



EUROPEAN CENTRE  
FOR MINORITY  
ISSUES KOSOVO

PRESS RELEASE

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## ECMI KOSOVO CONDEMS THE VIOLENT BLOCKAGE OF ENTRANCE TO THE SERB ORTHODOX CHURCH IN GJAKOVË/ĐAKOVICA AND CALLS ON KOSOVO AUTHORITIES TO ENSURE FREE AND UNIMPEDED ACCESS TO PLACES OF WORSHIP

On 6 January, Vetëvendosje activists, together with the NGO “Thirrjet e Nënave” (Mothers’ Calls), staged a protest in front of the premises of the Serb Orthodox Church in Gjakovë/Đakovica, in order to prevent the worshippers to enter the Church. The sit in was generally calm and nonviolent in nature. The Kosovo Police intervened and dispersed the protesters, arresting two people in the process.

The pilgrims—many of whom are originally from Gjakovë/Đakovica—travel from Serbia to Gjakovë/Đakovica every year at this time in order to attend the liturgy for Serbian Christmas, a religious celebration held on 7 January. According to media reports in Kosovo, a Vetëvendosje activist threw a piece of ice in the direction of the worshippers, thereby breaking the front window of the bus they were traveling with. According to the statement of the regional Kosovo Police spokesperson given to *GazetaJetanëKosovë*, Kosovo Police apprehended the individual throwing ice and immediately secured the area. The Kosovo Police spokesperson also noted that, according to the worshippers themselves, they had decided to go back since the road was very icy and they were unable to enter the church with their bus.<sup>1</sup> However, media in Serbia report a different story, with the chairman of the Association of People Displaced from Gjakovë/Đakovica Đokica Stanojević telling *B92* that they had to cancel their trip amid protests and rocks being thrown in their direction, lightly injuring the driver of the bus.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see here <http://live.kallxo.com/sq/MTL/Pelegrinet-Perseri-Kthehen-Pa-Hyre-ne-Kishte-Gjakoves-3940>

<sup>2</sup> For more information, please see here [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=01&dd=06&nav\\_category=640&nav\\_id=944135](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=01&dd=06&nav_category=640&nav_id=944135)

Vetëvendosje and “Thirrjet e Nënave” have argued that they were protesting the arrival of “suspected war criminals guilty of committing crimes” in Gjakovë/Đakovica, and also that of Đokica Stanojević, the mayor of Gjakovë/Đakovica during the repressive regime of Slobodan Milošević. Gjakovë/Đakovica municipality was one of the areas worst hit during the 1998-99 conflict, with many civilian casualties and a large number of people still missing and unaccounted for.

ECMI Kosovo reiterates the necessity to ensure the security of all citizens, regardless of their ethnic background in Kosovo, especially on the occasion of emotionally charged events for Kosovo communities. As guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, it is the duty of public authorities to ensure that all citizens and communities enjoy freedom of movement and unimpeded access to places of worship all over Kosovo. ECMI Kosovo recalls that while peaceful protesting is a guaranteed right, claims of war crimes should be addressed through the proper legal channels and that the violent blockage of entrance to places of worship is an act of violence that impedes the stable coexistence of communities in Kosovo and does not bring accountability for war crimes any closer.

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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.