



Building Bridges to European Integration: Albania and Kosovo's Joint Efforts in the Balkans

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Abstract

This study aims to look at the joint efforts of Albania and Kosovo in enhancing European integration within the Balkans. It tries to figure out, through an analysis of the joint programs and strategic partnerships, the extent to which these initiatives help them realize their shared goal of EU membership and regional stability. *Prior Work:* Previous scholarship has looked mostly into individual tracks on how to integrate into Europe by analyzing the political, economic, and social reforms undertaken by Albania and Kosovo separately. Other studies have tried to identify challenges and opportunities for the Western Balkans in this regard of EU integration. Yet little is known about cooperative work between Albania and Kosovo, and what it means for the wider regional context represents a gap in this literature. *Key Findings:* The two countries have managed, as shown by these findings, to build such a framework of cooperation together with dimensions being diplomatic, economic, and even cultural. Cross-border infrastructure projects, policy reforms, and joint diplomacy as well as collaboration in regional and international initiatives have played a bigger part in lifting up their prospects for integration. The paper shows how important it is for these two countries to ally strategically in tackling common challenges, like issues of political instability within their territories, fostering economic development programs, and social cohesion that make up the key tenets upon which EU membership is anchored. *Value:* This paper is therefore important in providing an insightful analysis into how synergistic cooperation between Albania and Kosovo can be used to enhance European integration prospects. It underscores the role bilateral cooperation can play in ensuring regional stability on the path to EU membership. The paper provides insight into how other aspiring member states from the Balkans can use cooperative strategies to inform the broader European integration agenda from a disadvantaged region. *Future Longitudinal studies* should be done to assess the impact that such joint initiatives by Albania and Kosovo could have on their EU integration trajectories over time. *Comparative analyses* with other regional Balkan partnerships could give a more nuanced knowledge of best practices and lessons learned. Moreover, investigating how international organizations and external stakeholders support these bilateral agreements will further make a lot of sense in the academic discussion on European integration in the region.

Keywords: Building Bridges, European Integration, Joint Efforts, Balkans

1. Introduction

1.1 *Albania and Kosovo's Strategic Partnership*

Albania and Kosovo have a long-term strategic partnership. The former has a total of 41 accredited universities, while the latter has 39. Both countries are EU members and Bologna higher education system integrated. This strategic partnership will encourage regular educational programs based on the European Credit Transfer System. Considering them also as drivers for sustainable regional development and innovation within their third mission, they will be actively promoted. The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of both countries addressed regional sustainability challenges to a great extent: not only at an operational but also at a strategic research-led level (Meyer et al., 2018). This involved public-private partnerships in research and development fields and the provision of knowledge-based services for local business. Besides, entrepreneurship was enhanced. It also increased both countries' visibility in terms of research opportunities. For example, HEIs in Albania and Kosovo have collaborated to study the implications of climate change on their regions. Through such research, specific strategies have been developed on how to mitigate the effects of climate change in their communities and also opportunities for increasing resilience identified (Babuna, 2000). Secondly, the partnership has created a network of collaboration between Albanian and Kosovan HEIs, acting as a platform for the exchange of knowledge and resources to enable each country to benefit from the other's experience and expertise.

1.2 *What are the main objectives of the partnership between Albania and Kosovo?*

The partnership between Albania and Kosovo is a long-standing one and has provided stability to the region. This partnership is based on the mutual recognition of each other's independence and sovereignty (Alshiqi & Sahiti, 2021). There have been previous studies on the relationship between the Albanian diaspora and the new state of Kosovo. Including looking into its socio-economic and political implications (Krasniqi, 2013). Also, the Albanian government has worked to ensure the rights of Kosovar Albanians, thus allowing them to exercise their political and civil rights. Similarly, The Kosovo government has sought cooperation between the two countries by signing strategic partnership agreements (Lika, 2023d). Which comes as a part of the Kosovo government's commitment to regional stability and security. In addition, both governments have committed to cooperation in general, which has included the promotion of mutual understanding, respect and cultural exchange (Duro, 2015). Finally, the Albanian government has also provided diplomatic assistance in strengthening Kosovo's independence. Together, these efforts have been key in ensuring regional stability and security, and are the main objectives of the partnership between Albania and Kosovo (Hewer & Vitija, 2013). This partnership between Albania and Kosovo has been long-standing and a source of stability in the region. There have been studies in the past on the relationship between the Albanian diaspora and emerging Kosovo state. Looking into the socio-economic and political implications that this relationship brought. The Albanian government also made sure that the rights of Kosovar Albanians were protected to enable them to exercise their political and civil rights (Hughes, 2013). In ensuring cooperation between these two countries, the Kosovo government went for nothing short of promoting it through strategic partnership agreements. A move which is within the commitment of the Kosovo Government to regional stability and security (Ingimundarson, 2007). Further commitment by both governments to work together in the broadest sense of this term has included mutual understanding, respect, and cultural exchanges. The Government of Albania has also provided diplomatic assistance in terms of strengthening the independence of Kosovo (Mustafa et al., 2015). All this, served regional stability and security well. With the main goals sought through this partnership between Albania and Kosovo.

1.3 *Efforts to Enhance Regional Integration and Cultural Exchange*

Albania and Kosovo took some measures to encourage regional integration. They created a joint chamber of commerce to enhance cross-border business cooperation, as is the case of this chamber of commerce that brings together businesses and entrepreneurs from both countries and provides a platform for dialogue, technical assistance for small and medium-sized businesses. In addition, they signed a free trade agreement (Sklias & Tsampra, 2013), the first of its kind in the region, which has increased exports and imports between the two countries, thus creating a unified market for goods and services. Also, they intensified collaboration in transportation, energy, and education as well as the management of natural resources. Finally, Albania and Kosovo are committed to enhancing regional economic cooperation and integration with other countries in the region through initiatives like the Western Balkans 6 (WB6) and the

Berlin Process. Measures through which Albania and Kosovo are working to improve economic, political and social cooperation and also those that have fostered this region to be peaceful, prosperous, and interconnected. The initiation of a stronger cultural exchange between Albania and Kosovo has further been put into effect with the implementation of the strategic partnership agreement signed in 2011. This agreement implemented, among others, the mobility of students, teachers, and administrators between the two countries (Sulç & ebe, 2015). The strategic partnership involves the exchange of students on curriculum-based programs under the European Credit Transfer System. This strategic partnership has made it possible for these two countries to become part of the Bologna higher education process, as well as the recognition of degrees from each of the countries (Wit & Altbach, 2021). The same case can be seen in the joint development of the Albanian-Kosovo Bologna process, which is a joint initiative to further develop academic collaboration between two countries. Consequently, this has brought about increased opportunities for academic exchange through joint research projects, joint seminars, and other forms of academic exchange. It has also led to increased collaboration in terms of the development of joint curriculum, as well as the exchange of faculty members and students. As a result, both countries have been able to share their experiences and knowledge in higher education, which has allowed them to get to know one another better.

1.4 Albania and Kosovo's struggles to promote regional integration in the Balkans

Since then, Albania and Kosovo have actively sought to foster interregional exchange and facilitate the integration of those countries which have not yet been admitted to the EU (Börzel & Risse, 2009). This integration would enable Kosovo to be economically independent, without being absorbed into Greater Albania, which could potentially lead to conflict in the region (Radeljić, 2009). Studies show that regional business links can bring about economic gains, as has been evident in the Balkans with a sharp increase in regional trade (Sklias & Tsampra, 2014). This increase is seen in both Albania and Kosovo, despite the fact that neither country has yet joined the EU (Uvalic, 2001). Moreover, Albania and Kosovo have been working toward creating a unified zone within the Balkans, pushing for the equal status of Kosovo (Weller & Wolff, 2005). The success of promoting closer economic integration as core objectives between countries in the Western Balkans has been limited by several post-war economic difficulties and autarkic policies pursued by Albania, a developing economy in the region. This is also further underscored by the fact that some countries in the region, such as Kosovo (which has experienced substantial economic growth) have taken up economic integration as core objectives of developing their economies (Börzel & Risse, 2024:48:00). Active efforts in both countries to foster political dialogue and enhance bi-regional trade have been noted. This paper posits that much should be achieved since economic integration has been taken up as core objectives of developing economies in the region. Several factors limited this success between them: for example, difficulties related to post-war economies or even the kind of policy like autarky taken by Albania (Uvalić, 2019).

2. Role of the EU in Enhancing Regional Integration

The European Union (EU) has actively been undertaking measures of regional integration in the Balkans through financial and technical assistance, reforms implementation, and alignment of economies with EU standards (Kathuria, 2008). This is done under the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) and the Western Balkans Regional Economic Area (WBREA) initiative besides signing Association Agreements with Stability Pact countries. The EU has underlined that political issues be resolved and good governance improved in the region (Sanfey & Milatović, 2019). In addition to this, the EU has leveraged membership prospects to compel the Balkan countries to reform and cooperate with each other. As a result, they have adopted EU trade policies and standards as well as developed regional trade agreements and infrastructure projects (Bartlett, 2009). The EU has agreed on policy commitment to regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, having a specific regional approach for this region. Moreover, in Brussels, the European Union has set up a joint office with the World Bank to serve as an information provider for the Stability Pact, actively promoting regional integration through its partnership with key international financial institutions and donor organizations (Renner, 2024:39:01). The Energy Community of Southeast Europe has come into existence as a reflection of the external energy policy of the EU, which played an instrumental role in giving birth to this regional organization. According to the Summit, 'rapprochement with the European Union will go hand in hand with the process of developing regional cooperation'. All these initiatives underline the commitment of the EU to promote regional integration in the Balkans.

2.1 *How has the EU been helpful in supporting joint efforts between Albania and Kosovo?*

The strategic partnership between Albania and Kosovo has been fostered by the European Union. Evidence of this is found in the EU support of initiatives like the Berlin Process, which is geared toward regional cooperation encouragement. Evidence is also available in terms of financial and technical aid that is accorded to both countries by the EU, for their effective integration into the EU. The EU has further challenged Albania and Kosovo on reforms in areas of the rule of law, governance, and economy, to prepare them for integration into the EU. The European Union (EU) has been a steady United Nations (UN) partner in the support provided to Kosovo, Serbia and the countries of the region (Visoka & Doyle, 2016). It has supported Kosovo on its path to EU integration, as well as for stabilizing through institution-building and socio-economic development. The EU's perspective of integrating Kosovo has acted as a catalyst for both countries to engage in dialogue. Moreover, the EU-mediated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia reflects well how the EU can exercise its transformative soft power. After signing the SAA with the EU in June 2006, Albania also benefited from EU support. On the other hand, since 2001, the provisional authorities of Kosovo have put the European agenda at the top of their priority list; Kosovo signed its SAA with the EU in July 2014. In addition, the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) is a permanent technical and political dialogue that monitors progress in reform efforts in Kosovo. Therefore, support from the European Union has been very helpful for both Kosovo and Albania to advance their integration into the EU, which in turn has helped regional stability and security (Kosovo, 1992).

3. **Strengthening Political, Economic, and Social Relations**

The sudden rise of China on the international stage as a confident and powerful country has caught many European nations off guard. We have seen a surge in economic cooperation between African countries and China since the turn of the century (Lu et al., 2021). This has coincided with Africa's impressive economic growth rates over the past two decades (Hazvinei Vhumbunu & Rukema Rudigi, 2020). The relationship has brought development to the African continent but there are also downsides. Moreover, the Albanian government has established the Albanian-Kosovo Strategic Partnership, which is aimed at deepening and strengthening bilateral ties. This partnership has led to the opening of new opportunities for economic growth, trade and investment between the two countries (Lika, 2023a). Furthermore, the two countries have launched a number of joint projects, such as joint electricity production and distribution. These initiatives have been beneficial for both countries as they have helped to reduce the cost of energy production and consumption. In addition, the two countries have signed several agreements to enhance the free flow of factors of production between them. These agreements have allowed them to increase the volume of trade and attract more foreign direct investments (FDIs) into their countries. The Albania-Kosovo Strategic Partnership has also played a role in developing a common market between the two countries so as to enhance trade and investments. As a result, both countries have seen an increase in their economic activity levels and thus improved economic cooperation between them (Terziev et al., 2018).

3.1 *Social and cultural initiatives that have been undertaken to promote mutual understanding between the two countries*

Resulting from the ongoing geopolitical dynamics, social and cultural initiatives have been taken up to foster mutual understanding between both nations, as reported in (Isik & Zou, 2019). Governments have implemented pro-health policies (Nutbeam & Kickbusch, 1998), that not only enhance personal attributes of a citizen but also his or her social engagement, according to (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019). The WHO Mega-Country Initiative is an example of a multisectoral program that supports attainment of health goals within a specified region. Furthermore, it is also aimed at addressing issues related to developing traditional social relations and networks (Coalter, 2010). These initiatives have played a part in enabling people to enhance the political system as well as economic power between them (Davutoğlu, 2008). It is also worth noting that the Three Seas Initiative aims to enhance cooperation among the countries involved. This comprises a group of countries that have a common perception of regional stability and security (Kibaroglu & Scheumann, 2011). Also, policies and initiatives are adopted for peace and mutual understanding that in turn promotes the enhancement of economic and political strength among the countries.

4. Challenges to Facilitating Regional Integration

A Key Component in National Strategies for Globalization by Anne Marie Gulde and Juha Kähkönen Regional integration can be an important element of a country's strategy for globalization. Nonetheless, regional integration has often proven difficult to operationalize, not least because many countries have hesitated to cede sovereignty over key policy areas such as fiscal or monetary policy. Additionally, the reduction in barriers that regional integration implies often runs against the political pressures generated by globalization, such as the fear of job losses as a result of imports from low-wage countries. This paper reviews some of the challenges faced by policymakers in developing countries in implementing regional integration strategies, focusing on macroeconomic adjustment, and sectoral policies (Lika, 2023b). Macroeconomic adjustment countries undertake regional integration in an environment characterized by macroeconomic imbalances. Typically, one group of countries seeks to undertake regional integration as a way to pool risks and reduce costs related to external imbalances (current account deficits) or fiscal imbalances (budget deficits). Meanwhile, another group of countries does so with a view to obtaining economies of scale that make them more competitive as well as more attractive investment destinations (Lika, 2023c). Sectoral Policies Typically, regional integration efforts aim at reducing barriers between countries' markets (goods, services) and also at liberalizing factor markets (capital, labor). The sectors most affected by these liberalization efforts are manufacturing and agriculture (where production is typically less competitive than in developed countries) and services (where market access restrictions persist). Yet, these are also politically sensitive sectors. The Western Balkan countries have to deal with many challenges in regional integration. These are: the lack of a common approach and coordination in policy formulation and implementation, economic disparities and differences in economic structures, unresolved issues between countries (Sanfey & Milatović, 2019), a lack of a common vision and strategy, corruption and organized crime, non-tariff barriers and different regulatory frameworks, the absence of political will and trust, weak infrastructure and low economic development, a complex history of conflicts and ethnic tensions, political instability and unresolved conflicts, contractual relations with the EU, Free Trade Agreements, Croatia's EU membership (Bartlett, 2009), labor market problems, low economic development, insufficient competitiveness, and an unfavorable economic structure. All these factors make it difficult to achieve regional integration in the Balkans. The lack of trust and cooperation, the political instability and insecurity, the weak infrastructure: these are the obstacles that hamper regional integration. Moreover, various regulatory frameworks, non-tariff barriers, and individual countries' contractual relationship with the EU also weakens regional integration by creating a fragmented trade environment and augmenting the risk of trade deflection and trade diversion. The absence of a unified vision and strategy, as well as coordination between sectors and stakeholders, poses further challenges. This is in addition to low levels of economic development, unfavorable economic structure, and lack of competitiveness in the region (Džankić et al., 2019).

5. How have External Factors Including Migration and Security Impacted Albania and Kosovo?

The European Union's history of applying conditionality policies to Albania and Kosovo has been with the aim of promoting security and geopolitical interests, rather than relying on objective technical criteria ("THE EU APPROACH to the WESTERN BALKANS: A SECURITY or POLITICAL ISSUE?," 2015). This stick-and-carrot approach has since the refugee and Ukraine crises, as well as Serbia's new relationship with Russia, further complicated matters. Greece's approach towards Moscow in the midst of an economic crisis could also change the EU's stance on the Western Balkans (Bieber, 2011) (which includes Albania and Kosovo), as portrayed in the text. Eurostat does not report data on GDP per capita for Kosovo, which may indicate a lack of information about the country's economic conditions and security. The EU has therefore developed many policies related to human mobility and visa liberalization. These policies have been applied at the cost of Albania and Kosovo in delaying their accession to the Union. However, the provided text does not include any information regarding how migration affects these countries (Golemi & Muço, 2020). In this respect, the paper examines the development of the visa liberalization process after Thessaloniki 2003 to have a better insight into how external factors, such as migration and security, have affected Albania and Kosovo, respectively.

5.1 Potential solutions to address these challenges to regional integration

Because the challenges to regional integration are deep-rooted, this paper recommends strategic interventions at the national, regional and continental levels to fast-track the implementation of policy instruments that are meant to facilitate the free movement of people. These solutions are based on a wide array of relevant reports and literature. The sources of

evidence and knowledge were generated through the analysis of data, field-level investigations, wide-ranging consultations and perception surveys (Flinchbaugh, 2016). The proposed solutions include the elements of a framework SPS Agreement to deal with non-tariff barriers to trade with India. Identifying border measures and infrastructure that need to be put in place to reduce trade transaction costs. Implementing the sub-regional Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) by drawing on insights and experiences of global best practices (Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, Zimbabwe Open University. P.O.Box MP 1119. Mt. Pleasant. Harare. Zimbabwe et al., 2014). Moreover, regional integration should be founded on effective national growth and development strategies, with a normative convergence on issues of democratisation and human rights promotion as well. Employment initiatives, in addition to targeting job creation, should target capacity-building efforts, rather than discrimination or reversing restrictive policies; similarly, strategies ought to concentrate not only on individual employability but also on measures to overcome personal and structural barriers to the labor market (Bloch, 2008).

6. Conclusion

Albania and Kosovo's joint efforts for European integration are a big step towards bringing stability, economic development, and political cooperation to the Balkans. Both countries have shown themselves committed to bringing their policies closer to EU standards and improving regional connectivity with mutual support. These two work-in-progress entities thusly enhance not only bilateral relations but also the wider European integration process. A shared history and cultural bonds, plus shared ambitions: Albania and Kosovo are natural partners as they strive to become key players leading the region along its journey to European integration. A strategic partnership between Albania and Kosovo has seen visible progress in many areas, including infrastructure, economic partnerships, and socio-political reforms. In their joint action, the two countries managed to overcome a great number of challenges that political instability and economic imbalances posed throughout their history, retarding their development. The European Union is encouraged to give more support to them because they act as a model for other Balkan countries striving to enter the EU. Furthermore, the process of integration has caused both countries to implement major domestic reforms that are geared towards better governance, more effective rule of law, and increased respect for human rights. These reforms are a prerequisite not only for EU accession but also for developing resilient and prosperous societies. These bilateral initiatives have increased cultural and educational exchange programs that have done much to instill among their people a feeling of common identity and mutual esteem. In conclusion, the cooperative path of Albania and Kosovo toward European integration demonstrates how such regional cooperation can be a powerful force for change. Drawing on lessons from their shared histories and tackling common challenges, they contribute to making the Balkans a more united, secure, and wealthy place. Other nations within the neighborhood draw motivation from the success of their initiatives, which underlines the role played by cohesion, persistence, and common sight when it comes to realizing goals set for distant horizons.

7. Recommendations

From the review of all the material with quite rich literature, some important recommendations emerge on the long path of integration towards the EU.

Strengthening Institutional Cooperation: Establishing an institutional framework for cooperation between Albania and Kosovo to facilitate deeper collaboration more effectively. This includes joint committees, shared platforms for policy decisions, and synchronized legislative efforts aligned with those of the European Union.

Enhancing Infrastructure Connectivity: Prioritizing infrastructure projects that have a direct impact on connecting Albania with Kosovo in their implementation plans. This involves improving transportation and energy networks, as well as digital infrastructure, to facilitate easier economic exchanges and integration into EU markets.

Promoting Joint Economic Initiatives: Developing and enhancing joint economic initiatives that capitalize on the potentials of both countries. This includes the creation of cross-border economic zones, partnerships in priority industries, and cooperation in attracting foreign direct investment.

Increasing Public Awareness and Support: Citizen awareness campaigns to inform the population about the benefits of European integration, highlighting what has been achieved so far, the opportunities available, and how they can contribute to (and benefit from) the integration process.

Fostering Regional Cooperation: Expanding cooperation beyond bilateral efforts to include other Western Balkan countries. By doing so, they can, through a broader coalition, enhance regional stability and present a unified voice in their pursuit of EU membership.

Strengthening Anti-Corruption Measures: Corruption must be combated and governance improved. Both countries should emulate EU member states by ensuring transparency, accountability, and the rule of law in their jurisdictions to qualify for meeting the EU membership criteria.

Investing in Education and Research: Greater investment in education and research is necessary to build a skilled workforce capable of meeting EU standards. This can be achieved through collaborative educational programs, student exchanges, and joint research projects, which will not only contribute to human capital accumulation but also stimulate innovation.

Continuing Dialogue: Engaging in active and ongoing dialogue with EU institutions to stay updated on integration requirements and expectations. This will enable timely identification of deviations. A quarterly report should be prepared for submission to the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament on progress in the fight against corruption, including the implementation of this recommendation.

Monitoring and Evaluating Progress: Establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the progress of integration efforts on a joint basis. This will ensure that challenges are identified, achievements are quantified, and strategies are well-adjusted if necessary to continue ensuring uninterrupted advancement towards EU membership.

Securing International Support: Seeking and securing support from international organizations, financial institutions, and EU member states to enhance the integration process. Access to funding, technical assistance, and political support will be crucial in addressing challenges and keeping the progress towards EU membership on track and well-managed.

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