



Diplomatic And Consular Services In Transition: A Comparative Analysis Of Kosovo And Albania In The Context Of European Integration

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transformation of diplomatic and consular services in Kosovo and Albania through a comparative lens, situating the analysis within the broader context of European integration. As two Western Balkan states at different stages of their European Union accession paths, Kosovo and Albania face shared structural challenges while pursuing reforms aligned with EU standards in diplomacy and consular administration. The study aims to assess how legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, and administrative practices governing diplomatic and consular services have evolved in response to European integration requirements. Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative comparative approach, combining normative legal analysis with an examination of policy documents, international conventions, and institutional practices in both countries. The analysis highlights areas of convergence, particularly in the harmonization of diplomatic functions, consular protection of citizens abroad, and adherence to international diplomatic law, as well as persistent divergences related to administrative capacity, digitalization, and external recognition constraints. The findings suggest that European integration has served as a significant driver of reform, promoting professionalization and standardization of diplomatic and consular services, while also exposing structural limitations that continue to affect their effectiveness. The paper concludes that deeper institutional consolidation and targeted capacity-building measures are essential for strengthening diplomatic and consular services and enhancing their role in supporting European integration objectives.

Keywords: diplomatic services, consular services, European integration, Kosovo, Albania, comparative analysis.

Introduction

Diplomatic and consular services represent a core component of state sovereignty and international engagement, serving as primary instruments through which states protect their interests, manage foreign relations, and provide assistance to citizens abroad. Traditionally grounded in international diplomatic law and codified through key legal instruments such as the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, these services have evolved in response to political, administrative, and normative transformations within the international system (Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961; Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, 1963). In contemporary practice, diplomatic and consular services are no longer limited to classical representation and protection functions but increasingly encompass economic diplomacy, public diplomacy, and administrative service delivery.

For Western Balkan states, and particularly Kosovo and Albania, the transformation of diplomatic and consular services is closely linked to the broader process of European integration. Alignment with European Union standards requires not only the harmonization of domestic legislation with international and EU norms, but also the modernization of institutional structures, professionalization of diplomatic staff, and

enhancement of administrative effectiveness. As Rana (2007) argues, effective diplomacy in small and transitional states depends heavily on institutional capacity, adaptability, and the ability to integrate international norms into domestic administrative practice. In this regard, diplomatic and consular services function as both instruments of foreign policy and indicators of state capacity and governance quality.

Despite their shared regional context and similar strategic objective of EU integration, Kosovo and Albania operate under distinct political and legal circumstances that shape the development of their diplomatic and consular systems. Albania, as an EU candidate country, benefits from a longer trajectory of diplomatic recognition and institutional continuity, while Kosovo faces additional constraints related to partial international recognition and limited access to certain multilateral diplomatic platforms. These differences raise important questions regarding convergence and divergence in diplomatic and consular reforms, as well as the extent to which European integration acts as a unifying reform driver across differing state contexts (European Commission, 2023).

This paper is structured as follows: The first section outlines the theoretical and legal framework governing diplomatic and consular services, with particular emphasis on international diplomatic law and European integration standards. The second section presents a comparative overview of the institutional and legal organization of diplomatic and consular services in Kosovo and Albania. The third section analyzes key areas of convergence and divergence between the two countries, focusing on administrative capacity, professionalization, and reform outcomes. The final section discusses the implications of the findings and offers concluding observations on the role of diplomatic and consular services in supporting European integration processes.

3. Theoretical and Legal Framework of Diplomatic and Consular Services in the Context of European Integration

Diplomatic and consular services are not just “activities of a ministry”; they are institutional expressions of statehood and legal personality in international relations. At their core, these services recognize a state’s ability to represent itself abroad, negotiate with other governments, protect its nationals, and maintain structured channels of communication that remain workable even in periods of political tension. In classical terms, diplomacy is the formal management of relations between states, while consular work is more service-oriented and citizen-facing, yet in practice the two functions overlap, especially for smaller states and in crises (Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961; Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, 1963).

From a theoretical standpoint, the strongest and most widely accepted justification for diplomatic privileges and immunities is the functional necessity approach: the idea that immunities are not personal rewards, but tools to ensure diplomats can perform their functions effectively without intimidation, coercion, or interference by the receiving state (Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961, Preamble). This functional logic is repeated in the consular domain as well, where privileges and immunities are explicitly framed as serving the “efficient performance of functions” of consular posts (Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, 1963, Preamble).

The same reasoning appears in practical guidance used by host-state authorities, immunity is a rule-based framework designed to preserve the effectiveness of foreign missions, while still acknowledging that immunity is not absolute and does not eliminate the host state’s responsibility to maintain public order (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

Legally, the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (VCDR) sets the backbone for diplomatic relations. It defines diplomatic functions in a way that is still remarkably modern: representation, protection of interests and nationals, negotiation, information-gathering by lawful means, and promotion of friendly relations, including economic and cultural relations (Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961, art. 3).

These functions matter for Kosovo and Albania because they frame what diplomatic missions are expected to do, regardless of size, geopolitical constraints, or administrative capacity. The Convention also establishes key procedural and institutional rules that structure diplomatic practice: missions exist by mutual consent (VCDR, art. 2), heads of mission require *agrément* (VCDR, art. 4), and receiving states retain the sovereign right to declare a diplomat’s *persona non grata* at any time without providing reasons (VCDR, art. 9).

Together, these rules reflect a careful balance: diplomacy is protected to ensure stable inter-state relations, but the receiving state is not stripped of sovereignty.

The Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (VCCR) provides the parallel framework for consular functions and their legal limits. The Convention clarifies that consular relations also require mutual consent and that even the existence of diplomatic relations generally implies consent to consular relations unless otherwise stated (VCCR, art. 2).

Most importantly for the “services” dimension of this paper, the VCCR gives a detailed list of consular functions, ranging from protection of nationals, issuing passports and visas, assistance in succession matters, safeguarding minors, and support in judicial procedures, to commercial and cultural promotion (VCCR, art. 5).

This list is not theoretical; it is the blueprint for how consular services should work in practice. For states with high mobility patterns and large diasporas, like Kosovo and Albania, consular services are often the most visible face of the state abroad.

European integration adds a second layer to this framework, beyond the Vienna rules, states pursuing EU membership are expected to build institutions that are reliable, predictable, and interoperable with European governance standards. In practice, this affects diplomatic and consular services in two ways. First, it raises expectations around administrative professionalism: recruitment systems, training, integrity, accountability, policy coordination, and service standards. Second, it gradually pulls diplomatic and consular systems into European regulatory and policy ecosystems, including digital governance, cybersecurity, data protection, and crisis management. These expectations are visible in the EU's enlargement monitoring logic, where public administration reform, rule of law, and institutional capacity are treated as foundational conditions for accession readiness. The European Commission's reporting on Kosovo and Albania consistently connects reform progress with administrative capacity and alignment with EU standards, including digital transformation and cybersecurity frameworks, policy areas that increasingly shape consular service delivery (European Commission, 2024a; European Commission, 2024b).

A practical way to understand EU expectations is through the SIGMA "Principles of Public Administration," which the EU and OECD use as a benchmark for assessing governance performance in enlargement contexts. The SIGMA monitoring reports for Kosovo and Albania explicitly assess areas such as policy development and coordination, public service and HR management, accountability, and service delivery, dimensions that directly influence how foreign ministries and consular networks operate in reality (e.g., staffing quality, digital services, integrity controls, and responsiveness to citizens) (OECD/SIGMA, 2024a; OECD/SIGMA, 2024b). Even though these are not "diplomatic law" documents, they are extremely relevant: a consular office can only deliver protection and services effectively if the state has functioning administrative systems behind it.

Another major integration-related development is the rise of digital transformation as both a diplomatic tool and an administrative necessity. The EU has increasingly framed "digital diplomacy" as part of its external action, highlighting the need to promote a human-centric digital transformation and protect strategic interests in a global digital environment (EEAS, 2023). In its internal accountability reporting, the EEAS has also referenced institutional structures such as a Digital Diplomacy Task Force and a network of EU Digital Ambassadors, illustrating that digital issues are no longer peripheral, they are now part of mainstream diplomatic coordination (EEAS, 2021).

For Kosovo and Albania, this EU emphasis on the digital sphere translates into concrete pressures and opportunities: modern consular services increasingly depend on secure digital systems for appointments, documentation workflows, identity verification, emergency communications, and coordination with domestic registries. At the same time, it recognizes and raises hard questions about legality, confidentiality, cybersecurity, and the limits of interpreting classical treaty rules in a digital environment. Recent scholarship on digital diplomacy has argued that existing treaties provide space for interpretation, but there are clear points where practice moves faster than the legal framework, leaving states to choose between developing new norms or relying on evolving customary practice (Sullaj, 2020).

This is particularly important in consular work, where personal data is constantly processed and where public trust can collapse quickly after a security incident.

In addition, European integration indirectly shapes consular expectations through the broader European approach to citizen protection abroad. While Kosovo and Albania are not EU Member States, EU law on consular protection is still relevant as a reference point because it reflects how the EU recognizes minimum coordination standards in crises and "unrepresented citizen" scenarios. Council Directive (EU) 2015/637 sets rules for coordination and cooperation measures to facilitate consular protection for unrepresented EU citizens in third countries, an approach that matters conceptually for candidate countries aiming to align their institutions with European crisis-response expectations (Council Directive (EU) 2015/637). Related EU research commissioned in the last five years has also focused on strengthening the effectiveness of this framework in large-scale crises, which is closely tied to the lessons learned from recent emergencies and evacuations (Moraru, 2021). Even if Kosovo and Albania are not bound by this directive, the underlying logic, coordination, rapid information sharing, predictable assistance standards, and crisis readiness is increasingly treated as a modern benchmark for consular capacity.

Finally, any legal and theoretical framework for diplomatic and consular services in Kosovo and Albania must be realistic about structural differences. Albania operates with full diplomatic recognition globally and has a longer continuity in participation across international platforms, while Kosovo's partial recognition affects diplomatic reach, access, and sometimes even the practical conditions under which missions operate. This is not simply a political observation; it shapes the administrative environment in which diplomatic and consular services function, ranging from bilateral arrangements to participation in multilateral coordination mechanisms. At the same time, Kosovo has sought to strengthen legal and strategic frameworks in areas such as e-government and cybersecurity, which can directly support modern service delivery models (European Commission, 2024a). The broader point for this study is that convergence toward European standards does not happen in a vacuum: it is mediated by recognition, institutional capacity, and governance maturity.

Taken together, the legal "hard core" of diplomatic and consular services (the Vienna system) provides the essential baseline of functions, immunities, and inter-state rules. European integration then adds a governance-driven reform layer, recognizes and promotes accountability, service quality, crisis readiness, and digital transformation. This paper uses these two layers, international diplomatic/consular law and EU

integration governance standards, as the combined framework for evaluating how Kosovo and Albania are transforming their diplomatic and consular services and what convergence and divergence look like in practice.

2. Institutional and Legal Organization of Diplomatic and Consular Services in Kosovo and Albania

The institutional organization of diplomatic and consular services in Kosovo and Albania reflects both shared regional legacies and distinct state-building trajectories. In both countries, diplomatic and consular affairs are centrally managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which functions as the core authority responsible for representation abroad, coordination of bilateral and multilateral relations, and protection of nationals outside state territory. Despite this structural similarity, the legal bases, institutional maturity, and operational reach of diplomatic and consular services differ in important ways, shaped by historical continuity, international recognition, and the dynamics of European integration.

In Albania, the organization of diplomatic and consular services is grounded in a relatively stable constitutional and legislative framework that has evolved gradually since the early 1990s. The Albanian Constitution establishes foreign policy and international representation as competencies of the executive, while sector-specific legislation regulates the status of diplomatic missions, consular posts, and the professional diplomatic service. Albania's Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs oversees a broad diplomatic network, including embassies, permanent missions, and consular posts, which operate under standardized administrative and legal rules aligned with international diplomatic law and EU-oriented reforms. As an EU candidate country, Albania has been subject to continuous monitoring and guidance aimed at strengthening administrative capacity, transparency, and professionalism across public institutions, including the foreign service (European Commission, 2024a). This has resulted in a relatively consolidated institutional framework, where diplomatic and consular services are integrated into broader public administration reform agendas, particularly in areas such as human resource management, policy coordination, and service delivery.

Kosovo's diplomatic and consular system, by contrast, has developed under conditions of post-conflict state-building and partial international recognition. The establishment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora marked a crucial step in asserting Kosovo's international presence and administrative sovereignty. However, Kosovo's diplomatic network remains more limited in scope, both geographically and institutionally, due to the absence of recognition by several states and its exclusion from certain international organizations. These constraints directly affect the organization and functioning of diplomatic and consular services, requiring a stronger reliance on bilateral arrangements, ad hoc cooperation, and strategic prioritization of missions. Nevertheless, Kosovo has adopted a legal framework that mirrors international standards, explicitly referencing the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations as foundational sources governing the status, functions, and privileges of its diplomatic and consular representatives.

At the institutional level, both countries organize diplomatic and consular services through hierarchical structures that combine central oversight with decentralized implementation abroad. Embassies and consulates act as extensions of the foreign ministry, tasked not only with classical diplomatic representation but increasingly with consular assistance, economic promotion, and engagement with diasporas. This multifunctional role has become particularly pronounced in Kosovo and Albania, where large diaspora communities place sustained demand on consular services, including documentation, civil status registration, and emergency assistance. The Vienna Convention on Consular Relations provides the legal backbone for these activities, defining consular functions in broad and flexible terms that allow states to adapt service provision to contemporary needs (Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, 1963). This flexibility has been essential for both countries as they expand consular services beyond traditional assistance toward more administrative and service-oriented functions.

European integration has played a decisive role in shaping the internal organization of diplomatic and consular services in both Kosovo and Albania. EU enlargement policy treats foreign policy alignment and administrative capacity as interconnected processes, emphasizing that effective diplomacy depends on coherent institutions, professional staff, and predictable procedures. Recent EU progress reports highlight that Albania has made steady advances in strengthening administrative professionalism and coordination within its foreign service, while also pointing to remaining challenges related to workload management and digital service integration (European Commission, 2024a). In Kosovo's case, EU assessments acknowledge progress in legal alignment and strategic planning but continue to identify limitations in administrative capacity, staffing stability, and institutional coordination, which directly affect the effectiveness of diplomatic and consular operations (European Commission, 2024b).

A critical institutional development in both countries over the last five years has been the growing emphasis on digitalization of consular services. Digital appointment systems, online information portals, and electronic civil registry coordination are increasingly central to consular work, particularly in high-demand missions. While Albania has advanced more rapidly in integrating digital tools into consular administration, Kosovo has also adopted e-government strategies that explicitly include foreign service modernization as part of broader public sector digital transformation. These developments align with EU-wide priorities on digital

governance and service accessibility, reinforcing the expectation that consular services should be efficient, transparent, and citizen-centered (European External Action Service, 2023). At the same time, digitalization exposes institutional vulnerabilities, especially in areas such as cybersecurity, data protection, and interoperability between domestic and overseas administrative systems.

Another distinguishing institutional factor concerns international cooperation and coordination mechanisms. Albania, as a recognized state with long-standing participation in international organizations, benefits from structured diplomatic coordination platforms and established consular cooperation practices. Kosovo's participation in such mechanisms remains uneven, which can limit access to shared crisis-response frameworks and multilateral consular coordination. This difference becomes particularly relevant in emergencies, where institutionalized cooperation and information-sharing are crucial for effective consular protection. Although EU law on consular protection primarily applies to EU Member States, it has increasingly influenced expectations and best practices in candidate and potential candidate countries, indirectly shaping how Kosovo and Albania conceptualize consular readiness and inter-state cooperation (Moraru, 2021).

The institutional and legal organization of diplomatic and consular services in Kosovo and Albania demonstrates a clear trajectory toward convergence with international and European standards, while still reflecting asymmetries rooted in recognition status, administrative capacity, and historical continuity. Albania's framework shows a higher degree of institutional consolidation and integration into EU-driven reform processes, whereas Kosovo's system remains more adaptive and constrained, balancing formal legal alignment with practical limitations. These differences provide an essential context for understanding subsequent analysis of convergence and divergence in diplomatic and consular reforms between the two countries.

3. Convergence and Divergence in Reform Outcomes: Capacity, Professionalisation, Digitalisation, and External Constraints

When Kosovo and Albania are assessed side by side, the most visible area of convergence is the direction of reform rather than its depth. Both states are working within the same international legal shell of diplomatic and consular practice (especially the Vienna framework), and both are under strong incentives, political, administrative, and reputational, to align their institutions with European standards of good governance. In practical terms, this has pushed both countries to recognize how foreign ministries operate, how they recruit and train staff, and how consular services are delivered to citizens and diaspora communities. The convergence is clearest where reforms can be framed as technical: recognizes procedures, reducing administrative burden, and moving services online (Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, 1963; European Commission, 2025a; European Commission, 2025b).

A second convergence point is that, in both cases, the EU has become the main "reference system" for evaluating public administration performance, including the parts of administration that sit behind diplomacy and consular service delivery. The SIGMA assessments (endorsed by the OECD and the European Commission) are particularly useful here because they measure not only whether laws and strategies exist, but whether institutions actually perform in practice (OECD/SIGMA, 2025a; OECD/SIGMA, 2025b). Albania's reform trajectory, for instance, is increasingly documented through strategy-driven governance. The 2025 EU report notes the adoption of major cross-cutting strategies, including the Cross-Cutting Strategy on Public Administration Reform 2025–2030, but it also underlines that key amendments to civil service and state administration laws remain pending, meaning that the legal and recognizes ion backbone for merit-based recruitment and accountability still needs to be strengthened in ways that matter for professional foreign service administration (European Commission, 2025a). Kosovo, similarly, has a strategic framework in place and adopted a new action plan for implementation of its PAR Strategy (2022–2027), yet its progress is described as limited, with recurring delays in implementing the legal framework and persistent weaknesses in administrative capacity and coordination (European Commission, 2025b).

Professionalisation is another area where both countries show partial convergence, but with different bottlenecks. In Albania, the EU report highlights the continuing need for a revised civil service framework that improves merit-based recruitment, promotion, and dismissal, particularly at senior levels. This matters directly for diplomatic services because senior appointments shape institutional credibility, coherence of foreign policy implementation, and the quality of consular management abroad (European Commission, 2025a). In Kosovo, the 2025 report is unusually direct about the structural nature of the problem: the state should strengthen civil service capacity through merit-based recruitment and performance assessment, reduce vacant and "acting" positions, finalise job classification, and ensure the functioning of the remuneration system (European Commission, 2025b). These are not abstract HR issues. For diplomacy and consular services, they translate into whether a ministry can maintain continuity in missions, deploy staff predictably, and build recognizes expertise (consular protection, crisis response, legal assistance, migration documentation, and diaspora services) rather than relying on short-term staffing fixes.

Digitalisation is where the comparison becomes especially revealing, because it shows how "modern diplomacy" is increasingly inseparable from domestic administrative infrastructure. Kosovo's 2025 report explicitly links improved service delivery to the implementation of its Digital Agenda and e-government strategy, noting legal steps such as adopting legislation on electronic identification and trust services and on

cybersecurity, and reporting that a national eID system became operational as part of upgrading the e-Kosova portal (European Commission, 2025b). At the same time, it flags problems that affect the quality of digital consular-style service delivery as well: data quality and reliability challenges, and insufficient progress in aligning sector-specific laws with the general administrative procedures framework (European Commission, 2025b). Albania's 2025 report similarly notes progress in implementing the 2022–2026 Digital Agenda but points to gaps that matter for equitable consular access, digital security and equal access for vulnerable groups remaining issues, and institutional capacity for data collection and analysis needs further development (European Commission, 2025a). In other words, both states are recognizing it, but both are also discovering that digital consular services are only as good as the legal clarity, cybersecurity readiness, and administrative interoperability behind them.

Where divergence becomes most decisive is in the external environment in which diplomatic and consular systems operate. Albania's diplomatic service functions within the "normal" conditions of a fully recognized state with stable access to multilateral platforms, standard treaty participation, and routine diplomatic reciprocity. Kosovo's diplomatic environment is structurally different: partial recognition affects the reach and intensity of bilateral relations, complicates participation in certain international mechanisms, and can indirectly shape consular effectiveness (for example, through limitations on representation formats, constraints in cooperation, or narrower networks for coordination during crises). Even where Kosovo advances domestically, external constraints can limit how far diplomatic infrastructure can translate into comparable outcomes. This helps explain why Kosovo can simultaneously be described as advancing on service delivery and recognition, yet still struggling with institutional coordination, administrative capacity, and delays in broader EU integration processes due to political gridlock and governance challenges (European Commission, 2025b).

A final divergence is the relationship between domestic political stability and administrative reform continuity. The Kosovo report notes that the reporting period was affected by political stalemate and post-election gridlock that slowed preparations and limited implementation of agreed reform steps; it also highlights that several EU integration bodies struggled and that administrative capacity was weakened by key positions being held in an acting capacity (European Commission, 2025b). Albania's report also recognizes political and governance challenges, but its reform process reflects a more continuous pattern of strategy adoption and administrative steering, even while key legal amendments remain pending and certain executive practices (such as budget revisions via normative acts) continue to raise concerns (European Commission, 2025a). For diplomatic and consular services, this difference matters because foreign service institutions depend heavily on predictable budgeting, stable staffing, and long-term planning for missions abroad.

Taken together, Kosovo and Albania are converging toward European administrative and service standards in the formal architecture of reform, strategies, digital agendas, and legal alignment with the core international framework for diplomacy and consular relations. Yet they diverge in reform outputs due to differences in administrative capacity, stability of implementation, and the external constraints each state faces. The practical implication is that "Europeanisation" of diplomatic and consular services cannot be evaluated only by legal approximation; it must be measured by whether citizens and diaspora actually experience reliable services, whether missions are staffed and managed professionally, and whether digital transformation improves access without undermining legality, security, or accountability (OECD/SIGMA, 2025a; OECD/SIGMA, 2025b; European Commission, 2025a; European Commission, 2025b).

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that diplomatic and consular services in Kosovo and Albania are undergoing a profound transformation shaped by the interaction between international diplomatic law and the normative pressures of European integration. Rather than representing a purely technical adjustment of institutions, these reforms reflect deeper processes of state consolidation, administrative maturation, and strategic repositioning within the European and international order. The analysis confirms that diplomatic and consular services function not only as instruments of foreign policy, but also as indicators of governance quality and institutional credibility.

A key conclusion of the paper is that convergence between Kosovo and Albania is most evident at the normative and strategic level, where both states increasingly adopt European standards as benchmarks for reform. However, convergence in legal frameworks and policy objectives does not automatically translate into equivalent outcomes. Differences in administrative capacity, continuity of implementation, and external constraints continue to shape the effectiveness of reforms. This highlights the limits of formal legal approximation as a measure of progress and underscores the importance of institutional performance and service quality in evaluating diplomatic and consular systems.

The paper also shows that the modern role of diplomatic and consular services extends well beyond traditional representation and protection functions. Growing reliance on digital tools, intensified engagement with diaspora communities, and heightened expectations for crisis responsiveness have transformed consular services into a central interface between the state and its citizens abroad. These developments require foreign

ministries to operate as complex administrative organizations, capable of integrating legal compliance, technological innovation, and citizen-oriented service delivery within a coherent institutional framework. The findings suggest that European integration remains a powerful, but not self-sufficient, driver of reform. While EU conditionality and monitoring provide direction and incentives, sustainable transformation depends on domestic political commitment, professional civil services, and stable institutional leadership. For Kosovo and Albania alike, the future effectiveness of diplomatic and consular services will depend on the ability to move from formal alignment toward durable administrative capacity, ensuring that reforms enhance both international credibility and the everyday experience of citizens relying on diplomatic and consular protection abroad.

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