



EUROPEAN  
INSTITUTE  
OF PEACE



## Foreword



January 2025



## Foreword

---

The Western Balkans is at a critical juncture. After decades of international development and peacebuilding spearheaded by the Euro-Atlantic community, the region is falling back. A blend of populist politics, revamped nationalism, and revisionism of the settings established after the conflicts of 1990s, has stalled crucial processes and partially dismantled the gains achieved. The negative trends appear stronger with every passing day, threatening to draw the region further away from the European project and into traditional 'Balkanism' ripe with malign external influence. These tendencies are clearly visible in one of the crucial processes for regional stability: the Kosovo-Serbia normalization. Following the 'golden era' of the EU-Facilitated Normalization Dialogue from approximately 2011 to 2015, the recent years have been marred by stagnation, tension, and setbacks. With the EU accession prospect ever-elusive, commitment to the Dialogue is limited. The landmark 2023 agreement that was meant to provide stabilization and lead to next-level normalization has remained largely unimplemented. Instead of the upgrades anticipated by the agreement, the situation on the ground deteriorated further, as evidenced by the deadly Banjska attack in September 2023.


It is in this context that civil society organizations with a strong commitment to normalization and the European project in the region have come together for positive change. The European Institute of Peace, active in the context since early 2021, is one of them. Since 2023, the Institute has joined forces with leading CSOs and independent experts to establish a bespoke Civil Society Mechanism for Normalization. It provides tangible support to the EU-facilitated Dialogue and normalization. Grounded in the belief that the Dialogue process is vital for aligning with European Union values, this work prioritizes effectiveness, transparency, and societal inclusion. It seeks to demonstrate the valuable contribution of civil society to the normalization process through thematic expertise, grassroots presence, outreach, and advocacy. The mechanism is created in recognition of the critical juncture faced by the Kosovo-Serbia Normalization Dialogue and the adverse effects on grassroots normalization and EU integration. It seeks urgent action to enhance the implementation commitment and revitalize comprehensive normalization, addressing the deteriorating inter-ethnic relations and the spread of misinformation.

Work is centred on CSO coalitions in Kosovo and in Serbia. In Kosovo, the group is called the Kosovo Civic Alternative. It has been active across the board in pursuit of the above stated goals with the underlying goal of strengthening Kosovo's constitutional multi-ethnicity. In Serbia, leading CSOs are collaborating around these goals, providing invaluable expert inputs and broad societal reach. With support provided by the Open Society Foundations, the Institute serves both as a member and a secretariat of the mechanism, generating content and facilitating operations. This set of working papers is a product of this ongoing collaboration. The working papers provide thoroughly researched suggestions for reorientation the process towards delivering tangible benefits for all stakeholders. In particular, the contents will be useful for the post-election period ahead when the Euro-Atlantic community should generate a renewed initiative for Western Balkans stability with the Dialogue at its centre.

## Executive Summary

---

Rooted in the concerns over the state of play in the normalization context, this group has taken up action, seeking to be a 'civil society that matters.' It seeks to have a direct positive influence on the mainstream, be it the Dialogue process or the social climate. This publication has been prepared in line with this approach. It addresses the crucial aspects of normalization and represents a




comprehensive advocacy agenda of the bespoke civil society group for the period ahead. The contents work both individually and collectively. Individually, each of the thematic papers included brings a wealth of information and options for meaningful upgrades on the given issue. Collectively, the papers offer the possibility for a fundamental shift in the conduct of the Dialogue that would de-block the process and ensure its uninterrupted flow. While upgrades would ensue under each of the addressed issues if the suggested options were pursued, it would be the application of the overall concept offered by this publication that would produce the highest dividends. This is how it all works and ties together:

1. It starts off with a **comprehensive overview of the state of play regarding all Dialogue agreements**. The paper provides a wealth of information on where things stand and offers a balanced and workable approach to restoring implementation, coupled with a shift in the EU's approach that would ensure effectiveness. This roadmap is designed to break the current stalemate by offering a balanced, transparent, and comprehensive path forward, with clear timelines and incentives to ensure the process moves ahead. Key priorities include implementing the 2023 agreement commitments, addressing citizen needs (e.g., mutual recognition of documents and resolving missing persons cases), removing trade barriers, and normalizing relations in northern Kosovo. The process should be supported by the Euro-Atlantic community with stronger EU enforcement, incentives for compliance, and independent civil society monitoring.

2. This is followed by a paper on **the key lessons learned from the Dialogue process** thus far. It is meant to inform and advise the next stage of the Dialogue and normalization, providing a formula for a shifted EU approach that would substantially increase the chance of success. The recommendations propose two key approaches to improve the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue. First, a shift from 'constructive ambiguity' to 'constructive clarity,' which involves the EU publishing a comprehensive report outlining all agreements and their implementation status, with clear action plans and penalties for non-compliance. This approach calls for active EU involvement, including pro-active monitoring, information campaigns, and broad public engagement to ensure clarity and support for the agreements. Second, transitioning from facilitation to mediation, which advocates for a more authoritative EU role, granting it the power to propose solutions, enforce compliance, and include local stakeholders. This shift requires robust political backing from EU institutions and member states, a clear incentive structure linking dialogue progress with EU accession and particular mechanism, and stronger coordination within the Euro-Atlantic community.

3. The next chapter focuses on **restoring normalization in northern Kosovo**. It provides a context overview and a set of recommendations for stabilizing and normalizing this Kosovo region. The recommendations are rooted in the idea that the Kurti Government has generated a significant change on the ground but that this change need to be consolidated into meaningful constitutional and democratic sovereignty. Crucial to this would be establishing a dialogue forum between the Kosovo government and northern Kosovo Serb representatives to build community trust and create functional solutions. The Kosovo government should pursue confidence-building measures, such as recruiting Kosovo Serb police officers and enhancing Serbian-language capacities within the police force. The chapter offers substantive guidance for the development of a comprehensive normalization plan, addressing key areas like elections, police reintegration, judicial reinstatement, and land expropriation. The plan should be rolled out once fully agreed through this informal dialogue form, with international stakeholders kept abreast to ensure transparency and trust. The process should also include opening the Mitrovica main bridge and resolving trade and development challenges in the region.



4. The EU has recently launched the **Western Balkans Growth Facility** as a way of re-energizing the accession process for the region. It has a strong dimension related to Kosovo-Serbia normalization, but not necessarily the appropriate clarity that would provide for immediate and lasting positive consequences for the Dialogue. This chapter offers detailed ideas precisely for that. To effectively utilize the EU Growth Plan for the normalization between Kosovo and Serbia, the key recommendations include establishing ‘principal and targeted conditionality,’ where financial support is linked directly to progress in the Dialogue and this conditionality becomes central to all Growth Plan assistance for Serbia and Kosovo. Governance reforms should be tied to confidence-building measures, ensuring mutual trust and accountability. A robust ‘monitoring and reporting framework’ should track compliance – based on the EU-produced state of play report and implementation roadmap noted under the previous chapters – and link all financial aid to measurable progress. Civil society organizations should receive targeted funding to provide input into the monitoring mechanism and foster normalization at the community level, while joint economic initiatives in key sectors would create mutual dependencies and build trust.

5. The publication further addresses the challenges related to the Western Balkans 6 (Berlin) Process, in particular the establishment of a **Common Regional Market (CRM)** from the point of view of the agreements on recognition of professional qualifications. The chapter provides an overview of how the agreements were developed and their intended purpose, illustrating the significant gains of the CRM and consequently losses from its non-implementation. The CRM offers significant economic and social benefits, including a potential 1% annual GDP increase and a projected 6.7% growth over the coming years. Non-implementation would result in billions of Euros in lost potential and hinder regional integration with the EU Single Market. CRM would lower banking costs, increase business interactions, and reduce fees for Diaspora remittances. It also addresses competitiveness deficiencies, enhances professional mobility, and could resolve bilateral disputes, such as recognition of professional qualifications. Ultimately, CRM would prepare the Western Balkans for EU accession, boost foreign direct investment, and help retain skilled professionals in the region, especially in sectors like healthcare.

6. Finally, included is also a perspective on the potential of the **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans** to resolve energy security and environmental issues in Kosovo while fostering regional cooperation and conflict resolution, particularly between Kosovo and Serbia. It outlines a comprehensive development plan aimed at achieving sustainable carbon neutrality through regional energy integration, decarbonization, and renewable energy projects. The agenda emphasizes the need for collaboration between EU institutions, local stakeholders, and regional actors to address energy poverty, pollution, and economic challenges, with a focus on building infrastructure, enhancing regional energy markets, and creating employment opportunities.