

POLICY REPORT
OCTOBER 2025

From Protégé to Partner

The Way Forward for Kosovo-U.S. Relations

BY MIECZYSLAW P. BODUSZYŃSKI AND VICTOR PESKIN



NEW LINES
INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

**THE NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY**

Our mission is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

Our purpose is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.

CONTENTS

Executive Summary _____ 3

Policy Recommendations _____ 3

Introduction _____ 4

Unprecedented Leverage and its Selective Deployment _____ 4

The Roots of U.S.-Vetëvendosje Distrust _____ 6

Saying ‘No’ to Washington _____ 7

Recommendations _____ 11

Authors _____ 12

U.S.-Kosovo Relations Timeline _____ 13

The content and views expressed in this intelligence briefing are those of the authors and should not be taken to reflect an official policy or position of New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy.

Cover Image: Flags of Kosovo, the U.S. and the EU (picturesd/Getty Images)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past quarter century, the U.S. role in Kosovo has evolved from that of midwife of a new nation to guardian of a troubled status quo. Washington policymakers should recognize the progress Kosovo has made in consolidating its young democracy and treat the Vetëvendosje party – whether in power or in opposition – as a genuine partner, recognizing its views of Kosovo's sovereign interests. The U.S. should continue to strongly support political negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia but not at the expense of tolerating graft or state capture.



Supporters of the ruling Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) party celebrate in front of the government building in Pristina on Feb. 9, 2025. Prime Minister Albin Kurti's ruling party secured the most seats in the parliamentary elections, but has struggled for months to form a majority government. (Armend Nimani / AFP via Getty Images)

Policy Recommendations

1 RECOGNIZE DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION NEEDED FOR STABILITY

Washington should treat the Vetëvendosje party as a genuine partner, recognizing its views on sovereignty and cooperation on anti-corruption. At the same time, U.S. officials must signal that support will not extend to leaders in Pristina, Belgrade, or elsewhere who erode rule-of-law norms. Strong backing for Kosovo-Serbia talks should continue, but never at the cost of tolerating graft or state capture.

2 EQUAL EXAMINATION OF SERBIAN BEHAVIOR

Even as it presses Kosovo, the U.S. should hold Serbia equally accountable, avoiding the perception that its authoritarian slide is being ignored while Pristina receives more scrutiny and criticism. Whether intentional or not, this policy has emboldened Serbia in talks with Kosovo. Applying consistent standards would strengthen Washington's credibility as a principled mediator.

3 DIALOGUE WITH KOSOVO ACTORS

The U.S. should engage in a robust dialogue with Kosovo's civil society, activists, and independent media. These groups have often been at the forefront of exposing wrongdoing and pushing for accountability. Washington has poured aid into Kosovo's civil society since 1999, helping build a vibrant NGO sector. Now, it should re-energize these partnerships with a focus on grassroots impact.

4 SUPPORT EU-LED NEGOTIATIONS

To resolve the impasse in Kosovo's north, the U.S. should back EU-led negotiations and support a creative solution on the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities. This means addressing Kosovo's legitimate concerns and ensuring self-governance by Kosovo Serbs does not weaken the state. Washington must also press Serbia to dismantle illegal security structures in northern Kosovo, end financing of illegitimate parallel institutions, and genuinely encourage Kosovo Serbs participation in the democratic institutions.

5 PRESS FOR KOSOVO RECOGNITION WITHIN EU

Washington should continue to press EU members that do not recognize Kosovo to change their position to advance both regional stability and European enlargement. Securing Kosovo's entry into the Council of Europe could be one major interim goal.

Introduction

More than a quarter century after the 1999 United States-led NATO military intervention aimed at halting Serbian ethnic cleansing, Kosovo, Europe's newest state, has evolved significantly and gained broader international acceptance. Despite a range of governance challenges and its long-running political dispute with Serbia, Kosovo has been ranked by the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index¹ as the most democratic state in the Western Balkans.

Kosovo's approach to its relationship with the United States, its most important external backer, has also evolved. Under recent governments led by Vetëvendosje, a reformist movement-turned-political party that has led Kosovo for most of the past five years, Pristina has increasingly been willing to prioritize its interests and assert its sovereignty, saying "no" to its chief ally at key junctures. This marks a major reversal from Kosovo's first two decades of postwar transition. However, the U.S. has been slow to adapt to a government ready to move from protégé to partner. Washington would do well to use the lessons of its past diplomacy in Kosovo to hone its approach to the Pristina government in the present and future.

Interviews with Kosovar and U.S. officials reveal that the reasons for Washington's inability to adapt to a changing Kosovo are multifold and rooted in how U.S. leaders have chosen to deploy their formidable leverage over the past quarter-century. First, the U.S. has often focused on the "external," particularly on Kosovo's unresolved status vis-a-vis Serbia, over the "internal," particularly governance and rule-of-law issues, despite a strong demand in Kosovo to combat corruption and state capture. Second, under Kosovo's former ruling class – with which it became very close – the U.S. became accustomed to pliable Kosovar governments. Third, Washington missed opportunities to build a meaningful relationship with Vetëvendosje and its leader, Prime Minister Albin Kurti, increasing mutual distrust and acrimony.

There are steps U.S. policymakers can take to improve their relationship with Pristina, including by Washington doing more to find constructive ways to align U.S. policy with the rule of law and anti-corruption policies of the Kurti government. When it does put pressure on Pristina, the U.S. should apply (at least) equal scrutiny to Serbia's behavior – ending the perception that Belgrade's authoritarian slide is being ignored while Pristina receives more scrutiny and criticism. The U.S. should also take a larger role in supporting creative solutions for the long-running EU-led negotiations that aim to resolve the protracted Kosovo-Serbia political dispute.

Unprecedented Leverage and its Selective Deployment

Kosovo's political elite have struggled to form a new government² months after the February parliamentary elections. The process of government formation has been carried out in a more independent fashion than perhaps at any other point in the young state's history, and it has proceeded without significant influence from its primary patron, the United States.

Washington's outsized role in Kosovo's journey to statehood is without precedent. The 1999 NATO intervention, championed by President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, cemented America's image as Kosovo's savior among most of the Balkan country's ethnic Albanian majority. Although largely premised on humanitarian grounds, the 78-day NATO bombing campaign was crucial to the eventual victory by Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) rebels in their armed conflict against Serbian forces. In fact, the KLA would

1 V-Dem institute. (2025, March). 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped? https://www.v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr_2025_lowres_v2.pdf

2 Radio Free Europe. (2025, May 25). Kosovo Faces Deepening Political Crisis After 21 Failed Attempts To Elect Speaker. <https://www.rferl.org/amp/kurti-kosovo-speaker-parliament-bajrami-haxhiu/33423764.html>

A poster of U.S. President Donald Trump with the text "The Serbs stood by him all along" is seen in the Serbian area of Mitrovica on Feb. 20, 2017, in Mitrovica, Kosovo. (Pierre Crom/Getty Images)



have been unlikely to prevail without NATO. Belgrade's capitulation entailed the withdrawal of all Serbian forces and enabled the return of hundreds of thousands of Kosovar Albanian refugees.

In the postwar period under a United Nations protectorate – and at the height of post-Cold War American power – U.S. diplomats micromanaged Kosovo's politics.³ U.S. diplomatic intervention helped to keep fractious politicians on board with the difficult compromises needed to advance the statehood project, especially related to ensuring postindependence rights for Kosovo's minority Serb community.

When Kosovo declared independence in February 2008, the U.S. promptly recognized Europe's newest nation-state and pressed the world to join suit. But Serbia and Russia both vowed never to recognize its status. While most European states followed the U.S. lead, five members of the European Union have not. American diplomats acted as guarantors of Kosovo's fledgling statehood while U.S. and NATO troops provided a security guarantee. This set the groundwork for a *de facto* bargain: Kosovo owed its freedom and independence largely to U.S. leadership, and in turn Kosovo's elites were expected to follow American guidance. A group of entrenched domestic political elites – many who had been wartime KLA leaders – consistently said "yes" to key U.S. and EU political objectives related to regional stability and Kosovo's final status.

These included EU-led negotiations to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia, a border demarcation agreement with Montenegro, identifying and dealing swiftly with Kosovars who joined the Islamic State, and the establishment of a U.S.-backed, EU-run criminal tribunal to prosecute former KLA leaders for alleged wartime and postwar abuses. Washington policymakers also spoke frequently about internal rule-of-law reforms. However, U.S. officials did not use their formidable leverage to press Kosovar leaders to curtail high-level corruption and abuse of power in the way Washington has done in Albania or Ukraine. Over time, the economy stagnated, and high unemployment resulted in waves of emigration. Many Kosovar Albanians blamed much of the country's economic problems⁴ on the corruption and patronage networks reportedly run by the former rebel leaders who became political leaders. Meanwhile, some former Washington policymakers used their ties with Kosovo to pursue their own economic interests.⁵

3 Marzouk, L. (2011, April 25). *State Department Cleans Dell's Wiki Log of Controversial Material*. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2011/04/25/state-department-cleans-dell-s-wiki-log-of-controversial-material/>

4 Szpala, M. (2010, December 15). *Elections in Kosovo – a shaky stabilisation*. OSW Centre for Eastern Studies. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2010-12-15/elections-kosovo-a-shaky-stabilisation>

5 Brunwasser, M. (2012, December 12). *Americans Who Helped Free Kosovo Return as Entrepreneurs*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/12/world/europe/americans-who-helped-free-kosovo-return-as-entrepreneurs.html>

“At critical junctures, therefore, Washington not only failed to distance itself from a problematic ruling class but also neglected to use the tools of diplomacy to engage and potentially influence Vetëvendosje.”

The Roots of U.S.-Vetëvendosje Distrust

The rise of Vetëvendosje as Kosovo’s most powerful political force is in part rooted in the failure of the U.S. and other international actors to facilitate better economic prospects for Kosovo’s relatively young population and meaningfully deal with high-level corruption and abuse of power. While the party first emerged as a movement opposing the compromises forced upon Kosovo in the run-up to its 2008 declaration of independence, over time, it took on a platform of fighting entrenched corruption.

Distrust between Washington and Vetëvendosje runs deep. Multiple interviews indicated that the strong negative feelings toward Kurti and Vetëvendosje among U.S. officials have roots in the party’s early obstructionism, occasionally violent tactics, and perceived ideological rigidity. In their early years as an opposition party, Vetëvendosje members used tear gas to try and block controversial votes and once physically accosted the U.S. ambassador when she visited parliament. For years, Washington’s response was to treat Kurti as a pariah. U.S. diplomats held Vetëvendosje members at arm’s length even as the party evolved and gained popularity in successive elections. Even as senior U.S. officials we interviewed repeatedly cited Vetëvendosje’s early political immaturity, obstructionism, and undemocratic tactics to justify the policy of non-engagement, they said little to nothing about the criminality and corruption of the dominant political figures with whom they dealt on a daily basis. Some of these figures from Kosovo’s “warrior class” were credibly accused of human rights violations that were much worse than the acts in which Vetëvendosje activists engaged. Thus, Washington’s decision to distance itself from Vetëvendosje was less morally clear when juxtaposed with its embrace of key former KLA leaders. After all, Hashim Thaçi, Ramush Haradinaj, Fatmir Limaj, and other leading politicians were figures with deeply troubling wartime pasts and questionable presents.

Nor was Vetëvendosje any more troubling than other problematic opposition groups with which American diplomats have engaged around the world. In fact, none of its leaders and members were implicated in the war-related human rights abuses or the corruption and criminality that had long tainted leading political figures in Kosovo who had worked closely with U.S. officials.

This perceived hypocrisy generated deep resentment toward the United States among Vetëvendosje’s leadership and supporters. In a context where mere American contact with or distancing from an individual or group can send a powerful signal that can make or break political fortunes, Washington’s decision to hold Vetëvendosje at arm’s length while continuing to embrace the governing elite had several consequences. First, it meant the U.S. lost the ability to moderate Vetëvendosje’s rhetoric and obstructionist tactics. Second, it provided cover to the established parties and politicians, signaling that they could continue to count on Washington’s support emboldening their political misbehavior and sense of impunity. Third, shunned by Washington and other international powers and denied a meaningful place at the bargaining table, Vetëvendosje had little incentive to moderate its own problematic behavior. Fourth, the U.S. lost the opportunity to associate itself with Vetëvendosje’s core anti-corruption message, which could have helped to rally a rather disengaged public around strengthening the rule of law at a critical postindependence moment.

At critical junctures, therefore, Washington not only failed to distance itself from a problematic ruling class but also neglected to use the tools of diplomacy to engage and potentially influence Vetëvendosje. It is this dynamic – and the associated long memories and distrust on both sides – that have continued to shape U.S.-Kosovo relations in the recent years of Vetëvendosje rule.

Saying ‘No’ to Washington

The *de facto* bargain between the KLA parties and Washington ended with the ascent of Kurti and his “leftist nationalist” Vetëvendosje party, which formed a governing coalition⁶ in early February 2020. In sharp contrast to their predecessors, Kurti and Vetëvendosje have repeatedly been willing to say “no” to Washington. Vetëvendosje’s firmness is rooted in its activist days staging rambunctious – at times violent⁷ – protests against the U.N. protectorate supporting its campaign opposing the Ahtisaari Plan,⁸ which laid out the terms of Kosovo’s path to sovereignty, including rights guarantees for the Serb minority.

Vetëvendosje demonstrated its will to stand up to Washington soon after Kurti took power. As President Donald Trump’s first term was nearing its end, his administration pursued a highly transactional diplomatic initiative aimed at Serbia-Kosovo rapprochement and involving Thaçi and his Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK). Thaçi, the principal Kosovar interlocutor of a generation of American diplomats, is currently on trial at the U.S.-backed, EU-run, Hague-based Kosovo Specialist Chambers⁹ facing charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. But according to sources we spoke to in Pristina, in early 2020, Thaçi, who had signaled to the Americans his willingness to offer concessions to Belgrade, was serving as president alongside a government led by Kurti and Vetëvendosje, which had just formed a fragile coalition with the Democratic League of Kosova (LDK).

Circumventing the long-established EU-led negotiations for advancing Kosovo-Serbia relations, Richard Grenell, Trump’s then-special envoy for the Balkans, sought to broker a deal himself. Amid the crisis triggered by the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Grenell placed intense pressure on Kurti’s brand-new reformist government to reach a quick accommodation with Belgrade. Reportedly, his proposal would have included highly controversial land swaps – an initiative initially backed by then-EU Commissioner of External Affairs Federica Mogherini¹⁰ – with Grenell threatening¹¹ a suspension of U.S. aid if the fledgling Kosovar government did not comply.

Kurti, however, rejected the deal, scoffing at the suggestion of altering borders with Serbia as an infringement of Kosovo’s sovereignty. Many analysts and government insiders believed¹² Grenell’s aggressive pursuit of a deal was an effort to engineer a White House ceremony that Trump could use to bolster his chances for reelection that November. Perceiving Kurti as an obstacle, Grenell and other U.S. officials, according to a senior Kosovar official with whom we spoke, pressed the LDK to turn on the new prime minister. The LDK, a moderate party with roots in Kosovo’s initially nonviolent resistance to Serbian oppression in the 1990s, had previously aligned with Thaçi’s PDK. But now the LDK supported a no-confidence motion that toppled the first-ever Vetëvendosje-led government in late March 2020.

Grenell’s gambit ultimately backfired. While Kosovo’s population remained overwhelmingly pro-American, what emerged from Washington’s strong-arm diplomacy was a growing undercurrent of disappointment and even anger at the U.S. for throwing its weight around to prop up an increasingly discredited

6 Prishtina Insight. (2020, February 3). Kurti elected prime minister. <https://prishtinainsight.com/kurti-elected-prime-minister/>

7 Human Rights Watch. (2007). Better Late Than Never: Enhancing the Accountability of International Institutions in Kosovo: II. Background. <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/eca/kosovo0607/2.htm>

8 International Crisis Group. (2007, May 14). Kosovo: No Good Alternatives to the Ahtisaari Plan. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/kosovo/182-kosovo-no-good-alternatives-ah-tisaari-plan>

9 Kosovo Specialist Chambers. (2025). Case Information Sheet, Case No. KSC-BC-2020-06. <https://www.scp-ks.org/sites/default/files/public/CIS-Thaci-et-al-EN.pdf>

10 Barigazzi, J. (2018, August 31). Mogherini defends Kosovo border change talks. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/federica-mogherini-kosovo-serbia-defends-border-change-talks/>

11 Kakissis, J. (2020, June 5). How A Trump Diplomat Helped To Bring Down Kosovo’s Government. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/05/870227931/how-a-trump-diplomat-helped-bring-down-kosovos-government>

12 Kostreci, K. (2020, June 27). After Kosovo President War Crimes Indictment, Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue Uncertain. Voice of America. <https://www.voanews.com/amp/europe-after-kosovo-president-war-crimes-indictment-kosovo-serbia-dialogue-uncertain/6191766.html>



Members of the Kosovo Security Force take part in the joint military exercise 'DEFENDER 25' attended by U.S. military personnel in the village of Babaj Bokes, Kosovo, on June 3, 2025. (Armend Nimani/AFP via Getty Images)

political class. The fallout of Kurti's ouster contributed to a major realignment in early 2021, when Vetëvendosje won a landslide election victory that handed Kurti an outright parliamentary majority, a first¹³ for any political party in postwar Kosovo. Kurti has been prime minister ever since, through presently he governs by technical mandate while coalition talks continue after winning approximately 42 percent of the vote in the February 2025 elections – down from the 50.28% his party won in 2021. With a strengthened Kurti back as prime minister in 2021, the stage was set for a potential clash with a U.S. policy establishment accustomed to more pliant partners like Thaçi.

Kurti and Vetëvendosje – buoyed by their success at the polls – were indeed willing to continue to say “no” to Washington, particularly when it came to the hot-button issues related to managing Pristina's volatile relationship with the Serbian minority in northern Kosovo. Kurti's government had been given a strong mandate to clean up corruption and assert Kosovo's full sovereignty in the contested north. Particularly in regards to the north, the prime minister's objectives became points of tension with American diplomats interested in avoiding confrontation with Serbia's nationalist leaders.

Kurti took a firmer line on integrating the Serb-majority municipalities bordering Serbia than any of his predecessors, moving to impose reciprocal rules like vehicle license plate requirements¹⁴ to combat “parallel structures” beholden to Belgrade. These steps triggered protests by local Serbs in 2021 and 2022.

More flashpoints followed. In mid-2023, Kurti's insistence on installing Kosovar Albanian mayors who had won elections that Serbian voters in northern towns had boycotted led to clashes and the deployment of NATO peacekeepers. The U.S. response was openly critical of Pristina. This time, Washington imposed tangible consequences. Then-U.S. Ambassador Jeffrey Hovenier announced Kosovo's expulsion from a NATO military exercise¹⁵ for not heeding American advice on de-escalation, and he threatened other measures,¹⁶ including a halt of U.S. lobbying for Kosovo's international recognition.

On Oct. 23, 2023, some 30 heavily armed Serb militants ambushed a Kosovo Police patrol¹⁷ near the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo, killing Sgt. Afrim Bunjaku. The gunmen barricaded themselves in the nearby Serbian-Orthodox monastery. Under Kurti's orders, special Kosovar security units retook the compound the same day, killing three assailants and seizing a large cache of military-grade weapons. Kurti blamed the attack on a Belgrade-linked paramilitary network, an assessment backed by international analysts.¹⁸ The Serbian government denied state involvement, but a senior Kosovo-Serb politician and known criminal boss, Milan Radoičić, later acknowledged organizing the group.

Washington's response was mixed, with figures such as U.S.-Balkans envoy Gabriel Escobar and then-U.S. Ambassador to Serbia Christopher Hill blaming¹⁹ Kurti for escalating the incident. The White House's more measured response²⁰ pointed to Serbia's culpability and called for Belgrade to withdraw the troops²¹

13 Perparim I. and Bami, X. (2021, March 22). Kosovo Parliament Elects Albin Kurti as Prime Minister. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/22/kosovo-parliament-elects-albin-kurti-as-prime-minister/>

14 Si, N. (2021, September 20). License plates aren't a choice; they're imposed onto us by the other side, said Kurti. Euronews Albania. <https://euronews.al/en/license-plates-arent-a-choice-theyre-imposed-onto-us-by-the-other-side-said-kurti/>

15 Radio Free Europe. (2023, May 30). NATO To Send More Troops To Kosovo As U.S. Says Pristina Suspended From Military Exercises. <https://staging.rferl.org/a/kosovo-violence-serbs-kfor-borrell/32434719.html>

16 Delauney, G. and Wright, G. (2025, May 30). Nato to send 700 more troops to Kosovo after clashes. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65759214>

17 Horncastle, J. (2023). How Serbia-Kosovo tensions hang like a spectre over the European Union. The Conversation. <https://doi.org/10.64628/aam.5ftwgw4u5>

18 International Crisis Group. (2024, April 2). Northern Kosovo: Asserting Sovereignty amid Divided Loyalties. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/kosovo/269-northern-kosovo-asserting-sovereignty-amid-divided-loyalties>

19 Deutsche Welle. (2024, April 5). Noje Zircher Zeitung: “Kurti is leading Kosovo astray”. KoSsev. <https://kossev.info/en/noje-cirher-cajtung-kosovo-kurti-stranputica/>

20 Borger, J. (2023, September 30). White House warns of “unprecedented” Serbian troop buildup on Kosovo border. The Observer. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/29/kosovo-serbian-troops-buildup-us-uk>

21 Bubola, E., Rogers, K., & Engelbrecht, C. (2023, September 30). Why Is the U.S. Telling Serbia to Move Troops From the Kosovo Border? The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/30/world/europe/kosovo-serbia-troops-nato.html>

it had amassed at Kosovo's border. At home, however, Kurti's actions against Serb criminal networks in the north benefited from widespread public support. Ordinary Kosovars demanded what they viewed as natural for a sovereign state – that the government assert control and exercise a monopoly of violence over its entire territory.

Meanwhile, Escobar and other senior U.S. officials repeatedly pressed²² Kurti to establish the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) – a form of autonomy for the north that had been agreed to during an earlier phase of the EU-led negotiations between Pristina and Belgrade. In the eyes of Washington policymakers, the ASM is a pragmatic compromise that would guarantee minority rights within Kosovo and, in turn, improve tense relations between Kosovo and Serbia while advancing Washington's elusive goal of obtaining Serbian recognition of Kosovo statehood. To Kurti, however, creating an ethnically based autonomous body like the ASM is anathema. He pejoratively likened the ASM to the autonomous Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina,²³ which experts blame for the country's ongoing dysfunction. As many Kosovar Albanians told us, they fear an ASM could imperil Kosovo's sovereignty by entrenching Belgrade's influence on Kosovo's soil. Kurti has at times bristled at U.S. pressure over the ASM, even calling former Secretary of State Antony Blinken's approach to Serbia naïve²⁴ (a statement that Kurti's political opponents now highlight as evidence of his "anti-Americanism"). For their part, American officials such as Escobar privately voiced frustration that Kurti is obstinate and a nationalist.

Although Kurti's crackdown on Kosovo Serb criminal networks in the north generated opposition and rebukes from American officials wary of sparking instability in Kosovo's combustible north, Washington did little to publicly align with Kurti's larger anti-corruption agenda. During an April 2022 visit to Kosovo, for example, then-U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried focused her public comments on the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, saying nothing about Kurti's rule-of-law push.²⁵

Critics – some who served in the administration of former President Joe Biden – maintain that senior figures such as Donfried, Escobar, and Hill never updated their views of Kosovo as a maturing state with its own legitimate interests and failed to meaningfully engage Kurti and support his reformist agenda. Antipathy toward Kurti in Washington's Balkans policy circles – often rooted in decades-old attitudes – preempted a dialogue rooted in genuine partnership. The prime minister's domestic political opponents have seized on this prevailing line of thought, and Grenell has continued his campaign against Kurti during the second Trump administration, calling the prime minister "untrustworthy."²⁶

On Sept. 12, the Trump administration suspended²⁷ a strategic dialogue on strengthening political and economic ties with Kosovo, citing "actions and statements" by Kurti that constituted "challenges to progress." The U.S. chargé d'affaires to Kosovo expressed concerns²⁸ about Kurti's recent moves, saying

22 Associated Press. (2023, January 30). *U.S. presses Kosovo on municipal body in Serb-majority areas*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/politics-kosovo-government-united-states-european-union-4afa2d08a416b933231124e326ab02a1>

23 Mujanovic, J. (2025, February 20). *Dayton Plus: A Policymaker's Guide to Constitutional Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. New Lines Institute. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/political-systems/dayton-plus-a-policymakers-guide-to-constitutional-reform-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

24 Walker, S., and Tondo, L. (2023, May 30). *Kosovo: "fascist mobs" guided by Serbia causing violence, says country's PM*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/30/kosovo-fascist-mobs-guided-by-serbia-causing-violence-says-country-s-pm>

25 Berisha, K. (2022, April 25). *Mesazhi i Donfried: Kosova dhe Serbia urgjent të riangazhohen në dialog*. Telegrafi. <https://telegrafi.com/donfried-kosova-dhe-serbia-urgjent-te-riangazhohen-ne-dialogun-e-lehtesuar-nga/>

26 Si, N. (2025, February 3). *Grenell Strongly Attacks Kurti: "He Is Not Trustworthy for the U.S., Don't Be Deceived"*. Euronews Albania. <https://euronews.al/en/grenell-strongly-attacks-kurti-he-is-not-trustworthy-for-the-u-s-dont-be-deceived/>

27 Reuters. (2025, September 12). *US suspends dialogue with Kosovo, says government moves stoke "instability"*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-suspends-dialogue-with-kosovo-says-government-moves-stoke-instability-2025-09-12/>

28 Perparim I., and Antigone I. (2025, September 12). *US Blames Kosovo's Kurti After Suspending "Strategic Dialogue"*. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/09/12/us-blames-kosovos-kurti-after-suspending-strategic-dialogue/> Secretary Rubio and President Vucic Meet on the Margins of UNGA, New York. Statement Issued by the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade, September 24, 2025.

that “these actions undermine the political process, weaken Kosovo’s institutions, and exacerbate interethnic tensions,” without specifying which of Kurti’s actions displeased Washington. The U.S. charge’s words – likely dictated by Washington officials – demonstrate continuing distrust between Kurti and the United States. Given Washington’s enduring influence in Kosovo and the potential of statements by U.S. officials to move local politics, they will certainly be used by Kurti’s domestic opponents to discredit him.

The Trump administration’s decision to signal a downgrading of relations with Pristina, in light of the strategic dialogue suspension, comes as Washington is indicating a closer relationship with Belgrade. In early August, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced a U.S.-Serbia strategic dialogue scheduled for later this year. On the sidelines of U.N. General Assembly in late September, the State Department announced Rubio and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić had discussed “the deepening partnership between the United States and Serbia” as well as U.S. participation in EXPO 2027 in Belgrade.²⁹

Where once Washington’s words were treated as commands in Pristina, a popular Kosovar government felt confident enough to push back, arguing that Washington’s single-minded pursuit of a deal with Belgrade in 2020 was short-sighted, especially given Serbia’s authoritarian and pro-Russian drift³⁰ under President Aleksandar Vučić. While the United States focused on short-term conflict management in the north, Kurti and his supporters asked why their country should make one-sided concessions to an increasingly corrupt, autocratic, and anti-Western Serbia.

Washington’s historic role in the formation of a sovereign Kosovo state has represented the best-case scenario for the U.S. to exert its influence by directing a successful postwar political transition to a democratic state which upholds the rule of law. The case of Kosovo thus offers numerous lessons for policymakers working on postconflict states where Washington possesses substantial influence. In particular, the U.S. policy experience in Kosovo contains insight into how Washington can most productively use its leverage to advance the rule of law and good governance more generally. One use of leverage relates to how and when Washington chooses to diplomatically engage with various political groups. Here, our research on the history of U.S. policy in Kosovo suggests that Washington missed multiple opportunities to build a meaningful working relationship with Vetëvendosje. This, in turn, stemmed from an inability on the part of policymakers to see Kosovo’s evolution from Washington’s protégé to partner.

What does the transformation of Kosovo’s politics suggest for the future of its relations between Washington and Pristina?

Kosovo cannot afford to estrange its most powerful ally. Security is one area where U.S. support is critical, and cooperation between the Kosovo Security Forces and the U.S. military is robust and growing.³¹ At the same time, Kosovo’s leaders cannot simply revert to the old stance of largely doing what the U.S. asks (even though Kosovar President Vjosa Osmani in May 2025 agreed to Washington’s request to temporarily accept a group of deported migrants).³²

Kosovo’s population has also grown more mature and demands that political elites fight for their country’s sovereign interests. The tensions with Washington witnessed under Kurti’s governments, therefore, can be seen as natural growing pains in a relationship transitioning from tutelage to true partnership.

29 Secretary Rubio and President Vucic Meet on the Margins of UNGA, New York, Statement Issued by the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade, September 24, 2025.

30 Chin, J. (2025, February). *How Tragedy Sparked a Protest Movement*. Journal of Democracy. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-tragedy-sparked-a-protest-movement/>

31 The Geopost. (2025, May 14). *Kosovo and USA strengthen military cooperation with CISMOA agreement*. The Geopost. <https://thegeopost.com/en/news/kosovo-and-usa-strengthen-military-cooperation-with-cismoa-agreement/>

32 Montoya-Galvez, C. (2025, June 11). *Kosovo agrees to accept U.S. deportations of migrants from other countries*. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kosovo-accept-u-s-deportations-of-migrants-from-other-countries/>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To align its Kosovo policy with advancing the rule of law and long-term regional stability, the U.S. should consider a strategic recalibration.

1 RECOGNIZE DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION NEEDED FOR STABILITY

The ways in which both Washington and Pristina respond will shape the next phase of Kosovo's statehood.

Washington should recognize that democratic consolidation, including advancing rule-of-law and anti-corruption efforts, are prerequisites for durable stability, not just in Kosovo but also throughout the region. Washington policy-makers should recognize the progress Kosovo has made in consolidating its young democracy and treat Vetëvendosje — whether in power or in opposition — as a genuine partner, recognizing the party's views of Kosovo's sovereign interests. U.S. officials should make it clear that they will no longer uncritically support leaders — in Pristina, Belgrade, or elsewhere — who undermine rule-of-law norms. This means continuing to strongly support political negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia but not at the expense of tolerating graft or state capture.

2 APPLY EQUAL SCRUTINY TO BELGRADE AND PRISTINA

The U.S. should apply at least equal scrutiny to Serbia's behavior — ending the perception that Belgrade's authoritarian slide is being ignored while Pristina receives more criticism. Whether intentional or not, this policy has had the effect of emboldening Serbia in its negotiations with Kosovo. By holding both sides to consistent standards, the U.S. can bolster its credibility as a principled mediator rather than a patron of "stabilocracy,"³³ a type of government that claims to provide security and advance the values of EU integration while adopting practices that actually undermine the rule of law. It is in the U.S.'s interest that Kosovo continues to develop as a well-governed and stable state, simultaneously strengthening its resilience against malign foreign influence. By aligning itself with Kosovo's reformers, the U.S. will stand to regain moral authority and local goodwill that have waned during the years Washington appeared to shield the corrupt status quo. This does not mean blindly supporting Kurti's reform agenda, but it does mean signaling that Washington should take concrete steps to support domestic efforts to combat high-level corruption and strengthen the rule of law.

3 VIGOROUS DIALOGUE WITH KOSOVO'S CIVIL SOCIETY, ACTIVISTS, AND INDEPENDENT MEDIA

A recalibrated U.S. approach should include a robust dialogue with Kosovo's civil society, activists, and independent media. These groups have often been at the forefront of exposing wrongdoing and pushing for accountability. Washington has poured aid into Kosovo's civil society since 1999, helping build a vibrant NGO sector. Now, it should re-energize these partnerships with a focus on grassroots impact. The Trump administration's dismantling of USAID will not make that easy, but the U.S. can still help open the door to more organic civil society initiatives.

4 SUPPORT EU-LED NEGOTIATIONS TO HELP RESOLVE NORTHERN KOSOVO SITUATION

To resolve the impasse over the unsustainable situation in Kosovo's north, the U.S. should lend support to ongoing EU-led negotiations and help in the search for a creative solution to the contested issue of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities. This should entail listening to Kosovo's legitimate concerns and ensuring self-governance by Kosovo Serbs does not lead to a Republika Srpska-like entity³⁴ that paralyzes the functioning of the state. Washington should also insist that Serbia fulfill its parallel obligations: dismantling illegal

33 Pavlovic, S. (2017, May 5). *West is best: How 'stabilocracy' undermines democracy building in the Balkans*. London School of Economics. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euorpblog/2017/05/05/west-is-best-how-stabilocracy-undermines-democracy-building-in-the-balkans/>

34 Cerimagic, A. (2025, March 25). *A Dangerous Standoff: The Battle for Bosnia's Institutions*. RUSI. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/dangerous-standoff-battle-bosnias-institutions>

5 PRESS FOR KOSOVO RECOGNITION WITHIN EU

security structures in northern Kosovo, ending financing of illegitimate parallel institutions, and genuinely encouraging Kosovo Serbs to participate in the country's democratic institutions. Washington could also press the EU to become more involved in crafting an ASM policy that makes sense for both Kosovo's sovereignty and the minority rights of Kosovo Serbs. A more balanced approach would help Kosovo's government justify future compromises internally as a win rather than a loss for sovereignty.

Washington should continue to press EU members that do not recognize Kosovo (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) to change their position to advance both regional stability and European enlargement. Securing Kosovo's entry into the Council of Europe³⁵ could be one major interim goal.

Over the past quarter century, the U.S. role vis-a-vis Kosovo has evolved from that of midwife of a new nation to guardian of a troubled status quo. American influence, which once shaped every major decision in Pristina, has receded as Kosovo matures. Kosovo is now stable and democratic enough to become a real partner, and Washington should adapt to that reality.

This report is based on several years of research, including over 50 interviews in Kosovo and with current and former U.S. policymakers and diplomats.

AUTHORS




Mieczysław (Mietek) Boduszyński is a scholar and former practitioner of foreign affairs. He is an associate professor of Politics and International Relations at Pomona College. He formerly served as a foreign service officer with the U.S. Department of State with postings in Albania, Kosovo, Japan, Egypt, Libya, and Iraq, and has also worked as a policy adviser in the Pentagon and U.S. Congress. He has authored two books on democratization and democracy promotion alongside numerous articles and op-eds.



Victor Peskin has been a political scientist and an associate professor at the School of Politics and Global Studies of Arizona State University since 2006. His research and teaching interests lie at the intersection of international relations, comparative politics, and human rights. His research seeks to understand the conflicts between international legal institutions and nation-states that have ensued with the expansion of international humanitarian and human rights law. Peskin has authored the book "International Justice in Rwanda and the Balkans: Virtual Trials and the Struggle for State Cooperation" and co-authored "Hiding in Plain Sight: The Pursuit of War Criminals from Nuremberg to the War on Terror."

35 Mujanovic, J. (2024, May 2). *The Case for Admitting Kosovo to the Council of Europe*. Just Security. <https://www.justsecurity.org/95340/the-case-for-admitting-kosovo-to-the-council-of-europe/>

U.S.-Kosovo Relations (1992-2025)

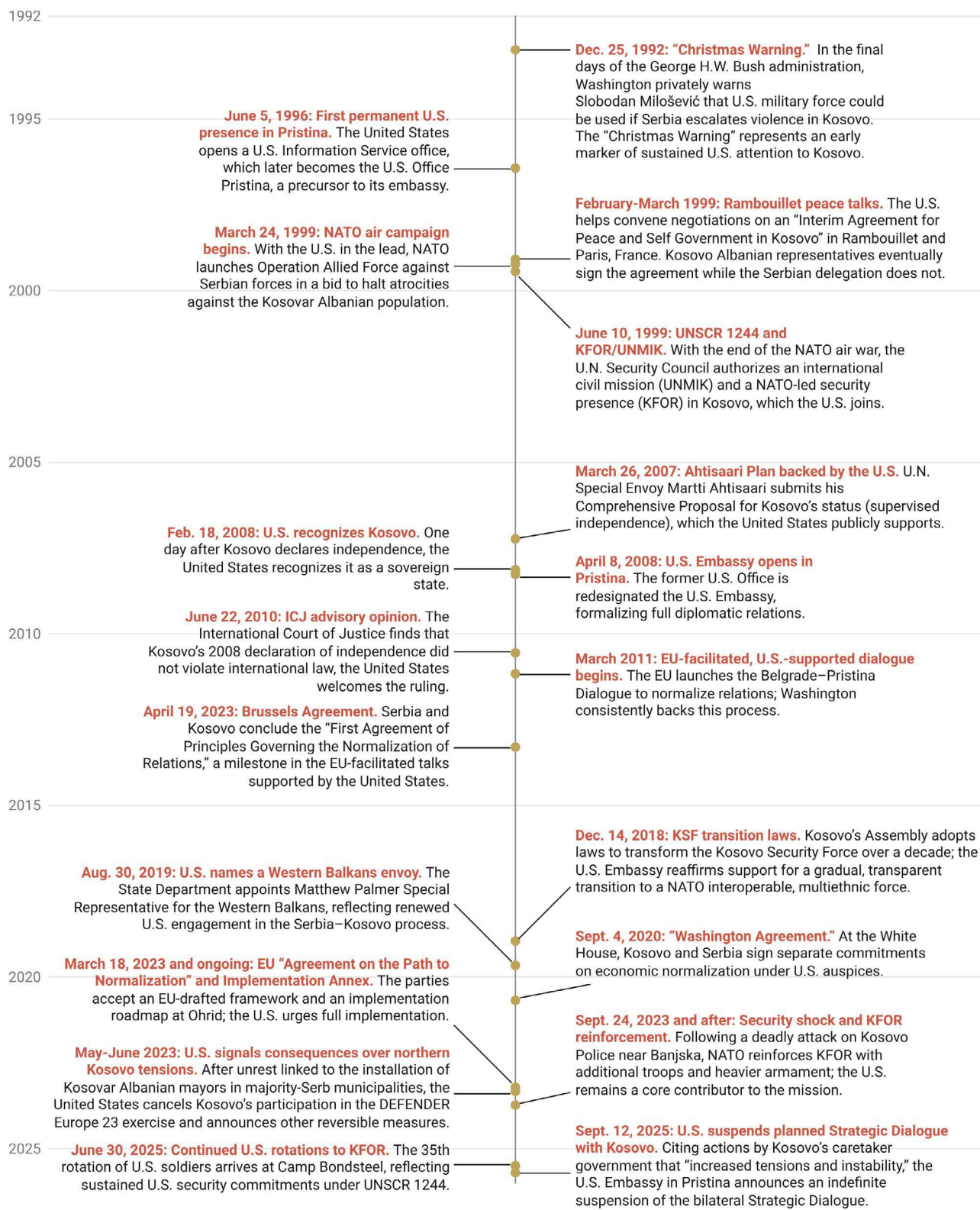


Chart: 2025, New Lines Institute • Source: The New York Times; U.S. Embassy in Kosovo; U.S. Department of State; Jstor.org, Hosmer, S., & Monica, S. (2001). The Conflict Over Kosovo. Why Milošević Decided to Settle When He Did; NATO; United Nations Peacekeeping; OSCE; NBC News; International Court of Justice; European Union External Action; United Nations; Balkan Insight; Radio Free Europe; CNN; BBC News; AP News; Defense Visual Information Distribution Service; U.S. Embassy Pristina • Created with Datawrapper



Contact

For media inquiries, email
media@newlinesinstitute.org

To learn more about New Lines'
publication process, email
submissions@newlinesinstitute.org

For other inquiries, send an email to
info@newlinesinstitute.org

A: 1660 L St. NW, Ste. 450
Washington, D.C., 20036

P: (202) 800-7302