

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS REGIONAL COOPERATION AND BILATERAL RELATIONS OF ALBANIA WITH SERBIA AND KOSOVO WITH SERBIA





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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 perceive 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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February 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Executive Summary 1
- Introduction2
- Methodology3
- 1. Perceptions towards regional cooperation 4
- 2. Public perceptions on bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia.. 8
- 3. Public perceptions on bilateral relations between Kosovo and Serbia... 11
- Conclusions 14
- Endnotes 16

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents and review the perceptions of citizens in Albania regarding regional cooperation and bilateral relations between of Albania with Serbia and Kosovo with Serbia. The report is structured in three main chapters, in which the results of the survey regarding regional cooperation, bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia and Kosovo and Serbia are presented.

In the answers of the citizens asked, a significant support for regional cooperation can be observed, where 83.32% of them support it. Although less than previous year, the "Open Balkan" initiative is supported by 67% of the respondents, who list the exchange of goods, investments and people between the Balkan countries as the main reason for this support. 28.18% of citizens who do not support the "Open Balkan" initiative list as the main reason the dominance of this initiative by Serbia (43.47%) and the exclusion of Kosovo from this initiative (27.16%).

Regarding the relations between Albania and Serbia a tendency to maintain a neutral position can be observed from the answers of the respondents. The majority of respondents (64.18%) evaluate the current relations between Albania and Serbia as neither good nor bad. Compared to the year 2021 the percentage of citizens thinking that the relations between Albania and Serbia are good or very good is nearly reduced by half.

A majority of respondents (88.21%) think that Albania and Serbia should improve their relations. Compared to previous year it is evidenced a slight increase of the number of citizens who think that Albania and Serbia should not improve their relations. Some of the preconditions to improve the relations between Albania and Serbia include economic development (37.73%), increased security (26.39%), strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law (25.61%), personal links between politicians (6.42%) and cultural exchanges (1.65%).

When asked about the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, a majority of respondents (88.91%) support it, nevertheless compared to previous year the number of respondents supporting it is decreased. A slightly increased it is evidenced in the number of citizens who do not support the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue compared to previous year. Citizens in Albania are nearly equally divided regarding how the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia is moving.

United States of America and European Union are considered as the most trusted actors by 46.50% of respondents as regard their role as mediator in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Even the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia is supported by the majority of respondents in Albania, 67.31% think that Kosovo and Serbia will not reach a final agreement in the near future, while 65.55% think that it is somewhat unlikely or very unlikely to happen an armed conflict between Kosovo and Serbia.

INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) is a regional project that measures public perceptions in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia for a wide range of security, rule of law, justice, regional cooperation and peacebuilding issues, implemented by local civil society organisations in the respective countries.

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.

CSDG has implemented WBSB in Albania for the second year since 2021. Along with the National Security Barometer which CSDG has produced since 2019, this project has produced a wealth of data that are used by a wide range of actors from policy makers, security practitioners, academia, the media, the international donors, etc.

The regional edition measures 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.

The first report was “Public Safety and Internal and External Threats” (2022). The second report was “Public Perception towards Security and Justice Institutions and Corruption Issues” (2022).

This is the third report **“Public Perceptions towards Regional Cooperation and Bilateral Relations of Albania with Serbia and Kosovo with Serbia” 2022.**

METHODOLOGY

The report has been produced based on data collected from a survey based on multi-layered random sample of 1120 adults conducted between 23 September and 2 October 2022 through face-to-face interviews.

Surveys were proportionally distributed among 61 municipalities of Albania, taking into consideration the rural/urban areas, gender, and age quotas. Based on this multi-layered sampling approach an accurate geographic and demographic representation of Albania's adult population has been achieved, while maintaining a sampling error lower than $\pm 2.9\%$ for the overall sample.

1. PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS REGIONAL COOPERATION

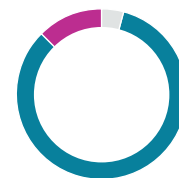
83.32% of the citizens asked in Albania support regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, while only 12.50% of them do not support it.

There is a clear difference between women and men who do not support regional cooperation, as about 50% less female respondents compared to male respondents do not support regional cooperation.

GRAPH 1 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON REGIONAL COOPERATION IN WESTERN BALKANS

DO YOU SUPPORT THE REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?

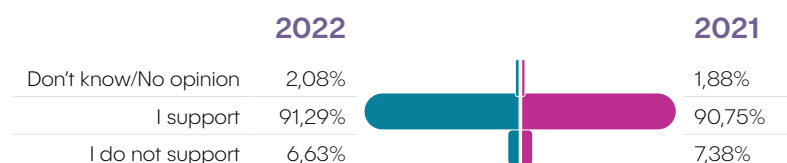
Don't know/No opinion 4,19%
I support 83,32%
I do not support 12,50%



Almost the same trend is evident when citizens were asked about free movement, exchange of information and the common market for goods and labour in the Western Balkans, where 91.29% of the respondents support them. About 50% fewer female respondents compared to male respondents do not support them.

GRAPH 2 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE FREE MOVEMENT, EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION AND A COMMON MARKET FOR GOODS AND LABOUR IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?

DO YOU SUPPORT THE FREE MOVEMENT, EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION AND A COMMON MARKET FOR GOODS AND LABOUR IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?

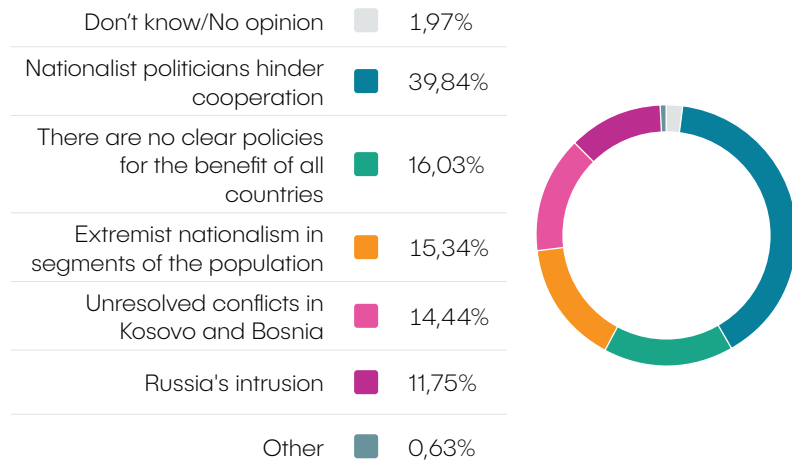


Nationalist politicians are considered by 39.84% of surveyed citizens as the main factor, which is harming regional cooperation the most. 16.03% of respondents consider the lack of clear policies as the main factor that harming this cooperation, whereas 15.34% of respondents consider extremist nationalism as the main factor that harm regional cooperation. Fewer citizens (14.44%) state that the disputes between Kosovo and

Serbia on one hand and between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia on the other hand are the main the main reasons that harm regional cooperation, while 11.75% define Russia's intrusion, through its influence in fuelling ethnic cleavages, promoting nationalist politicians and complicating the region's lagging reform agendas.

GRAPH 3 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE REASONS HARMING REGIONAL COOPERATION THE MOST

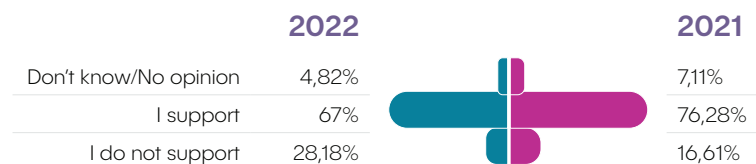
WHAT DO YOU THINK IS HARMING REGIONAL COOPERATION THE MOST?



Although the majority of citizens in Albania (67%) support the "Open Balkan" initiative, there is a decrease in the number of those who support this initiative compared to 2021, where 76.28% supported it. Conversely, there is an increase in the number of citizens who do not support the Open Balkan initiative compared to the previous year. 28.18% of respondents in this year's survey do not support this initiative, while this number in 2021 was 16.61%.

GRAPH 4 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE SUPPORT OF THE SO-CALLED "OPEN BALKAN"

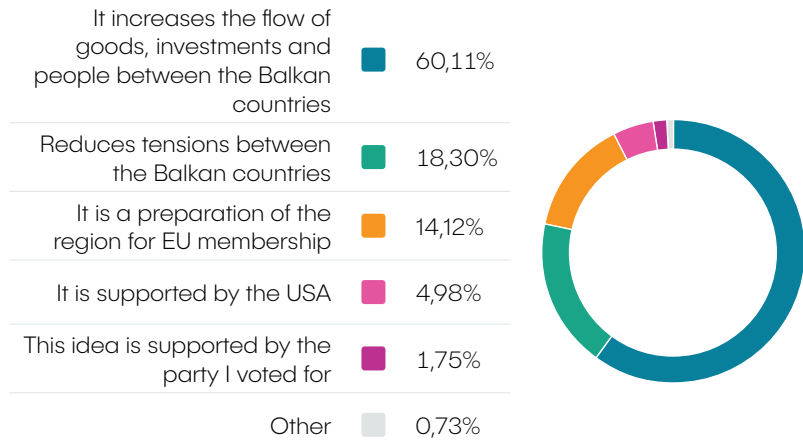
DO YOU SUPPORT THE IDEA OF THE SO-CALLED "OPEN BALKAN"?



The increase in the flow of goods, investments and people between Balkan countries is considered by 60.11% of citizens as the main reason why they support the "Open Balkan". The second main reason is related to the reduction of tensions between the Balkan countries (18.30%), followed by the region's preparation for EU membership (14.12%).

GRAPH 5 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON REASONS FOR SUPPORTING THE "OPEN BALKAN"

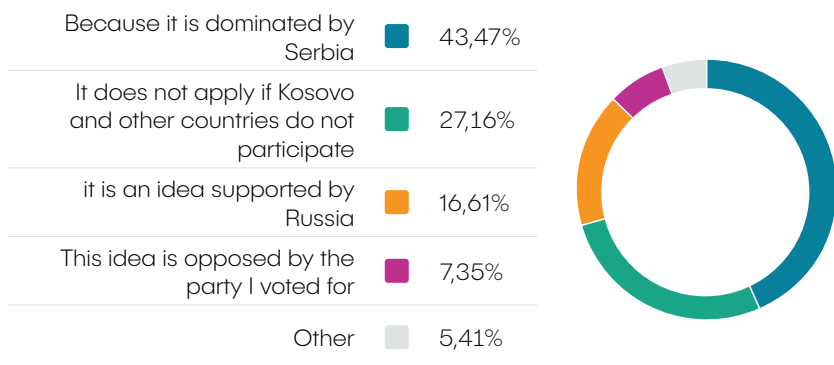
IF YOU SUPPORT THE "OPEN BALKAN", PLEASE EXPLAIN WHY?



The majority of respondents (43.47%) list Serbia's dominance as the main reason why they do not support the "Open Balkan" initiative. 27.16% do not support it due to the non-participation of Kosovo (which refused to join the initiative due to the lack of its recognition by Serbia) and other countries, 16.61% do not support it as they consider it an idea supported by Russia and 7.35% do not support it as they consider it an idea not supported by the party for which they voted for.

GRAPH 6 IF YOU DON'T SUPPORT THE "OPEN BALKAN", PLEASE EXPLAIN WHY?

IF YOU DON'T SUPPORT THE "OPEN BALKAN", PLEASE EXPLAIN WHY?



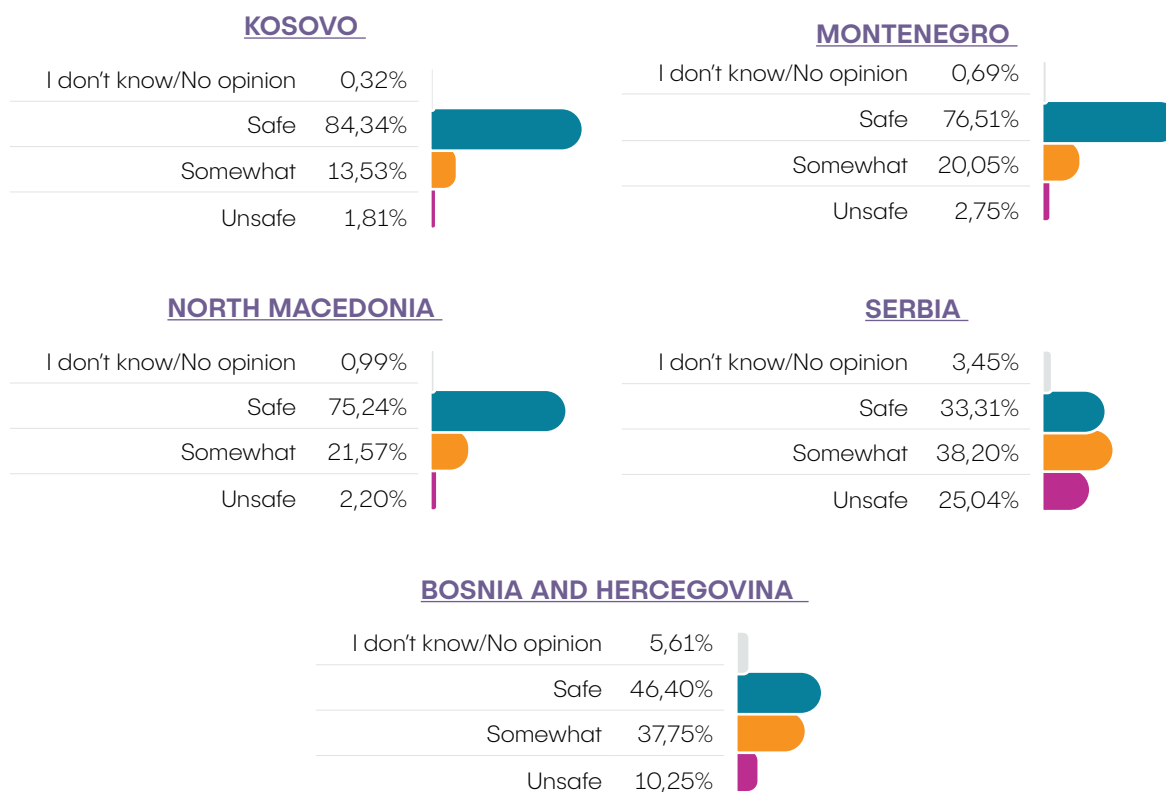
Kosovo is considered by 84.34% of citizens questioned in Albania as the safest place to travel in the region, followed by Montenegro (76.51%) and North Macedonia (75.24%).

Serbia is considered by 25.04% of citizens as the most unsafe country in the region to travel to, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina (10.25%).

In 2021, 53.09% of citizens asked in Albania felt safe to travel to Serbia, while this number in 2022 has dropped to 33.31%.

GRAPH 7 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE LEVEL OF SAFETY TO TRAVEL TO COUNTRIES OF THE REGION

HOW SAFE WOULD YOU FEEL TO TRAVEL TO THE FOLLOWING COUNTRIES OF THE REGION?



2. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ON BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN ALBANIA AND SERBIA

The majority of respondents (64.18%) evaluate the relations between Albania and Serbia as neither good nor bad. Compared to previous year, the percentage of citizens who think that relations between Albania and Serbia are good or very good has decreased. However, there is an increase in the number of respondents (7.55%), who think that relations between Albania and Serbia are bad or very bad compared to previous year (3.9%).

GRAPH 8 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE CURRENT OVERALL RELATIONS BETWEEN ALBANIA AND SERBIA



Although the majority of respondents think that the relations between Albania and Serbia during the last two years have improved (85.71%), this number is lower compared to 2021, where 92.41% of citizens thought the same.

39.48% think they have improved somewhat, 35.72% think they have improved a little and 10.51% think they have improved a lot. Compared to last year, more citizens (9.83%) think that relations between the two countries have not improved at all.

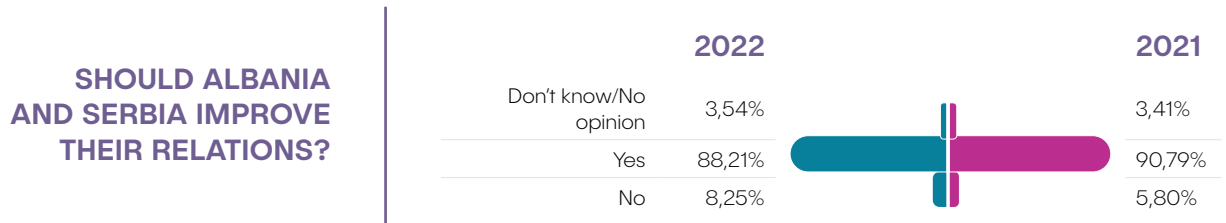
GRAPH 9 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF RELATIONS BETWEEN ALBANIA AND SERBIA OVER THE LAST 2 YEARS



88.21% of respondents in this survey think that Albania and Serbia should improve their relations.

Compared to previous year, there is a slight increase in the percentage of citizens who think that Albania and Serbia should not improve their relations.

GRAPH 10 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE NEED TO IMPROVE THE RELATIONS BETWEEN ALBANIA AND SERBIA



37.73% of respondents think that the main precondition for improving relations between Albania and Serbia is economic development, 26.39% think the increase in security, 25.61% think the strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law, 6.42% the personal ties between politicians and only 1.65% cultural exchanges.

More citizens than the previous year think that increasing security, strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law, and personal ties between politicians are the main preconditions for improving relations between Albania and Serbia.

GRAPH 11 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON PRECONDITIONS FOR IMPROVING RELATIONS BETWEEN SERBIA AND ALBANIA



Albanian citizens have a positive attitude regarding the arrival of employees from Serbia to Albania.

63.50% think that employees from Serbia are welcome in Albania and only 29.70% think the opposite. Around 24% less respondents from rural areas say that they support the arrival of employees from Serbia to Albania.

GRAPH 12 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE ACCEPTANCE OF WORKERS FROM SERBIA IN ALBANIA

DO YOU THINK
WORKERS FROM
SERBIA ARE
ACCEPTED/
WELCOMED IN
ALBANIA?

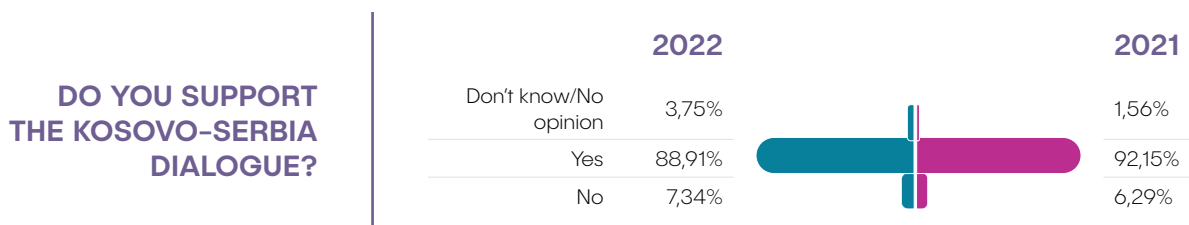
Don't know/No opinion 6,80%
Yes 63,50%
No 29,70%



3. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ON BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN KOSOVO AND SERBIA

When asked about the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, a majority of citizens in Albania (88.91%) support it, although compared to the previous year there is a decrease in this number. A slight increase is evident in the number of citizens who do not support the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue compared to the previous year.

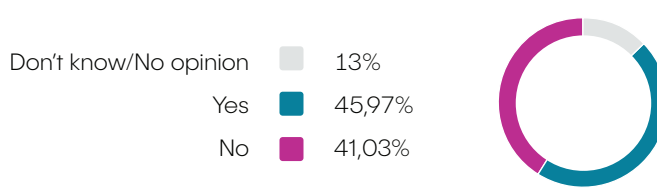
GRAPH 13 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON KOSOVO-SERBIA DIALOGUE



Citizens in Albania are almost equally divided about how the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia is going. Despite the support of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, 41.03% of respondents think that the dialogue is not going in the right direction, whereas 45.97% think the opposite. 47.31% of female respondents think that the dialogue is going in the right direction, while 36.99% of them think the opposite. 44.62% of the male respondents think that the dialogue is going in the right direction, while 45.12% have opposite perceptions.

GRAPH 14 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE PROGRESS OF KOSOVO-SERBIA DIALOGUE

DO YOU THINK THE NORMALIZATION DIALOGUE BETWEEN KOSOVO AND SERBIA IS MOVING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?



41.35% of respondents in Albania think that in case of failure to reach an agreement on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, a frozen conflict will be created and the current status quo will continue to remain. 19.83% think that from this failure, Kosovo and Serbia will encounter problems and obstacles in the process of European integration. 17.91% think that in the case of the failure of the agreement

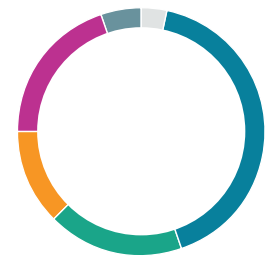
3. Public perceptions on bilateral relations between Kosovo and Serbia

between Kosovo and Serbia, there will be an increase in clashes between the Albanian and Serbian communities, while 12.36% think that there will be a direct conflict between the two countries.

GRAPH 15 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE CASE OF FAILURE TO REACH AN AGREEMENT OF NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN KOSOVO AND SERBIA

WHAT DO YOU THINK WOULD BE THE CONSEQUENCES IN CASE OF FAILURE TO REACH AN AGREEMENT/ ABSENCE OF NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN KOSOVO AND SERBIA?

Don't know/No opinion	3,48%
The frozen conflict and status quo will continue to be maintained	41,35%
There will be an increase of clashes between the Albanian and Serbian communities in Kosovo and Serbia	17,91%
There will be a direct conflict between two countries	12,36%
Kosovo/Serbia will fail in the EU integration process	19,83%
None of the above	5,07%

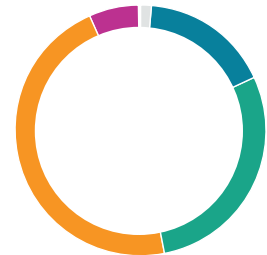


The United States of America and the European Union are considered the most trusted actors by 46.50% of Albanian citizens asked in the survey regarding their role as mediators in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. The involvement of both actors is considered more reliable by citizens compared to their separate involvement.

GRAPH 16 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE ROLE AS MEDIATOR IN THE KOSOVO-SERBIA DIALOGUE

WHOM WOULD YOU TRUST THE MOST AS A MEDIATOR IN THE KOSOVO - SERBIA DIALOGUE?

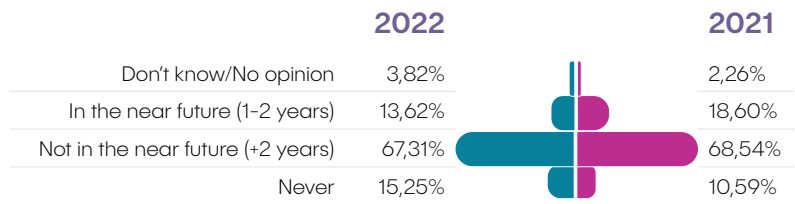
Don't know/No opinion	1,58%
I'd rather trust EU to mediate the dialogue	16,66%
I'd rather trust US to mediate the dialogue	28,72%
US and EU should mediate the dialogue together	46,50%
Neither EU nor US should be involved in the dialogue	6,55%



Although the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue is supported by the majority of citizens surveyed in Albania, 67.31% of them think that Kosovo and Serbia will not reach a final agreement in the near future. A low percentage of citizens (13.62%) think that these two countries will reach an agreement in the near future. On the other hand, there is an increase in the number of citizens (15.25%), who compared to previous year (10.59%) think that an agreement will never be reached between Kosovo and Serbia.

GRAPH 17 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON REACHING A FINAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN KOSOVO AND SERBIA

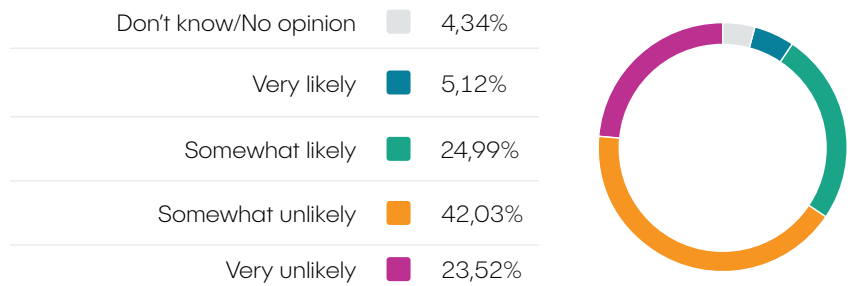
WHEN DO YOU THINK THAT KOSOVO AND SERBIA WILL REACH A FINAL AGREEMENT?



The majority of citizens asked in Albania (65.55%) think that it is somewhat or very unlikely to have an armed conflict or a potential a new war between Kosovo and Serbia. While 30.11% of the respondents think that it is somewhat or very likely that there will be an armed conflict between Kosovo and Serbia.

GRAPH 18 CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ARMED CONFLICT BETWEEN KOSOVO AND SERBIA

WHAT IS THE LIKELIHOOD OF AN ARMED CONFLICT - DO YOU THINK THERE IS POTENTIAL FOR A NEW WAR BETWEEN KOSOVO AND SERBIA?



CONCLUSIONS

Regional cooperation is a key element for Albania in its journey to be part of the European Union, helping to build a beneficial atmosphere for resolving many bilateral issues as well as the development of many vital sectors of the economy and beyond. This is shown in the positive perceptions that the citizens in Albania have about the support towards cooperation between the countries of the region.

The “Open Balkan” initiative, also known as the Balkan “Mini-Schengen”,¹ initiated in 2019 between Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia, is supported by the majority of respondents. Despite the questionable results of this initiative,² the main reason why citizens support it is related to the free movement of people, goods, capital and services.

Although the initiative received the support of the European Union and the USA, it was viewed with scepticism from its beginnings and this was due to the negative influence of Serbia on Kosovo’s statehood, as well as the increasing influence of Russia in the Western Balkans, particularly with regards to the latter’s relations with Serbia.³ These factors turn out to be the primary causes of those citizens who do not support this initiative, who list Serbia’s involvement as the main reason for not supporting it.

The European Parliament stated at the end of 2022 that the initiative should aim to include all six countries of the Western Balkans, demanding the intensification of efforts for better neighbourly relations, comprehensive and effective socio-economic cooperation at the regional level and solidarity for countries that aspire to be part of the European Union.⁴

Relations between Albania and Serbia are considered good,⁵ intensifying even more after 2014 following the historic visit of the prime minister of Albania to Belgrade, the first by an Albanian prime minister in 68 years.⁶ Meanwhile, the purpose that both countries have to be part of the European Union seems to have fuelled even more the need for cooperation between them. Conversely, the Government of Albania has stated that the strengthening of Albania’s relations with Serbia has not altered the country’s unwavering position towards the recognition of Kosovo’s independence.

Despite the enhancement of relations between the two countries, citizens evaluate them as neither good nor bad, while fewer of them compared to 2021 think that they are good. Nevertheless, in the responses given, a positive attitude towards the need to improve relations with Serbia is noticeable, focusing especially on economic development as the main precondition for reinforcing these relations.

Meanwhile, a critical process for the entire region remains the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, which began as early as 2011.⁷ The incidents instigated by Serbia that took place in the north of Kosovo, and the pressures that followed the relations between Kosovo and Serbia during the month of December 2022 constructed a difficult climate for advancing the discussion between the two countries with the ambition of achieving an agreement.⁸

Despite the dedication of the European Union and the United States of America to speed up the process of reaching a final agreement between Kosovo and Serbia within the framework of the EU proposal, known as the Franco–German proposal, it is still unclear whether this the process will be completed during the year 2023.⁹

These events are also reflected in the perceptions of citizens in Albania regarding the relations between Kosovo and Serbia and the development of dialogue between the two countries. Although most of them support this process, a majority think that it is not going in the right direction and that the chances of reaching an agreement in the near future are limited. Whereas mediation of the process by the two main actors EU and US is considered more reliable compared to its mediation by a solitary actor (EU or US).

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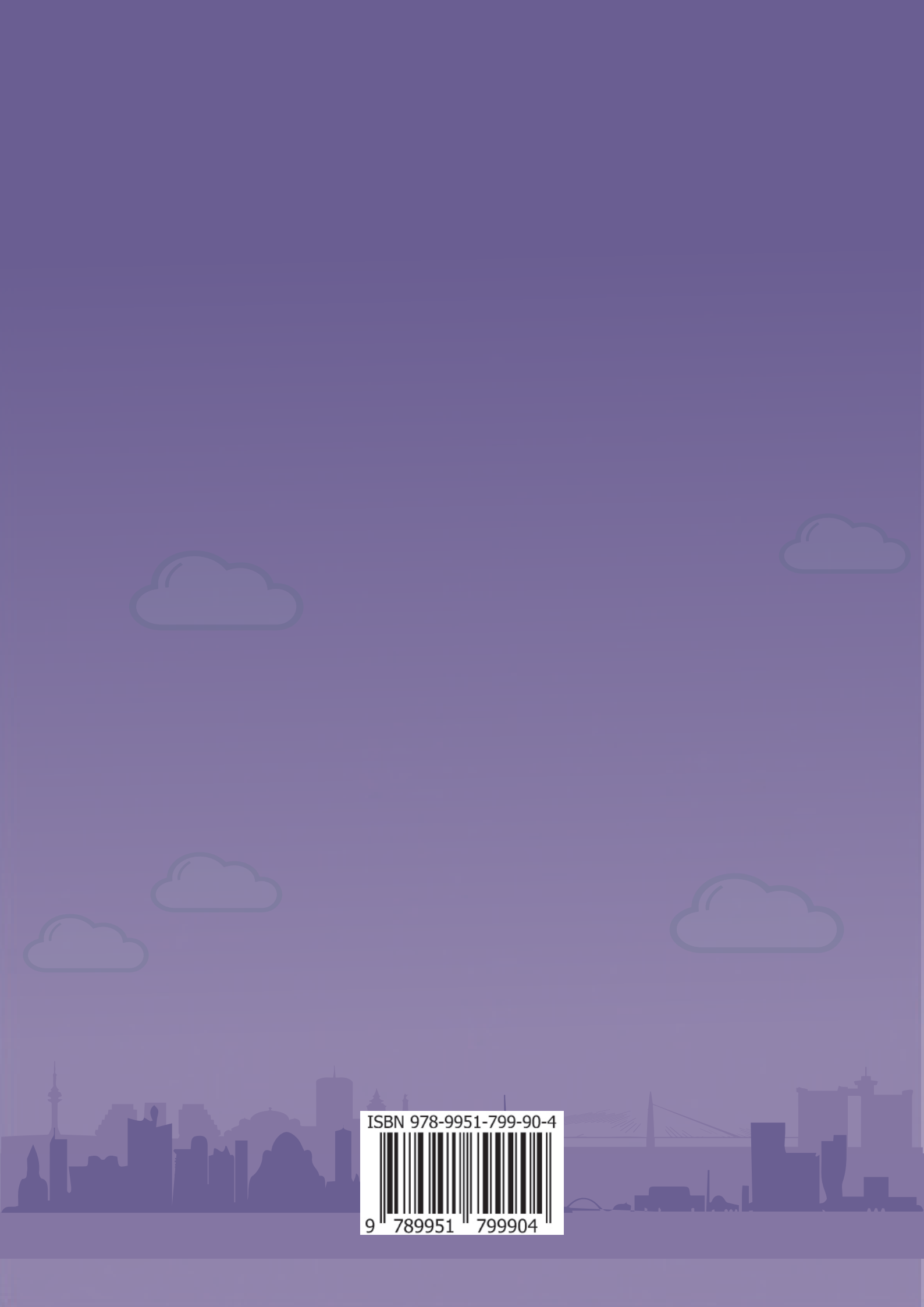
Hallunaj, Mirsada

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