



BETWEEN DENIAL AND RESPOND: CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON KOSOVO INSTITUTIONS DEALING WITH COVID-19



2020



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Perceptions presented in this report are a summary of information gathered from respondents and it only demonstrates how people percept institutions. It is in no way a conclusive assessment of the quality of the work of institutions subject to this study. It shall serve as an instrument to them for addressing potential shortcomings but also an indicator of the effectiveness of their communication with the people.

The views presented in this report are perceptions of the respondents and do not necessarily represent the views of the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies or of its donors.

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CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS ON KOSOVO

INSTITUTIONS DEALING WITH COVID-19

June 2021, Prishtina



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KEY FINDINGS

- A significant number of Kosovar respondents doubt on the existence of the COVID-19: around 34 percent did not believe that the virus exists compared to 64 percent who have no doubt on its existence.
- Kosovo's central institutions (Assembly, Government and President) are perceived rather poor or very poor as regards to handling the COVID-19 pandemic situation in the country.
- Conversely, Kosovo Police (74 percent), public health institutions / hospitals (68 percent), and municipalities (61 percent) are assessed highly positive by respondents as to their performance for handling the pandemic crisis.
- Majority of respondents (53 percent) viewed that the pandemic situation in Kosovo was handled better from March-June 2020 coinciding when the Government was led by then Prime Minister Albin Kurti. However, a considerably lesser number of respondents – 15 percent in total – believed that the health crisis was managed more properly under the Government headed by the former Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti from June-September 2020.
- Negative consequences caused by coronavirus pandemic including having impact on economy and mental health have been mentioned by 71 percent of respondents. Despite this, around 29 percent of them stated they have not faced any negative impact due to the COVID-19.
- Economic recovery is and will be the most challenging issues produced by the COVID-19 – almost all respondents (95 percent) answered that the pandemic situation will negatively affect Kosovo's economy.
- Only 31 percent of interviewed respondents declared that democracy has been affected by the COVID-19 prevention and precautionary measures put by Kosovo's state institutions compared to 46 percent stating that the pandemic had no affect towards democracy. This implies that issues related to democracy are not of major concern for the Kosovo citizens if compared to economic recovery.

● In terms of international support, 29 percent of respondents perceived that the United States has provided the biggest financial and humanitarian support to Kosovo for the pandemic situation and the second biggest support is Germany (20 percent). They are followed by the European Union (12 percent) and Turkey (10 percent).

● The role of Kosovo's international partners amidst the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in the country has been perceived generally positive by respondents. Thus, first on the list as ranked by respondents is Germany (74 percent) followed by the United States (64 percent), European Union (62 percent), Turkey (58 percent) and the United Kingdom (49 percent).

● Whilst, non-recognizers of Kosovo's independence among great powers, such as China (55 percent) and Russia (48 percent) are perceived as exerting mostly negative political influence towards Kosovo in the course of coronavirus situation.

INTRODUCTION

This report examines attitudes and perceptions of Kosovo citizens as to the coronavirus pandemic aiming to deconstruct respondents' opinions on the most topical issues related to the COVID-19 situation in Kosovo. First section of the report presents perceptions whether Kosovar respondents believe on the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also interprets perceptions on how the Kosovo institutions handled the COVID-19 situation in Kosovo from March – September 2020. The second section is related to the degree the COVID-19 has impacted everyday life of citizens from socio-economic to human rights points of view. Whilst, the third section of the report highlights perceptions on political influence of foreign countries/organisations towards Kosovo on handling the COVID-19 as well as their financial and humanitarian aid donated to Kosovo amidst the coronavirus crisis in Kosovo.

A considerable number of citizens in Kosovo were doubtful and distrustful on the existence of coronavirus disease. This was specifically in common in the course of early stages of the pandemic situation, whilst some public figures were campaigning against the Kosovo Government's prevention and protective measures against the spread of coronavirus disease in 2020. This apparently was motivated by circulation of dozens of conspiracies and pseudoscience news articles among the Kosovar media stating that the COVID-19 pandemic is an inexistent disease. Thus, citizens were eager to believe in conspiracy and disinformation campaign. This explains as to why 1/3 of citizens interviewed by Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) through this survey back in September-October 2020 responded that they do not believe on existence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, KCSS decided to measure perceptions of Kosovar respondents on this specific matter as well as on the performance of Kosovo's central, local, security and health related institutions on handling the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in the country in order to surface respondents' perceptions on these issues. Besides this, this survey had also measured socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kosovo and perceived foreign support / influence in Kosovo amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is worth mentioning that perceptions presented in this report were gathered by Kosovo Security Barometer (KSB), a distinctive tool through which KCSS annually measures public perceptions in Kosovo on the trust towards institutions and various security-related issues, including attitudes on the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Kosovo. In its tenth edition, KSB has taken a regional dimension and marks the first edition of the Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) implemented simultaneously in Kosovo and Serbia in September-October 2020.¹

¹ The survey methodology is available in the previous report published by KCSS at the following link: http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/WBSB_KosovoReport_Eng_final_844795.pdf

1. THE COVID-19 CRISIS MISHANDLED BY THE KOSOVO INSTITUTIONS?

Given the doubts of Kosovar citizens towards the COVID-19 pandemic existence, KCSS introduced on the survey questionnaire a pre-defined set of questions dedicated to the pandemic situation primarily, but also an open-ended question. Therefore, this section of the report includes perceptions on the existence of coronavirus disease and respondents' opinions on performance of the state institutions on handling or mishandling the pandemic crisis. Opinions of respondents are important in this regard intending to deconstruct the from the perspective of respondents the most topical issues concerning the COVID-19 situation in Kosovo during 2020 (March - October 2020).

The survey conducted in Kosovo revealed that 1/3 of respondents (34 percent of them) have doubts on the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic disease. This may derive due to many sources of information circulated among domestic and foreign online media and social media networks having disinformation or conspiracy content as to the pandemic. However, more than half of Kosovar respondents confront this view as 64 percent of them responded that the COVID-19 exists.

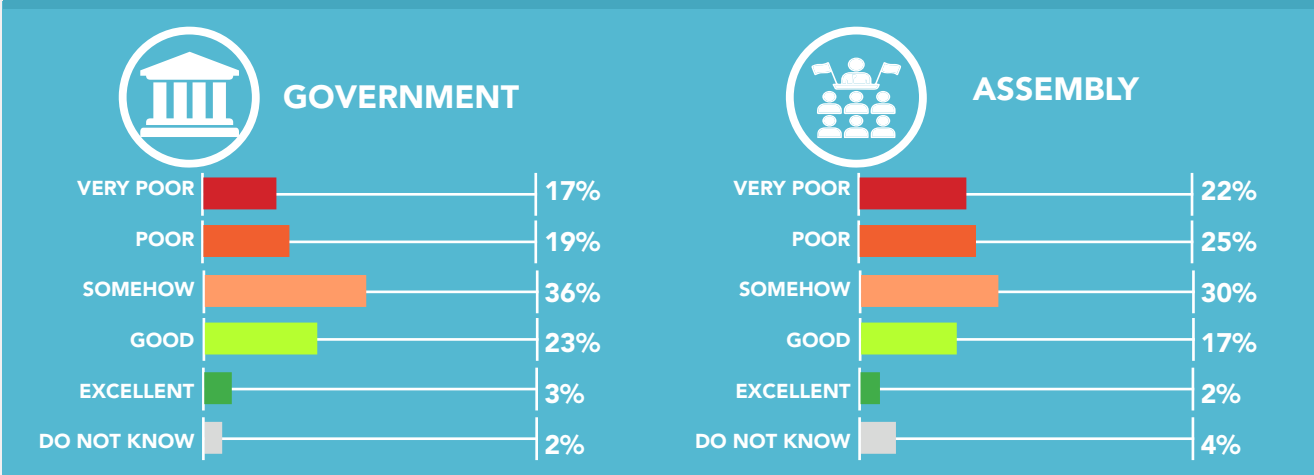
FIGURE 1

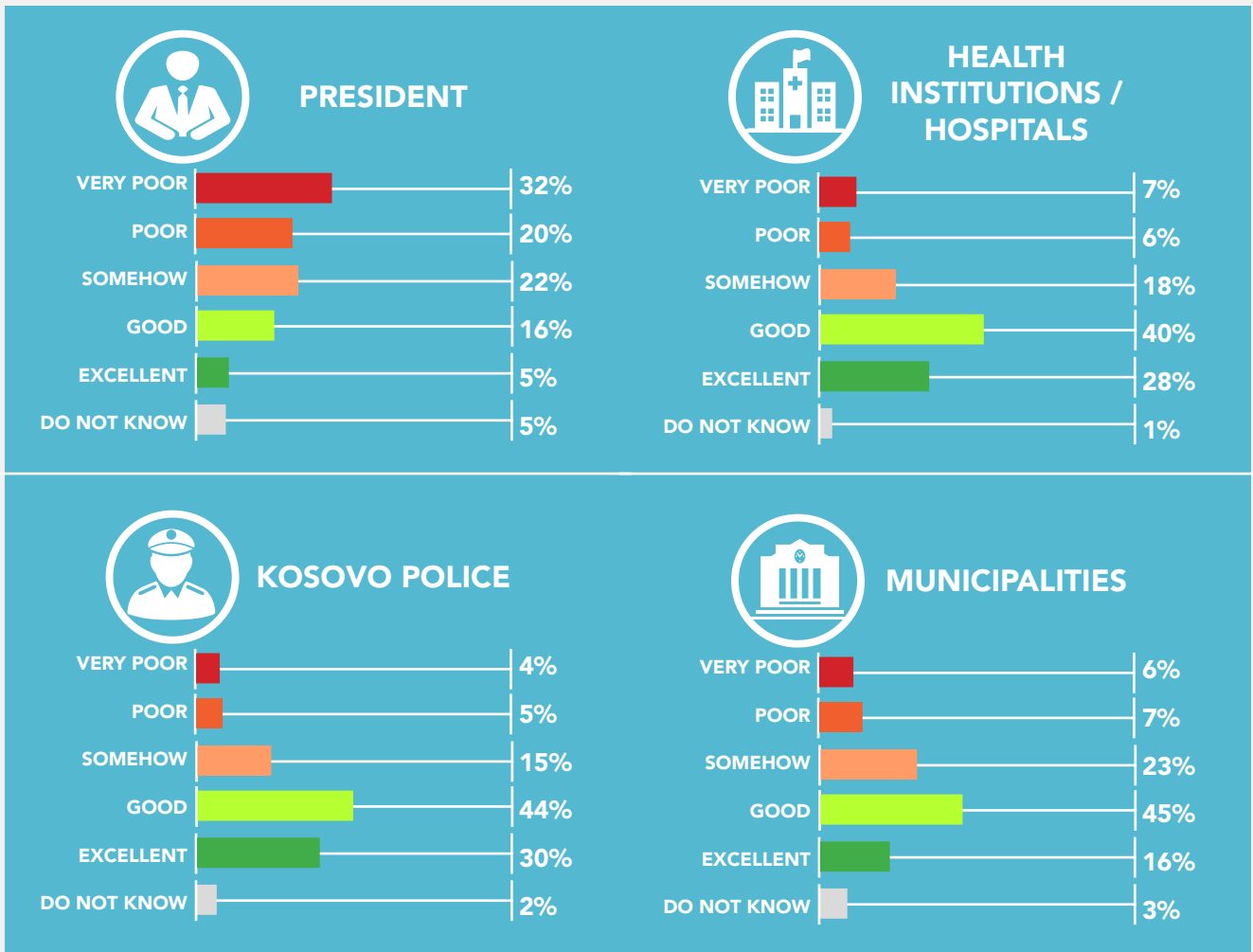
PERCEPTIONS OF KOSOVAR RESPONDENTS ON THE EXISTENCE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Handling of the pandemic situation by Kosovo's central institutions is not perceived good by almost majority of respondents compared to other institutions being directly involved with the pandemic prevention. Hence, Kosovo Police has been assessed most positively by 74 percent, health institutions including hospitals by 68 percent, and municipalities by 61 percent in total.

FIGURE 2 PERCEPTIONS AS TO HOW THE KOSOVO INSTITUTIONS HANDLED THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SITUATION

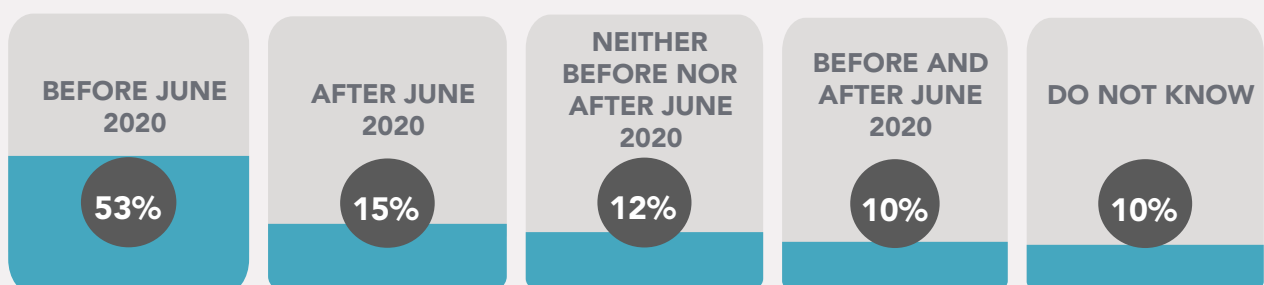




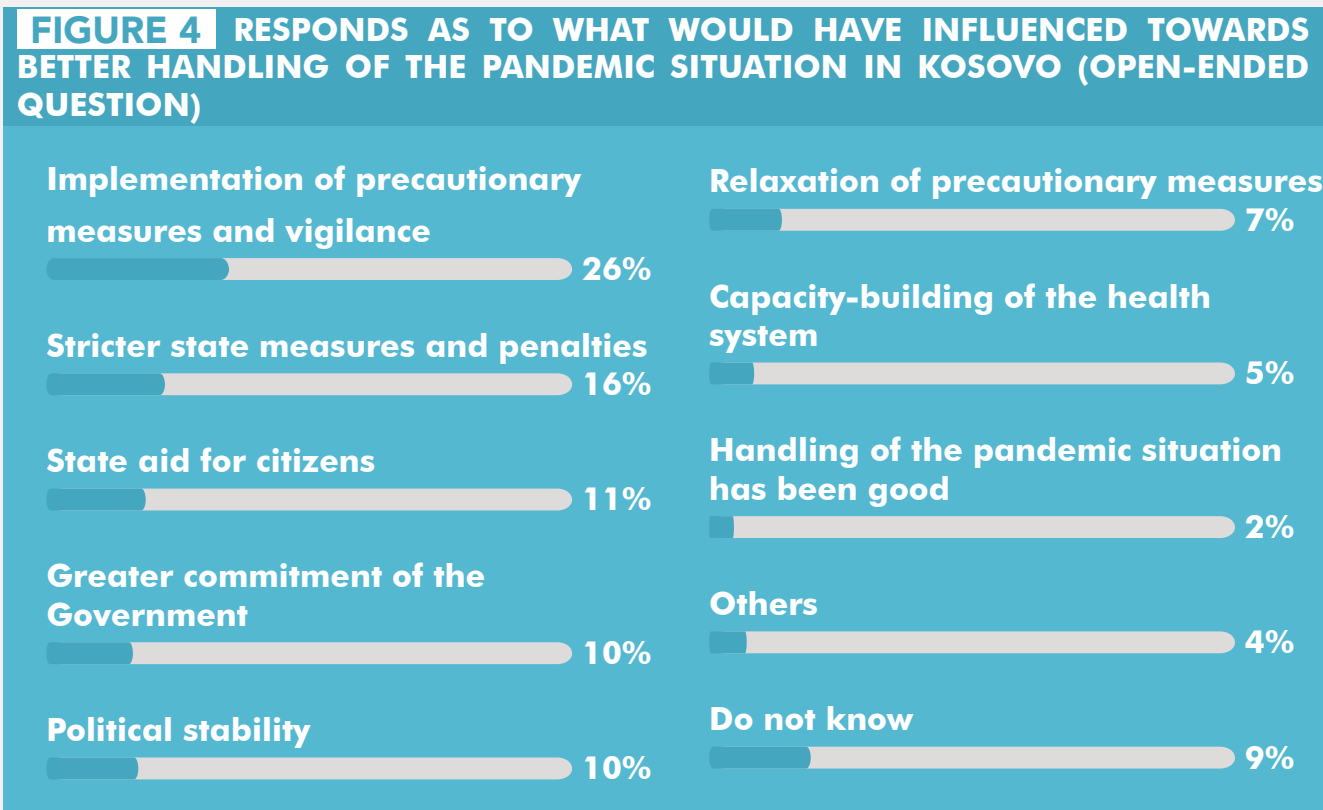
Majority of the respondents (53 percent) perceived that the pandemic situation was handled more properly before June 2020 implying the period when the Kosovo Government was led by then Prime Minister Albin Kurti (February-June 2020). During this period the country went under rigid lockdown measures put by the Government, whilst the number of infected cases and deaths were significantly lower.

On the other hand, only 15 percent of citizens responded that the pandemic was managed better corresponding to the measures undertaken by then newly formed Government cabinet under the former Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti (this involved the period from June to September 2020, whilst the fieldwork activities of the survey conducted by the KCSS team had occurred in September-October 2020). The latter eased the pandemic prevention and precautionary measures, however the number of infected persons and deaths started to upsurge rapidly in Kosovo.

FIGURE 3 PERCEPTIONS AS TO WHICH PERIOD THE PANDEMIC SITUATION WAS HANDLED BETTER IN KOSOVO



Respondents provided their opinions, suggestions and recommendations as to what should have been done by state institutions for better handling of the COVID-19 situation in the country. The first in the list expressed by 24 percent of respondents are implementation of precautionary measures and vigilance of citizens against coronavirus infection. It is followed by stricter measures and penalties against those not implementing measures (16 percent), state aid for citizens (11 percent), greater commitment of the Government (10 percent), political stability (10 percent) and other responses as provided in the following figure.



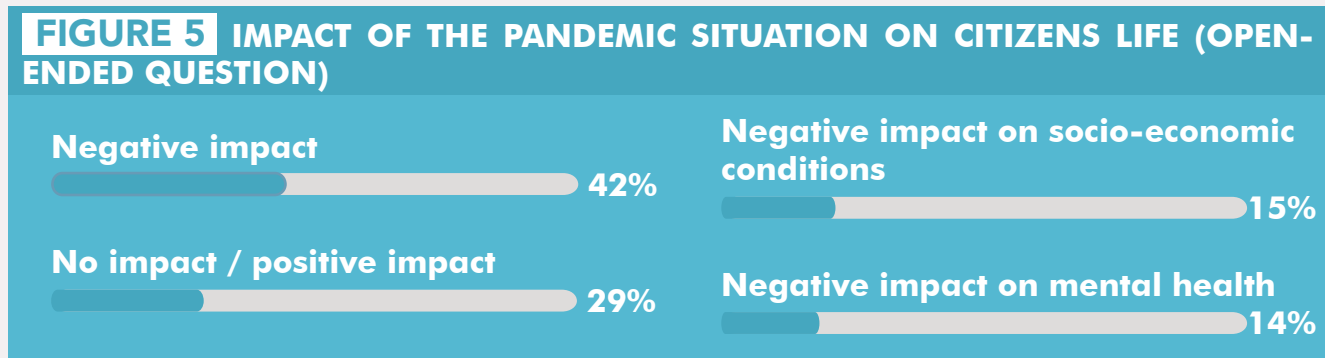
1.1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- While a considerable number of respondents had doubts on the existence of COVID-19 existence, the Kosovo institutions at local and central as well as non-state actors (i.e., media, non-governmental organizations, etc.) level should undertake in-depth information and public awareness campaigns on the necessity to massive vaccination of the population against COVID-19 virus. This would contribute to decreasing the number of those who refuse or show hesitations to receive vaccines among the general population.
- Unless population is vaccinated against the coronavirus disease, citizens and state/non-state institutions and organizations should implement Kosovo’s health institutions rules and regulations on wearing masks, keeping a safe physical distance and good personal hygiene in order to reduce and avoid the spread of this infectious disease.

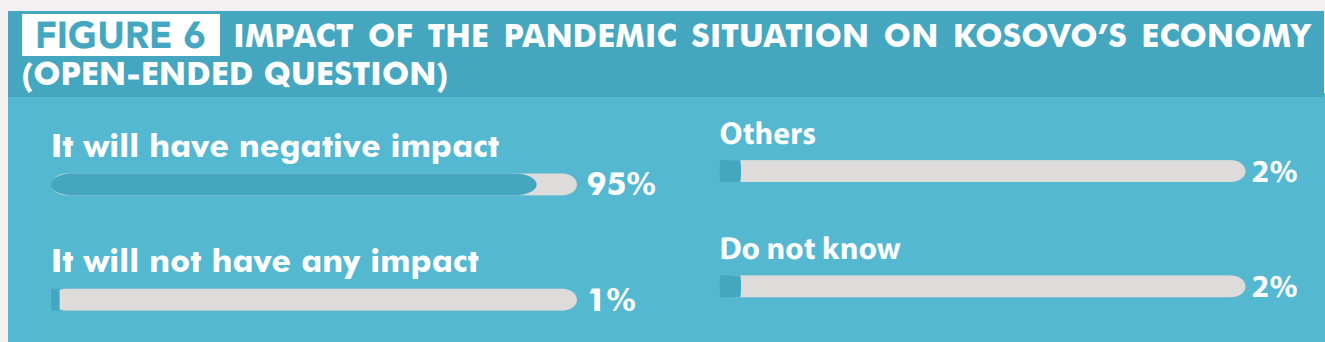
2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN KOSOVO

Similar to all countries affected by the pandemic, Kosovo is currently facing with severe challenges and consequence produced by the pandemic crisis. This was confirmed by respondents' answers on the survey stating that key challenges are socio-economic ones among others. Moreover, the questionnaire developed by KCSS involved three open-ended questions on the impact of pandemic in the everyday life of citizens.

In principle, majority of citizens or 71 percent viewed that the pandemic has negatively affected their life in the country, including negative impact on economic conditions and mental health. Whilst 29 percent of respondents stated that the COVID-19 did not have any negative impact towards them.

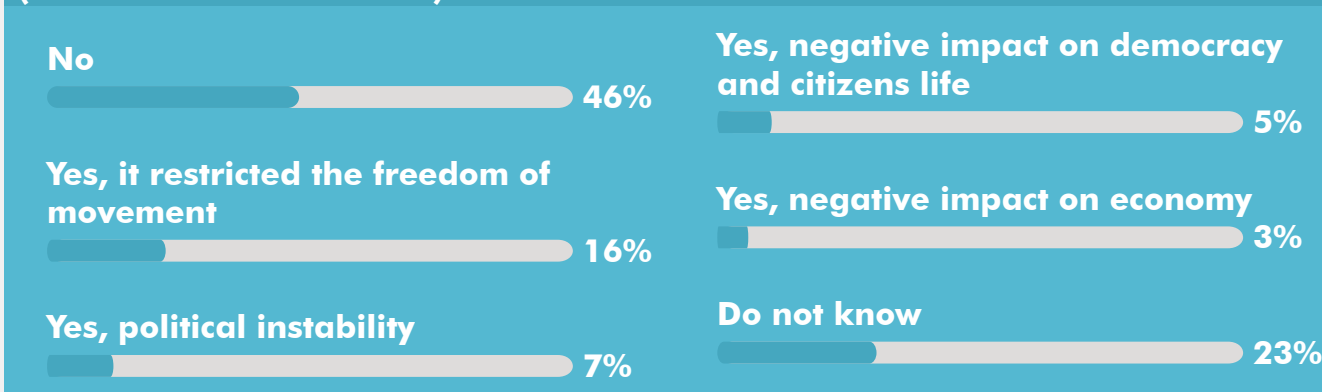


Deconstruction of respondents' perceptions found out that economic recovery will be the most challenging issue created by the pandemic. Almost all interviewed respondents (95 percent) pointed out that the coronavirus situation will negatively affect the country's economy.



In spite of decisions put by the Kosovo institutions against the COVID-19 spreading (such as quarantine, lockdown, restriction on the freedom of movement, etc.) almost majority of respondents (46 percent in total) did not feel that the pandemic affected democracy in Kosovo. Conversely, around 31 percent of respondents considered that the pandemic affected democracy through restriction on the freedom of movement (16 percent), political instability (7), negative impact on democracy and citizens' life (5 percent) and negative impact on economy (3 percent). On the other hand, those who did not have an opinion on this particular open-ended question were 23 percent in total.

FIGURE 7 IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC SITUATION ON DEMOCRACY IN KOSOVO (OPEN-ENDED QUESTION)



2.1. RECOMMENDATIONS

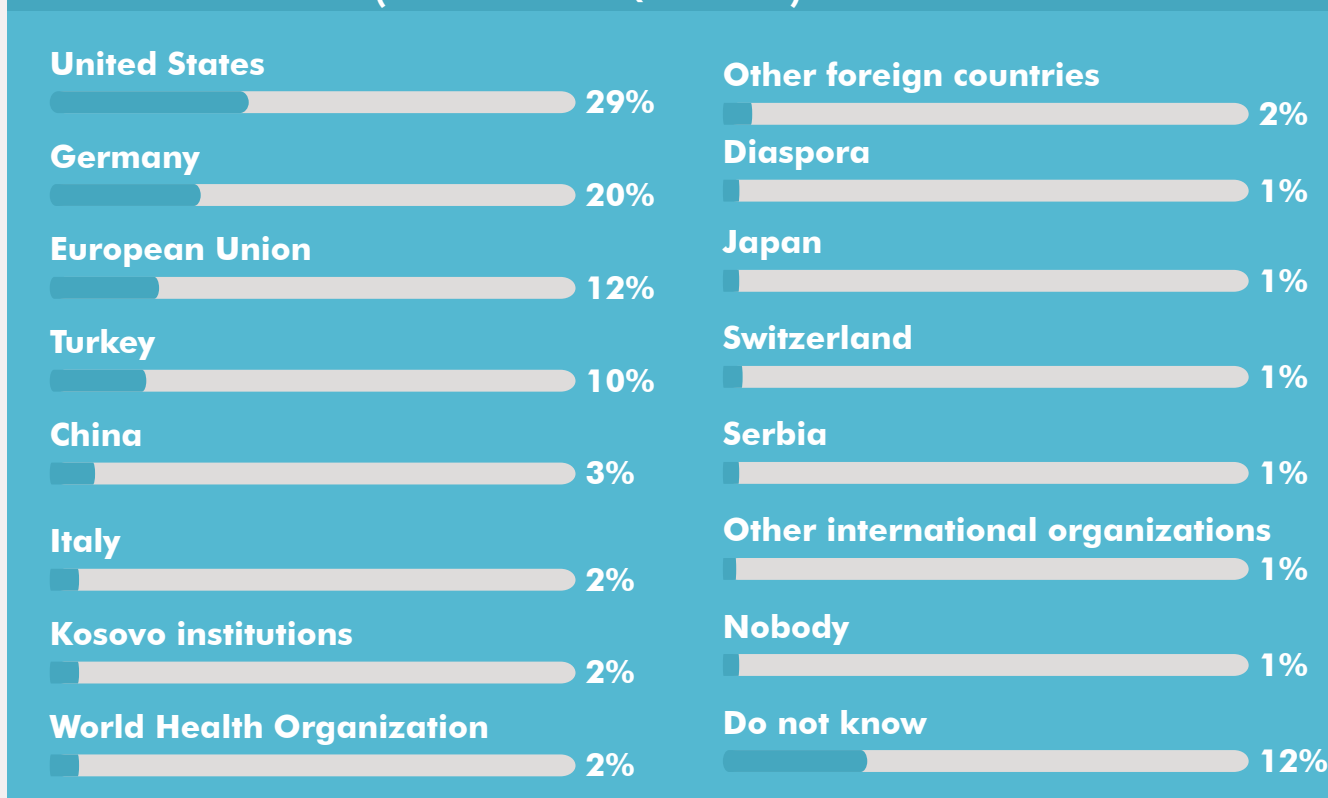
- The Kosovo Government in cooperation with the Kosovo Assembly and economic chambers/associations should introduce a new comprehensive socio-economic recovery plan or upgrade the current recovery plan for inclusion of the most vulnerable target groups suffering due to COVID-19 restrictive measures.

3. PERCEIVED FOREIGN SUPPORT AND INFLUENCE IN KOSOVO AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This survey measured respondents' perceptions as to support provided to Kosovo by foreign countries and organisations on one hand, and the political influence of foreign countries towards Kosovo during the pandemic crisis on the other hand. The idea behind introducing such survey questions was to receive direct feedback by respondents as this section is encompassed of an open-ended question and a closed-ended question. In this regard, one of the goals of this survey edition was to quantify the impact of foreign support and influence that Kosovo have received based on the citizens perspective. Based on responses received by respondents, it is interestingly to highlight that foreign support in Kosovo (i.e., equipment, financial aid, etc.) originated mainly from those partner countries which recognized Kosovo's independence and which are prominently perceive to exert positive foreign influence in the country.

Consequently, international support amidst the COVID-19 crisis has been constant to Kosovo mostly from foreign partner countries and international organizations in order to face with the pandemic challenges in terms of health equipment as well as providing financial assistance to the state institutions.

Measured through an open-ended question, 29 percent of respondents stated that thus far (the field research of the survey with citizens was conducted in September-October 2020) the United States has provided the biggest financial and humanitarian support to Kosovo in dealing with pandemic situation. The second place is reserved for Germany by 20 percent of respondents perceiving it as the second biggest supporter towards Kosovo during the pandemic. It is followed by the European Union (12 percent) and Turkey (10 percent) as the biggest supporters of Kosovo after the United States and Germany.

FIGURE 8 WHICH COUNTRY / ORGANIZATION HAS GIVEN THE BIGGEST FINANCIAL / HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT TO KOSOVO IN DEALING WITH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (OPEN-ENDED QUESTION)?

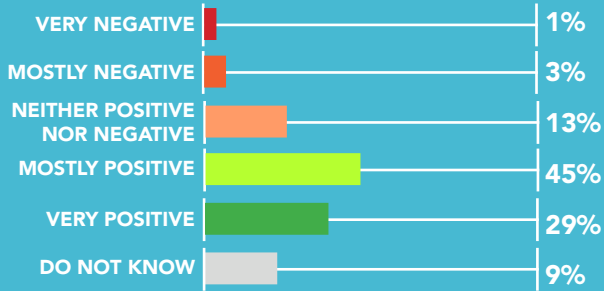
Interesting results came out also when analysing the closed-ended question regarding to this issue. As expected, the results were highly positive when it comes to countries that have recognized Kosovo's independence and who have constantly supporting Kosovo in handling the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Yet, unlike the results of the open-ended question, when measuring the closed-ended question, the ranking was slightly different. Germany received the most positive perceptions with 74 percent stating that its influence during the COVID-19 has been highly positive. This positive mood can be primarily related to large number of Kosovo's diaspora that Kosovo has in Germany and whose support towards their family members here in Kosovo continued also during the pandemic situation. However, these positive perceptions can be attributed also to direct supported that Kosovo received from the German state during the pandemic and not only. Meanwhile, the US who have been very actively engaged in the Kosovo's political developments especially in relation to political dialogue with Serbia resulted second with 64 percent. Whereas, within the top five resulted also the European Union (with 62 percent), Turkey (with 58 percent), and United Kingdom (with 49 percent).

Meantime, as noticed above, the survey results show that the Kosovo non-recognizing countries primarily are not positively perceived by Kosovar respondents, whilst if not negatively perceived at least respondents are undecided towards them. In this regard, China is viewed by 55 percent as exerting negative influence in Kosovo in relation to handling the COVID-19 situation and Russia by 48 percent in total. The reason as to why exists difference on perceiving China and Russia is that 32 percent of respondents did not know or had no information about the role of Russia towards Kosovo amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, above majority of respondents are undecided about the role of Iran as 60 percent of respondents did not know of its role related to Kosovo during the COVID-19 crisis, albeit the percentage of those perceiving it as positive (3 percent) is incomparable lower than negative (25 percent) given that Iran does not recognize Kosovo's independence.

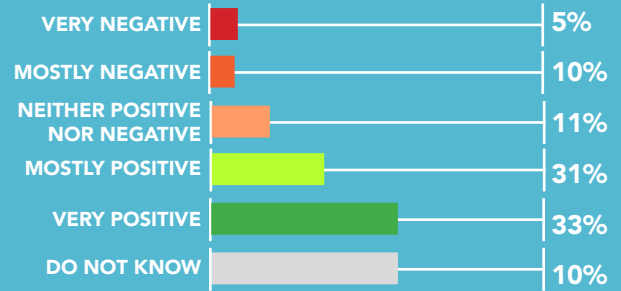
FIGURE 9 PERCEPTIONS ON POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF FOREIGN COUNTRIES / ORGANIZATIONS TOWARDS KOSOVO IN HANDLING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SITUATION



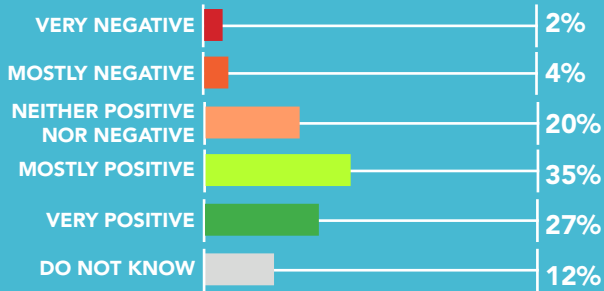
GERMANY



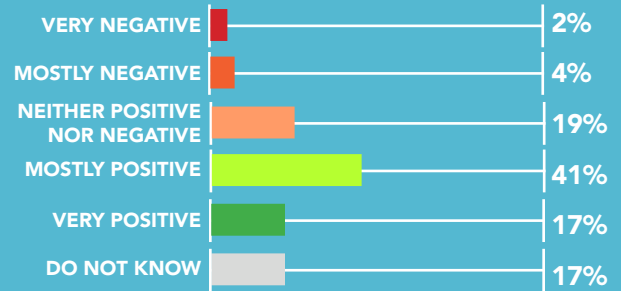
UNITED STATES



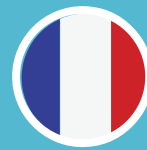
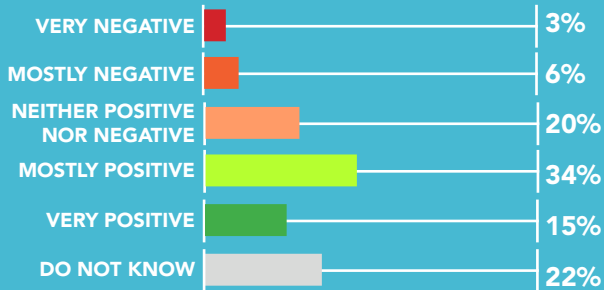
EUROPEAN UNION



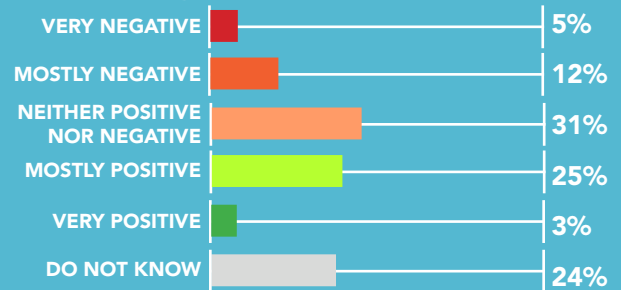
TURKEY



UNITED KINGDOM



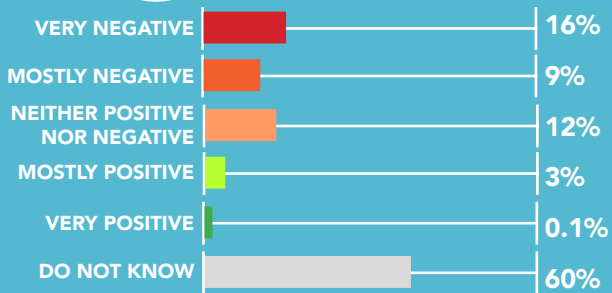
FRANCE



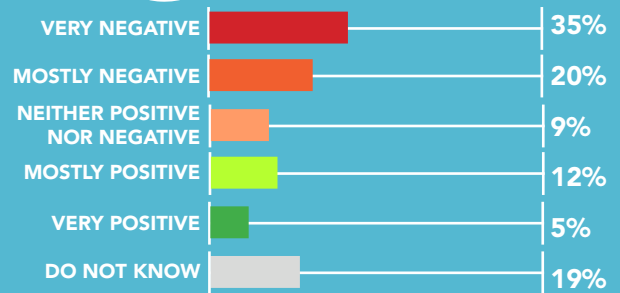
3. PERCEIVED FOREIGN SUPPORT AND INFLUENCE IN KOSOVO AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



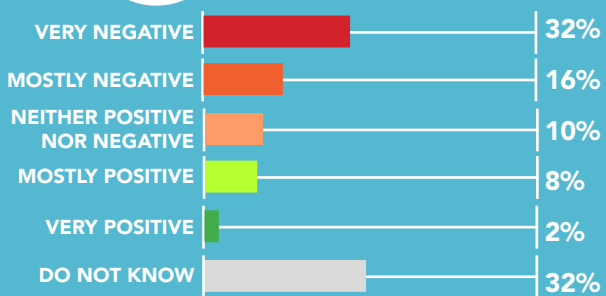
IRAN



CHINA



RUSSIA



3.1. RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Kosovo institutions should be persistent on developing and enhancing bilateral cooperation with partner countries perceived highly positive by respondents. In this regard, KCSS recommends the following mode of cooperation with its partner countries:
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Relations between Kosovo and Germany are twofold due to: i) large concentration of Kosovo-based diaspora community residing in Germany and ii) significant contribution of Germany in Kosovo in the last decades. Therefore, the state of Kosovo should make the full utilization of this potential in order to advance bilateral relations with Germany and its institutions in terms of political, economic and EU integration agenda.
- 

Bilateral and diplomatic relations of Kosovo with the United States are highly important for Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration and contribution provided by the United States to Kosovo on different areas of mutual interest. The Kosovo Government should further explore possibilities of deepening bilateral relations with the United States. Besides the membership into Euro-Atlantic structures (that is to say Kosovo's membership into NATO), Kosovo should closely cooperate with the United States for the membership process into international organizations (i.e., INTERPOL, etc.) and ask for further and active inclusion of the United States into the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.
- 

Besides the ongoing dialogue with Serbia facilitated by the EU, the Kosovo Government should insist to upgrade the EU's integration agenda and collaborates with the hesitant EU Member States (France, the Netherlands and Denmark) for granting the visa-free regime to the Kosovo citizens. In terms of vaccination against the COVID-19 disease, the Kosovo institutions should utilize solely authorized vaccines by the European Medicines Agency as the most effective ones.
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On the other hand, the Kosovo Government needs to identify areas of cooperation with Turkey and maintaining equally constructive partnership relations on practical related matters.
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When it comes to the United Kingdom, Kosovo should enhance bilateral relations on security, defence, political and economic issues. The United Kingdom's contribution in Kosovo is very important for the country's membership into regional and international organizations, including NATO, INTERPOL, UNESCO, etc.
- 

Even though perceptions of the Kosovo respondents have been rather neutral towards France, nevertheless the latter is an important ally of Kosovo on the EU membership process and the ongoing Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. There is a huge potential of framing the cooperation with France in a broad range of issues. Hence, the relevant Kosovar state institutions should bilaterally work with France in the visa liberalization process and other topics related to the EU integration.
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In terms of non-Western countries (i.e., Russia, China, Iran, etc.), Kosovo should align its international agenda with the European Union and the United States stances.

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