



EUROPEAN CENTRE
FOR MINORITY
ISSUES KOSOVO

EDUCATION IN THE SERBIAN LANGUAGE AND DIPLOMA VERIFICATION IN KOSOVO

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About ECMI Kosovo

ECMI Kosovo is the principal non-governmental organisation engaged with minority issues in Kosovo, with the overarching aim to develop inclusive, representative, community-sensitive institutions that support a stable multi-ethnic Kosovo. ECMI Kosovo contributes to the developing, strengthening and implementation of relevant legislation, supports the institutionalisation of communities-related governmental bodies, and enhances the capacity of civil society actors and the government to engage with one another in a constructive and sustainable way.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education in Kosovo is organized in two parallel strands. The education system of Kosovo is organized in Albanian, Bosnian, Turkish and Romani languages, and is attended by members of Albanian and other non-Serb communities. Education in Serbian language is organized and led by the Ministry of Education of Serbia and attended by the Serb community and communities who use Serbian language (mainly Gorani, Roma and Bosniaks). The Serbian-language education institutions, which encompass all levels of education, operate in all parts of Kosovo where Serbs and other Serbian-speaking communities live. As it stands, this network is completely separated from the wider education system of Republic of Kosovo. The education system in the Serbian language is not recognised by Kosovo, nor, for that matter, is the Kosovo system recognised by the Serbian system. Although the Kosovo Constitution guarantees the education in Serbian language, and furthermore, it allows for the usage of textbooks and teaching materials from the Republic of Serbia, this is foreseen to be done through a complex of mutual agreements between Serbia and Kosovo, which are not yet concluded.

Therefore, in practice, the two systems exist next to each other, without any interaction. This situation has persisted since 1999, with the onset of UN Administration in Kosovo, and has continued after the proclamation of independence of Kosovo in 2008. Apart from many political, educational and cultural issues stemming from this divide, a key practical issue which blocks the access to education and employment for members of the Serb and other communities is the non-recognition of diplomas between the two systems. The non-recognition in practice prevents individuals from crossing the division line between both systems. The following is a short summary of the work that is being done on tackling this issue, which is led by European Centre for Minorities issues in Kosovo.

2. DEGREE VERIFICATION: A COMPLICATED HISTORY, A COMPLEX SITUATION

Within the framework of EU-facilitated Brussels Dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, in April 2013, the two countries agreed to recognise higher education (university) diplomas. The agreement foresaw a third mediating party, and a very complicated process. Already in 2014, it was noted in the European Commission's annual progress report that cooperation was lagging as only five diplomas from Kosovo had been accepted in Serbia. Serbia's Constitutional Court annulled the Government's decree on diploma recognition in 2014 and, even though the Government issued a new decree a few weeks later, by now the process is considered completely blocked.¹ Three years after its ratification, it is deemed "truly tragic" that Kosovo's education system remained totally segregated and without genuine intentions for bilateral educational relations to be improved.² Aware of the deficiencies of the Brussels Agreement in terms of developing a functional framework for education between Kosovo and Serbia, ECMI Kosovo has integrated educational reform in its own agenda and is contributing to the resolution of the impasse with a number of actions.

One of the issues of great importance for members of the Serb community in Kosovo, which has remained unresolved under the agreement, was the position of the University of North Mitrovica (UNM), the only higher education institution providing language in the Serbian language in Kosovo. Under the Kosovo Constitution as well as the Law Higher Education³ and the Law on the Education in Municipalities⁴, 2008 the Municipality of Mitrovica North enjoys enhanced competencies in higher education, and the UNM is recognized as an autonomous public institution under the authority of the municipality.⁵

1. Bureau for Social Research, Report on the Implementatino of the Brussels Agreement (by the Republic of Serbia), June- December 2014, p. 14; Institute for the Study of Human Rights (Columbia University). Implementation Review of the Kosovo- Serbia Dialogue, 5 September 2017, p. 1

2. Gëzim Krasniqi, 'The challenge of moving from normalized dialogue to normalized relations', Pristina Insight, 19/04/2016, available at: <http://prishtinainsight.com/challenge-moving-normalised-dialogue-normalised-relations/> [accessed 22/05/2018]

3. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2761>

4. <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2543>

5. European Commission. February 2017. Overview of the Higher Education System: Kosovo, pp. 8-9

However, up to now, the UNM continues operating within the framework of Serbian education system, under the name 'University of Pristina with temporary seat in KosovskaMitrovica'.^{6,7} At an institutional level, the agreement only covered institutions that operate within the Republic of Serbia and education institutions that operate under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technologies of the Republic of Kosovo.⁸ The agreement did not cover the Serbian-run institutions that operate within the territory the Republic of Kosovo. In practical terms, for Serb and Serbian-speaking population living in Kosovo, this is the core of the problem, as all of their education diplomas are issued by the Serbian education system inside Kosovo, which were not covered by the Brussels Agreement.

Since 1999, graduates from all levels of Serb-language educational institutions in Kosovo have not been able to use their diplomas within the Kosovo system. In practical terms, they were not able to use their diplomas for employment in any position within the Kosovo institutions. This has not only hampered the access to education and employment of members of the Serb and other communities which attend education in Serbian language, but also blocks to broader integration of the Serb and other communities in Kosovo. In 2015, under the mediation of ECMI Kosovo, the Ministry of Education of Kosovo and University of MitrovicaNorth reached a deal for the verification of diplomas issued by the University of Mitrovica North. The Government of Kosovo's Regulation No. 21/2015 (December 2015), which was carefully crafted and negotiated with the representatives of the University of Mitrovica North, allowed for the first time after the war for diplomas issued by the only higher education institution operating in the Serbian language in Kosovo to be verified and, accordingly, be recognized for employment procedures in all public institutions of Kosovo.

⁶ Kosova Education Centre. 2014. Brief Situation Analysis of the Education Sector in Kosovo, p. 12

⁷ Big Deal: Civic Oversight of the Kosovo-Serbia Agreement Implementation, Report #1, November 2014, p. 39

⁸ For the full text of the Agreement see: <http://www.thebalkansdaily.com/full-text-of-agreement-between-belgrade-and-pristina/> [Accessed: 15/05/2018]

Since the regulation was put into practice, a Commission has been working on the diploma verification process, aided by ECMI Kosovo. In total, until May 2018, out of the 1418 applications for verification, 1075 diplomas have been positively verified. As of 8 May 2018, the Government of Kosovo extended the mandate of the Commission for the Verification of diplomas for another year. These numbers indicate the importance and success of the verification process in reaching graduates of the UMN. However, not only did the verification process reach a lot of graduates within a short period of time, it has also significantly improved the access to employment and education of the applicants. According to two surveys among graduates with verified diplomas, conducted by ECMI Kosovo during December 2016 and April 2017, out of the 269 applicants, 43% (115 applicants) used the diploma to apply for employment. 15% of them (40 applicants) stated that they used their verified diploma to take further professional examinations in Kosovo, 25% (68 applicants) stated that they were already in employment and used the verified diploma to regulate their status at their current employment positions, while 17% (46 applicants) confirmed that they had successfully secured employment after their diploma was verified.

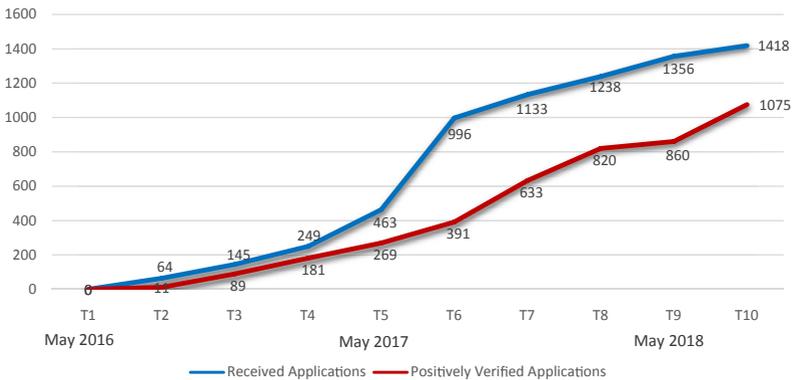
ECMI Kosovo plays a pivotal role in the process. The organization cooperates closely with the Kosovo government and has assumed vital responsibilities, acting as an intermediary between the UMN, graduates, and governmental agencies. In the current process, graduates submit a copy of the diploma to their local municipality. Through the Secretariat of the Independent Commission for diploma verification, diploma copies are forwarded to ECMI Kosovo in Pristina. ECMI is currently not mandated to receive applications straight from the applicants.⁹

Use of Verified Diploma	Number	%
Employment Application	115	43%
Status Verification	68	25%
Secured Employment	46	17%
Further Exams	40	15%
Total	269	100%

⁹ ECMI Kosovo. 2016. Diploma Verification Process. Available at: <http://www.ecmikosovo.org/en/Studies-and-handbooks/-Diploma-Verification-Process>

In consultation with the respective department of the University of Mitrovica North, ECMI confirms the credibility of the diploma and returns the documents to the Secretariat. The Independent Commission for diploma verification then reviews the documents arrived and, if applicable, formalizes the verification of the diploma.¹⁰

COMMISSION FOR THE VERIFICATION OF DEGREES ISSUED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH MITROVICA



3. ECMI AND EDUCATION FOR NON-MAJORITY COMMUNITIES IN KOSOVO

Apart from the contribution of ECMI Kosovo as a broker in the administrative process of degree verification, the NGO has developed a number of important parallel actions to resolve practical issues resulting from the political disputes surrounding Serbian-language education in Kosovo. As part of its wider efforts for minority rights and equality in education, ECMI Kosovo is currently working on a larger framework through a supporting project financed by the European Union and the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Pristina.

¹⁰ Andric, M. 18 May 2017. 'Accountability Sofa: Diploma Verification', available at: <http://www.ngoaktiv.org/news/accountability-sofa-diploma-verification> [Accessed 02/05/2018] [Accessed 02/05/2018]

The project seeks to improve the quality of Serbian-language higher education in Kosovo and to increase the employability of graduates, with a view of working towards the development of a regulatory framework that will cover not only the UNM, but also other higher education institutions, colleges and professional schools. Apart from providing technical support to the work of the Commission for the Verification of Degrees Issued by the UNM and advise to the Government of Kosovo on Serbian-language policy, the projects seeks to look beyond the degree verification and tackle education issues from a larger perspective.

In 2018, the organization conducted ground-breaking original research which mapped and evaluated the status and quality of Serbian-language education in Kosovo for the first time since 1999. Through interviews with stakeholders, statistics and demographic information, as well as analyses of the school infrastructure and facilities, dropout rates and investment analysis, the research brings together all available information and for the first time to map and analyses the conditions, problems and direction of education in the Serbian language in the country. The resulting publication is under preparation and will assist policy-makers, Kosovar and Serbian authorities, and the EU in their efforts at breaking the impasse in the educational dialogue between the two countries.

Last but not least, the importance of continuous development with an eye to the future being always at the heart of ECMI's operations, the NGO has established a partnership with the University of Flensburg (Europa-Universität Flensburg, EUF) in northern Germany, to facilitate capacity building for the UNM. The University of Flensburg was chosen not only because of their reputation as a respected research centre on teacher training but, more importantly, because of their extended experience in providing bilingual and mutually recognized education. As such, it became an instructive example of good practice in the coexistence of two different educational institutions in a border region. As part of this collaboration, ECMI organized a three-day study-visit at the EUF (26–28 September 2017) that included meetings of senior academic staff from the UNM with their respective colleagues from the University of Flensburg and the University of Southern Denmark.

4. A CHALLENGING FUTURE

High-quality education is one of the core governmental objectives for prosperity in Kosovo, even though budgetary concerns often hinder progress. According to the 2017–2021 Education Strategic Plan (KESP), a roadmap to the overall development of Kosovo’s educational system, reform is tied to a set of ambitious targets for the increase of gender and ethnic inclusivity, as well as the drastic decrease of dropout rates.¹¹ In terms of higher education performance, the 2018 EU Kosovo Report recorded that, even though the ratio of HE students per total population is double compared to EU average, completion rates remain low, and high unemployment rates among holders of degrees issued by vocational colleges (25%) indicate a mismatch between HE programs and labour market demand.¹² Recent governmental decisions have resulted in further dissonance between national educational operations and EU regulations. As noted in the EU 2018 Kosovo Report, in 2017, the government dismissed the entire board and acting director of the Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (KAA), an agency overseeing Kosovo’s efforts at abiding by EU standards. This move has undermined the Agency’s autonomy and has led to its exclusion from the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), a fact particularly worrying since Higher Education is considered a high-risk sector for corruption and political influence in Kosovo.¹³

The progress report for 2017 also noted that degree recognition, an issue of paramount importance to the overall process of normalization of the relationships between Serbia and Kosovo, remained unresolved.¹⁴ With verification of vocational degrees stemming from the same indecisiveness in regards to the relationship of Kosovar educational institutions to their Serbian counterparts, verification continues to be a highly political issue connected to the overall relationships between the two countries, and causing significant distress to Kosovo citizens.

¹¹ Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. 2016. Action Plan of Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017–2021, p. 2

¹² European Commission, 14.04.2018. Commission Staff Working Document: Kosovo 2018 Report“, p. 62

¹³ European Commission, 14.04.2018. Commission Staff Working Document: Kosovo 2018 Report“, p. 62–63

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 48

Building on the success - both in numbers and in actual impact - of the ongoing verification process, but also in recognition of time-consuming bureaucratic process, ECMI Kosovo is creating a new model for a more efficient, easy, user-friendly process. Until today, however, the government does not appear to have set specific targets for boosting administrative efficiency regarding degree verification, or to have plans for a gradual solution to the problem. Important issues of educational equality under the law, as well as equal access to the labour market ought to be decided and funded in an annual basis, which is one of the issues that ECMI Kosovo examines during the degree verification process, in its current form.

ECMI Kosovo continues monitoring the developments in the higher education sector closely. At the same time, the NGO recognizes that even though the verification of diplomas has been a success-story for the University of North Mitrovica, this does not mitigate the fact that there is a lot of room for improvement. In Kosovo today, primary and secondary schools operating in the Serbian language are not covered by existing legislation on verification of vocational degrees, and as such their diplomas are not yet recognized. At the same time, three Serbian-language vocational colleges (the College of Economic Vocational Studies from Pejë/Peč-Leposavić/Leposaviq, the Technical College of Vocational Studies from Ferizaj/Uroševac-Leposavić/Leposaviq, the Technical Trade College in Zvečan) are not covered either. As evident in the Commission's 2018 Kosovo progress review, the Kosovar educational system is facing a diverse set of challenges overall, and ECMI Kosovo aspires to include this very important issue of education in the Serbian language among the pressing problems to be discussed and included in future actions, until a workable solution is devised.



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