The intercultural communication and community participation in local governance: the case of North Macedonia and Kosovo

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THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE: THE CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND KOSOVO[1]

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Abstract: Communication is a process and part of human identity without which man could not exist today. Intercultural communication is a form of global communication, which refers to intercultural interactions between different cultures that appear in a social group with different religious, social, ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds. North Macedonia and Kosovo are considered multicultural states which have ethnic identities within them, which are part of the mosaic and the promotion of intercultural communication is a test of the democratic development of these states. Therefore, this study aims to research and analyze the role of intercultural communication between local communities in both countries, communication of local government with the community, and community participation in public meetings as part of local decision-making. The methodology applied in this paper is the study of literature and the development of quantitative research with local communities. The results show that even though the participation of local communities is low in both countries, due to various factors, intercultural communication has broken down barriers between communities and has influenced the initiatives for the organization and development of the community itself.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Multiculturalism; Participation; Decision Making; North Macedonia; Kosovo

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is an important human process through which information is exchanged between two or more people. Today, communication is considered a dialogue that is a bridge between other cultures and societies. The word communication is derived from the Latin term *'communis'* which means common. The definition underscores the fact that unless a common understanding results from the exchange of information, there is no communication" (Fred 2010). In addition to communication, other forms of communication have been developed, especially intercultural and political communication. The first one is about breaking down barriers between different cultures and it "is the sending and receiving of messages across languages and cultures. It is also a negotiated understanding of meaning in human experiences across social systems and societies" (Arent 2009) whereas, political communication according to Brian McNair (2011) includes "all forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors to achieve specific objectives. Communication addressed to these actors by non-politicians such as voters and newspaper columnists. Communication about these actors and their activities, as contained in news reports, editorials, and other forms of media discussion of politics". Intercultural communication has the effect of strengthening inter-community relations and avoiding prejudices and stereotypes, while the political one has the effect of strengthening government-community relations and increasing community trust in public institutions.

In the Western Balkan countries, intercultural and political communication plays an important role in community development and increasing participation in local decision-making as a crucial form of democracy. It is assumed that society is developed and democratic when there is genuine communication between the community and the local governments themselves.

This paper elaborates and analyzes the role and importance of intercultural communication as an important element in the development of the community itself and the participation of communities in the local policy-making and decision-making process in North Macedonia and Kosovo. The paper also analyzes the legal framework of the local government system in both countries and local decision-making mechanisms as an important part of democratic development. In the framework of this paper, the following were used: literature study method, legal method, comparison method, and development of quantitative research with 500 representatives of the municipalities of the Prishtina region in Kosovo and 480 respondents of municipalities in North Macedonia – or in total 980 respondents.

Due to the pandemic, the research in North Macedonia was conducted through the *Google Forms* software, and then the data were systematized in the program SPSS No 24. The target municipalities in North Macedonia were: Skopje, Tetovo, Gostivar, Kichevo, and Debar. Whereas, in Kosovo, the target municipalities were: Prishtina, Obiliq,

Fushe Kosove, Drenas, and Gracanica. Some of the research questions we have presented during this article are: What is the role of intercultural communication between the cultures of different ethnicities in North Macedonia and Kosovo? How much do local communities participate in the policy-making and decision-making process? What are the factors of (non)participation of local communities in these processes? How much can intercultural communication affect the diversity between different ethnicities in North Macedonia and the Republic of Kosovo?

THE LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN NORTH MACEDONIA AND KOSOVO: A BRIEF COMPARISON

In democratic societies, the functioning of self-governing systems is important for the overall development of democracy. Such systems are based on principles and values that benefit local communities, seeing them as part of the partnership. A political system cannot be accepted without the involvement of local government, because it is considered the first stage of democracy. According to Pollazhani *et al.* (2010), "local government is seen as an autonomous system of government with local communities, established in narrow parts of the state territory. The development of local self-government is one of the conditions of democracy and the rule of law". The local government is the 'first door' of communication with citizens and it must take into account the interests, suggestions, and concerns of citizens. Thus, local government is about "a government of all issues related to the general interest of residents and which extends its activity and power in a narrow space, defined within a state" (Selimi 2008). Concerning that, local governance needs "to happen when people live in a community and have sufficiently close interaction and to solve their problems they must work together as a group to achieve the results they want" (Ndreu 2016).

The social developments and changes that took place during the year 2000 and all were made to be added to transform from a monistic system to a democratic system, thus that time had taken over the local government reform. Such reforms undoubtedly affect the countries of the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia and Kosovo. Local government in these two countries is based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which is the "first-level for the exercise of democracy. It has become the benchmark international treaty in this area. The Charter was opened for signature on 15 October 1985 and came into force on 1 September 1988; it is ratified by 47 Council of Europe member states. It is complemented for the regions by the Council of Europe Reference Framework for Regional Democracy" (Council of Europe 2021). North Macedonia signed this Charter in 1996, while in 1997 it ratified it and also entered into force in the same year. Kosovo has not signed it yet, although the principles of the Charter are incorporated in the Constitution and the legislation of local self-government in Kosovo.

North Macedonia is a unitary state and "composed of two tiers of government – central and municipal, and the principles of local self-government and decentralization are enshrined in the Constitution of 1991. Central authorities oversee the legality of municipal government's acts and endeavors; whereas the municipalities, on the other hand, have the right to appeal to the Constitutional Court if the State authorities encroach on their prerogatives" (SNGWOFI 2019). The local government in North Macedonia is a:

> constitutional matter, since the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, defines local government as a fundamental value of the constitutional order and devotes a chapter to this whole area, even the fifth chapter (provisions of Articles 114-117), which defines the constitutional position of local government in the political system of the country. The Constitution stipulates that citizens are guaranteed the right to local government. The units of local government are the municipalities and the City of Skopje as separate units, where forms of local government can be established (Shasivari 2020).

Regarding the territorial organization of the local government,

> with the Law on Territorial Organization of Local Government in the Republic of North Macedonia of 11.08.2004, the number of municipalities was reduced from 124 to 84 municipalities. In 2013, after the local elections of March 24, the number of municipalities was reduced from 84 to 80 municipalities, as they are currently in the RMV. The City of Skopje is a special unit of local government with an area of 571.46 km^2 and a population of 506,926 inhabitants, which includes 10 municipalities: Aerodrom, Kisela Voda, Karposh, Butel, Gazi Baba, Center, Saraj, Chair, Shuto Orizari, and Gjorche Petrov (Shasivari 2020, 320).

Whereas, regarding the municipal bodies according to the law on local self-government, they are: the Council and the Prefect (Mayor). The Municipal Council represents:

> the collegial body representing the citizens, which consists of representatives of the citizens elected in general, direct and free elections by secret ballot. The members of the council are elected for a four-year term; they represent the citizens and decide in the council according to their convictions. The council member cannot be revoked. The council consists of 9 to 33 members depending on the number of inhabitants in the municipality. The mayor represents the individual executive body of the municipality with broad and important competencies, where his/her position derives from the direct way of his/her election because he/she is

elected every four years by general, direct, and free elections by secret ballot (Law on Local Self-Government 2020).

Unlike the local government in North Macedonia, local government in Kosovo is a single tier, central and local, and municipalities are the basic unit of local self-government. Thus, the Law on Local Self-Government in Kosovo states that "the municipality is the basic unit of local self-government in the Republic of Kosovo, made up of a community of citizens of a specific territory defined by law and shall exercise all powers which are not explicitly reserved for the central institutions" (Law No. 03/L-040 on Local Self Government, 2008). The municipalities practice their competencies, which are specified in the framework of the Law on local self-government. There are currently 38 municipalities, 10 of which are governed by the Serb community and 1 of them by the Turkish community. Municipalities apply their responsibilities following the Law on Local Self-Government. The main structures of local government are the Municipal Assembly and the Mayor (Law No. 03 / L-040 on Local Self Government 2008).

The Municipal Assembly is considered to be the highest decision-making body in the municipality and mainly plays the role of the legislature. The members of the assembly are elected directly by the vote of the citizens, where their number varies depending on the number of population in the municipalities, from 15 to 41 members, including the gender quota component of 30%, and the capital of Kosovo - Prishtina - has 51 members due to its status as the capital. The chairman of the assembly is elected by "the members of the assembly and his term are 4 years. The Municipal Assembly is also a supervisory body charged with ensuring the provision of services by the executive bodies following the law. The Municipal Assembly serves as a platform for the exchange of views and opinions" (Association of Kosovo Municipalities 2008).

According to the legislation in force, in municipalities where the communities that do not constitute the majority and constitute at least 10% of the population, the position of Deputy Chairman of the Municipal Assembly for Communities is reserved for the candidate who belongs to the non-majority community, who has received the majority of votes from the open list during the municipal elections. The Municipal Assembly, in addition to the functions and duties assigned to it under the Law on Local Self-Government, should establish mandatory committees and other committees. The Municipal Assembly has:

> functional and advisory committees. Functional committees consist of members of the assembly while advisory committees consist of citizens (local communities) and professionals, not members of the assembly. Functional committees include standing committees, which must exist in all municipalities and other committees which belong to a certain area and can be added or removed from the assembly by statute. The Standing

Committees are the Policy and Finance Committee as well as the Committees (Bakija 2017).

In the framework of local government, the local administration also plays an important role, which is composed of two main components: a) directors, who are politically appointed by the mayor, and b) civil servants who are elected according to the Law on Civil Service.

THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

A community is primarily understood as a group of people who have common goals, social affiliation, and a sense of belonging to a particular community. Community development "is the gradual positive change, among people within a given geographical area, towards self-determined ideals, with minimal outside interference" (Schutte 2016). Marshall Gordon (2009) in his dictionary of sociology states that "today, the community concerns a particularly constituted set of social relationships based on something which the participants have in common - usually a common sense of identity". The community unites people, creates a social cohesion between them, has an interaction that and creates common aspects, including values, norms, and religion.

Therefore, "the communities can be micro (small) encompassing mainly small communities such as religious communities, business communities, etc., as well as macro (large) communities that involve national, international or even virtual communities. Hence, the community has even greater empowerment at the moment that empowers their interests, achieved through participation in decision-making in local government" (Kamberi 2018). In this regard, the role of intercultural communication is extremely important, because, in addition to strengthening inter-social relations within the community, it also has an impact on mobilizing the community to participate in public policies in local government.

Table 1: Community Development Goals and Objectives (Source: Taylor 2009)

Focus/ Resource	Goals	Possible Objectives
Economic	Sustain existing levels and create additional economic activity (jobs, businesses, income streams)	• Retain and expand existing businesses • Recruit new businesses and industries from elsewhere • Plug the leaks that cause capital and profits to leave the community
Physical, Natural, and Cultural	Connect the community with distant markets Ensure public health and safety Preserve and enhance the natural, cultural and historic environment	• Ensure adequate water, sewer, and other utilities • Provide transportation and telecommunications services to link the community with distant markets • Build community consensus on appropriate land and environmental uses

People	Create a high-skill, high-value workforce and enterprising, knowledgeable entrepreneurs	• Upgrade the skills of adult workers and keep them at competitive levels • Provide under-skilled adults with strong, job-specific skills, linking training and work • Develop new value-added business enterprises • Promote entrepreneurship
Environment	Create economic enterprises using locally appropriate management of natural, historical, and cultural resources	• Develop heritage, cultural and ecotourism opportunities • Consider the environmental consequences of development activities
Social	Ensure strong human and social services to support working people, families, and those in need	• Provide for adequate child and eldercare • Provide recreational outlets for all ages • Foster the development of affordable housing
Civic	Build a visionary, accountable and inclusive culture of civic decision making and problem-solving	• Ensure open, competent, and accessible governmental and civic institutions • Deepen and broaden the leadership pool • Promote participation in civic affairs by all sectors of the community

As can be seen from Table 1, community development has three main phases: focus, goals, and objectives which then convert into activities and play an important role not only in community development but also in participation, policymaking, and decision making.

During the research with the local communities in the municipalities of North Macedonia and Kosovo, we measured the perception of the communities about the cooperation between them, implying an intercultural communication from which we received the answers below.
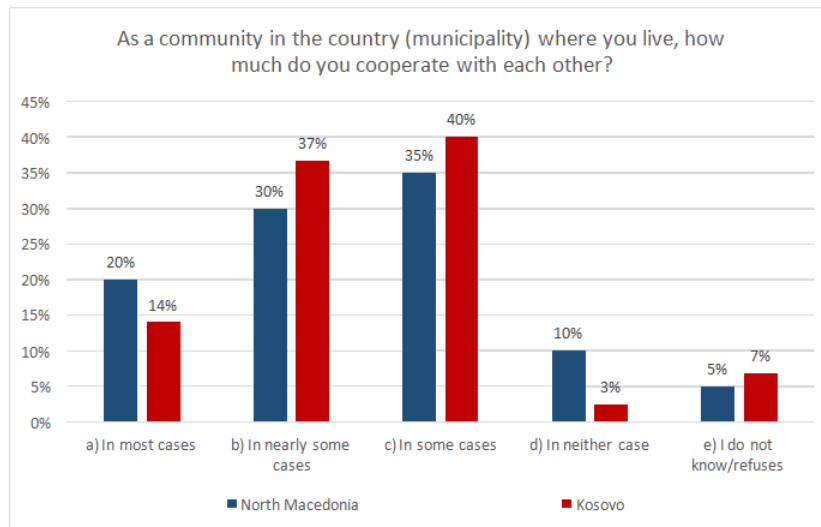

Figure 1: Cooperation between Local Communities - Intercultural Communication
(Source: Kamberi and Vejseli 2019-2020)

Based on Figure 1, we can see that after all there are no major differences between the cooperation among the communities in the municipalities of North Macedonia and the municipalities in Kosovo. We see that the community in the municipalities of North Macedonia, about 20% of them have expressed that they cooperate in most cases, 30% in some cases, 35% in some of them, 10% in no case, and 5% do not know or have refused to respond. In the case of Kosovo municipalities, we see that there is a slightly lower percentage, where about 14% of respondents say that in most cases they cooperate, 37% in some cases, 40% only in some of them, 3% in no case and 7% said they did not know or refused to answer.

So, it can be seen that intercultural communication is the one that breaks the barriers between communities (ethnic groups) that live and operate in certain territories. In the case of the municipalities of North Macedonia and Kosovo, there are different cases where communities overcome ethnic, social, religious, or gender differences and focus on the common good. Perhaps, Etzioni (2015) is right when he claims that the community is closely related to communitarianism otherwise known as "a social philosophy whose core assumption is the required shared formulations of the good, that communities consider the common good".

THE DECISION-MAKING MECHANISMS AND PARTICIPATION IN THE POLICY-MAKING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Communication does not mean just a simple conversation, it is a process that includes ideas, emotion and as such conveys a message to the other person or the other party. Local government communicates with citizens through various forms and ways which are defined by the legislation of each state. Some of the forms of communication between local government and citizens are public meetings, civic initiatives, referendums, meetings with consultative committees, meetings with village councils, neighborhoods and urban settlements, petitions, and other forms of democracy, which otherwise are also known as local decision-making mechanisms. Joe Ohren (2007) points out that "Communication barriers also affect sharing between local officials in one unit and those in surrounding or overlapping units. Local officials often recognize the impact of their actions on others or vice versa, yet few local units have systematic mechanisms for communication and information across jurisdictions. Whether they take the views of other officials into account in their actions is another issue".

This communication must take place through different forms, in which citizens can participate. In developed countries, such forms have already passed into the virtual world and this has facilitated communication between local government and citizens, but also intercultural communication, increasing the participation of local communities in decision-making. Furthermore, according to Pateman (1970):

people's participation in the community's decision-making stabilizes the community. A decision-making process that allows public participation develops from the very start as a process that perpetuates itself due to the effect of political participation. Participatory political processes have an impact upon the development of the social and political capacities of citizens, and this positively influences the next act of participation. Participation has an integrative effect especially upon those citizens who take part in political activity, and thus makes the acceptance of collective decisions easier (Kukovic, 2005).

Based on the legislation on local self-government in North Macedonia, the law provides three forms of direct local democracy: "civic initiative, a gathering of citizens and referendum" (Law on Local Self-Government 2020). In addition to the above-mentioned forms, there are also: submissions and proposals, where citizens have the right to submit submissions and proposals for the work of municipal bodies and municipal administration on their own or together with others. Based on Article 29 of the Law on Local Government during the drafting of municipal provisions, the council, respectively the mayor can organize public debates in advance, conduct surveys, or request proposals from citizens. Whereas, in Kosovo, the Law on Local Self-Government first sees some of the forms of democracy, such as public information and communication, the right to petitions, civic initiatives, the referendum (although there is still no law on referendums), consultative committees, and the right of citizens to dismiss the mayor which should be 20% of the citizens from the voter list" (Law No. 03/L-040 on Local Self-Government 2008). Although both countries have legal mechanisms of local decision-making, the results in the research conducted with the community in the municipalities of the two countries, show that nevertheless, the participation in public meetings is weak.

We can see that the respondents of both countries (Figure 2) have expressed that in most cases they do not participate in public meetings. About 50% of respondents from the municipalities of North Macedonia state that they do not attend any meetings, 30% in some of them, 10% in nearly half of them, and only 10% stated that they participate in most public meetings. Whereas, in the case of Kosovo municipalities, we see that there is no big difference. About 57% of respondents said they do not attend any public meetings, 36% in some of them, 6% in half of them, and only 2% in most public meetings. Public meetings are important for local democracy and are a measuring mechanism for community participation in decision-making. In other words, "meetings include information about the proposed project and offer an opportunity for the public to voice any concerns and/or questions" (Amborn 2010).
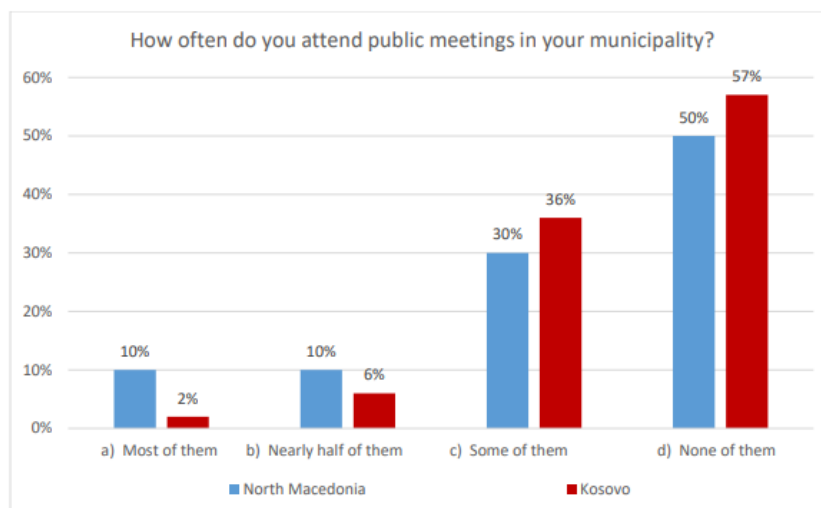
Figure 2: Cooperation between Local Communities - Intercultural Communication
(Source: Kamberi and Vejseli 2019-2020)

Albert Bandura proposed a Social Learning Theory emphasizing observation, imitation, and modeling. This theory "has evolved to include recognizing mutual goals and perspectives, uncovering values, sharing problem identification, co-creating knowledge, understanding interdependencies, complexities, and trust. The outcomes of social learning processes influence decision-making, helping community stakeholders reach agreement and make decisions based on a shared understanding of the situation" (Jemie 2014). It is a good opportunity for local authorities to take into account the concerns, suggestions, or recommendations of communities, and the non-participation of the community in such meetings undoubtedly makes it more difficult for local authorities to make decisions. This suggests that there are several factors why communities do not participate as much in public meetings.

Table 2: How Much are your Opinions Taken Into Account by the Municipal Bodies?
(Source: Kamberi and Vejseli 2019-2020)

	North Macedonia		Kosovo	
	Number of cases	Percentage	Number of cases	Percentage
a) Highly	60	13%	40	8%
b) Average	80	17%	60	12%
c) Little	180	38%	180	36%
d) Not at all	120	25%	140	28%
e) I do not know/Refuse to answer	40	8%	80	16%
Total	480	100%	500	100%

We can see that respondents in both countries have expressed that the disregard for their thoughts, ideas, or suggestions is one of the reasons why they do not participate in public meetings or have a low turnout. Although there are other factors, including political apathy of local authorities, lack of communication, i.e. timely information, long geographical distances, negligence of the community itself to be part of policy-making and decision-making, as well as other factors. In general, the low number of communities participating in public policy at the local level is not a good mechanism for democracy and it gives a signal for a passive and inactive citizen.

CONCLUSION

Intercultural communication is a key factor in the development and emancipation of local communities, while politics is another factor in cooperation between local government and local communities. Our findings show that intercultural communication is the connecting bridge for peaceful functioning between ethnic groups living in North Macedonia and Kosovo. There are also cases within these territories where communities transcend ethnic, cultural, racial and religious, and gender differences when it comes to common interests. Regarding the participation in public meetings, we see lags in both countries, where about 50% of respondents from the municipalities of North Macedonia and about 57% of respondents in Kosovo said they do not participate in any public meeting that indicates a period of prolonged transition which has also been reflected in the general process of democracy. Some of the factors we have identified why communities do not participate so much in public meetings are the disregard for the opinions (ideas) of communities on certain issues by local authorities, then the political apathy of local authorities, lack of proper communication with the community, long geographical distances, the negligence of the community itself to be part of policy-making and decision-making. The low participation of local communities in public policy is a bad reflection of general democracy and a signal that local authorities need to pay more attention to local communities for the latter to regain confidence in them as well as to create an active citizen with democratic values.

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