



Policy Memo

Fostering Cooperation and Shared Values: A View from Six Community Roundtables in Kosovo

I. Introduction

From November 2024 to July 2025, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), conducted six community roundtables in the municipalities of [Kamenica](#), [Gračanica](#), [Viti](#), [Lipjan](#), [Strpce](#), and [Gjakova](#). These forums brought together local officials, youth, civil society, law enforcement, and community members to discuss interethnic relations, shared challenges, the role of disinformation, and social trust at the municipal level among different communities in Kosovo. In the absence of progress on cooperation at the political level, the roundtables were therefore designed to amplify local voices and provide insight into institutional reform and interethnic inclusion in Kosovo.

II. Key Findings

1. Interethnic Relations: Stable, But Structurally Vulnerable

Across all municipalities, participants described strong interpersonal interethnic relations, often in contrast to how the situation may be perceived based on national politics, namely at the official dialogue between the governments of Kosovo and Serbia, which is currently stalled due to several circumstances. Indeed, as many participants pointed out, communication at the local level is rather positive. As one participant in the Municipality of Lipjan mentioned, “We don’t feel the divisions here in Lipjan. We live together, work together, and help each other,” Zoran Stanojevic, Serbian community representative stated. Similarly, in the Municipality of Strpce/Shtërpca, Igor Savić, a municipal official said that “Respect for diversity is a norm in Strpce/Shtërpca. The problems we face aren’t ethnic – they’re political and structural.” Participants further explained that they are more concerned with structural issues, which are often imported from the wider political implications. Examples of structural issues include challenges such as delays in licensing for waste collection and unresolved disputes surrounding local infrastructure projects, including citizen protests over planned water plants, the delayed process of diploma nostrification from Serbia, and the unutilized potential of youth to access sustainable employment and educational opportunities. Citizens also noted the untapped potential of the Brezovica tourist area and the declining role of civil society activism, which lacks the necessary support for developing projects.

Municipalities like Kamenica were also repeatedly referenced as models of coexistence, where cooperation between Albanian, Serbian, and Roma communities is embedded in daily life. One of the participants praised the history of interethnic cooperation in Kamenica, mentioning the example of a farmers' market that has been maintained by the municipality where all communities come together. Another group member supported this claim, describing Kamenica as a place where she feels safe, noting that she never felt unsafe walking alone at night. The discussion also touched on successful initiatives, such as the flower shop project initiated by the Roma community members, mentioned by the participants from the NGO "Luludi," supported by the EU and the Municipality of Kamenica.

2. Shared Socio-Economic Challenges Across Communities

Rather than ethnic divides, participants consistently identified unemployment, youth migration, and lack of educational perspectives as core concerns. For instance, a Kosovo-Albanian high school student and NGO worker from Kamenica said that "The real problem here isn't ethnicity – it's the lack of opportunities. Young people are leaving because there's nothing to stay for." Similarly, a local teacher and artist in Kamenica seconded the concern regarding socio-economic barriers, saying that, "Unemployment hits us all the same – Serbs, Albanians, Roma. It's not about ethnicity, it's about survival."

Gracanica participants highlighted dysfunction in private sector grants. When asked about challenges within the municipality, participants mentioned the lack of job opportunities, citing the private sector as one of the most underdeveloped ones. The Municipality of Gracanica offers grants for startups and businesses that need further development. However, as one participant and municipal worker mentioned, people just apply for the grants and rarely do the work that is required afterwards. The private sector is deeply underdeveloped, whereas the public sector does not have the capacity to employ everyone. A participant, who works as a beekeeper, for example, outlined people's limited interest in working in fields outside of medicine or education.

In the municipality of Gjakova, on the other hand, participants called for bottom-up economic integration of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) communities through business support and public services. However, despite progress, such as through the societal inclusion of RAE youth, who noted that more than 100 businesses run by members of the RAE community are now operating in central Gjakova - a sign of progress and participation in public life, a challenge that persists in Gjakova is the slow improvement of cross-community dialogue.

3. Disinformation as a Tool to Damage Interethnic Relations

The role of disinformation emerged as a cross-cutting concern. While there are other factors that contribute to this atmosphere, in almost all municipalities, the spread of disinformation was identified as a key factor attempting to maintain fear among the population. A journalist from Gjilan mentioned in the Kamenica roundtable that, "Fake news manipulate- our past and keep- hate alive. People don't check facts, instead they believe what fits their fear." Similarly, a municipal participant from Gracanica mentioned that disinformation and news that tend to incite fear target the more vulnerable part of society, which oftentimes includes the elderly. "Elderly people read something online and believe it immediately. This is how division spreads," noted the participant. Another important factor was the language barrier – since most participants do not speak each other's languages, namely Albanian and Serbian, societies are left

vulnerable: first, by lacking opportunities to communicate directly, and second, by being more prone to misinterpreting events unfolding across Kosovo.

Participants linked disinformation to low media literacy, a polarized media environment, and a lack of cross-community dialogue, reinforcing stereotypes and deepening mistrust.

4. Civil Society and Public Institutions: Trusted but Under-Resourced

Public institutions, especially police, fire departments, and health services, were largely viewed as neutral and fair. "We never look at ethnicity when we respond. That's not part of our job, and the people trust us for that," a firefighter in Vitia noted. Indeed, there was a general consensus that when it comes to public services, the Offices for Communities and other relevant institutions at the municipal level respond to the needs and requests of all community members. Yet, there is a need for a larger campaign by the public institutions to inform the citizens of the contact points where they can address their concerns. Therefore, more top-down public communication by the municipal authorities is needed.

In all municipalities, the participants appeared to be well-integrated into the topic of interethnic cooperation due to several activities that have been organized over the years by civil society and international organizations operating in Kosovo. These activities have helped bring together all communities and address issues and topics such as reconciliation, socio-cultural cooperation, socio-economic development and so forth. However, participants in Shtërpçë and Gjakova raised alarm over declining donor support and the shrinking space for long-term civil society engagement. "Donors come and go, but the problems stay. We need projects that stay longer than one year," a CSO representative from Strpce/Shtërpçë emphasized.

5. More Showcase of Positive Examples

Building on the findings regarding the impact of disinformation in fostering fear and tension in interethnic relations, another significant aspect concerns the role of the media in shaping perceptions. Discussions across the municipalities revealed that positive examples of interethnic cooperation are rarely highlighted in mainstream media outlets, such as television, news portals, and other communication channels. Increasing the visibility of such cases could contribute to fostering a more constructive narrative and promoting interethnic understanding. It would also allow even the more polarized communities to learn from successful practices, helping normalize cooperation and mutual support.

For instance, in the Municipality of Lipjan, a representative from the local police shared a case where an elderly Serbian woman hesitated to access social services due to documentation-related concerns. A Kosovo-Serb representative from the municipality assisted her, providing the necessary guidance, and as a result, she now receives her pension regularly. Similarly, in Vitia, representatives from the local hospital described how healthcare services are provided inclusively, with Kosovo-Serb nurses actively working in the institution and maintaining close communication with the community.

6. Dealing with the Past: An Unresolved Barrier

Despite the discussions on structural, socio-economic, and political issues, a complex issue remains the legacy of the 1990s wars, which continues to shape perceptions. "Some of the most nationalist voices are young people who never lived through the war. It's not experience, it's inheritance," said Agnesa, sociology

student in the roundtable discussion in Gracanica. In other municipalities, such as in Lipjan, participants stressed that in the early aftermath of the war, there was less communication, but eventually, citizens started (re)building their relations. Despite this, participants agreed that constructive historical dialogue is essential to reconciliation. “Ignoring the past only gives it more power. We need to talk about it, but the right way, not to fuel hate,” said a youth participant during the discussion in Kamenica.

III. Policy Suggestions

Based on the above findings, there was time to discuss some recommendations that the participants brought forward. Some of the policy suggestions include the following:

- ✓ **Policy Suggestion 1:** Senior state officials should organize open discussions in multiethnic municipalities to directly engage citizens on challenges and promote greater cooperation and understanding.
- ✓ **Policy Suggestion 2:** Public institutions must invest more in resolving issues of common concern for both Albanians and Serbs in mixed municipalities.
- ✓ **Policy Suggestion 3:** Municipal Offices for Communities and Returns should be upgraded to better respond to the needs of youth in multierhnx municipalities.
- ✓ **Policy Suggestion 4:** Invest in interethnic exchange programs, especially among high school students in Kosovo.

IV. Looking Ahead

Kosovo’s local communities have shown that interethnic peace is both possible and present. Yet, daily life is shaped less by ethnicity than by systemic challenges, such as economic stagnation, political inaction, and disinformation. Building a resilient and inclusive society requires targeted investments in youth, education, civil society, and trust-building initiatives. Institutions and donors must align efforts with what local voices are clearly demanding: opportunity, fairness, and meaningful inclusion. KCSS will continue its work to elevate community perspectives and ensure evidence-based dialogue remains central to Kosovo’s democratic future.

V. Note

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