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Language as a (way of crossing the) barrier between two communities

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Executive Summary</u>	01
<u>Background</u>	02
<u>Analysis</u>	04
<u>Recommendation and Conclusion</u>	12
<u>Bibliogprahy</u>	14

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper addresses the language barrier between Albanian and Serbian communities in Kosovo, which hinders effective communication, understanding as well as social cohesion and interaction. Efforts have been made to promote bilingualism in Kosovo through the “Law on the Use of Language” that made both languages official. However, its implementation faces challenges, and the Office of the Language Commissioner lacks sufficient power and competencies to enforce the law effectively. Albanian and Serbian language belong to different language families, which further complicates the problem. While other ethnic groups can serve as key players in promoting bilingualism, Serbian and Albanian communities face pressures and obstacles regarding language learning, because of wider political context and lack of reconciliation.

Potential solutions to address the language barrier include providing economic incentive for bilingual individuals in government and public institutions, promoting cultural exchanges on university level to encourage language learning, and better promoting of multiculturalism and multilingualism in the public sphere. Additionally, organizing summer schools or camps for children, teenagers and young adults to interact and learn each other’s languages could foster understanding. Ultimately, fostering bilingualism and better language proficiency and understanding can lead to improved social cohesion, better communication, and reduced tensions between communities.

BACKGROUND

Kosovo is one of the most complex societies in the Balkans, due to its ethnic diversity, and mostly because of historical and political events that had happened in last decades, since the breaking up of Yugoslavia. The two major ethnic communities are Albanians and Serbs. Albanians are the majority in Kosovo, and Serbs live concentrated in enclaves throughout Kosovo, in six municipalities in the south and in the four northern municipalities. Ethnically divided Kosovo does not seem ready to maintain multiculturalism on the basis of which it is trying to build social and political institutions, and language barrier seems to be one of the biggest reasons why.

Albanians speak Albanian language , an Indo-European language that consists of two primary dialects: Gheg and Tosk. Gheg is primarily spoken in northern Albania, Kosovo and parts of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, while Tosk is spoken in southern Albania and among Albanian communities in Greece and Italy.

As for the Serbian language, it's a member of South Slavic branch language family, which belongs to the larger Indo-European language family. It is spoken in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and other parts of the Balkans.

Two major communities in Kosovo have a lot of political and historical differences that have contributed to language barrier between them, that already existed since Albanian and Serbian language are not much related, and they both use different alphabets, which further complicates the communication between communities. In former Yugoslavia, the language differences did not seem to be an issue, since both languages were taught in the Universities and schools, and older generations have either spoken both languages or have been able to understand one another to some level. Since Kosovo war in 1998-1999, two communities have just grown more and more apart from each other. These conflicts have deepened the divide between the communities and contributed to a lack of trust and understanding. As a result, individuals from each community may have limited proficiency or exposure to the language of other community, which creates difficulties in everyday life.

In 2007 Kosovo Assembly adopted the “Law on the Use of Language”, which made both Serbian and Albanian languages official languages in Kosovo, that are to be treated as equal. Kosovo’s Constitution also treats both languages as the only two official languages. But, when it comes to implementing the Law in public administration offices, or in day-to-day activities, there are many challenges.

Most Kosovo Albanians do not speak Serbian, nor do Kosovo Serbs speak or understand Albanian language. To facilitate proper implementation of the Law and promote and protect the official languages and their equal status, the Office of the Language Commissioner (OCL) was established in 2012. But for the Office of the Language Commissioner and Commissioner, it is a great challenge to ensure implementation of the Law, due to weak competencies and lack of adequate tools to do so. While some institutional and legal progress has been made, the language barrier remains a significant challenge that impacts various aspects of daily life. Regarding the society, efforts have been made to reconcile and build peace between communities, mostly influenced by the EU facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, in so-called process of normalization of relations, which started in 2011. Twelve years later, in 2023, it does not seem like it brought two communities closer, nor is the problem of the language barrier included in the Dialogue.

Even with good institutional framework and foundation in the “Law of Use of Language” and Commissioner of Language, Kosovo is not close to creating a bilingual society. The European Commission report for Kosovo for 2022, recognizes the challenges with implementing the “Law on the Use of Language” as well as in more general context with language rights of communities and appeals for this to be resolved. The Report says that not all communities have access in their language in judicial proceedings, that there is a lack of implementations of the Law and language rights, and that a more consistent implementation is necessary for all institutions.¹ Since it is already identified that there are issues with institutional framework, the question that remains is will the people of Kosovo learn to speak the language of the other community?

Speaking both languages could help facilitate the normalization and reconciliation between Albanians and Serbs, more importantly, it could bring people together, help them understand each other , and see the world and situation from a different perspective .

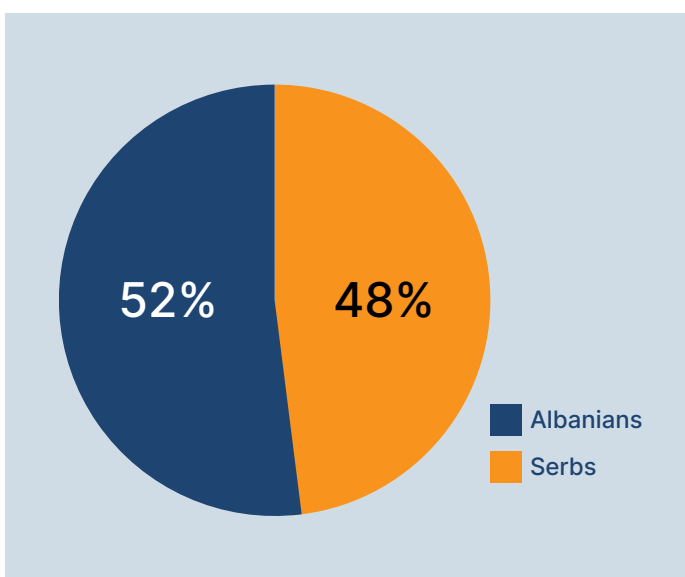
The need for learning both languages was observed by Kosovo's University of Priština, where the Serbian language is being studied as part of the Balkanistika program. More of such programs and schools could bring a positive change in Kosovo society, and probably improve the institutional capacities for better implementation of the Law.

ANALYSIS

This part of policy paper provides an in-depth analysis of the issue that the language barrier presents for Kosovo society. It is an analysis based on semi-structured interviews and focus group consisted of five people and representative from an NGO from Kosovo. The goal of this section is to address the causes and effects of the language barrier in Kosovo society, and to give possible solutions for this problem. In researching this issue, we have started from understanding the context of the issue, approaches to learning and speaking language(s) among people and understanding of institutions and institutional framework and capacities in this field.

The goal of this paper is to examine language barriers between the Albanian and Serbian communities living in Kosovo. First of all, based on the data, it seems that rare are the ones that see language as a problem for Kosovo society, and that doesn't come as a surprise, since language barrier is one of the major issues regarding this society, that scarcely anyone seems to be addressing or even bothering to address and tackle. One of the contributing factors can be widespread use of English language, not only among people, but also in institutions. Kosovo society is a very complex one, and uneasy to understand looking both from outside, and within. Much of that complexity strives from many barriers that stand between communities, and language is one of them, which makes it complicated sometimes to derive cause and effect of this problem.

LANGUAGE ATTITUDES



The attitudes of people towards language. The percentage of people who feel uncomfortable when they hear the other language. 52% of Albanians feel uncomfortable when hearing Serbian language, and 48% of Serbs feel uncomfortable when hearing Albanian.²

LANGUAGE USAGE

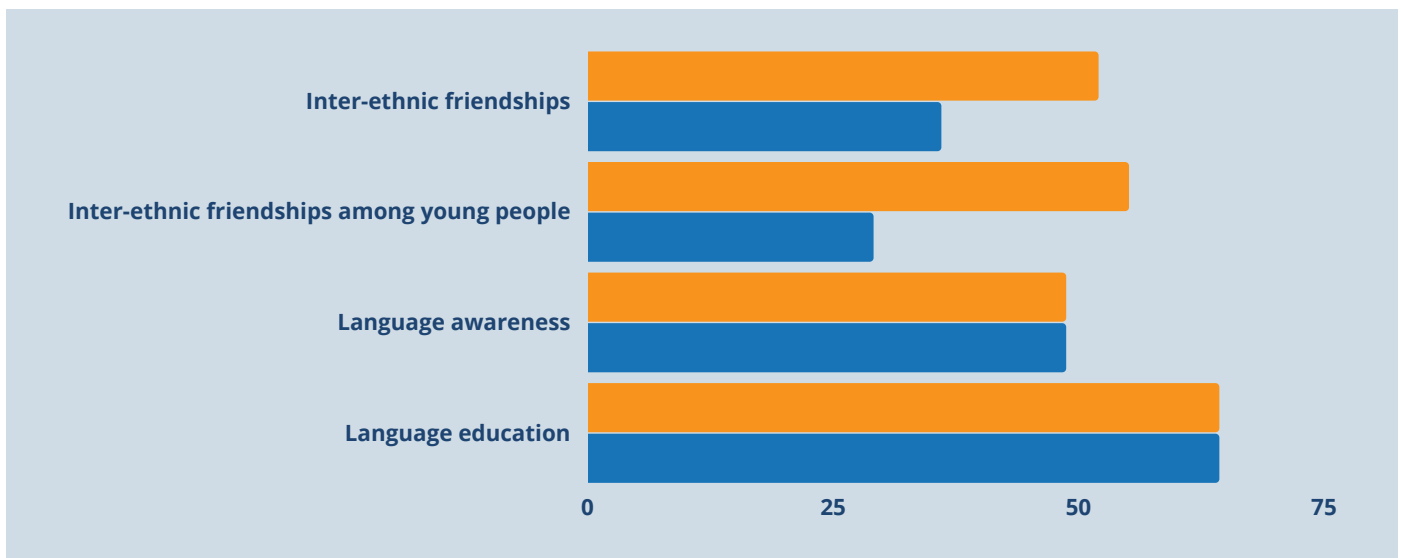


The usage of language.
The percentage of Albanians in both parts of Kosovska Mitrovica that speak Serbian language

Participants in the focus group were young people mostly from urban areas of Kosovo, such as one person from Priština, one person from Serbia, living in Gračanica, one participant from Kosovska Mitrovica, and one from small village nearby Zvečan. When asked, participants from focus group all gave almost the same answer on the language(s) they speak. Serbs speak only Serbian, Albanians only Albanian, and they both speak English and/or German. Their parents or grandparents spoke and learnt some of Serbian and Albanian language in former Yugoslavia, but they themselves never learnt it or felt the need and will to learn it. They also almost never went outside their own communities and hung around people from other ethnic community.

When they did, it was as a part of some NGO project, where they spoke English to one another. There is a lack of interest among young people to learn the language of other ethnic community, that can be understood as both cause and effect of this problem. Young people are not interacting with each other and are not familiarized with different languages spoken outside their place of life. Those "last generations" that spoke both languages are now 50 or more years old, and they mostly don't speak English. An interesting situation is the one where people of Kosovo may actually know and speak Serbian or Albanian language, but choose not to use it, which only deepens the barrier.

Because there is a significant lack of interest to learn Serbian and Albanian language, there is also a lack of communication between communities and not nearly enough understanding of society. Some state that the reason they are not going outside of their own community is risky political situation followed by a lot of tensions and events that took place on this territory. Absence of bona fides political will among political representatives on both sides can be seen as one of the causes for this barrier, since they not only speak of promotion of both cultures and diversity, but are actually misusing language for political purposes. In example, Kosovo’s ruling party “Lëvizja Vetëvendosje” in its campaign against the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (ZSO) deliberately used Serbian word “Zajednica” in order to provoke negative feeling towards Community itself, but also towards Serbian people. Similarly, not long ago, during the unrest in Kosovo’s Assembly, another Serbian word was used. Taped on the lectern was the word “Zdravo” (Serbian for hello), in order to create unpleasant atmosphere regarding discovering a recent affaire. Again, Serbian language was used to denote something negative. As a representative from one NGO stated in an interview, political statements have more importance and influence than all others, and when they are negative, that can lead to radicalization . Positive statements on the other hand can help to deradicalize.



This chart shows percentages of people who: 1. Do not think that both languages should be compulsory subjects in schools (language education); 2. Know that both languages are official languages (language awareness); 3. Young people who would not mind having Serb/Albanian for a friend (Interethnic friendship among young people) and 4. Would not mind having Serb/Albanian for a friend.

Numerous political obstacles, and absence of political will makes for creation of different perspectives among people about the society they live in. People mostly resort to using only English in interaction with others. Serbian people do not follow Kosovo's media which is mostly in Albanian language, and as such perhaps this is an indicator that they do not want to be a part of that society. Lack of Serbian representatives, whether they speak Albanian or not, is obvious in public sphere. In TV debates, which are very popular, participants are always only Albanians, and often they seem to try to speak on behalf of Serbian community in Kosovo, which is itself not constructive. Since there are very few Serbs who speak Albanian in public sphere, they do not take part in these debates, and cannot represent true needs of Serbian community. On the other side, hosting a Serb to speak on such a debate, would cost a lot of money for simultaneous translation, which is not sustainable in a long run. That all takes us to the lack of dialogue within society itself, which contributes to the creation of parallel realities for Serbs and Albanians. Recent events can testify on that. The paper does not suggest that the language barrier is main cause for those perceptions but it is significantly contributing a lot to the misunderstandings among communities.

All participant in the research, agree on that the incentive for creating and boosting a will among people to learn Serbian or Albanian must come from institutions, and from urban areas of Kosovo, such as Pri ština/ Prishtinë or Đakovica / Gjakova. There, another problem arises, and that is that Kosovo Serbs were pushed out of urban areas and big cities, and any intent to come back to those areas has a lot of challenges, including how it would be perceived. This is a complex problem, and very difficult to overcome, especially if we cannot understand each other. There is little to none interaction between Serbs and Albanians in capital city, some is achieved only in rural areas where they both live. Only urban area in entire of Kosovo where true multi-ethnicity can be realized, is northern part of Kosovska Mitrovica, or North Mitrovica. There live all ethnic communities, Albanians, Serbs, Bosniaks, Roma and Goranis. As long as there is not a significant Serbian population in cities like Pri ština/ Prishtinë, Đakovica / Gjakova, Pe ć/ Peje , Gnjilane/Gjilan, we cannot truly talk about a multi-ethnic society that has hope for future social cohesion. That brings us to a circle in which people don't speak Serbian or Albanian, because there are no Serbs or Albanians to interact with inside one community, and in which people don't interact with each other because they do not speak the language beside their native language and English. Language barrier deepens the ethnic division in society, furthermore it prevents the development of a true multi-ethnic society.

An example of good practice was shown by the mayor of Peć, who attended the enthronement of the patriarch Porfirije, in 2022, which send messages of peace. 3 It is very important to have more examples like this throughout Kosovo, in order to build peace and encourage good interethnic relations.

Regarding the languages themselves, Serbian and Albanian language come from different families of languages, and don't



have many similarities. Albanian language spoken in Kosovo has, so to say, two versions. One standardized, that's spoken in formal conversation, and an informal one that is more common among population. That presents a difficulty for people learning Albanian, since there are a lot of doublets to learn. More importantly, for Serbian speaking population, problem for learning is lack of textbooks. The textbooks that are still being used today date from nearly fifty years ago, and are outdated. There are no language professors, mostly people who teach Albanian to Serbs are the ones who happen to know it. The lack of educational structure to overcome language barrier is more than obvious. According to the Law on use of Languages, both languages are official, and schools are left with the choice in which language they want to hold their classes. Of course, schools are choosing the language of the community that they are mostly consisted of. So, there is no overcoming language barrier on primary and secondary levels of education in Kosovo schools.

While Serbs and Albanians face pressures regarding (not) studying each other's languages, other ethnic groups don't encounter such issues. Bosniaks, Roma, Gorani and other communities have the needed potential to be the key groups in promoting bilingualism, and multilingualism. They could easily understand and

explain many benefits of knowing more than one language. Advantage of Serbian language in this case, is that once you learn it, you can easily understand and learn all other Slavic languages. Communication would be especially easy in the rest of the Balkans, where approximately nineteen million people speak Serbo-Croatian language. For Serbs living in Kosovo, knowing Albanian would be multi-valued. Maybe presence of Serbian perspective in media would rise, but more importantly, lives of common people will be much improved.

Knowing both languages will be useful, it can help bring down the tensions between communities, too. It is easier to interact, integrate and connect in society if you speak the same language, whether its Albanian or Serbian. As participants said, it is much more pleasant to speak with someone in their native language, because then, people are friendlier, you can get to know them better, and have more understanding for their position. It can mean better life for future generations if we knew our languages. When you don't speak someone's language it's easier to dehumanize them and hate them, as we have seen in certain political campaigns, and can see on road signs, where some toponyms in Serbian or Albanian (depending on which part of Kosovo you are) are painted over. Because we don't speak languages, we make assumptions easier, don't understand each other, and are easier to divide.

Speaking Albanian for Serbs, and vice versa, would be especially useful in public services. But people still would not want to learn the other language because of various reasons, such as the political situation, or social stigmatization, or because they do not see the need. Lack of infrastructure in this field only makes it harder to do so. Another aspect of this issue is that people are not very much informed about institutional and legal framework regarding language rights. Less than 50% of people are aware of the fact that both languages are official, even less are familiar with the "Law on the Use of Language" and the work and mandate of Language Commissioner.

Promotion of language rights of two communities by Kosovo institutions is almost non-existent, which brings to lack of institutional capacities to address the issue properly. The Commissioner's mandate consists of checking whether new laws that are passed are in accordance with the Law on use of Languages, he cannot engage in proofreading. The Commissioner's legal powers are limited to issuing fines and

warnings to institutions that make mistakes in translation, and the money from the fines is just being transferred from one budget to another. Practical policy proposal “The quality of the translation of Kosovo laws into the Serbian language”, published by NGO “Aktiv” shows many mistakes and obstacles regarding translation of Kosovo’s laws and documents on Serbian language. Perception of this mistakes by Kosovo Serbs is telling them that there is a lack of respect for their language. That doesn’t necessarily have to mean that, but it’s enough for the people to feel that way.

Possible solutions to this problem can vary, and can be sent to many parties, but the main incentive for change must come from official institutions. Four possible solutions that came across during this research are:

- 1** Economic incentive – for government institutions – higher salaries for bilingual people; creating more jobs for translators; promoting bilingualism in public sphere.
- 2** Cultural exchange – on university level – for young people, so they can interact and learn about other culture and learn each others languages. Balkanistika program in University in Priština can serve as an example of good practice. Focusing on creating modern textbooks for learning languages.
- 3** Better promoting of multiculturalism and multilinguism in public sphere. Investing in advertising in media and cooperation with non-governmental sector.
- 4** Summer school for children, teenagers and young adults to get together and get to know each other.

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

In this research, Kosovo was, on multiple occasions, compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina, in context of political tensions that exist regardless of language barrier. Kosovo and BiH have a lot in common, since they are both created on premises of liberal peace building and state building, which has its advantages and disadvantages. War legacies play big role in both societies, but a really great difference is that in BiH, language barrier is not creating culturological and societal barrier nor two separate realities that are primarily based on linguistical misunderstanding. Even though there are political differences and tensions, there is somewhat of a dialogue. In Kosovo, dialogue between communities, and society itself is non-existent, to which one major contributor is language.

Fortunately, language barrier is one issue that can be solved if we work together and realize once and for all, that both communities have lived together, and must continue to do so. Possibility of creating some great wall in the middle of Kosovo that will separate its people, so that no Serb can get in contact with some Albanian, or other way around, is absurd. Institutions need to find a way to overcome many obstacles and create capacities for promoting language rights on much better grounds. Non-governmental organizations can play a big role in resolving this issue, but they cannot carry the whole process on their backs.

If the goal is to cross and overcome the language barrier, then the simple solution is to create opportunities for communities in Kosovo to start learning each other's languages. Summer school, or summer camp is innovative approach in attempts to do so. It should be organized for young people, because they are the future. Summer school can be organized for couple of months, and it could also include cultural exchange, and host both young Albanians and Serbs who are willing to make a change. All stakeholders should come together for this goal. By leveraging their resources, expertise and networks, institutions, media and NGO's can significantly enhance the impact and accessibility of language summer school. They can do so by advertising, financial support, promotions and partnerships.

Ultimately, language summer school, organized by NGOs with the support of both Governments, can be rewarding experience for language learners seeking to make significant progress in short period of time. Some of the advantages of summer schools are:

- Intensive learning
- Cultural experience
- Networking opportunities
- Practical application
- Academic preparation

Disadvantage of summer school is that its effectiveness can depend on individual motivation, learning preference, or dedication, which is why it's important that summer school has experienced instructors, good network of volunteers and marketing team.

Such summer school can be first of many steps that need to be taken for crossing the language barrier between Albanians and Serbs. It's a small step, but a complex and very important one. If we mean to make it real, we need to dedicate ourselves to common goal, which is a society in which people understand each other, communicate and resolve issues through dialogue. Only when there's mutual understanding, there can be a prosperous, multiethnic society with a future.

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