



KOSOVO
PUBLIC OPINION
ON
DIALOGUE WITH SERBIA



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INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings of National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute) public opinion research in Kosovo on attitudes about normalization of bilateral relations with Serbia through negotiations referred to as the Brussels Dialogue (Dialogue), following the 2013 Brussels Agreement signed by Belgrade and Pristina under European Union (EU) auspices.

With funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), NDI conducted a series of targeted focus group discussions in July 2018, with 60 participants in Dragash, North Mitrovica, and Pristina. Dragash is a multi-ethnic municipality in the south; North Mitrovica is majority Kosovar Serb; and Pristina, the capital, is predominantly Kosovar Albanian. Albanian and Serbian speakers moderated discussions, which were gender-segregated, with people between 18 and 65 years of age. The Institute used these focus groups to provide qualitative information on what citizens think about the Dialogue, their views on individual and collective identity, and their perspectives on interethnic relations. NDI explored whether or not there are trusted leaders capable of engaging with communities on important or sensitive issues.

Following the July 2018 research and in the lead-up to a September 2018 meeting in Brussels between Kosovo President Hashim Thaci and his Serbian counterpart, Aleksandar Vucic, territorial exchange along ethnic lines was raised as a primary focus of the negotiations. Neither party to the negotiations fully or formally endorsed a territory exchange, nor specified the scope and modality of what such an exchange would constitute. U.S. and EU interlocutors have neither endorsed nor rejected prospective territorial changes.

NDI incorporated questions regarding the Brussels Dialogue, territory exchange, and interethnic relations into subsequent research conducted with support by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This included a series of 12 focus groups in September 2018, with 131 participants in Gjakova, Gjilan, Gracanica, North Mitrovica, Pristina, and South Mitrovica. It also included a country-wide quantitative survey, conducted in September and October 2018, using face-to-face interviews with a stratified random sample, by region, type of settlement (urban or rural), gender, and ethnicity, with an overall sample size of 1,800¹. For both, questions regarding the Brussels Dialogue and interethnic relations were part of broader lines of inquiry on government performance, confidence in political institutions, and corruption.

In the below report, focus group findings and quotes are predominantly drawn from the July 2018 focus group series, unless noted as findings from the September 2018 research. Polling data is from September 2018, though may include trend analysis from past USAID-funded surveys. NDI engaged UBO Consulting to field each round of research and Binda Consulting International to analyze results of focus groups.

Following the conduct of this research, the Assembly approved a resolution in December 2018 to create a negotiation team comprised of governing and opposition representatives, as well as civil society. The team expects to send a draft law to the government in January 2019 on the obligations and competencies of the Kosovo state delegation in the process of Dialogue with Serbia.

¹ Margin of error for the full sample is +/- 2.74 percent with a 95 percent confidence level. Subgroup findings carry higher margins of error.

MAIN FINDINGS

- The Brussels Dialogue is seen to be of paramount importance among Kosovars of all ethnic communities to improve relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Citizens want the Dialogue to continue, but at the same time question its effectiveness and express distrust about the process. They desire more information about the purpose, content, and expected outcomes of negotiations. They perceive conflicting public positions between the parties about what has been agreed upon, and criticize the lack of implementation of past agreements.
- There is no public appetite for territory exchange or so-called border corrections or for greater autonomy for majority-Kosovar Serb municipalities through an Association of Serbian Municipalities, which is intended to oversee local economic development, education, and health matters, and perform a representative role to central government authorities, as agreed between Kosovo and Serbia in 2015. Many within Kosovo believe that a border/territorial change could destabilize the country and deteriorate interethnic relations. Given these choices, citizens would rather the Dialogue continue, regardless of delays, in order to advance Kosovo's EU integration prospects.
- The economic situation and unemployment remain major concerns of Kosovars. They link the Dialogue process to an improved economic outlook, although few believe the economic situation in Kosovo will improve.
- Kosovar Serbs in northern municipalities describe an oppressive political environment that prevents them from expressing their concerns – particularly as they relate to perceived inaction on agreements made through the Brussels Dialogue. Several say they are fearful to speak about or be critical of political leadership and policy choices within their community.
- Regardless of ethnicity, most citizens view the state of Kosovo as a political construct and not central to how they identify themselves. However, they care how outsiders view them as Kosovars, especially as they believe foreigners' perceptions to be negative. Most derive their sense of identity from their ethnic origins, and express pride in it, valuing their respective group's traditions, languages, and community.
- Various ethnic communities appreciate that they share similar conditions and challenges. Those in multiethnic communities tend to speak of greater tolerance for and harmony with other ethnicities than those in more mono-ethnic municipalities. No one thinks radicalization on ethnic or religious bases is happening or foresees its growth. They suggest, instead, that conflict is driven by political actors.
- No political actor has the trust of the people, and no groups or individuals emerge collectively, or within ethnic groups, as influential messengers. However, participants identify individuals at the community level whom they respect, including professionals and academics, who could be enlisted to communicate with citizens on the Brussels Dialogue.

THE BRUSSELS DIALOGUE

Dialogue is necessary. It's the only solution, but the process is not trusted

A vast majority of focus group participants across ethnic lines believe that the Brussels Dialogue is necessary to resolve outstanding issues related to Kosovo in a peaceful manner and to ease political conditions that stand in the way of economic and social progress. However, most express unease with the current Dialogue process and confusion over competing narratives from different actors involved in negotiations. Most were put off with what they believe were disingenuous political theatrics by their representatives, whose motives they question. Perhaps most important, there is no appetite for violence to press for resolution of specific issues.

"It's always better than the war, but it has to be a real dialogue that will solve problems." (Man, North Mitrovica)

"I don't think that the people's interests were represented [in the Dialogue]. It was more focused on political games, and not on things that are of interest to citizens. It was not until now when we started to talk about missing persons. But it is very important for citizens to be more involved because those issues affect us most." (Woman, Pristina)

"Dialogue is good but this one is not clear, and I don't know what to expect." (Man, Dragash)

"There is a saying: it is better to talk for 1,000 years than wage war for one day." (Man, Dragash)

"There are many groups. In Kosovo, you have a group that promotes nationalism too much. They brainwash teens. But even in Serbia you have that." (Woman, Pristina)

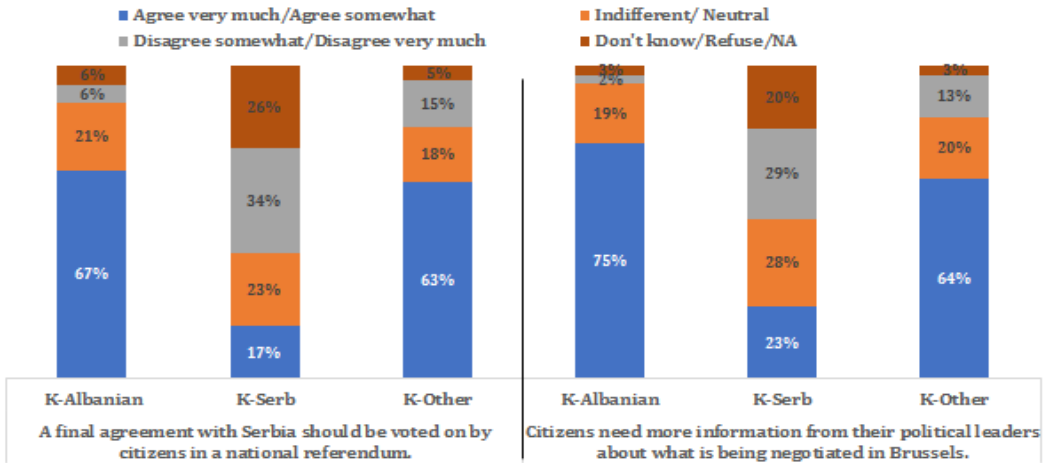
"It all goes in a direction that someone else wants. No Serb or Albanian has any say in it." (Woman, North Mitrovica)

"Kosovo has not developed at all since they are occupied with the Dialogue. I don't know why we are doing this." (Man, South Mitrovica)

"There is no dialogue. It's only a stage for politicians. People here have been forgotten in the 'dialogue', our freedom was lost in 2013. Citizens here didn't win anything but lost a lot; police and courts. Some of these institutions should have brought security and safety, but they didn't. None of them do the job, they are just called Kosovar institutions" (Man, North Mitrovica)

In polling, citizens – predominantly Kosovar Albanians and other non-Serb minorities – desire more information from their political leaders about the Dialogue, and think that an ultimate agreement should be put to citizens through a referendum. Kosovar Serbs are divided in opinion, with approximately half in both options selecting neutral preferences or not responding.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements: Ethnic Breakdown

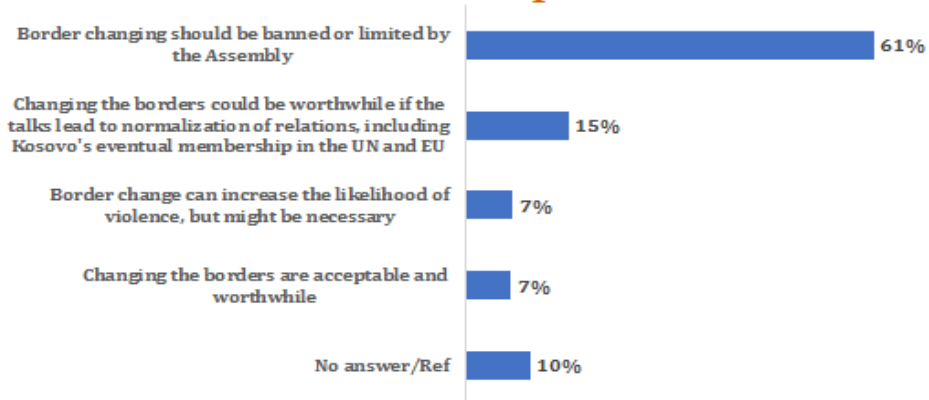


Territorial exchange is not an option

In the September focus groups, participants discussed three possible options: 1) territory exchange between Kosovo and Serbia as a means to obtain diplomatic recognition of Kosovo by Serbia and eventual U.N. membership and EU accession; 2) creation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities within Kosovo to resolve outstanding obstacles to Serbia's diplomatic recognition; and 3) continued Dialogue and negotiation through the present EU-mediated process.

Both Kosovar Albanians and Kosovar Serbs dismissed territorial exchange altogether, calling the option an affront, though for different reasons described below. September polling likewise found more than six-in-10 calling for the Assembly to ban border changes. Nearly one-third of Kosovar Serbs declined to answer the question, and among the remainder, opinion was largely divided across several statements: changing borders is acceptable (25 percent); border changes can increase the likelihood of violence but might be necessary (19 percent); border changes should be banned or limited by the Assembly (14 percent); and changing the borders is worthwhile if it leads to normalization of relations and membership in the U.N. and EU (14 percent). Kosovar Serbs in the north were more likely to not answer the question (44 percent) than their neighbors in the south (10 percent).

What comes closer to your mind when discussing the issues of borders between Kosovo and Serbia? Please select one option.



For many, the Association of Serbian Municipalities evokes visions of Bosnia-Herzegovina's *Republika Srpska*, with perceptions that the Kosovar Serb community would be autonomous and separate from Kosovo's institutions. Participants preferred to continue the Dialogue, hoping that better alternatives would emerge to secure recognition.

"Time is not important, Kosovo is. This Dialogue can continue." (Man, South Mitrovica)

"From all the options, the Dialogue is the best for us Serbs. We can have negotiations continue, not about the status of Kosovo, but about our quality of life. And if we find some model that would work for both sides, then why not?" (Man, North Mitrovica)

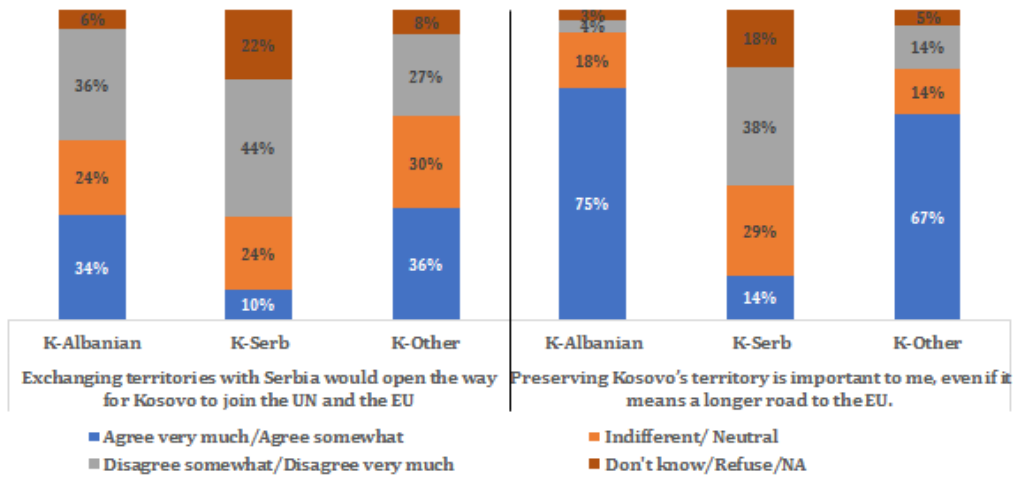
"Continue the Dialogue. We are not for division of territories whatsoever." (Man, Gracanica)

"The suggestion [border change] is absurd. How much more can Serbia want to take from us?" (Woman, Gjilan)

"There is no reason to exchange lands. We don't have any Serbian territory." (Man, Pristina)

"Giving something that is ours to get something that is ours doesn't make sense." (Man, North Mitrovica)

To what extent do you agree with the following statements: Ethnic Breakdown



Some participants discuss proposed territorial exchange as an outcome of a hard reality that most have not acknowledged.

“As much as it hurts me to say this, I think the North of Kosovo is already lost.” (Woman, South Mitrovica)

“We’re a failed state when we begin to talk about dividing our country. What’s more, we have done nothing to support Serb integration into Kosovo.” (Man, Gjilan)

“It would finish the process and we could continue forward, at least to move forward. We lost 20 years on this. Kosovo is not ours anymore. Reality is different from what we want.” (Man, North Mitrovica)

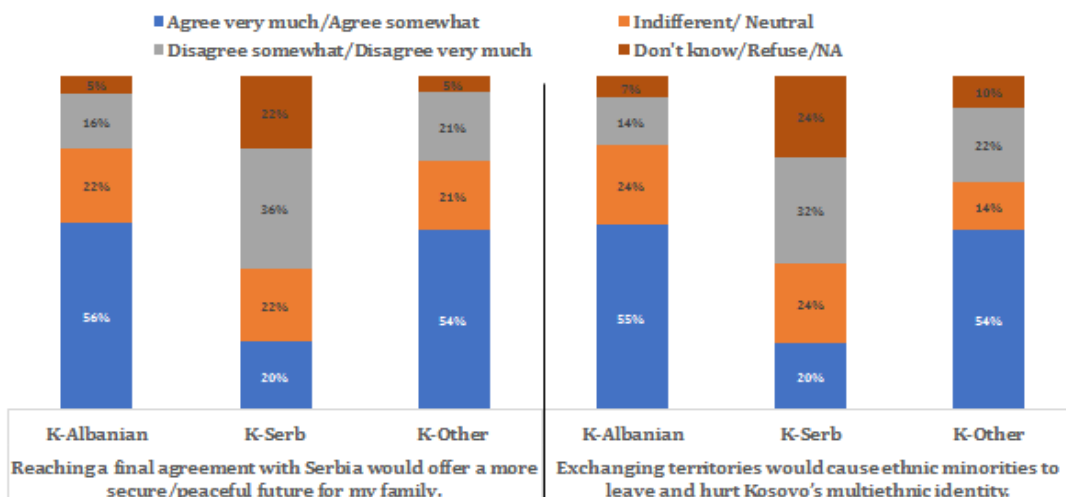
Kosovar Serbs worry territorial exchange would have detrimental effects in the south

NDI’s September survey saw more than 50 percent of citizens acknowledging ethnic minorities would leave Kosovo if territories were exchanged. In September focus groups, Kosovar Serbs spoke of concern for both cultural and religious heritage sites in the south, as well as concerns for the safety of the majority of Kosovar Serbs, who live in communities in central and southern Kosovo.

“It might be good for us, but for people down south, they would be terrorized.” (Man, North Mitrovica)

“If we are moved to the north safely, then maybe the President can do whatever he wants with the north.” (Woman, Gracanica)

To what extent do you agree with the following statements: Ethnic Breakdown



Concerns over regional impact

Several participants believe that territory exchanges would trigger broader regional conflicts.

“The positive is that we would know on which side we belong, but the negative is the conflict it would trigger.” (Woman, North Mitrovica)

“I don’t think it’s going to happen. The EU wouldn’t allow it because of what will happen in the region.” (Man, Pristina)

“There simply can’t be a peaceful exchange of territories in the Balkans.” (Man, South Mitrovica)

President Vucic’s visit to northern municipalities of Kosovo in September 2018 provoked several participants to harden their views on negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia, primarily due to his comments extolling former Serbian ruler Slobodan Milosevic. However, his visit did not feature significantly in discussions in Kosovar Albanian municipalities. Some participants suggested that his visit was a distraction for which they had little time.

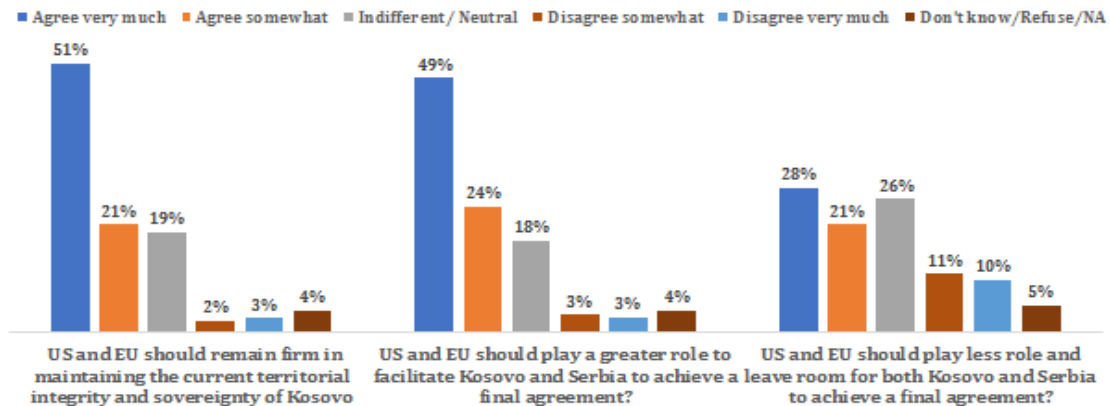
“We can’t have peaceful resolution with a country that still defends Milosevic.” (Man, South Mitrovica)

“Vucic said that Milosevic was a good guy?! How can we have Dialogue with him?” (Man, Gjakova)

The international community should affirm Kosovo’s territory and sovereignty

In NDI’s September survey, approximately three-quarters of citizens agreed that the U.S. and EU should firmly back Kosovo’s territory and sovereignty, as well as play a strong role in achieving a final agreement between Kosovo and Serbia.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:



Disaggregated data showed Kosovar Serbs as mostly neutral or indifferent as to U.S. and EU participation in facilitating a final agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. September focus groups offered context on differences of opinion emerging between the ethnic groups. Kosovar Albanians were moderately supportive of the EU and U.S. as conveners, though many think they are driving the process. Kosovar Serbs were of the opinion that the international community is not neutral or necessary for negotiations. Some expressed that the outcomes are predetermined by the EU, and negotiators have not been transparent about the process.

“Dialogue is being handled in a very sneaky way. One of the leaders steps forwards and says this is what we did, then the other leader says something different. There is no intermediary. For example, the European Union should step up and inform us on what was discussed. You trust the referee, but as long as there is no referee...” (Man, Pristina)

“They (the EU and U.S.) should not be involved anymore. It has to come from both sides (Kosovo and Serbia). No third parties are needed.” (Woman, Gracanica)

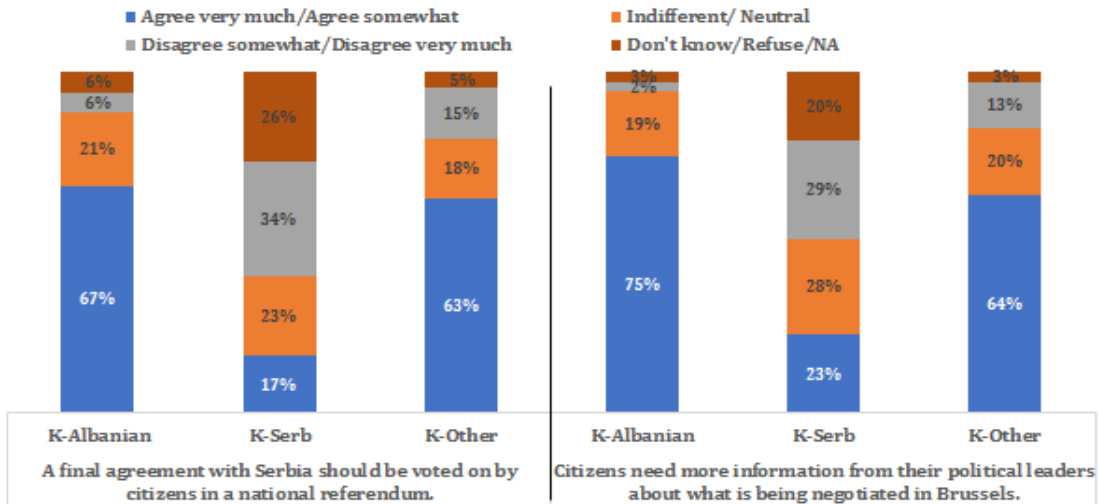
Serbia is better prepared

In September focus group discussions, Kosovar Albanians felt their representatives are not competently prepared to negotiate with Serbia.

“Kosovo should be better prepared and more determined because it seems that the Serbs do better and we are afraid to go.” (Woman, South Mitrovica)

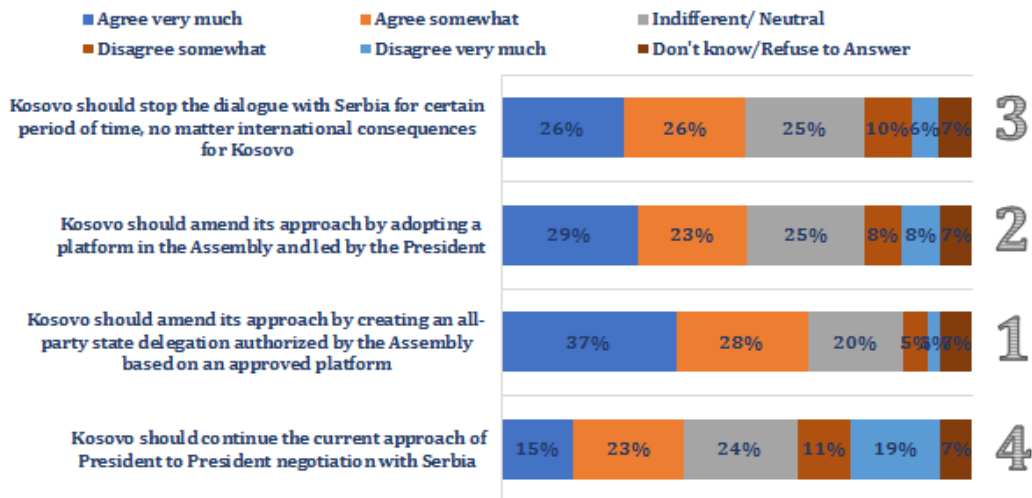
“Serbs go to the meeting prepared. We go with our hands in our pockets.” (Man, Gjilan)

To what extent do you agree with the following statements: Ethnic Breakdown



When presented with options for how the Dialogue should proceed, citizens support an all-party delegation, with authorization from the Assembly based on an approved platform. Almost twice the number of citizens agree with this approach, as compared to the president-to-president negotiation approach pursued through this past year.

Do you agree or disagree with each statement and how strongly?



More transparency desired on implementation of agreements

There is a clear opportunity for politicians from both Kosovo and Serbia to communicate openly about agreements and manage expectations by explaining the complexities that often accompany implementation of an agreement. The agreement on recognizing documents, for example, was welcomed by many Kosovar Serbs, who believed they could simply show up at the relevant institution and obtain new documents. However, the practicalities of setting up systems to confirm and transfer data is not well understood. And rather than accepting that this is a

bureaucratic complexity, the impulse is to blame incompetence, corruption, or hostile treatment from public institutions or officials.

“I worked with Kosovar institutions, my diploma is from Belgrade, and it wasn’t recognized by Kosovo authorities.” (Woman, North Mitrovica)

Participants express that agreements to-date under the Dialogue process are indeed achievements, but they are the beginning of resolving outstanding issues and not resolutions themselves. Citizens want genuine progress on issues that have lingered for nearly two decades. They understand that negotiations can be arduous and sensitive, but are frustrated that their personal circumstances have not improved. The wearing effect of political instability and economic uncertainty is leading Kosovar Serbs in particular to accept that negotiations may require compromise.

Conditions for the Dialogue and *de facto* recognition

Given the unclear substance of the Dialogue and its duration, Kosovar Albanian participants in September focus groups suggest demanding conditions in the negotiations, or narrowing the scope.

“We should only be discussing the missing people from the war, not the Association of Serb Municipalities, at the Brussels talks.” (Man, Pristina)

“Both parties need to be equals at the table. Serbia was the aggressor in the past and they need to apologize for what they did.” (Man, South Mitrovica)

“The talks need to continue but on equal terms, and they need to reciprocate.” (Woman, Gjilan)

Several Kosovar Serb participants say that, through the Dialogue, there is *de facto* recognition of Kosovo statehood. For them, that senior Serbian politicians cannot travel into Kosovo without formal permission, along with Kosovo’s ability to charge duties at the borders are evidence of this fact. When asked to write what they want out of the Dialogue, several women from North Mitrovica want politicians to be truthful about the final determination of Kosovo’s status, and speak to the practicalities of outstanding issues related to health care, education, and mobility.

“It’s already done [the issue of recognition]. He [Vucic] is just preparing people for referendum.” (Woman, North Mitrovica)

“Consider that it’s an administrative line for us and a border for them. The fact of the matter is people can’t trade across it without paying taxes and customs duties. And this is supported by the Serbian authorities. None of the agreements to date have brought something good.” (Man, North Mitrovica)

What people want from the Dialogue processes depends on their ethnicity and location. However, most want visa liberalization – visa-free travel within the Schengen zone of the EU – to allow for economic migration. If their economic prospects cannot be improved in Kosovo, they are willing to move. Kosovar Serbs want assurances that they will receive quality health and education services in their language; the ability to move freely not only in Kosovo but into

Serbia as well; and assurances that their culture and language will be able to thrive. They do not want complications in obtaining official documentation (driving licenses, passports).

“I do follow the process. It’s long and we are hopeful for the best result [from Dialogue]. We are interested due to our pensions that are still left in Serbia.” (Woman, Dragash)

“[Dialogue impacts] courts, municipality, you can’t get any papers (documents) here, you need to go to Raska (in central Serbia). It affects all people.” (Man, North Mitrovica)

“We want the truth about Kosovo. Will youth be integrated? What will happen with education and health care?” (Woman, North Mitrovica)

Though far from dominant, some participants in Pristina and North Mitrovica want issues related to the war resolved. This includes concerns related to property rights (for some in North Mitrovica) and the whereabouts of people who went missing during the war (for some in Pristina). A few in both male and female groups indicate that they want war crimes prosecuted and reparations from Serbia. Participants in Dragash focused primarily on economic outcomes from the Dialogue, seeking employment, improved health and education, and visa liberalization.

“Dialogue is needed if it’s a genuine dialogue. Why don’t we negotiate about the property of Serbs that are unlawfully taken by Albanians?” (Man, North Mitrovica)

“Three things that I want as a result of real dialogue are resolving issues surrounding missing persons, war reparations, and Mitrovica.” (Woman, Pristina)

Not expecting much

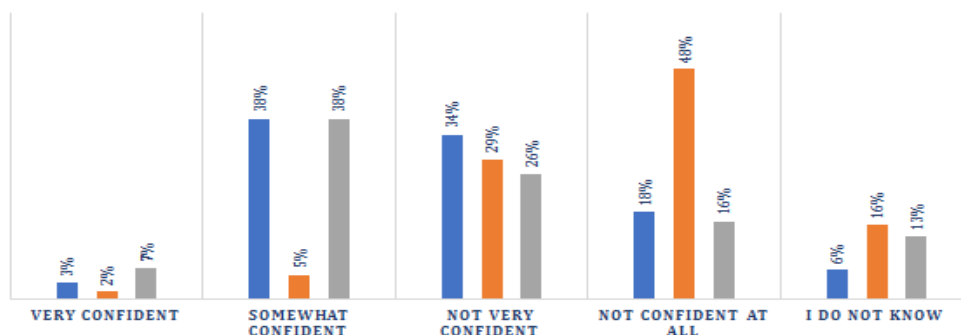
Few believe much will be accomplished on citizen priorities. They feel any agreement will be implemented slowly and have little or no impact on their personal circumstances. More than 75 percent of Kosovar Serbs, and particularly those in central and southern areas, are far more pessimistic on this count. This reflects feelings among Kosovar Serbs in the center and south that the Dialogue has focused only on the north.

“I don’t expect anything good since it has been going on so long - 19 years.” (Woman, Dragash)

Regarding the Dialogue, how confident are you that discussions between the governments of Kosovo and Serbia have the ability to improve conditions in the lives of average citizens?

Ethnic Breakdown

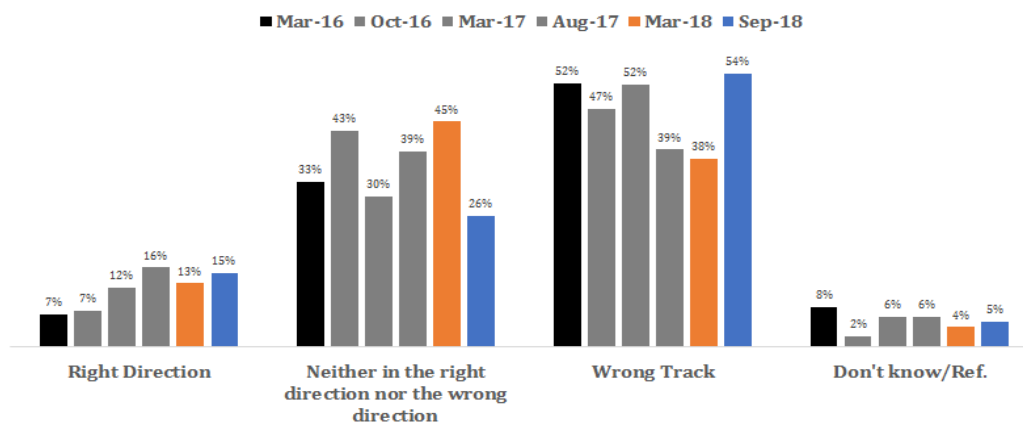
■ K-Albanian ■ K-Serb ■ K-Other



GENERAL OUTLOOK

Citizens have a bleak outlook on Kosovo's general direction. Those claiming the country is headed in the wrong direction substantially increased, from 38 percent to 54 percent, between March and September 2018, a drop which could be indicative of concerns over the growing discussion over territorial exchange with Serbia as part of the Brussels Dialogue process. Assessments of Kosovo's direction are otherwise informed by concerns with perceptions over the state of the economy and corruption. Similarly, satisfaction rates with Kosovo's overall progress since independence in 2008 have dropped; 55 percent say they are somewhat or very dissatisfied with progress, with 14 percent more between March and September 2018 indicating that they are very dissatisfied.

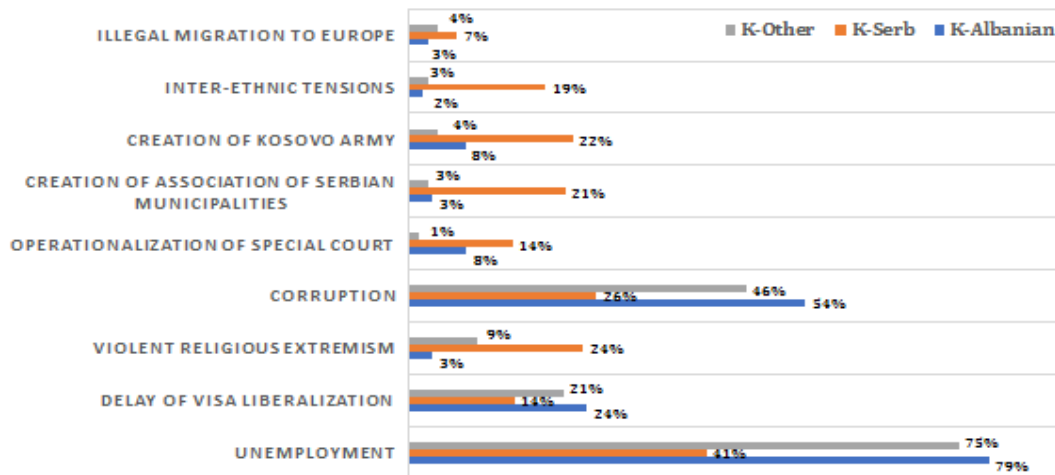
Are things in Kosovo going in the right direction or wrong direction? 2016 - 2018



How people perceive the economy, and employment opportunities in particular, affects their mood, with polling showing unemployment and corruption as top-of-mind issues for all citizens (respectively, 78 percent and 53 percent of citizens rate these issues as the biggest problems for Kosovo). Focus group participants' assessments of their respective communities' prospects are dim, with overwhelming concerns about the economy, followed by corruption and low quality public services. What differs from past focus groups is that most participants struggle to name any positive developments in their communities.

With one notable exception – EU visa liberalization, and with it the heightened prospect for many to emigrate – people express little hope for the future. They see no prospects for an improved economy, largely because of governing leaders and bodies that they view as self-serving and incompetent.

Which of the following issues will be the biggest problem for Kosovo in the near future? Ethnic breakdown



In September polling, Kosovar Serb citizens share concerns about unemployment (41 percent) and corruption (26 percent), but, unlike Kosovar Albanians, rank creation of the Kosovo Army (22 percent), creation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities (21 percent), and inter-ethnic tensions (19 percent) among their top two concerns for Kosovo in the near future.

All participants expect the government to invest in infrastructure – it is after all their job, they say – but believe public works are a means for graft and corruption, and institutions fail to act on what really matters to people – employment and social support.

“It’s not too much of an improvement if such basic things are fixed. Building roads, providing water and electricity, etc.... this is the job of government, if these basic things are not provided, then the people will rise up. These mean nothing, as long as no one in your family works. The government should open some factories, employ 2,000 to 3,000 people, and not build roads only to destroy them five years later so that the next leader can fix them. If you don’t have a job, it doesn’t matter whether you walk on mud or surfaced roads. They are ripping off the state to make someone else wealthy.” (Man, Pristina)

It’s not what you know, it’s whom you know

Nepotism and patronage are believed to be at the root of all state employment practices, and it is still widely perceived to be the largest employer in every community. Participants describe employment in particular as captured by corruption, as well as educational institutions and health care services. Women participants express more concern regarding the latter, and how this impacts the quality of health and educational services, than men. Participants believe that unqualified, politically connected people are being given hiring preference, and as a result, institutions are becoming less and less able to serve citizens because of growing cadres of unqualified workers.

“Our problem as youth is that we are very isolated (marginalized). On the one hand we can’t go abroad, and on the other hand corruption is killing us. They only try to

accommodate their family members and they do not care at all for others. I have many friends who have master's degrees and they earn 150 to 200 EUR a month. Some of them don't even have parents, and the whole burden of the family falls on their shoulders."
(Man, Pristina)

There is a clear opinion that political actors are a class of their own; above the law, manufacturing crises to distract people from their daily issues of concern.

"Unfortunately, no one is consulting with people. Important decisions are made against the needs of the people. People feel betrayed, cheated, and feel like no one is listening."
(Man, North Mitrovica)

"...It is impossible to get a job if you lack family connections or party connections... Let's not even talk about the prospects for youth. Our institutional leadership do not govern for us; they work for their own interests. A concrete example is their salaries - 10,000 EUR! A Prime Minister, a Minister and their circle are to get 10,000 EUR!? I don't know how they can even accept that money." (Man, Pristina)

For Kosovar Serbs, especially in the north, the political situation is dire

Kosovar Serb participants see politics as toxic and oppressive. They are increasingly scared of the political class they believe has been forced upon them. They say there is no room for dissent, or even space to voice concern. In large measure, they feel this is a betrayal by their own. This is true among local government as well, as residents of North Mitrovica describe an oppressive state of affairs in which people are afraid to speak out for fear of being marginalized, blacklisted or worse. They feel that their institutions care only about instructions from Belgrade.

"[A Kosovar Serb politician] is not elected rightfully and not my representative."
(Woman, North Mitrovica)

"You can get punished if you talk against politicians, or if you criticize. You can't even have a child in preschool without political support/connection here." (Woman, North Mitrovica)

"People are frightened by Belgrade, which stops people from expressing their opinion."
(Man, North Mitrovica)

Safety and security in Kosovar Serb municipalities

In September focus groups, safety and security among Kosovar Serb municipalities continued to be a concern, though cited more frequently than in past focus group studies. In North Mitrovica, the principle concern relates to ineffective police; in Gracanica, participants express concern with individuals driving through their community to yell slang words, particularly at young women, and other provocative acts. Women ultimately expressed more concerns about their personal safety, though men in these groups agreed with the concerns raised.

"There were groups of people from the south that were shouting at us. It's the people from South Mitrovica that cause problems, they insult us. I had an encounter when I was

walking alone in the evening, and they were stopping their cars and saying stuff to us.” (Woman, North Mitrovica)

“Whenever the police are needed to solve something, they don’t do their job correctly. When people fight, the police don’t intervene.” (Woman, North Mitrovica)

“We have a neighbor that uses drugs and steals for a living. My husband caught him trying to steal a car and took him to the police. They didn’t do anything!” (Woman, North Mitrovica)

IDENTITY

For most participants, regardless of ethnicity, the state of Kosovo is not important in how they identify themselves, with the exception of a few participants in Pristina. Some perceive Kosovo as a source of embarrassment because of its association with corruption, foreign fighters, poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment.

Kosovar Albanian participants are roughly divided between reluctance and pride in espousing a Kosovar identity. Kosovar Albanian women are more likely to express pride in Kosovo as having fought for its independence, values, and traditions.

Participants care about how the outside views them, and international stories of Kosovars fighting with terrorist organizations, or officials committing crimes, are considered a blight on Kosovo. Most believe external audiences have negative perceptions about Kosovo as a land of perpetual ethnic conflict, corruption, and a poorly educated population. Kosovar Serbs talk about how people in Belgrade describe them as “*Shqiptar*” (Albanians) because of their residence.

“We are ashamed to say who we are and where we come from.” (Man, Dragash)

“Well, there is history and the fact that we are the youngest country. We have nothing else to be proud of.” (Man, Pristina)

*“I had a problem with my child who plays soccer. Children from Belgrade called my son *Shqiptar*, *Shqiptar* from Kosovo.” (Woman, North Mitrovica)*

“People outside humiliate us. We hear stories from our people living in the EU. Europeans think of us as second or third-class citizen and they don’t like us.” (Man, Dragash)

Kosovo is a place; ethnicity is identity

Most participants derive their sense of identity from their ethnic origins (in the case of the July focus groups, Albanian, Serbian, or Gorani). While they do not express a sense of identity deriving from Kosovo, most will say they belong to an ethnicity from Kosovo. Kosovo, as such, has little impact on identity and does not unite groups of people. Focus group participants from Pristina are most likely to reflect some element of Kosovo in their identity.

“Here we don’t use it (Kosovar). You are either Albanian, Serbian or Gorani. It just says you are Kosovar in passports. Albanians are Albanians wherever they live. Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians, the same as well.” (Man, Dragash)

“When people here were getting Kosovar IDs, it says ‘KOSOVAR’ and people didn’t have the option to declare themselves. You don’t have an option. It’s an artificial identity.” (Man, North Mitrovica)

“We fought to be Kosovars, that history makes us feel proud.” (Man, Pristina)

“We were one of the most educated people. You can always see Serbs as experts in fields. Sports figures, doctors, professors. We are intelligent, but we are hard-headed.” (Woman, North Mitrovica)

“I believe that we are known for our values. We have always had good values and intentions and maybe that’s why we were always conquered. When I introduce myself, I feel brave.” (Woman, Pristina)

“I’m proud because our land has been seized by many nations throughout history, but we were always, and remain, Gorani. We didn’t change or claim to be other. They all came - the Turks, Serbs, Bulgarians - but we were always Gorani.” (Man, Dragash)

How politics is practiced in Kosovo is disappointing for many. For Kosovar Albanians, concerns also are expressed in how they think the international community views Kosovo. They bristle when a Kosovar is caught shoplifting, implicated in corruption, or involved in international terrorism. Kosovar Serb participants are least proud of their political representatives, though several Kosovar Albanians echo the sentiment.

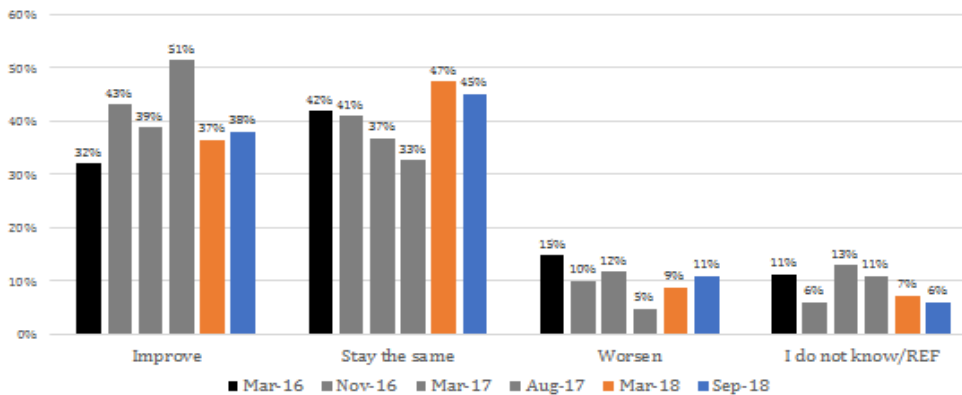
“People who (are supposed to) represent people (politicians) do not represent people.” (Man, North Mitrovica)

“When we talk about politics, that is when we are ashamed - whoever they are, they are bad.” (Man, Dragash)

INTERETHNIC RELATIONS

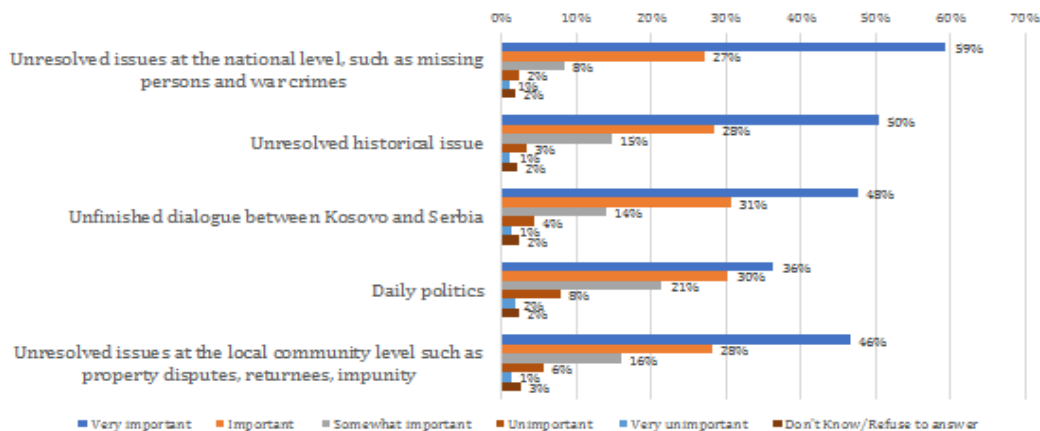
More citizens expect interethnic relations within Kosovo to stay the same (45 percent in September 2018) than they are to expect improvements (38 percent). Expectations for change reverted to these rates after a peak in 2017 following Kosovo’s parliamentary elections, when a majority (51percent in August 2017) expected an improvement, as compared to three-in-10 saying they would say the same. The pessimism can be explained in context of persistent negative relations between Kosovo and Serbia, and particular events that exacerbated tensions at times of NDI’s polls – for example, the January 2017 provocation of sending a train covered in “Kosovo is Serbia” propaganda to Kosovo’s border, and the January 2018 assassination of Kosovar Serb opposition leader Oliver Ivanovic. One-in-10 expects a decline in relations, though Kosovar Serbs are twice more likely (at 20 percent) to expect a decline than are Kosovar Albanians. This data was echoed in focus groups: in September, most Kosovar Albanian and Kosovar Serb participants felt that relations at an individual and community level are stable. And almost all felt that tensions result from political manipulation.

Looking ahead a few years, do you expect ethnic relations within Kosovo to improve, worsen or remain the same? 2016-2018



When asked in the survey about barriers to relations between Kosovar Serbs and Albanians, overall, a variety of issues - unresolved issues at the national level, unresolved historical issues, unfinished dialogue, daily politics, and local community issues receive very similar rankings of importance. Among the Kosovar Serb community, unresolved issues at both local and national levels are counted as the most important (34 percent very important and important). Kosovar Serbs in the north are slightly more likely to rank local issues of highest importance (36 percent) while those in the center/south are slightly more likely to rank national issues over local.

How significant are the following factors as barriers to better relations and cooperation between Kosovar Serbs and Albanians?



In previous focus groups, particularly when discussion turns to the Brussels Dialogue process, some participants were concerned with the perceived benefits of other ethnic groups. For example, Kosovar Albanian participants would complain about accommodations made for the Association of Serbian Municipalities, or parallel institutions. Kosovar Serb participants sometimes noted that Kosovar Albanians are getting preferential treatment under the law or ignore official language requirements. While some of these specific grievances have not gone away – and, in point of fact, came up in the September focus groups – discussions in the July focus groups were less often framed as “us versus them”. Kosovar Serb and Albanian

participants acknowledge that they all share common conditions and experiences: lack of employment or economic opportunity, limited mobility rights, dysfunctional state bureaucracy, corruption, and a failing political class. To some extent, they find solidarity in such hardships, and hold politicians responsible.

“We should sit with Albanians and talk about the solution... Best for us to talk and agree to join and to continue with normal life as before.” (Woman, North Mitrovica)

“There’s this phenomenon – the population does not agitate, but politics are so bad so that it fuels conflict. The politicians are responsible for misusing and maligning each other at an ethnic level, but neither the Albanian nor the Serb populations share the same views.” (Man, Pristina)

“In Klina, for example, there are Serbs and that is not a problem. I worked at customs and I had good relations with them. We are friends on Facebook, we wish each other well on holidays.” (Woman, Pristina)

“The problem with Serbs is our constitution, as they are privileged and have more rights than us.” (Man, South Mitrovica)

“If we had employment there wouldn’t be any problem.” (Woman, South Mitrovica)

Greater tolerance in diverse communities

Focus group participants in North Mitrovica describe regular engagement with diverse ethnicities in and around their city. Most of the interactions are of a commercial or economic nature, but because of regular engagement, participants have more tolerant views of other communities than those participants living in more homogeneous ethnic groups, like in urban Pristina. Kosovar Albanians living in ethnically diverse Dragash describe greater tolerance of other communities. These findings were similar in September focus groups, where participants in mixed ethnic communities and communities in close proximity to other ethnicities have positive perceptions.

“From the Gorani perspective, we live together we work together, we wish all the best to each other.” (Woman, Dragash)

“I don’t feel good and comfortable with Serbs. My heart doesn’t want them and end of deal. Why should I try to have a conversation with someone that never loved us? I don’t even give myself the opportunity to get to know a Serb, I won’t tolerate it. I might hang out with a criminal, but once I know someone is a Serb, that’s it.” (Man, Pristina)

“I don’t have a bad opinion of Albanians. My grandfather lived better with Albanian neighbours than with his family. On all three sides of my property are Albanian neighbors, and we’ve never had problems.” (Woman, North Mitrovica)

“It’s getting better even with all that is going on in the north. There is, at the community level, harmony.” (Man, South Mitrovica)

“Relations are not better or worse. Kosovar Serbs have been ignored and neglected, and segregated from the rest of Kosovo.” (Woman, Gjakova)

RADICALIZATION

Kosovars do not express appetite for violence or radicalization. Kosovar Albanian participants do not see it as a threat to their community, and dismiss the small numbers reportedly recruited to fight for terrorist organizations in Syria or elsewhere. Several believe that the firm actions of the security forces have eradicated the phenomena. When asked about the two largest threats facing Kosovo in the near future in NDI's polling, religious intolerance and extremism rank low, with four percent of citizens selecting it. Kosovar Serbs select this more (24 percent) than Kosovar Albanians (three percent) and other ethnic minorities (nine percent), although the threat is largely perceived as extremism against the Kosovar Serb community rather than radicalization influenced from abroad.

Nearly all Kosovar Albanians recall media or news reports of radicals operating in the country, but none stated knowledge of radicalized elements within their municipalities. Almost all equate radicalization with religious extremism and recruitment from outside of Kosovo. Several feel that political extremism represents a greater threat than religious radicalization. Kosovar Serbs are more concerned about radicalization, but do not seeing it as inciting fear.

"We can see in media, Albanian people in Syria and when they come back. All news we get from media and we are not sure is it true." (Man, North Mitrovica)

"After the arrests in 2015 and 2016 of Imams, I think this problem was reduced. I personally feel safe though. During a scandal at beer fest a few years ago, the police responded so quickly." (Woman, Pristina)

"In my opinion, they're scared due to the arrests that have been made." (Man, Pristina)

"We are small community, I don't think that (radicalization) happens here." (Man, Dragash)

"Can we expect religious violence? No. But political, yes. You cannot give your opinion, it's like in communism." (Man, North Mitrovica)

LEADERSHIP

Within officialdom, no one emerges as a trusted source of information for focus group participants. There are no common, trusted non-governmental institutions or actors, or religious leaders identified as influential and trusted messengers. However, participants could point to a person in their municipality for whom they had respect. Most often it was an educated professional, nurse, academic, or Imam. Oliver Ivanovic, a Kosovar Serb politician assassinated in January 2018, enjoyed respect from many Kosovar Serbs.

"I'm not politically engaged, but I was happy to see Ivanovic and was always proud to have him on TV talking about needs of people here. He was a real politician." (Woman, North Mitrovica)

"Albanians here have more information than Serbs. Their president is more forthcoming with citizens." (Woman, North Mitrovica)

Regardless of ethnicity, Kosovars curate information from multiple sources, exchanging information with neighbors, friends, and co-workers; accessing the internet or watching the news; and forming opinions through triangulation. When asked to write down trusted sources of information, those in Pristina are more likely to list international sources – media outlets and personalities. Men in Dragash frequently list RTS and women say friends and family are their trusted sources. Many of the participants in North Mitrovica list KOSSEV news portal as a trusted source of information. Friends and family discuss news and attempt to sort out information that fits their world view or seems most plausible. People continue to access multiple online news, though they do not trust anyone more than others. What is clear is that they do not trust information from politicians and are weary of ‘official’ sources. Some from North Mitrovica say that they believe Albanian language media to be more reliable on issues related to the Dialogue process than the Serbian media.

“I get information from conversations with friends, the internet, ‘National Geographic’, and religious leaders.” (Man, Dragash)

“It’s not only the internet. I still believe that people trust someone who is older or someone who is better educated. For me, whenever someone says, ‘I’ve seen it on Facebook,’ I don’t trust them.” (Man, Pristina)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Transparency and communication. The government should inform citizens of progress in the Dialogue in order to manage expectations, as well as regularly update citizens on implementation of existing agreements, celebrating achievements on agreements made and offering explanations for any delays. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document could increase awareness about the process and intended outcomes. With government and international support, civil society and community leaders should be enlisted to explain negotiating complexities as the Dialogue continues.
- Public feedback. The government should ensure mechanisms to allow for citizen feedback on Brussels Dialogue agreements, and undertake efforts to incorporate the feedback into stated rationale for negotiation positions. This could include town-hall meetings between elected leaders and citizens, and discussions with civil society the private sector, and government bodies. Online forums may provide anonymity for citizens that feel challenged to raise their opinions in public spaces. These opportunities should be made available for all ethnicities, in both mixed and single-ethnicity settings, to help citizens feel comfortable expressing their views.
- Issue resolution. The government should ensure that, through the negotiations, it addresses such longstanding citizen concerns as regard missing persons, property rights, mobility rights, and documentation. Ongoing dialogue should enhance, not preclude, government efforts to tackle economic issues and unemployment, particularly among youth. Economic disparities, real and perceived, between communities will need to be addressed to foster increased tolerance.
- Oversight. The Assembly should enhance its role in overseeing the Brussels Dialogue, sharing information with citizens on what is being discussed and agreed upon, and overseeing implementation of agreements.
- Leadership. The international community should continue empowering and supporting those political and civic leaders undertaking efforts to build consensus, de-escalate conflict, and reduce corruption. Civil society and political parties can help to foster and develop trusted leaders among citizens, looking to those professionals in academia, the business community, healthcare, or religious institutions to take part in community programs that foster dialogue.
- Inter-ethnic relations. All citizens, and young people in particular, need regular opportunities and mechanisms to engage across ethnic lines. Learning each other's language is key to these interactions. Civil society and the government should work together to hold multi-cultural events that celebrate Kosovo's diversity, and to facilitate other opportunities that expose citizens to different communities' traditions and languages. This is important to help citizens understand the Dialogue in context of Kosovo's complex but rich diversity to build greater tolerance and acceptance.