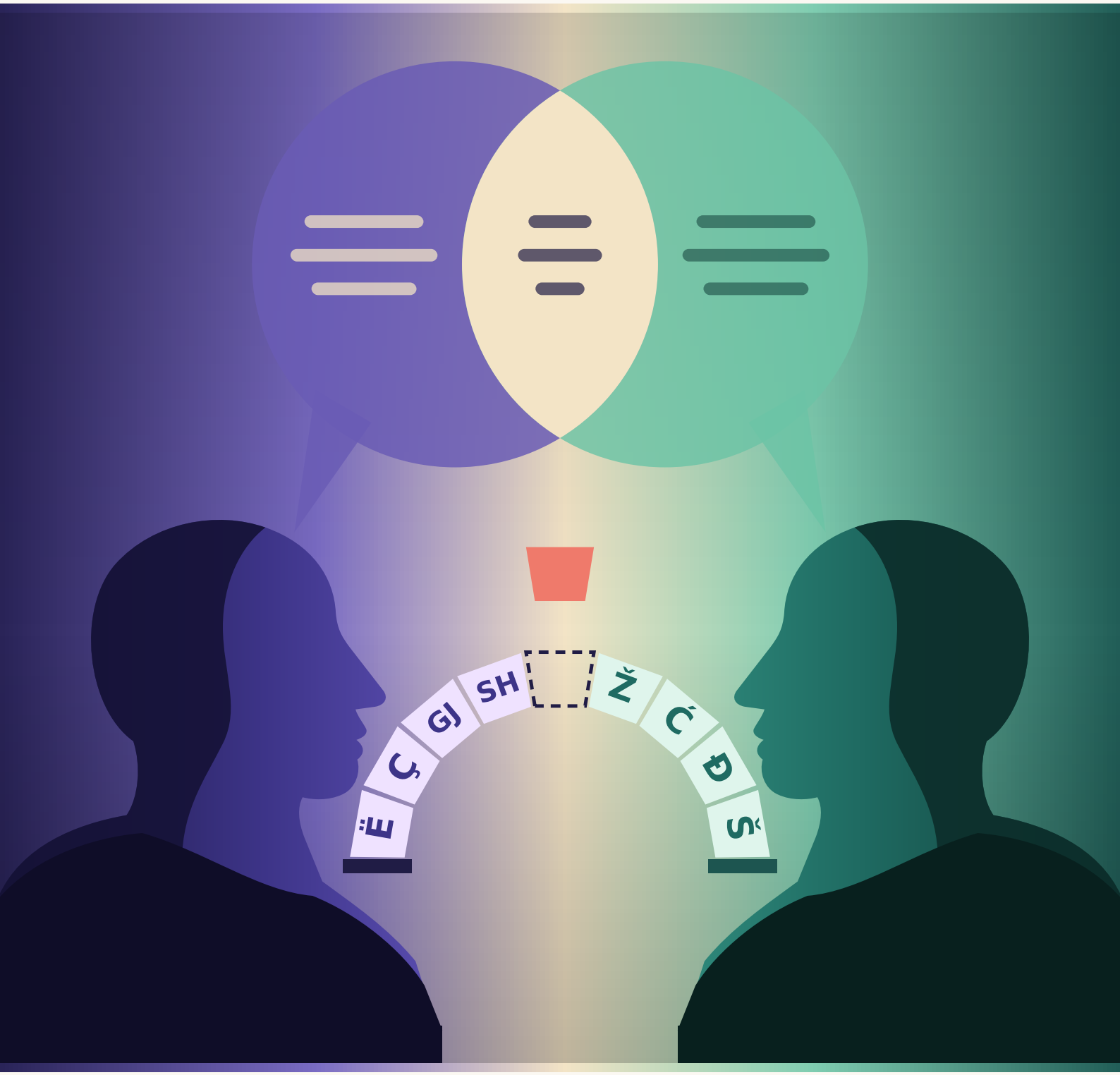
# Bridging the Linguistic Divide

From Formal Bilingualism to Functional Language Capacity in Kosovo




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From Formal Bilingualism to Functional Language Capacity in Kosovo

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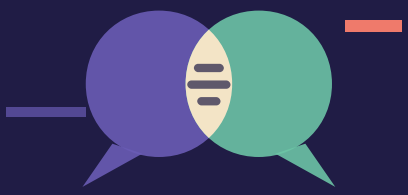
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# Executive Summary

Kosovo has one of the most extensive legal frameworks for linguistic equality in the Western Balkans. Article 5 of the Constitution establishes Albanian and Serbian as official languages, while the Law No. 02/L-37 on the Use of Languages guarantees their equal status in Kosovo institutions. Yet the gap between formal bilingualism and its practical implementation remains substantial. The European Commission's 2025 Kosovo Report concludes that institutional compliance with obligations deriving from the Law on the Use of Languages remains insufficient and that the number of qualified translators and interpreters in central and municipal institutions is inadequate.

The problem is not primarily the absence of linguistic rights in law. It is the declining institutional capacity to exercise those rights in practice. Kosovo's public institutions have traditionally relied heavily on an older generation of bilingual employees. As this generation gradually leaves the labour market, it is being replaced by younger citizens who have largely been educated in linguistically separated systems and who often have little or no functional knowledge of the other official language.

Education is therefore at the centre of the problem. Albanian and Serbian are not systematically taught to pupils belonging to the other linguistic community. The OSCE has repeatedly identified limited interaction between the Kosovo and Serbian curriculum systems, while the Council of Europe has similarly noted the continued absence of reciprocal language learning. This creates a structural contradiction: the state requires bilingual public services while the education system does not systematically produce citizens with the linguistic skills required to provide them.

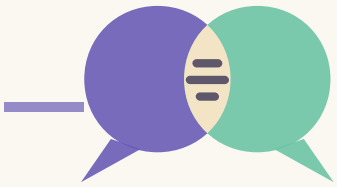
This policy paper therefore addresses the following policy question:

**How can Kosovo transform formal bilingualism into sustainable functional language capacity in education and public administration?**

The paper proposes a coordinated approach based on three mutually reinforcing pillars: introducing practical learning of the other official language during primary and secondary education; strengthening higher-education pathways for bilingual professionals, particularly the Balkanistics programme at the University of Prishtina; and creating incentives and structured language training within the public administration.

Rather than attempting to integrate currently separate education systems institutionally, the proposal focuses on a narrower and potentially more feasible objective: ensuring that students acquire practical communication skills in the other official language. An updated version of the former Yugoslav concept of the "Language of the Social Environment" (Jezik društvene sredine / Gjuha e mjedisit shoqëror) could provide the conceptual starting point, adapted to contemporary language-teaching standards and Kosovo's current institutional framework.

The objective is not linguistic assimilation, but functional multilingualism: enabling citizens to access public institutions, employment and everyday communication without weakening the right of any community to education in its own language.



# 1.

# Introduction

**Language rights occupy a central place in Kosovo's constitutional and institutional architecture. Albanian and Serbian enjoy equal official status, while Turkish, Bosnian and Roma may receive official status or official-use status at the municipal level under conditions defined by law. The Law on the Use of Languages further requires Kosovo institutions to ensure equal use of the two official languages.**

The legal framework, however, has developed much faster than the social and administrative capacity required for its implementation.

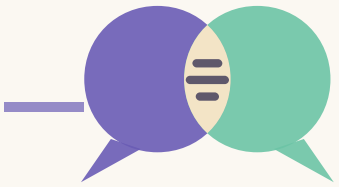
The European Commission has repeatedly identified shortcomings in the practical application of language rights. Its 2025 report notes insufficient institutional compliance with the language law, an inadequate number of qualified translators and interpreters and difficulties experienced by public institutions, including courts, in providing services and documents in both official languages. The same report also notes that representation of non-majority communities in public institutions remains insufficient.

These problems are often approached primarily as questions of translation, administrative compliance or minority rights. Yet they also have an important education-policy dimension. Public institutions cannot sustainably function in two official languages if successive generations enter the labour market without opportunities to acquire even basic competence in the other official language.

The separation of educational pathways reinforces this problem. Research and monitoring conducted by international organisations have consistently pointed to limited contact between students educated under the Kosovo and Serbian curricula and to the lack of systematic opportunities for reciprocal language learning. The OSCE has argued that this separation reduces opportunities for inter-community interaction and limits educational and employment integration.

The issue should therefore be understood not simply as a question of protecting linguistic rights but also as a question of state capacity. Functional bilingualism affects access to public services, recruitment into public administration, the quality of translation and interpretation, communication between institutions and citizens, and the capacity of the state to implement its own legal framework.

This paper consequently shifts the focus from formal bilingualism to functional bilingualism: from whether two languages are legally recognised to whether institutions and citizens possess the practical capacity to use them.



# 2.

# Problem Statement and Analysis

The central policy problem is a growing mismatch between Kosovo's bilingual institutional framework and the linguistic skills produced by its education system.

## 2.1. The institutional implementation gap

The Constitution and language legislation assume that public institutions can operate in both Albanian and Serbian. Yet the educational pathways through which future civil servants, teachers, lawyers, translators, healthcare professionals and other public employees are trained largely remain monolingual.

This contradiction becomes increasingly significant as generational change takes place within the public administration. Older employees who acquired knowledge of both Albanian and Serbian in a different educational and social environment are gradually leaving the workforce. Younger generations have grown up in much more linguistically separated settings. Without policy intervention, bilingual administrative capacity can therefore be expected to become increasingly dependent on professional translation rather than direct communication.

Translation remains indispensable in a bilingual administration, particularly for legislation and formal documentation. It should not, however, become a substitute for basic linguistic competence among public employees. Excessive dependence on translation increases administrative costs, slows communication and makes implementation of language rights dependent on a limited pool of specialised professionals. The European Commission's finding that institutions continue to face shortages of qualified translators demonstrates the vulnerability of such a model.

## 2.2. Education as a structural source of the problem

The roots of this problem can be found partly in the structure of education.

Students from Bosniak and Turkish communities following the Kosovo curriculum have had opportunities to learn Albanian, while reciprocal Albanian–Serbian language learning remains particularly weak. The Council of Europe has noted that Serbian is not taught in Kosovo-curriculum schools and that Albanian is generally not taught in Serbian-curriculum schools. Earlier OSCE assessments similarly concluded that the physical and curricular separation of the two systems significantly limits interaction between Albanian- and Serbian-speaking students.

This produces consequences extending beyond education itself. A young Kosovo Serb who does not speak Albanian faces narrower opportunities for employment and interaction in predominantly Albanian-speaking environments. At the same time, an Albanian-speaking public servant without Serbian-language competence is more dependent on translation when communicating with Serbian-speaking citizens. The costs of monolingualism therefore fall on both citizens and institutions.

## 2.3. Existing but insufficient mechanisms

Some institutional foundations for overcoming this divide already exist.

The Balkanistics programme at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Prishtina was specifically designed to strengthen interlingual and intercultural communication and to train professionals capable of translation between Kosovo's official languages and other Balkan languages. Its curriculum includes translation, language practice and professional internships in public institutions. The programme is currently accredited through 2029.

Yet higher education alone cannot compensate for the absence of earlier language exposure. The European Commission already noted in its 2023 report that the programme had historically experienced very low enrolment, despite being the only programme within the Kosovo education system offered in both official languages. Creating a sustainable supply of bilingual professionals therefore requires both earlier language learning and clearer employment incentives for students who decide to develop advanced bilingual skills.

Civil-society initiatives, including projects encouraging language learning and inter-community contact, can complement this process. Initiatives such as those organised through Europe House and other organisations create valuable opportunities for voluntary interaction. Their project-based and voluntary character, however, means that they cannot replace systematic language education reaching successive generations of students.

## 2.4. A policy window: reviving the Language of the Social Environment

A useful conceptual starting point already exists in the region's own educational history. During the Yugoslav period, multilingual areas used variants of the "Language of the Social Environment" model, under which students learned another locally relevant language. Research on this model shows that its underlying principle was not replacement of the mother tongue but the treatment of multilingualism as a social resource.

Reintroducing this idea today should not mean restoring the former model unchanged. A contemporary programme would need to be voluntary or phased where appropriate, pedagogically modern, focused primarily on everyday communication and designed in consultation with the communities concerned. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages could provide measurable learning outcomes and allow students gradually to progress toward recognised A1–B2 proficiency levels.

The policy challenge is therefore not to create an entirely new bilingual system. It is to connect institutions that already exist — schools, universities and the public administration — into a coherent pathway through which functional bilingualism becomes practically useful and professionally rewarded.

# 3.

# Recommendations and Conclusion

The policy measures developed in this paper are conceived as a mutually reinforcing package rather than isolated interventions.

1. **Introduce an updated "Language of the Social Environment" programme in primary and secondary education.** MESTI could develop a practical, communication-oriented curriculum enabling Albanian-speaking pupils to learn Serbian and Serbian-speaking pupils to learn Albanian. Rather than beginning with immediate nationwide implementation, the programme could first be piloted in selected multilingual municipalities and schools. Its emphasis should be on everyday communication rather than literature-heavy or grammar-dominated instruction. Learning outcomes should be aligned with CEFR standards and evaluated after an initial pilot phase.

2. **Create a stronger education-to-employment pathway through the Balkanistics programme.** The existing programme at the University of Prishtina provides an institutional basis for educating translators, language teachers and bilingual professionals. Public scholarships, student accommodation support, paid internships and structured placements in public institutions could increase the practical value of the programme. Cooperation between the university and institutions experiencing shortages of Serbian- and Albanian-speaking staff could create a more direct transition from graduation to employment.

3. **Develop systematic second-official-language training within the public administration.** Newly recruited civil servants working in positions involving direct citizen contact should have access to structured language courses. Bilingual competence at B1 or B2 level could be recognised through recruitment incentives, professional-development credits or promotion criteria where relevant to the position. This would gradually shift bilingualism from being treated primarily as a translation service toward becoming an administrative skill.

4. **Establish joint monitoring of language capacity.** MESTI, the Office of the Prime Minister, the relevant public-administration institutions and the Office of the Language Commissioner should periodically assess the availability of bilingual personnel, translation capacity and demand for language skills across public institutions. Such monitoring would allow scholarships, training and recruitment incentives to be targeted toward areas where shortages are most pronounced.

These measures would not eliminate the political, historical or institutional divisions surrounding education and language policy. Nor should language learning be presented as a substitute for broader inter-community dialogue. Their purpose is narrower and more practical: to prevent linguistic separation from progressively undermining the implementation of rights that already exist in law.

Kosovo therefore does not primarily need additional declarations of bilingualism. It needs the human capacity to implement bilingualism.

An updated Language of the Social Environment programme, connected to university-level professional training and incentives within public administration, would provide a pathway from school to employment and from legal language equality to practical access to institutions.

The long-term objective is not that every citizen should become perfectly bilingual. It is that knowledge of another official language should once again become an accessible, useful and institutionally valued skill. In this sense, language policy can serve two purposes simultaneously: protecting the rights of different linguistic communities and improving the everyday functioning of public institutions.

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