

THE KOSOVO–SERBIA DIALOGUE AMID EUROPE’S POLYCRISIS: BUILDING TRUST IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

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ABSTRACT

Europe’s overlapping crises, the pandemic, energy insecurity, and Russia’s war against Ukraine, have placed a disproportionate burden on the Western Balkans. Focusing on Kosovo–Serbia relations, this article argues that the European Union’s facilitation of a status-neutral normalisation process, one that brackets the question of final status, can produce lasting results only if commitments move in parallel, are independently verified, and generate visible benefits in citizens’ everyday lives. The study examines the Franco–German initiative and the Ohrid framework together with the security-related stress test created by the Banjska incident and the conditionality mechanisms of the EU’s new Growth Plan. It contends that moving the dialogue beyond crisis management toward trust-building depends on the balance between enforcement capacity, locally legitimate security arrangements, and the provision of everyday services that improve daily life.

Keywords: Kosovo–Serbia Dialogue, Normalisation, EU Growth Plan, Polycrisis, KFOR.

AVRUPA’NIN ÇOKLU KRIZLERİ ORTASINDA KOSOVA–SİRBİSTAN DİYALOĞU: BELİRSİZ ZAMANLARDA GÜVEN İNŞASI

ÖZ

Avrupa’da iç içe geçen çoklu krizler (pandemi, enerji güvensizliği ve Ukrayna savaşı), Batı Balkanlar üzerinde orantısız bir baskı yaratmaktadır. Bu makale, Kosova–Sırbistan ilişkilerine odaklanarak, Avrupa Birliği’nin kolaylaştırdığı nihai statüyü paranteze alan normalleşme sürecinin (status-neutral) ancak taahhütlerin eşzamanlı ilerlemesi, bağımsız biçimde doğrulanması ve yurttaşların gündelik yaşamında somut faydalar üretmesi halinde kalıcı sonuçlar doğurabileceğini savunmaktadır. Çalışmada Franco–Alman girişimi ve Ohrid çerçevesi, Banjska olayının yarattığı güvenlik temelli stres testi ve AB’nin yeni Büyüme Planı’nın koşulluluk mekanizması birlikte ele alınmaktadır. Makale, diyalogun kriz yönetimi sınırlarının ötesine geçerek güven inşasına evrilmesinin; yaptırım gücü, meşru güvenlik düzenlemeleri ve günlük yaşamı iyileştiren hizmet sunumu arasındaki dengeye bağlı olduğunu ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kosovo–Sırbistan Diyalogu, Normalleşme, AB Büyüme Planı, Çoklu Kriz, KFOR.

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INTRODUCTION: TRUST-BUILDING IN A POLYCRISIS CONTEXT

Europe’s polycrisis, the overlapping effects of COVID-19, energy insecurity, Russia’s war against Ukraine, and resurgent nationalism, has reshaped policy agendas across the continent. The Western Balkans are particularly exposed: fragile institutions, contested statehood, and tight fiscal space magnify the impact of external shocks, yet these same pressures may also incentivise structured cooperation if enforcement is credible and security arrangements are locally legitimate.

This article examines the EU-designated Western Balkans, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, with a specific focus on the Kosovo–Serbia relationship. The central claim is conditional: in a polycrisis setting, the Pristina–Belgrade dialogue can serve as a test of the EU’s crisis-era statecraft provided that commitments are sequenced in parallel, independently verified, and translated into benefits that citizens can see in everyday life. The analysis starts from the premise that diplomatic frameworks gain traction only when three conditions hold simultaneously: credible enforcement, locally legitimate security arrangements, and material improvements felt on the ground.

In this context, the article understands trust-building not as a vague ideal but as a practical and measurable process. It refers to how enforcement, legitimacy, and everyday problem-solving work together in real institutional settings. In the Western Balkans, where state capacity is uneven, parallel structures exist, and communities depend on cross-border ties, trust develops when both sides can reliably predict each other’s behaviour and when institutions deliver clear, depoliticised services that people can experience in daily life.

For the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, trust-building therefore rests on three connected elements: (1) predictability, created by parallel and time-bound steps that limit incentives for unilateral escalation; (2) verification, through third-party monitoring that shows both sides that commitments are being implemented as agreed; and (3) community-level acceptance, which grows when technical arrangements—such as mobility, energy supply, municipal services, or document recognition—produce visible improvements for citizens regardless of ongoing political disputes.

By setting out this practical definition of trust at the start, the article makes clear that the following sections do more than recount diplomatic events; they assess whether the design of the dialogue can deliver the predictability, verification, and local acceptance needed for a stable and lasting reduction of tensions.

The pandemic and the war in Ukraine altered the calculus in three main ways. First, they expanded the EU’s material toolbox, from emergency macro-financial support to a more strategic use of pre-accession instruments, culminating in the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans as a potential vehicle for accelerated convergence, contingent upon transparent indicators and inclusive monitoring. Second, they raised the premium on stability, pushing Brussels to anchor dialogue deliverables in parallel, time-bound steps rather than open-ended talks. Third, they intensified security interdependence, reinforcing a division of labour in which the EU leads diplomatically while NATO/KFOR underwrites the security environment that makes negotiations possible.

Within this frame, the article traces how the Franco–German proposal informed the 2023 Ohrid framework for status-neutral normalisation, understood here as *de facto* accommodation without *de jure* recognition, and how subsequent events, most notably the Banjska episode, exposed the limits of under-sequenced implementation. Status-neutral arrangement mirrors the

Basic Treaty logic of de facto acceptance without de jure recognition (European Western Balkans, 2023; Vulović, 2023).

Rather than asking whether diplomacy has “succeeded” or “failed,” the discussion evaluates whether institutional design and incentive structures are robust enough to sustain de-escalation under persistent stress.

The contribution is twofold. Empirically, it synthesises recent diplomatic, security, and economic developments to show how polycrisis dynamics permeate the dialogue. Analytically, it advances a trust-centred framework: credibility grows when small, parallel steps are independently verified; when technical cooperation (customs, border management, energy) is insulated from political shocks; and when security practices are embedded in community consent.

1. The EU’s Polycrisis and Its Impact on the Balkans

COVID-19 reshaped Europe’s public health, politics, and economies, prompting unprecedented restrictions and emergency spending while exposing structural weaknesses in state capacity, most visibly in healthcare systems under strain. These vulnerabilities were amplified by the war in Ukraine, which tightened energy supplies, depressed growth, and widened distributional tensions across the continent. In this environment, nationalist and populist actors capitalised on uncertainty, questioning the adequacy of the EU’s response and contesting supranational coordination.

The Western Balkans felt these pressures acutely. Pre-existing institutional fragility and contested governance made the region especially susceptible to overlapping shocks, including deteriorating public finances, job losses, and a fall in investment. Political effects were uneven but notable: episodes of democratic backsliding, limits on civil liberties under emergency measures, and heightened polarisation placed additional stress on already delicate inter-ethnic relations. These trends were most visible in the Kosovo–Serbia relationship, where tensions persisted despite periodic openings for dialogue.

At the same time, crisis management generated incentives for cooperation. Governments coordinated on medical supplies, vaccine procurement, and mobility rules, and the EU expanded financial instruments to cushion the downturn and stabilise expectations. This recalibration also touched enlargement: North Macedonia’s NATO accession in March 2020 was followed by the EU’s decision in July 2022 to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, while Brussels intensified high-level engagement with Pristina and Belgrade. (Gijs, 2022)

Perceptions of the EU in the region nonetheless suffered during the pandemic’s early phase, when internal divisions and institutional bottlenecks fuelled scepticism about the Union’s consistency and resolve. These concerns, shaped both by capacity constraints and external contestation, dampened expectations about the EU’s role at a critical moment for the Western Balkans. (Arežina, 2020)

Against this backdrop, the EU introduced the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans in November 2023 as a vehicle to accelerate regional economic integration and narrow socio-economic disparities vis-à-vis the Union. The Plan aims to front-load elements of single market access, deepen the Common Regional Market, and link increased pre-accession resources to reforms that improve governance, investment conditions, and the rule of law. It is anchored by a €6 billion Reform and Growth Facility (2024–2027) combining grants and concessional loans, with disbursement conditional on demonstrable progress. (Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, 2023)

By late March 2025, the Commission began releasing pre-financing under the Facility, with North Macedonia and Albania first and Serbia expected to follow, a sequencing choice intended to reward early delivery and signal credibility. The Regulation and the Facility were adopted on a compressed timetable before the 2024 European Parliament elections, illustrating political will but also raising concerns about limited ex-ante consultation and impact assessment. (Kacarska, 2025)

Design features matter for outcomes. The Plan’s four pillars, closer ties to the EU single market, a stronger Common Regional Market, accelerated reforms, and a targeted financing instrument, create a coherent architecture provided that implementation remains measurable and verifiable. Equally, the Facility’s cadence requires governments to report every six months, after which the Commission has up to 90 days to assess results, useful for discipline, but vulnerable to information bottlenecks if documentation is not shared transparently with stakeholders. Sustained delivery will therefore depend on a whole-of-society approach that embeds civil-society inputs and public scoreboards into monitoring. (Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, 2023; Kacarska, 2025)

If these safeguards take hold, the Growth Plan could serve not only as pre-accession conditionality but also as a trust-building tool: tying resources to citizen-facing improvements (service continuity, municipal functionality, predictable payments, and energy reliability) while reinforcing day-to-day interdependence. In that sense, the initiative is best read as part of the EU’s broader response to a polycrisis, an attempt to align recovery, convergence, and regional stability through performance-based financing and early integration incentives. (Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, 2023)

2. From Conflict to Structured Dialogue: The Brussels Acquis and Its Limits

Within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Serbia counted Kosovo as a province; the 1974 constitution granted Kosovo far-reaching autonomy inside the federation. Following Yugoslavia’s disintegration in the early 1990s, when Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia became independent, Kosovo remained within the Serbia–Montenegro federation. Separatist mobilisation intensified through the decade, and by 1998 clashes between Serbian security forces and Kosovo Albanian armed groups escalated into open warfare, culminating in NATO’s 1999 air campaign, the withdrawal of Serbian forces, and the deployment of KFOR alongside international civilian missions.

On 17 February 2008, Kosovo’s assembly declared independence with support from the United States and several EU member states, a move that left relations with Belgrade tense and legally contested. Serbia challenged the declaration before the International Court of Justice; the Court concluded that Kosovo’s declaration did not violate general international law (Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo 2008).

To manage the dispute, the EU launched a structured dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina in 2011. The first major outcome was the Brussels Agreement of 19 April 2013, which created a framework for integration and day-to-day coordination. Core elements included: the establishment of an Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities; integration of northern police into a single Kosovo Police with a regional commander for the four northern municipalities; OSCE-facilitated municipal elections under Kosovo law; and an EU-facilitated implementation committee. These arrangements opened space for further deals on issues such as civil protection, justice, and technical coordination (Introduction to the Dialogue, 2011).

Demographically, Kosovo Albanians today constitute the vast majority of the population, while an estimated 5%, roughly 100,000, are Serbs, many concentrated in the north with dense administrative and social ties to Serbia. This configuration shaped the agenda of the Brussels talks, which focused on practical matters such as identity documents, vehicle plates, healthcare and education access, and telecommunications, areas where incremental progress could ease daily life despite unresolved status questions. The Brussels dialogue did not settle the sovereignty dispute, but it helped resolve concrete problems and laid important foundations for pursuing a comprehensive normalisation framework (Gashi & Novaković, 2020).

Building on this partial *acquis*, the EU sought to upgrade the process in early 2023 through the Ohrid package. The EU-facilitated Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex, concluded in February and March 2023, mirrored the logic of the 1972 German–German Basic Treaty: Pristina would ensure “an appropriate level of self-management” for the Serb community, including via an Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM), while Belgrade would not oppose Kosovo’s participation in international organisations. Disputes over sequencing, however, quickly stalled implementation, leading the EU High Representative to characterise the track increasingly as “crisis management.”

The implementation impasse coincided with a deteriorating political–security environment. After unrest in northern Kosovo, the EU imposed “temporary measures” in May 2023, and the Council of Europe postponed Kosovo’s application in May 2024, citing Pristina’s non-fulfilment of dialogue commitments. Further tension followed the Central Bank’s January 2024 decision to make the euro the sole legal currency, which effectively halted dinar transfers to Kosovo Serbs; despite multiple negotiation rounds, no compromise emerged. Taken together, these developments fuelled the perception that both sides were obstructing the process and that EU leverage was being blunted by unilateral moves and contested authority on the ground.

The fragility of the track was starkly illustrated by the Banjska events of 23–24 September 2023. Kosovo police encountered barricades near Banjska (Zvečan) and came under attack; one officer was killed and others wounded. Subsequent engagements revealed roughly thirty heavily armed Serb fighters who briefly occupied a nearby monastery; at least three assailants were killed, several suspects fled, and a significant cache of weapons was seized. In the aftermath, KFOR tightened coordination with Kosovo police along the boundary line (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2024).

Attribution and intent became a point of contention. Pristina released material alleging links to Milan Radoičić, who later appeared in Serbia and accepted responsibility for his role before being released on bail by Serbian prosecutors; Kosovo authorities argued that the equipment and training indicated support networks in or from Serbia, while Belgrade denied state involvement. Given the legal and political sensitivities, it is analytically prudent to note institutional characterisations, U.S. and EU statements referred to terrorism, while maintaining a neutral authorial voice (ICG, 2024).

The shock also produced immediate policy effects. Pristina accelerated measures to consolidate state authority in the north, most visibly the euro-only cash regulation and actions against Serbia-funded offices and payment channels, steps viewed in Washington and key EU capitals as precipitous. Trade patterns shifted as restrictions on commercial traffic from Serbia took hold: imports from Serbia dropped by about 47%, while imports from Albania rose by roughly 28%, with substitution from North Macedonia as well (European Institute of Peace [EIP], 2025).

For the dialogue, Banjska compounded pre-existing implementation deficits. Sequencing disputes around the ASM and elements of de facto recognition had already strained the Brussels/Ohrid acquis; the September 2023 episode effectively froze the track despite limited late-2023/early-2024 steps on license-plate issues and electricity billing. Policy lessons point toward enforceable, parallel sequencing with third-party monitoring and the insulation of technical cooperation (e.g., IBM/SEED, veterinary certificates) from political shocks (EIP, 2025).

Competing narratives further complicated external signalling. Analysts cautioned against assigning exclusive blame to a single actor absent a fully independent investigation, noting the complex mix of state and non-state stakeholders shaping the northern security ecosystem. A balanced assessment therefore acknowledges both the evidence publicised by Pristina regarding weapons, training sites, and leadership responsibility, and Belgrade’s denial of state complicity, amid calls in Brussels and Washington for judicial cooperation (IFIMES, 2023; ICG, 2024).

In sum, Banjska did not invalidate the Ohrid architecture; it exposed the costs of an under-sequenced and under-enforced framework operating in a deteriorating security context. A credible path forward will require calibrated de-escalation, transparent judicial cooperation, and renewed attention to community trust in northern municipalities if the dialogue is to function as more than emergency crisis management (EIP, 2025; ICG, 2024; IFIMES, 2023).

Before the pandemic, the parties sharpened opposing priorities around the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM): Belgrade pressed for rapid establishment to safeguard Serb interests, whereas Pristina insisted that the ASM could not precede a comprehensive settlement that includes recognition of Kosovo’s sovereignty. The dialogue then stalled after November 2018, when Pristina imposed a 100% tariff on goods from Serbia, effectively freezing negotiations until the measure was lifted and replaced with reciprocity (100 percent tariff replaced with reciprocity, 2020).

A cautious reopening followed during the pandemic. In April 2020, Kosovo removed the 100% tariff on imports from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina—a key precondition for restarting EU-facilitated talks and a step welcomed by external partners (Semini 2020). Momentum increased with the Agreement on Economic Normalization signed in Washington, D.C., on 4 September 2020, which, among other points, reaffirmed mutual recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications, an item tracing back to the 2011 Brussels agenda (recognition of diplomas, 2011).

By July 2021, EU-facilitated meetings had resumed with a broader remit: beyond crisis containment, negotiators revisited economic connectivity, modalities for minority protection, and practical steps toward normalisation. While breakthroughs were limited, observers noted a partial shift from ad hoc firefighting to more structured discussions, creating opportunities for incremental trust-building (Brzozowski, 2023).

These steps unfolded against a demanding strategic backdrop. Enlargement fatigue within the EU, the economic and energy repercussions of the war in Ukraine, and the legacies of the pandemic underscored that merely “managing” frozen disputes carries mounting risks for regional stability. In this environment, a more credible accession perspective, and dialogue outcomes that translate into tangible, citizen-facing benefits, became not only desirable but necessary to sustain momentum in Kosovo–Serbia relations.

This tentative recalibration was stress-tested by the September 2023 Banjska incident, which exposed persistent vulnerabilities in the dialogue architecture. Rather than revisiting the details of the event, which are analysed earlier in the article, its implications are key: Banjska

demonstrated how quickly unresolved security issues and weak sequencing can spill over into the technical agenda. The episode underscored that without enforceable, parallel, and time-bound commitments, technical arrangements remain susceptible to political shocks. (ICG, 2024).

Attribution and intent became contested, Pristina publicised evidence linking the group to Milan Radoičić while Belgrade denied state involvement, yet, regardless of culpability, the episode showed how quickly technical files can be derailed absent enforceable sequencing and locally legitimate policing. In policy terms, Banjska reinforced the need for parallel, time-bound reciprocity and for insulating core technical arrangements (e.g., IBM/SEED, energy, veterinary certificates) from political shocks so that day-to-day interdependence can withstand periods of heightened tension (EIP, 2025).

3. The Franco–German Initiative, Ohrid and the Conditions of Trust-Building in Crisis Diplomacy

The pandemic and the war in Ukraine reshaped how European policymakers view their external environment, widening the EU’s toolbox and raising the political premium on stability in its neighbourhood. Pre-COVID, Europe’s political landscape was already split between integrationists and Eurosceptic nationalists; COVID-19 strengthened the latter by channelling public anxieties into sovereignty-first narratives that also resonated in the Western Balkans (Morris and Birnbaum 2020). Yet the crisis also created an opening for concerted EU action: the Franco–German recovery plan (May 2020) and the subsequent €750 billion Recovery Fund signalled a willingness to mutualise risk and invest in a collective rebound (Rankin & Oltermann 2020; EU nations finally ratify €750bn recovery fund, 2021). In parallel, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans 2021–2027 aimed to drive long-term recovery, green and digital transitions, deeper regional integration, and gradual convergence with the EU (European Union and the Western Balkans, 2020).

This macro-level reset fed directly into Kosovo–Serbia diplomacy. Paris and Berlin, concerned by pandemic-era fragilities and Russia’s renewed leverage in the region, advanced a Franco–German proposal to move the dispute out of crisis management and toward structured normalisation, accelerating EU tracks while seeking a workable deal on status-sensitive questions (Picciano 2023). Public opinion remained mixed: support for EU membership stayed comparatively high, but pessimism about timelines and EU credibility persisted, reflecting a gap between expectations and delivery (Balkan Barometer, 2019; Growing skepticism, 2021).

On the ground, post-pandemic frictions underscored the need for a political blueprint. The licence-plate dispute that escalated from 2021 became a visible proxy for sovereignty claims and a focal point for disinformation; barricades at Jarinje and Brnjak illustrated how quickly technical issues can spill into security crises (Kovacevic, 2022). The EU responded by re-energising shuttle diplomacy: leaders reconvened in Brussels on 15 June 2021, affirming the goal of comprehensive normalisation, though the subsequent 19 July 2021 meeting yielded limited progress (Miroslav Lajčák’s press statement, 2021; Tuhina, 2021). Through 2022, high-level rounds continued amid recurring tensions, without a durable settlement on plates or related files (Stojanovic, 2022).

By late 2022, the Franco–German proposal was formally tabled as the basis for further talks, and in 2023 it crystallised as the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation (Ohrid). Substantively, Ohrid mirrors the German–German Basic Treaty logic: Pristina commits to an “appropriate level of self-management” for the Serb community, commonly read as operationalising an Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM), while Belgrade pledges not to

obstruct Kosovo’s participation in international organisations (EUISS, 2024; EIP, 2025). As a post-COVID instrument of influence, the package sought to convert crisis-era political capital into parallel, enforceable steps that would reduce escalation incentives while advancing day-to-day integration (EIP, 2025; EUISS, 2024).

Effectiveness, however, proved contingent on sequencing and enforcement. Disputes over the legal form of commitments and the order of steps stalled the Joint Monitoring Committee and left key provisions unimplemented, even as the EU tried to anchor reciprocity more clearly (EIP, 2025; EUISS, 2024). Crucially, the 2023 security shocks exposed an enduring division of labour: the EU leads diplomatically, but NATO/KFOR acts as the ultimate security backstop, its reinforced posture in 2023 being central to preventing further deterioration while talks continued (EUISS, 2024).

The Washington economic normalisation track briefly complemented this agenda. On 4 September 2020, Kosovo and Serbia reaffirmed practical commitments, including the mutual recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications, an item first negotiated under the 2011 Brussels talks, illustrating how technical deliverables can support political de-escalation when insulated from status disputes (recognition of diplomas, 2011). Still, the durability of such steps depends on consistent implementation and an enabling political context.

Looking ahead, the Franco–German blueprint can enhance the EU’s post-COVID influence provided that three conditions hold. First, enforcement ladders and time-bound reciprocity must be explicit to avoid a return to ad hoc crisis management (EUISS, 2024; EIP, 2025). Second, security guarantees must rest on locally legitimate policing even as KFOR remains the backstop (EUISS, 2024). Third, regional and global alignments, such as Serbia’s stance on EU sanctions against Russia, need careful handling, since balancing strategies complicate both EU leverage and trust in the dialogue’s end-state (Dönmez, 2023). Under these conditions, the Franco–German/Ohrid track offers a realistic path to status-neutral normalisation, linking political commitments to economic incentives and a credible security umbrella, while acknowledging that progress will be incremental and contingent.

Conclusion: From Crisis Management to Trust-Building: Can the EU Deliver Through Conditionality?

Europe’s overlapping shocks, the pandemic, energy insecurity, and Russia’s war against Ukraine, have recast the Kosovo–Serbia question from a bilateral dispute into a test of the EU’s crisis-era statecraft. In this setting, dialogue is not merely a venue for talks but a mechanism for translating geopolitical urgency into enforceable steps. The Franco–German proposal, operationalised through the 2023 Ohrid framework, embodies that ambition by front-loading practical benefits, mutual acceptance of documents, non-obstruction of international participation, and community self-management, while deferring final-status questions. Yet absent credible implementation ladders and parallel reciprocity, the architecture has struggled to move from design to delivery.

The September 2023 Banjska shock did not invalidate Ohrid; it exposed the costs of weak sequencing and contested policing in the north. In practice, a familiar division of labour persists: the EU leads diplomatically, NATO/KFOR underwrites security. This arrangement can prevent dangerous spirals, but it is insufficient, by itself, to rebuild local trust or to insulate technical cooperation from political turbulence. Post-Banjska trade restrictions and policy escalations further eroded confidence, even as KFOR–EULEX coordination contained immediate risks. The

net effect is a dialogue that works as crisis management, but only intermittently as a pathway to de-escalation and institutional convergence.

The EU's post-COVID leverage, especially the Growth Plan and its Reform and Growth Facility, creates a window to rebalance this pattern. Performance-based disbursements, if paired with transparent criteria and inclusive monitoring, can reconnect conditional finance to measurable governance outcomes in the north (community-responsive policing, municipal functionality, predictable service delivery). Equally, keeping the acquis of technical deals (customs, IBM/SEED, energy, veterinary certifications) operational during political shocks is essential to preserve the day-to-day interdependence that raises the costs of renewed escalation.

Rebuilding trust will not follow from declarations alone; it depends on visible, bite-sized deliverables that matter for citizens: safe mobility, reliable billing and metering, predictable payments, Serbian-language public services under Kosovo law, and representative local authorities. Parallel movement is crucial. Steps toward a workable Serb-majority municipalities arrangement should be matched by verifiable non-obstruction in international fora and sustained restraint in policing posture. External actors can reinforce this with calibrated incentives and clear red lines, rewarding compliance quickly, documenting backsliding transparently, and avoiding open-ended "talks about talks."

In sum, success amid Europe's polycrisis hinges less on new blueprints than on enforcement and trust-building. Where enforcement is credible and benefits are tangible, politics moderates; where sequencing falters and delivery stalls, crises fill the gap. The task for the EU and transatlantic partners is to convert today's crisis-management platform into a results-oriented pathway, one that citizens can see, measure, and ultimately come to trust.

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