

BETWEEN DISTANCE AND OPPORTUNITY

Attitudes of Young Serbs Toward
Employment in Kosovo Institutions

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This report explores the underlying reasons behind the limited interest of young Serbs in Kosovo in pursuing employment within Kosovo institutions, revealing a complex interplay of political tensions, community attitudes, economic factors, and institutional barriers.

Introduction

The issue of adequate employment of members of non-majority communities in public administration institutions in Kosovo is one of the most longstanding and sensitive matters when it comes to the realization of community rights and the building of trust. Due to the significance this issue holds for the overall position of non-majority communities in Kosovo, it was addressed in detail in the report “The Legal Framework for the Protection of Non-Majority Communities in Kosovo: A Comprehensive Analysis of Constitutional, Legal, and Sub-Legal Provisions.” The report was prepared as part of the project “Enhancing Inclusion and Advancing the Rights of Non-Majority Communities through Legislative and Policy Development in Kosovo,” implemented by NGO ACDC with the support of IOM. The aim of the report was to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing mechanisms for the protection of the rights of non-majority communities in Kosovo.

As a continuation of this initiative, a three-day workshop was organized in February 2025, bringing together representatives of Kosovo institutions and civil society organizations. During the workshop, the issue of employment of members of non-majority communities in Kosovo institutions stood out as particularly important. Although the legal framework provides clear guarantees, including the obligation that at least 10% of employees in central institutions must come from non-majority communities, and that, at the local level, employment should reflect the demographic composition of the population, in practice, the prescribed minimum is rarely achieved.

Workshop participants pointed to obstacles in fulfilling legal obligations concerning the employment of non-majority community members – ranging from a lack of political will to inadequate institutional practices. In addition to institutional shortcomings, another challenge was identified that often goes unnoticed. Namely, there is an increasing lack of interest among members of non-majority communities, especially youth from the Serbian community, in applying for jobs in Kosovo institutions. This highlighted the importance of examining more closely why young Serbs tend to avoid applying for positions within Kosovo institutions. The idea was to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions, motivations, dilemmas, and hesitations that shape the attitudes of young Serbs toward potential employment in Kosovo institutions.

In order to gain deeper insight into the declining interest of young Serbs in employment in Kosovo institutions, an additional qualitative research study was initiated to examine the key social, political, and institutional factors that discourage young Serbs from seeking employment in Kosovo institutions.

The research was conducted during the spring of 2025 using the method of semi-structured interviews. As part of the study, two focus groups were organized and six individual interviews were conducted. The sample included a total of fifteen young people from the Serbian community from different parts of Kosovo – both from Serbian areas south of the Ibar River and from the north of Kosovo. One focus group was held in Gračanica/Gračanicë, with four participants from areas south of the Ibar, while the other was conducted in the north, with five participants from the north of Kosovo. The six in-depth interviews provided a more detailed insight into individual attitudes and reasons that shape young people's views on employment in Kosovo institutions.

The sample includes respondents from a total of nine municipalities in Kosovo. Among the Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo, North Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, and Leposavić/q were included, while in the south, Gračanica/Gračanicë, Ranilug, and Štrpce/Shtërpçë were covered. In addition, the sample includes three municipalities where Serbs constitute a minority: Vučitrn/Vushtrri (Priluzje), Kamenica (Veliko Ropotovo/Ropotovë e Madhe), and Peć/Peja (Goraždevac/Gorazhdevc).

The aim of the research was to explore, through direct insights, perceptions, and everyday experiences of the respondents, on the complex web of circumstances that shape their attitudes, reluctance, and expectations regarding work in Kosovo institutions. In addition to individual motives, the research also sought to identify broader patterns within the community that contribute to the low response rate of young Serbs to job vacancies within the Kosovo system.

The research findings are presented through a thematic analysis that includes dominant patterns, reservations, and dilemmas shaping the attitudes of young Serbs toward employment in Kosovo institutions. The report first presents the general lack of interest and distance toward these institutions, then examines the conditions under which individuals would still consider employment, with particular attention to the local context, political tensions, procedural obstacles, as well as the influence of the social environment and community expectations. The final section provides a synthesis of findings and recommendations for future initiatives.



Research Findings

The analysis of statements from young respondents from the Serbian community in various parts of Kosovo reveals a complex and multilayered picture of attitudes toward employment in Kosovo institutions. Instead of a unified stance, what emerges are interwoven common experiences, specific local circumstances, and individual reflections.

The attitudes that respondents hold toward Kosovo institutions are neither homogeneous nor fixed, but are shaped by current political conditions, the degree of trust in institutions, and everyday existential considerations. Through the conversations, it becomes clear that the decision to apply for a job in Kosovo institutions is not merely an individual or professional matter, but one that is closely linked to the broader political context and the situation within the community.

The responses of the participants, although differing in certain aspects, point to several key patterns and determinants that influence their decisions on whether and under what conditions they would apply for a position within Kosovo institutions.



General Disinterest in Kosovo Institutions

The main finding of the research is that the vast majority of respondents expressed a lack of interest in working in Kosovo institutions. Some emphasized that they had never even considered the possibility of working in Kosovo institutions—that it simply had never “*crossed their minds*.” Even respondents who are currently unemployed stated that they do not view this as a potential option. When asked to provide reasons for their disinterest, most respondents did not have ready answers, which indicates a low level of engagement with this topic. Respondents noted that they “*don’t see themselves as belonging to that system*”, that the idea feels “*foreign*” to them, and that they do not think about it at all. In addition, some of the specific reasons mentioned include low salaries, the politicization of institutions, and a lack of prospects for advancement.

In line with this disinterest in working in Kosovo institutions, nearly all respondents stated that they do not follow job postings and are not aware of where vacancies are announced, which further confirms their lack of interest in employment opportunities in the Kosovo public sector.

In addition to their personal disinterest, respondents also highlighted that there is no visible interest among their peers or in their immediate surroundings in working in Kosovo institutions. Few of their acquaintances consider that option, apply, or work in Kosovo institutions. An exception to this general disinterest exists in certain professions, such as law. Respondents noted that lawyers express interest in careers in the judiciary and in independent institutions, where they perceive potential for professional development and less political interference in daily work. For this reason, they are more interested than average in working in Kosovo institutions compared to other professions.

Out of the total number of respondents, only one is currently employed in Kosovo institutions, one had worked there previously but left the job, one applied but was rejected due to diploma-related issues, and one is awaiting the outcome of an application. All other respondents have never applied for a job in any Kosovo institution, and a large number have never even sought information about that possibility. Nonetheless, some noted that they would be willing to consider working in Kosovo institutions as an option in case they are unable to find employment in Serbian institutions or elsewhere. This was particularly the case for those determined to remain in Kosovo. For them, employment in Kosovo institutions represents a backup option—acceptable if other opportunities fail to materialize.



The Municipality as the Main Association with Kosovo Institutions


When speaking about Kosovo institutions, almost all respondents primarily refer to the local level—namely, the municipalities. Employment in municipal institutions is seen as potentially acceptable, but significant regional differences are evident in this regard. Central institutions (ministries, agencies, independent bodies, etc.) are rarely viewed as a viable employment option. These institutions are most often perceived as both physically and politically distant and inaccessible.

For most respondents—especially those living in northern Kosovo—institutions based in Pristina are not seen as a realistic or desirable place to seek employment. This perception stems not only from political distance but also from practical inaccessibility. Salaries in Kosovo institutions are considered so low that employees commuting from Serb-majority areas are left with little income after covering basic daily costs, such as transportation to Pristina and meals. As a result, many respondents believe that a job in a Pristina-based institution would be financially unfeasible. Within this context, only respondents from Gračanica/Graçanicë stated that they might consider seeking employment in Pristina.

Local Context as a Decisive Factor

Differences in place of residence—specifically between northern and southern Kosovo—significantly shape respondents' attitudes toward employment in Kosovo institutions.

The attitudes of youth in northern Kosovo have been shaped by the political circumstances following the withdrawal of Serbian representatives from Kosovo institutions at the end of 2022. In an atmosphere where municipalities are led by Albanian officials and where many institutional buildings have been taken over with the presence of police units, the idea of working in Kosovo institutions seems unthinkable. Many respondents expressed a sense of alienation and non-acceptance of such institutions.



Respondents from **northern Kosovo** emphasized that employment in municipalities currently led by Albanian representatives would be met with disapproval and condemnation within their community, as it would be perceived as a sign of cooperation with the current governing structures established without the consent of the local population. Particular resistance is triggered by the manner in which the new institutions were established. This is reflected in the language used by respondents, who said they were established without prior agreement, "forcibly," and with the "closure of Serbian institutions," which creates a sense that these structures were "imposed" on the community.

Young people living in northern Kosovo often choose employment in Serbian institutions or plan to leave, while working in Kosovo structures—including municipalities—is generally not seen as an option. Moreover, many express caution due to potential negative reactions from the community and the possible loss of existing benefits. On the other hand, there is a prevailing sense of temporariness regarding the current situation. Respondents from northern Kosovo often noted that they expect changes after the local elections in fall 2025, when municipalities are expected to be taken over again by Serbian representatives. In that case, they believe significantly more people would be willing to apply for jobs, as was the case in earlier periods when municipal institutions were led by Serbian staff.

In Serb-majority municipalities **south** of the Ibar, especially in Gračanica/Graçanicë and surrounding areas, a more pragmatic approach toward Kosovo institutions is observed. These institutions are more often discussed in economic terms, such as salary levels and job profitability. Although the Serbian system is still preferred due to better wages and broader social security, young people from these areas are more likely to consider employment in Kosovo institutions, particularly in situations where they lack access to jobs in Serbian structures. They also express a higher level of confidence that they would be treated fairly in central institutions led by Albanians—primarily because of the legal obligation to employ members of non-majority communities.

On the other hand, young people from Serb villages located in Albanian-majority municipalities—such as Goraždevac (Peć/Pejë), Veliko Ropotovo/Ropotovë e Madhe (Kamenica/ë), and Priluzhje/Prilluzhë (Vuçitrin/Vushtrri) rarely consider working in local municipal structures. Among them, there is a sense of caution, distance, and mistrust regarding the possibility of genuine integration and advancement in that working environment.



Between Current Political Tensions and Existential Needs

The dominant framework within which respondents consider employment in Kosovo institutions is the current political situation. All respondents speak from a position deeply shaped by the present tensions between Kosovo authorities and the Serbian community. This indicates that attitudes toward employment in Kosovo institutions are not solely the result of reflections on professional opportunities, but are conditioned by perceptions of current political developments. In this context, many respondents do not perceive Kosovo institutions as places of potential employment, but rather as sources of risk and instability. A partial exception to this are municipal structures in Serb-majority municipalities south of the Ibar.

Almost all respondents display a marked distance toward Kosovo institutions. Most of the answers provided by the respondents are not based on consideration of potential future improvements but are clearly rooted in the present moment, marked by a strong sense of insecurity and tension. Even in their choice of words, one can recognize mistrust and detachment. Expressions such as “*fear*,” “*violence*,” “*discrimination*,” and “*no prospects*” are frequently repeated. Terms like “*their system*” or “*their laws*” are often used. This discourse reflects not only political reservation but also a deeply rooted feeling of exclusion from decision-making processes and a general mistrust of institutions. In this vein, one respondent stated that they do not want to be a “*token figure*”.

In addition to perceptions of broader political dynamics, respondents' views are also shaped by economic and professional considerations regarding Kosovo institutions. Many noted that salaries in Kosovo institutions are low compared to the Serbian system. Furthermore, for those who would need to travel to their workplace, transportation costs often cancel out the income earned. This reinforces the perception that working in Kosovo institutions is “*not worth it*”—not only politically, but also materially. Throughout the interviews, this aspect was frequently emphasized as the main reason why seeking employment in central institutions based in Pristina is not even considered.

Respondents pointed out that even those people in their surroundings who are employed in Kosovo institutions often view it as a temporary solution. For them, it is “*a necessity, not a choice*.” Respondents do not believe that the Kosovo system offers opportunities for advancement or professional development, except in certain specialized professions. Furthermore, none of the respondents expressed interest in retraining programs aimed at finding employment in Kosovo institutions.

Procedural Barriers and Perception of Discrimination

Several respondents pointed to a range of administrative and procedural obstacles that further complicate employment in Kosovo institutions. The main issues cited include the lack of information in the Serbian language, non-transparent recruitment processes, and inconsistent practices in diploma recognition. Although most do not consider these obstacles to be entirely insurmountable, they serve as additional demotivating factors for youth who already show little interest in such employment.

A clear difference in the perception of institutions is also evident depending on whether they are led by Serbs or Albanians. For institutions with Serbs in leadership positions—such as local governments in Serb-majority areas south of the Ibar—there is a widespread belief that jobs are mostly obtained through political connections, party affiliation, or family ties. This discourages many young people who feel they cannot compete on equal footing without "connections." On the other hand, when it comes to institutions led by Albanians, respondents demonstrate greater awareness of the existence of quotas or the need to employ Serbs, which leads them to believe they may objectively have better chances of being hired there. However, in such cases, issues of language barriers and diploma recognition come to the forefront.

Regarding diploma verification, experiences are mixed. Some respondents reported that the process was carried out without major difficulties, while others are aware of cases in which verification took a long time or was completely blocked due to the relevant commission not functioning.

Fear of ethnic discrimination is present among several respondents, especially when discussing work in environments where they, as Serbs, would be the only member of their ethnic group. Respondents believe they would feel isolated and unwelcome in such settings. On the other hand, some respondents expressed a willingness to work in a majority-Albanian environment. This position is driven by a rational and pragmatic approach: if the working conditions are good, if there is a clear need for Serbian staff, and if the recruitment process is open and transparent, some would be willing to consider institutions led by Albanians.



Community Influence

The issue of community perception plays an important role in young people's reflections on employment in Kosovo institutions. Many respondents expressed the view that, under current circumstances, employment in Kosovo institutions would not be appropriate or acceptable. This personal feeling is further reinforced by the expected reaction of their surroundings. Applying for a job in Kosovo institutions is perceived as inappropriate or undesirable due to fears that it could provoke comments, misunderstandings, or distancing from members of the community. This concern is not necessarily the result of direct pressure, but rather reflects a general atmosphere of reservation toward Kosovo institutions within the Serbian community.

This caution is further fueled by the current political circumstances, in which local municipalities in the north are led by Albanian officials, while central institutions in Pristina are perceived as responsible for unilateral actions in Serb-majority areas. In this context, engagement in Kosovo institutions is often seen as a move that does not align with the expectations of the surrounding community. Although there is a somewhat more pragmatic attitude and a lower degree of reservation in areas south of the Ibar, even there, enthusiasm is not strong. The possibility of employment within the Kosovo system is primarily considered out of necessity, not as a desirable career path.

At the same time, there is a prevailing sense that no clear message of encouragement has been issued by the community affirming that participation in Kosovo institutions is legitimate and acceptable. Even among those who do not express strong political resistance, this prevailing community attitude functions as an effective barrier. Several respondents emphasized that a potential change in attitude would only be possible if the community itself sent a clear signal that involvement in Kosovo institutions had become acceptable.

Withdrawal and Migration as a Response

Finally, a significant number of young people from the Serbian community are not considering employment in either the Serbian or Kosovo system, but rather leaving Kosovo altogether. The dominant sense of hopelessness contributes to passivity, loss of motivation, and diminishing interest in engaging with local institutions, regardless of their affiliation. Even those who are still actively looking for work usually do so with the hope that it will serve as a transitional phase before leaving, rather than as a step toward long-term integration into any institutional framework or meaningful inclusion in life on Kosovo.

Final Reflections

The research findings indicate that the issue of employment of young Serbs in Kosovo institutions cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader political context and the social climate in which the respondents live. Almost all participants expressed their views under the strong impression of current political tensions and the crisis in relations between the Serbian community and the institutions in Pristina. Rather than seeing employment as a professional challenge or development opportunity, young people primarily describe it as a politically and security-sensitive choice that carries a certain degree of risk.

In addition to practical considerations such as salary and working conditions, the research revealed that a significant obstacle lies in the deeply rooted mistrust toward Kosovo institutions as a whole. Many respondents stated that they do not perceive these institutions as "**theirs**," which further reduces their motivation to even consider professional engagement within them. Even when formal obstacles, such as diploma recognition or language, are not present, there remains a lack of long-term prospects and a sense of security.

The perception that young Serbs have of Kosovo institutions plays a key role in shaping their attitudes. In their view, employment in the Kosovo system carries political connotations. It is not seen as a neutral professional decision but as an act that can be interpreted as distancing oneself from the collective expectations and values of the community. This symbolic weight deters even those who, under different circumstances, might not object to seeking employment within these institutions.

In addition to its political meaning, Kosovo institutions are not perceived as professionally attractive by most respondents. Salaries are viewed as low, opportunities for advancement as limited, and the work environment as insecure and insufficiently inclusive. The spatial dimension is also particularly important. For many respondents, the location of the institution is crucial. If the job requires daily travel to a distant location, this often renders the idea of employment meaningless, as it becomes financially unsustainable.

Nevertheless, despite the pronounced skepticism, the research showed that attitudes are not homogeneous. These findings point to the existence of latent openness and potential for engagement with Kosovo institutions, which has yet to be realized due to the dominant stance of distance and caution within the community. Some respondents expressed openness to the idea of working in Kosovo institutions—but primarily for economic reasons, namely the need for a stable income. However, their willingness is not unconditional. For many, the key prerequisite is not just individual interest, but also a collective decision within the community to give Kosovo institutions a "**chance**." If broader support and consensus within the community were to emerge regarding the utilization of available employment opportunities, they too would consider such an option.

Recommendations



Depoliticize the issue of employment in institutions

Efforts must be made to change the entrenched perception that working in Kosovo institutions implies political loyalty or distancing from the community. Through public campaigns, dialogue with the community, and the promotion of positive examples from practice, a narrative should be built that frames employment in institutions as a legitimate, neutral, and personal professional decision—not as an act carrying political weight. Employment should be communicated in the context of economic, professional, and personal needs, rather than political affiliation. This approach can reduce social pressure and empower young people to make independent decisions regarding their professional development.



Promote Kosovo institutions as professional and encouraging environments for youth

It is necessary to actively promote the advantages of working in the public sector—such as job stability, opportunities for professional development, and contributing to the community. To increase the appeal of these jobs, working conditions must be improved, employee benefits clearly presented, and job offerings tailored to the needs of youth from different areas. Greater visibility of these advantages may lead to increased interest among youth and attract qualified personnel to Kosovo institutions.



Increase the visibility and accessibility of job vacancy information, especially in Serbian

Efforts must be made to improve access to job vacancy information so that all citizens, including members of the Serbian community, have equal access to employment opportunities. Regular publication of vacancies in community languages, on clearly marked and easily accessible platforms, can contribute to greater visibility and a perception of inclusivity.

Foster trust-building through direct contact and positive examples

Young people already employed in Kosovo institutions should be actively involved as intermediaries in communication with their peers. Their personal testimonies about their work, conditions, and professional opportunities can help break down prejudices and open space for a more realistic and less politicized view of institutional engagement.

Strengthen local support mechanisms for employment of youth from non-majority communities

Local support programs should be developed to provide youth from non-majority communities with practical information, counseling, and assistance in the application process for jobs in Kosovo institutions. Providing advisory support can reduce the feeling of disconnection from the system and increase the willingness and capacity of young people to seek employment in the public sector.

Address the spatial dimension of employment access

Given that many job positions are physically distant from the places where members of the Serbian community live—particularly in northern Kosovo—measures should be considered to reduce logistical barriers to employment. These include subsidized transportation, decentralization of certain job positions, and enabling hybrid work arrangements where possible, in order to increase accessibility and the cost-effectiveness of institutional engagement.

