

CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON FOREIGN ACTORS INFLUENCE IN KOSOVO AND REGIONAL COOPERATION



Author:

Dorjeta Rukiqi

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

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction2
- Executive Summary3
- Methodology4
- Citizens’ perceptions on foreign actors in Kosovo5
 - Citizens’ perceptions on foreign actors in Kosovo.....7
- Citizens’ perceptions on regional cooperation11
 - Citizens’ perceptions on Western Balkan countries influences in Kosovo.....11
 - Data analysis – correlation between Western Balkans and Public Safety/ National Security13
 - Citizens’ perceptions on regional cooperation14
- Reality check vs. Citizens’ perceptions17

TABLE OF FIGURES

Table 1	In your opinion what is the influence of these countries in Kosovo?	5
Table 2	Variables	8
Table 3	Relation between foreign influences and public security/national threats	9
Table 4	Relation between Foreign Influences and National Threats-Regression Analysis	10
Table 5	Relation between Benign Influences and National Threats -Regression Analysis	10
Table 6	What is the influence of these countries towards Kosovo?	11
Table 7	How safe would you feel to travel to these countries?	12
Table 8	Relations between National Threats and Western Balkans	13
Table 9	Relations between Public Safety and Western Balkans	13
Table 10	Relations between Western Balkans and Public Safety	14
Table 11	How much do you support regional cooperation, freedom of movements and Open Balkan Initiative regression analysis?	15

INTRODUCTION

This report is the outcome of the WBSB 2022, aimed at examining the perceptions of citizens regarding foreign influences in Kosovo and regional cooperation.

The report comprises three chapters: i) Citizens Perceptions on Foreign Influences, ii) Citizens Perceptions on Regional Cooperation and iii) Reality Check vs. Citizens Perceptions.

The first chapter scrutinizes citizens' perceptions of foreign actors' influences in Kosovo. Within this chapter, a subsection analyses the results of correlations between perceptions of foreign influences and citizens' views on public safety and national security in Kosovo.

The second chapter focuses on citizens' perceptions of regional cooperation. It includes two subsections that explore citizen perspectives on the Open Balkan Initiative and provides correlational analyses between perceptions of regional actors and public safety as well as national security.

The third chapter scans various security situations in Kosovo and compares them to the citizens' perceptions of foreign influences and regional cooperation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The general perception of respondents towards Western countries such as the USA (91 percent), Germany (90 percent), Austria (84 percent), and the United Kingdom (83 percent) is positive. Conversely, negative perceptions are held towards states that do not recognize Kosovo, such as Russia (86 percent), Greece (69 percent), China (65 percent), Spain (61 percent), and Iran (49 percent).

The positive impact of Western actors in Kosovo is evident in their aid, assistance, and support throughout the state-building process of Kosovo. Their foreign agendas, aimed at promoting democracy and providing economic and financial support, have greatly facilitated Kosovo's advancement as a young state.

Conversely, perceptions of malign influences align with the hindrances posed by countries like Russia, China, and Spain. These nations have impeded Kosovo's progress by obstructing its participation in crucial processes, blocking its membership in international organizations, refusing to acknowledge its independence, and disregarding its institutions. These actions have contributed to the negative perceptions of these countries among respondents, reflecting their adverse impact on Kosovo's development.

Regarding regional countries, 90 percent of the respondents view Albania as having the most positive impact, while Serbia is perceived as the regional country with the most negative impact.

In terms of regional cooperation, 69 percent of respondents support it, while 24 percent oppose it. Similarly, 70 percent of respondents support the free movement of labor and goods within the region, while 24 percent hold an opposing view. However, only 31 percent of respondents support the so-called Open Balkan Initiative, while 52 percent are against it.

The Open Balkan Initiative, a regional effort to promote cooperation in the Western Balkans, has elicited a mixed response among the public in Kosovo. The lack of a clear written statute and undefined objectives have led to confusion, with many perceiving the initiative as a means for Serbia to consolidate its dominance in the region. These factors contribute to the complex dynamics and uncertainties surrounding the Open Balkan Initiative in Kosovo.

Respondents who support the Open Balkan Initiative argue that it improves regional cooperation, establishes freedom of movement in the region, generates employment, and fosters economic development. On the other hand, those who oppose it argue that it empowers Serbia, discriminates against Kosovo's position in the region, and weakens Kosovo's economy.

METHODOLOGY

The survey data for this report was collected within the framework of Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) survey through face-to-face interviews with randomly selected respondents throughout Kosovo. The WBSB is a regional project led by Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) and the survey was simultaneously conducted in Albania and Serbia. KCSS is partnering with the Centre for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG) in Albania and the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) in Serbia to implement this project. Field research was conducted from 25th of September to 2nd of October 2022. The questionnaire for the survey primarily consisted of closed-ended questions in the form of five-point Likert Scale, followed by several open-ended questions without pre-defined options. The national sample for the survey featured 1,136 households. The first stage of drawing the sample was based in the administrative divisions of the Kosovo Police Regional Directorates, including the following eight districts: Ferizaj, Gjakova, Gjilan, Mitrovica South, Mitrovica North, Peja, Prishtina, and Prizren. The number of surveys conducted in each district was drawn in proportion to the population numbers for each municipality within the respective districts based on Kosovo's 2011 population census. Within the municipalities, the sample was stratified into urban / rural sample based on the number of households in each area.

Random patterns were used to select households within the sampled locations, while the randomization within the households was based on the next adult birthday method. The data was verified in real time through field coordinators who visited a pre-defined sample of households after the completion of the survey in the respective households, through telephone contact with all respondents to confirm the adherence to the methodology and some of the key answers, and by analyzing the logical consistency of the answers when processing and analyzing the data. The margin of error is 3 percent with a confidence interval of 95 percent.

CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON FOREIGN ACTORS IN KOSOVO

The Western Balkan countries experienced a period of political upheaval during the 1990s, which posed a significant risk to the stability of the European continent. The dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo war in 1999 led to security challenges, prompting active involvement of the international community in the region to address the crisis. This extensive engagement resulted in the Western Balkan region becoming a multipolar world, with various actors involved in its development. Although the European Union and the United States play crucial roles in the region's advancement, they are not the sole actors. Notably, Russia, China, Turkey, and other states also participate in shaping the dynamics of the Western Balkan region. While Russia and China destabilize Kosovo by exercising malign influence through media (disinformation, fake news) and politics (creating unrest among non-majority communities in Kosovo), Turkey has an economic and security impact in Kosovo.

The WBSB survey examined the perception of Kosovo citizens/respondents regarding the influence of various actors. In this respect, approximately 91 percent of respondents regarded the influence of the United States in Kosovo as very or mainly positive, making it the most favourably perceived foreign influence among the respondents. Similarly, a majority of participants also held very or mainly positive views towards Germany (90 percent), the United Kingdom (83 percent), and Austria (84 percent). Turkey, recognized as an important ally of Kosovo, ranked sixth among the positively perceived foreign actors, with 68 percent of respondents indicating a predominantly positive perception. On the other hand, certain foreign actors were perceived as mainly or very negative by the respondents. Notably, Russia garnered negative perceptions from 86 percent of respondents, followed by Greece (69 percent), China (65 percent), Spain (61 percent), and Iran (49 percent).

TABLE 1 IN YOUR OPINION WHAT IS THE INFLUENCE OF THESE COUNTRIES IN KOSOVO?

	Very positive	Mainly positive	Neither positive, nor negative	Mainly negative	Very negative	I don't know/no opinion
USA	75%	16%	3%	3%	2%	1%
Germany	55%	35%	5%	2%	1%	2%
United Kingdom	53%	30%	9%	4%	1%	3%

Citizens' perceptions on foreign actors in Kosovo

Austria	43%	41%	9%	2%	1%	4%
Italy	28%	47%	16%	3%	2%	4%
Turkey	21%	48%	19%	5%	4%	3%
Croatia	17%	45%	21%	10%	3%	4%
Netherlands	13%	37%	27%	12%	4%	7%
France	12%	31%	31%	15%	7%	4%
Israel	7%	26%	35%	14%	9%	9%
Saudi Arabia	4%	25%	33%	17%	13%	8%
Russia	2%	4%	5%	12%	74%	3%
Spain	2%	9%	21%	25%	36%	7%
Iran	2%	8%	31%	22%	27%	10%
China	1%	6%	22%	24%	41%	6%
Greece	1%	5%	19%	23%	46%	6%

Overall, the data suggests that respondents in Kosovo predominantly perceive Western countries as positive influences on their nation. This inclination towards Western nations is further reinforced by supporting data, which indicates 94 percent of respondents from Kosovo envision their country's future within the European Union. Furthermore, the positive perception of the United States (and other Western countries) can be attributed to its support of Kosovo during the 1999 war. Given that Kosovo's state-building process is founded upon principles of democracy and freedom, it is more inclined to align with and support Western values and interests.

The negative attitudes towards Russia and China can be attributed to their significant support for Serbia in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Russia's obstruction of Kosovo's membership in the United Nations, refusal to recognize its independence, and exploitation of Kosovo in narratives on frozen conflicts within its "near abroad" contribute to the negative perception.¹ Similarly, China disregards Kosovo's institutions and likens its position to that of Taiwan.² Furthermore, other actors, such as Spain, attempted to hinder Kosovo's participation in crucial agencies like the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications. This obstruction could have limited Kosovo's opportunities to benefit from European Union initiatives, however Spain's attempts were unsuccessful.³ A common factor among all the actors that are negatively perceived by respondents is their refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence. These reasons collectively contribute to a prevailing negative sentiment towards specific foreign actors within the public sphere in Kosovo.

Data analysis – correlation between Public Security / National Threat with Foreign actors

Foreign actors employ various approaches and exhibit different intentions when engaging with Kosovo. As discussed earlier, citizens tend to hold more favourable views towards Western countries, whereas influences from the Eastern region (with the exception of Turkey) are generally perceived as negative. These perceptions are influenced by historical events such as the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo war in 1999, as well as Kosovo's challenges in gaining membership in international organizations and the intricate dynamics of its EU membership process, which are influenced by neighbouring relations. In light of these factors, this section aims to assess the potential impact of foreign actors on public safety and national security in Kosovo.

The present study investigates various factors that contribute to the understanding of societal dynamics and perceptions. It explores the variables of 'National Threats,' which encompasses citizens' perceptions on a wide range of threats to the nation, 'Public Safety,' which focuses on factors affecting public safety, 'Foreign Influences,' which assesses the impact of various countries in Kosovo, and 'Benign Influences,' which examines the positive contributions of specific countries. To gain insights into these variables, regression and correlation analyses were performed in SPSS, providing valuable statistical relationships and patterns. This section aims to uncover the underlying dynamics and interrelationships between these variables.

1 Ingimundarson, V. (2022) London School of Economics and political science, London School of Economics. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/2022-SU-Valur-RussKosovo.pdf>.

2 Krstinovska, A. (2022) What to expect from China's Kosovo policy, China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE). Available at: <https://chinaobservers.eu/what-to-expect-from-chinas-kosovo-policy/>.

3 Callet, C. and Bachelier, P. (2021) Can Kosovo be considered as a third country in the meaning of EU law ..., Ghent University. Available at: <https://www.ugent.be/re/epir/en/news-events/enclosures/kosovocasenote>.

TABLE 2 VARIABLES

VARIABLES	EXPLANATION
National Threats	A composite variable formed from citizens' perceptions on various threats to the nation, including corruption, organized crime, illegal arms trafficking, drug trafficking, unemployment, COVID-19 pandemic, violent extremism and terrorism, migration and brain drain, economic crisis, pollution and global warming, fake news, cybersecurity threats, war in Ukraine and potential escalations in the region, increase in prices of goods, and energy crisis.
Public Safety	A composite variable formed from citizens' perceptions on various threats to public safety, including brain drain, stray animals, drug use/addiction, poor public health services, sexual harassment, traffic accidents, use of illegal arms, house/apartment robbery, murders, gender discrimination, domestic violence, lack of safety measures in construction sites/surrounding areas, violence in schools, pollution, human trafficking, bullying, poor infrastructure, and lack of public lighting in the city/village/neighborhood.
Foreign Influences	A composite variable assessing the impact of various countries on the nation, including the US, Germany, UK, Austria, Italy, Turkey, Croatia, the Netherlands, France, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Spain, Iran, China, and Greece.
Malign Influences	A composite variable assessing the negative impact and contributions of various countries on the nation, including Russia, China, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Greece.
Benign Influences	A composite variable assessing the positive impact and contribution to

The present study employed a correlation analysis to examine the relationships among the variables 'Foreign Influences,' 'Public Safety,' and 'National Threats.' The analysis revealed a moderate correlation coefficient of 0.64 between 'Foreign Influences' and 'National Threats,' as determined by the Pearson Correlation in SPSS. This finding suggests a significant association between these two variables, indicating that changes in the level of foreign influences are moderately related to the perceived national threats. However, the analysis indicated an absence of correlation between 'Foreign Influences' and 'Public Safety.' In other words, no significant relationship was observed between the degree of foreign influences and the perception of public safety. These findings highlight the complexity of the relationships between these variables, indicating that foreign influences may have a more substantial impact on the perception of national threats than on public safety concerns. However, further research is needed to explore the underlying factors and dynamics that contribute to these relationships and their implications.

TABLE 3 RELATION BETWEEN FOREIGN INFLUENCES AND PUBLIC SECURITY/ NATIONAL THREATS

	1	2	3
Foreign Influences	-	.048	.064*
Public Safety		-	.513**
National Threats			-

*. The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**.. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

The study further employed a regression analysis to explore the relationship between 'Foreign Influences' as the independent variable and 'National Threats' as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed that the significance level between these variables remains low, suggesting a weak relationship. Additionally, the resulting impact of 'Foreign Influences' on 'National Threats' was relatively low, accounting for only 0.03% of the observed variance. This indicates that 'Foreign Influences' alone explain a minimal portion of the variation in the perception of national threats. It suggests that other factors beyond foreign influences may play a more substantial role in shaping the perception of national threats.

TABLE 4 RELATION BETWEEN FOREIGN INFLUENCES AND NATIONAL THREATS-
REGRESSION ANALYSIS

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics	Durbin-Watson
.064	.004	.003	6.145	.004	4.610

Note. Dependent Variable: National_Threats
Predictors: (Constant), Foreign_Influences

In the regression analysis conducted specifically between 'Benign Influences' and 'National Threats,' a notable level of significance was observed, indicating a substantial impact of 19%. This impact can be characterized as moderate to strong, suggesting that the presence and influence of benign actors in Kosovo have a considerable influence on the perception of national security threats. The 19% impact provides an explanation for respondents' perception that their national security is less threatened in the presence of these positive foreign actors. The findings suggest that as the presence and influence of benign actors increase, there is a corresponding decrease in the perception of national security threats. However, in contrast, further tests examining the impact of malign actors on public safety and national threats revealed no significant connections or effects of relevance. This suggests that the influence of negative or harmful foreign actors does not have a notable impact on the perception of public safety or national threats among the respondents.

TABLE 5 RELATION BETWEEN BENIGN INFLUENCES AND NATIONAL THREATS
-REGRESSION ANALYSIS

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics	Durbin-Watson
.140	.020	.019	6.097	.020	22.786

Note. Dependent Variable: National_Threats
Predictors: (Constant), Benign_influences

CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON REGIONAL COOPERATION

Citizens' perceptions on Western Balkan countries influences in Kosovo

Kosovo's cooperation with regional countries holds great significance in its pursuit of European Union integration and the establishment of positive neighbourly relations. According to the Kosovo Report of 2022, Kosovo maintains favourable relations with Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro.⁴ However, the relationship with Bosnia and Herzegovina remains unchanged, characterized by a visa regime. The normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia is still being pursued through the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.

In line with these findings, respondents in the WBSB 2022 edition perceive Albania as the regional country with the most positive impact. 80 percent of respondents express that it has very or mainly positive influence. Montenegro is perceived to have a mainly positive impact by 42 percent of respondents, while 35 percent indicate that it neither has a positive nor negative impact on Kosovo. However, opinions are divided when it comes to North Macedonia's influence, with 37 percent of respondents perceiving it as mainly positive and an equal percentage stating neither positive nor negative influence.

The limited development of relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo potentially reflects in respondents' answers regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina's influence. A majority of respondents (43 percent) perceive neither a positive nor negative impact from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Kosovo, while 33 percent believe that it has a very or mainly negative influence. The relationship with Serbia is viewed as the most complex, with 89 percent of respondents indicating that it has a very or mainly negative impact on Kosovo.

TABLE 6 WHAT IS THE INFLUENCE OF THESE COUNTRIES TOWARDS KOSOVO?

	Very positive	Mainly positive	neither positive, nor negative	mainly negative	very negative	I don't know/no opinion
Albanian	46%	34%	10%	5%	3%	2%
Montenegro	10%	42%	35%	8%	1%	4%

⁴ European Commission (2022) Kosovo report 2022, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2022_en.

North Macedonia	8%	37%	37%	11%	3%	4%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1%	15%	43%	22%	11%	8%
Serbia	1%	4%	4%	6%	83%	2%

a. How safe do you feel when you travel in Western Balkan countries?

Within this edition of the WBSB, respondents were queried about their sense of safety when traveling to different countries in the region. The results indicate that approximately 89 percent of respondents feel safe or somewhat safe when traveling to Albania. Conversely, respondents expressed the least sense of safety when traveling to Serbia, with 69 percent feeling unsafe and only 38 percent feeling safe or somewhat safe. Furthermore, respondents reported feeling safe or somewhat safe when traveling to Montenegro (89 percent) and North Macedonia (87 percent). Regarding travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), respondents exhibited varying opinions. Forty percent of respondents indicated feeling unsafe to travel to BiH, while 30 percent felt somewhat safe, and 20 percent felt safe to travel to BiH.

TABLE 7 HOW SAFE WOULD YOU FEEL TO TRAVEL TO THESE COUNTRIES?

	Safe	Somewhat safe	Unsafe	I don't know/no opinion
Albanian	66%	23%	10%	1%
Montenegro	58%	31%	7%	4%
North Macedonia	53%	34%	9%	4%
Serbia	14%	14%	69%	3%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	20%	30%	40%	10%

Data analysis – correlation between Western Balkans and Public Safety/National Security

This section presents a data analysis aimed at explaining the impact of Western Balkan (WB) countries on public safety and national threats in Kosovo. Over time, these interactions have undergone changes due to the geographic proximity of the countries. While Kosovo seeks to strengthen its relations with Montenegro and North Macedonia, it continues to face challenges in its relations with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this analysis, the variable “Western Balkans” encompasses Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The variables of interest, namely Public Safety and National Threats, remain consistent as outlined in Table 2.

TABLE 8 RELATIONS BETWEEN NATIONAL THREATS AND WESTERN BALKANS

	1	2
National Threats	-	.086*
Western Balkans		-

*. The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

TABLE 9 RELATIONS BETWEEN PUBLIC SAFETY AND WESTERN BALKANS

	1	2
Western Balkans	-	.078*
Public Safety		-

*. The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

The analysis reveals a moderate degree of correlation between the Western Balkans region and both National Threats (0.086) (Table 8) and Public Safety (0.078) (Table 9). These findings suggest a discernible but modest relationship between the Western Balkans region and the perception of both national threats and public safety. The correlation coefficients indicate a positive association, indicating that as the influence or presence of the Western Balkans region increases, there is a slight tendency for perceptions of both national threats and public safety to be affected. Although the magnitude of the correlations is not substantial, they signify that the Western Balkans region may have some influence on the perceptions of these security-related aspects.

TABLE 10 RELATIONS BETWEEN WESTERN BALKANS AND PUBLIC SAFETY
REGRESSION ANALYSIS

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics	Durbin-Watson
.006	.005	.006	6.888	.009	1.538

Note. Dependent Variable: Western Balkans
Predictors: (Constant), Public Safety

Nevertheless, the results of the regression analysis highlight the notable impact of maintaining positive relations with the countries of the Western Balkans on public safety in Kosovo. Specifically, the analysis indicates that the Western Balkans factor influences the perception of public safety by six percent. While this effect may be considered relatively modest in terms of statistical significance, it emphasizes the importance of neighbourly relations in shaping citizens' perceptions of public safety within Kosovo. These findings underscore the significance of fostering positive relationships with neighbouring countries as a contributing factor to enhancing the overall sense of public safety and security for the population.

Citizens' perceptions on regional cooperation

The Open Balkan initiative, which emerged within the Western Balkans region and aligns closely with the principles of the Berlin Process, is an economic endeavour. Initially backed by Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia, it encountered challenges in garnering broader support within the Western Balkans. Currently, Montenegro stands at a crossroads regarding its endorsement of the initiative. Notably, Kosovo's government firmly rejects the Open Balkan initiative, opting against participating in this type of cooperation outside the framework of the Berlin Process.

In a similar vein, respondents who expressed their lack of support for the Open Balkan initiative put forth arguments highlighting that it grants increased influence to Serbia, undermines Kosovo's position in the region, and weakens Kosovo's economy. Conversely, respondents who do support the Open Balkan initiative assert that it enhances regional cooperation, facilitates freedom of movement across the region, stimulates job creation, and fosters economic development.

Regional cooperation within the Western Balkans, aimed at addressing shared political and economic challenges, plays a crucial role in the region's path towards EU membership

and stabilization.⁵ The belief within the EU is that fostering economic cooperation will foster greater unity, leading to a shared future and reconciliation among the nations.⁶ Undeniably, the region requires economic development; however, relying solely on economic solutions to resolve political problems may be overly simplistic.

Based on the significance of regional cooperation for the Western Balkan region's development, the WBSB 2022 has measured citizens' perceptions regarding the topic. In this respect, the majority of respondents in the WBSB 2022 survey do not hold a negative view of regional cooperation in various contexts. In fact, 69 percent of respondents expressed support for regional cooperation, while 24 percent expressed opposition.

When specifically asked about supporting freedom of movement, information exchange, and the establishment of a common market for goods and the labour force, 70 percent of respondents expressed their support, while 24 percent held an opposing view. However, when asked about their support for the concept of "Open Balkan," which encapsulates the principles of regional cooperation, 52 percent of respondents indicated their lack of support, while 31 percent expressed their support. Approximately 17 percent of respondents did not offer an opinion on the matter of Open Balkan.

TABLE 11 HOW MUCH DO YOU SUPPORT REGIONAL COOPERATION, FREEDOM OF MOVEMENTS AND OPEN BALKAN INITIATIVE?

	Yes	No	I don't know/No opinion
Do you support regional cooperation in the Western Balkans?	69%	24%	7%
Do you support free movement, information exchange and a common market of goods and labor force in the Western Balkans?	70%	24%	6%
Do you support the so-called idea "Open Balkan"?	31%	52%	17%

The "Open Balkan" initiative is subject to varying interpretations, even within the international arena. While Kosovo's government opposes the initiative, citing concerns over its impact on independence, sovereignty, and other factors, the governments of Serbia and Albania regard it as a highly beneficial economic solution. Balkan analyst Edward P. Joseph, in an interview, warned that the "Open Balkan" initiative could have

⁵ European Commission (no date) Regional cooperation, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). European Commission . Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/regional-cooperation_en#:~:text=Regional%20co%2Doperation%20is%20an,%2Dborder%20criminal%20activities%2C%20etc.

⁶ European Union (no date) Regional cooperation: Webalkans: EU projects in the western balkans, WeBalkans. European Union . Available at: [https://webalkans.eu/en/themes/regional-cooperation/.](https://webalkans.eu/en/themes/regional-cooperation/)

dangerous implications for the Western Balkans and contribute to idea of Serbia's hegemonic inclination in the region.⁷ Conversely, the United States fully supports the initiative, endorsing the concept emanating from the region, insisting that the initiative is successful only if all WB countries are on board. US Ambassador to Serbia, Christopher Hill, asserts that the "Open Balkan" initiative does not have any negative repercussions for the region.⁸ Nonetheless, the region remains divided in its stance towards this initiative.

7 Elezi, E. (2022) 'open balkan' could worsen political problems in region – DW – 08/18/2022, dw.com. Deutsche Welle. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/open-balkan-initiative-risks-aggravating-political-problems-in-the-region/a-62834261>.

8 CorD (2022) Ambassador Christopher Hill: Open Balkans a necessary process, CorD Magazine. CorD Magazine. Available at: [https://cordmagazine.com/news/ambassador-christopher-hill-open-balkans-a-necessary-process/...](https://cordmagazine.com/news/ambassador-christopher-hill-open-balkans-a-necessary-process/)

REALITY CHECK VS. CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS

Foreign influences are generally perceived as positive when they result in mutual benefits for both the influencer and the target country.⁹ Conversely, an influence is considered malign when the actor gains at the expense of the target country.¹⁰ In such cases, the influencing state may impose its own political or economic system without seeking to promote the target country's interests. The reality reflects the positive impact of Western actors on Kosovo, as they have provided aid and assistance throughout its state-building process and beyond. The foreign agendas of Western actors, which have contributed to the promotion of democracy in Kosovo and provided economic and financial support, have facilitated the progress of Kosovo as a young state.

This reality aligns with the positive perceptions expressed by respondents towards the United States and several European Union (EU) countries. Many EU countries have shown support for Kosovo by recognizing its independence.¹¹ Shpat Balaj, researcher at Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) argues that citizens in Kosovo tend to perceive countries that have recognized Kosovo as positive influences, while those that have not accepted Kosovo's independence are viewed negatively.¹² It is important to note that citizens may not necessarily possess in-depth knowledge of other political processes. The division between benign and malign influences in Kosovo is often based on historical factors.¹³

Conversely, the perceptions of the respondents align with the reality of perceived malign influences. Countries such as Russia, China, and Spain have hindered Kosovo's progress by obstructing its involvement in crucial processes. Their actions, including blocking Kosovo's membership in international organizations, refusing to recognize its independence, and disregarding its institutions, have significantly influenced the perceptions of citizens and have contributed to cycles of stagnation in Kosovo's development.

States such as Russia and China, which maintain close cooperation with Serbia,¹⁴ face challenges to stretch their influence in Kosovo. While there is existing evidence of Russia's stance on Kosovo and vice versa, limited information is available regarding Chinese influence in Kosovo.¹⁵ Chinese influence indirectly reaches Kosovo through secondary channels, primarily through products exported from China to North Macedonia and subsequently to Kosovo.¹⁶ Instances of Chinese influence that may pose threats to

9 Vllasi, E. (2020) Ndikimi Rus në Kosovë: Nën Hijet E Mitit dhe realitetit, QKSS. Available at: <https://qkss.org/al/publikimet/ndikimi-rus-ne-kosove-nen-hijet-e-mitit-dhe-realitetit>.

10 Ibid.

11 Interview with KCSS researcher Adelina Hasani, 2023

12 Interview with KCSS researcher Shpat Balaj, 2023

13 Ibid.

14 Interview with KCSS researcher Adelina Hasani, 2023

15 Ibid.

16 Avdimetaj, T. and Ilazi, R. (2021) Beyond Economic Considerations: New frontiers of Chinese influence in the western balkans, QKSS. Available at: <https://qkss.org/al/publikimet/beyond-economic-considerations-new-frontiers-of-chi->

Kosovo's national security are known only to the intelligence services of Kosovo and are not publicly disclosed. The perceptions of citizens align with the reality that there is no public interest in cooperation between Kosovo and Russia or China, and vice versa.

Likewise, in the context of regional cooperation, states that do not recognize Kosovo, such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, are indeed perceived more negatively. On the other hand, states like Montenegro and North Macedonia maintain diplomatic relations with Kosovo and acknowledge its status as an independent country. An even more emotional connection is formed with Albania, driven by historical, cultural, and linguistic factors.¹⁷

The regional initiative aimed at enhancing cooperation in the Western Balkans has generated mixed signals among the public in Kosovo. There appears to be a correlation between citizens' perceptions and the reality on the ground. While regional cooperation can potentially foster economic activities on a broader scale, the Open Balkan Initiative has created confusion due to the absence of a written statute and unclear objectives.¹⁸ In Kosovo, the public often interprets this initiative as part of Serbia's project to strengthen its hegemony in the region.¹⁹ Additionally, since the Open Balkan Initiative overlaps with the Berlin Process, questions arise regarding its necessity and purpose.

In conclusion, this study relies on a quantitative methodology, which limits the exploration of why individuals hold specific opinions. However, by looking into the analysis of prevailing trends and topics in Kosovo, we gain a better understanding of the factors influencing citizens' perceptions. The perceptions examined in this report are closely intertwined with the historical and political contexts of Kosovo.

[nese-influence-in-the-western-balkans.](#)

17 Zemzadja, E. (2020) An overview of the relations between Albania, Kosovo and Serbia, FOMOSO. Available at: <https://www.fomoso.org/en/mosopedia/background-knowledge/an-overview-of-the-relations-between-albania-kosovo-and-serbia/>.

18 Interview with KCSS researcher Shpat Balaj, 2023

19 Ibid.

Katalogimi në botim **(CIP)**

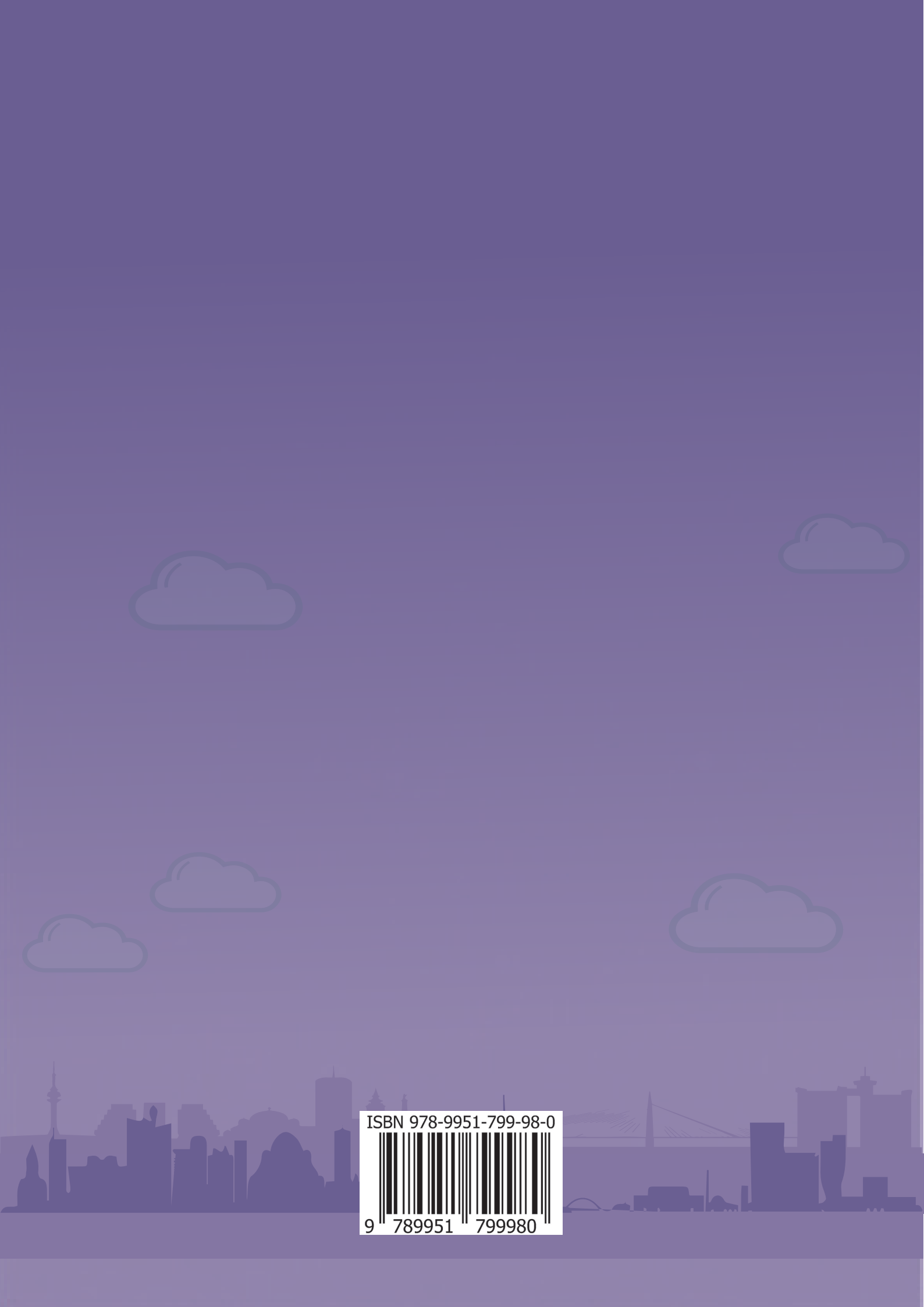
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