

Name: Alert ID: TMML2024034163484 Former Kosovo ruling party legislator Azem Sylja, whom prosecutors accuse of running an organized crime gang that they say deprived the state and Kosovo Serbs of property worth about 30 million Euros (US\$ 34 million), was heard in closed session at a Pristina court on Tuesday, reports Balkan Insight. Sylja's case revolves around plots of land the alleged crime group, composed of Kosovo and Serbian citizens, had allegedly acquired cheaply through bribing public officials and falsifying official documentation. Sylja was meant to be detained on April 27, a day after Kosovo prosecutors ordered a crackdown on the alleged organized crime gang. Together with the European Union's police mission in Kosovo (EULEX), local police arrested six alleged members of the group and raided 42 locations that day. He had left the country, but returned to Kosovo within a couple of days to face the allegations. He was finally arrested on April 29. According to local news portal Lajmi.net, his lawyer Tome Gashi said Sylja was not aware of any investigation against him when he left. While still being sought by Kosovo authorities, on April 28, Gazeta Express reported that Sylja announced his resignation from Parliament in a statement without revealing his location. While calling the case against him "unfair", he expressed his willingness to cooperate with authorities. At the time, prosecutors said the group is composed of about 40 people, but according to newer news reports, prosecutors believe the group is composed of more than 50 members. Prosecutors allege that since 2006, Sylja and his associates "misused" the rights of Serb families to certain plots of land while they were temporarily seized by the Basic Court in Pristina, pending a decision to return them to their original owners once the legal status of the properties is clarified. After the NATO bombing of 1999 and the withdrawal of all Serbian institutions, these properties and other legal issues have fallen into limbo. It was believed that these issues would be resolved as part of the ongoing EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Kosovo Serbs who fled Kosovo after 1999 sold the properties cheaply, not having any intention to return to the now independent Albanian-majority country. Reuters reported investigators believe the scheme involved officials and businessmen who bought state-owned land cheaply, only to sell it for a larger profit. Sylja and his alleged associates are accused of abusing their official position, money laundering, falsifying official documents and receiving bribes. According to Balkan Insight, EULEX prosecutor Danilo Cecarelli said Sylja's court hearing was closed to the public because the case is still being investigated.