

# Albania and Serbia: Perceptions and Reality



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# 1. Introduction

**A**lthough Albania and Serbia are two important actors in the Balkans, their cooperation has been superficial. Excluding the honeymoon period between Enver Hoxha and Josip Tito – from the end of World War II to 1948 – both societies and their markets have operated in relative isolation from each other. The end of the Cold War and violent disintegration of Yugoslavia brought a new wave of conflict and enmity between Albania and Serbia. In the 1990s, Albania was faced with the possibility of military confrontation with Serbia over Kosovo.

Over the last decade, Albania and Serbia have made significant attempts to develop bilateral relations. Politically, dialogue between both states is present, and occasionally official state visits between their respective parties have occurred; while in economic terms, trade and investment have witnessed a slow, but positive trend. Now, more than ten years after the end of the Kosovo War, and five years after Kosovo's declaration of independence, Albania and Serbia are still far from the normal constructive relations that should exist between two states located in the same region and this is greatly influenced by the negative historical legacy.

In light of the above, the aim of this paper is to modestly contribute to the development and sustainability of relations between Albania and Serbia, by shedding light on current relations in the political, economic and cultural realms and potentials for future improvements. The initiative therefore aims to overpass often wrong perceptions that impede normal political, economic and cultural relations between the two countries. The paper is divided into five parts: Initially we draw attention to the historical background of relations between Albania and Serbia during the past twenty years; the second part is dedicated to the methodology adopted for the study; the third chapter deals with quantitative findings from media monitoring in both Albania and Serbia, and the fourth chapter focuses on qualitative findings retrieved from interviews both in Tirana and Belgrade; finally the paper ends with respective conclusions and recommendations that might serve to the future improvement of relations and, subsequently, perceptions on both sides.

## 2. Historical Background

### *2.1 Political Relations*

**R**elations between Albania and Serbia have, to a great extent, been determined by the events taking place in the region over the last two decades, namely the conflict in Kosovo and the shared path toward European integration.

To begin with, the Cold War left a legacy of poor relations between the two countries due to the Kosovo issue, inherited from centuries ago and, the subsequent ideological differences between the two communist regimes whose friendship lasted only 3 years (1945-1948). The dissolution of Yugoslavia after 1991 and the rise of ethnicity-based politics in the region also increased antagonism between Serbia and Albania. Mutual distrust was made evident and exacerbated by the conflict in Kosovo (Novakovic, Dukanovic and Petrovic 2010). Both countries went through significant changes and headed in different directions. Albania was transitioning from the most isolated and one of the poorest communist countries in the world (both in political and economic terms) to a democracy and an open economy for investment and free trade. The pyramid schemes of 1997 brought

Albania to the verge of collapse, causing civil unrest internally. During this period, Serbia was dealing with the consequences of Yugoslavia's breakup that proved to be violent and caused major conflicts between the new states that emerged during the 1990s. The relationship between the two countries hit the rock bottom in 1999, when Albania supported the NATO bombing in Kosovo.

Officially, relations were reestablished and normalized by the exchange of diplomatic notes in January 2001. Between 2001 and 2004 Albania and Serbia were both involved in the South East European Cooperation Process Stability Pact, in which high officials met in conferences and worked together to address the challenges ahead. However, it wasn't until 2004, when Serbia-Montenegro's Defense Minister Prvoslav Davinic made an official visit to Albania (the first visit since 1948), that tensions between Tirana and Belgrade ended. Later, Kastriot Islami, the then Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, repaid the visit to Belgrade in May 2005, which could be considered a turning point in bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia. The exchange of official visits provided incentives to step up high-level political dialogue. In 2005, relations were improved through political and economic cooperation. Although there were no official meetings in 2006, a number of agreements were signed, such as the Protocol of Cooperation between the ministries of justice, and negotiations were underway to conclude nine other agreements (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia: Bilateral issues with foreign countries).

The growing political cooperation was once again halted with the Kosovo declaration of independence in February 2008. Albania was among the first countries to recognize the newly-established state, a move not welcomed by Belgrade. The perception and reality of Albania being one of the main promoters of Kosovo's independence remains to this day one of the major



issues preventing full cooperation between the two countries and, Albania is also perceived to stand with Kosovo in every issue, working therefore against Serbia's national interest on this issue. As such, between 2005 and 2010 only a few agreements were signed between Tirana and Belgrade, mainly in the field of environmental protection and tourism promotion.

Nonetheless, a positive sign was sent in March 2010, when the Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister Ilir Meta visited Preshevo and Bujanovac, two ethnic Albanian majority municipalities in southern Serbia and declared that relations between Serbia and Albania are improving. The countries share one objective: EU integration, he said. Meta held a two-day visit during which he met with Serbian President Boris Tadic. This was accompanied a few months later by raising the level of Serbia's diplomatic representation in Albania, replacing the *charge d'affaires* with the appointed Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia in Albania. In line with this measure, in 2011 Albania and Serbia lifted visas on each other's citizens, that was largely perceived as a step forward in improving mutual cooperation. Albania's Foreign Ministry said that the agreement (signed by Albanian Deputy Foreign Minister Selim Belortaja and Serbian Ambassador to Albania Miroljub Zaric) "is based on the principles of full reciprocity between the two states, the good will and the mutual co-operation" (Karadaku 2011).

The most recent visit of Serbia's Foreign Minister, Ivan Mrkic, to Tirana in October 2012 was part of a regional tour including talks with peers in Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Romania, Greece and Italy with an emphasis on Serbia's foreign policy in the region. As Mrkic stated, "A foreign minister [of Serbia] has not been there for quite some time. I am confident that we will create a foundation for a better cooperation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania). During the two days stay in

Tirana he met with the Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs in a closed meeting where the Serbian ambassador to Albania and the Albanian ambassador to Serbia were also present, and met with the Albanian Prime Minister, discussing the importance of improved bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia.

Both the Albanian Prime Minister and the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the need to open a new chapter of positive relations between the two countries despite the divergences between them on certain issues, referring to Kosovo. During the meeting the Prime Minister emphasized that differences between the two countries should not become an obstacle to bilateral relations and leaving aside the past, the future of these relations should be that of mutual friendship and cooperation in fields of reciprocal interest such as economy, education, culture and tourism” (Top-Channel 2012).

The most recent visit of Serbia’s Foreign Minister to Tirana sent signals of improved cooperation between Serbia and Albania, indicating that both nations are looking to establish more open, sincere, and dynamic relations. For example, a declaration of mutual recognition of diplomas and an economic trade agreement will be signed in the near future. Adding here the historical agreement reached between Prishtina and Belgrade on April 19, 2013, after more than six months and ten rounds of intense negotiations between Prime Ministers Dacic and Thaci, normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia will definitely have a positive impact on relations between Serbia and Albania.

## ***2.2 Economic Cooperation***

**E**ven though Yugoslavia became Albania's biggest trade partner by the end of the 1980s, the changes that came with the fall of communism affected the two countries and brought economic relations to a halt. Trade and economic relations between Albania and Serbia during the first decade after the end of the Cold War were close to none. In 2000, trade exchange between Serbia and Albania was estimated to be a mere USD 233,000.

Bilateral economic relations between the two countries improved, though at a slow pace, since the regime change in Serbia in 2000. Starting in 2005, the Serbian Chamber of Commerce (SCC) increased its activity in the Albanian market, and in February of the same year, the SCC signed a cooperation agreement with the Albanian Union of Chambers of Commerce, which was followed by the forming of a Section for Albania, numbering more than 50 Serbian companies. Its main goal was to spread information about the business climate in Albania. The positive movement has been evident, with the most recent example consisting of the organization of the 'Serbian Days' at the Tirana International Trade Fair. Also, at the end of March 2011, the Regional Chamber of Commerce of Southern Serbia and the Tirana Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCI) organized the joint visit of businessmen from southern Serbia to Albania.

However, the true boom in trade occurred in 2007, with the establishment of CEFTA. That first year, trade exchange almost doubled from around USD 40 million in 2006 to more than USD 90 million in 2007 (Novakovic and Govedarica 2011). In 2010 Serbia was the fourth imports partner for Albania after EU27, China and Turkey, with 2.6% or 83.5 million Euros of the total.

As for exports, Serbia is the sixth major partner, standing at 18.5 million Euros, followed by the United States and Montenegro. Overall, Serbia is ranked among Albania's five major trade partners [EU27, China, Turkey, Switzerland, Serbia] (European Commission, DG Trade 2012) Furthermore, many Serbian companies have invested in Albania throughout the years but Albanian investments are still insignificant in Serbia.

Despite these positive developments in the economic sector, bilateral economic relations between Serbia and Albania are not balanced, largely due to technical obstacles that are being addressed by CEFTA. Also, trade between Albania and Serbia is highly concentrated and therefore not sustainable. One must acknowledge that trade cooperation between Serbia and Albania is particularly important at the national, bilateral and regional level. As Novakovic and Govedarica (2011) suggest, not only would such joint cooperation allow each country to improve its economic development and trade balance and to attract foreign investments, but it would also contribute to the overall political cooperation, and to the improvement of mutual perceptions about each other.

### ***2.3 Cultural Exchanges***

**D**espite close geographical proximity, cultural exchange between Albania and Serbia has been largely insignificant and people from both countries don't know much about one another. However, there was a period, by the end of the communist regime in Albania, when Yugoslav art entered the borders of Albania due to the new developments in technology. This way former Yugoslavia became a "Window to the West." Even though it wasn't officially allowed, Yugoslavian music and movies

became very famous and had an impact in everyday life of most Albanians. However, as with economic and political relations, cultural ties between Albania and Serbia were set around the year 2000, when a few cultural initiatives were undertaken, Serbian authors were being translated and the music of Goran Bregovic was often heard in Albania.

Recently, many initiatives have taken place in the region, bringing Albania and Serbia together in activities, projects and events closely linked to culture and art. For instance, Balkan's Initiative for Cultural Cooperation, Exchange and Development is a project organized in Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Kosovo, which aims to connect local cultural institutions at the regional level. This project was complemented by the Balkan Culture Watch Strengthening Project that aimed at involving government officials and decision makers to improve the situation in the region by strengthening cultural life and cross cultural cooperation (BIRN 2011).

The establishment of Balkans Beyond Borders as an NGO fostering cultural and artistic cooperation in the region, was conceived as a forum where young people from all over the region could express their views and share ideas using alternative means such as short movies and photography, which helps the younger generation to get to know the other. One of the latest regional cultural activities was the Second Edition of Balkan Film and Culinary Festival that brought together in Pogradec, Albania, representatives from Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Romania, Greece, Croatia, Bulgaria and Turkey to expose their traditional cuisine while competing for the best short movie.

In 2006, at a time when political and economic relations were improving, the arts took the role of boosting ties among people in the two countries. One example of that was the

performance of Nikolai Gogol's comic masterpiece "Marriage" by the National Theatre of Serbia before audiences in Tirana, which was a reciprocal visit following up on the Albanian National Theatre's performance of Chekhov's "The Seagull" in Belgrade. What was special about the event was the visits they had to other cities in Albania, as stated by the troop, "get a taste of Albania" (Selimaj 2006). An additional great contribution to the cultural cooperation between the two countries has been the co-production of the "Honeymoon" movie by the famous Serbian director, Goran Paskaljevic and Albanian screenwriter Genc Permeti. The news was welcomed with enthusiasm in Albania where the Serbian director was known primarily for his continuous presence in the jury of the Tirana Film Festival.

Until recently, collaboration in the field of education was also almost non-existent. Yet, the Department of Albanology (Albanian Studies) at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade has a long tradition in educating teachers of the Albanian language, literature and culture. At the moment, this faculty has cooperation agreements with the state universities in Shkodër and Tirana, as well as the Agriculture University of Tirana (Novakovic 2011). Also, initiatives promoting tourism in both countries have been in place, with one of the most recent being the promotion of tourism sites in both countries in a Tel Aviv exposition (Hartman 2012).

## ***2.4 Regional cooperation***

**T**he beginning of the 1990s was marked by the breakup of Yugoslavia and the emergence of new states, some of which went through violent conflicts that would trouble the

region for the next decade. Additionally, Balkan countries were transitioning from a communist system to a democratic system, thus, regional cooperation was not of paramount importance.

A plan to instate full multilateral cooperation was in fact suspended until the end of the Yugoslav wars. However, two important initiatives were put in place in the first half of the 1990s that fostered cooperation to a certain extent. The first was the Central European Initiative (CEI), based on the cooperation initiative of 1989 called the Quadronale. The CEI came to include initially Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and later on Serbia in 2000 and Montenegro in 2006. The original aim of the CEI was to support non-European Union (EU) countries on their journey to integration (Bilman 1998). Throughout the years CEI has played a key role in promoting transition to democracy and a market economy in most of its Member States, encouraging the involvement of civil society organizations in the respective countries. The second initiative was the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), whose main objective was to ensure that the Black Sea region was one of peace, stability, and prosperity that would encourage friendly neighbor relations.

When the Dayton Peace Accord put an end to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, regional cooperation was somewhat revived, as evidenced in a meeting of foreign ministers from all Balkan countries in Sofia, Bulgaria. The ministers agreed to launch a comprehensive process of multilateral cooperation in areas such as good neighborly relations, cross-border economic cooperation, as well as the development of humanitarian, social and cultural contacts, and combating organized crime (ibid). The Kosovo war, however, brought regional cooperation to a halt. Such cooperation was once again suspended until the normalization of the Kosovo situation. Only then was communication and cooperation re-established. Additionally, the Central European Free Trade

Agreement (CEFTA) was signed in 2006, representing a major step forward with the aim to “expand trade in goods and services and foster investment by means of fair, stable and predictable rules, [and] eliminate barriers to trade between parties” (CEFTA 2006).

On their path towards EU integration, both Serbia and Albania are eager to prove their commitments to improved regional cooperation, despite the Kosovo question. They participate in the work of various regional bodies and organizations, such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the South Eastern Europe Cooperation Process (SEECF), the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII), the Central European Free Trade Agreement 2006 (CEFTA), the South East Europe Cooperation Initiative (SECI), the Energy Community, etc. The European Union has tried to boost regional cooperation in the Western Balkan countries, as a means to bring peace and stability in the region, however the EU perspective of the countries and their substantial efforts towards integration has overshadowed to a certain extent incentives of cooperation.



## 3 - Executive Summary

### *Perceptions and realities: Politics*

The most obvious and expected finding when it comes to politics is that Kosovo is the one major issue standing between Albania and Serbia. This is evident from the quantitative and qualitative data as well. Specifically, out of 4012 articles in total from the Albanian media, 53% or 2047 are dedicated to Kosovo, while from the Serbian media, out of 1982 almost 2/3 or 1287 monitored articles are somehow related to Kosovo (whether in a negative or positive way). Although clearly the paper aims to look beyond the Kosovo issue, toward direct relations between Albania and Serbia, it is impossible to remove Kosovo from the equation of these relations. Beyond numbers, from the content analysis it is interesting to see in what context and connotation Kosovo is used in the media. In media monitoring in both Albania and Serbia, Kosovo ranks the highest in the list of keywords. There is, however, a discrepancy in the use of Kosovo. While in the Albanian media Kosovo is generally accompanied by a positive connotation or seen as a victim in relation to Serbia, the opposite happens in the Serbian media, where Kosovo, generally accompanied by Albania, is seen in a negative light (referring to its independence).

Everything stated above is confirmed by the interviews conducted in Tirana and Belgrade. Almost every interviewer considered Kosovo as the chief issue standing between Albania and Serbia. Interviewees indicated that once relations between Serbia and Kosovo are normalized with the northern part of Kosovo looming large as a problem to be resolved, then relations between Albania and Serbia would definitely improve further..

There is a clear tendency on both sides to focus more on political events than the other issues discussed in this paper. Respectively, 81% of articles in the Albanian media are related to politics, on the other hand almost the same overwhelming percentage of articles from Serbian media are dedicated to political events (particularly focused on the gruesome accusations of organ trafficking during the Kosovo war, which are being investigated by an international panel, but of which there is little widely accepted evidence outside Serbia) (Schmidle 2013). As content analysis suggests, key words in Albanian media related to politics such as agreement, EU and integration rank relatively high and this is understandable due to the common aspirations for EU integration, a process which is largely covered and enjoys a special attention in Albania. In the Serbian media, the same key words can be found at relatively the same level of usage.

Considering the above, many interviewees stress the importance of politics, politicians, political processes and diplomacy in improving bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia. They would help alter misperceptions on both sides as having political will to improve current relations might replicate to people's judgments and opinions. The EU is also seen as one of the most important actors in the region. The European Union is providing a fresh perspective for the future of the region, therefore is looked upon as an example, despite its current economic and financial crisis.

## ***Perceptions and realities: Economic relations***

**A**s American political pundit James Carville famously said in 1992, “It’s the economy stupid”, we contend that “it is still the economy stupid.” Extended economic cooperation and trade relations can and should be a driving force in easing tensions between the two countries and opening a new chapter in bilateral relations. One of the interviewees rightly observes that consumers are pragmatic and quality and price prevail over negative perceptions and fears. Therefore the economy, as a relatively safe sphere should gain the proper attention and focus.

Nevertheless, media monitoring on both sides suggests that the economy is either under-covered or often seen through a negative filter. More specifically, only 54 articles or 2.7% from Serbian media are dedicated to economic cooperation between Albania and Serbia and 127 or 3% of articles from Albanian media are dedicated to the economy. Going even further, many articles in the Albanian media have a negative connotation and several Serbian investments are seen doubtfully and are being used for political accusations (such as the alleged illegal arms trade).

Finally, some articles cover the economic situation and performance in both countries with the tendency to compare each other. In Albania, Serbia is generally seen as a positive model to follow and a leader in the region. Also, the articles emphasize the positive aspects of bilateral and regional economic cooperation. While in Serbia, Albania is seen as one of the countries in the region or even of the world that is doing worst than Serbia in many areas. However, in some articles, Albania is seen on a more positive light, as a more competitive and less risky economy, for example.

## *Perceptions and realities: Culture*

In the Albanian media, culture, referring to cultural events and exchanges as well as other social activities such as coverage of daily life in the respective countries, has 16% coverage or 633 out of 4012 articles in total. In the meantime, in Serbia, only a small fraction of articles are dedicated to sports (62) and even a smaller number is dedicated to Albanian culture. As an example the famous Albanian writer, Ismail Kadare, appears in 6 articles. On the keyword search, surprisingly culture appears at the same ranking position, obviously, at the end of the list.

The picture differs in the Albanian media where, even though only 16% of articles are dedicated to culture, there is a strong tendency to cover cultural events, especially those occurring at a regional level. Film festivals, song festivals, culinary fairs, etc. often appear with a clear positive connotation. Such a finding suggests that at least in the Albanian side there is a positive coverage of cultural events, although it is not always exclusively so. There are several articles related to culture that hold a negative connotation. For example, the latest movie directed by American actress Angelina Jolie outraged the Serbian public, while receiving positive coverage in Albania. However, as with the economy, culture is a safe sphere of cooperation and could serve as a tool to ease tensions and increase cooperation between the two countries. Although just a few, some projects have been undertaken as part of cultural exchange and cooperation especially in the movie industry, Albania and Serbia have been also parties in many regional cultural initiatives, which has contributed to bringing the cultural actors on both sides closer. As the interviews also suggest, culture should be seen as an important field of cooperation and people to people contact is essential if we are to try to change some of the negative perceptions undermining good relations between Albania and Serbia.

## 4- Methodology

This research project is interested in analyzing the relationship between Albania and Serbia through the perceptions that each state's citizens hold about the other country, also if and how they reflect the reality of relations between the two countries. To do so we combined quantitative and qualitative research methods. The chosen primary research method is a basic content analysis. The content to be analyzed includes articles from Albanian and Serbian media outlets and interviews.

**Media Monitoring:** The articles from online media outlets were selected based on availability. The articles from print media outlets were determined by selecting those with highest numbers of copies sold and, television articles were selected based on nationwide availability.

### ***Selected media outlets:***

#### **1- Albania:**

- a. Online media: Balkanweb, Shqipmedia and ALBEU

- b. Print media: Gazeta Shqip, Gazeta Panorama and Gazeta Shqiptare
- c. Television articles: Klan Tv, Top-Channel and ABC News

## **2- Serbia:**

The media monitoring of Serbian-Albanian relationship in the Serbian media encompassed 21 print magazines available online in the Ebart Media Archive. Those magazines are: *Press*, *Blic*, *Danas*, *Dnevnik*, *Politika*, *Večernje novosti*, *Pregled*, *Pravda*, *NIN*, *Kurir*, *Svedok*, *Ekonomist*, *Akter*, *Vreme*, *Status*, *Pečat*, *Biznis magazin*, *Ekonometar*, *Novi Magazin*, *TV novosti*, *Nedeljnik*. This selection covers both daily and weekly outlets from all spectres of political life.

### *Keywords*

The keywords to be used in the word count are reflective of the interview questions. The keywords give context to the Albanian public's perceptions of Albania's relationship with Serbia across the political and cultural spectrum. They include: cooperation, conflict, agreement, exchange, regional, initiatives, economy, European Union/EU, integration, culture, crime, students, security -- and Kosovo. Each word was chosen because it represents an issue defining the relationship between the two countries.

**Cooperation:** This keyword is reflective of the fact that though Albania and Serbia are two important actors in the Balkans, their cooperation has by and large been superficial.

**Conflict:** The end of the Cold War and the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia brought a new wave of conflict and enmity between Albania and Serbia. In the beginning of the 1990s, Albania was

faced with the possibility of military confrontation with Serbia over Kosovo.

**Agreement:** Over the last decade, Albania and Serbia have made significant attempts to develop bilateral relations. Politically, dialogue between both states is increasingly present, and on occasion state visits have taken place.

**Exchange:** Exchange is a keyword that one anticipates would be found in several contexts, including economic, political, diplomatic, cultural, etc.

**Regional:** This keyword is directly related to cooperation.

**Initiatives:** This keyword will be used to draw attention to any actions that have strengthened or weakened regional, political, cultural, educational relations between the two countries.

**Economy:** In light of the economic crisis, it is important to give attention to the evolution of economic relations between the two countries.

**European Union:** Albania and Serbia share the common objective of European Union integration. Since 2011 Serbia holds the status of an official candidate member state, whereas Albania has yet to align itself with the necessary standards for this consideration.

**Integration:** Cooperation with Serbia is a key factor in Albania's path toward European Union member state candidate status. The 2012 European Union Commission Progress Report for Albania states "[r]elations with Serbia [remain] good. Several high-profile bilateral meetings took place. An agreement on veterinary co-operation was signed in April 2012. A readmission agreement and an agreement on reciprocal movement of citizens were also signed.

**Culture:** This keyword is used because despite geographical proximity, cultural exchange between Albania and Serbia has been largely insignificant and citizens from both countries remain unfamiliar with one another's culture.

**Crime:** Among other crimes, the literature review points to a growing problem of trafficking in persons and drug trafficking between the two countries.

**Students:** Until very recently collaboration in the field of education was almost non-existent. At present, there are some small exchange opportunities between the Universities of Belgrade, Tirana, and Shkodra.

**International Organizations:** Names of international organizations and non-governmental organizations will be counted and categorized separately.

**Security:** This keyword is used due to the fact that relations between Albania and Serbia have to a great extent been determined by the events taking place in the region over the past two decades, namely the Kosovo war and the shared path toward European integration.

**Kosovo:** Today, more than ten years after the end of the Kosovo War and three years after Kosovo's declaration of independence, Albania and Serbia are still far from the normal constructive relations that should exist between two neighbor states, and this is greatly influenced by the negative historical legacy.

In certain cases, the positive and negative contexts will be noted and placed into two groups: Group A will reflect a positive context whereas Group B will reflect a negative context. This lays the foundations for the secondary method of research, which will be a quantitative analysis of the articles. This part of the project will provide a detailed picture of the distribution of articles by



topic and connotation. This information will be compiled for every news story monitored in the previously outlined Albanian and Serbian media outlets.

The table below is designed to conduct the quantitative monitoring:

Number of articles from print media
Number of articles from online media
Number of television pieces (accessed online)
Number of articles on political events
Number of articles from political events dedicated to Kosovo
Number of articles on economic/trade relations
Number of articles on economic/trade relations dedicated to Kosovo
Number of articles on cultural and art events
Number of cultural articles dedicated to Kosovo
Number of articles regarding regional events where Serbia is mentioned
Number of editorials and opinions
Number of editorials and opinions dedicated to Kosovo
Number of neutral articles
Number of articles with a negative connotation
Number of articles with a positive connotation

After media monitoring as quantitative research method, we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with civil society representatives, academics, journalists, politicians and professionals of several fields, conducted both in Albania and Serbia. The interview guide questions were:

## ***Political dimension***

- 1- In your opinion, where do political relations between Serbia and Albania stand? How do you evaluate their development these last 20 years?
- 2- How has the Kosovo issue influenced bilateral relations between the two countries?
- 3- To what extent are talks between Pristina and Belgrade influencing Albanian and Serbian foreign policy attitudes?
- 4- Beyond Kosovo, do you think there are other issues on which Albanians and Serbs need to work on?
- 5- How has Serbia's/Albania's foreign policy towards other countries in the region evolved? / What role are they playing in the political developments of Western Balkans?
- 6- What is their attitude towards regional initiatives and cooperation?
- 7- One of EU's conditions is good neighborly relations. Do you think Albania and Serbia, in the framework of European integration have done enough?

## ***Economy***

- 1- Do you think economic relations between Albania and Serbia are headed towards a positive or negative direction?
- 2- How do you evaluate trade exchanges between the two countries? Is there room for improvement?
- 3- Do you think there is concrete cooperation among professionals of your field?

- 4- Have you, personally, had exchanges, projects or joint activities with colleagues from Serbia?
- 5- How are they working to promote cooperation and economic growth?

### ***Art and culture***

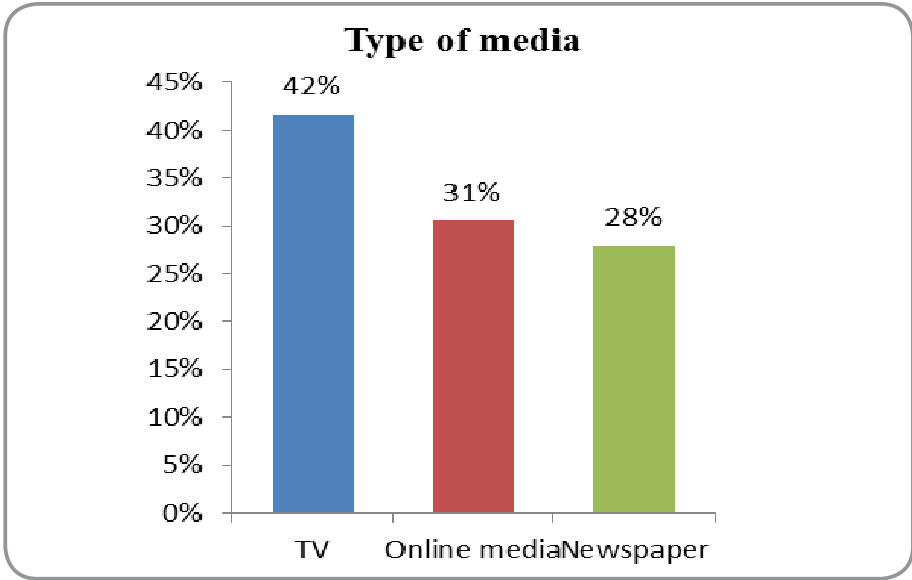
- 1- Do you think there is a satisfactory level of cultural exchange between the two countries?
- 2- What would be the right measures to fight negative stereotypes in both sides?
- 3- Have you ever been to Serbia/Albania? If yes, what was your impression? Did you feel welcomed? Did you see any negative reaction towards Albania/Serbia during your visit?
- 4- Are Serbian/Albanian authors being translated? How do readers react to them?
- 5- Do you think there are enough regional initiatives in the arts field (literature, music, cinematography)?
- 6- Do you think there are youth exchanges between the two countries? If yes to what extent?
- 7- Is there a need to extend and broaden cooperation in arts and culture?

## 5- Findings from quantitative data (monitoring)

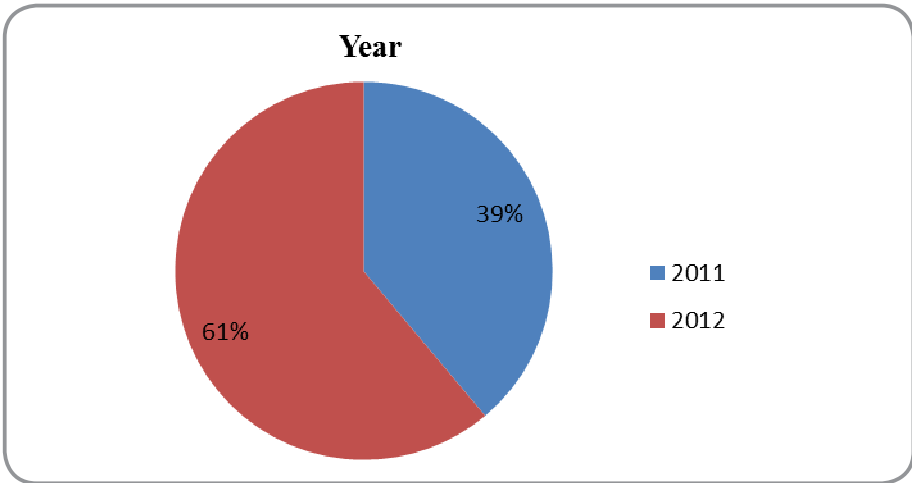
### ***5.1 General information***

#### *5.1.1 Media monitoring - Albania*

To better understand perceptions on both sides, an intensive media monitoring process was undertaken for two consecutive years, 2011 and 2012. For Albania, nine media outlets were chosen. 42% of the articles were retrieved from TV stations (available online): Top Channel, Klan TV, ABC News, 28% from newspapers: *Panorama*, *Shqip*, *Gazeta Shqiptare* and 31% from online media: Balkanweb, ALBEU and Shqipmedia. There were 4012 articles in total, out of which, 1560 (39%) were from 2011 and 2452 (61%) from 2012.



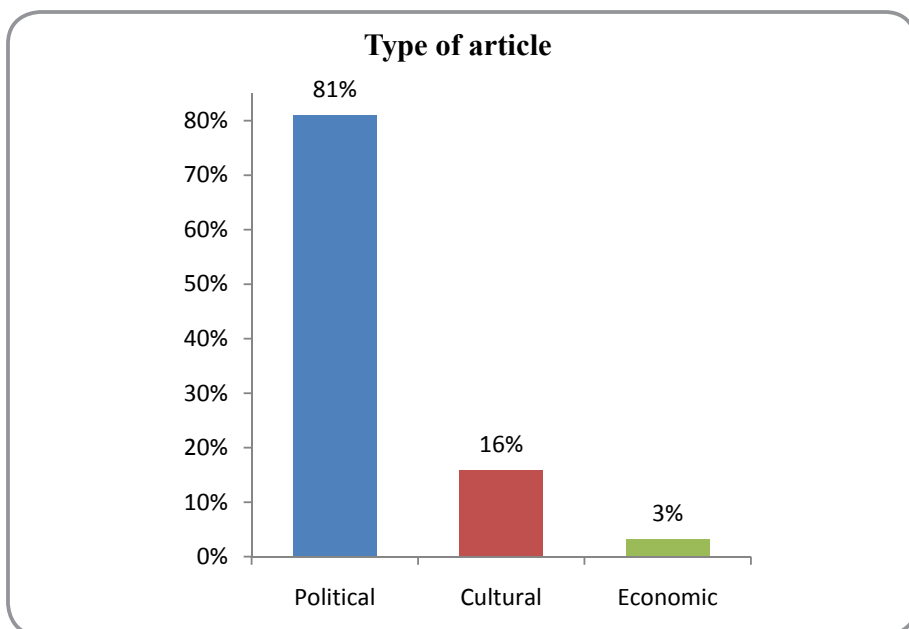
*Fig. 1: Type of media monitored*



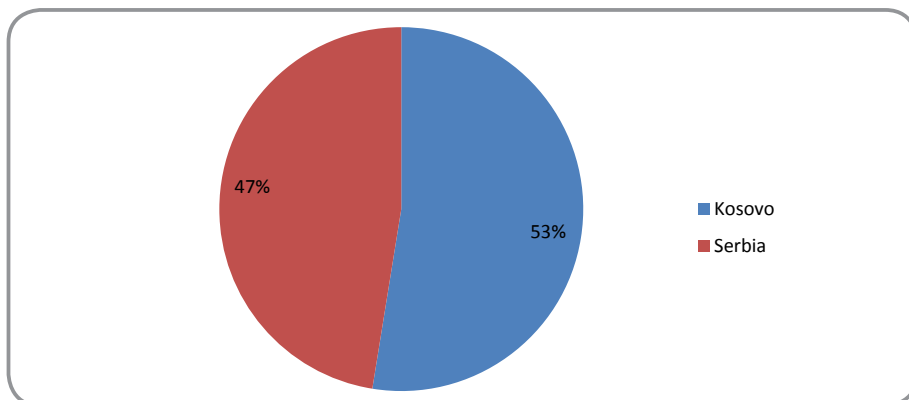
*Fig. 2: Time period for the media monitoring*

Regarding the type of articles selected, there is a clear tendency towards coverage of political events in Serbia with 81% being articles with a political nature. On the other hand, 16% are articles covering social/cultural events and finally economic articles amounting to 3%, which are approximately equally divided between Kosovo and Serbia, respectively 53% dedicated to Kosovo and 47% to Serbia. Furthermore, out of the total number of articles 2% are opinions and editorials out of which 46% are about Kosovo and 54% about Serbia.

There is very little coverage of regional initiatives where Serbia is mentioned in the selected media outlets. More specifically, out of 4012 only 120 cover regional initiatives where Albania and Serbia are mentioned.

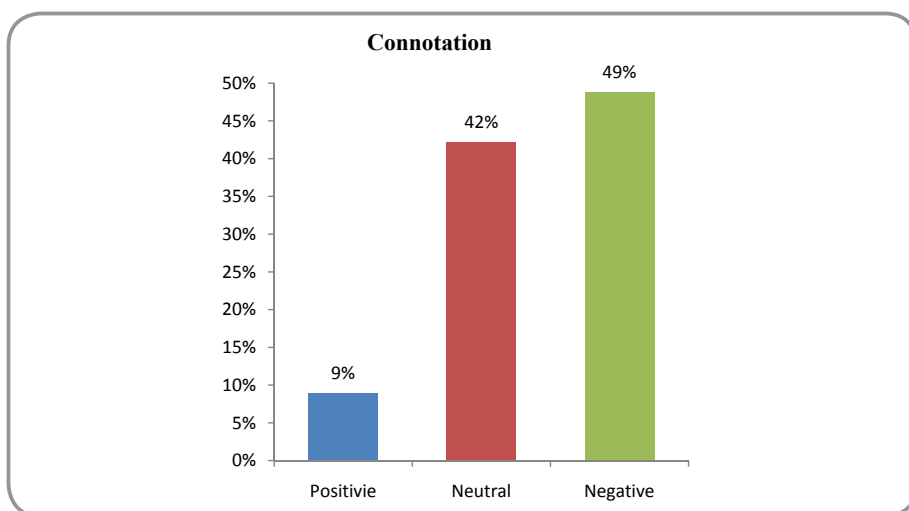


*Fig. 3: Types of articles*



*Fig. 4: Dedicated to*

An important aspect of the monitoring process was the connotation of the selected articles. It was used as a means to better understand the spectrum in which Serbia is portrayed in the Albanian media and vice versa. As the figure below suggests, there is a balance between articles with negative (49%) and neutral (42%) connotation, while only 9% have a positive connotations and are generally referred to cultural events and rarely related to the Kosovo issue (especially when talks between Prishtina and Belgrade were in a positive path).



*Fig. 5: Connotation of articles*

### *5.1.2 Media monitoring - Serbia*

In total, 1982 articles published in 2011 and 2012 containing the term Albania were retrieved, out of which 1251 for 2011 and 731 for 2012. More than a half of those articles are written on the subject of war crimes committed from 1990 to 2000 (845 in total out of which 709 in 2011 and 136 in 2012). More precisely, these articles concerned the alleged organ trafficking during and immediately after the Kosovo war that according to the Council of Europe report written by Dick Marty involved detention centre and a clinic located in the territory of Albania. While the two thirds of all the analyzed articles (1287) in one way or another were related to Kosovo (912 in 2011 and 375 in 2012), a total of 226 articles mentioning Albania were written solely on the subject of Kosovo (126 in 2011 and 98 in 2012). This is not surprising at all since Kosovo has been one of the core issues around which Serbia's political identity has been revolving. As is well known, Serbia has fiercely rejected the declaration of independence of Kosovo issued in 2008 as a threat to its sovereignty and national identity. Being an issue of all issues, a sort of a meta-issue, Kosovo has served as a prism through which the Serbian public construed the world politics in general and Albania in particular. In the analyzed articles, Albania was by default portrayed as a country that not only strongly supports but also actively sponsors Kosovo's independence or even strives to enlarge its territory at the expense of Serbia and other Western Balkan neighbors ("the Great Albania thesis"). Such a perspective dwarfed all other aspects of bilateral relations. For example only 54 articles were written about economic cooperation between Serbia and Albania out of which 26 in 2011 and 29 in 2012. The number of articles published about regional cooperation is even smaller, 14 in 2011 and 20 in 2012. A fraction of analyzed articles were devoted to



sports, 35 in 2011 and 27 in 2012 dealing mostly with transfer of players from/to Albania or different sport matches taking place in Albania or involving Albanian teams. Even smaller number of articles was covering Albanian culture. For instance, the most famous Albanian writer Ismail Kadare features in only 6 articles (1 in 2011 and 5 in 2012) while the rest of Albania's art production was virtually invisible in the Serbia's media.

## 5.2 Table: Keyword findings- Albania

<i>English</i>	<i>Albanian</i>	<i>Keyword Mentions</i>
1. Kosovo	Kosov*	16581 (Neutral)
2. Agreement	marrëveshje	2477 (Positive)
3. crime	krim*	1635 (Negative)
4. EU	BE*	1218 (Positive)
5. security	siguri*	1143 (Neutral)
6. economy	ekonom*	908 (Positive)
7. cooperation	bashkëpunim	402 (Positive)
8. integration	integrim	832 (Positive)
9. regional	rajonal	736 (Neutral)
10. conflict	konflikt*	471 (Negative)
11. culture	kultur*	412 (Positive)
12. exchange	shkëmbim	122 (Positive)
13. students	student*	85 (Positive)
14. initiatives	iniciativ*	82 (Neutral)

\* Search was made for root word of all grammatical variables of the same word in different grammatical variants of the Albanian language, i.e. *Kosovë, Kosova, Kosovës, etc.*

### *5.2.1 Kosovo*

While this paper aims to look at relations between Albania and Serbia and not those between Albania and Kosovo or Kosovo and Serbia, one cannot speak of Albanian-Serb relations without looking at Kosovo due to the importance of the Kosovo issue for both Serbia and Albania and the fact that both sides view the relationship through the prism of Kosovo.

As such we decided to include Kosovo in the keyword search in media monitoring, resulting in an overwhelming frequency of appearances, reflecting our earlier prediction that Kosovo remains the “elephant in the room” so to speak in Albania-Serbia relations, and how the Albanian media covers Serbia when it comes to media coverage. Media monitoring confirms the theory that coverage of Serbia in Albania is largely seen through the prism of Kosovo, as the term “Kosovo” (measured in all its different grammatical different variations) is by far the most frequent keyword, see eight. The name of Europe’s newest country dominated by far as the most used keyword. (This is further complemented by interview research, where Kosovo also led the discussion.)

### *5.2.2 Keyword findings*

Despite an original hypothesis that the Albanian media’s coverage on Serbia would be negative, the keyword count seen in ranking mixture of keywords also gives a strong presence to neutral and positive keywords.

As such, keywords with a positive connotation, such as “agreement,” “EU,” and “integration” rank respectively second,

fourth and eighth out of 14 in the finding, largely showing that the coverage of European integration is a goal for all the countries in the region, and “agreement” and “regional” (ranked 9th) issues are something that remains in focus for Albanian media. In the case of “agreement”, which ranked second behind Kosovo in the coverage of Albanian media, much of the usage accounted for coverage of negotiations for an agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, though this was not exclusive, and also involved regional agreements and those between Tirana and Belgrade exclusively.

The use of “economy” is ranked relatively high in the list of keywords (sixth out of 14). For the most part, economy is used in the context of the economic situation in Serbia, economic cooperation between Albania and Serbia and economic issues between Kosovo and Serbia. To a lesser extent, the keyword economy is accompanied by words such as regional cooperation and coverage of international organization’s reports on the economic performance of the region. Most frequently economy is used with a positive connotation showing the importance of economic cooperation between the two countries and the benefits of regional cooperation in this area, but we could also find negative contexts in which the word economy is used. That is to show the difficult economic situation in the Preshevo Valley (that these last couple of years has enjoyed great attention in the Albanian media), but it also referred to economic discrimination (especially when it comes to Kosovo) and often concerns in Albania regarding several suspicious Serbian-related investments.

Of course, the picture is not entirely rosy. “Crime” is high up there, in third place in the mentions and comes ahead of EU which is sandwiched between “crime” and “security” in the rankings conveying a certain sense of unease by Albanian media covering Serbia, focusing on issues that generally have a negative connotation. However, we note that the use of “crime” is not

limited solely on our original hypothesis of transnational criminal organizations affecting both Serbia and Albania. In many cases, because the coverage goes through the prism of Kosovo or other former Yugoslav conflict, the crimes in question are also war crime or crimes against humanity tried at international tribunals, which Albanian media has covered peripherally through the two observed years. These almost exclusively involve Serbia's conflict in Kosovo, but also conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. (That's with the exceptions of Serb accusations of organ trafficking taking place in Albania during the Kosovo war, which has sporadically been covered in Albanian media, but nowhere near in intensity to the coverage of Serb media on this issue.)

It is not surprising that for two countries with a volatile history and trying to coexist in a volatile region that has gone through its share of conflict, the word "security" would feature high on the list. In articles this term often relates to national security but also on security action or security forces. Albanian media, in relation to Serbia, often uses this word in the prism of security for Kosovo and ethnic Albanians in southern Serbia, more than the security of Albania itself. In addition some of the coverage relates to energy security, which is not surprising since during the two years we monitored the media, Albania went through a massive drought, leaving its hydroelectric plants dry, and forcing the country to look to secure electricity elsewhere, often with the assistance of Serb energy traders. Albania suffered a major energy weakness in that it has been almost 100 percent reliant on hydropower, while Serbia has a more advanced energy production and trade sector, according to the monitored coverage.

Ranked seventh, "cooperation" is a positive keyword that often pops in coverage of regional structures that aim to integrate Western Balkans in the EU. It also relates to all sorts of

cooperation between Serbia and Albania, related to some of the other keywords, such as economic cooperation.

When it comes to “culture,” it is clearly in the middle of the list, being mentioned slightly more than 400 times in the articles selected. Here, it is interesting to see in what context and terms culture is mostly used. There are four dominant axes: cultural cooperation, cultural events, culture as representative of national identity and culture as a topic in the Kosovo-Serbia talks. Cultural cooperation shows up frequently as initiatives or rhetoric from political leaders, as a way of improving relations between Albania and Serbia. From them, 6 articles interestingly focus on art and culture as a way to overcome political conflicts. Although a minority there were also articles addressing lack of cooperation between Albania and Serbia. The majority of articles where culture is mentioned relate to cultural events taking place in one of the countries or regional initiatives and events such as Balkan Film Festival, etc. In these articles the keyword has a positive connotation but there are at times negative connotations surrounding the word, such as articles about movies that were not well received, because of sensitive topics. A considerable number of articles are primarily focused on culture as part of the national identity. It comes as no surprise that the keyword in this case has a negative connotation because it is mainly used to show differences and incompatibilities between Albanians and Serbs. Similarly, culture is used in some cases to describe historical events and traditions and cultural legacy. In many of the articles covering the agreements between Belgrade and Prishtina, culture is often incorporated as being part of the agreements and forming a basis of cooperation between the two countries as a way to find common grounds of cooperation.

Indeed, “exchange” is found in several articles and contexts but two are the most frequent ones: Trade and territory. Trade

and economy appear with a high frequency accompanying the key word. It is usually referred to trade exchanges and cooperation between Albania and Serbia. Another very frequent theme accompanying exchange is territories, referring almost exclusively to exchange of territories between Kosovo and Serbia (Northern Kosovo and Preshevo Valley). The rest is divided between cultural exchanges, exchanges of visits and diplomatic notes, ideas and point of views, security issues, information, media, teaching methods, energy and regional exchanges.

As expected, student cooperation in education or art is still scarce and relatively uncovered by the media. The keyword “student” was found only 80 times and mostly related to political or cultural events. As for the keyword “initiative,” the few times it comes up it is about cooperation in the framework of European integration, NATO and other regional initiatives such as Central European Initiative, Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, SEE initiative, etc. Just in one or two cases “initiative” is followed by culture and art or politics. For the rest “initiative” is used to describe relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

### 5.3 Table: Keyword findings- Serbia

English	Serbian	Keyword Mentions
1. Kosovo	Kosov*	5599 (Neutral)
2. Agreement	sporaz*	509 (Positive)
3. crime	krim*	707 (Negative)
4. Europe	Evro*	3831 (Positive)
5. security	bezbed*	863 (Neutral)
6. economy	ekonom*	1326 (Positive)
7. cooperation	saradnj*	921 (Positive)
8. integration	integrac*	278 (Positive)
9. regional	region	1447 (Neutral)
10. conflict	konflikt	59 (Negative)
11. culture	kultur	444 (Positive)
12. exchange	razmen	235 (Positive)
13. students	student*	59 (Positive)
14. initiatives	iniciativ*	290 (Neutral)

The above-presented table may be misleading because the connotations significantly varied from article to article. For instance, although the term Kosovo is marked in the table as neutral, in most cases when Albania is mentioned together with the term “Kosovo,” it is being done in the negative context (e.g. “Albania as a sponsor of Kosovo’s independence”). Also, the term “security” is coded as neutral, even if the term can equally be used in a negative (e.g. “Albanian nationalism is a security threat”) and positive fashion (e.g. “security cooperation). Similar difficulties exist with all other keywords in a more or less pronounced fashion. That is why a more contextual quantitative and qualitative analysis is needed.

Connotation/Year	2011	2012	Total
Positive	101	65	166
Neutral	282	338	620
Negative	868	328	1196
Total	1251	731	1982

*Table: 1 Connotation of meaning*

From the above-presented table, one can conclude that the total number of texts mentioning Albania in the negative contexts (1196) by far exceeds the sum of texts that convey both positive (166) and neutral (620) meanings. On the more positive side, one can notice a sharp decrease of number texts with negative meaning from 868 in 2001 to 328 in 2012 and the rise in number of texts mentioning Albania in a rather neutral context (from 282 in 2011 to 338 in 2012). One of the explanations for this is above discussed decrease in overall number of texts covering the alleged organ trafficking affair in 2012 comparison to 2011. Yet another factor is undoubtedly the fact that the two countries stepped up their bilateral relations following October 2012 visit of the Serbian foreign Minister Ivan Mrkić to Albania, a first in many years. That the intensity of ethnic distance towards Albania and Albanian people in on the decrease was also confirmed by the polls conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. In the polls conducted in 2012, Albania came out as the third biggest enemy to Serbia as opposed to 2011 when it was considered to be second only to the U.S.

When it comes to articles mentioning Albania in a rather negative context, by far the largest amount of them are related to the alleged organ transplantation. In some of those articles Albania is mentioned explicitly as being involved in the case: the crimes allegedly took place near Kukes in the Northern Albania,



Albanian doctors and even politicians are said to be involved, etc. However, in a good part of those articles, Albania is not mentioned explicitly but rather implicitly, for example, through references to the so called Yellow House where organs were allegedly taken away from Serbian victims. It is noteworthy that in the entire analysed material only one text actually questioned the validity of charges made about organ trafficking. Closely connected to this are all other articles about all things Kosovo, with Albania represented as its closest ally in the international fora. As such Albania is portrayed as a diplomatic rival, if not an outright enemy of Serbia.

A recurring trope in the Serbian media is that of the “great”, “Ethnic” or “natural” Albania. Every step that Tirana and Pristina take towards each other, such as for example the merging of their consular services, building of a highway or even public proposals for an economic union between Kosovo and Albania, is by default interpreted by the Serbian media as a confirmation of the “great Albania thesis”. Huge attention was also paid to the issue of Albanian textbooks that allegedly portray parts of Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia and Greece as part of the “natural” Albanian territory. On rare occasions, when the realism of the “great Albania thesis” was questioned, it was done by analysts and journalists from Albania or Kosovo, not from Serbia.

When Albania is discussed in articles dealing with history, negative representations equally abound. Thus, it is described as a logistical base for KLA in the late 1990s, isolated dictatorship during communist period, Italian puppet in the interwar period, “unnatural” creation of Great Powers, etc. When discussing Albania in the present time, it is often affiliated with organized crime, terrorism, religious extremism, arms and drug trafficking (mostly coke, heroin and marijuana). Most articles discussing internal politics in Albania focused on violent protests slow

Europeanization or democratic setbacks. Albania is also sometimes depicted as a country in which the Serbian Diaspora is discriminated against and forced to assimilate.

Finally, Albania is often discussed in a comparative light as one of the few countries in the Western Balkans and sometimes even in the world that is doing worse than Serbia on a number of accounts such as: corruption, freedoms, exports per capita, minimal wages, digital piracy, human development index, education, gold reserves, purchasing power, standards of living for women and kids, economic development, freedom of press, level of urbanization, agricultural subsidies, investments in health sector, meat consumption per capita, democratization, unemployment, agricultural exports per hectare of arable land, quality of public administration, etc.

But Albania is sometimes also compared to Serbia in a more favorable light. Thus, Albania is represented as a more competitive and less risky economy, with bigger economic freedoms and GDP growth, superior health system, cheaper living costs, better irrigation system, smarter brain-gain policies, with more literate and happier population, better international standing and branding, more independent judiciary, higher public spending for culture, law on restitution and even services such as iTunes or Paypal.

In addition to the comparisons, Albania was in a number of articles portrayed positively as a tolerant, multi-confessional country in which nationalism or religion have never been a destructive mobilizing force. Only a fraction of articles covered affirmative developments in bilateral relationship of the two countries such as visa liberalization, various cooperation agreements, mutual political visits, readmission deals or potentials for economic cooperation. Very rarely, articles covered positive internal developments in Albania such as economic

growth, democratization progress or stabilization of the political situation. Finally, the Albanian coast is by and large depicted as nice and affordable but somewhat overcrowded, a bit unclean and inaccessible due to bad roads.

All other mentions, which bore neither positive nor negative meanings, were categorized here as neutral. These are the texts where Albania is mentioned in passing as a NATO member country, potential EU candidate or as a member of a number of regional cooperation schemes. Also, on rare occasions, the analyzed Serbian media reported about the elections, census or other politically important developments in Albania without giving them either a positive or negative qualification. Sport and cultural events by and large also fall into this category although they also sometimes slip into negative stereotyping.

## 6. Findings from qualitative data (interviews)

In addition to media monitoring, and based on some of its findings, a series of qualitative research interviews were conducted both in Albania and Serbia. To cover all the topics of the study (politics, economics and culture) experts from different fields were chosen. They included university professors, academics, politicians, diplomats, economists and journalists. Specifically, 9 interviews were conducted in Belgrade between 11 and 13 February, 2013 by Filip Ejduk, Andi Balla and Megi Llubani. The interviewees were: Mr. Zoran Ostojic, member of the Liberal Democratic Party; Ms. Maja Bjelos, researcher at Belgrade Centre for Security Policy; Ms. Sonja Stojanovic, Director of Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. Mr. Goran Tepsic, PhD Student and Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade; Mr. Danko Runic, member of the Liberal Democratic Party; Mr. Dusan Janjic, Founder of Forum for Ethnic Relations; Mr. Igor Novakovic, Research Fellow at International and Security Affairs Center (ISAC Fund); Mr. Dragan Janjic, journalist and; Mr. Idro Seferi, Top-Channel correspondent to Belgrade.

Another 9 interviews were conducted in Tirana by Andi Balla and Megi Llubani with: Mr. Albert Rakipi, Executive Director

at the Albanian Institute for International Studies; Mr. Remzi Lani, Executive Director Albanian Media Institute; Mr. Murat Shabani, diplomat; Mr. Lutfi Dervishi, journalist and analyst; Mr. Ilir Kalemaj, Lecturer of International Relations, European Studies and Political Sciences at New York University of Tirana, Odeta Barbullushi, Deputy Rector for Scientific Research and Methodology at the European University of Tirana; and Gentian Elezi, Executive Director at Albanian Centre for Competitiveness and International Trade.

As background for some of the questions, an annual AIIS survey was used. Though the focus of that survey is Albania's EU integration process from citizen's perspectives, it also looks at perceptions about neighboring countries. One of the interesting findings of the study is that from 2007 onwards fewer people say the Albanian government should not pay any attention to Serbia [40.4% in 2007, 15% in 2010], but at the same time according to another survey in 2011 [Albania 20 years after: People on state and democracy], 51.6% of respondents considered Serbia to be the major threat to the security of Albania.

### ***6.1 General trends in perceptions***

**D**espite improvement of official relations in the past few years, noted earlier in this paper, interviews we conducted indicate the state of Albania-Serbia relationship remains at this time – at worst cold and at best ambivalent or lukewarm – which is not surprising looking at the region's recent and not-so-recent history. As Shaban Murati, a diplomat and academic as well as one of Albania's top experts on Serbia put it “political relations between the two countries are still cold,” adding neither

Belgrade nor Tirana have followed the best policies to improve bilateral relations.”

Despite our efforts to look into the Albania-Serbia relationship as a separate item from Kosovo, it was impossible to escape “the elephant in the room,” because both nations essentially see each other through Kosovo. However, once Kosovo is placed aside, the major trend interviewees’ show is that Albanians are more interested in Serbia than Serbs are in Albania itself, a view that is matched by those interviewed in Serbia. Albania appears to be an afterthought among the Serbs, who often speak of “Albanians” solely with ethnic Albanians in Kosovo in mind. Those interviewed in Albania also see the Serbs through the prism of Kosovo, but not exclusively so. Serbia is seen as a threat to the security of Albania itself as well, though the two countries share no border at this time (lines between state and nation became blurry among interviewees at times, on both sides). The interviews reflect earlier studies of the population at large in Albania, which sees Serbia as the top threat to Albania, as stated above, 51.6% of respondents considering Serbia to be a major threat for the country. Greece has historically been the top threat in annual survey, leaving Serbia in second place usually, but this year Serbia has surpassed Greece, which remained at 47.9, potentially because a Greece in economic crisis is perceived as weaker among Albanians. (AIIS survey, 2013).

In terms of general perceptions, there are clear differences. To the Serbs, Albania is unfamiliar and somewhat of a no-go land, though there is some desire to know more, particularly about the affordable coastal tourism opportunities. On the other hand to the Albanians, Serbia is often seen as a Balkan powerhouse -- one to be feared and one that has not been remorseful enough for “setting the region on fire” in the 1990s, as two interviewees put it.

Yet, there is another nuance to the perceptions: Albanians see places like Belgrade as great to visit and have a good time and, on a person-to-person level, find Serbs welcoming, as one interviewee put it “they are typical Balkan people, sort of like us [Albanians].” Some of these perceptions might have been skewed by the fact that many of the Albanian experts interviewed had gone to Serbia as part of regional initiatives designed specifically to break the ice and promote cooperation between civil societies in both countries. That was the case with several of the Serb interviewees as well, with those who had visited Tirana offering positive feedback about their experiences in Albania.

Another noted trend appears to be that both sides tend to underplay the power of their own states and overplay the power or ability of the other – which is often seen as the ability to cause problems. In this regard, two Serb interviewees with extensive knowledge of Albania noted that Albanians view Serbia as a powerful state looking to dominate and cause mischief. That is misguided, they noted. They said the Serbs also view their country as weak in the grand scheme of things. Albanians, too, often complain their state should be stronger in the regional scene, and largely see Serbia as further advanced in state organization and as a result in the EU path. However, several interviewees in Albania also indicate that Albanians see Serbia’s perceived power as negative rather than positive. Both trends reveal a climate of continued suspicion between the two countries.

In Serbia, despite seeing Albania as a nice, sunny place that might be a destination for vacations, it is clear that there is at best some discomfort with Albanians and at worst a continuation of the Yugoslav perceptions that saw non-Slav Albanians as the lowest rung in the chain of nations in the Balkans. In Albania, people remain suspicious of the Serbs, and much of the discussion starts from that point. Indeed, asked to share their experiences and

perceptions in general they identified many negative perceptions on both sides, related to how we look and think of each-other. Key ideas retrieved from the interviews are: lack of information and interest, stereotypes and myths as well as nationalism. As Goran Tepsic, PhD Student and Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade, noted, school books are filled with myths and negative stereotypes, which to a great extent, has rooted negative feelings among the younger generation. Those in return are difficult to change so what he suggests is 're-humanizing the other' and the way to do that is by deconstructing dominant narratives in both countries. Language gaps also contribute to lack of information, interest and therefore misled perceptions about the other country. This is especially true for young people, but they are also fed with nationalism.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that once we discover the other [a considerable majority of those interviewed have visited the other country, mostly due to professional reasons], we are positively surprised. This is also to say that, as many of the interviewees suggested, we are very similar but because we are overwhelmed by history and political rhetoric we resist the idea to know the other. In light of this, one of the most interesting fact pointed in a couple of the Albania interviews is that often the negative perceptions and hostility between Albanians and Serbs do not stem from the fact that the two nations are so different – but rather from the fact that the two nations are too similar, despite unwillingness from most of those interviewed to recognize this. As Lutfi Dervishi, an Albanian journalist puts it, “the closer two people are when they are in conflict, the nastier the conflict gets.” And the Balkan Wars in 1990s proved that. He added as Balkan nations Albanians and Serbs share many characteristics that are similar and that placed the two nations at odds. However, many of the interviewees point out to the differences – the fact that the



Serbs are Slavs and Albanians are not. However, despite having languages that are entirely alien to each other, the two nations have intermingled for centuries – much of it through coexistence rather than conflict, and the two countries share a lot in terms of culture and understanding of the world.

Yet, this being the Balkans, there are attempts to conceptualize. Beyond the obvious – language and ethnicity, on the Serb side, there is an insistence to look at religion as a defining factor in divisiveness – showing general discomfort with Islam, the faith to which, nominally, more than half of Albania’s population subscribes. Albanians on the other hand appear to be completely oblivious to religious differences. Though no direct questions were asked about religion, it evolved as a separate trend during interviews on questions of perceptions. Research shows Albania to be among the least religious countries in Europe. Serbia is somewhere in the middle range. In Albania, where Muslims make up the majority of population, they also ranked last in the world in terms of importance of religion in daily life, below Bosnia and Kosovo (Pew Forum 2011). As a result, religion in relation to Serbia doesn’t appear to play a role in perceptions of Albanians. This could be partly because Albanians have been pragmatic about religious affiliation and ambivalent about religion, and partly because the former regime of Enver Hoxha declared the country officially atheist and moved to eradicate all religious practices. In Serbia, however, religion appears to be very much important in defining national identity and in creating perceptions about Albania. There was some limited understanding that not all Albanians are Muslims and that Albanians are generally not religious, but the interviewees appeared unfamiliar with the importance Albanians place on their own Orthodox and Catholic churches as well as Albanians’ lax attitudes toward religion. As one Serb interviewee pointed out, many of his countrymen were

surprised to hear large crowds gather in Tirana every year to celebrate Orthodox Easter.

## ***6.2 Political relations under lenses***

In terms of bilateral political relations, there are different views and perceptions. Some of the interviewees claimed that political relations between Albania and Serbia are slowly going up and will improve in the future, despite the Kosovo issue, holding thus positive expectations. On the other side, some of the interviewees thought of political relations between Albania and Serbia as being asymmetric, underdeveloped and currently at a low point.

Both countries have denser relations with other countries in the region, although some of them suggested that relations between Albania and Serbia should be the most important ones, considering the balances in the region. Ilir Kalemaj, professor at the New York University of Tirana, considered political relations between the two countries, conditioned by the following factors: “the intransigent approach of the Serbian political elites towards the Kosovo issue, the different geo-political affiliations of these countries and, lack of mutual trust due to inexistent cultural, economic and political exchanges throughout the twentieth century.” But there is also a general acceptance of the fact that the image of both countries is improving. We shouldn’t forget that not long ago there was a war, yet a new reality is unfolding despite the many problems it has.

Looking at the wider picture, Remzi Lani, a veteran Albanian journalist points out that political relations between the two nations – Albanians and Serbs – hold the key to peace and

stability in the region. He says that beyond the borders of Albania and Serbia per se, the Albanian and Serb nations are the region's largest and unless relations between these two are fully normalized the region will continue to be tense.

### *6.2.1 Kosovo: "The elephant in the room"*

Moving to the Kosovo issue, it became clear in almost every interview that it is the obvious issue, conditioning normalization of political, economic and social relations between Albania and Serbia. There are two ways to look at Kosovo. First, the approach that sees Kosovo as the problem standing between Albania and Serbia, impeding improvement of relations, which should be overcome if both sides wish to turn the tide. Moreover the interviewees emphasized a tendency in Serbia, that beyond Kosovo people are not interested in relations between the two countries, that is why since 2010 [referring to the Court of Justice advisory opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence] not many things have changed, suggested Igor Novakovic from ISAC Fund.

On the other hand, there is the view that, despite all the problems and unresolved issues between Belgrade and Pristina, there have been positive steps these last years. According to them, once these problems are resolved, relations will undoubtedly improve and move forward. As Gentian Elezi, executive director of the Albanian Centre for Competitiveness and International Trade, interestingly notes, we shouldn't forget that "there are two radicals on both sides who are paving the way to resolve problems". Furthermore, the dominant impression was that if we continue with the current steps and also find a solution to the last conflicting issues (northern Kosovo, border management), then

most probably the situation between Kosovo and Serbia will head towards a positive direction, which will then replicate to relations between Albania and Serbia. At the end of the day “Finding a solution to the Kosovo issue will ease bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia,” he noted, in words that were part of larger trend in interviews.

### *6.2.2 The EU as facilitator*

The interviews were also focused on the European Union and its role in the region. It comes as no surprise that the EU is perceived as the key (f)actor of change in the Western Balkan countries, using its soft power to bring progress in these countries and promote its integration and regional cooperation agenda. Unfortunately, the EU card has also served as a slowing factor in improving regional cooperation. This is due to the fact that every country in the Western Balkans, aspires EU membership in the future and they are overwhelmed by this process, lagging behind in regional initiatives and often bilateral cooperation. As Dusan Janjic, founder of the Forum for Ethnic Relations contends, people are more focused on EU and NATO than Albania. So in both countries, we can say the attention is shifted towards the EU as a role model, so little attention is paid to neighbors. On the positive side, the EU has forced both countries to use the Brussels language and work together constructively. Furthermore, as Dragan Janjic, journalist, pointed out “the EU integration will bring rules, and Albania and Serbia will behave according to them.”

In addition, the undercurrent of ambivalence and disinterest on both sides of each other or others in the region appeared to stem partially from the fact that both Albanians and Serbs are far

more interested in the EU (or, better said, the more developed, more powerful countries of Western Europe) than each other.

### **6.3 Economy**

Although findings from quantitative data (i.e. media monitoring) suggested that the economy is not at the top of the agenda in Serbia-Albania relation, most of the interviewees considered the economy a key area where Albania and Serbia can work together. Most of those interviewed in both Albania and Serbia agree that economic relations are headed toward a positive direction and there is some cooperation going on.

There is also room and potential for improvement in economic relations. Apparently the economy is seen as an important area that connects both sides and it is a relatively safe sphere to invest in. One of the major steps to improve economic relations between Albania and Serbia but not only, is the CEFTA agreement, which connects markets and also contributes to create direct markets. CEFTA has also helped in visa liberalization in the countries of the region. On the other hand there is criticism as well. Some of the interviewees claimed that trade and economic relations have improved but mostly in favor of Serbia and that Serbia has a greater economic interest in Albania.

Economic experts point out in interviews that the growth in economic exchanges is positive and above board though not even sided (with the Serbs selling more and Albanians less). Though there is a general understanding that trade has grown, the problem is that the growth has taken place in unsustainable sectors such as scrap metal and electricity exchanges. Another

angle to look at trade between Albania and Serbia is the content of that trade. As Mr. Elezi pointed out, trade between Albania and Serbia is relatively unstable as it is highly concentrated.

Also, in Albania there are prejudices in the media regarding economic relations, mostly because the Serbian investments in Albania are perceived as shady or even illegal. To illustrate the atmosphere, two years ago, a local Albanian television channel did a special on Albania-Serbia relations (TV Koha) opening the economic section with the soundtrack of an old Italian television serial dealing with Mafia. As Mr. Dervishi, the journalist, points out, the media often tend to represent the underlying feelings of the population at large. As such, the perception of the public at large in Albania – as seen in the media coverage and confirmed by those Albanian experts interviewed for this study – shows there are deep suspicions as to the intentions and legality of Serbian companies operating in Albania, which are often seen in the prism of ‘mafia’ and ‘shady dealings’ rather than as true investors.

It is important to note that, interviewees in both capitals said economic cooperation and investment is vital, and there was a sense of an underlying trend that businesses find “a common language” if it makes sense financially and are not deterred by the existence of negative perceptions based on national origin. Nevertheless, contrary to some beliefs, there is potential in improving relations between Albania and Serbia driven by economic interests. Most of the interviewees selected tourism as one of the sectors where both countries could invest to further improve relations and alter negative perceptions among citizens.

## ***6.4 Suggestions for improvements***

Trade and culture are, as Maja Bjelos from the Belgrade Center for Security Policy suggested, safe areas of cooperation, as opposed to the security sector which is still very sensitive. Furthermore media, as a powerful medium, has a great potential to change negative perceptions if used constructively. There are already some exchanges in the media realm, which have proved to be very efficient in creating spaces for improvement. Considering potentials, the interviewees were asked to give suggestions regarding the areas and actors responsible to improve relations between Albania and Serbia. Keeping in mind the diverse background of the people interviewed suggestions touch upon many areas as actors of change.

To begin with, politics and politicians are considered very important if the two countries are to improve relations in the future. They are responsible for the policy-making process and therefore can take relations to the next level. Often there is a need of political will to move things forward and if politicians on both sides are willing to overcome conflicts they have the means necessary to do so. During the interviews, it was also suggested that political solutions through public institutions can greatly contribute to changing and improving bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia. More than once, interviewees considered direct contacts (people to people), as key to not only improve relations but also change negative perceptions, dominant in both Albania and Serbia. People to people contacts were mentioned in five different interviews therefore we consider such a suggestion of vital importance.

Suggestions come across a wide spectrum of areas and ideas. It is almost universally accepted that direct contact between

people, businesses, politicians, etc. are extremely important in improving relations and changing negative perceptions on both sides. These channels of communication will help ease relations between Albania and Serbia and lower tensions at the same time. Some of the interviewees suggested that economy is key in building these channels of communication. Since consumers are pragmatists, price and quality of products will prevail over negative perceptions towards the other country. Others said that media is a powerful medium that can do more to promote economic and cultural relations. Also, investing in education could serve to uproot prejudices and negative stereotypes in both countries. Promotion of tourism, and therefore investments in infrastructure, will help increase people to people contacts and know the other from a different perspective. Last but not least, more cultural and student exchanges will help to better know and discover the other.



## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

Many lessons can be drawn from everything discussed above. To some extent, the ambivalence and often negative perceptions on both sides can be discouraging in advocating for improvements in the future. But one must not forget that Albania and Serbia share a common aspiration of EU membership, which can facilitate and ease relations between them. Despite a past packed with conflict and instability there is a need for reconciliation and dialogue not only between Albania and Serbia but in the region as a whole, as this is a region that was plagued by conflict and difficulties many times throughout history, but finds itself at crossroads.

The initial aim of this paper as expressed in the title “Albania and Serbia: Do perceptions equal reality?” was to shed light on the current state of affairs between the two countries seen from three dimensions (political, economic and cultural) and see how the public’s perception of the other state matched with the reality of those relations. But, what is more important, we wanted to discover the potentials and opportunities that lie ahead. During the process we started reflecting on another issue: perceptions

overpowering reality. If we choose to simplify by defining reality by our perceptions there would be different realities based on the observer.

Reality is “the quality or state of being actual or true; that which exists objectively and in fact; the state of things that are or appear to be, rather than as one might wish them to be.” On the other hand perception comes across as “a result of perceiving; a mental image; a capacity for comprehension.” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Still, there is a fine line between reality and peoples’ perception of it, where often perceptions, feelings, fears, confusion dominate over facts and make it extremely difficult to cooperate and coexist. In this sense, media also serves as a powerful tool to create perceptions, that can match or differ from reality, most of the time being the latter. The generally negative connotation of articles in Albanian and Serbian media helps strengthen and perpetuate negative perceptions among people. Therefore, it is our suggestion that media should act as a responsible actor in improving mutual perceptions.

From both media monitoring and interviews, an overall conclusion that despite negative stereotypes stemming from the past, Albania and Serbia have a certain level of ambivalence in relation to the other. But this is the sort of ambivalence that seeks to isolate one nation from another, not allowing for negative images to change. As a result, we need to overcome it, if relations are to improve in the future. To do so, we identify several fields where there is a potential to improve the situation. The striking truth is that people-to-people contact is lacking, which has contributed to skewed perceptions and reflections of reality in both sides. It comes as no surprise that the need for more direct contacts is a natural suggestion for improved relations, as most of the interviewees assert that once we get to know each other, we can see that we are more similar than different, and as such,

create a more positive image of each other by getting to know one another.

Another conclusion, from both the interviews and monitoring, is that in order to improve relations we will have to work on relatively safe areas. For example, cooperation on security issues has been relatively slow and lacking because of the sensitive nature of those issues. However, the economy constitutes a safe area of cooperation and should be one of the major areas to boost bilateral cooperation between the two countries. As one of the interviewees interestingly stated, in most cases, consumers are pragmatists and generally not influenced by negative perceptions. Therefore, the economy is serving and should continue to serve as a meeting point for Albania and Serbia, and should be seen as a cooperation that will spill over to other areas, mainly politics and culture.

One shouldn't leave aside the power politics and politicians have in improving bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia. At the end of the day, politicians are decision makers and being representatives of their people, if there is political will, it is relatively easy to change the course of action if needed. Relations between the two countries have been largely affected by politics and solutions also come from that realm. Things that have already happened: visa liberalization for citizens of the two countries, high level visits and agreements as well as the rising of Serbia's diplomatic representation in Tirana are just a few illustrating examples of the power politics hold as an actor of change. But politics can and has often spoiled relations between Albania and Serbia, which is why most of the professional interviewed invoke the need of caution in using political will to improve relations.

Regarding Kosovo, the obvious issue standing between Albania and Serbia, we can reach two conclusions. The first, is the necessity to move beyond the Kosovo issue to focus primarily

on future cooperation between the two countries. However, we are well aware of the difficulty to achieve the first, therefore, the second conclusion is that a solution over the Kosovo disputes between Pristina and Belgrade themselves, will also improve relations between Serbia and Albania. A good example of this expectation is the recent agreement reached this April by Belgrade and Prishtina. Although a full solution is far reached, because the agreement needs smooth implementation and consensus on both sides, one should not forget the importance of such an agreement in normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia. This is also good news for both countries and their aspirations for EU integration and eventually will be a stepping stone for good relations between Albania and Serbia.

The European Union has used its soft power and diplomacy to encourage regional cooperation and joint efforts of the Western Balkan countries in their integration path. As most of the interviewees pointed out, the EU has been one of the major actors of change in the region, trying to bring peace and prosperity among the countries in the region. Although often filled with controversy, the European integration process continues to this day to push forward the regional cooperation agenda. Major efforts are put in place to boost economic and political ties between countries that share a common interest. Even though in some of the interviews, it appeared that the EU integration agenda has overshadowed regional cooperation one can convincingly assert that once in the EU these countries have the potential to move beyond negative perceptions and historical legacies and improve relations as members of a larger family.

Last, but not least, culture can serve as an important instrument to ease relations and change negative perceptions. Public and cultural diplomacy should be included more often in the vocabulary of both countries. The impact of culture in

bilateral diplomatic relations is not a new topic. Understanding and accepting cultural diversity is essential to understand the underlying causes of many conflicting attitudes and become more inclined to seek compromise and consensual approaches rather than attempt to impose their own culturally-based views (Kappeler 80). This point of view, rightly expressed by Dietrich Kappeler, proves that culture, if correctly used, can be a powerful mean to alter negative perceptions, and, most importantly, accept the other as different but not with enmity.

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