



Kosovo: Focus Group Research Findings

November/December 2014

Introduction

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted a series of focus groups in November and December 2014 examining perspectives of Kosovar Albanians and Serbs in six municipalities: Gjakova, Gjilane, Gracanica, Mitrovica, North Mitrovica, and Pristina. The discussions centered on citizen perceptions of the current social, political, and economic environment.

The research took place after several months of political deadlock related to government formation following parliamentary elections in June 2014. One week prior to initiating the focus groups, the incumbent Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), led by outgoing Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, and the opposition Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), headed by Isa Mustafa, announced a governing coalition agreement.

The research forms part of a multi-component program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) supporting Kosovo's democratic transition.

Methodology

- Sixteen (16) gender-segregated focus group sessions involving nearly 200 respondents held in late November/early December.
- Respondents between the ages of 18 and 65, recruited randomly using pre-set criteria, and remunerated in accordance with qualitative research practices and market norms.
- Audio recordings were taken and translated transcripts produced for each session, to be used for the purpose of assessing main findings.
- The research is not predicated on a quantitative sample of the population. The findings are therefore indicative rather than statistically predictive of public opinion.

Kosovar Albanian Focus Groups



Summary

The general mood of Kosovar Albanians has changed from being angry and frustrated to resolute in their desire for palpable change and their readiness to take action. The change that they envision, and how they see it coming about, varies. Some talk of the inevitability of mass action, demonstrations, and protest, while others discuss individual actions that demonstrate their personal responsibility for fixing what they perceive is wrong. Such action includes voting for candidates who can deliver on their promises, ending corrupt practices, and being more vocal about issues that concern them directly.

Increasingly, focus group respondents paint a picture of two Kosovo's. In one, the privileged have the means to accumulate great wealth (often at public expense), receive preferential treatment, and have greater opportunity to reward friends, family, and supporters with employment, contracts, and other favors. Respondents say that corruption has burgeoned in the past 15 years, driven, in part, by a political class enriched through ill-gotten wealth. Respondents resent the conspicuous wealth of large mansions and luxury cars. In a country with a small population, respondents point out that they know who and what their politicians are having once been their co-workers or neighbors.

In the other Kosovo, that of the vast majority of citizens, there is no employment unless one is connected to the privileged or in possession of means to win favors. Post-secondary education, for example, does not reward merit or ambition, but is conferred on the basis of nepotism or bribery. Fair treatment under the law is also seen as not accessible for most people. A politicized justice and policing system is seen to answer to the top tier of society.

Economic discourse has altered over the years. It used to be notable that residents of Gjakova in western Kosovo alone expended a great deal of time discussing reinvigorating the manufacturing sector. Groups in other municipalities are also wondering about the

sustainability of an economy built largely as they see it on cafes, petrol stations, and road construction. Recognizing that corruption is a serious impediment to investment of any sort, most respondents express an urgency to create transparency and other conditions favorable to investment.

They hold very little confidence in the political class, as they are believed to be too self-interested to focus on the concerns of citizens - unemployment, economic development and lack of justice. Compounding disappointment has been frustration about the illusion of democratic remedies. Several respondents believe that they voted for change in the June 2014 parliamentary elections, but got more of the same. Personal actions are needed in the face of unresponsive, dispassionate state institutions.

To address corruption, some respondents say Kosovars have to stop bribing health workers to obtain faster service or paying educators for better grades or access to limited opportunities. Others say that the only option left is to leave Kosovo, and given the opportunity and means would do so without hesitation. As a consequence of seeing no substantive change in 15 years since the conflict ended, most view emigration as a rational though risky enterprise. Others say leaving Kosovo is not the panacea people would believe, because there are few opportunities abroad, and the talent and energy of young people is needed in Kosovo. Ultimately, respondents in several focus groups talked about increased protests and demonstrations needed to clearly communicate group dissatisfaction. The frequency of such sentiments is something recent, as respondents in years past seemed more patient.

Respondents are clear about what they want, and are ready to voice their concerns and aspirations to politicians. Institutional leaders have a very real opportunity to focus the determination and resolve of Kosovars to address fundamentally difficult issues facing the country. It, however, has to be a collaboration built on honesty, accountability, and with the interests of the entire country taken into consideration.

General Direction

- **Public is demanding action**
- **Progress on infrastructure but not on issues of concern**
- **Corruption and nepotism contributing to declining economy, education, and health care**
- **Unemployment leading to desperation**
- **People seeking change frustrated at the ballot box**

Respondents frequently express dissatisfaction with the current circumstances and the way things have progressed– or not progressed – over 15 years. The three ‘top of mind’ issues affecting their mood are high unemployment, corruption and nepotism and similar ‘fair shake’ issues, and what they view as an unsustainable and under-performing economy.

“Currently there is no rule of law, there is nepotism, high levels of corruption in Kosovo which is what we are facing today in Kosovo. People are being manipulated into thinking that they will have a better future in European countries. But we can’t all abandon the country. However, those jobs that are available here, you can only get through nepotism or your connections with a political party. Corruption is high which is bringing us all our troubles, and we are losing our youth as a result.” (Man, Pristina)

Recognizing that there are limited jobs to be had, many believe that even those are closed to the average Kosovar.

“The economy is growing at a very low rate. This results in high unemployment. What employment there is can be found in the public sector, which is run by nepotism.” (Man, Pristina)

High unemployment is leading to desperation. Faced with an inaccessible job market, it is reasonable that people will look outside of Kosovo for opportunity. There is a dark side in that people find opportunity in the desperation of others.

“There is high unemployment here in Kosovo – just look at the unemployed in this group. Employers don’t respect their workers. Those 800 people that left in search of something better are now in prisons in Hungary! If life were good here, people wouldn’t feel that they have to leave. We have an unemployed professor here, that’s how bad it is. We are completely disappointed because of the rampant corruption here.” (Man, Gjilan)

To a great extent, respondents believe that institutional leadership is unconcerned with the plight of average citizens, and that they are more focused on their well-being and that of friends, family, and supporters. This belief does not inspire optimism about the future.

“I would be curious to know, for all those desperate people leaving Kosovo, are any of them the children of members of parliament and ministers? Or are they unemployed and poor people? I have applied to work as a professor here but the militants of political parties are getting those jobs. In the municipality and central government they only hire their own people and party activists. I left during the war and when I returned I found a very different Kosovo. I don’t think this is what young people expected. I am disappointed the president and prime minister are not talking about these things.” (Man, Gjilan)

“Political parties only employ their own militants. The party I voted for hasn’t improved the employment situation for me. I have knocked on a lot of doors to get any job. I am tired of going to offices and seeing incompetents working there.” (Woman, Gjilan)

“In the next four years nothing will improve. All the money will be for infrastructure and highways, which are ad hoc temporary jobs. This is not sustainable. There needs to be capital investment in production, but no plans to open factories. No hope for improvement with this government because most are corrupt.” (Man, Mitrovica)

“The economy is zero in Kosovo. Unemployment is bad. Education is bad. There are kids getting degrees and no hope of a job.” (Woman, Gjakove)

Some are not entirely prepared to give up on government, or society.

“After the new government gets formed I think things will improve. The economy though is zero, with people living off 50 cents a day.” (Man, Mitrovica)

“The majority of things are headed in the wrong direction, but not everything. The worsening of things is not entirely in our hands, but we should take responsibility for the state of law and order.” (Man, Gjakove)

Economy

- **Unemployment is the top issue**
- **Emigration as a result of unemployment and diminishing opportunity**
- **Jobs restricted to partisans, and bribery-driven**
- **Infrastructure improvements not leading to diversification of economy and manufacturing**
- **Privatization efforts viewed as incompetent at best, corrupt at worst**

Respondents are clear about what they want from their economy – an expanded private sector and productive industrial manufacturing. First, they view the economy as largely dominated by the state, the largest employer being one level of government or the other. Government jobs are seen as preferable to private sector jobs because they have better benefits and working conditions, but nepotism excludes many from having fair access to these jobs. However, most believe that an economy based on government jobs is not sustainable or desirable in the long term. Second, they feel that the private sector is dominated by the service industry and there is insufficient production or manufacturing that adds value to the economy. What promise there was—privatization—is largely viewed as having been mismanaged. Whether incompetence, corruption, or both, privatization did not spur modernization of manufacturing, protect or expand the jobs market, or create sustainable economic activity. The factories were torn down and replaced with restaurants, supermarkets, and petrol stations. Factory jobs were replaced with low-wage service jobs.

Focus group respondents have developed a relatively uniform economic model preference. They do not see the present economic situation as desirable or sustainable. They do not see an economic development policy by successive governments. Their view is that infrastructure improvements and highway construction have created temporary and seasonal employment and are not long-term placements. There is no connection to improved infrastructure being the basis of expanded trade corridors or networks to transport goods produced in Kosovo. An articulate economic policy would help bridge this gap, but would need to address what people believe is deep corruption acting as a disincentive to prospective and needed investors.

“The policy of the government has been to support imports, not our production. We lack production. We as citizens need to act and not buy imports. Maybe the quality of products in Kosovo is not the best, but we need to support products made here. We used to produce juices, so why do we now buy them from Serbia when we have our own? The government needs to keep money in the country.” (Woman, Mitrovica)

“Privatization was done for the personal enrichment of politicians. They should have placed certain conditions on privatized industries. It would have been okay if they had sold the factories even for 1 Euro, but they should have been required to hire so many Kosovars. There is an investment from Macedonia that bought an enterprise in Rahovec, and they brought employees from Macedonia instead of Kosovo. These economic policies are the reason why our young people feel they have to leave.” (Man, Pristina)

“Privatization was done in the wrong way. Factories were sold and they put up supermarkets. The money wasn’t reinvested into manufacturing.” (Man, Gjakove)

The perceived economic situation is leading to respondents considering drastic action, principally leaving Kosovo in search of prosperity elsewhere.

“If I get the chance, I would send my sons out of Kosovo. I have three sons looking for work but they can’t get a job, we don’t have connections.” (Woman, Mitrovica)

Respondents believe that elected and institutional officials care more about themselves than dealing with the dire economic and unemployment situation in Kosovo.

“They’ve done a great job taking care of their uncles, but nothing for the rest of us! There’s been no development, five years ago 5,000 people laid off during privatization, and all we got were supermarkets. Where did all that money go?” (Man, Gjiilan)

Corruption

- **The only way to get things done**
- **Politicians viewed as amassing obscene levels of wealth**
- **Jobs and education opportunities and preferential treatment to those with wealth or party connections**
- **Government spending and perceived excesses provoke anger**
- **Respondents accept that their individual behavior contributes to corruption**

There is the belief that corruption has become way of life in Kosovo, and that it has deleterious effects on education, health, justice and economic development, which is of great concern. Citizens, some say, share a proportion of the blame for allowing the situation to get so bad and for their own corrupt behaviors. Clearly the preference is for a Kosovo in which opportunity is not subject to corruption, but until that point one is forced to ‘play the game’ to get anywhere. Particularly offensive to many respondents is what they see as obscene wealth flaunted by politicians, government officials and friends

and families of a privileged class. As a small country, people say they are quite aware of who is abusing their positions, as everyone knows everyone else.

Aside from corruption, focus group respondents are angered by perceptions that government officials and elected members abuse the resources they have access to by virtue of their positions: expense claims, preferential treatment and transportation being the most frequently raised.

“There are people without food or even 50 cents, yet politicians with high salaries and limousines spend €80,000 on meals and cars! ...We’ve been patient until now, too patient!” (Man, Gjilan)

“Most rich people in Kosovo are politicians. We know how they started and we know how they are now.” (Man, Gjakove)

“I’m the wife of a war veteran and children of veterans get scholarships. Yet when the lists come out you see people on there that shouldn’t be on the list. We are a small community and we know these people.” (Woman, Gjakove)

“We need to destroy this system of nepotism – because today if you want to be successful in Kosovo you have to use connections to get anywhere, and that’s been instilled in our mentality. I blame us for this situation because we have not demonstrated in large numbers.” (Man, Mitrovica)

“The current system makes it necessary for us to be corrupt, that’s the only way to do it! I will, as a teacher, have to be corrupt – that’s what they teach us.” (Woman, Gjilan)

Education

- **Value of education losing worth**
- **Corruption and nepotism in post-secondary education leading to anger, particularly among women**
- **Because of corrupt post-secondary education, people with inadequate qualifications are obtaining jobs**

The quality of education is seriously eroding, say respondents. In particular, the value of an education is rapidly appraised as worthless as there are too few jobs for qualified graduates. The education system and job market is rife with nepotism and corruption. Mothers and students are most concerned about the situation. For students, they are faced with choices to engage in corruption through bribery, and mothers are concerned with the psychological impact on their children.

The phenomenon of people with advanced degrees working in low-wage, service sector jobs is frequently raised. The lack of coherent labor market information impairs students’ ability to pursue targeted academic or skilled trades training. Academic opportunities are

largely viewed to be reserved for those willing to pay bribes or for the privileged or those connected to people of privilege.

“People with masters degrees work as waiters. We sacrificed a great deal for our kids to get an education.” (Woman, Gjakove)

“Everything moves with money. To register for university you need to bribe someone.” (Woman, Gjakove)

“Principals are appointed with only high school diplomas! Private universities are not providing quality service, and a master’s degree is worthless. There is a lot of nepotism in education.” (Man, Gjakove)

Health

- **Quality in decline as corruption and preferential treatment rises**
- **Public sector lacks medication and basic supplies**

There is a common belief that only wealthy and connected people obtain competent health services. Several respondents believe that politicians and even doctors leave Kosovo for competent health care. There is a view that doctors and health workers are corrupt and will not provide service as readily without bribes or favors. Doctors who work in public and private clinics, it is believed, frequently refer patients in public clinics to their private clinics as a means to supplement their incomes. Respondents also say that they are often advised to purchase their own medications and supplies for treatment in hospitals.

The health system is cause for great concern among respondents. It feeds the idea that there is a two-tier Kosovo in which the greatest proportion of citizens is left to fend for themselves. Several respondents recognize that citizens are responsible, in part, for corruption. Faced with a sick child or family member, people feel they will get faster service if they offer bribes of money or food to health workers.

“The health system is catastrophic. I hope God does not give me an illness, because I don’t know how I will pay for it. Even if I could, I’m not sure of the quality of the doctors. My niece was almost paralyzed because they gave her the wrong medication.” (Woman, Gjilan)

“Even the doctors and politicians leave the country for medical treatment – that’s got to tell you something.” (Man, Gjakove)

“There was a video posted on the internet of a woman going into labor and the nurses could be heard telling her to make her own bed and so on.” (Woman, Gjilan)

“Doctors should not be allowed to work in both the public and private systems, it’s a conflict of interest. There is no accountability for these doctors; they have lots of money

and do not face the consequences. I am very surprised that the families of patients who have been harmed have not done more, but then I've heard people say that these rich doctors are above the law and nothing can be done.” (Man, Gjakove)

Governing Institutions

- **There is a significantly low level ,indeed absence of public confidence in governing institutions**
- **Most seen as partisan, corrupt, and ineffective**
- **Once positive reviews of the Kosovo Police are now mixed.**

Respondents are sour on the quality and motivations of their leaders. Most feel that elected and institutional actors have been unable to achieve improvements in the quality of life over 15 years. Most are unable to point to improvements over the years. Respondents are emphatically clear about what they want government to do urgently: address corruption, unemployment and economic development. They want politicians to enforce the law and keep their promises, to stop engaging in corrupt practices, and to enforce legislation that provides fair access to services – for instance legislation that stops doctors from working in public and private sectors simultaneously, or stops nepotism in education.

To a limited extent, political and government leaders are forgiven for what respondents consider to be their failings. There is a perception that they have little leeway to do things without approval from international actors - undoubtedly a view heavily influenced by perceptions of how the coalition government ultimately came about. Many see the new coalition as much the same as previous governments, and are frustrated that they voted for change but got the status quo.

“The worst thing is that Government today has become an employment institute for their party militants through nepotism” (Man, Mitrovica)

“I don’t like the way when a particular party boycotts the plenary session. We didn’t vote them to boycott the plenary sessions but to face and challenge the government” (Man, Pristina)

- Virtually every respondent feels that it is unlikely anything will change with the **new coalition government**. This provides scope for even modest changes to be recognized as some measure of progress, though respondents will need evidence of diligence and accountability to change their views.
- The **Office of the President** is not viewed as an independent institution. Most see it in negative terms, as being politicized.
- **The judiciary** inspires little to no confidence. Most describe the judiciary as corrupt. No other institution tested receives such emphatic unanimity. Other views

are that the judicial branch ignores or does not respect the rule of law and that it is not independent of the political class.

- Perceptions of the **Kosovo Police** have changed over time. They used to inspire a fairly high degree of confidence among respondents. The police are now viewed in mixed terms. More frequently, they are negatively assessed as being politically captured, corrupt, and incompetent. However many still describe them in positive terms as being good, and doing a good job.
- **The Constitutional Court** is viewed in almost exclusively negative terms, such as politically compromised and corrupt.
- **The Assembly of Kosovo** is not viewed in a positive light. Respondents have difficulty identifying accomplishments by parliament, which they view as a place where self-interested politicians argue among themselves on topics that are only of interest to them. The public interest or the issues that most directly affect Kosovars are not attended to. Several believe that parliament should pay more attention to implementing laws that exist as opposed to passing laws and forgetting about them. A strong majority says they would be willing to attend a meeting organized by or for elected members, bemoaning a view that elected officials are inaccessible and only interested in citizens' opinions at election time.

To this end, several people suggested that electoral reform is needed to establish defined constituencies so that elected members can be accountable to a specific group of constituents. Ultimately they want accountable politicians to better represent the interests of citizens, and in doing so use language in debates that reflects the expected dignity of public discourse. Many who view the regular sessions broadcast live or as summarized in news reports feel that the members do not act in a dignified manner, often preoccupied on the phone or reading newspapers. They feel that the arguments and fighting debase the institution.

- **Political parties** are the only institution tested that garners no positive sentiment. They are largely viewed as corrupt, self-interested and not doing what they say. As a whole the institution is viewed negatively, although several participants made a point of expressing confidence in *Vetevendosje* as being unlike the rest. A significant number of respondents say they are prepared to punish political parties and personalities at the polls, though they have little confidence that this works. They claim that they voted for change in the last election, but the coalition delivered them much the same as they had.

Non-State Actors

- **Civil society** inspires the most positive sentiments. Respondents believe they are a positive force capable of holding politicians accountable and enabling young

people to become active in public life. The few negative comments revolve around a perception that they are politically captured, or not critical enough.

- The **media** is viewed with a mix of positive and negative feelings, but is increasingly seen as being politically captured, exaggerating issues and limited in its free speech.
- **Religious** institutions are viewed with mixed feelings. Positively people express confidence that they act as ethical institutions and are good overall for Kosovo. Negative views contradict this positive view with beliefs that they are corrupt and manipulative.

International Community

- The perception of **EULEX** is damaged by recent allegations of corruption. Most negative comments involve words describing them as being, or infected with, corrupt.
- While **KFOR**'s presence in Kosovo draws down, people view them in positive terms, providing a level of security that they have confidence in.
- The **diplomatic and donor community** is well-regarded, though respondents express concerns that the international community takes too much of a hands-on approach with respect to Kosovo's political life, pointing to the recent coalition agreement. Some respondents felt that accommodation had to be found among Kosovars alone, while others feel that agreement could not be reached and someone had to step in. People worry that the international community prefers a status quo that tolerates corruption, high unemployment, and unaccountable political leadership.

"I believe the next government will be the same as the previous one. Everything is served to us by the USA and EU – it is accepted and dictates how our political life will be. I often think we are not yet an independent state; our politicians are only working on what the international community tells them. I am very grateful to the USA, I owe them my life and would die for them, but there are some internal issues in which they should not involve themselves to support the level of politicians that we have." (Man, Pristina)

Municipal Government

Local governments are viewed similarly, though recent changes in administrations seem to hold rays of hope for some. Pristina and Gjakove respondents are relatively optimistic.

"In Pristina there is a new approach to transparency. The new government is trying to fix a lot of issues. Teachers are being hired in a very transparent way here." (Woman, Pristina)

"It's very good for Gjakove to have reform by changing the mayor. The problem is the damage done by the previous administration. She will have difficulty recovering from that and she's hired some unqualified people. But generally it's good though." (Man, Gjakove)

Mitrovica residents participating in focus groups are less satisfied with the change in local administration and worry that the mayor will be limited in what he can do by the central government. Certainly the delay in forming the national government has a perceived impact on local administrations being able to do their jobs.

"I don't think I can point to anything he has done. At first I was hopeful, but now I am doubtful." (Man, Mitrovica)

"The new mayor cheated the people. He said he'd open the factory, but he hasn't done anything." (Woman, Mitrovica)

Respondents from Gjilan are more dissatisfied with the situation in local politics.

"There are seven kids in my family, all educated and can't find a job. I have lots of ideas that I wanted to take to the mayor, but you can't meet with the mayor. They tell you he's not there when you know he is. I want to complain about unemployment but they just don't want to hear about it. Political parties only hire their own!" (Woman, Gjilan)

"I think the mayor of a city should be someone who knows how to organize the lives of citizens. I don't think that people with academic or intellectual credentials should be, because they don't know the reality people face. The mayor has to know about development and understand how communities work. People see our mayor as more concerned with other things and not the issues facing people." (Man, Gjilan)

Kosovar Serb Focus Groups



Summary

There are notable differences between respondents from Gracanica and North Mitrovica, particularly in their acceptance of Kosovo as a new state. North Mitrovica respondents feel less affected by Kosovo's statehood, though increasingly say they feel the consequences of political agreements arising from the so-called Brussels Agreement of 2013 and ensuing EU-sponsored negotiations on normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

All groups express concerns related to developments through the Brussels dialogue process. For North Mitrovica respondents, these concerns are primarily political but also have practical dimensions. Having to obtain double documentation for licensing vehicles, questions about recognition of academic qualifications and the increasing cost of goods coming from Serbia affect all respondents.

While those from the North deny the impact of Kosovo politics, their southern brethren are keenly aware. Several Gracanica respondents weighed in with opinions on Kosovar Albanian political actors and their abilities. This is the natural consequence of a community more integrated into the surrounding communities. However, many respondents feel that their rights and aspirations are not respected by Kosovar Albanians who, they feel, fared better as a minority community prior to the war.

None of the respondents express confidence in Kosovar institutions—sentiment not dissimilar to Kosovar Albanians. Like the Kosovar Albanian population, Kosovar Serbs have significant concerns about the economy, employment and out migration. And like Kosovar Albanian counterparts, most respondents are not optimistic about the future. However, unlike Kosovar Albanians, there is greater confidence in those institutions that deliver public services and, to some degree, a relative level of confidence in local politicians.

General Direction

Respondents believe that Kosovo is headed on a worsening trajectory. For residents in North Mitrovica this is inexorably associated with the Brussels dialogue – a process that all respondents in both municipalities believe is occurring without their input between the highest levels of two governments and at the behest of the European Union and the United States. Residents of Gracanica are less concerned with the process unfolding in Brussels and focus on conditions of their daily lives, viewing any progress in the latter as stagnant or moving very slowly.

Unemployment is the chief concern of both communities, followed by freedom of movement, declining quality in public services and the increasing bureaucratic hurdles required for integration into Kosovo. Young women in North Mitrovica express concerns about the recognition of their academic qualification in Kosovo. Several respondents talk about needing to obtain expensive vehicle insurance to travel to Serbia.

While generally negative about the way things are going, almost all respondents, when prompted, point to positive developments in their respective communities. In North Mitrovica the most frequently discussed improvement is the removal of the *ad hoc* kiosks that litter sidewalks, the new cinema, and road improvements. Older men focus more on external or larger political issues as they voice optimism or concerns, where older women are more affected by pocketbook issues, and more frequently talk about rising prices and declining income.

All groups agree that quality of life and conditions for Kosovo Serbs is better north of the Ibar, though respondents from North Mitrovica have an exaggerated understanding of what life in the south likely entails.

“We are the same as Serbs in enclaves, but they have bigger issues, they are isolated. They can’t even speak out and need to accept every rule imposed on them.” (Older Man, North Mitrovica)

Most respondents say they generally feel safe in their communities and, while they worry about security, it is not a big concern—except among older women in North Mitrovica, who express concerns about their personal safety on the street and in their homes. Respondents point to the unpredictability of inter-communal peace as a source of concern. They offer examples of events prompting increased tension and hostility.

“I know a man who for years has been going to Pristina to buy bread every day. He would go in and even speak in Serbian to the baker. After the football game¹ the baker refused to sell him bread.” (Older Man, Gracanica)

¹ During a soccer match between Serbia and Albania in Belgrade in October 2014, angry Serb fans drove the Albanian team off the playing field after a drone carrying an Albanian flag was spotted on the pitch. The incident triggered nationalist protests around the region, including in Kosovo.

Economy

Unemployment, rising prices, the declining value of the Serbian dinar and an underdeveloped economy are principal economic concerns. As Kosovo begins providing services in Kosovar Serb communities, respondents increasingly comment that the better paying Serb institutions are laying people off, adding to unemployment. The lack of factories and value-added industry adds to the limitations of an economy with a shrinking public sector. Rising prices are attributed to the imposition of customs duties on goods coming from Serbia, something that older women talk about more than others. The value of the Serbian dinar is disturbing to respondents who are paid in dinars and increasingly purchasing goods in euros. For older people living off pensions, this is a big concern.

Economic disparity is a concern among young people in Gracanica. The distribution of economic benefits is seen as unfair and used by families to secure jobs for themselves. Many respondents in both municipalities pointed to families without any workers, while others had many members employed.

“Some people take salaries from both Kosovo and Serb institutions while other people don’t have any jobs.” (Young Woman, Gracanica)

Economic and cultural migration is becoming a growing concern as people attempt to identify future opportunities. Much like their Kosovar Albanian neighbors, respondents in these focus groups believe that the economy must be developed through manufacturing, creating products and jobs. A few respondents, most from Gracanica, see themselves suffering the same economic circumstances as Albanians.

“People who get employed are the same people who are deeply involved in politics. Speaking about Albanians and Serbians, it is the same for all of us. Eight-five percent of Albanians are unemployed and living in bad conditions. The whole family lives off one family member’s pension – this even happens in Serbia, not only Kosovo.” (Older Man, Gracanica)

“The only employers here are the hospital and post office. We can’t all work in the public institutions, so not sure where we can expect jobs.” (Older Man, North Mitrovica)

Health Care

Kosovo Serbs, particularly those in Gracanica, have greater confidence in medical professionals than do Kosovar Albanians. However, they feel quality is suffering in large measure due to Kosovo customs barring entry of Serbian medications and medical supplies. Gracanica residents feel their clinics and hospital are stretched beyond capacity, forcing patients to seek treatment in North Mitrovica or elsewhere. Some Gracanica residents express frustration at being unable to access Kosovo health facilities, but associate that with being oppressed as a minority community. One respondent felt that treatment provided by the Kosovo public system was adequate, though several young respondents worry that language will increasingly be a barrier.

“Serbs need to have Kosovo documents, but we cannot use Kosovo health insurance. They ask us to be Kosovar citizens but we are not given full rights.” (Young Man, Gracanica)

“I have no concerns. I heard of a Serb being in a vehicle accident and he got really good treatment at a hospital in Pristina.” (Young Man, Gracanica)

Education

Unlike their Kosovar Albanian counterparts, Kosovar Serbs express more confidence in their education system as a whole and in primary and secondary systems in particular. The education system is viewed as an important cultural as well as economic institution. Post-secondary institutions are, on balance, well regarded though several respondents say they believe a fair amount of nepotism exists. Outright corruption seems the exception rather than the rule, however. In North Mitrovica there is concern about the university having to bring visiting professors from Belgrade, and the amount of attention they pay to students. In Gracanica the biggest concern about education is overcrowding at the local school.

“The conditions for school here are not good. We have five schools operating out of one building. The students have to go in shifts.” (Older Woman, Gracanica)

“Education is paid for by the Serbian government, and as long as they pay salaries we will work with them. I used to work in a school in Pristina, but after the war we had to merge several schools into one facility. We have three shifts and the place is overcrowded.” (Older Man, Gracanica)

Corruption

Petty corruption and nepotism are viewed as routine. Many talked about paying police to not issue traffic fines, as the headaches associated with recovering licenses and the costs of fines themselves make the bribe easy.

Institutional corruption is not mentioned as a significant problem, though most express sentiments suggesting that politicians are corrupt, usually participating in nepotism. A few respondents talked about having to bribe professors at university. Many believe the Kosovo police are corrupt, and also engage in criminal activity.

“One of the reasons I feel insecure is because of the agricultural machinery thefts, the rise in crime. It’s like the Wild West here and the police don’t do anything, suggesting to me that they are part of the problem.” (Young Man, Gracanica)

Security

With the exception of older women in North Mitrovica, most respondents feel safe in their communities or homes. This sense of security diminishes significantly when

traveling through Kosovar Albanian communities or at times of heightened tensions caused by external political events such as the soccer match between Serbia and Albania.

Older women in North Mitrovica talked at length about not feeling safe at night on city streets, or in their homes. Troublesome youth get into fights, they believe, and engage in violent criminal behavior. In addition women in this group worry about increased crime as a result of rising poverty and desperation. Aside from this, the removal of barricades between north and south Mitrovica has raised concern among all groups in the north. As a result of negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo, changes are introducing new uncertainties and fears among northern residents.

“I don’t feel secure now that the barricades have been taken down, and the borders are closed. There is no security in Bosniak Mahala where some Albanian people stop by with their vehicles and throw things – they are free to do that now.” (Young Woman, North Mitrovica)

However, most of the young men in North Mitrovica feel that the general security situation has improved over the years and violent confrontations and criminal behavior have decreased. One participant also felt satisfied with fewer cases of drunk driving.

Politics

Respondents principally from Gracanica feel the political impasse had an impact on their lives. Gracanica respondents provided concrete examples of how the delay in forming a government impacted their lives. Others in Gracanica linked the impasse to the ability of the municipal administration to set its budget and begin work in earnest. Ultimately, the residents of Gracanica have the highest awareness of Kosovo politics

“It has an impact on me – I haven’t received my salary in six months. They keep telling me I will get it once the government is formed.” (Young Woman, Gracanica)

Though respondents from North Mitrovica say that Kosovo politics still have very little to do with their lives, they admit with regular frequency that Kosovo politics do play a part in their community’s politics. Many referred to the local elections saying that they were forced to vote, and directed to vote for particular candidates. The Srpska list, they claim, threatened the jobs of public employees if they did not participate, drawing many to the conclusion that the previous elections were fraudulent.

Prime Minister of Kosovo

Asked if selection of Prime Minister by the Parliament of Kosovo would have any impact on their lives, many respondents said it would not. While northern residents were dismissive, residents of Gracanica largely said it makes no difference to them, but were more interested in actively discussing whom they thought the best and worst candidates would be. Respondents from North Mitrovica were very clear that they did not concern themselves with thoughts of who would be prime minister of Kosovo. Many say nothing would change for them.

“Considering who we elected from the Serbs it would be better to have an Albanian Prime Minister.” (Young Woman, Gracanica)

“I would put Behxhet Pacolli into Prime Minister’s sea. He’s the richest person in Kosovo, strong economist who doesn’t care about corrupt money, and is above politics. He came from nothing – he would be the right person for president of Kosovo.” (Older Man, Gracanica)

“Ilir Deda would be an ideal candidate for prime minister. He’s not corrupt and would uphold the rule of law.” (Young Man, Gracanica)

Institutions

Respondents were asked to provide their opinions of various institutions. Included were; the Kosovo Assembly, political parties, civil society/NGOs, the president of Kosovo, EULEX, the media, the judiciary, the government of Kosovo, the municipal assembly, and the mayor. The most favorable attitudes among this group were towards the mayor, civil society, and media. Least favorable perspectives were for EULEX, the government and the Assembly of Kosovo, reflecting how respondents feel about the representative nature of these institutions.

- **Political Parties:** Most focus group respondents express views of dislike for current political leaders and actors. Most believe that they are self-interested and engage in nepotism. None expressed much hope that political parties would achieve any progress for their communities. In order to win support from respondents, the majority says parties must keep their promises and implement their platforms as presented. Some suggesting that leadership in political parties would need to change before they would consider supporting parties.
- **Srpska:** The dominant view of the Srpska List is negative; many saying they were forced to vote for its candidates. In addition, there is a deeply cynical view of politicians, painting them as self-interested ‘do-nothings’. The most negative views come from Northern residents.

“They were active during the campaign, but after that – nothing!” (Older Woman, North Mitrovica)

“They are all the same. Nobody is interested in the people, they promise lots of stuff and haven’t done anything. There is no trust in parties period.” (Older Man, North Mitrovica)

“Srpska will not represent us, they are not legitimate representatives. They don’t have our support. It’s important which system organizes the elections, because the quality of corruption in the last elections was high.” (Young Man, North Mitrovica)

Residents of Gracanica are less dismissive and are more prepared to give them a chance. Some respondents feel that even if the list members want to accomplish something, Kosovar Albanian politicians will not allow Serb community representatives to accomplish anything of substance.

“They promised a lot – let’s see what happens after the coalition government is formed and they start working.” (Older Man, Gracanica)

- **Kosovo Assembly:** Almost all respondents dismiss the ability of the Assembly to achieve anything of substance that will impact their lives. For those in the North, the parliament is largely irrelevant, and they express little interest in what they do. While respondents in Gracanica are more informed about governing institutions, they also express little concern with the elected assembly. Several respondents believe that their representatives were selected in a dubious process and lack the legitimacy to represent their aspirations and communities.
- **Government of Kosovo:** Similarly, respondents consider their communities and political realities as detached from the concerns of Kosovo’s government. Kosovar Serbs feel that the government doesn’t reflect or champion their community interests. In part this is because they feel it is an ‘Albanian’ institution which is concerned only with narrow interests. Secondly, many respondents view the government of Kosovo as corrupt and illegitimate, incapable of governing with any positive effect. Most acknowledge that the Kosovo government will have an impact on the Brussels dialogue process, but feel that the broader priorities of the European Union and United States will be more influential on the outcomes.
- **Kosovo Serb-Held Ministries:** With low confidence that the institutions of Kosovo can impact their lives, respondents dismiss outright the ability of ministries to deliver substantial change to the problems they face. Added to this is the perception that the Kosovar Serbs elected and participating in the government are not competent or selfless, so they expect very little. Gracanica residents hold a small measure of hope that Serb ministries responsible for communities and returns, agriculture, and police will make some progress on issues of concern to them.

International community

- **International community:** To some extent, most respondents feel negatively toward the diplomatic community, saying that they are pursuing objectives that are not compatible with the aspirations of Kosovo Serb communities.

“They took Kosovo away from us.” (Young Man, North Mitrovica)

“They are on the Albanian’s side of things.” (Older Man, Gracanica)

- **International development organizations:** While attitudes toward the international diplomatic community are largely negative, there are more positive sentiments expressed about international development organizations and donors. Several respondents singled out USAID and GIZ as supporting community development initiatives. Importantly, such support utilizes the positive associations with civil society, and therefore lends credibility to the efforts, and earns the donor some measure of goodwill.

Municipal Government

- **Local Politics:** While generally cynical about politics and politicians, many respondents easily describe what they view as improvements in their communities. North Mitrovica respondents point to investments in the museum, library, and removing kiosks as achievements by the local administration. Gracanica residents point out infrastructure improvements, some recreational playgrounds, and streetlights as tangible accomplishments by municipal government.

Despite this, most of the respondents express dissatisfaction with the work of local government. In part they feel that these are not significant and do not address more fundamental problems. While recognizing the enormity of these issues, respondents feel that they are not being addressed.

- **Local Administration:** The range of expectations of local administrations ranges from the mundane city works and parking to the more complex problems related to inter-communal relations. Almost all respondents believe that local governments should be doing more to increase employment opportunities and improving quality of life of citizens. Improving quality of life, creating more opportunities for young people, they believe, will stem the flow of economic and cultural migration out. Most are not hopeful when asked what they believe these councils will be able to achieve.
- **Mayor:** All respondents know who their mayor is and have mixed views. Some in Gracanica, for example, believe the mayor and local government have not been able to accomplish anything because of the political impasse over the past six months. Others only say their mayor has not accomplished anything of note, and few believe the mayor will be able or willing to address any of the issues of concern to residents.

Brussels Dialogue

The Brussels dialogue process is viewed by most respondents as contributing to their feelings of insecurity. Two dominant perspectives are advanced during the discussion: that the dialogue process is favoring Kosovo over Serbia, and that discussions are

conducted without local input between political interests more concerned with European and American concessions than on-the-ground conditions.

Respondents feel removed from the dialogue process, but see themselves bearing the brunt of decisions made far from their local reality. They see the negative impacts of limits to freedom of movement, customs duties on goods, and parallel bureaucracies as a direct result of the negotiations. For respondents, this seems to be a very one-sided outcome to date, leading them to believe that Kosovo is gaining more than Serbia, with whom they want to identify. At best, some believe that the negotiations are more about technical issues like international telephone codes.

Adding to the sense that Kosovo Serb communities are losing more than they are gaining from negotiations is the feeling that their concerns and aspirations are being ignored. Many of the respondents express the view that these discussions are going on without any local input. It concerns them that they have been forgotten, or are bargaining chips in remote political calculations. Ultimately, the Brussels dialogue process is viewed as a contributing factor to a worsening of the environment for Kosovar Serbs.

“We are the puppets – higher powers decide without concern for us.” (Older Woman, Gracanica)

Association of Serbian Municipalities

Some respondents see the Association of Serbian Municipalities (ASM) as inadequate compensation for losing direct Serbian control of Kosovo territories. Others hope it will help maintain and promote Serbian culture and nationhood.

“The formation of the association will ensure there is something of the Serbian nationality left or preserved.” (Older Woman, Gracanica)

Working with Albanians, Governing Kosovo Together

There are generational, political, pragmatic, and regional differences regarding how and whether Kosovar Serbs and Kosovar Albanians can coexist. Most respondents believe coexistence is possible, though several condition the possibility. Older generations point to pre-war experiences of having lived and worked with Kosovar Albanians to describe how coexistence will work. Other respondents take a pragmatic view, recognizing that the outcomes of history dictates the two communities will need to resolve practical issues. This relationship will not necessarily be friendly, but needs to be productive.

“We need to work with them because we need to sort out customs duties – we have no option but to work with them.” (Young Woman, North Mitrovica)

Having a productive relationship will be complicated by a young generation in the North with limited direct exposure to Kosovar Albanians. They are more militant in their views of any possibility of coexistence.

“The youth don’t have patience, there is no trust like there used to be before. The older generations remember how living together was possible, but now it’s different – their heads are filled with hatred so I don’t know how we could work or live together.” (Older Woman, North Mitrovica)

Complicating the various perspectives is the view of respondents with respect to Kosovar institutions. They do not trust current Kosovar politicians or the institutions they occupy. Coexistence for some would necessarily mean changes to who governs and the role of Kosovo Serbs in government.

“If well-meaning educated Albanians were part of the process we could do it. But, while criminals rule Kosovo there is no chance for cooperation.” (Young Man, Gracanica)

“We had Serbs in the government, so we cannot blame Albanians for everything.” (Young Woman, Gracanica)

While views and beliefs are complex, there is room for optimism. First, there is experience having lived and worked together, among older generations. There are more contemporary experiences, mixed as they are, expressed by respondents in Gracanica. And finally, there are social, political, and economic problems faced by all communities that if attended to would demonstrate a tangible benefit. Ultimately, the most encouraging opening is that there is willingness to try, even if very hesitant. But, bridges to coexistence do need to be built.

“Everything that we discussed today would need to be addressed. Better security, more jobs, and more equality for Serbs.” (Older Woman, Gracanica)

“I’d be hesitant a little bit because I don’t know how they will react.” (Older Woman, North Mitrovica)

Biggest Threat to Kosovo

There is no single future threat that is common to all groups. Those in the North, however, view external factors as most destabilizing, and in particular, Serbia’s pursuit of EU membership and conditions related to accession. This relates more to a sense of abandonment for northern residents, which is less pronounced in their southern cousins.

Gracanica residents focus more on local threats related to employment, rule of law, and increased criminality. To some extent they have a different view on the presence and role of the international community than northern respondents, and see their departure as a possible threat.

“If the international community leaves there will be no safety for the Serbs in Kosovo.” (Young Woman, Gracanica)

A couple of respondents in both municipalities also worry about the threat posed by radical jihadism and potential terrorism in Kosovo. Similarly, a few worry about a new outbreak of war.

Media

Focus group respondents express interest in getting more news and information from other Kosovo Serb communities. Additionally, those in the North are open to getting more information about Kosovo politics, though this is a matter of curiosity not necessity. Residents of Gracanica feel they have adequate information about Kosovo, and demonstrate a significant awareness.

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