

**The Ostrich Effect: What the
Serbian Public Knows, Doesn't
Know, and Avoids Knowing About
the Brussels/Ohrid Agreement**

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INTRODUCTION

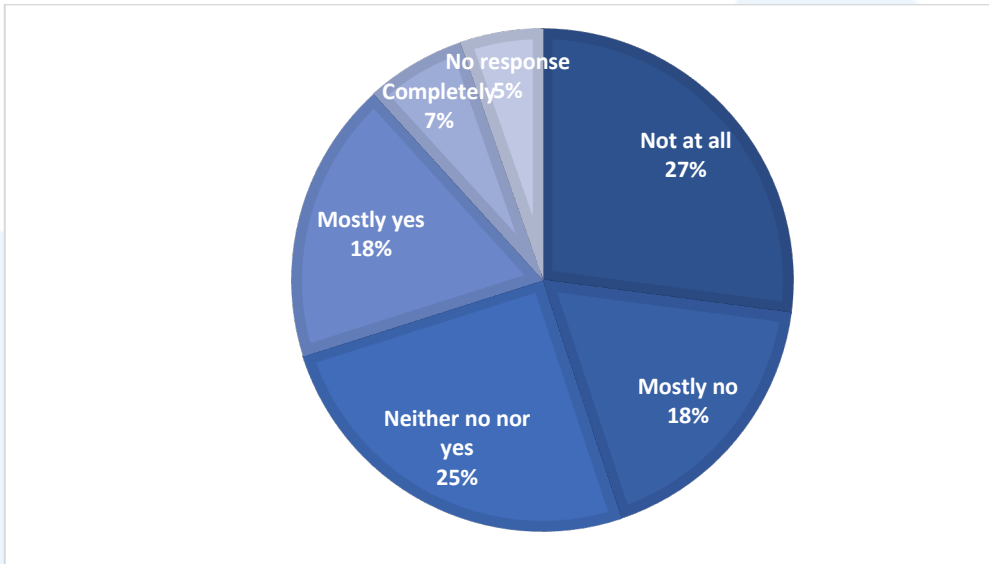
On 27 February 2023, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti met in Brussels, where they verbally agreed to the EU-facilitated Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia. Shortly after, an Implementation Annex was adopted in Ohrid on 18 March 2023, leading to the Agreement being often referred to as the 'Brussels-Ohrid' or simply 'Ohrid Agreement.' The most controversial aspect of the Agreement, which sparked immediate reactions in national and international media, was Article 4, which explicitly states that "Serbia will not object to Kosovo's membership in any international organization." For this reason, already the following day, in a prime-time interview on Serbian public television, President Vučić explicitly stated that he had not agreed to Kosovo's membership in the UN and repeatedly insisted that he "had not signed anything." Since then, there has been a great deal of uncertainty as to whether the Agreement was concluded or not and whether Serbia has suddenly agreed to move its strongest 'red line' in the negotiations – Kosovo's seat in the UN. The lack of clarity regarding the existence of political will to accept all of its articles and their sequencing has been complicating their practical realisation.

This brief shows how Serbian public reacted to this set of events. To this end, a public opinion poll was conducted from July 1 to 9, 2023. The poll, conducted by Sprint Insight, was a face-to-face, door-to-door survey carried out on a representative, stratified sample of 1,213 respondents across Serbia (excluding Kosovo). Our main finding is that, despite a strong attachment to the idea of Kosovo as part of Serbia and its central role in Serbian national identity, the majority of Serbian citizens are not only unfamiliar with the agreements concluded in Brussels and Ohrid but appear to prefer not to know much about them. Moreover, the findings also suggest that individuals with lower levels of overall understanding of the Kosovo issue, or of specific agreements, are less likely to perceive their national identity as being threatened in this context. Based on this, we tentatively conclude that there is an "Ostrich Effect" in the Serbian public opinion regarding Kosovo since its important segment prefers not to learn about the realities of the Kosovo issue in order to protect their emotional and cognitive belief that Kosovo remains part of Serbia.

SURVEY RESULTS

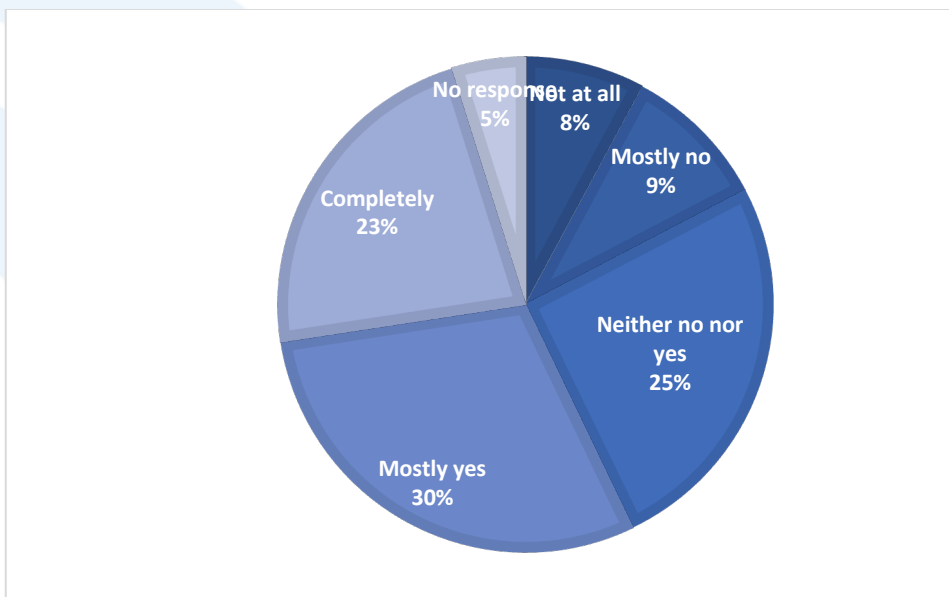
Survey results indicate that nearly half of the Serbian public (45%) believes that there is still hope for preserving Kosovo and Metohija as part of the Republic of Serbia. About a quarter of the public believes Kosovo is lost, while the remaining quarter is unsure (Graph 1).

Graph 1: Do you believe that the fight to keep Kosovo and Metohija as part of the Republic of Serbia is lost?



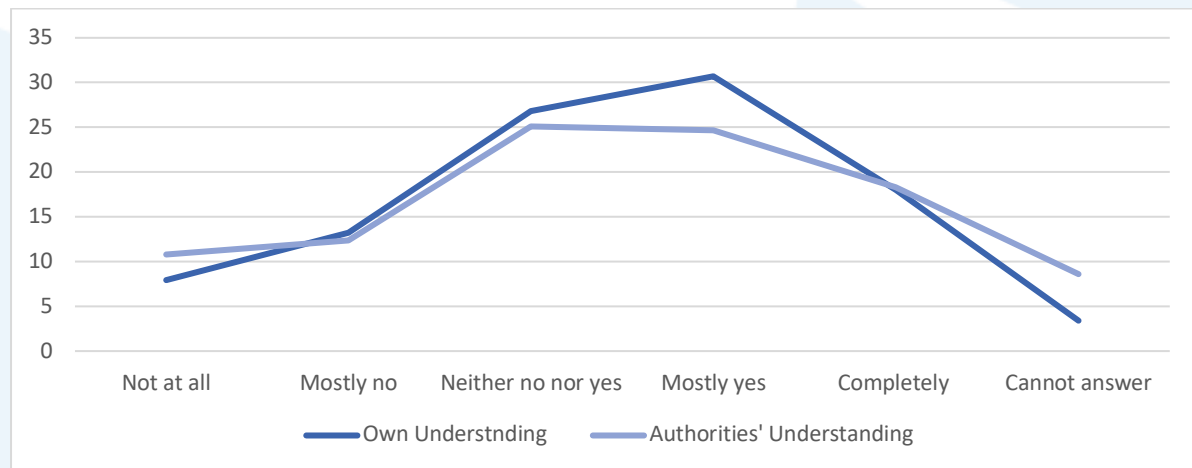
Apparently, slightly more than half of the Serbian population would feel that their national identity and pride would be jeopardized if Serbia were to recognize Kosovo. Fewer than one in ten people believe their national identity would not be threatened by recognizing Kosovo, while a quarter remains uncertain about the issue (Graph 2)

Graph 2: If Serbia were to recognize the independence of Kosovo, to what extent would this jeopardize your sense of national identity and pride?



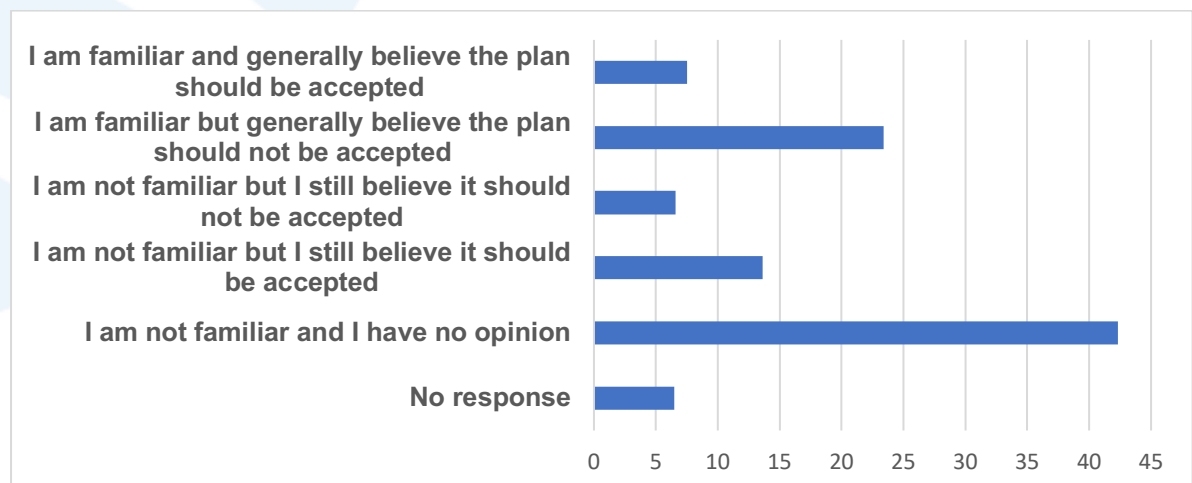
Public confidence in understanding the Kosovo issue and Serbia's policy toward it is partial, with about half of the population expressing confidence in their grasp of the situation (Graph 3). Approximately one-fifth of the public lacks confidence in their understanding of the Kosovo issue, while a quarter remains uncertain. Notably, confidence in the authorities' understanding of the Kosovo issue is even lower.

Graph 3: On a scale from 1 to 5, how confident are you in:



Nevertheless, when asked about the content of the most recent agreement, less than one-third of the respondents demonstrates awareness (Graph 4). Despite controversies surrounding the agreement, particularly regarding an article that may indicate a shift in Serbia's official stance on Kosovo's UN membership, nearly two-thirds of the respondents remain uninformed. Among those familiar with the agreement, opponents outnumber supporters by a ratio of three to one.

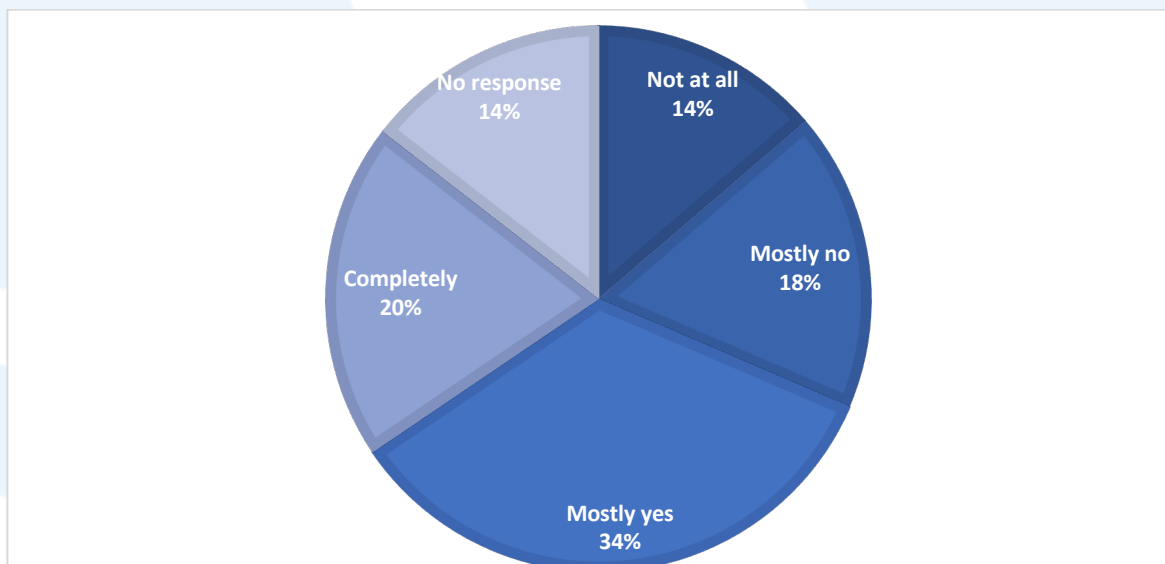
Graph 4: How familiar are you with the contents of the agreements made in Brussels and Ohrid to resolve the Kosovo issue?



The survey results suggest that the public's lack of interest in or willingness to engage with the details of Serbia's policy on the Kosovo issue may stem from a preference for emotionally comforting beliefs about Kosovo's status (Graph 5). More than half of respondents (54%) perceive this lack of knowledge and awareness as a conscious or unconscious way of preserving national identity and pride, allowing them to more easily and comfortably believe that Kosovo remains part of Serbia. Statistical analysis further indicates that a lower level of understanding of the situation correlates with a reduced sense of threat to one's national identity from the potential loss of Kosovo.

Graph 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

"Most people are not interested in knowing what exactly is happening regarding Kosovo. It's easier for them to believe that Kosovo is still Serbian."



Finally, survey results also reveal a profound lack of trust in sources of information about Kosovo issue and policy (Graph 6). Not only is public trust in politicians fundamentally shaken (mean score: 2.9), but confidence in experts and scientists is also relatively low (mean score: 3.62). Similarly, citizens express a complete erosion of trust in both traditional (mean score: 2,78) and new media (2,74), with a negligible difference between the two. In response, people appear to rely more heavily on intimate circles of family and friends (mean score: 4.18) and, above all, their own common sense (mean score: 4.22).

Graph 6: How much do you trust the following sources of information about Kosovo?

Source	Not at all	Mostly no	Neither not nor yes	Mostly yes	Completely	Don't know	Mean
Family and friends	0.7%	4.2%	14%	36.3%	41.6%	3.1%	4.18
Politicians	19.5%	17.3%	27.4%	19.4%	13.6%	2.8%	2.9
Common sense and logic	1.5%	3.2%	14.6%	30.7%	47.1%	2.9%	4.22
Experts and scientists	4.1%	8.1%	27.7%	35.9%	19.8%	4.4%	3.62
Religious leaders	7%	11.9%	35.4%	25.3%	13.3%	7.1%	3.28
Traditional media	15.5%	21.6%	34%	17.4%	7.1%	4.5%	2.78
Social media	17.8%	18.6%	29.9%	17.2%	6.8%	9.6%	2.74

CONCLUSION

The Serbian public's attachment to the Kosovo issue remains one of the strongest anchors of national identity but also serves as a significant barrier to Serbia's official position in negotiations over the normalization and final status of Kosovo. Strong public opposition to any form of recognition of Kosovo by Serbia is often assumed and taken for granted. Over the years, the Belgrade–Priština dialogue has not only stalled and stagnated but also grown increasingly complex, with dialogue formats and agreements becoming less clear and less known to the public on both sides.

Survey results reveal that the Serbian public's knowledge of the official policy toward the Kosovo issue is in disarray, with only half of the population expressing confidence in their overall understanding of this key identity and national interest issue. Public awareness of

specific agreements, including the most recent Ohrid Agreement, is even lower, with less than a third of the population familiar with its content a few months after its conclusion.

The findings further suggest that many citizens find it easier to retreat behind a "veil of ignorance," preserving their national identity by clinging to a cognitively and emotionally appealing narrative of Kosovo as the heart of Serbia. More than half of the public agrees that by avoiding knowledge about Kosovo, people in Serbia protect their national identity and pride. The results also show that the less the Serbian public understands the Kosovo issue, the less they feel threatened by the potential loss of Kosovo to their national identity. Much like an ostrich allegedly burying its head in the sand to avoid danger, Serbian citizens appear to consciously or unconsciously choose to remain unaware of certain realities surrounding the Kosovo issue rather than confront the possibility of its loss.

Moreover, survey results indicate that the lack of transparency in Serbia's official policy on Kosovo, as well as the limited results achieved so far, has led to a complete erosion of public trust in traditional sources of information. Serbian citizens lack confidence in politicians, experts, scientists, and even religious figures, who have historically shaped public attitudes toward Kosovo. As a result, many rely on "common sense" (*zdrav razum*), which is often neither *zdrav* nor *razum*. Paradoxically, this lack of trust offers a sense of psychological protection, allowing citizens to avoid confronting uncomfortable facts that might challenge their deeply held beliefs.

However, this strategy of ignorance also makes citizens vulnerable, creating a broader space for politicians to pursue Kosovo policies according to their own agendas, for better or worse. Any responsible handling of the Kosovo issue therefore demands not only greater public engagement but, more importantly, greater accountability from the authorities in both Belgrade and Priština. The role of the media, which has long facilitated both public ignorance and governmental irresponsibility, is crucial in fostering meaningful dialogue and rebuilding trust between all stakeholders.

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