

# Kosovo, European Integration and the SAA: An analysis of citizens' perceptions

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# KOSOVO, EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND THE SAA: AN ANALYSIS OF CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS

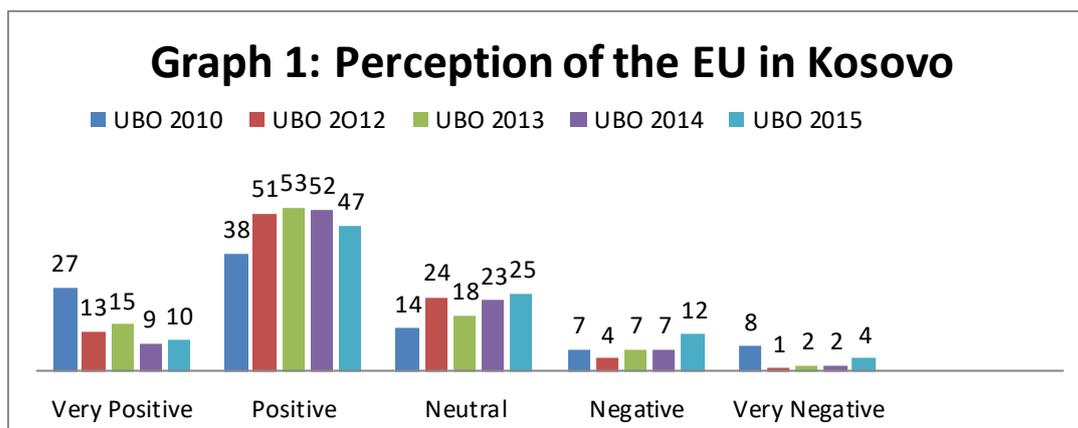
## Introduction

The Republic of Kosovo, since its independence, has been on a slow but steady path to European Integration. The European Union (EU), by far the leading international political and economic actor in Kosovo, has been directly involved in the stabilisation, monitoring, strengthening, and state-building phases over the past decade. Since the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003, Kosovo and other neighbouring Western Balkan countries have been given a European perspective, beginning their long journey towards European Integration. One of the fundamental steps was taken in 2015 with the signing of the Stabilisation Association Agreement (SAA) between the EU and Kosovo, marking the entry into force of the first agreement between Pristina and Brussels involving contractual obligations. Nevertheless, Kosovo's path to European integration has been everything but uncomplicated. It is arguable that Kosovo's path towards EU Integration has been challenged by sizeable external factors such as the non-recognition by five EU Member States, a massive economic recession, which was immediately followed by an unprecedented socio-political crisis that developed through the EU. Kosovo's inability to significantly improve its judicial, political, and economic sectors, added to the fact that EU membership expansion lost its momentum and relevance in Brussels, drove Kosovo to a situation of significant impasse.

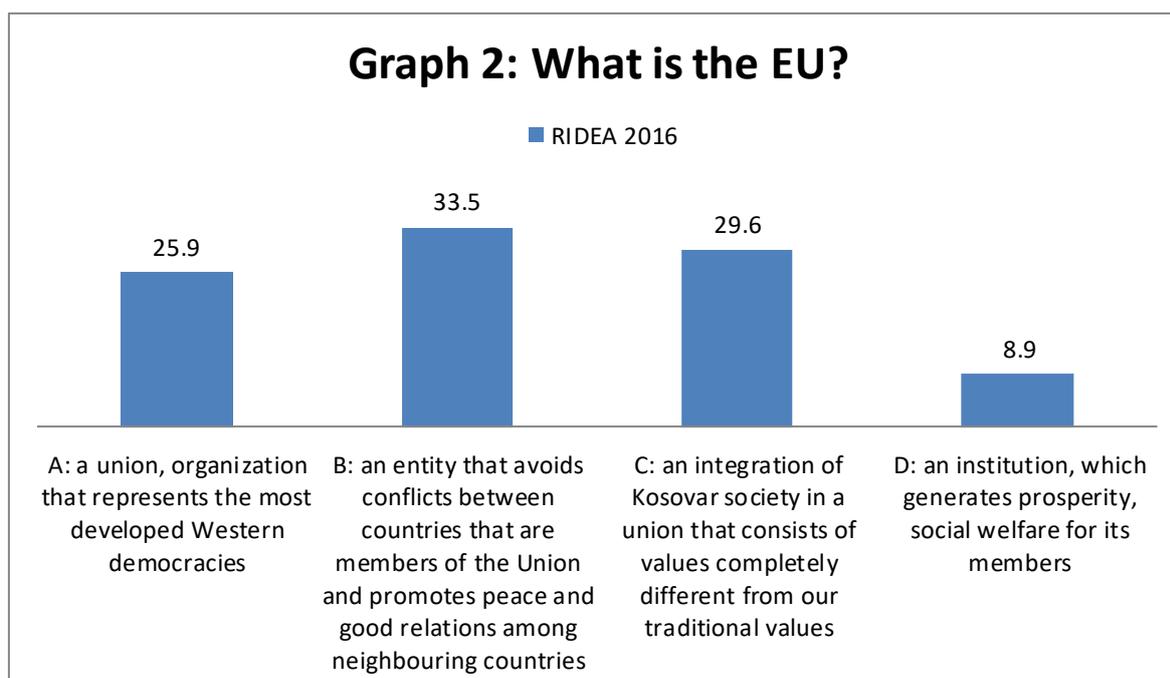
While political positions on both sides are somewhat known, the aim of this policy paper is to carry-out a comparative analysis of the surveys that have assessed citizens' perceptions of Kosovo's EU integration. The following six surveys will be evaluated: 'Survey of Awareness of the EU and European Integration in Kosovo' of 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 published by Ubo Consulting; 'Public Opinion Perception on European Integration' prepared by the Research Institute of Development and European Affairs (RIDEA), published in November 2016; and 'Citizens' general knowledge and perception on SAA' prepared by the Pristina Institute for Political Studies and released in 2016. The number of respondents in these surveys ranged from a minimum of 1,000 to a maximum of 1,500, all of them collected in all of the 38 municipalities of Kosovo. All the surveys aimed to raise public awareness and understanding of EU institutions and EU integration issues among the citizens of Kosovo. Furthermore, this policy paper aims to report any changes in public perceptions over the last years and analyse any possible trends that have recently developed.

## Analysis

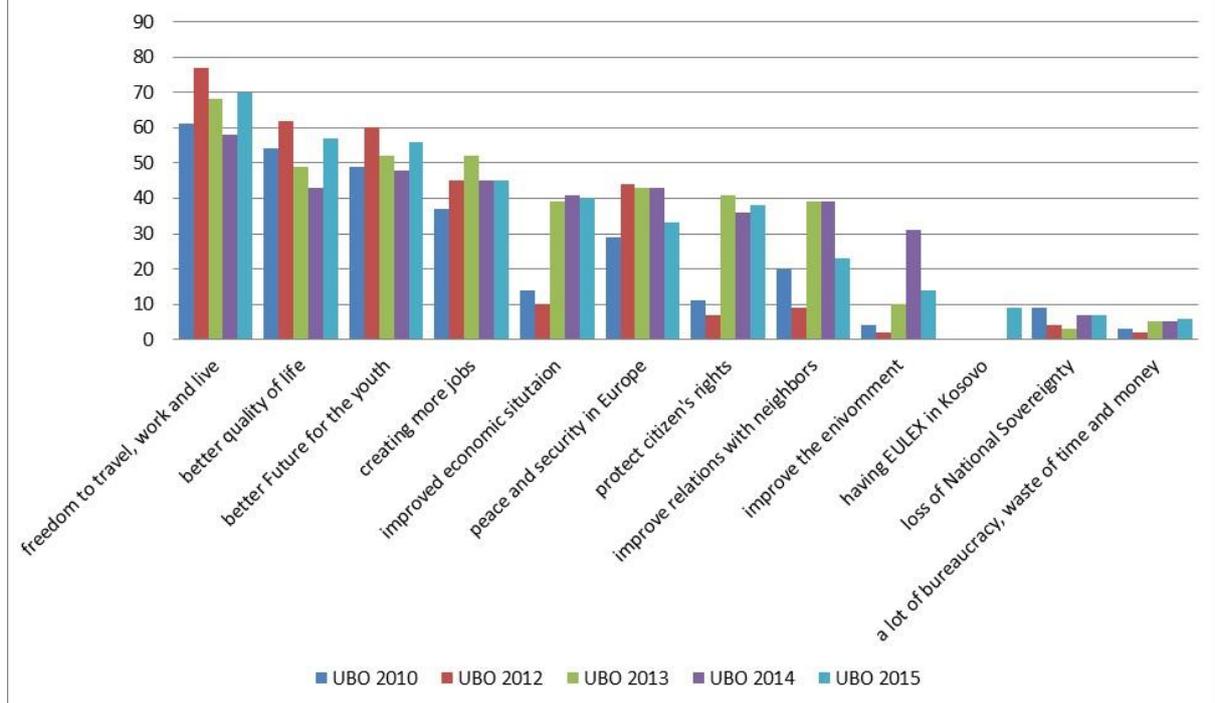
Overall, Kosovo citizens have had a positive perception of the EU and its institutions since the beginning of the above-mentioned surveys in 2010. The combination of the answers 'very positive' and 'positive' has always reached over 60% of preferences, with only in 2015 combining to 'solely' 57%. On the other hand, 'negative' and 'very negative' perceptions have never reached over 16% in any given year. On average, one individual out of four or five (depending on the year) has a neutral perception of the EU and its institutions.



good perception of the EU, as showed by this survey results, works as the founding-stone of the argument that sees Kosovo improving its current conditions due to the process of EU integration. As suggested in the RIDEA survey, 85% of the respondents believe that Kosovo will benefit from an EU integration process, with merely 3% claiming that Kosovo would lose from entering the Union. Although there is a widespread consensus, as shown by different surveys of different years, on the benefits of a future in the EU, there is certain divergence of opinion on what these benefits might be. When asked what EU integration meant, in the survey conducted by RIDEA, 26% of the respondents chose answer 'C', an 'integration of Kosovar society in a union that consists of values completely different from our traditions'. Still, answer A, 'A union that represents the most developed Western democracies', and answer B, 'an entity that avoids conflicts between countries that are members of the Union and promotes peace and good relations among neighbouring countries', received more preferences with 34% and 30% respectively. Interestingly enough, the respondents in the region of the capital Pristina mostly perceived the concept of EU integration as described by reply B, while in the region of Mitrovica the same concept was perceived more in line with the definition provided by answer C.



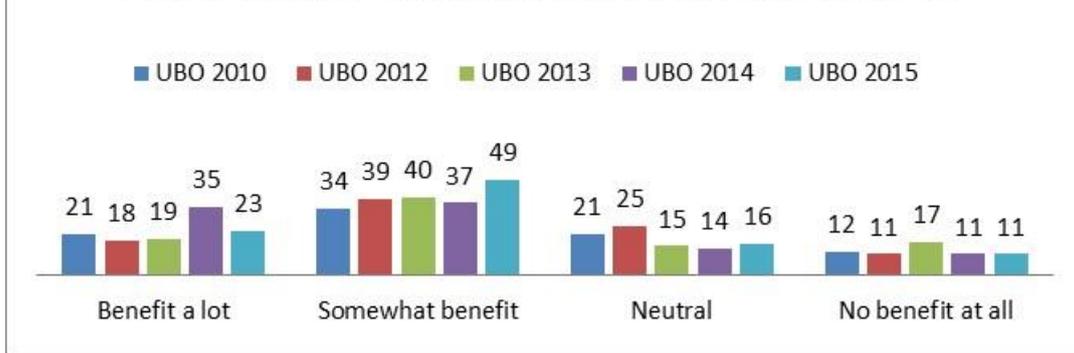
**Graph 3: What are the benefits from entering the EU?**



According to Kosovar citizens responding to the Ubo Consulting surveys the most important benefit deriving from EU Membership is ‘the right and freedom to travel, study work and live anywhere in the European Union’, which has been always the top choice ranging from 58% (2014) to a 77% (2012), with the latest result standing at 70% (2015). A better quality of life (57%), better future (56%), more jobs (45%), and improved economic situation (40%) have been other high-selected options among citizens. On a final note, loss of sovereignty and waste of time and money are ranked at the bottom of the list with 7% and 6% respectively. It is thus again evident that Kosovar citizens see in the European Union a wide array of opportunities rather than threats. In addition, it is important to note a direct correlation between young respondents and favourability of the EU. The relevance of continuing on the path of EU integration is shared among Kosovar citizens and is reflected in the answers given to Ubo Consulting to the question ‘how important is it for Kosovo to strengthen ties with the EU?’. Over 80% of the answers have always been a combination of ‘very important’ and ‘somewhat important’, with a significant shift of answers from ‘somewhat important’ to ‘very important’ starting in 2014. Almost 50% of the respondents claimed that they would somewhat benefit from Kosovo’s entry in the EU (added to 23% who believe that they will benefit a lot, meaning that three out of four individuals see personal benefits in entering the EU, compared to only 11% afraid of not benefitting at all).

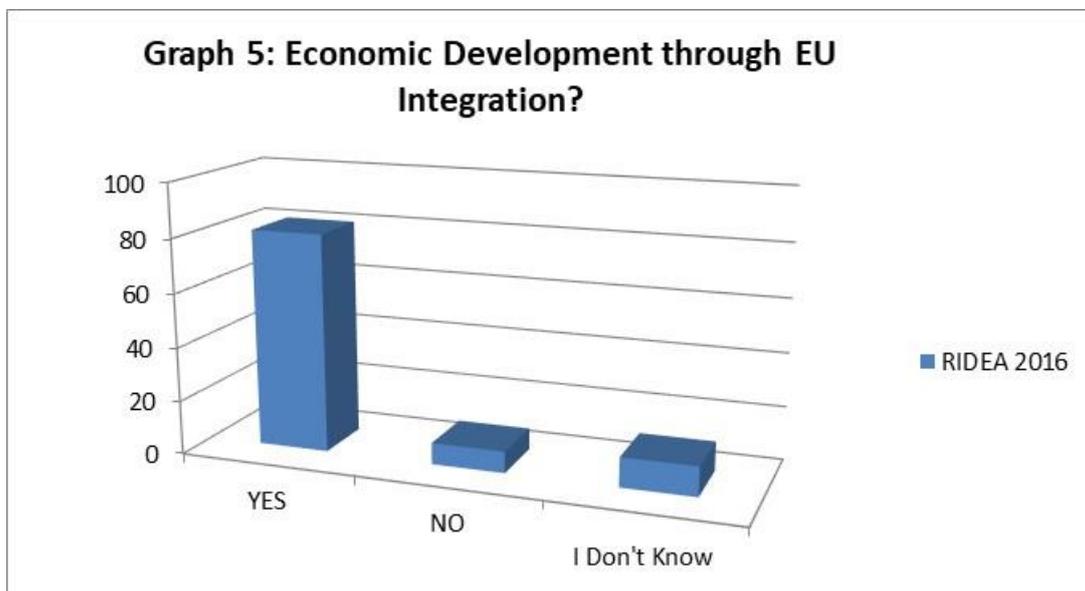
The 2016 survey by the Research Institute of Development and European Affairs provided some interesting numbers regarding the benefits of Kosovo from EU integration showing a direct correlation between young respondents and more benefits identified. When asked whether or not they would like to move and settle in an EU country, respondents were divided almost equally in two halves.

**Graph 4: Would Kosovo benefit from entering the EU?**

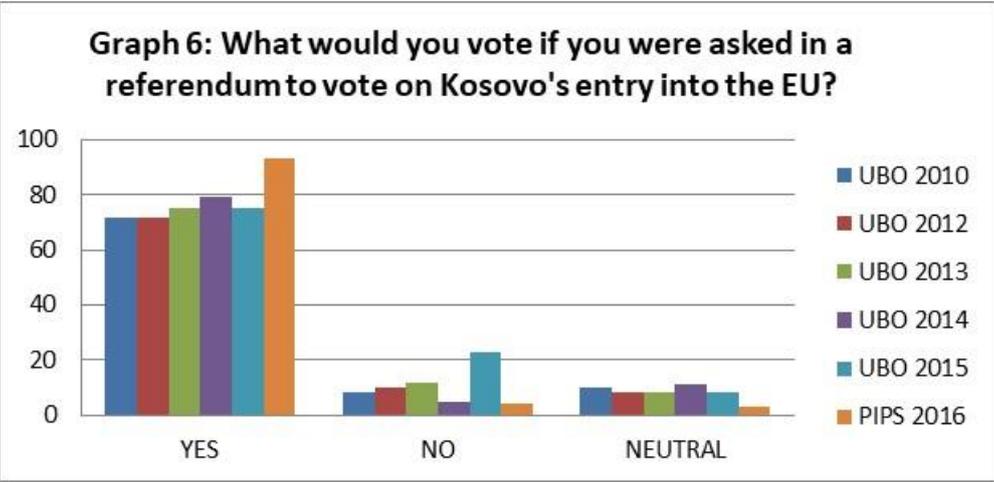


81 % of respondents claimed that the EU integration process would generate significant economic development in Kosovo. Although this belief is shared by the majority of Kosovars throughout the seven regions of Kosovo, in the region of Pristina and Prizren the delta between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ is even larger compared to the national mean. On the other hand, in the regions of Ferizaj, Gjilan and Mitrovica, the delta between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ is marginal, with the two options sharing extremely close results. It is relevant to point out that Kosovars perceive the EU integration process as useful to overcome local political challenges, with 46% of respondents answering ‘yes’ and 18% ‘not sure’. Once again, the Mitrovica region provided us with contradicting results compared to the rest of the country, where the majority of the population, especially the ethnic Albanians, believed that a future EU integration would not be helpful in improving political issues in Kosovo.

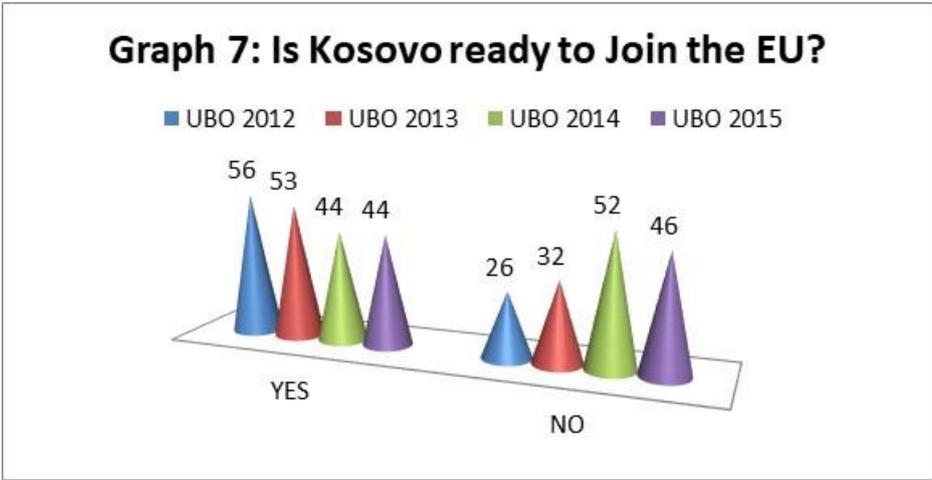
**Graph 5: Economic Development through EU Integration?**



The overwhelming majority of Kosovo citizens, if to vote in a referendum on the country’s entry into the EU, would vote in favour of it. In the five years that Ubo Consulting asked about a hypothetical referendum, it continually registered ‘yes’ responses at above 75% with no more than 13% of the respondents that would have voted ‘no’. In the 2016 survey conducted by the Pristina Institute for Political Studies, over 90% of respondents said ‘yes’ to question ‘Should Kosovo become a EU Member state?’, portraying a result in line with the ones provided by Ubo Consulting.



Kosovo citizens, although proving themselves able to acknowledge the benefits of entry into the European Union, still appear to be quite naïve about the readiness of their country to join the EU. When asked, citizens of Kosovo have roughly divided themselves in two halves over whether or not Kosovo is ready to join the EU. Over the last four years the percentage of citizens who argue that Kosovo is ready to join the EU has decreased each year, stabilising itself at 'only' 44% in 2015.

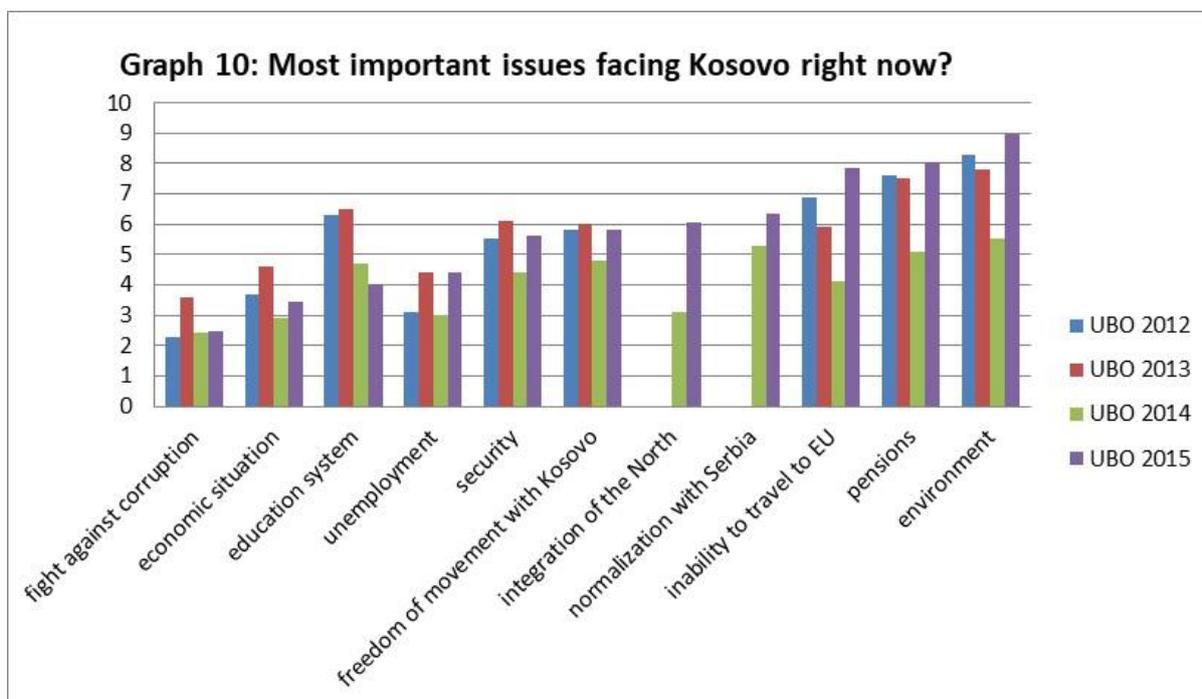
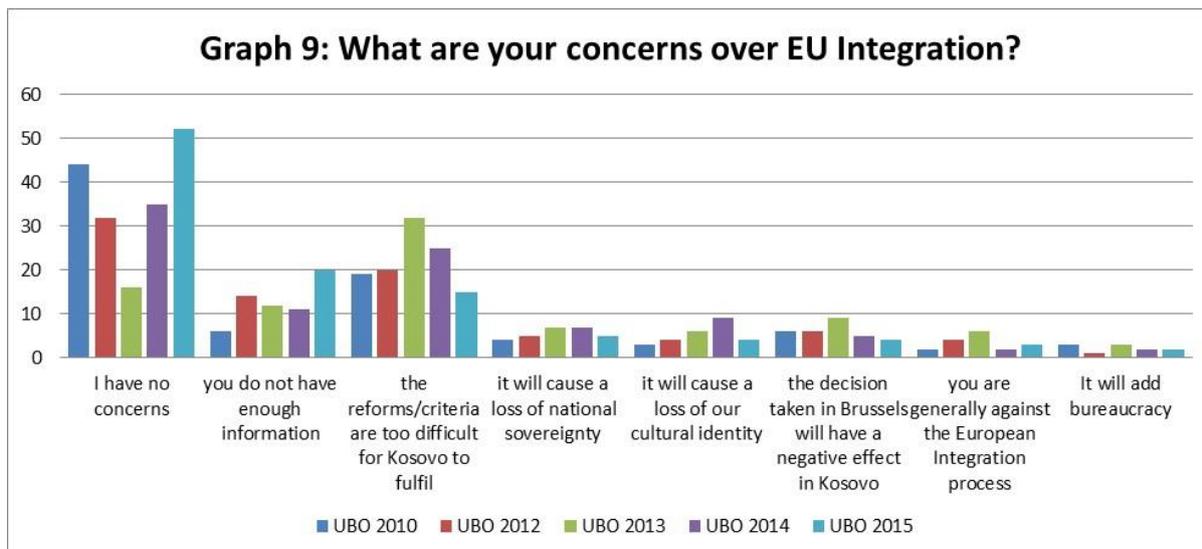


The tremendously optimistic answers portrayed by Graph 7 prepare the ground for the contagious positivity of the answers given by Kosovo citizens about the country's entry into the EU. By looking at the answers provided in 2010 in the Ubo Consulting survey, 60% believed that as of today, Kosovo would have been in the EU. Two years later, 54% of respondents still argued that in a five-year timespan Kosovo would join the Union. If we look at the five-year timeframe that began after the last Ubo Consulting survey, an overwhelming 68% of citizens argued that Kosovo would be a member by 2020. The striking answer of '2012', given in 2010 by 37% of the respondents, and '2015', given in 2013 by 36% of the respondents are a clear portrayal of how a significant percentage of the population is either somewhat detached from reality or overly optimistic about local politicians' skills. In other words, over one third of the respondents believed that in a matter of two years Kosovo would have signed an SAA and open and closed all of the chapters required to comply with EU standards in order to join the European Union. Unfortunately, these results are the product of uninformed citizens that are not really aware of

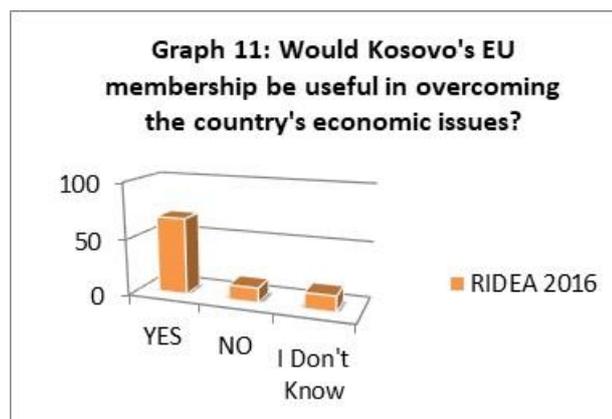
the complex mechanisms and requirements that are behind the process of EU integration. The dissatisfaction with the integration progress is portrayed by almost three quarters of the respondents of the 2016 RIDEA survey, who claimed that EU integration is progressing at a severely slow pace, while a mere 16% asserted that the whole process is moving at a normal pace and 3% that the process was moving at a fast pace.

<b>Graph 8: When will Kosovo become an EU Member State?</b>					
	<b>UBO 2010</b>	<b>UBO 2012</b>	<b>UBO 2013</b>	<b>UBO 2014</b>	<b>UBO 2015</b>
<b>2012</b>	37 %	9 %			
<b>2013</b>		4 %			
<b>2014</b>		21 %			
<b>2015</b>	23 %		36 %	18 %	
<b>2016</b>					9 %
<b>2017</b>		20 %			8 %
<b>2018</b>			26 %	25 %	13 %
<b>2020</b>	16 %		1 %	25 %	38 %
<b>2022</b>					6 %
<b>2025</b>		17 %	8 %		11 %
<b>2030</b>	3 %	10 %	3 %	12 %	
<b>NEVER</b>	7 %	8 %	13 %	2 %	
<b>DON'T KNOW</b>	12 %	11 %	13 %	17 %	

Graph 8 presents results in line with our expectations built upon previous survey questions and answers. The majority of respondents chose the answer 'I have no concerns', except in year 2013 where the answer 'the reforms/criteria are too difficult for Kosovo to fulfil' received 32% of compared to just 16% for 'I have no concerns'. Regardless, concerns about the requirements that Kosovo must fulfil before joining the EU have always been registered as the second preferred answer in the surveys throughout the years. The pressure that Brussels is exerting on the Kosovo government is strongly felt also by citizens, who identify this pressure as the main concern of EU integration. If overall one third of respondents had no problems with the process of EU integration, approximately one fifth of them still showed concerns over loss of cultural identity and sovereignty, EU institutions, and a general dislike towards the whole EU integration process. On the other hand, when asked to rank the most important issues facing Kosovo at the moment from 1 to 11 (1 being the most important and 11 the least important), citizens often ranked in low numbers 'fight against corruption' (2.49), the 'economic situation' (3.44), and the 'education system' (4.00). Interesting enough, the main areas identified by the respondents as the most pressing issues for the country are the same that Brussels is urging the government to fix in order to expedite their EU integration process.

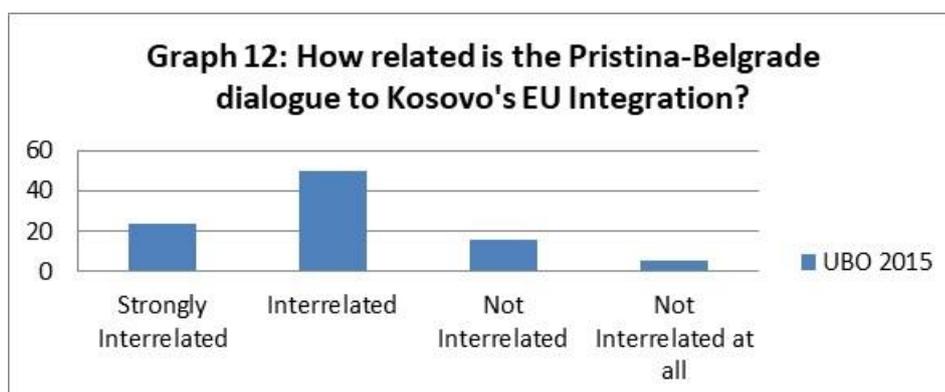


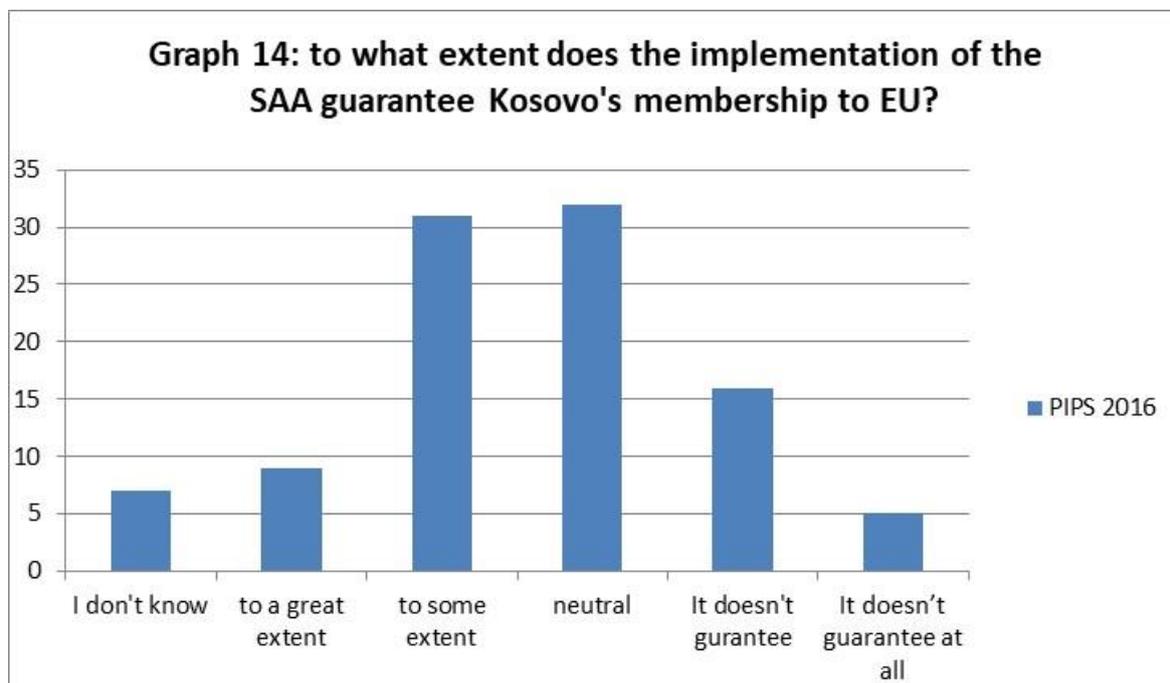
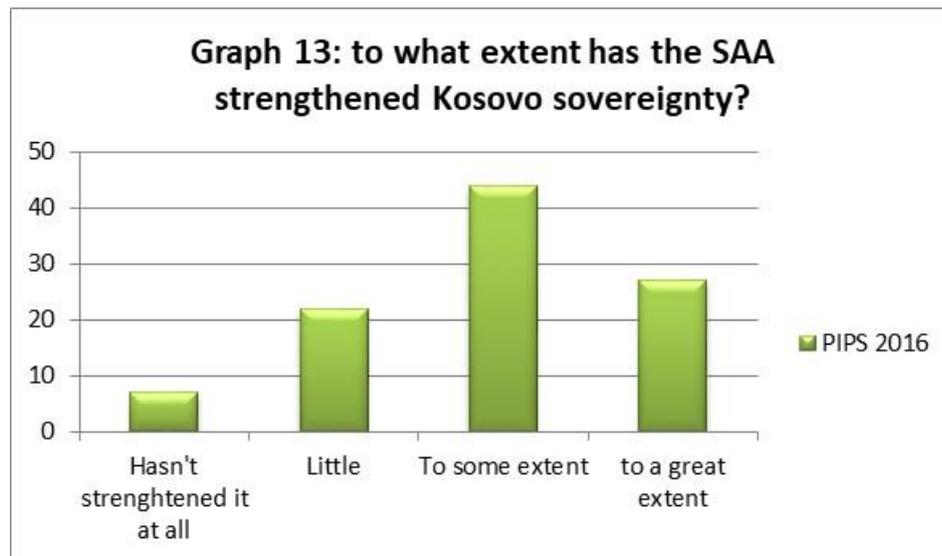
The slow growth and modest size of the Kosovo economy has been identified as one of the major factors hampering Kosovo’s chances on the EU integration path. 68% of the respondents to the 2016 RIDEA survey claimed that Kosovo’s EU membership will be useful to overcome the country’s economic issues, with only 13% claiming the opposite. Once again, there is a direct correlation between optimistic responses and young age groups. The percentages of six regions show a similar trend supporting the idea that Kosovo’s entry into the EU will improve the country’s economic condition, while in the Mitrovica region the numbers of the two sides of the argument are extremely close to each other.



The Pristina-Belgrade dialogue is, without a doubt, another major variable in Kosovo's path towards EU Integration. According to the REDEA survey, less than half of the respondents (47%) believe that Kosovo can improve relationships with Serbia through its EU integration process. Moreover, 27% (with peaks of 60% in the Mitrovica region, especially from ethnical Albanian citizens) firmly believe that there is no way that the Kosovo-Serbia relationship can improve via EU integration, while the remaining 20% does not know. In the Ubo Consulting survey of 2015, almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the respondents asserted that the Kosovo-Serbia relationship and EU integration are either 'strongly interrelated' or 'interrelated', with merely 5% stating that they are 'not interrelated at all'. Hope for the future is provided by data that shows that the younger the age group, the more possible is, according to them, that EU integration leads to a normalisation of the Kosovo-Serbia relationship.

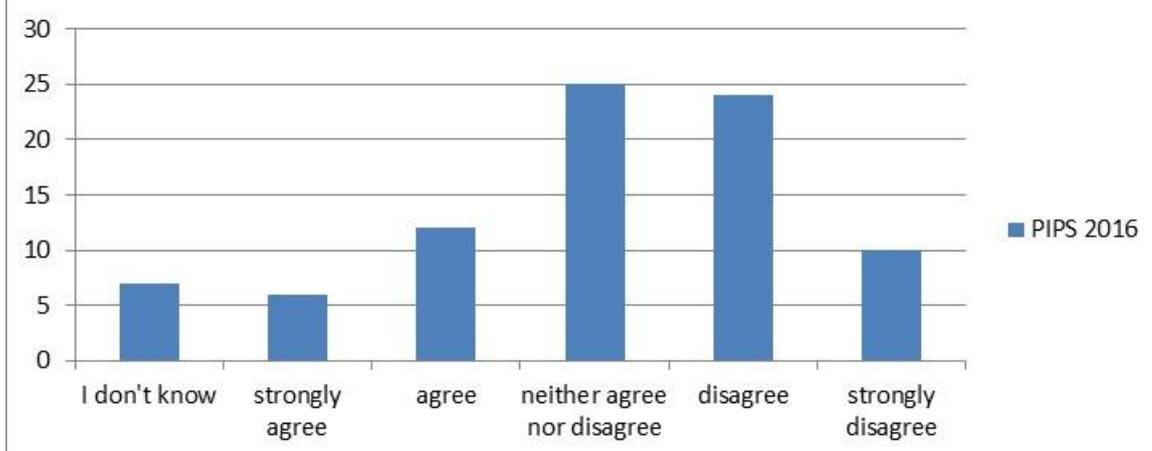
The Kosovo-Serbia dialogue is perceived as a 'not important' aspect in the implementation of the SAA by more than a third of respondents, while 28% said that is an important variable of the SAA implementation. But how much do Kosovo citizens know about the most significant step that their country took towards EU integration? The SAA entered into force at a delicate time in Kosovo's journey towards European integration. 59% of the respondents of the 2016 RIDEA survey confirmed that they have heard about the signing of the SAA between Kosovo and the EU, while the remaining 41% was not aware of its existence. These results are evenly spread across the different age groups of the survey, while on a regional level we can evince a significantly higher percentage of individuals aware of the SAA in the Pristina and Prizren regions with extremely negative figures in the Gjilan region. Of the 59% who said they had heard about the signing of the SAA only 35% claimed to be aware of the actual benefits from the SAA, while more than 60% were not aware whether or not the country will benefit from it





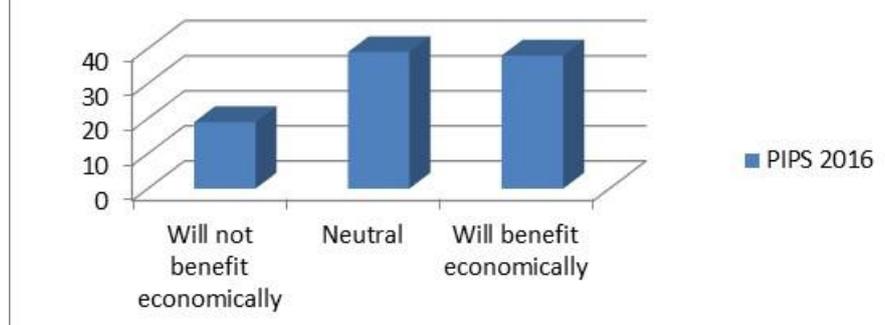
Almost half of the respondents to the Pristina Institution for Political Studies survey of 2016 (PIPS 2016) claimed that the SAA has, to some extent, strengthened Kosovo's sovereignty. In the meantime, the remaining half was more or less divided between individuals claiming that the SAA has provided little support and those arguing that the Stabilisation Association Agreement will strengthen Kosovo's sovereignty to a great extent. On what will happen after the implementation of the SAA, there was a significant spread-out of answers through the spectrum. One third respondents believed that there are some guarantees regarding Kosovo's EU membership following a correct implementation of the SAA. Another third remained neutral to the question, while the last 33% were somewhat divided between highly optimistic and highly pessimistic views.

**Graph 15: Kosovo has capacities to implement the required reforms through SAA**

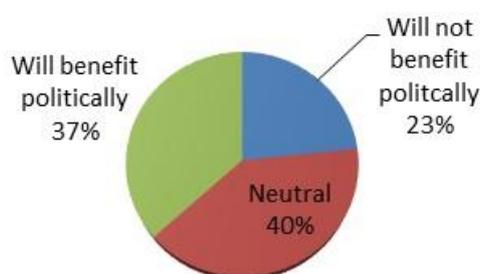


According to the PIPS 2016 survey, the respondents who believe that Kosovo does have the necessary tools to implement the required reforms are less than half than those who argue the opposite. As it appears from the results of the survey, Kosovo citizens share a strong sense of optimism over the benefits that the SAA and EU integration could bring to the country but, in the meantime, are quite disappointed over the actual status of the matter in Kosovo and afraid that the socio-economic and political situation might jeopardise its future in the EU. Graph 16 shows how only one fifth respondents have a negative attitude towards the possible economic benefits deriving from the SAA. Perceptions on economic and political benefits share more or less the same percentages, with almost two fifth of the respondents having an optimistic idea regarding the future benefits deriving from the SAA. At the same time, another 40% of respondents are somewhat neutral on the subject. When asked whether or not EU integration could generate economic development, the majority of the respondents seem to have clear opinions, with 81 % claiming that it will bring economic prosperity, while only 8% think the contrary. Interestingly, the majority of the 'yes' answers came from the region of Pristina and Prizren, while the lowest percentage of 'yes' came from Mitrovica and Peja. In the ethnically divided province of Mitrovica, 'yes' and 'no' stand at breakeven point of 35%.

**Graph 16: Perception on economic benefits that derive from SAA**



**Graph 17: Perception on political benefits that derive from SAA**



## Conclusion

This survey analysis confirms, once again, the continuous support of the European Union and its institutions among the citizens of Kosovo. Kosovo citizens believe that the EU has the knowledge, capacity, and political will to lead the efforts to solve most of the issues that afflict the country. More than 50% of the respondents evaluated as positively the work of the EU in Kosovo, identifying it as a source of peace, democracy and economic prosperity. It is a widespread belief among the population that improving the relationship with the European Union will prove beneficial for Kosovo. A future entry into the EU would allow to Kosovars the possibility to free travel and employment in other EU member states. This opportunity is considered as something incredibly attractive, especially for young individuals. However, survey respondents appeared to be, in several instances, overly optimistic or uninformed about Kosovo's timeline for EU integration, foreseeing entry into the Union in a just a few years; however, still perfectly aware of the shortcomings of their government. For example, according to the 2016 RIDEA survey, 61% of the respondents have a good understanding of visa liberalisation, arguing that it will grant them free movement in the Schengen area. However, 26% believe that visa liberalisation will grant them free movement in all EU countries and 12% in the 'EU Zone'. Interestingly enough, a variety of surveys clearly show how age is a key factor in the responses given. The younger the respondents the more his/her answers are optimistic, well-thought and closer to current state of the matter. Overall no new major trends have developed over the last years, with clear (and still present) distinctions between the different regions and ethnicities through in the country. The worrisome situation of the Mitrovica region continuously represents a constant threat for the socio-political equilibrium of Kosovo. In the Mitrovica region, Ethnic Albanians have a tendency to favour the EU and its institutions, while ethnic Serbs are less favourable towards Brussels. What must not be left unnoticed is the significant sense of dissatisfaction shared by a large percentage of individuals in Kosovo over the actual economic and political situation, which generates a sense of distrust towards the government and its actual capabilities to undertake reforms required by the EU. In order to fulfil the desires of its citizens, Kosovo's officials thus face the necessity of expediting inter policy reforms, meaning concrete efforts to tackle the economic, social, and political issues that afflict the country. Only then, Kosovo current state of affairs could match its European aspirations.



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## **Policy Analysis**

Policy Analysis in general is a policy advice paper which particularly aims to influence the key means through which policy decisions are made in both local and central levels of government. The purpose of Policy Analysis is to address, more in-depth, a particular problem, to examine the arguments related to a concerned policy, and to analyze the implementation of the policy. Through Policy Analysis, Group for Legal and Political studies seeks to stimulate wider comprehensive debate on the given issue via presenting informed policy-relevant choices and recommendations to the key stakeholders and parties of interest.



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