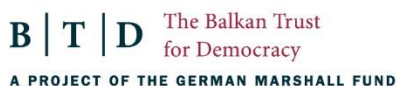




A BRIEF HISTORY OF CITIZENS' VIEWS ON THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN BELGRADE AND PRIŠTINA. WHAT HAS (NOT) CHANGED?



Publisher

National Convention on the European Union
Working Group for Chapter 35

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Year

2021

The publication was produced within the project “National Convention on the European Union 2020/2021, Chapter 35: Other Issues – Kosovo” financed by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Norway in Belgrade and the Balkan Trust for Democracy of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. The opinions and views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Norway, Serbia, Balkan Trust for Democracy of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, National Conventions on the European Union or the Institute for Territorial Economic Development.

A brief history of citizens' views on the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. What has (not) changed?

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March 2021

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ABBREVIATIONS

BCSP	Belgrade Center for Security Policy
CSDRI	Centre for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives
CEAS	Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies
CeSID	Center for Free Elections and Democracy
CRTA	Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability
EU	European Union
FES	Friedrich Ebert Foundation
OSF	Open Society Foundation
IDN	Institute of Social Sciences
IEA	Institute for European Affairs
NSPM	New Serbian Political Thought
USA	United States of America
SOC	Serbian Orthodox Church
SAA	Stabilization and Association Agreement
Tanjug	Serbian National News Agency
UN	United Nations
CSM	Community of Serb Majority Municipalities

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of March, ten years have passed since the beginning of the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. Immediately after the signing of the Brussels Agreement in 2013, it seemed that the dialogue unquestionably led to a compromise and the achievement of a binding agreement on the comprehensive normalization of relations between the two sides. Today, it is clear that the final solution is “low-hanging fruit”. There are many reasons for this outcome, but it is indicative that the elites in Belgrade and Priština have often referred to public opinion “tying their hands” and preventing them from making a compromise. The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, did it openly, emphasizing that the people “did not support the solution he offered” (without specifying the solution), although he advocated a compromise in the interest of the state. On the other hand, the highest officials in Priština justified themselves behind closed doors that the establishment of the Community of Serb Majority Municipalities or the withdrawal of prohibitive customs duties are impossible due to the opposition of the public in Kosovo. Even regardless of whether these claims were completely true or were just an alibi for the reluctance of political elites to make a substantial compromise - public opinion is certainly a factor that has influenced and will influence the course of dialogue between Belgrade and Priština and the possibilities for achieving final solution for the Kosovo issue.

With that in mind, the research team of the Belgrade Center for Security Policy (BCSP) and the Centre for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives (CSDRI) analysed more than 30 relevant public opinion polls in Serbia between 2013 and 2020. The first part of the analysis presents the answer to the position of the Serbian public on the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, and underlines and explains the causes of key trends related to this issue. The second part presents the key findings of the analysis of Serbia’s public support for various modalities for Kosovo’s final status in the past eight years. Finally, faced with the fact that, when processing the findings of existing research, we noticed the need for a different approach in the future, so that research findings are more comparable and it is easier to draw conclusions about trends, the third part of the analysis presents key advice and guidelines for future researchers of public opinion on this topic.

THE VIEWS OF SERBIAN CITIZENS ABOUT THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN BELGRADE AND PRIŠTINA

Initiation of a dialogue between the governments of Belgrade and Priština after Kosovo's declaration of independence is one of the most important political processes for Serbia. Prior to the talks on Kosovo's status at the highest political level, the chief negotiators of Belgrade and Priština, Borko Stefanovic and Edita Tahiri, discussed the following "standards" at the so-called technical level, between March 2011 and mid-2012: freedom of movement, personal documents, customs, cadastre, mutual recognition of diplomas, integrated border/administrative line management and representation of Kosovo in interstate forums for cooperation in the region of Southeast Europe. The EU-facilitated negotiation process was characterised by ambiguity and conflicting interpretations of the agreements reached in Brussels, by stagnations, frequent changes of government in both political communities, by rising tensions in Serbian and Albanian community, embargoes, assassinations of Serbian politicians in northern Kosovo and other incidents. Despite everything, in the period from the beginning of the political dialogue to this day, the support of the citizens of Serbia for the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština has been above 50 percent (see the table below). At the same time, the initial resistance to dialogue in April and October 2012 was slightly reduced and today, about one third of citizens oppose the process. Although the majority support for the dialogue is indisputable, two surveys conducted at the end of 2020, only a month apart, indicate different tendencies. The BCSP's survey shows that the level of support for dialogue today is the same as in October 2012, i.e., that there has been a decline in support in the meantime, while the percentage of those who do not have a clear position on the dialogue has increased. Conversely, a survey conducted by Ninamedia agency for the European Union Delegation in Belgrade indicates that support for dialogue is relatively stable, but that there has been an increase in resistance to the dialogue with a small percentage of those who are undecided.

Table 1. Public support for the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština (2012-2020)

Do you support the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština? (%)											
	Apr 2012	Oct 2012	Apr 2013	Feb 2014	Sep 2014	Mar 2015	Oct 2015	Oct 2019	Oct 2020	Nov 2020	
Yes	44	51	63	56	58	58	60	55.3	50.6	57	
No	41	40	28	29	31	29	28	22.1	28.5	35	
Do not know	15	9	9	14	11	13	12	22.5	20.9	8	
Source	TNS Medium Gallup							CSDRI	BCSP	Ninamedia (EU)	

BCSP's survey shows that today, the vast majority of citizens (83%) think that the dialogue between Priština and Belgrade should continue, despite pressure from the international community to resolve outstanding issues with Kosovo Albanians. The opinion that the dialogue should be conducted regardless of EU pressure prevailed among the citizens of Serbia in the BCSP's survey from 2013. Accordingly, the basic motive for Serbia to continue the dialogue should not be to increase its chances for membership in the European Union. Citizens' perception of the continuation of the dialogue with Priština was measured differently in 2017, because the BCSP research team, in cooperation with the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), formulated the answers to the same question differently. For one third of the citizens of Serbia, the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština was still necessary in order to leave as few unresolved issues in relations with Albanians as possible to future generations. What is different compared to the previous and subsequent research, is that the support for the dialogue is conditioned by the protection of "Serbian interests" and by its final result not being the recognition of Kosovo's independence by Serbia. However, given the small percentage of citizens opposing the dialogue with Kosovo Albanians and a clear commitment to continuing the process, it can be said that there is a social consensus that the dialogue with Priština is a necessary and important process.

Table 2. Citizens' perception of the continuation of dialogue between Belgrade and Priština (%)

The dialogue between Belgrade and Priština should be continued:						
	Regardless of the pressure from the EU	Only if it increases the chances for EU membership	Only if it does not lead to the recognition of Kosovo's independence	Only if it ensures the protection of Serbian interests	It should not be continued	I do not know
2013	56	14	-	-	13	17
2017	34	5	14	23	9	16
2020	83	8	-	-	9	-

A high percentage of support for the dialogue with Priština calls into question the common assumption that the dialogue is not popular. This also suggests that citizens see the value and benefits from a process of peaceful and diplomatic conflict resolution. However, this assumption was disrupted by an exceptionally large percentage of Serbian citizens (91.6%) who do not see any possible personal benefit from the dialogue, as shown by the BCSP's survey from 2020. This result may indicate that citizens consider the dialogue to be the responsibility of the political elite or a process that takes place at the macro level, in which they are not directly involved, and which does not affect their lives. A large percentage of citizens who believe that the dialogue does not bring them any personal benefit may also be the result of ineffective communication of the benefits and results of the dialogue by the Government of Serbia. Negative opinions of citizens regarding the benefits of the dialogue are also related to access to information of public importance and transparency of the process, as well as general information citizens have about domestic and foreign policy processes.

What do we actually know about the dialogue?

The Brussels dialogue did not lead to a final solution for the status of Kosovo and another agreement on the normalization of relations, but it did resolve many concrete problems, consequently contributing to the normalization of relations between the two societies. According to the analysis conducted by Igor Novaković and Shpetim Gashi for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Belgrade and Priština have negotiated about 50 documents over ten years, signed 21 agreements, and about 80 percent of the agreements are being implemented. Due to the significant progress in the dialogue and the signing of the Brussels Agreement on the Normalization of Relations (19 April 2013), Serbia was given a date for the start of negotiations on EU membership, while in 2015, Kosovo signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU.

After almost ten years of negotiations and achieved results, according to the CSDRI's survey from 2019, 62.3% of Serbian citizens claim that they are not familiar with the content of the dialogue, while one fourth of citizens are partly familiar, and only 12.6% state that they are well informed about the content of the dialogue. This is also confirmed by CRTA's research on citizen participation in democratic processes from 2019, according to which 65% of citizens estimate that they know little or nothing about the course of negotiations between Belgrade and Priština, and the number of citizens who feel uninformed about that topic has grown by as much as 4% compared to 2018. Apart from not knowing what the subject of negotiations is, according to BCSP's survey from 2020, half of the citizens do not even know what the goal of the authorities in Belgrade is in the dialogue with Priština, while CSDRI's survey indicates that 58.5% of them do not know what the Serbian president's policy is with regard to Kosovo. However, the data from BCSP's survey showing that two thirds of citizens support Serbia's goals in the dialogue speaks in favour of the fact that there is no critical questioning of government decisions, but that there is a huge, almost unconditional trust in their intentions. Since most citizens are informed about Kosovo through television (mostly national TV), ignorance of the goals of the dialogue, as well as other topics related to Kosovo, may only be the result of procedural reporting on the dialogue without content analysis, but also vague messages from the authorities due to the lack of clear policies on Kosovo, as well as unwillingness of the main negotiators to make the dialogue process more transparent and open to citizens. In addition, the government clearly has the "tools" to influence citizens to trust it but does not use them to objectively inform the citizens or contribute to improving relations between Serbs and Albanians. The consequence of the non-transparency of the process is the view of 71% of citizens that the dialogue has not changed anything in the mutual relations between Belgrade and Priština, as indicated by BCSP's survey from 2020 (13% think it harmed mutual relations, and 16% think that relations have improved). The non-transparency of the process and the lack of information among citizens about the dialogue affect their reasoning and make it difficult for them to participate in

democratic processes. More importantly, effective independent oversight of the executive is more difficult, and the uninformed public is unable to hold government and public officials accountable for the actions and the decisions they make.

The reason for insufficient information about the course of negotiations between Belgrade and Priština is also the fact that the interest of citizens in topics and events related to Kosovo is not great since citizens are more occupied with economic problems (unemployment, low living standards, economy), corruption and organized crime, including public health, air, and environmental issues. This is confirmed by the data from Open Society Foundation's survey from 2017, according to which only 13% of citizens actively follow topics and events related to Kosovo, compared to 59% who mostly do not follow topics related to Kosovo, or do not do it at all. A similar result was found by the Centre for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives two years later.

Internal dialogue – accepting “the reality” or moving away from it?

Greater participation of Serbian citizens, their associations and other interest groups (e.g., Serbian Orthodox Church, sports associations, entrepreneurs) in the social dialogue about Kosovo should have been achieved by initiating a so-called “internal dialogue”. The internal dialogue¹ was initiated by the President of Serbia in mid-2017 under pressure from the West so that the citizens of Serbia would “accept the reality that Kosovo is independent”² and internationally recognized by many UN and EU member states. Ten years after Kosovo's declaration of independence, 69% of citizens supported the Serbian president's initiative for social dialogue about Kosovo, and according to a 2017 survey conducted by Faktor Plus, almost the same percentage of citizens think social dialogue about Kosovo is necessary (70%), and all important social factors should participate (72%). As the key reasons for participating in the dialogue, the majority of citizens pointed out that the status of Kosovo and Metohija is a crucial issue for Serbia (56%) and that it is necessary to make the general agreement among important political and social actors (20%), while less than one fifth think that dialogue is a democratic form of political communication and decision-making (18%), and 6% think that nothing should be hidden from the public eye (Ibid.). The view of the majority of citizens (68%) is that starting a dialogue about Kosovo does not imply a solution to the Kosovo problem.

However, the majority of Serbian citizens were not directly involved in the process according to the 2018 survey of the Institute for European Affairs (IEA), but were partly informed about

¹ A similar process has not been started in Kosovo at the same time, which does not imply that citizens in Kosovo are better informed about the dialogue with Belgrade and that the decisions and work of the government in Priština are more transparent.

² FoNet. “*Vilson: Srbija ne kontroliše Kosovo, treba da se suoči sa realnošću.*” *Danas*, 30. maj 2019. <https://www.danas.rs/politika/vilson-suociti-se-sa-realnoscu/>; Zejneli Loxha, Amra. 2012. “*Gordon: SAD snažno podržava Kosovo, Srbija treba da prihvati realnost.*” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 9. Jul 2012. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/gordon-sad-snazno-podrzava-kosovo-srbija-treba-da-prihvati-realnost/24639956.html>; Leon, Jakov. 2012. “*Posle izbora, suočavanje sa realnošću.*” *DW*, 10. maj 2012. <https://www.dw.com/sr/posle-izbora-suo%C4%8Davanje-sa-realno%C5%A1%C4%87u/a-15938575> Milutinović, Vladimir. “*Suočavanje sa realnošću.*” *Politika*, 19. mart 2008. <http://www.politika.co.rs/sr/clanak/36755/Specijalni-dodaci/Suocavanje-sa-realnoscu>

the internal dialogue through the media, and the National Assembly, in which MPs as representatives of citizens are obliged to have public debates on the most important political and social topics, was excluded from the internal dialogue. At the same time, the events that occurred in 2017 and 2018, such as the presidential elections, the assassination of Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanović, the elections in Belgrade, the reveal of the idea of “exchange of territories” and many scandals - pushed this process to the margins of media reporting. As a result, the process of internal dialogue did not involve all important actors, nor did it bring more clarity and contribute to citizens being informed better, but it led to a reversal of the situation and the fact that citizens may have moved further away from the “reality” they had to “confront”. This claim can be illustrated by comparing the data from the research conducted before and after the internal dialogue. A survey by B92 and IPSOS indicates that in 2013, 63% of Serbian citizens thought that Kosovo was a *de facto* independent state, while after the end of the internal dialogue, 63% disagreed with the claim that Kosovo is independent according to the research of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS) from 2018. The research of the Open Society Foundation from August 2017 points to the conclusion that the change in citizens' views occurred in a short period of time, since only a month after the beginning of the dialogue 55% of citizens thought that it is high time to accept the reality and find a compromise solution with the Albanians because the Kosovo problem is perceived as the key obstacle for Serbia's economic progress (due to undefined borders and black economy, direct expenditure from the Serbian budget for administration, etc.). It is possible that the views of citizens were influenced by the text written by the President of Serbia published in July in the daily *Blic*, which, among other things, states that “it is time for us as people [...] to be realistic”, then to “try to solve our conflicts” and that “Serbia needs a responsible and serious approach, brave and realistic, but with a view to the future”, because in that case “all roads of political cooperation and economic progress would be open to Serbia”, as well as “the doors of the European Union”.³

Previously mentioned data indicate the manipulation of citizens by political marketing. Government officials and key negotiators in Belgrade present the dialogue with Priština as a marathon process⁴ in which victory is important (5:0)⁵ and often send contradictory and confusing messages to the public, like the one that it is in the Serbia's national interest to preserve Kosovo and the Orthodox churches and monasteries within Serbia, but that it is necessary to respect the reality that “the state authorities of Serbia do not control an inch of Kosovo”⁶. The public is also confused by the inconsistent behavior of the Serbian government which continuously transfers competences in various areas from the state bodies of Serbia to the executive and public authorities in Priština, while at the same time assuring

³ Vučić, Aleksandar 2017. “EKSKLUZIVNO Autorski tekst predsednika Aleksandra Vučića za “Blic”: Zašto nam je potreban unutrašnji dijalog o Kosovu.” *Blic*, 24. jul 2017. <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/ekskluzivno-autorski-tekst-predsednika-aleksandra-vucica-za-blic-zasto-nam-je/v7xgl6q>

⁴ RTS. 2018. “Đurić: Dijalog je maraton.” *Danas*, 28. maj 2018. <https://www.danas.rs/politika/djuric-dijalog-je-maraton/>

⁵ KoSSev. 2018. “Posle 5:0 i 10:0 Marko Đurić trči na polumaratonu u Briselu.” *Kossev*, 27. maj 2018. <https://kossev.info/posle-50-i-100-marko-djuric-trci-na-polumaratonu-u-briselu/>

⁶ FoNet. 2018. “Vučić: Pisma penzionerima plaćena novcem stranke.” *Danas*, 29. novembar 2018. <https://www.danas.rs/politika/vucic-pisma-penzionerima-placena-novcem-stranke/>

the citizens that they work on preserving the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity with the promise not to recognize Kosovo's independence. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are conflicting opinions, that is, cognitive dissonance in citizens' views - such as that more than 50% support dialogue, although they do not know the goal of the Serbian government in negotiations, while more than 90% feel no benefit from it and almost three quarters think it has not changed anything.

Constructive ambiguity and consequences

Since the beginning of the dialogue in 2011, the EU has also been deliberately vague about defining the goals of the dialogue and what the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Priština means. The EU's approach to the dialogue includes the so-called constructive ambiguity, which enabled Belgrade and Priština to reach different agreements, but (un)intentionally created potentially severe consequences for control of expectations in both societies. Examples of constructive ambiguity that raise controversy in both societies are: the use of the phrase administrative line instead of border, stating that the Kosovo government has jurisdiction instead of sovereign authority in Kosovo, accepting the name Kosovo with an asterisk (*) and footnote instead of the name for the autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohija, etc.

Constructive ambiguity has resulted in over 60% of citizens thinking that recognizing Kosovo is a *conditio sine qua non* for Serbia's accession to the EU. The conditionality of European integration with progress in the dialogue with Priština is often linked to the negotiating Chapter 35 on other issues, including Kosovo as the most prominent issue, and the United Nations General Assembly Resolution of 8 September 2010 (A/64/L.65/Rev.1) which states that "dialogue should promote cooperation, achieve progress on the path to the European Union and improve the lives of people"⁷. Even though the recognition of Kosovo is presented to the Serbian public as a "condition of all conditions" for Serbia's accession to the EU, the majority of Serbian citizens are continuously against it (see the table below). An exception to this rule is the finding from the research "Citizens' views on resolving the status of Kosovo" of the Open Society Foundation (2017) on whether Serbia should stick to European integration at the cost of Kosovo. The research indicates the division of the society, since 43% think that "Kosovo as a territory is already lost, Serbia should take care of Serbs and cultural heritage in Kosovo, but it is unreasonable to give up the chance for faster development of Serbia offered by joining the European Union for an already lost territory", while 37% believe that "Serbia has no benefit from the European Union and should not make any compromises related to Kosovo, even if all ties with the European Union are cut off."

⁷ United Nations General Assembly. 2010. "Request for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on whether the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo is in accordance with international law." September 8, 2010. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Kos%20A64%20L.65%20Rev1.pdf>

Table 3. Citizens' views on Kosovo recognition for EU membership

	If the recognition of Kosovo's independence is a condition for EU accession, do you think it should be accepted?				* Should Serbia recognize independence of Kosovo and Metohija if it is a condition for Serbia's accession in the European Union? (question 2016) ** Would you support the independence of Kosovo for Serbia's faster membership in the European Union? (2018-2020)				
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2016*	2017 ⁸	2018**	2019	2020
No	67.7	65.8	71.1	73.5	80	-	81	78	77
Yes	22.4	18.8	15.6	12.6	14	-	11	13	13
Do not know	-	15.7	13.3	13.9	6	-	8	9	10
New Serbian Political Thought					Institute for European Affairs				

As shown in the BCSP's survey from October 2013, optimism prevailed because 43% of citizens thought that dialogue was a way to improve mutual relations, while slightly more than one fifth (27%) were convinced that this would not happen. Six years later, a CSDRI's survey indicates pessimism among Serbian citizens about dialogue and improved relations between Albanians and Serbs, as 55.8% of citizens thought that the Brussels dialogue has not improved Serb-Albanian relations, and only 16.6% thought that it has, while 27.6% have a neutral view. This finding and those from previous research show that the current way of conducting negotiations, with non-transparency, unclear goals, and exclusion of the majority of the public, creates the impression in the public that the dialogue process leads nowhere, and that pessimism grows over time because of that. These data, with general support for dialogue, but the absence of benefits, actually speak volume about disappointed citizens. In addition, today, two thirds (72.7%) do not believe that there will be peace between the two nations (BCSP 2020). For 62% of citizens, the expected normalization of relations between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs will not happen in the near future, regardless of the outcome of the dialogue, which means even if another agreement is reached within the Brussels dialogue (Ibid.). However, for 28.8% of citizens, normalization of relations is possible if a final agreement is reached (Ibid.). However, Serbian citizens are also pessimistic about the possibility of reaching a final agreement with Kosovo, since 53% think that it will never happen, and one fourth (25%) think that the final agreement with Serbia will be reached in the next 3-5 years (BCSP 2020). Normalization of relations through citizens seems to be considered a political necessity, however, research findings indicate that the reach of the process of normalization of relations is limited to the level of political elites involved in dialogue, but that there has been no improvement in relations between the two societies. In that sense, another agreement on the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Priština

⁸ Institute for European Affairs did not conduct a research on Kosovo in 2017.

under the auspices of the EU might be a success in the eyes of international actors, but not for the majority of Serbian citizens.

VIEWS OF SERBIAN CITIZENS ON THE FINAL SOLUTION OF THE KOSOVO ISSUE

The first impression based on a comparative review of Serbian public opinion polls in relation to an adequate solution for the final status of Kosovo is that they cannot provide particularly precise answers and that many questions remain open. This does not seem surprising, having in mind that even from the statements of Serbian officials, it is not clear what the government's plan is on this issue. Still, it is possible to draw several general conclusions. First, the recognition of independence, as well as the exchange of territories are undesirable options for the majority of Serbian citizens. Second, delimitation as a concept is articulated in a confusing way and that citizens mostly do not know what to think about that solution. Third, the division has the support of a slightly larger number of citizens, but it does not have enough support at this moment in order to succeed in a referendum. Fourth, a combination of territorial concessions (division of Kosovo) and institutional concessions (for the Serbs south of the Ibar river and for the SOC) would lead to increased support and future research need to develop different modalities of such solutions to reach more precise conclusions about which concessions are sufficient for citizens to accept the recognition of (a part of) Kosovo. The fifth conclusion is that a solution for the status of Kosovo that does not imply recognition could have the support of the majority of citizens. Finally, the sixth conclusion is that, despite the government's narrative of the need to find a historic solution and compromise with the Albanians, citizens still prefer *status quo* to a solution in which Serbia would have to make concrete concessions and get something in return.

We know what we do not want– the recognition of independence

The first issue to be singled out in this field is the relative continuity in rejecting the recognition of independence (with the existing borders) as an option for a final solution of the Kosovo's status. According to the latest survey of the Belgrade Center for Security Policy (BCSP) from October 2020, a total of 7.8% of Serbian citizens believe that the recognition of Kosovo with the existing borders is the best final solution for the status of Kosovo. Since opinion polls began to consider options for Kosovo's final status, support for (recognizing) Kosovo's independence as a final solution has almost never been in double digits. The only slight exception was the survey of the Center for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives (CSDRI) conducted in late September 2019, but even then, only 12.4% of citizens said that, in a possible referendum, they would support an agreement by which Serbia recognizes Kosovo, while 78.5% were against it, and 9.1% were neutral. So, it is obvious that this is an option that continuously (and as expected) has the least public support in Serbia.

Recognition is also the option that is least articulated in the proposals of Serbian political actors, which was publicly advocated only by political groups of negligible influence. Even when some actors emphasized the need for a “realistic” view of matters and claimed that they were “not presidents in Priština” (President Tomislav Nikolić) or that Serbia did not have “a single inch” in Kosovo (President Aleksandar Vučić), such a diagnosis was not followed by a recommendation of “therapy” in the form of recognition of independence – but a far broader call for compromise on this issue. This brings us into the classic “chicken-egg” dilemma - is the lack of a clear articulation of Kosovo’s recognition as one of the options the reason why public opinion does not support this option, or is a strong public opinion on this issue the reason why politicians avoid mentioning recognition as a taboo?

It is impossible to give a definite and simple answer to this question. However, the fact is that this “realistic” discourse of the government did not affect the changes in the perception of the current situation. Namely, compared to the period 10 years ago, fewer people in Serbia today believe that Kosovo is lost, regardless of whether they support recognition or not, as already mentioned in the previous part of the analysis. This speaks in favour of the thesis that the influence of political actors in Serbia on public opinion towards Kosovo is still somewhat limited. For example, in a research conducted by the Institute of Social Sciences (IDN) from 2000 to 2004, the percentage of respondents who felt that Kosovo was not lost varied between 22% and 42% (the highest percentage was in 2001, when there was hope that DOS could “return” Kosovo), while the percentage of those who thought that Kosovo was lost ranged between a minimum of 35% in October 2001 and a maximum of 56% in November 2003 (Slavujević 2018). In March 2013, as many as 63% of the citizens in the survey of B92 television and Ipsos Agency thought that Kosovo was lost, while only 32% thought that it was not. The situation has been significantly different in recent years, and all research, with the exception of the research of the Institute for European Affairs from March 2019, showed that there were more people who thought that Kosovo was not lost than those who thought it was. In the surveys of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies from 2018 and 2019, the percentage of those who thought that Kosovo was not lost was as much as 63% and 58%, respectively, and the CSDRI’s survey from September 2019 showed that the absolute majority of citizens (52.1%) believed that Kosovo was not lost.



Also, the mentioned CSDRI’s research showed that even the voters of the ruling parties were not particularly receptive to the messages of such a “realistic” discourse and that those parties encountered cognitive dissonance among voters - who claimed that Serbian leaders were firm and uncompromising about the issue of Kosovo. although they themselves explicitly stated that they were in favour of a compromise! The reasons for this outcome can be found in the reporting of pro-government tabloids, which, seemingly paradoxically (and perhaps deliberately) had a completely different narrative on these topics and thus “blurred” all compromise messages for their readers sent by representatives of the current government on

this topic. Certainly, future research should address in more detail the mutual influence of the media, politicians and public opinion on the issue of Kosovo, in order to arrive at a clearer answer to the question of who in this triangle has the greatest influence on whom.

Table 4. Citizens' support to the recognition of Kosovo's independence

Research implementation period	Organisation	The Agency conducting research	Support to (unconditional) recognition of independence (%)
February 2017	BCSP	CeSID	8%
August 2017	FOD	IPSOS	5%
December 2017	FOD	IPSOS	7%
March 2018.	Tanjug	Faktor plus	8%
March 2019	IEP	Ninamedia	6.2%
May 2019	Blic	Faktor plus	8%
September 2019	CSDRI	Sprint Insight	12.4%
June 2020	IEP	Ninamedia	9%
November 2020	BCSP	Sprint Insight	8%

Note:

-  - responses to questions 'what is the best solution for Kosovo'
-  - responses to questions 'would you support Kosovo's independence'

Are there concessions for which we would recognize Kosovo?

Some research has shown that recognizing Kosovo's independence within the existing borders, with certain additional concessions, would have the support of a slightly larger number of citizens. The problem is that it is impossible to determine the precise opinion of citizens on the basis of existing research results on how many concessions would satisfy them, let alone trends in this regard. For example, in the CSDRI's survey, 20.4% of citizens said they would support the recognition of Kosovo if the Community of Serb Majority Municipalities was established in return and extraterritorial status was granted to Serbian monasteries in Kosovo, while the same percentage was neutral, with 58.2% citizens against it. OSF's survey from December 2017 showed that 7% of citizens believe that the best solution is the recognition of independence with territorial and personal autonomy for Kosovo and Metohija, and when we add the identical percentage of those who supported recognition even without this condition, it makes a total of only 14% of those who would certainly support this proposal. However, the findings of this research indicate the first preferences, so that does not mean that support for a solution with autonomy for Serbs in which independence is recognized would not be greater.

On the other hand, CEAS' survey, conducted almost at the same time as the CSDRI's survey, shows a much greater willingness of Serbian citizens to compromise in the event of

reciprocal concessions. Namely, according to the findings of this research, 62% of citizens would certainly or probably support an agreement that implies mutual recognition, if it would guarantee Serbia an access to resources in northern Kosovo, with a total of 28% of citizens against it. The result is similar if Serbia was offered special status for the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Kosovo, with recognition in that case being accepted or probably accepted by 61% of citizens, and 30% of opposing respondents. Given the extremely high percentage of respondents who oppose recognition, it seems rather surprising that a large number of them would be willing to accept recognition if Serbia received relatively small concessions in return, as suggested by the CEAS' survey. Future public opinion polls should certainly address this aspect of citizens' opinions far more thoroughly, including how much autonomy for Serbs (or how broad the competencies of the CSM) would be enough for some citizens to recognize Kosovo.

Another option that was occasionally mentioned in the discourse of certain political actors was the possibility for Serbia to recognize Kosovo, and in return to "gain" the independence of the Republika Srpska (RS), or even its annexation to Serbia. The analogy between the right to self-determination of Kosovo Albanians and Serbs in BiH was drawn relatively often in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century by Serb officials such as Zoran Đinđić, Vuk Drašković, Nebojša Čović or Slobodan Samardžić, but primarily as an argument against Kosovo's secession because of the possible domino effect. and not as a solution proposal. Since 2008, no such parallels have been used by the leaders in Belgrade, but in the second decade of the 21st century, connecting the fate of Kosovo and RS has become an integral part of the political discourse of the political leader of Serbs in BiH, Milorad Dodik. BCSP's survey from 2020 shows that as many as 80% of Serbian citizens reject this idea. It is obvious, therefore, that the citizens are not only interested in the size of the territory, and that the territorial compensations to Serbia in this way would not be satisfactory for the citizens.

Even EU membership as compensation for the recognition of Kosovo would not be an acceptable concession for most Serbian citizens. Surveys conducted by the New Serbian Political Thought (NSPM) between 2013 and 2017 show that the percentage of respondents who oppose recognition for the sake of EU membership varied over the years between a minimum of 65.5% and a maximum of 76.3%. IEA's surveys between 2016 and 2020 showed that at the end of the decade, this percentage increased even more, so between 77% and 81% of respondents constantly opposed recognition for the sake of a faster path to EU membership. However, if rapid membership was accompanied by other concessions for Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, it is possible that the level of support would be higher. Future research should also address how possible large sums of money that the EU and the United States would donate in case of recognition would affect the opinions of citizens on this issue. Of course, the key question would be how the authorities would articulate this proposal in their communication with the public and how much resources they would invest in winning the public for such a potential solution.

Mysterious variations on the issue of delimitation

When we move from the option of recognizing Kosovo in its current state, with possible concessions regarding the position of Serbs in Kosovo, to the field of various compromises, which include territorial concessions to Serbia for mutual recognition, the possibility of delimitation has been emphasized lately in the discourse of political officials. This solution began to appear in public as a possible solution in 2017, when President Aleksandar Vučić pointed out that he was supporting it and when the internal dialogue on the Kosovo issue in Serbia began. However, neither Vucic nor other political actors specified what the delimitation should mean in practice. Is it the division of Kosovo, the exchange of territories, a small correction of the border line or something else? Where and how would this delimitation be made?

Opinion polls have shown that, as expected, citizens were not sure what the delimitation actually meant. For example, the IEA's survey from March 2019 showed that 57% of citizens did not know what exactly this wording meant, 29% thought that it meant the exchange of territories (northern Kosovo for the Preševo Valley), and 14% thought it meant establishing the border along the current administrative line, i.e., the recognition of Kosovo within its current borders. This finding coincides with the findings of CSDRI's survey conducted six months later, where 58.5% of respondents said they were unfamiliar with President Vučić's policy towards Kosovo.

Certain research has also raised the question of whether citizens would support delimitation, which seems paradoxical, bearing in mind that most do not even know what it means. The CEAS' survey from December 2018 showed that 36% of the respondents would support the delimitation in the referendum, while 34% would be against it, and the rest do not know what they would decide, or they would not participate in the referendum. A year later, the percentage of those who would support delimitation increased to 39%, but the number of opponents also increased to 38%. Finally, this year, the percentage of respondents who would support delimitation in the referendum dropped to only 29%, while the number of opponents increased to as much as 54%. Other surveys showed less support for this solution even before 2020, so the previously mentioned IEA's survey from March 2019 recorded 24.5% of positive opinions of respondents regarding delimitation, with 41.8% of opposing respondents. Two months later, a survey by the daily Blic and the Factor Plus agency showed that 32% of respondents believe that delimitation is the best option for a final solution, without specifying what is meant by delimitation.

Having in mind that the level of support for delimitation varies from research to research, it is not easy to draw a concrete conclusion about how much support the citizens have for this proposal. Such variations are not overly strange, given the inaccuracy of the state leaders

regarding this proposal. However, it seems that one trend can be noticed from the CEAS' research, and that is a serious increase in the number of opponents to delimitation from 2018 to 2020. There may be several reasons for this, but one of the key reasons is probably the fact that lately there has been speculation that such a scenario is impossible due to the rise of the Self-Determination Movement in Kosovo, which strongly opposes it, due to the open opposition to border changes by Germany, and due to the rejection of this option by the United States, which were believed (especially during the period when the president's national security adviser was John Bolton) to be ready to accept and sponsor such an idea a few years ago.

Table 5. Citizens' support to "delimitation"

Research implementation period	Organisation	The Agency conducting research	Support to delimitation
December 2018	CEAS	CeSID	36%
March 2019	IEP	Ninamedia	24.5%
May 2019	Blic	Faktor plus	32%
November 2019	CEAS	CeSID	39%
July 2020	CEAS	CeSID	29%

Note:

- responses to questions 'what is the best solution for Kosovo'
- responses to questions 'would you support delimitation'

Undesirable exchange of territories

When delimitation is further specified as an exchange of territories, the percentage of those who would support such a solution is not large. This option is most often operationalized through a formula: four Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo in exchange for (part of) the predominantly Albanian Preševo Valley in south-central Serbia, and with mutual recognition. Although the concept of "delimitation" can also mean the division of Kosovo, in international and domestic circles, since 2017, more and more people have started talking about how it is actually a proposal for the exchange of territories. It was also indicative that a similar narrative started to be used in this period in Kosovo by the then President Hashim Thaçi, who was believed to be willing to reach an agreement with President Vučić based on this model.

The findings of public opinion polls, which only started to include this option in 2017, contain significant variations in this regard as well, but it is clear that most citizens do not prefer this option and it seems that support for this option even decreases over time. The most positive opinions on the exchange of territory are recorded in the research of the Open Society Fund in Serbia (OSF) from August 2017, in which as many as 20% of surveyed citizens mentioned the exchange option as the most desirable outcome, while in December of

the same year this percentage dropped to 15%. However, it should be noted that the option of division in this survey was accompanied by “special care for the human rights of Serbs who remain in Kosovo and protection of Serbian churches and monasteries”, while support for division without such additions was lower. According to the findings of a 2020 survey by the Belgrade Center for Security Policy (BCSP), only 4% of respondents chose exchange as the most desirable option for Kosovo’s final status. Even when the question is formulated in a way to ask whether this option would be acceptable (even if it is not an initial preference) for citizens, the CSDRI’s survey from September 2019 showed that only 15.8% of respondents would support the exchange of territories if it was proposed as a solution, with unequivocal opposition from two thirds of respondents (66.7%).

The question is whether the support for this proposal would have been greater if President Vučić had clearly and unequivocally said that he supports the exchange of territories as the final solution, instead of saying that he supports “delimitation”. The fact that, as we have already pointed out, a good part of his voters did not take into account his declared inclination towards a compromise solution, adds a dose of scepticism to this conclusion. Also, the question is whether the number of citizens who support the exchange would decrease if it meant receiving only a part of northern Kosovo (and not all four Serb-majority municipalities), or giving in return the entire Bujanovac municipality (where a large number of Serbs live) and the entire Preševo municipality (including the highway), and maybe even the majority of Serbian Medveđa? The assumption is that in that case, support would drop. Certainly, the findings of public opinion clearly suggest that the exchange does not have sufficient support among the citizens of Serbia. In surveys that provide more detailed questionnaires (field), questionnaires could also take into account variations in possible exchange models, as well as how many citizens would support this option in a referendum if it was accompanied by additional concessions (such as extraterritoriality for monasteries or constitution of CSM for Serb-majority municipalities south of the Ibar River) in order to gain a more precise insight into the opinions of citizens on this issue.

Table 6. Citizens’ support to exchange of territories

Research implementation period	Organisation	The Agency conducting research	Support to exchange
August 2017	FOD	IPSOS	14% (with protection for Serbs and SOC)
December 2017	FOD	IPSOS	21% (with protection for Serbs and SOC)
September 2019	CSDRI	Sprint Insight	15.8%
November 2020	BCSP	Sprint Insight	4%

Note:

- responses to questions ‘what is the best solution for Kosovo’
- responses to questions ‘would you support exchange’

Divided over the division

Another possible specification of “delimitation” as a concept would be that it actually means the division of Kosovo. This option has been in the public spotlight much longer and it began to be a possible solution in the 1990s, although the support of neither the public nor the political elites for this option was enough at that time to take it more seriously. However, the divisions of Kosovo along ethnic lines in the conceptions of Dobrica Ćosić, Aleksandar Despić, Branimir Krstić or Slobodan Samardžić significantly differed in the (informally proposed) lines of delimitation, and some also regarding whether it should have meant the definitive secession of the Albanian part of Kosovo from Serbia, in relation to the concept of division that is considered after 1999. In the last 20 years, the term division has most often meant that four Serb-majority municipalities north of the Ibar River become a part of Serbia, and the remaining territory gains internationally recognized independence. The division today contains more support from citizens than the exchange of territories or recognition of independence, but it seems that it is still insufficient to verify such an agreement in a potential referendum.

During the first decade of the 21st century, support for this solution was at a pretty high level, according to the findings of the research of the Institute of Social Sciences (IDN) from Belgrade (Slavujević 2018). In the first years of the 21st century, it reached 37% in the research from 2001, and as much as 43% in 2003. By the end of the decade, it first dropped to 28% between 2007 and 2009, before increasing again to 38% in November 2010. By the end of the next decade, the percentages will remain similar, so IEA's survey from 2016 will show that 37% of respondents would support the division, but only if it is acceptable for Serbs from Kosovo, while 52% rejected this option even in that case. A survey conducted by this organization in March 2018 showed that 33% of respondents would support the division of Kosovo (this time without the condition that it is acceptable for Serbs in Kosovo), while 56% would be against it. This is similar to the findings of the research of Blic and the Factor Plus agency from July 2018, which showed that 32% of respondents would support the division in the referendum, while the option “no” would be selected by 44% of respondents, and almost one quarter of respondents (24%) still did not have an opinion on this issue.

However, the findings of the NSPM's survey from July 2019 indicate that support for the division has dropped to 27.3%, despite a milder formulation in the questionnaire – that, in return, Kosovo will receive international recognition and a seat in the UN, without explicitly mentioning recognition by the official Belgrade. The findings of the CSDRI's survey from September 2019 indicate that only 21.9% of respondents would support this idea in a referendum, with 57.3% opposing and approximately 20.9% undecided. Such findings may indicate a slight downward trend in support to this solution compared to the percentages of surveys conducted in previous years. This can also be noticed in research that sought an

answer to the question of what the best solution for Kosovo is, according to citizens. In the BCSP's survey from February 2017, a total of 11% of respondents pointed out that they see division as the best solution, and in the survey conducted by the same organization in November 2020, that percentage dropped to only 6%. Still, to confirm this hypothesis, it would be necessary to have more regular surveys of citizens' opinions on this issue, with the same formulation of the question, in order to adequately compare changes.

It is certainly interesting that, even if the decline is not as sharp as the comparison of these surveys shows, there is definitely no increase in support for division among the citizens of Serbia, despite the official support of the state leaders to "delimitation". It should be noted that the level of support would probably be lower if the division meant that Serbia does not get all four municipalities in northern Kosovo, which was an option in political circles, but not taken into account by public opinion polls. The only exception is CSDRI's survey from 2019, which also offered an imaginary referendum option in which Serbia gets three municipalities from the north of Kosovo, Kosovska Mitrovica becomes a district, and Trepca and Gazivode go under international administration. This option was supported by 18.9% of respondents - which is three percent less than in the case of delimitation by the Ibar River. This finding partially confirms the assumption that a territorially or otherwise defined division would have even less support from the citizens of Serbia. Future research should take into account different variations of the division and address additional concessions which would make the division acceptable to a larger number of citizens.

Table 7. Support to division of Kosovo

Research implementation period	Organisation	The Agency conducting research	Support to division of Kosovo (without additional conditions)
July 2001	IDN	/	37%
June 2003	IDN	/	43%
October 2007	IDN	/	28%
February 2008	IDN	/	28%
August 2009	IDN	/	28%
November 2010	IDN	/	38%
July 2016	IEP	Ninamedia	37% (with support from Serbs from KiM)
February 2017	BCSP	CeSID	11%
March 2018	IEP	Ninamedia	33%
July 2018	Faktor plus	Faktor plus	32%
July 2019	NSPM	NSPM	27.3%
October 2019	CSDRI	Sprint Insight	21.9%
November 2020	BCSP	Sprint Insight	6%

Note:

- responses to questions 'what is the best solution for Kosovo'
- responses to questions 'would you support the division of Kosovo'

What do we actually want?

Most Serbian citizens would prefer the option of not recognizing Kosovo as part of the final solution. Recent CEAS' surveys have shown that the absolute majority of Serbian citizens are in favour of Kosovo remaining "part of Serbia" at all costs (2018-53%; 2019-66%). The research findings show that in this domain, **a broad autonomy for Kosovo within Serbia** is still the most popular option, so in the last BCSP's survey from November 2020, 48% of respondents chose this concept as their preference for the future status of Kosovo. Somewhat less support for this option was recorded in OSF's surveys in 2017 (August - 26%; December - 28%), but it was still the most popular first choice that respondents would choose. Of course, this is the option of the first choice, so the possible support for this option in a referendum would be far greater. However, research through focus groups conducted by OSF in 2018 showed that citizens were still aware that, although this was a desirable scenario - it was not realistic, because Priština would not want to accept it - just as it did not want to accept this proposal during the 2006-2007 dialogue. At that time, the support of the citizens of Serbia to this idea as an official proposal of Belgrade was also high and amounted to 57% of respondents, according to the findings of the IDN's survey from October 2007 (Slavujević 2018).

When we move to more realistic scenarios, the frozen conflict stands out, that is, *status quo*. In the OSF's survey from 2017, this was not among the most desirable options for a large number of respondents (August - 7%, December - 11%), but a qualitative survey conducted by the same organization the following year qualified this scenario as moderately desirable, but very realistic. Subsequent research by the Factor Plus agency indicated a large percentage of citizens who would support this option (2018 - 63%; 2019 - 50%). A similar finding was recorded by the NSPM's survey from July 2019, according to which a relative majority of 46.2% agreed with the position that the resolution of the status of Kosovo should be postponed for better times, while 32% of respondents were against. All this represents a considerable increase compared to the years around the unilateral declaration of independence (2007-2009) when, according to the findings of the IDN's survey, support for *status quo* was continuously only 4% (Slavujević, 2018). A probable reason for the increase is the fact that a decade later it was realized that the current situation was somehow sustainable and could function without a final solution, and that the solution the majority of Serbian citizens would prefer (broad autonomy within Serbia) was currently unrealistic. However, it is interesting that this finding is in complete contrast with the narrative of state officials (especially President Vučić) who, since the opening of the internal dialogue, have insisted on the need for a historical solution and compromise with Albanians, i.e., the need to get out of the current situation.

The research findings show that **some other options that do not include recognition** could potentially gain the support of Serbian citizens in a possible referendum, although they are far

less popular than broad autonomy or the *status quo* scenario. The BCSP's survey from 2017 showed that the largest number of surveyed citizens (31%) circled the option that any agreement that promotes stability is acceptable to them, as long as there is no formal recognition. If we add those who would support any solution that improves the protection of the rights of Serbs in Kosovo (30%), it is clear that there is a large pool of support for solutions that would include, for example, the establishment of CSM in Kosovo, and some concessions for Priština by Belgrade, but with a condition for Serbia not to recognize Kosovo. This is confirmed by the findings of the CSDRI's survey from September 2019, where 32.6% of respondents said they would support the agreement according to which Kosovo gets a seat in the UN, and Serbs in Kosovo get the final constitution of the CSM, but Serbia does not formally recognize Kosovo. As many as 47.5% of the surveyed citizens are against this scenario, with 19.9% neutral, but it is possible to imagine that, with the government's campaign to support such a scenario, the support would be even higher and would overcome the opposition. When asked to choose between this scenario and the exchange of territories, almost a three-quarter majority of the respondents (72.9%) chose this option without recognition.

There are also two options that include recognition, and which could hypothetically be supported by the majority in Serbia. We will call the first option “**division plus monasteries**”, and it implies a division in which Serbia would get the northern majority Serb municipalities, and the rest of Kosovo would get recognition of independence, but it would be followed by an additional solution for the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo. According to NSPM's research, the option of dividing Kosovo, in which Serbia would have the north and key monasteries, was acceptable to most people during the first half of 2010s. Thus, support for this solution in 2013 amounted to a record 68.6%. From the middle of the decade, the support dropped, and in 2015, such a solution was supported by a relative majority of 46%, with the opposition of 44.4% of respondents. It should be noted that only in the 2015 survey, an opinion was explicitly added that the rest of Kosovo would gain recognized independence, so it is possible that one of the reasons for such a difference in findings within just two years is the emphasis on recognition in the questionnaire (even though this was implicitly stated in earlier questionnaires). However, even in this research, the number of supporters of the division remained higher than the number of opponents. In OSF's survey from December 2017, 21% of respondents chose division as the best solution, with special status for SOC churches and monasteries south of the Ibar - the second most popular choice after broad autonomy. If we add 15% of those who chose the exchange of territories and 7% of those who chose the recognition of independence as the best option (and who would probably support a more favourable division for Serbian side), it is likely that over 40% of respondents would support this option as well, which could then have been the majority of the turnout at the referendum. However, it is still uncertain whether the majority in a possible referendum in the coming years would really support such an option, especially having in mind the

decline in support for the “ordinary” division in the last few years, compared to support that existed previously.



The second option will be called “**division plus guarantees**”, and it implies that, in addition to the division, certain institutional protection would be guaranteed for Serbs south of the Ibar (through a guarantee of self-government / autonomy and / or the stay of KFOR). According to the findings of the CEAS’ survey from autumn 2019, the division, with “broad autonomy” for Serb municipalities south of the Ibar and the continued presence of KFOR, would be supported by as many as 44%, with 25% opposed and a large group of as many as a fourth (25%) of citizens who are “neither for nor against it”. On the other hand, the findings of the CSDRI’s research from the same period (autumn 2019) give different results, according to which the option of division, which would be followed by the constitution of CSM for Serb municipalities south of the Ibar, as well as extraterritoriality for SOC’s monasteries, would be supported by 36.4% citizens, 44.4% would be against it and 19.2% neutral. This finding brings doubts towards the claim that the option “division plus guarantees” or “division plus monasteries” would have the support of the majority, because in this case even the integration of both models did not have the support of a relative majority. Still, it should be emphasized that this option received the greatest support of all the compromise solutions offered to the surveyed citizens in the mentioned research. With a referendum campaign, it would be very possible for the 8% difference between support and opposition to disappear and for this option to gain the support of the majority of citizens. In the future, it would be very useful to develop more precise questionnaires, in order to get a clearer insight into the degree of concessions in these domains that would satisfy the citizens of Serbia sufficiently to choose the option “yes” in a potential referendum, and to understand whether institutional concessions for Serbs south of the Ibar are more important than those for the SOC.

Table 8. Citizens’ support to different “division plus” options

Research implementation period	Organisation	The Agency conducting research	Additional concession with division (“plus”)	Support for “division plus”
November 2011	NSPM	NSPM	“monasteries most important”	50.8%
May 2013	NSPM	NSPM	“monasteries most important”	68.6%
October 2015	NSPM	NSPM	“monasteries most important”	46%
August 2017	FOD	IPSOS	“special status for SOC’s churches and monasteries”	15%*
December 2017	FOD	IPSOS	“special status for SOC’s churches and monasteries”	21%*
September 2019	CSDRI	Sprint Insight	“CSM in the south and extraterritoriality for Serbian	36.4%

			monasteries”	
November 2019	CEAS	CeSID	“continuing the presence of KFOR and broad autonomy for Serb municipalities” (south of the Ibar)	44%

Note:

-  - responses to questions ‘what is the best solution for Kosovo’
-  - responses to questions ‘would you support division plus’

Conclusion

Although we know what we do not want at all, as well as what we would like the most if it was possible (broad autonomy of Kosovo within Serbia), it seems that it is difficult to define what would be acceptable to us in the end. This situation is not surprising, given the confusion produced by the state leaders regarding this topic. According to IEA’s survey from June 2020, as many as 89% of citizens believed that they did not know what the plan of the Government of Serbia for Kosovo was. The internal dialogue obviously did not contribute to better communication between the citizens and the state leaders regarding the solution for the status of Kosovo, because only 3% of the citizens in the IEA’s survey from March 2019 said that they participated in it. However, it is anticipated that citizens would prefer an option that does not imply the recognition of Kosovo, especially if it contributes to a better position of Serbs in Kosovo. In addition, the option of division and additional concessions for Serbs south of the Ibar and for the SOC could have the support of the majority of citizens, but only with an adequate campaign. As mentioned several times, in the future, public opinion polls should calibrate their questionnaires much more precisely, so that we can get more concrete information about citizens’ opinions on this topic, and specific proposals in this regard will be presented in the last part of this analysis. It would also be desirable to have more questionnaires conducted in direct (face to face) surveys of citizens, which has been the case since 2013 only in the BCSP, CSDRI and FOD’s surveys, while the rest were conducted by telephone surveys.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Public opinion polls on Kosovo, the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, or relations between Serbs and Albanians attract a great deal of interest from the public and are therefore often conducted. This research, for example, identified and covered 36 quantitative public opinion polls conducted in the period 2013-2020, with different scope of topics and methodological approaches.⁹ While analysing the findings and trends, the research team noted that, although very useful for understanding the current situation, all research suffers from certain problems that make it impossible to accurately determine the dynamics of changes in citizens' opinions over time. In other words, although there is a sufficient number of surveys at almost strictly regular time intervals, due to inconsistencies in research design it is impossible to analyse them as a time series.

Therefore, in addition to analysing public opinion in previous sections of the report, this chapter examines methodological approaches in public opinion research in more detail, with the intention of proposing ways to address the above mentioned shortcomings. This would improve the research agenda about citizens' opinions on these important issues, upgrade the quality of available data and provide a better understanding of changes and trends that are evident but insufficiently researched.

Sample and methodology

The main difference between the analysed public opinion polls is in the way the respondents' answers were collected. Most research have applied telephone interviewing, most often computer-assisted telephone interviewing, so-called CATI (e.g., a series of IEA's surveys or the ones done for daily newspapers), while face-to-face method was used less often (CSDRI, OSF and BCSP's surveys). Although due to a lower cost and simpler implementation, telephone interviewing is often the only option, field research and face-to-face interviews are a gold standard of public opinion polls. Without going into a detailed consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of these different approaches, it is important to note that they are not always comparable for the following reasons.

First, although most surveys include enough respondents to make estimates for the population of Serbia as a whole (between 1000-1200), sampling errors are always higher in those conducted by telephone than in face-to-face interviews. Telephone interviews cannot provide the representativeness that field research can, as it depends on the willingness to respond to the call as well as the prevalence and use of telephones in households. While some of these challenges can be addressed by research design, some are inevitable. For example, although some telephone surveys stratify their sample by gender, age, education, and region in which

⁹ See the annex with the list of all used surveys.

respondents live (IEA), they immediately exclude an increasing percentage of people who use only mobile phones and who are not covered by this approach at all.

An additional challenge regarding telephone interviews is that they are not suitable for researching views on complex issues, which the topic of Kosovo certainly is. For example, a large number of surveys after 2017 focused on how citizens understand the proposal on demarcation, which at that time began to be presented in the media as one of the solutions within the negotiations between Belgrade and Priština. The initial results showed that citizens generally do not understand what exactly this proposal includes, which may be a consequence of communication difficulties, and in a telephone conversation it should be explained that it could mean exchange of territories (northern Kosovo for Presevo Valley), but also recognition of Kosovo within current borders, i.e., setting the border where the administrative line is now.

Finally, some opinion polls, in addition to only providing statistics without interpretation, which is left to the imagination of readers, do not report at all on the methodology used. This makes it impossible to assess the quality of the results obtained in this way, and it primarily refers to research that was done for the needs of dailies, such as the research conducted by Factor Plus for the daily Blic or the Tanjug agency. Although it is understandable that newspaper articles are written in a way that is different from research reports, it is necessary to include at least basic data on the size and representativeness of the sample, as well as data collection methods.

Based on this brief analysis of methodological challenges, general recommendations for the future research agenda are as follows:

- Be clear and unambiguous about the methodology used in the research, always trying to state at least the method of data collection, and the description and size of the sample
- If a telephone survey is conducted, the questionnaire must be relatively short, with simply formulated closed-ended questions with a small number of possible answers:
 - Example: It is methodologically more justified to ask the following question in a telephone interview “Do you support the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština?” with the possible answers *yes*, *no* and *do not know/refuse to answer*, instead of asking the same question with the options for answers: *Yes, if that is a condition for EU membership*, *Yes, if it leads to...*, *No, under no conditions*.
- Questions about complex problems, as well as insufficiently clear topics, are best not included in telephone interviews, but analysed in face-to-face interviews when the opportunity arises. Whenever material and organizational conditions allow, it is recommended to conduct field research.

Different dynamics and topics of questionnaires

There were many problems that researchers encountered when making this analysis. In some cases, important questions were not covered by opinion polls for a longer period, which made it impossible to analyse the results as time series. In addition, questions about Kosovo have often been an integral part of other research, on the topics of European integration (EU Delegation research) or foreign policy (CEAS), so it is difficult to do an analysis outside the context of the overall research.

However, the biggest problem the authors encountered in the analysis of public opinion research is that the findings are often incomparable, even when conducted by the same organizations over a long period of time, and there are two main reasons for this. First, the negotiation process between Belgrade and Priština is very dynamic and new topics are often imposed that affect the research agenda. For example, previously mentioned idea of demarcation as one of the modalities for resolving a dispute appeared in 2017 and was included in research after that period. In addition to the fact that there is no data on the opinions of citizens on this topic before it became part of the public discourse, it also influenced the subsequent results where this solution is mentioned as one of the possible issues dealing with the outcomes of the Brussels dialogue. This made the previous trends from the questionnaire regarding some other solutions incomparable, such as the *status quo*, because they do not measure this variable. Another cause is inconsistency in research issues, which has nothing to do with events in the environment or with the course of the dialogue but is a consequence of research design. Both problems can be solved to some extent, and obstacles prevented, and the analysis that follows below offers some suggestions for that purpose.

One of the standard issues covered by most of the surveys is how much the citizens are informed about the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština and/or the agreements reached. Although particularly important to understand how citizens see the dialogue and its results, different approaches make the answers incomparable. For example, previously presented data from the research conducted by CSDRI (2019) on the level of information about the dialogue was obtained from answers to the question '*Are you truly informed about the agreements from Brussels signed between Belgrade and Priština?*', with the available answers being 'not informed' (62.3%), 'partly informed' (25.1%) and 'informed' (12.6%). Although it offers three answers on different levels of information on the Likert scale, which is used in other research and is thus comparable and offers a sufficient level of detail, the qualification '*truly informed*' can lead respondents to be more modest about how much they are informed. This is evident when compared to a survey conducted by BCSP in 2020, where 36.9% are not informed, 45.5% are only partly informed and 17.9% are informed about the dialogue agreements. Such a large difference between those uninformed about the results of the dialogue cannot be explained by any change in the approach to reporting of the media or

actors involved in the dialogue but can rather be seen as a consequence of the methodological approach. On the other hand, this data from the BCSP's survey was obtained on the basis of question that combined an assessment of the level of information and a statement on the transparency of the dialogue in the offered answers: *Yes, I am informed, the process is transparent; I am partly informed, the process is very non-transparent, and I am not informed, the process is completely non-transparent.* This could also affect the results as two answers were actually offered within one question, and it can be assumed that there are respondents who may think that the dialogue is not transparent enough, which most think, but that they are nevertheless sufficiently informed.

In relation to this topic, the research on the level of information about the dialogue conducted by OSF in 2017, in two stages, in August and December, and CSDRI in 2019, illustrate another problem. Both surveys have a similarly worded question, OSF, *to what extent do you follow topics and events related to Kosovo?* and CSDRI *how often do you follow the news about Kosovo?* However, research conducted by OSF uses a customized 5-response Likert scale from *'do not follow at all'* *'follow very carefully'*, with a mean value formulated as *'only main issues / basic events'*, while CSDRI uses a 4-answer Likert scale with no mean value. It is known that the scale with 4 offered answers forces the respondents to form an opinion on the spot or to reject the answer otherwise, since they do not have a neutral option available. Therefore, it is not surprising that as many as 28% of respondents who opted for the mean value in the 2017 survey chose some other options in the 2019 survey, and the results obtained are quite different and completely incomparable. The difference between 50% and 60% of respondents who do not follow the topic at all or not much in the OSF's research is especially noticeable, respectively in the surveys from August and December 2017, compared to 55% of respondents from 2019 who follow the topic to a greater or lesser extent.

Suggestions:

- The issue of the level of information citizens have is one of the key issues in the research agenda and it is desirable to continue measuring it in the future.
- The Likert scale with three offered answers ensures a sufficient level of detail and it can be conducted both by phone and face to face, and it is possible to compare it with a simple calculation to surveys with 5 or 7 answers.
- The formulation of the question must be unambiguous, and it would be good to separate the survey into three topics: level of information, i.e., the extent to which respondents follow the news about the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, which is recognized as the Brussels dialogue; knowledge of agreements arising from the dialogue, and assessment of the transparency of the dialogue.
- Avoid using imprecise terms in questions, such as the concept of *demarcation*, if it is not clearly specified what it means. This is especially important for vague terms that are present in the public sphere at the time of conducting research and polarize society.

In addition to the level of information, two topics that are equally present in the research are those about the future of the dialogue and its results, i.e., about what would be an acceptable solution. As mentioned in the previous parts of the analysis, in general, the results show that the citizens of Serbia are in favour of continuing the dialogue, while returning Kosovo to Serbia, or the *status quo*, which are seen as ideal solutions with some minor variations appearing in time. However, as different solutions were changing on the negotiating agenda, they were included in public opinion polls and this was reflected in the obtained results, which for this reason are often incomparable.

An excellent example to illustrate the challenges related to this topic are two face-to-face surveys conducted, independently of each other, by two different agencies in September and October 2020 for the needs of BCSP. Since this is a minimum period that elapsed between the two surveys, and both were conducted on a representative, stratified sample, the differences in the results cannot be a consequence of a change in opinions but are due to methodological causes. In the first survey, for the question *whether the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština should continue*, three answers were offered, and the results showed that: the vast majority of respondents (83%) are of the opinion that it should, regardless of the presence of foreign pressure; only 8% believe that negotiations should continue if this increases the chances of Serbia's membership in the EU, while 9% of respondents believe that negotiations should not continue. The second survey, just a month later with differently formulated answers to the question *do you support the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia*, gave the following results: 51% gave an affirmative response, 28% negative, and 21% said they did not know. Although the questions are essentially very similar, in addition to the fact that the formulation of the first issue in the context of Belgrade-Priština negotiations is more status-neutral than the second, where Kosovo-Serbia negotiations are mentioned, the first question additionally emphasizes the need to continue dialogue, whereas the second one transfers the focus to how the dialogue is currently conducted. With different answers offered, which, in the first question, are qualified with different conditions without the option *I do not know*, and in the second the only options are *yes, no, I do not know*, this makes the results very different and difficult to interpret. In addition to this approach, the 2017 BCSP's survey had some new categories in the responses, where one option was also that the dialogue should continue only if it does not lead to the recognition of Kosovo, and another one on condition that it leads to the protection of Serbian interests, which was chosen by almost 40% of respondents.

In addition to the issue of dialogue, it is also very important what outcome of the negotiations between Belgrade and Priština is acceptable to the citizens. With a complete cacophony when it comes to possible solutions, which was also contributed by the unclear positions of Serbia and its goals in the negotiations, the situation is further complicated due to inconsistent issues. This is also the topic with the greatest number of variations in research. They range

from very simple questions such as the IEA's survey on whether citizens would support Kosovo's independence if it was a condition for EU membership, to questions in CSDRI's research on participating in a referendum where citizens would vote on seven possible outcomes (from the recognition of Kosovo's independence to Kosovo's membership in the UN with the formation of the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities and non-recognition of independence), to BCSP's survey from 2020, where out of 6 offered options, the most popular one was the return of Kosovo and Metohija to Serbia.

In addition to the fact that all the proposed solutions are very complex and difficult to communicate, there is a frequent need to adjust the questionnaires due to the appearance of some new proposals on the negotiating agenda. Therefore, it is not necessary to mention that it is almost impossible to establish a unique research approach that would enable the comparability of such research. However, what could certainly be ensured is the inclusion of key parameters in the basic research questions, and questionnaires could be supplemented with additional ones if necessary. Some suggestions for this purpose are listed below.

Suggestions:

- include basic questions in the research on whether citizens support the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština (*yes, no, I do not know / refuse to answer*), as well as on reaching a final, legally binding agreement between Serbia and Kosovo (*yes, no, I do not know / refuse to answer*)
- if possible, especially if the research is conducted face-to-face, include additional questions after the basic ones, which would measure support for different options. Example:

There should be the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština:

regardless of the existing pressure from the EU;

only if that will increase chances for EU membership;

only if it does not lead to recognition of Kosovo's independence;

only if it ensures protection of Serbian interests;

there should not be a dialogue;

I do not know.

- for questions related to the results of the dialogue, one solution may be to formulate questions at a more general level of outcome, while offering a choice of options based on respondents' preferences regarding the elements of the agreement. The question could be:

What outcome of the negotiations between Belgrade and Priština would be acceptable for you personally?

- *Leading to Kosovo's independence:*

- *Within the existing borders*
- *With a division of territories (North of Kosovo a part of Serbia)*
- *With the establishment of CSM*
- *With a special status for monasteries and protection of Serbian cultural heritage*

A brief history of citizens' views on the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. What has (not) changed?

- *With a quick EU membership for Serbia*
- *Keeping status quo*
 - *Without agreement, frozen conflict*
 - *With Kosovo's membership in international organisations*
 - *With the establishment of CSM*
- *Enabling the return of Kosovo to Serbia*

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