

# Public Perceptions towards bilateral relations, cross border cooperation and identity issues in Albania





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The data presented in the report derive from the Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) survey. WBSB is a new regional initiative launched by KCSS in 2020, implemented in cooperation with the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in Serbia and Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG) in Albania, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). WBSB serves as an instrument to measure public perceptions in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia on different security-related issues. The findings demonstrate how citizens percept or are informed about the issues presented in this report. As such, the views presented in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the KCSS, BCSP, CSDG or NED.

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# **PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS BILATERAL RELATIONS, CROSS BORDER COOPERATION AND IDENTITY ISSUES IN ALBANIA**

**March 2022**



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# INTRODUCTION

The Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG) has conducted the Albanian Security Barometer for the past two years (2019 and 2020) in an effort to measure public perception towards institutions and different security related issues. In its third edition, CSDG has joined the Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) in its second edition to conduct an identical regional barometer in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia. This edition is different from the two previous barometers, because it has taken a regional dimension by measuring not only the perception of Albanian citizens towards their institutions and security issues, but also their perceptions on regional cooperation and specifically the relations between Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia. WBSB has an identical methodology in all three countries, and it also measured simultaneously the perceptions of the citizens of Kosovo and Serbia on the same issues. The results of the WBSB will be published in four different reports for each country.

The first report was the Public Perception towards Security and Justice Institutions and Corruption Issues and the second report was Public Safety and Internal and External Threats. This is the third report Bilateral Relations, Cross-Border Cooperation and Identity Issues which includes only the data for Albania. In the upcoming period, the fourth and last report, European Integration and Regional Security, is going to get published. This report focused solely on bilateral relations, cross-border cooperation and identity issues in Albania.

A multi-layered random sample of 1125 adults were used for this survey. Surveys were proportionally distributed among 61 municipalities of Albania, taking into consideration the rural/urban areas, gender and age quotas. The purpose of this multi-layered sampling approach was to achieve accurate geographic and demographic representation of Albania's adult population, while maintaining a sampling error lower than  $\pm 2.9\%$  for the overall sample. A random sampling was used for this survey, for it ensures that each resident in Albania had an equal probability of being chosen for participating in the survey. This survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews. Before starting the field work, the interviewers were trained by the project management team. The field work for collecting the data was conducted on 10-20 September 2021. The answers of the interviewees were entered directly by the field researchers on smartphones and were transmitted instantly to the central server through a special, purpose-built software program by the project's IT specialist. The time and location of each interview was recorded automatically. At the end of the field work, a general quality control check of the interview data collected on the server was conducted.

The majority of Albanians are skeptical about the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, although they believe that there will be consequences if both countries fail to reach an agreement. The vast majority of Albanians believe that mutual recognition would be the best outcome of the dialogue.

The majority of Albanians perceive an improvement of the relations between Albania and Serbia over the past year. Almost all Albanians consider the relations of citizens

and governments of Albania and Serbia as either good or neither good nor bad. The vast majority of Albanian citizens would accept Serbian citizens to live in their state, neighborhood, be their colleague at work, or their friend. However, less than half of Albanians would accept Serbian citizens to become public officials in Albania or teachers to their children.

The majority of Albanians believe that the Government of Albania should get involved in the internal politics of Kosovo. They also believe that Albania and Kosovo should coordinate and unify their foreign policy, remove their border checkpoints and support the unification of both countries.

Italy, United States of America and Turkey are perceived as countries with the most positive influence towards Albania, whereas Russia, Serbia and Iran are perceived as countries with the most negative influence towards Albania. The vast majority of Albanians support the "Open Balkan" initiative.

This report is divided into two main parts. The following chapter provides the findings pertaining to the public perception of bilateral relations between Albania, Kosovo and Serbia; whereas the subsequent chapter provides the findings pertaining to the cross-border cooperation and identity issues. A conclusion that reflects upon the findings is also provided at the end of the report.



# PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

This section provides all the survey results related to the perception of responders towards bilateral relations between Albania, Kosovo and Serbia. Thus, this section presents all survey results related to the perceptions of responders on the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia; the relations between Albania and Kosovo, as well as the relations between Albania and Serbia; and their perceptions towards Kosovo and Serbian citizens.

The majority of Albanians are skeptical about the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, although they believe that there will be consequences if both countries fail to reach an agreement. The vast majority of Albanians believe that mutual recognition would be the best outcome of the dialogue. The majority of Albanians perceive an improvement of the relations between Albania and Serbia over the past year. Trade and economic cooperation (53.7%), facilitation of contacts among people (21.69%), and implementation of infrastructural projects (10.07%) are considered by responders as the main priorities for cooperation between Albania and Serbia. Almost all Albanians consider the relations between both citizens and governments of Albania and Serbia as either good or neither good nor bad.

The vast majority of Albanian citizens would accept Serbian citizens to live in their state, neighborhood, become their colleague at work, or become their friend. However, less than half of Albanians would accept Serbian citizens to become public officials in Albania or teachers to their children. The majority of Albanians believe that the Government of Albania should get involved in the internal politics of Kosovo. The vast majority of responders believe that Albania and Kosovo should coordinate and unify their foreign policy, remove their border checkpoints and also support the unification of both countries. The governments of both countries are considered by the majority of responders as the main reason for the economic barriers between Albania and Kosovo.

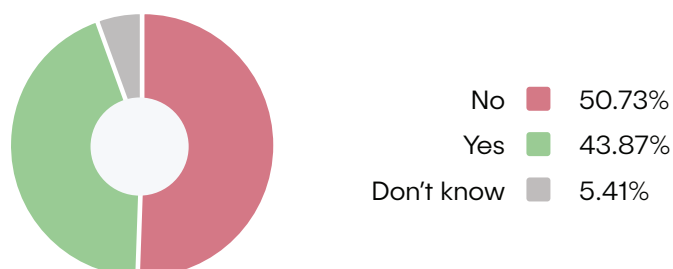
As regards to the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, the majority of citizens (59.08%) believe the dialogue has not changed a thing. 29.88% believe the dialogue has improved relations, whereas a small percentage of responders (8.09%) believe that as a result of the dialogue, the mutual relations between Kosovo and Serbia have deteriorated.

The vast majority of responders (77.24%) believe that mutual recognition would be the best outcome of the Kosovo and Serbia dialogue. Almost one in ten responders (8.99%) believe that the best outcome of the Kosovo and Serbia dialogue would be an agreement that consists of no mutual recognition but membership in the United Nations and other international organizations (including the formation of the Association of Serb Municipalities, special status for monasteries). 8.25% of responders believe the best solution would be the mutual recognition with the land swaps/exchange of territories among both countries. A small percentage of responders (4.88%) believe the best solution would be to remain without agreement at all.

Almost all responders (94.9%) think that Serbia should recognize the state of Kosovo.

Responders were also asked whether there would be negative consequences for Kosovo and Serbia if they fail to reach an agreement. The majority of responders (63.35%) believe that there will be either minor or major consequences. In contrary, one in three responders (33.42%) believe there will be no consequences.

**TABLE 1 DO YOU THINK THAT DEVELOPMENT OF KOSOVO/SERBIA IS POSSIBLE WITHOUT AN AGREEMENT?**

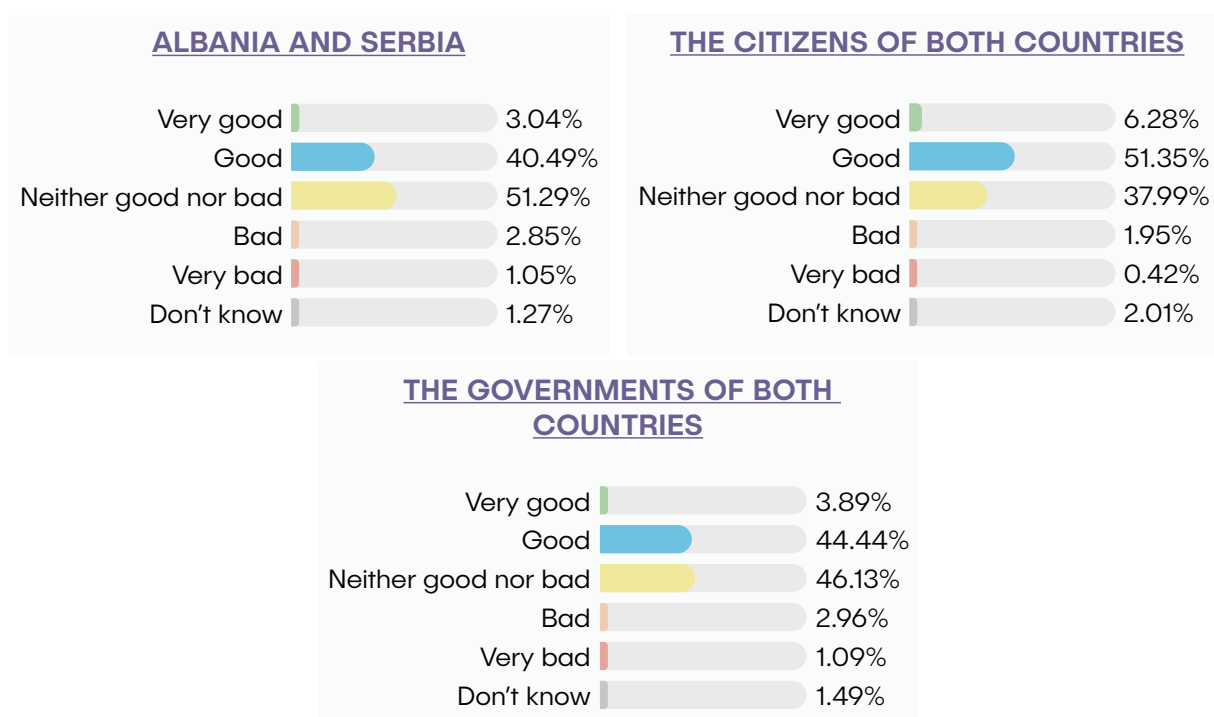


The audience is divided to the question whether the development of Kosovo and Serbia is possible without an agreement. Half of responders (50.73%) think that the development of both countries is impossible without an agreement. In contrary, 43.87% of responders think that the development of both countries is possible regardless of the mutual agreement.

The majority of responders (66.43%) are informed via TV with regard to the relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The second most used tool of information is the internet (27.15%). A very small percentage of responders (3.44%) are informed through debates/discussions with friends and family.

The majority of responders (55.79%) believe the relations between Albania and Serbia have been improved during the last year. In contrary, 42.44% of responders believe the relations are either improved little or not at all.

**TABLE 2 PLEASE EVALUATE THE RELATIONS BETWEEN ALBANIA AND SERBIA:**





Responders were asked to evaluate the relations between Albania and Serbia, as well as the relations between the citizens and governments of both countries. Albanians tend to perceive the relations between two countries as calm and generally good. The relations between Albanian and Serbian citizens (57.63%) are perceived as better than relations between the governments of both countries (48.33%) and the overall relations between Albania and Serbia (43.53%). A small percentage of responders 4.05% believe the relations of both governments are either bad or very bad; (3.9%) believe that the overall relations between Albania and Serbia are either bad or very bad; and 2.37% believe the relations between Albanian citizens and Serbian citizens are either bad or very bad.

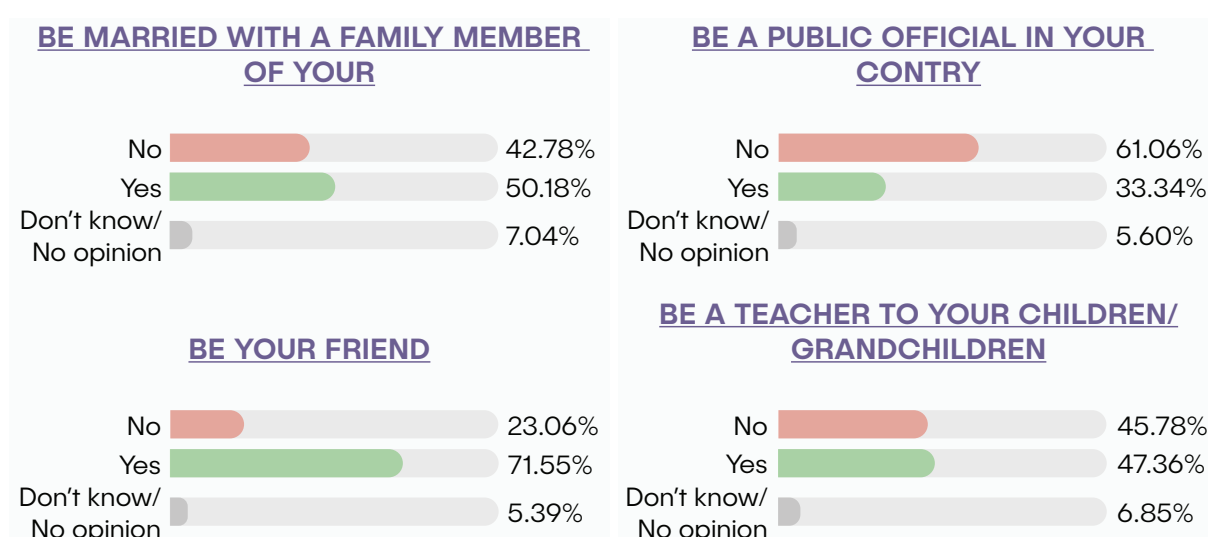
**TABLE 3** WHAT SHOULD THE PRIORITIES FOR COOPERATION BETWEEN ALBANIA AND SERBIA?

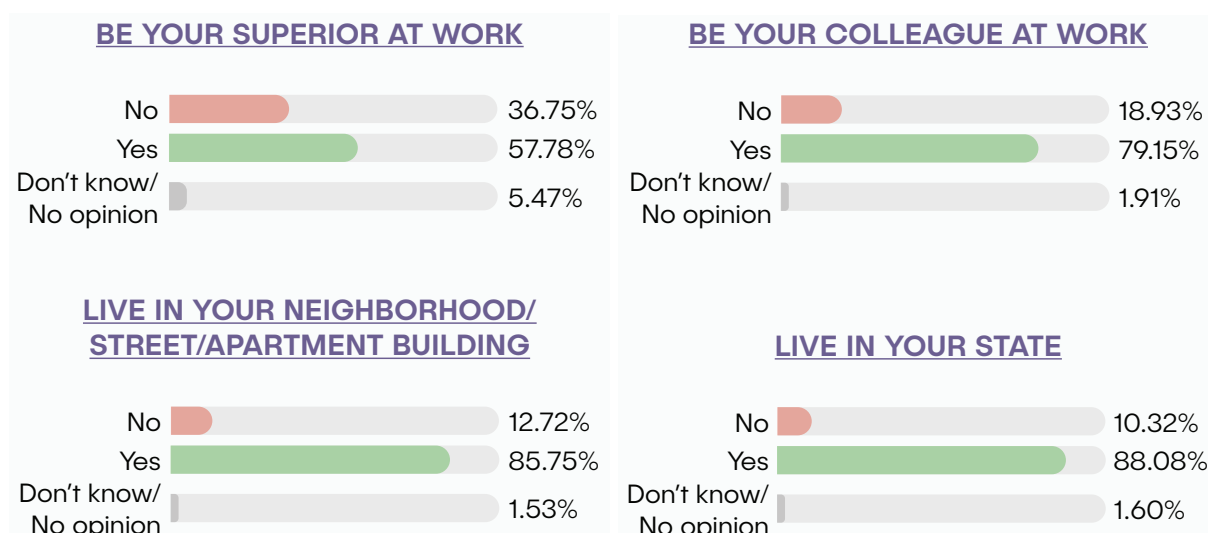


Trade and economic cooperation (53.7%), facilitation of contacts among people (21.69%), and implementation of infrastructural projects (10.07%) are considered by responders as the main priorities for cooperation between Albania and Serbia. In contrast, emergency management (0.47%), cultural exchanges (2.75%), and joint representation abroad (3.39%) are considered as the least significant priorities by responders.

Little more than half of Albanians (53.09%) feel safe to travel to Serbia, and 37.84% others feel somehow safe. In contrast, a small percentage of Albanians (6.95%) feel unsafe to travel to Serbia.

**TABLE 4** WOULD YOU ACCEPT A SERBIAN CITIZEN TO ...





Responders were asked whether they would accept a Serbian citizen to live in their state and their neighborhood; become their colleague or superior; become a teacher to their kids; become their friend; become a public official in their country; and get married with a family member of theirs. The results indicate that Albanians would mostly accept a Serbian citizen to live in their state (88.08%), live in their neighborhood/street/apartment building (85.75%), become their colleague at work (79.15%), and become their friend (71.55%). In contrary, Albanians are not willing to accept a Serbian citizen to become a public official in Albania (61.06%), are not willing to accept a Serbian citizen to become a teacher to their children/grandchildren (45.78%), and get married with a family member of theirs (42.78%).

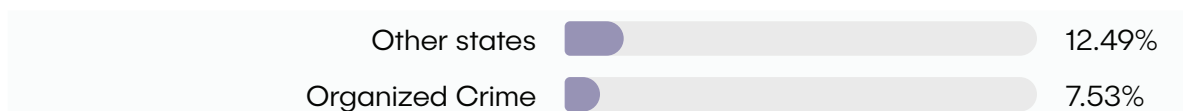
The vast majority of Albanians feel safe to travel to Kosovo. Interestingly, more than one in ten responders (11.4%) only feel somehow safe to travel to Kosovo.

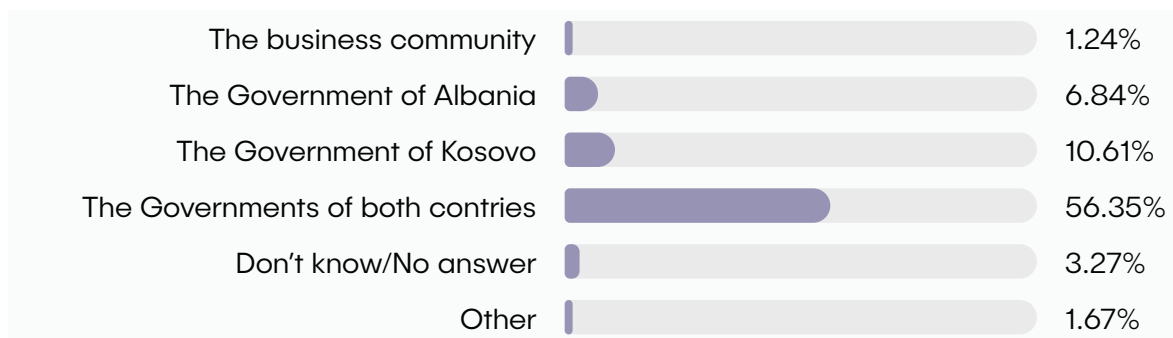
Responders were also asked whether they believe that the government of Albania should get involved in the internal politics of Kosovo (such as Kosovo and Serbia dialogue, internal political developments etc.) The majority of responders (57.09%) believe that the Government of Albania should get involved in the internal politics of Kosovo. In contrary, 40.63% of responders believe that the Government of Albania should not get involved in the internal politics of Kosovo.

Responders were also asked whether they think that Albania should have an active role when it comes to Kosovo's relations with other countries in the region. The majority of Albanians (63.2%) believe that Albania should do so but only upon Kosovo's specific request. More than one in four Albanians (28.81%) believe that Albania should do so in a proactive way, without needing prior consent from Kosovo. In contrary, only 6.14% of Albanians think that Albania should not have an active role in this regard.

The vast majority of responders (85.42%) think that Albania and Kosovo should coordinate and unify their foreign policy. In contrary, more than one in ten Albanians (11.89%) think that both countries should not unify their foreign policy.

**TABLE 5 WHO DO YOU BELIEVE STANDS BEHIND THE ECONOMIC BARRIERS BETWEEN ALBANIA AND KOSOVO?**

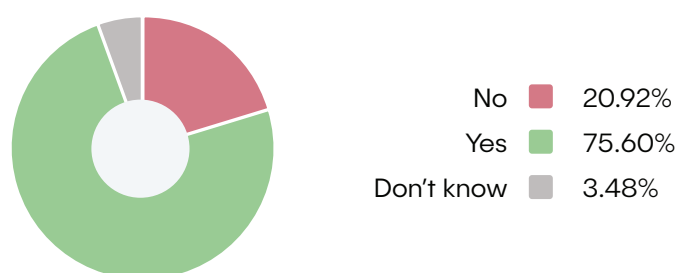




The governments of both countries are considered by the majority of responders (56.35%) as the main reason for the economic barriers between Albania and Kosovo. More than one in ten responders (12.49%) believe that other states stand behind the economic barriers between both countries, and one in ten responders (10.61%) believes that the Government of Kosovo stands behind the economic barriers between both countries.

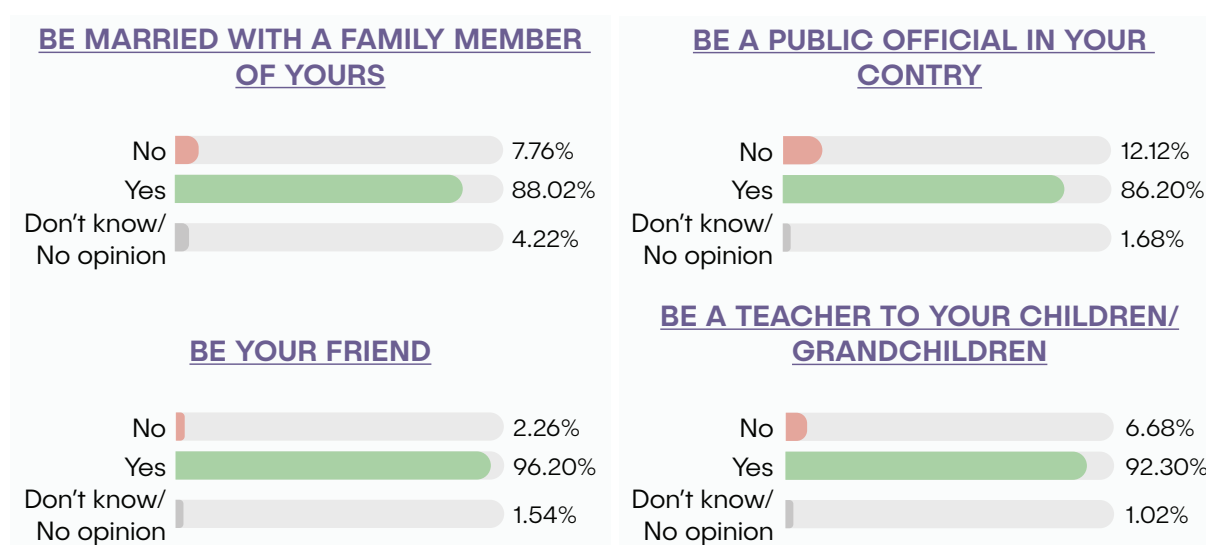
The vast majority of responders (84.9%) think that the border checkpoints between Albania and Kosovo should be removed. In contrary, 13.24% of responders believe that the border checkpoints between two countries should not be removed.

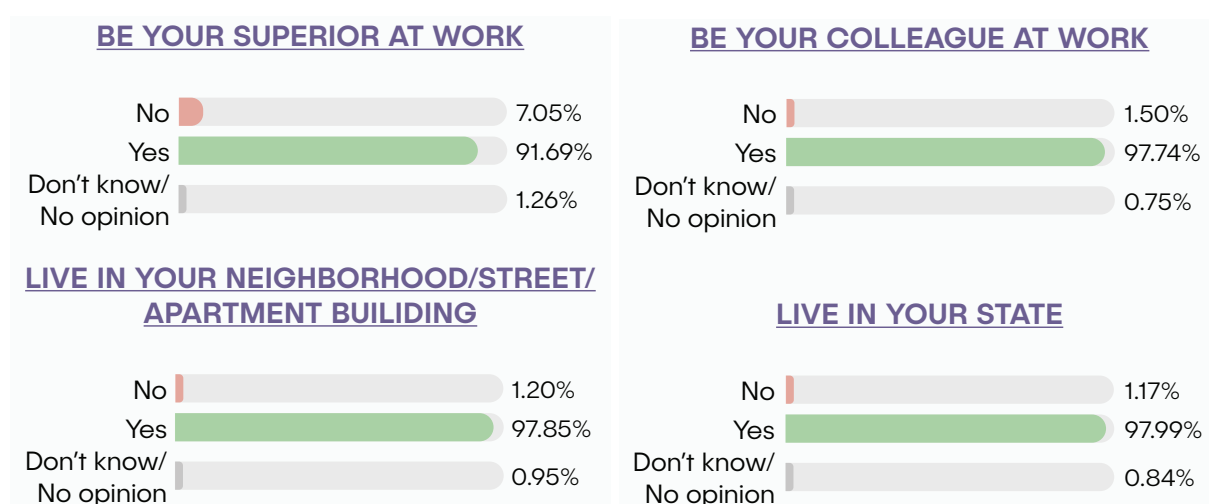
**TABLE 6 DO YOU SUPPORT THE UNIFICATION OF ALBANIA AND KOSOVO?**



The vast majority of Albanians (75.60%) support the unification of Albania and Kosovo. In contrary, one in five Albanians (20.92%) do not support the unification of two countries.

**TABLE 7 WOULD YOU ACCEPT A KOSOVO CITIZEN TO ...**





Responders were asked whether they would accept a Kosovo citizen to live in their state and their neighborhood; become their colleague or superior; become a teacher to their kids; become their friend; become a public official in their country; and get married with a family member of theirs. The results indicate that the overwhelming majority of Albanians would accept a Kosovo citizen to live in their state (97.99%), live in their neighborhood/street/apartment building (97.85%), become their colleague at work (97.74%), and become their friend (96.20%). Slightly lower acceptance ratings are noticed with regards to the willingness of Albanians to accept a Kosovo citizen to become a public official in Albania (86.20%), get married with a family member of theirs (88.02%), become their superior at work (91.69%) and to be a teacher to their children/grandchildren (92.30%).

This section provided the survey results pertaining to the bilateral relations between Albania, Kosovo and Serbia. The following chapter provides the survey results related to the cross-border cooperation and identity issues.



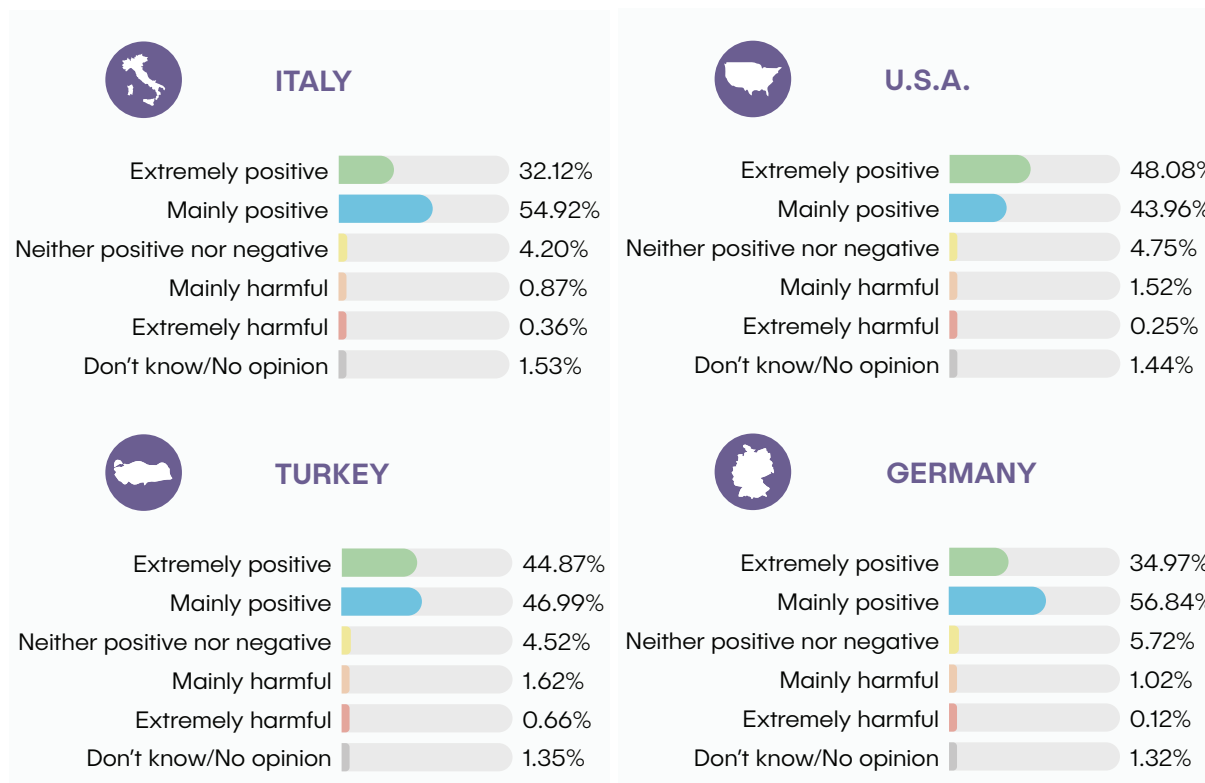
# PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CROSS BORDER COOPERATION AND IDENTITY ISSUES

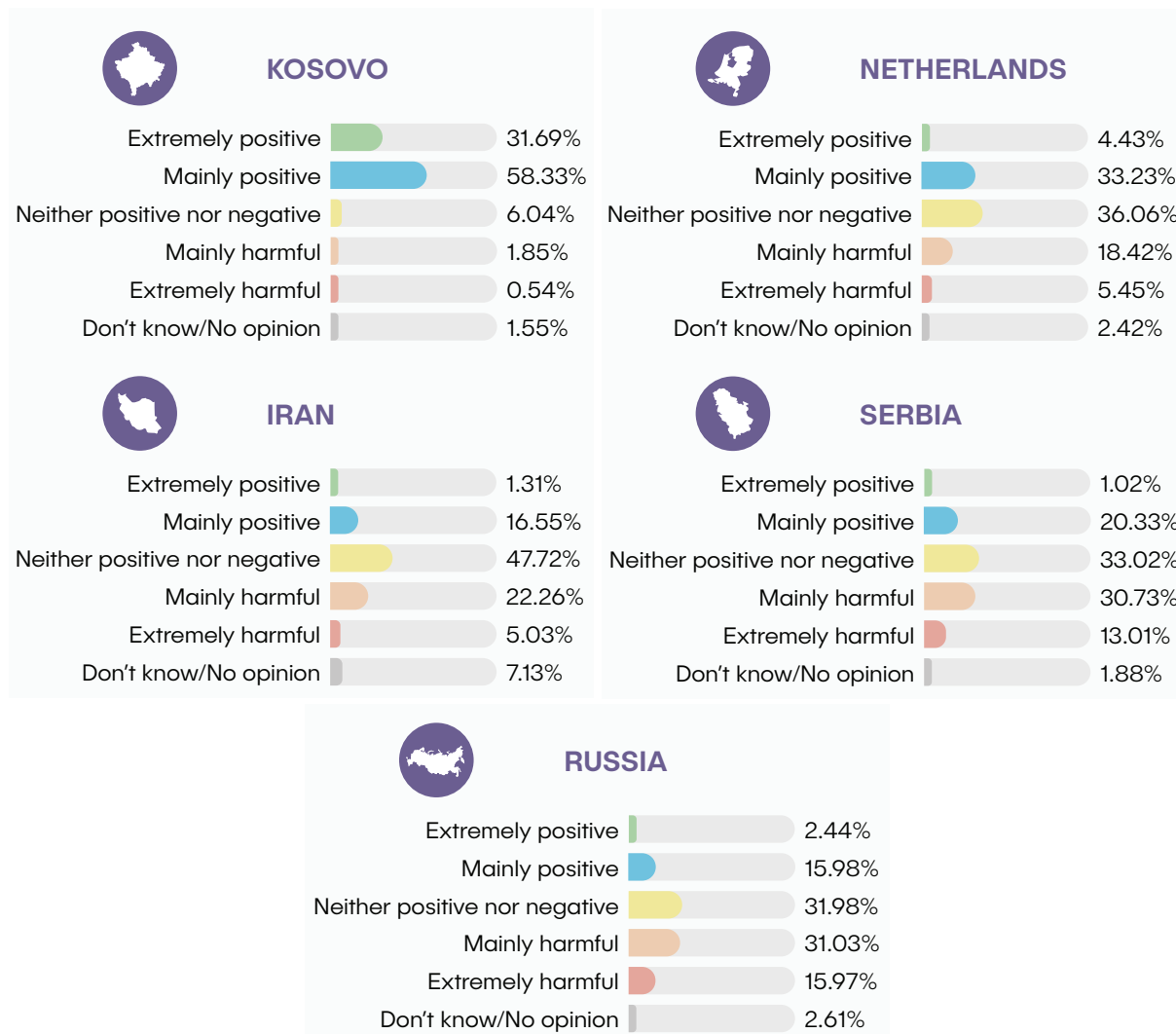
This section provides all the survey results related to the public perception of cross-border cooperation and identity issues. The issues that this section covers include perceptions of the Albanian citizens towards the influence of (main) foreign countries in Albania, and their view towards regional cooperation initiatives, such as "Open Balkan".

Italy, United States of America and Turkey are the three countries perceived with the most positive influence towards Albania, whereas Russia, Serbia and Iran are perceived with the most negative influence towards Albania. The vast majority of Albanians support the "Open Balkan" initiative. Albanians believe that Turkey, United States of America and Italy have provided the most help during the COVID-19 pandemic to Albania.

Albanians perceive Italy (93.04%), United States of America (92.04%), Turkey (91.86%), Germany (91.81%) and Kosovo (90.02%) as the countries with the most positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, Russia (47%), Serbia (43.74%), Iran (27.29%) and Netherlands (23.87%) as the countries with the most harmful influence towards Albania (see graph no. 8).

**TABLE 8** IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT IS THE INFLUENCE OF THE FOLLOWING COUNTRIES TOWARDS ALBANIA





38.96% of responders believe that Saudi Arabia has a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, 7.32% of responders believe that Saudi Arabia has a harmful influence towards Albania.

Half of responders (50.28%) believe that Austria has a positive influence towards Albania. A very small percentage of responders (4.11%) believe that Austria has a harmful influence towards Albania.

37.63% of responders believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina has a positive influence towards Albania. A very small percentage of responders (4.88%) believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina has a harmful influence towards Albania.

More than one in four responders (28.66%) believe that Bulgaria has a positive influence towards Albania. A considerable percentage of responders (15.47%) believe that Bulgaria has a harmful influence towards Albania.

The majority of responders (62.73%) believe that United Arab Emirates has a positive influence towards Albania. A very small percentage of responders (5.1%) believe that United Arab Emirates has a harmful influence towards Albania.

Little more than half of responders (53.59%) believe that France has a positive influence towards Albania. A considerable percentage of responders (16.74%) believe that France has a harmful influence towards Albania.

The majority of responders (61.19%) believe that Greece has a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, more than one in ten responders (12.88%) believe that Greece has

a harmful influence towards Albania.

39.41% of responders believe that Hungary has a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, a small percentage of responders (6.64%) believe that Hungary has a harmful influence towards Albania.

The majority of responders (56.12%) believe that Israel has a positive influence towards Albania. A very small percentage of responders (4.87%) believe that Israel has a harmful influence towards Albania.

36.69% of responders believe that China has a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, one in five responders (19.92%) believe that China has a harmful influence towards Albania.

The vast majority of responders (71.82%) believe that Croatia has a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, a very small percentage of responders (2.16%) believe that Croatia has a harmful influence towards Albania.

The vast majority of responders (73.39%) believe that Montenegro has a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, a very small percentage of responders (2.67%) believe that Montenegro has a harmful influence towards Albania.

The vast majority of responders (74.3%) believe that North Macedonia has a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, a very small percentage of responders (3.74%) believe that North Macedonia has a harmful influence towards Albania.

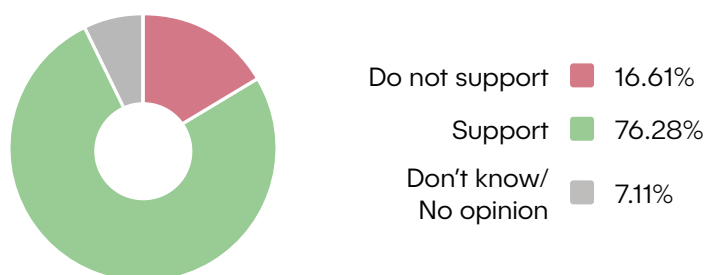
The majority of responders (58.59%) believe that United Kingdom has a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, a small percentage of responders (7.09%) believe that United Kingdom has a harmful influence towards Albania.

One in three responders (34.79%) believe that Romania has a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, a small percentage of responders (5.34%) believe that Romania has a harmful influence towards Albania.

More than one in three responders (35.97%) believe that Spain has a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, less than one in ten responders (9.31%) believe that Spain has a harmful influence towards Albania.

38.6% of responders believe that Scandinavian countries have a positive influence towards Albania. In contrary, a very small percentage of responders (2.42%) believe that Scandinavian countries have a harmful influence towards Albania.

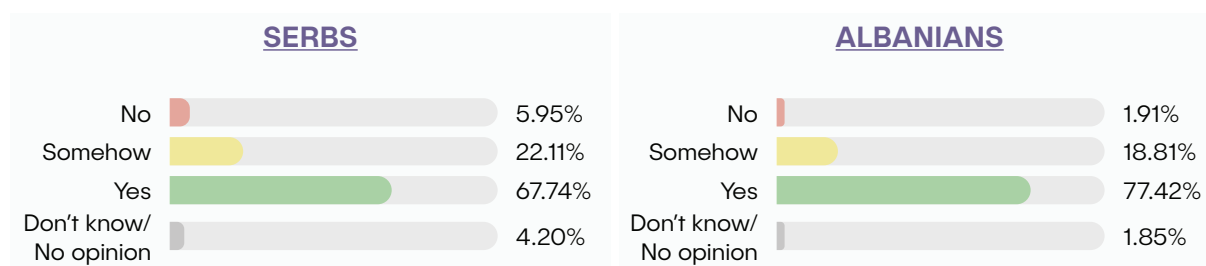
**TABLE 9** IF YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE IDEA OF SO-CALLED “WESTERN BALKANS MINI-SCHENGEN” RECENTLY RENAMED INTO “OPEN BALKAN”, DO YOU SUPPORT IT?



The overwhelming majority of responders (86.18%) are familiar with the idea of so-called “Western Balkans Mini-Schengen” recently renamed into “Open Balkan”. In contrary, 13.82% of responders were not familiar with that initiative. Responders were then asked whether they supported the “Open Balkan” initiative, where the vast majority of

responders (76.28%) supported this initiative (see graph no. 9).

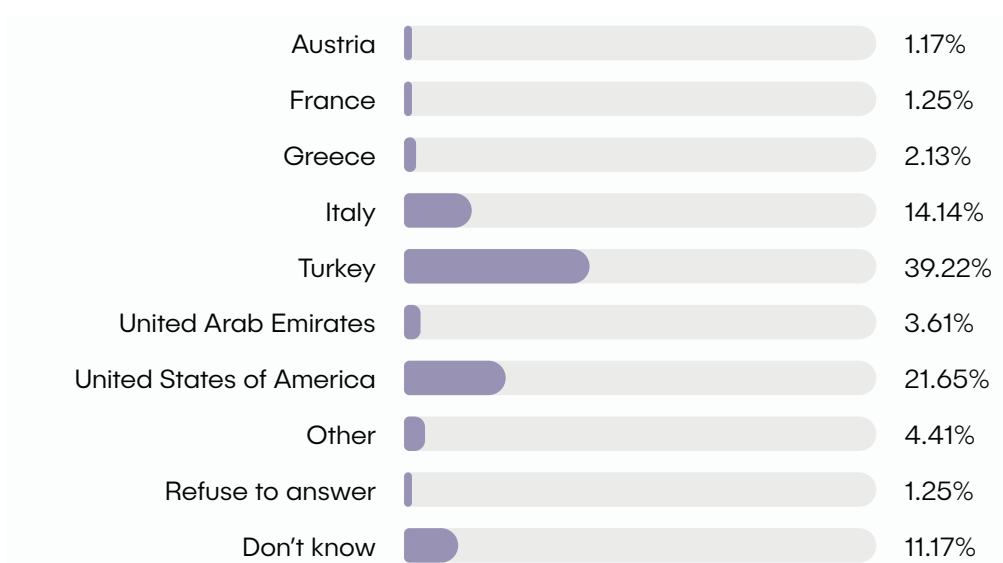
**TABLE 10 DO YOU THINK THAT THE FOLLOWING ARE IMPORTANT FACTORS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?**



The vast majority of responders (77.42%) believe that Albanians are an important factor in the Western Balkans. Although in a lower percentage (67.74%), the majority of responders also believes that Serbians too are an important factor in the Western Balkans (see graph no. 10).

Responders were also asked which state do they think has given the biggest financial/humanitarian support to Albania in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic (see graph no. 11).

**TABLE 11 NAME ONE COUNTRY/INSTITUTION WHICH HAS GIVEN THE BIGGEST FINANCIAL/HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT TO ALBANIA IN DEALING WITH COVID-19 PANDEMIC**



This section presented citizens perceptions towards cross-border cooperation and identity issues. This was the third and last section of this report. The following conclusion reflects upon the survey results.





# CONCLUSION

This report was prepared with the aim of examining the attitudes of Albanian citizens towards bilateral relations, cross-border cooperation and identity issues.

Good neighborly relations and regional cooperation are part of the first cluster “The Fundamentals of the Accession Process” and form an essential part of Albania’s European integration process. They contribute to stability, reconciliation and a climate conducive to addressing open bilateral issues and the legacies of the past. According to the European Commission’s Albania 2021 report, the country has continued to engage in a constructive way in dialogue with neighboring countries to address bilateral issues and to ensure good neighborly relations.

In terms of relations of Albania with Kosovo, given that both countries are part of the same nation, with a shared past, nationality and language, the relations between them have always been excellent. This view is confirmed by this survey, as the vast majority of Albanian citizens suggest Albania and Kosovo governments to unify their foreign policy; remove border checkpoints and also support unification of both countries in one single state. While the citizens of both countries express excellent attitudes towards each other (also confirmed by this survey), at the government level, relations are not the same. Although, the governments of both countries meet annually in an effort to bring countries closer and have successfully maintained overall good relations, they have occasionally disagreed over certain aspects which has led to disputes. The Albanian public also shares this perception, as the majority of them believes that the governments of Albania and Kosovo are responsible behind the (economic) barriers between two countries.

As regards to the relations of the governments of Albania with Serbia, they remain good, but they are also subject to the historical past and also dependent on Serbia’s attitude towards Kosovo. Albania continues to support the resumption of the EU-sponsored Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. For this, more than half of Albanian citizens asked in this survey believe that such dialogue has not yet changed anything, and the majority of citizens believes that mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia would be the best outcome of the dialogue. Besides that, the relations between Albania and Serbia have improved since 2014 when the first ever visit of an Albanian premier took place in Belgrade, which was followed by the visit of Serbian premier to Tirana the following year. Since then both leaders have met occasionally and signed bilateral agreements to bring their countries and people closer. This is also reflected in this survey, as the majority of Albanian citizens consider the relations between two countries to have improved; and they also express positive attitudes towards Serbian citizens. It is worth mentioning that albeit this positive picture, as a result of the past, there are still unfavorable perceptions towards Serbia. For this, only half of Albanians feel safe to travel to Serbia and an approximate number of Albanians perceive Serbia’s influence to Albania as mainly or extremely harmful (second after Russia).

In terms of the idea of “Mini-Schengen”, that was materialized in October 2019 when Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia decided to advance regional cooperation by

forming this initiative in order to improve life and the economy in the region until the European Union (EU) opens its doors to them. This initiative is open to all six Western Balkans (WB) countries, albeit Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro are skeptical about the idea over fears it would impact their EU accession process and allow Serbian dominance or disruption in the region. Regardless of this opposition, the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia are keen to remain invested. At the Economic Forum on Regional Cooperation held in Skopje in June 2021, the trio unveiled a new name for this initiative, "The Open Balkan". They signed three agreements (i) Responding together to natural and other disasters; (ii) Allowing citizens to work in one another's countries; and (iii) Helping goods move without delays. Amid widespread debate in Albania over this initiative, this survey finds that the vast majority of the Albanian public is aware and also supportive of the "Open Balkan" initiative.

It is not clear whether this initiative will go through, but since half of the WB countries are not willing to join, the entire initiative may head to failure because as a regional initiative it cannot succeed without the participation of all six WB countries.

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