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Views from north Kosovo: the ethnic distance is not getting any closer

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A recently published report represents the first attempt to assess the views of the citizens in four Serb-majority municipalities in north Kosovo. The goal of the research was to gain insight into the key social and economic issues Kosovo Serbs face. [Joanna Hanson](#) provides an analysis, remarking that a lack-of-trust theme runs throughout the report.



Church in northern part of Kosovska Mitrovica, Kosovo. Credit: Tiia Monto / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0)

The ethnic distance between the Albanian and Serbian community is not getting any closer. That is one of the conclusions of this latest report by the NGO *Aktiv* and *The Centre for Peace and Tolerance* on the “[Views of the citizens in north Kosovo](#)”. The research was carried out between May and July this year in the four Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo. The report certainly paints a difficult socio-economic picture of north Kosovo as it moves through the normalisation process but it does reveal some evolving changes in approach.

The document contains two pieces of data which jumped off the pages for me. The first was the figure of 56% of the respondents who support the participation of Serbs in the Kosovo institutions despite the fact, and this was the second, that respondents’ assessments of all government institutions, both those of Belgrade and Pristina, displayed low levels of trust and satisfaction. This lack-of-trust theme runs through the report. There is a willingness to support greater integration but there is a real feeling of desertion by the authorities, by the political elites of both Serbia and Kosovo. This situation is further compounded by the fact that the Serbian community still feels excluded from the process which continues despite them. They feel they have solutions imposed on them by Belgrade, Pristina and the internationals.

This figure of 56% is even more interesting as the weighting towards this figure is higher in the older age groups which could betray not only an instinctive understanding of the need for it but also perhaps a legacy of collective memories of past history which had its good and bad times. It would appear that rationale of the people who did not support participation was that this would be tantamount to recognition of the Republic of Kosovo.

The aim of this poll was to gain an insight into the key social and economic issues in the north and to help inform political decisions related to the normalization process and the implementation of its agreements. As regards the former it paints a fairly grim picture of the socio-economic situation in the north and prospects there. Unemployment, especially amongst the young at 44%, is discouraging as are the wishes of 40% of those interviewed wanting to leave Kosovo.

None of these statistics will be a real surprise to the reader familiar with present-day Kosovo and the wider Balkans although these problems are further complicated by the fact that 52% of the working population hold jobs financed by Belgrade. These are predominantly public sector jobs, some of which will disappear as the normalization agreements become fully

implemented. However 60% said that they would be prepared to work in the Kosovo institutions which is another sign of understanding that the changes are real and cannot be avoided.

Despite this difficult socio-economic picture the report reveals encouraging data about people's realization that they are having to change their jobs and look at different career and employment options. Over 30% said they were looking to start up new private businesses. The largest obstacle to this was seen as the lack of financial resources for starting a business by nearly 60% of all the respondents. This is important as it may demonstrate that people realize they can no longer look to the state to provide them with employment and hence they are starting to take greater ownership of their own lives.

Opting to start up a private business in the north is quite a tough decision – doing so is no easy task. This difficulty is further underlined in the report, which lists the problems related to obtaining loans. There are two points to be made regarding this data. Firstly, this is an important example of the report's objective to inform political decisions because the government needs to ensure that the right procedures are in place to set up businesses. Secondly, the growth of business should help instigate greater collectivity of other stakeholders to help strengthen formal and informal institutions so necessary to the development of the north.

Business development is a well-known way of bringing traders and business owners together regardless of ethnicity. It could well help narrow the ethnic distance between the two communities.

This is a valuable report as it contains indicators and new information. It is a first albeit only two years after the signing of the EU-facilitated Brussels agreement, important aspects of which have not yet been implemented. This agreement has generated a process progressing slowly in a highly politicized environment, which as the report itself states, lacks in real transparency. Therefore, any conclusions must be cautious. Hopefully *Aktiv* will follow up this research in a couple of years. That notwithstanding there are clear points in this report which need to be heard, which are not being said for the first time but which seem to have no listener. The report's authors need to ensure they can actively carry out their objective to inform decision makers, who should find time to listen to these northern voices and engage with them.

Note: Previous versions of this article, in Serbian and Albanian language, were originally published on [New Perspektiva](#). The article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe, nor of the London School of Economics.

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