

THE **ALBANIAN** GEOPOLITICAL FACTOR IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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IDM 2020



This report was prepared in the framework of the project 'Europeanisation Beyond Process' supported by the Open Society Initiative for Europe (OSIFE). The views and opinions expressed in this survey report are those of the respondents, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or views of the authors or the organisations involved in drafting this report. Findings and conclusions, due to the small sample size and homogeneous sample, should be used only as a starting point for new research that further explores the concepts discussed in this report.

List of Abbreviations

AA	-	Alliance of Albanians
AAK	-	Alliance for the Future of Kosovo
AKR	-	New Kosovo Alliance
ASK	-	Kosovo Agency of Statistics
CSO	-	Civil Society Organisation
DPA	-	Democratic Party of Albanians
DUI	-	Democratic Union of Albanians
EU	-	European Union
LDK	-	Democratic League of Kosovo
LVV	-	Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination Movement)
NATO	-	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OFA	-	Ohrid Framework Agreement
PDK	-	Democratic Party of Kosovo
RIEDA	-	Research Institute of Development and International Affairs
SDSM	-	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia
US	-	United States of America
WB	-	Western Balkan

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Introduction

Almost three decades after the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, the region still suffers the consequences of the resulting conflicts such as poverty, corruption, weak governance, and economic despair. The threats of nationalism are moulded by the opportunities it presents to populists, hard-liners and consumed political figures who leverage nationalist sentiments to gain or stay in power; vindicate themselves from their poor track record; rally support and discredit their opponents. In a nutshell, such methods yield immense political benefits for their proponents, as it enables populist leaders to change the narrative to something in which they alone and their close collaborators emerge as heroes, patriots and eventually, beneficiaries.

This 'go-it-alone' nationalist approach hinders prosperity, impedes on democratic processes, disregards human rights and the freedom of expression, and tarnishes hopes for regional cooperation and stability. To counter the appeal of such disruptive powers, it is necessary to anchor balancing factors ensuring the geostrategic orientation of the region towards integration with the European Union and commitment to democratic values of accountability, transparency, the rule of law, human rights, and regional cooperation.

Although with mixed democratic credentials, the ethnic Albanian political factor has been unwavering in its support and efforts to enhance cooperation and advance the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. There are two primary considerations for this. Firstly, despite being dispersed in different countries¹, the Albanian political factor has maintained its commitment to the Euro-Atlantic perspective of the region. While this has not always translated into a genuine commitment to the rule of law and democratic values at home, its Western geostrategic and political orientation has been unequivocal, even in times when nationalist rhetoric has been used. Secondly, the determinant role of the Albanian political factor in the political life of at least three of the six Western Balkan countries, namely Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, where they either constitute a majority or serve as key governing partners.

This paper provides insight into the composition, nature, perception, and the role of the Albanian political factor in the Republic of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Through targeted surveys of the socio-political elites in the three target countries, the paper identifies and analyses individual perceptions of the Albanian political factor and seeks to identify ways through which nationalist² elements within the political factor can be contained. The paper explores opportunities to instrumentalise this factor to foster regional stability, good neighbourly relations, democratisation and EU integration. As the first of its kind, the study aims to create a 2030 Roadmap for the Albanian

¹ *Ethnic Albanians live in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and in Serbia. Whereas in Albania and Kosovo ethnic Albanians form the majority of inhabitants, Albanians are a smaller portion of the population in North Macedonia and considered an ethnic minority in Montenegro and Serbia. In North Macedonia they constitute at least 25% of the population, in Montenegro ethnic Albanians make up around 5% of the population, and in Serbia 0.8% (according to the 2002 census). Such figures are not universally accepted as genuine.*

² *When speaking about "negative nationalist narratives" throughout the paper, the authors mean hard-lined ethnic nationalism or chauvinism, not patriotism or the sense of feeling proud of one's heritage, ethnicity or country.*

geopolitical factor driven by European values such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

In the surveys, respondents answered a series of questions aimed at identifying the Albanian political factor and highlighting its role and contribution to a series of key issues related to democratisation, rule of law, regional cooperation, and Euro-Atlantic integration. What emerged is a clearer picture of who constitutes the “Albanian political factor,” what it does and how nationalistic it is. The results of the survey uncover the perceived contribution of the Albanian political factor in furthering important domestic and national agendas such as accountability, rule of law and regional cooperation. More importantly, respondents provided recommendations on how the factor could leverage its role and influence to counter nationalism and other nationalist narratives, promote cooperation, and foster positive change in Western Balkan countries where they live, by boosting prosperity, enhancing good governance, and undertaking necessary democratic reforms that serve the populace instead of narrow interests of consolidated political elites. After all, joining the EU, improving living standards, enhancing opportunities and welfare, is a formal aspiration ascribed by each country in the region.

Notably, there are similarities and distinct differences in the perceptions among respondents from the three countries surveyed. A key commonality is that many see the role of the Albanian political factor to play a more positive influence in foreign relations than domestic affairs. As a result, factors contributing to regional cooperation, integration into NATO and the EU, or regional stability are seen as highly positive. However, their perceptions significantly change when considering the factor’s contribution to domestic affairs, where it is perceived much more negatively. Leading the trend is the perceived negative impact or diminished role the Albanian political factor has on key issues such as driving the reform agenda, democratisation, and fighting corruption.

This is important for two reasons. First, it corroborates regional perceptions that entrenched political elites, be it ethnic Albanians or others, are often corrupt and unaccountable to their respective electorates. Second, it shows that despite the Albanian political factor playing a positive role in maintaining and fostering regional stability and integration with Euro-Atlantic structures, they are often detached from the everyday concerns of the communities they represent. In this survey, this is illustrated by cases in which influential political actors’ resort to nationalist rhetoric albeit the public not being susceptible to it.

Another important result of the survey is the diversity of perceptions and the localisation of issues. It is often assumed that, in the Western Balkans, members of the same ethnicity share similar opinions, ideas and values. Although the scope of this survey comes with its limitations, it does indicate that ethnic Albanian elite Albanians living in different countries do not always share the same outlook on certain issues. In part, this is a by-product of localisation. As a result, the political infighting of the day in Albania does not have an impact on the daily life of someone from Kosovo and North Macedonia, or vice-versa. As a result, internal politics are largely outside the influence of developments in another country, bar issues of national character. This weak convergence of interests is largely a result of the lack of coordination, interconnection, and fragile relations among political actors in any of the three countries.

Naturally, this is understandable given that local patronage systems of country-specific factors are not interlinked with those in the rest of the region. In addition, there are country-specific issues that make it more difficult for common political platforms. For instance, the use of the Albanian language in North Macedonia, the legacy of war in Kosovo or the legacy of communism in Albania, have no electoral impact in the other countries, and as a result have limited political appeal.

Although Albanians in the region belong to the same ethnicity and speak the same language, we are far from seeing a genuine alignment of efforts to streamline the role of the Albanian political actor to serve more decisively to democratization, development and integration processes. The ongoing tensions between Kosovo and Albania are a case in point. In 2019, relations between Pristina and Tirana reached a tipping point, when threats of a trade war took off. With Albin Kurti as the Prime Minister of Kosovo, relations reached a new low as both parties exchanged bitter accusations, including treason. Central to these accusations were claims that Edi Rama, Albania's Prime Minister was undermining Kosovo's sovereignty with his "paternalistic role". In addition, he was accused of supporting territorial exchanges between Kosovo and Serbia as part of a final agreement, and the so-called "mini-Schengen", a regional economic initiative launched by Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia. Mr Rama strongly refuted both accusations.

Nonetheless, these tensions demonstrate how weak and fragile the links and relations between ethnic Albanian political actors in the region are. A key reason for this is the strong dependability on personal rapport instead of institutional ties. In addition, the establishment of local branches by Kosovo's Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV) in both Tirana and Skopje is unlikely to contribute to the improvement of these cross-border relations, considering it could pose electoral competition to local parties. Although unlikely to amass the necessary support to pose a real challenge to ideological rivals such as the Socialist Party of Albania, such a move has both hampered relations and uncovered the fragility of relations among ethnic Albanian political actors in the region. However, such weak links and tensions were there before 2019 as output has been scarce, and the results of publicly appraised actions have had a limited impact.

In lieu of prospects, the value of this study is two-fold. First, it is unique in its composition and treatment of the Albanian political factor as a potential driver and promoter of regional cooperation, development, and integration. This is, in part, a reflection of the positive role and contribution of the Albanian political factor to regional stability and integration within Euro-Atlantic structures. Secondly, the study informs, guides and challenges pre-existing misconceptions related to the Albanian political factor. Future studies and research could build on and expand on the findings. However, until this happens, it is imperative to maintain that the Albanian political factor is an already influential actor that helps shape decision-making at the local, national and regional level.

Case study: North Macedonia

Introduction

Since the independence of North Macedonia in 1991, and its transition to a pluralist democracy, the Albanian political factor has played a crucial role in expressing the collective demands of Albanians living in North Macedonia. Albanians represent at least 25% of the population of North Macedonia, and the ethnic Albanian political factor represented through Albanian political parties plays an important role in the political developments of the country. Since its independence in 1991, an unwritten rule has been established in North Macedonia where Macedonian political parties cannot form a government without the participation of Albanian parties. As such, the ethnic Albanian political factor plays an even more important role in parliamentary politics and the executive branch, often as kingmaker in government coalitions.

After the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which ended the 2001 armed conflict between the ethnic Albanians and Macedonians in North Macedonia, the state-building role along with all the rights related to the participation of the Albanian community within the country was re-defined through legislative and constitutional changes. Regardless of some positive outcomes since the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, the relations between the two ethnic communities remain fragile. The OFA review from 2015 shows that while many legislative processes were completed, the spirit of the agreement has not been implemented and still requires work in all key pillars: language, education, decentralisation and equitable representation.

After 2001, the Albanian political camp in North Macedonia completely defocused from political ideology instead dealing primarily with issues that serve narrow party interests yet do not reflect the priorities of the electorate. There is growing consensus among the ethnic Albanian community and elites in North Macedonia that Albanian political parties must present better political manifestos for ethnic Albanian citizens in North Macedonia. Whereas party politics were previously limited to ethnic priorities, the electorate now requires improving the socio-economic perspective – effectively assuming that the once prominent issues of ethnic and civil rights are now guaranteed.

This, however, is seen by ethnic Macedonians as a threat to the nation-building process and as an attempt to transform the country into a bi-national state through federalisation or partition of the country, and/or the creation of “Greater Albania”. This narrative is the main driver for nationalism and inter-ethnic tensions between the two largest ethnic communities, with ethnic Macedonians portraying ethnic Albanians as trying to “take over” the country, while ethnic Albanians claim they are discriminated and denied participation, legitimacy, and inclusion – narratives which are used in every election cycle to polarise ethnic relations for political purposes.

Inter-ethnic co-existence is of major importance to the stability and democratic development of North Macedonia and its road toward the EU. Yet, despite the brittle inter-ethnic relations, the Albanian political factor in North Macedonia has shown its potential as a stabilising factor over the past few decades and influenced the democratisation of the country while also contributing to Euro-Atlantic integration and regional cooperation. This was the case during the difficult change of government in 2016, but also during the referendum on the country’s name change in 2018,

bringing into place the Prespa Agreement and unlocking North Macedonia's EU perspective which until then were blocked by Greece for almost three decades. In this way, the Albanian political factor has always been an important factor on which not only the governing coalitions have depended, but all political processes in North Macedonia.

This research **presents the perception of the ethnic Albanian elite in North Macedonia** (political parties, academia, civil society, representatives of the institutions, and journalists) on the relevance of the Albanian political factor in North Macedonia, its role in the state building process, the potential of tackling nationalistic narratives and contributing to democratisation, good neighbourly relations and EU integration. The research is based on **a survey with 33 individuals**, representatives of the abovementioned Albanian elite in North Macedonia. In addition, **15 interviews** were conducted with valuable members of the Albanian elite, including leaders of political parties. Interviews were also carried out with representatives of Macedonian elites in North Macedonia. However, they were excluded for harmonisation at the regional level and production of a regional study based solely on perceptions of Albanian elites across three countries, North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo. The country paper which cross-examined Albanian and Macedonian views will be published as separate country report on North Macedonia.

State-building process and demographics in North Macedonia

Ohrid Framework Agreement

Over the last 19 years, the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA)³ has proven its potential as a framework for ensuring a functioning multi-ethnic democracy in North Macedonia. Nonetheless, the enduring challenge of deepening the mutual understanding between different communities remains. According to the 2015 Urgent Reform Priorities⁴ and the European Commission country reports to date, the inter-ethnic situation remains fragile, and a lack of trust between communities continues.⁵ Since the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Government has pursued the commitment to increase trust. However, further initiatives are needed to promote good inter-community relations and an inclusive multi-ethnic society. The model of a power-sharing agreement showed

³ *The Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), was signed after the 2001 conflict, by the leaders of the two biggest ethnic Macedonian parties, two biggest ethnic Albanian parties and the then president and representatives from the EU and US, with the aim to secure democracy and promote peaceful development respecting the interest of all citizens of the country. So, the main goal of the OFA was mutual understanding among the different communities with prospects of at least some de-nationalisation North Macedonia towards shared citizenship. See also: <http://www.crpm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OneDecade.pdf>*

⁴ *European Commission, 'Urgent Reform Priorities for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' <https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/urgent_reform_priorities_en.pdf> accessed 23 January 2020.*

⁵ *In 2012, the Government adopted a report on the status of the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which included the suggestion to continue the review process and to define clear policy recommendations. The review OFA Review for Social Cohesion was carried in 2015 as contributing to fulfilling conditions and recommendations of the 2015 European Commission Progress Report. The process was led by Albanian political camp with the help of OSCE. The Macedonians distanced from the process and did not participate at all during the review. For more see: 'Ohrid Framework Agreement Review on Social Cohesion' (2015) <<http://www.eip.org/sites/default/files/OFA%20Review%20on%20Social%20Cohesion.pdf>>. and the EC Country reports on the official website: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/north-macedonia_en*

weak institutionalisation of consensual democracy, while the implementation of the OFA has been placed at the core of political criteria fulfilment.

Improving inter-ethnic relations and the implementation of the OFA are strategic priorities that have yet to be fully met. While ethnic Macedonians assert that the agreement has been fully implemented and the Albanian coalition partner in the Government stressed that the adoption and enforcement of the Law on Use of Languages (15 January 2019) resolves the last remaining normative issue from the OFA, the rest of the Albanian political parties and elites claim that it is inconsistently implemented through the affirmative action quota system, decentralisation, and language laws.⁶ According to the 2020 US Human Rights Report, the ethnic Albanians continue to criticise unequal representation in government ministries and public enterprises, as well as inequitable budget allocations.⁷

During the 2016 parliamentary elections, in a bid to attract the Albanian political parties in North Macedonia, and jointly end the VMRO-DPMNE's decade-long rule, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) pledged to create a society in which everyone will feel like a member of one society. After coming into power, the SDSM initiated steps towards drafting a Strategy for One Society and Inter-culturalism, an electoral promise, and was subsequently adopted in 2019. The main goal of this strategy is to promote a shift from a divided society into a society that is fair, equitable, and makes citizens more equal. However, the Albanian political factor did not participate in the process nor does it feel any association with the document. This is mainly a result of the assumption of Albanian political parties that they should be the bearers of political agendas for protection and inclusiveness. According to one of our interviewees, *"in the case of this strategy they are not the bearers, but they are the part of the Government that thinks that such a strategy should exist"*.⁸ For the Albanian political factor in North Macedonia, the OFA continues to be the 'alpha and omega' for peace, stability, and security in the country.⁹ With the latest constitutional changes in 2018 supporting the Prespa Agreement, the OFA has been incorporated as a constitutive element of the state.

There are divergent views between the representatives of the ethnic Albanian elite and Albanian political party representatives interviewed with regards to the strategy "One Society for All". The former is more open and welcomes the concept, the latter is more critical and sceptic.

For the more optimistic group, representatives of the ethnic Albanian elite, this strategy is very positive, prepared in inclusive way and it is a step towards social cohesion.¹⁰ However it is not easy

⁶ Reka, B., *Ten Years from the Ohrid Framework Agreement: Is Macedonia Functioning as a Multi-Ethnic State?* (South East European University 2011) <https://www.seeu.edu.mk/files/research/projects/OFA_EN_Final.pdf>.

⁷ Bureau for democracy, human rights, and labour, 'North Macedonia 2019 Human Rights Report' <<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NORTH-MACEDONIA-2019-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>>.

⁸ 'Interview with Albanian Law Professor from South East European University' (5 November 2019).

⁹ Altiparmakova, B., 'Ahmeti: DUI's Red Lines for Coalition Are Ohrid Accord, Prespa Agreement and Bulgaria Treaty' Media Information Agency (10 July 2020) <<https://mia.mk/ahmeti-dui-s-red-lines-for-coalition-are-ohrid-accord-prespa-agreement-and-bulgaria-treaty/?lang=en>>.

¹⁰ 'Interview with Special Advisor at Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia' (8 November 2019).

to implement it taking into consideration the ethnic Macedonian factor as well. *“Many people don’t believe in this strategy. It is a constant fight between the nationalists in the both sides, only a small number of people believe that North Macedonia can function as an inclusive society and these are the people that voted “for” the referendum and the change of government”*.¹¹ However, according to an interviewee, the scepticism is understandable because the discourse is very nationalistic and societal problems are divided along the ethnic lines¹².

For some Albanian political parties, new strategies that aim to bridge the divide in North Macedonia society are welcomed as long as they present authentic concepts and are fundamentally based on the objectives of equality, freedom, and justice.¹³ However, Albanian political parties stress that if new concepts such as the “One Society for All” strategy are not in line with these principles which guarantee stability, there is no assurance that they will succeed and will be unsustainable.¹⁴ As such, they should carefully design and fully implemented. Other representatives of Albanian political parties interviewed in this study support the concept of “One Society”, but feel that it does not reflect the situation on ground where ethnic Albanians cannot be equal in a ‘society for all’ when they have been historically discriminated.¹⁵ They believe that it is difficult to respect the principle of meritocracy in conditions of inequality, *“because the one who has exploited them the most will always win.”*¹⁶ In addition, they state that *“there cannot be an equal society for all at a time when the state is purely Macedonian because this means that a “society for all” means a Macedonian society for all”*.¹⁷

Demographics of North Macedonia

According to the country’s most recent census in 2002, the ethnic composition of the population of North Macedonia is 64.2 percent Macedonian, 25.2 percent Albanian, 3.9 percent Turkish, 2.7 percent Romani, 1.8 percent Serbian, 0.8 percent Bosniak, and 0.5 percent Vlach.

Demographics are important, and to some extent political as they determine the power-sharing structures of the country. Two attempts were made to hold a new census: in 2011, which was annulled before it even started due to the disagreement on basic data collection rules¹⁸ and in

¹¹ *‘Interview with Albanian Law Professor from South East European University’ (n 7).*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Democratic Union for Integration’ (12 November 2019).*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *‘Interview with Albanian Professor from South East European University – Former MP in the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia’ (5 November 2019).*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - BESA’ (11 November 2019).*

¹⁸ *After its annulment, the Albanian political parties and organisations claimed that the Macedonian majority of the commission had arranged the idea to drastically lower the number of Albanians, whereas the Macedonian political parties and organisations claimed that the Albanian commissioners wanted to artificially increase the number of the population by including people who had been living abroad for more than a year, whereas Macedonian members were against it citing that the rules of the European Statistical Agency, dismiss people who have been living abroad for more than a year and they should be accounted in the countries they currently live. For more see: Marusic, S.J, ‘Macedonia Scraps “Failed” Census’ *Balkan Insight* (13 October 2011) <<https://balkaninsight.com/2011/10/13/macedonian-population-census-fails/>>.*

2020¹⁹, which was postponed due to the April 2020 elections²⁰ with April 2021 as a potential census date.²¹

Experts assign the failure of censuses on ethnic and political incentives. Without recent population statistics, policies are based on the interest of politicians and not the public. This has been the subject of debate since the concept of power sharing was introduced with OFA, whether the ethnic Albanian population in North Macedonia constitutes a minority or not and if greater rights should be accounted on that basis. Albanians, being the second largest ethnic community, refuse to be labelled as a minority, as they perceive it is incorrect to consider any community who is less in number than another community a “minority”. Instead, representatives of the ethnic Albanian political factor believe that the definition is dependent on the capacity to (de)stabilise the country: the larger the capacity, the less the community should be considered a minority²². The ethnic Albanian community has that (de)stabilising capacity and throughout the decades it has used it to keep the country politically and economically stable.

Other representatives of the Albanian factor in North Macedonia stress that the multi-ethnic composition of the country should be reflected in the Constitution and entire legal system^{23,24} since *“the bearers of the real sovereignty of the country are the two biggest ethnic communities, the ethnic Macedonians and the ethnic Albanians and until this relationship is regulated on a sincere and real basis, the state will still not be functional”*.²⁵

Defining the Albanian political factor

To gain a better understanding of who is considered an “Albanian political factor”, the representatives of the ethnic Albanian elite in North Macedonia surveyed in this study were asked the following question: ***How would you define the “Albanian political factor” (i.e. Albanian actors in political life) in the Western Balkans? Who is a part of this Albanian political factor and what does it mean to you?*** According to the respondents, the ethnic Albanian political factor in North Macedonia consists of several actors with political parties as the main ones. Besides the political parties, other important actors are also ethnic Albanian representatives in academia, business elites and civil society representatives. This view is also shared by representatives of the Albanian political parties in North Macedonia which were interviewed for this research.

¹⁹ In 2018 the second foreseen census was announced to be held in April 2020, but would not contain questions about ethnical and religious affiliation, rather two questions regarding the language since it should be a statistical procedure and everyone should refrain from politicizing the procedure. For more see: Telma Tv, ‘Census without Questions on Ethnic and Religious Affiliation (Попис Без Прашања За Етничка и Верска Припадност)’, 13 November 2018, <https://telma.com.mk/popis-bez-prashana-za-etnichka-i-verska>

²⁰ Elections were postponed for the second time for July 2020

²¹ Marusic, S.J, ‘Snap Polls Postpone North Macedonia’s Census’ *BalkanInsight* (20 October 2019) <<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/29/snap-polls-postpone-north-macedonias-census/>>.

²² ‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alliance for Albanians’ (15 November 2019).

²³ ‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Democratic Union for Integration’ (n 9).

²⁴ ‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alternativa’ (5 December 2019).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Political representation by political parties

According to representatives of the ethnic Albanian political parties in North Macedonia a distinction should be made between the Albanian political scene of the 1990s and the factor after the 2001 conflict. The Albanian political scene in North Macedonia in the 1990s is perceived as much more structured and ideological than after the 2001 conflict. Several of our interviews show that representatives of the Albanian elite in North Macedonia believe that the Kosovo conflict affected the political entities which emerged after the conflict as *“Albanians are inclined to think that what happens to the neighbour, the same will follow in North Macedonia.”*²⁶ After 2001, the Albanian political scene in North Macedonia defocused from the ideological point of view and now tackles issues that are not necessarily among the priorities of the electorate *“but are hot policies following nationalistic and/or populist agendas.”*²⁷

Today, the situation remains the same and considering the size of the electorate, it is remarkable how many ethnic Albanian political entities are present in North Macedonia. Currently, there are five ethnic Albanian parties - Democratic Union of Albanians (DUI), Alliance of Albanians (AA), Alternativa, BESA, and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). These parties are the derivative of internal divisions and do not have a unified political activity.

According to our interviewees, these Albanian political parties lack a national agenda or strategy that *“should be focused on coordinating all political activities related to concluding national issues with and aims to build an agenda that will contribute to making the ethnic Albanian electorate feel equal and with economic, educational, health prospects”*.^{28,29} Instead, the agenda of the Albanian political factor in North Macedonia is, according to an interviewee, “pure ethnic”. It still deals with very political issues such as language and flag³⁰ and according to the interviewee, there is not a single positive example of a consistency of a political party with its platform, its pre-election program or before coming to power and at the time it was part of the government. All the parties that have so far been in government *“have been parties that have come out with big words, but when they have ended up in Government have remained silent about the demands of the ethnic Albanians”*.³¹ As such, Albanian political parties have only managed to provide employment in the public administration for party affiliates³² – an unofficial party promise in many countries in the region.

On several occasions, the ethnic Albanian political factor in North Macedonia has been a kingmaker in the formation of governments. However, according to representatives of the political parties interviewed for this study, they have failed to resolve the basic issues of ethnic Albanians, such as equality that ought to be achieved based on several premises, including the autochthony that they

²⁶ *‘Interview with Special Advisor at Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia’ (8 November 2019).*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Almost every representative of political party and professor that we interviewed pointed this conclusion out.*

²⁹ *Throughout the 2014-2015 the leader of the Albanian political party Alliance of Albanians pledged for introduction of an important political instrument called the joint roundtable of Albanian parliamentary political parties which will aim to build an agenda towards equality, economic, educational, health perspective.*

³⁰ *‘Interview with Albanian Law Professor from South East European University’ (n 7).*

³¹ *‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - BESA’ (n 13).*

³² *‘Interview with Albanian Law Professor from South East European University’ (n 7).*

have, their economic capacities, and the numerical aspect³³ – especially as a high percentage makes it virtually impossible for the exercise of a classical hegemonic influence of a majority over a non-majority community³⁴.

The failure of using this advantage to improve the status of the ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia is attributed to the lack of real or genuine joint programmes between Albanian and Macedonian coalition partners. According to our respondents, Macedonian political parties have always imposed and implemented their programme.³⁵ However, Albanian political parties remain very relevant in creating post-election coalitions, and in the coming years, their relevance will depend on their ability for the formation of future governments based on ideological and programmatic compliance. *“This means not to be part of certain governments where they will accept the programme of the majority but to be genuine contributors in the creation of the new government programme while being ideologically very close.”*³⁶

Regarding the relevance of the Albanian political factor in North Macedonia, the Albanian political party in power believes that significance comes from systematically articulating the demands, i.e. to be present and to make demands known. The Albanian political factor has always been loyal to the functioning and future of North Macedonia in the context of its development and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, and has never had contrary or discriminatory policies.³⁷ As such, there have always been consistent policies in line with Euro-Atlantic values which the country aspires to join.

Contrary to this, the representatives of some Albanian political parties in North Macedonia interviewed in this study feel that the relevance of the Albanian factor has been minimised or is even considered to be absent now³⁸ for several reasons. This is primarily owed to the division between smaller parties.³⁹ Secondly, because in the nearly 30 years of transition of the political, economic, legal system towards a pluralist system, *“the Albanian political factor still discusses issues that have been at the beginning of this process”*⁴⁰. Albanians in North Macedonia are still not equal in economic terms, nor ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or educational terms. One political party stressed that perhaps ‘official Tirana’ (Albanian officials) should aid the Albanians in North Macedonia to overcome ethnic issues in order to focus on other matters⁴¹. According to other representatives interviewed for this study, the relevance of the Albanian factor will remain minimal and not at the right level *“until we have a political entity that deals with the essential issues: those of the state and those of the Albanians”*.⁴²

³³ *‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alliance for Albanians’ (n 18).*

³⁴ *‘Interview with Albanian Professor from State University “Mother Teresa” (11 November 2019).*

³⁵ *‘Interview with Albanian Professor from South East European University – Former MP in the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia’ (n 11).*

³⁶ *‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Democratic Union for Integration’ (n 9).*

³⁷ *‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Democratic Union for Integration’ (n 9).*

³⁸ *Representatives of three political parties that we interviewed pointed out this.*

³⁹ *‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - BESA’ (n 13).*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *The term “Official Tirana” is often times used to refer to government officials of the Republic of Albania*

⁴² *‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alternativa’ (n 22).*

When asked about the relevance of the political factor, the representatives of the ethnic Albanian elite in North Macedonia surveyed in this study perceive the Albanian political factor as highly important and positive, as it is considered having a constructive role in the policy-making processes, as well as being a factor of stability in the Western Balkans, due to its geopolitical position and role in political processes.

Question: How would you consider the contribution of the “Albanian political factor” in North Macedonia in recent years with regards to each of the following concepts? Please rate on a scale of 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive)

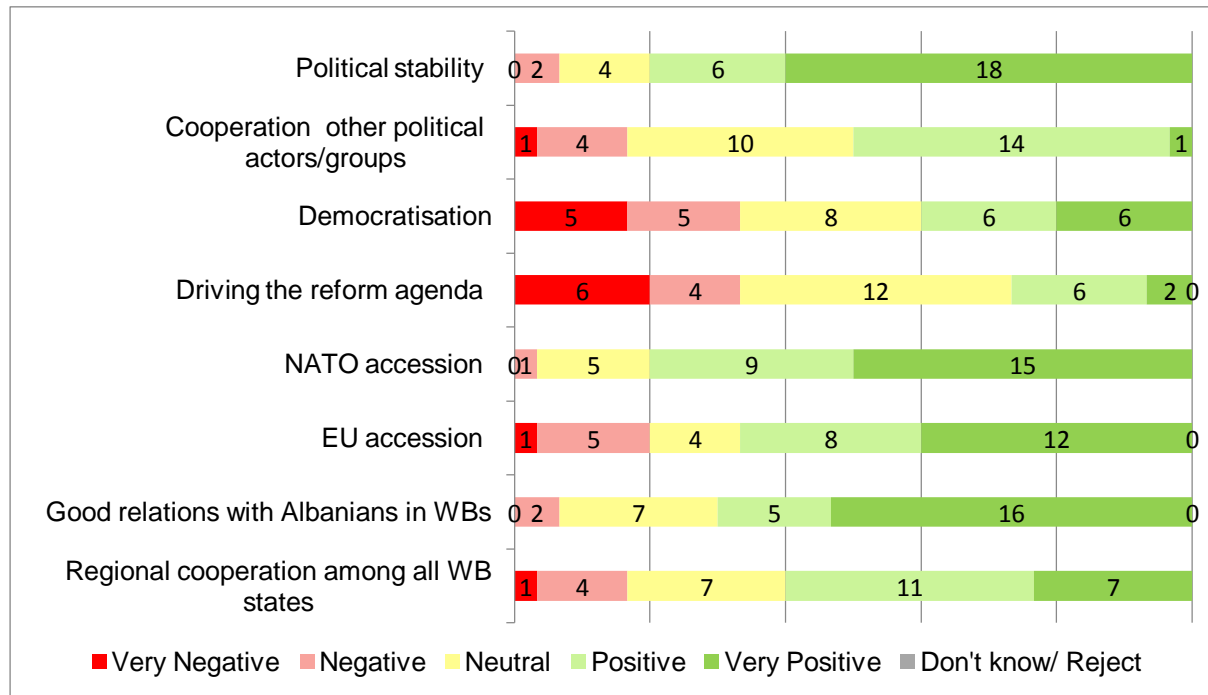


Figure 1: Contribution of the Albanian political factor in North Macedonia to eight political issues.

Most of the respondents perceive the contribution of the ethnic Albanian political factor in North Macedonia as very positive in relation to political stability, good neighbourly relations with Albanians in the region, NATO and EU accession. A large number of respondents see a positive role of the Albanian factor in regional cooperation among all Western Balkan countries, while also a considerable number of respondents think that the Albanian factor in North Macedonia has had a neutral role in driving the reform agenda and cooperation with the other political actors. The more negative perceptions as to the contribution of the Albanian political factor are related to driving the reform agenda and democratisation.

Question: How would you consider the contribution of the “Albanian political factor” in the Western Balkans in recent years with regards to each of the following concepts? Please rate on a scale of 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive)

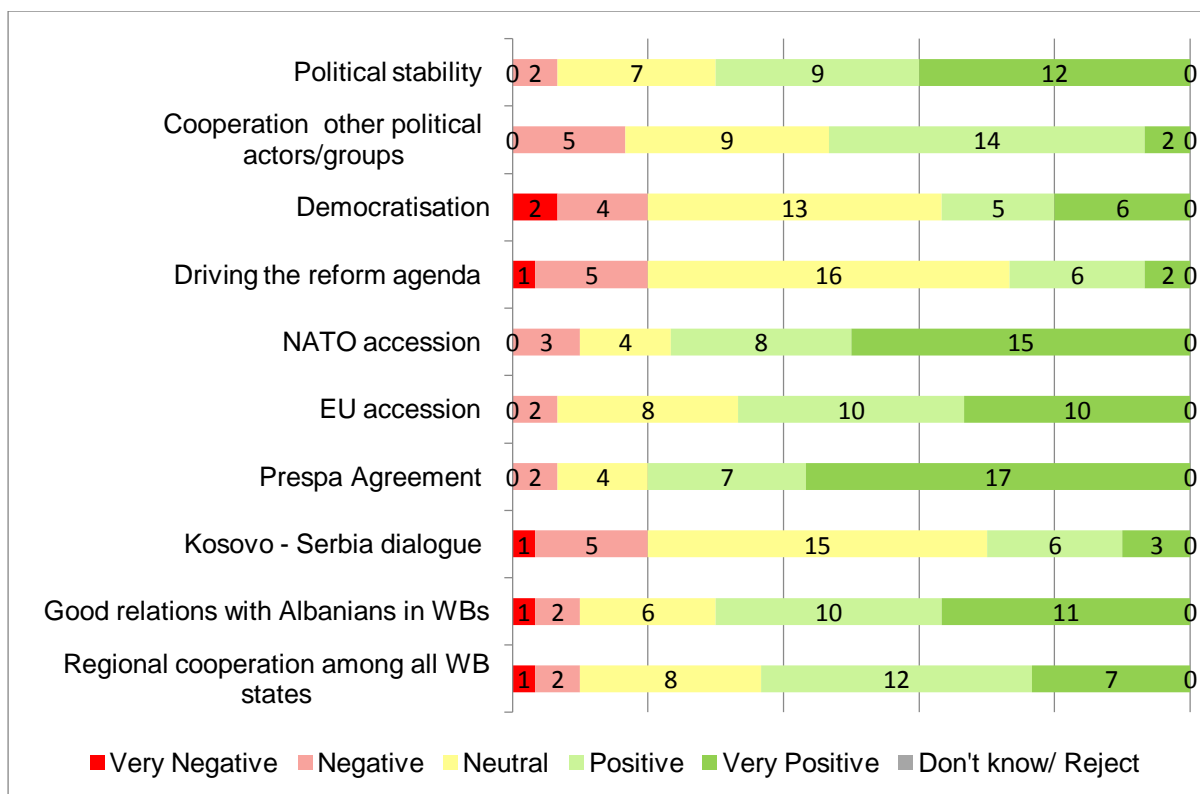


Figure 2: Contribution of the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans to ten political issues.

The respondents perceive the contribution of the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans largely as positive or very positive particularly with regards to the Prespa Agreement, NATO accession, political stability, and good neighbourly relations with Albanians in the region. Almost half of the respondents think that the influence of the Albanian factor has been more neutral with regards to the contribution towards the reform agenda, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and democratisation in the Western Balkans.

Compared to the contribution of the ethnic Albanian geopolitical factor in North Macedonia, the responses pertaining to the contribution of the Albanian geopolitical factor in the Western Balkans is more nuanced. While 16 respondents perceive the Albanian political factor in North Macedonia to make a very positive contribution to good neighbourly relations with Albanians in the region, only 11 respondents considered the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans (WB) as having a very positive influence on good neighbourly relations with Albanians in the region. Similarly, the ethnic Albanian political factor in North Macedonia is perceived as having a very positive influence on political stability by 18 respondents, while only 12 respondents would say the same about the influence of the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans. On the other hand, more respondents view the contribution of the Albanian geopolitical factor in North Macedonia on driving the reform agenda or democratisation as very negative, in comparison with the contribution of the Albanian geopolitical factor in the Western Balkans. Yet, it seems that the Albanian political factor is perceived as a driving force of NATO accession and regional cooperation, considering that this particular political factor has influence in at least three countries.

Albanian political factor and voting behaviour

As discussed in the previous section, Albanian political parties are seen as the main Albanian political factor in North Macedonia. There has always been more than one party representing the Albanian community in North Macedonia as there is no threshold to prevent the presence of another Albanian party in the Parliament⁴³. Traditionally, the voting behaviour in North Macedonia has been across ethnic lines. However, a notable change was evident during the presidential and local elections in 2009, and the parliamentary elections in 2016. In the former case, the ethnic Albanian candidate, Imer Selmani from the New Democracy political party, attracted a considerable number of votes from Macedonians by abandoning the notion of a nation-state for a civic state, attracted a substantial number of votes from Macedonians⁴⁴. The latter case precedes a protracted political crisis that resulted in the “wiretap scandal”⁴⁵ which shook the country. In response, anti-government protesters took to the streets *en masse* in 2015. For the first time, ethnic Albanians and Macedonians in North Macedonia protested side by side, holding their national flags while calling on the Government to resign. Ultimately, the desire to find a way out of the political impasse resulted in support of nearly 40.000 ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia for the leader of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), Zoran Zaev during the 2016 parliamentary elections.

It should be noted that these protests and the parliamentary elections which followed represented the first time in which both ethnic Albanians and Macedonians in North Macedonia were united in a common cause - trying to end a regime that was doing more harm than good. It was also the first time for ethnic Albanian citizens cast their ballot for a Macedonian party, attempting to present a civic concept that in a way, was a revolution in itself. According to one of the interviewees, “*This was a support that had a very clear purpose - to end the era of Gruevski (leader of VMRO and Prime Minister in power for ten years) by that time and start another period, and to give a chance to Zoran Zaev as Prime Minister who appeared with a much more inclusive and less nationalistic narrative than his predecessor*”.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, according to the representatives of the Albanian political parties, 2016 was an extraordinary case for North Macedonia as after several years of political crisis parliamentary elections were viewed as a possible momentum for change. For the first time, it seemed possible that the establishment, with its existing policies and nationalist discourse, would lose its strong position.⁴⁷

⁴³ Dimitrov, P., ‘Ohrid Framework Agreement and Its Implications for the Balkan Geopolitical Status Quo’, *One decade after the Ohrid Framework Agreement: lessons (to be) learned from the Macedonian experience* (Center for Research and Policy Making 2011) <<http://www.crpm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OneDecade.pdf>>.

⁴⁴ Daskalovski, Zh.; Trajkovski, K., ‘Macedonian Obama or the Platform from Tirana - How to Get the Votes of the “Others” and What to Do with Them?’ (Center for Research and Policy Making 2017) <<http://www.crpm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/obama-study-en.pdf>>.

⁴⁵ *Social democrat leader Zaev accused Gruevski for illegal surveillance of 20.000 people, including judges, foreign diplomats, civil society representatives, journalists and even members of his own cabinet. The wiretap scandal revealed widespread abuse of power and electoral fraud among senior officials which led to defining MKD as state capture by European Commission. Robinson, M.; Casule, K., ‘Wire-Tap Scandal Brings Thousands out against Macedonian Leader’ REUTERS (17 May 2015) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-crisis/wire-tap-scandal-brings-thousands-out-against-macedonian-leader-idUSKBN0020A420150517>>.*

⁴⁶ ‘Interview with Albanian Law Professor from South East European University’ (n 7).

⁴⁷ ‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Democratic Union for Integration’ (n 9).

A few political parties attribute the outflow of the ethnic Albanian electorate in North Macedonia to a Macedonian party primarily due to the disappointment of unfulfilled electoral promises and failure to improve the socio-economic standing of Albanians living in North Macedonia. *“The electorate is dissatisfied because there is no realisation of the programs and policies of the previous political parties⁴⁸ and normally there is dissatisfaction from the current party in power that always plays the card of the rights of Albanians in terms of language and flag, without focusing on the realisation of rights in other areas of life.”⁴⁹* Meanwhile, representatives of other political parties also view 2016 as a weakness of Albanian opposition parties in North Macedonia. The latter has not managed to capitalise on the widespread dissatisfaction and create a coalition which could grant them electoral success.⁵⁰ *“This has been very dangerous, and the Albanian political parties should not give the opportunity to ‘macedonianise’ the will of the Albanians in North Macedonia. The Albanian political parties in North Macedonia, good or bad, are our parties and should be given the opportunity to fight for the rights of Albanians.”⁵¹*

On the other hand, representatives of the Albanian elite in North Macedonia feel that 2016 has directly positioned ethnic Albanians as an important political factor given the transformative change made by citizens in 2016 through the re-dimensioning of the traditional support for Albanian political parties, stating that *“It was not a support that was given by chance”⁵².*

The representatives of the Albanian elite in North Macedonia interviewed by this study suggest that even though 2016 is seemingly a one-off phenomenon, Macedonian parties in the future will continue to attempt attracting the Albanian vote by including ethnic Albanians in their ranks⁵³ and presenting a genuine civic offer with a certain ideology that will strive to improve the conditions and quality of life in North Macedonia wherever they live⁵⁴.

During the interviews, representatives of the elite expressed doubt over the possibility for a joint electoral coalition between Macedonian and Albanian political parties, such a coalition was formed for the first time during the July 2020 parliamentary election between the Macedonia SDSM and Albanian political party BESA. It is evident that there is growing potential for cooperation between ethnic political parties and the merging of their agendas. After the elections, the SDSM – BESA coalition won the most votes and seats in the parliament, however both the DUI and the Alliance – Alternative coalition won a great number of seats in parliament, giving the ethnic Albanian political factor in North Macedonia an even greater relevance. This showed that the support of the ethnic Albanians for SDSM has dropped compared to 2016 and that the concept has not managed to gain more popularity.

⁴⁸ *‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alliance for Albanians’ (n 18).*

⁴⁹ *‘Interview with Albanian Professor from South East European University – Former MP in the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia’ (n 11).*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *‘Interview with Albanian Law Professor from South East European University’ (n 7).*

⁵³ *SDSM included Albanian representatives in their ranks and have an Albanian MP for the cycle 2016-2020*

⁵⁴ *‘Interview with Special Advisor at Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia’ (n 24).*

Nationalism and the “Albanian factor”

Over the past decade, political polarisation and conflicts continued to hinder North Macedonia’s democratic consolidation and progress toward EU membership. There were several ethnically motivated protests in 2013 and 2014 and several anti-government protests at the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015. There is a strong sense of ethnic identity, and the general impression is that politicians further polarise ethnic relations for political reasons. For example, the leaders of the ruling parties of ethnic Macedonians and Albanians in North Macedonia (at the time the VMRO and DUI), though government coalition partners, both used inflaming ethno-nationalist rhetoric in their campaigns for local and parliamentary elections.

The anti-Albanian nationalistic discourse in North Macedonia was especially present during the December 2016 elections when accusations were made that the new parliamentary majority (SDSM-DUI/AA) was against the unitary character of the country. This rhetoric stemmed in great part from the signature of a joint document by Albanian political parties of North Macedonia in Tirana that advocated greater rights for the ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia as per 2001 Ohrid Agreement, which also known as the ‘Tirana Platform’.⁵⁵ This rhetoric implied Albania’s hand behind such demands. The same narrative was followed by the then President of North Macedonia, Gjorge Ivanov who claimed that the ‘Tirana Platform’ is a plan backed by the governments of Albania and Kosovo, and Albanian leaders in North Macedonia, to federalise the country and pave the way for the creation of a “Greater Albania”⁵⁶. Additionally, Russia and media also attempted to aggravate ethnic tensions by claiming that the EU is trying to create a “Greater Albania”.⁵⁷ Subsequent reactions from Albania argued that such narratives associated with the ‘Tirana Platform’ are pursued for political purposes.

These accusations have been described as a “myth created in Skopje for political purposes that the Albanian parties are following a platform that is written in Tirana. This is a lie, a myth created by the politics of very bad taste. The attack on the platform is very dangerous because it is a kind of politics that fuels divisiveness and not unity [...] The last thing Macedonia needs, the last thing we all need, is to fuel interethnic conflict because you cannot control these kinds of things.”⁵⁸

For the purposes of this research, we also analysed the perceptions of the ethnic Albanian elites in North Macedonia on whether Albanian nationalism and the narratives that are associated with it (e.g. “Greater Albania”) enjoy support among the Albanian community in North Macedonia and among influential ethnic Albanian political actors.

⁵⁵ *The Joint declaration was signed by DUI, Alliance for Albanians and BESA in Skopje, and followed with a meeting in Tirana by the Albanian political parties in North Macedonia, and prime minister of Albania Edi Rama.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *European Western Balkans, ‘EU Disturbed by New Balkan Instability and Geopolitics: Hidden Contradictions’ (22 March 2017) <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/03/22/eu-disturbed-by-new-balkan-instability-and-geopolitics-hidden-contradictions/>>.*

⁵⁸ *Meta.mk, ‘Rama: The “Tirana Platform” Is a Myth Created by Politicians’ (18 April 2017) <<https://meta.mk/en/rama-the-tirana-platform-is-a-myth-created-by-politicians/>>.*

Question: In your opinion, is Albanian nationalism and the narratives that are associated with it (e.g. Greater Albania) still supported in North Macedonia by Albanian actors? Please rate on a scale of 1 (Strongly supported) to 5 (not supported at all).

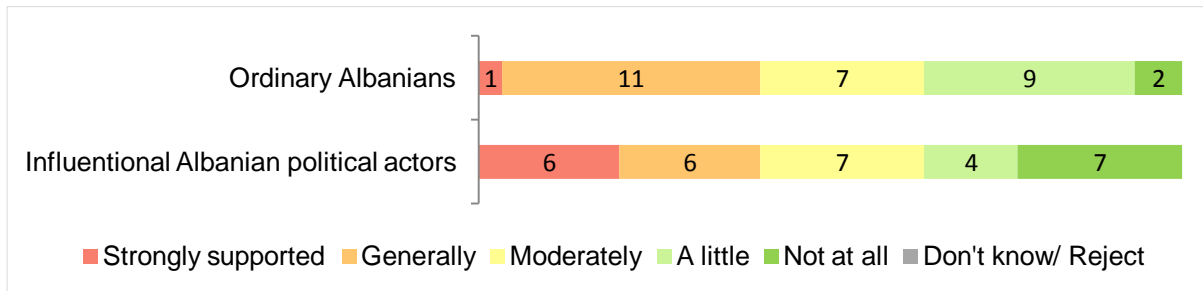


Figure 3: How supported are Albanian nationalism and associated narratives?

According to the survey results, the respondents have very different perceptions with regards to the support of nationalist ideas among the ethnic Albanian population and political actors. However, they do perceive that nationalism and associated narratives are supported more strongly by influential ethnic Albanian political actors in North Macedonia than by ordinary ethnic Albanians in the country. For influential Albanian political actors, 6 respondents indicate that Albanian nationalism is strongly supported, while for ordinary Albanians there is only one respondent that thinks Albanian nationalism is strongly supported. In total, 12 respondents indicate that among both groups Albanian nationalism is strongly or generally supported. 11 respondents indicate that Albanian nationalism is, according to them, a little or not supported among ordinary Albanian citizens and among influential ethnic Albanian political actors in North Macedonia.

The representatives of political parties that were interviewed also agreed that such narratives and associated ideas do not enjoy support among the influential ethnic Albanians/Albanian political parties but instead are fuelled by anti-Albanian narratives in North Macedonia as well as other countries in the region. According to the political party representatives, the Albanian political factor in North Macedonia does not want a unification of territories where ethnic Albanians are the majority if the cost is destabilisation, conflict or casualties.⁵⁹ Also, they do not see these intentions from the neighbouring countries such as Albania, even though Albania has a constitutional duty for the protection of Albanians outside its borders⁶⁰. *“Albania has always played the role of a state that extinguishes conflicts and does not add fuel to fire. The political factor in North Macedonia has cleared the dilemmas, there is no project for the unification of lands, but there is a project to feel equal with the Macedonians, and completely equal.”*⁶¹ It was also stressed by the respondents that the fear of ethnic Macedonians is unfounded and has to do with paranoia to prevent federalisation or to continue their project of a nation-state. Furthermore, according to representatives of Albanian political parties in North Macedonia interviewed for this study, Macedonians continue to link the request of Albanians for a bicameral parliament with federalism, *“while it is neither nationalist nor federalist, but it is a tendency, a political instrument towards equality of all citizens”*⁶²

⁵⁹ Interview with Albanian Professor from State University “Mother Teresa” (n 29).

⁶⁰ Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alliance for Albanians’ (n 18).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Interviewees also point towards the idea of “Great Albania” as a complicated process and one that no one is interested in accomplishing, neither citizens or global actors such as the European Union.⁶³ Lastly, the representatives of the elites believe that the Albanian political factor in general in North Macedonia has kept a vertical line in terms of strategic orientations of the country such as the EU and NATO⁶⁴ that automatically reject such narratives. President Pendarovski has shared this opinion and has stressed that there is no enthusiasm for such outcome among Albanians in North Macedonia and the region. *“Instead of new borders, the majority favours EU membership and no borders”*⁶⁵.

According to our interviews, as with the Albanian nationalist rhetoric losing significance among Albanians in North Macedonia, the Macedonian nationalist rhetoric is also losing ground⁶⁶ due to the constructive role of Albanian political parties being understood as an attempt to create cohesion.⁶⁷ The perception is that *“even the most nationalistic Macedonian party VMRO DPMNE, has started to withdraw from the nationalist rhetoric towards Albanians that has been their main weapon in winning votes and in promoting ethnic Macedonian feelings, and will use each possibility if it comes back in power to show that it does more for the ethnic Albanians than SDSM.”*⁶⁸ Yet, the 2020 elections demonstrated once again that ethno-centric rhetoric remains relevant illustrated with the campaign of the biggest ethnic Albanian party DUI that vowed for the first ethnic Albanian Prime Minister. The victory of DUI in this respect illustrated that ethnic centric rhetoric may still pay off for the parties.

In our survey, we asked the representatives of the ethnic Albanian elite in North Macedonia: **What would you consider the three most important drivers of Albanian nationalism in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia?** According to the respondents, frequent drivers of nationalism in the three listed countries are: frequent political instability resulting in corruption and non-functional institutions; economic instability resulting in poverty and high levels of unemployment; and continuous stagnation of the EU integration process. However, as the drivers of ethnic Albanian nationalism in North Macedonia specifically, respondents consider the denial of political rights, language and ethnic symbols. Some respondents have pointed out that *“nationalism is perpetuated by politicians before elections and when they need support from the citizen”*.⁶⁹ While nationalism does not seek elementary rights there are views that the mere existence of nationalism does not imply hate towards other ethnic groups.

However, as continued stagnation of EU integration of North Macedonia is seen as one of the main drivers of nationalism, respondents from the representatives of the Albanian elite were posed the following question:

⁶³ *Interview with Representative of Political Party - BESA’ (n 13).*

⁶⁴ *Interview with Albanian Professor from State University “Mother Teresa” (n 29).*

⁶⁵ *Adriatic Journal, ‘The West Did Not Want Another Republika Srpska in the Heart of the Balkans’ (31 July 2019) <<https://www.adriaticjournal.com/geopolitics/the-west-did-not-want-another-republika-srpska-in-the-heart-of-balkans>>.*

⁶⁶ *Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alternativa’ (n 22).*

⁶⁷ *Interview with Albanian Professor from South East European University – Former MP in the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia’ (n 11).*

⁶⁸ *Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alternativa’ (n 22).*

⁶⁹ *Respondents of the survey*

Question: If North Macedonia was denied to become an EU member state in the foreseeable future, do you think ethnic divisions and nationalism will rise? Please rate on a scale of 1 (very much so) to 7 (not at all)

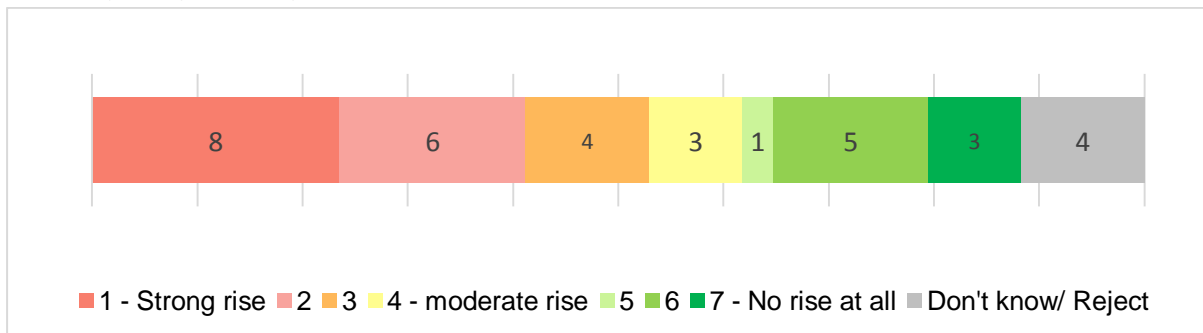


Figure 4: Likelihood of rise in Albanian nationalism rising in North Macedonia

The results show that the number of respondents which perceive that ethnic divisions and the support for nationalism would rise if North Macedonia was to be denied EU membership or would be off the table is higher than the number of respondents who think that it would not affect the support for ethnic nationalism. 18 respondents think that losing the European perspective would increase ethnic tensions, while 9 respondents do not think it will have much influence.

One of the interviewees showed concern that if the Albanian electorate loses its European perspective, they will also lose the perspective of Albanians being gathered inside the EU, as well as losing the promise that their rights will be respected. Then, the interviewee states, ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia will not accept their demands to be neglected as it has happened many times before: *“Despite the fact that ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia are great supporters of the EU/NATO and have maintained these political objectives for decades, this has often been at the cost of neglecting the very just and necessary demands of ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia, which are also urgent for the needs of the population. Yet, by doing so, Albanians have maintained political stability in North Macedonia”*⁷⁰. Furthermore, it has been pointed out by all ethnic Albanian political party representatives in North Macedonia that the largest communities in North Macedonia, Albanians and Macedonians are pro-Western leaning. Geopolitical objectives such as being admitted to NATO and the EU are a few of the shared aspirations of the Albanian and Macedonian political elites of the country.⁷¹ According to one political party representative, the Euro-Atlantic perspective has been the only element that kept both communities together and if the EU and NATO are not an option than another adhesive should be produced⁷². As stressed by this political party representative, this is seen as dangerous *“since it will require to start thinking very carefully about another adhesive, an alternative to the EU that will only increase the divergences among the communities and will question the very existence of the state.”*⁷³

Given the issues discussed above, we posed the following question in the survey: In which ways do you think the Albanian (geo) political factor could counter nationalist narratives and the idea of

⁷⁰ Interview with Albanian Professor from State University “Mother Teresa” (n 29).

⁷¹ Dimitrov, P. (n 43).

⁷² Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alternativa’ (n 21).

⁷³ Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alternativa’ (n 22).

“Greater Nation”? The most common answers among all respondents were the countries becoming full member states of the European Union, promoting European values such as democracy and with sound economic prosperity. However, most respondents pointed out that the ideas of “Greater nations” are not prevalent among the ethnic Albanian political factor in North Macedonia and such an idea “sounds more as an archaic romantic vibe rather than a political ideology or any system of some pragmatic belief.”⁷⁴ A few respondents also noted that if such ideas hypothetically exist, the Albanian political factor in North Macedonia and in the Western Balkans could counter them by continuing to work towards their aspirations on EU integration.

In addition to becoming member of the EU, some representatives of the political parties think that the ethnic Albanian political factor should take further steps towards countering nationalistic ideas such as the ‘Greater nation’ idea, “by openly and clearly stating that the Albanians of North Macedonia are not supporters of Greater Albania”⁷⁵. By not stating it clearly or hesitating to put it bluntly, they believe that the Albanian representatives have created too much room for manipulation and portray ethnic Albanians as promoters of the partition of North Macedonia and the unification with Albania⁷⁶. One respondent said that unless the Albanian political factor in North Macedonia clearly distances itself from the “Greater Albania” narrative, it “will continue to be an element for the Macedonian or Serbian part to abuse this ambiguity that we have shown in relation to this phenomenon.”⁷⁷

The Albanian factor as an anchor for cooperation

The ethnic Albanian political factor has proven to be a stabilising factor in the North Macedonia. According to the interviewees, the ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia have been instrumental to stability in the country, even if not always in their benefit – simply because they believe that integrating in Euro-Atlantic structures will finally bring the equality that they deserve.⁷⁸ Respondents say that “Albanians in North Macedonia have borne on their backs the stability and peace of North Macedonia and the price paid has been national discrimination of Albanians in North Macedonia”⁷⁹ and “If there is any merit that North Macedonia is stable today, it has been and is the Albanians in North Macedonia”⁸⁰.

According to our interviewees, the policy making of the ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia is oriented towards the West: “This message must be clearly understood by the EU because the goal of the last 20 years has been full membership and not a potential/possible membership”⁸¹ and this has

⁷⁴ Respondent of the survey

⁷⁵ Ali Ahmeti, leader of DUI, has said in a Kosovar TV7 show “Pressing” that there will not be unification of territories, / no national unification of Albanias, instead Albanians should reinforce the countries they live in and together to integrate in the EU. The same was published in media outlets in North Macedonia:

<https://alsat-m.tv/ahmeti-nga-prishtina-nuk-ka-bashkim-kombetar/>

⁷⁶ ‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alternativa’ (n 22).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ In the NDI 2020 poll, 41% of Albanians in North Macedonia believe that the EU serves best their national interest, followed by Turkey (17%), USA (14 %) and NATO (11%) For more see:

https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_PPT_ENG_FINAL_PUBLIC%20VERSION_1.pdf

⁷⁹ ‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - BESA’ (n 13).

⁸⁰ ‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alliance for Albanians’ (n 18).

⁸¹ ‘Interview with Representative of Political Party - Alliance for Albanians’ (n 18).

been supported at large by ethnic Albanian citizens in North Macedonia⁸². The support for EU integration has been consistent over the years, which has been marked through various polls^{83,84,85,86} conducted throughout different periods of social and political developments in North Macedonia⁸⁷. Generally, they all show that in comparison to ethnic Macedonian citizens, ethnic Albanian citizens show a stronger support for Euro-Atlantic integration. Additionally, the Albanian political factor, even though it is spread across many different social strata, it is unique in terms of their contribution to the EU and NATO⁸⁸ and according to an interviewee, it should be used to demand genuine action towards the functioning of institutions and the fight against corruption.⁸⁹

In our survey, we asked our respondents on how the ethnic Albanian political factor can make a more positive contribution towards EU and NATO and accession process.

Question: How do you think the Albanian political factor could make a more positive contribution to North Macedonia's EU/NATO⁹⁰ accession process?*

Fight against corruption	11
To promote inter-ethnic cooperation and understanding	8
To promote meritocracy	6
Party programs must be developed across ethnic lines	2
Adhere to democratic principles in internal political party structures	2
To promote the rule of law through justice reform, to fight corruption, and to promote the basic principles of morality (moral of the ruling elite)	1
Other	0

⁸² According to the NDI 2020 poll, 70 % Albanians in North Macedonia still strongly support joining the EU. For more see: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_PPT_ENG_FINAL_PUBLIC%20VERSION_1.pdf

⁸³ For more see: Nechev, Z.; Petrusev, H., 'The Credibility of the European Union in Macedonia Is Questionable (Кредибилитетот На Европска Унија Во Македонија е Доведен Во Прашање)' (Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' -Skopje 2017) <<https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Publikacija-Kredibilitetot-na-EU-vo-Makedonija.pdf>>.

⁸⁴ For more see: 'Eurometer - Fall 2019 - North Macedonia and the EU, Expectations and Opinions of Citizens (Еврометар - Есен 2019 - Северна Македонија и Европската Унија, Очекувања и Ставови На Граѓаните)' (Eurothink - Center for European strategies 2019) <<http://mcet.org.mk/gridfs/data/id/637588206b7b7183ed8028b4>>.

⁸⁵ For more see: European Policy Institute - Skopje, 'Citizens' Deliberate: Why and How in the EU? - Deliberative Polling on the Opportunities and Challenges of Macedonia's EU Accession' (2018) <http://epi.org.mk/docs/Rezime_debatna%20anketa_EN.pdf>.

⁸⁶ For more see: Krzalovski, A.; Popovikj, M., 'Referendum 2018 - Public Attitudes in Macedonia (Референдум 2018 - Ставови На Јавноста Во Македонија)' (Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' -Skopje; Macedonian Center for International Cooperation; Telma TV 2018) <<https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/referendum-2018-stavovi-na-javnosta-vo-makedonija-vtora-anketa.pdf>>.

⁸⁷ The polls have been conducted in times of VMRO-DPMNE governing, during the political crisis in the years 2015-2016, the period of stabilisation after the 2016 and 2017 elections, the year of signing the Prespa Agreement and name change as well as through the reoccurring process of not getting an accession negotiation date.

⁸⁸ 'Interview with Albanian Professor from South East European University - Former MP in the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia' (n 11).

⁸⁹ 'Interview with Albanian Law Professor from South East European University' (n 7).

⁹⁰ At the time this survey was conducted, North Macedonia was not yet accepted as a NATO member.

**Contrary to the respondents from Kosovo and Albania, the respondents from North Macedonia only chose one answer option*

Most respondents emphasised (N=11) the importance of fighting corruption as the main contributor to the EU/NATO accession process. Fighting corruption and strengthening the rule of law are some of the cornerstones of EU accession and considering that North Macedonia was ranked well below its regional counterparts - 106th in the Transparency International's 2019 Corruption Perception Index⁹¹, the respondents' answers should not come as a surprise. The 2019 European Commission Country Report for North Macedonia also stipulates the proactive implementation of the new rules for preventing and fighting corruption.⁹² Other priorities singled out by the respondents are the promotion of interethnic cooperation (N=8), which leads to the further implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and overall maintaining the multi-ethnic environment in the country, as well as the promotion of meritocracy (N=6).

When asked about the role of the Albanian political factor across all countries, the prevailing opinion among all interviewed ethnic Albanian political party representatives in North Macedonia is that the Albanian factor in general has also played a stabilising role across the region, especially after the end of the war in Kosovo and the 2001 conflict in North Macedonia⁹³. According to interviewees, the political agenda of the Albanian political factor throughout this period has always been for stability and peace. *"The silence of Albania, official Tirana, over discriminations happening openly to Albanians in North Macedonia, openly in Kosovo in Kosovo-Serbia relations, in certain nuances in Albania in relation to Greece, shows that the Albanians pay for the stability of the Balkans and of the respected countries very dearly"*⁹⁴. Nonetheless, according to one interviewee, ethnic Albanians hope that the Western Balkans will be integrated into the European Union as soon as possible, and issues related to regional stability and the possibility of external influences which may lead to conflicts and be a concern for Europe and the US will be resolved or diminished. Furthermore, the territorial or geographical compactness of the Albanian political factor determines its geostrategic importance for the stability and development of the region.⁹⁵ Therefore it is strategically in the interest of the region that the path towards EU membership is realised.⁹⁶

In our survey, we asked the ethnic Albanian elites about their perception with regards to **the three important factors that can strengthen the geopolitical importance of the Albanian factor in the region**. Respondents listed economic growth and cooperation for strengthening the geopolitical importance of the Albanian factor. A good education system and cooperation between educational institutions are also perceived as important. This could be a result of the dissatisfaction the general public has with the education system across the countries of the region of Western Balkans and the lack of quality within these institutions. The third most-frequent answer is the commitment to democratisation and the fight against corruption. It is perceived that geopolitical importance can be

⁹¹ Transparency International, 'Corruption Perception Index 2019' (2020)

<https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2019_CPI_Report_EN_200331_141425.pdf>.

⁹² European Commission, 'North Macedonia 2019 Report' (2019) <<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-north-macedonia-report.pdf>>.

⁹³ 'Interview with Representative of Political Party - Democratic Union for Integration' (n 9).

⁹⁴ 'Interview with Representative of Political Party - BESA (n 13)

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ 'Interview with Representative of Political Party - Democratic Union for Integration (n 9)

achieved through enhanced cooperation between the Albanian political factor in the spheres of good governance, democracy, the rule of law and the fight against corruption.

According to some of our interviewees, the geopolitical importance of the Albanian factor can be strengthened, firstly through a common strategy within each country and then a regional strategy. They argue that this strategy should aim to coordinate all political activities related to the conclusion of national issues – Albanians in North Macedonia, as much as they have national problems, also face economic, social issues that are shared with other communities⁹⁷. To this, representatives of the elites point out that the disadvantage of ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia is that they have not managed to design a strategy and highlight the comparative shortcomings of being a non-majority community in a small country bordering two Albanian states⁹⁸. As such, Albanians in North Macedonia have the potential to boost trade with the region given their family ties and linguistic skills (being bilingual from birth). According to our interviewee, when it comes to economic cooperation, the ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia should be the ones to connect a small domestic market with a wider regional market.⁹⁹

Lastly, we asked respondents how they think **the Albanian political factor can help development and democratisation of the region**. The ethnic Albanian elite surveyed perceive that cooperation among all Albanian political parties in the region is necessary including economic cooperation, free movement of people and goods, promotion of cultural values and educational cooperation. The fight against corruption continues to be a top priority, not only for contributing toward EU/NATO accession but also in the overall development and the democratisation of the Western Balkans.

According to our interviewees, an increase in regional cooperation (in different areas) and most importantly implementation of reforms for strengthening institutions and the rule of law are the necessary modalities for good neighbourly relations and democratisation of societies^{100,101,102}. Additionally, the process of rapprochement and communication, or intra-national integration between Albanians in different countries removes *“this black shadow that stands over the Balkans for the attempt to create ethnic states, which really is very difficult to achieve without open armed conflicts between these states and in the end is not in the interest of either Europe or the US.”*¹⁰³

Conclusion

The three pillars that can systematise the activity of the ethnic Albanian political factor in North Macedonia are interethnic relations within the country, a regionally-balanced economic development for all citizens regardless of ethnicity and Euro-Atlantic integrations that guarantee a perspective.

⁹⁷ Interview with Representative of Political Party - BESA' (n 13).

⁹⁸ Interview with Albanian Professor from State University “Mother Teresa” (n 29).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Representative of Political Party - Democratic Union for Integration (n 9)

¹⁰¹ Interview with Albanian Law Professor from South East European University' (5 November 2019).

¹⁰² Interview with Albanian Professor from South East European University - Former MP in the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia' (5 November 2019).

¹⁰³ Interview with Representative of Political Party - BESA' (n 13).

Inter-ethnic co-existence is of major importance to the stability and democratic development of North Macedonia as a country and its road toward the EU. However, the severity of nationalistic narratives, seemingly fading after the 2016 parliamentary elections, and fragility of the relations, should not be neglected due to its potential to fuel interethnic nationalistic divisions. The DUI's campaign in 2020 is the best illustration that ethnic-centric rhetoric continues to be used as a tool for political gain at a cost of creating further division between communities.

There is general feeling among the ethnic Albanian elite in North Macedonia, that Albanians in the country have sacrificed their rights to advance geopolitical objectives like EU and NATO accession. According to them, this has been the driving force for the Albanian political factor to act as stabilising factor and a constructive partner in North Macedonia and the region in critical moments.

Joining the EU and NATO has been a shared aspiration of all Albanian political entities and citizens in North Macedonia, an aspiration which is present in all political agendas. NATO accession has already been achieved as one of the focal points of the political agenda in North Macedonia, however EU accession is still at a very early stage and it is proceeding with "baby steps". While NATO accession has already been achieved since this survey was conducted, EU accession continues to be a great incentive towards democratisation and genuine reforms for strengthening institutions and the rule of law.

Ultimately, the most important factor that could foster cohesion is economic development of the country in a balanced way where all ethnic communities would benefit. This is illustrated with the answers of the respondents that curbing corruption and strengthening economic cooperation as very important factors. All this can be achieved with a commitment to genuine reform through the roadmaps enshrined in the already achieved NATO membership and ongoing EU membership process.

Case Study: Kosovo

Introduction

Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 marked the beginning of a new era in the geopolitics of the Western Balkan, elevating the role of Albanians in the region. Moreover, the constructive role of Albania during Kosovo's struggle for independence and as host to a significant influx of refugees was internationally recognised and reduced the impact of the 1998-1999 conflict while increasing Albania's influence in the region.^{104,105}

Twelve years after the declaration of independence, Kosovo has made considerable progress; more than 100 countries have recognised it, it has joined a number of international organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank, and in 2016 it signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement that forms the foundation for its accession into the European Union. Yet, consolidating its statehood has not been easy: it has failed to join the UN, five out of 27 EU Member States do not formally recognise it, and this weighs negatively on Kosovo's ability to fully participate in regional organisations and initiatives, and path to EU membership. Domestically, its institutions remain weak, and constant political crises have hindered work on pressing issues.¹⁰⁶ At a regional level, Kosovo trails behind all other Western Balkan countries on integration with the EU and NATO. In part, this is due to the unresolved conflict with Serbia, and the inability of the EU and NATO to fully engage with the new country. Unless its issues with Serbia are resolved, this risks further prolonging Kosovo's integration.

Preoccupied with domestic issues, Kosovo's institutions and political actors often fail to fully comprehend developments in the region. As such, local political actors see limited benefits from engaging other regional actors. Considering the inability of domestic leaders to resolve difficult agendas, they have had little to offer to the regional Albanian factor. As a result, the view in Prishtina is that cooperation between Albanians in the region remains weak and unreformed.

However, cooperation and coordination between Kosovo and Albania has intensified in recent years. In October 2017, Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama appointed four Kosovo-born deputy ministers, which experts claim as intending to send a "political message" about ambitions to increase his administration's influence in the region.¹⁰⁷ Subsequently, he promoted two of them to ministerial positions, namely: Minister of Education, and Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs. In the spring of

¹⁰⁴ Metushaj, M. "Albania, a Stabilizing Factor in the Western Balkans Region Favored by Its Geostrategic Position" (*Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, July 2018).

¹⁰⁵ Uncovering Albanian's role in Kosovo war. BBC, May 17, 2010, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8687186.stm#:~:text=As%20Serb%20military%20and%20paramilitary,refugees%20found%20shelter%20in%20Albania.&text=Some%20stayed%20in%20makeshift%20refugee%20camps%20near%20the%20border.>

¹⁰⁶ Kosovo 2020: A Complex Agenda for the New Government. BPRG, December 17, 2019, available at: <https://balkansgroup.org/en/kosovo-2020-a-complex-agenda-for-the-new-government-2/>

¹⁰⁷ Albania's Edi Rama has given four of the 33 new vice-ministerial posts in his government to Kosovars, October 10, 2017, Tirana, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/10/10/analysts-see-albanian-pm-strategy-in-appointing-vice-ministers-from-kosovo-10-09-2017/?fbclid=IwAR10eCjBCf5bMRpNix6OZOVbRLoswoofz-Q2nsztz1Y8R6SogpvG9DRvits>

2020, Kosovo's then newly appointed Prime Minister Albin Kurti aimed to send a similar message by appointing Blerim Reka, an established politician and former presidential candidate in North Macedonia as Kosovo's Minister for EU Integration.¹⁰⁸

Due to the considerable number of Albanians in the region, Tirana's official foreign policy approach is considered as a key component for the overall stability of the Western Balkans by the international community, namely the EU and the US, as well as its neighbours. Albania's membership to NATO in 2009 was considered a major achievement in establishing the country as a regional leader and contributing factor in securing regional peace and stability. As a NATO member, the Albanian government acquired more authority to advocate for other countries' integration, and more responsibility in fostering peace and stability in the region.^{109, 110}

This study is a result of desk research and questionnaire responses (consisting of open and closed questions) conducted with 30 Kosovar elite representatives. They come from a wide range of professions and represent 5 Albanian political parties in the Assembly of Kosovo (mainly MPs), academics, analysts, career diplomats, and journalists.¹¹¹

Demographics of the Republic of Kosovo

Kosovo conducted its last population census in 2011; however, ethnic Serbs boycotted the process, and the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (ASK) used an estimated account.¹¹² According to the 2011 census, 1,739,825 people live in Kosovo. However, Kosovo also has a large diaspora estimated at around 800,000 largely concentrated in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Italy, which is allowed to vote in Kosovo's elections.¹¹³ Out of the resident population, 1,616,869 are ethnic Albanians, 25,532 are ethnic Serbs, and 97,424 declared themselves as belonging to other ethnic groups (Turk, Bosnian, Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian, Goran, and others).¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, figures may be skewed as the number of Serbs living in Kosovo is estimated to be higher than the estimated 120,000 figure

¹⁰⁸ Blerim Reka is Kosovo's new minister of European integration, February 3, 2020, available at:

<https://english.republika.mk/news/balkans/blerim-reka-is-kosovos-new-minister-of-european-integration/>

¹⁰⁹ Regional Policy of Albania, available at:

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_146877.htm?selectedLocale=en

During his speech at the annual NATO Military Committee Conference, the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, said: "Albania's responsibility in NATO is to contribute transforming the fragile and problematic Balkan region into a region of peace, democracy, stability and prosperity."

¹¹⁰ Speech by the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama at the annual NATO Military Committee Conference attended by the Chiefs of Staff of Alliance member countries, October 12, 2017, Tirana, available at:

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_146877.htm?selectedLocale=en&fbclid=IwAR1P7NyVH8-t9dy10VpP82hDtQQuBrFCwxEf_v5tEbszX3mKMY0ZmUFqn9s

¹¹¹ In terms of gender, seven of the respondents were female, and 23 were male.

¹¹² Community Profiles: Serb Community. ECMI, available at:

<https://www.ecmikosovo.org/uploads/Serbcommunity1.pdf>

¹¹³ 'Strategjia për Diasporën 2019-2023', Ministry of Diaspora and Strategic Investments, 2019, available at https://mdis.rks-qov.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Fin.-Dizajni-Projekt-Strategjia_p%C3%ABr_Diaspor%C3%ABn_2019-2023.pdf (Albanian)

¹¹⁴ Census of Population, Households and Housing, 2011 FINAL RESULTS. Kosovo Agency of Statistics, available at: <https://ask.rks-qov.net/media/2074/te-dhenat-kryesore.pdf>

currently used for official statistics in Kosovo.¹¹⁵ This suggests that Serbs make up between 7 to 8% of the population.¹¹⁶ As such, Serbian is recognised as an official language and provided equal status to Albanian. Minority languages besides Serbian and Albanian are also designated as official languages in municipalities where it is spoken by five percent or more of the local population. This provision ensures that minority rights related to language are respected.¹¹⁷

Broad protection of minority rights is included in the Constitution of Kosovo, which itself is derived from the Comprehensive Proposal presented in 2007 by Marti Ahtisaari, the UN's Special Envoy for Kosovo as part of a settlement for its final status.¹¹⁸ The proposal was the result of Vienna-based talks aimed at reaching an agreement between representatives from Serbia and Kosovo on the latter's final status.¹¹⁹ Although Belgrade has never accepted Kosovo's independence or the Ahtisaari Plan, its content is reflected in the Constitution of Kosovo and in subsequently adopted laws.

The political landscape and Albanian political factor in Kosovo

Besides shaping the country's inclusion of minority rights, the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement often referred to as the Ahtisaari Plan, has significantly affected the political scene in Kosovo. To ensure the highest possible participation of ethnic communities in the Assembly, the Constitution ensures reserved seats for ethnic minorities. As a result, from 120 MPs in the country's unicameral legislative body, 20 seats are reserved to minorities. Of these, ten are reserved for parties or political groups representing the Serbian community and the rest for the remaining minorities.¹²⁰

Since 2014, the designated seats for the Serbian community have been mostly filled by the Srpska List, an ethnic Serb minority party which in the 2014 and 2017 elections won 9 seats and in the 2019 elections won all 10 seats reserved for the ethnic Serb minority. Srpska List has never hidden its close ties to the leadership in Serbia, and it is often seen by locals as Belgrade's instrument to control the representation and policy of Serbs in Kosovo's institutions.¹²¹ Their representation in the Assembly and participation in the government (ensured by the Constitution) has been a major

¹¹⁵ *Community Profiles: Serb Community*, available at:

<https://www.ecmikosovo.org/uploads/Serbcommunity1.pdf>

¹¹⁶ *Minority Rights Home, Kosovo Profile*, available at: <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/serbs-3/#:~:text=According%20to%20estimates%20based%20on,estimate%20in%20the%202011%20census.>

¹¹⁷ *Law on the Use Languages*, available at: <https://qzk.rks-qov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2440>.

¹¹⁸ *REFERENCE ICG REPORT NO GOOD ALTERNATIVE Report of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Kosovo's future status, March 26, 2007*, available at:

<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Kosovo%20S2007%20168.pdf>

¹¹⁹ *KOSOVO: NO GOOD ALTERNATIVES TO THE AHTISAARI PLAN. ICG, May 14, 2007*, available at:

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/464969da2.html>

¹²⁰ *Division of seats is as follow Roma community one (1) seat; Ashkali community one (1) seat; the Egyptian community one (1) seat; and one (1) additional seat will be given to the Roma, Ashkali, or Egyptian community, depending on which has the largest number of general votes; the Bosniak community three (3) seats, the Turkish community two (2) seats and the Goran community one (1) seats Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Article 64 [Structure of Assembly].*

¹²¹ *Serb Party Pushes Belgrade's Agenda in Kosovo. Balkan Insight, October 19, 2016*, available at:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2016/10/19/highs-and-downs-in-relations-between-listasrpska-and-kosovo-institutions-10-11-2016/>

challenge for consecutive governments since the 2013 Brussels Agreement.¹²² Considering it serves as a “guardian” of Serbia’s interests and reflective of its disposition toward Kosovo, cooperation with the Srpska List has been difficult. Although there are other ethnic Serb politicians and political parties that are more constructive and cooperative with other ethnic groups, they have not received the necessary votes to pass the electoral threshold for representation in the Assembly. Ultimately, the Srpska List’s dominance of Serb political representation demonstrates Belgrade’s absolute influence on Kosovo Serbs.

Following the 6 October 2019 parliamentary elections, six (6) political parties represent Albanians in the Assembly of Kosovo: Self-Determination Movement (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje - LVV), Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK), Democratic Party e Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës - PDK), Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës - AAK), NISMA Social Democratic (NISMA Social Demokrate) and New Kosovo Alliance (Aleanca Kosova e Re - AKR).¹²³ For much of the last two decades, these parties have dominated Kosovo’s politics. In terms of their ideological leaning, VV and NISMA are centre-left parties; LDK, PDK, and AAK as centre-right, and AKR as a liberal party. LDK is a member of the European People’s Party while VV is an observer member of the Socialist International Group.

Albanian Factor on the region, rhetoric, and complicity of relations

In the popular discourse of Kosovo, “the Albanian factor” in the Western Balkans commonly refers to all ethnic Albanian political and social actors in the region. It is often assumed to include the state institutions of the two Albanian-majority states of Albania and Kosovo and their political and social representatives. Moreover, it includes the ethnic Albanian political actors living in the territories of Former Yugoslavia including North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia (Preshevo Valley), as well as elites, civil society and community organisations, the academic and cultural communities, and the media.¹²⁴

Albania-Kosovo relations

The cooperation between ethnic Albanians in the Western Balkans has varied over time, depending on state borders, the political and security situation, as well as many other external and internal factors. Relations between Kosovo and Albania particularly, have deepened and expanded following Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania, the relations between Albania and Kosovo are “excellent”. Bilateral cooperation, according to the Ministry, is “guided by the national interest to deepen the political, economic, social and cultural intercommunion” as well as to “boost the integration process towards the European Union, as a fundamental unifying project of the Albanian space in the service of its peace, stability and

¹²² See *Balkans Group report Serb integration after the Brussels Agreement, Prishtina, March 2015*

¹²³ For more see the *Balkans Group report, Kosovo 2020: A Complex Agenda for the New Government, December 2019*

¹²⁴ Under Yugoslavia, Albanians of Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and South Serbia’s Preshevo Valley had long associated. According to recent censuses, 61,647 Albanians live in South Serbia, 509,083 in Macedonia and 31,163 in Montenegro. With the disillusion of Yugoslavia all but Albanians of Montenegro had been affected by wars.

prosperity”¹²⁵. At the same time, Kosovo’s cooperation with Albanians of the Preshevo Valley, North Macedonia, and Montenegro has loosened.

In 2014, Albania and Kosovo signed a “Strategic Partnership” agreement that requires both countries “to coordinate the common political and diplomatic actions for the active engagement of the Republic of Kosovo in all regional processes and initiatives” and aims to “further consolidate the international position of the Republic of Kosovo, earning more recognitions and memberships in regional, European and global organisations”¹²⁶. Moreover, Kosovo and Albania share several diplomatic missions around the world. They have also signed another agreement that aims to unify and coordinate their foreign policy, including among other the establishment of joint embassies abroad.¹²⁷

Unification with Albania

Closer cooperation between Kosovo and Albania has fuelled reactions (and many concerns) to the possibility of two-state unification.¹²⁸ The unification of Albanian territories has been an existing narrative dating back to the 19th century; however, the idea has lost appeal and support in recent decades.¹²⁹ In the past few years, domestic leaders of Kosovo and Albania bring up unification every time they fail at home or on their regional and international agendas, much to the irritation of their strategic Western allies.¹³⁰¹³¹ Notably, in 2017, Albania’s Prime Minister Edi Rama told the US-based *Politico* that he could not rule out a “little union” between Albania and Kosovo if the EU decided to take membership off the table¹³².

A year later, during a visit to Prishtina, Rama suggested a joint president for the two Albanian-majority states, adding that; “Kosovo and Albania will have a common foreign policy, not only joint embassies and diplomatic offices, but why not one single president too, as a symbol of the nation’s unity, and joint national security policy?”¹³³ The statement caused quite a stir among political elites in Kosovo, calling it “a disrespect for Kosovar aspirations for an independent state [that is] fully

¹²⁵ *Relations with Regional Countries*. Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania, available at: <https://puneteshjeme.gov.al/en/shqiperia-ne-rajon/marredheniet-me-vendet-e-rajonit/>

¹²⁶ *Statement on Strategic Cooperation and Partnerships between the Council of Ministers of Albania and the Government of Kosovo*, available at: <https://shtetiweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Deklarata-per-bashkepunim-dhe-partneritet-strategjik.pdf>

¹²⁷ *Kosovo and Albania signed a landmark agreement to coordinate their foreign policies and unify their diplomatic missions*, July 3, 2019, Pristina, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/03/kosovo-and-albania-agree-to-run-joint-foreign-policy/>

¹²⁸ *Kosovo’s trade war with Serbia prompts Tirana to push for Albanian unification*, November 27, 2018, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/kosovos-trade-war-with-serbia-prompts-tirana-to-push-for-albanian-unification/>

¹²⁹ *Kosovo-Albania: Interaction, knowledge, values, beliefs, cooperation and unification*, 2019, available at: https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/raporti_plote_kosove_-_shqiperi_-_eng.pdf

¹³⁰ *The strange influence of the Macedonian model*, May 9, 2019, see more:

https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_strange_influence_of_the_macedonian_model

¹³¹ *Albania and Kosovo to unite, inside EU or not: Albanian PM*, April 7, 2015, available at:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-albania-kosovo-unification-idUSKBNOMY18L20150407>

¹³² *Albanian prime minister: EU faces ‘nightmare’ if Balkan hopes fade*, April 18, 2017, available at:

<https://www.politico.eu/article/albania-prime-minister-edi-rama-eu-faces-nightmare-if-balkans-denied/>

¹³³ *Albania's Edi Rama floats joint president idea in Kosovo*, February 19, 2018, available at:

<https://www.dw.com/en/albanias-edi-rama-floats-joint-president-idea-in-kosovo/a-42642058>

integrated into the European Union and NATO"¹³⁴. Following such a controversial statement, the EU, in turn, warned Albania against "interference" in neighbouring countries and Serbian officials accused Tirana of wanting to create a "Greater Albania."¹³⁵

Kosovo's political elites did not approve of Rama's approach and rejected any discussions on unification that could threaten the country's independence. Yet, unification with Albania does have some support in Kosovo. In the past, the Self-Determination Movement - "Vetëvendosje" clearly expressed its aspiration for unification, and last year, it formally expanded into Albania, where it registered as a non-governmental organisation under the name "Lëvizja VETËVENDOSJE! në Shqipëri" (eng. "Self-Determination Movement in Albania").¹³⁶ However, Albanian political elites in Kosovo – including Vetëvendosje – are well aware that unification would be strongly opposed by their strategic allies, including the US, UK, EU, and its member states such as Germany, France, and Italy. Consequently, the notion of unifying the two countries has been revamped to unifying Albanians through EU accession. As a result, the unification of ethnic Albanians within the European Union has become the prominent narrative in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia.¹³⁷

Kosovo – Serbia relations and Albania's role in Kosovo

Twelve years after its independence, Serbia continues to contest the statehood of Kosovo. This impedes bilateral relations, cooperation, understanding, and trust between people and institutions. As such, the unresolved issue between Belgrade and Prishtina remains a key source of instability in the Western Balkans. To help resolve some of the immediate tensions and build prospects for full normalisation, the EU and US have mediated a series of talks between Serbia and Kosovo. Between 2011 and 2015, the two countries signed more than 30 agreements and agreed to jointly partake in regional initiatives.¹³⁸

Certain aspects of these agreements have been implemented and produced positive results, including the transition and integration of Kosovo's northern Serb majority into local structures.¹³⁹ Other aspects have not been implemented leading to a rise in tensions between Belgrade and Prishtina.¹⁴⁰ As a result, the EU-led Brussels dialogue has failed to establish sustainable bilateral

¹³⁴ *Avdullah Hoti has come up against the idea of the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, for a joint president of the two countries, February 18, 2018, available at: <https://www.balkanweb.com/president-i-perbashket-avdullah-hoti-kunder-edi-rames-po-treqon-mosrespekt-ndaj-kosovareve/>*

¹³⁵ *EU, Serbia Hit Out At Albania-Kosovo 'Single President' Idea, February 19, 2018, see more at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/albania-kosovo-president-rama-serbia/29047539.html>*

¹³⁶ *Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) party said they have applied to open a sister organisation in Tirana to promote the 'national unification' of Albanians, April 9, 2019, see more at: https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/09/kosovos-vetevendosje-opens-albania-branch-for-nation-unification/?fbclid=IwAR2sbaaOlhnBhn-dvLrboQ8LG-SW6y_vwqDP5wqz_l6Y1nTQQz8KV-hiN9k*

¹³⁷ *U.S. raps ally Albania for 'careless' words on Kosovo, February 22, 2018, available at: <https://www.balkaninsider.com/reuters-u-s-raps-ally-albania-for-careless-words-on-kosovo/>*

¹³⁸ *Serbia – Kosovo relations 2011-2015 briefing: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)635512_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI(2019)635512_EN.pdf)*

¹³⁹ *Serbia – Kosovo relations 2011-2015 briefing: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)635512_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI(2019)635512_EN.pdf)*

¹⁴⁰ *The Association of Serb Municipalities: Understanding conflicting views of Albanians and Serbs, January 22 2017, available at: <https://balkangroup.org/en/the-association-of-serb-municipalities-understanding-conflicting-views-of-albanians-and-serbs/>*

cooperation between the two countries. Serbia had continued to lobby against Kosovo's membership in regional and international organisations and Kosovo, in turn, imposed tariffs on Serbian goods.¹⁴¹ As a result, progress stalled and the dialogue was discontinued until recently.

At the same time, between 2016 and 2018, the leaders of Kosovo and Serbia engaged in constructing an agreement that would facilitate Belgrade's mutual recognition in exchange for significant border adjustments or corrections, leading to a swap of territories between the northern Serb-inhabited areas of Kosovo and the Albanian-inhabited areas of southern Serbia.¹⁴² This prompted accusations and reactions from a broad socio-political spectrum, aided in part by the alleged involvement of Albania's Prime Minister.

In an attempt to pressure Serbia to recognise Kosovo's independence, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama reiterated his position during a "historic visit" to Belgrade in 2014, marking the country's first leader to visit Serbia in 68 years.¹⁴³ Although never confirmed, public opinion widely believes that Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has attempted to insert himself into talks about border corrections between Kosovo and Serbia.¹⁴⁴ These accusations are opposed by Albania's Acting Foreign Minister Gent Cakaj, who stated that Kosovo has to set its political platform, which Albania will support "unconditionally."¹⁴⁵ In Kosovo, the opinion is divided about how or if Tirana should be involved in the talks between Prishtina and Belgrade. Yet, most refuse to allow Rama or anyone else, be it in Albania or elsewhere in the region to talk on behalf of Kosovo in the difficult dialogue with Serbia.¹⁴⁶ It is often assumed that Kosovo and Albania have a shared vision of close collaboration. However, upon a closer look, this is not always the case, considering cooperation is sometimes lacking due to disagreements and even personal quarrels.¹⁴⁷

Kosovo-North Macedonia relations

Until the last few years, relations between Kosovo and North Macedonia have never been great, and there were times when tensions between the two have grown severely.¹⁴⁸ Yet, since Zoran Zaev

¹⁴¹ Kosovo hits Serbia with 100% trade tariffs amid Interpol row, November 21 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46287975>

¹⁴² For a peaceful border correction between Kosovo and Serbia: September 17 2018, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/for-a-peaceful-border-correction-between-kosovo-and-serbia/>

¹⁴³ The first visit to Serbia for 68 years by an Albanian prime minister has turned into a diplomatic spat about the status of Kosovo, November 10, 2014, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29985048>

¹⁴⁴ The strange influence of the Macedonian model, May 9, 2019, see more: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_strange_influence_of_the_macedonian_model

¹⁴⁵ Albania's Acting Foreign Minister Gent Cakaj said Albania has three key positions on Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, October 30, 2019, available at: https://www.rtklive.com/en/news-single.php?ID=15149&fbclid=IwAR3D9I53qLytdQwb15oIFYas5_WcAShsAyxwIY46EE_uUuWhyDbz6TIMic

¹⁴⁶ Albania PM Accused of 'Interfering' With Kosovo. Balkan Insight, October 18, 2016, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/10/18/albanian-pm-comments-in-belgrade-spark-debate-between-tirana-and-pristina-10-17-2016/>

¹⁴⁷ Edi Rama padit Ramush Haradinajn për "shpifje". Deutsche Welle, January 16, 2020, available at: <https://www.dw.com/sq/edi-rama-padit-ramush-haradinajn-p%C3%ABr-shpifje/a-52024481>

¹⁴⁸ Under the leadership of Nikola Gruevski, relations between two state had reached a low point and in 2015 an armed incidents involving many Kosovo Albanians occurred in Kumanovo. For more see the Crisis Group

came to power in 2017, relations have considerably improved. This was followed by a ‘first-ever’ visit to Kosovo by a North Macedonian Prime Minister and an exchange of numerous private visits between Kosovo’s then-Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj and Zoran Zaev over the next two years.¹⁴⁹

Zaev's election as Prime Minister marked a sharp turn in North Macedonia's foreign policy and regional cooperation following his government's interest in overcoming the country's obstacles to joining NATO and the EU.¹⁵⁰ In addition, his government made tangible progress on equitable representation, language rights, and implementation of the Ohrid Agreement which has considerably contributed to reducing ethnic tensions in North Macedonia and consequently positively affected their relations with Kosovo and Albania.

In 2019, largely driven by the failure of the EU to launch accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, the Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama, the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić and the Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev launched the so-called “mini-Schengen” initiative between the three countries to increase regional cooperation and prepare the region for future EU accession.¹⁵¹ This initiative would facilitate the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital in the Western Balkans using only ID cards.¹⁵²

The idea of the so-called “mini-Schengen” quickly sparked a heated debate in Kosovo. Politicians in Kosovo questioned the benefits of such an initiative as long as it is not recognised by two Western Balkan countries, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, the head of Kosovo’s second-largest political party, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) Isa Mustafa, cast further doubts on the initiative by stating that it resembles the remaking of Yugoslavia.¹⁵³ The initiative also created

report *MACEDONIA: Defusing the Bombs*, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/macedonia/macedonia-defusing-bombs>

¹⁴⁹ Macedonia PM pays first-ever visit to Kosovo, December 12 2017, available at:

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/energy-diplomacy/macedonia-pm-pays-first-ever-visit-to-kosovo/15943>

Haradinaj in Skopje, meets with Macedonian PM Zaev, April 18 2018, available at:

<https://www.aa.com.tr/sq/balkan/haradinaj-n%C3%AB-shkup-takohet-me-homologun-e-tij-zaev/1121783>

Prime Minister Haradinaj met with the Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev, February 16, 2019,

available at: <https://kryeministri-ks.net/en/prime-minister-ramush-haradinaj-met-with-the-prime-minister-of-north-macedonia-zoran-zaev/>

Ramush Haradinaj goes to Zoran Zaev's home, May 25 2019, available at:

<http://fax.al/read/news/20691374/20632698/ramush-haradinaj-i-shkon-ne-konak-zoran-zaevit>

Haradinaj in Skopje, meets with Zoran Zaev, August 24 2019, available at: <https://gazetablic.com/haradinaj-ne-shkup-takohet-me-zoran-zaev/>

¹⁵⁰ Changing relations after Zaev, August 30, 2017, available at:

https://www.europeanforum.net/headlines/the-diplomatic-conflict-between-macedonia-and-serbia-what-happened?fbclid=IwAR22O8qYPprE03bjcZ_Ohzm-kbS_6PBdNi-XkhMHmymwCjCXReqI7-x-q

¹⁵¹ On 10 October, the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia declared that they would implement a mini-Schengen zone with free movement of goods, capital, services and people. The leaders expect all six Western Balkan countries to join soon, October 20, 2019, see more at:

<https://globalriskinsights.com/2019/10/western-balkans-a-mini-schengen-zone/>

¹⁵² Mini-Schengen, pro and contra attitudes in Kosovo, December 23, 2019, see more at:

https://balkan.eu.com/mini-schengen-pro-and-contra-attitudes-in-kosovo/?fbclid=IwAR3nyNSBFpNbhMhC_tRwe1EwkJ6NByccBSCbnrOV05CKAgyBFRmdX-Wbqxx

¹⁵³ LDK President, Isa Mustafa has reacted to the idea being pushed forward by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev and President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, to create a

friction between the Albanian government and leaders in Kosovo, who claimed that Rama did not consult with Kosovo in advance.¹⁵⁴ Contrarily, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama criticised Kosovo, arguing that non-recognition by Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina should not prevent Kosovo from taking part in regional initiatives or from signing agreements with European representatives.¹⁵⁵ In Kosovo, opposition to this initiative was met with broad support from political and societal actors which contributed to further collisions with the Albanian government, namely Prime Minister Rama and potentially lowering support for unification. Ultimately, the initiative highlighted that Albania, Kosovo, and their respective leaders do not always share the same vision for the future.

Definition of “Albanian Political Factor”

To understand what the ethnic Albanian cultural, political, economic, and societal elite in Kosovo consider as the “Albanian political factor” in the Western Balkans, survey respondents were asked to define and describe how they perceive it. Most respondents define it as political actors (political parties and politicians), while some also include civil society, the media, or even academics, opinion-makers, and people with influence in society, without naming any in particular but referring to persons with great social authority. The role of the media and its representatives was also esteemed in this regard. One of the respondents described the Albanian political factor as follows:

“A spectrum of political and public actors that present, represent and promotes the history, existence, and role of a nation in the Balkans. On these premises, the Albanian political factor aims to play a contributing role in the states and spaces where [Albanians] live, with the aim of political factorisation and at the same time preserving cultural values”.

Some respondents considered the role of the associations emerging from the Kosovo War as an important part of the Albanian political factor, considering they have a certain influence in policy-making both in Kosovo and in North Macedonia. To a few of them, *this is the best political factor in the history of Albanians in the Balkans.*¹⁵⁶ However, most responses point to a broader and more inclusive explanation, from which a working definition emerges. In this paper, the Albanian political factor according to the respondents means ethnic Albanian political parties, academics, civil society organisations, and opinion-makers with influence in society.

Question: How would you consider the contribution of the “Albanian political factor” in the Western Balkans in recent years with regard to each of the following concepts? Please rate on a scale of 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive).

mini-Schengen between countries of the Western Balkans, November 11, 2019, available at:

<https://telegraf.al/politike/isa-mustafa-e-kemi-provuar-njehere-juqosllavine/>

¹⁵⁴ *Kosovo declines invitation to third ‘mini-Schengen’ meeting in Durres, December 20, 2019, available at:*

tiranatimes.com/?p=143715&fbclid=IwAR3XhBh9VeocSw8EaB5bTsqSdzFqSLSTxVXO_7Tso6uA4U1k2jPuZSZ2baW

¹⁵⁵ *Kosovo leaders opposed the idea of a Mini-Schengen area for the Western Balkans, November 11, 2019, available at: <http://www.rtklive.com/en/news-single.php?ID=15236>*

¹⁵⁶ *Balkans Group interview with a Kosovo political representative, Prishtina, March 2020*

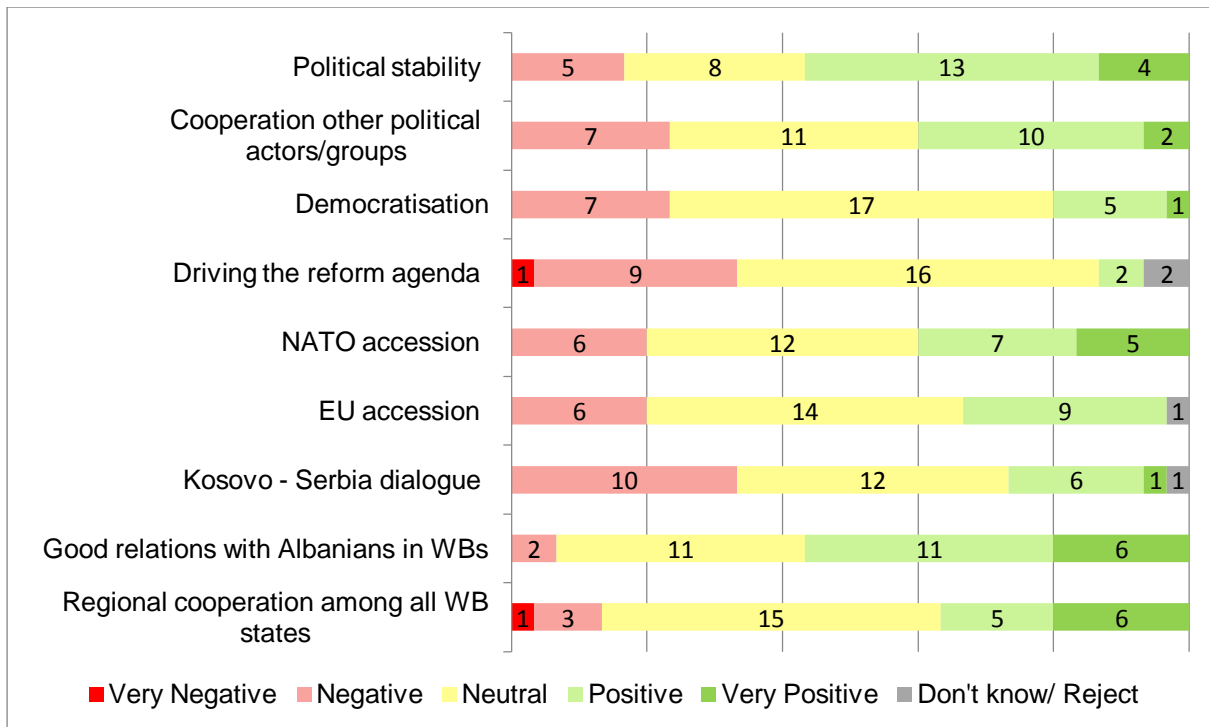


Figure 5: Contribution of the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans on 9 concepts

As can be seen from the answers, the respondents averagely assessed the influence of the Albanian political factor in Kosovo on the above-mentioned concepts.

When asked to assess the contribution of the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans, respondents from Kosovo deem that a predominantly positive role has been played in supporting stability (13 positive) across the region. More concertedly, Albanians have played a significant role in developing good neighbourly relations (11 positive), including enhanced relations between one another which was also positively assessed. This may be related to the increased open communication between the Albanian political elites in the countries of the region and the increasing qualitative and quantitative participation of Albanians, particularly in post-election governments and coalitions such as in North Macedonia (including the position of the Speaker of the Assembly, which is now held for the first time by an Albanian). This has also led to Albanians contributing to increasing cooperation with other actors or groups in the Western Balkans (10 positive as well) with similar participation of Albanians in the political spheres of other countries in the region. However, the Albanian factor has been deemed to have little impact on the reform-making agenda (9 negative). Similarly, the respondents consider that the Albanian factor did not contribute much to democratisation processes throughout the region.

Furthermore, contributions to the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia (10 negative) have not been seen as beneficial. The respondents from Kosovo continue to negatively assess the role of the Albanian factor on this topic. This is largely driven by reports that Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has engaged and supported talks between the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić and President of

Kosovo Hashim Thaçi on border adjustments arrangements between the two countries as well as Rama’s indispensable push for the so-called “mini-Schengen” idea.¹⁵⁷

Nationalism and the “Albanian factor”

To assess the perceived support for nationalism and narratives such as Greater Albania supported by influential political actors and average citizens, we asked our respondents to rate the level of support for such ideas among these two groups.

Question: In your opinion, is Albanian nationalism and the narratives that are associated with it (e.g. Greater Albania) still supported in Kosovo by Albanian actors? Please rate on a scale of 1 (strongly supported) to 5 (not supported at all).

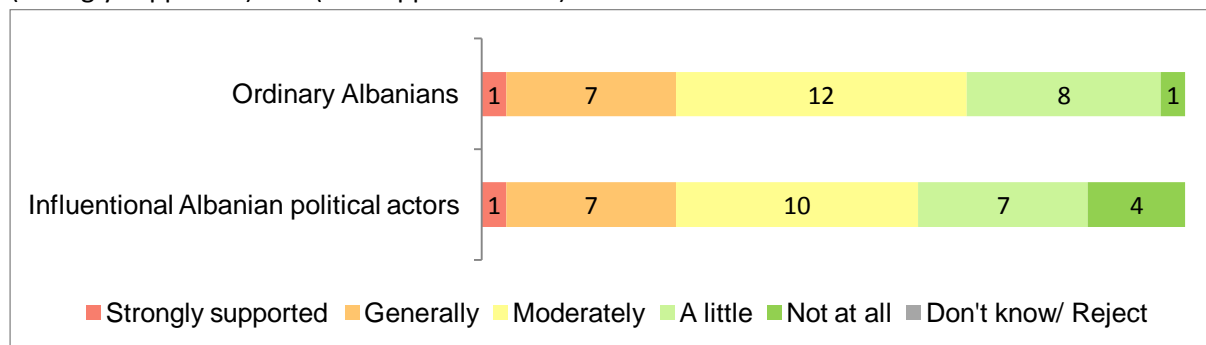


Figure 6: Support of nationalism and narratives such as Greater Albania in Kosovo

According to the ethnic Albanian elites responding to this survey, there is some support for nationalist narratives in Kosovo society. Eight respondents indicated that nationalist narratives are still influential among ordinary citizens, while 12 respondents said they are somewhat influential and nine said that they had little to no impact. Respondents perceive nationalist narratives to have less impact on political actors. According to 11 of the surveyed ethnic Albanian elites, nationalist narratives have little to no impact, while 10 respondents indicated that there is some impact with 8 respondents stating that there is an influence of nationalist narratives among Kosovo’s influential Albanian political actors.

However, the results of this survey are not unique in reflecting that the “Greater Albania” narrative is losing support. This is in part due to its gradual replacement with the aspiration to join the EU under the premise of “uniting Albanians in the bloc”. Today, only “Lëvizja Vetëvendosje” officially embraces unification with Albania as a concept. However, over the last several years, Albin Kurti and the movement have had to temper their support for unification and cut back on nationalist rhetoric to enhance its popular support. In the words of an observer, LVV won when they abandoned unification with Albania.¹⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, in 2019, when it ran on a platform with a greater focus on anti-corruption it managed to achieve its best electoral result to date.

¹⁵⁷ The ‘mini-Schengen’ is an initiative to establish the free movement of people, goods, services and capital between Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia. Kosovo has so far refused to participate on the basis that it is recognized by Serbia. For more read Euronews, “Western Balkan leaders plot their own ‘mini-Schengen’ zone”, 11 November 2019, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2019/11/11/western-balkan-leaders-plot-their-own-mini-schengen-zone>

¹⁵⁸ Balkans Group interview, opinion maker/journalist, Prishtina, January 2020.

In recent years, nationalist narratives such as “Greater Albania” are perceived as a threat to the statehood of Kosovo, as highlighted by a 2018 survey. This survey queried 1,304 Kosovo citizens (1,004 Albanians and 300 Serbs) with the question: “Regardless of circumstances and opportunities, how in favour are you personally of national unification?”. The respondents answered as follows: 29.4% would personally be “very much” in favour, 25.1% said “I want it to happen”, 16% answered “So-so”, 8.8% “A little”, and 16.5% “Not at all”. 4.1% answered Don’t know.¹⁵⁹ These responses are in line with perceptions that Kosovars are primarily preoccupied with their welfare, security, and prosperity rather than nationalist objectives, which are unlikely to deliver the much-needed and sought-after services and opportunities.

Kosovo – Serbia Dialogue

The exchange of territories or border correction represents a formulation used by leaders of Serbia and Kosovo between 2016 and 2018 while discussing the normalisation of bilateral relations in the EU-facilitated dialogue. It was presented as a *modus vivendi* to allow both countries to come to a comprehensive agreement that would include mutual recognition. However, outside the close circles where it was discussed, the idea provoked massive reactions and strong opposition in Kosovo, the region, and Europe. Its circulation instigated controversies and fuelled a severe crisis both at home among different political parties and abroad between Prishtina and its key international allies. To get a better idea of how the ethnic Albanian political, societal, academic, and cultural elite think about the idea of a border correction with Serbia, respondents were asked to rate their assessment of the idea on a 7-point scale; with one being very positive and seven as very negative.

Question: In recent years, there has been increasing talk of a swap of territories between Serbia and Kosovo, the so-called ‘border correction’ of the Kosovo-Serbian border. What do think about this?

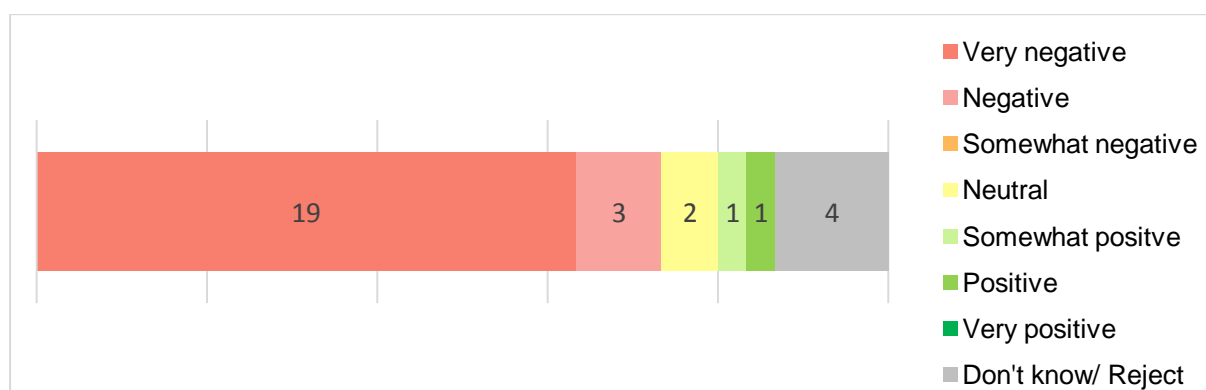


Figure 7: Respondents’ opinion on the border swap between Kosovo and Serbia

The respondents of the survey, all of which are ethnic Albanian Kosovo elites, strongly oppose this potential arrangement. More than two-thirds of the respondents think very negatively or negatively about this idea, while two maintained a neutral stance, two were positive and four did not state an

¹⁵⁹ Demi, Agron & Çeka, Blendi. “KOSOVO – ALBANIA Interaction, knowledge, values, beliefs, cooperation and unification”, (Kosovo Foundation for Open Society & Open Society Foundation for Albania, 2019), https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/raporti_plote_kosove_-_shqiperi_-_eng.pdf

answer. Citizens share similar views, as demonstrated by a survey conducted by the Kosovo Democratic Institute in September 2018. This survey, with a sample size of 1066 respondents (from all ethnicities living in Kosovo), asked: “Would you accept the exchange of territory between Kosovo and Serbia as part of the normalisation agreement between the parties?” 77.6% answered with “No”, 11.3% said “Yes” and 11% “Don’t know/I refuse to answer.”¹⁶⁰

This seems to be a widely shared sentiment. A survey conducted by the Research Institute of Development and International Affairs (RIEDA) in December 2018 with 1100 respondents came to similar conclusions. On the question: “Do you agree with border adjustment provided that in return Serbia provides de facto and de jure recognition to Kosovo?”, they responded: Strongly Agree - 5.6%, Somewhat Agree - 5.9%, Somewhat Disagree - 6.2% Strongly Disagree - 76.2%, and Don't know/Don't have a view - 6%¹⁶¹. In September 2018, Lëvizja Vetëvendosje mobilised a large protest against the talks that included border exchanges.¹⁶²

There are many reasons why the redrawing of borders remains very unpopular in Kosovo, especially if it includes making compromises with Serbia. Due to historical reasons, Kosovo society is very sensitive to border and territorial issues, best reflected with the ratification of the border demarcation with Montenegro.¹⁶³ If given a voice, Kosovo society and elites will be much less compromising in talks with Serbia than with Montenegro, given fears that any talks involving border adjustments are a threat to the country’s existence.¹⁶⁴

Drivers of nationalism and ways to counter them

Drivers of nationalism are rooted in history and became a form of survival among all Albanian communities outside the Republic of Albania across the Western Balkans. Over time, it fluctuated in resilience and depth. Nationalism and patriotism represent a reaction towards prejudice and under-representation in the post-World War II period of history. Nowadays, some local politicians formulate nationalism and unification with Albania as a response to the absence of a genuine European perspective.

Question: What would you consider the three most important drivers of Albanian nationalism in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia?

¹⁶⁰ KDI Survey: 77.6% of citizens oppose the idea of the territory exchange between Kosovo and Serbia, 28.09.2018, <http://kdi-kosova.org/en/activities/sondazhi-i-kdi-se-77-6-e-qytetareve-kundershtojne-idene-e-shkembimit-te-territorit-mes-kosoves-dhe-serbise/>.

¹⁶¹ Vox Populi on the ‘Grand Finale’ between Kosovo and Serbia Volume I (Research Institute for Development and International Affairs, February 2019) http://www.ridea-ks.org/Articles/3/Images/29-01-2019/212369_Report_in_English_-_Vox_Populi_on_the_'Grand_Finale'_between_Kosovo_and_Serbia.pdf

¹⁶² Thousands Protest In Kosovo Over Possible Serbia Land Swap, September 29, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/protest-in-kosovo-over-possible-land-swap-with-serbia/29516478.html>.

¹⁶³ Kosovo parliament ratifies border deal with Montenegro after stormy session. Reuters, March 21, 2018, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-parliament-teargas/kosovo-parliament-ratifies-border-deal-with-montenegro-after-stormy-session-idUSKBN1GX1GB>

¹⁶⁴ KDI: Three quarters of Kosovo citizens oppose the exchange of territories. European Western Balkans, July 28, 2018, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/09/28/kdi-three-quarters-kosovo-citizens-oppose-exchange-territories/>

The respondents were asked to list important drivers of Albanian nationalism in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. A considerable number of those interviewed perceive Serbian nationalism (including the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church), and their historical ambition to rule Albanian territories to be the primary instigator of Albanian nationalism as a countermeasure. For them, Albanian nationalism was always of a 'defensive' or 'responsive' form caused by other ethnic groups' nationalist rhetoric. Most respondents insist that there is no equivalent expansionist Albanian nationalism.

According to the respondents, the historical and persistent ethnic discrimination and under-representation of Albanians still present in North Macedonia, southern Serbia and Montenegro continues to preserve Albanian nationalism. The lack of perspective at home and a tangible pathway for membership to the European Union alongside the feeling of "being left behind or segregated from the others" in both integration and visa liberalisation, could become nationalist tools in the hands of politicians, eager to instrumentalise these grievances for short-term political gain.

The other instigators of nationalism are political parties (designated in different countries), lack of economic development, and perspective for a better life. In some form, nationalist approaches may become justified as a necessary means for the preservation of Albanian ethnicity and identity in the region, considering the mass migration and external threats.

Respondents raised the lack of a clear perspective for EU integration, which is an important element presented in other reports as well and warned by various politicians and political analysts, as a key potential driver. The slow progress in this front, as evidenced by delays to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, risks the resurgence of dormant nationalism in the Western Balkans to which the Albanian factor cannot be immune. Therefore, it is critical to swiftly remedy this as a means of preventing the region, including the Albanian factor, from flirting with such dangerous ideas which could potentially threaten regional peace and security.

Question: In which ways do you think the Albanian (geo) political factor could counter nationalist narratives and the "Greater Nation" idea?

On the views of respondents, the political factor can oppose nationalist narratives in many different ways, such as investing in economic development, providing a better perspective for the youth as well as opportunities for personal and professional advancement. However, according to the respondents, the most effective method would be the strengthening of state institutions in countries with an ethnic Albanian population and by enhancing the welfare and prosperity for Albanians in the region. Creating better living conditions for Albanians is considered to contribute to the abandonment of ideas and narratives that, irrespective of their degree, do not contribute to the stability and development of the Western Balkans.

An important policy to counter nationalist narratives, according to respondents, is the accession of countries with Albanian populations into Euro-Atlantic institutions - NATO and the EU; as they would facilitate "unification" within the European family, providing for a good "compromise for Albanian nationalists".

“Delays in the integration processes (vitaly Kosovo’s membership into NATO) would increase Albanian demands for unification,” one respondent said.

Granting equal rights to Albanians in countries where they form an ethnic minority (referring to the Albanians in North Macedonia and other areas where Albanians live) is also seen as vital for overcoming nationalism. Other respondents, however, perceive Albanian nationalism to pose no threat. Corresponding to this view, one respondent stated that “the idea of Albanian unification is driven by Belgrade simply as a way to undermine the state of Kosovo”.

One respondent summarised the phenomenon by noting that Albanian political elites are well aware that unification “will not find the support among their strategic allies, [such as] the US and the European Union” and in response, the notion of the "unification of all Albanians within the EU" has emerged. Another respondent said that delays to the unification of Albanians in the European Union, and Kosovo’s prolongment of visa liberalisation have revived “the old nationalism of the Albanian left-wing again leading to the electoral triumph of Vetëvendosje in 2019” prompting the narrative to adjust towards protecting “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kosovo...”.

The Albanian political factor as an anchor for cooperation

In recent years, popular demand for cooperation between ethnic Albanian populations in the Western Balkans has increased. This has varied in both shape and objectives. Yet, state institutions and local elites have failed to meet these demands. For many, coordination among the Albanian political factors is key for strengthening and promoting their influence in the region. The survey respondents identified the following areas of cooperation Albanians need to concentrate their attention on: education, culture, science, economic development and security. It is clear that many respondents are dissatisfied with the current level of cooperation in these areas, and as such, more needs to be done to compensate for missed opportunities.

Question: In your opinion, what are the three most important factors that can strengthen the geopolitical importance of the Albanian factor in the region?

For many of the respondents, cooperation with key international partners (the US and the EU) remains vital. Respondents view democratisation of Albanian societies, the strengthening of their respective institutions, human and capital security, and inclusion, as vital ingredients for the perspective of the Albanian factor in the region. They want Albanians to align foreign policies and see a “strong” US presence in the region as a stabilising and democratising factor.

One respondent considers that an important factor for improving Kosovo’s positioning is "strengthening Kosovo's bilateral relations with Montenegro and North Macedonia, and cooperating with them to prevent Russia's influence in the Western Balkans." In the same vein, respondents consider “fighting extremism, political Islam, and pan-Arab support for the domestic and regional network” as key priorities which should be implemented in cooperation with regional partners “and with support of key allies; the US and EU”.

Once again, EU and NATO integration (for Kosovo) of the countries where ethnic Albanians live is seen as a key factor in strengthening the role of the Albanian political factor in the region. Albanians

play an essential role in the stability of the Western Balkans, despite feelings of discrimination and inequality. For the respondents, strengthening and enhancing cooperation among the countries where Albanians live and their neighbours is of vital interest to them as well as citizens of the region. It is also the only venue to counter the influence of others, i.e. Russia, political Islam, etc. Pursuing the path to full membership into the EU and NATO as well as embracing their values remain vital policies and the only geopolitical choice for Albanians.

Cooperation amongst Albanians in the region should go beyond traditional topics of brotherly support. Twelve years after independence, the people of Kosovo have been demanding other forms of cooperation. Respondents were therefore asked where they thought that the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans and in Kosovo itself might make a positive contribution to the Euro-Atlantic perspective of the region. The participants were given a list of seven options largely the same as the other country surveys, but could also fill in an answer themselves. Most respondents chose four answers from the list.

Question: How do you think the Albanian political factor could make a more positive contribution to Kosovo’s EU / NATO accession process?*

Fight against corruption	26
To promote inter-ethnic cooperation and understanding	19
Increase efforts to reach an agreement in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue	19
To promote meritocracy	16
To promote democratic principles within the structures of political parties	15
To increase co-operation between Albanian political actors in the region	15
The party program must be developed across ethnic lines	12
Other	2

**Respondents could choose more than one answer option*

Asked to elaborate on what the regional Albanian factor can positively contribute most, respondents insisted that democratisation, development of institutions, and societies where they live, provide a key contribution to Kosovo society. In other words, progress in their own countries will help to set a good example, rather than direct meddling in Pristina.

Good governance, strengthening the rule of law, and the fight against corruption in other countries can set the best example for Kosovo society. 26 of the 30 respondents said that by fighting against corruption, the Albanian political factor could make a more positive contribution to Kosovo’s EU and NATO accession process, underlining that Kosovo elites are in desperate need of good examples and role models from the region. The perception of corruption in Kosovo continues to be high, and this is confirmed by the latest Transparency International Index, which ranks the country in the 101st place out of 180.¹⁶⁵ According to the respondents, the democratisation of the political factor, including

¹⁶⁵ *Transparency International, ‘Corruption Perception Index 2019’ Kosovo:*
<https://prishtinainsight.com/kosovo-falls-in-the-ranks-of-transparency-internationals-corruption-index/>

political parties, and making them more inclusive will positively affect Kosovo. Promoting inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation was highly evaluated by 19 respondents and considered to play a positive role.

Question: How could the Albanian political factor help development and democratisation in the Western Balkans?

The final Kosovo-Serbia agreement has also been assessed as an element in which the political factor could have an impact. The prolongment of this process, combined with the inability of Kosovo to join an international organisation such as the UN, have made this process very important to Kosovo's elites. The involvement of the US in the process and a new energy brought by the White House Special Envoy, Richard Grenell once again brought back the public's attention to this complex and long-delayed issue.

As one of the respondents said, *“the Albanian factor can help by becoming a key ally of the US and NATO in the region, as a counterbalance to the rising influence of other authoritarian regimes, of Russia and China, as well as waiting for possible new EU dynamics on enlargement”*.

In other words, the Albanian factor can contribute by keeping the region's aspiration for integration alive and strong. This is even more important considering the EU's recent lack of appetite to continue its Eastern enlargement with the integration of the Western Balkans which in turn has made local elites and leaders pessimistic about the prospects of EU integration. As such, this has led to a feeling of uncertainty about the future of the region.

Another respondent noted that a good approach for Kosovo would be to pursue coherent and friendly relations with Montenegro and North Macedonia, and materialise special relations with Albania on the implementation of regional integration projects derived from the Berlin Process. Areas such as “roaming, railways, highways, the unification of customs procedures, and removing non-tariff barriers would be “politically non-contentious” and would immensely “help Albanians and the region” economically.

Conclusion

As the respondents reveal, the Albanian political factor has countless opportunities to deepen cooperation and coordination among one another to positively influence development and cooperation in the Western Balkans and the EU integration perspective for the whole region. The history of conflicts in the region should not keep it and the perspective of the Albanians hostage. Countries where Albanians live and the institutions they influence should take swift actions to

Corruption Perception Index on Albania, 2019: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/alb#details>

Corruption Perception Index on Serbia, 2019: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/srb>

Corruption Perception Index on North Macedonia, 2019:

<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/mkd>

Corruption Perception Index on Montenegro, 2019: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/mne>

Trading Economics: Kosovo Corruption Rank: <https://tradingeconomics.com/kosovo/corruption-rank>

promote cooperation, exchanges, good governance, and the rule of law to expand their positive impact throughout the Western Balkans.

Democratisation and the strengthening of institutions form a key element for the development and bettering of the region's perspective and is a vital ingredient to bringing hope to the citizens of the countries where Albanians live. European perspectives and values should be deeply embedded into systems of thinking and acting as European integration remains key to the further development of the Western Balkans and Albanian communities. In Kosovo, the EU perspective and membership to NATO are seen as vital paths to making Albanians more prosperous.

The Albanian political factor in Kosovo, Albania, and Northern Macedonia should constantly act and cooperate within the institutional and political systems to counter the influence of third actors, be it derived from governmental or non-governmental entities. The growing influence of Russia, China, Turkey but also other Eastern countries can be countered through effective channels. Democratisation, the rule of law, and economic development based on well-established models form the safest paths. Closer cooperation among states and political factors will further strengthen the role of Albanians and contribute to geopolitical alliances.

Case Study: Albania

Introduction

The Republic of Albania declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire on 28 November 1912. Although its declaration of independence was accepted and supported by European powers such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, its territories were not finalised until the Conference of London in 1913. The conclusion of the conference helped consolidate the territorial integrity of the country, even though sizeable territories inhabited by ethnic Albanians, which were claimed by the country's founding fathers were left outside its borders.¹⁶⁶ In the historical conscience of the country, particularly in relation to ethnic Albanians living outside the Republic of Albania, this event plays a key role in shaping and framing Albanian nationalist narratives.

This event, however, goes beyond national boundaries and political power, as it continues to hold an evolving legacy to this day. Article 8 (1) of the country's constitution stipulates that "The Republic of Albania protects the national rights of the Albanian people who live outside its borders." This is important considering that ethnic Albanians are dispersed in different countries of the region, namely: Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro. Notably, there are two primary considerations in relation to it.

First, the term "Albanian" is interchangeably used to mean both a citizen of the Republic of Albania and an ethnic Albanian who simultaneously may or may not be a citizen of the country. As a result, this can be used to mean both, depending on the beholder. Second, there are important differentiating traits among ethnic Albanians. This is to be expected considering that they have not lived under one administration, do not share the same experiences and outlooks as they have been ruled by different ethnicities and differ greatly in values such as religion.

Varying considerations are especially evident when comparing the level of religiosity among ethnic Albanians. In this regard, religion plays a smaller role among Albanians in Albania than it does for Albanians in Kosovo and North Macedonia, where religion is more pronounced in the life of the individual and the community. In addition, the last seven decades alone have played an important role in shaping communities and perceptions in each of the target countries.

Similar considerations are also evident in politics. Given that ethnic Albanians constitute the majority in the Republic of Albania, ethnic politics and respecting the rights of ethnic Albanians in the country carries no political weight. Instead, political platforms revolve around socio-economic issues, development, and Euro-Atlantic integration. This stands in sharp contrast to other ethnic Albanian political actors in the region, particularly in countries where they constitute a smaller part of the population. Among these communities, the promotion and the respect of political and economic rights of ethnic Albanians form the core of local political party programmes. In other words, alongside greater ethnic considerations, there are local aspects that shape the urgency and

¹⁶⁶ 1912. The Declaration of Independence. Albanian History – Robert Elsie. Web. 2 July 2020. Link: http://albanianhistory.net/1912_Declaration-of-Independence/index.html

importance of nationalist narratives. Due to the above-mentioned considerations, in the Republic of Albania, nationalism is not an evident part of daily or even political life.

In Tirana's relations with countries in the region, the issues of ethnic Albanians have always been present. However, this importance has fluctuated over time. For instance, when Kosovo's Assembly declared independence in 1991, the Parliament of Albania moved on to recognise the country,¹⁶⁷ making it its sole recogniser. However, as the conflict was broiling on the ground, the then-Prime Minister of Albania, met with his Yugoslav counterpart in Crete and allegedly stated that Kosovo is an internal human rights issue of the federation. A similar fluctuation of rhetorical positioning has marred Tirana's relations with ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia.

At times however, the rhetoric has taken an opposite turn, where nuances have been more nationalistic, as was the case with Sali Berisha's nationalist rhetoric in the wake of the 2013 parliamentary elections;¹⁶⁸ the Red and Black Alliance, a nationalist movement which called for a referendum on the reunification of Kosovo and Albania in 2013;¹⁶⁹ or Edi Rama's talk about a Pan-Albanian union if the EU fails in keeping its doors open in 2017.¹⁷⁰ Notably, all these statements were issued during a pre-election period. Remarkably however, nationalist rhetoric has proven incapable of influencing elections, as the dismal electoral outcome of both Berisha and the Red and Black Alliance in 2013 demonstrates. Nonetheless, the rhetoric could serve as a useful distraction from everyday issues related to bad governance, corruption, resources mismanagement and a poor track record. Albania's widely constructive attitude towards its neighbours is in small part a result of the unimportant role nationalist rhetoric plays in its politics. Albania's clear strategic orientation towards the EU and NATO has cemented its credentials as a reliable Western ally, as demonstrated by its 100% alignment with all the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy positions and declarations.¹⁷¹

This attitude is largely representative of its status as a NATO member, aspiring member of the European Union, and a close ally of both the European Union and the United States. Its actions, be it the push for the so-called "Tirana Platform" for ethnic Albanian political parties in North Macedonia, its efforts to politically unify ethnic Albanian parties in the Preshevo Valley in Serbia, and Montenegro, are all part of the effort to push the Euro-Atlantic agenda of the region forward and promote the political rights of ethnic Albanians in all the countries where they live. Some of these efforts were implemented in concert with Kosovo's institutions.

¹⁶⁷ Binder, David. *Yugoslavia's Albanians Seek Foreign Affirmation*. Nov. 3, 1991. Web. 10 October 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/03/world/yugoslavia-s-albanians-seek-foreign-affirmation.html>

¹⁶⁸ Likmeta, Besar. "Leaked US Memo Pans Albania PM." *Balkan Insight*. 15. February 2013. Web. <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/02/15/leaked-us-memo-pans-berisha-s-nationalist-rethoric/>

¹⁶⁹ Mejdini, Fatjona. "Spahiu shpall nismën e referendumit për bashkimin e Shqipërisë me Kosovën." *Gazeta Shqip*. 27 November 2012. Web. <https://www.qazeta-shqip.com/2012/11/27/spahiu-shpall-nismen-e-referendumit-per-bashkimin-e-shqiperise-me-kosoven/>

¹⁷⁰ Mejdini, Fatjona. "US Ambassador Calls Rama's Pan-Albanian Talk 'Careless.'" *Balkan Insight*. 21 April 2017. Web. <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/04/21/us-condemns-albanian-pm-statement-over-unification-with-kosovo-04-21-2017/>

¹⁷¹ "Key findings of the 2020 Report on Albania." *European Commission*. 6 October 2020. Web. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_20_1794

Other initiatives include efforts to provide Albanian textbooks to ethnic Albanian pupils, build hospitals, and facilitate the education of ethnic Albanian youth in the region through scholarship schemes. Although some are less inviting of attention than others, relations between Albania's political actors with their ethnic counterparts remain largely dependent on personal rapport. As such, there are no coherent efforts to undertake tangible actions that could positively impact everyday life and opportunities in their communities. Unlike previous stages in bilateral relations, where the dominant theme were unimplemented agreements and rich rhetoric, Albanians throughout the region are eager to see concrete actions that boost cooperation, welfare and prosperity.

Survey results

A total of 21 individuals from the Republic of Albania were surveyed for the purpose of this research. They are valuable members of Albania's political, social, economic, and cultural elite, with professions ranging from university lecturers, renowned civil society experts, businessmen, politicians and journalists. From the 21 interviewees, **6 were female and 15 are male between the ages of 30 to 60 years old**. The survey consists of three main parts. In the first part, we asked respondents to define the "Albanian factor" as they see it, considering the term has often been loosely used to refer to a wide range of actors. In addition, we ask interviewees about the contribution of the Albanian factor to regional political developments, pertaining to issues related to stability, cooperation, reforms and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The second part focuses on the relationship between the Albanian factor and nationalism. This plays a dual function as it helps identify respondent's perception of how the factor drives and can counter nationalism and nationalist narratives. In the last part, the survey seeks the input of respondents on how the Albanian factor can be utilised to serve as an anchor for regional cooperation, EU integration and the reform agenda. Combined, the responses acquired provide valuable insight into the perceptions of the respondents on what the Albanian factor is, what it does, and how it can serve as a catalyst for socio-political transformation at both the local and regional levels.

Defining the "Albanian political factor"

Question: How would you define the "Albanian political factor" (i.e. Albanian actors in political life) in the Western Balkans? Who is a part of this Albanian political factor and what does it mean to you?

The first question in the survey for the Republic of Albania sought to obtain respondents own definition of the "Albanian political factor" in the Western Balkans. Responses uncover the preconceived notions and definitions of the term, held by individual respondents. This is helpful in acquiring insight into their perceptions without serving the respondents with a pre-established definition. Upon analysing responses received, we can highlight both trends and stand-alone features pertaining to the actors constituting the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans.

Interpretations of the term varied in both detail and description. Nonetheless, responses indicate there is an established understanding that the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans is

composed primarily of ethnic Albanian political actors with an influence on regional decision-making and political debates. Nonetheless, respondents differ in their perception of what actors constitute the factor. Most respondents restrict the definition to include only formal political actors such as politicians or political parties.

However, some respondents see beyond formal political entities, and as such, they note that beyond political actors, the Albanian political factor consists of ethnic Albanian individuals such as businessmen, journalists, and activists, as well as civil society organisations. One of the most comprehensive definitions received, which overlaps with most responses was provided by a renowned director of a local non-governmental organisations. To him, the Albanian political factor in the region “is a mix of political parties, civil society organisations, media, individuals and other influential actors in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia who represent the interests and ideas” of ethnic Albanians living in their respective communities.¹⁷²

Question: How would you consider the contribution of the “Albanian political factor” in the Western Balkans in recent years with regards to each of the following concepts? Please rate on a scale of 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive)

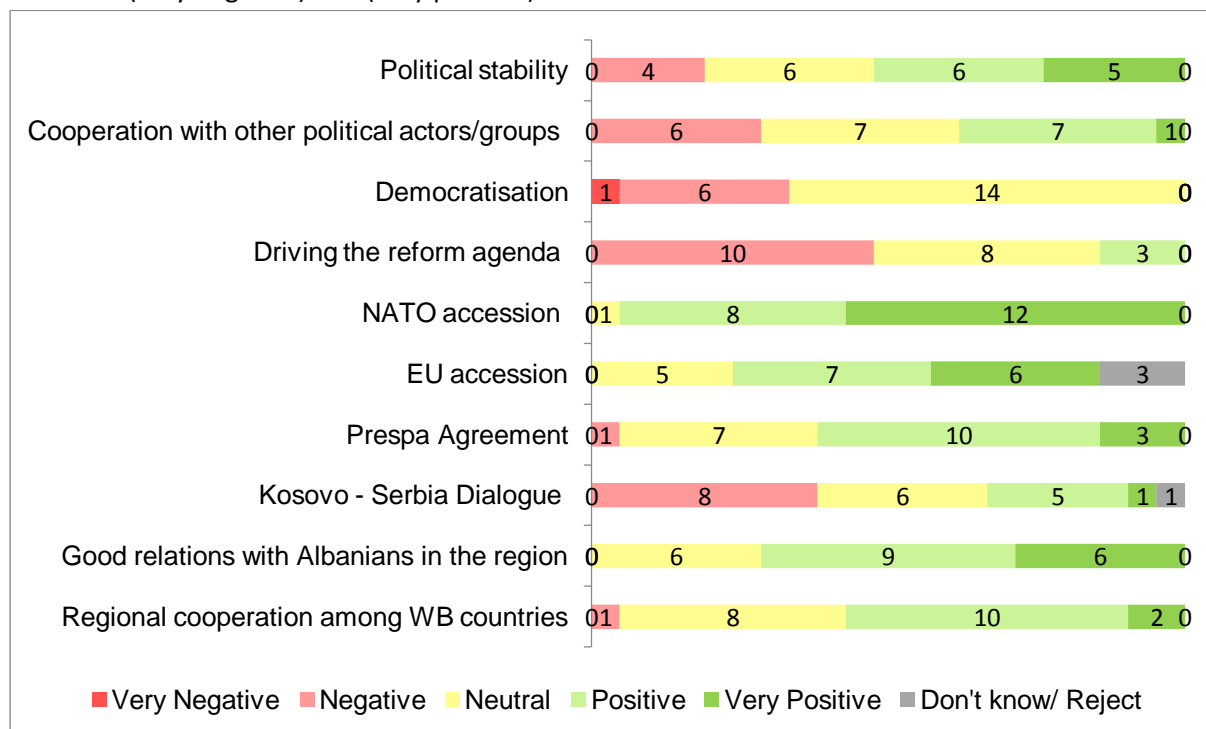


Figure 8: Contribution of the “Albanian political factor” in the Western Balkans to ten concepts

In the next question, we asked respondents to rate the contribution of the Albanian political factor on important political issues in the Western Balkans (Fig.9). The areas covered include: political stability; cooperation with other political actors or groups; democratisation; driving the reform agenda; NATO accession; EU accession; the Prespa Agreement; the Kosovo – Serbia dialogue; good neighbourly relations with Albanians in the region, and regional cooperation among all Western Balkan countries. Respondents were asked to rate the influence of the Albanian political factor on a

¹⁷² Response of a local NGO Executive Director

scale of 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive). Notably, the respondents' opinion was largely divided alongside domestic and foreign affairs, with a perceived negative contribution on issues such as democratisation and reforms, but positive on topics such as NATO and EU accession.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents perceives that the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans has made a positive contribution to NATO accession. From 21 responses, 20 consider its contribution to NATO accession to be (very) positive and only one respondent displayed a neutral stance. On EU accession, respondents also underlined positive perceptions. Out of 21 respondents, 13 perceived the contribution of the Albanian political factor to be (very) positive, 5 as neutral, while 3 others did not provide an answer. Similarly, the contribution of the Albanian political factor to intra-ethnic relations was perceived as (very) positive by 15 respondents, among which 9 are positive and 6 as very positive. The remaining 6 respondents see the factor's contribution in a neutral light.

Responses on most other regional issues were more nuanced. On the Prespa Agreement, 13 respondents saw the contribution of the Albanian political factor as (very) positive, while 5 respondents maintained a neutral perception and 3 opted for 'don't know/refuse' responses. Notably, none of the respondents perceived its contribution as negative. With regards to regional cooperation among Western Balkan countries, respondents see the role of the Albanian political factor as balanced. From 21 respondents, 1 sees its contribution as negative, 8 as neutral, 10 as positive and 2 as very positive. On Kosovo-Serbia or Prishtina-Belgrade dialogue, 8 respondents perceive the contribution of the Albanian political factor to be negative, while 6 maintain a neutral opinion. Only 5 see it as positive and another as very positive. The relatively high number of negative perceptions can be attributed, at least in part, to the heightened and divisive political rhetoric and media coverage on the topic.

Once respondents consider internal politics and issues, the contribution of the Albanian political factor is more negatively perceived. Leading the trend is democratisation for which no respondents perceive the role of the Albanian factor as positive. Instead, 7 consider it as (very) negative and 14 as neutral. A similar dynamic is repeated when respondents are asked to rate the contribution of the Albanian political factor to drive the reform agenda. About half of respondents (10) consider it to be negative, 8 to be neutral, and only 3 see the Albanian factor's contribution as positive.

On political stability both in the region and in Albania, respondents consider the role of the Albanian political factor as mixed, with 4 respondents perceiving it as negative, 6 maintaining a neutral opinion, followed by 6 respondents who perceive it as positive and 5 as very positive. Similarly, they perceive the factor's contribution to cooperation with other political actors and groups at the local level to be nuanced. From 21 respondents, only 1 perceives its contribution to be very positive, followed by 7 who see it as positive, 6 as negative and another 7 as neutral.

These perceptions reinforce some of the long-held beliefs that local elites in the Republic of Albania see their political actors and government officials as corrupt, undemocratic and unrepresentative. In the meantime, they are, just as ethnic Albanians at large, strong supporters of accession to NATO and the European Union. This belief is echoed regularly by diplomatic channels and studies affirming Albania's positive contribution to Euro-Atlantic integration, regional stability and cooperation.

Nationalism and the “Albanian factor”

The second section of the survey explores to what extent nationalist narratives are supported in Albania and what the respondents to this survey, all valuable members of Albania’s political, social, economic, and cultural elite, perceive as drivers to Albanian nationalism in the region. First, we asked our respondents the following question: *In your opinion, is Albanian nationalism and the narratives that are associated with it, such as Greater Albania, still supported in the Republic of Albania?* In response, respondents shared what their perceptions of the level of support such narratives enjoy among influential political actors in the Republic of Albania and average Albanian citizens. Responses were ranked between 1 to 5, with 1 representing ‘very influential’, and 5 ‘not at all’. Although not used, a ‘don’t know/refuse’ answer option was also provided.

Notably, the majority of respondents consider nationalism and its associated narratives to have little to no support among influential political actors. Five respondents rated it with a 5, meaning not supported at all, and nine others rated it with a 4 (little support). Three respondents rated it with 3, the more neutral answer option, and four others answered “2”, meaning that nationalism and the narratives associated with it are supported among influential Albanian political actors.

The perceptions of respondents on the level of support nationalism and associated narratives associated has among average Albanians, were unambiguous. As such, the majority of respondents consider nationalism to play a small and marginal role among them. Reflectively, only one respondent rated nationalism and its associated narratives to be influential, rating it as a 2, followed by 7 respondents who opted for a neutral stance or a balance consideration that it is somewhat important. However, the majority of respondents, namely 13, represented by 9 who consider it a little influential and 4 others who consider it to have not impact among average Albanians, and ranked it with a 5.

Question: In your opinion, is Albanian nationalism and the narratives that are associated with it (e.g. Greater Albania) still supported in Albania? Please rate on a scale of 1 (strongly supported) to 5 (not supported at all).

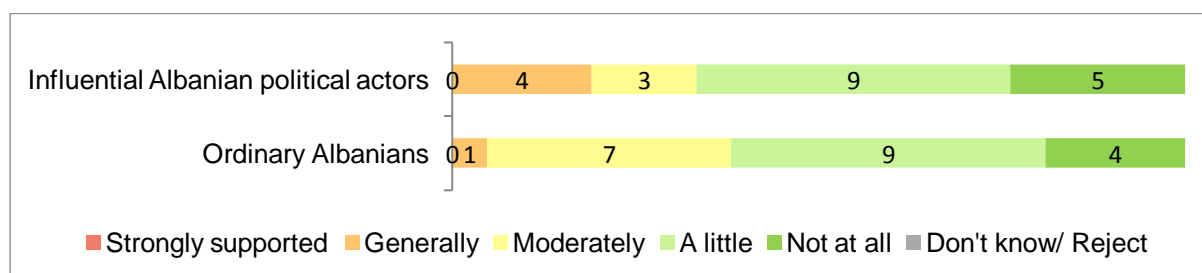


Figure 9: Perceived level of support for Albanian nationalism among influential Albanian political actors

Both these scenarios highlight that presently, nationalism and nationalist narratives are marginal and unimportant. However, that is not to say that should there be developments which trigger or instigate the awakening of potential dormant sentiments toward nationalism and associated narratives, this would remain unchanged. It is for this reason that political leaders in both Albania and the region ought to refrain from using nationalist rhetoric, and instead focus on providing socio-

economic deliverables instead. This is likely to yield better electoral results and public support than nationalism.

Question: In recent years there has been an increasing talk of a swap of territories between Serbia and Kosovo, the so-called ‘border correction’ of the Kosovo-Serbian border. What do think about this?

Unresolved issues between Kosovo and Serbia are of a great importance for the region. To ethnic Albanians, ensuing disputes are of a particular interest. To understand what our respondents thought about territorial exchanges or border correction as part of a final deal between the two countries, we asked them to rank what they thought about the idea. Respondents were asked to rank the idea between 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive).

Among them, 13 considered perceived the idea to be generally negative. From them, 8 consider it very negative, 4 consider it negative, and 1 considers it as a little negative. Another 5 respondents perceived the border correction idea to be neither good, nor bad, ranking it with a 4. Meanwhile, 1 respondent considers it as a little positive and another did not provide an answer. Notably, 1 respondent opted for very positive, although they made sure to add a note with an asterisk, noting, such an idea would be very positive only if it leads to mutual recognition.

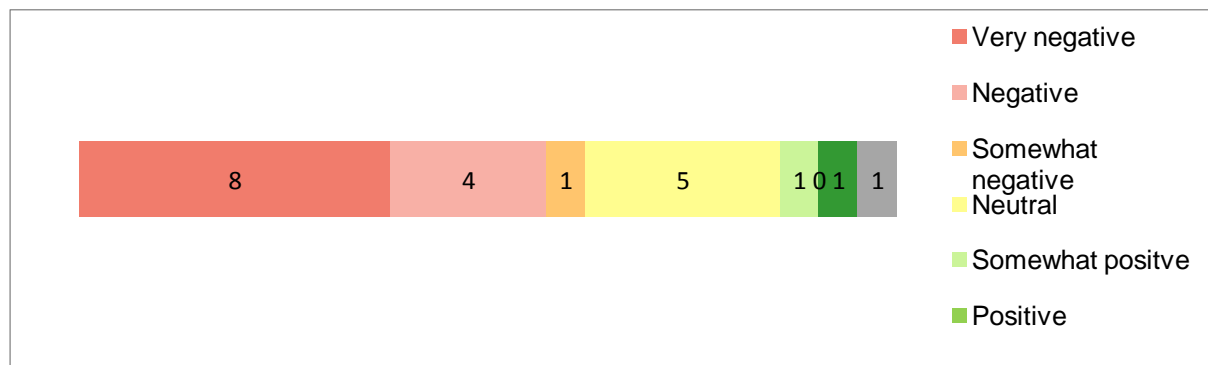


Figure 10: Opinions on the potential swap of territories between Serbia and Kosovo

In the previous two questions we sought to measure our respondent’s perception of support for nationalism and nationalist narratives, as well as a border correction between Serbia and Kosovo. With this question however, we wanted to know what they perceived as potential triggers, namely what could drive Albanian nationalism in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. To accommodate potential nuances in questions, we asked respondents to provide their three most important drivers, in the form of an open-ended question, which provided for a diverse set of answers.

Question: What would you consider the three most important drivers of Albanian nationalism in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia?

Respondents were asked to list the three most important drivers of Albanian nationalism in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The surveyed members of Albania’s political, social, economic, and cultural elite considered both internal factors and external factors that could lead to a surge of Albanian nationalism in the region, including socio-economic progress; external influences from geopolitical powers; the use of nationalist narratives by political actors for political gain; and nationalism as a response to aggression by other ethnic groups. The driver most-often mentioned

(24) times, sometimes twice by the same respondent but framed differently, can best be paraphrased as a general sentiment of Albanians being disfavoured in comparison to other ethnic group in the Western Balkans and the need to stand up for their rights. The answers varied from “Albanians not having historical allies”¹⁷³ and “being historically treated with disfavour by Great Powers”¹⁷⁴, but also currently, as “ethnic Albanians often do not have their rights respected”¹⁷⁵ and are “not treated equally as their regional counterparts”¹⁷⁶ by different geopolitical actors. Several respondents mentioned that the repression of Albanians “as a minority by the ethnic majority dominated state”¹⁷⁷ or simply by other ethnic groups, could lead to more Albanian nationalism. Other respondents highlighted the ability (or lack thereof) for ethnic Albanians to participate in regional politics as a potential driver, as Albanians historically lack allies in the region. According to one respondent Albanian nationalism and greater cooperation among ethnic Albanians will allow them to play a bigger role in regional politics, which according to another respondent is important as “the Albanian factor has been unsuccessful in participating as equals in sub-regional dialogue processes”¹⁷⁸.

Another often-mentioned driver for Albanian nationalism in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, is the use of nationalism or nationalist narratives by politicians for political gain and individual interest of policy makers (mentioned 10 times). Respondents cite among others, special interests, political show, the political ambitions of ethnic Albanian parties to assume a leading regional role, and the aspiration to become a “relevant factor in the region”. However, as the respondents are a part of the political, social, economic, or cultural elite, they are not fooled by these political tactics.

Several respondents note that the nationalist card is only a distraction from real issues, such as corruption, unemployment, mass migration, and mismanagement. As one respondent notes: a key driver to nationalism is the “use of nationalism by political actors for personal or political gain and / or deviation of public debate on corruptive cases or political crises.”¹⁷⁹ In general, respondents mentioned that a lack of economic or political progress, bad governance, and corruption could make citizens more prone to nationalist rhetoric. This means that politicians using this rhetoric for political gain could potentially find an audience among the economically and politically deprived citizens.

The third most-often mentioned driver for nationalism in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia was the “need to respond to aggression by other ethnic groups in the region”¹⁸⁰, such as Serbs or Macedonians. Respondents mention the increased aggression of Serbs, an increased nationalist rhetoric of Macedonians or even the armament of Serbia as drivers for Albanian nationalism. One respondent also highlights the influence of other geopolitical actors such as Russia, which fuel nationalism of other ethnic groups in the region. This respondent says that the Albanian nationalist rhetoric is simply a “counter reaction”¹⁸¹ to the Serb nationalism instigated by Russia. In some cases,

¹⁷³ Response by a senior member of civil society

¹⁷⁴ Response by an academic, a political actor, and a businessman

¹⁷⁵ Response by a political actor, an academic, and a journalist

¹⁷⁶ Response by an academic

¹⁷⁷ Response by a political actor

¹⁷⁸ Response by a senior member of civil society

¹⁷⁹ Response by a senior member of civil society

¹⁸⁰ Response by an academic and by a journalist

¹⁸¹ Response by a member of the economic elite

respondents highlight that nationalist rhetoric can be a part of a political game, where “sides push each other toward extremes by claiming the others are traitors”¹⁸².

Furthermore, another often-mentioned driver was partially resolved just weeks after the survey was conducted. Many respondents had mentioned that the lack of a clear Euro-Atlantic perspective could be a driver for Albanian nationalism, particularly considering the uncertainty about EU enlargement in the beginning of 2020. One respondent summarised that when there is a lack of a clear integration perspective and if the EU remains unclear on the priorities and needs for the region, then that could drive Albanian nationalism.¹⁸³ Thankfully, the uncertainty was curbed as the EU gave the green light for opening accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in March 2020 and North Macedonia became a NATO member within the same week.

Lastly, one respondent was particularly worried about Turkey’s geopolitical and religious influence, as they seem to try to replace the Albanian national identity with a religious identity. This respondent, an academic and religious leader, said: “Islamic religious influence related to foreign factors uses the nationalist jargon but the interest (at least as far as the result can be seen to be) is more to emphasise the Islamic than the national element among Albanians.”¹⁸⁴

Question: In which ways do you think the Albanian (geo)political factor could counter nationalist narratives and the “Greater Nation” idea?

Previously, respondents provided insight into their perceived drivers of Albanian nationalism. In this question however, they provide insight into what they perceive to be the best counter measures against nationalist narratives. Respondents provided their ways through which the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans can counter nationalist narratives, including ideas such as “Greater Albania”.

As in previous questions, responses listed both internal and external actions that could help counter hard-lined ethnic nationalism. At the country level, respondents highlight the importance of democratisation, ensuring the proper functioning of institutions, economic development and welfare. Other domestic measures included the need to avoid using nationalist rhetoric as an instrument to enhance political support. Regional factors include the need to recognise Kosovo as an independent country and enable it to fully integrate within international structures. Another feedback received noted that the strict separation of religion from the state by other countries in the region would also serve as a measure to counter Albanian nationalism. Although the response is provided by a respondent from Albania, the framing makes it clear that secularism must be applied in other countries where Albanians live.

Respondents underlined the need for greater economic cooperation, including the creation of a common market through which economic development and integration could be enhanced. In addition, respondents highlight the need for the rights of Albanians to be respected in countries where they are minorities. Some respondents emphasised the importance of giving the region a

¹⁸² *Response by a senior member of civil society*

¹⁸³ *Response by a senior member of civil society*

¹⁸⁴ *Response by an academic and religious leader*

clear EU perspective and enabling its integration as a means to counter nationalism in the region, including Albanian nationalist narratives.

As one of the respondents put it, “the most effective way [to counter Albanian nationalism] is to build a functioning democracy, fight against corruption, and ensure economic development”¹⁸⁵ as venues through which youth have a more positive perspective. Equally important is the message of another respondent who noted that “cooperation among Albanians across [the] Western Balkans should not be viewed as a threat, in particular if it can boost economic growth.”¹⁸⁶ Both these responses echo the nature of the responses received on the need to create opportunities and enhance cooperation.

The Albanian factor as an anchor for cooperation

This sector aims to receive the respondents’ ideas on how the Albanian factor can strengthen itself along with ways on promoting development and democracy in the Western Balkans. In the first question of this section, the survey asks the respondents to name the three most important factors they think can strengthen the geopolitical importance of the Albanian factor in the region.

Question: In your opinion, what are the three most important factors that can strengthen the geopolitical importance of the Albanian factor in the region?

For the most part, the respondents cited the need for enhanced and closer cooperation among the Albanian political factor either on issues that concern the Albanian nation or other regional challenges. As one member of the political elite stated, the geopolitical importance of the Albanian factor in the region can be strengthened through “the cooperation and collaboration of all the Albanian political parties in the region, be them in the government or in the opposition”¹⁸⁷. Another prevalent was the closer and more efficient collaboration of the Albanian factor with international actors such as international organisations or other powerful countries. Other suggestions consisted in strengthening the communities’ economies, establishing democratic institutions and focusing more on the process of EU integration.

The respondents of the survey were asked how the Albanian political factor could make a more positive contribution to Albania’s EU accession process. They were presented with a number of potential options to choose from while also having the option to enter their own answers (fig.4).

Question: How do you think the Albanian political factor could make a more positive contribution to Albania’s EU accession process?*

Fight against corruption	13
To promote democratic principles within the structures of political parties	8
To promote meritocracy	7
To increase co-operation between Albanian political actors in the region	6

¹⁸⁵ Response by a senior figure in civil society

¹⁸⁶ Response by an academic

¹⁸⁷ Response by a member of the political elite

Increase efforts to reach an agreement in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue	3
To promote inter-ethnic cooperation and understanding	3
Other	10

**Respondents could choose more than one answer option*

More than half of the respondents (13) considered that fighting against corruption is one of the ways through which the Albanian political factor can positively contribute to Albania's EU accession process. 8 respondents chose the option 'adhering to democratic principles in internal political party structures' as supportive of Albania's EU accession path and 7 respondents singled out 'promote meritocracy'. Another option that was chosen by a substantial part of the respondents was that the Albanian political factor could 'increase of cooperation among Albanian political actors in the region'. Three respondents said that 'promoting interethnic cooperation and understanding' or 'increase efforts to reach a deal in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue' would make a strong contribution to Albania's bid to EU accession. As for the respondents who chose to propose their own suggestions on how the Albanian political factor could make a more positive contribution to Albania's EU accession process, many of the ideas put forward are about promoting democratisation and improved governance. Answers vary from "Building a functioning democracy and institutions", to "Legitimisation of power and institutions" and "more local ownership, accountability, and transparency". Other answers focused more on the regional perspective, such as "having an open dialogue among all political parties and focus on regional priorities", "promoting economic cooperation" and "pressure of international community on all countries to advance democratisation and respect of human rights all over the Western Balkans".

Question: How could the Albanian political factor help development and democratisation in the Western Balkans?

Following the question on how the Albanian factor could make a more positive contribution to Albania's EU accession process, the survey required the respondents to write up their suggestions on how this factor could contribute to the development and democratisation of the region. More than half of the respondents suggested that the Albanian political factor should lead by example and provide good practices to their regional counterparts. As the executive director of a think tank in Albania put it, the Albanian political factor should "provide the example by promoting internal institutional reforms and democratisation."¹⁸⁸

Moreover, some respondents stressed the need for the Albanian political factor to become more open to regional cooperation and to devote more resources on joint investments.¹⁸⁹ Lastly, a few respondents suggested efforts on changing the political elites. As a media professional stated, on the case of Albania, 'many of the difficulties Albania faces are a direct consequence of the attitudes and decisions of its ruling elites.'¹⁹⁰ This is an important observation considering Albania's differences with its neighbours. It has what local analysts refer to as a 'luxury problem' consisting of a predominantly ethnic Albanian population, harmonious religious diversity and no open issues that could not be resolved if sufficient political will were available. In addition, it has actively not been

¹⁸⁸ Response by a think tank executive

¹⁸⁹ Response by a journalist

¹⁹⁰ Response by a media professional

subject to interstate war since World War II. In retrospect, these characteristics, make the lack of progress in all fronts ever more disappointing.

Conclusion

This survey sheds light on perceptions of Albanian nationalism and the role of the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans, both as a driver and as a counter-measure. According to the 21 surveyed members of Albania's political, social, economic, and cultural elite, the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans is composed primarily of ethnic Albanian political actors with an influence on regional decision-making and political debates. Although some respondents would limit the composition of the factor to politicians or political parties, others stretch it to include civil society, ethnic Albanian journalists, opinion-makers, and influential businessmen.

Their responses provide valuable insight into important issues such as nationalism. According to the response received, in Albania, Albanian nationalism and the narratives associated with it (such as the idea of a "Greater Albania") are not generally supported by either politicians or the public. Notably, responses indicate a lower level of support among the public than political actors. Asked what the surveyed elite considers main drivers of Albanian nationalism in the region, the most frequently quoted drivers are; the belief that ethnic Albanians are disfavoured in comparison to other ethnic groups; aggression by other ethnic groups such as Serbs and Macedonians towards them; a lack of socio-economic opportunities; and the use of nationalist narratives by political actors for short-term political gain. To counter Albanian nationalism and the narratives associated with it, respondents highlight the need to build functioning democratic systems, ensuring economic development of the entire region, enhancing cooperation among ethnic groups, and fighting corruption.

Interestingly, the Albanian elite's recommendations to counter nationalist narratives largely overlap with the country's criteria for EU integration, namely, adherence to democratic values such as rule of law, respect for human rights, and a functioning market economy. Moreover, they state that if the Albanian political factor would make a stronger commitment to promoting internal institutional reforms and democratisation, and if it would be more open to regional cooperation with Albanians and other ethnic groups, the Albanian factor could serve as an anchor for development and democratisation in the Western Balkans. Ultimately, this reinvigorates claims that first and foremost, Western Balkan countries must comply with and fulfil the EU criteria not as a justification for integration, but as a necessity for delivering on the demands of their own citizens.

Regional comparison

The Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans evokes different meanings, understandings, and perceptions among respondents. These differences can be attributed to the localised context of respondents and their corresponding life experiences given that they come from different countries, in spite of their shared ethnicity. Nonetheless, comparisons at the regional level shed light on important differences and commonalities among ethnic Albanian populations in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, variations in reputation, trust, and credibility of the Albanian political factor helps us understand what ethnic Albanian elites from the Republic of Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Kosovo think about the Albanian political factor's contribution to key local and regional developments.

In addition, comparisons uncover areas where further efforts and attention are required to help move forward the reform agenda, democratisation, regional and Euro-Atlantic integration. It also provides valuable insight into perceived levels of support for nationalist narratives among important political actors and citizens. Most importantly, **the perceptions of the respondents help develop an agenda for the Albanian factor on how to serve as an anchor of socio-economic development and a pillar for European integration processes in the Western Balkans as a whole.**

This section is divided into four parts. First, we provide an analysis of perceptions on the contribution of the Albanian political factor toward important issues such as democratisation, the reform agenda, regional cooperation, and EU integration. Second, a comparison among the perceived level of support for Albanian nationalism and associated narratives among influential political actors and average citizens. Third, we contrast the perceptions of the respondents on the idea of border corrections or territorial exchanges between Kosovo and Serbia as part of a final agreement. And fourth, we analyse the ways through which the surveyed elites think the Albanian political factor can make a positive contribution to EU reforms.

Contribution of the Albanian political factor to important political issues

We asked respondents from North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania to rate the contribution of the Albanian political factor in recent years to a myriad of domestic and regional issues. Similar to the country level, we noted that perceptions about the contribution of the factor to driving forward the reform agenda and democratisation is perceived very negatively by respondents. In contrast, they perceive the contribution of the factor to NATO integration and political stability much more positively.

In this section we compare and contrast the responses of the ethnic Albanian elite across the three countries on the perceived contribution of the Albanian political factor on ten different concepts. The following issues were surveyed; political stability; cooperation with other political actors and groups; democratisation; driving the reform agenda; NATO accession; EU accession, the Prespa Agreement; Kosovo-Serbia dialogue; good relations with Albanians in the region; and regional cooperation among all the Western Balkan countries. For ease of access, we have grouped responses into positive (very positive and positive) and negative (very negative and negative) only, with neutral ratings being implied. However, in the initial country survey, respondents rated the

contribution of the factor on a scale from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive). A detailed overview of the perceptions is provided in the table below.

	Albania			Kosovo			North Macedonia		
	<i>positive</i>	<i>neutral</i>	<i>negative</i>	<i>positive</i>	<i>neutral</i>	<i>negative</i>	<i>positive</i>	<i>neutral</i>	<i>negative</i>
Political Stability	52.4%	28.6%	19.0%	56.7%	26.7%	16.7%	70.0%	23.3%	6.7%
Cooperation other political actors/ groups	38.1%	33.3%	28.6%	40.0%	36.7%	23.3%	53.3%	30.0%	16.7%
Democratisation	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%	20.0%	56.7%	23.3%	36.7%	43.3%	20.0%
Driving the reform agenda	14.3%	38.1%	47.6%	6.7%	53.3%	33.3%	26.7%	53.3%	20.0%
NATO accession	95.2%	4.8%	0.0%	40.0%	40.0%	20.0%	76.7%	13.3%	10.0%
EU accession	61.9%	33.3%	4.8%	30.0%	46.7%	20.0%	66.7%	26.7%	6.7%
Prespa Agreement	61.9%	23.8%	0.0%	X	X	X	80.0%	13.3%	6.7%
Kosovo-Serbia dialogue	28.6%	28.6%	38.1%	23.3%	40.0%	33.3%	30.0%	50.0%	20.0%
Good relations with Albanians in the region	71.4%	28.6%	0.0%	56.7%	50.0%	6.7%	70.0%	20.0%	10.0%
Regional cooperation among all WB countries	57.1%	38.1%	4.8%	36.7%	50.0%	13.3%	63.3%	26.7%	10.0%

Table 1: Comparison of the perceived contribution of the Albanian political factor in the Western Balkans on 10 concepts

When looking at the answers by respondents from all three surveyed countries, the Albanian political factor's contribution is considered most often as positive on issues such as stability and regional cooperation. The largest proportion with positive responses was for regional cooperation across all Western Balkan countries, good neighbourly relations with ethnic Albanians in the region, NATO accession, EU accession, and political stability. On the other hand, the surveyed elite across all countries see the factor's contribution to the transformative democratisation processes and the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue as much more negative.

When comparing the perceptions of the surveyed ethnic Albanian elite across the three countries, the respondents from North Macedonia generally responded positively more often than respondents from Albania or Kosovo. On political stability, cooperation with other political actors or groups, EU accession, the Prespa Agreement, and regional cooperation among all Western Balkan countries, the surveyed North Macedonian elite answered more often that the contribution of the Albanian political factor was positive than their counterparts from Albania and Kosovo. Furthermore, respondents from Kosovo see the contribution of the Albanian political factor least often as positive. On the factor's contribution as a driving force of the reform agenda, NATO accession, EU accession, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, good relations with Albanians in the region, and regional cooperation among all Western Balkan countries, the elite surveyed for this study perceived the contribution from the Albanian political factor least often as positive. Overall, respondents from Albania and Kosovo view the contribution of the Albanian political factor more often as neutral (not positive, nor negative).

The biggest differences among the perceptions from the three surveyed countries are seen in political stability, democratisation, NATO accession, and regional cooperation (among all countries, but also specifically among ethnic Albanians). On political stability, a small majority of the respondents from Kosovo and Albania assessed the Albanian political factor's contribution as positive, while from North Macedonia more than two thirds answered positively. As per democratisation, for Albania, none of the respondent's answered positively, while in Kosovo 20% answered positively, followed by 36.7% in North Macedonia. Contrarily, for NATO accession all respondents from Albania but one answered that the factor had a positive influence, while from North Macedonia it was three quarters and from Kosovo only 40% gave positive responses to the question "How would you assess the contribution of the Albanian political factor to political stability?". Lastly, on regional cooperation among all Western Balkan countries and good neighbourly relations with ethnic Albanians in the region, the surveyed elite from Kosovo was a lot less often positive about the factor's contribution than the surveyed elite from North Macedonia or Albania.

Support for Albanian nationalism and narratives associated with it (i.e. Greater Albania).

Through this question we sought to assess the perceived levels of support for Albanian nationalism and associated narratives among average citizens and influential political leaders of the three surveyed countries. As is the case with other questions, the local context seems to play an important role in shaping perceptions, providing for contrasting views on the topic.

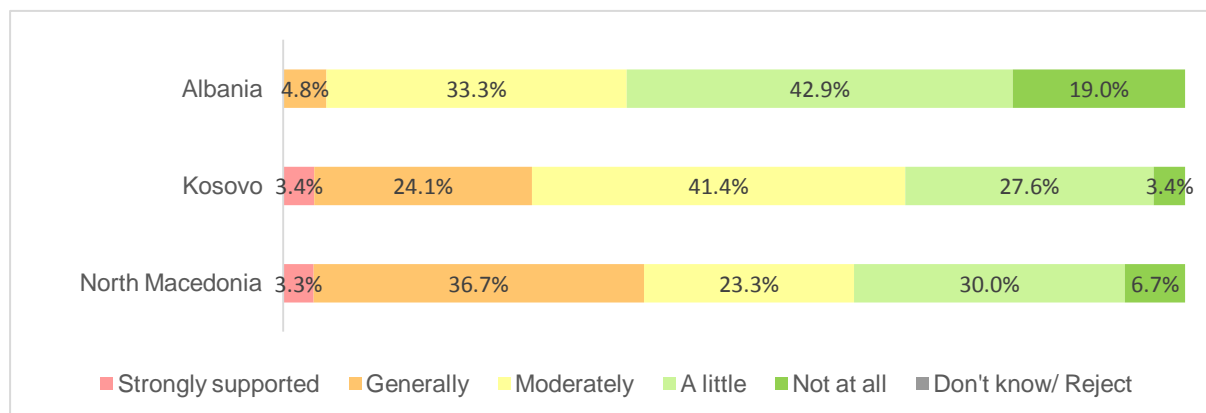


Figure 11: Support for Albanian nationalism among average Albanians according to the surveyed elite

Respondents from Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia think that generally there is little support for Albanian nationalism and narratives associated with it among average ethnic Albanians. On average, approximately a quarter of the surveyed elite thinks that there is support for nationalism among average ethnic Albanians, while approximately 40% says that there is little to no support for Albanian nationalism.

At the country level, it is notable that in Albania the perceived rate of support for Albanian nationalism and associated narratives is the weakest. In comparison, in the two multi-ethnic countries, the support for Albanian nationalism among average ethnic Albanians is seen as more prevalent. Even though Albanians constitute the large majority in Kosovo, 27.5% of the surveyed

elite think that nationalism is supported among average ethnic Albanians there. This sentiment is a bit stronger in North Macedonia, where Albanians constitute a lower share of the population, which is also reflected in representation in power structures. Here, 40% of the surveyed elite says that they think nationalism is strongly or generally supported among average ethnic Albanians. Yet, when combining the perceptions in all three countries, the dominant perception is that nationalism is not supported among average Albanians.

Similar perceptions persist on the level of support for nationalism among influential Albanian political actors. In Albania, where nearly all inhabitants are ethnic Albanian, the support for nationalism is lower than in Kosovo, where there is also a Serb minority with significant political representation. The highest support for nationalism among ethnic Albanian political actors, according to the respondents to the survey, is found in North Macedonia, where ethnic Albanians make up a lower share of the population.

In Albania, respondents indicate that support for nationalism is stronger among influential political actors than among average Albanians. 19% of the respondents said that Albanian nationalism is supported among ethnic Albanian elite in Albania, compared to only 4.8% among the general public. In Kosovo however, these figures remain largely unchanged across the two categories, where 27.5% of the respondents answered that Albanian nationalism is supported among Albanian political actors and average ethnic Albanians. In North Macedonia, the difference between the perceived support for Albanian nationalism among average ethnic Albanians and ethnic Albanian politicians is more nuanced. A few respondents perceive Albanian nationalism as not supported at all by ethnic Albanian politicians in North Macedonia, while others think it is highly supported. This makes it difficult to provide a conclusive answer with the available data (see figures 11 and 12).

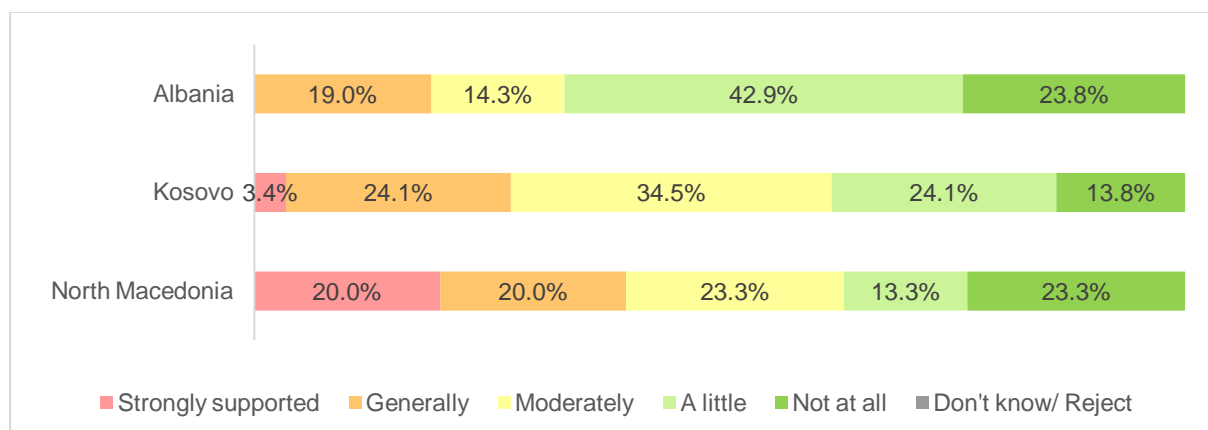


Figure 12: Support for Albanian nationalism among influential Albanian political actors according to the surveyed elite

Kosovo Serbia Dialogue and Perceptions on 'Border Correction' Proposals

Respondents from the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Kosovo were asked their opinion on border adjustment or correction as part of a final bilateral agreement to resolve the ongoing disputes between Pristina and Belgrade. The surveyed elite from North Macedonia were not asked this question as the country was not directly or indirectly involved in the Kosovo-Serbia talks, hence the lack of comparison with North Macedonia in the figure below.

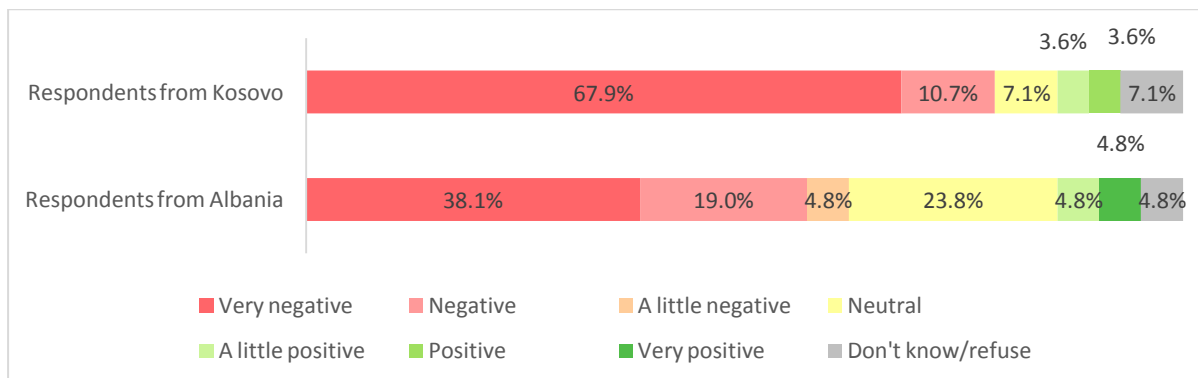


Figure 13: Perceptions of the surveyed elites regarding the proposed border correction of the Kosovo-Serbia border

It is not difficult to see that the difference in perceptions across the surveyed elites in both countries is striking. Although on the same trajectory, respondents from Kosovo are unambiguous in their responses and as such maintain a firm opposition to the idea of border corrections. Notably, 78.6% of the respondents from Kosovo consider the idea of border corrections as negative, with 67.9% even indicating that they have a “very negative” perception about the idea. In Albania, on the other hand, the respondents maintain a less firm perception than their counterparts in Kosovo, albeit it is still largely negative. In real terms, only 38.1% of respondents think very negatively about border correction. In contrast to respondents from Kosovo, there is a larger proportion of respondents that have a neutral opinion, namely 23.8%, about the idea of a correction of the Kosovo-Serbia border.

When comparing perceptions in the two countries, it is important to emphasise that the information available has been highly speculative and inconclusive, as officials have yet to admit to this. Media reports and political statements on the matter, are likely to have contributed to these perceptions, particularly in Albania. However, a notable difference between the two countries is that, in Kosovo, border corrections have a more negative perception due to the directness of impact such an agreement would have on the stability, integrity and sovereignty of the country they live in.

The Albanian political factor as an anchor for development and democratisation

Elites in each of the surveyed countries were asked how they think the Albanian political factor could make a more positive contribution to their country’s EU accession process (and NATO for Kosovo). In all three countries, the answer that was chosen most often was that the Albanian political factor could do more to fight corruption at home. In Kosovo and North Macedonia, respondent opted for the promotion of inter-ethnic cooperation and understanding as the second-most chosen answer, followed by reaching a deal in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue (an option only available for respondents from Kosovo), and promoting meritocracy in public administration. In Albania, due to a lack of ethnic tensions inside the country, there was more focus on promoting democratic principles within the structures of political parties and promoting meritocracy.

Interestingly, the recommendations that the surveyed elite gave the Albanian political factor to help move forward towards EU and NATO integration are not very different from their suggestions with

regards to how the Albanian political factor could have a stronger geopolitical influence and serve as an anchor for development and democratisation in the Western Balkans.

In order to strengthen its role as a geopolitical actor in the Western Balkans, the surveyed elite in all three countries suggest that the Albanian political factor should focus on increased cooperation among ethnic Albanian populations across the Western Balkans, namely collaboration between ethnic Albanian political parties across the region. Other often-mentioned suggestions were democratisation, strengthening institutions, and fighting corruption. In Kosovo and Albania, the surveyed elite highlighted the need to cooperate with international partners, such as the EU and the US, to increase the geopolitical influence of the Albanian political factor. Specifically, an ethnic Albanian elite from Kosovo said that a strong US presence in the Western Balkans is good for the stability of the region.

In North Macedonia, on the other hand, the most-often mentioned suggestions were that the Albanian political factor should stimulate economic growth; ensure a good education system; and foster cooperation between educational institutions. The authors of the chapter on North Macedonia cite a general dissatisfaction with the status of the education system in the Western Balkans. Understandably, this is a reason for concern given that they are providing education to future generations of leaders, politicians, community organizers, journalists, researchers, and analysts.

Lastly, with regards to the suggestions on how the Albanian political factor can serve as an anchor for development and democratisation, the surveyed elite highlights the need for cooperation, implementing reforms, and EU and NATO integration. However, depending on the country in which the surveyed elite reside, the focus of the given answers varies greatly. In North Macedonia, the answer that was mentioned most frequently was the need for cooperation, whether it is economic cooperation, free movement of people and goods, the promotion of cultural values, or educational cooperation. In Kosovo, on the other hand, the focus of the respondents was on the country's long struggle for recognition and the lack of a clear Euro-Atlantic perspective. They argue that the EU's recent lack of appetite for enlargement has made local elites and leaders pessimistic about the prospects of EU integration, which contributes to a feeling of uncertainty. In Albania, emphasis was put on democratisation and institutional building. According to respondents, the Albanian political factor should try to lead by example and embrace necessary reforms and democratisatic values.

Combined, these responses can help us understand that despite their commonalities, ethnic Albanians are first and foremost concerned with issues impacting their daily life, well-being and future prospects. Differences in perception reflect this importance, threat and urgency. That is why for instance, fighting corruption receives most responses from respondents from Albania; a final agreement between Belgrade and Pristina is more important from respondents from Kosovo; and the increase of cooperation among ethnic Albanian political actors in the region is of a higher importance to respondents outside the Republic of Albania. Equally important however, is that respondents highlight embracing reforms and values often associated with EU integration, as critical for the future of their respective countries and the Albanian geopolitical factor.

Conclusion

Ethnic Albanians constitute one of the largest groups inhabiting the Western Balkans. Although dispersed across several countries, they play an important role in the overall stability, prosperity, and future political orientation of the countries they live in as well as the entire region. Although the Western Balkans are better connected and integrated than at any period in the past, potential threats could undermine all the tangible progress attained in recent decades. In light of this, it is ever more important to provide a final solution to prolonged bilateral problems, such as a final resolution of the Pristina and Belgrade dispute. The alternative, one in which unresolved issues, combined with a lack of a clear EU perspective, could prompt a reawakening of nationalism, has the potential to turn into a disruptor of stability, progress and cooperation.

As one of the core ethnic based nationalisms in the region, Albanian nationalism poses its own risks. Although historically recognised for not being expansionist and proactive, Albanian nationalism has provided sufficient proof that it can match up to external threats when faced with an existential challenge. Hence, it is important to consider its drivers from a broader spectrum which incorporate triggers beyond its internal characteristics. Considering, geopolitical issues of the regional nature form an essential instrument in shaping its future development. Evidently, this requires an understanding of potential competing forces that could help trigger and awaken Albanian nationalism, namely regional developments and other regional ethnic based nationalisms.

Contrary to common perception however, ethnic Albanians do not always share the assumed unity and sense of purpose, as clearly demonstrated by the survey. Many of the issues facing ethnic Albanians are localised and perceived through the lenses of the people who are directly affected by them. That is why nationalist rhetoric has failed to influence voting behaviour in Albania, as illustrated by the Red and Black Alliance (AKZ) dismal results in 2013, which in spite of its well organised campaign, unprecedented media coverage and ever-present nationalist rhetoric, it got only 10,196 votes nationwide.¹⁹¹

The story is more nuanced in Kosovo and North Macedonia where ethnic-centred politics play a larger role than in Albania. Yet, even there, being merely ethnic Albanian and using nationalist rhetoric has proven not to be sufficient, as illustrated by the 2016 elections in North Macedonia, where Albanians, fed up with their ethnic politicians voted for Macedonian parties. Similarly, Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV) of Kosovo managed to clinch to power only when it ditched its nationalist rhetoric and ran on an anti-corruption campaign. Tellingly, these cases demonstrate that ethnic Albanians, are first and foremost concerned with welfare, economic prosperity and stability. As a result, it is imperative to improve living standards, boost democratic credentials and accountability as a counterweight to nationalist appeal.

Considering the reactive nature of the Albanian nationalism, it is critically important to understand the impact of other competing narratives, especially Serb nationalism, on its future prospects. It is

¹⁹¹ *Parliamentary Election Results 2013. Central Election Commission. Web. 15 August 2020.*
http://www.cec.org.al/Portals/0/Documents/CEC%202013/zqjedhje-per-kuvend/2013/zqjedhje_2013_web/lidhja_2.pdf

for this reason that keeping the EU perspective well alive is instrumental in fostering regional interconnectivity, understanding and cooperation. Promoting people to people exchanges could help challenge misconceptions that drive nationalism in Albania and beyond. In real terms, this means that a final agreement between Kosovo and Serbia could serve as an impetus to positive peace and sustainable stability in the region. Ultimately, this must be followed by concrete efforts to incorporate the region into the Euro-Atlantic structures.

In this regard, ethnic Albanians, both citizens and political actors alike, have an important role to play. They have consistently maintained a close relationship with these structures and played a crucial role in pushing forward the integration agenda, in each of the countries where they live. This is especially true in the case of the ethnic Albanian political factor in North Macedonia, who lead the charge for EU and NATO integration through political and civic action. A case in point is their support for the name change referendum, leading to a final resolution of the dispute between Skopje and Athens. Similarly, the ethnic Albanian minority in Montenegro has played a crucial role in the independence referendum and have staunchly supported the country's integration in NATO.

Nonetheless, the same cannot be said about the commitment of the same forces in driving the reform agenda, democratisation, or other tangible internal issues. Here, ethnic Albanians, be them in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia or elsewhere, have a lot of work to do before they can fully claim their Euro-Atlantic credentials. With sufficient will however, significant improvements can be made. There are three main areas through which they can bolster their credibility as genuine leaders committed to democratisation, rule of law, cooperation and integration, especially with the EU.

First, political actors must learn to walk the talk on cooperation. This is equally relevant for collaboration across and within ethnic lines. For too long, political brinkmanship has impaired the ability of national and local political forces to deliver on key issues such as economic growth, improved living standards, better education, and health services. Albania's internal politics is rich with examples of political divisions hampering necessary reforms, democratisation, prosperity, and economic growth. As a result, if one considers the rhetoric of political actors and their commitment to any of these areas, they could be forgiven for thinking these actors are fervent supporters of rule of law, democratic representation, institutional accountability, and EU integration. But if one assesses their actions, it becomes evident that their efforts and activities, are in fact a genuine obstruction to progress in any of the above-mentioned areas.

It is important however to note that this call for cooperation should not be limited to political actors alone. Instead, it is essential that individual, institutional and organisational efforts to collaborate expand to civil society, media, academia and business. Previous examples of collaboration among CSO's, artists, media enterprises and private academic institutions have yielded impressive results. This is especially true in all areas where politics have taken a back seat, proving yet again that narrow political interests continue to hamper both cooperation and progress.

Second, ethnic Albanian political actors must give up the practice of life-long political careers. Throughout the region, ethnic Albanian politicians have occupied key political posts in the party and government. In spite of having served for over two decades, many of them still use similar justifications as they did when they first came to power. In Albania, this means translates into

utilisation of being a proponent of the mass student protests in early 1990's which brought down the communist regime. In Kosovo, it relates to the legacy of war, where political leaders justify their power by having been at the helm of the KLA fight for liberation. Similarly, in North Macedonia, many key politicians use their involvement in the quest for more political rights as a key justification for maintaining the posts. Surprisingly, they have been able to use such justifications with a degree of success, in spite of its diminished relevance over time. The changes each of the countries have undergone, and the evolution of the issues underline the need for new causes, new approaches, and new faces. Although it may be possible for some of them to uphold their current posts, it is imperative they pave the way for emerging leaders whose vigour and aspirations more closely reflect those of the post war and post-communist generations.

Third, it is imperative the Albanian political factor adapts to facilitate the changes experienced by their constituencies and respond to their concerns. One such way to improve their standing, reputation and the outlook of their countries is to deliver tangible results that do not force people to migrate. The longevity in service and the evolution of circumstances have created an increasing gap between the populace and their leaders. Adopting reflective strategies and approaches is not only a smart political move, but an essential feat for survival.

Fourth, Albanian political factor and the actors that represent it must ensure that relations are institutionalised to avoid being too reliant on personal rapport between influential politicians. Side lining institutions may bring about short-term personal interests, but it will not be sustainable or beneficial in the long term.

Fifth, they must realise that small steps sometimes yield better results. For them, this means that constituents are less keen on grand but unrealistic propaganda, and would be more appreciative of small but tangible achievements. Recognition of diplomas and academic credentials in countries where such agreements have not materialised is an example of such a small but impactful action.