

Assessing the Kosova–Serbia Diploma Recognition Process

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Executive Summary

Diploma recognition between Kosova and Serbia remains difficult to navigate because different institutional categories follow different procedures, verification depends on cooperation between authorities, and publicly communicated positions do not necessarily establish how individual cases are decided. The university in North Mitrovica requires particular attention: its institutional history and Serbian-system affiliation underpin a separate verification mechanism whose continuity matters for graduates' access to employment (European Commission, 2023; OSCE Mission in Kosovo, 2021).

The evidence distinguishes prolonged waiting and historical exemption from actual refusal; it does not support treating every unresolved application as a rejected diploma. This paper proposes four priorities: publish consolidated guidance identifying the correct route for each qualification; establish a time-bound verification workflow with named contacts and applicant tracking; disclose all recognition criteria and require reasoned decisions; and secure uninterrupted verification alongside permanent monitoring. Institutional integration may offer a longer-term option, but should not be a precondition for protecting current applicants. Policymakers should prioritize reliable procedures and transparent outcomes while using case-based audits to test possible differences between official positions and administrative practice.

01/
Introduction

The recognition of higher-education qualifications is important for access to employment, professional opportunities and further education (EU-facilitated dialogue, 2016, para. 2). For graduates whose qualifications cross the institutional boundary between Kosova and Serbia, recognition also raises questions about institutional authority, document authentication and the relationship between political positions and administrative decisions. This paper argues that the central policy problem is not simply whether a diploma is recognized: it is whether applicants can identify the applicable procedure and obtain a usable, reasoned decision within a predictable period. The proposed response combines clear procedural guidance, time-bound verification, published decision criteria and stable institutional responsibility. The analysis distinguishes academic recognition for further study, professional recognition for employment, and the special verification of diplomas issued by the university in North Mitrovica. It also separates refusal from exemption, referral, incomplete applications and prolonged non-decision. Combining these outcomes under the label of non-recognition obscures both the causes of difficulty and the appropriate response.

This paper draws on dialogue arrangements, legislation, institutional guidance, European Commission reporting, an anonymous interview (2026, August 8), and written correspondence received from an ENIC/NARIC coordinator on 20 August 2026. The interview provides an administrative perspective on diploma verification in Kosova, while the correspondence sets out the coordinator's position on the treatment of Kosova-issued documents in Serbia. The analysis identifies institutional mechanisms and implementation risks rather than estimating their prevalence.

02/

Problem Statement and Analysis

The problem is the gap between a formally available recognition route and an applicant's ability to obtain a usable decision. Three dimensions require attention: institutional categories that determine which procedure applies; verification delays that limit practical access to employment and further study; and uncertainty about how communicated restrictions relate to actual decisions. The analysis examines these dimensions and considers policy options that can improve access without requiring the diploma-recognition process to resolve the wider political dispute.

Diploma recognition entered the EU-facilitated dialogue in 2011. The published arrangement refers to the operational conclusions of 2 July 2011 and assigns certification to a committee of European academic experts established by the European University Association (EUA), following verification that diplomas were issued by authorized institutions. (EU-facilitated dialogue, 2011, paras. 1–4). Its stated purpose is use of the qualifications for further education or public employment. The conclusions of 19 January 2016 distinguish professional recognition, with a maximum period of 90 days after receipt of the application and a fee ceiling equivalent to EUR 50, from academic recognition for further study, with an overall period of five months. They also provide for previously obtained EUA certificates and apply to institutions and programmes accredited by the respective authorities. (EU-facilitated dialogue, 2016, paras. 2–4).

Domestic procedures remain important. Article 38 of Serbia's Law on the National Qualifications Framework places professional recognition within the ENIC/NARIC centre as an organizational part of the Qualifications Agency and assigns the decision to the Agency Director. The agency-published statutory text specifies 60 days from receipt of a complete application. This general domestic provision should not be conflated with the 90-day commitment in the 2016 dialogue framework, nor does it establish how a particular Kosova-issued qualification is treated (Republic of Serbia, 2018, art. 38). On the Kosova side, the North Mitrovica verification mechanism is a distinct route for using specified qualifications in public-institution employment procedures, rather than a universal procedure for every foreign diploma (ECMI, 2023). The university in North Mitrovica requires a separate explanation because institutional location and educational governance do not coincide. The institution identifies itself as the University of Priština with temporary seat in Kosovska Mitrovica. Its own institutional history dates its foundation to 18 November 1969 and records relocation after the 1999 war, followed by the establishment of its temporary seat in Mitrovica under a Serbian government decision at the end of 2001. It operates within the Serbian educational system while being physically located in Kosova. Its institutional chronology helps explain why geographic location alone does not determine the applicable recognition route (University of Pristina, 2023).

Kosova's legislation also envisages a distinctive university arrangement. Article 14(a)–(c) of the Law No. 03/L-068 on Education in the Municipalities of the Republic of Kosovo provides for an autonomous public university in North Mitrovica and an independent commission to decide on the compatibility of its statute and matters concerning accreditation within the Kosovo university system (Republic of Kosovo, 2008, art. 14(a)–(c)). Article 17(2) of Law No. 04/L-115 changed one commission appointment from an international representative selected by the International Civilian Representative to a member selected by the Prime Minister (Republic of Kosovo, 2012, art. 17(2)). These provisions establish an institutional framework; they do not, by themselves, demonstrate that the Serbian-system university has completed that process or that its diplomas automatically have domestic recognition. This combination of territorial location, Serbian-system affiliation and an unresolved institutional relationship makes the case different from a diploma issued in Belgrade.

The OSCE's 2021 report, assessing the situation as of December 2019, states that post-1999 degrees from Serbian-curriculum institutions operating in Kosova, including the North Mitrovica university, were outside the mutual-recognition agreement (OSCE Mission in Kosovo, 2021, pp. 7, 44). Serbia's April 2016 progress report also recorded disagreement over excluding the university's diplomas from the dialogue arrangement (Government of Serbia, 2016, pp. 11–12). These dated accounts explain the development of separate treatment. According to the OSCE's account, Regulation No. 21/2015 established verification for post-2001 North Mitrovica university degrees for job applications, professional licences and examinations in public institutions (OSCE Mission in Kosovo, 2021, p. 44).

The European Centre for Minority Issues in Kosovo (ECMI) describes the certificate-of-validity process as a temporary mechanism enabling eligible graduates to use their diplomas in public-institution job applications (ECMI, 2023). Its practical significance is that individual qualifications can be verified without making applicants wait for resolution of the university's wider institutional relationship. Continuity is a distinct issue from eligibility. On 19 June 2026, the government announced an extension of the verification commission's mandate from 22 June to 22 September 2026. The decision concerns the commission's mandate. Reliance on periodic renewal creates an avoidable risk of interrupted decision-making. A durable arrangement should protect pending applications, clarify the treatment of existing certificates and ensure that graduates do not face an administrative gap when a commission's term ends (Office of the Prime Minister, 2026).

The interviewee (2026, August 8) describes separate departments for diplomas from Serbian institutions located in Serbia and those operating in Kosova, calling them "two completely separate departments." Different routes are not inherently problematic: they may reflect different institutional circumstances. They become a policy problem when applicants cannot identify the responsible authority, required documents, expected timeline and available remedy. The interviewee (2026, August 8) also identifies the stages at which a case may stop. The interviewee first checks the diploma and supporting documents; incomplete applications are set aside while the applicant is contacted by email. Complete cases are entered into a database and forwarded through the European Centre for Minority Issues in Kosovo (ECMI) to the rectorate for confirmation. A commission subsequently considers verification. This account identifies two distinct potential sources of delay:

completing the application and obtaining external confirmation. Addressing either requires a clear record of where each application is awaiting action. The interviewee (2026, August 8) gives 2019 as an example of a period when cases could be completed in approximately two or three months, while reporting that some later applicants had waited one or two years. The interviewee also recalls an influx of more than 2,000 diplomas following discussion of integration or licensing of Serbian-system educational institutions. That figure describes incoming applications, not a verified current backlog. The account suggests that increased demand coincided with coordination problems, but does not isolate their respective effects. The contrast between earlier completion times and later waits nevertheless identifies a concrete operational problem: an eligible application can remain unresolved long enough to lose its practical value for the applicant.

An additional documented implementation episode shows why establishing a commission is not equivalent to completing cases. The European Commission's Kosovo 2023 Report records that the commission's work was discontinued in 2021 and that it was re-established in February 2023. By 21 June 2023, the ministry had received 44 applications, none of which had yet been verified. This indicates pending verification, not 44 refusals (European Commission, 2023, p. 40). The Kosovo 2025 Report records 320 diplomas verified during 2024 and the availability of online submission, but also describes verification of diplomas from Serbia-supported high schools in Kosova as pending. The availability of an application channel therefore should not be equated with completed verification across all educational categories (European Commission, 2025a, section on protection of minorities).

The distinction between applying for verification and receiving a final certificate is also important for employment. The Office for Community Affairs notice permits applicants to request confirmation that verification is in progress when a verified diploma is required for a job (Office for Community Affairs, 2024). This is evidence that proof of a pending procedure is available; it does not establish that an employer must accept it, that a contract may be signed before verification, or that a particular applicant was hired. A transparent policy on the use of pending-application confirmations could reduce uncertainty without treating them as final recognition. The interviewee (2026, August 8) states that "mostly" diplomas are recognized, but this qualitative assessment cannot be converted into an approval rate. The interviewee also describes older university and high-school diplomas as outside the current verification procedure, rather than substantively refused, identifying June 2001 and June 1999 as relevant historical boundaries. The distinction reinforces the need to publish precise eligibility rules, including whether the controlling date is graduation or diploma issuance. Monitoring should distinguish approval, refusal, historical exemption, referral, missing documents and cases awaiting an external response.

In written correspondence received from an ENIC/NARIC coordinator on 20 August 2026, the coordinator stated that the agency follows instructions from the Office for Kosovo and Metohija against accepting documents bearing wording that designates Kosova as a republic. The coordinator also indicated that a later EUA marking would not overcome the restriction. This response provides evidence of a stated institutional position and raises questions about the transparency of the criteria communicated to applicants. It does not, on its own, establish how every application is decided. Without the underlying instruction and decisions applying it, the correspondence does

not establish either the legal status of the reported restriction or its consistency of application. The defensible conclusion is a transparency problem: applicants need to know whether the stated restriction is a formal recognition criterion, what legal basis supports it, and how a decision relying on it can be challenged.

The distinction between certification and recognition is equally important. The 2016 conclusions provided for previously obtained EUA certificates and their direct submission for recognition (EU-facilitated dialogue, 2016, para. 3). Against this background, the reference to a later EUA marking in written correspondence received from an ENIC/NARIC coordinator on 20 August 2026 leaves an important question unresolved: whether the restriction described applies to a formal certificate issued through the agreed mechanism or to a different stamp or annotation. Public guidance should identify the acceptable certification documents and explain how each is treated. The distinction between official positions and de facto practice warrants examination. Institutions may communicate a restrictive position while processing some applications through a legally differentiated or administratively more flexible route. Conversely, apparently inconsistent outcomes may reflect different institutions, issue dates, certification histories or purposes of recognition rather than informal discretion. In its Serbia 2025 Report, the European Commission states that implementation of the agreements on cadastre and acceptance of university diplomas remained pending because of non-implementation by Serbia (European Commission, 2025b, section on normalisation of relations). A case-based audit would make this distinction testable by linking institutional replies to submitted diplomas, certification documents and written outcomes. It should record the issuing institution, programme, diploma date, recognition purpose, document wording, submission and completion dates, requests for further information, decision date, reasons and any appeal. Comparing completed, refused and pending cases within each route would help distinguish legitimate procedural differences from unpublished restrictions or inconsistent treatment. The present evidence identifies a possible gap between declared positions and practical outcomes; it does not establish unacknowledged recognition as a systematic practice.

03/

Recommendations and Conclusion

The fragmented procedures, verification delays and transparency concerns identified in the analysis call for four measures to make recognition more predictable, transparent and usable. Except where an existing commitment is expressly identified, the service periods and implementation targets below are proposed standards rather than current legal entitlements.

1.

Publish one consolidated recognition framework.

The competent education authorities in Kosova and Serbia, their recognition bodies and the North Mitrovica commission secretariat should each publish a searchable portal, with EU facilitation supporting a comparable presentation. A decision tree should distinguish the issuing institution's location and status, academic and professional recognition, historical exemptions and the North Mitrovica certificate route. Each route should specify the responsible authority, documents, accreditation and certification requirements, fees, applicable deadlines, grounds for refusal and review mechanisms. Information should be available in Albanian, Serbian and English. Publish an initial version within six months and update it within 30 days of a procedural change. Indicators should include coverage of every identified category, named page owners, dated updates and user testing in which at least 80 per cent of applicants identify the correct route without ministry assistance.

2.

Create a time-bound verification workflow.

The ministry, commission secretariat, ECMI and rectorate should agree a protocol for the North Mitrovica route; Serbia's Qualifications Agency and relevant higher-education institutions should adopt equivalent arrangements within their own responsibilities. Within 60 days, appoint named contacts and agree acknowledgement within five working days, a substantive response within 30 calendar days and automatic escalation when no response arrives. Track receipt, completeness, referral, response, decision and notification separately, and explain any suspension of the applicable decision period. Within six months, extend existing online submission facilities into end-to-end case tracking. Where the legal framework permits, employers should publish transparent conditions for parti-

cipation in recruitment while verification is pending; this must not be represented as automatic final recognition. Monitor response times, overdue cases and completion times rather than application volume alone.

3.

Publish every criterion and require reasoned decisions.

Within 90 days, the competent authorities should publish complete substantive and documentary criteria and standard decision templates. Every refusal or partial-recognition decision should identify the authority, legal basis, facts, unmet requirement, evidence considered and applicable challenge route and deadline. Serbia's Qualifications Agency should clarify the instruction reported in the correspondence, identify its legal basis and scope if it exists, and explain whether it is a recognition criterion. Both sides should specify acceptable certification documents and distinguish them from informal stamps or annotations. Audit a sample of decisions against published criteria; informal advice and generic email replies should not substitute for individualized decisions.

4.

Secure continuity and establish permanent monitoring.

The Government of the Republic of Kosovo and the competent ministry should ensure that the commission's mandate is renewed or replaced without interruption at the end of the term specified in the 19 June 2026 decision, on 22 September 2026. The measure should explicitly address pending and new cases, remedies, existing certificates and transitional staffing and funding. The date concerns the announced commission mandate and should not be treated as automatic expiry of graduates' certificates (Office of the Prime Minister, 2026). Within 12 months, the competent authorities and the EU facilitator should establish permanent verification contacts and a technically limited monitoring mechanism covering authentication, transmission, deadlines and aggregate outcomes. This should build on the tripartite implementation group envisaged in the 2016 conclusions rather than assume that no monitoring arrangement was ever agreed (EU-facilitated dialogue, 2016, para. 7). Publish quarterly figures distinguishing approval, refusal, exemption, incompleteness and pending verification, accompanied by an anonymized case audit comparing published criteria, institutional replies and actual decisions. This would test the possible divergence between official positions and practice without making a political settlement a precondition for helping applicants. The evidence supports a differentiated explanation of diploma-recognition difficulties. North Mitrovica qualifications arise from a distinct institutional history and are handled through a special mechanism; general dialogue commitments do not eliminate the need to identify the correct administrative route. Reported delays, the documented interruption and restart of verification, and published service benchmarks illustrate why practical access de-

pends on timely decisions as well as formal eligibility. The Serbian correspondence raises an important question about transparency, but does not establish the outcomes of unobserved cases. The most defensible policy response is to combine clear routing and published criteria with reliable verification, continuity and evidence-based monitoring. These measures would protect applicants while making both obstruction and any legitimate administrative flexibility visible and reviewable. Policymakers should now assign responsibility for these measures, adopt the proposed implementation schedules and publish progress, so that access to employment and education does not depend on an applicant's ability to navigate institutional uncertainty.

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