

# TIME FOR SMART INTEGRATION AT COMMUNITY LEVEL

Challenges and opportunities for improved  
interethnic relations in Kosovo from local and  
international perspectives



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report provides an analysis of the local and international perceptions on the state of interethnic relations and cooperation in Kosovo. The report draws from the discussions of a focus-group with young Kosovars, as well as personal semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from civil society as well as the public sector. The goal of this report is to help better understand what are some of the challenges are for the betterment of interethnic relations in Kosovo, as well as opportunities to advance interethnic cooperation.

Kosovo made significant progress in improving the interethnic relations in the after of its independence in 2008, and through its commitment to implement the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement, commonly referred to as the 'Ahtisaari Plan', which defines Kosovo as "a multi-ethnic society, governing itself democratically and with full respect for the rule of law and the highest level of internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms".

Improving interethnic relations and cooperation are not a priority for political parties in Kosovo, which exacerbates tensions and distrusts between majority and non-majority communities. In addition to this, political parties in Kosovo, in general, have a serious gap with the everyday that the community faces, and fail to recognize that there are plenty of common denominators between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs, with respect to challenges they face, such as unemployment, nepotism and accessibility and quality of public services.

There is a difference between the state of interethnic relations and cooperation in the north of Kosovo, which is arguably subject to heightened tensions, compared to the south of the country, which is relatively calmer. In the south of Kosovo, the communities have more experience of cooperation and cohabitation, are more resilient towards ethno-political radicalization, compared to the north. Implementation of power-sharing formulas in the framework of the decentralization process, is one of the contributing factors why non-majority communities in the south have been more supportive of integration policies.

A major challenge for interethnic relations and cooperation in Kosovo is lack of sufficient interactions and communication between Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians, albeit with the exception of civil society that has seen a higher intensity of cooperation compared to other sectors.

There is untapped potential to foster interethnic relations through economic cooperation in order to tackle the main problems for both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, which is unemployment and lack of opportunities for youth, as well as through community mobilization to advance common interests.

In a context when the public institutions are not fully accepted by Kosovo Serbs, civil society organizations remain the key actors that work on improving interethnic relations in Kosovo, however, the government does not seem to have an adequate level of cooperation with such organization, in addition to their input in the policy-making process being limited. However, government think non-government organizations are driven by personal agendas and donors when it comes to their work on interethnic relations.

Among the Kosovo Albanian community there is a widespread perception, that the Serbian community in Kosovo, and especially the political representatives are strongly controlled by Belgrade and this leads to lack of trust, which is another important factor that contributes to interethnic tensions and limited cooperation.

# EXAMINING KEY CHALLENGES FOR INTERETHNIC RELATIONS AND COOPERATION IN KOSOVO FROM THE LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

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This section provides an overview of the main challenges from the perspective of local policy-makers and civil society activists, that undermine Kosovo's potential as a multi-ethnic society. The main argument of this section is that, Kosovo has made significant progress, especially through legislation and other policy measures to promote multiethnicity and foster inter-ethnic cooperation in the country, however there are serious shortcomings with respect to overall implementation, as well as the quality of implementation of the laws pertaining to the rights of non-majority communities in Kosovo. In addition to this, this brief report shows that the state of interethnic relations and cooperation in Kosovo are shaped by the discourse from the political leaders, and as such heightened ethnic tensions in the country are triggered by or follow the speech of political leaders from Kosovo and Serbia.

**Kosovo made significant progress in improving the interethnic relations in the after of its independence in 2008, and through its commitment to implement the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement, commonly referred to as the 'Ahtisaari Plan', which defines Kosovo as "a multi-ethnic society, governing itself democratically and with full respect for the rule of law and the highest level of internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms"<sup>1</sup>.** However, despite evident progress, interethnic relations in Kosovo are fragile, and in the recent year have been particularly characterized by heightened tensions and in some cases violence, especially in the north of Kosovo, which includes four Serb-majority municipalities (North Mitrovica; Leposavic; Zubin Potok and Zvecan). One of the contributing factors to the recent heightened ethnic tensions in Kosovo is seen as the failure on the part of the public institutions and political leaders in Kosovo to discern their speech and messages meant for Serbia from the Kosovo Serbs.<sup>2</sup> In other words, when the often-negative rhetoric towards Serbia by the political leaders of Kosovo seems to include the Serbian community in Kosovo as well, or at least this is how they perceive it. The Kosovo Serbs often feel attacked when the political leaders in Kosovo direct political messages against Serbia. According to the civil society activists who regularly monitor interethnic relations, the perception in the Serbian community in Kosovo is widespread that the political leaders quote "Serbia and Kosovo Serbs, which is contributing to serious deterioration of inter-ethnic relations, and on the other hand we also have not helpful behavior of the Kosovo Serb political representatives, namely Srpska List, who find

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1 See: Main provisions of the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement, retrieved from the United Nations Security Council, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4F-F96FF9%7D/Kosovo%20S2007%20168.pdf> p. 6

2 Personal interview with a senior civil society representative. North Mitrovica: December 23, 2022.



it, I guess, almost impossible to talk to Kosovo Government in a constructive manner.”<sup>3</sup> This clearly indicates to the fragility of the interethnic relations in Kosovo, which seem to be depended upon the personal mood and feelings of leaders from both countries. In other words, without serious normalization of relations at the political level between government representatives from Serbia and Kosovo, any progress in the ground, at the community level, can be undermined or even undone.

**Improving interethnic relations and cooperation are not a priority for political parties in Kosovo, which exacerbates tensions and distrusts between majority and non-majority communities. In addition to this, political parties in Kosovo, in general, have a serious gap with the everyday that the community faces, and fail to recognize that there are plenty of common denominators between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs, with respect to challenges they face, such as unemployment, nepotism and accessibility and quality of public services.** According to a Kosovo analyst with government experience “the approach of political parties from both sides is distant and does not touch the real problems of the community and does not promote interethnic cooperation”<sup>4</sup>. In a similar sense, an official from the municipality of Mitrovica South, interviewed for this report, shares a pessimistic view of the role that political parties play in the context of interethnic relations, saying that “politics is drowning us, the communities do not sit together”<sup>5</sup>. This shows, that from the perspective of some citizens, politics and political parties in general have become a hindrance for betterment of interethnic relations as well as community organization. As a result of the failure to prioritize interethnic cooperation by political parties, results in missed opportunities as well as loss of talent and potential for economic growth and cooperation. Furthermore, the gap between political parties in Kosovo with the community creates vulnerability towards efforts to radicalize communities along the ethnic and religious lines. Political leaders often exploit fragility of interethnic relations to advance populist goals, especially when failing to deliver on domestic reforms. Politicians are seen as not interested to have regular contact and exchange with members from other communities. Rare efforts, such as the case of the Mayor of Peja participating in Orthodox religious ceremony, are well received by the non-majority communities and help to bridge the gap between the two communities. According to an expert, such initiatives from leaders pave the way for other citizens to interact and form joint collaborations with all different ethnic groups living in the same environment, whereas other cases where political leaders are seen reluctant to interact with non-majority communities set a poor example for citizens to follow.

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3 Ibid., (December 23, 2022)

4 Personal interview with Kosovo analyst. Prishtina: November 3, 2022

5 Personal interview with a municipal official from Municipality of Mitrovica South. Mitrovica South: December 19, 2022

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## WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT OBSTACLES TO BETTER ETHNIC RELATIONS IN KOSOVO?

“The Kosovo Serb community denying war crimes and the Kosovo Albanian community trying to use war crime to gain political ground in negotiations which are mostly supposed to be about the rights of Kosovo Serb community is what is really poisoning the waters. So, this is what I see as the primary obstacle.” (An extract from the interview with a Kosovo Serb from the north of Kosovo)

“Regarding relations with the Serbs, many things are tense with dialogue, the narratives of the Serbian and Kosovar sides are making the situation even more tense and are harming inter-ethnic relations.” (Kosovo analyst)

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**There is a difference between the state of interethnic relations and cooperation in the north of Kosovo, which is arguably subject to heightened tensions, compared to the south of the country, which is relatively calmer. In the south of Kosovo, the communities have more experience of cooperation and cohabitation, are more resilient towards ethno-political radicalization, compared to the north. Implementation of power-sharing formulas in the framework of the decentralization process, is one of the contributing factors why non-majority communities in the south have been more supportive of integration policies.** The Kosovo Serbs living in the south of Kosovo have been more integrated in the Kosovar society, compared to the Serbs in the north, however, in the recent period, they have also been under pressure: “We saw it at the end of August when the, new policies were going to be introduced about the car plates and about the documents, how overnight the situation can change. And that’s because it’s probably manipulated by politicians and the individuals know how far they can go, but they are put under a lot of, a lot of pressure as well.”<sup>6</sup> Due to a lack of interaction, Kosovo citizens are unaware of the issues that other groups face as well as the conditions and environment in which they live. This makes citizens particularly susceptible to constructing their perceptions based on the past narratives, the rhetoric used by political leaders in both countries, and it makes them vulnerable to disinformation and information with polarizing implications. The perceptions developed in this manner are in most cases diametrically opposed to reality, rendering ethnic distance relatively unfounded. The lack of contacts leading to unbased perceptions is also evident in the field research findings, which show that although living in the same municipalities, Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians have vastly different perspectives on ethnicity-based discrimination happening in Kosovo. Considering that the narratives about one another play a huge role in forming better inter-ethnic relations, more inter-ethnic activities should be planned from both local and central institutions, in order to facilitate contacts between people from both communities.

**A major challenge for interethnic relations and cooperation in Kosovo is lack of sufficient interactions and communication between Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians, albeit with the exception of civil society that has seen a higher intensity**

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<sup>6</sup> Personal interview with a director of non-government organization working on advancing interethnic relations in Kosovo. Prishtina: October 21, 2022.

**of cooperation compared to other sectors.** This lack of interaction or exchange between the two communities also contributes to lack of awareness at the community level of both, how common the everyday challenges for both communities are (i.e., corruption, lack of employment, quality of public services, etc.), which can potentially facilitate more cooperation, but also contributes to lack of empathy and understanding about the struggles and experiences of each community. The donor community also has prioritized funding exchange activities and interactions between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs from Serbia, but less support is evident for exchange events between Kosovo Serbs and Albanians. Lack of interactions has a particularly negative effect in the society, as communities learn to live entirely separate and forget how to interact. Civil society leaders argue that “there is not as many interactions as they were in the past and that is a pity, and I think that is what people have forgotten too, because, we took a group of students to the, monastery in Gračanica last year and one of the reasons we wanted to take them to the church was to remind people that once upon a time at these churches, when they had their annual sort of festivals, religious festivals, the other communities would come partly because there were a lot of superstitions around them, you know, you, you there was healing, all these things.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, support from public institutions is limited for exchange events, albeit with some exceptions. According to civil society activists interviewed for this report there are cases when municipal institutions support events that aim to promote multiethnicity and interactions: “in truly multi-ethnic municipalities, like Prizren and North Mitrovica, I would say that there are some attempts of the local authorities to support social initiatives, but I’m not sure that they are visible enough”<sup>8</sup>. One particular concerning area of the lack of interactions concerns schools.

**There is untapped potential to foster interethnic relations through economic cooperation in order to tackle the main problems for both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, which is unemployment and lack of opportunities for youth, as well as through community mobilization to advance common interests. Fostering interethnic cooperation through economic opportunities and building societal** consensus on common challenges, is also what can be understood as ‘smart integration’. Participants of a focus-group with young Kosovo Albanian, organized in the framework of the FIERC project for this report, showed overwhelming support for economic cooperation, or activities that bring communities together through economic projects<sup>9</sup>. Experts interviewed for this report also share a similar opinion, when asked what areas they see as holding the greatest potential for improving interethnic relations: “I see hope for the improvement only in the economic area, I think that only with economic development can we do something to advance inter-ethnic cooperation. With economic development, we can address the issue of economic dependence of Serbs from Serbia, and create opportunities for them to work in Kosovo and having a sense of community, through which interethnic cooperation could be improved”<sup>10</sup>. Such opportunities would include supporting i.e., multi-ethnic start-ups, small businesses with multi-ethnic staff, and providing vocational training for Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb youth. In addition to this, interethnic cooperation can be

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7 Ibid., (October 21, 2022)

8 Personal interview with a senior civil society representative. North Mitrovica: December 23, 2022

9 FIERC project focus-group with Kosovo Albanian youth. Prishtina: October 25, 2022.

10 Personal interview with Kosovo analyst. Prishtina: November 3, 2022

improved by supporting citizen initiatives to tackle problems of common interests, such as the case from 2019 when both Albanians and Serbs protested against the damage caused by the construction of a hydropower plant in the Lepenc river in the municipality of Shterpce<sup>11</sup>. This case illustrates how well citizen can operate in ethnically diverse communities when addressing problems that affect all of them equally.

**In a context when the public institutions are not fully accepted by Kosovo Serbs, civil society organizations remain the key actors that work on improving interethnic relations in Kosovo, however, the government does not seem to have an adequate level of cooperation with such organization, in addition to their input in the policy-making process being limited. However, government think non-government organizations are driven by personal agendas and donors when it comes to their work on interethnic relations.** Civil society organizations (non-government organizations), have been the main driver of affirmative change in diverse communities in Kosovo, largely supported by the international donor community. International actors that operate in Kosovo, also tend to see civil society as “the most constructive player”<sup>12</sup>. Civil society representatives themselves also maintain that the work that they do in promoting interethnic relations it is a difficult work, which in some cases it can even lead to public backlash, who see such organizations as doing the bidding of international community. One area where civil society organizations have contributed significantly is normalizing dialogue on challenges for better interethnic relations in Kosovo. In this context, the work that the New Social Initiative (NSI) has done with the ‘Kosovo Collective’ project is especially relevant, to address stereotypes but also have a hard talk on issues such as cultural heritage, association/community of Serb-majority communities, etc. One criticism towards civil society organizations working on interethnic relations, is that they tend to work with youth, and highly liberal individuals that would normally support better relations between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. In other words, civil society is seen as mostly talking with each other when it comes to hot issues of interethnic relations in Kosovo, and lazy or not having the courage to engage in the dialogue other groups in the society that might have a different opinion. From the government perspective civil society or non-government organizations (NGOs) “are mostly working for personal interests, including Serbs and Albanians. In NGOs, I see that they often use the causes of cooperation or reconciliation only to represent themselves in high-level meetings, representations in Brussels and other countries, and not because they want to do something that helps them and improves the situation. We see how many years these people have been working for inter-ethnic cooperation, but nothing has been fixed yet, the state of this cooperation is totally unsuccessful”<sup>13</sup>. Civil society representatives working in the north of Kosovo, argue that what NGOs are doing “is nowhere near enough” but that they “cannot carry the whole weight on their shoulders and this is showing, in the past few months, that whatever CSOs worked on for years can be dismantled in a matter of hours, not even days, but in a matter of hours by disruptive political actions. So, my main conclusion here would be

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11 Read “Albanians and Serbs protest again in Shtërpçë against the construction of the hydropower plant” from Koha Ditore, <https://www.koha.net/kosove/171735/serish-protjestojne-shqiptare-e-serbe-ne-shterpce-kunder-nder-timit-te-hidrocentralit/>

12 Personal interview with an international expert. Prishtina: October 21, 2022.

13 Personal interview with Kosovo analyst. Prishtina: November 3, 2022

that CSOs do the most of reconciliation, they do the best work on reconciliation, but also the least sustainable and tangible, unfortunately<sup>14</sup>. The discussions in the FIERC focus-group show that civil society is seen by young Kosovo Albanians as “the only way they can communicate with Kosovo Serbs”<sup>15</sup>. A key civil society approach that has proven important for interethnic relations and cooperation in Kosovo includes awareness raising and outreach activities among non-majority communities about their rights and legal protection against discrimination.

**Among the Kosovo Albanian community there is a widespread perception, that the Serbian community in Kosovo, and especially the political representatives are strongly controlled by Belgrade and this leads to lack of trust, which is another important factor that contributes to interethnic tensions and limited cooperation.**

In recent years, but especially since 2018, the political discourse between Kosovo and Serbia arguably started to deteriorate to a different level, which has exacerbated lack of trust between political leaders, which in return has affected also local perceptions in Kosovo between communities. According to a Kosovo analyst with government experience “as long as [Serbian President Aleksandar] Vučić is in charge, there will be no cooperation between Kosovo Serbs and Albanians, despite any kind of normalization agreement, there simply will be no interethnic normalization”<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, civil society representatives working in the north of Kosovo, also see the Kosovo government as engaging in acts that undermine interethnic relations, “as a result of very harmful rhetoric that comes from Kosovo Government officials”<sup>17</sup>. A major reason for this perception is how the Serbian List, a Parliamentary political party, behaves in Kosovo, by constantly showing that they are only loyal to Belgrade, but also through the efforts to control and monopolize political agency and participation of the Serbian community in Kosovo.

Having discussed the local perspectives of challenges that hinder interethnic relations and cooperation in Kosovo, the next section analyses the perspectives from the international state and non-state actors.

**The EU-facilitated normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, plays a crucial role on the state of interethnic relations in Kosovo, and since 2011 when it started it has in most cases contributed to the betterment of interethnic cooperation and in some other cases it has played a rather negative role.**

In terms of contribution, several of the agreements reached in the framework of the dialogue, and their effective implementation, have improved the status of interethnic relations, primarily by making it easier for non-majority groups to approach institutions.<sup>18</sup> According to a civil society representative “The idea that dialogue demonstrated to both parties the value of cooperation for development—which also applies to interethnic relations—is another aspect in which it has done a good job”.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, most of the politically driven

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14 Personal interview with a senior civil society representative. North Mitrovica: December 23, 2022

15 FIERC project focus-group with Kosovo Albanian youth. Prishtina: October 25, 2022.

16 Personal interview with Kosovo analyst. Prishtina: November 3, 2022

17 Personal interview with a senior civil society representative. North Mitrovica: December 23, 2022

18 Personal interview with an international expert. Prishtina: October 21, 2022.

19 FIERC project focus-group with Kosovo Albanian youth. Prishtina: October 25, 2022.

dialogue stalemates that have occurred over the past few years have been detrimental to the state of Kosovo Serbs and interethnic relations as they have caused the public and the leaders to shift their rhetoric to one that is more nationalistic and divisive between the two communities. According to the results of the FIERC Field Research Survey, this public rhetoric associated with the dialogue, especially in the last year, is perceived as highly hostile by Kosovo Serbs. This rhetoric contributes to worsening the status of interethnic relations through raising the level of hate and distrust between the communities. According to the interview with an expert dialogue is very important when done right, but can also impose major changes, especially for non-majority communities in both countries, that come along with the process and have proven to be harmful. Nonetheless, dialogue process, even with its big stagnations on the recent years, is highly important and the only platform through which agreements to normalize the situation between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serbs can be reached.

Having examined local perspective on the state of interethnic relations in Kosovo, with a focus on challenges, the next section, synthesizes information from international reports on this subject. It is important to have a mapping of both perspectives, in order for Kosovo to advance in its obligations to foster multiethnic society in the country.

# EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE STATE OF INTERETHNIC RELATIONS AND COOPERATION IN KOSOVO

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This section provides a summary of the views of the European Union (EU), the United States of America (USA) and of the international think-tanks, on the state of interethnic relations and cooperation in Kosovo. The purpose of this section is to provide a mapping of key challenges for better interethnic relations in Kosovo from the view of international actors.

The European Commission identified some improvements in interethnic relations in Kosovo between 2019 and 2022, notably the investigating efficiency of the Institution of the Ombudsperson in relation to workplace discrimination, and the implementation of specific human rights laws in line with EU norms. However, there are still major gaps which have not been sufficiently addressed such as the underrepresentation of non-majority communities in the public sector due to limited job access and opportunities for those communities.

The United States seemingly takes a similar stance as the EU regarding inter-ethnic relations, with an overall improvement in the steps made to strengthen inter-ethnic reconciliation and cooperation, but lacking implementation of relevant legislation. Particular focus was drawn on the lacking rights afforded to minority ethnic returnees and the negative influence that Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo may have on the overall Serb-minority community in Kosovo.

International think-tank organisations highlight that the lack of implementation of legislation regarding inter-ethnic integration is the main issue affecting inter-ethnic relations. Additionally, KAS suggests that to ensure inter-ethnic relations reach a level of reconciliation and cooperation, the Kosovo government must recognise minority communities as Kosovars and not as "outsiders".

## **THE VIEW FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU)**

This subsection is based on the analysis of the information pertaining to interethnic relations in Kosovo from the annual Country Reports by the European Commission from 2019 until 2022. The goal of this part of the report is to understand where are the main challenges for improvement of interethnic relations in Kosovo from the perspective of the European Union (EU), which is particularly relevant for Kosovo, as a country that aspires to become one day a member State of the EU.

In relation to interethnic relations and cooperation in Kosovo, the 2022 European Commission report on Kosovo found that the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo maintained political dialogue between majority and non-majority communities through forum-based communication. However, during political debates, inflammatory language between political opponents continued, highlighting the need for further development in cooperation and consensus-building regarding political dialogue and reform.



At the central and local level, Kosovo has well established mechanisms for human rights, and has a sufficient framework to protect the rights of non-majority communities. There is a need for better institutional coordination and communication within the government as the current environment does not currently foster inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation. These gaps are prevalent in relation to returnee rights, access to property, personal documentation, language rights, education, employment, and social welfare. These issues were identified in the 2022, 2021, 2020, and 2019 European Commission report on Kosovo, suggesting resistance from the Kosovo government to fully address this problem.

The University of Prishtina has worked on improving its access to language learning for its majority and non-majority students, offering courses in regional and foreign languages. However, the University's success in fostering inter-ethnic relations in this way requires the recognition of verified diplomas obtained by students from the Serbian-run University of Mitrovica North. Such recognition ceased on 31 December 2021, preventing graduates from the University of Mitrovica North from accessing higher education and labour market opportunities in Kosovo. This hinders inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation as young non-majority Serb communities are limited in their access to jobs in Kosovo, particularly in the public sector, resulting in the underrepresentation of non-majority communities at all levels of society. Such underrepresentation in the political and civil service sector was identified in the 2021, 2020, and 2019 European Commission report on Kosovo.

The processing and categorisation of certain security incidents by police has the potential to be ethnically motivated when addressing crimes committed by non-majority individuals. The Kosovo police should address security incidents by all members of the population in line with existing legislation, and should consider any pertinent aggravating factors, such as hate, in their prosecution of offenders. The 2020 European Commission report on Kosovo found a rise in ethnically motivated security incidents directed towards non-majority communities when compared with the 2019 report. It was reported that the police handling of such incidents was poor, and highlighted the need for increased community policing in areas with higher proportions of non-majority populations as to strengthen inter-ethnic relations.

As of 2022, Kosovo has brought its human rights legal framework in line with European standards, however, more can be done to ensure the protection of minority groups' rights, particularly its Roma and Ashkali communities. Kosovo still needs to develop its approach to freedom of expression regarding non-majority communities, particularly in identifying the benefits of a pluralistic media domain. Additionally, there are concerns regarding the representation of non-majority communities in the media as smear campaigns and attacks on journalists remain significant, and vulnerabilities to political and ideological influences persist. As per the 2021, 2020 and 2019 European Commission report on Kosovo, there is still a gap between the written legal framework protecting the human rights of minority groups and how such laws are implemented and upheld in actuality.

Kosovo has made efforts to address discrimination in employment and social policy, particularly regarding women from non-majority communities. However, reports of workplace discrimination are not comprehensively investigated by Ombudspersons, with over 25% of reported cases deemed "inadmissible". This limited attention to claims of workplace discrimination may further alienate minority communities who feel marginalised as their legitimate grievances are dismissed, reducing their confidence in investigating authorities.



The investigating efficiency of the Ombudsperson has improved in 2022 when compared with 2021, 2020, and 2019 reports respectively.

Human rights, in reference to the non-majority populations in Kosovo, is not a priority for the government's political agenda, therefore, there are shortcomings in the implementation and management of human rights legislation. Addressing this issue requires better coordination of the Programme for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (2021-2025) and the related Action Plan (2021-2023), and more efficient communication between the government bodies involved to ensure the effective implementation of legislation affecting non-majority groups. This in turn would strengthen inter-ethnic relations as majority groups are seen to accommodate and promote inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation. Kosovo's long-term goal of protecting and promoting human rights, as proposed in the aforementioned programme and action plan, shows improvement from 2019 and 2020, during which such programmes were not in place.

Having discussed the EU's perspective on the challenges for better interethnic relations in Kosovo, the next subsection examines the view from the United States of America, which more than often cooperates with the EU on human rights and minority rights, especially in Kosovo.

### **THE VIEW FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA ON INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN KOSOVO**

This subsection is based on the analysis Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for Kosovo from 2019 until 2021 by the United States Department of State. The subsection presents different findings from the respective report with respect to interethnic relations in Kosovo.

The issue of human rights violations targeting non-majority ethnic communities in Kosovo was identified by the United States Department of State country report on Kosovo in their 2021, 2020, and 2019 editions. Serb, Romani, Ashkali, Balkan-Egyptian, Turkish, Bosniak, Gorani, Croat, and Montenegrin communities reported violations of their rights, particularly in relation to "employment, education, social services, language use, freedom of movement, the right to return to their homes". What has improved since 2019, however, is the government response to violence and threats of violence, yet the 2021 report stated that more must still be done to improve the consistency of identifying, investigating, and prosecuting such incidents.

This inconsistency in police and court procedures notably affected Kosovo-Serb minorities, who felt that court rulings were disproportionately swayed in favour of the majority population of Kosovo-Albanians. Such failure to rule in Kosovo-Serb favour was exemplified by the 2016 decision to refuse the Constitutional Court's ruling of ownership of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its 24 hectares of surrounding land in Deçan. As of 2022, the Deçan municipality is still in dispute over the land, and none of the officials involved in the refusal of recognition have been sanctioned by the Kosovo government. This has exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions in the region as Kosovo-Serbs feel ignored by the Kosovo government.

In addition, challenges still remain for Kosovo–Serbs regarding access to identity documents. However, it was reported in the 2021 US report that the number of individuals from non-majority community are gaining access to identity and civil documents is increasing.

A common issue identified in the 2019, 2020, and 2021 US reports was the challenges faced by returning ethnic minority refugees to Kosovo. It was reported that this issue particularly affected those of the Romani, Ashkali, and Balkan–Egyptian communities, who reported that cases of discrimination and prejudice prevented their return. The main factor affecting the return of such minority communities was the “resistance of some municipalities to allocate land” and recognise the “possession rights” that these communities held prior to their initial displacement. This issue of property rights is one of the main contributing factors which impedes inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation as the municipal authorities fail to recognise the ownership of the land once owned by minority ethnic communities before their displacement. This shows resistance by the Kosovo government to reintegrate returning minority communities to Kosovo.

Another issue identified in the 2019, 2020, and 2021 US report was the continuation of the Serbian Government operating “illegal parallel government structures” in areas predominantly occupied by Kosovo–Serb and Kosovo–Gorani communities for means of political and ideological influence. The use of illegal governance in this way inhibits the social cohesion of these communities with the rest of Kosovo, and further drives inter-ethnic segregation at the local level.

Manipulation of minority groups of this kind by Serbia was identified in the 2021 parliamentary elections, whereby ethnic minority group representatives observed “pressure and intimidation” to support political parties which aligned with Srpska Lista, which closely aligns itself with the Serbian Government. Additionally, Srpska Lista politicians were reported to have called for the creation and integration of new Roma and Bosniak political parties into the Kosovo Assembly.

This notion in itself is difficult to analyse as the representation of minority groups in the Assembly is warranted, however, under the pretence of Serbian political influence and intimidation, the inclusion of such parties in the Assembly may be used to disrupt progressive discourse and escalate inter-ethnic tensions.

The 2021 US report on Kosovo found that the representation of ethnic minority groups in the Assembly has increased since 2020 and 2019, and such representation was more than relative to the population of ethnic minorities in Kosovo. Furthermore, a step towards inter-ethnic reconciliation was identified as representatives of ethnic minority communities reported “better cooperation and partnership with the Vetevendosje-led government than with its predecessors”.

In line with the 2019–2022 European Commission reports on Kosovo, the 2019–2021 US reports identified that despite the legal framework which is implemented to protect ethnic minorities being developed and improved over the years, the effectiveness of such was lacking. This resulted in persistent reports of violence and discrimination towards ethnic minority groups, highlighting the need for institutional reform within law enforcement to properly address the issues affecting minority groups as the law dictates.

The relatively underreported issue of harassment of Kosovo–Serb members of KSF by other

ethnic Serbs was identified in the 2021 US report. Despite the difficulty in tracing such incidents, due to the lack of self-reporting by victims, the Ministry of Defence and KFOR showed commitment to protect their ethnic minority members through increased documentation of incidents, regular welfare checks, and improved police response.

An improvement in access to justice for minority communities has been observed through analysis of the 2019–2021 US reports, which has been attributed to the 2017 integration of the judiciary system in Serb-majority municipalities in the North of Kosovo. However, in other Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo, funding issues mean that there are inconsistencies in translation, a backlog of cases, and low numbers of ethnic minority staff. This highlights the need for more minority-inclusive judiciary institutions in all municipalities as the aforementioned issues disproportionately affect non-majority populations in those areas. This contributes to inter-ethnic tensions as cases involving Kosovo-Albanians are seen to be handled better than cases involving ethnic minorities, furthering challenges affecting inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation.

Kosovo has made steps towards implementing legislation granting equal status to the Albanian and Serbian languages, and at local levels, Bosnian and Turkish have also been recognised as official languages. On an institutional level, however, there are still major challenges in regard to implementing language laws within public services, workplaces, and the justice system.

The main issue associated with implementing language laws within the justice system is the translation of legislation and legal documents into languages other than Albanian. The translation services that are in place have been reported to be inconsistent, which affects the court procedures involving ethnic minorities who do not speak Albanian as a primary language. In addition to this, signage and communications within the courts are often poorly translated or not translated at all, increasing the inequality between the majority Kosovo-Albanians and ethnic minorities within the judicial system.

Having discussed the views from the United States on the state of interethnic relations in Kosovo, the next subsection examines how Kosovo stands with respect to interethnic relations in the reports by reputable international think-tanks.

## **THE VIEW FROM THE INTERNATIONAL THINK-TANKS ON THE STATE OF INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN KOSOVO**

This subsection draws from the reports of two international organizations: the Freedom House and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS). The reports and other statements from both organizations are taken very seriously in Kosovo, and shape the public dialogue in the country about democracy and human rights.

The 2022 Freedom House report on Kosovo identified that despite seat reservations in parliament, ethnic Serb minority communities still have not been fully integrated into Kosovo's electoral process or government institutions. This same issue of integration was identified in all Freedom House reports since at least 2019, highlighting a systematic resistance to

inter-ethnic integration and cooperation. This resistance is particularly prevalent at the local and municipal levels, wherein inter-religious tensions are expressed, particularly between Muslims and Orthodox Christians, however inter-religious relations have generally remained stable over the years.

Additionally, the Freedom House report identified that freedom of movement for the Kosovo-Serb minority population is a significant issue which has not improved over the years. Members of these communities are not afforded the same visa liberties as Kosovo-Albanians as the government does not recognise Serbian issued travel documents to Serbs with listed residence in Kosovo. This majorly affects their travel liberties, particularly when attempting to enter Bosnia and Herzegovina. Restrictions on the freedom of movement for these minority ethnic communities is another limitation affecting inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo as non-majority individuals are still not afforded the same travel rights as Kosovo-Albanians.

The 2020 Freedom House report identified that attacks on Serbs in predominantly Albanian municipalities have reduced from 2019 and from years prior, however, attacks which do take place rarely result in prosecution. This shows that despite the reduction in frequency of attacks on Serbs, there is a limited legal response to such attacks. This may contribute to resistance in inter-ethnic reconciliation as there is reduced confidence in the Kosovo government to prosecute crimes against non-majority community members.

In 2020, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) released a report focusing on inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo from the perspective of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. The report highlighted how much inter-ethnic discourse in Kosovo predominantly focuses on the tensions between Kosovo-Serb minorities and Kosovo-Albanian majorities, with little focus on the issues affecting minorities.

One main issue identified by the report, which was also echoed in the European Commission report, was the claim that the laws aimed at protecting minority communities were strong and effective. However, the implementation of such laws was lacking, therefore, creating a disconnect between the perceptions of the legal frameworks that the Kosovo government mandates, and the real-life experiences of ethnic minorities in Kosovo.

KAS reported that inter-ethnic reconciliation and cooperation involving communities relies on international, and thereby external, projects and donorship. This is an issue as upholding the laws affecting minority rights should be a priority for the Kosovo government, however, the Kosovo government seems to view the integration of ethnic minorities as the responsibility of the international community. The issue with this stance is that the Kosovo government is viewed to perceive non-Kosovo-Albanians as international citizens and not as Kosovars. This ultimately affects any effort to forward inter-ethnic reconciliation and cooperation as the government itself purportedly shuns the notion that ethnic minorities can be integrated into Kosovo society. Therefore, according to KAS, the government should make a direct change in the way it views ethnic minorities in Kosovo by strengthening its "national and local coordination in order to guarantee the full implementation of the legal framework currently in force".

# KEY TAKEAWAYS AND MOVING FORWARD

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## **AUTHORS WOULD LIKE TO EMPHASIZE FOUR KEY POINTS FROM THIS REPORT:**

First, while local and international actors might focus on advancing interethnic relations in Kosovo, perhaps the focus should be first and foremost to safeguard and protect the existing progress, before pushing for more.

Second, there is an urgent need to invest more on exchange activities and people-to-people events between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, including to organize cultural visits across Kosovo, in order to raise awareness among communities, particularly on everyday life in different parts of Kosovo.

Third, key to moving the Kosovar society in the right direction with respect to interethnic relations is the language from the political leaders from Kosovo and Serbia. In other words, without having the political leadership of both countries stop talking to each other in degrading, and threatening way, both the progress achieved as well as hopes for better interethnic relations and cooperation in Kosovo are seriously undermined. In this sense, if the political leaders of Kosovo and Serbia, choose to speak in more reconciliatory manner, this can significantly improve the context for interethnic cooperation in Kosovo between Albanians and Serbs.

Fourth, without normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, in the EU-facilitated process, progress in the community level to improve confidence and interactions between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo is very difficult. In this context, even if the public perceptions is that the normalization dialogue is moving in the wrong direction, it can affect the state of interethnic relations at the community level.

## **IN ORDER TO MOVE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION FOR IMPROVING INTERETHNIC RELATIONS AND COOPERATION IN KOSOVO, THESE CAN BE SOME OF THE IMPORTANT STEPS:**

1. Political leaders from Kosovo and Serbia need to urgently change their language and messages, and in general how they talk with each other. The current rhetoric can only lead to deeper divisions among the Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, which will have detrimental effects, both domestically for Kosovo, as well as in the context of normalization dialogue as well and make it more difficult for parties to agree on compromises. It is vital for Kosovo government to start to make a difference in the way it talks to Serbia and the Kosovo Serbs;
2. While there are some important efforts by the Office of the Prime Minister with respect to internal dialogue, Kosovo institutions need to show stronger commitment towards meaningful engagement with the Serbian community in Kosovo, especially that they are ready to listen to legitimate concerns and grievances of the Kosovo Serbs. Government should send a strong message

that improving interethnic relations is a priority;

3. We need more investments and support in people-to-people activities between communities in Kosovo, and especially between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, with a focus on increasing exchanges with the north of Kosovo. Civil society is best positioned to facilitate these exchanges. It is essential to have confidence building measures between the Serbian community living in the north of Kosovo and the rest of the country;
4. With respect to the north of Kosovo, it is very important to take into consideration that the community there has been living, to some degree, in a different political, social, economic and cultural reality for over 20 years. This is important to take into account when designing and implementing measures that aim to advance integration of the community there, and
5. It's the economy. In order to advance interethnic cooperation, both government and donor community need to urgently prioritize supporting projects that incentivise economic initiatives/projects from multi-ethnic communities. Lack of jobs and opportunities for youth, is the number one concern for both Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo.

# ABOUT THE FOSTERING INTERETHNIC COOPERATION AND RECONCILIATION (FIERC)

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FIERC (Fostering Inter-Ethnic Cooperation and Reconciliation) is an 18-months projects funded by the by the Stability Pact Fund of the German Federal Foreign Office, and it is implemented by the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) in partnership with the New Social Initiative (NSI). Fostering Interethnic Cooperation and Reconciliation (FIERC) project, works to increase cooperation among communities in order to improve development opportunities and energize active citizenry in municipal decision-making processes in order to advance public interest in divided communities in Kosovo, with a focus on Albanian and Serbian communities. The overall objective of the project is to foster interethnic cooperation in Kosovo by opening up space for mutual trustbuilding interactions, creating opportunities to jointly identify/address common challenges, and collaborate for community solutions.

## **FIERC PROJECT HAS THREE COMPONENTS:**

**Component I: Research and Analysis:** The goal of the first component of research and analysis is to provide a deeper understanding of how citizens and community leaders perceive interethnic relations in their community and what obstacles prevent better cooperation. The research and analysis will be accompanied and supported by external academic advisers, in the form of reviews of research activities and workshops on quantitative and qualitative research methods and research ethics. As part of the first component a public opinion survey will be conducted in ethnically diverse sites in Kosovo, about community perception of interethnic relations and cooperation. Also, motivational and awareness raising videos with community leaders and citizens will be developed and promoted.

**Component II: Capacity Building Development and Training:** The goal of the second component is to provide direct support to support development of skills and know-how among non-government organizations, public institutions, community leaders, private sector and business community to engage more actively in the national decision-making processes. This will be done through training, mentoring and on the job-coaching which will improve the soft skills of the citizens to help them to move forward with economic and start-up initiatives which will support them in their project development ideas.

**Component III: Advocacy and engagement:** The goal of the third component is to directly support inter-ethnic cooperation through engagement at the community level (grassroots). The main focus of this component will be to increase civic activism of the targeted community and municipalities and doing activism for common community interests such as: protecting their basic community rights, protecting environment, tackling domestic violence, etc. The main result of this component will be the creation of the informal Community Forums for Public Interest (CFPI) which will serve as a coordinating mechanism. FIERC will support with small grants up to 10 community initiatives which are designed to address a community issue or interests, with up to 500 Euro. In addition to this FIERC will support six start up business initiatives with up to 1, 500 Euros for each initiative.



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