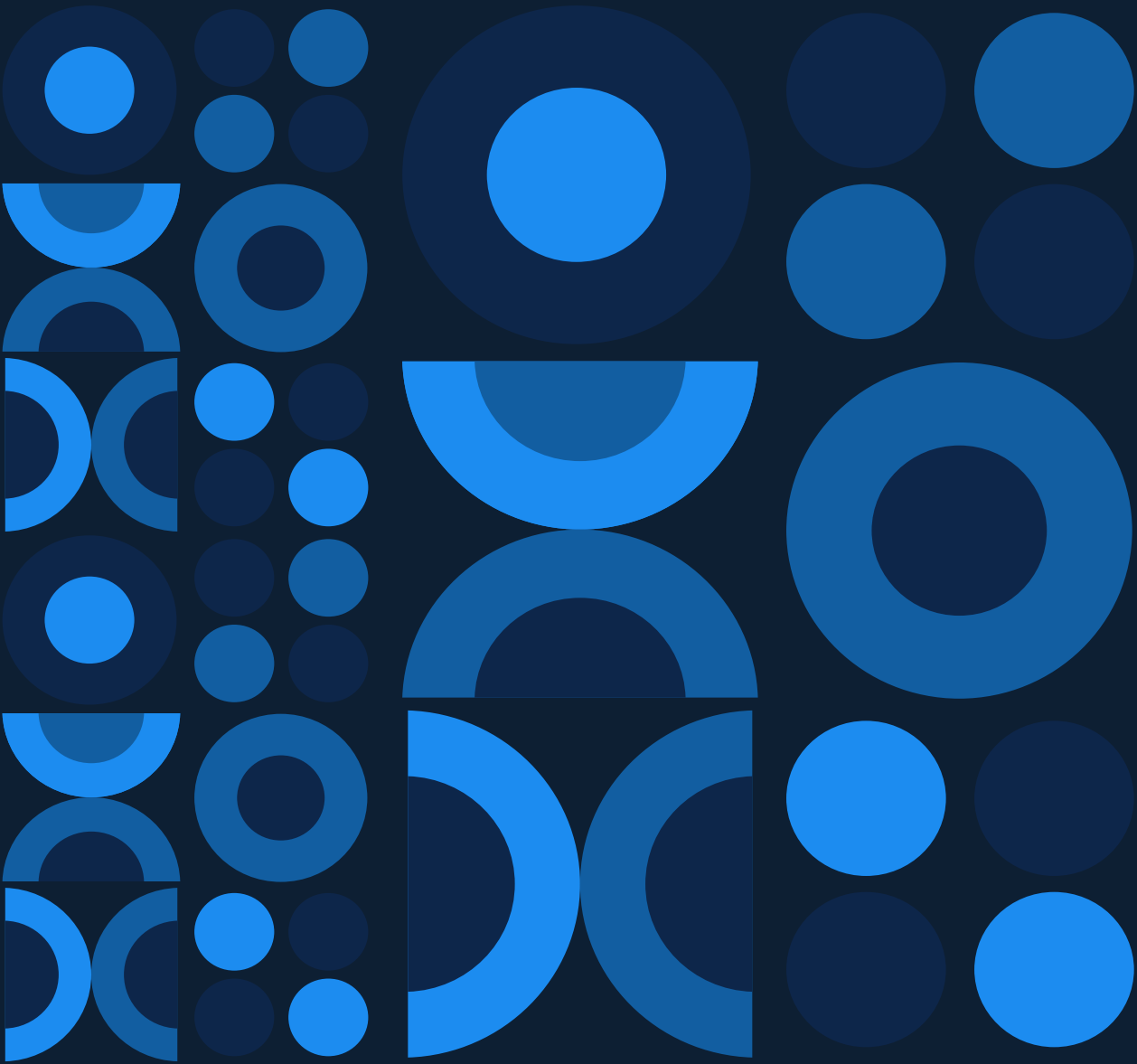


AN OVERVIEW OF THE POTENTIAL FOR
*CONSTRUCTIVE INTEGRATION IN EDUCATION,
HEALTHCARE, ECONOMY, AND CULTURAL
HERITAGE OF THE KOSOVO SERBS*



An overview of the potential for constructive integration in education, healthcare, economy, and cultural heritage of the Kosovo Serbs

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Executive Summary

This report explores the challenges and opportunities for integrating Kosovo's Serb community across key sectors such as education, healthcare, cultural heritage, and the economy. The findings are based on primary data collected through two focus group discussions with the Kosovo Serb community in North Mitrovica in August'24 and with the Kosovo Albanian community in September'24, alongside an analysis of secondary sources, including legal documents, reports, and expert analyses.

Our analysis indicates that meaningful integration of the Kosovo Serbs is closely tied to the broader political normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Without significant progress in this area, efforts to integrate Kosovo Serbs will most likely face resistance from this community. The Kosovo government's approach toward the Kosovo Serb community should shift toward a discourse that promotes existing rights granted by Kosovo's Constitution and the Ahtisaari Plan.

Our focus group discussions have revealed significant confusion and misunderstandings regarding what the integration of Serbian-speaking schools or the Serbian-funded healthcare system in Kosovo entails. Among Kosovo Serbs, there is concern that integration might mean losing control over decisions such as which textbooks to use or the curricula in their schools. Meanwhile, the Kosovo Albanian community also appears to lack full awareness or understanding of the rights guaranteed to Kosovo Serbs in areas such as education and healthcare. For example, the Kosovo Constitution grants Kosovo Serbs the right to use Serbian textbooks, follow a Serbian curriculum, receive funding from the Serbian government, and allow the municipality of North Mitrovica to establish a university. These misunderstandings underscore the need for clearer communication and information-sharing to bridge the gap between the communities.

Kosovo's public should be more informed about the existing rights and autonomy that the Serb community enjoys under Kosovo's legislative framework. Misunderstandings about the extent of these rights, such as the ability of Serbian-speaking schools to operate under Serbian curricula and receive funding from Serbia, have contributed to negative perceptions that such measures are concessions rather than legal guarantees.

The Kosovo government must prioritize the long-promised internal dialogue with the Serb community. This dialogue must be conducted transparently, with a focus on building trust and addressing community concerns. Confidence-building measures, in coordination with international actors such as the EU, US, and Quint countries, will be crucial for fostering a constructive relationship.

Economic integration is still limited, with Serb-majority municipalities primarily relying on public sector employment and informal economies, while efforts to formalize the economy and foster interethnic business cooperation have been met with some resistance in the north of Kosovo, while in the south there is some level of interethnic business cooperation.

Several pressing issues hinder the potential for economic integration and stifle the development of the business sector in Serb-majority areas, particularly in northern Kosovo. Rather

than fostering growth, these challenges contribute to the closure or significant reduction of business activity. Key factors include the fragile political and security situation, especially in the north, the partial ban on Serbian goods imports, the politically motivated opening of Albanian-owned businesses in the north, and ongoing campaigns discouraging the purchase of Serbian products. Additionally, Kosovo Serb producers face limited opportunities to access the broader Kosovo and Albanian markets, further exacerbating economic isolation. These dynamics not only undermine local businesses but also deepen ethnic divisions, impeding the broader goals of regional integration and economic cooperation.

The integration of Serbian-speaking schools into Kosovo's education system is fraught with political sensitivities and deep-seated concerns within the Kosovo Serb community, such as how it will affect the curriculum of the school if it would undermine the Serbian identity and culture, as well as job security among teachers. Important to note in this context is that Article 12 of Law No. 03/L-068 on Education in the Municipalities clearly states that "Schools that teach in the Serbian language may apply curricula or textbooks developed by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia upon notification to the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of Kosovo."¹ At the policy level, there is a real concern among the Kosovo Serb community regarding Kosovo's educational regulatory framework concerning the student-to-teacher ratio, which could potentially lead to the closure of many schools, particularly in smaller Serb-populated villages. This would disproportionately affect rural communities, where Kosovo Serb students are already more isolated, and could further erode the presence of Kosovo Serbs in these areas. Kosovo's legal framework guarantees the protection of Serbian cultural heritage. However, instances of politicization of cultural issues have fueled mistrust.

The report concludes that solutions exist for moving toward constructive integration, but implementation will be challenging. Success depends on the political will of both Kosovo and Serbia to engage in transparent dialogue, avoid inflammatory rhetoric, and ensure that integration measures are supported by the Kosovo Serb community through confidence-building initiatives. International support and coordination with the EU and US will also be crucial in driving the process forward.

¹ See Law No. [03/L-068](https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2543) <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2543>

01 Introduction

This report analyzes the challenges and opportunities for constructive integration of the Kosovo Serb community across four key sectors: education, healthcare, cultural heritage, and the economy. For this report, we use the concept of constructive integration to refer to a process that is based on consent, consultation, and coordination, and it is not imposed. This means it is a process that is closely coordinated and consulted with the EU, the US, and, in general, the Quint countries, and, more importantly, with the local Serb community in Kosovo. Furthermore, it means the process is a result of the normalization dialogue. This approach ensures that integration measures are supported by the community and not imposed. Kosovo's government should take some confidence-building measures so that there is a better understanding and some trust between the government and the Kosovo Serb community and ensure that integration is both inclusive and respectful of the rights and autonomy provided under the Ahtisaari Plan and Kosovo's Constitution.

The effective integration of the Kosovo Serb community is critical for the present and the future of Kosovo as a democratic and multiethnic society, yet it remains a significant challenge due to political, social, and economic barriers. Although the Ahtisaari Plan and Kosovo's Constitution provide a strong legal framework that guarantees the rights and autonomy of non-majority communities, particularly the Kosovo Serbs, the implementation of these provisions has been inconsistent and hampered by political tensions and mistrust. These challenges are further exacerbated by unresolved disputes between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as internal divisions within Kosovo. Consequently, advancing integration will require not only legal guarantees, but also active efforts to build trust, foster dialogue, and create tangible opportunities for integration.

The report is organized into three main sections. The first section examines the overall state of play in education, healthcare, economy, and cultural heritage vis-à-vis the Kosovo Serbs. The second section looks deeper at the challenges for integration in each sector, while the third section discusses the way how to move forward through constructive integration.

The methodology for this report is based on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected through two focus group discussions held with members of the Kosovo Serb community in Mitrovica North in August 2024 and members of the Kosovo Albanian community in Pristina in September 2024. These focus groups provided insights into the community's perspectives on key issues, including education, healthcare, cultural heritage, and economic participation. The qualitative data from these discussions was instrumental in identifying the concerns, fears, and expectations of the Kosovo Serb community regarding integration.

In addition to the primary data, the report draws extensively on secondary sources, including legal documents, reports from international organizations such as the European Commission and OSCE, and academic analyses. These secondary sources were used to contextualize the findings from the focus groups and to provide a deeper overview of the legal and institutional frameworks governing the integration of non-majority communities in Kosovo. Key reports and legal documents, such as the Ahtisaari Plan, the Kosovo Constitu-

tion, and various EU-facilitated agreements between Kosovo and Serbia, were analyzed to understand the structural and legal challenges facing integration efforts.

This mixed-methods approach ensured that the report reflects both the lived experiences of community members and the broader political, legal, and institutional context in which these experiences occur.

02 An examination of the state of play in education, healthcare, cultural heritage and economy

The current state of integration of the Kosovo Serbian community in education, healthcare, cultural heritage, and the economy reflects deep-rooted challenges that remain unresolved. While Kosovo's legislative framework, largely based on the Ahtisaari Plan, provides for extensive rights and autonomy for non-majority communities, including the Kosovo Serbs population, practical implementation has been limited. Each sector faces unique challenges, and despite efforts at reconciliation and integration, mistrust, political tensions, and systemic inefficiencies continue to hamper progress. This section provides a detailed analysis of the state of play in these critical sectors, highlighting the gaps and opportunities for fostering greater inclusion.

2.1 Education

Education remains a fundamental concern for the Serb community in Kosovo, largely due to its symbolic and practical ties to Serbia, as well as to its vital importance to the Kosovo Serb community. Despite the goal of creating an integrated education system as part of post-conflict peacebuilding efforts, Kosovo's education system remains segregated along ethnic lines. Serbian-speaking schools operate within the Serbian education system, using Serbian curricula and adhering to Serbian rules. Trust is a major issue for integration, as explained by a Kosovo Serb, 'I may eventually accept integration, but I cannot send my kids to an Albanian school or Albanian doctor.'² This demonstrates the deep-seated mistrust toward Kosovo institutions.

The legal framework, however, provides significant autonomy to Serbian-speaking schools. The Kosovo Constitution guarantees non-majority communities the right to receive education in their own language and to establish private educational institutions. Article 59 of the Constitution underscores that members of non-majority communities have the right to "receive public education in one of the official languages of the Republic of Kosovo of their choice at all levels" and to establish their educational institutions. Yet, a major barrier to integration remains the lack of trust in Kosovo institutions, particularly in northern Kosovo, where 70% of Kosovo Serbs report no trust in the government of Kosovo. As shown during the focus group discussion with members of the Kosovo Serb community, distrust is primarily directed toward the yet-undefined process of integration and the various challenges that may arise during this transition. From the perspective of the Serb community in Kosovo, the future Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities in Kosovo should take responsibility for overseeing the Serbian-speaking schools in Kosovo, and in general, the establishment of the A/CSM is

² A young Kosovo Serbs quoted in the report "Serb Integration in Kosovo After the Brussels Agreement" written by Marko Prelec and Naim Rashiti for Balkans Policy Research Group (BPRG), p. 40, available at: <https://balkans-group.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Serb-Integration-in-Kosovo-After-Brussels-Agreement-2.pdf>

seen as the key to constructive integration of the Serb community in Kosovo.

Discrepancies in student enrollment data further complicate efforts at integration. While Serbian officials report 22,546 students across 132 Serbian-speaking schools, Kosovo's Ministry of Education has not updated its data on these schools since 2015. Focus group participants from the Serb community in northern Kosovo noted that emigration is increasingly viewed as a solution due to the challenging political and security situation because the challenging political and security situation in the north in recent years has become one of the push factors. This situation has also led to a decline in the number of Kosovo Serb students and a reduction in the arrival of students from Serbia and Montenegro.

The lack of coordination between Kosovo and Serbian education authorities further fragments the education system, and Kosovo's government struggles to ensure equitable funding due to these inconsistencies. Despite this, Kosovo continues to allocate funds for Serbian-speaking schools from its public budget, though over 80% of the education budget is spent on teacher salaries, leaving little for investments in improving the quality of education. The European Commission has criticized this approach in their annual country reports for Kosovo.³

In this context, a particular concern is the salary discrepancy between teachers in the Kosovo and Serbian systems, which may serve as a major disincentive for teachers in Serbian-speaking schools in Kosovo to support integration efforts. Establishing the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities could play an important role in addressing this issue by creating a potential salary top-up system as a transitional solution for teachers in these schools.

The focus-group discussion with the Kosovo Albanians shows that they perceive the education sector in Kosovo as highly segregated, with Serbian-speaking schools operating independently of Kosovo's education system, noting that this perception of a segregated education system in Kosovo helps foster division in the society⁴.

However, what is important to note, is how little all participants knew about how the Serbian-speaking schools in Kosovo operate and what are the rights in the education sector guaranteed by the Kosovo legislation to the Kosovo Serbs. For instance, participants were surprised that the Serbian-speaking schools in Kosovo were allowed to use their curricula and that the municipality of North Mitrovica had the legal power to establish a university.

³ See for instance, Kosovo* 2024 Report, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/c790738e-4cf6-4a43-a8a9-43c1b6f01e10_en?filename=Kosovo%20Report%202024.pdf

⁴ Focus-group discussion with Kosovo Albanian community, Pristina, September 12, 2024

2.2 Healthcare

Like education, the healthcare sector in Kosovo is also segregated, with Serb-majority municipalities relying on a parallel healthcare system funded and managed by Serbia. This separation is seen as essential by the Kosovo Serb community, not only for maintaining ties with Serbia but also due to the perception that the quality of Serbian healthcare services is superior to Kosovo's underfunded public health system. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Serbian government provided vaccines and other medical support directly to Serb-majority areas without coordination with Kosovo authorities, reinforcing the independence of the parallel healthcare system.

However, there is a rare area of interethnic cooperation in the private healthcare sector, where Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb doctors often work together in private clinics and hospitals. Patients from both communities are also willing to seek treatment from doctors of the other ethnicity, indicating that healthcare, unlike education, is less politically charged at the individual level. An example from Prishtina Insight illustrates this: "Fifty-six-year-old Ismet L. had never imagined undergoing surgery at the hospital in North Mitrovica... The next day, Ismet went to the hospital, and after completing the tests, he underwent surgery." Such examples of cross-community healthcare interactions are encouraging, though they remain limited to the private sector.

Despite the autonomy granted to Serb-majority municipalities in healthcare, including the right to manage secondary healthcare and register health institutions, many municipalities, such as Mitrovica North, have yet to establish municipal health departments. Furthermore, the Kosovo Ministry of Health has no data on healthcare institutions in Serb-majority areas, which limits the government's ability to oversee and improve healthcare integration. The EU-facilitated dialogue has made little progress on healthcare issues, apart from the 2015 agreement on the mutual recognition of Certificates of Medicinal Products (CPP), which remains under-implemented.

2.3 Cultural Heritage

The protection of cultural and religious heritage is enshrined in Kosovo's Constitution and legislative framework, with extensive provisions based on the Ahtisaari Plan. The plan explicitly recognizes the religious sites of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo (SOC), such as monasteries and churches, as integral parts of the Serbian heritage in Kosovo, and Kosovo is obligated to protect these sites. Annex V of the Ahtisaari Plan stipulates that Kosovo must "recognize the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo... as an integral part of the Serbian Orthodox Church seated in Belgrade."

However, the implementation of these laws has been inconsistent. The most significant example was the failure to enforce the 2016 Constitutional Court decision confirming the ownership of land surrounding the Visoki Dečani Monastery. This has led to widespread criticism from international actors, including Europa Nostra, which added the monastery to its list of the seven most endangered cultural heritage sites in Europe. As the organization noted, "The very fact that a monument of European culture needs to be constantly protected by a military force is an indicator that Kosovo has still more to foster [a] multi-cultural society."

However, in March 2024, the 2016 ruling by Kosovo's Constitutional Court, which granted 24 hectares of land to the Serbian Orthodox Visoki Dečani Monastery, was officially implemented, with the land being registered as monastery property in Kosovo's Central Cadaster. The resolution of this issue came because of the Council of Europe (CoE) making it a condition for advancing Kosovo's membership application in the CoE.

While Kosovo's legislation provides extensive rights to the SOC, the perception of the church as a political actor rather than a religious institution complicates efforts to protect cultural heritage. Improving relations between the Kosovo government and the SOC, and ensuring that cultural heritage sites are depoliticized, is essential for fostering greater cooperation.

2.4 Economy

The economic relationship between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo is weak, largely due to the persistence of the shadow economy in Serb-majority areas and the reliance of the Kosovo Serb community on public sector employment. Serb businesses in Kosovo, particularly in northern municipalities, operate within informal networks that resist integration into Kosovo's economic framework. Efforts by the Kosovo government to tackle organized crime and the informal economy in these areas have been met with resistance, often seen by local Serbs as attempts to undermine their autonomy.

Despite the challenges, the private sector offers some examples of interethnic cooperation. In particular, the private healthcare sector and small business ventures in decentralized municipalities such as Gračanica/Graçanicë and Štrpce/Shtërpce have seen modest success. However, these examples are rare, and there has been limited investment in joint business initiatives between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities. As noted by one expert, "Very little has been done in strengthening the involvement of different ethnic community-owned businesses."

Kosovo's overall economic strategy lacks a specific focus on non-majority communities. Neither the National Development Strategy 2016-2021 nor the National Development Strategy 2030 includes targeted measures for Serb-majority municipalities. The Development Fund for north of Kosovo, established through the EU-facilitated dialogue, has made some progress in promoting socio-economic development in northern municipalities, but its impact remains underrepresented in Kosovo's media. It is important to note that the recent lifting of the import ban on products from Serbia has resulted in partial implementation of this ban, as goods from Serbia are entering Kosovo primarily through the Merdare crossing, bypassing the Jarinje/Jarinjë and Brnjak/Bërnjak border points in the north. This shift has had a direct impact on the Development Fund for the North of Kosovo, which collects revenue from these northern crossing points, thereby reducing its potential income and further complicating the region's economic situation. Trade between Kosovo and Serbia, valued at €344 million in 2022, declined significantly after Kosovo imposed an import ban on Serbian goods in 2023, further straining economic relations. The Central Bank of Kosovo's regulation on cash operations from late 2023 has further strained businesses in predominantly Serb areas. The elimination of the Serbian payment system means that citizens employed by Serbian institutions in Kosovo can only withdraw their salaries in Serbia, where a significant portion of their money stays.

Despite the advanced legal framework provided by the Ahtisaari Plan, practical implementation remains limited due to political tensions, mistrust, and systemic inefficiencies. Education and healthcare systems are still largely segregated, with little coordination between Kosovo and Serbia. While cultural heritage protection is enshrined in Kosovo's laws, the politicization of these issues complicates efforts to safeguard Serbian Orthodox sites. Economically, the persistence of the shadow economy and the lack of joint business initiatives hinder meaningful cooperation. Moving forward, both the Kosovo government and the Kosovo Serb community must engage in dialogue and collaboration, with support from international actors, to overcome these challenges and foster greater integration.

03 A closer look at the challenges for constructive integration in education, healthcare, cultural heritage and economy

The integration of the Kosovo Serb community into Kosovo's systems in the sectors of education, healthcare, cultural heritage, and the economy remains a significant challenge. Despite the legislative framework provided by the Ahtisaari Plan and Kosovo's Constitution, practical obstacles persist, often exacerbated by political tensions and mistrust. This section explores the key challenges in these sectors, providing a closer look at the structural barriers and highlighting opportunities for progress based on existing agreements and legal frameworks. Addressing these challenges will require coordinated efforts from the Kosovo government, Kosovo Serbs, and international stakeholders.

3.1 Education

The education system in Kosovo remains highly segregated, with Serbian-speaking schools operating under the Serbian curriculum and receiving funding from Serbia. While this arrangement is supported by the Ahtisaari Plan, which states that "schools that teach in the Serbian language may apply curricula or textbooks developed by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia upon notification to the Kosovo Ministry of Education," the lack of communication between Serbian schools and the Kosovo Ministry of Education poses a significant challenge. According to senior Kosovo government officials, "there have not been any attempts by Serbian-speaking schools to notify the ministry of their curricula," which has led to a lack of oversight and transparency in the system.

Additionally, aligning the curriculum used by the Serbian-speaking schools in Kosovo, can prove to be a difficult task, especially for subjects like history, due to the different and competing narratives about the past among Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs.⁵ This concern was also highlighted during the focus group with members of the Kosovo Serb community.

Another key challenge is the recognition of diplomas from Serbian institutions, particularly the University of North Mitrovica. While Kosovo has recognized 96% of the applications submitted for diploma recognition, Serbia's Constitutional Court ruling in 2014, which declared the 2011 Agreement on Mutual Recognition of University Diplomas incompatible with Serbian law, continues to create barriers for Kosovo Serb graduates seeking employment in Kosovo's public sector. This has left many Serbian-speaking students unable to use their diplomas for employment in Kosovo despite existing agreements. As one Kosovo official

⁵ Ardit Orana and Ramadan Ilazi, "Kosovo-Serbia dialogue: Consequences of the status-quo", March, 2022, KCSS and NSI, https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/Status-Quo_Report.pdf

noted, “Efforts to employ a professor to teach at the University of Pristina failed because the Serbian institution never responded to repeated inquiries to verify the diploma.”

A major concern among the Kosovo Serb community is the possibility of forced integration of their schools into the Kosovo education system. During a focus group in August 2024, participants expressed fear that integration would lead to the closure of Serbian schools or the loss of jobs for Kosovo Serb teachers, many of whom are employed through different procedures than those used in Kosovo. The Ahtisaari Plan provides protection for Serbian-speaking schools, but the ongoing ban on Serbian textbooks in Kosovo since 2015 has strained relations and added to the perception of forced assimilation.

The absence of the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/CSM) in Kosovo hinders progress in integrating Serbian-speaking schools into Kosovo’s education system. This mechanism could help coordinate logistical and administrative challenges related to the integration process. Establishing the A/CSM could improve communication and alleviate concerns among Kosovo Serbs regarding the integration of Serbian-speaking schools into the Kosovo education system.

The focus group discussion with the youth and students of the Kosovo Albanian community shows that they strongly feel there is poor quality in the education sector in Kosovo, especially in elementary schools. Participants in the focus group noted the failure of reforms and pointed out that schools do not focus on developing critical thinking but rather on memorization. Participants believed that this issue affects all communities and could serve as a starting point for shared reform efforts.

The focus-group discussion with the Kosovo Albanian community repeatedly emphasized the importance of learning both Albanian and Serbian in schools in Kosovo. However, participants expressed a preference for keeping the language course elective rather than as a mandatory subject. This is potentially an indicator of the lingering sensitivities among some Kosovo Albanians toward learning Serbian as a compulsory subject. In a broader context, it is an indicator of the lack of a process for dealing with the past.

Focus group participants also expressed frustration over what they see as the politicization of schoolbooks, especially history books. Participants of the focus-group discussion with the Kosovo Albanian community believe that in Serbian-speaking schools, history books do not accurately portray the war of the 1990s. They believe that harmonizing textbooks, with input from both communities and an emphasis on factual, unbiased education, is key to greater mutual understanding.

3.2 Healthcare

The healthcare sector presents similar challenges, particularly concerning the quality and trust in Kosovo’s public healthcare system. Kosovo Serbs mainly rely on Serbia’s healthcare system, often viewed as superior to Kosovo’s underfunded and ineffective public healthcare services. A healthcare expert noted, ‘In Kosovo, it’s inevitable to encounter citizens seeking financial help for treatment abroad,’ underscoring deficiencies in the Kosovo’s system. This reliance on Serbia’s healthcare system is further complicated by the lack of a public health insurance system in Kosovo, which Serbia has and from which Kosovo Serbs benefit. It’s

worth noting that having access to the Serbian healthcare system not only provides medical treatment within Serbia but also extends to other former Yugoslav republics, such as Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, ensuring broader healthcare options for the Kosovo Serb community in Kosovo.

The trust deficit between Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo's public healthcare institutions presents a major barrier to integration. According to the Kosovo Security Barometer, 39% of Kosovo Serbs have little or no confidence in healthcare institutions in Kosovo. Language barriers also deepen this mistrust, with many Kosovo Serbs reporting difficulties in accessing healthcare services in their native language, despite Serbian being the official language in Kosovo. In the August 2024 focus group, participants voiced frustration over delays in licensing medicines and registering pharmacies in Serb-majority municipalities, which has further weakened confidence in Kosovo's system.

Healthcare integration will require the Kosovo government to address these concerns directly. Clear messaging is needed to reassure the Kosovo Serb community that integration does not mean losing access to the privileges and services they currently enjoy from Serbia's healthcare system. As Kosovo's healthcare system continues to improve, efforts must also be made to ensure language accessibility and to rebuild trust through increased cooperation between healthcare institutions in Kosovo and Serbia.

Similar to education, the healthcare system is segregated, with Serb-majority areas relying on a healthcare system funded and managed by Serbia. Focus group discussion with the Kosovo Albanian community shows that they believe healthcare services would be available to them if needed in Serb-majority municipalities, however there is still some fear among them about using healthcare services in Serb-majority municipalities, and most participants opted for using them only in cases of emergency. There is also the language factor that the participants of the focus group did not believe there would be healthcare workers speaking Albanian. A similar concern is also present among the Kosovo Serbs. In this sense, mistrust in healthcare services across ethnic lines is a major barrier to integration. There is a need for coordinated efforts for some confidence-building measures in the healthcare sector, potentially through cross-community health initiatives and more accessible information in both official languages in Kosovo, Albanian and Serbian.

The Serbian-led healthcare system in Kosovo also faces external challenges. As citizens noted during the focus group discussion, the licensing process for medicines imported from Serbia remains hindered by the limited capacity of the Kosovo agency, causing delays of up to a month in approving drugs destined for the Serbian system, creating significant difficulties for healthcare institutions and their patients. Additionally, participants noted significant obstacles in registering pharmacies and medical practices with the Kosovo institutions, particularly challenges with diploma recognition from the relevant institutions, which is essential for both establishing and operating these businesses.

Participants of the focus-group discussion with the Kosovo Albanian community also noted the significant infrastructure problems and corruption within the healthcare system, which affect all communities. While often regarded as better to the Kosovo system in terms of service delivery, the Serbian-administered healthcare system in Kosovo faces many of the same challenges, including corruption, nepotism, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of labor.

3.3 Cultural Heritage

Kosovo's legislative framework strongly protects cultural and religious heritage, particularly regarding the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). However, these laws have been inconsistently implemented.

However, Serbian cultural and religious heritage in Kosovo frequently faces both institutional and individual attacks. During the focus group discussion with members of the Kosovo Serb community, citizens voiced serious concerns regarding the significant lack of respect for Serbian cultural and religious heritage. The heritage and religious sites of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) enjoy enhanced protection under Special Protective Zones (SPZ). However, uncontrolled development poses a threat to the integrity of these zones.⁶ For instance, a section of the planned Deçan/Dečani—Plav (Montenegro) road is expected to pass through the special protective zone around the Visoki Dečani Monastery. This zone, established under Kosovo law to safeguard cultural heritage sites, particularly those tied to the Serbian Orthodox Church, prohibits large-scale infrastructure projects like roads, as they pose a threat to the site's integrity, tranquility, and natural environment. This issue remains unresolved, and in the meantime, the municipality's new development plan outlines several other project activities within the Monastery's special protective zone.

The focus group discussions with the Kosovo Serb community highlighted several concerns regarding cultural and religious heritage, perceived as a fear of cultural appropriation. For example, in November 2023, they mentioned an attempt to take control of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the village of Rakinicë/Rakinica near Podujevë/Podujevo. Similarly, the Church of the Lifegiving Spring in Vinarc i Epërm/Gornje Vinarce, near North Mitrovica, was reportedly reclassified as a Roman Catholic church by Kosovo's Ministry of Culture. The most recent issue brought up was related to the remains of the Bogorodica Hvosnanska Monastery (Mother of God of Hvosno), a site considered historically significant by the Serbian Orthodox Church and associated with the ancient Hvosno Diocese, established in 1219. Additionally, the abbot of the Devina Voda monastery was deported from Kosovo at the end of October 2023, despite holding a valid residence permit, which he had renewed without difficulties in previous years. Although not a Kosovo citizen, the abbot was informed in Prishtina/Priština that he had to leave the country and would be barred from returning for five years due to national security concerns. Community members expressed unease over the process, noting the presence of OSCE and EULEX representatives, which led them to question the fairness of the procedure. They also cited the Law on Religious Freedoms in Kosovo, which prohibits arbitrary entry bans for religious figures. Furthermore, there were several reported incidents involving the desecration of Serbian Orthodox churches and cemeteries across Kosovo.⁷ These occurrences were seen as a source of distress and concern by the community.

The politicization of cultural heritage issues in Kosovo has further complicated matters. For many Kosovo Albanians, the Serbian Orthodox Church is seen as a political actor rather than a religious institution, due to its historical role in supporting Serbian nationalism during

6 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), "Protection of Cultural Heritage in Kosovo" 18 July 2022, <https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/522892>

7 Civil Society Report on Human Rights, <https://newsocialinitiative.org/civil-society-report-on-human-rights-in-kosovo-in-2022/>; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), "Protection of Cultural Heritage in Kosovo" 18 July 2022, <https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/522892>

the 1990s. This perception has been reinforced by the SOC's opposition to Kosovo's bid for UNESCO membership. As a result, many in the Albanian community remain skeptical of the SOC's intentions, and discussions about cultural heritage are often viewed as "concessions" to Serbia.

The SOC remains a critical institution for the Serb community in Kosovo, and improving relations between the Kosovo government and the SOC is essential for the protection of Serbian cultural sites. The Implementation and Monitoring Council (IMC), established by the Law on Special Protective Zones, could play a crucial role in facilitating this dialogue, but it has not been fully utilized. Building trust will require sustained efforts from both sides, including confidence-building measures such as outreach from the SOC to the Albanian community and greater participation by Kosovo leaders in SOC events.

Participants of the focus-group discussion with the Kosovo Albanian community expressed the need to showcase Kosovo's diverse cultural heritage as a means of promoting better interethnic relations. They suggested promoting cultural visits and exchanges among high school students to better understand each other's heritage. The participants of the focus-group discussion with the Kosovo Albanians shared their perceptions of the politicization of the Serbian Orthodox Church's role in Kosovo. For the Kosovo Albanians, there is a perception that the SOC undermines the Kosovo state and promotes division. However, participants expressed openness to interfaith dialogue, and this could be an area for potential cooperation.

3.4 Economy

Economic cooperation between Albanian and Serb communities in Kosovo remains limited, although there have been some positive examples of collaboration in business. However, the shadow economy in Serb-majority areas, particularly in northern Kosovo, poses a significant challenge to economic development. Efforts by the Kosovo government to combat organized crime and informality have often been met with resistance, as these actions are perceived by local Serbs as attempts to undermine their autonomy. The lack of Kosovo Serb police officers in such operations and the use of specialized police units have further heightened tensions, reinforcing the perception that rule of law measures are politically motivated.

Energy is another contentious issue. The ongoing subsidization of electricity for northern Kosovo by the Kosovo government has created frustration among the Kosovo Albanian community, who view it as an unfair financial burden. However, progress has been made in the EU-facilitated dialogue, and the integration of the energy sector in the north of Kosovo is ongoing. The Trepça/Trepča mining complex, once seen as an economic powerhouse, has been a source of contention, with both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs blaming each other for its decline.

A key issue raised by the Kosovo Serb community is the perceived lack of public investment in Serb-majority municipalities. Independent research has shown that per capita investment in these areas is lower than in Albanian-majority municipalities, although the reasons for this disparity may vary. This perception of neglect has fueled resentment and discouraged Kosovo Serb participation in Kosovo's economy. As one expert noted, "There is a lack of an economic vision for the entire country that includes non-majority communities." Without targeted economic strategies, Serb-majority areas will continue to lag behind.

The Development Fund for the north of Kosovo, created through the EU-facilitated dialogue, offers an important mechanism for promoting economic development in Serb-majority areas. However, its impact has been limited, and the results are underrepresented in Kosovo's media. Strengthening the visibility and accountability of this fund, as well as ensuring that public investments are evenly distributed, could help address some of the economic disparities and encourage greater cooperation between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb businesses.

There were also signs that the Government of Kosovo intended to misuse the Development Fund for the North by diverting funds to cover the accumulated electricity debt caused by non-payment from local residents. However, this move was met with EU condemnation.

Currently, the main issue with the Development Fund is that due to the ban on the import of the goods from Serbia that was in place for over 15 months, very little revenue has been generated for the Fund. Even though the Government of Kosovo agreed to lift the import ban at one border crossing point, Merdare, it is important to note that this crossing is not in the north of Kosovo. As previously mentioned, this means that the funds collected from the import of goods are still not allocated to the Development Fund for the North, further depriving the region of crucial financial resources.

This has indirectly hindered the region's development, as the funds could have been used for projects aimed at improving the quality of life for residents in the north.

Participants of the focus-group discussion with the Kosovo Albanian community noted that economic opportunities for Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs are not equal. The Serbian state plays a significant role in supporting the economic livelihood of Kosovo Serbs, which adds another layer of complexity. Participants of the focus-group discussion noted that they believe there are fears of discrimination and boycotts that prevent some from starting businesses in the majority Albanian or Serb areas, respectively. As part of a broader campaign to boycott Serbian goods, there has been a spillover effect impacting Kosovo Serb producers as well. Notably, businesses like the Lakićević Winery and Pivdžan Brewery have been unable to place their products in Albanian-majority areas, limiting their market access and further isolating their economic opportunities.

However, in some Serb-majority municipalities, such as Gračanica/Graçanica and Štrpce/Shtërpcë there are cases of business cooperation, such as Albanian businesses setting up shop and Albanians working in Serb-owned businesses.

In the focus group with the Kosovo Serb community, participants emphasized that the government systematically creates unfavorable conditions for Kosovo Serb businesses, particularly in northern Kosovo. They pointed out that political decisions (ban on the import of Serbian goods; regulation of the Central Bank of Kosovo on cash operations) often weaken these businesses and may ultimately lead to their closure while simultaneously promoting the establishment of Albanian businesses in the region.

04 Areas with potential to move forward with constructive integration

Moving forward, Kosovo's approach to fostering constructive integration in the sectors of education, healthcare, culture, and the economy should be grounded in a clear strategy that emphasizes inclusivity, trust-building, and sustainable development. These sectors are crucial to interethnic relations between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities, with the potential to foster both local cooperation and broader societal integration in Kosovo. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that aligns government policies, civil society initiatives, and private sector contributions.

4.1 Cultural and Religious Heritage

One of the key challenges to interethnic relations in Kosovo is the perception of cultural and religious heritage by the Kosovo Serb community. There is a pressing need for public awareness campaigns to inform all citizens, particularly the Kosovo Serb community, about the protections granted by Kosovo's legislation and the Ahtisaari Plan regarding cultural and religious heritage. Increasing public awareness of these rights is essential to dispel fears that these sites might be neglected or appropriated by the Kosovo Albanian majority.

A critical confidence-building measure would be for the Kosovo government and its political leadership to adopt a more cautious approach in public discussions concerning Serbian cultural and religious heritage. The perception of appropriation by the Albanian community has been a source of tension, and refraining from such rhetoric can significantly reduce misunderstandings and mistrust.

Additionally, law enforcement agencies must play a proactive role in safeguarding Serbian cultural and religious sites. Individuals involved in vandalism or violence targeting these sites must face legal consequences. A robust legal framework, backed by effective law enforcement, would strengthen the protection of minority heritage and reinforce the perception that these sites are valued as part of Kosovo's diverse identity.

4.2 Economic Integration

The private sector offers an important avenue for bridging the gap between Kosovo's Albanian and Serb communities. However, for economic integration to be effective, there must be greater support for interethnic economic projects that actively involve non-majority communities, particularly in Serb-majority areas. This requires a more inclusive economic development vision that acknowledges the contributions of non-majority communities as vital to Kosovo's overall growth.

The upcoming National Development Strategy 2030 presents an opportunity to incorporate specific measures aimed at addressing the development needs of non-majority commu-

nities, ensuring that Serb-majority municipalities are not left behind. A thorough review of public investments in these areas is necessary to identify gaps and increase opportunities for economic development. This would not only reduce economic disparities but also foster a sense of shared prosperity across ethnic lines.

Moreover, Kosovo's ICT sector, which has experienced substantial growth, holds significant potential for cooperation with Serb-majority municipalities. By encouraging partnerships in this sector, Kosovo can leverage technology to promote interethnic collaboration, create jobs, and integrate Serb-majority municipalities into the national economy.

Reducing the shadow economy and informality in Serb-majority municipalities is also essential. Integration into the fiscal system remains a challenge, but this can be addressed through incentive programs that encourage businesses in these areas to formalize their operations. The government should also take steps to repeal discriminatory bans, such as the prohibition on importing Serbian goods, which hinders economic integration and cooperation. Addressing such issues with a more proactive approach will help build trust and improve economic relations between communities.

The government of Kosovo should take a proactive approach by denouncing discriminatory campaigns that advocate for the boycott of Serbian products imported from Serbia. At the same time, it should work to increase the visibility and market access of products produced by Kosovo Serbs within Kosovo. Furthermore, the government needs to address the challenges faced by citizens of Serbia in Kosovo due to regulations imposed by the Central Bank of Kosovo, ensuring these regulations are implemented fairly and inclusively.

Participants of the focus-group discussion with the Kosovo Albanian community suggested that fostering joint economic ventures, especially in sectors like technology or healthcare, where interethnic cooperation already exists to a limited extent, could help reduce mistrust and promote greater integration. Providing better information and support for such ventures is essential.

4.3 Education

The education sector remains one of the most sensitive areas for integration of the Kosovo Serb community. There is a need to clearly define what integration of Serbian-speaking schools into the Kosovo education system entails, particularly to reassure the Kosovo Serb community that integration does not imply a loss of cultural or linguistic identity. Schools must retain their curricula, books, and employment of Serbian-speaking teachers, and this should be explicitly communicated to dispel any concerns.

To facilitate this process, international actors such as the EU could play a pivotal role in assessing the current curricula used in Serbian-speaking schools. A discreet and collaborative review could identify any issues early, preventing unnecessary conflict and ensuring smooth integration. Additionally, Serbian-speaking schools should be encouraged to engage with the Ministry of Education of Kosovo to report on curricula and student enrollment data. Accurate data is crucial for equitable resource allocation from the Kosovo budget to these schools, ensuring they receive the funding and support they need.

A critical challenge, much like in the healthcare sector, is the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities. This intermediary mechanism is essential for ensuring a peaceful and orderly integration process.

Another key aspect of educational integration is the need for mutual recognition of diplomas between Kosovo and Serbia. This has been a point of contention for years, yet it remains vital for enabling mobility and employment opportunities for students from both communities. The EU should continue to push for the full implementation of the 2011 EU Guidance on diploma recognition, ensuring that students from Serb-majority municipalities can pursue opportunities both in Kosovo and Serbia without bureaucratic obstacles. The establishment of a University in North Mitrovica, in line with Kosovo's legal framework, would also signal a positive step toward improving access to higher education for the Kosovo Serb community.

4.4 Healthcare

Integration of the healthcare system requires a careful approach that considers the existing privileges and access enjoyed by the Kosovo Serb community. The Kosovo government must clearly define what healthcare integration means, reassuring the Kosovo Serb community that they will continue to benefit from quality services without disruption. At the same time, improving the overall quality of public healthcare in Kosovo, including the ability to provide services in Serbian language, is crucial for building trust and encouraging integration.

To develop an effective integration plan, the government must first ensure it has accurate, up-to-date information on the state of healthcare in Serb-majority municipalities, including the number of doctors, nurses, and healthcare facilities. This information is essential for planning and policy formulation. The EU, as part of its facilitation role in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, could assist by assessing the healthcare system in these municipalities, ensuring that any efforts toward integration are grounded in a realistic understanding of current needs.

Further cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia in the healthcare sector could be mutually beneficial, particularly given the region's struggle with a growing loss of talent in healthcare. A collaborative approach to training and retaining healthcare professionals could benefit both Kosovo and Serb-majority municipalities. Ensuring the uninterrupted flow of medical supplies from Serbia to Serbian healthcare institutions in Kosovo is also vital for maintaining trust and delivering adequate care.

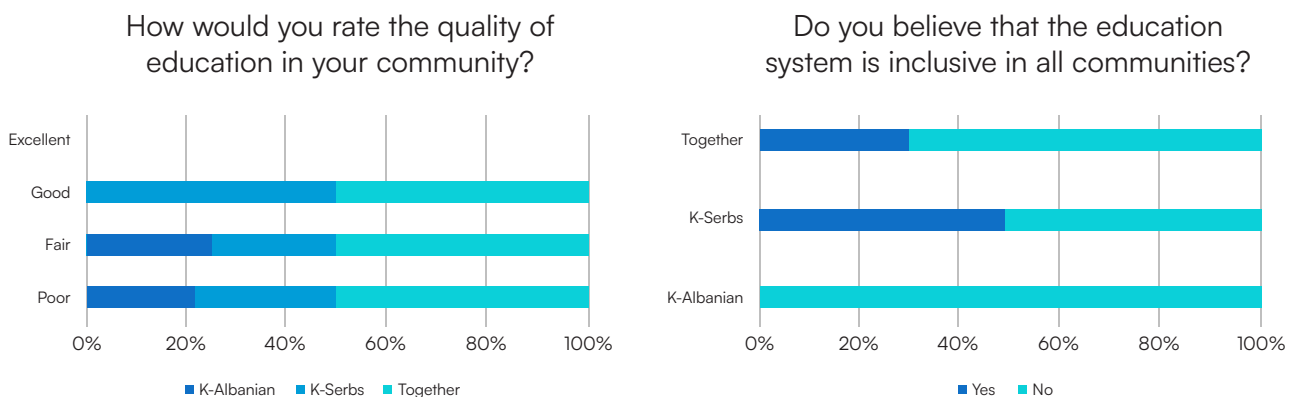
Constructive integration in the sectors of education, healthcare, culture, and the economy is essential for building a cohesive, multiethnic society in Kosovo. By taking targeted actions—rooted in transparency, inclusivity, and respect for cultural identity—the Kosovo government can strengthen interethnic cooperation and enhance the overall societal integration of the Kosovo Serbs. Each sector presents unique challenges, but with the support of key stakeholders, including the EU, progress can be made in ensuring that both Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities feel equally valued and represented in Kosovo's future.

05 Perceptions of constructive integration, in numbers

After the two focus-group discussions with the Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities, we shared with them a questionnaire to collect some quantitative data about their perceptions of the integration of Kosovo Serbs in key sectors—education, healthcare, economy, and cultural heritage. The results paint an interesting picture of interethnic relations in Kosovo, underlining the need for targeted policy interventions that address the gaps in services and opportunities while fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. Here’s a comprehensive analysis, framed in a consistent narrative:

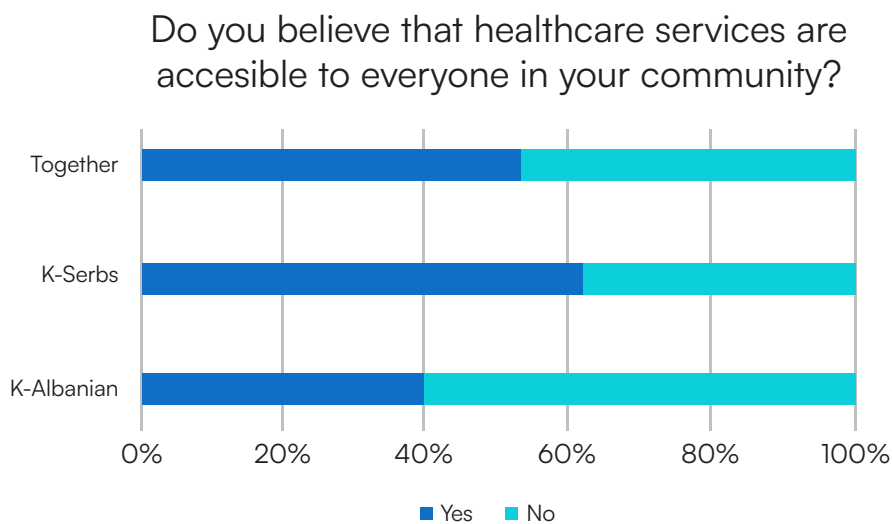
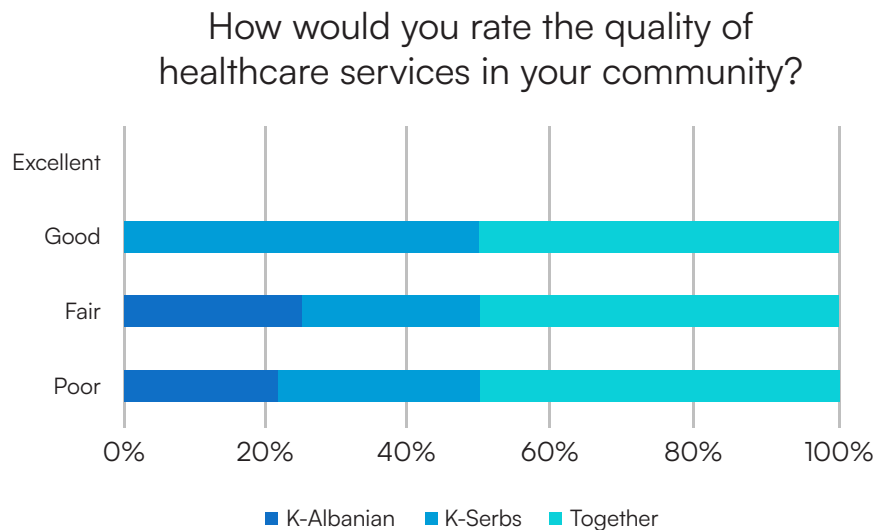
5.1 Education: A System Seen as Lacking in Quality and Inclusivity

The survey reveals dissatisfaction with the quality of education across both communities. When asked to rate the quality of education, 60% of Kosovo Albanians and 50% of Kosovo Serbs rated it as “Poor,” while 40% of Kosovo Albanians and 25% of Kosovo Serbs rated it as “Fair.” Only 25% of Kosovo Serbs gave the system a positive rating (“Good”), while no Kosovo Albanians rated it higher than “Fair.” These results suggest that both communities perceive the education system as falling short in delivering quality education, with a slightly more favorable view from the Kosovo Serb community. When it comes to inclusivity, there is a notable divide. All Kosovo Albanians surveyed (100%) believe the education system is not inclusive, compared to only 50% of Kosovo Serbs who feel the same. The other half of Kosovo Serb respondents believe the system is inclusive, pointing to divergent experiences between the communities. This gap suggests that while some Kosovo Serbs experience inclusivity, Kosovo Albanians overwhelmingly perceive the system as exclusionary. This means that they do not feel that the education system in Kosovo is ready to have diversity. While there are cases, especially in the south of Kosovo, where Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs pupils go to the same school building, the spaces are physically separated, a system called “two schools under one roof,” a concept that is widely used to denote segregation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



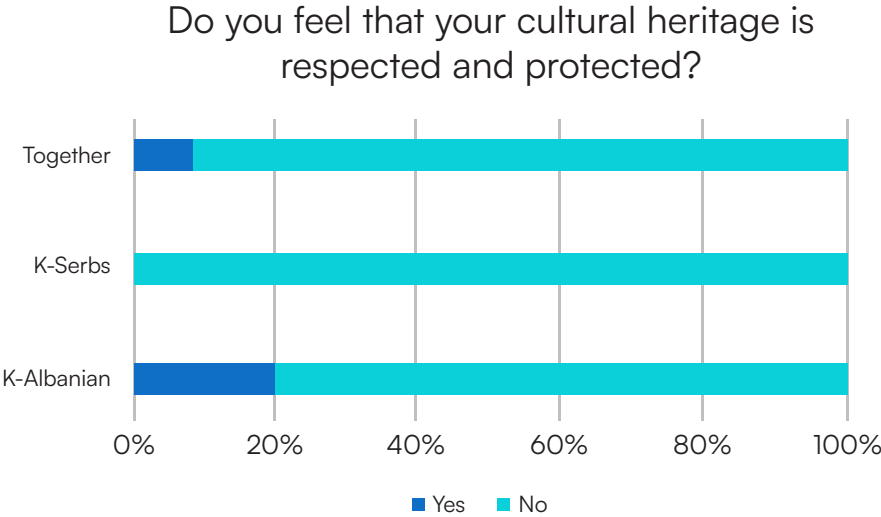
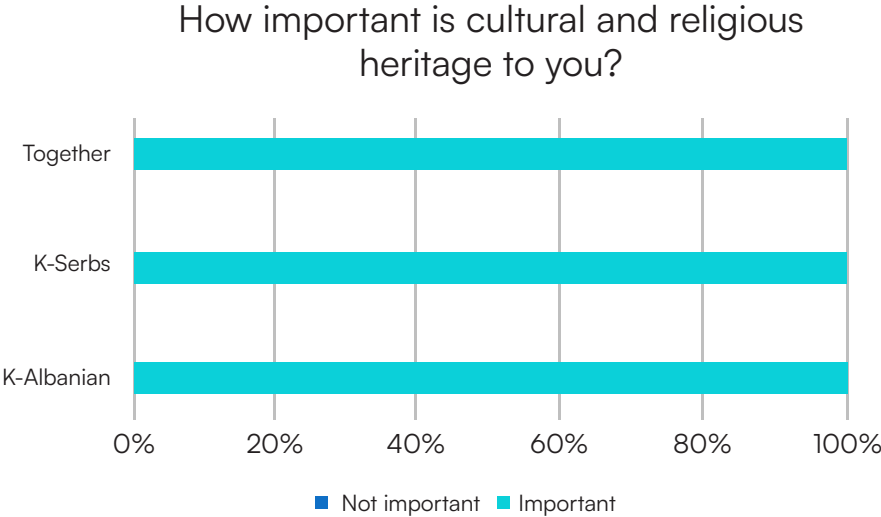
5.2 Healthcare: Accessible but Inconsistent in Quality

Healthcare services also emerge as an area of concern, though perceptions of quality vary between the communities. While 20% of Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs each rated healthcare as “Poor,” the majority of respondents from both communities rated it as “Fair” (80% of Kosovo Albanians and 50% of Kosovo Serbs). Interestingly, 30% of Kosovo Serbs rated healthcare services as “Good,” indicating a more positive experience compared to Kosovo Albanians, none of whom rated the services above “Fair.” In terms of accessibility, 40% of Kosovo Albanians and 60% of Kosovo Serbs feel that healthcare is accessible to everyone in their community. However, a significant portion of both groups—60% of Kosovo Albanians and 40% of Kosovo Serbs—still feel that healthcare services are not equally accessible. This indicates that while more Kosovo Serbs report better access to healthcare, challenges remain in ensuring that services reach all community members equally.



5.3 Cultural Heritage: A Shared Concern

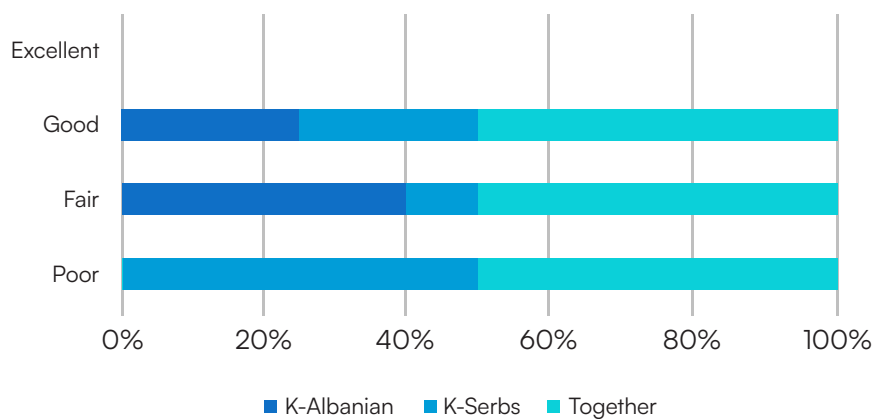
One area where both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs converge is the importance they place on cultural and religious heritage. Every respondent—100% of both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs—indicated that cultural heritage is “Important” to them. This shared value suggests that despite the many challenges facing the communities, cultural heritage could serve as a common ground for fostering dialogue and cooperation. However, when asked if they feel their cultural heritage is respected and protected, the overwhelming majority of both communities responded negatively. Among Kosovo Albanians, 80% said “No,” and 100% of Kosovo Serbs expressed the same sentiment. This widespread feeling of neglect or disrespect toward cultural heritage is a potential source of tension, but it also highlights an opportunity for the government in Kosovo and other stakeholders to address these concerns through more robust initiatives.



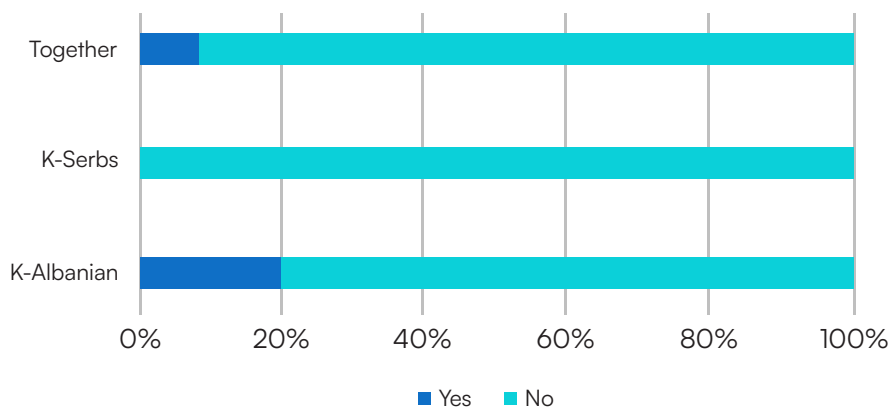
5.4 Economic Opportunities: A Major Source of Frustration

Economic opportunities—or the lack thereof—are a significant point of dissatisfaction, especially among Kosovo Serbs. While 80% of Kosovo Albanians rated economic opportunities as “Fair” and 20% as “Good,” the picture is much bleaker for Kosovo Serbs. A striking 75% of Kosovo Serbs rated economic opportunities as “Poor,” with only 12.5% each rating them as “Fair” or “Good.” This sharp contrast suggests that Kosovo Serbs feel much more economically marginalized than Kosovo Albanians, reflecting broader structural inequalities that disproportionately affect minority communities in Kosovo. When asked whether there are equal economic opportunities for all communities, 80% of Kosovo Albanians and 100% of Kosovo Serbs said “No.” This unanimity in perception highlights economic inequality as a major barrier to integration, with both communities recognizing the need for a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities.

How would you rate the economic opportunities in your community?



Do you believe that there are equal economic opportunities for all communities?



The survey results shed light on the critical challenges facing the integration of Kosovo Serbs into Kosovo society, and some key themes emerge. Both communities report dissatisfaction with the quality of education and healthcare. This indicates that efforts to improve public services would benefit both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, helping to bridge some of the gaps in quality of life that hinder integration. The perception of unequal access to economic opportunities, healthcare, and education is a major obstacle to integration. Kosovo Serbs, in particular, feel economically marginalized, and both communities recognize that the system is not providing equal opportunities. Despite differences in other areas, both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs place a high value on their cultural heritage. This shared priority offers a potential entry point for dialogue and cooperation and for confidence-building measures. Focusing on cultural heritage protection and promotion, allows Kosovo's government to foster interethnic cooperation that may transcend political divides.

The findings point to the need for policies that go beyond service delivery and economic development. Inclusivity must be at the heart of the efforts of constructive integration, to ensure that minority communities like Kosovo Serbs feel equally valued and included in Kosovo's broader societal framework. This includes addressing the deep-seated perceptions of exclusion that both communities harbor.

06 Conclusion

In conclusion, the challenge of integrating the Kosovo Serbian community is starkly illustrated by the feeling of “two separate worlds living on the same territory.” This quote encapsulates the deep-rooted segregation that permeates key sectors like education, healthcare, and cultural heritage. Despite being geographically close, these communities remain socially and politically divided, making meaningful integration a complex task.

One of the most significant barriers to progress is the unaddressed trauma of the past. As one participant noted, “The trauma of the past... people immediately shift into survival mode... these traumas have not been addressed.” This reflects the emotional and psychological wounds that continue to influence interethnic relations, preventing trust-building and reconciliation efforts from taking root.

To move forward, there is a pressing need to “end the ‘othering’” between communities. Participants emphasized the importance of improving language skills and fostering cross-ethnic cooperation, particularly in healthcare, where greater interaction between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb doctors could help break down barriers. Addressing these issues through targeted policies, cross-community initiatives, and sustained dialogue will be crucial for fostering a more cohesive, multiethnic society in Kosovo.

The integration of the Kosovo Serb community into key sectors—education, healthcare, cultural heritage, and the economy—faces substantial challenges rooted in political sensitivities, lack of coordination, and deep-seated mistrust.

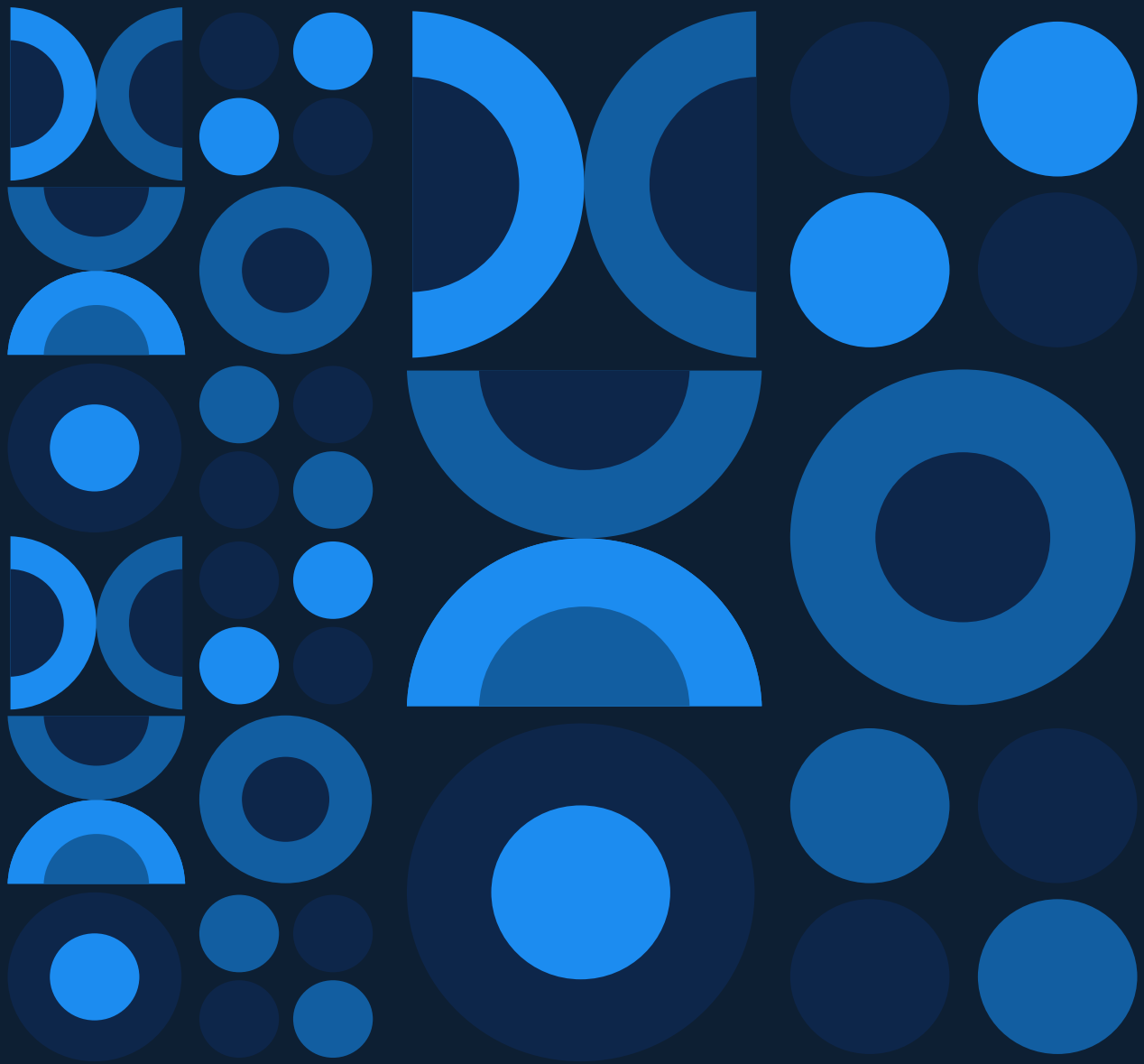
In education, the integration of Serbian-speaking schools into Kosovo’s system is hindered by practical and political concerns, including the lack of cooperation between Serbian and Kosovo educational authorities and the Kosovo Serb community’s fears about potential curriculum changes and the job security of teachers. These factors have reinforced segregation and stymied efforts toward an inclusive education system.

Healthcare presents a slightly different dynamic, where the private healthcare sector offers rare examples of interethnic cooperation. However, the persistence of parallel healthcare systems, where the Kosovo Serb community relies on services provided by Serbia, further isolates the community. Trust in Kosovo’s public health system remains low, and without greater cooperation and confidence-building, healthcare integration will remain elusive.

In the area of cultural heritage, the protection of Serbian Orthodox Church sites is a politically charged and contentious issue. Although Kosovo’s legal framework guarantees the protection of Serbian cultural heritage, enforcement has been inconsistent, leading to ongoing disputes and fueling mistrust between the communities. The politicization of cultural heritage protection has hampered efforts to depoliticize this critical area and foster greater cooperation.

Finally, in the economy, integration remains limited, with Serb-majority municipalities heavily dependent on public sector employment and informal economies. While trade between Kosovo and Serbia continues, it has not translated into meaningful economic cooperation at the community level. Efforts to reduce the shadow economy and encourage interethnic business cooperation have faced resistance, further entrenching economic divisions.

Overall, the integration of the Kosovo Serb community requires sustained efforts that go beyond legal frameworks. Constructive integration must be built on confidence-building measures, coordination with international actors, and meaningful consultation with local communities to address the underlying mistrust and practical barriers that continue to impede progress.



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