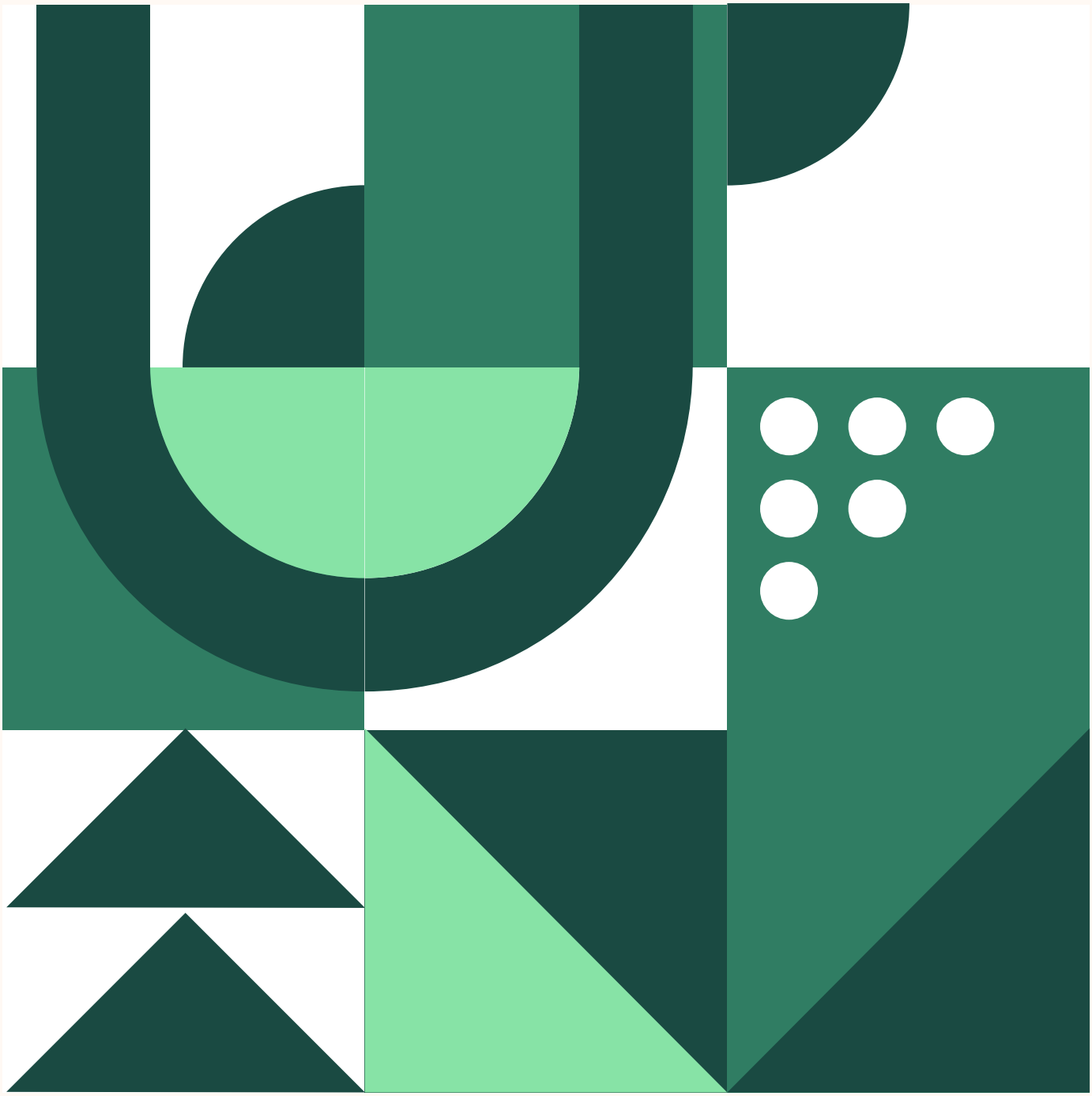

Participation of Young Serbs in Government Employment Programs in Kosovo

New Social Initiative

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1. Introduction

This policy brief addresses a critical research question: Why is there a significant disparity in the participation and success rates of young Kosovo Serbs compared to their Kosovo Albanian counterparts in government-sponsored employment programs facilitated by the Republic of Kosovo's Employment Agency? This question is paramount for Kosovo's social cohesion, economic stability, and the long-term integration of all its communities. As the government rolls out large-scale initiatives like "Superpuna," a wage-subsidy scheme for youth, and "Qeveria për Familjet," designed to support families with no employed members, ensuring equitable access and outcomes for all citizens is not just a matter of policy effectiveness but a cornerstone of building a truly multi-ethnic and democratic state.

The issue directly affects the economic prospects and social mobility of young Serbs, a community crucial to Kosovo's future. Failure to integrate this demographic into the formal labor market risks deepening inter-ethnic divides, fostering economic disenfranchisement, and potentially fueling outward migration. For the government and its international partners, this disparity represents a significant challenge to the stated goals of inclusive development and good governance. While existing reports have addressed youth unemployment in general,this brief focuses specifically on the structural and state-level barriers that exclude young Serbs from public programs. It argues that the lower participation and success rates among young Serbs are not arbitrary but are the result of systemic barriers. These include a lack of targeted, linguistically appropriate outreach, inequitable access to vocational training programs, and a lower level of trust in public institutions. Addressing these structural issues is essential for unlocking the full economic potential of all of Kosovo's youth and ensuring that government employment schemes achieve their intended universal impact.

2. Methodology

To answer the research question, this brief employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis with a qualitative review of official policy documents and existing research. The quantitative foundation is built upon official, anonymized administrative data from the Employment Agency covering the period from 2022 through June 2025. This data includes statistics on registered jobseekers, employment outcomes, business registrations, and participation in active labor market measures, disaggregated by ethnicity and municipality. The analysis focuses on comparing key indicators between six Serb-majority municipalities (Gračanica, North Mitrovica, Leposavić, Zvečan, Štrpce, and Zubin Potok) and six comparable Albanian-majority municipalities. Key metrics include the ratio of young jobseekers to the total, employment success rates, and the local company-to-jobseeker ratio. The qualitative component involves a thorough desk review of three key documents: the Strategjia e Punësimit – Kosovë 2024-2028 [2], the Strategjia Shtetërore për Rininë 2024-2032 [2], and the UNDP-supported report Research analysis on satisfaction for the provision of employment services for jobseekers and employers by the Employment Agency (2020) [3]. This documentary analysis aims to understand the existing policy framework, identify stated government priorities regarding minority youth, and contextualize the statistical findings with data on public satisfaction. A primary limitation of this research is the absence of new, direct surveys or interviews with the young Serb jobseekers themselves. Therefore, the analysis relies on interpreting existing administrative data and reports, rather than capturing firsthand accounts of their experiences and perceptions.

3. Background

Kosovo's labor market operates within a complex post-conflict socio-political environment, where efforts toward economic development are intrinsically linked to fostering inter-ethnic reconciliation and trust. The Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (Agjencia e Punësimit e Republikës së Kosovës - APRK) stands as the central public institution tasked with bridging the gap between jobseekers and employers. According to the government's official Employment Strategy, the Agency's mandate is to administer the labor market by registering active and passive jobseekers, offering counseling and guidance, mediating job placements, implementing active labor market programs (ALMPs), and issuing short-term work permits for foreigners. [2] It operates a network of employment offices across all municipalities and manages Vocational Training Centers (VTCs) designed to upskill the workforce. In recent years, the Government of Kosovo has launched ambitious, high profile employment programs managed through the Agency. "Superpuna" targets young people (ages 18-25) by subsidizing their wages for the first six months of employment, aiming to ease their transition into the workforce. The "Qeveria për Familjet" scheme addresses household poverty by subsidizing the salary of one newly employed person from a family with no other employed members. While these programs are designed to be universally accessible, gaps in their implementation have emerged. The persistent challenge lies in ensuring that these national-level initiatives effectively penetrate all communities and overcome localized barriers. Despite a legal framework guaranteeing equal rights, the legacy of conflict, parallel institutional structures, and linguistic divides continue to create obstacles to the full and equal participation of the Kosovo Serb community in state-run programs, a gap this brief 's findings will explore in detail.

4. Findings

The evidence collected reveals a significant and troubling disparity in outcomes for young Serb jobseekers participating in programs managed by the Employment Agency. While registration rates are comparable across communities, success in securing employment is not. This suggests that the barriers to entry are not related to a lack of willingness to participate, but rather to systemic issues within the programs' design and implementation.

Quantitative Findings: An analysis of the Employment Agency's administrative data [1] for young jobseekers (ages 15-24) reveals a notable concentration in the six Serb-majority municipalities of Gračanica, North Mitrovica, Leposavić, Zvečan, Štrpce, and Zubin Potok. On average, youth constitute 34% of all registered jobseekers in these municipalities. This figure is only slightly lower than the 36% average in six comparable Albanian-majority municipalities, indicating a similar level of engagement with the agency among young people from both communities. An illustration of the raw job seeker numbers by municipality is provided below (Figure 1).

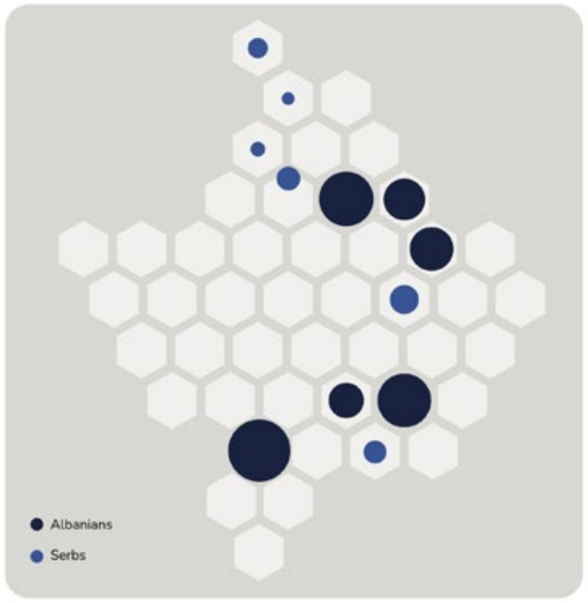

Figure 1: Number of Registered Jobseekers (Ages 15-24) in Selected Municipalities

Despite this similarity in registration, a stark gap emerges in employment outcomes. Only **16%** of young Serb jobseekers registered with the agency successfully secure a job through its programs. This stands in sharp contrast to the **22%** success rate for their Albanian peers—a difference of over a third [1]. The data on employment per municipality is illustrated below (Figure 2).

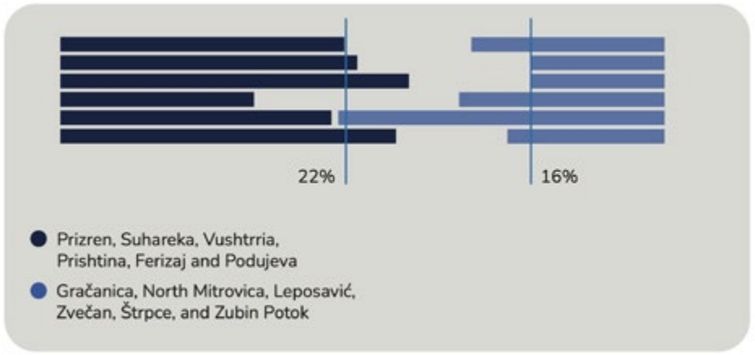

Figure 2: Number of Employed Youth via Agency Programs in Selected Municipalities

A common assumption is that this gap could be caused by a weaker private sector in Serb-majority areas. However, the data refutes this; the company-per-seeker ratio is identical at 1.2 in both sets of municipalities, suggesting that the availability of local jobs is not the primary driver of the disparity.

The most critical finding points to a bottleneck in skills development: an analysis of participation in the agency's vocational training programs shows that 95% of trainees were Albanian, 5% belonged to other communities (Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian, etc.), and 0% were Serb [1]. This total exclusion from official training programs, which are designed to make candidates more competitive, represents a major systemic failure and is a likely contributor to the lower employment success rate.

Analysis of Supporting Documents: The UNDP's 2020 satisfaction survey provides crucial context for these figures. It reveals a deep trust deficit among Kosovo Serbs towards the Employment Agency. When asked to rate their satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 5, K-Serbs gave significantly lower scores than K-Albanians on key metrics like staff attitude (3.37 vs. 4.55), readiness to listen (2.90 vs. 4.29), and most critically—equal treatment for all unemployed (2.88 vs. 4.18) [3]. This perception of unequal treatment is corroborated by the finding that only 44% of K-Serbs would recommend the agency to others, compared to a staggering 91% of K-Albanians [3].

The government's new State Strategy for Youth 2024-2032 acknowledges the need for inclusivity and mentions addressing the challenges faced by ethnic minorities. However, its action plan lacks concrete, targeted, and budgeted measures specifically designed to overcome the barriers faced by young Serbs [2]. It speaks of broad goals but fails to prescribe the specific outreach, linguistic, and programmatic adjustments needed to bridge the gap identified in the data. The strategy, therefore, represents a missed opportunity to translate general principles of inclusivity into practical action.

5. Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the disparities in employment outcomes for young Serbs are not insurmountable but require a deliberate and targeted policy shift. The following recommendations are concrete and feasible, drawing inspiration from successful regional initiatives and prioritizing immediate actions while paving the way for long-term systemic change. For instance, North Macedonia's "Youth Guarantee" program, which actively profiles and provides tailored support to unemployed youth within four months of registration, serves as a valuable model for proactive outreach and service delivery. Similarly, programs in the region show that empowering local civil society organizations to monitor implementation creates crucial accountability.

To that end, the recommendations are structured into two phases: immediate priorities that can be implemented within the next 6-12 months to build momentum and deliver tangible results, followed by foundational, long-term reforms necessary for sustainable equity.

Immediate Priorities: Urgent Actions to Build Trust and Access

1. **Develop a Targeted Outreach and Information Campaign (Kosovo Employ ment Agency):** The EA must move beyond passive, universal announcements. As a first and most critical step, it should launch a proactive outreach strategy in Serb-majority municipalities, utilizing Serbian-language media, local civil society organizations, and community leaders. All online platforms, application forms, and promotional materials for programs like "Superpuna" must be made fully available and accessible in the Serbian language to remove the primary barrier to entry.

2. Establish Serbian-Language Service Points and Pilot Local Vocational Training (Kosovo Employment Agency): To build trust and improve ser-vice quality, the EA must ensure Serbian-speaking staff are available in its municipal offices, especially in mixed regions. Crucially, the Agency should design and pilot at least two vocational training programs directly within Serb-majority municipalities, tailored to skills demanded by local businesses. This would directly address the 0% participation rate and provide an immediate pathway to equip young Serbs with competitive skills.

Long-Term Foundational Reforms: Systemic Changes for Lasting Equity

3. Mandate a Full Equity Audit (Kosovo Employment Agency): The EA should conduct a systematic internal audit of its Active Labor Market Programs to identify and remove all procedural or linguistic barriers disproportionately affecting non-majority applicants. This includes a review of criteria and evaluation processes for grants and subsidies to ensure they are applied equitably.

4. Allocate Specific Funds in the Youth Strategy Action Plan (Government of Kosovo): To ensure sustainability, the government must translate the inclusive vision of the State Strategy for Youth into action by earmarking specific funds for initiatives that promote inter-ethnic economic cooperation and employment. This includes financing joint business projects for young Albanian and Serb entrepreneurs.

5. Fund Independent, Community-Based Monitoring (International Partners): International partners like the UNDP and the EU Office should fund local civil society organizations in Serb-majority areas to independently monitor the implementation of government employment programs. This creates a sustainable accountability mechanism and provides a valuable, continuous feedback loop to policymakers from the community level.

The cumulative impact of these recommendations would be to transform the Employment Agency's services from a one-size-fits-all model to a more responsive, equitable, and effective system that actively builds trust and delivers tangible results for all of Kosovo's youth.

6. Conclusion

The evidence is clear: while young Kosovo Serbs are engaging with the Employment Agency at rates comparable to their Albanian peers, they face significant systemic barriers that lead to markedly worse outcomes. The stark disparity in job placements and a complete absence of Serbs in vocational training programs underscore a critical failure of policy implementation. This is not an issue of youth apathy or a lack of local economic opportunities, but a structural problem rooted in inadequate outreach, a lack of targeted services, and a demonstrabletrust deficit.

By adopting the concrete recommendations outlined in this brief—including targeted outreach, localized training in the Serbian language, and a robust equity audit of all programs—the Government of Kosovo and its Employment Agency can begin to dismantle these barriers. Taking these steps is not only a matter of fulfilling legal obligations for equality but is a strategic imperative for fostering economic growth, promoting social cohesion, and ensuring that the promise of a prosperous, multi-ethnic Kosovo is a reality for all its citizens.

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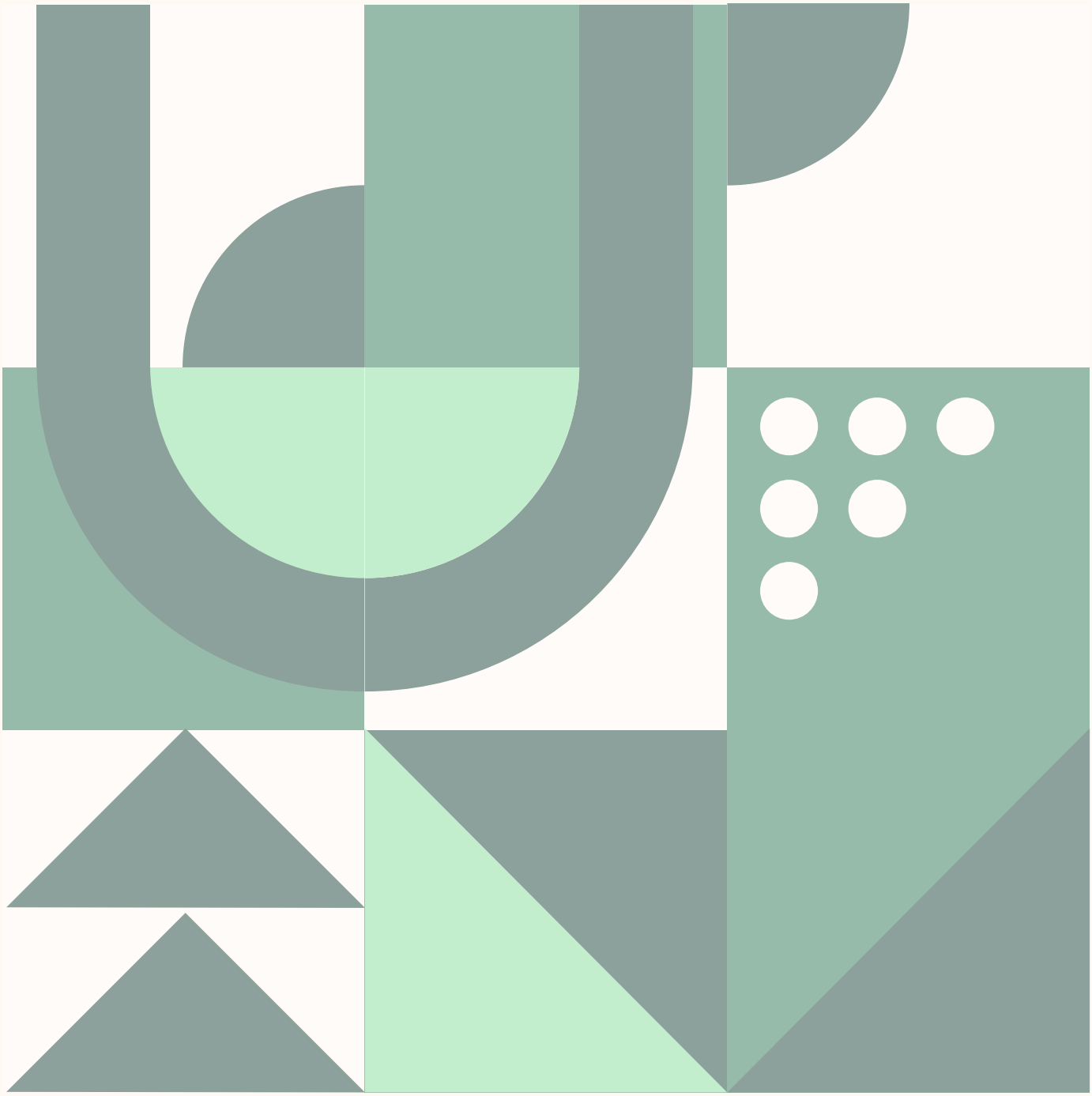

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