Interethnic Relations and Reconciliation in Kosovo: Political and Media Narratives in Perspective

Policy Report
November 2025

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The policy report "Interethnic Relations and Reconciliation in Kosovo: Political and Media Narratives in Perspective" is prepared with the support of the "SMART Balkans – Civil Society for Shared Society in the Western Balkans" regional project implemented by the Centar za promociju civilnog društva (CPCD), Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) and financially supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA). The content of this policy report is the sole responsibility of the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED) and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA).

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Executive Summary

This paper examines how political, civil society, media and public opinion dynamics shape interethnic relations and reconciliation in Kosovo. The study explores how the key actors frame narratives on interethnic relations, how these narratives travel through media ecosystems, and how they are perceived by citizens across communities.

Empirically, the paper weaves together four strands. First, it analyses semi-structured interviews with four senior political figures (PDK, LDK, AAK and the Minister for Return) alongside a rule-based coding of their parties' Facebook posts between September 2022 and October 2024. Second, it examines interviews with leading civil society organizations working on dialogue, transitional justice and non-majority rights. Third, it assesses journalists' and editors' accounts of their own practice, complemented by a narrative analysis of coverage in 16 Albanian- and Serbian-language outlets from September 2022 to October 2024. Finally, it draws on a nationally representative omnibus poll (N≈1,165) conducted in September 2025 to capture citizens' views on interethnic relations, media, and political narratives.

Qualitative testimonies are treated as expert accounts of discursive environments and constraints, while media and social-media content is coded into conciliatory, hardline/security-focused, stigmatizing and neutral categories; the poll provides a bottom-up picture of normative priorities and trust patterns.

The findings on political-elite discourse are stark. All interviewed leaders agree that interethnic relations have deteriorated, though they stress different drivers, from Serb boycott and instrumentalization of other minorities to "law before dialogue" approaches and deepening distrust between central and local levels. Systematic analysis of party Facebook posts shows that across VV, PDK, LDK, AAK and especially Lista Srpska, communication that explicitly addresses interethnic themes is dominated by hardline, security-first frames, with only a small share of conciliatory messages and, in the case of Lista Srpska, a visible layer of stigmatizing content. AAK maintains a mixed, but still securitized profile, while Nenad Rašić appears as an outlier whose communication is largely non-confrontational. Together, these patterns normalize a conflict-centered agenda in citizens' information diets and send repeated signals that dialogue is exceptional and risky rather than a routine part of democratic life.

Civil society leaders working on reconciliation describe a persistent asymmetry of leverage. They are able to sustain cross-ethnic contact, cultivate "micro-trust" and build counter-narratives through coalitions, civic education, debunking and storytelling, but these gains are repeatedly undermined by escalatory rhetoric, smear campaigns, security incidents and a tightening civic space since 2021. Delegitimisation of bridge-builders as "collaborators," unresolved and competing narratives of the 1990s war, and chronic funding precarity further narrow the room for sustained, long-horizon reconciliation work. The cumulative picture is not one of failure but of contingent success: progress is possible, yet it resets whenever state and party actors send exclusionary rather than reassuring signals.

The media environment sits between restraint and polarization. Compared with the pre-independence period and crises such as March 2004, mainstream Albanian- and Serbian-language outlets are more disciplined: they largely avoid explicit hate speech, rely on the national Code of Ethics, apply higher verification thresholds and use de-ethnicised language and senior gatekeeping to "cool" potentially inflammatory stories. Yet structurally, coverage remains skewed toward security, crisis and high politics rather than everyday coexistence, shared interests and local-level cooperation. Language deficits among reporters, weak field presence in Serb-majority areas and two largely parallel media ecosystems combine to produce a "stereotype of absence," in which ordinary cross-community life rarely appears in the news, while a politicized, click-driven belt monetizes identity and grievance. Journalists report operating in a pressure environment shaped by economic fragility, shrinking donor support, opaque institutions, militant online networks and cross-border propaganda from Belgrade-aligned outlets, all of which encourage caution or self-censorship, particularly in the north. At the same time, "professional islands" already model more constructive practice through multi-source reporting that includes non-majority voices, mixed-studio formats, citizenship-first language and cross-language content sharing.

The opinion poll adds a crucial bottom-up perspective. Around 78% of respondents rate interethnic relations and reconciliation as important or very important in their own lives, with this high level of normative commitment broadly shared across Albanians, Serbs and other communities, as well as across age and gender groups. Nearly two-thirds believe Kosovo's politicians should adopt a clearer and more open approach to promoting interethnic reconciliation, with outright opposition limited to 5% of the sample. At the same time, trust in key intermediaries is very low. Only about one-third of respondents express any trust in media reporting on interethnic relations, while roughly two-thirds report little or no trust, a pattern that is most pronounced among Serb respondents but evident among Albanians as well. Political narratives and media are nevertheless seen as highly influential: majorities in all groups believe that both significantly shape public perceptions of interethnic relations. However, Albanians tend to view political communication as modestly helpful for reconciliation, Serbs overwhelmingly see it as harmful, and other minorities often judge it as having no real effect, revealing sharply divergent experiences of the same discourse. Taken together, the four pillars point to a basic asymmetry. On the societal side, there is substantial latent demand for more constructive interethnic relations and for a political agenda that takes reconciliation seriously. On the institutional side, the actors best placed to respond to this demand – especially political elites and partisan media – too often produce securitised and sometimes stigmatizing narratives that circulate in a low-trust information environment.

In sum, the study argues that Kosovo does not face a lack of public demand for reconciliation, but a shortage of credible, trusted intermediaries and institutions willing to use their communicative power to build, rather than erode, interethnic trust. The paper therefore concludes with targeted recommendations aimed at aligning leadership, media practice and civic initiatives with this broad societal mandate.

It calls on the Presidency, Government, Assembly and political parties to adopt and internalise a doctrine of responsible speech that avoids hate speech, ethnic slurs and collective blame, rejects exaggerated security-focused framing that portrays entire communities as threats, and uses fact-based, de-escalatory language, especially in times of crisis. This should be embedded in party rules and matched by concrete guarantees through consistent enforcement of language rights, proportional representation of non-majority communities in public institutions and systematic consultation with locally elected Serb and other representatives of non-majority communities.

Public and major private outlets are urged to invest in Albanian–Serbian bilingual capacity and joint editorial projects so that sensitive topics, such as developments in north Kosovo, mixed municipalities and security incidents, are reported from the ground in a professional, inclusive and bilingual manner, with donors and regulators incentivizing content that highlights coexistence, joint economic interests and local cooperation.

Finally, political leaders and state officials should cease delegitimising cross-ethnic initiatives and instead publicly affirm the work of civil society actors engaged in dialogue, transitional justice and non-majority rights, ensuring that storytelling on practical cross-community cooperation is systematically linked to mainstream and local media rather than remaining confined to project reports.

Introduction

Interethnic relations and reconciliation remain central to Kosovo's social fabric a quarter century after the 1998–1999 war and more than 17 years after independence. Despite formal guarantees of non-majority rights and repeated commitments to dialogue, political and security crises in the north, recurrent boycott cycles and polarized rhetoric have kept relations fragile.

Hence, this paper brings together four empirical sections in order to map the narrative landscape of inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo. First, it examines how political elites frame inter-ethnic relations through semi-structured interviews with key leaders and a systematic analysis of party Facebook posts from September 2022 to October 2024. Second, it analyses interviews with civil society leaders who work directly on dialogue, transitional justice and non-majority rights. Third, it explores how journalists and editors in mainstream Albanian and Serbian language media understand and practice reporting on inter-ethnic issues, complemented by a narrative analysis of coverage in sixteen outlets between September 2022 and October 2024. Finally, it draws on a nationally representative omnibus opinion poll conducted in September 2025 to capture how citizens themselves view inter-ethnic relations, the media and political narratives.

Methodologically, the paper combines qualitative and quantitative tools. Political leaders', journalists' and civil society interviews are treated as expert testimonies on discursive environments, institutional constraints and field practices. Social media and news content are coded using a rule-based lexicon that distinguishes between conciliatory or dialogue-first messages, hardline or security-first frames, stigmatizing or othering language and neutral or bureaucratic communication. The opinion poll provides a complementary bottom-up perspective on how important inter-ethnic relations are to citizens, how much they trust media and political actors and how they perceive the impact of political and media narratives on reconciliation.

On the basis of these four strands, the paper concludes with a set of focused policy recommendations for political institutions, media actors, civil society and international partners, aimed at promoting responsible and inclusive public communication, strengthening professional and bilingual reporting from the ground, and supporting cross-ethnic initiatives that respond to citizens' expressed demand for more constructive inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo.

1. Political Leaders' Narratives and Interethnic Relations

Introduction

This section analyzes how political-elite discourse shapes interethnic relations in Kosovo by combining semi-structured interviews with leaders of key political parties,[1] Bernard Nika (PDK), Lutfi Haziri (LDK), Ardian Gjini (AAK) and Nenad Rašić (Minister for Return), conducted between April and August 2025, with a systematic analysis of party Facebook posts from September 2022 to October 2024. It addresses four interlinked questions, namely how these leaders assess the current "temperature" of interethnic relations, how political rhetoric influences public perceptions and prospects for reconciliation, which policy instruments they consider relevant for improving relations, and how political and media narratives might be reframed to rebuild trust across communities.

Methodologically, the study reconstructs leaders' frames from interviews and applies a rule-based coding of social media content to map conciliatory, hardline or security-focused, stigmatizing and neutral tones. The core claim emerging from both evidence streams is that discourse sets incentives, in the sense that incident-driven hardline messaging can crowd out dialogue, whereas normalized contact and concrete guarantees expand the space for coexistence.

- **The State of Inter-Ethnic Relations**

All four interviewed political leaders agree that inter-ethnic relations have deteriorated, though they emphasize different drivers. Nikaj stresses system-level decline across multiple non-majority relations and a deepening distrust between central and local levels. Haziri grounds his assessment in Serb-community, boycott-driven disengagement (especially in the north) and in the instrumentalization of other non-majority communities. Gjini warns about sequencing coercive legality before social dialogue. Rašić highlights the wedge-driving role of political elites, which outpaces citizens' more pragmatic coexistence.

Against this backdrop, Nikaj argues that inter-ethnic relations are at their lowest point since 1999, and especially since 2008, and that this deterioration extends beyond Albanian–Serb relations to ties between the Albanian majority and most non-majority communities. He links this trend to parliamentary dynamics, particularly difficulties in forming majorities with non-majority parties, and to the governing party's rhetoric, which he contends has alienated former partners. He adds that even in Serb-majority municipalities south of the Ibar, mayors find it "impossible" to meet central government officials, which is an indicator of degraded inter-institutional trust—while tensions in the north further heighten risk.

[1] KIPRED's research team contacted Mr. Glauk Konjufca, Vice-President of VV, and Mr. Dalibor Jevtić, Vice-President of Lista Srpska, to request interviews, but did not receive any response.

Haziri disaggregates inter-ethnic relations into two tracks. Among political and civic representatives of Serb communities, especially in the north, he sees boycott, "limited relations," and an almost complete absence of cooperation with the Government of Kosovo. Among other non-majority communities besides Serbs, he observes deep instrumentalization for everyday political purposes, producing fragmented and tense representation rather than stable integration. He also traces two phases of Serb political boycott, the first immediately after independence and the second in recent years, and argues that both were errors that depressed legitimate representation.

Gjini emphasizes a structural divide, in which non-majority communities other than Serbs have generally moved toward integration, while Serb communities have resisted it and kept alive hopes of future border changes. He argues that Kosovo's political class tolerated this stance for a period, expecting that a softer approach would eventually integrate Serbs. In his view the last five years have brought a shift toward a law before dialogue approach, which he believes increases antagonism and is unlikely to result in durable integration.

Rašić distinguishes citizens from politicians: everyday cooperation among citizens exists, but political actors repeatedly pull relations backward - "one step forward, two steps back" - through negative, non-conciliatory narratives, especially in Albanian–Serb relations.

Taken together, the four interviews indicate that the cooling of interethnic relations stems less from deep-seated social animosity than from the discourse of political elites, which steadily erodes trust. This erosion leaves cooperation brittle and communities vulnerable to episodic shocks. Ultimately, the trajectory is shaped less by the existence of differences than by how leaders frame them, whether and when they engage across them, and which narratives the media elevate as representative.

- **Political Elite Rhetoric and Shaping of Inter-Ethnic Perceptions**

The interviewed political leaders identify four distinct narrative frames shaping interethnic relations in Kosovo: (1) narrative narrowing and estrangement; (2) master narratives that frame non-majority communities; (3) identity insecurity and solidarity erosion; and (4) escalation motivations and performative toughness.

In this regard, Nikaj links the current downturn to a governing discourse that stigmatizes interlocutors and normalizes non-engagement. According to him, when senior leaders avoid meeting Serb counterparts or even Serb civil society, it signals that inter-communal dialogue is abnormal or illegitimate. Consequently, this perception cascades into local government, where practical cooperation stalls. He also warns that failing to build internal interethnic dialogue cedes the megaphone to competing narratives, which then "take root."

Haziri traces how successive governments have framed cooperation or non-cooperation with non-majority communities in different ways. LDK's post-war approach emphasized reserved

representation and direct cooperation with community actors, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, to secure legitimacy. PDK favored inclusion through offers and centralized deals. By contrast, he argues that the current ruling party, VV, has cultivated a securitized narrative toward Serbs, thereby narrowing the consensual space for reconciliation.

On the other hand, Gjini argues that when the majority's public discourse foregrounds national identity ("we are Albanians") as the primary frame, non-majority communities respond by hardening their own ethno-national identities and downgrading a shared state identity, undermining the solidarity needed for state-building.

Rašić observes that in the Balkan media market, radical and even chauvinist language outperforms moderation, as clicks and sensationalism crowd out "lighter" stories of coexistence. This dynamic incentivizes politicians to outbid one another with hardline rhetoric, distorts public perception and suppresses conciliatory frames.

In sum, the interviews indicate that when leaders stigmatize counterparts and ignore cooperation, they show the public that dialogue is abnormal. Consequently, cooperation then fades through the tiers of governance, resulting to a vacuum filled by competing hardline narratives. Furthermore, identity-first messaging invites mirror hardening among non-majority communities and weakens a shared civic frame, while media that reward sensationalism amplify the most polarizing cues.

- **Policy Pathways to Improve Interethnic Relations**

The interviewed political leaders identify four complementary policy approaches to improve interethnic relations: (1) normalizing the elite-level dialogue and contacts; (2) providing the structured guarantees and practical inclusion; (3) putting the dialogue first, with legality in the service of trust; and (4) prioritizing the citizens first approach, with politicians in a supporting role.

Against this backdrop, Nikaj calls for re-normalizing discussions between Albanian and Serb political actors at the highest levels so that such meetings cease to be "strange." He links this to resuming non-electoral but consequential topics from dialogue with Serbia to a broader, society-wide narrative coalition that includes civil society and media. Nikaj also stresses coordination with international actors and warns that miss-sequenced or perceived coercive policies toward Serb communities invite extremist narratives to fill the vacuum.

Haziri's policy core is dialogue as "the only instrument," backed by constitutional guarantees of representation at all levels, language rights, and curriculum harmonization developed with Serb representatives to build a sense of preservation of identity and security. He also emphasizes that the state should remove real and perceived discrimination, cultivate trust, and avoid instrumentalizing non-majority communities for day-to-day political purposes. In this regard, he points to inter-municipal cooperation in the southeast, across Serb-majority and Albanian-

majority municipalities, as proof that technical collaboration can be routine and tension-free when de-politicized and focused on shared services.

Gjini cautions against leading with legal enforcement absent prior human-level dialogue. He argues that "law before dialogue" aggravates antagonism and fails to produce sustainable integration, drawing on comparative intuition from beyond Kosovo. He urges policies that create an unmistakable feeling that "Serbs of Kosovo are not unwanted," after which practical integration (education, political participation, etc.) becomes easier.

Rašić argues that the usual sequence should be reversed, with so called light stories from everyday life taking the lead, for example multiethnic projects and joint economic initiatives, while politicians concentrate on providing infrastructure and budgets rather than seeking visibility and promotion. In his view, economic cooperation is the most promising sector for advancing common interests, and proportional representation of members of non Albanian communities in the administration would create a cadre able to shape institutions from within. He emphasizes that citizens already cooperate more than politicians permit, so public policy should remove barriers created at the elite level and amplify the successes that already exist among citizens.

Taken together, these proposals outline a coherent and sequenced pathway to stronger interethnic relations. First, elite contact should be normalized in order to reset motivations and make dialogue a routine rather than an exceptional practice. Second, constitutional and practical guarantees such as representation, language rights and curriculum cooperation should be secured so that inclusion becomes tangible rather than rhetorical. Third, dialogue should precede enforcement, with legality used to consolidate trust rather than to replace it. Finally, stories from everyday life led by citizens, especially joint economic initiatives, should be brought to the forefront, while politicians focus on providing the necessary infrastructure and budgets. If pursued together and coordinated with international partners, this combination can turn episodic cooperation into durable practice, reduce the space for hard line narratives and build resilience against future shocks.

- **Analyses of the social media posts**

For the purpose of this study, KIPRED assembled a corpus of Facebook posts published by VV (Vetëvendosje), PDK, LDK, AAK, Lista Srpska, and the pages of Nenad Rašić between 1 September 2022 and 31 October 2024. The corpus was then filtered to posts explicitly referencing interethnic themes excluding here the statements on commemorations related to the 1998/1999 war, using a compact multilingual (Albanian/Serbian/English) keyword list.

We applied a rule-based lexicon to assign each post related to (inter-ethnicity) with one overall label: (i) Conciliatory/Dialogue-first (e.g., *dialogue, coexistence, rights, cooperation*), (ii) Hardline/Security-first (e.g., *threat, attack, criminality, sanctions, incidents*), (iii) Stigmatizing/Othering (pejoratives tied to an ethnic group), or (iv) Neutral/Bureaucratic (informational/administrative without affective cues). "When multiple tones co-occurred, one

overall label was assigned by precedence: Stigmatizing → Hardline → Conciliatory → Neutral. This conservatively avoids understating harmful rhetoric. Nevertheless, the following few limits of this methodology have to be underlined. Rule-based tagging may miss nuance, and percentages based on small actor samples are less stable. Findings should therefore be read as indicative tone patterns rather than definitive measures of intent.

Against this methodological background, the results are analyzed below.

VV (n=101) — Conciliatory 5 (4.95%); Hardline/Security 61 (60.39%); Stigmatizing/Othering 2 (1,98%); Neutral 33 (32.67 %). VV's communication is incident-driven and sovereignty-centric. While conciliatory messages are present, followers are more frequently exposed to security/legal framing and some othering—conditions that can normalize confrontation unless neutral slots are deliberately used to carry inclusive cues.

PDK (n=22) — Conciliatory 0 (0.0%); Hardline/Security 19 (86.3%); Stigmatizing 0 (0.0%); Neutral 3 (13.7%). The PDK sample is almost monolithic in its securitized framing. The absence of stigmatizing content suggests that this hardline framing is not systematically paired with overt ethnic slurs or explicit othering, but it still reinforces a conflict-centered narrative in which security risks and confrontations dominate the agenda.

LDK (n=19) — Conciliatory 0 (0.00%); Hardline 15 (78.9%); Stigmatizing 0 (0.0%); Neutral 4 (21.1%). LDK's communication in this sample normalizes a security-first lens on inter-ethnic issues. The lack of stigmatizing content indicates that this hardline framing is not consistently accompanied by explicit ethnic slurs or open othering

AAK (n=27) — Conciliatory 8 (29.6%); Hardline 18 (66.6%); Stigmatizing 0 (0.0%); Neutral (3.7%). With two thirds of the items coded as hardline and almost one third as conciliatory, AAK oscillates between a firm, threat-focused narrative and messages that leave room for dialogue, coexistence, or de-escalation.

Lista Srpska (n=147) — Conciliatory 0 (0.0%); Hardline 111 (75.5%); Stigmatizing 11 (7.5%); Neutral 25 (17.0%); The Lista Srpska corpus is overwhelmingly confrontational and securitized. This discourse leaves virtually no space for dialogue, compromise, or shared problem-solving. Instead, it normalizes a narrative of threat, confrontation, and grievance, by occasional explicit stigmatization and no visible rhetorical investment in reconciliation.

Nenad Rašić (n=4) — Conciliatory 2 (50.0%); Hardline 0 (00.0%); Stigmatizing 0 (0.0%); Neutral 2 (50.0%). The Nenad Rašić sample, though very small (n=4), points to a consistently non-confrontational discourse. With two items coded as Conciliatory and two as Neutral, his messaging oscillates between actively promoting dialogue, coexistence, or de-escalation and conveying information in a detached, bureaucratic manner.

In sum, across the main Albanian parties and Lista Srpska, inter-ethnic communication is dominated by hardline, security-first framing with minimal conciliatory content and, in the case

of Lista Srpska, a non-trivial layer of explicit stigmatization. Neutral messages are present but largely function as a secondary register rather than a consistent vehicle for de-escalation or inclusion. AAK stands out for combining a strong securitized core with a comparatively visible conciliatory strand. Within this landscape, Nenad Rašić appears as an outlier whose small but coherent sample points to a non-confrontational, reconciliation-oriented and technocratic style of communication.

Conclusion

The evidence from both elite interviews and social media content converges on a central conclusion that in contemporary Kosovo the "temperature" of interethnic relations is shaped less by fixed societal hostility and more by the way political elites choose to frame difference, legality and cooperation. Leaders across the spectrum acknowledge that relations have deteriorated, yet their own communication, particularly on social media, most often amplifies risk, confrontation and grievance instead of normalising contact and shared problem solving.

The interviews show a striking degree of consensus on diagnosis. All four political actors describe interethnic relations as fragile or regressing, but they locate the primary drivers in elite behavior rather than in everyday citizen animosities. Taken together, these accounts depict a context in which interethnic relations are structurally vulnerable not because communities are inherently incompatible, but because political actors repeatedly send signals that dialogue is exceptional, risky, or illegitimate.

The rhetorical frames identified in the interviews help to explain how this vulnerability is reproduced. Practices of narrative narrowing and estrangement, including the stigmatization of interlocutors and the deliberate avoidance of contact, send the message that engagement across communities is abnormal. Overarching stories that define members of non-majority communities mainly in terms of their usefulness or as potential threats erode any sense of shared belonging. Messages that place identity ahead of citizenship invite a hardening of positions among non-majority groups and weaken a civic framework in which all citizens can recognize themselves.

The social media analysis reinforces and sharpens this picture. Across VV, PDK, LDK, AAK and especially Lista Srpska, posts that explicitly address interethnic themes are dominated by hard line, security first framing, with conciliatory messages forming only a small share and, in the case of Lista Srpska, a visible amount of stigmatizing content. VV relies on incident driven and sovereignty centred communication, PDK and LDK post in an almost entirely securitized register, and Lista Srpska combines hard line and openly othering rhetoric, so that followers' feeds are saturated with a conflict centred agenda. AAK is somewhat more ambivalent, combining a strong securitized core with a secondary but recognisable conciliatory strand. Nenad Rašić appears as an outlier, with a small sample that is largely non confrontational, conciliatory and neutral. The analysis therefore suggests that reframing the public sphere is not only a matter of changing words but a political project that must anchor new responsible narratives in credible practices and shared interests.

2. Political and Media Discourses: Civil Society and Inter-ethnic Relations

Introduction

This section analyzes semi-structured interviews with five leaders of civil society organizations working on inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo, Adelina Hasani from Kosovar Centre for Security Studies – KCSS (April 14th, 2025); Bekim Blakaj from Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo – HLC (April 15th, 2025); Marigona Shabiu from Youth Initiative for Human Rights Kosovo – YHRC (May 2nd, 2025); Miodrag Milićević from NGO Aktiv (June 5th, 2025); and Jovana Radosavljević from New Social Initiative – NSI (June 13th, 2025).

Drawing solely on these primary sources, the following issues have been examined: (1) how political and media discourses shape inter-ethnic relations; (2) the principal challenges civil society faces in reconciliation work; (3) how women and youth are included in initiatives; (4) how partnerships, dialogue, and civic education are used to counter negative narratives; and (5) the interviewees' proposals for government policy. The five accounts converge on several themes—especially the outsized role of elite rhetoric and media amplification—while offering distinct vantage points that reflect organizational missions, community positions, and geographic focus.

Methodologically, these interviews are treated as expert testimonies about discursive environments, institutional constraints, and field practices. All claims are therefore confined to what emerges from the interviews; no external evidence is introduced.

- **Political and Media Discourses as Drivers of Inter-ethnic Climate**

All five interviewees identify political elite rhetoric and media behavior as critical determinants of inter-ethnic relations. Hasani characterizes the prevailing language as "toxic," arguing that party leaders and media frequently prioritize attention and political benefit over social cohesion, sometimes generalizing about the entire Serb community, particularly in the wake of security incidents, thereby fueling distrust.

Milićević likewise condemns "harsh" and sometimes insulting tones from ruling parties on both Albanian and Serb sides, with media transmitting and magnifying such statements. He calls on editors to challenge inflammable claims rather than relaying them uncritically.

In this vein, Blakaj provides a vivid historical illustration, namely sensational and inaccurate reporting during the March 2004 unrest contributed to rapid escalation, demonstrating how media and official statements can harden attitudes and trigger inter-communal conflict dynamics.

On the other hand, in Radosavljević's formulation, elites "set the scene," and the governing party's stigmatizing narratives over recent years have deepened the rift between communities and eroded non-majority trust in institutions. Focusing on the period since 2021, she argues that elites set the "tone" of public life and that stigmatizing narratives about one group deepen

societal cleavages. Furthermore, from the perspective of Kosovo-Serb civil society, Radosavljević adds a critical layer: mainstream outlets in Prishtina often report events in the North solely through majority-community frames and do not solicit Serb voices. This produces dueling, polarized narratives; concerns raised by Serbs are reflexively labeled as Belgrade-driven propaganda, which discredits local actors and collapses the middle ground.

Shabiu, in turn, explains how political discourse and media logic interlock, in the sense that politicians depend on media, including social platforms, to transmit their messages, media that face competitive pressures reward sensationalism, and external actors exploit these channels to spread disinformation, including so called "deep fakes" that carry hate tinged narratives into both information ecosystems. The result is a high risk environment in which polarizing stories crowd out nuance. She also notes an underreported reality that in parts of Kosovo, Serb majority communities are engaged in deeper everyday integration and joint economic activity than the dominant narrative admits, yet positive stories receive little coverage.

Another aspect of discourse concerns responsibility. Interviewees insist that institutions, and not only media, owe citizens accountability for language choices. In this vein, Radosavljević argues that the relevant institutions should sanction discriminatory statements and that the government should model inclusive rhetoric. Without such action, exclusionary talk becomes socially acceptable and further normalizes division. Milićević likewise contends that the main priority is narrative change by political authorities, since without it the impact of civil society reaches an upper limit set by the behavior of the executive.

In sum, all five interviewees converge on a common diagnosis that elite rhetoric and media dynamics decisively shape interethnic relations, with stigmatizing, sensational and security framed discourse crowding out nuance and trust, sometimes with escalatory consequences as in March 2004. Governing parties set the scene, and when their narratives present Serbs as the other and mainstream outlets ignore Serb voices, polarized echo chambers harden and local actors are discredited. A profit driven media logic, amplified by social platforms and external disinformation including deep fakes, further privileges inflammatory content while positive, everyday cooperation receives little coverage. Interviewees therefore stress institutional responsibility to sanction discriminatory speech and to model inclusive language, and argue that without narrative change from above the impact of civil society remains limited.

- **Core Challenges Facing Civil Society in Reconciliation**

The interviews reveal a demanding operating environment for civil society organizations (CSOs) working on reconciliation. Four clusters of challenges stand out.

(a) Politicized delegitimation and securitized labeling: Hasani argues that civil society organizations that support dialogue are often branded as collaborators with Serbia, a stigma that also discourages individual activists. This form of delegitimation presents bridge building as a kind of betrayal and increases the risks and social costs of engagement. Blakaj describes long standing

NGO efforts to cooperate across communities, but notes that recent exclusionary state rhetoric and non-inclusive policies have led many Serb NGOs to withdraw. In addition to open hostility, he highlights a quieter barrier in the form of being ignored by institutions and by society, which erodes the incentives to sustain bridge building work.

(b) Competing master narratives and unresolved past: Blakaj observes that narratives of the 1990s war are diametrically opposed and reinforced by partial or inaccurate school materials, which blocks recognition of each other's suffering and undermines trust. Hasani similarly argues that legacies of violence that have not been sufficiently addressed create a vacuum that political entrepreneurs and disinformation actors' exploit.

(c) Shrinking civic space and intimidation: Shabiu argues that unilateral government actions and a worsening security atmosphere have damaged the trust that NGOs spent years building, and that many participants now feel unsafe taking part in joint activities. Radosavljević describes a deteriorating climate since 2021, marked by polarization, pressure on independent critics and episodes of smear campaigns or attacks, which together make reconciliation work more dangerous and resource intensive. In a similar vein, Milićević evokes a sense of Sisyphean effort, since progress can be wiped out by a burst of incendiary rhetoric from political elites, forcing organisations to start again in order to repair broken ties.

(d) Funding fragility and donor misalignment: Both Milićević and Radosavljević underscore financial precarity. Milićević warns that donor agendas do not always match on-the-ground needs, complicating continuity in long-term trust-building. Radosavljević adds that sector-wide instability endangers the very capacity of CSOs to persist as independent actors. Hasani notes broader geopolitical shifts that may diminish support precisely for the kinds of cross-community platforms that are most needed.

In sum, the interviews depict a civil society operating under heavy headwinds. Bridge builders are stigmatized as collaborators, competing war narratives and partial curricula block mutual recognition, and a tightened civic space since 2021 has normalized pressure, smear campaigns and periodic setbacks that can erase gains overnight. Financial fragility and donor misalignment further undermine continuity in long term trust building, while geopolitical shifts threaten support for cross community platforms. Across these constraints there is a common thread of asymmetry of leverage, in which CSOs can nurture dialogue and micro trust, but their progress remains highly vulnerable to politicized shocks they cannot control.

- **Countering Negative Narratives: Partnerships, Dialogue, and Civic Education**

Based on interviews with civil society leaders, this sub-section examines how interethnic partnerships, dialogue platforms and civic education are used to counter harmful narratives. It highlights practical tactics such as media collaboration, targeted debunking and storytelling that presents everyday coexistence as normal.

(a) Inter-ethnic coalitions and platforms**:** Blakaj recounts Kosovo and regional engagement in the long-running RECOM/KOMRA initiative, where victims' associations and youth across communities created empathy and "normalized" communication even when states refused to institutionalize a joint truth commission. Milićević emphasizes the Kosovo Civic Alternative—a joint effort by Serb and Albanian organizations and independent actors to push back against harmful narratives and to advocate collectively toward government and international stakeholders. Radosavljević highlights network-building and joint advocacy with Prishtina-based CSOs, combined with outreach to international partners when government engagement stalls.

(b) Civic education and public pedagogy: Blakaj's organization has pursued *non-formal education on transitional justice* in secondary schools for over a decade, aiming to insert balanced content into curricula and to break the monopoly of antagonistic master narratives. Radosavljević, while noting systemic separation between education systems, stresses the formative power of family, social circles, and new media, making community-level education and media literacy central to counter-narrative work.

(c) "Debunking" and media partnerships: Hasani's organization produces analytic reporting to de-mythologize disinformation, especially narratives targeting Serb communities in Serbian language, and collaborates with Serbian CSOs to increase credibility and reach. She also argues for stronger NGO–media alliances to surface stories of coexistence and to penetrate Serbian-language information spaces where fear-inducing disinformation circulates. Milićević underlines the unrealized potential of CSO-media collaboration. He argues that while media possess unmatched reach, CSOs can supply balanced, principled frames; together they could transform elite noise into public accountability.

(d) Storytelling and everyday normalization: Radosavljević describes two initiatives: a trust-building platform that curates positive cross-community stories otherwise absent from mainstream headlines, and Oči u oči ("Eye to Eye"), which worked with young influencers to depict ordinary, mixed activities across Kosovo—small but concrete acts that can subtly re-humanize "the other."

In sum, the interviews outline a pragmatic counter narrative approach in which interethnic coalitions widen the space for contact, long term civic education and media literacy gradually weaken antagonistic master narratives, and NGO and media partnerships work together to debunk and reframe content in both Serbian and Albanian language information spaces. Storytelling that highlights everyday coexistence makes such experiences visible, and together these efforts help turn scattered micro trust into broader public influence, provided that collaboration is sustained and outreach extends across segmented audiences.

- **Proposals to Government**

Drawing on the interviews, this section outlines practical steps for government to de-escalate rhetoric, broaden inclusion, and rebuild inter-ethnic trust, thereby securing an enabling civic space and making the shift toward cohabitation sustainable.

(a) Responsible, inclusive official discourse: Blakaj urges the government to adopt a more moderate, inclusive and fact-based tone, to avoid presenting only one side, and to acknowledge crimes and victims in all communities, both to model civility and to deprive polarizing frames of oxygen. Radosavljević similarly calls on decision makers to act responsibly and to sanction discriminatory statements, stressing that top officials must represent and address all citizens, including by using Serbian when communicating matters of public concern. Milićević argues that the single most important change is a shift in narrative. He emphasizes that leaders must stop mutual vilification, clearly signal that Serbs are welcome in Kosovo and match these messages with policies that protect rights and everyday dignity.

(b) Engage Serb citizens in a genuine "internal dialogue": Shabiu recommends structured inclusion of local Serb communities in domestic dialogue processes and cautions against unilateral "forced integration" measures (e.g., abrupt closures of parallel institutions) that may look symbolically strong but erode trust and make future cooperation costlier.

(c). Linguistic equality and information access: Hasani's most concrete institutional recommendation is systematic bilingualism, meaning that all official news and public posts should appear in both Albanian and Serbian, which would enable Serb citizens to verify information and reduce vulnerability to rumour and fear-based disinformation. Milićević goes further by highlighting persistent violations of language rights at the institutional level and arguing that consistent enforcement is a basic precondition for rebuilding trust.

(d) Partnership with civil society and two-way engagement: Hasani emphasises structured collaboration between institutions and CSOs, including in the north, and the need to reach Serbian language media with accurate and reassuring information about state intentions. Radosavljević, while recalling unsuccessful early attempts at dialogue with the outgoing government, still sees a need to identify institutional partners who are willing to correct problematic policies.

In sum, the interviewees call for a state led reset based on responsible, inclusive and bilingual official communication, sanctions for discriminatory speech and a clear narrative that Serbs are welcome, with words backed by policies that protect rights. They urge structured internal dialogue that includes local Serb communities, avoids unilateral forced integration measures and ensures strong enforcement of language equality and access to information. Combined with two way partnerships with civil society and a proactive presence in Serbian language media, these steps would turn political signals into credible guarantees, limit polarizing narratives and secure the civic space needed to make coexistence more durable.

Conclusion

Taken together, the interviews provide a clear causal picture that political and media discourse is not background noise but the main driver of the interethnic climate in Kosovo. When political elites fall back on stigmatizing, security oriented legal frames, especially in times of crisis, media dynamics amplify polarization, push aside conciliatory messages and erode non-majority trust. The result is a high-risk information environment in which positive stories and everyday cooperation are structurally underreported.

Civil society operates in this difficult environment and faces an inherent asymmetry of leverage. CSOs can sustain contact, cultivate micro level trust and build counter narratives through coalitions, civic education, debunking and storytelling, yet these gains remain fragile when civic space tightens, delegitimation increases and funding is insecure. The lesson is not that bottom up work is ineffective, but that it is contingent, since without supportive signals and safeguards from the state and mainstream media, progress is repeatedly undone by new waves of inflammatory rhetoric.

A coherent pathway emerges from the interviewees' proposals, centered on responsible, inclusive and systematically bilingual official communication, visible sanctions for discriminatory speech, structured internal dialogue with local Serb communities and institutionalized two-way partnerships with civil society, including a proactive presence in Serbian language media spheres. These steps are not cosmetic additions, because they align incentives, normalize contact and create the civic space in which coexistence can become routine rather than episodic.

Finally, this analysis is deliberately limited to primary testimonies, yet it still points to a practical test of success, namely whether the routine information citizens receive, in terms of tone, language access, frequency of conciliatory signals and accountability for exclusionary speech, changes in ways that make trust less reversible.

3. Between Restraint and Polarization: Kosovo's Media Environment on Inter-Ethnic Relations

Introduction

This section examines how journalists and editors from Kosovo's mainstream Albanian and Serbian language media describe their coverage of inter-ethnic relations, the editorial standards that guide their work, their approaches to incident reporting and stereotype management, and the pressures and resource constraints that shape newsroom practice. It further explores how they understand the media's role in reconciliation, the degree of cooperation across the language divide, and the policy measures they themselves propose to curb harmful narratives in a context marked by polarizing political rhetoric.

Fieldwork was conducted between April and August 2025 and included the following interviewees: Brikenda Rexhepi (Koha Ditore), Ilir Mirena (Periskopi), Valon Syla (Gazeta Metro), Xhemajl Rexha (Association of Journalists of Kosovo - AGK), Arbër Vllahiu (RTV21), Leart Hoxha (ATV), Besnik Tahiri (Klan Kosova), Kushtrim Sadiku (Kanal 10), Rid Berisha (Arbëria TV), Halil Matoshi (veteran journalist), Leonard Kerquki (Gazeta Express/T7), Darko Dimitrijević (Radio Goraždevac), Mirjana Milutinović (Kontakt Plus), Isak Vorgučić (RTV KiM), and Tatjana Lazarević (KoSSev).

To systematically mirror and contextualize these qualitative insights, KIPRED also analyzed narratives on interethnic issues in sixteen media outlets, comprising twelve Albanian-language outlets (RTV21, ATV, Gazeta Express, Indeks Online, KTV, Kallxo.com, Kanal 10/Gazeta 10, Klan Kosova, Kosova Press, Metro, Nacionale and Telegrafi) and four Serbian-language outlets (KoSSev, RTV KiM, Radio Goraždevac and Kosovo Online), covering the period from 1 September 2022 to 30 October 2024.

- **Assessment of the media environment on inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo**

Across the interviews, Kosovo's information space on interethnic relations appears divided between a generally professional mainstream that avoids open incitement and a politicized, profit seeking segment that treats identity and grievance as commodities. The main fault lines relate to language deficits, uneven editorial capacity and the gravitational pull of high politics, especially during crises in the north.

Several interlocutors see mainstream Albanian language outlets as comparatively restrained. Rexhepi considers the television channels and portals she follows to be largely accurate and professional in their coverage of tensions, reflecting real developments rather than inflaming them, while warning that parts of the Serbian language sphere, influenced by Belgrade, produce unclear or inaccurate narratives for Serb audiences. Mirena draws a firm distinction between mainstream outlets with visible ownership and so-called phantom pages on social media, and describes the former as careful and non-inflammatory on sensitive incidents, even though a

persistent fake news environment requires the vigilance learned since 2004. Syla likewise stresses the disciplining effect of donors and regulators, noting that ethnic slurs are excluded and punished quickly, and recalling a broadcaster's use of the term "shka" that led to a resignation within a day. In his view, political actors seeking nationalist votes, rather than journalists, are the main source of ignition, while KFOR and external oversight serve as stabilizing factors.

Others emphasize the system's uneven strengths. Matoshi acknowledges a degree of neutrality but sees parts of the ecosystem still feeding on nationalism, particularly around the north, where the other can easily be cast as an enemy. Rexha describes interethnic reporting as the most sensitive beat and praises NGO backed outlets such as BIRN and Kosovo 2.0 for formats with multiple sources that include non-majority communities, while noting that breaking news routines in private outlets can heighten emotions, especially among young reporters with little cross community contact during spikes such as Banjska. Vllahiu links newsroom behavior to political cycles, arguing that when relations calm, interethnic coverage recedes, and when tensions rise, news is pulled into high politics. The lesson of March 2004 still weighs heavily, and he maintains that the absence of a centralized propaganda machine of the Serbian 1990s type should allow pluralism to act as a democratic counterweight, even though older Serbian narratives about Albanians continue to circulate.

Structural constraints begin with language and capacity. Hoxha estimates that around nine out of ten field reporters do not speak Serbian, which severely limits routine reporting from the north and encourages reliance on episodic, crisis driven coverage. Some online outlets ethnicise crime by adding labels such as "Serb, 56, arrested," an asymmetry that is rarely applied to Albanians. The local media supply is unbalanced, since Serbian outlets that are close to the state, such as Kosovo Online, are well resourced and agenda driven, while independent outlets face pressure and municipalities under Srpska Lista restrict access to information. Tahiri notes a clear turning point and argues that coverage has improved as majority non-majority sensitivities have been internalized, but also that distortions now come mainly from Serbian outlets that most Kosovo Serbs follow, while his own newsroom still has only a small number of journalists who speak Serbian. For Sadiku, standards have matured through learning moments in 2004 and 2008 and, despite strains in recent years, support from AGK and editorial caution have largely helped to keep balance. He adds that his regular invitations to Serbian journalist Branislav Krstić several times a week have helped to normalize Serbian voices and encouraged colleagues to create similar spaces.

The divide between professional caution and politicized amplification emerges as a recurring theme. Berisha notes that serious outlets use precise, de ethnicised language and distinguish suspected individuals from the wider community, while a parallel layer of party sponsored media and social networks turns identity into electoral fuel. Public debate then collapses into contests over who is more Albanian, and poor handling of developments in the north risks entrenching Belgrade's leverage and damaging Kosovo's external image. Kerquki describes several phases, beginning with caution built through post war training, then the events of March 2004 which

exposed catastrophic failure, including one fake news item by the public broadcaster, and finally the period since Banjska, in which he sees a rise in nationalist discourse, especially among younger reporters who did not experience the war.

Serbian language editors describe a hostile incentive structure. Dimitrijević notes that Belgrade aligned outlets stigmatize dissenters as traitors or Kurti's collaborators, while parts of the Albanian language sphere portray their targets as proxies of Srpska Lista or Belgrade, often without granting a right of reply. The demonization of figures such as Oliver Ivanović shows how narratives can spill over into real harm, even though cross community formats such as "Ekvitas" and "Da te pitam, komšija" remain underused. Milutinović sees deeper polarization than in the early 2000s, with an ethnic lens that becomes sharper during crises in the north and smaller Serbian newsrooms relying more on reposting than on direct engagement with institutions in Prishtina.

From another perspective, Vorgučić argues that coverage of "the other" community skews negative, while positive stories draw hostile online reactions, reinforcing distance. For Lazarević, the problem is systemic, since there are two parallel media ecosystems, each captive to its national narrative, operate in a broader "post-truth" climate where political centers, not newsrooms, set the agenda.

- **Editorial policies for reporting on inter-ethnic issues**

Across the interviews, editors describe a similar pattern in which most Kosovo outlets do not maintain separate rulebooks for interethnic coverage. Instead, they rely on the national Code of Ethics and apply it through stronger editorial control, careful language and specific crisis reporting routines. Together, these practices form a shared informal toolkit that aims to cool stories which might otherwise inflame ethnic tensions.

At KOHA, Rexhepi bases practice on basic criteria of truth seeking and on the Code of Ethics, which already includes protections for non-majority ethnic communities, children and gender. In her view, a separate manual is unnecessary if the existing Code is rigorously applied. Mirena similarly notes that his outlet does not have a specific regulation dedicated to interethnic reporting, and that guidance is implicit but firm, with an emphasis on rigorous verification during periods of heightened tension, particular care with headlines, and avoiding fueling the fire while keeping coverage balanced.

Several editors describe clear red lines rather than long and detailed rulebooks. Syla refers to internal memoranda in major outlets that ban derogatory ethnic language, discourage strong opinion in news copy and require sensitive drafts to be reviewed by a responsible editor who checks both editorial quality and legal risk. He contrasts this structured gatekeeping with volatile and anonymous Facebook pages that rebrand from one day to the next and blur the origin of information, undermining trust. For Matoshi, the main reference point is what he calls constitutional equality, understood as a form of constitutional patriotism that rejects a majority

against non-majority framing and expects the press to exercise self-regulation, even if the overall balance remains uneven.

Language discipline proves to be a central operational norm. Rexha notes that private media do not maintain special rulebooks beyond the Code and that the baseline is strict, fact based fairness with one non-negotiable principle, namely to avoid language that offends the other community. In his view, such terms are not permitted in Albanian language media, and if lapses occur on air, moderators are expected to intervene and secure corrections in real time. He contrasts this with Serbian state aligned media, where derogatory language toward Albanians is common and shapes Serb audiences. He adds that, alongside newsroom practice, AGK supports training, including work with ZFD Forum ProPeace on reporting the past and using neutral and locally sensitive terminology.

Crisis reporting routines are widely shared. Vllahiu prefers clear standards over special manuals and follows a simple ethic in times of tension, first protect reporters and then secure ground truth from all sides, particularly in the northern municipalities, in order to reflect the real and objective situation. He sees a gap in preparedness and argues that younger reporters need targeted training, an issue that came to the fore after the 2023 protests, the Banjska attack and the Mitrovica bridge controversy. Hoxha likewise underlines that editors rely on established norms and use police incident reports as a neutral basis for initial coverage. Common pitfalls he observes include failure to distinguish between citizens of Serbia and Kosovo Serbs and a tendency to overethnicise ordinary scuffles, while major events such as Banjska were politicized in real time, which made accurate reporting more difficult.

Operational disciplines converge on de-ethnicisation and high verification standards. Tahiri highlights two rules, namely that incidents should not be over-ethnicised and that journalists should use citizenship first language, mentioning ethnicity only when it is causally relevant. When under pressure, his team reports only what it has verified directly. For Sadiku, the core principles are simple but strict, to verify information, include all sides, avoid amplifying a we against them narrative and monitor headlines closely. Formulations such as “a Serb did X” or “an Albanian did Y” are not permitted, and hate speech remains a clear red line. At Arberia TV, Rid Berisha applies stringent verification to prevent ethnicisation, with experienced reporters drafting plain and unemotional copy during periods of tension and younger journalists receiving targeted training so they internalize the same restraint. Kerquki describes his team’s approach as a combination of truthfulness and disciplined terminology, embedded in everyday newsroom culture rather than in written manuals alone.

Serbian language outlets describe either layered codes or practice based regimes. Dimitrijević notes that Radio Goraždevac operates under a stack of guidelines, including the Kosovo Journalists’ Code, an internal code and sub code, rules on sensitive language and a gender equality code, in order to keep copy precise and deethnicised. Milutinović explains that Kontakt Plus follows a practice based ethos that relies on verification from multiple sources, inclusion of different communities, avoidance of polarising language and explicit statements when incidents

are not interethnic so as to prevent escalation. At KIM, Vorgučić insists on having at least two sources, offering a right of reply and obtaining police confirmation before publication, while also highlighting positive achievements such as sports in order to offset the structural bias toward bad news. For KoSSev, Lazarević describes a small newsroom anchored in ethical standards and operating almost as a guerrilla team, where there is no harmless news and where pluralism of sources is treated as first aid, while timing and context are carefully calibrated, particularly when they report on wartime crimes against Albanians.

- **External pressures on inter-ethnic reporting: ambient risk, shrinking buffers**

Across the interviews, editors describe a transition from overt censorship to diffuse, ambient pressures that make objectivity fragile, especially during crises in the North. Economic precarity, militant online networks, institutional opacity, and cross-border propaganda combine to narrow the space for standards-based reporting. Most newsrooms respond by tightening verification and language discipline rather than by openly confronting power.

For Rexhepi, the main constraints are financial and technological, including shrinking donor support, limited staffing and the precarious status of Serbian language media that risk closure or dependence on advertising from the Serbian government. She sees less direct pressure across society on interethnic topics than in earlier periods, but notes that influence from Belgrade, local intimidation and audience expectations encourage self-censorship in Serb majority areas. Mirena emphasizes a hostile political climate in which party militants and loyalist publics label critical outlets as pro Serb or foreign funded. Austerity during the COVID period made this worse, as advertisers withdrew, staff were laid off and investigative capacity declined. Safety risks in the north and frequent pile ons on social media further incentivize caution.

Several interviewees stress that direct political pressure on ethnic coverage is lighter than it was before independence, but that softer forms of influence are now more common. Syla contrasts today's environment with the magnifying glass of the 1990s and argues that donor agendas and militant party or religious networks, often coordinated from the diaspora, now use social media as a weapon. He explains that the editorial response has been to rely on additional verification and restraint rather than to amplify such pressures. Halil Matoshi points to nationalist custodians within institutions who stigmatize journalists when stories unsettle the majority, and notes that these subtle sanctions shape newsroom behavior in sensitive periods without any need for explicit bans.

Others highlight structural pressures and information asymmetries. Rexha does not see systematic external steering of Albanian language media, and considers that decisions are driven mainly by newsroom priorities and broader social attitudes. In his view, the bigger disruptor is Serbian government control over outlets followed by Kosovo Serbs, where racist and xenophobic rhetoric is common, combined with community pressures that isolate Serbian journalists from professional bodies and language barriers that make access more difficult. Vllahiu and Hoxha both emphasize what they call institutional immaturity, in which authorities withhold facts and

then attack the media for speculation, while other actors such as Lista Srpska maintain communication blackouts that force Kosovo outlets to rely on Serbian media and street interviews. They argue for frequent and detailed institutional briefings, especially from the police, so that information gaps are not filled by disinformation and hybrid war tactics.

Some editors' note that formal interference has become less frequent, but the risk that careless framing will be used as a weapon has increased. Tahiri reports no direct donor, political or commercial pressure, but treats the possibility of miss-framing as the main hazard. Sadiku describes pressures as real but mostly ambient and political, explaining that inviting prominent Serb guests has triggered backlash and physical risks, and that attempts at open debates have been portrayed as provocation. His response is to act professionally, keep the studio open to Serb voices and ensure systematic coverage of Serb communities south of the Ibar. Berisha observes that projects funded by donors to reduce tensions have faded just as unregulated social platforms have become central arenas for branding balanced coverage as pro Serb, in a context where government attacks on the media have harmed both international rankings and public trust.

For Kerquki, the hardest challenge is self-censorship under taboo conditions. Political actors draw clear red lines, and he notes that interviewing a Lista Srpska MP is almost impossible, while party cadres monitor journalists with a magnifying glass, insinuate ties to Serbia and create constant stress. In both Kosovo and Serbia, public grant schemes sideline critical outlets, and threats from power structures in the north, together with coordinated harassment of so called foreign funded independents, amount to indirect but powerful pressure. Milutinović adds that objectivity is most fragile when access to information collapses, for example during unannounced high-level visits when even embassies refuse to provide basic details or translation, leaving Serbian language newsrooms in a kind of paparazzi mode. Vorgučić recalls March 2004 as the toughest test of professional restraint and sees the main current constraint in reporting that humanizes the other.

On the other hand, Lazarević is explicit that political and social pressure exists and is sometimes acute, and she argues that denying it is in itself a sign of self-censorship. In her view, nationalist rhetoric has contaminated public life, leaders behave as if they own the media, institutions communicate in a one directional way, and information vacuums invite manipulation. In this environment, editors are expected to shield their staff while maintaining objectivity, even though social media often punishes nuance.

- **Media reporting stereotypes: absence over insult, discipline over drift**

Across the interviews, stereotypes in Kosovo's media appear less as open insults and more as invisibility, simplistic framing and political echo chambers. Most mainstream outlets have internalized basic language discipline and rarely use overt slurs, but everyday Serb and Albanian lives remain largely off screen, so crisis and high politics continue to stand in for social reality.

Several editors identify absence rather than insult as the main distortion. Mirena notes that major newsrooms largely regulate themselves, avoid pejorative language and increasingly give space to vulnerable groups, yet the everyday life of Serb communities is rarely covered. He attributes this to a mix of self-isolation within Serb communities, the influence of Belgrade and limited resources for dedicated community reporting. Syla illustrates how nationalist frames stigmatize dissent, recalling that when his outlet opposed the one hundred per cent tariff on Serbian goods it was branded pro Serb, even though the measure was later reversed, which he sees as evidence that punitive narratives can discipline media that depart from the dominant script.

In this context, several interviewees argue for a citizenship first perspective. Matoshi insists that minorities must not be treated as inherently anti state and that ethnicity should be highlighted only when it is causally relevant, with people presented first as citizens. Rexha proposes starting from human, everyday issues such as water, roads and services that cut across community lines. He observes that central outlets still rarely send crews to Gračanica for ordinary stories, while pointing to Radio Free Europe and RTK's Serbian language service as positive examples that show coexistence without stereotype cues. Vllahiu similarly contends that the dominant stereotype is invisibility, since outlets on both sides tend to see each other mainly during crises rather than in daily life in Gračanica, North Mitrovica, Kllokot or Partesh. His guiding rule is also citizenship first labelling, because casual ethnic tags can turn a routine crime into what appears to be an ethnic incident.

Others focus on the micro mechanics of representation. Hoxha finds most articles broadly fair but identifies headlines and formulaic frames as weak points, especially as trials in absentia for wartime crimes increase. Because younger reporters lack direct familiarity with the north and social media incubates crude collectivist nationalism, he sees title writing as a critical site for editorial discipline. Tahiri counters stereotypes by surfacing disruptive facts, for example a case where a local Serb family first alerted police after an explosion, a detail many outlets omitted because it challenged presumed sides. He criticizes headlines such as "A Serb arrested at Jarinje" when nationality is irrelevant, and the reflexive blaming of Albanians for church vandalism without evidence.

Pluralism and format design are another layer of anti-stereotype practice. Sadiku supports procedures that build programs around conflicting viewpoints, anchored in rights-based standards and a visibly inclusive mix of guests. The objective is honest disagreement under shared rules rather than cosmetic harmony. He warns against false historical analogies, for example equating today's situation of Serbs with that of Albanians in the 1990s, which inflate grievance. For Berisha, good practice begins with decisions about who is invited and how they are presented, and he argues that more Serbian voices, including politicians, academics and activists such as Nataša Kandić, should be present to contest nationalist narratives. Yet fear of social media pile-ons and political reprisals makes editors cautious about inviting unpopular interlocutors, which reinforces an us versus them pattern of visibility.

Language, structure and professional ethos form a fourth group of responses. Kerquki argues that anti stereotype strategies begin with careful word choice and narrative arcs that discourage tribal score keeping and orient audiences towards understanding. Dimitrijević stresses disciplined terminology across national, religious and gender lines and sets a clear limit against journalists displaying partisan or nationalist insignia, for example OVK branded phone cases, that undermine neutrality. Training, especially for younger reporters, is seen as essential. Milutinović emphasizes human stories and shared civic concerns, noting that early Kontakt Plus programming highlighted the rights of Albanians, Roma and Bosniaks in North Mitrovica, followed later by features on intangible cultural heritage.

Finally, some outlets embed anti stereotype norms directly in their house style. At KIM, Vorgučić places emphasis on lexical discipline, using institutional names as they are officially recognized in Kosovo, avoiding delegitimizing qualifiers such as “so called” and writing “Kosovo” in a neutral form except in quoted official titles. He argues that this consistency reduces the activation of stereotypes and signals respect for diverse audiences. Lazarević describes KoSSev’s approach as a combination of rigorous pluralism and deep contextualization, bringing together verified perspectives, timelines and arguments from both communities, even on apparently simple topics such as the Mitrovica bridge. In her view, de tabooing issues that have long been avoided is the most effective way to puncture prejudice.

- **How can media contribute to reconciliation**

Across the interviews, journalists agree that the media can support reconciliation in Kosovo, but only when political conditions and resources allow it. They see media outlets as bridge builders that widen the space for coexistence when they resist polarization and focus on everyday concerns.

Many interviewees emphasize formats that put Albanian and Serb voices in direct conversation. Rexhepi highlights cross newsroom projects and joint reporting from multiple perspectives as a way to normalize collaborative work. Syla calls for prime time debates that bring together Serbian and Albanian journalists who are prepared to challenge their own political camps. Berisha likewise supports sustained face to face debate in shared studios, and programs that unpack disinformation and abusive speech on social media. For Rexha, the key is that all communities appear regularly in each other’s main media spaces, and he argues that stronger bilingual capacity in newsrooms is needed to make such exchanges routine.

Other interviewees place the emphasis on local reporting. Hoxha argues that reconciliation depends on treating a blocked sewer in Leposaviq in the same way as one in Junik and on sending crews to under reported municipalities, Serb and Albanian alike, even when there is no crisis. Dimitrijević and Milutinović prioritize everyday stories and coverage that shows how policy changes affect people’s livelihoods. By focusing on services, infrastructure and family routines, journalists can reveal shared problems and narrow zero-sum political framing. Vorgučić underlines that Serbs are a small non-majority and that public discourse often treats integration

as a distant negotiation between Belgrade and Prishtina rather than a local relationship between neighbors. In his view, media can counter this by normalising practical ties and resisting generalizations that portray all Serbs as unwilling to integrate.

A third area concerns professional norms. Mirena argues that the media cannot transform relations on their own without de-escalatory politics and support from civil society, but they can reduce harm by enforcing bans on hate speech, avoiding ethnic stereotyping and acting as core partners in reconciliation projects rather than remaining peripheral coverage providers. Matoshi sees the central task as systematically confronting stereotypes and majority nationalism, especially anti-Serb reflexes, so that equality before the law and civic belonging become normal features of everyday coverage. Kerquki links reconciliation to the preservation of pluralism, which in his view requires careful terminology, access to all relevant voices, resistance to self-censorship and stronger audience media literacy so that interethnic reporting is not interpreted through a zero-sum lens. Lazarević warns against a donor driven peace keeping industry and purely performative positive reporting, and argues instead for uncompromising professional journalism that also addresses difficult subjects such as war crimes.

Finally, interviewees highlight enabling conditions. Tahiri proposes a media-led "internal dialogue" through regular, bilingual programs on reconciliation experiences elsewhere, anchored in a joint Albanian-Serbian-English media space in Mitrovica, but insists such formats must be newsroom-owned to endure. Sadiku assigns journalism a double mandate to report facts and orient public opinion when politics goes astray, calling for a "silent accord" among outlets to treat inter-ethnic topics with restraint and to expand encounters between Albanian and Serbian guests, including coverage of Serb communities in the South. Milutinović points to media literacy projects and "false news" debunks as ways to reduce susceptibility to propaganda. Vllahiu stresses that rhetoric "from above" sets behavior "below" and advocates routine joint debates, newsroom contact, and exchange of materials so dialogue is normal rather than crisis-driven. Mirena notes that the tone set by political leaders and the availability of resources ultimately shape how far media efforts can go.

- **Cooperation with media from other ethnicities**

Across the interviews, cooperation between Albanian and Serb language media appears real but fragile, based on personal ties, ad hoc exchanges and donor driven projects rather than on a stable and institutionalised system of joint production.

Several journalists describe a practical, everyday layer of collaboration. Rexhepi points to a formal memorandum of understanding with KoSSev for content sharing, complemented by regular informal exchanges with Kontakt Plus and Radio Goraždevac. Syla portrays cooperation as mainly pragmatic, involving fact checking with colleagues in Belgrade, sharing contacts for interviews and providing workspace when crews report from Kosovo. For Matoshi, cooperation is also personal and direct, for example through frequent statements to Serbian outlets such as Danas, which he sees as one way to challenge insulated narratives.

Rexha notes that the most consistent form of collaboration is professional solidarity among individual reporters. Journalists share contacts, facilitate interviews, help with translations and rely on trusted outlets on the other side, with Kosovo media turning to KoSSev for developments in the north and Serbian journalists using Koha and other Prishtina based outlets for information about central institutions. More structured cooperation between newsrooms generally depends on donor support from actors such as the EU, the Council of Europe or UNMIK, while AGK and the OSCE provide joint trainings and language courses for Albanian and Serbian journalists.

Others emphasize that cooperation is sporadic and not firmly institutionalized. Vllahiu experiences contact mainly through AGK events, international conferences and occasional exchanges, and argues that what is missing is a permanent bridge for routine content sharing and joint work. Hoxha points to a functioning professional culture, ranging from co-hosting a Serbian and Albanian podcast with Vorgučić to field crews sharing equipment, with English often serving as the practical lingua franca. He and others also stress that limited bilingualism is a structural barrier to deeper co productions and that joint projects usually require deliberate planning and donor support.

Where language skills are present, they change the dynamics in depth. Tahiri describes cooperation with Serbian colleagues as excellent and notes that direct interaction helps to soften prejudices on both sides. He calls for much more systematic collaboration with local Serbian language media as the backbone of a genuinely interethnic information space. Sadiku, by contrast, stresses that institutionalized projects between newsrooms are rare. In his experience, attempts to launch joint productions or parallel debates have often failed because of political victimhood narratives, professional hesitation and limited international support. Without stronger backing from NGOs and international partners, cooperation remains largely ad hoc.

Berisha notes that political and structural constraints weigh heavily. He sees almost no structured collaboration beyond RTK's non-majority language services, and explains that private initiatives have faded in a climate where cooperation with Serbian outlets can trigger coordinated attacks from online groups and those in positions of power. Even so, he supports pragmatic collaboration on non-political topics such as health, education, culture and public safety as a relatively low-cost way to rebuild trust. Kerquki likewise points to the absence of stable institutional partnerships and the reliance on a small pool of trusted, often internationally funded outlets, and argues for the creation of a permanent platform for cross newsroom cooperation.

Dimitrijević, Milutinović, Vorgučić and Lazarević all stress that collaboration is episodic and limited by resources. Dimitrijević points to the Voice of the Community coalition in the Peja and Prizren region, where local stations jointly produce stories on everyday issues such as water restrictions and infrastructure, which he sees as evidence that low cost and routine cooperation on daily life problems can build familiarity and trust. Milutinović contrasts today's lighter touch contacts, including study visits, exchanges and reliance on portals such as KOHA for translated material, with earlier networks that were more focused on shared content, and notes that downsizing has made sustained joint production more difficult.

Vorgučić describes solidarity in the field and occasional exchanges of material as workable but sporadic, similar to the pattern of cooperation within Serbian language media itself. Lazarević points to very small staffs, the pressure of breaking news and limited capacity to place reporters inside other communities as major obstacles. She also underlines that cooperation often takes the form of mutual reliance on each other's reporting and translation, which can sometimes be distorted by pre framed requests from larger outlets that are mainly seeking confirmatory quotes.

- **Media policies for countering narratives that damage inter-ethnic relations**

Across the interviews, media policies for countering narratives that damage interethnic relations are described as part of a broader ecosystem that includes professional standards in newsrooms, responsible state behavior, empowered regulators, long term donor support and media literacy across society. Journalists stress that without political de-escalation and structural backing, editorial codes on their own cannot neutralize polarizing narratives, although they still regard those codes as the first line of defense.

At the core is rigorous professional practice. Rexhepi stresses strict adherence to the Press Code and truth-based reporting, noting the relative absence of recent hate-speech cases on ethnic grounds in the Council of the Written Media. Content-sharing agreements, such as those with KosSev, are seen as policy tools in their own right, circulating verified information across divided audiences and reducing space for distortion.

Several interviewees emphasize newsroom-level rules that institutionalize restraint. Mirena underlines strict verification, neutral headlines, and non-denigrating language as the practical "policy," alongside financial incentives for high-reach outlets to systematically cover non-majority issues. Syla adds internal bans on slurs and opinion disguised as news, legal vetting of sensitive content, and a professional obligation to triangulate contested claims with multiple sources, including European institutions, when domestic statistics or official communication are unreliable. For Matoshi, resisting populist, nationalist storylines and refusing majority-default narratives are essential to keep constitutional equality and rights at the center. He warns that fair reporting on "them" can provoke accusations of disloyalty from "our own," illustrating how nationalism is equated with patriotism and how quickly journalists can be branded as traitors.

Other proposals focus on the responsibilities of the state and its institutions. Rexha calls for properly targeted public funding for non-majority media, access to information in non-majority languages and sustained support to small outlets such as Romano Avazo, which he sees as the backbone of a genuinely multiethnic information space. Vllahiu advocates a whole of society approach in which civil society convenes cross community contact, politics becomes a source of trust rather than division and the media use citizenship first language, with guaranteed access to official information in times of crisis. Hoxha similarly argues that parties instrumentalize Serbia to hide governance failures and to escalate smear by association, and he calls for clear and timely institutional communication and consistent enforcement of existing broadcast and press codes.

Several interviewees stress that political leaders set the upper limit of public discourse. Tahiri argues that if the Prime Minister and the President remove exclusionary rhetoric from their language and visibly engage non majority communities in their local environments, this would influence institutions and society as a whole. He urges journalists to avoid ethnic labels unless they are essential and to resist formulaic frames that turn ordinary crime into ethnic incident. Sadiku's approach begins with inclusive institutions, based on an internal dialogue with Kosovo Serbs and routine, open communication, while media and civil society maintain professional, plural and fact checked coverage and resist the ethnicisation of stories for clicks. Berisha adds that leaders must curb triumphalist rhetoric, particularly in relation to police actions in the north, and ensure frequent institutional briefings to limit rumors. He also argues that newsrooms should enforce ethical rules, protect staff on high-risk assignments and invest heavily in training younger journalists.

Beyond immediate practice and politics, interviewees also look to regulators, media literacy and structural incentives. Kerquki and Milutinović call for stronger regulatory oversight, independent monitoring of harmful narratives, clear ethnic sensitivity guidelines and sustained training programs, with incentives that reward interethnic journalism beyond short term projects. Both note an enforcement gap, especially regarding incendiary rhetoric, and the vulnerability created when almost anyone can act as a journalist on social media. Dimitrijević argues that leadership and a renewal of public language on both sides are preconditions for normalization; until that happens, he believes the media must reinforce enforceable ethics, transparent corrections and cross ethnic professional solidarity, as demonstrated during the clashes in Zvečan.

Vorgučić and Lazarević extend the discussion to long term social change. Vorgučić supports confronting wartime legacies through processes similar to truth and reconciliation initiatives and through temporary affirmative measures for minorities in a society where the majority dominates, combined with careful framing that avoids criminalizing entire communities and with media literacy in schools to help unlearn stereotypes. Lazarević calls for a policy of accountability and a policy of ethics that would apply to institutions, donors and media alike, and for donors to move away from superficial multiethnic projects toward sustained support for professional journalism with real reach and contextual depth. In her view, and across these perspectives, the common denominator is that countering damaging interethnic narratives depends not on symbolic peace content but on durable structures that reward fact based, rights centered and de-ethnicized journalism.

- **Per media editorial framing**

The per-outlet breakdown shows that interethnic issues are covered mainly through a security lens, with relatively little space for explicitly conciliatory narratives. In most Albanian and Serbian language outlets, hardline or security focused pieces greatly outnumber dialogue oriented ones, while neutral or administrative reporting plays a secondary, stabilizing role.

Among Albanian-language broadcasters and portals, several are clearly dominated by security-focused coverage. At RTV21, ATV, Kanal 10, Indeks Online, Nacionale and especially Kosova Press, where all relevant items fall into the security or hardline category, reporting on interethnic issues mainly centers on incidents, threats or policing events, while explicitly conciliatory content rarely exceeds ten per cent and is entirely absent in some outlets.

Gazeta Express, Klan Kosova, KTV and Kallxo.com display more mixed profiles. They still carry a substantial amount of hardline coverage, at roughly half of articles, but they also feature larger neutral segments and, in the case of KTV and Kallxo, the highest shares of dialogue-first content at around one fifth of articles. This indicates that although security frames remain dominant, some mainstream outlets systematically combine institutional reporting with at least occasional reconciliation-oriented narratives.

Another cluster is characterized by high neutral/bureaucratic output. Telegrafi and Metro, publish a majority or plurality of neutral pieces. This pattern indicates a preference for institutional, multi-source, or process-focused coverage that neither explicitly escalates nor actively de-escalates, but keeps emotive framing in check.

Within the Serbian-language ecosystem, Kosovo Online stands out for combining a strong security-first profile with the single highest rate of stigmatizing/othering content (over 17%), and no conciliatory pieces. By contrast, Kossev and RTV KIM lean heavily toward neutral or mixed neutral–hardline repertoires with negligible stigmatization and small, but present, dialogue-first segments. Radio Goraždevac sits between these poles, with a majority of hardline pieces but only marginal othering.

Overall, the data point to a relatively disciplined mainstream that largely avoids open ethnic slurs but is structurally oriented toward security coverage. Conciliatory reporting remains a minority genre across outlets, while stigmatizing narratives are concentrated in a few actors. The net effect is an information space that tends more to manage and bureaucratize tension than to actively promote reconciliation.

Media outlet	Total articles	Conciliatory / Dialogue-first	Hardline / Security-first	Stigmatizing / Othering	Neutral / Bureaucratic
RTV 21	31	3 (9.6%)	22 (70.1%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (19.3%)
ATV	21	1 (4.7%)	15 (71.4%)	1 (4.7%)	4 (19.2%)
Gazeta Express	36	4 (11.1%)	18 (50.0%)	0 (0.0%)	14 (38.9%)
Indeks Online	29	3 (10.3%)	15 (51.7%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (37.9%)
KTV	77	16 (20.8%)	36 (46.7%)	0 (0.0%)	25 (32.5%)
Kallxo.com	66	15 (22.7%)	13 (19.7%)	0 (0.0%)	38 (57.6%)
Kanal 10 (Gazeta 10)	39	1 (2.6%)	25 (64.1%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (33.3%)
Klan Kosova	39	4 (10.2%)	25 (64.1%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (25.7%)
Kosova Press	15	0 (0.0%)	15 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Kosovo Online	81	0 (0.0%)	37 (45.7%)	14 (17.3%)	30 (37.0%)
Kossev	149	3 (3.4%)	42 (28.6%)	0 (0.0%)	100 (68.0%)
Metro	56	8 (14.3%)	14 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	34 (60.7%)
Nacionale	15	1 (6.7%)	8 (53.3%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (40.0%)
RTV KIM	82	11 (13.4%)	30 (36.6%)	0 (0.0%)	41 (50.0%)
Radio Goraždevac	79	4 (5.3%)	42 (55.3%)	1 (1.3%)	29 (38.1%)
Telegrafi	18	0 (0.0%)	5 (27.8%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (72.2%)

Conclusion

Kosovo's media environment on interethnic relations is more ethically disciplined than in the past, but it remains structurally skewed toward security, crisis and high politics rather than everyday coexistence. Mainstream Albanian and Serbian language outlets largely avoid explicit hate speech, rely on the national Code of Ethics and use higher verification standards, de-ethnicized language and senior gatekeeping to cool potentially inflammatory stories. Yet across outlets, hard line or security first frames still dominate, conciliatory oriented narratives remain marginal, and the most stigmatizing content is concentrated in a small group of highly politicized Serbian and Albanian language media outlets.

Journalists operate in an environment of pressure rather than under direct censorship. Economic fragility, shrinking donor support, opaque and often immature institutions, militant online networks and cross border propaganda, especially from Belgrade aligned media followed by Kosovo Serbs, all narrow the space for independent reporting and encourage caution or self - censorship, particularly in the north. Structural constraints deepen this pattern, since language deficits, limited field presence in Serb majority areas and two largely parallel Albanian and Serbian media ecosystems create a stereotype of absence rather than open insult, as ordinary cross community life is rarely reported at all.

At the same time, the assessment shows that some professional outlets already model a more constructive role. They invest in reporting based on multiple sources and longer formats that include non-majority voices, use programs that bring Albanian and Serb guests into the same studio, adopt language that puts citizenship first and engage in practical cooperation across the language divide through content sharing and joint projects. Editors are clear that the media cannot deliver reconciliation on their own, since political leaders, regulators, donors and institutions set the outer limits of what is possible. If these broader structures reward bilingual, rights oriented and non-crisis coverage instead of polarization and sensational content, Kosovo's professional mainstream can act not only as a buffer against escalation but also as a slow and steady force for normalizing shared civic life across ethnic lines.

4. Analysis of the opinion polls

This section offers an in-depth analysis of the UBO Consulting omnibus poll on inter-ethnic relations and reconciliation in Kosovo (N ≈ 1,165), commissioned by KIPRED and conducted in September 2025. The examination is structured around five core dimensions: (1) the normative importance of inter-ethnic relations and public demand for a political agenda, (2) trust in the media, (3) perceived influence of media and political narratives, (4) whether political narratives are understood as facilitating or obstructing reconciliation, and (5) the main strategic implications.

- **Normative baseline – importance of inter-ethnic relations and demand for a reconciliation agenda**

How important are interethnic relations and reconciliation between ethnic groups in Kosovo to you?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very important	450	38.6%	38.6%	38.6%
	Important	456	39.2%	39.2%	77.8%
	Somewhat important	210	18.0%	18.0%	95.8%
	Not at all important	49	4.2%	4.2%	100.0%
	Total	1165	100.0%	100.0%	

Overall, 38.6 percent of respondents consider these relations very important and a further 39.2 percent regard them as important. Only 18.0 percent see them as of little importance and 4.2 percent as not important at all. Taken together, almost 78 percent rate inter-ethnic relations and reconciliation as important or very important, while around one in five place them low on their personal agenda.

This high level of declared importance is broadly consistent across groups. Among Albanian respondents, 38.7 percent rate these relations as very important and 38.3 percent as important, while 18.6 percent see them as of little importance and 4.5 percent as not important. Among Serb respondents, 37.3 percent consider them very important and 34.3 percent important, with 25.4 percent saying they are of little importance and only 3.0 percent not important at all. Respondents from other communities are the most normatively committed, with 39.1 percent describing interethnic relations as very important and 56.5 percent as important, and just over 4 percent placing them in the two lower categories.

By age, there is no major generational divide. In all age groups, roughly three quarters or more consider interethnic relations important, with only minor variation. Men are slightly more likely than women to describe them as very important (42.4 percent compared to 34.8 percent), but when very important and important are combined, both genders clearly fall into the pro-importance camp.

Thus, almost two thirds clearly support a reconciliation agenda, and outright resistance is very limited. What stands out is less the level of opposition than the sizeable "uncertain" group of around one third, whose views could still be shaped in either direction.

Do you think Kosovo politicians should have a clearer and more open approach to promoting interethnic reconciliation?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	733	62.9%	62.9%	62.9%
	I am not sure	374	32.1%	32.1%	95.0%
	No	58	5.0%	5.0%	100.0%
	Total	1165	100.0%	100.0%	

Overall, 62 percent of respondents think politicians should adopt a clearer and more open approach to interethnic reconciliation, while only 5 percent believe they should not. This indicates broad public support for a more proactive reconciliation agenda and almost no explicit resistance.

Among Albanian respondents, 63.1 percent think politicians should have a clearer and more open approach to interethnic reconciliation, 32.3 percent are not sure, and 4.6 percent are opposed. Among Serb respondents, a majority also supports this stance, with 53.0 percent saying yes and 34.8 percent unsure, but opposition is higher at 12.1 percent. Respondents from other communities are even more supportive, with 68.6 percent in favor, 27.1 percent unsure and 4.3 percent against.

By gender, men are more clearly in favor, with 67.5 percent supporting a clearer reconciliation agenda and 26.2 percent unsure, compared to 58.3 percent of women in favor and 38.1 percent unsure. By age, support is strongest in the 25 to 44 group, at around 65 percent, and somewhat lower among the youngest group of 18 to 24 and the oldest group of 55 and above, although in both cases it still exceeds 55 percent. Overall, across communities and demographics, interethnic relations are seen as important and there is a broad mandate for politicians to adopt a clear reconciliation agenda. The main political challenge is not a hostile public but how to engage a large uncertain middle and turn this normative support into concrete policies and consistent public communication.

- **Trust in media reporting on inter-ethnic relations and reconciliation**

The opinion poll results indicate that local media operate in an environment of low trust on this sensitive topic. When asked how much they trust Kosovo's media in reporting on interethnic relations and reconciliation, only 37.7 percent of respondents express trust, while roughly 63.3 percent report little or no trust.

How much trust do you have in the media in Kosovo for reporting related to interethnic relations and reconciliation?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	I have a lot of trust	116	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%
	I have trust	311	26.7%	26.7%	36.7%
	I have little trust	507	43.5%	43.5%	80.2%
	I have no trust at all	231	19.8%	19.8%	100.0%
	Total	1165	100.0%	100.0%	

When broken down by ethnicity, differences are stark. Among Serb respondents, only about one fifth, 19.7 percent, report a lot or some trust in media coverage of interethnic issues, while 80.3 percent say they have little or no trust. Albanian respondents are also largely distrustful, with 36.9 percent expressing at least some trust and 63.1 percent reporting little or no trust. Other minorities are almost evenly divided, with 50.7 percent reporting a lot or some trust and around 49.3 percent reporting little or no trust.

By gender, the patterns are very similar, with women and men showing almost identical low trust profiles, roughly one third with at least some trust and two thirds with little or no trust. Across all age groups, little trust is the most common response at around 44 to 45 percent, while no trust ranges from about 16 to 25 percent, and younger adults in the 25 to 34 group stand out slightly for higher levels of no trust. Urban and rural differences are marginal, as urban respondents are only slightly more likely to report some trust and rural respondents lean a bit more toward little trust, yet in both settings low trust clearly dominates. Overall, the poll reveals a structural trust deficit in the media, strongest among Kosovo Serbs but substantial among Albanians as well, which creates a major challenge for any reconciliation-oriented media strategy, since actors who are normatively important and influential are not widely trusted to report fairly on interethnic issues.

Thus, the poll confirms a structural trust deficit in the media, strongest among Kosovo Serbs, but significant for Albanians as well. This poses a major challenge for any reconciliation-oriented media strategy: actors who are normatively important and influential are not broadly trusted to report fairly on inter-ethnic issues.

- **Perceived influence of media and political narratives**

Despite low trust, respondents attribute significant influence to both media and politician's narratives. Around 75 percent believe that the media shape public perceptions of interethnic relations and reconciliation either a lot or somewhat.

In your opinion, how much influence do the media in Kosovo have in shaping public perceptions of interethnic relations and reconciliation?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Influence a lot	370	31.8%	31.8%	31.8%
	Influence to some extent	506	43.4%	43.4%	75.2%
	Influence a little	205	17.6%	17.6%	92.8%
	Not at all	84	7.2%	7.2%	100.0%
	Total	1165	100.0%	100.0%	

By ethnicity, this pattern is broadly consistent, with 75.0 percent of Albanian respondents, 71.1 percent of Serb respondents and 81.1 percent of respondents from other communities placing media influence in the top two categories. Similar trends appear among men and women, at 74.4 percent and 74.5 percent respectively, and among urban and rural respondents, at 76.2 percent and 74.4 percent. Differences by age are small, with the highest share in the top two categories among respondents aged 35 to 44, at 77.2 percent.

When respondents are asked how far political narratives in Kosovo shape public perceptions of interethnic relations and reconciliation, politicians emerge as a major force in framing how people think about these issues.

To what extent do you think politicians' narratives influence shaping public perceptions of interethnic relations and reconciliation in Kosovo?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Influence a lot	312	26.8%	26.8%	26.8%
	Influence to some extent	567	48.7%	48.7%	75.4%
	Influence a little	203	17.4%	17.4%	92.9%
	Not at all	83	7.1%	7.1%	100.0%
	Total	1165	100.0%	100.0%	

Taken together, these results show that around three quarters of respondents believe what politicians say has a strong or moderate impact on how the public understands interethnic relations. In detail, 26.8 percent think political narratives influence perceptions a lot and 48.7

percent think they influence them to some extent. This confirms that political leaders are seen as highly influential in shaping views on these issues.

To what extent do you think politicians' narratives influence shaping public perceptions of interethnic relations and reconciliation in Kosovo?

		Albanian	Serb	Other
Valid	Influence a lot	26.3%	25.8%	34.3%
	Influence to some extent	48.8%	43.9%	51.4%
	Influence a little	17.3%	27.3%	10.0%
	Not at all	7.6%	3.0%	4.3%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

When we look at ethnic groups, the pattern is remarkably consistent. Among Albanian respondents, about one quarter say that politicians' narratives influence perceptions a lot and just under one half say to some extent. Serb respondents show similar levels in the top two categories, but a noticeably larger share, more than one quarter, say that political narratives influence their perceptions only a little. Respondents from other communities are, if anything, the most emphatic, with more than one third saying that politicians' narratives influence perceptions a lot and just over one half saying to some extent, leaving only a small group in the little or no influence categories.

Women and men are both heavily clustered in the top two categories. Among women, 24.1 percent say that political narratives influence perceptions a lot and 49.7 percent say to some extent, while among men 29.4 percent choose a lot and 47.5 percent to some extent. In both groups, more than 70 percent acknowledge substantial political influence, and only a small minority think politicians have little or no impact on public views of interethnic relations.

Across all age groups, a clear majority between about 74 and 77 percent in every cohort believe that politicians' narratives influence perceptions of interethnic relations a lot or to some extent. Among respondents aged 18 to 24, 24.5 percent say a lot and 52.1 percent to some extent, while among those aged 55 and above the shares are 35.8 percent and 41.5 percent. This confirms that recognition of political influence is broadly shared across generations, with older respondents somewhat more inclined to see that influence as very strong.

The urban and rural contrast is limited. In urban areas, 29.3 percent of respondents say that politicians' narratives influence perceptions a lot and 45.5 percent to some extent, while in rural areas 24.9 percent say a lot and 51.0 percent to some extent. In both settings, around three quarters of respondents place themselves in the top two influence categories.

- **Do politician's narratives help or hinder reconciliation?**

The most nuanced picture comes from this question that asks respondents to what extent political narratives help or hinder interethnic reconciliation.

To what extent do you think politicians' narratives in Kosovo reinforce or hinder interethnic reconciliation?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	They reinforce it a lot	173	14.8%	14.8%	14.8%
	They reinforce it somewhat	432	37.1%	37.1%	51.9%
	They have no impact	258	22.2%	22.2%	74.1%
	They hinder it somewhat	208	17.8%	17.8%	91.9%
	They hinder it a lot	94	8.1%	8.1%	100.0%
	Total	1165	100.0%	100.0%	

At the level of the whole sample, the picture looks slightly positive but much more ambivalent. About 14.8% of respondents believe that politician's narratives "strongly" strengthen reconciliation and 37.1% that they "somewhat" strengthen it. Taken together, just over half of the population (about 52%) sees politicians' communication as contributing, at least to some degree, to reconciliation between communities. On the other hand, 22.2% think political narratives have no impact either way. At the same time, a substantial minority of 25.9% say that political narratives hinder reconciliation, either "somewhat" (17.8%) or "strongly" (8.1 per cent). This already indicates that politics is perceived as a more contested and less reliably constructive force than the media.

Once we look at the breakdown by ethnicity, the aggregate numbers hide very different experiences. Among Albanian respondents, a clear majority of 54.3% believe that politicians' narratives strengthen reconciliation (15.9% "a lot" and 38.4% "to some extent"), while 24.1% think they hinder it and 21.5 per cent see no effect. For this group, political communication is, on balance, seen as more helpful than harmful, even if a sizeable quarter remains critical. Among Serb respondents, the pattern is almost inverted. Only around one third (33.3%) consider that politicians' narratives strengthen reconciliation, while a clear majority of 56.1% judge that they hinder it, and only 10.6% think they have no impact. Respondents from other communities sit somewhere in between. 34.7% believe political narratives strengthen reconciliation, 21.7% think they hinder it, and a striking 43.5% say they have no effect at all, which suggests a mix of distance and skepticism.

Gender differences are modest. Both women and men tend to see a net positive effect of political narratives, with just over half in each group saying they strengthen reconciliation and roughly a quarter saying they hinder it; men are slightly more likely than women to feel that narratives

“strongly” hinder reconciliation, but the overall balance is similar. Age and settlement also do not fundamentally change the picture: across age brackets and between urban and rural areas, more people say political narratives help than hinder, but in no group is the positive reading overwhelming.

Conclusion

The opinion polls point to a basic asymmetry at the core of interethnic relations in Kosovo. Citizens across communities broadly want better relations and expect more from their leaders, yet they place little trust in the very actors and channels that shape the public conversation. Interethnic relations and reconciliation are not marginal concerns. Close to four in five respondents regard these issues as important or very important in their own lives, and nearly two thirds want politicians to set out a clearer and more open agenda for promoting reconciliation. This pattern appears among Albanian, Serb and other communities, across age groups and in both urban and rural areas, which shows that the public is not indifferent and that reconciliation is widely recognized as part of Kosovo’s political future.

At the same time, the trust architecture around this agenda is extremely fragile. The media, which citizens see as powerful agenda setters on interethnic issues, are trusted very little on this topic. Only about one third of respondents express any degree of trust in media reporting on interethnic relations and reconciliation, while roughly two thirds say they have little or no trust. The picture is starkest among Serb respondents, more than 80 per cent of whom report low or no trust, but Albanians also lean clearly toward distrust, while other communities are almost evenly divided. Any attempt to promote more nuanced narratives must therefore operate in an environment where the main intermediaries are recognised as influential but are not seen as fair or reliable, especially by communities that feel most vulnerable.

Perceptions of political influence follow a similar, although not identical, logic. Around three quarters of respondents believe that political narratives significantly shape public views of interethnic relations and reconciliation. This judgement is consistent across ethnic groups, genders, age cohorts and settlement types. Citizens clearly do not see politicians as marginal to interethnic dynamics. On the contrary, they acknowledge that political language and framing have real power to structure how people think about other communities, about risk and about the prospects for living together. What differs is not the recognition of influence, but how that influence is evaluated.

When respondents are asked whether political narratives strengthen or hinder reconciliation, the aggregate picture is mildly positive but fractured along ethnic lines. At national level, just over half of respondents think that political narratives strengthen reconciliation a lot or to some extent, about one quarter believe they hinder it and around one fifth see no real impact either way. Among Albanian respondents, this net positive reading holds, since a clear majority see political narratives as contributing to reconciliation, although a sizeable minority remains skeptical or critical. Among Serb respondents, the pattern is almost reversed, with a majority

judging that political narratives hinder reconciliation and only about one third experiencing them as supportive. Respondents from other minorities most often say that political narratives have no effect at all, combining distance from mainstream discourse with a modest tendency to see it as slightly more helpful than harmful.

These findings have several implications. First, Kosovo does not appear to face a demand side crisis of reconciliation. Citizens across communities' value good interethnic relations and are, in principle, open to a stronger political agenda on these questions. The blockage lies elsewhere, in low trust in gatekeepers, in unequal experiences of political discourse and in an information environment that different communities inhabit in very different ways. Second, the data underline that media and political actors play a double-edged role. They are perceived as powerful in shaping perceptions, yet they lack cross community credibility to use that power as a bridge rather than a wedge. For Serb respondents in particular, narratives from central institutions are not merely ineffective, they are seen as actively damaging to reconciliation. For other minorities, political discourse risks becoming irrelevant. For Albanians, by contrast, the same narratives are more likely to be interpreted as broadly positive or at least acceptable. This gap becomes a driver of mistrust in its own right.

Finally, the large group of respondents who are uncertain on several questions, especially those concerning a political reconciliation agenda, deserves careful attention. Roughly one third are not sure whether politicians should have a clearer agenda on reconciliation. This group includes a disproportionate share of women, Serbs and some younger and older age cohorts. They are neither clear supporters nor firm opponents, but a fluid constituency whose attitudes can move in response to concrete experiences and credible signals. For policymakers and civil society, they represent both risk and opportunity. If their uncertainty is filled by polarising narratives and sporadic crises, they may drift toward resignation or cynicism. If, instead, they encounter tangible improvements, inclusive messaging and visible cross community cooperation, they can become a stabilizing force for a more durable reconciliation agenda.

Conclusion and Recommendations

All the four sections of this study, namely political elite discourse, civil society testimonies, media practices and the omnibus poll, point to a consistent and in some respects hopeful diagnosis of interethnic relations in Kosovo. The central finding is that the temperature of relations is shaped far less by community sentiments than by the ways in which a relatively small group of political and media actors frame differences, incidents and cooperation. When elites fall back on hardline, security focused narratives, especially in moments of crisis, they amplify polarization even though everyday coexistence and shared interests continue beneath the level of headline politics.

The interviews with political leaders and the analysis of social media underline this elite driven dynamic in sharp terms. Across the main Albanian parties and Lista Srpska, interethnic communication is dominated by hardline, security first framing, with almost no sustained investment in conciliatory narratives. In the case of Lista Srpska, this also includes a significant amount of explicit stigmatization. AAK maintains a mixed repertoire but still leans heavily on securitized messaging, while Nenad Rašić appears as a marginal outlier whose communication is largely non-confrontational. This environment normalizes a conflict centered agenda in citizens' information space and sends repeated signals that dialogue is exceptional, risky or illegitimate rather than a routine part of democratic life.

Civil society leaders, operating in the same environment, describe a persistent asymmetry of leverage. They can maintain contact, build micro level trust and generate counter narratives through coalitions, civic education, debunking and storytelling, yet these gains remain structurally fragile. Periodic shocks, such as escalatory rhetoric, smear campaigns or security incidents, can quickly erase years of incremental work. Shrinking civic space, politicized delegitimation of bridge builders, unresolved narratives of the 1990s war and chronic funding insecurity all narrow the room for sustained reconciliation initiatives. The overall picture is not one of civil society failure but of contingent success, where progress is possible but is repeatedly reset whenever state and party actors send exclusionary signals instead of conciliatory messages.

The media environment occupies a space between restraint and polarization. Mainstream Albanian and Serbian language outlets are by most accounts more professionally disciplined than in the past, with the Code of Ethics, donor support and hard lessons from 2004 and 2008 having reduced overt hate speech and crude ethnic stereotyping. Yet structurally, coverage remains skewed toward security, crisis and high politics, with little sustained attention to everyday coexistence, joint interests or local cooperation. Structural constraints, especially language deficits among reporters, limited field presence in Serb majority areas and two largely parallel information ecosystems, reinforce what can be described as a stereotype of absence, in which ordinary cross community life simply does not appear in the news, while a politicized and click driven media belt monetizes identity and grievance.

The opinion poll adds a crucial bottom-up perspective. It shows that interethnic relations and reconciliation are not marginal concerns for citizens, since close to four in five respondents consider them important or very important in their own lives and nearly two thirds want political leaders to set out a clearer and more open agenda for advancing reconciliation. At the same time,

trust in key intermediaries is very low. The media are widely seen as influential on interethnic issues but are trusted by only about one third of respondents overall, with particularly acute distrust among Kosovo Serbs. Political narratives are also recognized as powerful agenda setters, and large majorities across groups believe they significantly shape perceptions of interethnic relations. Yet evaluations of their impact diverge sharply, with Albanian respondents tending to see a net positive effect, Serb respondents a strongly negative one and other communities showing a mix of distance and skepticism.

Taken together, these strands point to a basic asymmetry. At the societal level there is substantial latent demand for more constructive interethnic relations and for a political agenda that takes reconciliation seriously. At the institutional level, however, the actors best placed to respond to this demand, particularly political elites, too often produce securitized and sometimes stigmatizing narratives that circulate in a low trust information environment. Civil society and professional media demonstrate, in miniature, that more constructive practices are possible, but they remain constrained by the political signals and actions set from above.

Recommendations:

Building on these findings, the following recommendations aim to align political leadership, media practices and civil society initiatives with the broad societal demand for more constructive and inclusive inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo.

- The Presidency, Government, Assembly and political parties should commit to a doctrine of responsible speech that avoids hate speech, ethnic slurs and collective blame, rejects exaggerated security-focused framing that portrays entire communities as threats, and uses fact-based language that is calm in crises and focused on de-escalation and rights, particularly in times of crisis. This standard should be built into party rules and communication strategies, and inclusive rhetoric should be matched by concrete guarantees through consistent enforcement of language rights, proportional representation of non-majority communities in public institutions, and transparent consultation with locally elected Serb and other non-majority representatives.
- Public and major private outlets should invest in Albanian–Serbian language capacity and joint editorial projects so that sensitive topics such as North Kosovo, mixed municipalities and security incidents are reported from the ground in a professional, inclusive and bilingual manner. Donors and regulators should support and incentivize content that highlights everyday coexistence, joint economic interests and local cooperation, to counterbalance the commercial incentives for conflict-centered, click-driven coverage.
- Political leaders and state officials should refrain from delegitimizing cross-ethnic initiatives and instead publicly affirm the work of civil society actors engaged in dialogue, transitional justice and non-majority rights. Storytelling projects that document practical cross-community cooperation and shared experiences should be systematically

connected to mainstream and local media, rather than remaining confined to project reports.