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AUGUST 2023

Presence of special units of the Kosovo Police in the Serb- majority North

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This Policy Paper is published as part of the project “Strengthening Youth Civic Participation in Political Processes” implemented by New Social Initiative (NSI) funded by National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

Opinions expressed in this Policy Paper do not necessarily represent those of the New Social Initiative, or the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than a year has passed since the Government of Kosovo started the action of permanently deploying special units of the Kosovo Police in Serb-majority municipalities in the North. While for the Prime Minister Albin Kurti this decision represented a step towards establishing law and order in this region, for the local Serb population the presence of these units will become a source of fear and insecurity. The unprofessional behavior of the members of these formations, but also the fact that the nature of their presence is illegal, caused this to be one of the key reasons for Serbs from the North to resign from all the local Kosovo institutions in which they had been integrated until then. After this, and under the pretext of the departure of Serbs from the Kosovo Police, the presence of these units increased further, and together with that, the number of incidents between them and the local Serb population also increased. The situation culminated after the extraordinary local elections, which were boycotted by Serb representatives and in which ethnic Albanians were elected mayors in Serb-majority municipalities. In order to allow the newly elected mayors access to the municipal buildings, against which the Serbs protested, the members of the special units entered into conflict with the Serbs from the North for the first time, after more than 10 years. Since then, the crisis has deepened even more, relations are at a record low level, and a solution to the problem is not in sight. How did it even come to this? What impact did the decision to deploy special units have on broader socio-political processes? Can we move forward, and how?

This policy paper tries to provide answers to the questions raised. In the first part of it, the course of events that led to the situation we have today was analyzed using the process tracing methodology. After the initial part that provides an insight into the factual situation, in the next section of the paper, 3 key socio-political aspects on which the decisions on the permanent deployment of special units had an impact were singled out:

1. Democratic process and rule of law
2. Peace and stability
3. Trust issues

The final part of the work, devoted to recommendations, consists of two parts. The first part analyzed the possibilities of de-escalation in a broader sense. For the purposes of this part, by using the interview method, representatives of the NGO sector, as well as officials of international organizations in Kosovo from the Serb community, contributed. The second and last part presents specific recommendations to the Government of Kosovo with the aim of de-escalating the situation and solving this problem in the best interest of all parties.

BACKGROUND

At the end of February 2022, the Kosovo Police set up, in Brnjak, the first of several police bases that will be built in the next year.¹² This action followed only two days after the closure of alternative roads leading from the territory of Kosovo to Serbia. The closed alternative roads are marked as smuggling roads, and this action was carried out in order to prevent and suppress those illegal activities. In this sense, alternative crossings were closed throughout Kosovo, both in the north and in the south.³

Along with this mentioned base, the construction of another border base started at the same time, in Bistrica, in the municipality of Leposavic.⁴

The construction of police bases was not welcomed by citizens in the North of Kosovo. On April 15, 2022 a vehicle of special units of the Kosovo Police was attacked in the North. According to the statement of the Director General of the Kosovo Police, Samedin Mehmeti, as well as the Minister of Internal Affairs of Kosovo, Xhelal Svecla, this was the fourth attack in just three days. These units were going to perform a shift change at the border crossings, precisely in those bases set up at the beginning of the year. Frequent attacks on members of the special units of the Kosovo Police served as an argument for the Government of Kosovo to increase their presence in the North.

From that moment on, their presence not only increased quantitatively, but also became more permanent. Special units began to spend more and more time in Serb-majority areas in the North of Kosovo. Although the legality of such actions could be discussed even at that moment, the situation was still not out of control.

Source: Kossev



Source: Kossev



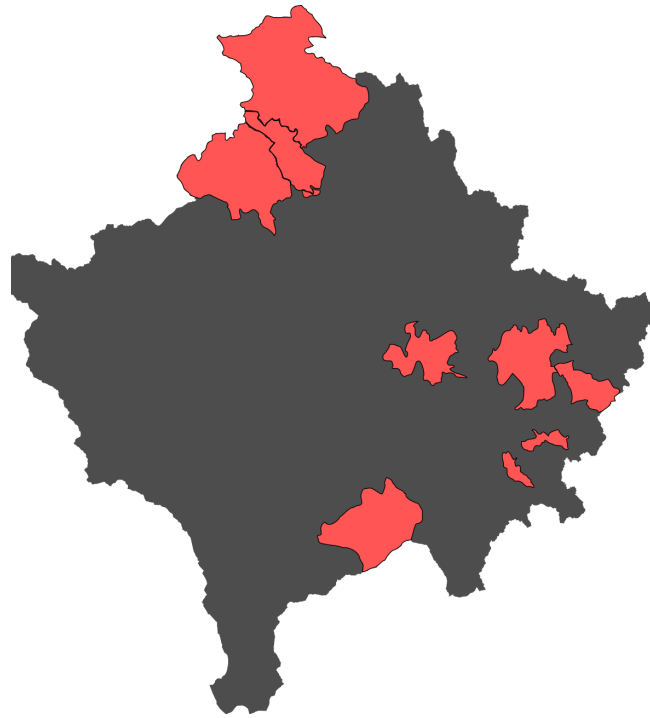
However, the Government of Kosovo then makes a decision on the repurposing of the municipal building in Kosutovo (Leposavic municipality), which becomes the third base of the Kosovo Police in the North.⁵⁶ At the same time, the Minister of Internal Affairs of Kosovo, declares that the Kosovo Police is stationed in the North 24 hours a day, which confirms previous allegations about their permanent presence in Serb-majority areas. In addition, on that occasion, he also announced the establishment of the fourth base, which will be located in Gornji Jasenovik, Zubin Potok municipality.⁷



In addition to the unrest caused by these bases of monoethnic units made up exclusively of Albanians among the local Serb population, there are also many legal problems with the construction of these bases. Namely, most of the plots on which the aforementioned bases were built on land that is owned by local Serbs from the North of Kosovo. Through a series of decisions on expropriation, the Government of Kosovo took land from the Serbs on which the construction of bases was already underway or even completed at that time. The first among such decisions was made on August 19, 2022. On that occasion, the expropriation of plots in the municipalities of Zubin Potok and Leposavić, which were built at the beginning of the same year, was made official.⁸

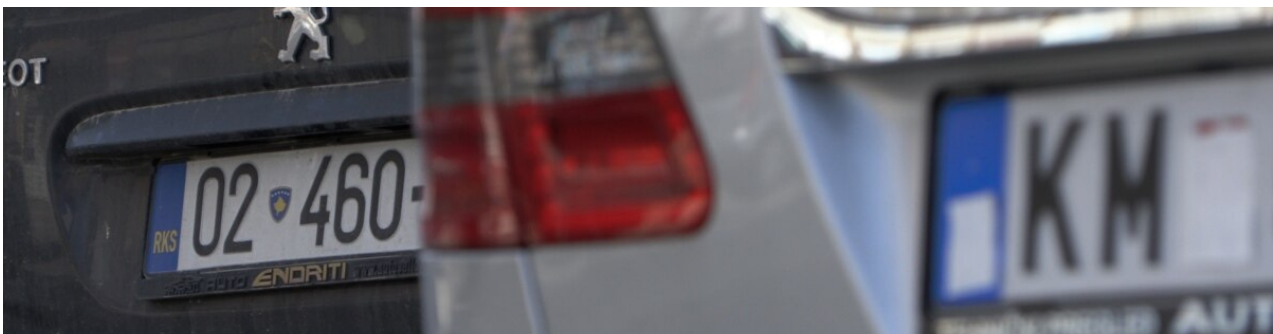
The increased presence of special units of the Kosovo Police, as well as the aforementioned construction of bases on the usurped land of Serbs from the North, have influenced the Serb community to feel intimidated and threatened for their security.⁹ However, along with this, two other important problems occupied the relations between the Government of Kosovo and the Serbian community - the issue of establishing the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities, the obligation of Kosovo assumed by signing the Brussels Agreement in 2013, as well as the issue of unilateral actions of the Pristina authorities when it comes to Serbian license plates with acronyms of cities in Kosovo.¹⁰

When it comes to the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities, the Government of Kosovo has refused to form this body for 10 years, referring to the decision of the Constitutional Court of Kosovo, which declared that some aspects of the 2015 agreement, which regulates its competences more closely, were not in spirit with the constitution. However, it is often overlooked that the Constitutional Court found that the first agreement from 2013, which was ratified by the Assembly of Kosovo, is an obligation that Kosovo must respect.¹¹



Source: Wikipedia

When it comes to license plates, the crisis began in 2021 when, as we mentioned, the Government of Kosovo declared all Serbian license plates with the acronyms of cities in Kosovo (KM, PR, GL, PZ, UR, PE, DjA) illegal and made a decision on mandatory re-registration on RKS (Republic of Kosovo) plates.¹²



Source: RFE/RL's Balkan Service

Namely, the agreement on freedom of movement, signed in 2011 between Belgrade and Pristina, regulated, among other things, the issue of license plates. Although Article 7 of this agreement agreed that 'all car owners residing in Kosovo will use either RKS or KS vehicle license plates', Serbs in the North of Kosovo continued to use Serbian registration plates with the acronyms of cities in Kosovo.¹³ However, in the same agreement, in Article 6, it was also agreed that 'the authorities in Kosovo will extend the validity of KS vehicle license plates for an initial period of five years at the end of which the issue will be reviewed by the two parties'.¹⁴

With a subsequent agreement in 2016, the validity of those plates was extended for an additional period of 5 years. It was agreed that, after the expiration of this period, the parties will review this issue again. However, in September 2020, the then Prime Minister of Kosovo, Avdullah Hoti, made a decision to cease the validity of KS plates, contrary to the letter of the mentioned agreement.¹⁵ Such a decision was just confirmed in September of the following year, when the deadline officially expired. The Government of Kosovo made the decision on the final termination of validity and mandatory re-registration of RKS plates unilaterally, without additional review of this issue through dialogue with Belgrade, as agreed. At the same time, the Government of Kosovo confirmed the decision on the illegality of Serbian license plates with the acronyms of cities in Kosovo that were used in the North until then, but avoided offering to extend the validity period of KS plates, which would potentially ease the dissatisfaction of Serbs from the North.

The decision was postponed several times with the mediation of the European Union and the United States of America so that in October 2022 the Government in Pristina would make a decision on fining people who do not re-register their vehicles.¹⁶ This caused a revolt among the Serbian community, and the commander of the Kosovo Police for the North Region said that he would not implement this decision. Not long after, he was fired from his job, and two days later the Serbs made a decision to withdraw from all public Kosovo institutions in the North.¹⁷

With the departure of the Serbs from the Kosovo Police in the North, almost no one remained in it, considering that it reflected the ethnic structure of the North itself, where Serbs make up over 90% of the population. In this sense, a security vacuum was created, which the Government of Kosovo used to increase the presence of special units of the Kosovo Police in the North. The absence of Serbs in the Kosovo Police, as well as the increasing number of special units, caused an increasing number of incidents between these formations and the local population. Several cases of inappropriate behavior by these units were recorded, and one of these occurred immediately after the exit of Serbs from Kosovo institutions, on 14 November 2022, when members of these units mistreated the executive director of the non-governmental organization 'Aktiv', Miodrag Milićević, near the Jarinje crossing.¹⁸ The most serious incident in which the special units of the Kosovo Police were involved took place on April 10 this year, when a member of this formation shot and wounded a Serb, M.J, who was in a moving vehicle near the Bistrice Bridge, not far from the checkpoint of the special units established in December last year.^{19 20}

Along with the deployment of units in the North, the confiscation of land from the Serbs in order to build new police bases continued. One such decision was made at the 112th session of the Government of Kosovo in December 2022, 'when a decision was made to declare of special public interest the immovable properties of owners and interest holders that are necessary for the implementation of infrastructure projects on the territory of the municipality of Leposavic, i.e. in Saljska Bistrica and in Jasenovik, which is located on the territory of Zubin Potok.²¹ The same practice continued during 2023, when on January 16, a decision was made to expropriate plots of land in Dren and Lesak, in the Leposavic municipality.²²

Taking into account everything stated so far, it can be assumed that the presence of special units of the Kosovo Police did not particularly contribute to peace and stability in the North. Namely, it can even be argued that the perception of the level of security from the point of view of the local population is getting lower since the deployment of these formations. The increased number of incidents, some of which were almost fatal, clearly indicate a problem in the relationship between the parties, in this case between the special units of the Kosovo Police and the local Serb population in the North. Although these cases are isolated and separate from each other, the increase in tensions that they cumulatively create could easily lead to a more serious escalation on the ground. In addition, taking the above into account, the damaged relations between the members of the special units and the local Serb population in the North spilled over into the relations between the Serb and Albanian communities in Kosovo as a whole. Also, the presence and behavior of the aforementioned formations directly influenced the exit of Serbs in the North from the Kosovo institutions in which they had been integrated for almost 10 years. That is why it is very important to think in the direction of solving this problem, which I see as crucial for peace and stability, primarily in the North of Kosovo, but also for the relations between Serbs and Albanians in this territory in general.

WHY THE DEPLOYMENT OF SPECIAL UNITS OF THE KOSOVO POLICE IN THE NORTH MUNICIPALITIES MATTERS?

Previous section listed some of the direct and indirect consequences of the deployment of special units of the Kosovo Police in Serb-majority areas in the North municipalities. This section focuses on why and how the deployment of these units affects the wider socio-political context in the north of Kosovo. Accordingly, the section is organized into three main parts, each addressing a particular issue of the impact that the deployment of the special units of the Kosovo police has had in the north. First, the section examines the democratic validity of the policies of the Government of Kosovo related to the presence of the special police units in Serb-majority municipalities in the North of Kosovo. Second part, focuses on the effects of the recent government policies towards the north of Kosovo in the context of peace and stability, as well as the impact for the wider region of the (Western) Balkans. The third part, discusses implications of the government policies in the north of Kosovo towards the wider context of the relations between the Serbian and Albanian communities in Kosovo, as the key actors on which the Kosovo society rests.

DO THE KOSOVO GOVERNMENT POLICIES TOWARD THE NORTH OF KOSOVO HAVE DEMOCRATIC VALIDITY?

As argued in the introduction of the paper, the recent actions of the deployment of special units of the Kosovo Police to the North by the Government of Kosovo, at first, were aimed at preventing the smuggling of goods through the border crossings between Serbia and Kosovo. That this was indeed the intention of the Government of Albin Kurti is clear because certain actions were carried out not only at the crossings located in the North of Kosovo, but also at all the others.²³ Already in the spring of 2022, it became clear that the action to suppress smuggling was only the initial phase of a more concrete deployment of members of the special units of the Kosovo Police in the North. Namely, since April, the more intensive presence of the units in Serb-majority municipalities in this region began. It was certain that the way in which these units are present in the North contradicts the legal framework of Kosovo, as well as the First Agreement of Principles Governing

the Normalization of Relations, which became an integral part of it through ratification in the Kosovo Parliament. Namely, articles 61 and 128.4 of the Constitution of Kosovo, as well as article 9 of the agreement, stipulate that the ethnic structure of employees in public institutions or specifically in the police must reflect the ethnic structure of the municipalities in question.^{24 25} At the same time, special units are expected to perform special, time-limited tasks. Therefore, the presence of the mentioned units was, and remains, disputed for two reasons: the mono-ethnic, Albanian character of these formations in Serb-majority municipalities and their permanent presence in the mentioned areas. Although the Government of Kosovo started a campaign of sending special units to the North under the pretext of establishing the rule of law in the entire territory of Kosovo, it is clear that these actions were in contradiction with the current legal regulations. Namely, the authorities in Pristina, led by Albin Kurti, prepared the ground for the mentioned actions by securitizing the predominantly Serbian North. By securitizing, that is, presenting the North as a security threat, the Government of Kosovo tried to justify illegal and undemocratic actions aimed at this Serb-majority region. First, it is known that this part of Kosovo, even before the aforementioned exit of Serbs from public Kosovo institutions in November 2022, was the least integrated.²⁶ The homogeneity and coherence of the Serbian community in the North, as well as its direct connection with the territory of central Serbia, caused significantly greater resistance to integration into Kosovo society after the 1999 conflict. Already after the Self-Determination movement and its leader Albin Kurti came to power, it became clear that one of the main goals would be the establishment of Kosovo's sovereignty over the North. In this sense, the already mentioned, controversial, unilateral decisions on license plates and IDs were also made.²⁷ Sending special units of the Kosovo Police was just a continuation of this policy. As we stated, the question of the North was the subject of securitization. Namely, securitization as a concept was introduced by representatives of the so-called Copenhagen School of Security Studies. Securitization actually represents the 'discursive construction of something into a security threat'.²⁸ In our case, the Government of Albin Kurti carried out the securitization of the North, that is, four Serb-majority municipalities in the North of Kosovo. Namely, the theory of securitization is based on the assumption that "phenomena are treated as a security threat because they are socially constructed", and the most important segment is the "speech act".²⁹

A speech act is the way in which the use of language, that is, the creation of a narrative, creates an image of a certain phenomenon that characterizes it as a security threat and justifies the means to deal with it. The mentioned segment in the context of the securitization of the North, that is, the Serbs living in this part of Kosovo, was highlighting the 'criminal' character of this region.³⁰ In this way, the Government of Kosovo managed to present the North as a security threat and a destabilizing factor in Kosovo. This is exactly what helped it to justify (or rather, not have to justify) its illegal actions aimed at the North.

It is important to point out another aspect in this part of the work. Namely, during the aforementioned process, the Government of Kosovo almost completely ignored the voices of the Serbs from the North of Kosovo. Although the influence that Belgrade has on the Serbian community in Kosovo through the de facto monopartism established by the formation of the Serbian List, a party created by the ruling structure in Serbia, is at a high level, it is often perceived by the Government of Kosovo as absolute and comprehensive. Relying on this, the authorities in Pristina, especially the current ones, overlook two very important things. The first is that among the Serbian community in the North there is, although not significant, a certain number of people who are not connected to the political structures supported by the authorities in Belgrade. The second is that the Government of Kosovo is not ready to accept that there is a consensus among the Serb community regarding key security, existential and identity issues and that these are the authentic views of Serbs from the North of Kosovo and that the community is not instrumentalised by the official Belgrade. Taking into account these premises, the Government of Kosovo ignored the opinion of the vast majority of Serbs from the North who, as we have already stated, felt security threatened due to the illegal presence of special units, but also due to their inappropriate and unprofessional attitude towards citizens who belong to the Serb community. Despite the announcements of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, about starting a dialogue with the Kosovo Serbs, it is clear that the authorities in Pristina were not ready to hear the voice of the Serb community in the North when it comes to this matter. The unwillingness of representatives of the central government to respect the opinions of the majority of members of the non-majority community, especially in a post-conflict society such as Kosovo, undoubtedly threatens democratic capacities and undermines overall relations between communities. This section discussed democratic validity of the Kosovo government's policies toward the Serb-majority North, while the next section will discuss concepts of peace and stability.

PEACE AND STABILITY IN KOSOVO AND THE REGION

Although 24 years have passed since the end of the conflict in Kosovo, this area is still perceived as a fragile post-conflict society. Precisely for this reason, every crisis and tightening of relations between the communities that were the key actors of the previous conflict requires a serious approach and commitment to its resolution. However, frequent crises were not the embodiment of the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina in the entire post-war period. Namely, after the start of the dialogue under the auspices of the European Union in 2011, which aimed to normalize relations between the parties, a number of agreements were signed, mostly on the 'technical', but also on the 'political' level. That trend continued until 2016, when the last agreement was concluded within the negotiations on the normalization of relations.³¹ After this "period of improvement" in relations, there was a "period of stagnation" which, in our opinion, lasted until 2021, that is, until Albin Kurti came to power. Although sporadic crises existed during the period of stagnation, it was primarily marked by the interruption of dialogue as such. What makes the period after 2021, which we called the 'crisis period' different, is the continuity and permanence of crises and crisis management.

Relying on the concepts of peace and stability as key factors in conflict/post-conflict societies, it is clear that stability has been replaced by permanent instability in this period, while peace could be defined as negative, that is, as the mere absence of conflict on a wider scale. This concept was defined by the theorist of peace studies, Johan Galtung. According to him, negative peace is the absence of direct violence, while positive peace represents the integration of human society.³²

Among the series of controversial decisions that marked this period, the most significant for us are those related to the deployment of special units of the Kosovo Police in the North. As we have already stated in the previous part of this paper, the unprofessional behavior of the members of these units led to the fact that the Serb community in the North feels threatened by their permanent presence and the increasingly intensive, although also illegal, construction of police bases in this region.³³ In relations that have never been more strained, if not since the end of the war, then certainly since the beginning of the dialogue between the two sides,

even the smallest spark could start a fire. The situation reached its peak when, after the local elections in the North, which were boycotted by the Serbs, the Government of Kosovo issued an order to the special units of the Kosovo Police to provide the newly elected mayors, who are ethnic Albanians, with access to the municipal buildings that the Serbs had blocked in protest.³⁴ Then there was a conflict between the members of these units and Serbs from the North, the first such conflicts recorded since 2011.³⁵ Immediately after the mentioned event, international actors (in the first place the USA) marked these actions as unilateral and uncoordinated and called on the Government of Kosovo to stop their further negotiations, threatening to damage relations with Kosovo.³⁶ As the authorities in Pristina refused to cooperate on this issue, sanctions/restrictive measures were imposed on Kosovo, primarily by the United States of America, and later by the European Union, its traditional allies.³⁷ Although it is clear that the eventual conflict of a wider scale would be localized (as in 2004) due to the presence of numerous international actors in Kosovo, primarily the NATO mission (KFOR), there is no doubt that the aforementioned actors recognized that the deepening of the crisis would have significant implications when it comes to the entire region of the Western Balkans. At a time when Europe is facing a war in Ukraine, an additional escalation in an atmosphere of long-lost stability and fragile peace in Kosovo would certainly not be in anyone's interest. This closes the section on concepts of peace and stability. The next section will discuss trust issues caused by the Kosovo government's policies.

TRUST ISSUES

This section deals with the concerns the concept of trust. In this sense, the disruption of relations or the loss of trust between the central government and members of the Serb community, primarily in the North of Kosovo, is much very important to examine in the overall context of interethnic relations and stability. The section looks at the disruption of relations between the Serb and Albanian communities in Kosovo, who represent – in the context of this paper – the bearers of contemporary Kosovo society. Precisely for this reason, international actors have invested extraordinary efforts to build trust between the members of these communities, because this factor is recognized as one of the most important for the future of multi-ethnic Kosovo.

CAN WE MOVE FORWARD? AND HOW?

No matter how serious and delicate the situation, there is no doubt that one can always move forward. However, the second question is much more complex and difficult - how? Crisis management, which, as we have already stated, was one of the hallmarks of the 'crisis period', is perceived by many as a necessity. Although it was a necessity in a situation when the crisis itself has already occurred, relying exclusively on crisis management led to the use of crisis management exclusively. Namely, dealing with the consequences and not the cause of the crisis cannot be an effective solution in the long term. That's why the perspective of 'process tracing' that we offered in the first part of this paper can help us to better understand the bigger picture in order to create a comprehensive approach to solving this situation. First of all, the presence of special units of the Kosovo Police, made up almost exclusively of ethnic Albanians, which are permanently present in Serb-majority areas, contradicts the current legal framework. In this regard, most of the police bases that were built in the last two years for the needs of these formations in the North are also considered illegal because they were mostly built on land usurped/expropriated from the local Serb population. If we take into account that the aforementioned development was one of the main reasons for the exit of Kosovo's public institutions and, in that sense, especially of the Kosovo Police, by the Serbs from the North, it is clear that the termination of their permanent presence in Serb-majority areas in this region would be a key precondition for the solution of this problem. Senior civil society leader from the North of Kosovo Milica Andrić-Rakić, from the New Social Initiative NGO, argues that

“a political solution is difficult to imagine at this stage, and that we could rather expect some kind of security solution imposed by the international community.” This would imply the withdrawal of special units of the Kosovo Police from the North and the establishment of an arrangement like the one that already exists between the Kosovo Security Forces and the NATO KFOR mission. The agreement between the then Secretary of NATO, Rasmussen, and, at that time, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, meant that the KSF must request and receive the consent of KFOR to enter the territory of four Serb-majority municipalities in the North”.

On the other hand, many people think that special units will continue their presence in some form in the North of Kosovo. An unnamed UNMIK official from the Serb community, through an interview, proposed the following solution: "In accordance with Articles 61 and 128.4 (Constitution of Kosovo, ed.), create a multi-ethnic, Serb-majority special unit that would deal with special operations in Serb areas. This unit could be formed on the model of a special police unit established for the preservation/protection of religious and cultural heritage". Also, this official noted that 'additional determination and detailing of article 9 of the Brussels Agreement, which deals with the ethnic composition of the police in the Region North, should be carried out. This is especially important considering that the Government of Kosovo tried to cheat the mentioned agreement in April 2022 by justifying that the units present in the North are not 'special units of the Kosovo Police' but that it is a 'Rapid Border Patrol Unit' made up of regular police, although made up of ethnic Albanians armed with rifles and in armored vehicles'.

The next step would be the reintegration of members of the Serb community into the Kosovo Police, as well as other relevant institutions in the North. This is especially important if we know that the presence of special units intensified after the aforementioned exit of the Kosovo Police by the Serbs, and their return is perceived as one of the necessary conditions for the situation to normalize again. When it comes to this matter, Andrić-Rakić referred to the reintegration of Serbs into the Kosovo Police stating that 'those police officers should organize a union and start negotiations on their possible return. In this sense, the key aspect of the negotiations should be the discussion about the internal problems they had, which were one of the reasons for the initial exit. These are, above all, problems of mistrust between them and the special units, as well as the creation of a second level of decision-making, that is, the violation of their competences given by the Brussels Agreement. After harmonizing the positions on this issue, a *lex specialis* should be passed which would allow the aforementioned Serbs to return to the Kosovo Police.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with all of the above, below are the key recommendations to the Government of Kosovo in order to resolve the issue of the presence of special units of the Kosovo Police in the North and, in this sense, to de-escalate the situation:

Specific steps to solve the problem:

- 1 Withdraw special units of the Kosovo Police from the Serb-majority North
- 2 Leave on the ground only members of the regular Kosovo Police who would assist KFOR/EULEX in their work until the reintegration of the Serbs in the KP
- 3 Adopt the necessary legal acts that would enable the initiation of the procedure for the removal of the current mayors through a petition signed by 20% of registered voters in the municipalities in question (in accordance with Article 72 of Law No. 03/L – 040 on local self-government)
- 4 Call for new, extraordinary local elections in 4 Serb-majority municipalities in the North of Kosovo
- 5 Conduct negotiations on the return of Serbs to other relevant institutions, primarily the Kosovo Police
- 6 Restructure all previously permanently present units in accordance with Article 9 of the Brussels Agreement, which states that the composition of the KP in the North will reflect the ethnic composition of the population, these four municipalities will

7

Establish a clear division of responsibilities and insist on cooperation between local regular police in the North and special units

8

Establish a mechanism in accordance with which special units would have to request and receive KFOR's consent to enter the North (according to the existing agreement between KBS and KFOR)

9

Adopt a *lex specialis* in the Assembly of Kosovo that would enable Serbs who left the Kosovo Police to return to it

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