
Kosovo's EU Integration: Progress, Challenges, and the Road Ahead

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Abstract

This paper examines Kosovo's efforts towards European Union (EU) membership. Declaring independence in 2008, Kosovo faces a unique path due to ongoing recognition disputes with some EU members. Despite this hurdle, Kosovo has demonstrably advanced its EU candidacy. The signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2016 marked a significant step, followed by visa liberalisation in 2024. Kosovo's formal membership application in December 2022 underscores its commitment to the EU project. However, challenges remain. Continued progress in rule of law, economic development, human rights, and dialogue with Serbia are crucial. This paper analyses these developments and proposes strategies for navigating the complexities of Kosovo's EU integration process. Employing a qualitative methodology focused on document review, this research will analyse official documents, policy reports, and relevant academic literature. Understanding Kosovo's EU integration process is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and the international community invested in the Western Balkans' stability and democratic development. This research will contribute valuable insights into the key factors influencing Kosovo's path towards the EU, offering recommendations to navigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Keywords: Kosovo; EU; Accession; Progress; Challenges; Western Balkans

1. INTRODUCTION

After declaring independence, the aim for the Republic of Kosovo remains European Union (WU) integration. It must be emphasised that this process is expected to be greatly impactful for the future of the country as it will impact the country politically, economically and even socially (Tare, 2023). With this process being an important impetus for general reform, this has led the country of Kosovo to take action in order to ensure that the various administrative practices, legal framework and institutional mechanisms are in alignment with the EU standards. Such changes are important as they ensure greater democratic, more awareness regarding human rights, rule of law, and, perhaps more importantly, greater economic progress. Perhaps, one of the primary significant steps in the road toward EU accession was achieved in 2015 when the country of Kosovo became a signatory of the SAA (Stabilization and Association Agreement) with the European Union. This agreement was particularly important as it clarifies the necessary steps that the Republic of Kosovo ought to take in order to better meet the requirement toward the accession to the EU (Tare, 2023).

Nevertheless, the journey toward EU accession has had its fair share of problems for the Republic of Kosovo. These issues have generally been related to organised crime, corruption and even issues related to governance throughout the years (International Monetary Fund, 2022). In addition to these issues, the Republic of Kosovo has in fact been characterised by relevant socio-economic issues that tend to bring further complication toward the EU accession process. Particularly significant in this regard have been the dividing atmosphere between the Kosovo Albanians and Serbs which have in fact been a major issue in many of the processes associated with progress toward European integration. This has been mainly present in those circumstances in which certain agreements have needed to be accepted by the population.

While there are significant hurdles related to the EU accession process, the country of Kosovo is committed to its main aim of being a EU member state. In this regard, Kosovo has been working to address the above mentioned issues. In fact, addressing such challenges remains the ultimate goal of the country if the aspiration to join the EU might still be in place. This willingness to work toward the EU has been visible in the efforts made by the country of Kosovo to be part of different regional initiatives which in fact are key requirements for EU accession (Krasniqi 2020).

It must be noted that EU membership serves as a great incentive for the economic future of the country. More specifically, accession to the EU provides relevant economic benefits as a result of increased trade and foreign direct investment. Further, businesses of the Republic of Kosovo through accession are expected to greatly benefit from a wider European market which would then positively influence job creation and economic growth in general. In addition to this, Kosovar consumers are expected to benefit from a greater variety of products and services and maybe lower prices as a result of the greater competition.

Political stability is also an important factor that is expected to be impacted by the EU accession. This process is expected to bring more political stability as then the country of Kosovo would be part of the solid legal framework of the European Union. Also, from a broader perspective, Republic of Kosovo would also benefit from the core values and principles of the European Union which consist of human rights, rule of law and democracy. It follows that operating within such an environment is expected to enhance the current levels of democracy in the Republic of Kosovo.

EU membership is expected to positively influence the country of Kosovo also from a social and cultural perspective. More specifically, this process would in fact allow the amalgamation of a variety of ideas that derive from the contact with the EU. The process also has been deemed as beneficial to the educational opportunities for the youth of Kosovo. As shown by the visa liberalization process enacted in January 2024, free movement has been deemed to be a key factor toward cultural integration of Kosovo and the legitimization process of the European Union to the population. In this regard, it can be inferred that the process of EU integration is expected to provide a better future for the country and its citizens. While the difficulties are visible, there are great incentives for the implementation of such processes.

As noted, the main aim of this paper is to provide a better understanding of Kosovo's EU accession process. The paper will analyse the benefits, difficulties and some of the challenges that are expected to derive from this process. More specifically, the focus will be on the road toward the EU accession process and not the aftermath of this. Therefore, the hypothesis for this paper is that although there are clear benefits associated with the EU accession, the impact of the process has been.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF EU INTEGRATION

There are a variety of benefits associated with the EU accession process for the country of Kosovo. A recent study by Tare reaffirms the fact that aspirations to join the European Union tend to advance efforts in regards to the rule of law and the health of democracy (2023). This proposition is in accordance with Krasniqi's claim that EU membership would positively influence the process of the establishment of democratic institutions and would also further solidify the rule of law. More importantly, the harmonisation of regulation and laws in accordance with the EU standards serves as a beneficial factor for the strengthening of democratic institutions which then positively affects the concept of transparency in our institutions (European Commission, 2023). In this regard, it could be argued that this would also serve as beneficial to the current socio-economic and political environment in general.

EU integration has also been associated with relevant economic benefits. Simply the fact of joining the European Market which comprises at least 500 million consumers would greatly enhance the trade possibilities for the Kosovar businesses (European Commission, 2023). As a result of this presence in this major market, there exists the possibility for a significant rise in exports which then would also produce an increase in foreign direct investment thus ultimately positively impacting economic growth (Tare, 2023). Of course, this would also improve the position of consumers in the Republic of Kosovo due to the access to a greater variety of goods and better prices (Tare, 2023). More importantly, being a state member of the European Union means that countries tend to receive funds which then tend to positively influence the development infrastructure, education and other relevant sectors that ultimately enhance economic growth (Novotna, 2020).

Integration to the European Union has also been linked to significant long-term benefits for the human capital development of Kosovo. The access to a wide range of opportunities that are associated with the integration of the EU is expected to enhance the socio-cultural development of the Kosovar citizens (Krasniqi, 2020). This integration is relevant as integration to such mechanisms has been deemed as important for the greater socio-cultural development of Kosovar citizens.

2.2. CHALLENGES AND HURDLES ON THE ROAD TO ACCESSION

While there are obvious benefits to the EU accession for the Republic of Kosovo, the process itself has been deemed rather challenging. In fact, there are significant problems that hamper the road toward the EU accession. According to a recent report by the International Monetary Fund, there are significant problems in areas such as corruption, possible organised crime and consistent issues dealing with inappropriate governance that tend to present significant issues and which prove to be rather detrimental to the economic progress of the country and which further damage the trust that people have in their institutions (IMF, 2022). Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perception Index has ranked the Republic of Kosovo 99th out of 180 countries. This itself represents a very challenging issue with which the country of Kosovo continues to keep struggling (Transparency International Kosovo, 2023).

The accession process does also face significant challenges when it comes to the current ethnic divisions mainly associated with the Serbian minority. There is an ongoing possibility for tensions between the Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs which further exacerbates the environment for the greater or more fluid reform progress which might also call for greater levels of popular legitimacy (Tare, 2023; Krasniqi, 2020). In addition

to this, the differences between various regions in the Republic of Kosovo tend to generate problems in achieving more coherent and perhaps more integrated approaches in regards to the efforts related to EU accession.

Particularly problematic for the Republic of Kosovo has been the ongoing territorial dispute with Serbia. This has been a major obstacle as in order to earn the full membership of European Union, there is a need for full normalization of relations with Serbia. While the process has been facilitated by the European Union, there has only been limited success for the both countries (Krasniqi, 2020). Furthermore, as it pertains to the international community, the country of Kosovo has also been negatively affected by the limited international recognition of its independence with this including several EU member states. This rather limited support by the international community is another relevant obstacle on the path to EU accession.,

Another aspect of Kosovo's accession to the European Union remains the acknowledgement of the process by the public opinion. While, in general, there is great acceptance when it comes to the EU membership by the Kosovar opinion, people remain rather uninformed regarding the real implications associated with being part of the European Union (Krasniqi, 2020). It is therefore necessary for greater research in order to ensure that the process is EU accession is backed up by the necessary popular legitimacy.

2.3. PRACTICAL EFFORTS TOWARD EU ACCESSION

As discussed throughout the paper, the process of EU accession means that the Republic of Kosovo needs to address many of the internal issues. Meanwhile, this process also requires for the most effective strategies to be adopted in order for greater success possibilities. The following strategies remain key in this regard.

It must be noted that European Union plays an important role in supporting Kosovo's efforts toward EU accession. This is accomplished through the relevant financial assistance that is expected to be directed toward the promotion of relevant political, economic, infrastructural reforms. In addition to this the package also covers the enhancement of current institutions (Novotna, 2020). In addition to this, European Commission has prepared an enlargement package for the year 2023 and this significant funding package includes Kosovo. (European Commission). Furthermore, the EU is also a key facilitator for the needs of the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia which is in fact one of the most crucial steps for the normalization of relation between the two countries and ultimately for the accession process.

There is also an important incentive for the country of Kosovo to maintain stable relations with other Balkans countries. In this regard, it is vital for the Republic of Kosovo to work with other regional partners in order to further strengthen the cooperation, enhance economic integration, promote greater cross-border cooperation and to ultimately have a positive impact on the greater stability of the Balkans (Lutolli & Urljčanović, 2022). In regards to the cooperation efforts, initiatives such as Western Balkans Common Market and Regional Youth Cooperation Office serve as important mechanisms for the promotion of collaboration which ought to contribute toward a more suitable environment for the EU integration efforts.

As discussed earlier, there is a need for a broader consensus when it comes to popular acceptance of the accession process. In line with the earlier argument, there is also a need for the activation of civil society organisations which have the potential to raise awareness among the public opinion by promoting various discussion and thus helping mobilize support for the forthcoming reforms in relation to this process (European Commission, 2023).

2.4. THE GAP IN LITERATURE: MEASURING THE IMPACT OF EU ACCESSION EFFORTS

While it can be stated that there is relatively enough research on the topic of Kosovo's accession efforts toward the European Union, it must be made clear that there is need for further research. In fact, it is very necessary for more information as to what is the real impact of the EU accession process on the most relevant sectors which include education, healthcare and even infrastructure development. There is also more research on learning more regarding the public perception of Kosovo's efforts to join such mechanisms.

As hypothesised earlier in this paper, there is a lack of research on measuring the right impact of EU accession for the country of Kosovo. As mentioned earlier, while there is some discussion about expected benefits of EU accession in theory, there is in fact a lack of research that provides a clear measure of what have been the benefits for the Republic of Kosovo during this period. More specifically, there is a need for better understanding as to what have been the effects of this process on particular policy changes, institutional reforms and even how the process has been perceived by the public opinion.

It can therefore be concluded that while the efforts to join such mechanisms are associated with tangible benefits and tend to promise a better future for the Republic of Kosovo, there are significant challenges. In such circumstances, Republic of Kosovo ought to continuously adapt its strategies in order to effectively ensure that the country is in the right path toward its EU accession efforts.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper has employed qualitative methodology in order to conduct the research. More specifically, the research for the needs of this paper has been carried out using the document review process. In order to come to conclusions over the impact of the European Union accession process of Kosovo, the paper has employed a vast number of recent sources from reputable publications mainly from European and international organisations. Such sources provide relevant secondary information that allows us to have a more objective view as to what has been the degree of accomplishments made by the Republic of Kosovo during this period. Meanwhile, such sources allow us to have a better view of the limitations of this process. In addition to these sources, the paper also employs articles that describe and evaluate Kosovo through many lenses. Finally, it can be concluded that by employing this variety of sources, we are better able to tell the practical effectiveness of the reforms and processes established as part of Kosovo's EU accession journey.

4. RESULTS

In accordance with the already established hypothesis, it seems that the impact of the EU accession efforts in the context of the country of Kosovo has been rather moderate at best. While there have been obvious benefits associated with the implementation of the process, there are also a variety of areas in which the progress of the Republic of Kosovo is lagging behind. It is therefore necessary to present a picture that takes into consideration several aspects of the progress made in the country of Kosovo and the relation of this progress to the implementation of EU accession efforts.

Kosovo's aspirations for European Union (EU) membership are not without obstacles. Despite ongoing efforts, the road to EU integration is fraught with challenges that hinder the immediate and tangible impacts of current accession endeavours. This essay delves into recent sources to examine the limitations facing Kosovo's EU accession process, focusing on issues of governance, regional dynamics, evolving EU policies, and socioeconomic factors.

According to the EU Report on Kosovo 2022 which was produced by the European Commission, there are significant problems for Kosovo as the country undergoes the process of accession. Such issues are present in significant areas such as law, corruption and perhaps most importantly economic development (European Commission, 2022). Of course, there has been progress in this regard but the level of progress has been rather limited. Issues related to corruption are of major importance and tend to impact governance and economic progress. Furthermore, the perceived inadequate rule of law tends to negatively affect current institutions such as judicial independence and law enforcement in general.

Furthermore, territorial issues mainly related to the continued tensions with Serbia represent a major obstacle for the Republic of Kosovo toward its path to EU accession. This situation has been exacerbated by other internal divisions (mainly as a result of Serbian minority) which pose an important challenge in achieving the right levels of political stability and further progress on EU accession efforts (Hoffman, 2023).

Bieber and Tocci provide an insightful analysis that explains the role of the European Union in accelerating reforms and development in the Republic of Kosovo. The analysis demonstrates that while there has been

both financial and political assistance in this regard, there have been various implementation challenges and even resistance to synch reforms. This has been associated with the lack of political will due to the dispersed interests of many parties. Such problems have in fact been detrimental to the EU efforts for positively impact Kosovo's governing institutions and general development (Bieber & Tocci, 2023).

Kosovo's accession process has also been seen in the broader context of EU enlargement dynamics. As the entire enlargement process has been affected by stagnation, this also played a role in hampering Kosovo's accession efforts to such a mechanism. There have been various delays in accession negotiations which have then led to uncertainties and challenges and have contributed to lower trust levels on the benefits associated with the EU accession process.

Reports prepared by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Kosovo provide us with valuable insights in regards to the social and economic effects of Kosovo's EU accession process. While as it has been seen in the paper, there are economic benefits associated with the accession process, there are various structural challenges that the economy currently faces and those include high levels of unemployment, poverty and high level of remittances (IMF, n.d.) It is therefore important for the Republic of Kosovo to undertake reforms in various areas which include education, infrastructure and development of the private sector.

Furthermore, the World Bank has also provided context over the most pressing issues in which the country of Kosovo needs further progress. This report is in line with the previous insights from the International Monetary Fund in regards to the major issues in areas such as education, governance and inadequate infrastructure. If there is no further progress on such areas, Kosovo will only have a limited benefit from the EU accession efforts particularly in the economic context.

Ultimately, the journey of Kosovo toward the European Union is characterized by significant challenges that tend to hamper the impact of current accession efforts. There are many challenges that ought to be overcome if the country of Kosovo is to make tangible progress in the path toward EU accession. Such problems are generally related to socioeconomic factors, evolving EU policies and even governance issues. Only when such issues are properly addressed, there could be progress toward the EU which in turn does also positively impact current and future levels of prosperity.

5. DISCUSSION

However, as it has been shown throughout the paper, the EU membership process for the country of Kosovo appears to be a rather complex process whose benefits are not always obvious. More specifically, while the accession to the European Union serves as a tool for greater political and economic stability, the process itself has been hampered by several obstacles that seem to slow down the progress and most importantly hinder the positive aspects associated with the efforts toward the EU accession process. In this regard, it is necessary to view this process from a rather diverse perspective that tends to include governance, dynamics related to other neighbouring countries, various EU policies and other relevant socio-economic factors.

There are several sources that display a rather worrisome situation. State corruption is definitely one of such pressing issues. While there has been progress for the country of Kosovo, there are important problems in areas such as corruption, the rule of law and most importantly issues related to the current limited economic development (European Commission, 2022). Corruption has been associated with weaker governance while also negatively impacting the economic growth of the country. On the other hand, the rather unstable rule of law has negatively impacted the credibility of Kosovo institutions thus proving to be detrimental to the current judicial system and law enforcement in general. Furthermore, another report by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) demonstrates that EU integration is also greatly affected by the perceived corruption within the political elites of Kosovo and other issues related with the public administration. More importantly, there is a perceived lack of will to fight issues such as corruption which serves as another barrier for the right progress toward the EU (BIRN, 2023).

EU prospects have also been greatly affected by the internal issues dealing with the unresolved regional disputes. Such issues have been generally linked to the problems of Kosovo with Serbia in regards to

significant territorial disputes and important ethnic tensions that tend to produce actual roadblocks for the EU accession progress (Hoffman, 2023). In addition to this, various internal divisions have caused important political instability and this as a result has limited the capacity of the country to effectively implement reforms and thus to proceed further with the accession efforts. Recent research by Blerjana Krasniqi has in fact brought a wide variety of issues dealing with Kosovo's EU accession. This has been associated with problems such as: changing priorities of the European Union, increased levels of migration, security issues and further economic issues which tend to present new challenges for the Republic of Kosovo. The changing EU agenda is significant as it might present a new layer of problems for countries which fail to adapt to the changing circumstances and increasing demands (Krasniqi, 2023).

The European Policy Centre (EPC) warns that the EU's enlargement fatigue, fuelled by internal challenges and public scepticism, could further delay Kosovo's accession process (European Policy Centre [EPC], 2023). This stagnation creates a sense of uncertainty, diminishing the perceived benefits of EU membership for Kosovo (EPC, 2023). Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reforms and investments in education, infrastructure, and private sector development. Similarly, World Bank reports highlight areas where progress is needed for Kosovo to fully benefit from EU membership. Challenges in governance, education, and infrastructure remain significant barriers to sustainable development. Without addressing these fundamental issues, Kosovo's ability to leverage EU accession for economic growth and prosperity will be limited (World Bank, n.d.)

The issues related to EU enlargement are also of a very real nature. In fact, the European Policy Centre (EPC) that this "enlargement fatigue" coupled with other internal challenges and public opinion scepticism (European Policy Centre, 2023). This stagnation has added further insecurities over which are the real benefits of this process. Such issues coexist with other mainly socio-economic factors that greatly affect the accession process in the context of the Republic of Kosovo. Only when such barriers are properly addressed, the country of Kosovo might practically benefit from the accession process both in the present and near future.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article attempted to shed light on the journey of the Republic of Kosovo toward the EU accession. More specifically, the aim of the paper was to present the rather complex implications of this process. While in theory the accession process to the European Union is associated with significant expected improvements in several areas which tend to go beyond the political aspect. In this regard, the ultimate aim of this paper was to better understand the impact of the efforts toward the EU accession for the Republic of Kosovo. Of course, the effects of this process are rather broad and tend to have a practical impact.

As explained earlier in this paper, the efforts toward the EU accession process are associated with the need for many reforms that tend to include multiple aspects of a country's development. These include the need for improved governance, lower levels of corruption, greater political stability and perhaps more importantly further economic improvement. The efforts to improve these areas remain a prerequisite for the journey of the Republic of Kosovo toward the European Union accession, but as it was presented in this paper, the EU accession process did not necessarily result in a rather straightforward improvement for the country of Kosovo.

While there are many benefits associated with the EU accession process for the country of Kosovo, there is simultaneously enough evidence from important mechanisms such as World Bank or International Monetary Fund that report a wide variety of issues for the Republic of Kosovo mainly in the socio-economic dimension which tend to inhibit the current efforts towards the EU path. Equally important for the accession process remain the issues related to internal divisions and ongoing (and rather not fruitful) dialogue with Serbia. It must be noted that reforms and improvements in such issues serve as a prerequisite not only for the EU accession process in general but also tend to impact the tangible benefits of the process of implementing current EU reforms.

The EU accession process is of vital importance for the Republic of Kosovo. In fact, this process has been deemed vital for all the countries of the Western Balkans. This of course ought to be the case considering the overall expected impact of this process. Nevertheless, the journey toward the EU path is definitely complex and marked by significant difficulties. This has in fact been the case in the context of Kosovo. The journey toward EU accession has been marked by various problems which demonstrate that, at least until now, Kosovo has only partially benefited from the process.

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