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# KOSOVO CITIZEN PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

A Focus Group Study

March 2022



**Center for Insights in Survey Research**

**IRI.org**

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*Qualitative research on Kosovo citizen perceptions of political parties.*

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# CONTENTS

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|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>   | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>OVERVIEW</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>CONTEXT</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>FINDINGS</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL PARTIES             | 5         |
| ROLE OF WOMEN AND YOUTH IN POLITICS  | 8         |
| CITIZENS' VIEWS TOWARD THE ELECTION PLEDGES AND KEY MESSAGES                             | 10        |
| REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND YOUTH'S INTERESTS BY POLITICAL PARTIES IN KOSOVO             | 12        |
| REPRESENTATION OF ETHNIC MINORITIES' INTERESTS BY POLITICAL PARTIES IN KOSOVO            | 13        |
| REASONS FOR VOTING FOR A CERTAIN POLITICAL PARTY   | 15        |
| CITIZENS' EXPECTATIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND KEY CHALLENGES THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED | 17        |
| <b>CONCLUSIONS</b>   | <b>22</b> |
| <b>REFERENCES</b>  | <b>23</b> |
| <b>APPENDIX</b>  | <b>24</b> |

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In March 2022, IDRA Research & Consulting conducted qualitative research on Kosovo citizen perceptions of political parties on behalf of the International Republican Institute. This research examined the perceptions of political parties among Kosovo voters, particularly women and youth.

For the purpose of this research, a non-experimental methodological design was employed. IDRA used purposeful sampling to better target participants of selected municipalities, age, ethnicities and gender. The research method used to collect data was focus group discussions (FGDs). One key criterion for participation in these FGDs was that the participants did not belong to any political party. In total, twelve FGDs were

conducted with a total of 118 participants, out of which 60 were women and 58 men. The FGDs were held in nine municipalities in Kosovo, specifically Prishtina, Ferizaj, Mamusha, Prizren, Peja, Gjakova Gjilan, and North and South Mitrovica. The participants in nine of the FGDs were Kosovo Albanians, while one FGD was held with Kosovo Turks in Mamusha, one with Kosovo Serbs in North Mitrovica, and one with a mixed ethnic composition of Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Turks in Prizren. This research offers an in-depth analysis and can serve as a guide to inform better planning and preparation for future electoral processes. As common with qualitative research, findings do not necessarily represent the opinions of all citizens of Kosovo.



## Key findings

- FGD participants believe that recently, women and youth have been more involved in politics than in the past, notably during recent local and parliamentary elections. The composition of the political parties' lists of candidates for municipal and national legislatures, which reflects the representation of women and youth, is one of the reasons they have such a positive perception on this matter.
- Despite the increased level of involvement of women and youth in political parties in Kosovo, the findings of the FGDs imply that women and youth's positions and power in decision-making processes in political parties is not satisfactory.
- According to participants, women and youth are only involved in politics during election campaigns, rather than continuously in parties' non-campaign activities. Thus, while women and youth are involved in party structures as "party militants," political parties in Kosovo are not sufficiently taking into consideration their needs.
- FGD participants suggested that Vetëvendosje Movement (LVV) is one of the parties that best engages women and youth in politics, while also representing the interests of vulnerable social groups in Kosovo.
- Participants have difficulty remembering the ambitious promises made during the 2021 snap elections. The only pledges that the FGD participants remember are the ones currently being enacted (e.g. scholarships for students studying science, technology, engineer, math (STEM), abolishment of tuition fees, employment subsidies for unemployed women and so on).
- Among Kosovo's ethnic minorities, Kosovo Turks feel fairly represented in political institutions and share concerns with ethnic-majority Kosovo Albanians. In contrast, Kosovo Serbs not only feel unrepresented in Kosovo's democratic institutions, but also dissatisfied with Kosovo Serb parties.
- FGD participants, all of whom were recruited because they do not belong to political parties, do not pay much attention to the programs of political parties. FGD findings suggest that they perceive all political parties' programs launched during election campaigns to be nearly identical with each other.
- According to participants, political parties' lists of candidates running for seats, as well as political parties' performance while they were in power, play a crucial role in their decision to vote for a particular party.
- The way Kosovo citizens vote in local and parliamentary elections differs significantly. For instance, in parliamentary elections, participants tend to look more at the political party, whereas in local elections personal and family interests are prioritized, and hence specific candidate choice matters more.
- Low quality of education along with low quality healthcare, low salaries, and an overall unsatisfactory social welfare system are among the top concerns for focus group participants. Frequent elections in Kosovo, the lack of political parties' commitment to meet citizens demands, and their focus on self-interest rather than community interests are seen as top factors that have further impeded Kosovo's progress.
- Participants have low trust in political parties, particularly towards politicians at the local level. During the post-war period, citizens have expressed extreme dissatisfaction with nearly all political parties in power. The only party in which participants have hope and believe can make a change in the country is LVV, which already represents more than half of Kosovo's voters in the parliament.

# OVERVIEW

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This research analyzed public attitudes towards political parties in Kosovo, particularly focusing on how citizens view party proposals and messages used during recent elections in the country. The research was conducted in March 2022. The key objectives of this research and consequently those of FGDs were as follows:

- How do voters, particularly women and youth, perceive political parties within Kosovo?
- How do participants among different groups view party proposals and messages used during recent elections?
- How well do those messages speak to their needs and do they motivate them to vote for a certain party?
- How might they respond to future messaging?
- What are their expectations of political parties? How do their views differ by demographic group?
- How do ethnic minorities perceive political parties within Kosovo, including both parties that specifically compete for ethnic minority votes and parties that compete for votes more broadly?

These questions formed the basis of a semi-structured discussion guide that was used in 12 FGDs, each lasting approximately 90-120 minutes. While there were some sessions composed of participants from different ethnicities, the majority of sessions were with Kosovo Albanians. In Prizren there was a group composed

of Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Turk residents, in Mamusha there was a group with only Kosovo Turk residents, whereas in North Mitrovica there was a group with only Kosovo Serb residents. Lastly, some participants were drawn from Prishtina, some from other urban areas in Kosovo, and some from rural areas of Kosovo.<sup>1</sup>

In total, 118 participants participated in FGDs. Gender balance was maintained accordingly (discussants included 60 women and 58 men). Among each set of sessions in Prishtina, in other urban areas (7 regional centers), and in rural areas, there was one group consisting of only women and one only of youth to allow for open discussion of specific issues that affect women and youth. Further, there were groups consisting of only men. Focus groups that had only women participants had a woman as moderator, while focus groups that included only men had a man as moderator.

IRI recruited participants through a screening questionnaire to ensure they belonged to different neighborhoods within the research location cities, had completed at least secondary education, did not know other participants in the same session, and did not participate in a focus group or in-depth interview study in the past 12 months. In addition, no participant was a member of, or worked for, any political party.

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1. In total 12 FGDs were held; 3 were held in Prishtinë 1 in Gjiilan, 1 in Ferizaj, 1 in Mamushë, 1 in Prizren, 1 in South Mitrovica, 1 in North Mitrovica, 2 in Pejë and 1 in Gjakovë

# CONTEXT

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In February 2021, Kosovo held snap parliamentary elections, as the Constitutional Court declared Avdullah Hoti's (Democratic League of Kosovo – LDK) government illegitimate.<sup>2</sup> Growing frustration with the deteriorating socio-economic situation, high unemployment rates, and an almost-total deadlock in the national assembly led citizens to vote differently. LVV, a left-wing party led by Albin Kurti, won elections in a landslide victory, while the old parties conceded the election and stepped down after more than 10 years in power.

Winning more than 50% of the total votes, LVV obtained a historic victory. Sixty-seven out of 120 newly elected members of parliament (MPs) voted to support Kurti's government while 30 opposed.<sup>3</sup> Two months later, Kosovo's parliament elected Vjosa Osmani as the new president of Kosovo. She had previously served as acting president when former President Hashim Thaci was forced to resign in November 2020 after being accused of war crimes charges during Kosovo's 1998-99 war by the Hague-based Kosovo Specialist Chambers.<sup>4</sup> Today, Osmani is Kosovo's second woman president.

Kosovo held municipal elections barely eight months following parliamentary elections. In October 2021, citizens elected new mayors and members of local assemblies in 38 municipalities. LVV did not build on the

support received in the February 2021 parliamentary elections and was the only party that did not win a single municipality in the first round.<sup>5</sup> The 2021 municipal elections were well organized. Fundamental freedoms were respected during the campaign and a plurality of contestants offered voters a real choice, with the exception of the Kosovo-Serb municipalities where political competition was limited.<sup>6</sup>

Over the years, Kosovo has made some progress in advancing the socio-economic welfare of its citizens; however, the country still suffers from deep political polarization and the political system is characterized by its instability. Tensions with Serbia have continued to dominate the country's political context. Right before municipal elections, tensions rose along Kosovo's northern border with Serbia after Kosovo began requiring incoming travelers with Serb license plates replace those license plates with temporary Kosovo printed registrations (Serbia has required the same of Kosovo). Kosovo Serbs blocked roads near the border in response. However, the EU was able to mediate a compromise solution, and elections and campaigns were not seriously affected by these political developments.<sup>7</sup>

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2. European Western Balkans, Kosovo to hold snap parliamentary elections on Sunday, LVV clear favorites, February 2021
  3. Isufi, P., & Bami, Xhorxhina, Kosovo Parliament elects Albin Kurti as Prime Minister, Balkan Insight
  4. European Western Balkans, Kosovo to hold snap parliamentary elections on Sunday, LVV clear favorites, February 2021
  5. National Democratic Institute, Kosovo's 2021 Local Elections: Analysis of Inclusion and Information Integrity, February 2022
  6. European Union, Election Observation Mission, Kosovo 2021, Municipal Elections, 2021
  7. Ibid.



# FINDINGS

## Citizens' perspectives on women and youth participation in political parties

### Youth

Participation of young people in political life and public affairs in general is crucial for a healthy democracy. Findings from these FGDs suggest that there has been a recent upsurge of youth involvement in Kosovo's political parties. Youth participation in politics is substantially higher now that the biggest party in Kosovo, LVV, is in power. LVV is also known for having the biggest share of young voters.<sup>8</sup>

FGD participants were initially asked to express their views on youth involvement in political parties. Generally, they feel that the involvement of youth in politics, particularly in the last elections, is significantly higher compared to previous years. Young people tend to be more involved in politics during elections; they are generally involved in the organization of election campaigns.<sup>9</sup>

“ I think young people in Kosovo are involved in politics, especially during election campaigns. The youth are the ones who deal with almost all the organizations of political parties, for the campaigns and meetings that are organized with the public within the party.

— Participant of FGD in Prizren, ages 18+, mixed gender and ethnicities

One of the main reasons why FGD participants have such a view on youth engagement is because of political parties' candidate lists in both parliamentary and municipal elections. In the last two elections in Kosovo, participants saw a rise in the number of young people involved in political parties. Participants perceived that the majority of current Kosovo MPs, government representatives, and heads of local government departments are quite young, which emphasizes the higher involvement of youth in policymaking in Kosovo.

8. Radio Evropa e Lire, retrieved on 17th February 2022

9. Quotes cited throughout this report have been translated from the original languages and may have been minimally edited for clarity. The speaker's original contribution, including potential errors in word choice or grammar, has been preserved to the largest extent possible.

“ To get a clearer understanding of how political parties in Kosovo are involving youth, take a glance at the lists of candidates for municipal assembly in the most recent local elections. The majority of the candidates were young, but what surprised me was how many of my friends and family members were running in this election. In addition, the composition of the parliament and the current government in Kosovo includes a number of new MPs and ministers.

— Participant of FGD in Prishtina, ages 18-35, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

Despite an increase in youth political participation, FGD respondents believe that youth are not adequately represented and that political parties should include as many young women and men as possible in their structures. This belief coincides with IRI's November 2021 national public opinion poll in Kosovo, which found that 90% of the citizens agree that it is “very important” or “somehow important” that young adults are included in political decision making.<sup>10</sup>

Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe, where the median age is 29.5.<sup>11</sup> However, participants believe that political parties involve youth in their campaigns, political structures, and political programs purely for election purposes and to make their programs seem more appealing to the public. Discussants believe that young people lack power in decision-making in political parties, are not included in policy development, and their engagement was seen more as a choice of patronage. Participants see that political parties in Kosovo need to acknowledge the importance of youth involvement in political leadership since they can be catalysts of positive change in the country.

“ Since Kosovo is a country with a very young population, then political parties have no choice but to include young people in their parties. Moreover, the promotion and representation of the interests of the youth in the election campaigns are among the most attractive approaches for the population of Kosovo.

— Participant of FGD in Prishtina, ages 18-35, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

10. IRI nationwide Kosovo poll, published in November 2021 can be retrieved at: [kos-21-ns-01-pt\\_for\\_public\\_release-1 \(3\).pdf](#).

11. World Bank, Opportunities for Youth in Kosovo, March 2019

While young people have become more interested in politics, particularly in the last parliamentary and local elections, participants believe that LVV is the party that engages youth the most. The majority of participants, including Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Turks, perceive LVV as the party with the highest youth involvement. At the same time, this party seems to understand the importance of effective youth participation in political events, which may have contributed to strengthening the party itself and improving its legitimacy.

“Definitely, in terms of the party which includes the most youth, is LVV. This is an obvious reality, which is observed in all areas. Personally, I am not a fan of this party, I favor the LDK more, but we cannot deny the fact that LVV is mostly involving the youth currently. LVV is a youth party, the fact that this party was established by young people, even today continues to be the most attractive party when it comes to the involvement and membership of young people in politics.

— Participant of FGD in South Mitrovica, ages 18+, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

There is, however, a general sense among participants that political parties do not currently apply any criteria for youth inclusion in candidate lists, which indicates that young people who may lack sufficient qualifications are sometimes included in candidate lists, which can in turn produce adverse impact.

## Women

Even more positive trends emerged when it came to women's participation in political parties. FGD participants said that besides increased involvement in political parties, women in Kosovo have shown increased interest in performing an active role in politics in general. They have thus made notable progress and are beating the odds to get more involved in politics and policy developments than before. Participants stated that this interest is mostly visible when looking at positions of power, where the current president, Vjosa Osmani, is a woman. This view is further strengthened by the fact that Kosovo had another woman president, Atifete Jahjaga, who led the country from 2011 to 2016. The candidate lists of political parties for local and parliamentary elections, as well as the record number of women in the current government (five out of fifteen high profile ministries are run by women) are indicators that clearly illustrate an increased inclusion of women in politics.

Although citizens see positive trends on this matter, studies suggest that Kosovo has a long way to go in breaking the cycle of gender exclusion in political life.<sup>12</sup> The country has one of the most advanced laws on gender equality; however, there are currently only two women serving as mayors in two municipalities out of thirty-eight, both from the Serb List (SL).<sup>13,14</sup> In addition, there is still a substantial gap between the number of women and men serving in municipal assemblies.<sup>15</sup> Based on these arguments, it is evident that gender imbalance is more present at the local/municipal level. This stipulates the need to address gender gaps in politics by taking more affirmative actions and harmonizing other legal provisions with the Gender Equality Law.

12. Balkans Policy Research Group, Women in Politics III, March 2021

13. Ibid.

14. Local Election Results 2021, Central Election Commission, November 2021

15. Balkans Policy Research Group, Women in Politics III, March 2021

Contrary to youth involvement in politics, FGD participants had more doubts when speaking about the involvement of women in politics. Particularly when speaking of women's participation in political parties, citizens expressed different opinions. For instance, participants unanimously agreed that LVV has the largest number of women involved as party members, but when talking about the profile of women involved and their actual roles within the parties, then participants' opinions differed depending on where they lived and the party they primarily supported. LDK was seen as one of the first parties in Kosovo which included women representatives in its structures, including at higher-level positions, although perhaps small in number. Participants believe that the women included in LDK were valued as politicians. Participants had almost the same thoughts for the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) as well. On the other hand, in a single focus group (with young participants aged 18-35 in Ferizaj), the Social-Democratic Party (PSD) was also recognized by a few participants as one of the parties that has powerful women in its structures, while also treating women much better than any other party in Kosovo.

“ If we talk about the inclusion of women in politics, the truth is that LVV currently has the highest number of women in its party, but, if we talk more broadly, LDK was one of the first parties in Kosovo after the war, which supported women in politics and has given women an important role in its structures.

— Participant of FGD in Gjilan, ages 18+, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

Another participant from the same FGD added:

“ Also, PDK is one of the parties that have strong women in its structures, and who have very long experience in politics. So, I would say that the PDK has also included and offered political space to women.

## Role of women and youth in politics

When discussing the commitment of political parties to the cause of equal representation of women and youth in politics or specifically in political structures, there is a common belief among participants of FGDs that their representation is satisfactory. Nevertheless, when asked whether political parties are representing the interests and needs of women and youth, the evaluation is significantly more negative. FGD participants expressed their concerns about the role, importance, and consideration of the interests of women and youth by political parties in Kosovo. Therefore, although it may seem like women and youth are largely involved in political parties when solely looking at numbers of party members, the role and importance that those two groups have within the political structures is considered very insignificant and only a formality.

Another important point raised by participants is the format in which these two groups are represented in political parties. The fact that in most of Kosovo's parties' women and youth are represented by youth forums and women's forums created within the parties implies that there is a division between these two groups and the top-level party politics, which according to the participants, are mainly represented

by men. Therefore, women and youth's presence in political parties is seen merely as symbolic, through which they promote formal equal representation and try to create a better image for their parties. It was further emphasized that even when youth or women are assigned any duties within the party, they tend to be solely administrative jobs rather than important decision-making ones.

“ I know that almost every party has youth forums and women's forums. I think that it is exactly this division, or the need for these two groups to have their own forums that further strengthen their symbolic roles within a party. While it is true that these forums mainly represent the interests of young people and women through some useless and boring activities, the real decision-makers in the party are mainly men. Those who have established the parties, are the ones who decide for everything and take decisions on behalf of the party. As far as I know, LVV is the only party in which these types of forums do not exist.

— Participant of FGD in Gjilan, ages 18+, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

However, participants point out that one should not forget that some of the top high-profile posts in the current Kurti-led government are filled by women. They include second and third deputy prime minister, minister of foreign affairs, minister of justice, minister of education, minister of economy, and minister of industry, entrepreneurship and trade. Additionally, President Vjosa Osmani is Kosovo's second female president. This does not imply that the representation in decision-making is satisfactory, but progress has been made and as such should be recognized.

Participants see further engagement of women and youth in politics as crucial to a healthy democracy and a vivid equal political participation in the country.

Finally, participants of FGDs feel that women and youth in politics should be the voice of their demographic groups, yet they believe that women in politics are the least interested in women's concerns and are not working enough to advance women's position in Kosovan society.

## Citizens' views toward the election pledges and key messages

One of the key objectives of this research was to understand whether the messages of political parties in the recent elections in Kosovo have been inclusive of women and youth. FGD moderators gauged participants' perceptions of how well parties included women and youth's interests in political parties' programs, as well as the messages delivered, and pledges made during the parliamentary elections in February 2021 and the local elections in October/November 2021.

Initially, FGD participants were asked to share their understanding of the term "inclusiveness". Generally, inclusiveness of citizens in political parties is perceived as meaning inclusion in party structures or the involvement and contribution of citizens in important political decisions.

“ In my opinion, involvement means when all citizens have the right to join a certain party, and when citizens have the opportunity to express their opinions within the party, and these opinions are valued or respected by the representatives of political parties.

— Participant of FGD in Prizren, ages 18+, mixed gender and ethnicities

Nonetheless, participants had difficulties remembering campaign slogans and messages related to inclusion. They further elaborated by saying that it is difficult to remember campaign details, mainly because election campaigns, key messages and programs are almost always the same. They usually focus on general citizens' demands, such as the need for improved infrastructure, social welfare and increased employment opportunities. Participants' inability to remember campaign messages and programs also stems from the fact that participants did not pay much attention to political parties' programs, and from citizens' resentment and frustration of previously unmet promises. There is a general sense that any message delivered during the campaigns are purely for electoral purposes.

An exception was the campaign of Uran Ismaili from PDK, who ran for the Mayor of Prishtina in the recent elections and led one of the most creative and engaging electoral campaigns. Besides Prishtina participants, FGD participants from other cities also hailed Uran Ismaili's campaign by stressing how his program aimed to meet the essential needs of the Prishtina municipality. They claimed that his campaign style was something new and very interesting; for example, part of his campaign was to visit a family in Prishtina and spend a night in their homes to discuss their concerns regarding the city. Another novel campaign activity by Ismaili was his initiative to renovate and paint different parts of various neighborhoods to show his interest in fixing Prishtina's problems.

FGD participants also expressed deep disappointment with the recent local elections held throughout Kosovo, mainly due to paucity of choices and unmet promises. The perception is that citizens in local elections do not pay much attention to the programs, promises and messages of political parties because they are basically templates and the same for all competing parties. This in turn becomes a problem when it comes to deciding for whom to vote, and therefore citizens end up voting in a traditional way, influenced by family or friends rather than voting due to a promising political program.



Regarding the specific messages and promises of political parties during the last electoral campaigns, FGD participants in the study mainly mentioned the promises given in the last parliamentary elections. Hence, the promises that they recall are mainly from the party that is now in power, LVV. Some of the mentioned promises include:

- The Children's Financial Supplement Scheme, under which all children under the age of two will get monthly allowances of 20 euros, while children under the age of 16 will get a monthly allowance of 10 euros
- Employment subsidies for unemployed women during maternity leave. The financial support is 170 euros per month for six months in a row, while for employed women the financial support of 170 euros is for three months in a row in addition to regular maternity leave compensation.
- Scholarships for students who decide to study in fields that are in demand in the labor market
- Strengthening the engagement of young people in professional internships which are paid and subsidized by the state
- Abolishment of tuition fees for students from public universities
- Supporting the education system by reducing the skills gap in the labor market
- Supporting attractive programs that will increase innovation and support thousands of innovative youth initiatives

“ I do not remember many messages, because almost every choice is the same. However, I would like to mention some that have remained most in my mind from the campaign, and that have already started to be implemented by the government of Kosovo. Specifically, I remember that LVV promised subsidies for children up to 2 years old, also for women, a subsidy of 170 euros, up to 6 months after birth. They have also promised student scholarships, as well as the exemption of students from tuition fees at Kosovo public universities.

— Participant of FGD in Gjakova, ages 18+, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

It is worth noting that, when it comes to messages or promises made by political entities during election campaigns in Kosovo, participants recalled mainly promises that are already fulfilled or are in the process.

## Representation of women and youth's interests by political parties in Kosovo

It can be derived from public data, other research, and these FGDs that the socio-economic challenges women and youth face in Kosovo have long been exacerbated by careless politicians who have failed to respond effectively. In Kosovo, youth unemployment has skyrocketed; more than 50% of young people are unemployed,<sup>16</sup> the highest unemployment rate among youth in the Western Balkans.<sup>17</sup> The situation is no better with women: more than 32 percent of Kosovo's women are unemployed.<sup>18</sup> Considering these discouraging numbers, FGD participants believe that the

election campaigns are usually filled with promises to curb unemployment among youth, but after elections they go back to working for their own self-interest.

Low economic development and high level of youth unemployment has created dissatisfaction among citizens and is therefore fueling youth migration to European countries. For many Kosovars who are experiencing extreme hardships, escaping from their homeland seems like the only solution.

“ I have been one of those people that was totally against leaving Kosovo. However, now, because of current socio-economic situation in the country, particularly limited opportunities for employment, the first chance I get I will leave this country and move to Europe.

— Participant of FGD in Ferizaj, ages 18-35, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

Participants of FGDs believe that because of unresolved issues, women and youth end up joining a political party to realize their personal interest such as getting a job, receiving scholarships, or any other benefit offered

by political parties in exchange for votes. As stipulated during the discussions, membership in a political party in exchange for a job position, particularly in the public sector, is a widely used practice in Kosovo.

16. Arandarenko. M & Stefanie Brodmann, Job Opportunities for youth in Kosovo: Two steps forwards, one back? The World Bank, March, 2019

17. Ibid.

18. Agency of Statistics in Kosovo, Labor Force Survey in Kosovo, 2020, July 2021

“ I have personally been a member of a political party. The reason I joined that party was that they had promised me that they will find me a job. I worked hard for that party during elections, hoping that they will find me a job, but after elections, they were not interested anymore, and I have been deeply disappointed.

— Participant of FGD in Gjakova, ages 18+, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

The exception to this perception was LVV; participants ranked LVV the highest among political parties for working toward leaving no one behind, including women and youth. This argument was also backed up by ethnic minorities. In addition, the fact that LVV has neither a youth nor women’s forum may give the impression that this party works differently from other parties. FGD participants also mentioned how LVV has entrusted women and young representatives with many important positions in the government. Finally, Kosovo citizens participating in the FGDs were highly satisfied with Prime Minister Kurti’s government in terms of measures taken toward women and youth, including abolishment of student fees in public universities, and scholarships for girls in STEM.

## Representation of ethnic minorities’ interests by political parties in Kosovo

Despite a total population of less than 1.8 million, Kosovo’s population is quite diverse. Kosovo is made up of many communities and consists of several ethnic groups legally known as ethnic communities. According to the available official data, which does not include four northern municipalities where Kosovo-Serbs boycotted the census, the main minority groups are Serbs (1.47 percent), Bosnians (1.58 percent), Turks (1.08 percent), Roma (0.51 percent), Ashkalis (0.89 percent), Egyptians (0.66 percent), and Goranis (0.59 percent). These minority ethnic communities are entitled to equal representation in all public institutions and enterprises.<sup>19</sup>

Almost all citizens participating in the research—the vast majority of whom are Kosovo Albanian — believe that Kosovo adequately represents the rights and interests of ethnic groups in the political spectrum. In addition, they added that ethnic minorities are well represented in public administration and governance. However, according to FGD participants, they are not integrated enough in Kosovo society as other ethnicities.

To better understand whether ethnic minorities in Kosovo are well represented by political parties in Kosovo, two of the FGDs were conducted with Kosovo Turks and Kosovo Serbs in Mamusha and North Mitrovica, respectively. Kosovo Turks generally expressed satisfaction with the way they are treated on the political spectrum in Kosovo. Their general concerns were almost the same as Kosovo Albanians, namely unemployment, poor economic development and low social welfare. Furthermore, Turkish participants stated that it is crucial for them that political parties reflect the interests of all of Kosovo’s citizens, without focusing mainly on the needs of one community.

19. Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Kosovo Census 2011. Please note that the information on population in Northern Municipalities with Kosovo-Serbs majority population is not covered here, therefore the percentage of Kosovo Serbs and other communities are underestimated.

“ We as Turks are very satisfied with the representation of our ethnic rights; however, for me it is important to be treated like all other Kosovars. As a Kosovar citizen, for me, employment, the economic development of the country, and the general well-being of citizens are very important.

— Participant of FGD in Prizren, ages 18+, mixed gender and ethnicities

On the other hand, Kosovo Serbs generally expressed dissatisfaction and concerns with the Serbian politicians on representing their interests in politics.

“ Nobody represents our interests. We are dissatisfied with the representation of our political interests by Serbian representatives. In fact, we are very dissatisfied even with political representatives in Serbia and how they treat us and our interests. I think that they have left us aside and do not deal with our interests at all.

— Participant of FGD in North Mitrovica, ages 18+, mixed gender, Serb ethnicity

Serb citizens are generally dissatisfied; they feel left out not only by Serb political parties and politicians in Kosovo, but also by Serb political representatives in Serbia. Other research shows that many Serbs living in Kosovo do not trust a single party or politician.<sup>20</sup> In addition, they are also dissatisfied with prospects of economic development, and lack trust not only towards politicians but also towards international actors and institutions.<sup>21</sup>

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20. NGO Aktiv, Trend Analysis, Attitudes of Serbian Community in Kosovo, 2021

21. Ibid.

## Reasons for voting for a certain political party

Frequent snap elections in Kosovo and political instability, coupled with many economic and social problems, are causing significant dissatisfaction among the Kosovo citizens as recounted by FGD participants. One of the objectives of this research was to understand the motives behind voting for a particular party and the reasons behind it. FGDs revealed that citizens vote for a political party for a variety of reasons. However, it is interesting to see how citizens participating in FGDs have mentioned that in local elections, the program of the political party is the least important, compared to the political party or the candidate who is running for mayor.

Given that Kosovo's municipalities are very small, and the possibility of citizens knowing each other is very high, this phenomenon has a significant impact on the voting process for local elections. More specifically, the participants in this study have stated that in local elections they mainly vote for personal or family motives and interests. As mentioned above, when talking about the involvement of youth in policymaking, the promises and personal or family interests of citizens take a very important role when deciding for whom to vote.

“Kosovo is a very small country. As you may know, in every municipality of Kosovo, everybody knows somebody or knows somebody who knows somebody else. For instance, in local elections, in most cases, it is impossible to not have a well-known candidate. In addition, we usually know many people from parties' lists of candidates, thus, in local elections people usually vote based on family interest.

— Participant of FGD in North Mitrovica, ages 18+, mixed gender, Serb ethnicity

Another participant, from the same FGD:

“In addition to family reasons, in local elections very often citizens vote for specific interests. For example, someone promises a job, someone promises a favor if their party wins, or even some other service that has to do with personal interests. As a result, almost every citizen thinks of their personal benefit before voting, as we know that everything works this way in Kosovo.

On the other hand, when it comes to parliamentary elections, participants say they take many aspects into consideration. Usually, the long-term collective and social interest is more important than the short-term self-interest.

The top factors impacting citizens' decision to vote for a particular party in parliamentary elections are as follows: the political party, the candidate for prime minister,

the list of parliamentary candidates, their professional background, their biography, and their past performance if they were in power. Participants further added that the political program is also important but given that usually all political parties compile good programs, it is not a significant deciding factor. Finally, party representatives and their credibility are other criteria that citizens consider before casting their ballots.

“ Political parties must select adequate people to work in certain areas of government. For me it is important which candidate is running and what does he/she represent. For instance, when LVV spoke during the campaign for raped women, they were running with a candidate for MP like Vafije Krasniqi, who is a victim of sexual violence during the last war in Kosovo, and who in my opinion knows how to best represent this group.

Or, even the other example, when LVV said that they will contribute and work hard in the empowerment of women and youth in Kosovo, their campaigns convinced me, because LVV started the empowerment of youth within the party initially. I think that this party can really make changes in this aspect, due to the fact that most of its structures have youth. Youth know best how to represent youth.

— Participant of FGD in Gjakova, ages 18+, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity



Another participant from the same FGD highlighted:

“ We, as citizens of Kosovo, need employment opportunities, economic development, quality healthcare services, quality education and a justice system that supports the well-being of citizens in general. Gone are the days when we voted for political parties for promises related to infrastructure, we do not need infrastructure investments when we are facing essential problems such as the issue of employment. We do not need new and luxurious facilities for schools when the education quality is poor, nor do we need hospitals with European standards, when healthcare services are of a low quality.

Regarding government programs, participants generally consider that the political parties whose programs address citizens' well-being rather than infrastructure and non-essential investments are the ones that they would usually vote for.

## Citizens' expectations of political parties and key challenges that need to be addressed

Kosovo faces various challenges which are directly related to social welfare. Slow economic growth and high unemployment rates are considered the biggest hurdles. It is important to mention that when talking about employment, all participants, regardless of their profile, expressed that they have economic problems and that they consider this a serious issue. This underscores their expectations for political parties to accelerate economic growth and create the conditions for increased job opportunities.

In addition to unemployment, participants expressed concerns about the challenges they face with their jobs, particularly those working in the private sector. Among

the top subjects of criticism were the Law on Labor as well as the Law on Wages. Participants demanded continuous monitoring of the implementation of the Law on Labor, implying that private companies do not respect it properly. Meanwhile, participants believe that the Law on Wages should be amended since the minimum wage is very low and needs to be higher. At the time of these FGDs, Kosovo's government had not increased the minimum wage for 11 consecutive years.<sup>22</sup>

22. However, in April 2022 (after the fieldwork period for this study) the current government passed a bylaw which increased the minimum wage from 170 Euros per month to 250 euros per month. Bota Sot, Minimal Wage Increased, April 2022.

“ We as citizens cannot expect anything else, if initially we do not have employment opportunities, this is essential for the well-being of citizens. But, in addition to employment opportunities, all government bodies must work hard to improve working conditions, labor law and raising salaries, especially for the private sector.

We know that the level of employment in Kosovo is very low, even those who work in the private sector in Kosovo face many difficulties from their employers. They are abused and work non-stop for symbolic salaries, which are enough only for survival.

— Participant of FGD in Gjakova, ages 18+, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

Another participant from the same focus group discussion added:

“ In Kosovo, whenever there is a discussion about labor law, or salaries, only the public sector is taken into account. It seems to me that private sector workers are not even considered as labor force in our country. I think that only now, the Kurti government has begun to deal more with the issues of private sector workers. For me, it is very important to have the support of private sector in raising salaries. We hope that the conditions and salaries of the private sector will improve to the extent that it is possible. This is also one of the reasons why most young people do a lot for political parties, hoping that through that party they will find a job in the public sector.

Kosovo's state-funded healthcare system has become another fundamental challenge for its citizens. FGD participants expressed their concern with weak healthcare and poor-quality services in public health institutions. Therefore, participants expect the LVV-led government to work harder in improving the current state of the healthcare system in the country by making it more accessible, affordable and effective.

“ Even in healthcare sector, I believe that we are performing very bad. Regarding the healthcare sector in Kosovo, besides the lack of equipment and tools necessary for the service, the service by the healthcare staff in public institutions is a crime in itself. We only wish that we do not have to ask for help from these institutions, otherwise I have no words to describe it.

— Participant of FGD in Peja, ages 18+, men, Albanian ethnicity

The state of Kosovo's education is also unsatisfactory. According to OECD and PISA metrics, Kosovo is ranked as one of the countries with the lowest educational performance.<sup>23</sup> The various issues in the education sector range from a lack of sufficient school infrastructure, poor teacher performance, lack of sufficient budget for teacher trainings, and lack of quality assurance mechanisms.<sup>24</sup> FGD participants stated that improving the quality of education is one of the most urgent matters for political parties. Besides youth, who were firmly vocal on this matter, other participants and particularly parents expressed concern about the state of education quality in the country, particularly the teaching quality provided to their children. Citizens have high expectations and hope that the LVV-led government, along with opposition parties, will take appropriate measures and prioritize the improvement of the education sector.

“ The quality of education in Kosovo is in a very alarming state as well. PISA test best supports my argument on this. For instance, there is corruption in the process of hiring teachers. Teachers on the other hand, whenever they want, arrange protests and strikes, regardless of the adverse consequences caused to students by boycotting teaching. All they ask for is a salary increase, but what teachers and all representatives of education in Kosovo give is equal to zero.

— Participant of FGD in Ferizaj, ages 18-35, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

23. OECD, Kosovo PISA student Performance, 2018

24. Aliu. L., Analysis of Kosovo's Education System, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Corruption remains a serious problem in Kosovo. While Kosovo has an advanced legislative framework that is usually in line with EU acquis and international standards, countering corruption also requires an increased level of judicial autonomy, political will and improved active citizenship. So far, there has been a lack of concrete results in tackling this phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> Participants of FGDs largely believe that Kosovo has highly corrupt institutions. According to participants, especially ones older than 36, corruption, an ineffective justice system, and their adverse consequences are top issues in the country. Citizens believe that if the justice

system functioned properly, many other problems could be easily eradicated.

Corruption in Kosovo seems to have deep roots and is practiced even in daily services, such as bribing a police officer to avoid penalties.<sup>26</sup> Participants of FGDs stated that another area where corruption is prevalent is employment, particularly in public institutions. This is also evident in participants' statements that engaging in political parties is seen by some as a "quid pro quo" way to secure future employment.

“ I would say that LVV, simply because of their determination to fight corruption and improve the justice system performance, has managed to win so many votes and be among the most popular parties in Kosovo. If the justice system starts to improve, then I believe all other issues will start to improve in our country, because corruption rooted in political parties for a long time has brought us to this state that we are in today.

— Participant of FGD in Ferizaj, ages 18-35, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

Another issue raised during discussions, although not a specific objective of this research, was LGBT community rights, which some participants claimed to be limited and highly restrictive.

Even though Kosovo's legal framework, including the Constitution and the Law on Anti-Discrimination, prohibits any type of discrimination, including based on sexual orientation, discrimination remains largely

present at the social level. However, some participants of FGDs, mainly the youth, stated that none of the political parties in Kosovo properly represent the LGBT community. This statement could also be backed up by the fact that in March 2022, while fieldwork was ongoing, Kosovo's parliament rejected a new law that would allow same-sex marriages.<sup>27</sup>

25. Hajra, A & Arian Zeka, Corruption Perception Study 2019, American Chamber of Commerce in Kosovo December 2019

26. Ibid.

27. Kosovo's parliament rejects new law recognizing same-sex civil unions, Euronews, March 2022

“ I think that political parties should include the LGBT community a little more because so far, I have not seen any party that has taken their rights seriously. So, I think that in the future they should focus more on this direction, and their programs to include points that would improve the life of the LGBT community in Kosovo.

— Participant of FGD in Ferizaj, ages 18-35, mixed gender, Albanian ethnicity

Ensuring proper education and more employment opportunities for people with special needs was among the final issues mentioned by the participants without moderator prompting.

In addition, some mothers participating in the discussions expressed dissatisfaction with the treatment given to people with special needs as well as the lack of awareness towards the needs of this group.

“ Another issue that was raised, are the conditions of people with special needs. In Kosovo, people with special needs live in very limited conditions, especially children. I think that there is a need to work harder and offer a more dignified life. So, as long as political parties do not consider the needs of all social groups, they do not work seriously.

— Participant of FGD in Prishtina, ages 18+, women, Albanian ethnicity

They further stated that the importance and priority that political parties in Kosovo have for people with special needs is very limited, and that this group faces various challenges in many aspects of life, preventing them from living a dignified life and enjoying the rights guaranteed by the Constitution and other legal acts in the country. They believe that more needs to be done to improve the living conditions of people with special needs and other vulnerable groups.

# CONCLUSIONS

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Focus Group Discussions revealed that Kosovo's citizens are looking for competent and effective governments led by political parties that respond to citizens' concerns and represent citizens' needs and interests. Involvement of women and youth in political parties is seen as satisfactory. However, their role and power in decision-making political structures has a long way to go. Participants, none of whom are party members, feel that young people in political parties often experience prejudice due to perceptions of their lack of experience, expertise and sometimes their gender. Hence, their participation remains only of the representational nature and symbolic. Participants in the FGDs assessed that LVV best includes women and youth and has made the most effort towards meeting the needs of those two groups.

Participants in the FGDs stated that the reasons the youth of Kosovo become members of youth forums in political parties or join a political entity are mainly family related or regarding personal interests, such as securing job placement in public administration. When discussing the key messages and pledges delivered by political parties during election campaigns, participants of FGDs tend to recall only the promises that have been fulfilled and the projects that are already being implemented. Generally, participants of FGDs do not pay attention to political programs, since they believe that those are identical among political parties and not realistic. This in turn reflects the need to make political programs more pragmatic and reasonable. Political parties' candidate lists and past performance in the government are top influences on a citizen's decision to vote for a party.

FGDs revealed that the biggest concerns of Kosovo's youth are unemployment and the country's economy. Socio-economic problems such as the

lack of employment opportunities, poor economic development, high level of corruption, low quality of healthcare, and low quality of education have caused emigration among young people. FGD participants believe that these matters require urgent intervention and Kosovo needs a capable and strong central and local governance led by political parties to address these hardships and challenges.

While participants generally mentioned similar socio-economic concerns, there were some specific issues that were highlighted only by Kosovo Serb participants. Kosovo Serb participants generally expressed dissatisfaction and concerns primarily with Serb politicians which they believe are not representing their interests in politics. They highlighted their dissatisfaction and that they feel left out not only by Serb political parties and politicians in Kosovo, but also by Serb politicians as well. Generally, Serb participants stated to have little confidence in political parties and believe that they do not keep their promises, arguing that almost nothing has been done for the people on the ground. They stressed that the Kosovo Serb political life is controlled by Belgrade and all the messages by Kosovo Serb politicians are directed to Belgrade and the Serbian president to strengthen their positions in the party itself.

Kosovo Turk participants, on the other hand, have said they are content with how they are treated and how their interests are represented in Kosovo. Their general concerns were almost the same as those of Kosovo Albanians, such as unemployment, poor economic development, and low social welfare. Furthermore, Kosovo Turk participants stated that it is crucial for them that political parties reflect the interests of all Kosovo citizens, without focusing mainly on the needs of one community.



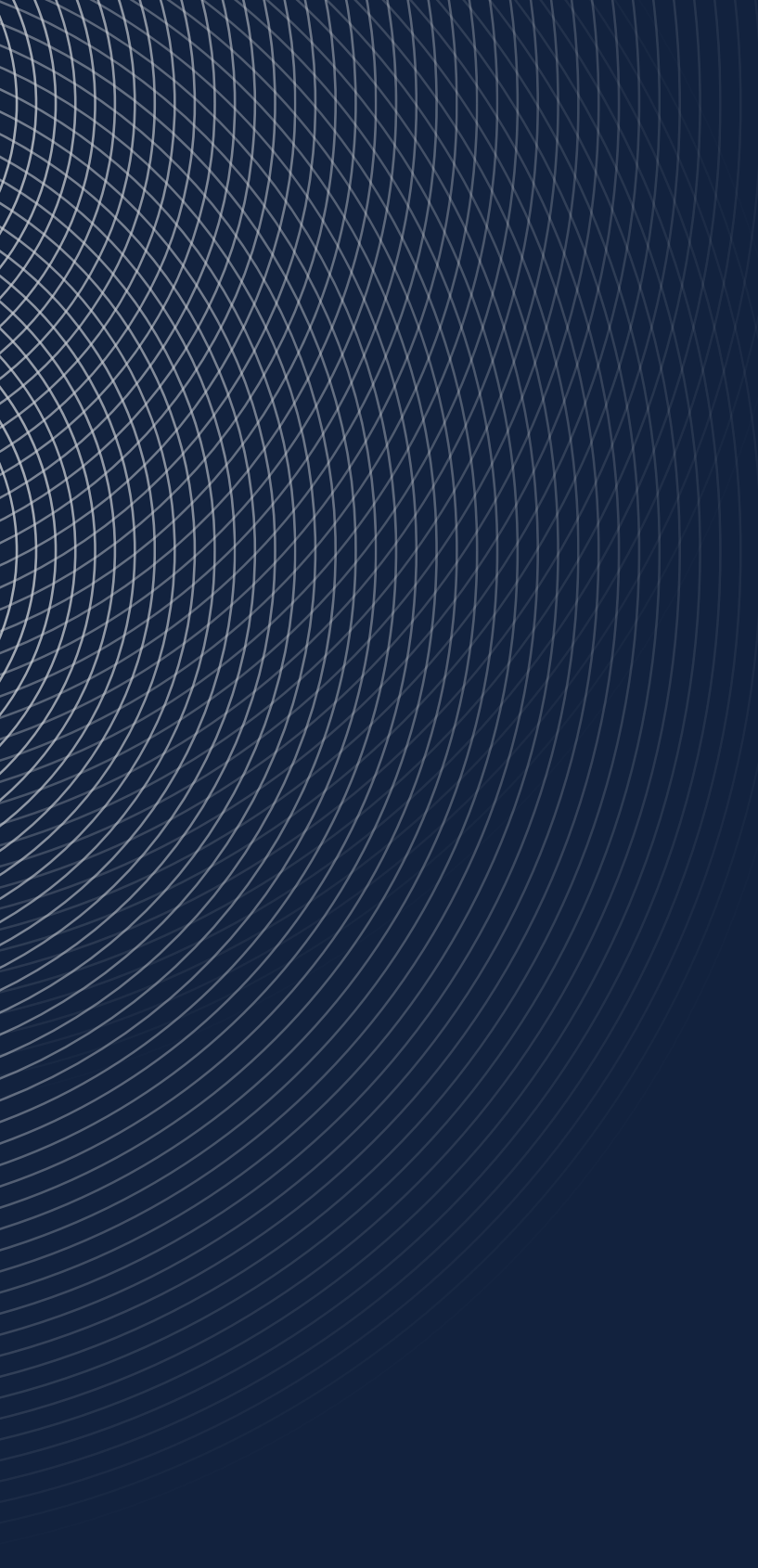
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# APPENDIX

## Composition of focus group discussions

| FG# | Location        | Date      | Composition       | Ethnic group          | Moderator | Number of participants |
|-----|-----------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------|------------------------|
| 001 | Prishtina       | 01-Mar-22 | Mixed Gender, 18+ | K Albanians           | Woman     | 11                     |
| 002 | Prishtina       | 03-Mar-22 | Men 36+           | K Albanians           | Man       | 9                      |
| 003 | Gjilan          | 10-Mar-22 | Mixed Gender, 18+ | K Albanians           | Woman     | 11                     |
| 004 | Prishtina       | 14-Mar-22 | Women, 18+        | K Albanians           | Woman     | 9                      |
| 005 | Ferizaj         | 16-Mar-22 | Mixed Gender, 18+ | K Albanians           | Woman     | 10                     |
| 006 | Mamusha         | 17-Mar-22 | Mixed Gender, 18+ | K Turks               | Man       | 10                     |
| 007 | Prizren         | 17-Mar-22 | Mixed Gender, 18+ | K Albanians & K Turks | Woman     | 10                     |
| 008 | North Mitrovica | 18-Mar-22 | Mixed Gender, 18+ | K Serbs               | Man       | 9                      |
| 009 | Peja            | 22-Mar-22 | Women, 18+        | K Albanians           | Woman     | 9                      |
| 010 | Peja            | 22-Mar-22 | Men, 18+          | K Albanians           | Man       | 10                     |
| 011 | Gjakova         | 30-Mar-22 | Mixed Gender, 18+ | K Albanians           | Woman     | 10                     |
| 012 | South Mitrovica | 31-Mar-22 | Mixed Gender, 18+ | K Albanians           | Woman     | 10                     |



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