MKI POLICY BRIEF

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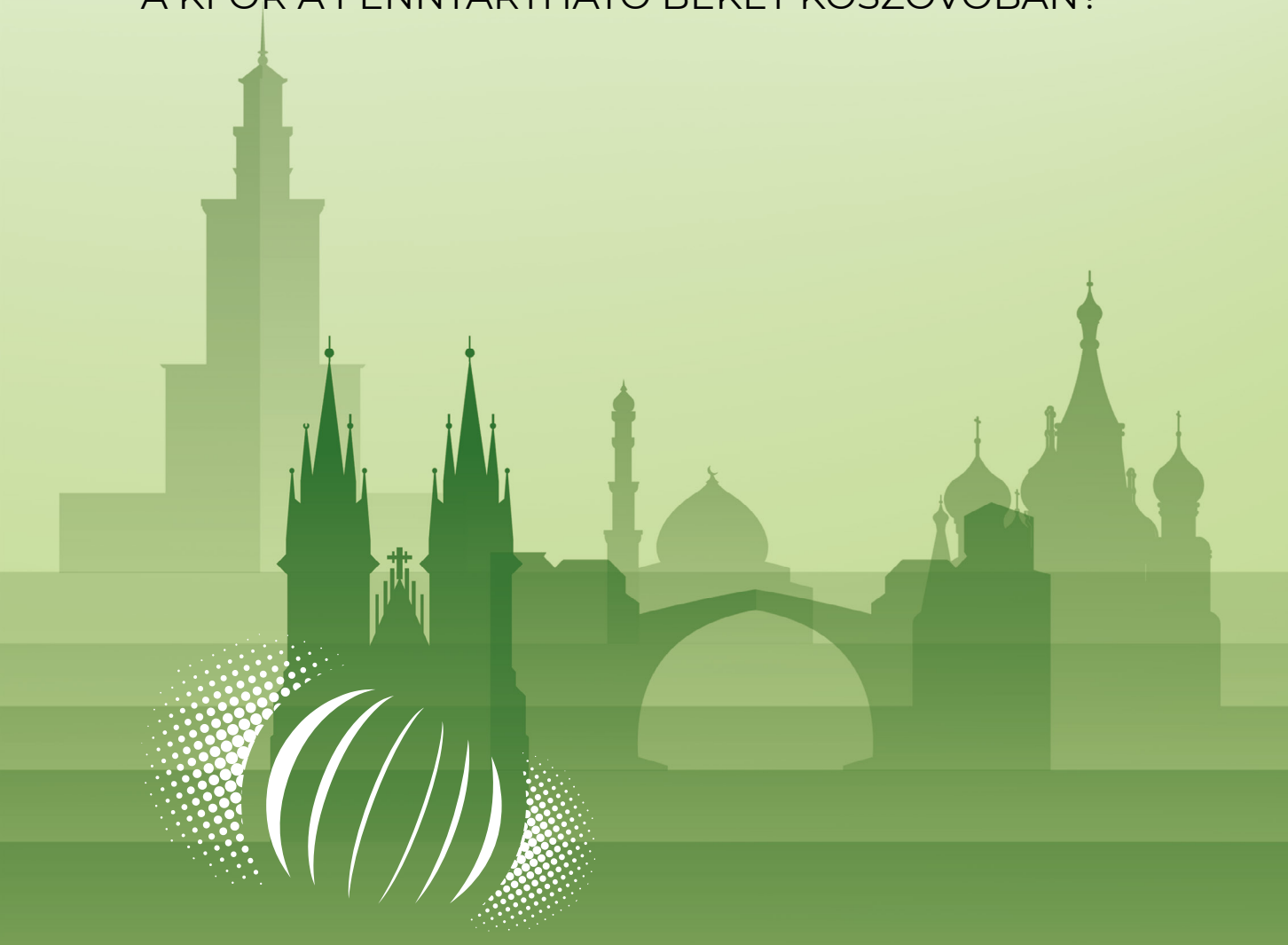
A PEACEBUILDING SUCCESS: HOW HAS THE KOSOVO FORCE FACILITATED SUSTAINABLE PEACE IN KOSOVO?

BÉKEÉPÍTÉSI SIKER: HOGYAN SEGÍTETTE ELŐ A KFOR A FENNTARTHATÓ BÉKÉT KOSZOVÓBAN?



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Abstract: After the Kosovo War ended on 10 June 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operationalized the Kosovo Force (KFOR) to maintain peace between Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Serbs. Since then, KFOR has ensured that conflicts between these two demographics do not escalate beyond the level of antagonism, thus maintaining peace in Kosovo. However, the dominant narrative perpetuated by political pundits often overlooks KFOR's contributions to peacebuilding and instead focuses on how ethnonationalism precipitates violent hostilities. Accordingly, this policy paper seeks to shine a light on KFOR's role by conducting a case study analysis of its operational activities. The analysis shows that KFOR has been integral to the formation of sustainable peace in Kosovo due to its enhancement of Kosovo's security sector reform process, the impact of its civil-military cooperation initiatives and psychological operations, and its ability to maintain operational readiness. Following the analysis, the paper presents two policy recommendations that are expected to reduce the likelihood of inter-community conflict if implemented by KFOR.

Keywords: Kosovo Force, Peacebuilding, Security Studies, Western Balkans, NATO

Összefoglalás: *Miután 1999. június 10-én lezárult a koszovói háború, az Észak-Atlanti Szerződés Szervezete (NATO) létrehozta a koszovói nemzetközi békefenntartó haderőt, a KFOR-t, hogy fenntartsa a békét a koszovói albánok és a szerbek között. Ezt követően a KFOR segített elkerülni, hogy a két etnikai csoport közti konfliktusok az antagonizmus mértékén túl eszkalálódjanak, így fenntartva a békét Koszovóban. A politikai szakértők által fenntartott domináns narratíva azonban gyakran figyelmen kívül hagyja a KFOR béketeremtéshez való hozzájárulását, és inkább arra összpontosít, hogyan vált ki az etnonacionalizmus erőszakos ellenségeskedéseket. Jelen elemzés egy, a KFOR operatív tevékenységeiről készített esettanulmány révén kíván rávilágítani a KFOR szerepére. Az elemzés azt példázza, hogy a KFOR szerves szerepet játszott a fenntartható koszovói béke kialakításában a koszovói biztonsági szektor reformfolyamatának elősegítése, a polgári-katonai együttműködési kezdeményezéseinek és pszichológiai műveleteinek hatása, valamint a műveleti készenlét fenntartására való képessége révén. Az elemzés két olyan politikai ajánlást mutat be, amelyek várhatóan csökkentik a közösségek közötti konfliktusok valószínűségét, amennyiben a KFOR végrehajtja azokat.*

Kulcsszavak: *KFOR, béketeremtés, biztonsági tanulmányok, Nyugat-Balkán, NATO*

Introducing the Kosovo Force: Legal Authority and Operational Mandate

Officially, the Kosovo Force began conducting operational duties on 12 June 1999. Its legal authority was concretized two days prior, on 10 June 1999, when the United Nations Security Council adopted *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244* (UNSCR 1244).

The resolution effectively ended the Kosovo War and authorized the United Nations Secretary-General to establish "international civil and military presences" within Kosovo. The civil presence became the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which had executive authority over civil administrative duties, humanitarian functions, democratization, institution building, and economic reconstruction. Conversely, the military presence became the Kosovo Force (KFOR), led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led Kosovo Force. Almost immediately, KFOR inherited an extensive operational mandate, which is outlined within the *Kumanovo Agreement*, the NATO *Operation Plan, 104 13*, and UNSCR 1244. The most notable security imperatives include deterring renewed hostilities, establishing a safe and secure environment, and ensuring the protection and freedom of movement of itself, the international civil presence, and other international organizations. These are referenced under Articles 9(a), 9(b), and 9(h) of UNSCR 1244, respectively.

The Evolution of the Kosovo Force: Changes to Operational Characteristics and Structure

Throughout the years, the operational characteristics and structure of the Kosovo Force have evolved to align with grassroots realities. Broadly speaking, KFOR held an 'interventionist' military posture in the post-war period (1999 to 2008) due to widespread concerns that a large-scale conflict would break out between Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Serbs. From 1999 to 2001, KFOR comprised 50,000 personnel. NATO grouped these individuals into four multinational brigades, each designated with a lead country that oversaw military functions under a single chain of command. Yet, in 2002, NATO reduced KFOR troops to 39,000; in 2003, to 17,000. On paper, the drastic reduction in active personnel occurred due to "an improving security situation" in Kosovo. In actuality, it happened because the mission became costly for Western donors, who began to withdraw their commitments to long-term funding due to notable events that compelled significant expenditure, such as the War in Afghanistan and the 2003 Invasion of Iraq. Then, on 17-18 March 2004, Kosovo Albanians carried out riots in response to inaccurate reports that ethnic Serbs had drowned Albanian children. Twenty-seven people died, and thirty-five Serbian Orthodox churches were critically damaged or destroyed. The incident precipitated significant changes to KFOR's operations, as increased emphasis was placed on enhancing intelligence gathering, cost efficiency, and responsiveness. Consequently, in 2005, NATO replaced the multinational brigades with five multinational task forces focused on reducing the "pre-conditions" for inter-community violence.

However, since Kosovo unilaterally declared independence on 17 February 2008, the Kosovo Force has gradually transitioned into a peacekeeping and support role. On 7 August 2009, NATO adjusted its posture to a deterrence presence. As such, on 31 January 2010, active troops were reduced to 10,000, which NATO further cut to 5,000 on 28 February 2011. In parallel with troop reduction, the multinational task forces were altered to five multinational battle groups with greater operational flexibility, while KFOR also allocated some of its tasks, such as guarding sites with religious, cultural, and symbolic value, to the Kosovo Police (KP). Then, in 2016, NATO gave more

responsibilities to KFOR pertaining to cyber defence and public diplomacy. Most recently, KFOR consisted of 3,700 troops in 2022, but violent conflict over the installation of Kosovo Albanian mayors in the four Serb-majority municipalities in North Kosovo has caused its numbers to increase to 4,511 (as of July 2023).

Analytical Framework: The Parameters for Assessing the Kosovo Force

As illustrated above, the character and structure of KFOR have evolved. Yet, despite this, its operations have continuously sought to fulfil Articles 9(a), 9(b), and 9(h) of UNSCR 1244 (although the specific language surrounding these imperatives has changed slightly). The current KFOR Mission Statement indicates that the NATO-led force seeks to support the development of a stable, multi-ethnic, and peaceful Kosovo, contribute to a safe and secure environment while ensuring freedom of movement for all people, and support international humanitarian efforts and civil presences. This policy paper seeks to demonstrate KFOR's impact on the formation of sustainable peace in Kosovo by analysing how it has fulfilled these imperatives through various operations. Here, it is worth noting that Articles 9(a), 9(b), and 9(h) of UNSCR 1244 are not mutually exclusive. For example, establishing a safe and secure environment might also deter renewed hostilities between Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Serbs. Thus, isolating how KFOR has fulfilled each imperative in an analytically distinct manner would be unproductive. As such, the paper identifies three principal contributions KFOR has made to the formation of sustainable peace, with each of these having a positive impact on Articles 9(a), 9(b), and 9(h) of UNSCR 1244.

Enhancing Local Ownership: The Security Sector Reform Process

First, KFOR has enhanced the security sector reform (SSR) process. SSR in Kosovo entails creating and strengthening local organizations that deter inter-community violence by protecting the territorial integrity of Kosovo, maintaining public order, and ensuring freedom of movement. Initially, KFOR's contributions to this process centred on the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA/UÇK). This task was vital for sustainable peace because UNMIK authorities immediately co-opted KLA elites into positions of power in an attempt to maintain post-war stability, while many of these individuals sought to conduct reprisal attacks against ethnic Serbs. However, members of the KFOR leadership induced compliance by portraying NATO as a credible partner that could protect Kosovo Albanians.

As a result, DDR began on 21 June 1999, with the signing of the Undertaking of Demilitarisation and Transformation by the UCK. Soon after, KFOR conducted disarmament and demobilization by collecting KLA weaponry and preventing illegal

KLA military factionalism. For reintegration, KFOR worked to transition a large portion of KLA members into the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), a 'civilian emergency service agency' tasked with non-militant responsibilities, such as providing disaster response and reconstruction services for minority communities. This transition ensured that former KLA members worked to create sustainable peace, as these individuals thereafter sought to ensure civilian safety and strengthen public order. Hence, by 2006, Kosovo's *Internal Security Sector Review* highlighted KPC's importance in peacebuilding, indicating that the biggest threat Kosovo faced had become economic instability rather than hostilities between Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Serbs.

Since Kosovo's unilateral independence, KFOR engagement in SSR shifted as the NATO-led organization became responsible for transforming the KPC into the Kosovo Security Force (KSF). In essence, the KSF is a 'lightly armed' and multi-ethnic defence force in charge of tasks that are "inappropriate for the police". While many scholars view its formation as inimical to peace due to its militant characteristics, the KSF has made significant contributions to peacebuilding by providing emergency response and civil protection. Furthermore, with KFOR's assistance, the KSF has started to obtain the capabilities necessary to address inter-community conflict. As such, it will be able to help establish a safe and secure domestic environment in the future.

Winning Hearts and Minds: Civil-Military Cooperation and Psychological Operations

Second, the Kosovo Force has contributed to the formation of sustainable peace by conducting civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) initiatives and psychological operations (PSYOPS). These undertakings have sought to address disinformation that could spur violent inter-community attacks and convince local populations of KFOR's coercive military capacities: its ability to apply punishment for noncompliance and offer safety from perceived or actual threats. CIMIC initiatives have pursued these objectives by maintaining professional relations with national authorities, civilians, and grassroots organizations. In parallel, PSYOPS have addressed disinformation and promoted KFOR's coercive capacities by relaying information through public channels about KFOR operations, the security situation in Kosovo, and peacebuilding processes.

On the one hand, the impact of CIMIC can be illustrated by the results of specific initiatives. For example, in the post-war period, ethnic Serbs distrusted KFOR due to its affiliation with NATO and the high incidence of reprisal attacks. However, by 2006, KFOR managed to rebuild its legitimacy by placing increased emphasis on coordinating humanitarian relief and civil protection with the Serb community. As a result, discontent within Serb-dominated areas decreased, reducing the degree to which these communities perceived violence as a credible response to the repression they experienced. On the other hand, CIMIC initiatives centring around the reconstruction and enhancement of public institutions have become essential for creating a safe and secure environment, which has deterred Kosovo Albanians from pursuing reprisal attacks against the ethnic Serb community. For example, in 2009, Kosovo Albanian

efforts to rebuild houses sparked an inter-community conflict in North Mitrovica. However, due to the diplomatic efforts made by KFOR, the reconstruction of these houses continued without any further violence.

In parallel, the impact of PSYOPS can be exemplified by the fact that Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Serbs view KFOR as a credible military force that can coerce locals into maintaining peaceful interethnic relations. This view largely derives from the belief that KFOR is an apolitical actor. While one could argue that this perception is the consummation of KFOR's performance, it is more appropriate to suggest that it is the result of how KFOR's contributions have been portrayed to the public. In one sense, this is indicated by the impact of specific PSYOPS. For example, in the post-war period, KFOR's "truth project", which disseminated information about KFOR missions while addressing the spread of disinformation, proved to be a major success in winning the support of the local population. Yet in another, it is indicated by the large emphasis NATO continues to place on PSYOPS. Note that NATO has allocated significant funding to Radio K4 and the KFOR Chronicle, which have supported peace by providing information about various conflict scenarios.

Deterring Hostilities: Operational Readiness and Effective Conflict Resolution

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, KFOR has contributed to the formation of sustainable peace by maintaining operational readiness. In this context, operational readiness references how effectively KFOR has quelled conflict between Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Serbs, where such is exemplified by key performance markers such as its role in conflict resolution, number of casualties, and conflict duration. Hence, negative indicators of operational readiness include instances where KFOR failed to prevent or halt emergent conflicts. Conversely, positive indicators include those scenarios in which KFOR quelled violence through action plans or various peacekeeping operations.

An analysis of the conflicts between Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Serbs since the end of the Kosovo War reveals that KFOR has been highly effective at minimizing inter-community hostilities. Since its operationalization, the only conflict that has resulted in large-scale violence was the riots of 17-18 March 2004. Beyond this incident, KFOR's presence within combat zones has prevented further escalation beyond the level of antagonism, as deaths have never exceeded single digits. For example, during the 2008 Protests Against Kosovo's Declaration of Independence, KFOR was able to quell violent riots, and the incident resulted in only two casualties (none caused by KFOR) despite its immense scale. Most recently, when riots erupted in response to the installation of Kosovo Albanian mayors in ethnic Serb-dominated municipalities on 26 May 2023, KFOR quelled the destructive civil disobedience without the incidents resulting in a single death. These outcomes occurred even though protestors attacked KFOR and inflicted many injuries.

Moreover, when conflict has taken a non-violent form, KFOR has been equally effective at facilitating conflict resolution. For example, to ensure freedom of movement, the NATO-led unit has been tasked with removing barricades and roadblocks erected

by the ethnic Serb community. KFOR has consistently achieved this task while making diplomatic efforts to minimize violent responses. One notable instance of this success occurred when Serbs blocked all major routes leading to two border crossings in North Kosovo after the KP had sought to seize outposts along these borders on 26 July 2011. KFOR immediately declared the conflict zone a military area, thereby reducing tensions, and it was able to have all roadblocks removed by 15 August 2011 through diplomatic negotiations. Another example occurred on 11 December 2022, when Kosovo Serbs set up barricades in North Kosovo after a former ethnic Serb police officer, Dejan Pantić, had been arrested. Following intensive diplomatic efforts with the governments in Serbia and Kosovo, KFOR was able to remove all roadblocks by 9 January 2023.

Policy Recommendations

In conclusion, while the dominant public narrative overlooks how important KFOR is to the pacification of conflict between Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Serbs, this case study demonstrates that the mission has been integral to the formation of sustainable peace in Kosovo due to its commitment to Articles 9(a), 9(b), and 9(h) of UNSCR 1244. KFOR has fulfilled this commitment through contributions to the security sector reform process, CIMIC initiatives and PSYOPS, and the maintenance of operational readiness. However, despite KFOR's successes, it is also important to consider whether more could be done to minimize inter-community conflict. Indeed, there must be. The situation in North Kosovo continues to be a contentious security challenge, as antagonisms consistently emerge, making upward mobility highly untenable. Hence, this paper engages with this reality by providing two policy recommendations for KFOR that are expected to reduce the likelihood of conflict if implemented.

Policy Recommendation #1: Enhance the Kosovo Police and the Formed Police Unit of the European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX FPU)

Officially, Kosovo has a three-layer approach to peace and security threats. The Kosovo Police are the first responders, EULEX's Formed Police Unit (FPU) is second, and the Kosovo Force is third. Yet, in actuality, KFOR is often the first or second responder because the other forces lack local legitimacy and operational capacities. This sentiment is particularly true for EULEX's FPU. Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Serbs distrust the EU civilian mission due to a proliferation of operational failures and scandals throughout its mandate. Moreover, the FPU has been unwilling to use its coercive capacities to achieve security objectives, relying instead on NATO for military assistance. As such, to minimize conflict between Kosovo Albanians and ethnic Serbs in the future, KFOR must work to enhance the KP and the FPU to ensure congruency in the effectiveness

of their conflict resolution capabilities. Thus far, KFOR's support measures have centred around the NATO Advisory and Liaison Team, which conducts capacity-building initiatives with security organizations in Kosovo. However, this paper contends that due to the continued mistrust and operational weaknesses of the KP and FPU, more emphasis needs to be placed on these types of initiatives.

Policy Recommendation #2: Develop the Kosovo Armed Force to Ensure a Locally Owned Sustainable Peace

By any measure, this policy recommendation is contentious. Yet, a dependence on KFOR to maintain sustainable peace will result in several problems. Most notably, reliance on KFOR would contribute to the Western Balkans' stability paradigm problem, where the maintenance of post-conflict stability is sought rather than actions that could allow local populations to ensure sustainable peace by themselves. The stability paradigm problem has typically led to frozen conflicts or endless international missions, which ultimately perpetuates discontent with 'interventionism' as people become increasingly frustrated with their lack of local autonomy. Hence, this paper contends that the transformation of the KSF into the Kosovo Armed Force (KAF) is necessary for a locally owned sustainable peace that moves beyond the stability paradigm problem. KFOR is therefore encouraged to assist with this process. However, there are two caveats to this recommendation. First, significant progress must occur in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, which would secure assurances on the integrity of North Kosovo, the multi-ethnic composition of the force, and a commitment from the Kosovo government to work with ethnic Serbs to ensure their viability. Second, the Kosovo government must restrict the KAF's ability to operate within Serb-dominated areas and beyond a military posture of deterrence. If the KAF does not meet these criteria, the Serbian community will likely perceive its development as an act of aggression. However, if the KAF meets these criteria, government officials in Pristina can gradually work to achieve a monopoly over the use of force, which is fundamental for the statehood of Kosovo. Evidently, a monopoly over the use of force requires an end to KFOR's mandate, and thus, government officials must work alongside NATO personnel to secure this outcome. Only upon doing so will the people of Kosovo begin to move away from the stagnation caused by the stability paradigm problem, and the international interventionism inherent to it, toward a future where they can facilitate sustainable peace and, ultimately, decide their fate autonomously.

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