



A Comparative Analysis on the Integration of Albanians in Serbia and Serbs in Kosovo

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Authors:

Vesa Shatri

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1. Introduction

The integration of minorities is a critical challenge in the normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia. This study examines the integration of Albanians in Serbia and Serbs in Kosovo, highlighting the implications for minority inclusion in post-conflict societies. Policies, laws, and political debates directly impact the daily lives of individuals. For Albanians in Serbia, particularly in the Presheva/Preševo Valley, this often means limited political participation, restricted language rights, and economic challenges. For Serbs in Kosovo, especially those outside the north, the main concerns are personal security, trust in institutions, and cultural preservation.

Integration is not just an abstract concept; it is about dignity, belonging, and envisioning a future where communities can coexist peacefully. The treatment of minorities by these states is crucial for regional stability, democratic credibility, and the everyday realities of citizens seeking normalcy after prolonged conflict.

By comparing these two cases, this study aims to highlight both progress and remaining obstacles. It seeks to demonstrate how inclusive governance can foster coexistence and peace, offering valuable lessons for reconciliation in divided societies.

Methodologically, this report employs a combination of research methods to comprehensively address the research question. The analytical method was utilized to review literature, legal frameworks, and reports related to minority integration. The comparative method served as the core approach, enabling a side-by-side analysis of Albanians in Serbia and Serbs in Kosovo. The descriptive/historical method was used to trace the development of minority rights since the Kosovo conflict, providing context for current challenges.

2. Background

The relationship between Kosovo and Serbia, particularly regarding their respective minorities, is governed by a series of political, institutional, and socio-economic frameworks. The EU-facilitated dialogue, initiated in 2011, has evolved from a technical process to a high-level political dialogue aimed at normalizing relations, with consistent support from the United States. This dialogue has produced several key agreements designed to integrate minority communities and improve daily life. The Brussels Agreements (2013 & 2015) established a plan for normalizing relations, with a central, and highly contentious, provision being the establishment of an Association of Serb Majority Municipalities (ASM) in Kosovo. The ASM is intended to represent the collective interests of Serb-majority municipalities in areas such as education, health-care, and economic planning, all while operating under Kosovo law. Prior to the political agreements, a technical dialogue yielded agreements on practical issues such as freedom of movement, integrated border management (IBM), mutual recognition of university diplomas, and the return of cadastral documents. These agreements aimed to facilitate smoother travel and trade for all citizens.

Several initiatives have been implemented to integrate the Serb population, particularly in the north, into Kosovo's legal and institutional framework. Based on the UN-led Ahtisaari Plan, Kosovo's constitution reserves 20 seats in its Assembly for non-majority communities, with 10 of those seats guaranteed for the Serb community. This measure is designed to motivate Serbs to participate in Kosovo's institutions. Following local elections in 2013, the four northern Serb-majority municipalities began operating legally within Kosovo's system. Illegal Serbian police structures were dismantled, and their personnel were integrated into the Kosovo Police. An implementation plan was also agreed upon to establish a unitary justice system in the north, with one Basic Court and one Basic Prosecution Office for the Mitrovica region. An agreement was implemented to collect customs revenue at northern border crossings, with the funds transferred to a Development Fund to promote socio-economic development in the northern municipalities. Kosovo and Serbia also exchanged Liaison Officers to facilitate communication.

The context for the Albanian minority in Serbia is shaped by systemic administrative discrimination and a challenging socio-political environment. A key policy is the "passivation of addresses," where the Ministry of Interior removes individuals from the civil registry, often after a single unannounced police visit determines they are not living at their registered address. This practice disproportionately targets Albanians in Southern Serbia, particularly in Preshevë/Preševo, Bujanoc/Bujanovac, and Medvegja/Medveđa. The consequence of being "passivized" is a complete loss of civil rights, including the right to vote, access healthcare, renew ID cards, or own property. Albanians face a hostile climate marked by routine hate speech from media and public officials, who have used pejorative terms without condemnation from the government. There is also significant political underrepresentation of Albanians in local and state institutions, including the police and judiciary. Southern Serbia is one of the most underdeveloped regions in the country, with high unemployment and a lack of in-

vestment. A major structural barrier is Serbia's non-recognition of university diplomas from Kosovo, which prevents educated youth from finding public sector employment in their hometowns. Furthermore, Albanian students have faced a chronic shortage of textbooks in their native language for nearly two decades.

3. Findings

The central finding across the sources is that both the Serb minority in Kosovo and the Albanian minority in Serbia are held hostage to the broader political conflict between Belgrade and Pristina. The unresolved status of Kosovo creates a state of limbo where the fundamental rights and integration of these communities are consistently neglected.

The greatest failure in the integration process is the deadlock over the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM). Serbia insists the ASM must have executive powers as outlined in the 2015 agreement, while Kosovo fears this would create a "Republika Srpska" style entity that undermines its sovereignty, blocking progress on all other fronts. While the integration of the police was a success, significant failures remain. Serbia reportedly continues to illegally pay parallel judicial personnel, and the paramilitary "Civil Protection Structure" has not been fully dismantled, posing a threat to the rule of law. The mechanism of 10 reserved seats is widely perceived as flawed. Both Serbs and Albanians believe these MPs are "controlled" by Belgrade and represent the interests of the Serbian state rather than the local community, turning a tool for integration into one for destabilization. A legacy of conflict has resulted in deep segregation, with communities living in "fear, mistrust and insecurity." This is reinforced by parallel education systems supported by Serbia, which entrench ethnic divisions and contribute to a feeling among Serbs that integration is being forced upon them into a system of "worse quality." Following the 1999 war, there was a systematic destruction of Serb Orthodox religious sites. While international actors like UNESCO have led reconstruction, local Kosovar institutions have shown less commitment to protecting this heritage.

The Serbian government is accused of conducting "ethnic cleansing through administrative means" by using the "passivation of addresses" policy to disproportionately target and disenfranchise ethnic Albanians. This process strips individuals of all their civil rights and has dramatically reduced the official Albanian population, particularly in Medveđa. Hate speech against Albanians is routinely used by media and high-ranking public officials without consequence, contributing to an atmosphere of intolerance. The community feels completely isolated, with neither the government nor the opposition showing genuine interest in their problems. Southern Serbia suffers from extreme economic neglect, with unemployment rates exceeding 40% in Bujanovac and approaching 60% in Preševo. Alleged discrimination in hiring and a lack of opportunity force mass emigration to Western Europe or Kosovo. The non-recognition of university diplomas from Kosovo is a major barrier that prevents educated youth from finding employment and forces them to emigrate, creating a "brain drain." This is compounded by decades-long shortages of textbooks in the Albanian language and extreme financial and political pressure on Albanian-language media.

4. Policy Recommendations

End Administrative Discrimination and Uphold the Rule of Law. To ensure equality and justice, it is imperative to end discriminatory state practices and establish a single, fair legal framework for all citizens. In Serbia, the government must immediately cease the discriminatory "passivation of addresses." An independent commission should be established to review all cases and restore the civil rights of those who have been unfairly "passivized." This action would address the practice described as "ethnic cleansing through administrative means." In Kosovo, the government must fully dismantle all remaining Serbian parallel structures, particularly in the justice and security sectors, to establish a unitary rule of law. This addresses the finding that Serbia continues to illegally pay judicial personnel and that the paramilitary "Civil Protection Structure" has not been fully dismantled. The primary responsibility lies with the governments of Serbia and Kosovo. They should be supported by local institutions, civil society organizations documenting abuses, and international actors like the EU and OSCE, who should use the EU integration process as leverage. Restoring civil rights and establishing a single rule of law would build trust in state institutions, strengthen sovereignty, and create a safer, more predictable environment for all citizens.

Ensure Fair Political Representation and Meaningful Autonomy. Legitimate political participation and self-governance for both minority communities are essential. The political deadlock over the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM) in Kosovo must be broken by finding a model that respects Kosovo's constitution while fulfilling international obligations. In the spirit of reciprocity, Serbia should address the call from Albanian leaders for a similar status, such as an Association of Albanian Municipalities. In Serbia, the government should implement proportional representation for Albanians in local and state institutions to address their severe underrepresentation. In Kosovo, steps should be taken to ensure that Serb political representatives genuinely advocate for their local constituents rather than acting as proxies for Belgrade. This would counter the widespread perception that they are "controlled" by the Serbian state. The governments of Kosovo and Serbia must engage constructively in the EU-facilitated dialogue. The EU and US must continue to facilitate this process, while civil society and experts can offer models to find a middle ground. Resolving the ASM issue would unlock the entire normalization process and advance EU integration. It would provide a framework for self-governance for Serbs and affirm equality for Albanians, reducing marginalization.

Promote Economic Development and Equal Opportunity. Addressing economic neglect and hardship is crucial to reducing emigration and inter-ethnic tensions. In Serbia, the government should launch a targeted economic renewal plan for the underdeveloped southern municipalities, actively combat employment discrimination, and create a secure legal framework to encourage investment from the Albanian diaspora. This would address the region's high unemployment rates and lack of opportunity. In Kosovo, the government must address the economic hardship and poverty that fuel inter-ethnic tensions and are often exploited by politicians. Both governments must implement targeted economic plans and enforce anti-discrimination laws. International donors like the EU should link financial support to tangible improvements in economic conditions and equal opportunity for minorities. Economic development would improve living standards, reduce the main driver of emigration, and give minorities a tangible stake in the success of their respective states, thereby reducing tensions fueled by poverty.

Guarantee Educational, Linguistic, and Cultural Rights. Preserving cultural identities and creating a viable future for educated minority youth is vital. In Serbia, the government must urgently resolve the non-recognition of university diplomas from Kosovo, provide all necessary textbooks in the Albanian language, and ensure the official use of the Albanian language as guaranteed by law. This would dismantle key barriers preventing educated youth from finding jobs and preserving their culture. In Kosovo, the government must demonstrate local commitment to protecting Serb Orthodox cultural heritage, rather than relying solely on international actors. It should also ensure the parallel Serbian education system does not completely isolate Serbian youth from the rest of society. Both governments must fully implement existing agreements on diploma recognition and minority education. International bodies like UNESCO and the OSCE should continue to monitor and support cultural heritage protection and educational rights. These measures would help preserve cultural identities and halt the "brain drain" of educated youth, giving them a future in their home communities. Protecting cultural heritage is also vital for reconciliation.

5. Conclusion

The central finding of this study is that both minority communities remain effectively hostage to the broader political conflict between Kosovo and Serbia. Their integration is hindered less by local intolerance than by persistent high-level political deadlocks, creating parallel challenges that leave these populations living in "worlds apart." Achieving genuine integration of Albanians in Serbia and Serbs in Kosovo is not only a matter of human rights and social cohesion, but also a strategic imperative. It is essential for the normalization of relations between the two states and for advancing their respective trajectories toward Euro-Atlantic integration. By addressing the political, economic, and cultural rights of these communities, policymakers can directly confront the root grievances that perpetuate mistrust and conflict, laying the groundwork for sustainable reconciliation and long-term stability in the region.

