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Educational Initiatives as a Means of Promoting Inter-Ethnic Relations and Reconciliation between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs youth in the North of Kosovo

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Executive Summary

Kosovo The policy paper aims to address the ongoing challenges in inter-ethnic relations between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs youth. It proposes a focused approach to reconciliation and coexistence, emphasizing educational strategies and reforms as a means of promoting healthy inter-ethnic relations between the two communities living in the North of Kosovo. The goal is to foster a peaceful, inclusive, and prosperous society in Kosovo, where both ethnic groups can coexist with mutual respect and cooperation. While the roads that can lead to this path are vast, the educational angle is often overseen; thus, contributing to lack of progress. However, being that education is key to a well-functioning society, thinking about educational reforms that can foster peaceful coexistence is paramount. Implementing specific strategies and norms within the scope of education, such as joint extracurricular activities and integrated curricula, will allow students from both ethnic groups to exchange ideas, learn about their differences, and embrace harmony.

Introduction

Today, despite the establishment of peace and various efforts at reconciliation, inter-ethnic relations remain strained (Balaj & Sejdiu, 2022). Issues of political representation, economic disparity, and cultural recognition persist. The northern municipalities of Kosovo, predominantly inhabited by Serbs, remain a focal point of tension. Notwithstanding the attempts for finding a solution through the EU-facilitated dialogue, the diplomatic relations between Kosovo and Serbia remains tense, influencing deeply the Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo; harmony and coexistence cannot withstand the tensions caused daily from the institutions.

While political tension is a problem on its own, the lack of inclusiveness in education directly impacts both parties involved—Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs youth, who share a home. Currently, only one academic institution in the North of Kosovo is doing all the work. The International Business College Mitrovica (IBCM) is an inter-ethnic higher education institution in Kosovo who's aim is to integrate the Kosovo Serbian community in North Kosovo. Funded by the European Union, IBCM

represents the West's attempt to foster reconciliation and contribute to coexistence. Adopting a similar approach to education allows for a more inclusive learning environment, where students from either community share their values with mutual respect.

This policy paper will explore how educational initiatives can play a pivotal role in improving inter-ethnic relations between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb students in the North of Kosovo. By analyzing the impact of inclusive and integrated education on reconciliation efforts, the paper will demonstrate how academic institutions can serve as neutral grounds for fostering dialogue, mutual understanding, and cooperation. Through educational reform that encourages joint learning, cultural exchanges, and collaborative activities, the policy aims to create a more inclusive environment that counters the division perpetuated by political tensions. This approach seeks to highlight how educational opportunities not only contribute to the academic growth of students but also play a crucial role in breaking down the ethnic barriers that continue to impede peace and coexistence in Kosovo.

The lack of educational impact, where is it leading us?

The lack of educational reforms in Northern Kosovo has severely impeded reconciliation and coexistence between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb youth, exacerbating tensions between the two communities. Education plays a critical role in shaping identity and fostering understanding; however, the segregated school systems in Kosovo contribute to maintaining deep-rooted divisions. Kosovo Serbs in the North predominantly follow the Serbian curriculum, which often presents a narrative conflicting with the Kosovo Albanian perspective, especially concerning historical events like the 1998-1999 war.

As per latest report from Kosovo's Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (2022) "*Serbian language schools in Kosovo continue to operate outside the Kosovo education system, despite the fact that the current legislation offers great opportunities to accommodate the specific needs of the Serb community.*" (p. 27) This divergence in

educational content perpetuates mistrust and alienation. Furthermore, the absence of a unified curriculum that promotes multiculturalism and shared values hinders efforts to build a cohesive national identity. Without a common framework for education, young people from both communities grow up with vastly different perspectives on history, governance, and national identity. This lack of shared understanding prevents meaningful dialogue and reconciliation efforts.

In addition to the lack of an integrated curricula, the absence of reforms aimed at creating inclusive educational environments limits opportunities for intergroup contact, further entrenching divisions. In this context, education is not merely a tool for knowledge transfer but a critical mechanism for peacebuilding. Without reforms, the prospect of long-term coexistence remains tenuous, threatening the stability and unity of Kosovo.

What can we do?

To promote inclusivity and reconciliation between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb youth in North, comprehensive institutional, educational, and cultural reforms are essential. These reforms will foster a shared identity while respecting the distinct histories of both communities.

Strengthening educational institutions is key to ensuring fair inclusion of both communities. Implementing power-sharing mechanisms in school governance can guarantee equal representation and decision-making from both ethnic groups. But how *exactly* can power-sharing be implemented?

Power-sharing refers to the distribution of decision-making authority and responsibility across multiple groups, preventing domination by any single community. As Norris (2008) puts it, *“the primary idea is that in multi-ethnic societies divided into different linguistic, religious, or national communities, power-sharing institutions and procedures turn political opponents into cooperative partners, by providing communal leaders with a guaranteed stake in the democratic process”* (p. 4). Applied effectively, this can foster collaboration and reduce ethnic tensions within the school system.

One key aspect of power-sharing is the establishment of joint school governance bodies that include equal representation from both Kosovo

Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities. This can be implemented by creating multi-ethnic school boards responsible for decisions related to curricula, hiring practices, extracurricular activities, and general school policies. Such boards should operate based on consensus, ensuring that neither community can unilaterally impose its preferences. This model mirrors successful examples in post-conflict societies, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, where schools employ ethnically balanced boards to ensure fair decision-making.

Power-sharing can also extend to student representation through multi-ethnic student councils. These councils can ensure that both Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb students participate actively in school life, have a platform to voice their concerns, and engage in the decision-making process. Equal representation on student councils will help foster a sense of ownership and inclusion among students from both communities, promoting cooperation rather than competition. A power-sharing approach can also be applied in staffing schools. Having a balanced composition of teachers and administrative staff from both ethnic groups ensures that neither Kosovo Albanians nor Kosovo Serbs dominate the educational environment. This balanced representation can help build trust, reduce biases, and create a more inclusive school culture.

An integrated curriculum is another component crucial for improving inter-ethnic relations between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb youth, particularly in the North of Kosovo. Teaching history and culture the right way can only lead to a positive change; manipulating or misrepresenting historical facts will contribute to mistrust in the long run, fostering a sense of imbalance between the history told and the events that occurred. By incorporating unbiased historical perspectives, cultural understanding, and shared values, it can bridge the deep-seated divisions between the two communities. Students learn about each other's histories and experiences, which helps dismantle the stereotypes and prejudices that have persisted since the Kosovo War. Furthermore, an integrated curriculum can prepare Kosovo's youth to participate in the country's future development, promoting a sense of shared national identity. This approach is vital for ensuring that the younger generation is equipped to lead Kosovo toward a peaceful, inclusive society where both Kosovo Albanians and Serbs can coexist and thrive together.

Joint educational initiatives, such as mixed classrooms and shared

extracurricular activities are ideal for creating opportunities for positive interaction, which can help break down stereotypes and build trust. While educational factors usually rely on the help of NGOs to create such opportunities, the broad spectrum of activities needed necessitates for the schools to be involved, too. Some of the initiatives schools can implement to foster cooperation between the two groups may include the following:

- **Collaborative Projects:** Teachers can organize joint academic projects that encourage students to work together across ethnic lines. These projects could focus on common interests such as science, environmental issues, or art, allowing students to cooperate and share ideas while learning.
- **Sports Competitions:** Sports are a powerful way to unite students, regardless of ethnic background. Schools can organize mixed teams in football, basketball, or other sports, fostering teamwork and trust in a fun, competitive setting.
- **Debate Clubs:** Schools can establish inter-ethnic debate clubs where students discuss important social issues, including those related to peace and coexistence. Encouraging respectful dialogue helps students challenge stereotypes and develop empathy.
- **Joint Field Trips:** Organizing field trips to historical or cultural sites important to both communities can help students understand the shared heritage of Kosovo, reinforcing commonalities rather than differences.
- **Extracurricular Clubs:** Creating mixed extracurricular clubs around common interests such as technology, arts, or music allows students to collaborate and form friendships naturally, outside of formal classroom settings.

What are the challenges that could impede the implementation of educational reform?

Despite the abundance of educational initiatives and the alleged willingness of many to support reconciliation between Kosovo Albanian and Serb communities through the educational lens, significant challenges remain that could severely impede the implementation of these efforts. These obstacles are not merely administrative but are deeply rooted in historical, political, and societal contexts that complicate the path forward. All these challenges can be tied to one factor: resistance.

Institutional resistance can be a significant challenge in implementing education reforms aimed at fostering reconciliation between Kosovo Albanian and Serb youth. Many representatives in the education sector may resist changes, viewing them as politically sensitive or disruptive to the existing system. Addressing this requires strong leadership from government officials, consistent involvement of all stakeholders, and a clear articulation of the long-term benefits of reform. Engaging educators, policymakers, and community leaders in the process, allows resistance to be mitigated through dialogue and consensus-building.

Societal resistance, rooted in deep-seated prejudices and historical mistrust, also presents a major obstacle to reconciliation efforts. Both Kosovo Albanian and Serb communities have experienced trauma and conflict, which has reinforced ethnic divisions over the years. Overcoming these barriers will require sustained efforts to foster mutual understanding, build trust, and promote inter-ethnic cooperation. Long-term strategies must include public awareness campaigns, media initiatives, and community engagement programs that challenge stereotypes and promote the benefits of coexistence. Furthermore, joint activities in education, culture, and sports can help bridge the gap between the two communities by encouraging positive interactions and shared experiences. To be effective, these efforts must be continuously supported by both local and international actors, ensuring that progress is made gradually and with the buy-in of both communities.

Ultimately, success in overcoming institutional and societal resistance will

depend on the collective will of leaders, educators, and citizens to create a more inclusive and peaceful Kosovo. This collective effort must go beyond surface-level commitments, requiring a genuine investment in reconciliation from all sectors of society. Leaders must demonstrate political courage and vision, prioritizing long-term peace over short-term gains. Educators play a crucial role by fostering environments that encourage critical thinking, empathy, and open dialogue among students. Citizens, too, must be willing to challenge prejudices and engage in meaningful interactions across community lines. International support and guidance can amplify these efforts, but the true drive for change must come from within Kosovo, fueled by a shared desire to build a future where all citizens can coexist peacefully. Only through this united and persistent approach can the deep-rooted divisions be addressed and a lasting reconciliation be achieved.

Conclusion

Building a peaceful and prosperous Kosovo necessitates a dedicated effort to improve inter-ethnic relations between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb youth. A key driver in achieving this goal is educational reform, which can provide structured and meaningful opportunities for interaction, understanding, and cooperation between the two communities. This policy paper emphasizes the importance of focusing on joint educational initiatives that go beyond traditional classroom settings, proposing a comprehensive approach to reconciliation and coexistence.

Such reforms include cultural exchange programs, integrated curricula, collaborative academic projects, mixed sports teams, and inter-ethnic debate clubs, all of which can help break down long-standing stereotypes and foster trust among young people. These initiatives aim to shift perceptions and create lasting bonds between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs, which are essential for long-term peace and stability. Schools must take an active role in organizing these activities, ensuring that students from both communities have regular opportunities to engage and collaborate.

However, the success of these initiatives will depend on the collective will of all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community leaders, as well as the sustained support of educational institutions. For reconciliation to be effective, schools and other local actors must take ownership of these programs, working closely with NGOs and international partners to ensure broad participation and long-term commitment.