



BARABAR PRINCIPLES

For trust and reconciliation in Kosovo

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 **Barabar**
CENTRE



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Foreword:

Used in both official languages in Kosovo, Albanian and Serbian, the word Barabar means equality and fairness. Inspired by this, and informed by a cross-section of stakeholders across Kosovo, the BARABAR PRINCIPLES aim to strengthen ties based on what unites rather than what separates different communities, with the objective of enhancing dialogue, promoting tolerance and cooperation, building trust, and seeking justice. The principles recognise that improving inter-community relations is key to achieving reconciliation, sustainable peace and development in Kosovo. They also recognise that every individual, regardless of ethnicity, age, gender, religion, ability, sexual orientation, social or economic status, or any other distinctiveness should be able to freely exercise their rights, express their views by means of choice, participate actively in social activities, and uphold their values.¹

¹ *The Barabar Centre is a joint initiative brought together by the civil society organisations INTEGRA from Pristina and CASA from North Mitrovica. With a hub in Pristina, it focuses on developing trust and inclusive open dialogue among all members of the diverse multi-ethnic society of Kosovo, through cultural, artistic, public information, capacity building, education, awareness raising and advocacy actions. It will be built upon the efforts of previous initiatives (Trust Building Forum and Platform, Coalition for Reconciliation, dealing with the past principles coalition, fostering interethnic cooperation and reconciliation project) and the many actions aimed at inter-community dialogue, that have taken place in Kosovo in the last two decades. The Barabar Centre is not foreseen as a project or platform of organisations or individuals, but a permanent safe space that serves as an open channel of communication and expression of ideas for all communities in Kosovo.



01. Building trust and reconciliation is a slow process. We must first learn about each other if we are to engage sincerely.

What:

Trust is at the core of peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. People from different communities in Kosovo share a living space but have limited interaction and contact. Trust has to be learned and earned slowly for a semblance of confidence to exist. The more you hear about people the more you can relate to them, see a common ground and set aside differences. If communities hope to reconcile, they first need to be exposed to each other, to each other's culture, traditions, religion, language, values and interests, all of which are precursors to building understanding and empathy.

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How:

We must ensure pre-existing individual connections evolve into group interactions – to better appreciate each other’s community, develop respect, and enjoy the allegiances of the different culture and traditions, accommodating diversity. Trust is not a quick-fix result that could be visible tomorrow, but over the long-term has the potential to save future generations from conflict and from lives that continue to be separated along ethnic lines.

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02. We must establish interpersonal communication between members of different ethnic communities.

What:

People of all communities should be able to interact and talk to each other without fear. Fear degrades trust and reconciliation processes by undercutting the basic tenet of such interaction: motivation. In Kosovo, there is still a non-inclusive social trust, by which people trust according to political/ethnic boundaries. Generalising the other and otherness, people only seem to feel safe among those from their own community.



How:

We must create an environment where trust can be achieved through open communication. We must facilitate social networks of trust not only through policies but also through practices within civil society, free and independently of political events. In this case, the availability of a permanent space for trust-building, a space to freely sit and talk without restriction or self-censoring, should assist overcoming prejudices. We must put in place mechanisms to facilitate continued peaceful inter-community relations and develop a safe environment for cooperation and integration. Interaction leads to understanding others, which eventually can facilitate subsequent phases of the normalisation/peace process, when people learn to live together, accepting and respecting differences.

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03. We must recognise, adapt to, and value the **distinctiveness between ethnic communities.**

What:

Reconciliation in Kosovo involves adaptation and differences need to be respected. We must prevent categorisation and stereotypes to change the overall perception about the others. The aim could be that sometime in the future, all should be able to belong to the same Kosovo society, without losing their community identity. This requires adjustments from all, rather than calls for assimilation of one community into the other. Unity is not strictly necessary, but there needs to be room for all communities to feel comfortable, respect each other's existence and feeling they belong. Thinking about the other should be at the centre of trust and reconciliation efforts.

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How:

All parties should equally invest in the reconciliation process. Those in the majority have an extra duty to embrace and advocate for minorities, wherever they are or in whichever geographical unit they may be. The Kosovo-Albanian community, particularly majority-community civil society, should increase efforts to reach out to non-majority communities and embrace them without conditions, accepting the differences, refusing stereotypes and aiming at social cohesion in a society where all can feel safe and accepted. Likewise, the Kosovo-Serb community should embrace and work with other communities in the municipalities where they are in the majority, engage and make efforts to understand them and contribute to a common well-being.

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04. We must identify and foster common interests and values among the different ethnic communities.

What:

Communities in Kosovo should be able to agree on shared beliefs and values and unite behind, at minimum, a set of common goals. We must help communities find the motivation required to bridge the differences and find these commonalities. In a globalised world, isolation is not an option. There are common challenges and opportunities affecting communities, including but not limited to: employment (opportunities for all), salaries, education (digitalisation gap), access to culture, arts, music, youth (new perspectives), road safety, social welfare (inequalities, care for the elderly and those with disabilities), wellbeing of children, psychosocial care for the victims, health (mental illness, women's reproductive rights, access to good health care), need for integrity, need for justice.

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How:

We must identify these common issues, be willing to discuss them, and eventually address them, with collaborative inter-community solutions whether that involves coming together behind a shared vision or even constructive disagreement.

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05. We must begin with individual efforts – a ground-up approach to reconciliation is possible.

What:

We must safeguard grassroots processes from being stonewalled or hijacked by a lack of progress at the political level. Reconciliation cannot wait for the successful untangling of political processes. The power of individual and community initiatives should not be underestimated.



How:

We must, at the individual and group level, be conscious of our responsibility, but also of the significance of our actions. In a bottom-up approach, the process shall move from individual reconciliation (grassroots) through community reconciliation (middle range leaders/opinion setters) to political reconciliation (leaders). In this, the organised civil society from all the communities must trigger changes and move forward in a sensitive manner at the community level, promoting inter-community cooperative interaction, giving visibility to those on the ground and allowing their voices to reach those in power. Once reconciliation at the local level begins to function, the political level will have to listen.

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06. We must ensure effective application of the existing system of guarantees on the rights of all communities.

What:

Supportive norms and a legal framework that recognises the rights of all ethnic communities are a pre-requisite for the full exercise of rights. The prevalence of the Rule of Law, specifically the implementation of the laws that guarantee the rights of the minority communities, should run in parallel to broader trust and reconciliation efforts.

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How:

Kosovo enjoys an advanced system of assurances for the protection of the rights of minorities, with institutional mechanisms and safeguards that, among other things, ensures representation and equal status to all groups. Kosovo also has anti-discrimination laws and policies in line with international and European standards. This includes rights such as the right to practice one's religion, enjoy one's cultural heritage, fair representation in institutions, the right to property, the right to use your own language, have access to information, an adequate accessibility to all services, including the holding of official documents or the right of one's civil status to be registered. They are all recognised in the Constitution and laws of Kosovo. Widespread poor implementation develops into discriminatory situations and contributes negatively to inter-community trust, exacerbating distance between communities. Non-implementation can be a barrier to inter-community integration. This should be understood to include all underrepresented groups including Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian, Bosniak, Gorani, and Turkish. In this regard, we must hold central and municipal institutions that do not comply accountable.

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07. We must ensure that trust building and reconciliation processes are inclusive.

What:

Reconciliation cannot be achieved without the inclusion and engagement of all communities. Inclusive inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation processes must occur in parallel to an inclusive development process that can achieve economic advancement and social cohesion towards sustainable peace.



How:

Taking a human rights-based and gender sensitive approach, we must ensure that every individual, regardless of ethnicity, age, gender, religion, ability, sexual orientation, social or economic status, or any other distinctiveness can contribute to the process and have their voices heard. We must create different networks of alliances among cross-community target groups of women, youth, artists, business, farmers, cultural actors, victims etc. to reach out to policy decision makers. In this regard, we must ensure that their views and interests are represented at all levels where the decisions are taken. This human rights-based and gender approach is important not only because of its fairness, but also because it shall contribute to the efficiency and sustainability of the process, as they all can provide different useful perspectives.

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08. We must hold to account those in the public eye, to ensure **narratives of those with a public voice are truthful and respectful, rather than conflict-driven or divisive.**

What:

We call upon those with a public voice in Kosovo to contribute to reconciliation, rather than promoting conflict-driven narratives. Politicians, opinion setters, media representatives, organised civil society, religious and community leaders across communities should contribute to reconcile positions rather than strengthen dissimilarities.

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How:

Reporting does not necessarily need to aim at a shared common view about all, and for all, but we must ensure it is ethical and fact-based. In this regard, while everyone with a voice should make efforts to minimise disparities, political reconciliation must also be differentiated from social reconciliation. Polarised discourses do not heal wounds, rather they exacerbate the divisions and contribute to develop an exclusive sense of community based on the need to keep separate, to only trust your own in order to maintain basic security. Trust-building and reconciliation efforts should not be prone to political decisions, but it is a fact that they are affected by divisive messages and rhetoric. People are vulnerable to messages from those with power that speak on their behalf, so they have the right to access to truthful information and not be manipulated. We must ensure an environment where the media and civil society can exercise their freedom of expression and counter widespread disinformation and hold institutions accountable.

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09. We must call for justice for all victims irrespective of their ethnicity.

What:

Victims are victims. No victim, or family of a victim or missing person, should be categorised or differentiated from another. There shall not be a collective attribution of crimes committed during the war in Kosovo, but rather a cross-community call for justice for all the victims of the war and for a solving of the fate of all missing persons, irrespective of their community.

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How:

While recognising the responsibility of public institutions to address the root causes of conflict, provide justice and admit responsibility if guilty, we must ensure that trust building and reconciliation processes do not engage in levelling collective blame or be hindered by divisive narratives. Our work must be sensitive to the victims suffering, while noting that reconciliation is difficult for family members of all victims, regardless of their ethnicity. They have the right to be respected, and their contribution to trust building should be considered and recognised.

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10. We must treat trust building and reconciliation processes as a **priority.**

What:

People are growing more used to living siloed lives. The more time that passes without trust and reconciliation will make the process increasingly more challenging and perpetuate the underlying sources of conflict, which can have a longer-term cost. Although it might be seen as unrealistic to talk about restoring mutual trust just in the aftermath, communities in Kosovo have been living for many years in close proximity without really interacting. All communities agree there is a need for peace and there is a fairly good predisposition from all to at least live in a conflict free environment, accepting each other's right to coexist. However, this outlook may not last forever. There is an increasing widespread fatigue over the length of time that the political normalisation of relations is taking. There is a risk that any momentum and interest could be lost amongst the challenging steps that a trust and reconciliation process entail.



How:

The moment is now. We must treat trust building and reconciliation processes as a priority. We should establish safeguards to prevent political interference, embrace all minorities, unite on common values, address grievances, and maintain open communication. These are the priority steps needed to build trust and promote reconciliation between different communities to achieve a shared vision of peace, which can lead to security and prosperity for all.

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