

Reflection paper

KOSOVO-NORTH MACEDONIA COOPERATION:

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC
RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL COHESION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kosovo and North Macedonia share close geographic, economic and social ties, yet cooperation between the two countries remains less developed than its potential. Their relationship is situated within broader Western Balkans initiatives, while practical bilateral cooperation on security, democratic resilience and social cohesion receives limited attention. Western Balkans debates tend to focus on bilateral disputes, while opportunities for practical cooperation among neighboring countries receive less consideration.

This discussion paper draws on the webinar “Kosovo–North Macedonia Relations, Democratic Resilience and Social Cohesion,” organized by the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) and HERA on 19 August 2026, with support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The discussion brought together experts and civil society representatives from both countries.

The central argument is that social cohesion should be treated as part of security infrastructure. Political polarization, declining public trust, exclusionary narratives and attacks on democratic values can weaken institutions and make societies more vulnerable to manipulation. Foreign and regional actors often exploit existing ethnic, political, religious and social divisions rather than creating new ones.

The discussion also highlighted how anti-rights, anti-gender and identity-based narratives can contribute to wider democratic backsliding. These narratives frequently move across borders and are amplified by political, religious, media and online networks. Addressing them therefore requires more than fact-checking activities. Kosovo and North Macedonia need a better understanding of the actors, their financing, networks and communication channels that support organized anti-democratic mobilization.

Both countries have established legal and constitutional protections for non-majority communities, but implementation and public ownership remain inconsistent. Sensitive questions concerning interethnic relations are often addressed through international institutions and actors or behind closed doors. Stronger democratic resilience requires these debates to be addressed openly within society and supported by accountable institutions, local communities, civil society and independent media.

Young people should be placed at the centre of this work. Although younger generations are generally open to regional cooperation, many have limited opportunities to interact across borders. Political narratives, linguistic divisions and closed social media environments continue to shape their perceptions. Renewed investment in youth exchanges, civic education, human rights, academic cooperation and regional networks can help build relationships grounded in shared democratic values.

Participants also identified opportunities for closer institutional cooperation. North Macedonia can share knowledge from its NATO accession process and support Kosovo's efforts to strengthen cooperation with the Alliance. The two countries can also exchange experience on minority participation, public administration, European integration and the inclusion of different communities in state institutions.

The paper recommends establishing a Kosovo–North Macedonia early-warning mechanism to monitor cross-border narratives and emerging risks to democratic resilience. This mechanism should connect organizations and institutions working on security, democracy, youth, gender equality, minority rights, media and European integration. It should develop a shared evidence base, enable the rapid exchange of information and support coordinated public communication.

Future cooperation should extend beyond Pristina and Skopje, and involve municipalities, universities, schools, local civil society organizations and border communities to identify risks and develop responses. Local engagement can help connect regional policy discussions with citizens' everyday experiences.

Kosovo and North Macedonia have an opportunity to turn their close societal links into sustained institutional and civil society cooperation.

Joint monitoring, knowledge exchange, youth engagement and local dialogue would strengthen democratic resilience in both countries and contribute to greater stability and social cohesion across the Western Balkans.

SOCIAL COHESION AS SECURITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Security in the Western Balkans is often discussed in relation to borders, bilateral disputes, organized crime, military threats and geopolitical competition. These issues remain important, but they represent only one part of today's security landscape and do not address the wider spectrum of human security.

The discussion emphasized that political polarization, declining trust in institutions, social exclusion and attacks on democratic values can make societies more vulnerable to internal and external manipulation. These pressures are often connected. Foreign or regional actors rarely create new divisions. They use existing ethnic, political, religious and social grievances, amplify them through political and media networks, and turn them into sources of wider instability.

Mila Carovska argued that social cohesion should be understood as security infrastructure rather than as a secondary or “soft” policy issue. Narratives that exclude certain communities or portray

equality and human rights as threats can gradually weaken confidence in institutions and democratic processes. She proposed stronger cooperation between Kosovo and North Macedonia to monitor cross-border narratives, develop shared evidence and bring together organizations working on security, democracy, gender equality, youth and EU integration.

Sanela Shkrijelj similarly stressed that anti-rights and anti-gender mobilization should be examined within the broader democratic security landscape. Such mobilization is increasingly supported by networks involving political actors, media, online influencers, organizations and sources of financing. These networks can use questions related to families, children, gender and identity to define “internal enemies,” deepen polarization and undermine pro-European reforms. Effective responses therefore need to examine the wider infrastructure behind these narratives, including who finances, localizes, legitimizes and amplifies them.

This points to the need for a broader understanding of early warning. Monitoring democratic and security risks should include changes in public narratives, attacks on minorities and civil society, declining trust in institutions, and the movement of exclusionary messages from social media into schools, municipalities, political parties and public policy.

DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE BEGINS AT HOME

Dane Taleski placed these challenges within the wider European security context. Russia's aggression against Ukraine, an increasingly volatile regional environment, hybrid threats, disinformation and reduced external support for democracy have created new pressures across the Western Balkans. At the same time, political polarization and the uneven implementation of reforms weaken the capacity of countries in the region to respond effectively.

His intervention underlined that democratic resilience cannot depend entirely on outside assistance. Governments carry the main responsibility, but civil society, independent media, academia, local institutions and citizens all have roles to play. Overcoming polarization requires cooperation across political and ethnic divisions, stronger institutional dialogue, and a renewed commitment to democratic values and Euro-Atlantic integration.

This is particularly relevant as European Union engagement and United States support undergo change. External partners remain important, but the countries of the region also need to strengthen their own institutional capacities and forms of cooperation. Regional cooperation should be viewed as a practical way to advance reforms, improve citizens' well-being and reduce vulnerabilities.

BUILDING DOMESTIC OWNERSHIP OF SOCIAL COHESION

Both Kosovo and North Macedonia have developed legal and constitutional frameworks intended to protect non-majority communities and regulate interethnic relations. However, formal frameworks alone cannot produce social cohesion.

Lura Pollozhani observed that both countries frequently externalize sensitive domestic debates. Political actors may turn to international institutions, embassies or external mediators before creating meaningful public discussion at home. This can reduce domestic ownership and contribute to the impression that social cohesion, equality and minority rights are demands imposed from outside.

Social cohesion concerns the safety, dignity and everyday lives of citizens. It therefore requires open domestic debate, political responsibility and implementation at the local level. Governments need the courage to address difficult issues even when decisions may be politically unpopular. Civil society also needs to help bring these discussions beyond closed institutional circles and closer to communities.

Institutional cooperation between Kosovo and North Macedonia could support this process. The two countries can exchange experience on minority participation, public administration, representation in institutions and the implementation of legal protections. Such cooperation should be anchored in institutions so that it continues regardless of changes in government or relations between political parties.

YOUTH, DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND REGIONAL EXCHANGE

Young people were identified as an important group in efforts to strengthen democratic resilience. Younger generations have grown up after the armed conflicts of the 1990s, but many continue to inherit political, ethnic and linguistic divisions from earlier generations.

Research discussed during the webinar indicates that young people remain open to regional cooperation and reconciliation, yet often have few opportunities to build relationships across borders.

Regional interactions remain divided along linguistic and national lines, while social media environments can reinforce closed information spaces and exclusionary narratives.

Pollozhani noted that earlier generations of civil society activists benefited from regional programmes, human rights training and cross-border networks that are less available to today's young people. Renewed investment in youth exchanges, democracy education, human rights and regional networks could help address this gap.

Youth engagement should extend beyond symbolic participation. Young people should be involved in identifying emerging narratives, designing community interventions and communicating democratic values in language that speaks to their everyday experiences. Universities and research institutions from Kosovo and North Macedonia could also develop more joint programmes, research projects and exchanges.

MOVING COOPERATION BEYOND REGIONAL MEETINGS

Jeta Loshaj argued that Western Balkans cooperation is often treated as a single regional process, while its bilateral foundations

remain underdeveloped. Kosovo–North Macedonia relations offer opportunities for more focused cooperation in security, institutional development, healthcare, mobility, economic exchange and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Everyday interaction between citizens already provides a basis for closer relations. Travel, shopping, education, healthcare and professional cooperation connect the two societies in practical ways. These interactions can support social cohesion by enabling citizens to see neighbouring countries through personal experience rather than political narratives.

Cooperation should also reach beyond Pristina and Skopje. Meetings in smaller municipalities and border areas can provide a better understanding of local concerns and reveal forms of cooperation that are less visible in capital-based policy discussions. Local authorities, community organizations, schools and youth groups should therefore be part of future initiatives.

EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION AND REGIONAL SECURITY

Kosovo's relationship with NATO was another important aspect of the discussion. North Macedonia's experience as a NATO member gives it institutional knowledge that could support Kosovo's efforts to develop closer cooperation with the Alliance.

Taleski noted that formal progress requires consensus among all NATO members, including those that do not recognize Kosovo. At the same time, Kosovo remains important to NATO's engagement in the Western Balkans, and NATO members from the region have supported closer cooperation between Kosovo and the Alliance.

Carovska argued that North Macedonia has an interest in supporting Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path because security challenges can move easily across borders. A neighbouring country that is more closely integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures contributes to wider regional stability. North Macedonia can share institutional knowledge from its own NATO accession process and help keep Kosovo's integration on the regional agenda.

Euro-Atlantic integration should, however, remain connected to democratic values. NATO and EU integration can provide institutional frameworks and incentives, while democratic resilience ultimately depends on public trust, accountable institutions, inclusive societies and cooperation across political and social divisions.

A PRACTICAL AGENDA FOR KOSOVO AND NORTH MACEDONIA

The discussion identified several areas for immediate cooperation:

1. **Establish a joint early-warning mechanism.** Civil society organizations and research institutions should monitor narratives, actors and networks that contribute to polarization, exclusion and the erosion of public trust.
2. **Create a shared evidence base.** Researchers working on security, democracy, gender equality, youth, minority rights and foreign influence should pool findings and develop joint analysis.
3. **Connect sectors that usually work separately.** Security organizations, human rights groups, youth organizations, gender equality advocates, media representatives and pro-European actors should participate in a common platform.
4. **Strengthen institutional exchange.** Kosovo and North Macedonia should exchange practical knowledge on minority

participation, social cohesion, public administration, NATO cooperation and European integration.

5. **Invest in young people.** New exchange programmes, regional research initiatives and civic education activities should help young people build relationships across linguistic, ethnic and national boundaries.
6. **Bring cooperation to the local level.** Activities should include municipalities, schools, universities, local civil society organizations and border communities, rather than remaining centred on the two capitals.
7. **Develop coordinated public communication.** Responses to anti-democratic narratives should offer citizens a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Communication based only on rebuttal and fact-checking cannot replace positive democratic narratives.
8. **Ensure meaningful civil society participation.** Civil society from the Western Balkans should be included in wider European mechanisms addressing democratic resilience, disinformation and foreign interference.

CONCLUSION

Kosovo and North Macedonia have a largely positive relationship and many shared interests, but the potential for deeper cooperation remains underused. Both countries face political polarization, declining public trust, exclusionary narratives, hybrid threats and pressure on civil society. These challenges often cross borders and require cooperation across institutions, sectors and communities.

The webinar demonstrated that security, democratic resilience and social cohesion belong in the same policy conversation. It also provided a practical starting point for cooperation between KCSS, HERA and other partners. Joint monitoring, institutional exchange, youth engagement, local-level dialogue and coordinated public communication could help both countries identify risks earlier and build stronger democratic resilience.

As Mentor Vrajolli emphasized, the discussion should continue beyond a single event. Kosovo and North Macedonia are close neighbours whose citizens already interact regularly. Turning these connections into sustained institutional and civil society cooperation would strengthen both countries and contribute to a more resilient Western Balkans.

This discussion paper was prepared by Dr Ramadan Ilazi, Head of Research at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, with AI assistance in organizing and editing the text. The paper is based on the contributions and discussion of the following webinar participants:

- ⇒ **Mila Carovska**, Executive Director of HERA
- ⇒ **Mentor Vrajolli**, Executive Director of the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies
- ⇒ **Dr Dane Taleski**, diplomat, political scientist and former Ambassador of North Macedonia to NATO
- ⇒ **Dr Lura Pollozhani**, researcher at the University of Graz and non-resident fellow at KCSS
- ⇒ **Sanela Shkrijelj**, policy expert and researcher
- ⇒ **Jeta Loshaj**, researcher at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies
- ⇒ **Dr Ramadan Ilazi**, Head of Research at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies and moderator of the discussion

The views and arguments presented in this paper reflect the discussion held during the webinar and have been edited for clarity and concision.