

Public Perceptions towards European integration and regional security in Albania



**Author:**

Arjan Dyrmishi

Methodologist:

Eduard Zaloshnja, Methodologist and Fieldwork coordinator

Internal Review:

Mirsada Hallunaj

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

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PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND REGIONAL SECURITY IN ALBANIA

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INTRODUCTION

The Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG) has conducted the Albanian Security Barometer for the past two years (2019 and 2020) in an effort to measure public perception towards institutions and different security related issues. In its third edition, CSDG has joined the Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) in its second edition to conduct an identical regional barometer in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia. This edition is different from the two previous barometers, because it has taken a regional dimension by measuring not only the perception of Albanian citizens towards their institutions and security issues, but also their perceptions on regional cooperation and specifically the relations between Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia. WBSB has an identical methodology in all three countries, and it also measured simultaneously the perceptions of the citizens of Kosovo and Serbia on the same issues. The results of the WBSB will be published in four different reports for each country. The first report was the Public Perception towards Security and Justice Institutions and Corruption Issues; the second report was Public Safety and Internal and External Threats; the third report was the Bilateral Relations, Cross-Border Cooperation and Identity Issues. This is the fourth and last report, European Integration and Regional Security, which includes only the data for Albania.

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

Albanians are overwhelmingly supportive of the European Union (EU) integration of their country, although only one-third of Albanians believe the EU is willing to accept Albania as a member state in the near future. The vast majority of Albanians suggest that even if there is no further integration into the EU, Albania should still continue to implement reforms and further align itself with EU's *acquis* and its foreign and security policy. The considerable majority of responders believe that Albania is not performing well towards EU membership. They believe Albania is doing little or no progress on depoliticizing public administration or ensuring independent judiciary. The vast majority of responders perceive that the EU is doing a good job as mediator in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, and they also support the dialogue between the two countries. The considerable

majority of Albanians believe Kosovo and Serbia will reach a final agreement but not in the near future. The overwhelming majority of Albanians support the free movement, exchange of information and a common market for goods and labor in the Western Balkans (WB); and they also agree to receive or provide assistance from/to other WB countries in case of emergency or natural/humanitarian disasters. Cybercrime¹ is not considered as a threat to the national security of the country by the majority of Albanians. Half of Albanians expect the relations between Albania and Serbia to be the same in the next year, although the overwhelming majority of responders think that Albania and Serbia should improve further their relations. Moreover, the vast majority of Albanians believe that both countries should improve their relations despite Serbia's relations with Kosovo. The vast majority of responders consider the relations between Albania and Serbia are important for the security and stability in the Balkans.

This report is divided into two main parts. The following chapter provides the findings pertaining to the public perception of European integration; whereas the subsequent chapter provides the findings pertaining to the regional security issues. A conclusion that reflects upon the findings is also provided at the end of the report.

¹ Cybercrimes include common cyber security threats like social engineering, software vulnerability and network attacks. However, it also involves criminal acts like social media accounts hacking, harassment and extortion, revenge pornography, money laundering, and more.



PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

This section provides all the survey results related to the perception of responders towards EU integration. Albanians are overwhelmingly supportive of the EU integration of their country, although only one-third of Albanians believe the EU is willing to accept Albania as a member state in the near future. This staunch pro-EU attitude of Albanians is not only related to the end-goal of joining the EU, but also related to the process of state reformation. For this, the vast majority of Albanians suggest that even if there is no further integration into the EU, Albania should still continue to implement reforms and further align itself with EU's acquis and its foreign and security policy.

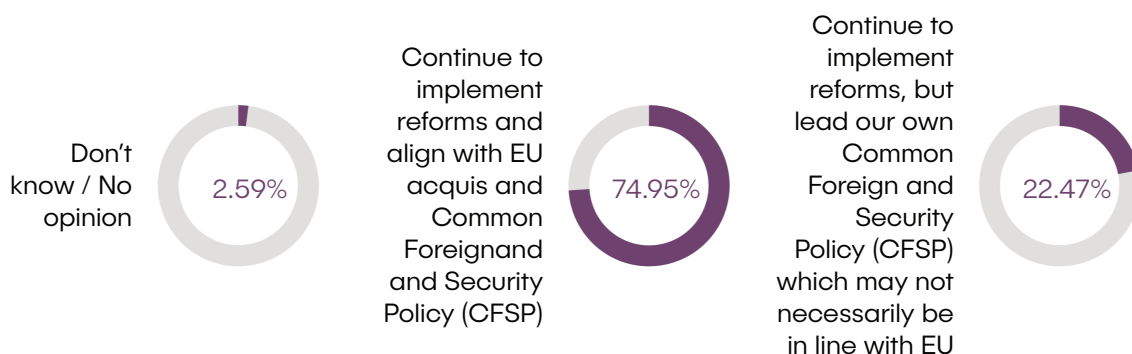
The considerable majority of responders believe that Albania is not performing well towards EU membership. After being asked over various areas of Albania's EU integration, the majority of Albanians believe their country is doing little or not at all progress with regards to depoliticizing public administration or ensuring independent judiciary; whereas less negative perceptions are noted with regards to country's progress on its bilateral relations with neighbors. The vast majority of responders perceive that the EU is doing a good job as mediator in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.

Almost all participants (96.69%) support the EU integration of Albania. Only a very small percentage (2.52%) of responders do not support such integration.

Responders were asked whether they think the EU is willing to accept Albania as a member state. The majority of responders (55.16%) believe that the EU is willing to accept Albania as a member state but not in the near future; one in three responders (33.6%) believes the EU is willing to accept Albania as a member state in the near future. In contrary, one in ten responders (9.18%) believes the EU is not willing to accept Albania as a member state.

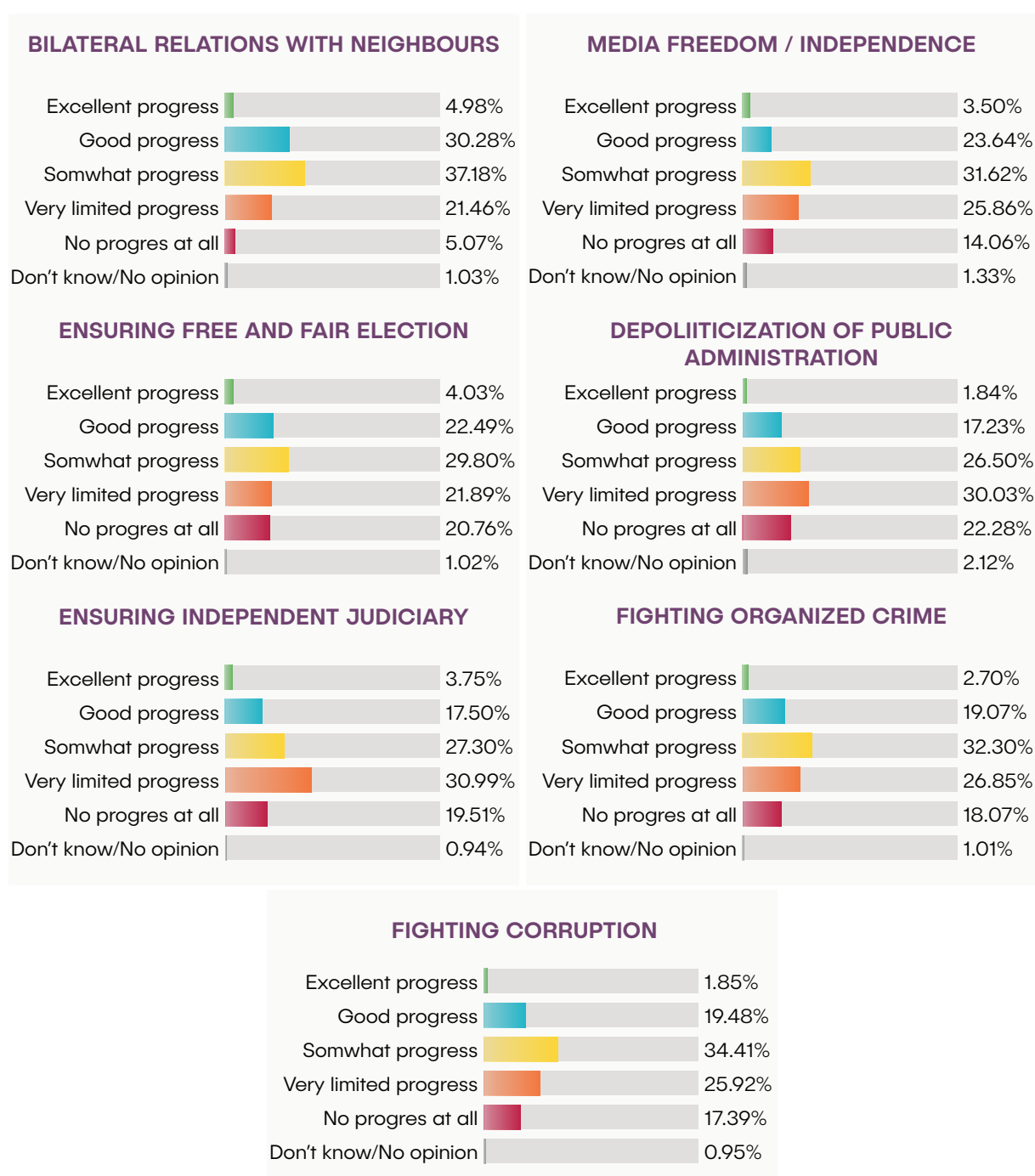
The vast majority of responders suggest that Albania should continue to implement reforms and align itself with EU's acquis and its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) even in case there is no further integration into the EU (see graph 1).

TABLE 1 IN CASE THERE IS NO FURTHER INTEGRATION INTO THE EU OR MEMBERSHIP, THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBANIA SHOULD



Responders were asked to assess the progress of Albania in several areas of EU integration (bilateral relations with neighbours, media freedom/independence, ensuring free and fair elections, depoliticizing public administration, ensuring independent judiciary, fighting organized crime, and fighting corruption). The results indicate that most Albanians do not assess positively the progress of their country towards EU integration. More negative public perceptions (no progress at all or little progress) are noted in the areas of depoliticizing public administration (52.31%) and ensuring independent judiciary (50.5%). Slightly less negative perceptions are noted in the areas of fighting organized crime (44.92%), fighting corruption (43.31%), ensuring free and fair elections (42.65%), and media freedom and independence (39.92%). The most positive perception was noted in the area of bilateral relations with neighbours, where 35.26% of responders believe Albania has done good or excellent progress in this area (see graph 2).

TABLE 2 PLEASE ASSESS THE PROGRESS OF ALBANIA IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS RELATED TO THE EU INTEGRATION



The vast majority of responders (75.38%) believe the EU is doing a good job as mediator in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. In contrary, one in five responders (19.91%) believes the EU is not doing a good job as mediator in this regard.

This section provided the survey results pertaining to the perception of responders towards EU integration. The following chapter provides the survey results related to the regional security.



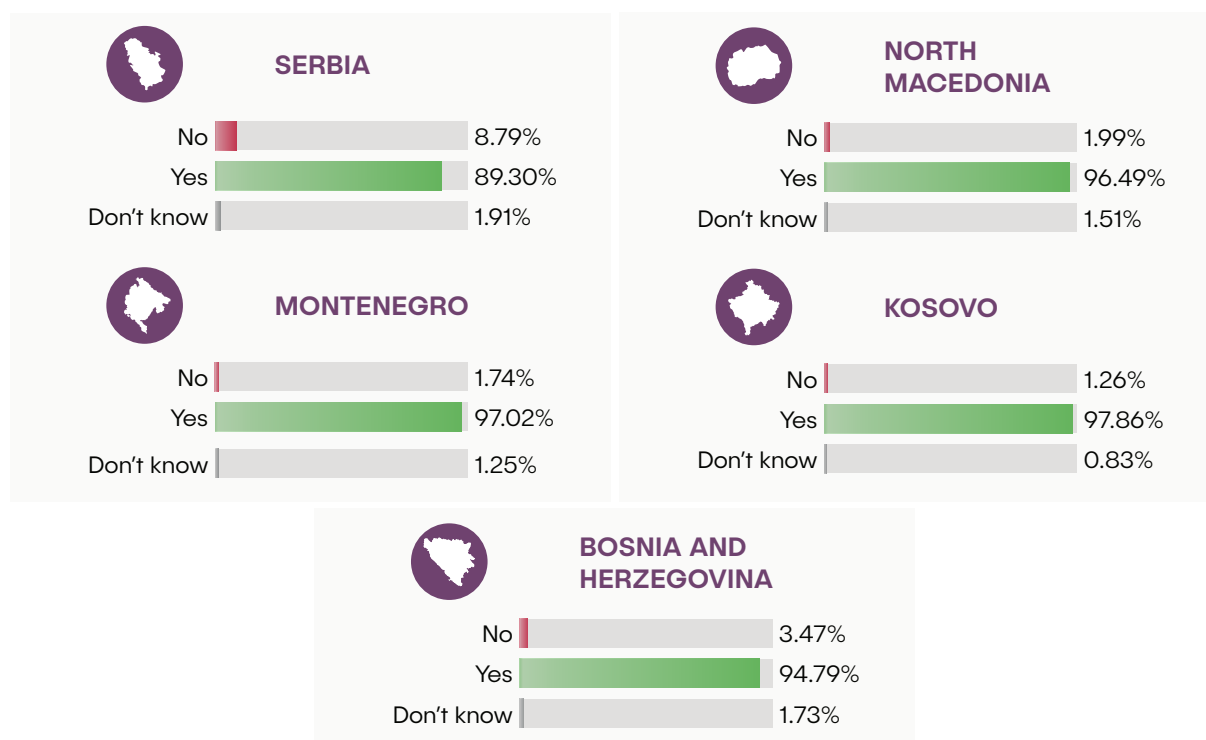
PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF REGIONAL SECURITY

This section provides all the survey results related to the perception of responders towards regional security. The overwhelming majority of Albanians support the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. The considerable majority of them believes both countries will reach a final agreement but not in the near future, and the majority of responders believe there will be peace between Kosovo and Serbia in the near future. The overwhelming majority of Albanians support the free movement, exchange of information and a common market for goods and labor in the WB. Almost all Albanians agree to receive or provide assistance from/to other WB countries in case of emergency or natural/humanitarian disasters. Cybercrime is not considered as a threat to the national security of the country by the majority of Albanians. This may be as a result of the fact that the overwhelming majority of responders have never been a victim of cybercrime. Half of Albanians expect the relations between Albania and Serbia to be the same during the next year, although the overwhelming majority of responders think that Albania and Serbia should improve further their relations. Albanians believe that relations between two countries should focus on economic development, strengthening rule of law and democratic institutions, and increasing security. The vast majority of Albanians believe that Albania and Serbia should improve their relations despite Serbia's relations with Kosovo. Albanians believe that political leaders and international community are the actors who are harming the most the relations between Albania and Serbia. Surprisingly, political leaders and international community, along with businesses, are also perceived as the actors who are contributing the most to the relations between Albania and Serbia. The vast majority of responders consider the relations between Albania and Serbia as important for the security and stability in the Balkans.

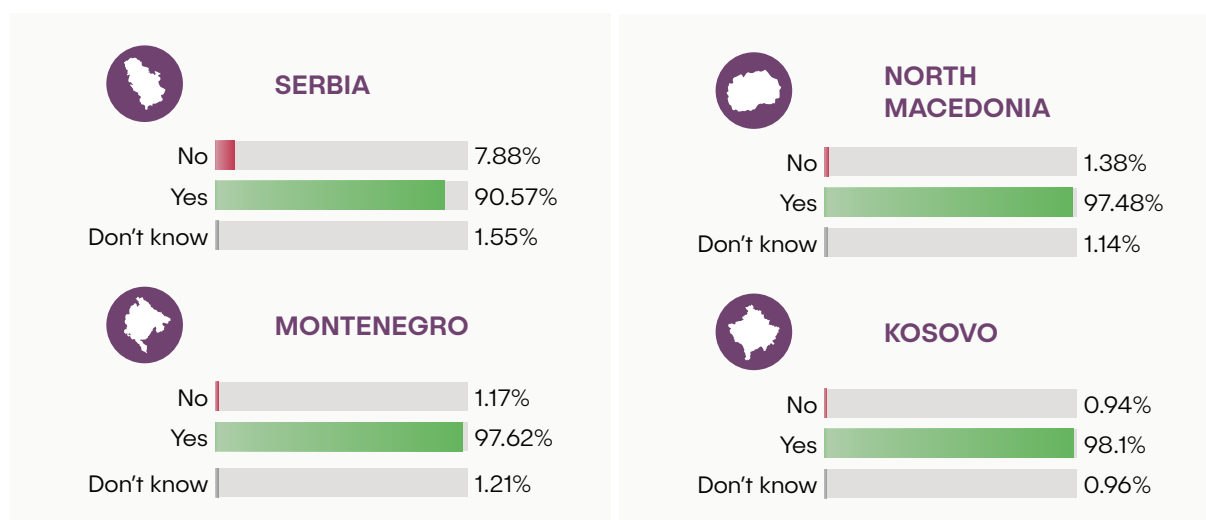
Almost all responders (92.15%) support the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.

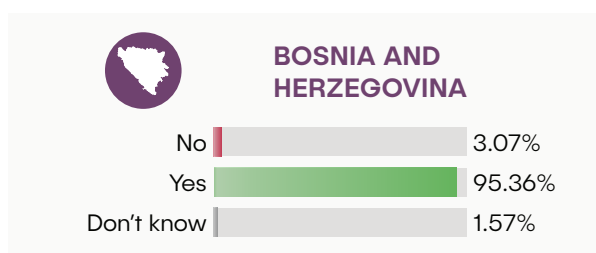
Responders were asked whether they support the free movement, exchange of information and a common market for goods and labor in the WB. The overwhelming majority of responders (90.75%) are supportive of it, whereas a small minority (7.38%) are against it.

Responders were also asked whether they would agree to receive assistance from other WB countries' security institutions in case of an emergency or natural/humanitarian disaster (floods, earthquakes, fires, pandemics, etc.). Almost all responders would agree to receive assistance from other WB countries. Albanians are slightly less willing when it comes to Serbia, for which almost one in ten Albanians (8.79%) would not agree to receive assistance (see graph 3).

TABLE 3 WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ACTORS IS CONTRIBUTING THE MOST OR HARMING THE MOST THE RELATIONS BETWEEN ALBANIA AND SERBIA

Similar to above, responders were also asked whether they would agree to send/provide assistance to other WB countries' security institutions in case of an emergency or natural/humanitarian disaster (floods, earthquakes, fires, pandemics, etc.). Almost all responders would agree to provide assistance to other WB countries. Again, Albanians are slightly less willing when it comes to Serbia, for which 7.88% would not agree to provide assistance (see graph 4). Interestingly, the number of responders who do not want to receive assistance from Serbia is slightly bigger (8.79% vs 7.88%) than the number of responders who do not want to provide assistance to Serbia.

TABLE 4 WOULD YOU AGREE TO SEND/PROVIDE ASSISTANCE FOR THE FOLLOWING COUNTRIES' SECURITY INSTITUTIONS IN CASE OF AN EMERGENCY OR NATURAL/HUMANITARIAN DISASTER



39.08% of responders consider cybercrime as a threat or high threat to the national security of Albania. In contrary, more than one in four responders (27.38%) considers cybercrime as a low threat or no threat at all.

The overwhelming majority of responders (91%) have never been a victim of cybercrime. Only a small percentage of responders (6.88%) have been victims of cybercrime.

Responders were asked whether they think that Kosovo and Serbia will reach a final agreement. The considerable majority of them (68.54%) believe Kosovo and Serbia will reach a final agreement but not in the near future (+2 years). Another 18.6% of responders believe Kosovo and Serbia will reach a final agreement in the near future (1-2 years). In contrary, one in ten responders (10.59%) believes Kosovo and Serbia will never reach a final agreement.

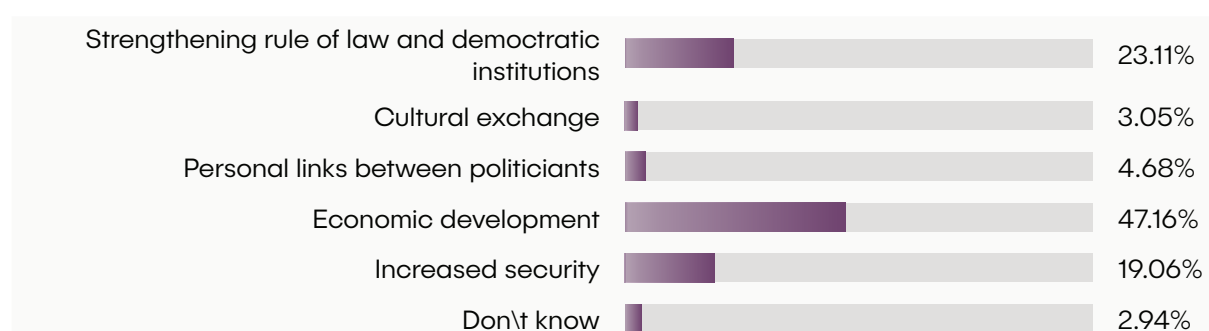
The majority of responders (56.76%) believe there will be peace between Kosovo and Serbia in the near future. In contrary, more than one in three responders (36.63%) believes there will not be peace between Kosovo and Serbia in the near future.

Responders were also asked how they expect the relations between Albania and Serbia to be in the next year. Half of responders (50.6%) expect such relations to be the same, another 43.52% expect such relations to improve, whereas only a very small percentage of responders (2.41%) expect such relations to deteriorate.

The overwhelming majority of responders (90.79%) think that Albania and Serbia should improve further their relations. Only a small percentage of responders (5.8%) does not agree with it.

Economic development (47.16%), strengthening the rule of law and democratic institutions (23.11%), and increasing security (19.06%) are considered by responders as the most important preconditions for improving relations between Albania and Serbia. In contrary, personal links between politicians (4.68%) and cultural exchanges (3.05%) are perceived as the least important preconditions in this regard (see graph 5).

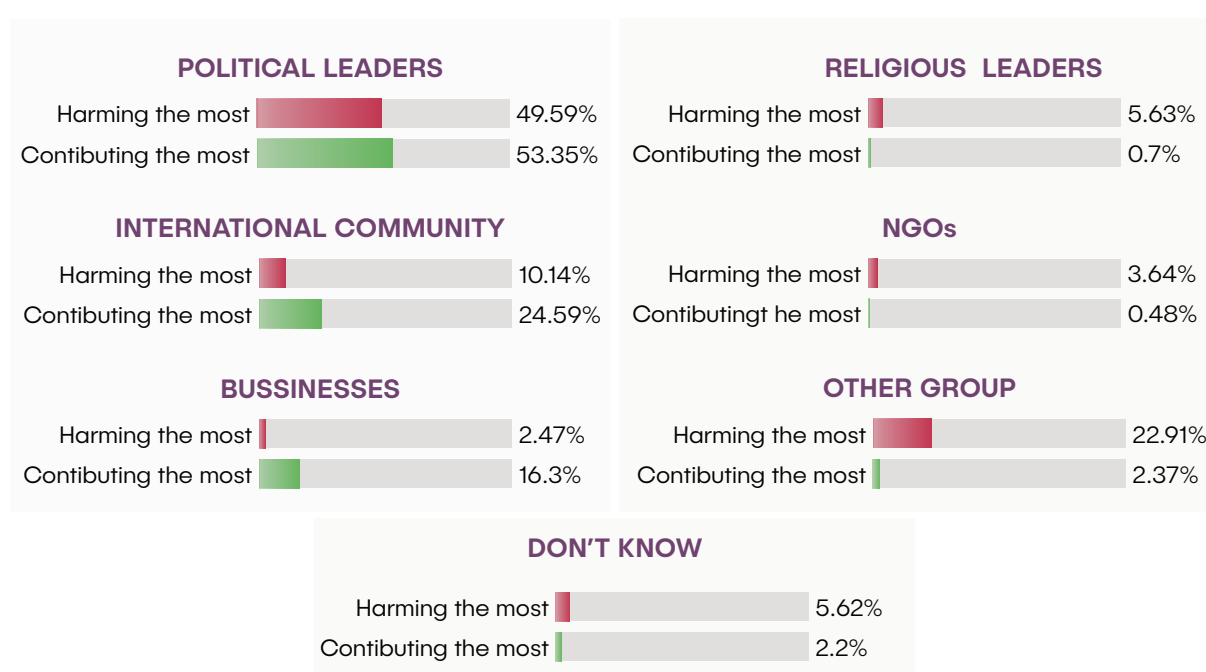
TABLE 5 WHAT IS IMPORTANT PRECONDITION FOR IMPROVING RELATIONS BETWEEN SERBIA AND ALBANIA



The vast majority of responders (83.42%) believe that Albania and Serbia should improve their relations despite Serbia's relations with Kosovo. In contrary, 14.06% of responders do not agree with this statement, suggesting that Albania's relations with Serbia should depend on Serbia's relations with Kosovo.

Albanians believe that political leaders (49.59%) and international community (10.14%) are harming the most the relations between Albania and Serbia. Almost one in four Albanians (22.91%) believes that 'other groups' are harming the relations between Albania and Serbia, without specifying such groups. Surprisingly, political leaders (53.35%) and international community (24.59%), along with businesses (16.3%), are also perceived as contributing the most to the relations between Albania and Serbia (see graph 6).

TABLE 6 WITH REGARDS TO THE RELATIONS BETWEEN ALBANIA AND SERBIA, WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING IS



Responders were asked how important they consider the relations between Albania and Serbia for the security and stability in the Balkans. The vast majority of responders (77.39%) believe such relations are either important or very important. In contrary, one in five responders (20.55%) believes such relations are either little or not important at all.

This section provided the survey results pertaining to the perception of responders towards regional security. This was the last chapter of this report. The following section provides a conclusion that reflects upon the findings.



CONCLUSION

This report was prepared with the aim of examining the attitudes of Albanian citizens towards EU integration and WB regional security.

Albania is an EU candidate country since 2014, and a country where citizens trust the EU more than their domestic institutions. This survey reconfirms that Albanians are overwhelmingly supportive of the EU integration of their country. This staunch pro-EU attitude of Albanians is not only related to the zeal of joining the EU, but also to the process of state reformation. This survey suggest that the vast majority of Albanians would prefer that even if there is no further integration into the EU, Albania should still continue to implement reforms and further align itself with EU's acquis and its foreign and security policy. Albania's EU narrative and framework provide the impetus for strengthening the rule of law, economic growth and the right push for deep reforms in the country. However, regardless of the fact that the relations with the EU are a priority of Albania's foreign policy (also enjoying large support from its citizens), the slow-paced enlargement process has impacted the country in this regard. This survey has found that only one-third of Albanians believe the EU is willing to accept Albania as a member state in the near future. This perception may reflect the saga of the EU failing to open accession negotiations with Albania since March 2020, even though Albania has fulfilled the criteria for beginning membership negotiations. This failure is a result of the EU member Bulgaria which opposes North Macedonia's membership, citing a bilateral dispute over history and national identity. Since Albania and North Macedonia's bids are linked and launching accession talks requires unanimous approval from all 27 EU nations, the veto has also prevented Albania from moving forward. There are also other recent factors that have delayed the progress of Albania and other WB countries, including the bloc's stalled interest in enlargement, years of diplomatic turmoil over Brexit, and also Albania's failure to undertake deep structural reforms. With regards to the latter, this survey confirms that the considerable majority of responders believe that Albania is not performing well towards EU membership. Although the slow-paced enlargement process has impacted the country's EU aspiration, Albanians are still overwhelmingly supportive of the EU, and this will presumably be the case for as long as there is no alternative to the EU integration.

After its NATO membership in 2009, Albania has a new status and role in international relations, a logical consequence of the growing partnership with all structures of regional and global security. This is further reinforced by the fact that Albania is currently a non-permanent member of the United Nations' Security Council for the period 2022-2023. The foreign policy of Albania is designed to be a reliable partner that is fully engaged in strengthening the good neighborly relations and regional integration. Regional cooperation is one of Albania's top foreign policy priorities. Good neighborly relations and regional cooperation are also part of the first cluster "The Fundamentals of the Accession Process" and form an essential part of Albania's European integration process. They contribute to stability, reconciliation and a climate conducive to addressing open bilateral issues and the legacies of the past. One of the most eminent

forms of the actual regional cooperation is the “Mini-Schengen – Open Balkan”, which was materialized in October 2019 when Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia decided to advance regional cooperation by forming this initiative in order to improve life and the economy in the region until the EU accepts their membership. During the 2021 Economic Forum on Regional Cooperation in Skopje, the three countries signed three agreements in this regard (i) Responding together to natural and other disasters; (ii) Allowing citizens to work in one another’s countries; and (iii) Helping goods move without delays. This survey has found that the overwhelming majority of Albanians support the free movement, exchange of information and a common market for goods and labor in the WB. Likewise, almost all Albanians also agree to receive or provide assistance from/to other WB countries in case of emergency or natural/humanitarian disasters. Regardless of the current discourse (Open Balkan) in the region which may give the impression of an increased cooperation between WB countries, it is unlikely for the region to further integrate into regional cooperation independently of the EU. The EU is a driving force that pushes countries of the region towards stability, strengthening the rule of law, economic growth and the right push for liberal values and deep reforms. Considering the history of the region and the ongoing lack of an overall agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, the prosperity of the region is still not on the horizon. EU’s driving force is of utmost importance.

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