Community Reflections

from

Inter-community Trust Tours

Community Reflections from Inter-community Trust Tours

May 2025, North Mitrovica

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Introduction

This paper presents the attitudes, concerns, and recommendations shared by residents who participated in the Inter-community Trust Tours (ITTs)—a series of locally focused dialogue sessions conducted as part of the project "Strengthening Community Relations in Kosovo."[1] The initiative, supported by UNMIK and implemented by New Social Initiative, aims to foster inter-community dialogue, empower civil society, and build trust through inclusive, grassroots engagement.

Between April 2 and April 17, 2025, six ITTs were held across the municipalities of Gračanica/Graçanicë, North Mitrovica, Gjilan/Gnjilane, Štrpce/Shtërpcë, Pristina, and Prizren.

These tours brought together more than 90 participants from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds—including community leaders, youth, activists, media, students, and civil society organizations. In open and facilitated discussions, participants exchanged views on key issues affecting their communities, with thematic focus on language rights, rule of law, media, environment, economic development, and civic participation.

The insights gathered through these sessions reflect a wide range of lived experiences and local challenges. More importantly, they offer community-driven recommendations for strengthening institutional accountability, advancing inclusion, and building sustainable inter-ethnic cooperation. The paper also supports the ongoing implementation of the Kosovo Trust-building Forum Outcome Document, reinforcing local ownership in reconciliation and trust-building processes.

[1] All references to "Kosovo" in this Report are made in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 of 1999.

Participation & Inclusion:

A Democratic

Promise Unfulfilled

Across all municipalities, one issue was raised repeatedly: resident participation in Kosovo remains shallow and heavily conditional.

People from all communities expressed a lack of trust in institutions, citing poor transparency, reactive governance, and consultations that feel performative rather than participatory.

In Prizren, active resident participation remains limited, largely due to widespread institutional mistrust and poorly organized public consultations.

Many residents, especially women and minority groups, feel excluded from decision-making processes, contributing to a broader sense of civic disengagement.

Structural barriers, such as the absence of gender-sensitive budgeting and resistance to female civic activism, reinforce this exclusion. However, Prizren also offers positive examples of interethnic cooperation, as seen in successful advocacy for Romani language recognition. K Roma, K Ashkali, and K Egyptian communities, particularly women and girls, face compounded marginalization that requires more targeted institutional support.

While NGOs and the international community have made strides in promoting education and outreach, municipal institutions remain disconnected from residents, failing to adopt the inclusive and community-driven practices used by civil society. Economic inequality, especially among women and youth, further restricts participation in civic life, signaling a need for more accessible, inclusive, and collaborative engagement strategies.

In **Shtërpcë/Štrpce**, low civic participation is primarily driven by apathy, especially among members of the K-Serb community. A persistent fear of political engagement—rooted in past experiences and reinforced by narratives from the central level—continues to shape behavior. For many, participation is narrowly understood as party affiliation, while broader forms of civic involvement remain underappreciated.

Even among the educated youth, engagement remains limited. *The non-recognition of diplomas and limited access to the labor market have further discouraged political and social involvement.* Although residents are generally informed about local assemblies and public meetings, turnout is low—suggesting that competing life priorities, rather than lack of awareness, are the primary barrier.

Civil society in the municipality is largely inactive, with minimal presence in key civic or policy platforms. Legal mechanisms to support resident participation exist, but are widely seen as ineffective. Many residents only learn about their rights when directly impacted. Language barriers continue to impede access to services and full participation in public life.

In **Gjilan/Gnjilane**, residents from all backgrounds shared a sentiment of fatigue:

Even when people show up, they feel that nothing changes.

Women are often present in meetings but absent from decision-making spaces. Youth — especially from rural areas — are largely unaware of institutional avenues like Youth Assemblies or advisory councils, due to limited outreach and civic education.

Across all municipalities, the disconnect between institutions and residents is wide and growing. Municipal practices rarely reflect lived realities. Many participants expressed the need for institutional models that mirror civil society strategies: going door-to-door, hosting small meetings in familiar spaces, and directly addressing the barriers to participation faced by women, youth, and minorities.

Language Rights:

A Right in Theory,

a Barrier in Practice

## Despite Kosovo's legal framework for multilingualism, implementation is highly uneven.

In Gjilan/Gnjilane, the Law on the Use of Languages is only partially implemented. While some translation services are in place, institutions often neglect their full legal obligations, limiting access to services and participation for non-majority communities.

The absence of sign language interpretation in public institutions was noted as a significant gap, excluding deaf and hard-of-hearing residents from both services and public life.

The K-Roma community continues to face linguistic exclusion, with their specific needs largely unaddressed in public service delivery. This further deepens their marginalization and limits their participation in decision-making.

Civil society actors also pointed to language requirements from donors, particularly the expectation to communicate and report in English, as a barrier. This disadvantages many local professionals and organizations despite their expertise and community reach.
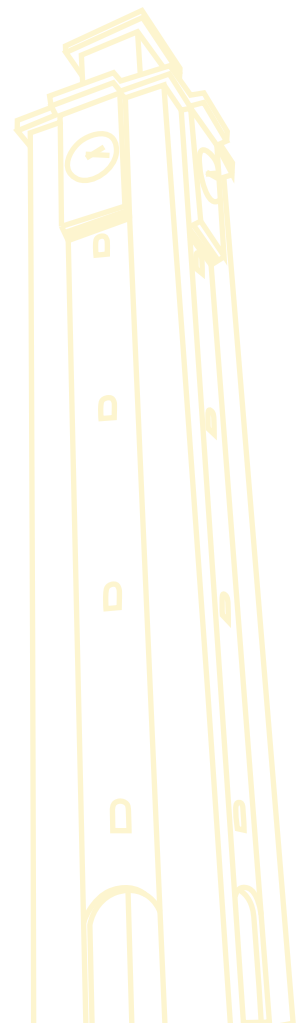
Participants emphasized that language barriers directly undermine inter-community relations, reducing opportunities for cooperation and joint initiatives between the K-Albanian, K-Serb, and K-Roma communities.

However, one successful NGO-led project involving both K-Albanian and K-Serb partners was highlighted as a positive example—effective translation enabled meaningful collaboration, illustrating the importance of inclusive language practices.

Persistent language barriers in public services continue to affect the K-Serb community in **Gračanica/ Graçanicë** and surrounding areas. Despite legal obligations, most municipal offices in nearby Pristina employ only one or two Serbian-speaking staff. As a result, many K-Serb residents must either pay for private translation or forgo accessing essential services, including healthcare, legal aid, and administrative procedures.

Participants emphasized widespread institutional non-compliance with language laws.

Official documents such as traffic fines, court rulings, and administrative notices are often issued exclusively in Albanian. Even when translation is formally provided, the quality is frequently poor, especially in court settings—compromising fair legal procedures for non-Albanian speakers.

There was a strong sense of political stagnation. Despite years of advocacy and international pressure, little progress has been made in improving the situation. Instead, the Serbian language has become increasingly politicized, further eroding political will and undermining trust in institutions.
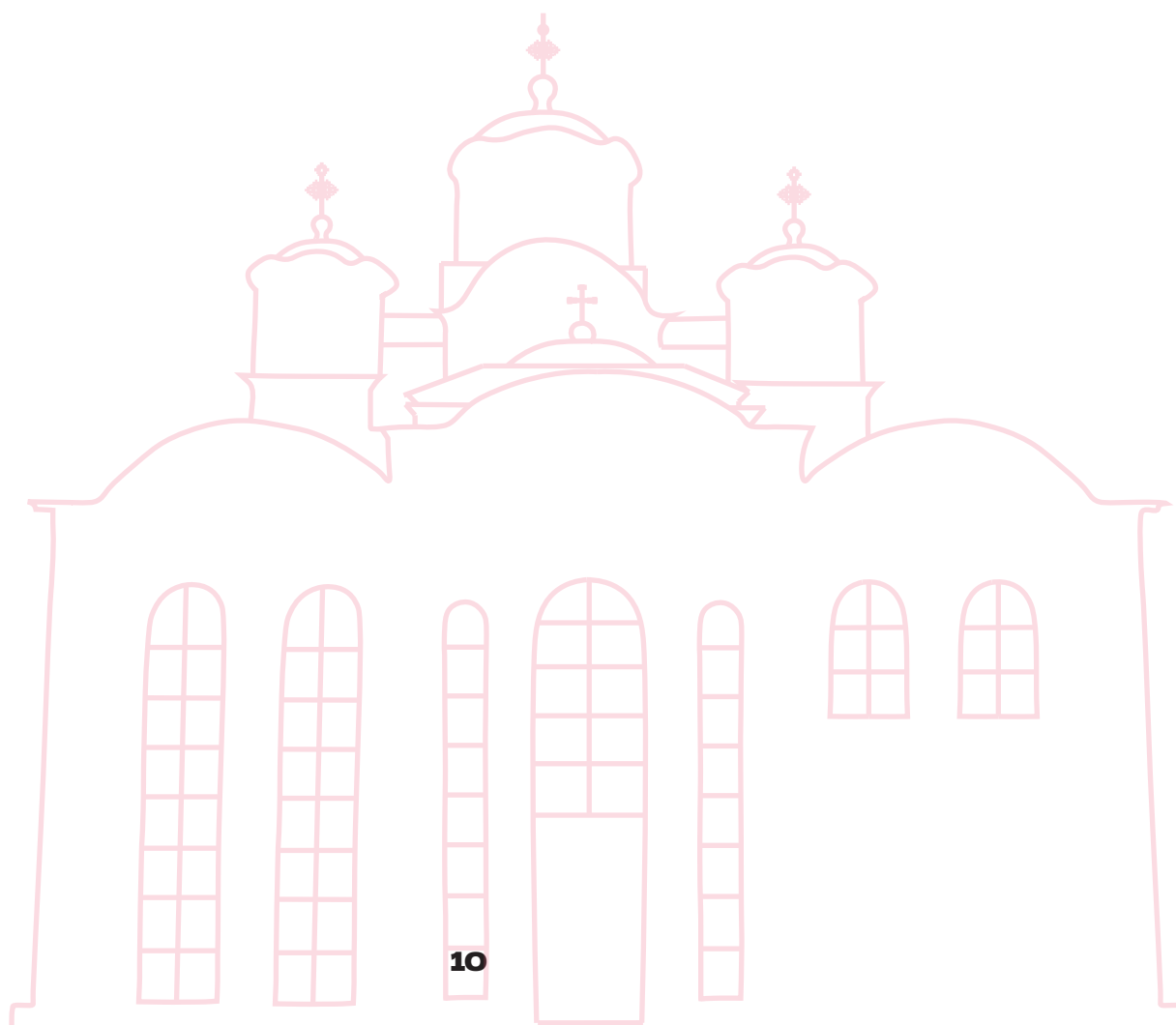
Economic Exclusion:

Discrimination by Design

Across multiple municipalities, participants identified a pattern of economic exclusion driven by politicized decision-making, discriminatory policies, and chronic underinvestment in non-majority communities. In K-Serb-majority areas especially, authorities' actions—such as currency restrictions and import bans—were viewed as intentionally disruptive to local economies. Structural barriers like corruption, excessive bureaucracy, and the lack of targeted development support further deepened feelings of marginalization. Despite these challenges, participants emphasized the untapped potential for interethnic economic cooperation, particularly in sectors like tourism and services, where successful local initiatives already exist.

In **Pristina**, economic exclusion is deeply rooted in structural discrimination, particularly affecting LGBTQ+ individuals and K-Roma women. These groups face pervasive barriers in employment and housing, driven by a culture of fear and invisibility that forces many to conceal their identities. Private sector practices remain largely non-inclusive, and the absence of targeted authorities' interventions or inclusive policies exacerbates systemic inequality. While queer-friendly spaces exist, they often avoid public visibility due to social stigma.

> Discrimination is not limited to personal experiences—studies show clear disparities in how businesses treat different groups.

The broader environment is shaped by conservative social norms and a lack of education on human rights within both the business sector and the general public. *Institutions continue to be mistrusted, particularly by marginalized communities, who often avoid seeking justice due to prior discrimination.* Civil society has attempted to fill these gaps by educating public officials, but sustainable change requires a shift toward people-centered economic development that prioritizes dignity, inclusion, and equal opportunity for all.

Participants in North Mitrovica described a climate of persistent economic stagnation, driven by a combination of political tensions, systemic corruption, and exclusionary policies. In the K-Serb-majority northern municipalities, including North Mitrovica, obtaining even basic business licenses can reportedly take over three years due to entrenched bureaucracy and administrative roadblocks.

Recent decisions by the Kosovo authorities —such as the Central Bank of Kosovo's ban on the use of the Serbian dinar and the prohibition on imports of Serbian goods—were widely criticized as politically motivated. These policies have had a disproportionate impact on the local economy of North Mitrovica,

disrupting trade, limiting access to essential goods, and intensifying economic insecurity.

Participants emphasized that the lack of meaningful public investment in K-Serb-majority areas like North Mitrovica continues to limit job creation and development opportunities. However, examples of successful interethnic cooperation do exist—especially in the tourism sector, where K-Albanian owned agencies refer clients to K-Serb tour guides, and some businesses in North Mitrovica employ ethnically diverse staff, showing the potential for collaboration when not politically obstructed.

Rule of Law and Institutional Credibility

Residents expressed deep distrust in institutions due to weak law enforcement, political interference, and lack of accountability. Legal protections, especially for minorities and vulnerable groups, are often disregarded in practice, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and impunity.

Legal frameworks exist, but trust in the rule of law is weak.

Survivors of domestic violence, particularly in Dragash/Dragaš and Shtërpcë/Štrpce, recounted stories of being ignored or dismissed by police. K-Roma women in Mitrovica North echoed similar experiences, where complaints went unregistered or uninvestigated.

Participants across municipalities spoke of nepotism in public employment, where party affiliation outweighs merit. This fuels disengagement and a sense of futility. Civic participation becomes a dead end when residents see laws selectively enforced or completely ignored.

There is a dire need for training frontline workers, especially police and municipal staff, to better support victims and engage marginalized communities without bias. Strengthening institutional accountability and depoliticizing local governance were recurring demands.

The rule of law in Gjilan/Gnjilane is challenged by weak enforcement of existing legal protections, particularly regarding language rights and minority inclusion. This fuels distrust in institutions and the broader justice system.

Concerns were raised about corruption and nepotism, especially in public sector employment. Hiring practices are widely viewed as influenced by political affiliations and personal networks rather than merit, damaging institutional credibility and morale.

Exclusion from public consultations was another concern. Residents often lack access to information about public hearings or feel intimidated from participating. There is a growing perception that only those aligned with ruling parties have influence, deterring independent civic engagement.

Finally, lack of institutional accountability—particularly for failures in implementing laws protecting minority rights—remains a persistent issue, deepening frustration among marginalized groups.

Media & Disinformation:

Between Watchdog and Weapon

The media landscape is fragmented, under-resourced, and increasingly hostile. In Pristina and Mitrovica, LGBTQ+ activists and K-Roma youth described targeted hate campaigns online. Journalists, especially those covering sensitive topics, face intimidation.

Most local outlets lack the resources for investigative journalism. Instead, copy-paste reporting dominates, with little nuance in how issues of gender, ethnicity, or identity are portrayed. Participants in Prizren and Gjilan/Gnjilane also noted that journalists are often poorly trained to handle complex topics like interethnic relations or human rights.

Disinformation spreads rapidly across ethnic lines. The lack of cross-language media partnerships means that narratives rarely travel between communities. What's needed is not only better regulation but also investment in media literacy, journalist training, and platforms for minority voices to be heard and trusted.

In Pristina, discussions revealed that while media coverage of LGBTQ+ issues has shown signs of improvement, it remains largely superficial and event-focused. Reports on Pride events have become more neutral, but broader representation of LGBTQ+ lives is still lacking, and deeper issues are often ignored.

Hate speech, especially on social media and in talk show formats, continues to poison public discourse, with limited accountability. Many journalists in Pristina have resisted training efforts, viewing them as disrespectful to their professionalism, which hinders progress toward ethical and inclusive reporting.

Meanwhile, **Serbian-language media remains isolated**, with limited mutual understanding between K -Albanian and K-Serb audiences. **K-Roma language representation in the media is almost nonexistent**, further marginalizing this community. Disinformation is a growing threat, fueled by unregulated digital platforms that lack editorial oversight.

Public awareness in Pristina regarding tools to detect and combat false information is low, making the information landscape increasingly fragmented and unreliable. This dual role of the media—as both a potential watchdog and a vector for harm—requires urgent attention to ensure it serves democratic and inclusive purposes.

Participants in the North Mitrovica discussion expressed concern over the increasing polarization of the media landscape in Kosovo overall. Both Belgrade and Pristina based outlets often engage in sensationalist reporting, which fuels ethnic tensions and fosters mistrust. Participants expressed concern that such reporting reinforces division and creates a toxic public discourse.

The rise of social media platforms—notably Telegram and TikTok—was flagged as a growing threat, with these channels increasingly used to spread

misinformation and even to coordinate harassment campaigns against civil society actors, particularly those promoting cooperation or dissenting from dominant nationalist narratives.

Despite this, local Serbian-language media in North Mitrovica are widely seen as trustworthy and community-oriented, especially in contrast to larger national or regional outlets. Their perceived closeness to local realities makes them critical sources of information for the population.

Environment:

A Shared Concern,

Unequally Prioritized

Environmental concerns cut across ethnic and regional lines, but institutional responses remain reactive and short-term.

Illegal waste dumping is a persistent issue in Shtërpcë/Štrpce and Prizren, exacerbated by insufficient infrastructure and weak enforcement.

Although Prizren has improved waste collection through partnerships like the one with a Japanese waste management company, environmental protection is still not a municipal priority. Illegal dumping continues, recycling services are lacking—particularly in rural areas—and awareness among residents remains low. Initiatives such as compost bin distribution and Earth Day cleanups are sporadic and insufficiently integrated into a long-term strategy. NGOs focused on environmental protection are few and under-resourced, while municipal responses tend to be reactive rather than proactive.

Community-driven events like river cleanups show promise, but they need stronger institutional backing and broader resident involvement. Efforts such as fines for littering and Car-Free Day are limited in impact due to weak enforcement and outreach. To foster real environmental change, Prizren requires sustained public education, cross-sector cooperation, and policies that prioritize environmental stewardship as a shared civic responsibility.

Waste management remains one of the most pressing issues in Shtërpcë/Štrpce. The municipality lacks a licensed waste collection company, preventing regular service and making it impossible to enforce payment or issue fines. Illegal landfills are widespread and tend to re-emerge even after cleanup efforts. Many residents misuse or refuse waste bins, often due to reluctance to pay for services.

Environmental education is lacking, particularly in schools, which contributes to poor waste disposal habits among younger generations.

Recycling initiatives are undermined by inefficiencies in the collection process, where sorted waste is ultimately mixed during transport.

The construction of mini-hydropower plants has led to the loss of drinking water in several villages. *Despite joint protests by both K-Serb and K-Albanian residents, no corrective measures were taken.* Deforestation continues unchecked, particularly in private forest areas, due to the absence of effective monitoring and enforcement.

Residents widely believe that both environmental improvement and greater civic engagement require a combination of better education and stricter enforcement. Without a shift in both governance and mindset, these longstanding issues are likely to persist.

Recommendations

1 Political Participation

- Increase awareness that political participation goes beyond party membership.
- Launch civic education campaigns to reduce fear and stigma around political engagement.
- Strengthen community-level dialogue spaces, especially for youth.
- Improve diploma recognition and access to employment to incentivize youth participation.
- Make legal mechanisms more accessible and understandable to the public.

2 Environmental Protection

- Formalize waste collection with a licensed company to enable enforcement.
- Educate residents, especially youth, proper waste disposal and environmental responsibility.
- Increase transparency around environmental decisions (e.g., mini-hydropower plants).
- Strengthen and strictly enforce regulations to prevent illegal deforestation, with a particular focus on privately owned forest areas.
- Improve the recycling system by preventing the mixing of separated waste.

3 Language Rights

- Fully implement and monitor the Law on the Use of Languages in public institutions.
- Institutionalize sign language services in public administration.
- Recognize and accommodate the language needs of the KRoma community.
- Support local civil society with access to professional translation, reducing reliance on English for donor communication.
- Promote language inclusion to improve inter-community cooperation.
- Enforce bilingual hiring practices across all public institutions.
- Establish permanent, professional translation units in courts and municipalities.
- Strengthen the enforcement powers of the Office of the Language Commissioner.

4 Rule of Law

- Improve implementation of legal protections, particularly language and minority rights.
- Combat nepotism by improving transparency in public hiring.
- Train institutions to respond more sensitively to gender-based violence.
- Ensure better outreach and inclusion in public hearings.
- Protect civic space by preventing the politicization of resident participation.

5 Economic Development

- Revoke politically motivated restrictions that harm economic activity.
- Increase investment in K-Serb-majority areas to support jobs and services.
- Create a free economic area in the North to strengthen the local economy and encourage cooperation between communities across neighboring areas.
- Promote interethnic economic cooperation, especially in tourism, agriculture, and services.

6 Media

- Expand international support for independent, professional local media outlets.
- Introduce digital literacy programs in schools to counter misinformation.
- Promote cross-community media projects that avoid sensationalism and foster constructive narratives.