

Orsós, György<sup>1</sup>

# Geopolitical Complexities of Kosovo: Symbolic and Geographical Tensions in the Western Balkans<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

There is currently limited Hungarian-language scholarship on the geopolitical and political geographic issues of Kosovo. This study aims to fill this gap by identifying the most critical thematic areas based on international literature, thus presenting both Kosovo's current issues and relevant research trends and approaches. Within the framework of classical geopolitics, the study outlines Kosovo's position in the international sphere, noting that, despite the prominent roles of UNMIK and EULEX as central actors, Kosovo's geopolitical interpretation remains complex and multifaceted. Additionally, it examines Kosovo's regional relationships from a political geographic perspective, focusing on the 'post-Westphalian system,' ethnic geographic issues, and border-related questions. Given the broader political climate of the Western Balkans, the analysis of symbolic political conflicts is also essential; therefore, the study explores these dynamics, particularly through an overview of Kosovar and Albanian identity and the memory politics of Kosovopolje.

*Keywords: Kosovo, Western Balkans, geopolitics, identity, symbolic space, political geography, borders*

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<sup>1</sup> Geographer, Doctoral School of Earth Sciences, University of Pécs. Email: [orsosgyorgydvk@gmail.com](mailto:orsosgyorgydvk@gmail.com), Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5979-8000>

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## INTRODUCTION

Kosovo is one of the entities with the most geopolitical problems in the Western Balkans. Yet there is as yet little writing that attempts to review them. The primary aim of this paper is to present and briefly contextualise the most important current geopolitical and political geographical issues in Kosovo through a literature review; however, it does not aim to provide a comprehensive history of research, but rather to present the most important current thematic nodes. To this end, it reviews the geopolitical and politico-geographical context and challenges of the Western Balkans. Finally, it will also present the symbolic political-geographical conflicts that are important due to the characteristics of the area. Through this, it will also provide insights into recent research approaches and issues within the international literature.

## METHODS

The analysis of secondary literature covers international and Hungarian literature from 2000 to the present. I searched the SCOPUS database using the keywords ‘Kosovo’, ‘Western Balkans’ ‘geopolitics’, and ‘political geography’. The sources cover articles mainly on geography, history, political science, conflict studies and memory politics. I supplemented secondary literature with other, but not closely related ones, that are necessary for understanding the context, which mainly focused on the activities of the geopolitical branches of the region. The literature was analyzed along the following lines: What are the main areas of focus for current political issues? What geopolitical and political geographic problems are identified by the authors? What symbolic geographic conflicts are associated with these issues?

## RESULTS

### **The geopolitical situation in the Western Balkans**

To review the geopolitical situation, first, we need to understand the overall geopolitical significance of the Western Balkans. I will begin with a historical overview of the problem, for which the works of Juhász and his colleagues, and more recently of Márkus and, at the international level, Mohammed (2022) are excellent starting points.

The history of geopolitical and geostrategic thinking on the Balkans is fundamentally determined by classical geopolitical theories which (with different emphases and concepts) consider the Balkans to be one of the key points to the Heartland, the core of the Eurasian continent, and therefore a geostrategically significant area and an important arena for great power competition.

In geopolitical terms, the Western Balkans are not a global priority today. However, its geographical location and the nature of its interconnection (intersection of sea and land routes) make it an area

of interest for great powers to engage in politics (Reményi, 2019). Therefore, there are several great power actors in the region. In addition to the US, there are EU member states, China and Russia, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, some Gulf countries. The study of geopolitics in the region has focused primarily on the form and impact of the activities of these actors. With the culturalisation of politics and the fragile (military) political balance in the region, the geopolitical activities of these actors have been interpreted primarily in terms of soft power through cultural and identity politics and economic-based activities.

The most significant power outside Europe is the US. It has also played a significant role in the post-socialist transformation of the peninsula; the Dayton Peace Agreement and the 1999 NATO bombing of the peninsula were indirectly significant US influences on these processes. The Balkans are also important to the US as an obstacle to Russia's historic geopolitical goal of reaching the Mediterranean (Gibas-Krzak, 2020).

The 2003 Thessaloniki Agenda declared the European integration goal for the Western Balkans. However, progress has been slow and there is a lack of strategic consensus among the EU's main actors on the issue. After the economic and political crisis that emerged in 2008, the issue of integration in the region was reduced and started to be revisited from the end of the 2010s. The enlargement strategy of 2018 already reflects the earlier geopolitical shortcomings, i.e. the rise of Russia, Turkey and China in the Balkans, making the defence of these positions—at least at the discursive level—an important issue in Western Balkans policy (Petrovic & Tzifakis, 2021).

The enlargement process within the EU is essentially influenced by two major rival states, Germany and France. Germany's significant South Slavic minority, business interests and classical geopolitical orientation towards South-Eastern Europe demand a stronger presence. Enlargement would primarily serve the interests of the German state, and therefore, because of its weak position, France is less supportive of it (Outeda et al., 2020), although not clearly opposed.

Among the non-European power factors, China is gaining more and more (economic) influence, which has an economic and geopolitical background, aiming to create Eurasian connectivity (Horváth, 2019), in which the Balkans can also be an important instrument, where the less bureaucratic and less conditional lending policy is also an important factor (Csapó & Reményi, 2018). However, Markovic Khaze and Wang (2021) have shown that China's economic importance is negligible and, although its presence can undoubtedly slow down the European integration process, it should not be a major obstacle.

Turkey is using the region as an important geopolitical arena, mainly through soft power, cultural and (symbolic) infrastructure financing (e.g. the Belgrade–Sarajevo highway). The TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) is gaining more and more important (symbolic) influence in the region through cultural heritage protection (Todorović, 2021). While there is no consensus on whether Turkey's foreign policy should be interpreted as a break from traditional Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans (neo-Ottomanism) or as continuity, it is clear that its presence in the peninsula is undeniable. The primary ideological-cultural pillar of foreign policy is the Muslim brotherhood,

as well as, the historical heritage. The latter, however, includes not only the memory of the Ottoman Empire but also the solidarity shown in the Bosnian war. For this reason, the cultural and educational institutions (TIKA and the Yunus Emre Institute, formerly the Gülenist schools) and the (symbolic) redefinition of the urban image are important soft-power factors. It should be added, however, that the perception of Turkey on the peninsula is far from uniform: in Albania, there is antipathy towards the state because of its lagging historical development, and in Bosnia, the perception of the state is also mixed (Koppa, 2021).

Among the Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran are the two most important actors. Saudi Arabia provided significant assistance to the Bosniaks during the Bosnian war. Although cultural soft-power activities (building cultural and religious institutions) are also significant, they are met with much greater resistance. Their activities are mostly subordinate to the development of their role in the Islamic world, apart from business objectives (Bartlett & Prelec, 2019). Thus, there is rivalry between Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran on the peninsula.

The region is also an instrument for Russian geopolitical goals, which are primarily based on the Serbian state and nationalities, Orthodox communities, mainly in the economic field (Serbian energy industry), but also in the field of intelligence/information. However, the Russian presence is indeed significant mostly at the level of perception, and apart from the energy sector, the economic and institutional political presence is minimal compared to EU countries, even in Serbia, Montenegro and Republika Srpska (Panagiotou, 2021). However, Serbia's support for Kosovo has given Russia a significant foothold in the central Balkans, while NATO bombing has also meant NATO's expansion in the Balkans and further on in the east (Hughes, 2013).

It should be stressed that, although the rise of non-European actors has been clear in recent years, their importance is still negligible. In fact, these countries have no alternatives to joining the European Union, nor do their own interests dictate it, and their relationship-building is often precisely because of European accession. Thus, although the Balkan states are symbolically and discursively increasingly open to Turkey or the Gulf countries, or perhaps Russia, a move towards them is not likely (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019).

After the Yugoslav Wars, the region attracted considerable attention in Anglo-Saxon political geography, particularly in relation to theoretical questions about the relationship between states and territoriality (Agnew, 2005). Scholars examined the Balkans in terms of the geographical organization of space within state geography (Pap & Tóth, 2008), focusing on issues such as the nation-state and the formation of borders.

### **Kosovo's geopolitical framework**

Kosovo's main geopolitical goal was to gain international recognition, and much of the literature has focused on the international legal and geopolitical implications and possibilities of this. The fundamental question that divided the researchers was whether Kosovo could be considered a precedent

for the Westphalian system. Typically, studies published in the early 2000s, Schaub (1999), Tziampiris (2002) and Jha (2000), argue that the 1999 NATO bombing and the Kosovo problem reinforce the further erosion of the Westphalian system. However, a later discourse (Patterson & Mason, 2010) has also emerged which points out that these may not be precedents. The debate has been fundamentally resolved by a review of the concept of the Westphalian system. Sovereignty began to be conceived of as increasingly transnational and hybrid, even within academic discourse (Coleman & Grove, 2009), and as a result, the concept of a post-Westphalian system began to gain currency. Thus, recent literature (Lefteratos, 2023) draws on this theoretical tradition.

Kosovo's situation is therefore part of a highly complex network of powers, which is why the geopolitical analysis of the entity is primarily interpreted in the light of the goals of the great powers, typically the US and the EU. As Siroky and colleagues (2021) have shown, the US and its alliance system were fundamental to international recognition: the speed and extent of recognition of Kosovo's independence were correlated with the presence of US military forces and capital investments in the recognizing country. The European Union also has a significant impact on Kosovo's relationship with Serbia, as both countries are striving towards European integration, and the settlement of their relationship is an important step towards achieving this (Noutcheva, 2020).

Kosovo's sovereignty is limited not only externally but also internally. The Secretary of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is effectively a shadow organization with a very strong influence on local politics. The European Union, through EULEX, seeks to 'monitor' and 'mentor' the legal framework of local institutions (Noutcheva, 2020). This partly explains the contradictory EU policy: on the one hand, the EULEX policy points towards Kosovo's path to full statehood, while on the other hand, it does not fully recognize it (Lefteratos, 2023).

Ethnic geography can also be a determining geopolitical factor, especially in the context of Greater Albania, so ethnic mapping is also an important research direction. The majority of Kosovo's population is Albanian, estimated to be around 93% (CIA World Factbook). They form a majority in most of the country, except in the three northern opstinas (local government units) north of Ibar (Zubin Potok, Leposavić and Zvečan), where it is estimated that roughly half of the Serbs live (Reményi, 2012). Ethnic diversity has essentially declined over the last two decades (although there are also subtle changes over time and space), with little diversification observed mainly in the northern and southern peripheries of the state (Reményi, 2014).

A frequent geopolitical question is the vision of a possible Greater Albania. The multiple ethnic and geopolitical complexities in the Balkans have created a relatively intricate network in which a local change can have a major impact on several other states. Therefore, it is foreseeable that the realisation of a common Albanian state would upset the state-geographical balance of the Western Balkans. While the possibility of a Greater Albania is realistic, there are different views on the degree to which the parties really want this. Márkus (2018), based on the economic and diplomatic rapprochement between Albania and Serbia, and Krasniqi (2016), referring to the relatively high nation-state loyalty shown by the 2011 IPSOS survey, make it less conceivable. This is also reinforced by EU policy:

although the Brussels process is not considered a success, it is likely that if Balkan enlargement goes ahead, Greater Albania will become merely an ideological relict.

### Territorial tensions

The entity is divided into the Kosovo and Metohija basins, and its geographical location makes it particularly important for the geopolitical domination of the Balkans. It also has significant mineral wealth, with world-class reserves of lignite, and the Trepča mines contain zinc, lead and copper. Thus there are still prevalent territorial tensions between Kosovo and other states (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Municipal boundaries and regions of Serb majority as of 2000



Albanian toponyms listed above, Serbian versions below. Source: Dahlman & Williams, 2010.

### The Preševo Valley and the issue of borders

The geopolitical importance of the valley, which is on the borders of Serbia and Kosovo, is further enhanced by its ethnic divisions. Census data from 1961 to 2002 show a steady increase in the proportion of Albanians (from 44.3% to 72.9%). In Presevo, the proportion of Albanians has reached 94%, providing a good basis for separatist aspirations (Reményi, 2019). This, combined with the condition of being a border region, is causing further inter-state tensions between Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia.

The Belgrade–Nis–Skopje–Thessaloniki road runs through the valley, providing access to the Aegean region. The valley was already considered by Cvijić to be of utmost importance: a key area for controlling transport, where longitudinal and perpendicular roads intersect; paraphrasing Mackinder’s

thesis, those who control the valley (including the Skopje valley) control the Balkans. The theory has gained considerable influence and has become a common argument for Serbian imperialism (Ejupi & Ramadani, 2016). Accordingly, Serbia continues to regard the region as a key area that it cannot, in its view, let out of control (Pap, 2016).

Kosovo's borders are a major problem along almost all borders, especially in this valley. The Macedonian–Kosovo border has been a minor source of tension in the past due to the occupation of strategic, military-political positions. In the area of Kosovska Mitrova, the Serb ethnic areas pose a serious ethno-regional challenge to the central state's exercise of power. There is also a refugee camp in the valley and intensive smuggling activity along the borders, in which Albanian criminal organisations are the main agents, thus playing a major role in the local black economy (Pap, 2016).

### **Mitrovica and the issue of the northern opstinas**

The Serb-majority opstinas in the northern areas, neighbouring Serbia, represent a major challenge to state-building in Kosovo, where the Pristina government's authority is weak and Belgrade's influence is much stronger. In 2009 and 2010, under international pressure, several Serb-majority opstinas were created (through a kind of “ethnic gerrymandering”) in order to give Serbs greater sovereignty at the municipal level (Reményi, 2012).

Mitrovica's importance is mainly due to its mining activity in Trepča/Trepçës (Gusic, 2020), its geopolitical position and significant ethnic division (2009 and 2011 data show that the share of Serbs in North and South Mitrovica combined is around 14%, while the share of Albanians is around 84%). A highly divided city, with a predominantly Serb population on the northern bank of the Ibar River and Albanians in the south, spatially segregated, with checkpoints and parallel institutions, it is the most diverse and conflict-ridden city in Kosovo, and also the one that offers the most opportunities for contact between the two ethnicities (Gusic, 2022). Some of its characteristics are similar to Mostar, Jerusalem, Belfast or Beirut, and these examples can help to understand it. Some international, mainly Anglo–Saxon, literature tries to understand them through the concepts of post-war cities and conflict-related violence (CRV). Elfversson and colleagues (2023) have shown, by mapping documented atrocities, that they are mainly concentrated around the main bridge.

The division, based on the contact hypothesis (see Gijberts et al., 2012), is precisely what prevents the easing of social tensions and ultimately peace, but Gusic sees it as a means of peace, based on the premise that the two ethnicities are incompatible because of different political goals. Its long-term development will therefore have a profound impact on the territorial influence of the state of Kosovo and Belgrade–Pristina relations.

## **Symbolic geopolitics**

Although the legal solution to the problems of inter-state relations has now been more or less achieved, research on symbolic spaces has made it clear that further geopolitical tensions remain, which are

manifested in identity and cultural conflicts. In terms of border problems, for example, it is often the symbolic content of spaces that actually constitutes serious mental boundaries (Elfvérsson et al., 2023), which perpetuate conflict and ultimately make social integration more difficult. An analysis of symbolic policies (e.g. linguistic landscapes) can also point to the visibility of (ethnic) groups in a given locality (Balizs, 2021), and their share of symbolic power. In constructivist nationalism theories (like Hobsbawm and Anderson), symbolic issues are also highly emphasized, so when we want to interpret nationalism manifested in the Balkans, this approach can be useful. In light of these, symbolic geography studies have become particularly important.

Territoriality is fundamental to nationalism, especially in the context of the Yugoslav Wars. This is also reflected in symbolic politics: the creation of a collective memory, which cannot exist without specific sites of memory, is key to the creation of the myth of the nation (Nora, 2001). Today, domination is no longer exercised by political elites through administrative or military means alone, but also through representation: the representation of memory, ideology, and values is also a means of symbolic domination of space. Because of the strong control of external actors, and for historical reasons, symbolic politics will be of paramount importance in the region, and can be understood in the context of repressed tensions. The research on symbolic spaces also focuses on the study of cultural and political images and representations, i.e. how power tries to shape a given territory according to its own (identity political) goals (Ermolin, 2014; Pap & Reményi, 2020). This paper focuses rather on the most important symbolic conflict space, Kosovo's Polje.

Before understanding its nature in more depth, however, it is necessary to review what national narratives dominate on the Serbian and Kosovo Albanian sides, which I base on the work of Márkus (Márkus, 2018).

Márkus identifies four distinct phases in the history of Serbian nationalism, each defined by its primary objectives: (1) achieving complete independence (secession); (2) uniting Serbian-inhabited territories and securing access to the sea (expansion); (3) integrating annexed territories acquired during expansion (assimilation); and (4) reclaiming Serbian territories after the failure of assimilation and subsequent disintegration (irredentism). For this paper, the fourth stage is the most relevant, so it is briefly summarized here.

The most recent phase of Serbian nationalism is deeply influenced by historical experiences of failed assimilation: neither the Serbian monarchist efforts to assimilate Kosovo were successful, nor was the Kardelj-led project aiming for federal state-based and cultural emancipation. Thus, Serbian nationalism has undergone significant changes since the 1980s. Under clerico-nationalist influence, the ideology began to target Orthodox believers, marking a departure from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century unification efforts and instead shifting towards ethnocentric and divisive identity politics. A defining aspect of the post-Yugoslav Wars is Serbian nationalism which creates the evident discrepancy between national borders and the geographic distribution of Serbian ethnic territories, which fundamentally directs contemporary Serbian nationalism towards an irredentist stance.



Similarly, Márkusz delineates four phases in the evolution of Albanian (and, subordinately, Kosovo Albanian) identity: (1) autonomist phase (1878–1912); (2) nation-building phase (1912–1968); (3) irredentist phase (1968–2008); and (4) unification phase (2008–present). He identifies the current phase as being shaped by Kosovo’s independence in 2008, rendering previous irredentist discourses obsolete and fundamentally altering political relationships with other Albanian-inhabited states. Pristina has now emerged as an independent political, cultural, and educational center within the Albanian ethno-national sphere. Additionally, a distinct Kosovo Albanian identity is forming, with its symbolic pillars rooted in the Dardania cult and the memory of Jashari.

### Key features of symbolic urban politics in Kosovo

Since 1999, Serbian markers and symbols have come under attack, leading to a radical transformation of public spaces in Kosovo. In addition to the proliferation of mosques, significant changes occurred within urban public spaces. The dominant narrative coalesced around the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK, \*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës\*), and particularly around the hero cult of Adem Jashari, as this story effectively encapsulated national independence into a positive and personalized tale. Prekaz, where Jashari and his family were executed, emerged as one of the most important “pilgrimage sites” for Kosovo Albanians (Krasniqi & Gëzim, 2013). In 2005, the mausoleum of Sultan Murad I at Kosovo Polje was renovated, becoming a site for Turkish commemorations. From a Serbian perspective, this 2005 restoration symbolized neo-Ottoman influence and, by extension, the further loss of Kosovo (Pap, 2016).

It is essential to move beyond the Serbian–Albanian dichotomy and examine the unique nature of a distinct Kosovar identity. Stiperski and Ejupi (2023) analyzed the toponymy of cities dominated by Albanian populations in both Albania and Kosovo, offering insightful comparisons. Their compilation and brief interpretation of central squares in key cities provide valuable insights, which I will present in tabular form (Table 1, using Albanian names for the cities).

Table 1. Main square names in major cities of Kosovo and Albania

Country	City	Name of Main Square	Explanation by Stiperski and Ejupi
Albania	Tirana	Kastrioti Gjergj Skanderbeg	Fought the Ottomans from 1443; declared the Champion of Christianity by the Pope.
	Shkodër	Democracy	–
	Vlorë	Albanian Flag	–
	Berat	Antipatreia	Named after a former Greek settlement at this location.
	Korçë	Saint George	Named after a Roman soldier and Christian martyr.
Kosovo	Gjakova	Hadum Aga	Named after the Hadum Mosque.
	Peja	Queen Teuta	Named after the 3 <sup>rd</sup> -century Illyrian ruler.
	Pristina	Mother Teresa (also includes a Skanderbeg statue)	Mother Teresa was an Albanian Roman Catholic born in Skopje, North Macedonia, with family roots in Prizren.
	Prizren	Shadervan	Named after the fountains in front of the mosque and caravanserai.

Source: Own edition based on Stiperski & Ejupi, 2023

As can be observed, the toponymic system of Kosovo and Albania cannot be considered a homogeneous symbolic space. This distinction can be explained by the diverging state frameworks in which the Albanian ethnic communities in Albania and Kosovo existed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Albania functioned as an independent state capable of orchestrating its own nation-building efforts, Kosovo was part of a predominantly Slavic state, with a fluctuating legal status, yet ultimately subordinate to an external center of power. These differing state contexts brought distinct societal experiences: the existence as a minority group, bilingualism, and geographical boundaries have contributed to the formation of a unique identity.

Furthermore, although Kosovo's toponyms are ethnically Albanian, they are also rooted in local histories, as is evident in the cases of Prizren and Gjakova. In the case of Pristina, we are witnessing more of a national historical representation, one that may align with the narrative of Greater Albania but, due to its specifically local ties to Kosovo, may also emphasize a sense of distinctiveness. Thus, beyond their ethnic associations, these toponyms at least partially embody a local identity that, although challenging as a basis for identification among local Serbs, may nonetheless possess such potential.

However, Kosovo Polje may be regarded as a source of conflict due to the development of parallel narratives in memory politics. As previously noted, Kosovo Polje/Fushë Kosova (the Field of Blackbirds) holds a key place in Serbian history, with its significance in national history comparable to that of Mohács (Pap & Reményi, 2020). The primary issue is that today, the most important site of memory, Gazimestan/Gazimestani, is located within the territory of a quasi-foreign state, specifically in an area with an Albanian majority. This complicates the organization of commemorations and the maintenance of infrastructure.

Another symbolically charged event was Milošević's 1989 nationalist speech, which focused on Serbian victimhood, the notion of Serbia as the bastion of Europe, and Serbian heroism (Bieber, 2002; Pap & Reményi, 2020). This nationalist rhetoric continues to resonate today, fitting neatly into the discourse of the clerico-nationalist Serbian nation-state. In this context, Kosovo Polje becomes especially significant in memory politics, as the historical theme of Christian Serbs versus Muslims is readily applicable to contemporary situations in which Serbs face ethnic conflict.

The site's potential for further conflict is also heightened by an emerging Kosovar interpretation that increasingly emphasizes Turkish–Albanian relations. This shift is in line with what Reményi (Pap & Reményi, 2020) has reported, namely that, in recent years, a segment of the Albanian elite has proposed transforming this site of memory to reflect a parallel narrative centered on an Albanian hero cult.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I have outlined the fundamental geopolitical context of Kosovo and the dominant approaches to geopolitics within the Western Balkans. The Anglo–Saxon literature typically addresses

the region during periods of crisis. Following the Yugoslav Wars, geopolitical issues surfaced both within the framework of a “post-Westphalian” system and amid the emergence of a multipolar world. Consequently, scholars analyzed the roles and influence of various actors in the Balkans, particularly those outside the EU. Both the actions of these actors and shifts within the field of geopolitics studies have brought symbolic and cultural politics into greater focus.

More narrowly defined political geography studies have primarily centered on ethnic mapping and border issues. These studies reveal that almost every area surrounding the central region—such as the northern municipalities near the border, Mitrovica, and the border disputes around the Presevo Valley to the east and south—faces some form of geopolitical challenge. These areas also represent points of significant conflict potential and pose challenges at supra-, sub-, and national levels alike.

The examination of symbolic politics has mainly focused on the relationship between nationhood and identity, addressing the fundamental question of Kosovo’s position regarding the Greater Albania issue. This research has largely identified the formation of an independent Kosovar identity. Nonetheless, challenges such as memory politics conflicts (e.g., Kosovo Polje), struggles over the symbolic landscape, and Mitrovica’s (mental) division remain substantial tasks to address.

These considerations raise further questions, such as the relationship between divided cities and the study of violence (Boyle, 2010), as this problem remains unresolved. Although symbolic geopolitical research has not yet extensively examined Kosovo’s commitment to the European Union and the associated identity patterns, this represents a promising area for geographic investigation in the region.

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