — because Belgrade trades the community for other things and the community will not trade itself. **The community's independence therefore**

makes its voice more authentic and less useful at the same time, and external actors resolve that by praising the agency and negotiating with Belgrade.

DEMOGRAPHY AND ECONOMICS

Both societies are losing people. Emigration of the young, educated and economically active weakens institutions, hollows out political competition, and turns economic frustration into support for whoever offers grievance instead of growth.

For the Kosovo Serb community, the same process is not a weakening but a clock. Departure is driven less by any single incident than by the accumulated experience of insecurity, degraded services, and political powerlessness, and it is irreversible in a way that nothing else in this dispute is.

REGIONAL LINKAGE

The dispute can no longer be assessed on its own. A crisis in Kosovo and a crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina draw on the same forces, the same attention, and the same exhausted political capital, and each makes the other more likely to be under-resourced. Secession moves by Republika Srpska become more plausible where unilateral action against a minority has been shown to carry no cost, and harder to prevent where the instruments that would answer them are committed elsewhere.

WHAT IS NOT A DRIVER

Russia and China do not determine the outcome of any scenario. Russia retains the capacity to complicate — at the Security Council, in the information environment, and through networks in the north — and Scenario C is the one in which it has something to gain. But it initiates nothing here, and no party invites it to.

No scenario foresees a change of borders, in either direction. The 2022 report treated territorial adjustment as a last-resort possibility; four years on, neither the regional nor the international appetite for it exists.

No scenario foresees Serbian recognition of Kosovo by 2030, as the political transition in Serbia makes is implausible for either the new government or the government of continuity with weakened parliamentary strength.

HOW TO READ THESE SCENARIOS

Each scenario has the same architecture: a framing section stating what the world looks like by 2030 and why; the scenario's main elements; its assumptions, drivers, policy shifts and actions; and the conditions under which it would break or be stopped.

That last section is the one to read first if reading only one thing. **A scenario is only as useful as the tripwires it names**, and the point of this exercise is not to predict which of the three occurs but to make visible, while there is still time to act on them the specific decisions that determine which one does.



Scenario A:

Peace by Neglect

SCENARIO A: PEACE BY NEGLECT

FRAMING

This scenario foresees that by 2030 Kosovo and Serbia arrive where they are today, having travelled a long way to get there. There is no comprehensive normalization agreement, no Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities (A/CSM), and no meaningful movement on either country's European path. There is also no collapse. The Dialogue continues through occasional meetings and modest technical steps - missing persons, civil documents, small arrangements on freedom of movement - and few on either side expect it to resolve anything. **The Dialogue survives largely because it no longer matters much.** It shapes no policy, commands no public attention beyond the Kosovo Serb community, and carries no consequence for either government.

The scenario takes hold because it is politically safe. In Belgrade, the prevailing view is that Serbia conceded on energy, telecommunications, and the north and received little in return. In Pristina, the equally settled view is that Serbia advanced toward the EU while continuing to obstruct Kosovo internationally and avoiding accountability for the conflict, Banjska, and all other transgressions. In this climate, **compromise - whether an institutional arrangement for Kosovo Serbs or tacit international confirmation of Kosovo's statehood - feels like settling for less than "deserved"**. Carry on costs nothing: Pristina proceeds with unilateral measures and centralized control, Belgrade largely disengages from Kosovo's daily governance while compensating rhetorically. Both governments choose the safer path, and keep choosing it.

What makes this scenario durable is not that it satisfies anyone, but that its costs are borne almost entirely by the actor least able to disrupt it. Kosovo Serbs pay for the arrangement in depopulation, degraded services, and political irrelevance. Neither capital, nor Brussels, nor Washington, pays a price that would force a change of course.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ELEMENTS

- **The Dialogue is formally alive, procedurally active, and politically frozen.** Technical contact at chief-negotiator level continues. Leader-level meetings occur rarely and produce communiqués rather than decisions. The dispute over whether the 2023 Basic Agreement and its Ohrid Implementation Annex are legally binding is never settled; it is instead managed, quoted selectively by both sides, and allowed to become irrelevant. The EU's periodic attempts to construct procedural workarounds succeed in convening meetings and fail to change behavior.
- **The A/CSM is never established, and never formally abandoned.** Pristina does not refer a statute to the Constitutional Court, arguing that Belgrade has not met its own obligations; Belgrade does not withdraw its demand, because the unmet obligation is more useful than the institution would be. The A/CSM remains simultaneously a live commitment and a political weapon, which is precisely why it is not implemented.

- **Kosovo's four Serb-majority northern municipalities remain formally inside the system and functionally hollow.** Local institutions exist and operate, but cooperation with Pristina is minimal and central control over local life is enforced administratively and through police presence. Participation is high enough to preserve formal legitimacy and low enough to make local competences close to meaningless. **From Pristina's perspective, this looks like sovereignty. For many Serbs in the north, it feels like oppression.**
- **Education and health remain unresolved and are managed rather than consensually legalized.** Serbia continues to fund education, healthcare, salaries for the displaced institutions, and social assistance for Kosovo Serbs. Pristina announces forced integration periodically, applies pressure incrementally, and stops short of forcing closure, because full integration would trigger the escalation it wants to avoid. The payment channels through which Belgrade's money reaches recipients are restricted but never fully severed; each side treats the resulting workarounds as evidence of the other's bad faith.
- **Serbia's influence in Kosovo narrows without disappearing.** Most parallel structures are displaced. What remains is financial: salaries, subsidies, and control over Kosovo Serb political representation. Belgrade neither escalates nor withdraws. It also polices its own flank, discouraging and discrediting voices in the north that call for open resistance, because an uncontrolled escalation would cost Serbia more than the status quo does.
- **Kosovo's international position does not advance.** No new recognitions, no membership in the organizations Pristina prioritizes, and no candidate status. The five EU non-recognizers see no reason to move, and Serbia's obstruction continues at low cost. Kosovo draws on EU Growth Plan funds and other instruments, so the relationship with Brussels is transactional and functional rather than political.
- **Serbia's accession remains formally open and practically inert.** Chapters do not close. Alignment with EU foreign policy remains insufficient. Neither the EU nor Serbia declares the process finished, because the fiction is useful to both.
- **The Kosovo Serb community continues to shrink.** Departure is driven less by any single incident than by the accumulated experience of insecurity, poor services, and political powerlessness. **The community that was once described as the bridge between the two largest peoples of the Western Balkans becomes too small and too exhausted to serve as one.**

SCENARIO'S MAIN ASSUMPTIONS, DRIVERS, POLICY SHIFTS, AND ACTIONS

- **The scenario does not depend on any individual remaining in office.** It assumes instead that whoever governs in Pristina and Belgrade faces the same incentive structure: the electorate that rewards firmness is larger and more reliable than the electorate that rewards settlement. Governments change; the calculation does not.
- **Domestic politics reward non-implementation.** In both capitals, an unimplemented obligation is an asset. It preserves a grievance, justifies inaction, and can be produced on demand to explain why nothing else can move. Neither government faces a domestic constituency strong enough to make implementation cheaper than delay.

- **The EU hosts the process without owning its outcome.** Brussels judges that a superficial Dialogue is preferable to a collapsed one, and that enforcement - suspending funds, imposing measures asymmetrically, or naming a defaulting party - costs more credibility than it buys compliance.
- **The United States is present enough to deter violence and absent enough to permit drift.** Washington's interest is concentrated in economic and security cooperation rather than in a political settlement. That interest is thin, but it is sufficient: neither government wants to be the one that provokes an American reaction.
- **KFOR remains, and its presence is the actual guarantor of the ceiling on violence.** Incidents occur, are contained, and are absorbed. Discussion of drawing down the international presence continues without resolution, which suits everyone: the debate itself signals that stability cannot be assumed, without anyone having to test it.
- **Neither side attempts what would break the arrangement.** Pristina does not force closure of the remaining Serbia-funded services in Kosovo. Belgrade does not withdraw Kosovo Serbs from Kosovo's institutions, and does not organize open resistance. Both understand these to be the escalation thresholds, and both stay below them deliberately.
- **Russia is not decisive.** Russia retains the capacity to complicate at the UN, but does not shape outcomes, and no party invites it to. Russia is not a driver of this scenario; it is noise within it.
- **"Normalization" changes meaning.** By 2030 the word no longer denotes reconciliation or a legally binding settlement. It denotes containment. This redefinition is not announced; it happens through use, and it is convenient enough that no one contests it.

WHAT WOULD BREAK THIS SCENARIO?

The arrangement is stable, not permanent. It would end if any of the following occurred:

- **Forced integration of Serbia-funded health and education.** This is the most likely trigger. It would remove the last material reason for many Kosovo Serbs to stay and would compel Belgrade to respond visibly.
- **A security incident that cannot be contained locally,** particularly one with fatalities, in the north or on the boundary. The arrangement has no shock absorber other than KFOR.
- **A government in Belgrade whose legitimacy rests on something other than the Kosovo grievance.** A post-transition Serbian government seeking rapid EU progress might find settlement cheaper than continuation. This cuts both ways: it is the main path out of this scenario and toward a better one.
- **An EU decision to attach real money and real conditionality to specific obligations,** applied symmetrically. Enlargement instruments make this possible; political appetite is what is missing.
- **Depopulation passing the point at which the north's demography no longer supports the dispute in its present form.** At that point the scenario does not so much break as expire, having resolved the question by attrition rather than agreement - and at the cost of

any realistic prospect of historic reconciliation between the two largest peoples of the Western Balkans. **This is the most consequential of the endings and the least visible while it is happening.** A Kosovo without a Kosovo Serb community is a Kosovo in which Belgrade has no constituency to protect and therefore no domestic restraint on disruption. Closing the boundary, obstructing the transit of goods, or imposing costs on Pristina in other ways becomes cheap in a way it is not today, because no one Belgrade answers to would pay for it. The dispute would then outlive the people it was fought over, leaving Belgrade and Pristina with nothing at stake between them except the dispute itself - the condition in which a conflict twenty or thirty years from now becomes possible rather than unthinkable.



Scenario B:

Normalization in Installments

SCENARIO B: NORMALIZATION IN INSTALLMENTS

FRAMING

The Balkans have never suffered from a shortage of agreements. They have suffered from a shortage of implemented ones. Every settlement in this dispute since 2013 has been signed and then converted into a grievance - kept alive because an unmet obligation is more useful to the party owed than a met one would be, and more useful to the party owing than compliance would be. **This scenario foresees no new agreement. It foresees the existing ones being carried out.**

By 2030 Kosovo and Serbia have not resolved their dispute. There is no recognition, no settlement, and no expectation of either. What has changed is that the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities exists, that the obligations of the Basic Agreement and its Ohrid Implementation Annex are being discharged on a published schedule, and that the two governments have acquired the habit of dealing with each other through institutions rather than through crises. The Dialogue stops searching for a final agreement and becomes the machinery for delivering the ones already made.

The scenario's difficulty is that nothing in the present situation obviously produces it. Every driver named below has existed in some form since 2013 and has not delivered. Euro-Atlantic engagement was strong in 2013 and produced Brussels; it was strong in 2023 and produced Ohrid. Both times it delivered signatures and failed to deliver implementation. So this scenario cannot rest on more international engagement. It rests on engagement of a different kind, and on a change inside Belgrade and Pristina that the international environment permits rather than causes. **The Euro-Atlantic environment decides what is possible; Belgrade and Pristina decide what happens.**

What distinguishes this scenario from the other two is not goodwill. Neither government acquires any. It is that for the first time the costs of non-implementation exceed the costs of implementation, for both, at the same moment - and that someone is prepared to guarantee that neither has to move first.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ELEMENTS

- **The A/CSM is established, and its establishment requires amending Kosovo's Constitution. The constitution is opened once, and it opens in both directions.** Pristina does not refer a statute for conformity review, which can only narrow what is possible. It goes to amendment, where Kosovo Serb deputies are gatekeepers — not only of this change but of every change, since no amendment passes without two-thirds of the reserved seats and ten of the twenty are theirs. That gatekeeping is what makes the trade possible and what makes it expensive: **a majority that must ask permission once will ask for everything it has been unable to obtain, and the community's price for entrenching the Association is to concede amendments it would never otherwise permit.** The likeliest candidates are

the mechanisms of community protection themselves — the number of reserved seats, and the double majority through which this very bargain was struck. This scenario does not assume a body assembled quietly within the existing legal order. Nothing was negotiated for eight years that the existing order already permitted; Kosovo's municipalities have always been free to associate. Ohrid speaks of an *appropriate level of self-management*, and that is what is created: defined competences in education, health, culture, and local economic development, a lawful channel for Serbian funding, and legal personality — without executive authority over matters reserved to the state, without a third chamber, and without a veto over Kosovo's foreign policy or its territorial integrity. **The amendment, not the statute, is the real content of this scenario**, and it names the political configuration required: a two-thirds majority in the Assembly together with the double majority of the minority seats. No government now conceivable in Pristina can deliver that alone.

- **Both parties stop treating their constitutions as natural law.** Pristina invokes its constitution to limit the Association; Belgrade invokes its own to refuse recognition. Neither document is immutable, both have been amended, and each side knows the other's claim of impossibility is a political choice wearing legal dress. **In this scenario each stops making the argument, because each recognizes that it is the same argument.**
- **Implementation is reciprocal and simultaneous, not sequential.** Nothing moves first. A single published timetable ties Kosovo's constitutional and statutory steps on the Association to Serbia's written acceptance that the Basic Agreement and its Annex are binding, to accountability for Banjska, and to the suspension of the de-recognition campaign. Compliance is assessed publicly, article by article, and named. **What has blocked implementation for a decade is not disagreement about the steps but the refusal of either party to take one first; this scenario supplies the only thing that solves that, which is a guarantor.**
- **International engagement becomes consequential rather than declaratory.** Condemnation continues, but it stops standing in for action. Unilateral moves by either party - administrative measures in the north, obstruction of Kosovo's international participation, closures, seizures, de-recognition lobbying - attract a named consequence applied within weeks and applied to whichever party acted. **The change is not that the EU and the US say more, but that what they say costs something.**
- **The north stabilizes because services stabilize.** Health, education, and social payments continue to be funded by Serbia, coordinated with Kosovo's institutions, and routed through channels both governments can see. Diplomas and professional credentials gain recognition in practice. Municipal institutions acquire real competences and the people staffing them acquire reasons to stay. Participation rises because participation begins to deliver something.
- **Kosovo Serbs are treated as a party rather than as a subject.** The community's own representatives negotiate the arrangements that govern it, and their agreement is required rather than merely reported. This is the element most often promised and least often practised: it has been easier for every external actor to settle with Belgrade, because Belgrade will trade the community for other things and the community will not trade itself. **In this scenario the internationals stop preferring the cheaper interlocutor.**

- **Serbia's role converts from parallel presence to declared presence.** Belgrade funds Kosovo Serbs through lawful municipal and Association budgets rather than through structures outside Kosovo's order. It retains influence and loses deniability. Pristina accepts a Serbian financial role it once treated as a violation of sovereignty; Belgrade accepts an integration of Serbs into Kosovo's system it once treated as capitulation.
- **The European path moves, and what moves is economic rather than procedural.** Serbia opens and closes chapters; Kosovo obtains candidate status. Neither approaches membership. What changes the domestic arithmetic is phased access to the EU Single Market on a schedule running to 2030 - staged access to the four freedoms, to European payment and customs systems, and to the financing that accompanies them. **Membership remains distant; the internal market does not.**
- **The five EU non-recognizers recognize Kosovo, and stop obstructing it.** Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain drop their objection to Kosovo's candidate status and to its participation in EU instruments. They draw a distinction between recognition and process that they have so far refused to draw, and they draw it because implementation gives them the cover to do so: an arrangement carried out with Serbia's signature on it is no longer a purely unilateral act, and a Kosovo that has settled with Belgrade is a far weaker precedent for anyone's domestic separatists than a Kosovo that has not. **What they refused Kosovo as a seceding province they can concede to Kosovo as a party to an implemented agreement.**
- **Fundamental positions do not change.** Serbia does not recognize Kosovo. Kosovo does not accept anything short of statehood. The disagreement is permanent. What ends is its capacity to generate crises.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ASSUMPTIONS, DRIVERS, POLICY SHIFTS, AND ACTIONS

- **The primary driver is domestic change in Serbia rather than external incentive.** A government emerging from Serbia's political transition derives its legitimacy from something other than Kosovo - anti-corruption, institutional restoration, living standards, a credible European timetable. It needs deliverables Kosovo can supply cheaply, and unblocking the European path costs it less than defending an unenforceable claim. **A government that did not build its authority on Kosovo can spend less of it there.**
- **The counter-assumption is at least as plausible and must be stated.** A government resting on a broad and fragile coalition may have less room to concede than a strong incumbent had, and the actor best placed to sell an unpopular compromise is usually the one who spent years opposing it. This scenario assumes the first dynamic prevails over the second. That is an assumption, not a finding, and it is the scenario's largest single vulnerability.
- **Serbian opinion on Kosovo does not soften; it narrows.** There is no evidence of a public becoming reconciled to compromise, and some evidence of hardening nationalist sentiment among younger Serbs on Kosovo specifically. What changes is salience rather than intensity: **Kosovo comes to matter less to more people while mattering more to fewer.** A government does not need a permissive public to implement an agreement. It needs a dis-

tracted one, and a hard core small enough to be outvoted rather than accommodated. Nothing here requires either government to win an argument about Kosovo - only for that argument to stop being the one on which elections turn.

- **Pristina's resistance to the Association is treated as reasoned rather than as bad faith, because it is.** Every arrangement of this kind in the region has been used as a vehicle for secession, and Republika Srpska is the standing demonstration. Serbia has never accepted Kosovo's existence, campaigns actively against it, and in 2023 an armed group operating from its territory attacked Kosovo Police at Banjska without any subsequent accountability. **Asking a state to institutionalize the self-management of a community whose patron denies that the state exists is asking it to accept a permanent risk, and no argument that ignores this will persuade anyone in Pristina.** This scenario therefore assumes the risk is bounded rather than dismissed: defined competences, constitutional review, no executive authority over reserved matters, and a Serbian commitment on Kosovo's international participation that is verifiable and time-bound.
- **The Albanian case for implementation is a case about Kosovo's interests.** An Association created on defined terms removes Belgrade's single most effective international argument - that Kosovo does not honour what it signs. It converts Serbia's best claim into Kosovo's. It unlocks candidate status, Single Market access, and the recognitions that remain outstanding. And it protects the foundation of Kosovo's own statehood: the case made to the ICJ and to hesitant capitals was never that a majority may secede, but that Kosovo is a supervised, rights-guaranteeing, constitutionally Ahtisaari-bound state in which protections for the Serb community were the consideration given in exchange for independence. **A Kosovo that keeps its Serbs is a Kosovo whose founding argument holds.**
- **Reciprocity is understood on both sides.** Albanians are minorities in the Preševo Valley, in North Macedonia, and in Montenegro, and Kosovo's advocacy for them rests on the principle that institutional protection does not depend on the majority's preference. Serbia's treatment of the Preševo Albanians is subject to the same standard and, in this scenario, to the same scrutiny. **Each government discovers that the argument it makes abroad constrains the argument it makes at home.**
- **The security ceiling holds, and is not lowered while implementation is under way.** KFOR remains capable and visibly present, and force-posture decisions are sequenced against political ones rather than taken on a separate calendar. This is the enabling condition rather than the background: implementation requires both governments to take steps that look like concessions, and neither can afford to while an unmanaged security risk exists that the other might exploit. **Nothing in this scenario is attempted under a security ceiling anyone doubts.**
- **The disarmament of the north is recognized as a vulnerability too, not just as a solution.** The dismantling of Kosovo Serb armed and criminal structures after 2023 sharply reduced the risk of Serb-initiated escalation, and simultaneously removed the community's own deterrent. A falling incident count is read for what it is - a change in capacity and in population, not necessarily in intent - and force posture is set accordingly, with attention to the dispersed communities south of the Ibar rather than only to the north.

- **The EU stops treating membership as the only reward it holds.** Phased Single Market integration decouples material benefit from the accession endgame, which is what makes it usable: it can be granted in stages, withdrawn in stages, and delivered inside the political lifetime of the governments being asked to take risks. Accession conditionality has failed in this dispute partly because its reward arrives after everyone now in office has left it.
- **Divergent accession speeds are managed and attributed.** Montenegro and Albania advance. The EU states plainly that the unresolved dispute is what separates Serbia and Kosovo from their neighbours' trajectory. Attribution is the point: an unattributed delay produces resentment at Brussels, an attributed one produces domestic pressure on the parties. **The same fact that drives this scenario drives the opposite one, and the difference is whose fault it is understood to be.**
- **Transatlantic cohesion holds, of which American attention is only the visible part.** Washington's engagement is intermittent and changes with administrations; this scenario assumes it is present when it matters - underwriting the reciprocity mechanism, discouraging spoilers, making non-compliance costly bilaterally - without requiring sustained attention. Beneath it, the alliance is credible. **The scenario does not require the Euro-Atlantic community to be ambitious. It requires it to be credible, which is a lower bar and a different one.**
- **The dispute is handled as a European security question rather than a bilateral one,** alongside Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, on the understanding that serious deterioration in any one of the three ends progress in the others.
- **Russia's capacity to spoil is not eliminated but loses its channels.** A Serbian government pursuing a European timetable has less use for it, and a Kosovo Serb political life that is competitive rather than monopolised offers fewer points of entry.
- **Everyone loses something, which is why the scenario is credible.** Kosovo's government surrenders the position that no institutional arrangement for Serbs is acceptable, and pays for it with part of its own base. A Serbian government accepts in practice what it denies in principle, and is attacked for it from the right. Srpska Lista loses its monopoly on Kosovo Serb representation and resists accordingly, including by means that have previously included intimidation and violence. The five EU non-recognizers lose the clean line they have held since 2008: having treated Kosovo as an applicant with an accession trajectory, they can no longer maintain that it is nothing at all, and their own separatist movements will quote the distinction back at them within days. **They accept a rhetorical cost at home in exchange for a structural gain - the precedent they fear becomes weaker, not stronger, once Serbia's signature is on an implemented settlement - which is the only reason any of them would move.**

WHAT WOULD BREAK THIS SCENARIO?

- **A Serbian government that needs the Kosovo file.** Any government whose domestic position deteriorates has an incentive to reactivate it, and the file is always available.

- **An Association negotiated up rather than down.** If the body acquires executive competences over reserved matters, no majority in Pristina can carry the amendment and the Constitutional Court will not sustain the result.
- **Enforcement that remains asymmetric.** One further round of consequences applied to one party and not the other ends the reciprocity mechanism permanently, and confirms to both capitals that enforcement is political.
- **A security incident during implementation.** The sequence has no slack. A Banjska-scale event, or mass violence against Serb communities following a political shock, would collapse it - and the present period, with a lowered security ceiling, a disarmed north, frequent Constitutional crises in Pristina, and a transition in Belgrade, is the most exposed the process has been since 2004.
- **A Single Market offer announced but not delivered.** Staged access is the only reward in this scenario that arrives soon enough to matter. An offer that proves conditional on the accession endgame after all is worse than no offer, because it confirms that European incentives are rhetorical.
- **Visible fractures in NATO or in transatlantic relations.** The fastest-acting failure condition, and the only one over which neither party has any influence. A security guarantee does not have to fail to do damage; it only has to be doubted.
- **Depopulation reaching the point where the arrangement has no beneficiary.** An Association established over a community that has already gone is an institution without members. **This scenario has a deadline, and it is not 2030.**



Scenario C:

Breakdown

SCENARIO C: BREAKDOWN

FRAMING

By 2030 there is no framework of any kind between Pristina and Belgrade. The Dialogue has not been suspended or replaced; it has been abandoned, and nothing has taken its place. The agreements of the last two decades are reversed: identity documents and vehicle registrations cease to be recognized, customs arrangements lapse, crossings function intermittently or not at all, and the movement of people and goods between the two becomes a matter of permission rather than routine. **Twelve years of agreements are undone in something closer to twelve weeks.**

This scenario does not require anyone to decide on it. It requires only that the incentives for cooperation disappear at the same time as the consequences for unilateral action, and that one incident occur in a place where one incident is enough. **Breakdown is not chosen. It is what happens when nothing prevents it.**

Its destination is the same as Scenario A's. The Kosovo Serb community leaves; the last reason for either side to want functional relations with the other goes with it, and the dispute survives the people it was fought over. The difference is speed and visibility: what Scenario A accomplishes over a decade through attrition, this scenario accomplishes in weeks through fear.

There is no war. Serbia does not send its army across the boundary, because doing so means engaging NATO forces and no Serbian government has an interest in that. **The absence of war is not evidence of restraint. It is evidence that the one form of escalation the West genuinely deters is the one it prepared for.** Everything else remains available, and everything else is what happens.

SCENARIO'S MAIN ELEMENTS

- **The Dialogue ends without being ended.** Meetings stop being scheduled. Chief negotiators are not replaced. The EU Special Representative's mandate continues on paper. Neither party announces a withdrawal, because withdrawal would carry a cost of being blamed for the dissolution of the dialogue in the future. Simply ceasing to attend does not. **The process dies of non-attendance and non-implementation, which is the only way a process nobody wants to be blamed for killing can die.**
- **The reversal is administrative, not military.** Documents cease to be recognized, plates are refused, insurance arrangements lapse, customs stamps are rejected, professional credentials become worthless in both directions. None of this requires a decision by a head of state. Each measure can be executed by an agency, defended as technical and constitutional, and reversed only through an agreement that no longer applies.
- **Kosovo Serbs lose the material basis of remaining before they lose anything else.** Salaries, pensions, and social assistance from Serbia cannot reach recipients. The dinar becomes unus-

able in practice. Institutions funded from Serbia are closed, taken over, or simply cease to function when the money stops. **The community is not expelled. Its ability to live where it lives is withdrawn, which produces the same result and requires no order that anyone has to sign.**

- **The process begins at the periphery, where the fewest people are watching.** The first Serbia-funded municipal structure was closed in Štrpce in 2022; the wave of closures that resumed in early 2024 began in Dragaš. It is in the smallest and most dispersed communities - Gorani, Roma, and the isolated central-Kosovo villages, where Serbian-system education still serves considerable numbers - that the method is established. The method has a rule-of-law mask: an inspection, a legal deficiency, a closure, no reaction. **By the time the same procedure reaches the north, it is no longer a new policy. It is established practice.**
- **Education and health are the flashpoint, because they are the last thing left.** Attempts to bring these institutions under Kosovo's system produce tensions, arrests, boycotts, and confrontations with police. In this atmosphere, frustration rises, and fear for the prospects of young generations is at its highest. Communities' tolerance for any more imposed solutions has disappeared, and everyone plans for departure sooner rather than later. This is where the fatality occurs. It is not planned by anyone: an arrest or a search goes wrong, a crowd forms, a weapon is used.
- **A Serb civilian killing reverses the political signature of every crisis since 2021.** Because the north has been disarmed, Serb responses are demonstrative rather than armed, and the confrontation is between unarmed people and an armed police force. No international reaction pattern has been designed for that. Every response mechanism built since 2021 assumes a Serb-initiated armed incident and an internationally isolated Belgrade, and none of it applies.
- **The north is a soft target for the first time since 1999, and it is also where the confrontation is centred.** In 2004 the violence went south because the north could resist. That constraint no longer exists. The dismantling of Kosovo Serb armed and informal structures after 2023 removed the community's own deterrent, and the withdrawal from Kosovo's institutions in 2022 removed Serbs from the police that now polices them. **The place on which the entire confrontational narrative is built has become, for the first time, a place that can be entered with little risk of armed resistance.** The dispersed communities south of the Ibar - and the Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian, Bosniak and Gorani communities that suffered in 1999 and again in 2004 - remain exposed, and remain the first to be reached by anything that spreads.
- **KFOR becomes the only actor capable of de-escalation and is not sized for it.** Reinforcement is possible but slow: regenerating force takes weeks, and an episode of mass violence takes days. National caveats limit which contingents will engage crowds. The force arrives too late to prevent what happened.
- **Departure becomes continuous rather than episodic.** After the first deaths, Serbs leave daily and individually rather than in a single exodus, along informal routes, with incidents occurring on those routes. **A flight that happens one family at a time never becomes an event, is never covered as one, and therefore never triggers the response that an exodus would.** Within weeks the Serb-majority areas of Kosovo are demographically residual.



- **Both economies pay, asymmetrically and visibly.** Kosovo's supply routes lengthen as freight avoids Serbia, raising costs across the economy. Serbian exporters lose a market. Energy arrangements, including the transmission agreements between the two systems, become instruments and then casualties. **The costs are large enough for everyone to feel and too small for anyone to change course over**
- **By 2030 Kosovo and Serbia are hostile, adjacent, and have nothing to discuss.** Belgrade keeps the boundary closed and militarized on its side, and this is now cheap: there is no longer a Serb population inside Kosovo on whom the cost of Serbian disruption falls. Pristina has full administrative control of its territory and no path to the recognition, memberships, or European trajectory that control was supposed to deliver. **Each government has obtained what it demanded and neither has obtained what it wanted.**

SCENARIO'S MAIN ASSUMPTIONS, DRIVERS, POLICY SHIFTS, AND ACTIONS

- **The scenario does not depend on any individual, and it is available to any government.** It assumes only that leadership in both capitals concludes that the Dialogue costs more than it returns. Kosovo reaches that conclusion because a decade of unilateral action has delivered more control than a decade of negotiation delivered.
- Either Serbian government reaches the same conclusion but with different reasoning. If Serbia's own democratic renewal produces a government committed to lustration, to prosecuting corruption, and to rebuilding institutions, that government would have every reason to treat Kosovo as the file that consumed its predecessors and delivered nothing. It would not escalate. It would deprioritize. On the other hand, continuity in Belgrade means ruling elite survives its gravest challenge and continues its arrangement with the West that has turned more structural than transactional in recent years: it does not destabilize the region, it aligns where alignment is asked for, and it avoids the crises to which it is now more exposed. **What it cannot do is concede that its Kosovo policy has failed, so it presents the failure as a wrong done to it.**
- **The absence of consequence is the necessary condition.** Unilateral measures by either party attract statements and no cost. Each uncostered action establishes that the next one is also free. **Condemnation without instruments does not restrain.** This is the same driver as in Scenario A, operating without the residual caution that a functioning process supplies.
- **Both capitals contribute to the breakdown.** Pristina proceeds by administrative fait accompli - closures, takeovers, appointments, and police deployment - treating each as an internal matter beyond negotiation. Belgrade obstructs Kosovo's international participation, refuses accountability for Banjska, maintains its earlier instruction that Serbs abandon (and stay out of) Kosovo's institutions, and treats the community as leverage until leverage fails, at which point it discovers that a smaller Kosovo Serb population is a smaller obligation. **Neither government wants this outcome, but both prefer it to the concession that would prevent it.**
- **Serbia's response after the first deaths is the branch point, and NATO determines its shape.** A Serbian government facing footage of Serbs fleeing Kosovo can neither do nothing

nor cross the boundary. What remains is everything in between: deployment and exercises on the boundary, emergency Security Council sessions, appeals to Moscow, support for whatever resistance exists, reception and resettlement of arrivals, and the severing of everything bilateral. **Its most damaging option is also its cheapest - to accept the arrivals, settle them, and close the boundary permanently, which converts the loss into a fact and removes the last constraint on Serbian conduct toward Kosovo.**

- **Russia's utility rises as Western capacity falls.** Not as initiator and not decisively, but a Security Council in which Serbia's case is amplified, an information environment in which every incident is magnified, and networks in the north that can be activated cheaply are all worth more here than in either other scenario. Its two lasting gains are structural: a fresh and durable wedge between Serbia and the West, and a Serbian politics pushed sharply to the right by images no Serbian government could absorb. **Russia does not cause this scenario. It inherits it.**
- **The regional linkage is what makes this a European problem rather than a local one.** A crisis in Kosovo concurrent with a crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina draws on the same forces, the same attention, and the same exhausted political capital. Secession moves by Republika Srpska become both more plausible and harder to prevent - more plausible because Kosovo will have demonstrated that unilateral action against a minority carries no cost, and harder to prevent because the instruments that would answer it are committed elsewhere. Actors in both places will time their moves accordingly.
- **Kosovo's losses are structural and largely invisible to it at the time.** Candidate status recedes indefinitely. The five non-recognizers are confirmed in the position they have held since 2008 and acquire, for the first time, evidence for it. Council of Europe accession becomes unavailable. Single Market access lapses, NATO aspirations dissipate. **And the argument on which Kosovo's statehood was built - that this was a supervised, rights-guaranteeing, multiethnic state-building process rather than an ethnic secession - is retired by events rather than refuted by opponents.**
- **A state that mobilizes for this cannot easily demobilize afterwards.** The political energy required to carry a population through a period of confrontation does not dissipate when the confrontation ends. It turns inward - on opposition parties, on courts, on journalists, and on the minorities that remain. **The Kosovo that emerges from this scenario is a harder country to govern and a worse candidate for anything.**

AFTER THE FIRST DEATHS

The scenario has a fixed beginning and two possible endings.

- **Escalation forces re-engagement.** The violence becomes large enough that the EU and the United States return in earnest, impose terms on both parties, and underwrite them. Whatever is imposed is accepted by governments that did not negotiate it and implemented as reluctantly as everything before it. **The international community proves more willing to impose a settlement after a catastrophe than to guarantee one before it.**

- **Or the scenario simply completes.** No settlement is imposed, because by the time attention arrives there is no longer a dispute of the kind that settlements address. The departure finishes. The crisis subsides for lack of anything left to happen to. Statements are issued, an inquiry is proposed, and the boundary closes. **The scenario does not end in a defeat or an agreement. It ends when the object of the dispute is no longer present** — the same ending as Scenario A, reached in a fraction of the time and in front of cameras.

WHAT WOULD STOP THIS SCENARIO?

- **A consequence attached to the first uncostered unilateral act, applied to whichever party commits it.** Almost everything here follows from the discovery that unilateral action is free.
- **Attention to the periphery.** The method is established in Dragaš or Štrpce long before it is applied in North Mitrovica. What passes without objection in the smallest communities becomes the template for the largest one. **The early warning for this scenario is not a crisis in the north; it is the absence of one anywhere else.**
- **A security ceiling that is visibly maintained rather than lowered.** Force posture decisions sequenced against political calendars rather than taken on their own, and reinforcement pre-positioned before a period of known risk rather than requested after one.
- **Any functioning channel between the two governments, however minimal.** The absence of a framework is not a neutral condition. It is what converts an incident into a crisis, because there is no one to call.
- **Belgrade choosing the community over both the leverage and the convenience of forgetting it** - including where that means supporting Kosovo Serbs' participation in Kosovo's institutions and offering diplomatic support for solutions coming from genuine political representation, which are often more demanding than what Belgrade was ready to accept in the past decades.
- **Pristina recognizing that administrative control is not sovereignty.** Full control of the territory, obtained this way, purchases none of the things Kosovo actually wants and forfeits several it currently has.
- **Time.** This scenario has a window, and it is open now: a lowered security ceiling, a disarmed north, frequent institutional and constitutional crisis in Pristina, a political transition in Belgrade, and a period of heightened public mobilization. **Every scenario in this report becomes harder to reverse the longer it is left. This is the only one that can be completed before anyone has decided to allow it.**



CONCLUSIONS

The trajectory of Kosovo–Serbia relations toward 2030 will not be determined by drafting new agreements, but by international actors' willingness to enforce existing commitments. While Scenario A (*Peace by Neglect*) remains the default operational baseline, treating it as a stable equilibrium is a critical miscalculation. The gradual erosion of trust, local institutional capacity, and minority protections under this baseline creates a compound structural strain that quietly pushes the region toward Scenario C (*Breakdown*) rather than Scenario B (*Normalization in Installments*).

At the heart of this drift is a persistent structural friction in Western diplomacy. Mediation efforts are frequently constrained by short-term national mandates and bilateral priorities, which often take precedence over a unified Euro-Atlantic strategic vision. By prioritizing immediate process management, keeping parties at the table, over strict compliance mechanisms, international oversight inadvertently absorbs the risks of delay while shifting the primary burden of instability onto the local populations least equipped to bear it.

Preventing a decisive breakdown requires a fundamental shift from passive crisis mitigation to active risk enforcement. If international actors continue to manage the process without enforcing structural guarantees, they risk dismantling the foundational premise of Kosovo as a multi-ethnic society. Long-term regional stability ultimately depends on aligning diplomatic incentives with strategic enforcement before a preventable crisis forces intervention.

