

ACCESS DENIED

Deinstitutionalization
of Kosovo Serbs

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Authors:

Aleksandar Šljuka

Marko Milenković

Milica Radovanović

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Editor:

Jovana Radosavljević

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Executive Summary

This report provides a detailed analysis of the evolving dynamics within the Kosovo Serb community, based on insights from five Policy Task Group sessions conducted between April and June 2025. These sessions brought together a diverse group of experts, including civil society representatives, local stakeholders, and policy analysts, to address pressing political, economic, security, institutional, and cultural challenges. Employing a qualitative research approach, the discussions captured nuanced perspectives and lived experiences to inform evidence-based policy development and advocacy strategies. Participants offered grounded, actionable insights into the risks and opportunities shaping interethnic relations, governance, and institutional trust, emphasizing the need for inclusive, community-driven solutions to foster integration and stability.

1. Political Representation and Pluralism

Kosovo Serb political life remains dominated by Srpska Lista (SL), largely due to strong backing from official Belgrade. While SL continues to receive widespread support, participants voiced growing disappointment over its perceived failure to protect community interests, especially following the 2022 resignations from Kosovo institutions and the 2023 election boycott. Alternative Serb representatives supported by Pristina are seen as lacking legitimacy, deepening distrust and reinforcing political polarization. Efforts to obstruct SL's participation in elections and the absence of enabling conditions for political pluralism were described as systemic barriers to democratic engagement.

2. Economic Decline and Institutional Marginalization

Participants expressed alarm at the deteriorating economic situation in the Serb-majority areas, driven by two major policy decisions: the Central Bank of Kosovo's regulation on the Serbian dinar (implemented in February 2024) and the prolonged ban on Serbian imports (introduced in June 2023). These measures have disrupted income flows, restricted access to goods, and undermined local commerce. Kosovo Serb-owned businesses have faced downsizing, layoffs, and closures, as consumers increasingly spend their income in Serbia. The arrival of Albanian-owned businesses—perceived as politically motivated and institutionally supported—has fueled further resentment and boycotts. The Development Fund for the North, intended to support local development, remains dysfunctional.

3. Security and Reintegration Challenges

The task group emphasized the sharp decline in trust between Kosovo Serbs and Pristina's institutions. Reintegration into Kosovo's police, judiciary, and local governance structures is seen as unlikely under current conditions. The presence of Special Operations Units (SOUs) in Serb-majority areas was described as invasive and counterproductive, contributing to a climate of fear and mistrust. The lack of legitimate municipal representation and the failure to implement inclusive reintegration strategies were highlighted as core obstacles to normalization.

Efforts to rebuild trust—such as the recruitment of new Kosovo Serb police officers—were seen as largely ineffective. Participants noted that most recruits came from outside the North, weakening their legitimacy and connection to local communities. These steps were widely viewed as symbolic and disconnected from on-the-ground realities, failing to address the deeper structural concerns of the Serb population.

4. Deinstitutionalization and Service Access

Since 2022, Kosovo authorities have shut down 100 Serbian-administered institutions, ranging from municipal offices to cultural and social service centers. These closures, often executed without legal transparency or consultation, have severely disrupted access to essential services—particularly for vulnerable populations. The failure to implement the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASMM) and the absence of Serbian-speaking staff in local institutions have further eroded institutional trust. Many residents are now forced to travel to Serbia to meet basic administrative needs, deepening their physical and psychological detachment from Kosovo's institutional system.

5. Religious Identity and Pressure on the Serbian Orthodox Church

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) remains one of the few trusted institutions among Kosovo Serbs, playing a vital spiritual and social role. However, participants expressed concern over legal, political, and media pressures undermining its status. Although the Constitutional Court ruling affirming SOC ownership of land around Visoki Dečani Monastery was finally implemented in 2024, it was publicly framed as politically motivated, reinforcing perceptions of selective justice. Participants also cited increasing instances of cultural appropriation, administrative neglect of Special Protective Zones, and inflammatory narratives portraying the SOC as linked to espionage, organized crime, or nationalist extremism. Such rhetoric, they warned, poses direct threats to clergy, believers, and religious heritage.

Key Recommendation Areas:

- Political Representation: Ensure inclusive, legitimate participation by fostering local political pluralism and avoiding imposed proxy figures.
- Economic Development: Remove discriminatory trade restrictions, restore funding mechanisms like the Development Fund, and depoliticize aid.
- Security and Reintegration: Scale down special police presence, prioritize structured reintegration with community buy-in, and ensure legal clarity.
- Institutional Access: Restore or replace essential public services with language-appropriate, legally grounded alternatives.
- Religious Rights: Respect and implement protections for the SOC, counter inflammatory narratives, and promote interfaith dialogue.

The Erosion of a Monopolized Model?

Since its establishment in 2013, Srpska Lista (SL) has grown to monopolize Kosovo Serb political representation, primarily due to strong institutional support from Belgrade. However, task group participants noted that the situation began to shift after 2022, when another political center—namely, Pristina—attempted to install alternative Serb representatives despite their lack of electoral legitimacy. This development was perceived as a turning point, further complicating the political landscape.

The majority of Kosovo Serbs continue to vote for Srpska Lista (SL), primarily because it is backed by official Belgrade—functioning as its de facto extension and maintaining control over all Serbia-supported institutions in Kosovo. Nevertheless, participants highlighted a growing sense of disappointment within the community. Many feel that SL no longer effectively represents their interests, particularly after the mass resignations from Kosovo institutions in 2022 and the boycott of the 2023 local elections. These actions were widely viewed by participants as poorly calculated, leading to a significant loss of institutional presence and weakening the Serb community's ability to influence local governance.

The situation was further compounded by the Banjska attack in September 2023. Participants noted that it did not significantly alter SL's support among Kosovo Serbs, many of whom continue to view the party through the lens of its alignment with Belgrade. However, the event marked a major turning point in the eyes of the Kosovo Albanian political elite, where it was widely perceived as confirmation of SL's destabilizing role. In the aftermath, public discourse increasingly framed Srpska Lista not merely as a political actor, but as a security threat—with some narratives even portraying it as a terrorist organization. Drawing from this framing, efforts were made to obstruct its participation in political life, most notably during the last parliamentary elections. Subsequent internal restructuring efforts within SL were seen by the group as superficial, failing to shift the perception of the party as a credible or constructive political actor. These efforts were also perceived as a missed opportunity to meaningfully reform the party's leadership, strategy, and relationship with the community.

While some international actors initially viewed Srpska Lista (SL) as a pragmatic vehicle for integration—due to its role in implementing Belgrade's constructive policies on the ground—participants observed that it gradually came to be seen as a mechanism of centralized control, suppressing dissent and limiting political diversity within the Kosovo Serb community. The group highlighted SL's lack of transparency and accountability to its constituency, reinforcing perceptions of it as a detached actor. Among Kosovo Serbs, particularly in the north, this has produced a deepening political fatigue and growing distrust—not just toward the party itself, but toward institutional participation.

The 2023 local elections, characterized by historically low turnout, underscored the extent of disconnection between the four northern Serb-majority municipalities and Kosovo's political system. The low participation was the result of a coordinated boycott by the Serb community, prompted by the Kosovo government's failure to meet key demands put forward by Srpska Lista and official Belgrade—namely, the implementation of the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASMM) and the withdrawal of Special Operations Units (SOU) of the Kosovo Police from the north. Participants stressed that no serious alternative has emerged to fill the resulting governance vacuum, due to continued pressure from Belgrade, a lack of institutional outreach from Pristina, and the absence of enabling conditions for independent political organizing, which effectively closes the space for political pluralism. Moreover, participants pointed out that competing with Srpska Lista is an uphill battle, given its substantial resources and direct backing from official Belgrade. On the other hand, figures like Nenad Rašić—aligned with the outgoing government in Pristina, which Kosovo Serbs widely perceive as oppressive—benefit from institutional access and public resources through positions of power within Kosovo's executive. In such a polarized and imbalanced environment, genuinely independent political options face overwhelming structural barriers and lack both visibility and traction.

Participants argued that the international community has generally lacked a nuanced understanding of the political identity of Kosovo Serbs. Rather than addressing structural challenges or acknowledging community-specific dynamics, international efforts were often described as idealistic and misdirected, focused on promoting alternative Serb representatives who align with a Kosovan civic identity, even when this comes at the expense of their Serbian identity. This approach was seen as a form of political engineering that disregards the actual drivers of legitimacy within the community. Several participants noted that such intrusive engagement is rarely, if ever, applied to other ethnic communities in Kosovo, further contributing to a sense of alienation and double standards.

Participants emphasized the importance of community dialogue and civic education as tools to counter growing political apathy and encourage the emergence of independent candidates rooted in local legitimacy. At the same time, they highlighted the increasingly repressive political climate under the leadership of Albin Kurti as a separate and serious obstacle. This environment, marked by centralization of power and marginalization of Kosovo Serb political voices, was seen as limiting the space for alternative actors to operate freely. Participants agreed that meaningful change would require not only grassroots engagement but also robust international support to safeguard electoral integrity and political pluralism.

Economic Realities and Challenges in North Kosovo

Task group participants expressed deep concern over the deteriorating economic situation in Serb-majority municipalities, particularly in northern Kosovo, marked by uncertainty, obstacles, stagnation, and growing distrust in institutions. While the region has long operated within a fragile socio-political balance, participants noted that recent political decisions and administrative measures introduced by the Kosovo authorities, such as the GoK's ban on import of Serbia-made goods and Central Bank of Kosovo's regulation on cash operations, have significantly disrupted the economic fabric of the local Serb community. The group highlighted that these policies have driven economic activity toward Serbia, exacerbating alienation and undermining local development prospects.

Participants observed that local businesses, particularly those owned by Kosovo Serbs, are operating under increasing strain due to a climate of political instability, combined with mounting institutional pressure and sustained neglect. The continued deterioration of the business environment—marked by legal uncertainty, lack of institutional trust, and limited access to formal support mechanisms—has pushed many entrepreneurs to rely on informal channels as a means of survival.

The Serbian institutional system remains the primary employer for Kosovo Serbs, offering salaries, social security, and access to healthcare and education. Participants described this network as a crucial safety net for many families. However, they also emphasized that much of this employment and service provision has been physically displaced, operating from outside Kosovo or in increasingly precarious conditions, which has led to a process of de facto deinstitutionalization. Rather than fostering integration, as proclaimed in the official narrative of the Kosovo government, these developments have further severed the community's connection to Kosovo's economic and institutional systems.

The 2023 local elections, widely boycotted by the Kosovo Serb community, and the subsequent appointment of municipal leadership lacking broad-based legitimacy were seen as critical turning points. Participants highlighted the events of May 2023, when the Kosovo government forcibly installed Albanian mayors in Serb-majority municipalities, sparking protests and a violent escalation. Despite clear recommendations from the international community that the mayors should serve only in a technical capacity and operate from alternate locations until conditions for new elections were established, the government proceeded otherwise. This deliberate defiance of international advice led to a unanimous decision by the European Union to impose political and financial measures against Kosovo. Participants noted that no significant capital investments have been made in Serb-majority areas since, with even routine infrastructure maintenance delayed or deprioritized. The group pointed out that public funds have often been allocated to villages predominantly inhabited by non-Serb communities, contributing to perceptions of unequal treatment and institutional neglect.

A special concern was raised regarding the construction of alternative roads in northern Kosovo, which are seen as strategically designed to connect southern areas to the northern bases of the Special Operations Units (SOU). Participants viewed these projects not as genuine infrastructure development, but as efforts to strengthen security presence and bypass Serb-populated areas—further reinforcing feelings of marginalization and distrust. As a result, many Kosovo Serbs are disengaging from formal interaction with Kosovo institutions, redirecting economic activity and investment toward Serbia, where families are increasingly relocating or purchasing property.

Task group participants identified two recent policy decisions by Kosovo authorities as particularly disruptive to the economic stability and daily functioning of the Kosovo Serb community: Central Bank of Kosovo's (CBK) regulation on cash operations and the GoK's ban on importing Serbia-made goods.

The CBK regulation, which de facto suspended the use of the Serbian dinar, was adopted in December 2023 and began to be implemented in February 2024. Task group participants described it as a major source of financial strain for all those who rely on dinar-based payments from the Serbian state. While the regulation did not directly target business operations, it significantly disrupted local commerce by making it difficult for individuals to access their income within Kosovo.

With transfers from Serbia now blocked and dinar withdrawals no longer possible locally, affected citizens are compelled to travel to cities in Serbia to collect their funds. Participants noted that this dynamic redirects spending away from Kosovo, as a substantial portion of the withdrawn money is spent in Serbia on goods, services, and administrative needs. Only a fraction of it returns to Kosovo, leading to reduced purchasing power and a sharp decline in local demand. This, in turn, has had a direct and negative effect on Kosovo Serb-owned businesses, many of which are increasingly strained by declining revenue.

The second major issue discussed was the ban on imports of Serbian goods, introduced in June 2023, which participants said had severely disrupted established supply chains and placed businesses in a precarious position. Although partial relief came in 2024 under international pressure, the measure remains largely ineffective in practice. The partial lifting applies only to the Merdare crossing, while the northern crossings—those most relevant to the local economy—remain closed to Serbian goods. In addition, strict customs inspections and prolonged delays at Merdare have made the delivery of goods extremely slow and unreliable.

Participants noted that even when goods do manage to enter through Merdare, they typically reach only as far as Pristina, with very little making it to northern Kosovo. As a result, businesses in the North continue to face significant shortages. The altered logistics chain has also led to increased transportation and operational costs, further straining local businesses that are already operating under difficult conditions.

These rising costs, combined with limited availability of preferred goods, have made it even harder for Kosovo Serb-owned businesses to remain competitive and sustainable.

Participants emphasized that Kosovo Serb-owned businesses in the North are closely tied to suppliers in Serbia, and the disruption of these links—exacerbated by the ban on Serbian goods—has led many to downsize, lay off staff, significantly alter their business models, or shut down. This trend was further intensified by the Central Bank of Kosovo’s regulation on the dinar, which restricted access to income for a large portion of the population. As a result, many residents now travel to Serbia to withdraw and spend their funds, redirecting a significant share of consumer spending outside of Kosovo. This decline in local purchasing power and demand has placed additional pressure on businesses, contributing to workforce reductions that are particularly damaging in a context where families often rely on those jobs as their primary or only source of income. Higher procurement costs under new, more complex logistics arrangements have pushed product prices up, while the population’s strong preference for Serbian goods—and reluctance to accept substitutes—has further limited sales. In some cases, these combined pressures have resulted in business closures.

Participants mentioned one more consequence of the ban on imports of goods, which is related to the Development Fund for the North of Kosovo, established through the EU-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Designed to channel customs revenues collected at the northern border crossings—Jarinje/Jarinjë and Brnjak/Bërnjak—directly into development projects benefiting communities in North Mitrovica, Zvečan/Zveçan, Zubin Potok, and Leposavić/Leposaviq, the Fund was intended as a key instrument to stimulate economic growth and foster integration by improving local quality of life.

However, participants stressed that the Government of Kosovo’s ban on imports from Serbia, lasting for over two years now, has severely limited revenue generation for the Fund. Although the ban was partially lifted to allow imports through the Merdare crossing, participants pointed out that this crossing lies outside the northern region, meaning customs revenues from Merdare do not contribute to the Fund. Consequently, the Fund remains deprived of vital financial resources.

Participants emphasized that the combined effect of these two policy measures—alongside persistent security concerns—has created a climate of deep legal and psychological instability in northern Kosovo. Access to goods, income, and reliable infrastructure is now perceived as unpredictable and politically contingent, making long-term economic planning nearly impossible. Task group members stressed that this environment not only undermines local entrepreneurship but also deters external investment, reinforcing a broader sense of exclusion from institutional and economic processes.

Another factor affecting the economic situation in northern Kosovo, according to participants, is the noticeable expansion of Kosovo Albanian-owned businesses into the region. This trend was widely perceived as being driven more by political motives than genuine economic interest.

Participants expressed concerns that many of these businesses are institutionally supported or subsidized, raising suspicions of a coordinated effort to alter the economic landscape in Serb-majority areas. The privatization of properties where these businesses have been established—many of which previously belonged to socially-owned enterprises—has further deepened distrust among the local Kosovo Serb population.

This perception of politicization has been reinforced by frequent visits from high-ranking Kosovo government officials during or after the opening of these businesses. The timing of this expansion—coinciding with an extremely challenging period for Kosovo Serb-owned businesses due to regulatory and financial restrictions—has contributed to a growing sense of systemic discrimination and targeted repression. As a result, the vast majority of the local Kosovo Serb community has chosen to boycott these businesses, reflecting both deeply rooted tensions and a lack of trust in institutions and economic processes perceived as politically orchestrated.

The group identified several institutional barriers to business development, including limited access to Kosovo-based grants due to political sensitivities and administrative bottlenecks, as well as disproportionate fines and inspections targeting Kosovo Serb businesses, which erode trust. The lack of meaningful dialogue with Kosovo institutions further discourages investment, while political tensions and unresolved security issues make strategic planning challenging. Participants also raised serious concerns about the 2024 population census, which was largely inadequately implemented in Serb-majority areas. While there was a public call for a boycott by some political actors, the more substantial issue was the near-total absence of enumerators in many Serb-majority areas. In numerous cases, census teams failed to visit these areas altogether, rendering large segments of the population uncoun-
ted.

This lack of institutional outreach has reinforced longstanding perceptions of exclusion and deepened mistrust in state-led processes. Participants warned of significant consequences, some of which are already becoming evident—such as a reduced number of municipal deputies in Serb-majority areas. However, they stressed that the full impact will likely be felt during the next cycle of municipal budget planning and resource distribution, where inaccurate population data could lead to further marginalization.

Despite these challenges, participants acknowledged the potential for economic renewal in the region but emphasized that progress will remain limited without first addressing underlying issues such as security, political stability, and fair political representation. They stressed that meaningful economic development cannot occur in an environment marked by institutional exclusion, mistrust, and periodic instability. Only once these conditions are improved can models such as a Free Economic Zone, cross-border cooperation (e.g., Peja/Peć–Šabac trade initiatives), and public-private partnerships be effectively pursued. Participants identified agriculture, IT, and logistics as sectors with strong long-term potential, if infrastructure investment is coupled with depoliticized aid delivery. They also underlined the crucial role of international support in creating enabling conditions—particularly through targeted funding, inclusive development programs, and equitable access to resources.

Strained Relations and Shifting Security

Task group participants explored the shifting security landscape in northern Kosovo, expressing alarm at the increasingly strained relationship between the Serb community and Kosovo's institutions. With local elections approaching and Kosovo's political future uncertain due to the failure to constitute the Kosovo Parliament, the group focused on several pressing challenges.

The prolonged inability to form a functioning parliament raises the real possibility of new elections, although the timing remains unclear, further deepening political uncertainty. Meanwhile, the outgoing government operates in a grey zone, where it can take unilateral decisions without sufficient oversight or accountability. This lack of checks and balances risks undermining democratic norms and eroding public trust in institutions. Such a scenario complicates efforts toward reintegration, governance reforms and weakens the role of international actors who seek stability and progress in Kosovo's political landscape. Participants agreed that the pre-2020 environment, where limited but functional Kosovo Serb participation in Kosovo institutions existed, has fundamentally eroded, making a return to any previous status quo virtually impossible.

The group reached a consensus that reintegration of Kosovo Serbs into police, judiciary, and municipal institutions in the north is deeply unlikely—not because individuals are unwilling, but because structural and political conditions no longer support meaningful participation. Participants noted that reintegration efforts have largely stalled as trust in Kosovo institutions has sharply plummeted. This decline in trust is primarily driven by the ongoing political instability in Pristina, which has been exacerbated by the lack of a functioning government following the 2025 elections. At the same time, persistent domestic unrest in Belgrade adds further complexity and uncertainty to the broader regional context.

The group broadly agreed that revitalizing reintegration efforts is crucial. It is seen as the key to unlocking the current deadlock in the normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia. Without renewed commitment to rebuilding trust and advancing reintegration, progress toward sustainable normalization risks remaining out of reach.

The heavy permanent presence of Kosovo Police's Special Operations Units (SOU) was described as a major point of contention, fueling perceptions of occupation rather than stability among Kosovo Serbs. Participants highlighted that this securitized approach obstructs community engagement and deepens resentment, particularly as SOUs deployments are seen as disproportionate responses to political tensions. Efforts to rebuild trust, such as recruiting Kosovo Serb police officers, were criticized as largely ineffective. Participants highlighted that most of these new Kosovo Serb recruits come from other parts of Kosovo rather than from the North, which undermines their legitimacy and connection to the local communities they are supposed to serve.

As a result, these recruitment efforts were described as mere “optics” rather than genuine steps toward reintegration, failing to build real trust or address the core concerns of the Serb population in the north. The group also expressed concern over the legality of decisions made by illegitimate municipal administrations, noting that these actions further erode trust and hinder coordinated governance.

Participants further criticized the lack of a comprehensive reintegration strategy from Pristina, noting that no long-term confidence-building measures, financial incentives, or consistent outreach efforts have been undertaken to meaningfully re-engage Serb communities in the north. They also pointed to the absence of constructive engagement by Pristina in the dialogue process, emphasizing that unilateral actions and a lack of inclusivity have further alienated local Serbs and undermined prospects for reintegration.

The group emphasized that the civil society sector in northern Kosovo has come under increasing pressure, with frequent attacks and political targeting placing NGOs in a highly vulnerable position. These actions appear aimed at diminishing the credibility of these actors and reducing their influence within local communities, even though their work over the past decade has been instrumental in facilitating dialogue, promoting civic engagement, and supporting conflict mitigation efforts.

Participants noted that these NGOs have played a crucial role in filling the void created by the leadership vacuum that emerged after Kosovo Serbs largely withdrew from institutional participation. In many cases, these organizations were the only consistent voice raising and advocating for the community’s concerns.

Several participants raised alarm about the rising number of public reports regarding sexual harassment of women in North Mitrovica, particularly in areas with low police visibility. These concerns were reported publicly several times by the local community, who described frequent cases of verbal abuse, stalking, and intimidation in public spaces. In response, the community has begun forming informal “citizen patrols” to monitor neighborhoods—an act the group saw as a direct reflection of the deep mistrust in Kosovo’s law enforcement and its failure to provide basic human security. Participants identified the anticipated return of the Kosovo Albanian diaspora in summer 2025, particularly to North Mitrovica, as a potential flashpoint that could amplify nationalist tensions. They emphasized the need for preventive measures, such as a community-centered security approach, to mitigate risks and foster a sense of safety.

In parallel, participants pointed to the growing role of media and disinformation campaigns—particularly through Pristina and Belgrade based outlets and social media platforms—which often fuel fear and polarization. The spread of exaggerated or false narratives was seen as one of the major barriers to rebuilding trust and promoting fact-based dialogue.

The group also stressed that human security issues—such as access to pensions, healthcare, and essential services—are critical to stabilizing the region and rebuilding trust.

They saw potential in leveraging international mediation, particularly from the EU and the U.S., to facilitate inclusive talks that prioritize diverse Kosovo Serb voices over elite-driven narratives. Participants argued that moving beyond crisis management to long-term resolution requires addressing these underlying security and trust deficits through dialogue and community-focused policies.

Access Denied: Deinstitutionalization of the Kosovo Serbs

Task group participants emphasized that access to essential public services has become a critical issue for Kosovo Serbs across the territory, due to the deteriorating relationship with Kosovo institutions. The group noted that tensions have worsened since 2022, culminating in the closure of around 100 Serbian-administered institutions throughout 2024 and early 2025. These closures—which included post offices, social work centers, pension and health insurance branches, and municipal offices—have severely disrupted daily life and deepened community distrust, leaving many feeling discriminated against by Kosovo’s institutional framework.

In addition to these closures, participants highlighted that numerous cultural and sports institutions were also shut down, including the Sports Hall, the Institution for Sports, Youth and Specialized Services, the Cultural-Artistic Society, the Sports Association, the City Museum, and the City Library building. These closures were seen as particularly damaging in terms of quality of life, as they go beyond mere access to administrative services and impact the social, cultural, and recreational well-being of the community.

Participants highlighted 2024 as a turning point, with Kosovo authorities closing numerous Serbian-administered institutions through non-transparent procedures and often without clear legal basis. The group pointed to condemnation from Quint countries as evidence that these actions lacked legitimacy and coordination, further undermining confidence in Kosovo’s governance. The closures were seen as particularly harmful because Serbian-run institutions were the only accessible and appropriate providers of services like pension disbursement, civil registration, and administrative support. They emphasized that these measures appeared to be undertaken unilaterally by the Kosovo government, seemingly without a grounded understanding of the everyday needs and vulnerabilities of the local population. Their removal in the absence of realistic or functional alternatives was described as punitive, disrupting the dual-document system that had previously enabled pragmatic access to services. In particular, no adequate alternative mechanisms were put in place to serve the most vulnerable groups—such as the elderly, women, persons with disabilities, and those living in rural areas—who are now disproportionately affected by the service gap.

The impact of these closures has been profound, forcing individuals to travel to Serbia for essential services, which imposes significant financial and logistical burdens. Participants noted that vulnerable groups—such as the elderly, women, and rural residents—are most severely affected, facing delays and jurisdictional confusion that exacerbate their isolation.

The group expressed concern that the closures occurred without public consultation or a clear legal framework for transitioning services, deepening the sense of erasure rather than reform. The failure to implement the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASMM) was seen as a critical missed opportunity to address these gaps, as the ASMM was specifically envisioned to enable a smooth transitional integration of the remaining Serbian-administered institutions into the Kosovo system. Its absence has left a legal and institutional vacuum, further complicating efforts toward sustainable integration.

A further problem, alongside the prevailing political tensions, is the lack of Serbian-speaking staff—not only at the central level, but, since the withdrawal of Kosovo Serbs from institutions in the north, increasingly within local structures as well—which hinders effective communication and service delivery. In addition, the refusal to issue documents in the Serbian language continues to marginalize the community and obstruct access to public services.

Religious Identity and Institutional Pressure

Task group participants underscored the immense religious, cultural, and historical significance of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) for Kosovo Serbs, viewing it as a cornerstone of community identity in the absence of trusted political leadership. The group noted that the SOC remains one of the few institutions perceived as legitimate and community-oriented, providing spiritual guidance and social services. However, participants expressed deep concern over increasing legal, political, and institutional pressures that threaten the SOC's role, property rights, and perception in public discourse, further complicating its ability to serve as a unifying force.

Participants highlighted that despite protections under the Ahtisaari Plan and Kosovo laws, implementation remains inconsistent and politicized. The 2016 Constitutional Court ruling affirming the SOC's ownership of 24 hectares around Visoki Dečani Monastery was implemented in March 2024. Participants noted that Kosovo officials openly framed the decision as politically motivated—driven by pressures related to Kosovo's application for Council of Europe membership, rather than as a genuine gesture of goodwill toward the Serbian Orthodox Church or a demonstration of respect for the rule of law. They argued that both the prolonged delay and the instrumental framing of the decision undermine the Serbian Orthodox Church's ability to operate securely and reinforce perceptions of selective justice.

Participants noted that the SOC's cultural and religious heritage, protected under Special Protective Zones (SPZs), is vulnerable to administrative neglect and development pressures. The planned Dečani–Plav road passing through the SPZ of Visoki Dečani Monastery was cited as a disregard for legal safeguards, raising fears of encroachment on sacred sites. The group also expressed concern over cultural appropriation, such as attempts to reclassify the SOC's churches as a Catholic site. Additionally, the group highlighted the unlawful occupation of the Serbian Orthodox Church's Church of St. Archangel Michael in Rakinicë/Rakinica near Podujevë/Podujevo by self-proclaimed priest Nikolla Xhufka. Despite widespread condemnation and legal complaints, local authorities have failed to respond effectively. Such cases illustrate ongoing efforts to undermine the Serbian Orthodox Church's religious and cultural presence in Kosovo.

Clergy and believers frequently face restrictions on movement, particularly during religious holidays, which participants perceived as deliberate attempts to discourage religious expression. The 2023 deportation of the Devina Voda Monastery abbot, despite a valid residence permit, was cited as a violation of legal guarantees, further eroding trust.

In addition to legal and institutional pressures, participants expressed deep concern over the growing use of inflammatory and delegitimizing narratives targeting the Serbian Orthodox Church. They noted that elements within political and media discourse in Kosovo increasingly portray the SOC as a malign actor—accusing it of involvement in arms smuggling, functioning as a criminal or paramilitary structure, and serving as a cover for foreign intelligence operatives linked to Serbia's BIA or even Russia's FSB/KGB. Participants also flagged revisionist efforts to dispute the origin and ownership of Orthodox churches and monasteries in Kosovo, framing them as non-Serbian or appropriated religious heritage. Moreover, the SOC is often implicitly or explicitly associated with war crimes and portrayed as a sympathizer or enabler of both past and present-day Serbian nationalist agendas. Such narratives, participants warned, do not merely damage interethnic trust but actively endanger clergy, believers, and sacred sites by fueling suspicion, hostility, and a permissive atmosphere for rights violations.

Participants saw potential in depoliticizing the SOC's role to enhance its capacity for interfaith cooperation, emphasizing the need for legal consistency and inclusion in heritage planning to protect its autonomy and foster trust. Also, participants underscored the importance of international actors—particularly heritage protection bodies and interfaith dialogue mechanisms—taking a more active role in monitoring violations of legal guarantees and ensuring that religious institutions are not instrumentalized or politicized in the context of ongoing disputes.

Recommendations

1. Political Representation and Democratic Pluralism

To the Government of Kosovo:

- Avoid political engineering in Kosovo Serb community by ensuring that representatives have genuine local legitimacy.
- Cease supporting proxy candidates who lack grassroots backing, as this undermines trust and inflames tensions.

To the Government of Serbia:

- Support the emergence of alternative Kosovo Serb political actors through pluralistic mechanisms, without monopolizing representation through Srpska Lista.
- Encourage democratic competition within the community.

To International Actors:

- Refrain from endorsing token representatives who align with a narrow civic agenda but lack legitimacy within the Kosovo Serb community.
- Invest in civic education, voter outreach, and mechanisms that foster independent political organizing under safe and fair conditions.

2. Economic Stability and Development

To the Government of Kosovo:

- Lift discriminatory restrictions such as the prolonged import ban and ensure that customs revenues from northern crossings contribute to the Development Fund for the North, as originally agreed.
- Remove disproportionate inspections and barriers targeting Serb-owned businesses.

To the Government of Serbia:

- Coordinate with Kosovo institutions and international actors to depoliticize aid mechanisms and facilitate cross-border economic initiatives that benefit the population rather than entrenched political interests.

To International Actors:

- Prioritize funding for inclusive development in Serb-majority areas, support the reactivation of the Development Fund, and create safeguards to ensure fair access to Kosovo-based grants and public tenders.

3. Reintegration, Security, and Institutional Trust

To the Government of Kosovo:

- De-escalate the presence of Special Operations Units in Serb-majority areas and develop a long-term, inclusive reintegration strategy that includes financial incentives, outreach, and confidence-building measures.

To the Government of Serbia:

- Support reintegration through constructive messaging and refrain from discouraging Kosovo Serbs from participating in institutions when such participation serves their basic rights and stability.

To International Actors:

- Facilitate structured reintegration talks that include local civil society and non-party actors. Increase monitoring of unilateral actions that hinder reintegration and reinforce mutual mistrust.

4. Access to Services and Institutional Inclusion

To the Government of Kosovo:

- Restore or adequately replace closed public service facilities in Serb-majority areas, particularly those affecting vulnerable populations.
- Ensure availability of Serbian-speaking staff and fully implement language rights in line with legal obligations.

To the Government of Serbia:

- Work through the dialogue process to facilitate service integration where possible and avoid duplicative structures that reinforce institutional isolation.

To International Actors:

- Hold Kosovo accountable for meeting obligations related to bilingual service provision and non-majority communities inclusion.
- Offer technical support to rebuild institutional trust through inclusive service delivery mechanisms.

5. Religious and Cultural Rights

To the Government of Kosovo:

- Fully implement legal protections for the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), including SPZ regulations and court rulings.
- Refrain from political narratives or actions that undermine the Church's legal status and community role.

To the Government of Serbia:

- Promote the SOC's role as a cultural and religious institution, not a political actor.
- Avoid politicizing its status in ways that could jeopardize interethnic trust or institutional neutrality.

To International Actors:

- Actively monitor violations of legal guarantees related to the SOC and engage heritage protection bodies to ensure compliance with Ahtisaari Plan provisions.
- Promote depoliticization of religious issues through interfaith dialogue and long-term institutional oversight.