

Invented pogroms

Statistics, lies and confusion in Kosovo

ESI background paper
19 February 2024

“You will now hear for the first time the correct numbers that the Republic of Serbia, of course, always knew, but for different reasons did not want to come out with in public.”
President Vucic, [2 February 2024](#), on Kosovo Serb numbers



Gracanica Monastery in Kosovo



[Meeting Nenad Rasic, Serb Minister, Kosovo government](#)

In June 2023, the EU imposed sanctions against Kosovo, including a restriction on “high level meetings.” The first victim: Serb minister for minorities in the Kosovo government Nenad Rasic, who had meetings scheduled in Brussels on 19 June to discuss support for the Kosovo Serb minority with EU officials. These meetings were then cancelled by the EU.

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“The **pogroms**, persecution **and ethnic cleansing** that the regime in Pristina is implementing against the Serb population are well organized.”

Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic, 6 July 2023¹

Invented pogroms

On 6 July 2023, Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic declared publicly that NATO and the UN had fourteen days to disarm Kosovo’s police forces and to protect Kosovo Serbs from ongoing Albanian “pogroms and ethnic cleansing.” Otherwise “someone else” would need to do this.²

Warnings that Serbia might need to send troops into Kosovo to protect Serbs are not new. Already in August 2018, when the president of Kosovo was Hashim Thaci, Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic described Kosovo as a powder-keg: “Everyone will wait for an opportunity to strike the other in order to achieve an advantage on the ground. And every day we will worry if they will attack us in the North, where they will strike us, with whose support ...”³ However, in 2018 statements argued that *if* Serbs are attacked in Kosovo, Serbia will defend them. Since 2023, statements argue that Serbs are *now* attacked and need to be defended.

ESI warned in late July 2023 about this being a serious threat to peace in the Balkans.⁴ A few months later, Serbian paramilitaries did attack Kosovo police in Northern Kosovo. It is time to take seriously what is currently being said by politicians in Belgrade. If pogroms are invented, then violence follows. If such false claims are not called out, the situation will escalate further.⁵

It should not be difficult for international organisations to rebut false, misleading and dangerous claims about imaginary pogroms every time they are made. None of the many international observers with staff on the ground in Kosovo – from KFOR to EULEX, the EU Rule of Law Mission, from UNMIK to the OSCE – have seen or described “ethnic cleansing of Serbs” or Albanian “terror” in recent years in any of their copious reports. But absence of evidence has not stopped incendiary claims being made.

One of the tools in this battle of narratives has also been statistics. On 5 October 2023, president Vucic explained that, as a result of “Albanian terror”, 11 percent of Kosovo Serbs had left Kosovo since early 2021.⁶ On 8 February 2024, speaking at the UN Security Council, Vucic referred to “14 percent” of Kosovo Serbs who had left in just one year.⁷

No evidence has been offered for the alleged pogroms, systemic violence or alleged “ethnic cleansing” in recent years. But what about evidence for these numbers that president Vucic and others have quoted? What do they reveal? What do we really know?

¹ Radio Television Serbia, [“Vucic: Necemo dozvoliti pogrom i progon naseg naroda”](#), 6 July 2023.

² *Ibid.*

³ ESI, [“The Hypnotist – Aleksandar Vucic, John Bolton and the return of the past”](#), 25 April 2019.

⁴ ESI Newsletter, [“Belfast, Kosovo and the end of peace”](#), 27 July 2023.

⁵ Gerald Knaus, [“Kosovo: The next attack is bound to come”](#), *Der Spiegel*, 3 October 2023.

⁶ Happy TV, [“Cirilica: Predsednik Vucic – Svi detalji haosa u Banjskoj: ‘Koren problema je u Kurtijevom rezimu’”](#), 2 October 2023.

⁷ United Nations Security Council, [“Letter dated 5 February 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Serbia – Security Council, 9545th meeting”](#), 8 February 2024.

How many Serbs live in Kosovo?

In 1991, a census took place in Serbia. Serbia was then governed by president Slobodan Milosevic, who had reestablished direct control from Belgrade over Kosovo. Serbs were encouraged to take part. According to the 1991 census the number of Kosovo Serbs was 194,000.⁸

In 1999, after the end of the Kosovo war, the Serbian military and administration withdrew from Kosovo. There has been no census in which Kosovo Serbs have participated since. However, it has still been possible to get to a reliable estimate of their population.

ESI looked at this in 2004 in our report: “The Lausanne Principle – Multiethnicity, Territory and the Future of Kosovo’s Serbs.”⁹ We obtained a document from the Kosovo Coordination Centre, an administrative body of the government of Serbia, which showed a detailed breakdown of the Kosovo Serb population in 2002. It gave a total number of 129,474.¹⁰

We also obtained data on pupils in Serb-language primary schools in Kosovo. The total number of pupils in these schools in 2004 was 14,368. Using a survey on the age structure of the Kosovo Serb population, it was possible to extrapolate a total Serb population in 2004 of 128,000.¹¹

With different sources converging, it is reasonable to assume that the Kosovo Serb population in 2002 was indeed around 129,000.

What is their number today? On 8 February 2024, Srpska lista, the dominant Serb political party in Kosovo, appealed to the ambassadors of the USA, France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy in a letter to help “stop the exodus of the Serbian people.” The letter was read out aloud at a press conference.¹² There, criticizing the Kosovo government’s policies, Zlatan Elek, head of Srpska Lista, explained that “**around 100,000 Serbs** who are here on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija will be affected most directly. To translate this, it means the entire Serb population here in Kosovo and Metohija.”¹³

Thus, this February the leading Kosovo Serb party with close links to the Serbian government claimed, on the basis of administrative data available to the Serbian state, that there are now 100,000 Serbs in Kosovo. We can cross-check this again by looking at pupils in Serbian primary schools in Kosovo. In autumn 2023, their number was 10,700.¹⁴ Using the same calculation as in 2004, we arrive at an estimated total Serb population of 95,000:

⁸ Institute for Statistics of Republic of Serbia, [“Popis stanovništva, domaćinstva i stanova u 2002.: Stanovništvo i uporedni pregled broja stanovnika 1948, 1953, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991. i 2002. Podaci po naseljima”](#), May 2004.

⁹ European Stability Initiative, [“The Lausanne Principle: Multiethnicity, Territory and the Future of Kosovo’s Serbs”](#), 7 June 2004.

¹⁰ Kosovo Coordination Centre (Government of Serbia), *Prinzipi organizovanja samouprave nacionalnih zajednica na Kosovo i Metohiji*, Belgrade, January 2003.

¹¹ The 14,368 pupils in eight years of primary school suggests a population of 25,150 under the age of 15. According to the 2000 Living Standards Measurement Survey, 19.7 percent of the Serb population in Kosovo are below the age of 15. See also: Statistical Office of Kosovo, *Kosovo and its Population*, 5 June 2003.

¹² Politika, [“Srpska lista se obratila Kvinti, traže zaustavljanje egzodusa srpskog naroda”](#), 8 February 2024.

¹³ 24 Sedam TV, [“Elek: Ovakav potez predstavlja uvod u egzodus srpskog naroda”](#), 5 February 2024.

¹⁴ Politika, [“U skolskim klupama na Kosmetu 15.000 djaka”](#), 2 September 2023.

Extrapolation Kosovo Serb population based on primary school pupils

Year	Pupils	Population
2004	14,368	128,000
2023	10,700	95,000

This backs up the number provided by Srpska Lista: The numbers quoted by the Serbian government for 2002 and by Srpska Lista for 2024 make sense. We therefore use them as the best we have available:

Serb resident population in Kosovo (according to Serbian sources)

Year	Total
2002	129,000
2024	100,000

What these numbers reveal *is* shocking: a dramatic population decline from 2002 to 2024 of around 22 percent. A look at the number of primary school students from 2004 to 2024 shows the same trend, here with a decline of around 26 percent.

If this trend continues, there is a likelihood that the community might eventually disappear. Obviously this is a serious concern.

Population decline in Serbia

Let us now broaden the horizon and look at population trends in Serbia. There, the situation with data is straightforward. Regular censuses were held in recent decades. These show the following trend:

Population of the Republic of Serbia (census results)¹⁵

Year	Total
2002	7,498,001
2011	7,186,862
2022	6,647,003

From 2002 to 2022, the population of Serbia has declined by 851,000 people, from some 7.5 million people to some 6.6 million, or by 11 percent. This is also a striking number. But things are even more striking when one looks at trends in the 25 administrative districts (Serbian: “okrug”) of Serbia.

¹⁵ Institute for Statistics of Republic of Serbia, [“Popis stanovništva, domaćinstva i stanova u 2002.: Stanovništvo i uporedni pregled broja stanovnika 1948, 1953, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991. i 2002. Podaci po naseljima”](#), May 2004; [“Popis 2011: Stanovništvo prema starosti i polu”](#), 2011; [“Popis 2022: Ukupan broj stanovnika, po opštinama i gradovima”](#), 2024.

Population decline from 2002 to 2022, based on census¹⁶

District	Population trend (%)
Belgrade	+7
South Backa	+2
Raska	+2
Sumadija	-10
Nisava	-10
All Serbia	-11
Pcinja	-15
Moravica	-16
Srem	-16
South Banat	-17
Podunavlje	-17
Zlatibor	-19
Macva	-19
Kolubara	-20
North Backa	-20
Pomoravlje	-20
Rasina	-20
Branicevo	-22
Kosovo Serbs	-22
Jablanica	-23
Toplica	-24
Mid-Banat	-24
Pirot	-27
West Backa	-28
North Banat	-29
Zajecar	-30
Bor	-31

This analysis of regional population trends in Serbia shows three remarkable things.

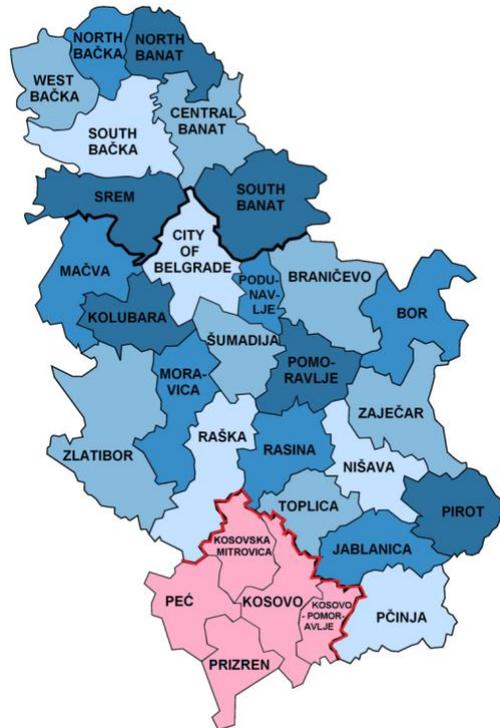
First, during these past two decades there has been a population decline of at least 10 percent in *all* districts but three: Belgrade, South Backa (Novi Sad) and Raska. Second, there has been a decline of at least 20 percent in 13 of 25 districts. Third, there has been a *bigger* population decline than among Kosovo Serbs in 8 districts in Serbia. These 8 districts had a combined population of one million people in 2002, and lost 355,000 people in two decades.

Looking at many of the districts inside Serbia next to Kosovo we see an equally disastrous population decline: in Pcinja district (capital Vranje), in Rasina district (capital Krusevac), in Jablanica district (capital Leskovac), and in Toplica district (capital Prokuplje). These districts had a combined population of 662,000 in 2002, and lost 167,000 people or 20 percent.

¹⁶ Institute for Statistics of Republic of Serbia, [“Popis stanovništva, domaćinstva i stanova u 2002.: Stanovništvo i uporedni pregled broja stanovnika 1948, 1953, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991. i 2002. Podaci po naseljima”](#), May 2004; [“Popis 2022: Ukupan broj stanovnika, po opštinama i gradovima”](#), 2024. Note that ‘all Serbia’ is without Kosovo Serbs.

Population decline in Serbian districts bordering Kosovo

Districts	Population 2002	Population 2022	Decline in %
Pcinja	227,690	193,802	15
Rasina	259,441	207,197	20
<i>Kosovo Serbs</i>	129,000	~ 100,000	22
Jablanica	240,923	184,502	23
Toplica	102,075	77,341	24

*Map of Serbian districts, according to the Serbian government*

The picture is clear: we are witnessing a collapse in the Serbian population both in Serbia and in Kosovo. It is especially dramatic in peripheral regions in the South (bordering Kosovo), the East and the North. What we are seeing in Kosovo is part of a wider development including Serbia itself.

But things are even worse when one looks at the young.

How Serb youth disappears – Kosovo, Serbia, Republika Srpska

On 12 September 2023, Srpski Telegraf daily paper reported that in the last two years, the number of Serb pupils in schools in Kosovo went down “by almost 1,000.”¹⁷

The report is based on an article by Serbian news agency Beta, which had quoted Miodrag Marinkovic from the North Mitrovica based think tank, CASA.¹⁸ Marinkovic had told Beta: “According to the available data of the School Administration for Kosovo and Metohija,

¹⁷ Srpski Telegraf, [“Za dve godine broj srpskih đaka na Kosovu smanjen za 1.000”](#), 12 September 2023.

¹⁸ KoSSev, [“Marinković: Za dve godine broj srpskih đaka na Kosovu smanjen za 1.000”](#), 12 September 2023.

15,520 students attended [Serb] primary and secondary schools in Kosovo in 2021. Two years later, according to the same source, 14,610 students attend [Serb] schools in Kosovo. So, in just two years, we have almost 1,000 fewer students in schools.”¹⁹

Minus 1000 students in two years? At this rate, the number of Serb pupils in Kosovo would reach zero within 30 years. This would be dramatic, if it were true. Alas, it is not. The next day, on 13 September 2023, Ivan Zaporozac, director of the School Administration for Kosovo in the Serbian Ministry of Education (*Skolska uprava Kosovska Mitrovica*) responded that this information was “absolutely untrue.”²⁰ It was based on a mistake:

“They used some semi-information from certain news agencies ... The data that went public and is ear-splitting, that there are allegedly 1,000 students less, is absolutely untrue. Also, the data from 2021 includes music school students, while the data from 2023 is without them ... with music school, we have 15,283 students, that is 237 students less than in 2021, or 1.5 percent. When we compare this to central Serbia, it’s negligible.”²¹

Zaporozac then underlined that in Kosovo not a single Serb school class had been closed in these two years.²²

While the Beta article was based on a mistake, it responded to an expectation: that somehow, the decline in the number of Serb youth in Kosovo has been particularly dramatic recently. In fact, as we have already shown, the number of Kosovo Serb primary school pupils has gone down a lot: from some 14,400 to 10,700 in 19 years. This is a decline of 3,700 or 26 percent.

Primary school pupils in Serb schools in Kosovo

Year	Number
2004	14,368
2023	10,700
Difference	3,668

Let us ask again, however, how this compares to Serbia as a whole, as well as to the situation in the 25 Serbian districts? Looking at primary school student numbers, we see the following:

*Primary school students in schools in Serbia*²³

Year	Serbia
2004	667,570
2023	500,514
Difference	167,056

¹⁹ Srpski Telegraf, [“Za dve godine broj srpskih djaka na Kosovu smanjen za 1.000”](#), 12 September 2023.

²⁰ “School administrations are organizational units of the Ministry [of Education of Republic of Serbia] whose task is to provide operational and professional support to schools...provide support and conditions for smooth entry, filling, updating and maintenance of the database on education.” See Ministry of Education of Republic of Serbia, “Skolske uprave“, 2024.

²¹ Kosovo online, [“Zaporozac: U srpskim skolama na KiM 300 djaka vise nego proslave godine”](#), 13 September 2023.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, [“Saopštenje: Ucenici osnovne škole na pocetku 2003/2004 skolske godine – Republika Srbija po opstinama”](#), March 2004; [“Broj učenika na pocetku skolske godine po polu i razredima“](#), 2023.

This is a decline of 25 percent. Looking at the 25 districts in Serbia reveals an even more striking reality: there has been a faster decline in the number of pupils in 22 (!) of 25 districts, when compared to Kosovo Serb schools.

Serbia vs. Kosovo primary school students: 2003 v. 2023²⁴

District	Students
Belgrade	+2
South Backa	-8
Raska	-20
Serbia	-25
Kosovo Serbs*	-26
Sumadija	-27
Moravica	-28
Nisava	-28
South Banat	-29
Srem	-29
North Backa	-31
Kolubara	-32
Macva	-34
Mid-Banat	-35
Podunavlje	-35
Rasina	-35
Zlatibor	-37
Pomoravlje	-38
Pirot	-39
Zajecar	-39
Toplica	-39
North Banat	-40
West Backa	-40
Jablanica	-40
Branicevo	-43
Bor	-47
Pcinja	-48

The decline in the number of primary school pupils in Kosovo is dramatic (26 percent). The decline in all of Serbia outside of Belgrade is even more dramatic. And the decline in Republika Srpska, the majority-Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a unit within a federal state with substantial powers, is nothing short of catastrophic. In schools in Republika Srpska, the decline has been 32 percent in less than two decades!

Primary school students in schools in Republika Srpska²⁵

Year	Number
2004	124,539
2022	84,643
Difference	39,896

²⁴ Institute for Statistics of the Republic of Serbia, "[Saopštenje: Ucenici osnovne skole na pocetku 2003/2004 skolske godine – Republika Srbija po opstinama](#)", March 2004; "[Osnovno obrazovanje – Broj učenika na početku školske godine po polu i razredima, 2023/2024.](#)", 2024.

²⁵ Statistical Office of the Republika Srpska, "[Statistika obrazovanja: Osnovno obrazovanje, kraj 2003./2004. i pocetak 2004./2005.](#)", 2005; "[Osnovno obrazovanje: 2022/2023](#)", 2023.

As one looks for explanations for these trends, one quickly realizes that it makes little sense to talk about the situation in Kosovo in isolation. The number of Serbs is falling sharply across the region. With an aging population because of low birth rates, and many emigrating from their home districts (also abroad), the number of Serb pupils across the whole of South East Europe is in free fall. This situation is dramatic in Kosovo and in Serbia and catastrophic in Republika Srpska.

Misinformation, tensions and lies

One of the most important conclusions from all this is the need to question henceforth all claims which do not include reference to facts.

On 30 January 2024, the respected think tank International Crisis Group wrote that: “over 10 percent of Kosovo’s Serbs have emigrated over the past year. The departures accelerate a pre-existing trend: Crisis Group estimates that up to one third have left in the past eight years.”²⁶ This claim of a dramatic *recent* development offered no footnotes and sources. It was based on conventional wisdom.

There are a lot of such claims bandied around, and many who share them might believe them to be true. At the same time, there is also intentional propaganda. Serbian media are full of it, claiming non-existent pogroms, “ethnic cleaning” and even genocide on the part of the Kosovo government. This is particularly the case in media close to the government in Belgrade:



“I warned this would happen, that people would stand up against Kurti’s torture, but only few listened. Main culprit for this bloodshed is him, because he wants to ethnically cleanse Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija.” (25 September 2023)

“Final act: Kurti is speeding up ethnic cleansing of Serbs in Kosovo” (26 September 2023)

And then there are the leading politicians in Belgrade. Depending on the audience, these claims sound both dramatic and threatening. In a 50-minute long speech on 6 July 2023, covered live by all major media in Serbia, Serbian president Vucic described in detail what he saw happening in Kosovo: a state policy of intimidations, arrests and murders, designed to bring about the removals of Serbs from the territory of Kosovo. The goal of this policy, he

²⁶ International Crisis Group, [“Toward Normal Relations between Kosovo and Serbia”](#), 30 January 2024.

explained, was “to leave Serbs hungry and without medicine, to bring fear into every Serb household” ... and to drive out the population.²⁷



The grey rhino

And on 8 February 2024, speaking at the UN Security Council, Vucic referred to “14 percent” who had left in one year “due to violence and persection”:

“The violence and persecution that Pristina is now openly carrying out against Serbs is natural part of long-term, systematic and wide spread attack on the Serbian civilian population throughout Kosovo and Metohija. **In the past year alone**, obviously due to the described physical and structural violence of Pristina institutions towards the Serbian population, **more than 14 percent** of Serbs left Kosovo and Metohija.”²⁸

As we have seen, these numbers are not real. It is high time that every time such statistics are presented there is a reaction.

The most important question for policy makers in Belgrade, Banja Luka and North Mitrovica is thus the same today: Is there a way to overcome a catastrophic regional dynamic that feeds on the continued isolation and economic backwardness of Serbia, Republika Srpska and Kosovo? What is certain is that rhetoric about invented pogroms and necessary violence is far more likely to accelerate than to reverse this trend. It is an interest that Serbs in Kosovo and in Bosnia and Herzegovina share with all their fellow citizens living there.

²⁷ Happy TV, [“Cirilica: Predsednik Vucic – Svi detalji haosa u Banjskoj: ‘Koren problema je u Kurtijevom rezimu’”](#), 2 October 2023.

²⁸ United Nations Security Council, [“Letter dated 5 February 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Serbia - Security Council, 9545th meeting”](#), 8 February 2024.

Annex A: Health insurance, births, returns

ESI has taken a closer look also at other statistics provided by Serbian authorities.

On 2 February 2024, Serbian president Vucic explained that Serbia had not until then wanted to publish any “correct” Kosovo Serb number, and that now they did:

“You will now hear for the first time the correct numbers that the Republic of Serbia, of course, knew since ever but for different reasons did not want to come out with them in public.

In Kosovo and Metohija **we have 31,831 persons employed, 29,115 pensioners**, of which 4,700 pensioners get their pension paid directly on hands every month, either for health reasons or because they are unable to go to the bank. In total salaries and pensions we have 60,946.

Next to this we have **social welfare, in total 31,586 users**. Of course, proportionally this represents the biggest share of population. The reason is that those people have no jobs in Kosovo and Metohija. And this is why the state of Serbia made effort to create basic conditions for their lives there. Within this number of 31,586, there are the parental and child support, returnee support, those caring for others, disabled veterans, support for families of missing persons. Within the 31,586 there are 13,931 are users of financial support, so people who are most vulnerable.”²⁹

What do the numbers which Vucic quoted here suggest about the Kosovo Serb population today? It confirms what we already established above.

Vucic gives a number of 60,946 for those pensioners and employed. He adds 13,931 who receive financial support, but no salary or pension. This adds up to 74,877. Then add to this the official numbers of all pupils in Kosovo Serb schools from September 2023: 15,000.

We get to 89,877. This leaves children younger than school age and a few working in the private sector. Thus we get close to 100,000 again, the number quoted this February by Srpska Lista.

Health insurance

In Serbia almost the entire population (98 percent) has health insurance.³⁰ All citizens with some income pay into the Health Insurance Fund of Serbia (salaries, pensions...).³¹ Family members without income are insured as well. The rest of population gets insurance from the state budget.

The Health Insurance Fund of Serbia is also in charge for providing health care for Serbs in Kosovo. It shared with ESI the data for December 2017 and September 2023.

²⁹ Source: Srpska napredna stranka, [“Vucic: Nastavicemo da se borimo za nas narod na Kosovu i Metohiji”](#), 2 February 2024.

³⁰ European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, [“Serbia: Health system review”](#), 2019.

³¹ Health Fund of Republic of Serbia, [“About us”](#), February 2024.

*Persons with health insurance, Serb health fund in Kosovo*³²

Year	Kosovo
2017	109,433
2023	104,064
Difference	-5,369

In six years, the number of health insured people fell by 4.9 percent. Across all of Serbia, there was a decline of 2.8 percent.

*Persons with health insurance, Serb health fund*³³

Year	Serbia	Kosovo
2017	6,792,049	109,433
2023	6,600,001	104,064
Difference	-192,048	-5,369

Births

We also looked at the number of babies born in the health system in Kosovo which is financed by the Serbian Health Fund. Again, there has been no “Kurti effect”: in 2020 and 2022 the number remained almost the same, in 2023 it was higher.

*Number of Serb babies born in Kosovo 2020 vs. 2022*³⁴

Year	Births
2020	919
2022	911
2023	926

On 31 December 2023, media reported that in North Mitrovica, during 2023, more than 500 babies were born.³⁵ In 2022, it had been around 430 babies. A similar trend was reported in Gracanica, the largest Serb municipality south of river Ibar. Furthermore, as Zoran Jaksic, a gynecologist in North Mitrovica explained, some births are not taking place in Kosovo:

“We are not a reference institution for the care of such patients [premature births]. Each year there is a number of women who give birth both in Kragujevac and in tertiary institutions in Belgrade.”³⁶

³² Health Fund of Republic of Serbia, [“Broj osiguranika sa 31.12.2017.”](#), 2019; “Pregled broja osiguranika po filijalama zakljucno sa 30.09.2023.”, 12 October 2023.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ RTV, [“U srpskim sredinama na KiM u 2020. vise beba nego 2019.”](#), 23 December 2020 (Note that data does not include births from 23 to 31 December 2020); N1, [“U srpskim sredinama na Kosovu rodjeno skoro 100 beba vise”](#), 19 December 2022 (Note that data does not include births between 15 and 31 December 2022; Kosovo Online, [“U porodilistima u Severnoj Mitrovici i Gracanici rodjeno vise beba nego u 2022. godini”](#), 31 December 2023 (Note: data does not include 31 December 2023).

³⁵ Kosovo Online, [“U porodilistima u Severnoj Mitrovici i Gracanici rodjeno vise beba nego u 2022. godini”](#), 31 December 2023.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Serb Returns to Kosovo

The most recent report of the UN Secretary-General about Kosovo to the UN Security Council from 5 October 2023 does not mention any expulsions, ethnic cleansing or pogrom.

Instead it noted that since April 2023 “the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registered 24 voluntary returns, 8 women and 16 men, from the Kosovo Serb community, who had been displaced within and outside Kosovo.”³⁷ The report listed concrete programs and efforts by international organisations and the government of Kosovo to increase returns of minorities:

- IOM contributed to safe conditions for returns by enabling sustainable livelihoods and durable integration for returnees, including through the construction or reconstruction of 15 houses for 54 returnees (24 women and 30 men) ...
- The Kosovo government allocated 3 million euros to support employment opportunities for businesses, small agriculture producers in rural areas and civil society organizations that contribute to the integration of communities.
- The Ministry for Communities and Returns of Kosovo announced the preliminary list of beneficiaries for a tender of 2 million euros allocated for non-majority communities ...

From October 2019, four months before Albin Kurti was elected prime minister of Kosovo for the first time, until October 2023, the United Nations Mission to Kosovo, registered 758 voluntary returns from the Kosovo Serb community (out of 12,762 in total since 2000).³⁸

Annex B: The least credible numbers: Serbian IDP statistics

There is one truly bizarre number floating around in debates on Kosovo Serbs. It concerns those who have allegedly been displaced from Kosovo since 1999 to Serbia. On 7 February 2024, the Balkans outlet of *Russia Today* wrote that there are today some 200,000 forcibly internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Kosovo in Serbia who are unable to return.³⁹ It referred to the website of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of Republic of Serbia. There this claim is indeed made:

“In March 2000, in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissariat for Refugees (UNHCR), Commissariat organized registration of internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija, when 187.129 people were registered. In the period between 2000 and 2005 there were more than 20.000 newcomers from Kosovo, so at the end of 2005, the number of internally displaced persons in Serbia without Kosovo and Metohija was 209.021. Currently this number is **201,047 persons**.”⁴⁰

³⁷ United Nations Mission in Kosovo, [“Report to the Secretary General”](#), 5 October 2023.

³⁸ United Nations Mission in Kosovo, [“Report to the Secretary General”](#), 4 October 2019; [“Report to the Secretary General”](#), 5 October 2023.

³⁹ RT Balkan, [“Fantasticni svet Mihaela Martensa: Legenda o egzodusu Srba sa KiM i druge price”](#), 7 February 2024.

⁴⁰ Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of Republic of Serbia, [“Internally Displaced Persons”](#), accessed on 16 February 2024.

UNHCR has always relied on Serbian government figures in its own reports on IDPs. But these numbers show also that none of the claims made by Serbian politicians about recent *increases* in the number of displaced people from Kosovo are backed up by their own statistics.

Internally displaced persons of concern to UNHCR, 1999-2022⁴¹

Year	Persons
1999	234,900
2000	267,500
2001	263,600
2002	261,826
2003	251,833
2004	248,154
2005	246,391
2006	227,590
2007	226,350
2008	225,879
2009	224,881
2010	228,442
2011	228,215
2012	227,821
2013	227,495
2014	223,139
2015	220,002
2016	219,633
2017	217,453
2018	215,794
2019	214,696
2020	213,018
2021	211,823
2022	210,308
2023	209,796

In fact, data on IDPs that Serbia submits to UNHCR shows the following:

First, neither the March 2004 riots (when there was targeted violence against Kosovo Serbs) nor Kosovo's February 2008 proclamation of independence led to any noticeable increase in the number of displaced Serbs from Kosovo. From 2004 to 2005 the number fell. From 2008 to 2009 the number fell again. There is also no "Kurti effect". After Albin Kurti first became prime minister of Kosovo in February 2020, and since, also in the past two years, the number of IDPs from Kosovo in Serbia *dropped*. There is no Kosovo exodus of any kind.

But there is a deeper problem with these numbers, and with the fact that UNHCR continues to quote them. Thus, in October 2023 UNHCR still wrote that there are "**approximately 200,000 displaced persons from Kosovo residing in the region, most of them in Serbia.**"⁴²

⁴¹ UNHCR, "Refugee Data Finder: Serbia and Kosovo:S/RES/1244 (1999) (SRB)", 16 February 2024. Data for the latest year (2023) is available up until mid-year.

⁴² UNMIK, "[United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo Report of the Secretary-General](#)", 5 October 2023.

In early 2000, shortly after the war, the only official figure on displacement of Serbs from Kosovo comes from a registration that was carried out by the Serbian government. The results were published in April 2000. They stated that there were then 187,129 IDPs from Kosovo, of whom 141,396 were Serbs, 19,551 were Roma and 7,748 were Montenegrins.

However, as we have pointed out above, if one compares the data on the number of Serbs who remain in Kosovo with Yugoslav statistical data from before 1999, the extent of displacement of Serbs from Kosovo is more likely to be in the vicinity of 65,000.

How is such a wide discrepancy possible?

From the start, the IDPs were scattered widely across Serbia. Fewer than 7 percent moved into collective centres operated by the Serbian government. Most already had accommodation in Serbia, or stayed with friends and relatives, or else rented apartments. The dispersal of the population made it very difficult to track subsequent movement of IDPs, or to verify the numbers produced during the initial registration exercise. In fact, a document produced by the Kosovo Coordination Centre in January 2003 gave a figure of only 110,287 Kosovo Serb IDPs in Serbia, without further explanation.

UNHCR, which operates on the territory of Serbia by invitation of the government, has not carried out any independent investigation. In some of its documents, however, it expressed serious doubts about the official figures already two decades ago:

“The sum of the estimated number of minorities living in Kosovo, and the number of currently registered IDPs in Serbia and Montenegro, results in a figure significantly higher than the minority population that has ever lived in Kosovo ... An undetermined number of minority returnees who have returned to Kosovo, including those who left during the NATO bombings but returned immediately after, never de-registered. Realistically, therefore, much lower numbers than those non-Albanians currently registered as IDPs in Serbia are truly IDPs, or remain IDPs in search of a durable solution, or await voluntary return.”

By now it should be obvious: There were never 200,000 internally displaced persons from Kosovo in Serbia.⁴³ The important question for policy makers is a different one: How many Serbs displaced to Serbia are today still potential candidates for return to Kosovo?

By any definition, those who chose to sell their property in Kosovo and resettled permanently in Serbia ceased to be IDPs. Nobody has made any attempt to track this process. As a result, it is impossible to assess the scale of the return task in Kosovo.

One thing is clear, however. If it were properly quantified, the task of helping any Kosovo Serb now in Serbia who wanted to return to do so would appear much more feasible than is commonly assumed.⁴⁴

This should be a priority for the Kosovo government and its supporters in the coming year: identify the total number of potential returnees, and support their return. With the goal that there should not be an displaced Kosovo Serbs by summer 2025.

⁴³ Alas, until today such fictional numbers are included in the annual UNHCR Global Trends report gives the number of 210,000 IDPs. See [UNHCR Global Trends report 2022](#).

⁴⁴ European Stability Initiative, “[The Lausanne Principle: Multiethnicity, Territory and the Future of Kosovo’s Serbs](#)”, 7 June 2004.

Annex C: Kosovo Serbs 1981 - 2002*Kosovo Serbs – from 2004 ESI report*

Municipality	Serb population 1981 (census)	Serb population 1991 (census)	Serb population 2002 (CCK)
<i>Gjilan-Ferizaj region</i>	60,963	58,475	34,324
Kacanik/Kaqanik	284	223	0
Strpce/Shterpce		8,138	8,123
Urosevac/Ferizaj	18,285	8,314	0
Vitina/Viti	8,369	7,002	3,266
Gnjilane/Gjilan	19,212	19,370	11,623
Kos Kamenica/Kamenice	14,813	12,762	10,039
Novo Brdo/Noveberde	*	2,666	1,273
<i>Prishtine-Lipjan-Podujevo region</i>	56,403	52,653	28,335
Lipljan/Lipjan	10,259	9,713	8,518
Stimlje/Shtime		971	0
Pristina/Prishtina		26,893	12,405
Kosovo Polje/Fushe Kosove	43,875	8,445	4,201
Obilic/Obiliq		5,490	3,211
Podujevo/Podujeve	2,242	1,118	0
Glogovac/Gllogovc	27	23	0
<i>Mitrovica region</i>	48,101	43,889	64,083
Vucitrn/Vushtrri	6,091	5,522	4,294
Srbica/Skenderaj	1,104	713	390
Kos. Mitrovica/Mitrovice		9,482	15,596
Zvecan/Zveqan	25,929	7,591	14,984
Zubin Potok		6,282	8,859
Leposavic/Leposaviq	14,977	14,299	19,960
<i>Peja region</i>	24,632	20,931	1,371
Istok/Istog	7,736	5,968	496
Klina/Kline	6,829	5,209	25
Pec/Peje	7,995	7,815	850
Decan/Deqan	234	188	0
Djakovica/Gjakove	1,838	1,751	0
<i>Prizren region</i>	19,338	18,242	1,361
Malisevo/Malisheve	-	475	0
Orahovac/Rahovec	4,026	3,795	1,148
Prizren	11,651	10,911	213
Gora – Dragash	93	60	0
Suva Reka/Suhareke	3,568	3,001	0
TOTAL	209,437	194,190	129,474

* During this period, Novo Brdo was part of Pristina municipality.

Sources:

- Yugoslav Census 1981
- Yugoslav Census 1991
- Kosovo Coordination Centre (Government of Serbia), *Prinzipi organizovanja samouprave nacionalnih zajednica na Kosovo i Metohiji*, Belgrade, January 2003.

Annex D: ESI on Kosovo Serbs

ESI has written many reports on the Kosovo Serb community since 2000.

We have argued for extensive minority rights; for the creation of a new majority-Serb municipality in North Mitrovica; for economic development initiatives for minority areas, including for a new university in North Kosovo; for a focus on identifying and helping all displaced Kosovo Serbs to return to their homes quickly, to resolve this displacement issue once and for all. We have also continued to make the case against any proposals of redrawing national borders or exchanging populations on an ethnic basis. Here are some of our publications on these issues:

Spiegel Op-ed: [The next attack is bound to come](#) (3 October 2023)
[Sledeći napad će doći sigurno](#)

ESI: [Belfast, Kosovo and the end of peace](#) (27 July 2023)

ESI: [The Hypnotist – Aleksandar Vucic, John Bolton and the return of the past](#)
 (25 April 2019)

Politico Op-ed: [Redrawing Balkan borders would be a fatal mistake](#) (28 August 2018)

ESI: [Why Kosovo needs migration – From research to policy](#) (23 Apr 2015)

ESI: [The cost of non-Europe – Textile towns and the future of Serbia](#) (18 Jan 2007)

ESI: [Mitrovica: Kosovo’s Litmus Test – ESI Discussion Paper](#) (28 Apr 2006)

ESI: [The development trap at the heart of the Balkans – A socio-economic portrait of Gjilan, Kumanovo and Presevo](#) (5 Jul 2005)

ESI: [Towards a Kosovo Development Plan – The state of the Kosovo economy and possible ways forward](#) (24 Aug 2004)

ESI: [The Lausanne Principle: Multiethnicity, Territory and the Future of Kosovo’s Serbs](#)
 (7 June 2004)

[Parimi i Lozanë: Multietniciteti, territori dhe ardhmëria e serbëve të Kosovës](#)
[Princip Lozane: Multietnicnost, teritorij i budućnost kosovskih](#)

ESI: [People Or Territory? A Proposal For Mitrovica](#) (16 Feb 2004)
[Narod ili teritorija? Predlog za napredak u Mitrovici](#)
[Njerëzit apo territori? Propozim për progres në](#)

ESI: [A post-industrial future? Economy and society in Mitrovica and Zvečan](#) (30 Jan 2004)

ESI: [Trepča, 1965-2000](#) (11 Jun 2003)

ESI: [De-industrialisation And Its Consequences – A Kosovo Story](#) (1 March 2002)