



Visa regime for Kosovo: Will the EU end this long suffering?

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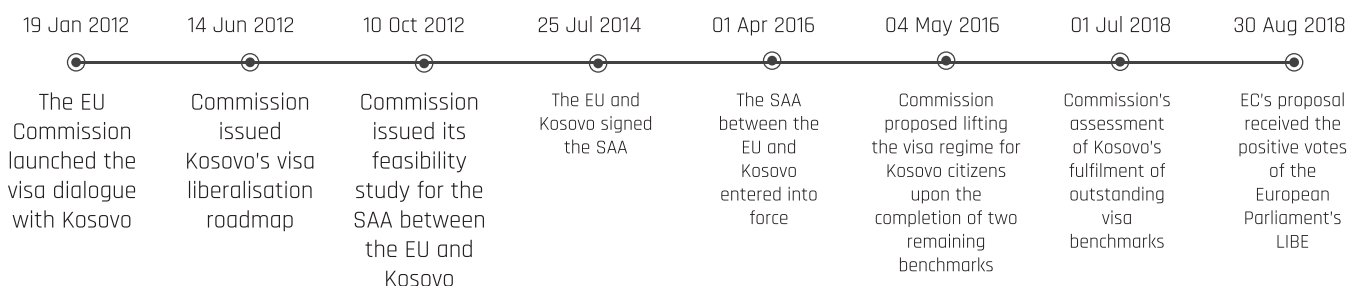
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Visa regime for Kosovo: Will the EU end this long suffering?

Ten years after the launch of the visa dialogue and four years from the implementation of benchmarks, Kosovo is still waiting for a visa-free regime with the EU.¹ In the last decade, Kosovo has achieved notable progress in fulfilling a long list of requirements related to migration, security, and the fight against organised crime and corruption, but most importantly has met the unprecedented condition of the border demarcation with Montenegro.² Yet again, Kosovars continue to wait in long queues in front of the embassies [of the EU/Schengen Zone countries] to obtain a visa.³

The rest of the Western Balkans are reaping the benefits of visa liberalisation for over a decade now. Kosovo, on the other hand, only began the visa dialogue in January 2012. The country was given a comprehensive Visa Liberalisation Roadmap with 95 criteria, covering the areas of Readmission and Reintegration, Document Security, Border and Migration Management, Public Order and Security, and Fundamental Rights related to Freedom of Movement.⁴ Disregarding the fact that it had to fulfil twice as many criteria as other Western Balkan countries (Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro with around 40-45 criteria), Kosovo remains the only isolated country in the region. The non-recognition by five member states (MS) of the European Union posed an additional burden in this regard: Kosovo had to sign bilateral readmission agreements with individual or groups of member states instead of with the EU as a whole (18 agreements with 20 EU/Schengen countries).⁵ In addition, unlike its neighbours, Kosovo was never offered visa facilitation agreement which would provide the visa applicants with simpler procedures (e.g. reduction of the visa fee, issuance of multiple-entry visas for specific categories of applicants, and shorter processing times).⁶



Source: [European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission.](#)⁷

Following the launch of the visa dialogue, the European Commission (EC/Commission) adopted three reports on Kosovo's progress on the visa dialogue (8 February 2013, 24 July 2014, and 18 December 2015). The fourth report (4 May 2016) came with the proposal to lift the visa regime for Kosovo citizens upon the completion of two remaining benchmarks - the ratification of the border demarcation agreement with Montenegro and the strengthened track record in the fight against crime and corruption.⁸

After the completion of two outstanding requirements, the Commission gave the long-awaited green light for visa liberalisation for Kosovo citizens in July 2018.⁹ In the following month, EC's proposal received the positive votes of the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), at the same time marking the opening of inter-institutional negotiations on the completion of the process.¹⁰

1 Balkans Group report, Kosovo's Long Delayed Path to Visa-Free Travel, 22 April 2018.

2 Kosovo Report 2021, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 19 October 2021, at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2021_en.

3 Consolidated text: Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement, at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02018R1806-20210101>.

4 Visa Liberalisation with Kosovo* Roadmap, 2012, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/visa_liberalisation_with_kosovo_roadmap.pdf.

5 Visa Liberalization: Kosovo's Saga on the EU Path, KFOS, at <https://kfos.org/en/publications/114/visa-liberalization-kosovos-saga-eu-path>.

6 In 2007, Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro signed Facilitation agreements with the EU. Facilitation agreements were part of the readmission agreements that each country had to sign with the EU countries to allow them to return migrants that have illegally arrived to their countries of origin or transit. European Commission, at https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa/visa-policy_en.

7 For more, see https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/kosovo_en.

8 European Commission proposes visa-free travel for the people of Kosovo, European Commission Press Release, 4 May 2016, Brussels. The EC's proposal refers to a change of Regulation (EC) 1806/2018 (to be adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union) that moves Kosovo under the Annex of visa-free entities.

9 Visa Liberalisation: EC Confirms Kosovo Fulfils All Required Benchmarks, EEAS Website, 18 July 2018, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/48608_en.

10 European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), Twitter, 30 August 2018, at https://twitter.com/EP_Justice/status/1035089993683886081.

With 420 votes pro, 186 against, and 20 abstentions, the European Parliament (EP/Parliament) confirmed its willingness to move on this issue, yet the change of regulation failed to receive the Council of the European Union (Council)'s qualified majority votes.¹¹

The visa liberalisation perspective for the Western Balkans (WB) derives from the Thessaloniki Summit of 10 June 2003, which affirmed WB countries' EU perspective and laid the foundations for their eventual visa-free travel to Europe.¹²

"The EU is aware of the importance the people and governments in the Western Balkans attach to the perspective of liberalisation of the visa regime. Meanwhile, progress is dependent on these countries implementing major reforms in areas such as the strengthening of the rule of law, combating organised crime, corruption and illegal migration, and strengthening their administrative capacity in border control and security of documents".¹³

A lost momentum and a revived hope

Having missed the momentum to receive visa liberalisation in a package, alongside Georgia and Ukraine in 2018, Kosovo's request has since fallen on deaf ears.¹⁴ The domestic political crisis over the border demarcation with Montenegro, in addition to the disagreements on the dialogue process with Serbia, have contributed to 'missing the train'.¹⁵ In addition, the scepticism of few EU member states on the reliability of Kosovo's fight against corruption and the enlargement fatigue have unjustly prolonged the process.¹⁶

The Commission has continuously maintained the July 2018 position that Kosovo has fulfilled all its visa liberalisation benchmarks, particularly during the recent talks on the possibility of introducing an additional roadmap for Kosovo.¹⁷ Yet, the Commission and the European Parliament did not manage to convince the Council so far, reflecting a severe disharmony within the EU.

After the war in Ukraine and the emerging security threats, the tables have turned and the EU's interest in the Western Balkans has increased. Seeing how easily decades of peacebuilding efforts can fail, and the immediate necessity to keep WB and Eastern Partnership countries closer, the EU is reviving its enlargement perspective once again. The application of Ukraine and Moldova for a fast-track accession to the EU is an evident indicator that such procedures and decisions are often more political than technical.¹⁸

For Kosovo, the EU must pass the first big test by lifting the visa regime for its citizens to prevent its dropping credibility within the country.¹⁹ More importantly, Kosovo -with the new government in place- has continued to make additional progress in the fight against organised crime and corruption, to convince the reluctant member states of its commitment in this area.

11 Jozwiak, Rikard. European Parliament Votes in Favor of Talks on Visa Liberalization for Kosovo, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 13 September 2018, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/european-parliament-votes-in-favor-of-talks-on-visa-liberalization-for-kosovo/29487932.html>. Voting System, Council of the European Union, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/voting-system/qualified-majority/>.

12 Thessaloniki Agenda, Western Balkans Council Conclusions, 16 June 2003, at <http://www.pascal-hector.de/Vertiefung-Erweiterung-Dateien/14a-ER-2003%20Thessaloniki-Agenda-Westlicher-Balkan.pdf>.

13 Thessaloniki Agenda, Western Balkans Council Conclusions, 16 June 2003, at <http://www.pascal-hector.de/Vertiefung-Erweiterung-Dateien/14a-ER-2003%20Thessaloniki-Agenda-Westlicher-Balkan.pdf>.

14 Balkans Group report, Kosovo's Long Delayed Path to Visa-Free Travel, 22 April 2018.

15 Kosovo Government Falls over Border Demarcation Deal with Montenegro, Euroactiv, 11 May 2017, at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/kosovo-government-falls-over-border-demarcation-deal-with-montenegro/>.

16 The Netherlands against Visa Liberalization amid Skepticism on Corruption Fight, Euronews Albania, 4 June 2021, at <https://euronews.al/en/kosovo/2021/06/04/the-netherlands-against-visa-liberalization-amid-skepticism-on-corruption-fight-reports-local-media/>.

17 Liberalizimi i vizave - Komisioni Evropian thotë se nuk do të ketë udhërrëfyes shtesë për Kosovën, Telegrafi, 28 June 2022, at <https://telegafi.com/liberalizimi-vizave-komisioni-evropian-thote-se-nuk-te-kete-udherrefyese-shtese-per-kosoven/>. EU Commission maintained the same position in the Country Reports from 2018-2021.

18 EU Commission's Recommendations for Ukraine's EU candidate status, EEAS, 17 June 2022, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/eu-commissions-recommendations-ukraines-eu-candidate-status_en?s=232.

19 Balkans Group interviews with citizens and businesses, August-September 2022.

- o **13.4%** increase in **police raids** in 2021 compared to 2020;²⁰
- o **75%** increase in **disrupting organised crime groups**;²¹
- o An **85%** increase in **indictments for economic crimes and corruption** compared to the previous year;²²
- o A newly-established tracking mechanism for high-level corruption and organised crime cases. The number of targeted cases has increased from 31 in 2016 to 82 in 2022;²³
- o Ranked the **first in the Western Balkans** by the World Justice Report on Rule of Law;²⁴
- o Improved its position in Transparency International Index by 17 places/ and **second-best scoring country in the Western Balkans**;²⁵
- o **726 new cases were initiated** with 792 persons arrested and 541 indictments against 738 suspected persons in the area of **prevention and fighting drugs**.²⁶
- o **A drop in readmission cases** from 1536 in 2019 to 849 in 2021.²⁷

Moreover, the number of asylum seekers has decreased from 4,720 in 2018 to 2,345 in 2021, which is another piece of good news for the EU.²⁸

In this climate of revived hopes (in June 2022) as the scepticism of some EU MS is fading, the EP called -again- on the Council to urgently lift visa requirements for Kosovo.²⁹ The government received more encouraging remarks from Poland's, France's, and Germany's joint declaration on 16 September 2022, displaying a positive change of position, especially from France's side.³⁰

“We call for progress regarding the visa liberalisation for Kosovo. Our countries are strongly committed to the Berlin Process as an additional means to foster regional cooperation and EU accession of the Western Balkan countries; we highlight the importance of implementing the historic decision by the six Western Balkan countries to create a Common Regional Market”.

The Netherlands which was also in sync with France regarding WB's European integration perspective has reflected a changed stance.³¹ Now that the chances are in favour of positive development during the Czech Presidency of the Council, owing to their declared commitment to push Kosovo's visa liberalisation forward, Kosovo is eagerly waiting for the meeting of the Visa Working Party of 13 October 2022.³²

After the June 2022 EU Summit, there is overall readiness among EU MS to move forward on the issue.³³ In August and September Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG Home) in cooperation with DG NEAR assessed Kosovo's progress on meeting the benchmarks.³⁴ Their report -in a shape of a technical non paper- will serve as the baseline for opening discussions on the visa-free regime for Kosovo during the Visa Working Party's meeting (13 October 2022), where COWEB (The Working Party on the Western Balkans Region) is also invited.³⁵

20 Raporti Vjetor i Punës i Policisë së Kosovës, Janar-Dhjetor 2021, at https://www.kosovopolic.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/RAPORTI-VJETOR-I-PUN%C3%8BS-I-POLICIS%C3%8B-S%C3%8B-KOSOV%C3%8BS_shqip.pdf.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 WJP Rule of Law Index, at <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/Kosovo>.

25 Corruption Perception Index, Transparency International, at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/ksv>.

26 Raporti Vjetor i Punës i Policisë së Kosovës, Janar-Dhjetor 2021, at https://www.kosovopolic.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/RAPORTI-VJETOR-I-PUN%C3%8BS-I-POLICIS%C3%8B-S%C3%8B-KOSOV%C3%8BS_shqip.pdf.

27 Data from the Government of Kosovo, September 2022.

28 Data from the Office of the Prime Minister, September 2022.

29 European Parliament Adopts Reports on BiH, Kosovo and Serbia, European Western Balkans, 6 July 2022, at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/07/06/european-parliament-adopts-reports-on-bih-kosovo-and-serbia/>.

30 Joint Statement by the Ministers for European Affairs of the Weimar Triangle, German Federal Foreign Office, 16 September 2022, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/weimar-triangle/2552384?fbclid=IwAR39cQvvtjb1PzpsnA8ozrykeRwSt4Kut6IKpCqP0lavbPBjKAZ04mGMikw>.

31 Holanda jep sinjale pozitive për liberalizimin e vizave për Kosovën, Telegrafi, 22 June 2022, at <https://telegrafi.com/holanda-ndryshon-disponim-per-liberalizimin-e-vizave-per-kosoven/>.

32 Balkans Group interview with the office of the Prime Minister, September 2022, Prishtina.

33 Balkans Group interview with the office of the Prime Minister, September 2022, Prishtina.

34 Ibid. The Government of Kosovo sent a detailed technical input to the EU Commission (DG HOME), on the 12 August 2022, as an Update Report on the EU Visa Roadmap covering years 2018-2022 and showing positive trends in all chapters of visa roadmap.

35 Balkans Group interview with the Office of the Prime Minister, September 2022, Prishtina. Liberalizimi i vizave për Kosovën në rend dite në BE më 13 tetor - në rast të vendimit pozitiv, kur do të mundën qytetarët të udhëtojnë pa viza, Telegrafi, 27 September 2022, at <https://telegrafi.com/liberalizimi-vizave-per-kosoven-ne-rend-dite-ne-13-tetor-ne-rast-te-vendimit-pozitiv-kur-do-tu-munden-qytetaret-te-udhetojne-pa-viza/>.

Through this report, EC confirms Kosovo's progress in key areas (as identified in the Visa Liberalisation roadmap) and by evoking its 2018 recommendation on visa liberalisation for Kosovo, calls on MS to exempt Kosovo nationals from short-stay visa requirements.³⁶

Still, some of non-recognisers (notably Spain and Cyprus) who refuse to accept Kosovo passports have not spoken yet.³⁷ Therefore, the EU should insist on applying the SAA's modality for Kosovo and prevent any state from derogating.

The meeting of 13 October is critical for Kosovo as it can finally press the resume button to its process of visa liberalisation. However, the procedure does not end here. Once the Visa Working Party and the Working Group for the Western Balkans region – COWEB reach a consensus, a set of actions and procedures will follow, which can take up to a few months.³⁸

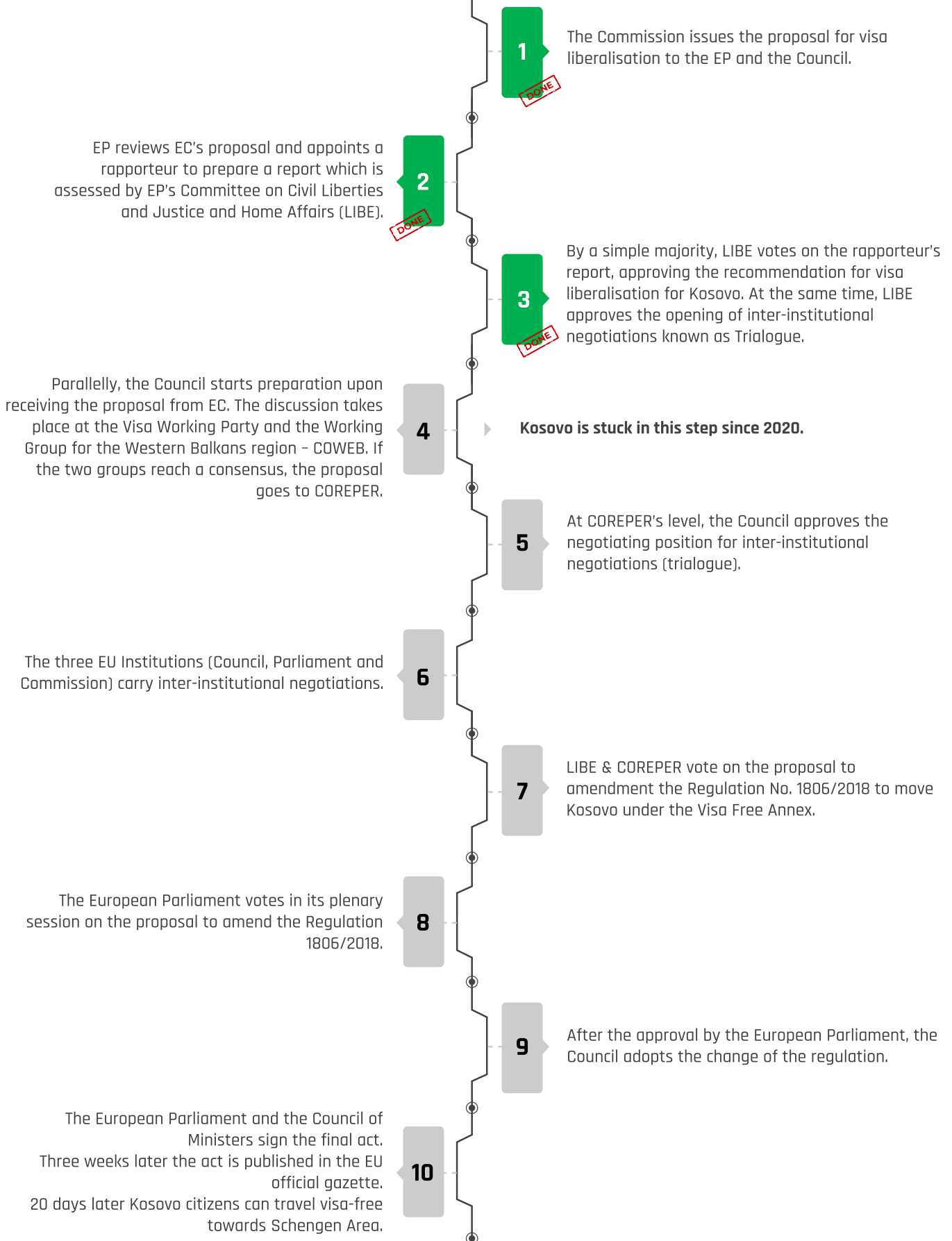
³⁶ Balkans Group interview with the Office of the Prime Minister, September 2022.

³⁷ Balkans Group correspondence with an EU official in Brussels, 07 October 2022.

³⁸ Balkans Group interview with the Office of the Prime Minister, September 2022, Prishtina.

10 STEPS TO KOSOVO'S VISA LIBERALISATION

7 Steps remain incomplete



Source: Schengen Visa News

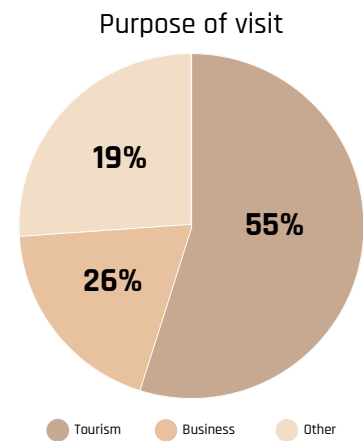
Green steps show actions/procedures that are completed.
Gray steps show actions/procedures that are still pending.

The price of moving [freely] to the EU

Four years after the European Commission's report on Kosovo's fulfilment of visa benchmarks, Kosovars still cope with lengthy and costly procedures to attain a short-stay visa to travel to EU countries. When Kosovo signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2015, the latter made strong statements on how this agreement will put Kosovo on the path of sustainable economic growth and lead to in-demand jobs for its citizens.³⁹ But without the free movement of people, Kosovo could not make the most of the free movement of goods and services that came through its SAA.

Despite the promises, it is the EU and the individual member states who continued to question Kosovo's worthiness of visa liberalisation, leaving one of the most pro-European populations in despair.⁴⁰ The small landlocked country of Kosovo, located in South-Eastern Europe, is the most isolated country on the continent today. It has a population of no more than 1.8 million, and the highest share of young people among EU candidate and potential candidate countries.⁴¹

Data from the Balkans Group's survey (including 220 respondents) shows that Kosovars are financially and psychologically affected by visa regime that has unjustly limited their opportunities in comparison to their neighbours.⁴² When asked about the purpose of their visit, 60% of respondents reported travelling for tourism, 29% for business and 19% for other reasons.

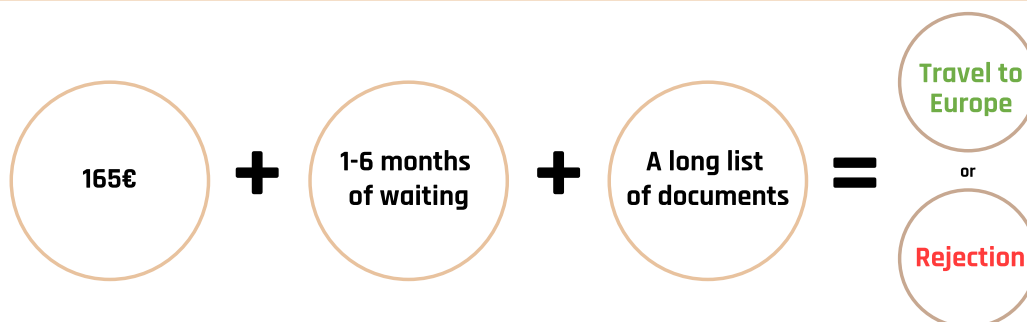


Germany's VisaMetric charges 30€ for appointment and 30€ for passport delivery by mail.³⁹

Based on the respondents' answers, a Kosovo citizen pays an average price of 165€ to obtain a visa, which in most cases covers a very short stay in Schengen Zone countries.

The cost is increased if the applicant hires an agency to provide the necessary assistance with the application and/or to schedule a fast visa appointment, which results in additional charges varying between 20 to 300€. Furthermore, the key embassies that issue the largest number of Schengen visas have contracted service providers -TLS contact for Switzerland or VisaMetric for Germany to deal with the short-stay visa applications for their respective countries. As if visa fees were not enough, these service providers charge extra for an appointment and/or passport delivery by mail.

“Some respondents, mainly family members, reported to have paid a separate fee for each passport delivery by mail even when all of their passports were delivered through a single package to their receiving address.”



³⁹ Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between the European Union and Kosovo signed, Council of the European Union, 27 October 2015, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/10/27/kosovo-eu-stabilisation-association-agreement/>.

⁴⁰ France, Germany and Netherlands opposed visa liberalization, RTK Live, 13 July 2020, at <https://www.rtklive.com/en/news-single.php?ID=17031>.

⁴¹ Enlargement countries - population statistics, Eurostat, at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_population_statistics

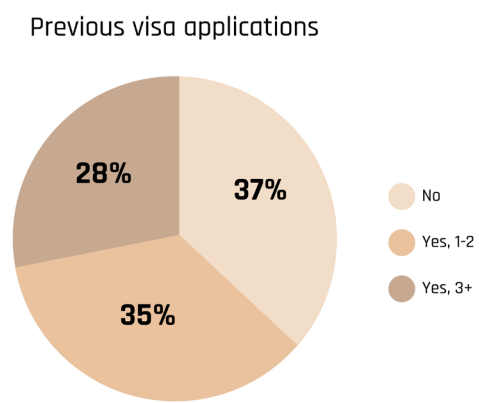
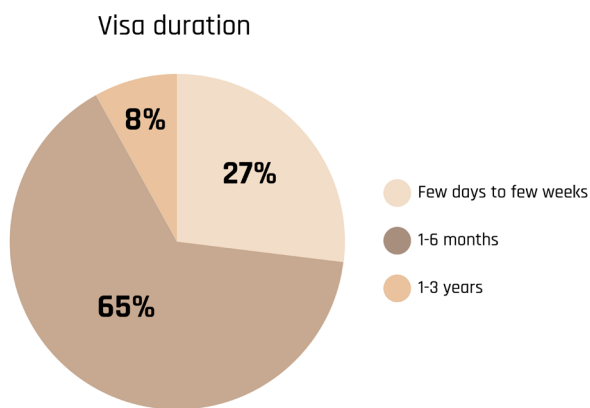
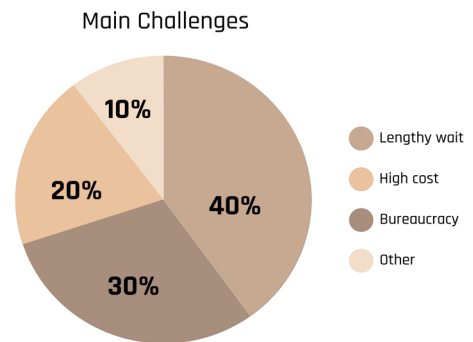
⁴² Balkans Group has conducted a survey with Kosovo citizens applying for a visa near the consular services of the Foreign Embassies in Kosovo (EU countries). The survey provides information only for short -stay visa applications. The gathered information aims to better reflect on citizens' material and non-material damages as a result of the prolongation of the visa liberalisation process. The survey was conducted in the form of face-to-face interviews by a group of field researchers, from 19 to 26 September 2022, in Prishtina. The questions were open ended, allowing respondents to voice their opinions without limitations. The survey involved a total of 220 respondents, whose perceptions are analysed and presented throughout this Chapter: The Price of the Movement to Europe. The data presented in this chapter solely represents the perceptions of the respondents and aims to shed light on some of the main challenges that Kosovars face to obtain visa.

⁴³ For VisaMetric's fees, see <https://www.visametric.com/Kosovo/Germany/en/p/fees>. For TLS's fees, see https://ch.tlscontact.com/xk/prn/page.php?pid=application_fees.

Taking into account factors such as embassies' unresponsiveness, the application fee and the lengthy wait to set an appointment, citizens willingly pay any other added amount, in hopes to minimise the chances of rejections due to potential procedural errors.

The financial aspect is not the only burden, regardless of how heavy it can be. Some of the main grievances that the vast majority of respondents listed during the visa application process are as follows:

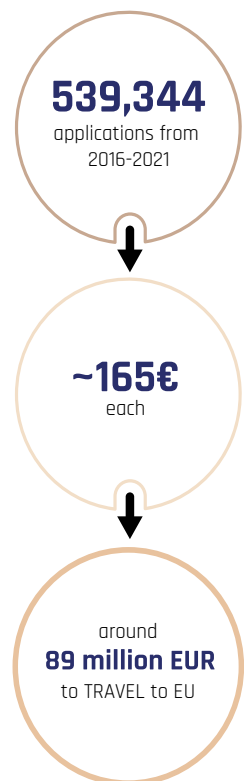
- A waiting time of 1- 6 months for setting a visa appointment;
- Long waiting hours for the submission of documents;
- The high application cost;
- The short validity of the issued visa (of a few days to a few weeks);
- Unreasonable rejections;
- A long list of documents to be submitted for every application;
- Improper information regarding all the necessary documents/procedures;
- Unresponsiveness of the embassy/consular services regarding information or questions.



A regular procedure to obtain a Schengen visa for a Kosovar takes from 1 to 6 months on average. Exceptionally, when applying at Croatia's and Bulgaria's consular services that do not issue Schengen, the procedure takes around 1 to 6 weeks. Accordingly, for a student to attend a conference or a businessman to participate in a fair, planning ahead is necessary (which is not always possible to do). But, once the high probability of having the visa rejected enters the equation, especially for first-timers, the result is a high discouragement to pursue an opportunity beyond the region. Or in the other quite frequent scenario, the duration of the issued visa is so short that just a change of date [of the event or flight] might jeopardize the whole plan. Consequently, Kosovars end up going through the same bureaucratic procedure more than once a year, which has material and non-material costs for them.

Despite these unprecedented challenges, the consular services of the EU countries in Prishtina have received around 539344 applications between 2016 and 2021.⁴⁴ If the average cost for each application is around 165€, Kosovo citizens have spent a total of **89 million EUR** to travel to the EU in the last 6 years. This amount is quite gigantic for a country with a GDP of 4,986\$ per Capita (in 2021) and an average salary of 484€ (in 2021).⁴⁵

The amount seems even greater when the receiving end is the EU (Member States), the one which is the largest provider of funds and financial assistance to Kosovo, aiding the country to fulfil the EU accession criteria through deep and comprehensive reforms.⁴⁶



44 Data from Embassies of the EU/ Schengen Zone countries in Prishtina, August-September 2022.

45 GDP per Capita- Capita, The World Bank, at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=XK>. Niveli i Pagave në Kosovë, 2021, Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, at <https://ask.rks-gov.net/sq/agjencia-e-statistikave-te-kosoves/add-news/niveli-i-pagave-ne-kosove-2021>.

46 EU Projects with Kosovo, EEAS, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/410741_hy?s=321. The EU from 2007-2020 has invested more than 1.5 billion euros in Kosovo.

Kosovo will receive 63.96 million euros from the new IPA III Framework (2021-2027).⁴³

Most recently, the EU is sending positive signals for Kosovo's visa liberalisation, but can Kosovars forgive the EU for the last years of isolation?! What about the lost opportunities and hopes?!

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	TOTAL
Belgian Office							
Embassy of Austria							
Embassy of Bulgaria	6728	5986	5507	6235	3859	6560	34875
Embassy of Croatia	2717	3414	5019	9557	4804	6221	29015
Embassy of the Czech Republic	No data						5282
Embassy of Finland	1450	2723	3927	3158	516	1561	13335
French Embassy							
German Embassy	26609	29838	32529	32529	9531	18707	161077
Embassy of Hungary	5278	6675	4013	4013	627	291	19816
Italian Embassy	5960	5711	5657	5657	1331	1400	25702
Embassy of the Netherlands							
Embassy of Slovenia	3683	4440	4692	4692	1049	798	19187
Swedish Embassy	4240	6611	8951	8951	2328	690	34010
Embassy of Switzerland	25739	30504	30712	30712	9732	17277	153509
Hellenic Liaison Office	6364	7427	6922	6922	1746	4599	34662
Royal Norwegian Embassy	2341	2957	2205	2205	1	No data	8874
Luxembourg Embassy							
Liaison Office of Slovakia	371	200	183	183	33	33	954
All consulates							539344

Free movement of goods and services with no free movement of people

In 2015, Kosovo signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU, as an important milestone in their bilateral relations.⁴⁸ From an economic perspective, SAA is the backbone of strengthened economic integration between Kosovo and the EU, aimed to create trade and investment opportunities and much-needed job prospects for its citizens, especially the youth.⁴⁹

European Union functions as a single market of 27 member states, and four EEA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein Norway and Switzerland), guaranteeing a free movement of goods, services, capital, and people between them. For aspiring countries, which are not able to enjoy these benefits yet such as the Western Balkans, the EU has launched the Stabilisation and Association Process to grant them limited participation in the EU single market.⁵⁰

By enabling the free movement of services and goods, the SAA 'granted' Kosovo businesses the right to access 500 million consumers in the 27 member states of the EU. From the agreement's entry into force, the EU abolished customs duties for all of Kosovo's industrial products, leading to zero (0) customs tariffs for their export.⁵¹ The same applied to agricultural products, with the exception of meat, vines, and fish products which are subject to quota limitations.⁵²

Kosovo's goods and services are primarily exported to Germany, Slovenia, Greece, Croatia, Romania, Italy, France, Hungary, Slovakia, Finland, Austria, and Switzerland, and the amount of export over total production varies; some companies export 100% of the total production, others 50% to 80%, and some only 10%.⁵³

47 The European Union Office in Kosovo, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kosovo/eu-and-kosovo_en?s=321.

48 Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between the European Union and Kosovo signed, Council of the EU Website, 27 October 2015, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/10/27/kosovo-eu-stabilisation-association-agreement/>.

49 European Parliament, MEPs ratify EU-Kosovo Association Agreement, at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20160114IPR09905/meps-ratify-eu-kosovo-association-agreement#:~:text=The%20European%20Parliament%20gave%20its%20consent%20to%20the, and%20economic%20integration%20between%20the%20EU%20and%20Kosovo](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20160114IPR09905/meps-ratify-eu-kosovo-association-agreement#:~:text=The%20European%20Parliament%20gave%20its%20consent%20to%20the, and%20economic%20integration%20between%20the%20EU%20and%20Kosovo.). Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between the European Union and Kosovo signed, Council of the EU Website, 27 October 2015.

50 The four freedoms of the European Union, at <https://www.grin.com/document/339299>.

51 SAA, Chapter 1, article 22

52 SAA, Chapter II, article 28. The export of wine is exempted from the customs fee up to a quota limit of 40,000 hectoliters for grape wine and 10,000 hectoliters for sparkling wine. The customs duty does not apply for fish products up to a volume of 15 tons per trout and 20 tons for carp per year. Quota limitations only apply to up to 475 tons of meat (calf/ baby beef) per year.

53 Interview with representatives from exporting companies in goods and services sectors, August, September 2022.

However, while Kosovo's goods and services can move freely, its citizens can't, and this is negatively affecting the overall implementation of trade exchanges between Kosovo and the EU. The visa regime is also having a domino effect on businesses that cannot take full advantage of the economic benefits of SAA. Consequently, compared to their peers in the region, Kosovo companies are at a disadvantage and subject to lower opportunities.

Kosovar companies, surveyed by the Balkans Group, consider that the **visa regime has negatively affected their turnover by 15-50%**.⁵⁴

Country	Launch of the visa dialogue	Entry into force of SAA	Visa-free regime
Albania	01 Jan 2008	01 Apr 2009	15 Dec 2010
Bosnia and Herzegovina	01 Jan 2008	01 Jun 2015	15 Dec 2010
Kosovo	19 Jan 2012	01 Apr 2016	-
Montenegro	01 Jan 2008	01 May 2010	19 Dec 2009
North Macedonia	01 Jan 2008	01 Apr 2004	19 Dec 2009
Serbia	01 Jan 2008	01 Sep 2013	19 Dec 2009

Source: European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission

With all the difficulties deriving from the visa regime, Kosovo's exports continue to increase. In 2021 the export of goods was 749.7 million euros from which 242.3 million is to EU countries or 32.3% of total exports. Import of goods on the other hand, in the same year (2021) reached 4.65 billion euros.⁵⁵ In contrary to goods, services are performing much better. In 2021, the export of services was 1.95 billion euros while the import was 870.7 million euros.⁵⁶ As for the Foreign Direct Investments, it reached 415.3 million euros from which 384.7 or 92.6% are in real estate activities that can mainly be attributed to the diaspora's expenditure on the property.⁵⁷

Year	Trade in Goods		Trade in Services		Foreign Direct Investments (million euro)
	Export (million euro)	Import (million euro)	Export (million euro)	Import (million euro)	
2021	739.7	4652.7	1954.4	870.7	415.3

Some of the main reasons for Kosovo businesses to necessitate traveling to EU countries are:

- Participation in business fairs;
- Participation in professional training; and
- B2B meetings.

Other equally important reasons that require travelling to EU countries might be:

- better or constant coordination with clients;
- being in close proximity to the emerging problems;
- conducting face-to-face meetings with potential clients;
- exploring new developments in international trade;
- following new trends and innovations in the given sector, etc.

While the visa regime has clearly played its part in businesses' access to numerous opportunities, some sectors are more affected than others.

Obtaining a visa for business purposes takes approximately 30-90 days and costs approximately 140-200 EUR.

A Kosovo company that exports products/services to EU countries applies for a Schengen visa on regular basis (within a year). The application process, from setting an appointment to obtaining a visa, takes approximately 30-90 days and a fee of 140-200 euros.⁵⁸

54 Ibid

55 Data from Trade Department, Ministry of Industry, Entrepreneurship and Trade, Republic of Kosovo, July 2022.

56 Data from Central Bank of Kosovo

57 Ibid

58 Interview with representatives from exporting companies in goods and services sectors, August, September 2022.

Data from the Balkans Group's interviews with Kosovo businesses show an interesting trend. The duration of the issued visa -most of the time- is depended on the applicant's job position. Consequently, the higher the position in the company, the greater the chances of being granted a longer validity of the visa. There are cases, however, when even management positions are granted visas of only a few days' validity.⁵⁹

In addition to this, none of the embassies in the Schengen zone has simplified procedures for business purposes. The Embassy of Germany has on one side complicated the appointment procedure (three to four months of waiting for an appointment) but has at least extended the validity of issued visas (of three to five years).⁶⁰

DMEXCO, Cologne, Germany (21-22 September 2022)

Some Kosovo companies providing information technology services were provided with an exhibition space at DMEXCO- Europe's leading international trade fair for digital marketing and advertising- by the Ministry of Industry, Entrepreneurship and Trade (MIET)/ Kosovo Investments and Enterprise Support Agency in Kosovo (KIESA).

This golden opportunity for Kosovo companies to establish contacts with large companies in the IT sector resulted in a big disappointment as most of the participants could not make visa appointments on time for the fair.⁶¹

Finding new partners is always a huge challenge for a Kosovo company as it requires constant and unplanned travels to specific countries. In most cases, the exported products to the countries of Schengen Zone have additional procedures such as the launch or instalment in the country of destination. To avoid bureaucratic visa procedures, Kosovo companies often contract service providers [in the country of destination] to perform these services on their behalf. This increases the product's market price, making Kosovo companies less competitive in comparison to their peers in the region.⁶²

In addition, companies often need to meet different clients -to provide customer support- in exporting countries. The nature of such meetings calls for more flexibility and for as long as Kosovo companies cannot meet this standard, their relationship with customers and partners is often jeopardised.⁶³

The visa regime has called for an outdated practice of training in Kosovo. To avoid lengthy and costly visa application procedures, companies are improvising by hiring foreign mentors to train their staff in Kosovo.⁶⁴ Regardless, Kosovo companies believe that benefits of this practice are not comparable to those of the trainings held abroad (i.e. country where the product/service is launched). By having access to advanced markets, meeting and interacting with industry's leading companies, and exchanging views and practices with people beyond the border, employees can better strengthen their capacities and transfer the know-how.

The visa regime is also affecting the relations with partners and clients in EU countries and is limiting the innovation opportunities for Kosovo businesses. Each unattended meeting has its share of negative upshots in a company's export growth as it minimizes future partnerships and cooperation opportunities.⁶⁵

Meetings are usually planned long ahead. However, at times the circumstances require unplanned trips to an EU country, especially during the launching of the product or participation in an important event.⁶⁶ There are other cases that due to their nature of work, require constant mobility of staff.⁶⁷

All these challenges indicate that the visa regime has placed Kosovo companies at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts in the region who are able to offer more competitive prices and maintain constant contacts with the costumers/clients.

59 Ibid

60 Ibid

61 Interview with a representative of a company in the ICT sector, September, Prishtina.

62 Interview with a representative from an exporting company in the sector of metal, 19 August 2022.

63 Interview with a representative from an exporting company in the sector of metal, 25 August 2022.

64 Ibid

65 Interview with a representative from an exporting company in the sector of fruits, 18 August 2022.

66 Interview with a representative from an exporting company in the ICT sector 1 September 2022.

67 In these cases, companies in Kosovo are forced to contract staff from the region, which many times results in deficiencies due to incompetence. Interview with a representative from an exporting company in the ICT sector, 5 September 2022.

Although Kosovo's goods and services are granted free access to the EU single market, owing to the lack of free movement of people/business community, Kosovo never managed to utilise the full potential of its SAA. The free movement of goods and services is impractical without a free movement of people. The fact that the visa regime was not abolished regardless of Kosovo's fulfilment of visa requirements, shows that such decisions are purely political. So, whatever the EU does next, it cannot fully compensate for the material and non-material losses that the visa regime has had for the Kosovars over the last several years.

While visa liberalisation would offer new opportunities for Kosovo's businesses by increasing their export growth, some are concerned about the brain-drain. Interestingly, businesses don't necessarily see it as a threat. The interviewed businesses are, in fact, convinced that it might have a negative effect at first, but it eventually will open perspectives for young people and entrepreneurs to learn directly from the EU's best practices and know-how and to bring new business-doing experiences to Kosovo.

Annex I. The list of third countries whose nationals are exempt from the short-stay visa regime

LIST OF THIRD COUNTRIES WHOSE NATIONALS ARE EXEMPT FROM THE SHORT-STAY VISA REGIME			
1. Northern Macedonia	17. Dominica	33. Mauritius	49. Timor-Leste
2. Andorra	18. Micronesia	34. Mexico	50. Tonga
3. United Arab Emirates	19. Grenada	35. Malaysia	51. Trinidad and Tobago
4. Antigua and Barbuda	20. Georgia	36. Nicaragua	52. Tuvalu
5. Albania	21. Guatemala	37. Nauru	53. Ukraine
6. Argentina	22. Honduras	38. New Zealand	54. United Kingdom (excluding British nationals as referred to in Part 3)
7. Australia	23. Israel	39. Panama	55. United States
8. Bosnia and Herzegovina	24. Japan	40. Peru	56. Uruguay
9. Barbados	25. Kiribati	41. Palau	57. Holy See
10. Brunei	26. Saint Kitts and Nevis	42. Paraguay	58. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
11. Brazil	27. South Korea	43. Serbia	59. Venezuela
12. Bahamas	28. Saint Lucia	44. Solomon Islands	60. Vanuatu
13. Canada	29. Monaco	45. Seychelles	61. Samoa
14. Chile	30. Moldova	46. Singapore	
15. Colombia	31. Montenegro	47. San Marino	
16. Costa Rica	32. Marshall Islands	48. El Salvador	
SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA			
62. Hong Kong SAR	63. Macao SAR		
BRITISH NATIONALS WHO ARE NOT BRITISH CITIZENS			
64. British nationals (Overseas)	65. British overseas territories citizens (BOTC)	66. British overseas citizens (BOC)	67. British protected persons (BPP)
68. British subjects (BS)			
ENTITIES AND TERRITORIAL AUTHORITIES THAT ARE NOT RECOGNISED AS STATES BY AT LEAST ONE MEMBER STATE			
69. Taiwan			

Source: Consolidated text: Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018.

The Balkans Policy Research Group is an independent, regional think-tank based in Pristina, Kosovo. We provide timely policy analysis and recommendations on a wide array of state building issues; institutional and democratic consolidation; minority integration and good neighborly relations; European integration and policy change. We have decades of experience in policy reporting and development, strategic thinking, and advocacy with governmental, international and non-governmental organizations. Our rigorous, detailed, impartial reporting, always based on-depth fieldwork, is the core of our work. We go beyond mainstream positions and seek to make change through creative, feasible, well-measured and forward-looking policy recommendations with the aim of helping develop strong, vibrant democracies, prosperous states and societies based on rule of law in the Western Balkans.

We engage in high-level advocacy, domestically, regionally and internationally, impacting policy discussions and options with regard to the home affairs and European policies toward the Western Balkans.

Balkans Group has developed other tools and platforms to achieve this change:

The Policy Dialogue promotes Kosovo's domestic dialogue, cohesion and reform-making agenda.

The Policy Forum (a Think-Tankers High-level Advocacy Forum) committed to enhancing the dialogue between the civil society and the institutions.

The Kosovo Serbia Policy Advocacy Group (a forum for Cross-Border Civil Society Cooperation) that aims to communicate, promote and enhance dialogue toward full normalization between Kosovo and Serbia, and their societies.

Women in Politics promotes the empowerment of women and girls; their security and inclusiveness; and is committed to strengthen the Women Caucus impact and reach throughout Kosovo.

Youth in Politics promotes an active participation from youth from different political parties in the institutions. The component helps in developing a culture of dialogue and cooperation, by providing capacity building trainings on key policy areas and skills and leadership.

The Dialogue Platform promotes the dialogue process between Kosovo and Serbia, by informing the wider public and generating debate about the agreements, benefits and challenges of the Dialogue.

Expert Support component provides policy support to the government and key institutions on key policy areas, peace and state- building agenda.



Norwegian Embassy

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