

The EU Micro-interventionism in Kosovo

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Abstract

This article critically examines the European Union's (EU) micro-interventionism in Kosovo, focusing on its implications for statebuilding and institutional reforms. It argues that, while the EU's micro-interventions aim to strengthen governance and promote European integration, they often undermine local ownership, provoke resistance, and yield superficial progress. The study analyses three key domains: rule of law reforms, where embedded EU officials and subcontracted experts have led to excessive micromanagement and reduced local agency; public administration reforms, characterised by externally imposed, short-term fixes rather than sustainable improvements; and micro-diplomacy in Kosovo-Serbia relations, which has fostered arbitrary negotiation practices and limited long-term conflict resolution. The article highlights the paradox of EU interventionism - intended to promote stability yet often resulting in governance inefficiencies and heightened local sovereignty demands. By providing a micro-political analysis, it contributes to debates on international statebuilding, emphasizing the need for more collaborative and locally driven approaches.

Keywords: Micro-interventionism, everyday statebuilding, Kosovo, EU, embeddedness

Introduction

This article examines how the European Union's (EU) everyday interactions have shaped statebuilding and institutional reforms in Kosovo. The European Union (EU) has emerged as a key player in statebuilding efforts following Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 (Krasniqi and Musaj 2014). This role arose partly from the UN's inability to endorse independence and the EU's promise of eventual membership (Ilazi 2024; Hehir 2013). The EU concentrated its statebuilding efforts on strengthening the rule of law and promoting inter-ethnic and political stability with the dual intention of creating a future member state and pre-empting security threats in the EU's surrounding neighbourhoods (Visoka and Doyle 2016). The existing research on EU statebuilding efforts in Kosovo focuses largely on macro-level politics – such as formal institutions, decision-making processes, and high-level policies – while neglecting the micro-level politics of everyday interactions that significantly influence the success or failure of statebuilding initiatives. A considerable amount of analyses on the EU's statebuilding approaches have focused on how the EU utilises conditionality to influence its

statebuilding agenda, particularly within the framework of the Enlargement Policy (Grabbe 2002; Bernardi, Hart and Rabinowitz 2015; Blagovcanin 2016; Keil 2018). However, we do not know much about how micro-politics influence macro-politics, specifically, how political practices that occur through everyday social interactions shape governance norms and transform the institutional arrangements of the targeted governmental bodies. The article aims to fill this gap by analysing the EU's micro-interventionist approach in Kosovo, arguing that it has paradoxically undermined local ownership and fuelled a backlash despite its intention to promote good governance and stability. It focuses on the local perspectives, providing an alternative account to the dominant international perspectives and thus expanding and pluralising the scholarly and empirical knowledge on statebuilding in Kosovo.

Before the declaration of independence in 2008, the UN and EU enjoyed executive powers in all governance domains, but gradually, they transferred those powers to the democratically elected representatives and local institutions in Kosovo (Weller 2009). A major drive behind such change was the discourse of local ownership, which entailed the transfer of governance powers to local authorities to enable the exit of international missions and build more sustainable political institutions. Despite shifting power relations, international micro-interventions have remained intact in Kosovo. At its core, micro-interventions through embedding experts and officers within Kosovo institutions aim to ensure that Kosovo's authority and sovereignty would remain intact and in the eye of the public, while the EU's role would only appear as advisory and supportive to the Kosovar authorities (Visoka 2017). However, in the informal domain of interactions, the EU retained its power in Kosovo, at least when imposing policy solutions or institutional arrangements. Partially, this is influenced by a context where the EU inherited a futile terrain for soft paternalism established during the UN administration of Kosovo. But it is also enabled by a local political system that is permeated by corruption and political interference with a deeply anxious political culture unable to pursue its political destiny without external help and a contested and incomplete statehood as a result of partial international recognition and unresolved dispute with Serbia. So, the nexus between statebuilding and the Europeanization process gave the EU a unique opportunity to exert its influence at the political and bilateral level and through a broad range of micro-interventions.

This article presents a novel and original contribution to the study of European Union (EU) statebuilding interventions by shifting the analytical focus from macro-level governance structures to the micro-politics of interventionism in Kosovo. We seek to understand how micro-intervention strategies in Kosovo, namely, political practices of embedding EU officials and sub-contractors within local institutions, have shaped institutional reforms and transferred European norms and practices. We argue that the EU's micro-interventionism seeks to maximise its policy-making impact and exert influence through soft paternalism, while deflecting criticism of political interference and evading accountability for failures in statebuilding. In other words, the EU's micro-interventionist political approach in Kosovo combined conditional policies associated with EU enlargement and financial assistance with paternalistic methods for controlling policy-making and institutional reforms in Kosovo. In the rule of law sector, direct interventions, mainly through the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), initially established standards for addressing corruption but eventually led to a decline in public trust, while indirect interventions, involving subcontracted experts, resulted in inconsistent policies and diminished local agency due to unclear EU guidelines. Furthermore, the EU's hierarchical and sometimes contradictory practices in public administration reform resulted in dysfunctional administrations and repeated rounds of reform. This approach has hindered sustainable institutional development and damaged the EU's credibility in Kosovo. In the Brussels Dialogue, the EU's embedding and use of micro-diplomacy facilitated numerous technical agreements between Kosovo

and Serbia, yet failed to foster genuine cooperation, creating a superficial appearance of progress without sustainable conflict resolution. While intended to strengthen governance, this approach often circumvented formal institutions, resulting in micro-management that undermined local ownership. Consequently, the EU's micro-interventionist model has elicited antagonistic responses from local institutions, derailing and delaying reforms and fostering the rise of local sovereignty—a movement seeking to increase local self-determination and reduce external interference.

By exposing the paradoxes and inconsistencies within the EU's technology of micro-interventionism, we aim to understand the effectiveness and limits of how norms and political institutions are imposed at the detriment of local political and democratic self-determination, and how, in the long run, this can undermine the political culture and the social contract in societies forced to engage in profound political transformation (and self-alienation). The European Union presents a polished image of ethical leadership in its external engagements, emphasising local ownership and high moral standards. However, its informal, behind-the-scenes interactions reveal a more pragmatic approach characterised by strategic negotiations and tactical alliances. Often diverging from the idealised public narrative, these practices illuminate the EU's operational dynamics. Analysing these informal processes reveals how the EU exerts significant influence in statebuilding beyond its official pronouncements. Examining these practices and engaging with local actors is crucial to accurately assess the EU's agency, thereby understanding its actual behaviour in partnerships and interventions. We show that the micro-dynamics provide strong foundations for a more reality-congruent macro-critique of statebuilding. The analysis in this paper demonstrates that the effectiveness of statebuilding largely depends on how social interactions among the EU and local actors emerge and develop in practice. We show that statebuilding is not prescriptive but an unfinished and performative endeavour, and it depends on how political goals are translated into action and how the micro-interactions produce macro outcomes (Ilazi 2024; Musliu 2021).

This article uses the approach of critical and interpretive policy analysis to understand how the EU statebuilding reforms have unfolded in practice and what results they have produced. We apply this methodological approach by engaging critically with the discursive practices of both the EU and Kosovo, as well as tracing the micro-practices through interviews with policy stakeholders. The article is organised into several sections, each addressing different aspects of the EU's micro-interventionism in Kosovo. The first section examines the EU's micro-management of Kosovo's rule of law reforms, focusing on direct interventions, such as embedding EU officials in Kosovo's institutions, and indirect interventions, through subcontracting interventions to experts and consultants from EU member states. The second section discusses micro-impositions and power-based interactions used by the EU in public administration reforms, highlighting how these interventions often aimed to correct previous mistakes rather than improve administration quality. The third section explores the EU's micro-diplomacy and neo-functionalist approach to normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia, revealing how supposed facilitation masked arbitrary practices that undermined the dialogue. The concluding section analyses the shifting power dynamics in Kosovo and the implications of micro-interventionism for the rise of sovereignty within its government and institutions.

A macro-critique of EU micro-interventionism in Kosovo

In the past three decades, interventional interventions in conflict-affected societies have received significant attention across different international studies, debates and disciplines (Fagioli and Malito 2024). As a result, there is an advanced corpus of scholarly and policy knowledge on the norms,

practices, and impacts and challenges of statebuilding. We also have developed a good knowledge of the multiscalar and organisational dynamics of statebuilding, including the role of regional organisations in statebuilding interventions. In particular, the EU has emerged as a leading regional actor in statebuilding and has been subject to extensive research (Ilazi 2024; Lika 2023; Greiçevci 2022; Musliu 2021; Visoka and Musliu 2019; Visoka 2017; Hehir 2013). The majority of research focuses on the macro-politics of statebuilding interventions, exploring how states are created, built and reformed by looking at the elite politics, norms, and institutional designs (Bieber 2011). The existing accounts provide important insights into the EU's decision-making processes, instruments, institutions, and policies regarding statebuilding approaches (Ilazi 2024; Gashi 2020). However, one area that remains slightly underexplored and would benefit from further examination is the micropolitics underpinning the EU's statebuilding interventions.

Across different social and political debates at both national and international levels, there has been a growing interest in studying political phenomena at the micro level. The turn to practice, the everyday, space, and affect in IR and other sub-fields exemplify the importance of micro-level analysis and observations for theorising and describing rather overlooked dynamics and agencies that have a tremendous influence on social epistemology and praxeology (Richmond and Visoka 2021). Everyday interactions are where social norms are practiced, challenged, and sometimes subverted, ultimately shaping institutions and governance (Visoka 2020). Micro-politics represent “the dispersed and micro-power structures and control mechanisms that are internalized in the plane of social activities and everyday life” it also operates through “various forms of knowledge power and spontaneous cultural power” (Junqing 2009: 41). As Solomon and Steele (2017: 265) note, “micropolitical lenses reveal sites that promise to reshape how we view global politics and our place in it”. Focusing on micro-interventions helps us better understand how macro-level and strategic goals are implemented in practice and how everyday practices, informal spaces, and individual emotions and personalities shape and transform such processes. As Isabel Bramsen (2024: 3) maintains, “all macro-social phenomena are composed of and manifested in micro-interactions.” Thus, micro-politics help us understand how collective intentions are personalised and localised, and vice versa, how individual intentions become collective and political goals. Micro-political analysis helps us deconstruct abstract policies and concepts and offers a better explanation of the macro effects of socio-political interventions.

The recent attention to micro-politics and everyday practices has allowed for a deeper understanding of agency, or “to grasp otherwise uncharted experiences and practices that are crucial for the performance of European integration” (Adler-Nissen 2016: 87-103). As a framework for investigating and analysing statebuilding interventions, it holds great potential to expand our knowledge of EU statebuilding micro-interventions. Scholars have already applied this framework in their investigations of the EU and have provided important alternative accounts of statebuilding interventions (Ilazi 2024; Visoka 2021; Musliu 2021). There is a strong connection between everyday practices and how statebuilding policies are implemented, which has received significant attention in peace and conflict studies in recent years, not just as a concept but also as a practical tool to understand the priorities of communities and assess better and monitor external interventions (Heredia 2017; Richmond 2011; Kubota 2022). In particular, examining everyday micro-interventions helps understand better the normative consistency of statebuilding organisations, namely the between rhetoric and reality. It exposes the hidden dynamics that might explain why statebuilding interventions struggle to achieve their desired outcomes. However, locating micro-interventions is problematic and subject to potential epistemological contestation. What are the criteria and rules for choosing which practices, actors, and sites constitute the domain for exploring micro-interventions? What constitutes a micro-intervention in the complex pool of everyday encounters?

In examining the EU's statebuilding initiatives in Kosovo, we aim to explore how micro-politics—political activities embedded in everyday social interactions—influence governance norms and reshape the institutional frameworks of targeted governmental bodies. We also seek to understand how the everyday as a site of subversive practices allows for the normal rules and protocols to be disregarded and alternative and extra-legal arrangements to emerge. Our analysis focuses on three key priority areas for the EU statebuilding in Kosovo: a) the rule of law – which is also used as a platform to diffuse norms and set priorities for the local institutions; b) public administration – to ensure legitimacy for EU demands and capacity to implement them; and lastly, c) conflict mediation – to resolve any disputes with neighbouring countries to establish interdependency and pre-empt any security threats or spill-over effects for the Union. The rule of law for the EU is translated as promoting anti-corruption, strengthening the judiciary and police, and diffusing norms and standards and best practices from member States in host countries (Ioannides and Collantes-Celador 2011; Pech 2012; Ejodus 2017; Kmezić 2019). Public administration is equally important in the EU's external dealings because the state's capacity to absorb and implement EU norms ultimately depends on how professional and effective the public administration of the respective government is (Zaum 2007; Juncos and Gross 2011;). Finally, international conflict mediation is important for the EU's internal and external security (Greicevci 2022; Brandenburg 2017; Bergmann and Niemann 2015). In this context, it is particularly important for the EU that states closest to its borders resolve their bilateral disputes. While these three issues are significant for Kosovo, they are symptomatic of its political expediency and geopolitical importance for the EU and its member states. The side-lining of equally important areas, such as strengthening Kosovo's international standing, signifies the primacy of the EU's self-interest rather than what Kosovo considered a collective priority, which can explain the mismatch between intervention and local acceptance of the EU's reform agenda (Visoka 2018). They also reveal the paternalistic attitude of the EU as an intervening force towards local institutions, where a blurred mixture of care and control is expressed through micro-interventions (see also Musliu and Orbie, 2016).

Our methodological approach for exploring the EU micro-interventions in Kosovo relies on critical policy analysis combined with field research and interviews with policy stakeholders (see Fischer et al. 2015). Critical policy analysis is a framework for analysing the complexity of policy process and the forms of knowledge, relations, and impacts that emerge. This applied methodological approach involves interpreting how the policy agenda is set, how policy problems are identified, and who makes the decisions. We use policy documents and interviews to account for micro-evidences and the politics of knowledge expertise to foreground the EU's statebuilding discursive institutionalism in practice and its impacts on Kosovo. Discursive institutionalism puts emphasis on “interactive processes by and through which ideas are generated in the policy sphere by discursive policy communities and entrepreneurs” (Schmidt 2015: 171). By examining micro-interventions in the rule of law, public administration and conflict mediation, we aim to gain insights into power dynamics, political transformation, and the everyday implementation of statebuilding efforts. We identify three discursive practices which describe the EU's microinterventionism and political technology: the micro-management of the rule of law sector, the micro-impositions in public administration reform, and the micro-diplomacy for normalising the relations between Kosovo and Serbia. We use critical and interpretative lenses to understand how macro and micro-interventions are intermeshed in practice to reveal how soft paternalism and power dynamics, namely care and control, are performed in everyday interactions (Barnett 2016; Luke 2015). This will allow us to develop context-specific generalisations (macro-critiques) about the effects of micro-practices. Ultimately, we hope to contribute valuable insights that apply to other cases of statebuilding interventions.

The European micro-management of the rule of law reform

The overwhelming focus of the EU's role in reforming the rule of law in pre-accession countries or post-conflict societies has been on the instrument of conditionality that the EU uses to encourage political reforms and harmonisation of domestic practices with European and international standards (see Nicolaidis and Kleinfeld 2012). Within the scope of the rule of law, the EU outlined corruption and organised crime as key challenges for Kosovo and implied that local institutions would need to undergo systematic reforms to implement the laws (Skendaj 2014) in this context, the EU justified micro-interventions based on the narrative that Kosovo requires constant expertise and support; otherwise, it would face far greater problems in drafting and implementing legislation based on EU standards (Ilazi 2024). In turn, the lack of capacities, high political instability, and uncertainty with sovereignty and EU membership prospects have pushed Kosovar political leadership to accept the EU's micro-interventionism (Interview 1).

The EU has approached its efforts to strengthen the rule of law sector in Kosovo through direct and indirect micro-intervention practices. Dafina Buçaj (2019: 85) notes that "drafting legislation and establishing the rule of law, as key components of statehood, are the areas that have been most influenced by the international community in different ways, whether through direct control of the drafting processes or dictating certain decisions, through the investment agendas of donors or, most recently, through the EU integration agenda". The direct micro-interventions took place through the placement or embedment of EU officials within Kosovo's law-making and law-enforcement institutions with semi-sovereign powers. This mainly occurred by placing EULEX's judges, prosecutors, police, and customs officers in domestic institutions. The EU's direct micro-interventionism was substantial in the aftermath of independence in 2008, and it has significantly reduced over the years as the local institutions gained more power and capacity to govern the country. At some point, the EULEX deployed around 1,400 police officers seconded from the EU member states (Balkan Insight 2008). It also ran hybrid judicial and court proceedings with mixed EU and local judges and prosecutors. As part of the EU's effort to promote local ownership and gradually reduce its heavy footprint in Kosovo, the EULEX has performed an advisory and monitoring role over the years. Although the EU and the Government of Kosovo have praised the significant contribution of the EU in strengthening the rule of law institutions in the country, a closer look at the everyday practices and the dynamics of micro-interventions reveals how micro-dynamics have had macro-political impacts.

The EU's direct micro-interventionism was manifested through bypassing both EU and Kosovo authorities' formal mechanisms and legal remits and utilising informal meetings, exchanges, and alternative modes of intervention to influence the domestic decision-making process and micro-manage the rule of law enforcement. For example, the process of designing and reforming Kosovo's anti-corruption agency involved the EU's micro-management of the process, which often replaced and undermined the formal procedures for policy-making that the EU itself has imposed on Kosovo to ensure public accountability and transparency (Ilazi 2024). As a result, the anti-corruption institutional architecture's design bypassed legislators' involvement and omitted wider public consultation. This ran against the EU's efforts to promote the rule of law, transparency, and good governance, which relies on respecting procedures, rules, and institutional mechanisms. The institutional embedment of European judges, prosecutors, and police officers have allowed the EU to create a parallel set of means to influence and shape local processes in addition to the more institutional and formal approaches. The fear of negative portrayal has encouraged local compliance rather than critical engagement with the EU in the policy-making process. This has harmed the evidence-based, democratic, context-specific, and

sustainable design of institutional reforms. In particular, for some policymakers and local actors, the EU *acquis*—a comprehensive body of laws and standards—is perceived as overwhelmingly complex. This perception can lead to a passive acceptance of EU directives under the assumption that these directives must inherently align with EU norms, even without thorough verification or understanding of the specific content.

The EU's direct micro-management has displaced the public responsibility for policymaking in Kosovo. Buçaj (2019: 86) notes that “the donor-driven agenda and the lack of consensus among the international community has often resulted in a power struggle between institutions and the creation of redundant bodies and institutions, which has then translated into a lack of efficiency”. Local bureaucrats in Kosovo have relied on the EU to indirectly craft policies that are likely to be viewed favourably by both the EU and the broader public. This not only alleviates their workload but also enhances their public image and that of their government, as they align with esteemed EU standards. For example, the EU's approaches to strengthening the judiciary in Kosovo created a comfort zone for local judges and prosecutors, in which the locals transferred to EULEX any case they thought was difficult or dangerous for them. In this regard, the EULEX negatively affected the judiciary's capacities to prosecute and adjudicate crimes and corruption cases independently (Ilazi 2024). The EU's approach further eroded public confidence in the local justice system because it confirmed the public perception that it was chronically unable to fight corruption and organised crime (Emma-Louise Rose, 2020). For example, the acquittal of several senior politicians accused of corruption (Berisha 2017), especially given the backdrop of serious accusations and public perception, pointed to a lack of effective judicial follow-through and raised questions about the efficacy and sincerity of EULEX's commitment to combating corruption. This approach had an acutely negative impact also on the local actors' confidence in the EULEX personnel, which is particularly important with respect to the mission's goal of providing advice and mentorship. Confidence in EULEX dropped significantly from 31 per cent in 2014 to only 16 per cent in 2015 (Rose 2020).

However, the deeper the European micro-management, the more inconsistent and incompetent the EU appeared to be in the eyes of local interlocutors who would be experts in the particular thematic area. The EU's focus on the rule of law in its EULEX mission in Kosovo was broadly supported by the local public, signalling the correct prioritisation of judicial integrity (FOL Movement, 2010). However, the implementation of this focus often seemed to serve more as a public relations manoeuvre rather than reflecting a genuine commitment to substantial judicial transformation or resource investment. In international media, EULEX was referred to as a good idea that was poorly executed (Cama 2018). A European Court of Auditors report found that the EULEX performance in fighting corruption and organised crime was slow (ECA 2012). This superficial engagement was evident in practical shortcomings, including procedural errors by EU prosecutors significant enough to jeopardize potentially strong cases. Similarly, the EULEX's cooperation with the Kosovo Police seemed to lack a clear idea of what it wanted to do, nor did it appear to have a strategy for achieving the goals prescribed by the EU policies on Kosovo (Ilazi 2024). Local actors, who expected the EULEX to set new standards in the rule of law, were disappointed by the mission's lack of clear plans and goals, and by its subsequent improvisations through projects that often failed to address underlying issues in the fight against corruption and organised crime (Interview 4; Mahr 2017). Moreover, the short-term deployment and regular circulation of EULEX staff meant no continuity and superficial engagement with capacity-building. According to senior officials from the embassies of the EU Member States in Kosovo, the European Commission faced challenges in recruiting good judges and prosecutors from Member States, especially for periods longer than one year to serve in Kosovo (Ilazi 2024). Without stability in these roles, the integrity and success of judicial processes was at risk, potentially undermining efforts to

enforce the law and administer justice. Consequently, EULEX has sometimes resorted to improvisation, assigning individuals to prosecutorial or judicial roles who may not have served in these capacities in their own EU member states (Ilazi 2024). As a result, local institutions became less enthusiastic about accepting that the EU's rule of law norms and conditions originated from a goal to Europeanise and modernise the sector (Interview 4). This impacted the cooperation and confidence between local and EU actors.

The second form of involvement in the rule of law sector has been indirect micro-interventions through sub-contacting EU's projects to European consultants and experts. In the EU statebuilding context, subcontracted experts tend to have significant autonomy and influence over policymaking processes. They are considered neutral and apolitical professionals due to their assumed detachment from the local context and objectivity deriving from their short, assignment-based connection with Kosovo (see Sending 2015). They are conventionally located in the so-called 'policy community' and are seen as apolitical operators without political agendas. Due to limited resources and capacity, local institutions have regularly relied on the EU for help writing concept documents and laws. Beyond limited capacities, it became an expectation that the EU subcontractors' involvement produced better-quality policies and served as assurance for the EU's positive assessment of such institutional reforms. This is because, in most cases, the same subcontracted experts who provided capacity support were also used by the EU officials as sources of information on the state of reforms within the respective institutions. In addition to representing the EU's interests, sub-contractors helped the EU disguise its power and evade responsibility for unwanted outcomes (failures). However, such indirect forms of micro-management of Kosovo's rule of law sector have produced several macro-problems that, in turn, could explain the limited impact of the EU's statebuilding investment in the country.

First and foremost, the close interaction between Kosovo public officials and EU-subcontracted experts has exposed how the EU improvises its statebuilding norms and standards. For example, what constitutes best practice in the rule of law is left to be defined by the subcontracted experts in law-making. The EU does not have a codified set of best practices, and there is a broad scope for defining what constitutes good European standards in the rule of law sector. Consequently, the definition of "best practice" was frequently left to the discretion of the subcontracted experts and their project teams, often based on personal experience from their home countries rather than a systematic evaluation of various practices across the EU. However, the role of the expert is not only confined to the technicalities of law-making; they are also utilised to shape political issues (Beha 2023). In some instances, subcontracted experts from EU technical assistance projects have developed close relationships with the offices of key government officials, such as the Minister's cabinet or the secretary-generals. These connections can be strategically leveraged to influence policy and even sometimes address political issues. For instance, in 2011, the Kosovo government established trade reciprocity measures with Serbia. The first reaction of the EU's Office in Kosovo was to utilise the subcontracted experts working in the Ministry of Trade and Industry of Kosovo to try to persuade the Ministry to reverse the decision (Ilazi 2024).

Contrary to the desired effect, the participation of the EU or EU-backed experts in government working groups has not always resulted in knowledge transfer, and in some cases, it was more in undermining local agencies. Dafina Buçaj (2019: 96) finds that the shortcoming of the rule of law sector in Kosovo can be "attributed to the failure of the international community to strengthen local capacity, attempting instead to replace it with international executive assistance". The role of subcontracted experts in the actual law-making process also goes beyond providing support. In practice, they take the helm of the process – important to note with the consent or silent approval of the local officials – and are the ultimate authority on what is included in or excluded from the draft law. Local actors rarely question their assumption of this role. Even if there are disagreements in the process,

according to senior government officials, the default position of the EU Office is to side with the expert (Ilazi 2024; Gulmez and Dikmen 2022). One such example has occurred as part of the process of rationalization of agencies in Kosovo, as well as the performance of technical assistance projects working with different institutions in Kosovo. If Kosovo institutions questioned or intervened in certain aspects of the legislation, the EU subcontractors delegated the pressure-making authority to the senior EU officials in Brussels, including commissioners or even ministers from EU member states.

The EU's approach to reforming the rule of law in Kosovo has relied heavily on micro-interventions, directly embedding EU officials within local institutions and indirectly subcontracting European experts. While these efforts aimed to improve Kosovo's legal framework and governance, they have often bypassed formal mechanisms, leading to micro-management that undermines local accountability and capacity. This dual approach exposes the challenges and limitations of EU statebuilding efforts, emphasising the need for more sustainable and locally integrated strategies to achieve the lasting rule of law reforms.

European micro-impositions in the public administration reform

The second domain of micro-interventionism concerns the EU's intrusive and contradictory approach to Kosovo's public administration reforms. Rebuilding, transforming, and reforming public institutions are central features of the EU's statebuilding interventions in post-conflict and fragile societies (see Dobra 2021). Moreover, an effective and transparent public administration is seen as not only promoting democratic institutions and good governance but also contributing to the EU's member state-making, enabling exerting influence, and maintaining stability in its neighbourhood (The European Commission 2020). Since the end of the war in 1999, the UN, OSCE, and the EU have experimented with multiple models of public administration in Kosovo. Although there is no 'hard' EU *acquis* in the area of public administration, the EU has considered public administration central to Kosovo's European integration path, as evidenced by its inclusion in the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) between Kosovo and the European Union (EU) (The European Union 2016: 34). At its core, the public administration reform focused on "capacity development, defragmentation and rationalisation of processes and services that administration delivers to citizens and other beneficiaries, based on professionalism and non-politicization within civil service" (Government of Kosovo 2015: 4). Other priorities included modernising the salary and benefits system in the public sector, reducing administrative burdens for the business community and citizens, advancing the digitalisation of public services, and enhancing ethics and accountability within the civil service (Ilazi 2024). However, in each round of institutional designs, external models were imposed. This, in turn, has resulted in dysfunctional public administration and multiple rounds of reforms, where the local actors have blamed the inadequacy of the externally imposed models whereas the EU officials the poor performance of local institutions. In particular, EU's policy inconsistencies, lack of coordination, and local perceptions of the EU as an actor that tends to deviate from joint commitments have produced macro-effects, negatively affecting the EU's credibility and actual implementation of public administration reforms.

Over the years, the EU has tried to offer Kosovo different public administration reform models (see OECD 2015), often exposing a mismatch between European and local preparedness and capacity to negotiate such a reform process. Albana Rexha (2018: 5, 8) maintains that although the policy agenda-setting in Kosovo is "mainly led by the donors and the international community including the USA and the EU", in the subsequent phases "policies are mainly developed and enacted in an ad-hoc manner and derived from the political agenda of main political parties rather than from the evidence

related to the most pressing issues in the country”. As a result of this, Kosovo has developed a discorded policy-making process with misaligned priorities, strategies, and capacities. Similar to the rule of law sector, the political technology of European micro-interventionism in Kosovo's public administration sector was channelled through subcontracted experts who have undertaken a wide range of agenda-setting and policy development functions on behalf of the EU. Local counterparts had little room to shape and negotiate the reform package. Local actors did not participate meaningfully in negotiating the Sector Reform Contract for Public Administration Reform (SRC-PAR) and did not believe they had a choice beyond picking the suggested objectives and targets by the European Commission (Interview 7). The implications of this are a lack of sustainable policy changes and reforms. In 2018, the government could not achieve an important part of the agreed indicators, such as the rationalisation of agencies, as they were unrealistic targets in the first place. In turn, prolonged institutional reforms discouraged local cooperation and willingness to adhere to the EU's agenda.

The EU lacked consistency in supporting the implementation of public administration reform, undermining the overall institution-building in Kosovo. The EU has imposed a reform agenda on local institutions only to walk away from its commitments or to request changes in the middle of the process. An example is the EU's imposition to rationalise public agencies in Kosovo. In the first place, the EU encouraged Kosovo institutions to develop public agencies to enhance the efficiency of public services and reduce political interference. Agencification refers to the decision-making process that sees the creation of a number of agencies to usually exercise oversight authority or implement a particular government policy (PIPS 2019). However, agencification disrupted other EU priorities, such as having clear lines of accountability in public administration and maintaining the required democratic separation of powers between the legislative branch that adopts policies and the government that implements them (Shamolli 2021). So, the EU Office in Kosovo could not effectively coordinate or manage internal interests when it came to the question of which agencies should undergo rationalisation (Interview 2). For instance, even though in the initial plan it was agreed for the Kosovo Agency for Comparison and Verification of Property to be included in the rationalization process, it was later asked by the government to be removed from the list because it was established as part of the EU-facilitated dialogue for normalisation of relations. Since the EU considered the political implications of the rationalisation process, the local stakeholders no longer saw the EU as a trusted partner or a standard setter. Such an approach exposed the lack of internal coordination within the EU, but also it created a comfort zone for the local political leaders to refrain from pushing for the rationalisation process and legitimise their position of defending their own interests.

In the process of public administration reforms, the EU sometimes resorted to soft paternalism and intimidating techniques to secure the desired outcome. Although publicly portrayed as a cooperative and equitable partnership, the EU's assistance to Kosovo often manifests as a hierarchical relationship where the EU's views prevail over Kosovo's at meetings (Ilazi 2024). For instance, the drafting of the conclusions from the meetings of the Special Group for Public Administration Reform between the Kosovo Government and the European Commission, as well as the meeting itself, is largely driven by the Commission personnel. For most joint consultative bodies, the drafts of the conclusions were prepared by the European Commission and often shared via e-mail with the local actors invited to comment. However, there has been an unwritten rule that local actors seem to observe – the Commission has the final say on what goes into the statement (Interview 6). If Kosovo institutions did not comply with specific demands, the EU used the periodical country report as a powerful disciplinary tool to publicly criticise the government for failing to meet the European integration goals. A negative mark in the country report criticising the government for lack of cooperation would be picked up by the media and civil society, who accept the report's contents without question, to lash out at the government for

hindering the European integration process. Although the EU was a guest in Kosovo, they were more sovereign than local institutions, and in such power relations, the EU acted as the foreign host and the local institutions were turned into guests in their home country (see Visoka and Musliu 2019).

Thus, the EU's micro-interventionist approach to public administration reforms in Kosovo has been marked by intrusive and contradictory practices. Despite the aim of building effective and transparent public institutions, the imposition of external models coupled with weak local capacity and political commitment has led to dysfunctional administrations and repeated rounds of reforms. Moreover, the EU's inconsistent support and lack of coordination have undermined local institutions' capacity and willingness to implement institutional reforms. Equally concerning has been the hierarchical nature of the EU's relationship with Kosovo, exemplified by its control over policy formulation and implementation, which has eroded trust and cooperation. These dynamics have hindered the effectiveness of public administration reforms and negatively impacted the EU's credibility and statebuilding efforts in Kosovo. While the EU's micro-interventionism has influenced the dynamics of statebuilding in Kosovo, the mixed results and the shared blame for these shortcomings have worked to the advantage of local elites, enabling them to strengthen their grip on power and further their economic interests in a weak state environment.

The European micro-diplomacy for the normalisation of ethnic relations

The third area of EU micro-interventionism in Kosovo concerns the application of micro-diplomacy and the practices of arbitrary facilitation of dialogue for the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Since 2011, the EU has led a complex process of technical and political dialogue with Kosovo and Serbia in an attempt to resolve sensitive outstanding political issues regarding the status of the Serb minority in the north of Kosovo, remove Serbia's interference in Kosovo's domestic affairs, and unblocking both countries' prospects for European integration (Visoka and Doyle 2016; Hajrullahu 2019). Although the EU tried translating complex political issues into technical processes, it could not remove political tensions at the heart of the dialogue (Visoka and Musliu 2023). In this context, the role of the EU was very difficult, and it entailed forging the normalisation of relations through blended facilitation and arbitration mechanisms.

However, the EU's micro-diplomacy, which guided the Dialogue for the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, negatively contributed to improving relations between both parties largely because it forged the entire process by acting as an arbiter disguised as a facilitator and suffocated the space for transforming relations by micro-managing and embedding itself in the entire dialogue process. Facilitation is meant to be "the least-interventionist strategy" (Bergmann and Niemann 2015: 962), but the EU turned it into a deep interventionist strategy (Lefteratos 2023). For the EU to advance the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia without resolving the mutual recognition question, it had to micro-manage the entire process. Such micro-management entailed using a specific set of diplomatic techniques, which entailed setting and controlling the agenda of negotiations, framing and drafting agreements, and utilising pressure points and incentives for both parties towards dispute resolution. Micro-diplomacy involves the conduct of everyday diplomatic performances to serve the macro-diplomatic goals. Micro-diplomacy resembles many aspects of everyday diplomacy as it involves navigating complex situations and finding solutions for intractable problems through strategic interactions (Faizullaev 2022). This micro-diplomatic approach inevitably required the EU to have a hands-on approach and embed itself in the agreements to make the technical and political agreements possible, which resulted in making a role for the EU throughout the lifespan

of the dialogue and embedding itself in the implementation process. The EU's micro-diplomacy for conflict mediation in Kosovo resembled the EU's own neo-functional logic, namely translating complex political issues into technical processes and using them as catalysts for spilling over and triggering wider macro-political changes (Visoka and Doyle 2016). In particular, the EU peace-making approach in Kosovo was an incremental approach based on the politics of incentives and conditionality to reach provisional agreements between the parties (Crisis Group 2021; Visoka and Doyle 2016; Gashi 2020).

However, the unclear purpose and format of the Dialogue required the EU to have a heavy footprint by micro-managing all aspects and, most importantly, embedding itself in the implementation process, which had a double effect. Although the EU's mandate was about facilitating a dialogue on improving the everyday lives of people (UN General Assembly 2010), the EU's approach nonetheless has focused on top-down and national-level peace-making between the governmental representatives and experts from both countries. The dialogue used micro-interventionism to resolve macro-political issues related to statehood, sovereignty, power, identity, territory, entitlement, and legitimate political authority. While the parties were consulted by the EEAS and invited to send their written proposals about the issues they believed should be discussed in the dialogue, the EEAS decided what topics would be included in the agenda and when the parties would meet to discuss them (Interview 8). There were instances when the invitation to participate in a round of dialogue in Brussels was sent to the delegations a day before the meeting (Interview 8). The invitation would not include the topic of the planned dialogue, which the delegation would only learn after arriving in Brussels. This was a deliberate tactic to minimise reluctance and friction between parties. The EU also assumed micro-managing the negotiation details by drafting different proposals and suggesting resolving outstanding issues, especially when the dialogue reached an impasse (see Ashton 2023). The only avenue for reaching consensus was through adopting ambiguous and double-meaning language in written agreements (conclusions). While drafting texts can be seen as a mundane and ordinary responsibility for the EU as a facilitator in the dialogue, it significantly increased EU agency, setting the tone and direction for the talks between Kosovo and Serbia. This format of tasks allowed the EU to control the situation and decide the parties' options for reaching a compromise solution. As a result, the role of the Serbian and Kosovan delegations ended up marginal, mainly in commenting upon such recommendations. The venue of negotiations has always been the EU offices in Brussels, which has given the EU, as a host, a wide range of powers to shape the process and the outcomes of talks.

Moreover, the EU used soft coercion techniques to pressure the parties to make the necessary concessions. This was especially relevant when dealing with the Kosovo delegation, which relied heavily on the support of the United States and key European powers (see Ashton 2023). The EU needed the United States to offset the confidence deficiency with the Kosovars because of its official status-neutral position vis-à-vis Kosovo (Interview 2). The EU's approach was to render impartiality from an external actor, in this case, the United States. The Kosovars had more confidence in the dialogue as long as the United States was involved. When the Kosovo delegation proved unwilling to cooperate or concede to an imposed solution, the EEAS would coordinate pressure with the U.S. State Department. Since many concessions had to do with sharing sovereignty or delegating, the US played a vital role in reassuring Kosovo that such decisions would not jeopardise Kosovo's sovereignty, which was the Kosovo delegation's main concern, as well as helped to handle the criticism of the opposition and public in Kosovo (Peci and Sejdiu 2024). This meant that Kosovo had to undergo microscopic intervention by the EU supplemented by macroscopic intervention by the US, who approached the dialogue through broader stability-seeking rationales and geopolitical considerations.

The macro-effect of micro-diplomacy, namely the EU's embedment in the dialogue was the avoidance of direct dialogue and negotiation between Kosovo and Serbia, leading to divergent

expectations, allegiances, and outcomes. Kosovo and Serbia made agreements not with one-another but with the EU. This was an effect of the micro-managing of the dialogue by the EU, which took the shape of imposing the embedment of the EU mechanisms in the implementation of those agreements and converting the dialogue into a process that bifurcated the separate negotiation of the advancement of the EU's bilateral relations with the two parties (Gashi, Musliu, and Orbie 2017). The embedment meant that in addition to monitoring the implementation of agreements and trying to play the role of the honest broker when implementation got stuck, the EU was also assigned direct responsibility for implementing key provisions (Hajrullahu 2019). The political technology of the EU's embedment operated on two levels. At the political and strategic level, the EU integrated Kosovo's and Serbia's implementation of agreements within the negotiation framework for integration and accession into the European Union. For both Kosovo and Serbia, the EU's annual country reports have served as a macroscopic overview of their performance on the dialogue as well as a disciplinary mechanism that has impacted the parties' cooperation with the EU.

At the technical and operational level, the EU made a role for itself through drafting provisions and incorporating itself into the implementing mechanisms of technical and political agreements, which offered the EU a broad scope to intervene in the process at the microscopic level (see Bashota and Hoti 2021). Partially, this suited the EU to ensure close monitoring of the implementation process, but partially, it reflected the preference of the parties who saw the EU's involvement as a co-party in the process as an optimal solution to address the inter-party trust deficit to avoid direct contact without third-party involvement and to reduce domestic costs and criticism from counter-peace forces who viewed compromised solutions as a defeat. For example, the agreement on Integrated Border Management was acceptable to Serbia because it included provisions for the embedment of EULEX personnel in all six border-crossing posts (Ilazi 2024). This, for Serbia, meant they were dealing with EU personnel, not Kosovo institutions. Additionally, the agreement stated that technical protocols can be signed directly with the EU, supplanting entirely the need for exchange and cooperation between the two parties. In other words, the EU's role in this agreement was not just to provide support; the EU was the main party to the agreement. The Serbian government agreed to return scanned cadastral records to Kosovo institutions, but on the condition that such a process would go via the EU. Regarding the customs in the north of Kosovo, it was agreed that the EU would administer a development fund based on the revenues secured from the applied customs duty to Serbian goods entering Kosovo (Dialogue Platform 2013).

Notably, the embedment of the EU in these agreements was imperative for the compromise between the parties, for translating the complex political issues into workable and implemental technical arrangements, and for establishing a *modus operandi* for cooperation. However, this practice failed to build the necessary confidence between parties for the technical arrangements to work. Embedment of the EU in Brussels Agreements during the technical dialogue explains properly how the EU managed to secure two major and over 30 sector-specific agreements between Kosovo and Serbia, but this approach created a bubble effect that burst in their implementation phase, particularly in the political-level dialogue. This also explains why the Brussels Dialogue failed to build the necessary confidence or a culture of cooperation between parties. The embedment practice fed the belief, especially in Serbia, that it was possible for the country to make significant progress towards European accession without the need to make decisive steps for the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. The micro-interventions served conflict management but not sustainable conflict resolution. By doing so, the EU created an enabling environment for both parties to bypass the need to meaningfully engage with each other and reach sustainable resolutions to their disputes. This gave the illusion that Kosovo and Serbia were

making progress towards normalisation of their relations, an illusion which disappeared when it became necessary for both parties to engage directly with each other in the framework of Brussels agreements.

Conclusion

This article examined the EU micro-interventionism in Kosovo as a specific example of the penetrating effects of international statebuilding in conflict-affected societies. The EU promotes local ownership and ethical governance; however, its informal interventions and strategic control often contradict this narrative. Examining everyday micro-interventions reveals a gap between rhetoric and reality, where the EU agency is enacted through an unaccountable and difficult-to-scrutinise approach, frequently resulting in ineffective institutional reforms. By looking at three significant sectors where the EU has had a heavy footprint in Kosovo – the rule of law reforms, public administration restructuring, and conflict mediation – this article mapped out the micro-political technology of interventionism, which is fluid, multi-dimensional, and connected to macro-political agendas. Through this, the article challenged the dominant narrative that portrays the EU as a neutral facilitator of reforms. It demonstrated how its micro-interventionist approach operates as a form of soft paternalism that enables control while evading direct responsibility for policy failures.

The EU deployed direct and indirect interventions to ensure that the EU's power is exerted and penetrated as deeply as possible. Direct interventions entail embedding EU officials within Kosovo's institutions, while indirect interventions utilise subcontracted EU representation to influence policymaking in the rule of law and public administration sectors. However, these micro-interventions have raised concerns about bypassing formal procedures, undermining local agency, and fostering a perception of EU norms as complex and opaque. The EU's micro-diplomacy in facilitating the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue similarly faced many challenges, including exacerbating tensions, sidelining local self-determination, and prioritising technical solutions over meaningful cooperation. Through the policy of conditionality, the EU has exerted political coercion, forcing local institutions to adopt policies and institutional reforms that are against their will and capacity. For the most part, however, the EU's pressure has been untrustworthy as it lacked a consistent and justifiable narrative of why certain political choices and institutional reforms had to be made by Kosovar counterparts. The EU officials or their sub-contractors have demonstrated a lack of consistency and strategic clarity in pursuing institutional reforms. This has not only delayed important reforms and thus improved governance in the country but also provided local institutions and political leaders reasons to disregard external advice, evade public accountability, and consolidate power by displacing responsibility for failures to the EU.

The discussion of the EU's role in reforming Kosovo's rule of law exposed the complexities of micro-interventionist statebuilding. While the initial deployment of EU officials (EULEX) aimed to strengthen legal institutions, its direct micro-management ultimately undermined local ownership and public trust. Similarly, the reliance on subcontracted experts, intended to share best practices, often resulted in inconsistent policies and weakened local agency. Bypassing formal mechanisms and prioritising short-term fixes over long-term capacity building hampered the development of sustainable and locally-owned reforms. While intended to address weaknesses, the overreliance on EU expertise ironically diminished local accountability and created a system vulnerable to inconsistency and external pressure. The EU's micro-interventionist approach to public administration reform in Kosovo exposed a fundamental flaw whereby the top-down strategy, characterised by imposed models, inconsistent support, and a hierarchical relationship, has yielded diminishing returns. The mismatch between externally imposed models and local capacities has resulted in repeated reform cycles, each targeting

the symptoms rather than the root causes. These cycles have eroded trust and discouraged local ownership. The EU's control over policy formulation and implementation - coupled with public criticism as a pressure tactic - bred local resentment and discouraged genuine partnership. The EU's micro-diplomacy in the Kosovo-Serbia normalisation talks experienced flaws, too. While the EU strived to translate complex political issues into technical agreements, its heavy-handed tactics ultimately hindered genuine progress. Micro-managing the agenda, drafting agreements, and relying on pressure tactics created a top-down process where Kosovo and Serbia did not manage to overcome their difference and forged concessions as a means to appease the EU rather than genuine steps towards normalisation, which then collapsed when it came to implementation on the ground.

The micro-politics of technocratic approaches to statebuilding in Kosovo highlight the broader tensions and challenges inherent in international statebuilding. Template-driven and externally-imposed models of political and institutional reforms that lack local ownership and fail to align with the socio-political context are prone to failure (see Richmond and Visoka 2021). Nonetheless, knowledge production about post-conflict states often emphasizes deficiencies in local governance capacity, perpetuating reliance on technical solutions. To break free from this knowledge-intervention nexus, hybrid institutional designs and models are proposed, though these are themselves challenging to reconcile and implement and can lead to local-international frictions (see Visoka 2012; 2017). As Mats Berdal and Dominik Zaum (2012: 3) observe, a key reason for the failure of statebuilding interventions lies in "the tensions arising from what are often the competing interests and values held by different interveners and local actors." In essence, it is the dynamics of micro-interventionism and the clash of competing agendas that generate mixed outcomes, rather than the success or failure of any single entity.

Thus, the impact of such micro-interventionist approach in Kosovo presents a complex picture. While intended to foster reforms and democratic development, it has arguably undermined local ownership and delayed progress. The impact of micro-interventionism appears to have been rather negative: it has undermined and delayed political and institutional reforms; prolonged Kosovo's custodian relations with the EU and thus undermined the capacity for self-reliance and development, and most importantly, it has undermined trust in the EU as a reliable statebuilding partner. This tension highlights the challenges of navigating between promoting good governance and respecting sovereign aspirations. Perhaps the most significant backlash against the EU's micro-interventionism in Kosovo has been the rise of an authentic sovereignist movement aimed at taking control over the country's fate and reducing extensive interference in internal affairs (Visoka 2011; Vardari-Kelser 2012). Since 2020, when the Movement for Self-Determination (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje!) has been in power, there has been against what they perceive as "diplomatic bullying", particularly in domestic political reforms and the normalisation dialogue with Serbia (A2 CNN 2024). The Government of Kosovo has pledged to align with the EU and the US on macro values and strategic goals, but they insisted on discontinuing the international micro-manage of Kosovo's internal affairs. In turn, political disagreement between the Kosovo Government and the EU has increased as a result of this cultural change and push against the EU's micro-interventionism.

However, the local quest for more ownership in Kosovo led to strong European diplomatic and political pressure, including threats to withdraw essential support for Kosovo on strategic matters. They perceived the quest for local ownership as a disingenuous move that disregarded the well-intended advice from Kosovo's allies, undermining Kosovo's efforts to consolidate statehood (Paçarizi 2024). Although micro-interventionism goes against the normative commitment of local ownership in the statebuilding context, it is seen as necessary and within the remits of permissible interventionism and soft paternalism centred on the loosely defined will to betterment, improvement, and progress. This signifies that despite decades of failed statebuilding in many conflict-affected settings (Richmond

2014), the EU and Western states are unwilling to change their foreign policy methods. On the contrary, the discourse on locally-led statebuilding is branded anti-democratic sovereignty and situated in the context of the rise of authoritarianism and counter-peace alliances aiming to erode Western-dominated international order (Pogodda, Richmond and Visoka 2023; Hehir 2024). Moreover, once interventions take place, it is hard for them to end. They may drift between macro and micro levels or direct and indirect forms but are unlikely to discontinue completely. Especially in situations such as Kosovo, with partially recognised statehood, unresolved disputes with Serbia, and widely embedded international missions, the discussion in our article has shown how hard it is to end external interventionism and enable full local ownership of the state (Visoka 2017). In this context, as long as Kosovo is not a full and equal member of the international society, it will likely be treated differently and navigate between strategic dependency and autonomy towards its international partners.

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Interviews

Interview 1 – Senior member of the former Ministry of European Integration of Kosovo, November 27, 2017.

Interview 2 – Senior member of the cabinet of the President of the Kosovo Assembly, December 20, 2017.

Interview 3 – Senior civil servant from the Ministry of Trade and Industry of Kosovo, March 1, 2018.

Interview 4 – Senior official from the Kosovo Police, n.d.

Interview 5 – Expert from an EU-member state working as a team leader in projects of technical assistance in Kosovo, April 24, 2018.

Interview 6 – Senior official from the Ministry for Public Administration of Kosovo, August 17, 2018.

Interview 7 – Senior civil servant from the former Ministry of Public Administration, August 17, 2018.

Interview 8 – Senior official from the Ministry for Dialogue, September 20, 2018.