

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND MEDIATION CASES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

ANÁLISE COMPARATIVA DE CASOS DE RESOLUÇÃO DE CONFLITOS E MEDIAÇÃO NOS BALCÃS OCIDENTAIS

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Abstract

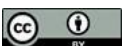
The Western Balkans still remains a region where conflict resolution went through in few decades through quite complex and often uneven mediation processes. Former Yugoslav countries are best example to analyse and compare conflict resolution process thought mediation while focusing on progress and stagnation. The case studies of this paper, to name here North Macedonia's issue with Greece, negotiation between Kosovo and Serbia, unresolved issues between BiH and Croatia, individual case of Slovenia and separation of Montenegro from Serbia are the best examples where conflict resolution and mediation process can be analysed. In addition, this research focuses on identifying interactions which shaped the outcomes and it thoroughly analyses how various actors, negotiation formats and historical legacies influence the outcomes. Further, this research brings to light repeating patterns of each analysed regardless of their different circumstances. Great importance of mediation process is attributed to external relevant actors such as EU, the UN and NATO who played important role in facilitating agreements. The conflict resolution in the Western Balkans can be best perceived as process that manages tensions between parties, not as process with achieved final agreement. Observation in the research can facilitate in designing adaptive peace strategies in similar conflict environments.

Keywords: Conflicts. Disputes. Mediation. Western Balkans. Similarities and Distinctions.

Resumo

Os Balcãs Ocidentais continuam sendo uma região onde a resolução de conflitos ocorreu ao longo de algumas décadas por meio de processos de mediação bastante complexos e, muitas vezes, desiguais. Os países da antiga Iugoslávia são o melhor exemplo para analisar e comparar o processo de resolução de conflitos por meio da mediação, com foco nos avanços e nas estagnações. Os estudos de caso deste artigo — a saber, a questão da Macedônia do Norte com a Grécia, as negociações entre Kosovo e Sérvia, as questões não resolvidas entre a Bósnia e Herzegovina e a Croácia, o caso específico da Eslovênia e a separação de Montenegro da Sérvia — são os melhores exemplos para analisar a resolução de conflitos e o processo de mediação. Além disso, esta pesquisa se concentra na identificação das interações que moldaram os resultados e analisa minuciosamente como diversos atores, formatos de negociação e legados históricos influenciam os resultados. H'HHh Além disso, esta pesquisa traz à tona padrões repetitivos em cada caso analisado, independentemente de suas diferentes circunstâncias. A grande importância do processo de mediação é atribuída a atores externos relevantes, como a UE, a ONU e a OTAN, que desempenharam um papel importante na facilitação de acordos. A resolução de conflitos nos Balcãs Ocidentais pode ser melhor percebida como um processo que gerencia as tensões entre as partes, e não como um processo que culmina em um acordo final. As observações da pesquisa podem facilitar a elaboração de estratégias de paz adaptativas em ambientes de conflito semelhantes.

Palavras-chave: Conflitos. Disputas. Mediação. Balcãs Ocidentais. Semelhanças e Distinções.



1 INTRODUCTION

Over four decades ago, the Western Balkans once again found themselves at the intersection of conflict and cooperation where history's ethnic, political and territorial confrontations overlapped while similarly being witness to episodes of historic diplomacy. From the Prespa Agreement on the North Macedonia-Greece name dispute, to the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, the Western Balkans has become a living room for conflict-resolution methodologies. Even if everyone has its own historical context, the Western Balkans collectively provide a valuable lesson in how mediation can be transformed in the face of complexity.

In order to make deep analyses six emblematic cases: North Macedonia-Greece, Kosovo-Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina-Croatia, intra-Bosnian wars, Slovenia, Serbia-Montenegro are considered for comparison and to conduct such comparisons, its goal is to identify commonalities in similar patterns, nuanced differences and resulting lessons learned between “most-similar” and “most-different” conflict pairs. Despite the interest worldwide, in particular from the European Union, academic research has frequently remained fragmented, viewing cases of trafficking as isolated events (in legal or psychological terms).

This paper fills this gap through a comparative mixed-method design and is threefold. First, it tests similarities and differences between the compared cases concerning conflict type, actors that play here a role, mediation strategies, and outcomes. Second, it sketches repeated problems, like open questions of identity or seclusion of substate entities and learns lessons from its previous efforts. Thirdly, it maps out guidelines for the future of MTO in the Western Balkans and other conflict regions of its kind, where utility holds in the diversity and specificity of its operations within the respective contexts.

This paper is based on a mix of document analysis and semi-structured interviews by mediators, regional experts and civil society.

Through embedding the case studies in a wider EU enlargement framework, it reflects both the motivating force of the prospect of accession and the disappointment when progress is delayed. What is unique about this study is that the human perspective takes the front seat. It transcends state visits to focus on things like grassroots efforts or

youth forums in Mitrovica, interfaith dialogue in Mostar, or civil society bridges across national lines. These grassroots dynamics are key to lasting peace.

The content follows the logic of aim: theoretical frame and method, the two cases, a cross-case comparison and finally a proposal for policy. Composed in this way, the study seeks to catalogue the Western Balkans not just as an area of post-conflict activity, but as a laboratory of peace development that can offer lessons for both scholars and practitioners for generations to come.

2 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To thoroughly look into the complex process for conflict resolution in the Western Balkans, this research is based on theoretical framework which is focused on four main dimensions: mediation formats, design of stakeholders, hybrid threats, and comparison between similarity and difference matrix. With its combination, the paper looks further aiming to bring to light broader mechanisms that shape success or stagnation of regional mediation efforts.

2.1 Mediation formats

The framework of mediation plays a critical role in shaping both the process and the outcomes of conflict resolution. This paper identifies three main formats:

1. Track I diplomacy, which is characterized by high-level formal negotiations led by state actors and international organizations, such as the EU-facilitated Brussels Dialogue (example negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia).
2. Track II diplomacy, which involves informal consultations between civil society, academics, and former officials. Such initiatives often run alongside with formal processes, as it can be seen in the youth-led dialogue forums in North Macedonia.
3. The hybrid-digital platforms, a combination of virtual resources with physical presence. This example can be mentioned and seen in the post-Dayton e-reconciliation workshops and that enabled increased participation and ongoing interaction that extends beyond traditional summits.

Each format offers specific procedural advantages, from confidentiality and prioritization of sensitive issues to broader inclusion and capacity building, which directly impact the pace, sustainability, and inclusiveness of mediated results.

2.2 Stakeholders

Just as important for knowledge of the mediation process are the characterization and interaction of the actors. This article arranges these actors in three different layers: international organizations, regional states, and local civil society networks.

At the highest level, international organizations, such as the EU, the UN, and the OSCE, are pivotal actors, to which the member states delegate part of their policy autonomy; often they do so by appealing to the dealing partners' institutional authority, expertise, and strategic advantage, notably in the form of, for example, peacekeeping operations, political conditionality, or accession frameworks. Instead of being neutral intermediaries, these intermediaries often influence nature and pace of the peace process.

The second is made up of regional powers, such as Croatia, Greece, and Serbia, which assume more subtle roles. They can be supporting players, direct players, or in some cases, spoilers, influenced by evolving national interests or underlying bilateral grievances. Their involvement is driven by domestic politics as it is by their stake in regional stability.

The third actors are the local civil society such as imams and community organizers, diaspora networks, business coalitions, and grassroots movements. Such groups, even if they are often overlooked in formal negotiations, possess valuable social capital and public legitimacy and their capacity to reconcile, to facilitate processes of transitional justice, and to create trust in communities are very important for sustainable peace agreements.

With such layered functions, delineated and recognized, it becomes evident where authority, legitimacy, and access to clout are distributed along the mediation spectrum and how these appropriations can, or cannot, be supportive for peacebuilding.

2.3 Comparison between similarity and difference

To facilitate this comparative analysis, the research employs a similarity-difference approach by examining:

- Most similar cases such as North Macedonia–Greece and Kosovo–Serbia. This comparison identifies impacts of cultural and historical inheritance within similar mediation frameworks.
- Most different cases for example, the rapid resolution in Slovenia contrasted with continued complexity to this day in Bosnia and it reveals how different stakeholder dynamics and hybrid interferences may nonetheless bring about different results from a state-level institutional perspective within a similar social setting.

Set against their historical and social contexts, the Serbian case of dialogue shows this in concrete. This twin-track approach, while allowing for almost excessive exploration of individual cases, also provides overall generalizations applicable to cases as a whole, thus strengthening the research findings.

3 CASE STUDIES

3.1 North Macedonia – Greece dispute and the Prespa Agreement (2018)

3.1.1 *From protracted identity conflict to symbolic resolution*

To remember the name dispute between North Macedonia and Greece which in reality traces back in the early 1990s, during the turbulent breakup of Yugoslavia, when the former Yugoslav republic declared independence in 1991 under the name “Republic of Macedonia”. This name immediately drew strong opposition from Greek government. Greeks in reality did not have the issue just about name, but what it represented, especially because it touched deep historical and emotional significance. When we look the Greek side, we can notice that the name “Macedonia” evoked their emotions about its northern region, steeping into ancient Hellenic heritage and the legacy of Alexander the Great. They feared the new state’s use of the name could mean territorial ambitions or even

rewriting the whole history. And when we analyze Macedonians, we can notice that the name was a crucial part of asserting a sovereign identity which was long overshadowed. Here we can see that what began as a disagreement over terminology quickly became a broader struggle over identity, memory, and regional legitimacy (Bieber, 20218).

The dispute was escalating in the course of time and Greece played a very strategic step by using its influence to block Macedonia's bids for EU and NATO membership, which significantly heightening tensions. However, the dispute finally reached a temporary compromise in 1993, when the United Nations admitted the country under the provisional name "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM). However, this name had a quite small impact to heal the deeper symbolic divide (United Nations, 1995). The ongoing name issue between Greece and North Macedonia is one of the most exemplary identity-based issue of then geographical former Yugoslavia. This name dispute can serve as reminder that historical narratives can be deep, as well as emotional legacies and national symbolism can influence contemporary diplomacy.

Initial agreement on this issue was realized in 1995 with Interim Agreement and was facilitated by the UN which allowed North Macedonia to engage in international discussion under then provisional name "FYROM". This contributed normalization of bilateral relations between Greece and FYROM but the main issue still remained unresolved. Matthew Nimetz was appointed as UN Special Envoy who led mediation from 1994 until 1998. However, little achievements were made due to political resistance and nationalistic narratives.

With appointment of new political leaders in Greece and North Macedonia in 2017 and 2018 drastic changes were made when the Prime ministers of both countries prioritized resolution of the issue and were at the same time got motivated by Euro-Atlantic aspirations (Petkovski, 2019). Greece was the one to block Macedonia's NATO and EU accession over the name issue for quite long time and this is how it made regional integration a powerful incentive. Both parties, backed by the EU and NATO, reached the Prespa Agreement in June 2018 and with it marked a major diplomatic milestone (European External Action Service, 2018).

The resolution process followed a hybrid diplomacy model. At the Track I level, the UN facilitated formal negotiations with robust support from the EU and NATO, which offered conditional incentives. Relevant stakeholders in Track II, particularly youth

movements, civil society, academics and others contributed to change of public narratives from the current to compromising and reconciliation narrative.

Composition of stakeholders in reality was made based on multi-layer and high risk. The EU and NATO made sure to influence with accession possibilities and government showed their courage by pushing the deal despite strong opposition from nationalist parties in both countries. Civil society and media played dual roles: it either will support regional peace or intensify nationalist backlash. Referendum in North Macedonia, which took place in September 2018, reflected though turnout as it was quite low and with over 90% of voters supporting the agreement.

Even if the Prespa Agreement achieved some success, numerous challenges were coming to light. A major legitimacy gap emerged from the low referendum turnout, which even if it was technically valid, raised questions about public ownership. The emotional depth of the issue meant that even technical terms, such as constitutional changes and linguistic clarifications, required symbolic sensitivity. EU Integration process for North Macedonia was obstructed by unrelated issues with Bulgaria. The name issue of North Macedonia proves that even well negotiated processes demands consistency and support from external actors.

Despite facing various surfaced challenges, many results were quite impressive. North Macedonia made a significant move which was amendment of its constitution and adopting its new name. In response to North Macedonia's move, Greece ratified the agreement and removed its vetoes and paved the way for North Macedonia to join NATO in 2020 (NATO, 2020). The agreement also touched on cultural matters, meaning that North Macedonia would recognize its identity and language which is Slavic and had to confirm that it does not claim any Hellenic heritage, which was a major concern for Greece. However, let's focus on some challenges which remained despite all work done. The Prespa Agreement is uncommon success story of conflict resolution which was focused on resolving identity-based issues. It proves how symbolic disputes, in many cases is considered as ungovernable, can be resolved when domestic political will aligns with strategic international mediation. Moreover, it emphasizes the potential of conditional integration frameworks to facilitate regional peace, so long as promises made by international actors are seen through.

3.2 Kosovo – Serbia dialogue (2011 – present)

3.2.1 Between normalization and political stalemate

The ongoing negotiation process between Kosovo and Serbia is regarded as one of Europe's most emotionally charged contemporary negotiation processes (Ker-Lindsay, 2018). Kosovo was governed by UN Interim administration while Serbia continued to regard Kosovo its territory as an integral part of its state to this day (Weller, 2008). It was a turning point for Kosovo when declaration of independence was made in 2008, however this independence caused deeper tensions with Serbia, who strongly opposed it (Weller, 2008). Tensions continued to remain high, particularly due to actions of the Serbian side and in the four municipalities in the northern Kosovo (Ker-Lindsay, 2018).

International mediation stakeholders, respectively the EU, stepped in to prevent further escalation and promote normalization (Bieber, 2015). The negotiation process between Kosovo and Serbia officially began in 2011 and it was initially framed as a platform which would gradually improve relations and resolve practical issues (Bieber, 2015). Over the years, the process went through a mix of technical and political negotiations, as customs and energy to mutual recognition of documents and the sensitive issue of the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM) (European External Action Service, 2013). Despite several agreements, progress still remained unequal. Moments of breakthrough were often followed by continued mistrust and stalled implementation (Rrustemi & Vogelaar, 2020). Negotiations remained a delicate balance of act with which history and identity is navigated as well as sovereignty, all while striving to guide both countries towards a more stable and collaborative future within the European Union.

The dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia commenced in 2011 under the EU facilitated Brussels Dialogue (Bieber, 2015). This dialogue was set to normalized relation between both countries without directly addressing the recognition issue. Dialogue process was held until a significant move was made with signing the Brussels Agreement of 2013, which addressed technical issues such as border management, integration of police and local autonomy for Serb majority areas (European External Action Service,

2013). The latter issue remained unimplemented and politically debatable (Rrustemi & Vogelaar, 2020).

The new agreement, the Ohrid Agreement 2023, offered new perspectives for normalization (European Western Balkans, 2023). This agreement was verbally agreed, even if it is considered as not legally binding, it includes provisions for de facto recognition, mutual respect of national symbols and documents and autonomy arrangements for Kosovo's Serb communities (European Western Balkans, 2023). Despite diplomatic momentum, implementation remains unequal, and political trust between both sides remains diminished, especially following the situation which occurred in northern Kosovo during 2021-23 (Rrustemi & Vogelaar, 2020).

The mediation process between Kosovo and Serbia was mainly shaped by Track I diplomacy which was led by the EU through its European External Action Service (Bieber, 2015). Occasional support from the U.S. and NATO added layers to the mediation but also risked collapse of the framework (United States Institute of Peace, 2020). Actors that fall under track 1.5 and II remain as secondary ones. The process reflects a complex, multi-actor framework where alignment among mediators is not always consistent (Rrustemi & Vogelaar, 2020).

Main stakeholder is the EU, which is mainly focused in dialogue with Serbia's on its EU accession process (Chapter 35), and Kosovo's aspirations for European integration (Bieber, 2015). The role of the US was to act as a parallel facilitator during the 2020 Washington Agreement (United States Institute of Peace, 2020) and on the other side Russia played a spoiler role by supporting Serbia's non-recognition stance (Ker-Lindsay, 2018). Political leaders in Kosovo and Serbia are compelled by nationalist rhetoric and electoral cycles and that position limits them to make any compromise (Rrustemi & Vogelaar, 2020). Local communities, respectively local Serbs in Kosovo, navigate a space of conflicting loyalties and institutional distrust, which restricts their political ability to reach desired compromise (Ker-Lindsay, 2018).

The dialogue Kosovo and Serbia is obstructed by consistent structural issues. Serbia's political position on Kosovo, its independence and its (non)recognition undermines the credibility of the negotiation framework (Weller, 2008). Issues such as ASM are currently pending and that intensify tensions and concerns about potential territorial disintegration within Kosovo. Political leaders face internal resistance and

inconsistent motivations create distrust (Rrustemi & Vogelaar, 2020). On one hand Serbia is working to become a member of the EU but on the other hand Kosovo is diplomatically obstructed due to limited international recognition (Bieber, 2015).

Considering all perspectives, it is worth mentioning that the negotiation process produced some incremental outcomes. Agreements on technical issues such as telecommunications, customs as well as border crossings improved daily life for citizens and this played a role in lowering tensions (European External Action Service, 2013). However, these achievements are fragile, often threatened by crises and political provocations (Rrustemi & Vogelaar, 2020). The Ohrid Agreement 2023 introduced renewed hope for negotiation progress between Kosovo and Serbia but its verbal and non-binding agreement between both states leaves enough space for backtracking (European Western Balkans, 2023).

The Kosovo-Serbia dialogue remains a case of managed stalemate as a process that prevented another conflict but yet it has to deliver a sustainable political settlement (Ker-Lindsay, 2018). This case demonstrates the limits of external mediation when domestic political will is weak and recognition remains elusive. The mediation process underscores the need for coherent international alignment, deeper societal engagement, and stronger accomplishment on commitments to ensure that progress achieved at negotiation tables is translated into actions that leads to stability (Rrustemi & Vogelaar, 2020).

3.3 BiH – Croatia (1995 – 2011)

3.3.1 Navigating borders and belonging after Dayton

Relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Croatia in the post war period is caused by outstanding territorial, political, and humanitarian issues stemming from the 1992–1995 Bosnian war (Bose, 2002). While both nations established their alliance in the later phases of the conflict, Croatia's early support for the Croat Defense Council (HVO) and Herzeg-Bosnia resulted in enduring wounds (Chandler, 2000). These are post-war elements that create a high degree of distrust and complicate the questions of cross-border leverage and post-war accountability. The conflict also displaced

hundreds of thousands of people and muddied bilateral relations for years to come. Despite the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995 having ended violence in Bosnia by and large, the treaty had ignored much of the unresolved problems between BiH and Croatia, leading to continued controversies over border demarcations, citizenship rights, return of refugees and IDPs (Office of the High Representative, 1995).

There were three principal stages in the attempts to resolve these post-war difficulties. The first attempt, the DPA defined the inner structure of BiH and the tools (such as the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and the Peace Implementation Council (PIC)) responsible for civilian implementation (Bose, 2002). Dayton froze some interstate issues, which left bilateral tensions unresolved, especially in Croat-majority parts of western Herzegovina, where Zagreb continued to have close informal links (Chandler, 2000). BiH and Croatia's negotiations were held between 1996 and 2003 which was to resolve specific disputes, such as the Neum corridor (Bosnia's connection to the Adriatic Sea), the Kostajnica bridge conflict, and the borders along the rivers Una and Sava (International Crisis Group, 2003). Although these negotiations were supported behind the scenes by the EU and U.S., it did not result in a comprehensive agreement. A third track developed around refugee return and property restitution under Annex 7 of Dayton, facilitated by UNHCR, OSCE, and OHR (Phuong, 2000).

The 2011 Sarajevo Process attempted to close the unresolved displacement issues within a regional framework, including Croatia, BiH, Serbia, and Montenegro (Regional Housing Programme, 2012).

The mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms were characterized by predominantly Track I type of diplomacy. Formal negotiations were held at the level of state and international institutions, most notably the OHR and United Nations (UN) agencies, and centered on the issues of legality and the protection of civilians (Office of the High Representative, 1995–2006). Where Track II actors, such as religious organizations, NGOs, and humanitarian organizations contributed significantly to local-level reintegration and symbolic reconciliation, their impact on politically sensitive issues such as border demarcation and dual citizenship was relatively weak (McEvoy, 2009). An international supervisor, who, through the “Bonn Powers” ceded to the High Representative in 1997, could press for the external imposition of institutions proved to instrumentalize the international community, came at a price in terms of the engagement

of domestic actors and their longer-term stake in the politics of the country (Venice Commission, 2005).

The stakeholder universe was intricate and multi-layered. The OHR, UNHCR, OSCE, and EU Special Representatives served as facilitators (OECD, 2005). The U.S. continued to be a strong presence as a result of Dayton and the continued presence of NATO (SFOR and then EUFOR) (Gow, 1997). On the national level, Croatia's involvement alternated in accordance with political cycles, sometimes looking constructive, sometimes protectively nationalistic, particularly where Croats in BiH were concerned (Subotić, 2011). Bosnia's internal division, characterized by disputes between the Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska, was frequently an obstacle to unitary action and distracted from the impact that a single diplomatic service can deliver (Bose, 2002). Return, housing, and legal rights advocates among local communities and civil society groups acted as an important connection between high-level mediation processes and realities on the ground, including with regard to issues of housing and rights (Ragazzi, 2009).

A number of stubborn sticking points stood in the way of a resolution. The return of refugees and IDPs was politicized and it resulted with harassment, administrative obstruction or lack of safety (UNHCR, 2011). Border issues have not been settled, and 1999 draft treaty was not ratified. The Neum corridor and the riverine boundaries are yet to be fully delineated (Sadiković, 2010). Its relatively large numbers of Bosnian Croats also have dual citizenship, with many holding Croatian passports, thereby confounding electoral systems and legal frameworks and increasing tensions (International Crisis Group, 2006). At the same time, the enforcement capabilities of international institutions were frequently inadequate to force established political actors to comply.

But there were even some post-war victories. About a million or so made their way back, if not all permanently for economic or security reasons (UNHCR, 2011). There was increased technical cooperation on some issues and Croatian accession to the EU in 2013 provided BiH with an additional incentive to harmonize with EU standards (European Commission, 2011). Yet, the lack of trust between the two sides throughout the years, outstanding border disputes, and the dysfunctional government structures of BiH are considered as remaining stubborn obstacles to reach normalization.

The BiH and Croatia case study proves that the final post-war normalization is not a matter of establishing treaties and technical details but also of long-term political will, confidence building, and the involvement of communities in shaping their own common future.

3.4 Slovenia – Ten-day war and the Brijuni Agreement (1991)

3.4.1 A model of rapid de-escalation through preventive diplomacy

The breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s led the first declarations of independence, which was that of Slovenia on 25 June 1991 (Ramet, 2006). Unlike Catalonia, Slovenia had established through a clear popular vote and a relatively homogeneous population with relatively limited ethnic tension that it was in a position to be free (Judah, 2000). But the federal government in Belgrade regarded this move as a blatant challenge to the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia and reacted with all the misbehavior, repression, and violence that characterised the Milosevic regime. This was followed by the Ten-Day War, a short but significant armed confrontation between the military forces of the Slovenian Territorial Defense and the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) (Gow, 1997). This relatively insignificant fight, involving less than 100 deaths, was, however, a big political victory and marked the start of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Slovenia was uniquely networked for international support and engaged in a creative exercise of resistance and mobilization which helped cement its de facto sovereignty before international recognition dawned (Woodward, 1995).

Efforts of the conflict resolution proceeded rapidly in the wake of the violence because the violence was limited in scope, and international mediators were quickly mobilized. The European Community was afraid about destabilizing impact throughout the region and thus intervened urgently with diplomatic means. This resulted in the Brijuni Agreement signed on July 7, 1991, ten days after the start of hostilities (Štiblar, 1992). As brokered by EC envoys, it stipulated that Slovenia would abstain from declaring independence for three months, with military action being halted and JNA troops pulling out of the country. Although it had been declared as a symbolic act and a temporary break, it really allowed Slovenia to establish its state structures, with further

military activity being out of the question (Rupnik, 1999). By the time of the JNA's retreat in October 1991, therefore, Slovenia had made a peaceful exit from the Yugoslav federation, as against the violent secessions that would occur later in Croatia, Bosnia (Gow, 1997), and subsequently Kosovo.

The mediation model in the case of Slovenia was an exemplary one of Track I diplomacy, rapidly and coherently applied (Gow, 1997). European foreign ministers such as Hans van den Broek and Jacques Poos quickly convened and brokered the Brijuni Agreement to engage in preventive diplomacy before the conflict would worsen and influence other republics in the region (Radeljić, 2012).

The war was both lean and mean, with little room for Track II or civil society initiatives, nor were any required. Unlike longer-lasting Balkan wars, this example demonstrated how timely, high-level involvement of credible external players along with local leadership dedication can prevent violence from spiraling upwards.

The distribution of stakeholders was amiss for resolution. The Slovenian political echelons, also among them Prime Minister Lojze Peterle and Minister of Defense Janez Janša, were dominated by strategic pragmatism. They ran coherent political and military public relations strategies to establish a unified negotiating position (Ramet, 2006). On the Yugoslav side, the federal presidency's power weakened, and the Serbian leadership under Slobodan Milošević was not prepared to engage in a war over Slovenia, having had other plans for land it considered to be a "Serb state". The no-pushover-here attitude, combined with Slovenia's lack of geostrategic importance to Serbia, made the stakes low (Judah, 2000).

Europeans displayed remarkable unity and urgency in mobilizing their diplomatic leverage to secure the original Brijuni ceasefire, out of fear of broader destabilization (Radeljić, 2012).

However, there were complications which came to light along the way. The ambiguous terminology used in the Brijuni Agreement, respectively the three-month postponement of independence clause, was open to different interpretations. While the EC saw it as a time buying measure and a way to avert further conflict, Slovenia used the time to solidify its *de facto* independence (Štiblar, 1992). Moreover, the peaceful character of Slovenia's secession served unwittingly as a precedent for others to follow suit, indicating in no uncertain terms that strategic secession may be internationally

acceptable. This may have hastened the disintegration of Yugoslavia, as players in Croatia and Bosnia turned to the Slovenian playbook, though one much messier and bloodier in their own cases (Woodward, 1995).

Yet in the absence of these clarities, the resolution of the Ten-Day War has been embraced as an early success of conflict prevention. Direct military confrontation with the JNA ceased when the latter withdrew all of its forces under the agreement in October 1991, and Slovenian forces thwarted the JNA attempt to seize weapons at military barracks before the end of the year. Full international recognition followed in January 1992 (Rupnik, 1999). The lack of a large Serb minority in Slovenia meant the risk of an internal Serb conflict or the involvement in the ethno-political troubles that affected other former Yugoslav republics were limited (Judah, 2000). Slovenia's case thus continues to stand as an exception in the post-Yugoslav wars, as one of relatively bloodless, negotiated secession early on, which was achieved thanks to its disciplined diplomatic efforts from the start, a sense of domestic unity, and good geopolitical luck (Gow, 1997).

3.5 Serbia – Montenegro separation (2006)

3.5.1 A peaceful secession: Mediation through conditional integration

In 20026 Serbia and Montenegro were only two remaining republics of former Yugoslavia. Maintaining political surface relations, ever-deeper concern over sovereignty, identity and foreign orientation had characterized association by these years (Bieber, 2003). In the late 1990s and early 2000s the country so all but cast off the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (the residual state subsequent to the SFRY) and edged closer to the West. Under the rule of Milo Đukanović, Montenegro underwent a process of economic and political modernization, focused on turning Montenegro into a tourism and investment destination, by promoting itself regionally as an elite tourist destination. Serbia meanwhile was tackling with its democratic transition after Milošević, Kosovo's unresolved status, and a trend to become more moderate in its foreign policy (Pavlović, 2003). The FRY was then reconstituted as the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2003, and as such the Socialist Republic of Montenegro was part of this state until the referendums on May 21, 2006, when the new state union was dissolved and Montenegro

declared independence. Most crucially, the accord included the agreement to allow either republic to hold a referendum on independence after three years. This institutional provision demonstrated a creative way for the prevention of conflict by the inclusion of the legal possibility of secession and thus indicating a way to bypass the killing resulting from escalating confrontation (Vuković, 2016).

The most destructive period during the dissolution was 2002-2006, when the European Union, under the guidance of diplomat Javier Solana, shepherded a “positive, sequenced approach to potential separation” (Radeljić, 2012). This was followed by the 2002 Belgrade Agreement, agreed to by both republics, which built a precarious balance: common state-level institutions and the potential for a future referendum. In 2005, the EU became more involved, drawing up rules for the vote, which were met with opposition from the vote's backers, who complained that the threshold for independence of 55% was too high and that the voting had to be monitored by international observers (OSCE/ODIHR, 2006).

The referendum took place in May 2006, with 55.5% of voters opting the independence and just passing the minimum threshold (OSCE/ODIHR, 2006). Although there were some irregularities and highly polarized campaign, the result was considered by international observers such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe as legitimate and transparent. It resulted in Montenegro declared its independence on June 3, 2006. No challenge came from Serbia to the result, thus peacefully splitting the republic and declaring itself the legal successor of the State Union (International Crisis Group, 2006).

The Serbia - Montenegro experience constitutes one of the few successful examples of Track I diplomacy by preventive institutions. Instead of responding to a crisis, the EU designed the mechanism from the start, breaking the option of secession out of a legal bind (Vuković, 2016). This diplomatic approach, combined with incentives tied to EU integration, indicated that both parties have a vested interest in monitoring the process.

There was an extraordinary degree of agreement among essential stakeholders. In Montenegro, the government carefully balanced between its message of independence and sensible political rhetoric and did not provoke with nationalist slogans (Pavlović, 2003). On the Serbian side, both political figures, though they objected to consolidating the states, were willing to bow to the dictates of the institutions rather than to confront

them. The EU supported the whole procedure and with it supported democratic legitimacy (OSCE/ODIHR, 2006). Civil society and the media were very active in discussions. Most stakeholders respected rules of democracy, which helped to calm down the emotions and political tensions.

Despite achieved success, the separation process faced some challenges. A significant issue which was debated had to do with voter eligibility, especially the inclusion of Montenegrins living abroad or those holding dual citizenships (Caspersen, 2008). In Montenegro, the referendum was very polarized. This made the vote's outcome both politically sensitive and quite emotionally sensitive. At the international level, concerns emerged about the precedent effect if would Montenegro's successful secession encourage similar aspirations in Kosovo or Republika Srpska (Sadurski, 2008). While these fears were not understood in the immediate aftermath, the process undeniably tested the boundaries of post-Cold War norms of territorial integrity and self-determination.

However, the results remained positive. Serbia's peaceful recognition of Montenegro's independence was in contrast to the violence of past regional divisions (Radeljić, 2012). Both the procedure of the referendum and the absence of armed conflict were praised as demonstrations of political maturity and diplomatic effectiveness. As for the European Union, this case validated the practice of structured conditionality and legal frameworks in the aspect of conflict prevention. The agreement emphasized the importance of multilateral diplomacy in addressing sovereignty disputes and providing a framework for the peaceful dissolution of states, based on legitimacy, substance and well thought institutional design.

4 COMPARISON

Six analyzed cases resulted from the breakup of Yugoslavia, and they each had different styles of conflict. Separatist dynamics without any internal ethnic violence characterized both Slovenia and Serbia-Montenegro. In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as well as Kosovo and Croatia were enmeshed in ethnicized conflicts. The post-war tensions between BiH and Croatia as well as intra-Bosnian fighting were outstanding national legacies of the war that had never been resolved. For its part, the Kosovo-Serbia dispute was still open because each side had different claims to sovereignty. Comparison

synthesis of all 6 above-mentioned cases include various perspectives, such as conflict resolution frameworks, mediation and actor constellations, challenges and obstacles, outcomes and patterns with lessons learned.

When we consider conflict resolution frameworks, these cases exhibit great contrasts in resolution. Early, preventive diplomacy in Slovenia and Serbia–Montenegro combined with the EU directives channeled separation paths. At the same time, big chunks of BiH's domestic politics plus its unresolved disputes with Croatia were all post-conflict institutional creation under intense international supervision, bilaterally. Kosovo–Serbia: the most protracted case was carried forward into negotiations by the technical and political dialogue mediated at EU side, but without any resolution of sovereignty.

Mediation and actor constellations perspective is focused on Track 1 and 2 diplomacy which are dominated in all cases, especially those with institutional transformation (BiH and Croatia, Kosovo and Serbia, Serbia and Montenegro). Reforms in intra-Bosnian took the “Bonn Powers” of OHR, while Kosovo and Serbia saw the EU and U.S. bringing lead actors to bear from time to time. In Track 1.5 and II engagement often little more than symbolic agreements, although civil society made itself more visible on issues of humanitarian returns and community rebuilding for instance (BiH and Croatia). Diplomatic foresight is shown by Slovenia’s Brijuni Agreement and Montenegro’s EU-facilitated referendum with coherent mediation coalitions and transparent outcomes. When we analyse challenges and obstacles and all cases, the problems that arose along the conflict’s course were similar in every case: institutional rigidity, nationalist discourse, and being dependent on the larger outside world. In BiH's constitution, ethnicity was consolidated into structural divisions, which meant that reforms were subject to veto politics. As for Kosovo and Serbia, it too had internal political unrest, and their negotiations were marred heavily with asymmetric incentives. The BiH and Croatia relationship was bogged down in legal uncertainty and lacking confidence in each other, primarily over refugees, borders, and dual citizenship. In Serbia–Montenegro, apart from the extremely polarized turnout almost being disastrous at least sleepwalked into a peaceful exit while Slovenia benefited from the absence of ethnic tension. Results, looking from the outcomes perspective, ranged from clear separation (Slovenia, Montenegro), even stalemates managed a success (Kosovo and Serbia). BiH’s internal and external mediation brought through large-scale institution-building but failed

to provide lasting institutional change. Refugee returns progressed unevenly in BiH and Croatia, and they have still not been completed border sovereignty remains open. Kosovo and Serbia dialogue reduced technical friction but left unresolved disputes on the base problem. Both cases which proceeded most smoothly together combined in successful fashion elements of preventative diplomacy clear consequences and mutual restraint: Slovenia and Montenegro.

There are several patterns. First, international mediation at an early stage (Slovenia, Montenegro) can be more effective than post-conflict intervention (BiH). Secondly, external mediation can invest functionality but not replace domestic consensus, something evident in the failure of BiH's April Package and the stagnating Kosovo and Serbia talks. Thirdly, EU integration incentives served as a powerful tool in the mediation process between Serbia and Montenegro and Kosovo and Serbia. Throughout requires effective follow-through. Finally, processes at the Track II level are still not fully operational in high level mediation, suggesting that there is room to expand such bottom-up initiatives in future dialogues.

5 CONCLUSION

The comparison of six cases of conflict resolution and mediation in the Western Balkans suggests that there is a complex interdependence between the external effort to facilitate a negotiated settlement and the internal political will. The experiences of Slovenia and Montenegro demonstrate what can be achieved through the proactive approach of early and preventive diplomacy and clearly defined framework for secession, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and Serbia are the examples of how limits of imposed internationally sponsored peace will always be there when there is no local consensus. International actors, emphasizing here the EU and U.S., were key in all cases, but the long-term durability of peace relies on owned reform, inclusive dialogue and constitutional flexibility. It worth saying at the very end that the region's lesson to all of us is that lasting peace is not just the result of high-level accords, but of trust and confidence-building, the resilience of institutions and a vision for coexistence.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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