

The Diplomacy of Uncertainty: Exploring the Protean Power of Aspirant States

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Abstract

This article examines how aspirant states with limited international recognition secure membership in international organisations. While soft and control power is a suitable framework to explore the foreign policy conduct of recognised states, in this article, we argue that aspirant states facing significant barriers to full recognition and membership in international organisations can leverage protean power, which involves adaptability, strategic innovation, and improvisation, to navigate complex political landscapes and achieve varying degrees of success in their pursuit of international legitimacy. We use Kosovo's diplomatic efforts as a case study, examining its successes and failures in joining organisations such as the World Customs Organization, the Permanent Court of Arbitration, and UNESCO. By comparing successful, partially successful, and unsuccessful cases, the article provides critical insights into the dynamics of international legitimacy, the politicisation of multilateral decision-making, and the evolving norms of state membership in a fragmented international order.

Keywords: soft power, protean power, aspirant states, membership, multilateralism, recognition

Introduction

The current international order - encompassing political relations between states as well as the shared norms, rules, laws, institutions, and practices that govern them - is highly sensitive and often inhospitable to the enduring demands of

peoples for self-determination, statehood, and recognition (Pegg 1998; Crawford 2007). The international recognition regime remains open to admitting new states only when they emerge through globally sanctioned processes and norms, such as decolonisation, or with the explicit consent of the parent state (Griffiths 2021). States that arise through alternative pathways, especially without the permission of their former parent state, are often excluded and denied recognition within the community of sovereign states (Badarin 2020). Nevertheless, despite the exclusionary and discriminatory logic underlying international state expansion, there are a few exceptional cases where entities have managed to circumvent these gatekeeping practices and secure recognition through alternative means (Newman and Visoka, 2018). While the merit for such penetration is widely attributed to systemic factors, normative institutions, and the preferences of great powers, there is wide disagreement on the determinants of successful state consolidation (Visoka, Doyle and Newman 2020; Vidmar, McGibbon and Raible 2022; Griffiths, Pavković and Radan 2023). Yet, we have limited knowledge of how aspirant states navigate and overcome challenges to membership in international organisations.

The pursuit of membership in international organisations represents a crucial avenue for aspirant states to affirm their sovereignty, secure international legitimacy, and participate meaningfully in the multilateral world (Visoka 2018). For these states, joining such organisations is far more than a ceremonial milestone - it is a strategic necessity that confers legal, political, and economic advantages. Membership can facilitate access to treaty-making, grant legal protections, and signal recognition of statehood, thereby bolstering an aspirant state's status within the international community. As scholars like Stephen Krasner (1999) and James Ker-Lindsay (2012) have noted, membership in international organisations often functions as an implicit recognition of sovereignty, offering a pathway to collective legitimacy, even for entities not universally recognised as states. However, the journey to membership is fraught with complexities. The struggle for membership reflects the broader challenges of statehood and sovereignty in the modern geopolitical landscape, where legal, political, and diplomatic forces intersect (Davis 2023). Aspirant states must navigate the dual challenges of gaining bilateral recognition and overcoming political obstacles within multilateral frameworks. Membership decisions are often shaped by geopolitical considerations, where powerful states wield disproportionate influence, deciding who gains access and who remains excluded. To overcome international obstacles to achieving statehood, aspirant states must adopt a flexible understanding of global politics. This includes developing adaptable strategies regarding when and how to act as a state, navigating the legal and social rituals of international relations, and employing innovative and prudent diplomatic methods.

This article engages with the politics of membership criteria in international institutions and reveals the diplomatic struggle for the admission and exclusion of new states that have contested statehood. The lack of universal norms and the politicisation of these processes mean aspiring states must adopt innovative strategies to assert their claims. Thus, the article examines the difficult path aspirant states must traverse to secure membership in international organisations through complex performative acts of dissidence and in defiance of existing rules that constrain their role in world politics. We argue that the concept

of protean power is better suited than soft power in the context of aspirant states that are unrecognised or partially recognised because it addresses the unique challenges these entities face in navigating a fragmented and politicised international system. While soft power relies on persuasion through cultural appeal, political values, or institutional legitimacy, aspirant states often lack the cultural and institutional platforms to exert significant influence, making soft power insufficient on its own. Their ability to exert soft power while remaining outside the club of recognised states remains limited. Although aspirant or *de facto* states may be similar in size to recognised small states, their exclusion from the international system significantly limits their ability to exercise soft power. Soft power, after all, requires at least some degree of control power, which emanates from membership in the international society. As a result, these aspirant states often turn to *protean power* - a more adaptive, unpredictable form of influence - as a means to eventually acquire both soft power and recognised control. The case of Kosovo exemplifies this struggle, as it had to leverage creative and adaptive approaches to navigate the uncertainties of state recognition and membership in international organisations. We argue that Kosovo's diplomatic success in gaining membership in international organisations has resulted from exercising protean power, namely, navigating the uncertainties surrounding the membership rules and developing prudent strategies that involved a situational convergence of diverse discourses, enacted through various performative and improvised actions, and entangled with alliance politics within international organisations.

The article employs a qualitative case study approach to analyse how aspirant states leverage protean power to navigate barriers to international legitimacy and membership in multilateral organisations. Kosovo's experience provides a compelling case for examining the application of protean power. As a state with partial international recognition, Kosovo offers unique insights into the challenges and strategies of aspirant states. The research focuses on three specific cases of Kosovo's membership attempts: successful protean power in the case of the World Customs Organization (WCO); partially successful protean power in the case of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA); and unsuccessful protean power in the case of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Each case is analysed in terms of procedural norms and criteria for membership, political resistance and advocacy strategies, and the role of protean power in shaping diplomatic outcomes. To assess Kosovo's application of protean power, the study examines: 1) adaptability, namely how Kosovo adjusted its strategies to align with procedural norms and counter-resistance; 2) innovation, namely the creative use of legal and procedural ambiguities to advance membership bids; and 3) outcomes, namely the degree to which Kosovo achieved its objectives in each case.

Through these case studies, we explore the broader implications of Kosovo's efforts for multilateral diplomacy and the evolving norms of statehood and legitimacy. They illuminate the tensions between the legal frameworks designed to facilitate inclusion and the political realities that often subvert these ideals. Moreover, these cases demonstrate the protean power of aspirant states, which, despite limited diplomatic leverage, can adapt, innovate, and improvise to assert their sovereignty on the global stage. Ultimately, Kosovo's experience reflects the challenges faced by many aspirant states striving to assert their place in the

international system. It underscores the importance of procedural integrity, the perils of politicisation, and the enduring potential of diplomacy as a tool for state-building and international recognition. As the global order becomes increasingly fragmented and contested, the lessons from Kosovo's journey provide valuable insights into the dynamics of international membership and the ongoing struggle for legitimacy and inclusion in an ever-evolving world.

This article is structured as follows. The first part discusses the importance of membership in international organisations for aspirant states. It delves into the innovative and adaptive strategies aspirant states employ (protean power) to navigate the uncertainties of international recognition and membership. The second part explores the protean power in practice by examining Kosovo's experiences, specifically its accession to the WCO, the PCA and UNESCO. These case studies illustrate the procedural, legal, and political hurdles Kosovo faced and its diplomatic strategies for overcoming them while exploring the broader implications for international law, institutional norms, and geopolitical dynamics.

Beyond Soft Power: The Protean Power of Aspirant States

Small states in world politics have limited agency and capacity to advance their national interests. They revert to soft power and diplomatic persuasion as the most realistic means to influence the world and defend their core interests (see Grøn and Wivel, 2011; Thorhallsson, 2018; Baldacchino, 2023). The concept of soft power, coined by Joseph Nye (2011, 2017), has become an influential framework for studying international relations, especially how states construct their foreign policy identity and capabilities through diplomatic and communicative persuasion (see also Bry 2017). While soft power is more compatible with small states and their limited capabilities, in times of uncertainty and power transition, dominant states also tend to rely on soft power as a strategic asset to navigate changes in world politics (Surowiec and Manor 2021). Yet, as Nye (2009, 161) recognised later, "soft power is not the solution to all the problems". Soft power is usually part of a broader strategic toolkit (or smart power) that operates in conjunction with hard (control/coercive) power to achieve national interests. One of the areas where soft power plays an important role is the diplomatic recognition and admission of new states in international organisations (Nye 2008). Diplomatic recognition is influenced not only by power politics but also by discursive persuasion, performativity, and the art of circumstances (Visoka 2019). Recognition is vital in international relations, serving as the linchpin for statehood, sovereignty, and integration into the international community (Crawford 2007; Griffiths 2016). The role of recognition extends beyond legal acknowledgement; it facilitates a state's access to multilateral institutions, protection under international law, and the ability to engage in diplomatic and trade relations. Similarly, membership in international organisations is a pivotal goal for aspirant states, offering them not only symbolic legitimacy but also tangible benefits essential for statebuilding and international integration. It provides access to legal sovereignty, material support, and participation in global governance. One of the benefits of universal recognition and membership in international organisations is the ability to exercise sovereignty at home and abroad. In other words, the established and recognised

states have a greater chance to consolidate and perform soft power (Nye 2011). As Stephen Krasner (1999) highlights, recognition through membership facilitates treaty-making and ensures diplomatic immunity, while small states find protection from the asymmetries imposed by larger powers (Keohane and Nye 2011). In particular, small states view international organisations as crucial shields against the power dynamics imposed by larger nations, offering protection and recourse against potential exploitation (Keohane and Nye 2011, 289). Membership transcends a ceremonial role, becoming a mechanism for aspirant states to assert their sovereignty, achieve international recognition, and exercise soft power. Organisations that do not explicitly require statehood, as James Ker-Lindsay (2012) observes, can still enhance the legitimacy of aspirant states, positioning them more favourably on the global stage. Lora Viola (2020, 69) similarly notes that membership confers legal personhood, granting aspirant states the rights and recognition associated with international standing.

Membership in international organisations often serves as a proxy for collective recognition, signalling a form of implied statehood (Peterson 1997). Admission of states to international organisations removes any doubt on the fulfilment of statehood criteria by the aspirant state (Visoka 2018). This is because, as Alison Duxbury (2011, 29) notes, “by granting membership to a state, an international organisation can itself confer legitimacy on its members”, which may have a constitutive function in the quest for universal recognition. Membership enables access to treaties, international privileges, and participation in multilateral institutions foundational to state consolidation. It also provides new states with protection and economic resources, which are crucial for survival (Fazal and Griffiths 2014, 102). In turn, international organisations benefit from expanded membership, including small states, as broad participation enhances their legitimacy as global actors (see Corbett, Yi-Chong, and Weller 2021, 5). However, the road to membership is fraught with contestation. As early as 1920, the League of Nations Secretariat concluded that “It is an incontestable fact that the admission of a State into the League of Nations implies the recognition of this State as a subject of law, as a legal personality from the point of view of the League of Nations” (League of Nations 1920). Similarly, admission to the UN signals universal recognition and significantly removes doubts about the statehood capacity and legitimacy of the new states. As Deon Geldenhuys (2009) asserts, admission to the United Nations functions as a powerful indicator of international legitimacy, facilitating entry into other multilateral bodies and bolstering the aspirant state's status within the global community. Yet, scholars such as Malcolm Shaw (2008) argue that while UN membership strongly indicates statehood, it does not bind other states to the same recognition. This underscores a persistent tension: membership alone does not constitute statehood, as bilateral recognition remains indispensable (Warbrick 2003). James Crawford (2007) and David Raič (2002) emphasise that statehood requires broader acceptance and recognition from individual states beyond the implied legitimacy that organisational membership provides.

Efforts to join international organisations are not free from power politics, even if that entails relying on different modes of social, political and institutional power (see Barnett and Duvall 2005, 48). Undoubtedly, soft power can be a helpful framework to explain how contender states - namely the central government or

the former base state and the seceding entity or the aspirant state – try to persuade third countries to take their side and recognise sovereignty over a specific territory (see Knotter 2024). However, since soft power relies on the possession of a diplomatic and institutional infrastructure and capabilities for exercising international persuasion, the concept has limited application in the context of aspirant states (see Seybert and Katzenstein 2018, 10). In other words, soft power has been widely seen as a tool for small states to punch above their weight and compensate for size-related obstacles through prioritising and investing “available power resources in issues of particular importance” (Panke 2012, 317). By contrast, aspirant states have a deficit of international recognition and remain outside major multilateral bodies, thus having limited resources and capabilities, which curtail the potential of exerting soft power and shaping the rules of the game (Griffiths 2021). With limited diplomatic capabilities, aspirant states are at the bottom of state hierarchies in world politics and suffer from limited diplomatic recognition and access to international organisations, including protection from international law (see Pegg 1998). Aspirant states face the dual challenges of securing bilateral recognition and avoiding the loss of existing diplomatic partners, as well as overcoming the political dynamics inherent in membership processes within international organisations (see Visoka 2024). Historically, recognition has been transactional, reflecting the strategic interests of powerful states rather than adherence to normative principles (Fabry 2010; Coggins 2014). Jens Bartelson (2013) highlights the unequal nature of this process, where powerful states often dictate terms to weaker ones, shaping the trajectory of their recognition and inclusion. This transactional approach extends to organisational membership, where geopolitical considerations – namely the geographical distribution of votes, power relations and regional rivalries – frequently override normative or legal criteria, creating additional hurdles for aspirant states (see Newman and Visoka 2023).

When aspirant states face exclusion from universal organisations like the United Nations, they often explore alternative pathways to international integration. Regional and thematic organisations, as noted by James Ker-Lindsay and Mikulas Fabry (2023, 145-152), offer aspirant states opportunities to assert their presence and gain partial legitimacy. However, these alternatives underscore systemic shortcomings, such as inconsistent norms and the politicisation of membership (Mathias and Trengove 2016, 984). Politicisation, defined by Lyons, Baldwin, and McNemar (1977, 85) as the pursuit of narrow political objectives within traditionally apolitical spaces, reflects the power dynamics that influence membership decisions. While some argue that politicisation integrates normative and geopolitical considerations, others contend it undermines fairness, consensus-building, and organisational cohesion. A recurring source of politicisation is the fear among existing states that granting recognition or membership to aspirant states legitimises unilateral declarations of independence. Non-recognition is often less about an aspirant state’s ability to fulfil its obligations and more about sanctioning its unilateral assertion of sovereignty (Berg and Pegg, 2018). As Duxbury (2011) explains, membership decisions are shaped by both legal and political factors, with member states’ strategic interests playing a dominant role. This results in a fragmented and

opaque system, where aspirant states are often marginalised despite meeting the criteria for membership.

Increasing and comparative research demonstrates that aspirant states lacking universal recognition find that exercising agency and statehood in world politics involves exploiting liminality, specifically by operating within infra-legal and quasi-institutional avenues and socio-political lobbying channels (see Lefteratos 2025; Fortan and Bouris 2025; Visoka and Ganohariti 2025). To achieve international recognition, aspirant states are often seen as liminal international actors who are forced to engage in hybrid diplomatic practices with a capacity for “agency, innovation, and the generation of new structures from the fringes of the international system” (Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018, 307). They are forced to adopt a fluid and performative understanding of sovereignty, which emerges through practices, discourses, and relationships between states and non-state actors (Weber 1998; Dittmer 2017; Visoka 2018; McLarren and Stahl 2025). This performative reading of statehood is not unique to partially recognised or unrecognised states: it also holds explanatory power for other recognised states, as captured by the research in political and cultural geographies of statehood (see Laketa 2025). Janis Grzybowski and Martti Koskeniemi (2015, 29) assert that “statehood has no ontological status apart from the claims, representations, assumptions, and routines performing it in political and legal practices.”

Short of diplomatic and geopolitical capabilities to perform control power (be it hard or soft power) over the process and outcomes of their bids for membership in international bodies, aspirant states are forced to rely mostly on generating and applying protean power. Lucia A. Seybert and Peter J. Katzenstein (2018, 4) refer to the protean power as the “effect of improvisational and innovative responses to uncertainty that arise from actors’ creativity and agility in response to uncertainty”. Whereas control power can be measured in terms of the actual effects of actions, protean power is harder to measure, and its effects are indirect, remaining at the level of potentiality and incalculable uncertainty. Moreover, as Seybert and Katzenstein (2018, 6) maintain, “control power operates most clearly, and reliably, in situations marked by calculable risk that actors experience as such; protean power arises in situations of deep-seated uncertainty that actors often experience as a crisis”. Yet, as Katzenstein (2020, 481) noted, the purpose of protean power is to rethink rather than replace the notion of control power. This reading of power shows that the international system remains an open system despite efforts by dominant and established states to close it off to newcomers (Viola 2020). In other words, international politics is an arena where soft and hard power, as well as control and protean power, are exercised (see Guzzini 2020, 450-56). Protean power explains instances where a diplomatic potentiality is actualised through prudent actions and tailored diplomatic tactics. Such a power is performed under conditions of uncertainty and difficulty in calculating risks and anticipating outcomes. While soft and institutional power (as conceived by Barnett and Duvall 2005) depends on the recognition and established platforms to project influence, protean power thrives in the margins, allowing aspirant states to assert agency, challenge norms, and secure incremental gains despite systemic resistance. Aspirant states are forced to apply protean power to guide their diplomatic conduct, which is embedded in prudence and situational adaptation of discourses and performances not driven by institutional knowledge and pre-

determined strategies but by practical knowledge and expertise accumulated in the course of diplomatic deliberation and reproduced through improvisation and imitation of other consolidated states (see Visoka 2019).

Protean diplomacy plays a central role in this performative enactment of statehood, serving both as a medium for asserting sovereignty and as a field where the politics of recognition is contested. Costas Constantinou (2013, 146) aptly observes that the meaning of sovereignty evolves “in the process of practicing diplomacy”. Similarly, Banai (2016, 224) characterises diplomacy as “fundamentally political sets of practices premised on the preservation and advancement of sovereign interests in world politics”. Ole J. Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann (2015, 7) argue that diplomacy “helps reproduce the state as the naturalized political arena for the generation of meaning and belonging”, where the change of diplomatic practice may result in changing the meaning of statehood. For fledgling states, diplomacy can become constitutive of statehood by mediating the consolidation of external sovereignty through diplomatic recognition and access to multilateral bodies as basic prerequisites for entering international relations. Thus, for aspirant states, diplomacy entails navigating external impediments to statehood while devising innovative strategies to claim international subjectivity and legal personality. The hope of aspirant states, through a combination of imitating and improvising established state practices alongside proactive actions, creates new diplomatic spaces and transcends conventional norms that may block their admission into international society. In other words, if aspirant states adopt the control power logic and take calculated risks, they would often limit their diplomatic actions in anticipation of refusal and rejection due to unrecognised statehood. However, by endorsing a protean approach to power, they tend to innovate under conditions of uncertainty and thus penetrate the international system (see Seybert and Katzenstein 2018, 13).

In this regard, Vincent Pouliot’s (2016, 3) work on diplomatic practices recognises the power of practical ‘know-how’ knowledge in defining the international hierarchical order and overcoming vulnerabilities within multilateral spaces. In other words, protean power resembles the emergent power, elaborated by Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014), which captures the exercise of power in practice through competence. Related to emergent power is prudence, which Harry Gould (2016, 261) describes as a quality that “allows us to make sense of some part of the world and understand how to carry on in it”. Small states in general tend to leverage multilateral spaces, such as the secretariats of international organisations to overcome power inequality and leverage procedural equality (Panke 2012). Similarly, for aspirant states, prudence meant balancing reasoned intentions with the flexibility to act under changing circumstances, a skill that proved essential in navigating the challenges of contested sovereignty. This diplomatic approach exemplifies what Copeland (2009) terms guerrilla diplomacy, characterised by agility, improvisation, and adaptability. Guerrilla diplomats, according to Copeland (2009, 206), are “attuned to uncertain, even unstable situations where developments are fast-breaking and the premium is on mobility, intelligence, and cultural adaptability.” While the protean power of aspirant states recognises the uncertainty of their prospects for membership in international organisations, their diplomatic conduct, nonetheless, is driven by

reasonableness, constant approximation, and the art of circumstances, which entail using situational and tactical knowledge to maximise effects (Scott 1998; Butler 2010). Protean diplomacy closely resembles the diplomatic practices of microstates, such as those in the Caribbean and the Pacific, which must balance their viability as states with sharing and trading sovereignty with larger states (Corbett 2023, 262).

Protean diplomacy highlights the power of diplomatic improvisation and creativity in altering the current global order, utilising loopholes in the international legal and political order, and overcoming conservative policies regarding who has the right to become a state (Visoka 2018). The protean power of aspirant states may not result in achieving the desired outcomes – such as membership in international organisations – but can disturb conventional diplomacy and add ambiguity to the rules and practices of international organisations (see Rumelili 2012). When protean power results in successful outcomes, it can be transformed into control power, showing that both types of power are co-constitutive and not necessarily exclusive to one another. Doing this opens the space for performing actorness, which may lead to reproducing, contesting or transforming the structural features of international organisations. The practice of reproduction includes mimicking the diplomatic conduct of existing member states and seeking inclusion, and sameness in terms of rights, entitlements, and privileges (McConnell, Moreau, and Dittmer 2012). The practices of contestation involve politicising existing norms, power relations, and institutional dynamics by exposing systemic flaws and fracturing the internal composition of international organisations (see Ross 2007). Finally, the protean power of aspirant states can open up and transform international organisations, which leads to what Cohen (2012, 6) calls progressive constitutionalisation. While performances predominantly are shaped by repetitive and mimetic processes with elements of contingent anticipation, regularity, and preparedness, the protean power of aspirant necessitates recognising external forces and entanglements that can help or hinder their strategic goals. Especially in multilateral spaces, agency is not constituted upon the political strengths of involved actors but on the monumental combination of political forces with fractural agency and emergent features (Visoka 2018). Thus, the diplomatic agency of aspirant states is to open spaces in the international system. However, since international organisations operate as an open and complex system, the prospects for inclusion remain at the level of potentiality rather than certainty. While we possess a much more nuanced understanding of how small European, developing, and island states assert their sovereignty within multilateral organisations (see Long 2022; Theys and Rietig 2020), our knowledge about the strategies and tactics of aspirant states is quite limited, especially regarding those who have achieved *de facto* statehood but remain outside the UN system. The remainder of this article explores the case of Kosovo and its exercise of protean power in practice in pursuit of membership in international organisations.

The Protean Power in Practice: Exploring Kosovo's Quest for Membership in International Organisations

Kosovo declared independence in 2008, following decades of conflict, Serbian repression, and international administration. While NATO and the UN laid the groundwork for statehood, Kosovo's independence was not universally endorsed, with Serbia, backed by Russia and China, opposing it. Supported by the U.S. and many European nations, Kosovo prioritised expanding diplomatic recognition and securing international organisation memberships to assert its sovereignty. By 2025, it had achieved recognition from 119 countries and joined over 60 organisations, though momentum waned due to shifting global priorities and domestic political instability (Brajshori 2025). The International Court of Justice's 2010 advisory opinion affirmed the legality of Kosovo's independence, but normalisation of relations with Serbia remains crucial for wider international recognition. Despite stalled progress, Kosovo's international standing remains ambiguous, and its future prospects for integration into the international society remain uncertain (Visoka 2018). The resistance from Serbia, backed by powerful allies such as Russia and China, and the divisions among European Union (EU) member states, including Greece, Spain, Romania, Cyprus, and Slovakia, have complicated Kosovo's pursuit of sovereignty and international legitimacy. Remaining outside the UN has significantly impacted Kosovo's ability to fully participate in the international community and assert its sovereignty.

Without universal recognition, Kosovo was compelled to engage in bilateral diplomacy, employing tailored, context-specific strategies to gain recognition on a country-by-country basis while pursuing membership in international organisations one at a time (Newman and Visoka 2018; Brajshori 2025). This necessity led Kosovo to adopt a processual approach to recognition and international membership, involving multiple stages, sustained diplomatic efforts, and navigating unforeseen challenges. Membership in international organisations has complemented Kosovo's diplomatic recognition efforts by reinforcing its independent statehood, broadening access to global platforms, and deriving political, economic, and socio-cultural benefits from integration into the international community. For Kosovo, participation in regional and international organisations has been a strategic move to enhance its international legitimacy and improve prospects for both individual and collective recognition (Hoxhaj 2017). Its diplomatic approach has focused on prudent, calculated engagement in multilateral forums across the UN, EU, and other regional bodies, initially targeting specialised agencies as a preparatory step towards securing membership in more prominent international organisations.

In contemporary international politics, the denial of membership to international organisations is often attributed to the failure to meet organisation-specific criteria, which are frequently linked to breaches of norms concerning human rights and democracy (Duxbury 2011, 4). For Kosovo, however, the principal barrier to membership has been political, stemming from the opposition of Serbia and its allies. Despite fulfilling the Montevideo Convention's criteria for statehood and demonstrating a commitment to democracy, human rights, and regional peace, Kosovo encounters substantial obstacles to United Nations (UN) membership. These obstacles include opposition from Russia and China in the Security Council, as well as uncertainty regarding support from two-thirds of the UN General Assembly. Serbia has further leveraged its insider status in other

organisations to obstruct Kosovo's bids, forming temporary alliances and engaging in legal and procedural battles to undermine Kosovo's applications.

Lacking conventional power, Kosovo employed protean power - improvisational and adaptive strategies - to navigate uncertainty and maximise its diplomatic potential. This included acting like a state by mimicking the diplomatic narratives, performances, and rituals of established states. It also involved building alliances and lobbying through third countries for recognition and membership in international organisations. Although powerful states played a significant role in strengthening Kosovo's international standing, Kosovo's own protean power has been crucial in generating momentum, building on support from great powers to reach out to other countries and consolidate external sovereignty (Visoka 2018). The lack of universal recognition and exclusion from major multilateral organisations compelled Kosovo to adopt a hybrid diplomatic strategy that combined compliance with certain international norms while simultaneously challenging and subverting others to pursue its diplomatic goals. This strategy capitalised on the absence of universal, codified rules on state recognition, allowing Kosovo to exploit legal and procedural loopholes in the conservative international order. While Serbia politicised Kosovo's pursuit of recognition and membership, Kosovo sought to depoliticise its actions by aligning them with international law and precedent. This tactic, described as a form of "self-styled dissidence," enabled Kosovo to disrupt and divide its opponents while gradually securing membership in regional organisations, specialised international agencies, and multilateral treaties.

Kosovo's strategy for gaining membership in international organisations has generally been to pursue those organisations where they can achieve consensus and sufficient votes, those that have strategically benefited Kosovo's economic and political interests, and those that we believe may pave the way for entry into more significant organisations. Kosovo focused on identifying international organisations where most members recognised its independence and where veto mechanisms were absent. Targeted campaigns, conducted at both bilateral and multilateral levels, sought to secure membership votes, often facilitated by sponsor states. These sponsors, typically small or medium-sized countries with strong diplomatic credibility, advocated on Kosovo's behalf within the structures of these organisations. Yet, in most cases, the potentiality of Kosovo's protean power was determined by the support of third countries within multilateral organisations and the controlling power of Serbia and its allies, who lobbied and used their privileged access to oppose Kosovo's membership in international organisations. Serbia utilised its position as an insider and a member state to vote and lobby against Kosovo's participation and membership in various international bodies (Ker-Lindsay 2012; Visoka 2018). This took the shape of building temporary alliances with other states to vote against Kosovo's bid for membership, followed by a discursive and legal battle for interpreting legal and procedural rules against Kosovo's bid for membership (see Visoka 2024). On the other hand, the lack of Kosovo's collective recognition and exclusion from the main multilateral forums forced the young country to reciprocate and not recognise the existing rules of the game (see Brajshori 2025).

While Kosovo's journey for membership in international organisations has differed from one case to another, three within-case studies are adequate examples

that explain the protean power of aspirant states in practice and the diplomatic tensions and politics underpinning membership in international organisations. As summarised in Table 1, Kosovo's bids for membership in the World Customs Organization (WCO), the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), and UNESCO highlight the spectrum of outcomes (success, partial success, and failure) that reflect the complex dynamics of protean power in international diplomacy.

Table 1. The Promise and Limits of Protean Power in Practice

Case Study	Key Strategies	Challenges	Outcome
World Customs Organization (WCO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leverage procedural simplicity of WCO membership rules. - Deposit instruments directly to the depositary state (Belgium). - Built alliances for support within the WCO. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Politicised resistance led by Serbia, Russia, and others. - Questioning of Kosovo's statehood by a minority. 	Successful: Membership finalized in 2017 after Belgium's administrative action and support from majority of member states.
Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accession via procedural norms of the 1907 Hague Convention. - Lobbying for recognition through bilateral and multilateral engagements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resistance from key players like Serbia and Russia. - Initial review of membership by the PCA's Administrative Council. 	Partially Successful: Membership recognised after a contested vote in the PCA Administrative Council.
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Highlight Kosovo's commitment to cultural preservation. - Build coalitions and conducted cultural diplomacy. - Focus on bilateral lobbying. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Geopolitical resistance, particularly regarding Serbian cultural heritage. - Failed to secure a two-thirds majority. 	Unsuccessful: Fell three votes short of the two-thirds majority required for membership.

Successful protean power: World Customs Organization

Kosovo's journey to join the World Customs Organization (WCO) highlights the dynamics of protean power and the uncertainties between procedural simplicity and politically charged responses. Accession to international conventions and treaties is crucial for states seeking recognition and membership in international organisations. They establish diplomatic legitimacy and adherence to international norms, providing a framework of shared principles and obligations (Klabbers 2002, 103). The Convention Establishing a Customs Co-operation Council exemplifies inclusivity, emphasising universality and cooperation beyond United Nations membership. By allowing that "The Government of any State

which is not a signatory to the present Convention may accede thereto”, it avoids imposing restrictions based on international status (Convention Establishing a Customs Co-operation Council 1950). For this reason, Kosovo prioritised accession to the WCO Convention, as the process is notably straightforward, providing a sharp contrast to the complex and detailed procedures required by other international organisations, such as the United Nations or UNESCO.

The WCO Convention states that depositing an instrument of accession is sufficient for an aspiring member state to initiate membership (Convention Establishing a Customs Co-operation Council 1950). The process of accession to the WCO is straightforward, requiring only the submission of accession instruments to the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which serves as the depositary authority. Unlike other international organisations, the WCO’s procedure avoids extensive screenings or votes. This streamlined approach underscores the WCO’s commitment to openness and non-discrimination, enabling broad engagement in trade and customs matters. The WCO’s founders emphasised the practical necessity for global customs cooperation over political considerations related to statehood. By simplifying the membership process and making it accessible to ‘any State’, the WCO aimed to facilitate comprehensive international collaboration in customs matters, irrespective of the political complexities surrounding state recognition and membership in other international bodies.

Kosovo initially attempted to join the WCO, but such a process sparked significant debate within the WCO Council and Policy Commission. Lacking consensus on Kosovo’s statehood, the Council postponed the decision. The Chairperson ultimately concluded that, due to a lack of consensus, Kosovo’s accession should not be revisited until there was tangible progress or a compelling reason to do so (WCO, 2012). The 2012 conclusion to defer Kosovo’s membership lacked legally binding authority since the WCO Convention does not grant the Council authority over accession matters. As a result of this, on January 25, 2017, Kosovo deposited its instrument of accession to Belgium as the depositary state, formalising membership (WCO 2017b). With limited control over the process and outcome of the application, Kosovo had to pursue this procedural pathway to membership in the WCO. As stipulated by Article XVIII, paragraph c, of the said convention, both the convention itself and its annexe became effective for the Republic of Kosovo on the date the instrument of accession was deposited, namely 25 January 2017 (WCO 2017b). A depositary’s primary duty is to manage the administrative aspects of international treaties, including receiving and recording accession instruments. However, Serbia vehemently opposed this, arguing that Belgium, as a depositary state, breached international law by accepting Kosovo’s accession and asserting Kosovo lacked the legitimacy to join the WCO (Embassy of Serbia in Belgium 2017). Serbia’s objection was rooted in statehood and sovereignty issues, highlighting the political dimensions of customs cooperation.

In 2017, despite the Convention’s clear guidelines, some member states challenged Kosovo’s membership. As Chair of the WCO Council, Russia led discussions opposing Kosovo’s inclusion, citing the 2012 conclusions as a collective decision reflecting the will of all member states (WCO 2017a, para. 253). Other countries, including China, Argentina, and Spain, echoed these objections, arguing that the Council should approve accessions. The Chairperson highlighted the

complexity of considering the legal status of quasi-state entities and the potential precedents set by the Council's decisions for future accession processes (WCO 2017a, para. 249-251). However, the WCO Secretary-General clarified that once the depositary notified members of an accession, the process was final. The Secretary-General distinguished between the 2012 and 2017 scenarios, emphasising procedural adherence in the latter (WCO 2017a, para. 316-318).

Countries recognising Kosovo, led by the United States, supported its membership and challenged the Council's role in accessions. They rejected the assertion that the Council had any part in the accession process, referencing the 1950 convention. Similarly, the Secretary General of the WCO clarified the procedural norms governing accession to the Convention, stating that once the depositary acknowledged an instrument of accession and informed the Members and Secretariat, the accession process was deemed finalised - a protocol consistently followed for 65 years (WCO, 2017a, para. 316-318). Belgium's neutrality in receiving Kosovo's instrument and notifying members adhered to procedural norms, considering notification as an administrative formality rather than a substantive decision (WCO, 2017a, para. 329). Despite objections, only 13 of 181 member states formally opposed Kosovo's accession, reflecting the majority's acceptance of its membership. Political contention heightened when the WCO Council Chair attempted to obstruct Kosovo's representatives and proposed revoking its membership (WCO, 2017a, para. 319-320). Austria objected to these actions, citing procedural inaccuracies and reinforcing Belgium's adherence to the Convention (WCO, 2017a, para. 324). Despite dissent from a minority of states, Kosovo's recognition by most members underscored its legitimate accession.

The WCO's management of Kosovo's accession highlights the challenges that international organisations encounter in balancing legal frameworks with political interests. The Convention's procedural simplicity contrasts sharply with the politicised resistance from certain states. Belgium's consistent approach, treating Kosovo's accession as a neutral administrative act, underscored the importance of procedural integrity. The Secretary-General's defence of Kosovo's membership emphasised adherence to established norms, while objections from a few states, driven by political motives, undermined the WCO's inclusivity. The case of Kosovo's accession to the WCO illustrates the vulnerability of international organisations to manipulation and politicisation. The resistance from a minority coalition, supported by the Council Chair, demonstrated how political alliances can challenge procedural norms. Despite this, Kosovo's recognition by the majority and its compliance with accession protocols affirmed its legitimate membership. This episode highlights the need for robust mechanisms to safeguard organisational integrity against political interference. As Kosovo asserts its rights within the WCO, this situation serves as a reminder of the complexities of balancing legal principles with geopolitical realities. It also emphasises the importance of procedural clarity, impartiality, and adherence to international norms in maintaining the credibility and functionality of global institutions.

Kosovo's accession to the WCO illustrates a successful exercise of protean power under conditions of deep uncertainty. Lacking access to formal institutional levers and facing resistance from powerful non-recognisers, Kosovo relied on adaptive and improvisational diplomacy to navigate the WCO's flexible procedural framework. This reflects adaptability, as Kosovo reoriented its strategy away from

Council consensus and toward direct action through the depositary state. It also exemplifies innovation by exploiting the legal ambiguity in the WCO Convention that does not require a vote or approval process for accession, an opportunity that most fully recognised states might overlook. These improvisational tactics, grounded in procedural fidelity yet politically disruptive, allowed Kosovo to create a *fait accompli* that established its membership despite opposition. The outcome of Kosovo's membership, despite subsequent objections, demonstrates the potency of protean power when deployed strategically. Kosovo turned the absence of a rigid accession procedure into an opening for entry, leveraging the administrative neutrality of Belgium and the Secretary-General's authority to legitimise its position. This success highlights how aspirant states can capitalise on procedural uncertainty and institutional fragmentation to assert agency, challenge exclusionary norms, and incrementally consolidate international standing. The WCO case confirms that even in environments resistant to formal recognition, aspirant states can mobilise protean power to shape outcomes and produce system-wide effects.

Partially successful protean power: Permanent Court of Arbitration

The second relevant case of protean power in practice concerns Kosovo's accession to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which illustrates the uncertainties and required adaptability to procedural norms, institutional authority, and political considerations. The PCA, established at the First Hague Conference, is designed to resolve disputes diplomatically and through an arbitration process (Convention for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes 1907). While initially focused on arbitration between states, the PCA has expanded its scope to offer diverse dispute-resolution mechanisms for states, intergovernmental organisations, and private entities, reflecting its evolving role in global diplomacy (Daly, Goriatcheva and Meighen 2014, 4).

Kosovo formally acceded to the 1907 Convention for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes on November 18, 2015 (MFA of the Netherlands, 2015). The Netherlands, as the depositary for the Convention, played a crucial administrative role in facilitating Kosovo's accession, adhering to the procedural guidelines set out in Articles 91-97 of the 1907 Convention for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes and Articles 76-80 of the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. At the time, 116 states were parties to the PCA's conventions, and 66 recognised Kosovo as an independent state (Zyberi 2016). This demonstrated that UN membership is not a prerequisite for PCA accession, underscoring the PCA's commitment to universal principles of peaceful dispute resolution. However, procedural disputes arose. On January 4, 2016, the PCA's Administrative Council decided to "keep under review" the status of Kosovo and Palestine, instructing the depositary to exclude Kosovo from the list of member states during evaluation (Zimmermann 2016). Kosovo objected, arguing that depositing an accession instrument completed the process and that neither the Council nor the depositary had the authority to review or remove its membership post-accession (MFA of Kosovo 2016a). This contention emphasised the PCA's historical practice of accepting new members without imposing

additional conditions. The conflict escalated when Palestine was accepted as a PCA member on March 14, 2016, following a favourable vote (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016b). This decision highlighted inconsistencies, as Kosovo's membership faced obstacles while Palestine's was approved. States recognising Kosovo proposed discussing its status at the PCA's 195th meeting in June 2016. Eventually, after further lobbying, on June 13, the Council reversed its earlier decision, formally recognising Kosovo as a PCA member by a vote of 41 in favour, 24 against, and 13 abstentions (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016a).

This case underscores the tension between procedural integrity and political influence in international organisations. The PCA's initial decision to review Kosovo's status reflects an attempt to navigate the political sensitivities surrounding international recognition and membership. The PCA's handling of Kosovo and Palestine's memberships revealed inconsistencies that raise questions about fairness and the role of geopolitical considerations in decision-making. The Netherlands' proactive role in highlighting Kosovo's accession also sparked debate. As the depositary, the Netherlands' function was administrative, not substantive. The Netherlands' initiative to independently raise the issue of Kosovo's accession to the PCA, despite the existence of a mechanism allowing any concerned state to request a meeting of the Administrative Council, raises questions about the necessity and motivations behind this action (Zyberi 2016).

The lack of widespread dissent among PCA member states further challenges the justification for initiating a review process, highlighting potential biases or political motivations that may be influencing the Netherlands' decision. At the time of the PCA Administrative Council's meeting on 4 January 2016, only three of the 116 PCA member states - Russia, Serbia, and Mexico - had objected to Kosovo's membership (Zyberi 2016). The unilateral actions taken by certain states to suspend or remove Kosovo from PCA membership, in the absence of clear legal authority or procedural legitimacy, underscore a departure from established norms. The PCA's 1907 Convention, akin to many international agreements, does not explicitly provide mechanisms for the suspension or expulsion of member states by the Administrative Council. This absence of clear procedural provisions suggests that efforts to alter Kosovo's status without a legal basis or broad consensus represent a significant departure from established practices, reflecting similar issues observed in other international bodies such as the World Customs Organization.

Kosovo's partial success in gaining membership in the PCA once again illustrates the relevance of protean power in the face of legal ambiguity and political resistance. It reveals Kosovo's adaptability, particularly in shifting from conventional diplomatic channels to a more assertive and improvisational approach when its accession was challenged. Despite the PCA's initial procedural neutrality, Kosovo had to innovate diplomatically, relying on coalition-building with recognising states, the strategic use of legal arguments, and pressure during Administrative Council meetings to reverse its effective exclusion. While the Netherlands' unusual intervention blurred the boundaries between administrative neutrality and political influence, Kosovo's diplomatic manoeuvring turned procedural uncertainty into an opportunity for contestation and eventual inclusion. Although the outcome was not as clear-cut or automatic as with the WCO, and by that demonstrating a lack of control power, Kosovo's

eventual formal acceptance by vote confirms a partially successful outcome. The PCA case demonstrates how aspirant states can exercise protean power by exploiting institutional openness and confronting and transforming institutional ambiguity through pragmatic improvisation.

Unsuccessful protean power: UNESCO

The membership process of aspirant states in international relations carries risks and uncertainties, including the possibility of failure. The third example of protean power in practice is Kosovo's attempt to join the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation in 2014, which was unsuccessful, falling short of the required two-thirds majority by three votes. The application for membership in UNESCO was driven by Kosovo's calculated risk and high probability for success due to wide recognition by the majority of UNESCO member states and the appropriate momentum with a successful recognition campaign, progress in the EU integration process, and normalisation of relations with Serbia.

In its letter dated July 16, 2015, addressed to the UNESCO Director-General, the Foreign Minister of Kosovo formally submitted an application for membership on behalf of the Republic of Kosovo (MFA of Kosovo 2015a). The letter affirmed Kosovo's commitment to the Constitution of UNESCO, its readiness to fulfil the obligations outlined therein, and its willingness to contribute to the financial expenses of the Organization. Despite the procedural submission, the Director-General of UNESCO did not forward Kosovo's application to the Executive Board. The Director-General's decision not to forward Kosovo's application introduced an element of procedural unpredictability, reflecting the discretionary and often opaque nature of multilateral governance. This created an obstacle in the formal procedural pathway, compelling Kosovo to adapt its approach and seek alternative mechanisms to advance its objectives. Instead of relying solely on the procedural role of the Director-General, Kosovo redirected its efforts toward diplomatic coalition-building. This strategy resulted in the successful mobilisation of 48 member states to request the inclusion of Kosovo's application on the Executive Board agenda (UNESCO 2015). This adaptive response exemplifies Kosovo's use of protean power to overcome procedural obstacles and assert its agency in an uncertain and complex international environment.

The analysis provided by Kosovo's allied countries suggested a slightly favourable outlook for achieving membership, particularly concerning the vote in the Executive Council, where a simple majority was required. Given that 32 out of the 58 member states of the Executive Council had formally recognised Kosovo, the probability of securing the necessary majority appeared strong. However, the two-thirds majority vote needed in the General Conference presented a more complex challenge, with outcomes less easily anticipated due to the broader composition of the voting body and the diverse geopolitical considerations at play. The analysis received from one of Kosovo's allied states indicated that the U.S. Department of State was, in principle, prepared to support Kosovo's candidacy (MFA of Kosovo 2015c). However, this support was contingent upon a high degree of certainty regarding the likelihood of success. The Department emphasised that

a potential failure in the membership bid could have adverse implications for Kosovo's future endeavours in international organisations, potentially undermining its credibility and diplomatic momentum. Despite the inherent uncertainties surrounding the General Conference, the overall prognosis for success remained optimistic. This assessment reflects a strategic appraisal that hinges on the dynamics of state recognition and voting behaviour in multilateral organisations. It also highlights the interplay between procedural mechanisms and the political will of member states, underscoring the importance of diplomatic engagement and coalition-building to navigate the multifaceted challenges of multilateral decision-making. The Executive Council of UNESCO formally added to its agenda a proposal recommending Kosovo's admission as a member of the organisation. This decision resulted from a vote on 21 October 2015, in which the Council approved the recommendation with 27 votes in favour, 14 against, and 14 abstentions (Deutsche Welle 2015).

Beyond procedural and voting uncertainties, Kosovo's bid for UNESCO membership touched upon complex issues surrounding the religious and cultural heritage of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Kosovo. Religious and cultural heritage, particularly that of the SOC, represented a dual-edged sword for Kosovo's UNESCO ambitions. On the one hand, safeguarding the SOC's heritage offered an opportunity for Kosovo to demonstrate its commitment to inclusivity, cultural preservation, and adherence to international norms. On the other hand, critics framed the bid as a potential threat to Serbian heritage, portraying it as an attempt to appropriate or undermine the SOC's legacy (Janjić 2015). Serbia's diplomatic offensive - characterised by lobbying, procedural challenges, and legal disputes - exploited Kosovo's liminal status to block its accession. Serbia's allies utilised their influence within UNESCO to question Kosovo's eligibility and legitimacy, emphasising the political rather than cultural dimensions of its application. In this context, the protean nature of Kosovo's UNESCO campaign was evident in the fluid interplay of institutional, cultural, and geopolitical factors. By collaborating with regional and global partners, Kosovo tailored its lobbying efforts to address specific concerns of UNESCO member states. This strategy combined compliance with UNESCO's procedural norms with creative tactics to counter opposition, such as promoting its rich cultural heritage and commitment to preserving historical sites. Ambassadorial visits, cultural diplomacy, and strategic communication campaigns became crucial tools for reshaping narratives and building support among undecided states.

On November 9, 2015, Kosovo's bid to join UNESCO was unsuccessful, falling short of the required two-thirds majority by three votes (The Guardian 2015). The final tally recorded 92 votes in favour, 50 against, and a significant number of abstentions. Achieving 95 affirmative votes was necessary for Kosovo to secure membership in this UN organisation. This outcome represented a setback in Kosovo's ongoing efforts to achieve broader international recognition and integration into multilateral institutions. Divisions among UNESCO's member states reflected broader geopolitical dynamics. The inability to secure a two-thirds majority in the General Conference underscored the limitations of Kosovo's protean power in overcoming entrenched opposition. These setbacks reveal the constraints of aspirant states operating within multilateral systems designed to privilege established members. The inability to secure a two-thirds

majority in the General Conference underscored the limitations of Kosovo's adaptable power in overcoming entrenched opposition. These setbacks reveal the constraints faced by aspirant states operating within multilateral systems designed to privilege established members. A notable challenge during the campaign was the unpredictability of voting intentions. Many countries exhibited last-minute shifts, creating significant uncertainty. This lack of transparency and internal coordination within numerous delegations led to unexpected outcomes, further complicating Kosovo's strategy. The volatile nature of voting behaviour required Kosovo to continuously adapt its approach, often in real-time, to address emerging dynamics. This unpredictability not only strained resources but also highlighted the limitations of bilateral lobbying efforts in the absence of clear and consistent commitments from member states.

For Kosovo, the failure to secure UNESCO membership marked a significant setback in its broader efforts to assert sovereignty and legitimacy on the global stage. This defeat was particularly striking as it represented the first instance in which Kosovo had failed in a membership bid, contrasting sharply with its previous cautious and calculated approach to joining international organisations. The loss not only undermined Kosovo's reputation as a rising actor in multilateral diplomacy but also revealed the limits of its strategic adaptability in the face of entrenched opposition and unpredictable voting dynamics. Despite being aware of the unpredictability inherent in the process, Kosovo's reliance on a protean power position proved insufficient to overcome the structural challenges and political resistance it encountered. The failure to secure membership highlighted vulnerabilities in Kosovo's diplomatic strategy and exposed the fragility of its international alliances, leaving its bid for recognition and legitimacy weakened. Rather than reinforcing its identity as an independent state, the unsuccessful outcome underscored the persistent barriers Kosovo faces in solidifying its position within the international system.

Conclusion

This article has examined the protean power of aspirant states, focusing on Kosovo's diplomatic efforts to join international organisations. The concept of protean power, characterised by adaptability, improvisation, and strategic innovation under uncertainty, offers a valuable lens for understanding how aspirant states with limited conventional power navigate the complexities of international relations. While soft power is a useful concept to describe the foreign policy of recognised states, we have observed here that protean power is more adequate to describe the foreign policy of partially recognised states. It captures the practice of power through non-coercive and non-controlling means, primarily relying on the deployment of situational knowledge and the emergent competence of leveraging institutional loopholes and diplomatic relations under conditions of uncertainty. Kosovo's experiences reveal the critical importance of procedural flexibility, alliance-building, and performative diplomacy in advancing the aspirations of states that face significant geopolitical resistance. Through the cases of the WCO, the PCA, and UNESCO, this study illustrates both the opportunities and challenges inherent in leveraging protean power. Each case

demonstrates how Kosovo has navigated legal and political ambiguities, highlighting the interplay between institutional rules and the broader geopolitical context. The successful membership in the WCO showcases how explicit procedural norms can be leveraged to bypass politicised resistance. The partial success of the PCA reflects the role of sustained lobbying and the importance of procedural adherence, even amid political disputes. Conversely, the failure to secure membership in UNESCO reveals the limitations of protean power when faced with entrenched opposition and geopolitical dynamics beyond the aspirant state's control.

These three examples emphasise that while protean power enables states like Kosovo to assert agency and craft innovative pathways to consolidating international legal sovereignty, its outcomes are not guaranteed. The interplay of institutional norms, political resistance, and diplomatic improvisation creates an uncertain landscape in which success depends as much on external factors as the aspirant state's strategies. Kosovo's diplomatic strategy displayed notable strengths in adaptability, procedural expertise, and alliance-building, allowing it to achieve selective successes despite formidable challenges. Kosovo effectively employed protean power, leveraging improvisation and creativity to navigate uncertainties in international norms and membership rules. Kosovo adopted a staged strategy, targeting specialised and regional organisations as stepping stones toward broader international recognition rather than immediately pursuing high-profile memberships like the United Nations. Flexible strategies, such as mimicking established state practices and tailoring diplomatic approaches, including coalition building with supportive states, enabled Kosovo to gain momentum and achieve selective successes, such as its membership in the WCO and PCA. In particular, Kosovo excelled in exploiting legal and procedural ambiguities in international treaties, bypassing political vetoes by utilising mechanisms like direct deposit of accession instruments (as seen in the WCO case).

Kosovo's experiences highlight the potential of creative and flexible diplomacy while also underscoring the limits aspirant states face in navigating the fragmented and politicised multilateral system. Geopolitical constraints, overreliance on allies, and the inherent unpredictability of multilateral decision-making often hindered its efforts. Regional resistance, particularly from Serbia and its allies, posed consistent and often insurmountable barriers in organisations requiring broad consensus. Despite efforts to align with international norms, opponents often framed Kosovo's bids as politically motivated or as challenges to existing cultural or geopolitical dynamics, undermining its narrative of inclusivity and legitimacy. While Kosovo's alliance with the U.S. and European states were a strength, its heavy dependence on a few key sponsors limited its autonomy and left it vulnerable to shifts in their priorities or support. As initial recognition efforts waned, Kosovo struggled to maintain the momentum needed to advance its diplomatic agenda in multilateral organisations. This was evident in Kosovo's subsequent inability to secure membership in INTERPOL and the moratorium on suspending applications for membership in international organisations after 2018. While flexibility and creativity were effective in some cases, they could not always overcome entrenched political resistance, as demonstrated by the failure to secure membership in UNESCO. The unpredictability and transactional nature of

international decision-making highlighted the inherent limits of Kosovo's strategies.

As global governance becomes increasingly fragmented and contested, the lessons from Kosovo's journey provide critical insights into how states can navigate the uncertainties of the international system and strive for recognition and membership in a world that often resists change. The protean power of aspirant states is a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of actors operating in the margins of the international system and the need to expand the conceptual and empirical scope of power in international diplomacy. Kosovo's diplomatic efforts exemplify the challenges faced by states seeking recognition and integration into the international system under conditions of contested sovereignty. Kosovo had to adjust to the inhospitable international system and perform protean power through a hybrid strategy of diplomatic dissidence, improvisation, and legal ingenuity to navigate the constraints of its contested sovereignty. Its ability to adapt to and challenge existing norms, modify institutional rules, and leverage procedural loopholes demonstrates a resourceful and pragmatic approach to diplomacy and the usefulness of protean power under the conditions of legal and political uncertainty. While significant obstacles remain, Kosovo's strategy offers valuable insights into how contested states can assert their agency and navigate the rigidities of the international system to advance their aspirations for recognition and membership. Although this article demonstrated the usefulness of protean power in explaining the diplomacy of uncertainty of aspirant states, there is further scope to examine its indirect and system-wide effects, specifically how contentions surrounding membership in international organisations shape the norms, rules, and practices of multilateralism both positively and negatively.

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