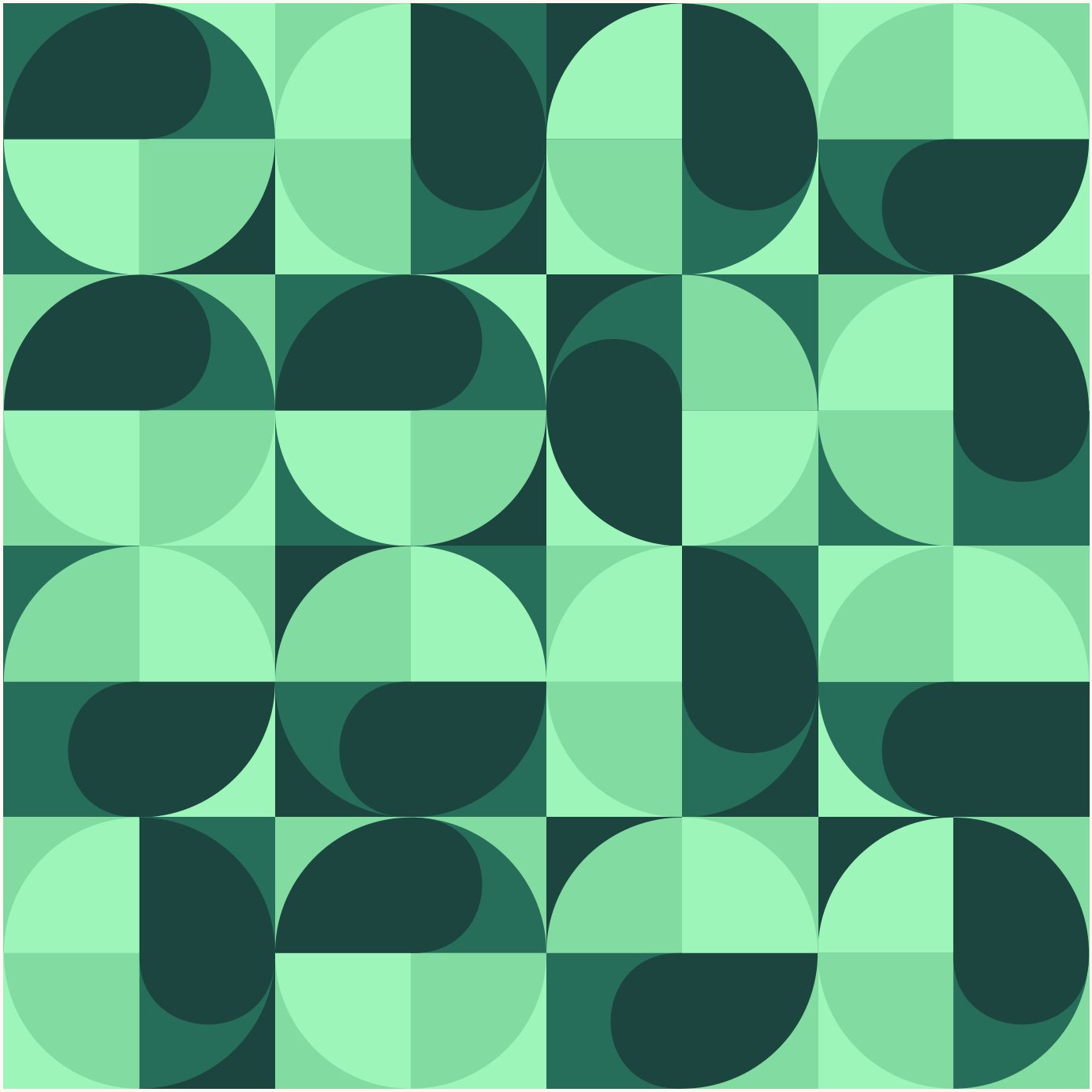

Problem of Lake Gazivode

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CONTENTS

1. Abstract

Lake Gazivode stands as one of the most critical yet contested resources in the Western Balkans. Supplying water, electricity, and ecological stability to communities in both Kosovo and Serbia, it embodies overlapping technical, political, and security dimensions. This paper examines the Gazivode problem as a convergence of political deadlock, institutional ambiguity, infrastructural vulnerability, ecological fragility, and social dependence. Building on analyses by multiple sources the study maps the multi-layered challenges and evaluates possible pathways for sustainable management. Proposed solutions include short-term technical modernization under the supervision of neutral third parties, joint monitoring mechanisms that avoid the recognition trap, ecological cooperation through international platforms, scenario planning for crisis situations, and long-term, but currently aspirational, institutionalization. The paper argues that while no single solution is sufficient, combining technical improvements, ecological adaptation, and incremental confidence-building offers the best chance of transforming Gazivode from a potential flashpoint into a stabilizing resource.

2. Problem Statement

At the core of the Gazivode issue lies the unresolved political relationship between Serbia and Kosovo. As Ljubiša Mijacić (2018) argues, Gazivode is a "bed of nails" precisely because any attempt to regulate its use raises sovereignty disputes. From Belgrade's perspective, entering into formal agreements with Kosovo on water management would be viewed as de facto recognition of statehood, something Serbia cannot accept without contradicting its constitutional framework. On the other side, Pristina insists on full sovereignty, framing Gazivode as a national asset. This clash of positions means that even proposals that would be technically beneficial are politically toxic. As the Rilak (2024) report suggests, the "long road to joint use" reflects not a lack of technical options, but a lack of political willingness to adopt them without jeopardizing deeply entrenched national narratives.

Both sides also draw on competing historical and economic claims to reinforce their positions. Serbia emphasizes multiple arguments for its right to manage the dam: the fact that the reservoir lies largely on Serb-majority territory, that the Ibar River originates in central Serbia, and that construction was financed through loans guaranteed and repaid by Belgrade. As Bukvić (2020) explains, Serbia has invested in the dam's maintenance and continues to stress that without its financial and technical contributions, Gazivode would not exist in its current form. Kosovo, however, insists that territorial sovereignty overrides such arguments, framing Gazivode as part of its national infrastructure regardless of who financed it. This fundamental disagreement whether legitimacy comes from investment and origin or from territorial control entrenches the political deadlock and makes compromise especially difficult.

The absence of binding legal frameworks is another critical layer of the problem. According to Mijacić (2018), proposals to model arrangements after the Columbia River Treaty between the U.S. and Canada are unworkable because they assume mutual recognition. Serbia and Kosovo lack both recognition and shared institutional platforms, leaving Gazivode in a gray zone where neither international conventions nor bilateral mechanisms apply. The Rilak (2024) article underscores that without credible institutional structures, discussions about joint use remain aspirational rather than practical. This institutional vacuum weakens accountability, delays investments in infrastructure, and allows unilateral actions that can destabilize the system.

Technically, Gazivode is a system of interdependence. The reservoir and dam are located in Serb-majority areas, while the water treatment plant is in Albanian-majority southern Mitrovica. As Mijacić (2018) points out, this split creates a fragile balance where neither side can operate independently. Infrastructure dating back to the 1970s is now aging, requiring modernization and reliable monitoring. Yet, in the absence of cooperation, maintenance is fragmented and risks are growing. Rilak (2024) notes that even attempts at practical collaboration stall when there is no agreed legal or institutional framework to back them up.

The ecological challenges are increasingly visible. As the Alternativna (2023) analysis warns, the Ibar River is vulnerable to droughts and climate change, with significant consequences for Gazivode's water levels. If inflows decrease, cascading problems emerge: shortages of drinking water, declining electricity production, and agricultural losses. Environmental degradation, including untreated wastewater and unregulated usage, further erodes the lake's sustainability. Mijacić (2018) highlights that in the long run, water will be a key resource in Kosovo and Serbia alike, making Gazivode's ecological stability central not only to local but also to regional development. Ignoring these trends risks turning the reservoir from an asset into a liability.

From a security standpoint, Gazivode is both leverage and vulnerability. Mijacić (2018) stresses its symbolic and strategic value: control of the dam translates into political bargaining power. Yet this leverage comes with risk any disruption in water supply, whether accidental or intentional, could escalate into a broader conflict. The dam itself becomes a potential target in times of heightened tension. Rilak (2024) reinforces this point by noting that unresolved management questions prolong insecurity, leaving the system exposed to political manipulation. Thus, Gazivode is not only an infrastructural resource but also a symbolic frontline in the broader Serbia–Kosovo dispute.

Finally, the human impact of these disputes must be emphasized. As Alternativna (2023) illustrates, disruptions in water supply would disproportionately affect ordinary citizens, undermining health, livelihoods, and trust in institutions. Communities in northern Kosovo, southern Mitrovica, and beyond depend on Gazivode daily, yet they have no influence over the political and institutional disputes that determine access. This disempowerment fosters mistrust between communities, where resource distribution is perceived as unequal or politicized. Effective solutions must therefore consider the social dimension, ensuring that people's basic needs are prioritized over political symbolism.

Taken together, the Gazivode problem is a convergence of political deadlock, institutional and legal ambiguity, technical interdependence, ecological fragility, security sensitivities, and social vulnerability. Mijacić (2018) highlights the political toxicity of the issue, Alternativna (2023) underscores ecological and social vulnerabilities, and Rilak (2024) points to the institutional deadlock. Each dimension reinforces the others, creating a complex and volatile policy challenge. Any attempt to resolve the Gazivode issue that focuses solely on sovereignty, infrastructure, or ecology will fail to produce sustainable solutions. Only by integrating all these perspectives can Gazivode be managed as a source of stability rather than a driver of conflict.

3. Solutions

1. Technical Modernization with Third-Party Coordination

The Gazivode dam, built in the 1970s, is now at an age where safety risks and efficiency losses become increasingly pressing. Modernization is not only about structural repairs but also about ensuring long-term functionality in the face of climate change. International experience shows that renovation can include sediment management to prolong reservoir life, spillway retrofits to withstand extreme floods, and updated operational rules to balance water supply with ecological flows (Kondolf et al., 2022). For Gazivode, such upgrades would directly translate into more reliable drinking water for hundreds of thousands of people, stable electricity production for industry and households, and reduced vulnerability to accidents that could destabilize the entire region.

For ordinary people, modernization would mean fewer power cuts during the winter, less fear of sudden shortages in drinking water, and more stability for farmers who depend on irrigation. A reinforced dam would reassure communities living downstream that they are not at risk of catastrophic failure, while cleaner water and better flow regulation would ease everyday life in Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, and beyond. Importantly, because of the mutual mistrust between Belgrade and Pristina, any such project could only succeed under the supervision of a neutral third party for example, the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI), the International Water Association (IWA), or programs under UNECE. Framing modernization this way, as an apolitical technical process led by international experts, could help both sides accept it without appearing to compromise sovereignty.

Yet despite these obvious benefits, such a project is unlikely to move forward in the current political climate. Modernization under third-party coordination would still require both Serbia and Kosovo to agree on external oversight, which Belgrade often interprets as a loss of control and Pristina frames as a test of its sovereignty. Even if the work were presented as purely technical, each stage could become politicized: questions of funding, symbolic ownership, or who gets credit for the improvements.

2. Joint monitoring and crisis management

If Gazivode is to be managed sustainably, both sides must be able to trust the information they rely on. At present, Serbia and Kosovo collect and interpret data separately, which often leads to conflicting narratives about water levels, pollution, or dam safety. This fuels mistrust and leaves the entire system vulnerable to sudden shocks. Establishing a joint monitoring and crisis-preparedness framework, facilitated by a neutral actor such as the OSCE or World Bank, could help bridge this gap.

The framework would consist of two key elements. First, real-time monitoring of hydrological flows, dam stability, and water quality, made public through an independent online platform. As McCracken and Meyer (2018) note, effective cooperation requires more than raw data it requires regular exchange, shared objectives, and coordinated action. By automatically publishing numbers accessible to both Pristina and Belgrade, monitoring would reduce opportunities for manipulation and reassure communities. Second, scenario-based planning would translate this data into preparedness. Following UNECE (2018) guidelines, the framework could define minimum guaranteed water releases in drought conditions, establish flood-alarm procedures, and coordinate downstream communication with municipalities.

For ordinary citizens, the impact would be tangible. Farmers would know in advance whether summer irrigation is at risk. Households could be assured that drinking water will not simply "run out overnight." Hospitals, schools, and local businesses would have time to prepare backup supplies. In other words, monitoring and planning together transform uncertainty into predictability a resource as vital as the water itself.

Imagine a summer drought: instead of relying on rumors or politically filtered announcements, citizens, farmers, and municipalities could consult an independent platform showing water levels and expected shortages. This would help reduce panic, improve crisis management, and prevent accusations of manipulation. Similarly, in times of heavy rainfall, both Pristina and Belgrade would have access to the same warning data, enabling quicker responses.

Still, the political obstacles remain formidable. Serbia fears that joint systems could be construed as recognition of Kosovo, while Kosovo sees resistance as obstruction. Even publishing a shared drought protocol could be spun into a sovereignty debate. As Rilak (2024) observes, the "long road to joint use" is shaped less by technical hurdles than by entrenched national narratives. This means that even the most rational proposals will depend on careful framing: presenting monitoring and preparedness not as a bilateral treaty, but as a neutral safety measure overseen by international experts. Without such steps, both sides risk being caught unprepared by crises that everyone can already see coming.

3. Shared Benefits and Gradual Institutionalization

While modernization and monitoring can address immediate risks, the long-term stability of Gazivode requires creating a framework where both sides see clear benefits in cooperation. This means going beyond short-term fixes toward mechanisms that share revenues and build institutions, even if these mechanisms look different from classic international treaties.

A practical starting point could be local-level revenue sharing, where profits from electricity generation or water tariffs are partially redirected to municipalities such as Zubin Potok and Mitrovica. Instead of negotiating directly between Belgrade and Pristina a process loaded with sovereignty disputes revenues could flow through a third-party trust fund managed by an international body. This would ensure that local communities see tangible benefits without either side needing to formally recognize the other. Such an approach mirrors arrangements in other contested regions, where resources

are managed through intermediaries to avoid political deadlock (Mijačić, 2018).

Over time, these revenue mechanisms could serve as stepping stones toward gradual institutionalization. The first step might be technical committees supervised by UN-ECE or the OSCE, tasked only with specific issues like sediment management or water releases during droughts. As trust builds, these technical groups could evolve into permanent boards with broader mandates. Importantly, the model would not need to copy treaties like the Columbia River agreement, which assume full recognition between states. Instead, Gazivode institutions could be framed as functional platforms for solving practical problems, without addressing sovereignty questions directly.

This approach acknowledges the political constraints while still pointing to a pathway forward. By linking revenue-sharing to local development and embedding institutional growth in technical cooperation, both Serbia and Kosovo could secure greater stability without appearing to compromise on their national positions. Over time, what begins as a mechanism to avoid conflict could transform Gazivode into an example of pragmatic coexistence not by ignoring politics, but by carefully designing solutions that make cooperation both rewarding and unavoidable.

4. Conclusion

The Gazivode problem is more than a technical dispute over water and energy. It is a microcosm of the wider Serbia–Kosovo relationship, where unresolved questions of sovereignty intersect with urgent ecological and infrastructural vulnerabilities. As Mijačić (2018) describes, Gazivode is a “bed of nails” precisely because every practical decision is politically charged. Alternativna (2023) underscores that climate change and ecological degradation will not wait for political solutions, while Rilak (2024) highlights the institutional deadlock that leaves the system exposed.

The analysis demonstrates that technical modernization, joint monitoring, and ecological cooperation are feasible entry points that can enhance resilience without forcing political recognition. However, each pathway is fragile. Technical oversight can be politicized, data-sharing may be manipulated, and ecological projects risk neglect. Revenue-sharing mechanisms and formal institutionalization, while theoretically optimal, remain politically implausible for now.

Still, inaction is not an option. The longer Gazivode remains unmanaged as a shared system, the greater the risks of infrastructural failure, humanitarian crises, and political escalation. A layered approach combining pragmatic short-term solutions with incremental steps toward transparency and ecological adaptation is the only viable path. Gazivode will continue to test the balance between politics and pragmatism, but it can also become a rare platform for cooperation if both sides, with international support, choose responsibility over conflict.

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