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Post-Independent Kosovo: From Prescriptive to Descriptive Identities

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**Post-Independent Kosovo:
From Prescriptive to Descriptive Identities**
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Abstract

The aim of this study was to uncover the existence, or possibility of, a Kosovar identity in today's Kosovo. I intend to discuss the role personal experience plays in confirming or challenging one's identity, and in this light show how the memories and personal experiences of Kosovo Serbs and Albanians endorse their ethnically-based interactions.

The methods of my research were mostly of an experiential nature, and consisted of staying in Kosovo for a two-week period. My research shows that there is no clear idea of what a Kosovar identity means for the people of Kosovo at this time. Their narratives and symbols demonstrate strong affiliation with their ethnic identities, which is seldom contested due to their geographical, educational, and linguistic divisions. For both groups, ethnic identity is much more central than a shared national identity.

The possibility of a shared national identity presents an opportunity for two ethnicities who have suffered in war to re-think and reconstruct a common disposition. Nevertheless, before a national identity can take hold in Kosovo, there needs to be a continuation of restoring trust on the community level.

Introduction

This project was an exploration of ethnic identities in Kosovo, conducted by an Albanian who had never been there.¹ The pressing urgency to go to Kosovo was as personal as it was political. I did not intend to go there to increase the already high international presence, or to give anyone a piece of my mind about what they should do with their land. I intended to go there as someone in the process of constructing my identity, with the expectation that I would "belong," based on the assumption of a joint language and ethnicity.

¹ Although born in Albania in 1988, I have lived in the United States since 1999, currently carry an American passport, and speak fluent English.

There are two main reasons I consider these factors important to my sense of belonging. The first is because as an immigrant in the United States of America for twelve years, I have created and embraced other facets of my identity in order to belong. This in turn demanded suppression of my Albanian ethnicity and language. The other reason is because my Albanian identity was directly challenged while living in Belgrade for two months. This “challenge” was a combination of a history of conflict between Albanians and Serbs, as well as a currently tense political situation in Serbia regarding Kosovo’s independence.²

Being Albanian did not always matter to me. It did not matter much while I was living in Albania, for example. I was a child with no sense of nationalism, and I had not encountered any alternative to Albania. It started to matter when I was acquainted with an other, where I in turn became an other: this was when I moved to the United States. Often, people who immigrate go one of two directions: they either become ultra nationalist, clinging to an already established identity when in a new space that threatens it, or they subdue this identity as a compromise to integrate into their new space. I did the latter. I went even one step further than subduing my identity: I often hid it because I was ashamed with the connotations the word “immigrant” carried. This shame was not specific to being an Albanian immigrant, but more about being a foreigner—a distinct other marked by a different language and culture.

In the past three years, I regained interest in my Albanian identity. This was a result of traveling, studying political theory, and being around people who showed genuine curiosity for my past. Effectively, I made the decision to travel to the Balkans—specifically Serbia and

² Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia on February 17, 2008, but the world community still remains divided on its status. Although the majority of the European Union recognizes Kosovo’s independence, the UN Security Council has not come to a consensus on the issue: the United States, United Kingdom and France recognize it as sovereign, whereas China and Russia, for example, consider it to be illegal.² More recently, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Prishtina’s declaration of independence was constitutional and did not violate international law. Serbia, of course, does not consider this declaration to be legal and politically opposes Kosovo’s independence.

Kosovo—places where being Albanian seemed to matter. While going to Kosovo affirmed by Albanian identity, the way I conceived of myself as Albanian was challenged more than solidified. I realized this by speaking with citizens of Kosovo, for whom ethnic identity has mattered in very different ways than for me. I, for example, have restrained my Albanian nationality in order to belong to a new space, whereas Kosovo Albanians have stressed it as an affirmation of their rights in a space that suppressed it. Now they have opened up a space where their ethnic assertion is stifling that of Serbs. As a result, Kosovo Serbs are clinging to their ethnic identity, which they feel is threatened in an overwhelmingly Albanian space. The two ethnic groups remain geographically divided within Kosovo, and inter-ethnic communication is therefore minimal.³

The goal of my research was to see if opportunities for breaking out of an ethnic self-understanding exist in Kosovo, and if this can lead to the possibility of a shared national identity. This may require taking prescriptive identities like ethnicity and turning them into descriptive identities—ones that we construct based on shared values as opposed to those that appeal to established doctrines. As Michel Foucault states, “Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political ‘double bind,’ which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures.”⁴ We must liberate ourselves not only from the system, but from the type of individualization linked to the system. This leads us to the possibility of re-defining ourselves so as to break out of ethnically-determined divisions and toward constructing systems that overcome them. In regard to Kosovo, it leads us to the possibility of a shared

³ Most Serbs live in the north of Kosovo (Potok, Zubin, Zvečan, Leposavić, and Kosovska (North) Mitrovica), close to the Serbia border, as well as in mono-ethnic clusters sprinkled throughout Kosovo—see Appendix B.

⁴ Faubion, James D. (ed.). *Essential Works of Foucault: Power*, The New Press, New York, (1998): 342.

identity, in a system that addresses common concerns but allows for the continuation of differences.

During my stay in Kosovo, I intended to discern whether a Kosovar identity has taken hold since its declaration of unilateral independence on February 2008. In a two week period, I visited different parts of Kosovo and spoke with students, teachers, religious and political leaders, activists, volunteers, writers, etc. I will use pseudonyms for all personal names referenced in this paper in order to protect the anonymity of my informants. For leaders of organizations and public figures, I will simply use their titles or positions instead of their names.⁵ In addition to my own observations and readings, all of these voices are taken into account in writing about inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo, and in contemplating the possibility of a Kosovar identity.⁶ Moreover, the goal of this project is to apply the general theme of identity—something that concerns every individual—to a specific case study as a means to expand on, and better understand, identity politics.

Literature Review

My reading material included books, scholarly articles, compilations from NGOs, and online news articles. Part of my secondary research focused on history in order to best contextualize the situation at present. These readings included *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis* edited by Nebojša Popov, *Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know* by Tim Judah, and *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War* by Julie A. Mertus. These three books provided insightful information and discussion of past events that explain, and continue to affect, present day issues in Kosovo. Nebojša Popov compiles different kinds of writing dealing

⁵ The names I use will be ethnic equivalents, meaning that though I will not use people's real names, I will use common Albanian names when referencing Albanians and common Serbian names when referencing Serbs.

⁶ This paper will not get too involved with history. My main concern is politics of memory, which deals with how events are remembered. Therefore, the focus is much more on memory in the present and its future implications.

with Serbia's role in the breakup of Yugoslavia, though my main focus in this anthology was Olga Zirojević's chapter "Kosovo in the Collective Memory." Tim Judah provides a factual (and as close as possible to objective) account of a history that led to today's Kosovo. Julie A. Mertus engages historical occurrences in a discussion about the role of memory in constructing truth and myth. She includes a lot of primary research in her book, which was a suitable guide on how I can continue to use the research I obtained in constructing an argument.

Another part of my reading focused on scholarly articles that provide commentary on present concerns regarding Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. Florian Bieber's article "National Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering" is a good example of research dealing with matters of truth and Serb victimization. Helena Zdravković-Zonta's "Narratives of Victims and Villains in Kosovo" is another article dealing with similar issues, such as subjective truth and different interpretations of history. These articles helped me to analyze and categorize the way people speak about their experiences, in order to better understand group relations in Kosovo.

I also read a fair amount of theory to best contextualize Kosovo's identity concerns in broader terms. The book *My Neighbor, My Enemy: Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity*, edited by Eric Stover and Harvey M. Weinstein, is a great compilation of anthropological theory applied to case studies like Rwanda, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Different authors contribute to this book in discussing different means/possibilities of reconciliation in post-conflict societies. I also read some of Michel Foucault's writings, namely "Society, Territory, and Population," "Technologies of the Self," and "The Subject and Power" in order to gain general knowledge about the theory of truth and power. This theoretical insight was helpful in constructing my argument and presenting the information I obtained through a theoretical framework.

In addition, I made use of brochures and catalogues published by different NGOs in Kosovo, such as the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), Center for Nonviolent Action (CNA), and Community Building Mitrovica. These reports provided up-to-date information on Serb-Albanian relations in Kosovo, as well as motivations and approaches for dealing with post-conflict societies on the community level. Moreover, I relied on Balkan Insight for online news articles to better understand the political situation regarding Serb-Albanian relations.

1. Symbolic Depictions of Ethnic Divisions

Before conducting any interviews, my first reflections on Kosovo were based on observation of symbols as representations of ethnic relations. I drove from Belgrade to Kosovo with Petar and Rade, two members of United Serbia.⁷ Our immediate challenge was not speaking each-other's language; I speak very little Serbian and Petar and Rade speak very little English and no Albanian. This strained our communication to a certain degree, but most importantly challenged each of us to tend to the other by way of trying to speak each-other's language. They made a genuine effort to speak English, as well as to mention the few words they knew in Albanian. I also made an effort to use the small amount of Serbian I knew. This fact alone showed that each of us was aware of our differences but willing to mediate them due to our need to communicate.

My first preconception—that I would be freely speaking Albanian while in Kosovo—was directly contested the first three days of being there. The first place we stopped in was North Mitrovica, where street signs and posters were all in Cyrillic, Serbia flags hung over store windows, and the Dinar was the common currency.⁸ Although Serbian is one of the official languages in Kosovo, it is solely spoken in the Serb parts of Kosovo (with some exceptions).

⁷ United Serbia is a student group in Belgrade, aiming to increase communication between Serbs in Belgrade and Kosovo and address the concerns of Kosovo Serbs.

⁸ The official languages of Kosovo are Albanian and Serbian (in Latin script), and the official currency is the Euro.

Likewise, Albanian is the main language spoken in the Albanian parts, even though many Albanians also know Serbian. The attachment to one's language is an example of the reaffirmation of nationality and refusal of the other's. Even inter-language differences were noted, for example. When I spoke Albanian in Kosovo, it was obvious that I was from Albania due to my dialect.⁹ My different dialect was positively received by Kosovo Albanians, and I often noticed that they tended to me by conforming their dialect in order to be understood. From these linguistic challenges, I noticed that being open to speaking the other's language is a sign of acceptance. Therefore, the linguistic divisions between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo demonstrate a lack of acceptance of the other.

The use of symbols is a persuasive way of communicating a position. The north of Kosovo, for example, was laden with OBRAZ and 1389 graffiti, while the south was an exhibition of different kinds of Vetëvendosje! graffiti.¹⁰ While in Prishtina later that week, I saw more Albania flags than Kosovo flags. If I were to describe the political situation in Kosovo strictly through my observation of flags and graffiti (and this would mean missing a lot, of course) I would conclude that people are not choosing to belong to a new nation but attaching themselves to two separate existing nations that represent their different nationalities. These symbols reduce Kosovo to a representation of two on hand nations as opposed to a unique state. Therefore, the veracity of a distinct Kosovar identity, if existent, is not readily visible.

⁹ Most of Albania uses the Tosk dialect, whereas Kosovo uses the Gheg dialect.

¹⁰ OBRAZ and 1389 are two radical Serbian groups that strongly oppose the independence of Kosovo and wish for it to remain part of Serbia. Vetëvendosje! is a political movement, recently turned political party, that opposes international involvement in Kosovo's affairs and supports a United Albania (see "Hopes and Fears of 'United Albania'" section of this paper).

2. Who is Representing the Interests of Kosovo Serbs?

My original intention was to visit different parts of Kosovo by geographic convenience, which meant starting from Mitrovica and working my way down to Prizren.¹¹ In reality, the first three days of my trip to Kosovo were exclusively to parts inhabited by Serbs. These places included North (or Kosovska) Mitrovica, Stari Gradska, Gračanica, Velika Hoća, Orahovac, and Zočiste Monastery. The nature of my visit compared to my intention reflects, to a certain degree, the high level of ethnic awareness in Kosovo. Because I entered with a Serbia-affiliated organization, they were only able to show me the Serb-inhabited parts of Kosovo. At the same time, I required their assistance in visiting these parts, which seemed inaccessible to me as an Albanian-American. Apart from North Mitrovica, which is close to the Serbian border, the rest of these regions were sprinkled throughout Kosovo. The term “enclave” is typically used to explain these mono-ethnic clusters, but I have refrained from using this term ever since Milica contested its meaning. Milica, an English teacher at the elementary school in Velika Hoća, tells me that “‘enclave’ is an inappropriate term because it refers to foreigners who live in someone else’s territory. Serbs are not foreigners in Kosovo!”¹²

Serbs should not feel like foreigners in Kosovo. A question that complicates this statement is whether they even want to feel like they belong in Kosovo. They want to belong in Kosovo, but have a different notion of what Kosovo is than Albanians and most of the international community do. They want to belong to a Kosovo that is part of Serbia; they want to belong to Serbia. And as far as they are concerned, Kosovo is Serbia, and they cannot be made to feel like they do not belong in their own country, especially not by Albanians, who they

¹¹ Refer to Appendix B for map of Kosovo.

¹² Interview by the author, Orahovac, 14 November 2010.

consider to be the foreigners. They feel that Albanians are the others but are treating Serbs like they are the others.

Much of Serbia's hold over Kosovo has to do with the religious significance of the territory. I had the opportunity to attend a *slava* celebration at Žocište Monastery, which was one of many monasteries destroyed by Albanians on March 2004.¹³ Žocište Monastery was rebuilt one year later and is now surrounded by barbed wire, as is the case with most churches and monasteries I saw during my stay. Bratislav, assistant to the main priest at Zočiste, explains to me that Kosovo and Metohija is a holy land, and this is the main reason Serbs refuse to forsake it.¹⁴ Bratislav tells me: "We would rather lose some other land, because Kosovo has special significance for Orthodox Serbs."¹⁵ Most religious Serbs see the independence of Kosovo as reversible because they never recognized it in the first place. Their attachment to Kosovo is tied to their spirituality, and many turn to God as their last hope of keeping this land. "The only hope for us now is God," says Milica. "Albanian and American leaders can do what they want, but even Serbian leaders do not think about our interests."¹⁶ Almost everyone I spoke to in Kosovo, Serbs and Albanians alike, thinks that the interests of Serbs are not being represented. Or if they are, they are done so to further specific institutional goals, not because the needs of Serbs are taken into consideration.

¹³ In the Serbian Orthodox religion, a *slava* is a celebration of a saint name. There are many *slavas* per year—one of the most celebrated is St. Nicholas.

¹⁴ "Metohija" means "church land" in old Slovenian. All Kosovo Serbs, when speaking of Kosovo, referred to it as "Kosovo i Metohija" as a way of recognizing the religious significance of the territory.

¹⁵ Interview by the author, Zočiste Monastery, 14 November 2010. Part of the religious claim of Kosovo for Serbs has to do with the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, "the most fateful event in the history of the Serbian people," according to a brochure from the Gračanica Monastery. Lazar Hrebeljanović led the Serb army in protection of Kosovo from Ottoman invasion in Kosovo Field (outside of Prishtina). Serbs were defeated by the Ottomans, and the loss is upheld as a sacrifice of Serbs as defending Europe and their Orthodox faith from Islamic invasion. The Battle of Kosovo remains particularly important to Serbian concepts of history, tradition, and national identity.

¹⁶ Interview by the author, Orahovac, 14 November 2010.

When asked what small step needs to be taken to improve life for Kosovo Serbs, Jovan, an Orthodox priest in Stari Gradska, says that “the only thing that can be done to make things better is to say Kosovo is part of Serbia and not independent, because this is the truth.”¹⁷ The chair of the Philosophy Department at University of Prishtina declares that the allegation “Kosovo is part of Serbia” is not accurate when considering political waves. “The character and demographics of Kosovo have changed throughout history, and while it was deemed part of Serbia during Yugoslavia, one can’t make the claim that it was *always* part of Serbia. With the fall of that regime came the fall of the legitimacy of the system that kept Kosovo bound to Serbia,” he asserts. “We had a right to self-determination, as an ethnic group, because we were exploited as an ethnic group.”¹⁸

The policy analyst for Lëvizja FOL argues that there is a Belgrade parallel system which has its own interests—contesting the independence of Kosovo—and is less interested in fixing the lives of Kosovo Serbs. “Their best alternative is getting representation within Kosovo,” he expresses. “[Kosovo Serbs] are in a difficult position because they don’t know who their addresser is; they don’t know who is representing them, they are anchorless. Serbia is keeping them in a fog, so Kosovo institutions need to pay more attention to their interests, not just for the sake of Kosovo’s advancement.”¹⁹ For Albanians, the lack of representation of Serbian interests is not because Kosovo does not want to represent them, but because Serbs do not want to be represented by them. FOL’s policy analyst, who considers it illegal for Kosovo Serbs to operate outside of Kosovo’s institutions, believes that their resistance to assimilate is the reason they feel marginalized.

¹⁷ Interview by the author, Stari Gradska, 12 November 2010.

¹⁸ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 22 November 2010.

¹⁹ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 20 November 2010.

Most of the Serb resistance is coming from the north part of Kosovo, which Serbia is the most fervent to possess. A recent Wiki Leak reveals Tadić's foreign policy adviser Jovan Ratković claiming: "while Belgrade would need to accept that it would not govern Kosovo again, Kosovo would have to come to the realization that it would not effectively be able to extend its governance north of the Ibar river."²⁰ The idea of partition is threatening to the Albanian majority in Kosovo, as it would mean losing a large chunk of Kosovo's territory as well as the bulk of the Serbian minority. If Kosovo is partitioned, the notion of a multi-cultural nation also flies along with it. "First and foremost," says FOL's policy analyst, "Serbs need to accept the legality of Kosovo's independence, then we can talk about decentralization. It is dangerous for the territory of Kosovo if Kosovo Serbs accept decentralization but not independence: this will create the Bosnification of Kosovo." Furthermore, he adds: "Serb integration will be long and difficult, but it is absolutely necessary if we're going to make anything succeed."²¹

The leader of movement (and recently turned political party) Vetëvendosje! agrees that it is necessary for Serbs to participate in Kosovo's institutions, but Serbia is using all its power to make it unnecessary for Serbs to integrate. "Serbia has bigger carrots for the Serbs than does Kosovo," he says. Recently, however, a growing number of Serbian political actors, both in Kosovo and Serbia proper, "realize that the policy of boycotting Kosovar institutions is in fact a denial of the reality on the ground, and it leads to a stalemate, which comes ultimately at the expense of the Serbian presence there."²² Even Vuk Drasković, leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement, is urging Serbs to partake in the general election on December 12, saying that it is in

²⁰ Barlovać, Bojana. "Plans for Greater Albania by 2015, South Serbia Leader says," *BIRN*, Belgrade: 3 November, 2010. Retrieved 4 December 2010. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/greater-albania-to-be-formed-by-2013-south-serbia-leader-say>.

²¹ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 20 November 2010.

²² Karabairis, Apostolis. "Will Serbs End Tradition of Kosovo Election Boycotts?" *BIRN*, 8 December 2010. Retrieved 9 December 2010. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/will-serbs-end-tradition-of-kosovo-election-boycotts>.

their interest, as it “will allow them to pursue their struggle within Kosovo's institutions for their national, property and cultural rights.”²³ The policy analyst for FOL further declares that many Serbs participated in the 2009 elections, and an even better outcome is expected this year.

On top of pressure coming from Serbia, many Serbs in northern Kosovo are indisposed to participate in Kosovo’s institutions because they do not consider Kosovo a sovereign state, and thus consider themselves citizens of Serbia. Serbia drafted a new Constitution in 2006, which represented a new beginning for the country as a young democracy “still finding its feet.”²⁴ In the Constitutional Preamble, Kosovo is defined as “an integral part of Serbia.”²⁵ So if a Serbian citizen (including Kosovo Serbs since they do not recognize Kosovo as a state) were to express support for the independence of Kosovo, not only would he be going against the mainstream approach, he would be going against the Constitution. Kosovo Serbs, especially in the north, are therefore stretched in countless directions, pressured to act from all sides, and therefore rendered inactive. If Serbia loosened the tug, would they be able to know where to turn?

3. Fighting over the Truth: Who has a Right to History?

Petar, Rade and I spent the first night with a family in Stari Gradska, the members of which spoke only Serbian.²⁶ As we toast with our domestic *rakija*, Bojan, a friend of the family who speaks English, looks at me and says: “Welcome to Serbia!” While talking to Bojan, the rest of the family is watching a special on RTS titled “How Serbian People Become Albanian.” I ask Bojan to translate from Serbian to English. The announcer speaks about how Serbs living in Albania were forced to take Albanian nationality when Albania became a country in 1912. Enver

²³ Collaku, Petrit. “Former Nationalist Firebrand Urges Kosovo Serbs to Vote.” *BIRN*, Pristina: 8 December 2010. Retrieved 8 December 2010. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/former-belgrade-fm-calls-on-serbs-to-vote-in-kosovo-elections>.

²⁴ Kovačević-Vučo, Biljana. “The Rule of Law, Human Rights and the Constitution of Serbia.” In P. Wolfgang (Ed.), *Serbia Matters: Domestic Reforms and European Integration*, (2009): 151.

²⁵ Kovačević-Vučo, 152.

²⁶ I will refer to the names of cities in Kosovo as the residents of each city did, which means some will be in Serbian and others in Albanian (since both are official languages).

Hoxha banned Serbian schools and forced Serbs living there to change their names to Albanian ones. I tell Nikola that I had not heard about a Serb community existing in Albania during this time, and he tells me that he is not surprised. “Albanians changed history and ignored Serb sufferings, and not just in this case.”²⁷

The claim that Albanians have falsified history to do justice to their cause was something I heard over and over from Kosovo Serbs. Vuk, an elementary school history teacher in Gračanica, declares that Albanian students learn a different history of Kosovo than Serb students.²⁸ “History is based on facts for Serbs,” he says, “but Albanians falsify it.”²⁹ Because I heard similar claims from Albanians—that Serbs falsify the history of Kosovo—I decided to focus more on their historical interpretation than preoccupying myself with facts that I have no way of proving. How does the Serbian interpretation of history differ from the Albanian one, and what does this say about their identity?

The general Albanian interpretation is that Albanians lived in the Balkans before the Slavs, and were therefore present in Kosovo long before it was declared an autonomous region of Serbia in the Republic of Yugoslavia. The general Serbian interpretation asserts that Albanians slowly started migrating from Albania to Kosovo, and their unusually high birthrates caused their population to grow and push out native Serbs. The historical interpretations of both groups indicate a preoccupation with belonging, and both interpret history in such a way that supports their separate claim over the same territory. Milica regrets ever believing that history is about facts, because “as [Serbs] were believing this, the false Albanian version reached the world.

²⁷ Interview by the author, Stari Gradska, 12 November 2010. Every Kosovo Serb, when speaking of Albanians, referred to them as “šiptars,” which tries to mimic the word “Shqiptar” (meaning “Albanian” in the Albanian language), considered derogatory when used by Serbs. The reason is because during Yugoslavia, Serbs made a differentiation between Albania’s Albanians (referred to as Albanci) and Kosovo Albanians, a symbolic way of cutting ties between Albanians in the different countries. For Kosovo Albanians, this distinction remains illegitimate and therefore, derogatory. See this related blog: <http://matthewharms.wordpress.com/2010/12/12/albanac-not-siptar/>.

²⁸ In fact, Albanian and Serb students learn everything separately because they go to separate schools.

²⁹ Interview by the author, Gračanica, 13 November 2010.

They took history from us,” she utters.³⁰ According to the chair of the Philosophy department at University of Prishtina, however, “neither Serbs nor Albanians have historical rights regarding Kosovo because neither can be objective.”³¹ Who, then, has historical rights to Kosovo—who can be objective about its history? For many Albanians, the United States provides a neutral viewpoint and is an example of objective intervention. For many Serbs, the United States is biased and favors Albanians. Milica warns me about Noel Malcolm’s *Kosovo: a Short History*, saying that it is an example of how the West helps Albanians in the falsification of Kosovo’s history. In this case, we cannot even deem an outsider to be completely objective.

The notion that history is objective whereas personal experience is subjective is not a direct dichotomy, because it supposes the existence of some independent truth standard. Narratives are judged based on societal standards, which are themselves subjective. Hence, referring to history as factual and objective ignores the fact that history is the product of people, or groups of people, who are themselves subjective. “In his context, the opposite of truth is not necessarily a lie; rather, it is a competing Truth linked to an alternative self-image.”³² Therefore, different interpretations of history can all hold ground as, albeit conflicting, truths. The test facing this realization is how to manage conflicting truths but still allow for individual expression. The answer may lie in understanding the ways we conceptualize truth in order to re-conceptualize how we relate to each other.

4. Truth and Power: Politicizing Personal Experience

In dealing with the past, what people *believe* to be true is more important than factual truth. Indeed, the existence of multiple truths does not necessarily mean that they are in conflict with one another. “Conflict arises only when one’s Truths are constituted as degrading the

³⁰ Interview by the author, Orahovac, 14 November 2010.

³¹ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 22 November 2010.

³² Mertus, Julie A. *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War*. University of California Press, (1999): 10.

‘other’.”³³ Claiming that one’s interpretation of history is truthful implies that the Other’s is inherently not.³⁴ And if one’s history is tied to their sense of national identity, classifying their history as false implies assassinating their national identity. Denying the legitimacy of the other’s history is therefore an act of power. Mertus writes that “Truth can be understood as the product of complex power relations whereby Truth is produced through power and power is exercised in the production of Truth...Through their daily experiences and by listening to the experience of others, [individuals] learn more about their own identity and that of their enemy.”³⁵

Power is not just a relationship, but a way by which “some act on others.”³⁶ Michel Foucault defines power as “a set of actions upon other actions,”³⁷ bringing into play *relations* between individuals/groups, and inducing *otherness* and *inequality*. Therefore, it exists only when it is put into action, within a specific relation. And the “other” must therefore be maintained as a subject who acts.³⁸ The relationship of power, according to Foucault, is the act of governing/government. Those in power manage the possibilities of free subjects by structuring the possible field of action of others.³⁹ After Tito, and lacking a centralized political system, the people of Yugoslavia grouped according to their primordial identities. After the breakdown of centralized authority in Yugoslavia, Milošević managed to stir up longstanding fears and distrust among the different ethnic/religious groups by creating an atmosphere of alarm and thus exacerbated divisions. Milošević used nationality as a mobilizing issue in running his campaign, and managed the possible field of action of subjects based on an ethnic self-understanding. In *Building Peace*, Lederach notes that when people’s field of action is restricted, like in situations

³³ Mertus, 4.

³⁴ Zdravković-Zonta, Helena. “Narratives of Victims and Villains in Kosovo,” *Nationalities Papers* 37, no.5, (2009): 15.

³⁵ Mertus, 2.

³⁶ Faubion, 340.

³⁷ Faubion, 341.

³⁸ Faubion, 340

³⁹ Faubion, 341.

of armed conflict, “people seek security by identifying with something close to their experience and over which they have some control, [such as]...clan, ethnicity, religion, or geographic/regional affiliation, or a mix of these.”⁴⁰

If personal experience follows an ethnicized interpretation of history, as it does for many people of the Balkans, and if the two different interpretations of Serbs and Albanians remain divided and un-discussed by the individuals upholding them, there is no objective history in play. Interaction becomes a battle of denying each-other’s history, and therefore destroying the Other’s national identity.⁴¹ It is apparent that the interpretation of the past in Kosovo has become ethnically exclusive, “creating subjective, psychological realities and different symbolic meanings of common events in people who belong to different ethnic groups.”⁴² In order to break away from this ethnicized interpretation of history, we should extract individual experiences that have merged into collective memories—give people more power by expanding their field of action—and externalize individual voices to approach what Foucault calls “the field of certainty.” Basically, we are more likely to create a new collective interpretation of history if we use individual bricks to build a new fortress, instead of pulling bricks away from existing structures and risk devastation. This begins by giving voice to every kind of narrative, which demands a level of responsibility and the empowering shift from self-victimization to self-avowal.

The emphasis on the victimization of Albanians is much more pronounced in international media, as opposed to the almost non-existent writing of victimization of Serbs,

⁴⁰ Lederach, John P. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington DC: USIP, (1997): 13.

⁴¹ Kelman, Herbert C. “The Interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian National Identities: the Role of the Other in Existential Conflicts.” *Journal of Social Issues* 55, no.3 (1999): 581-600.

⁴² Stover, Eric and Harvey M. Weinstein (ed.). *My Neighbor, My Enemy: Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity*. Cambridge University Press, (2004): 157-158.

because it fits in with the master narrative of the Kosovo conflict.⁴³ This contributes to the lack of trust among Kosovo Serbs toward the international community, which is just one of the obstacles in the peace-building process. Moreover, being cast as villains in the master narrative of the Kosovo conflict gives Serbs more justification for “enacting historical victimage,” as they feel that their experiences have been repressed.⁴⁴ In the ethnically divided town of Orahovac, Slavica and Ratko tell me, in great detail, about their experience during the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) invasion of their town in 1998. “We have been waiting so long for someone to listen,” they utter. “Everyone sees us as cannibals, they do not listen to our pleas. They do not see that we were so vulnerable.”⁴⁵ Slavica proceeds to explain her memory of being kidnapped and taken to a camp, along with forty-two other Serbs and Roma. She emphasizes that this all took place in “so-called peace,” before the war started. She remembers the hospital being taken under siege, and the people of Orahovac running out of food and water.

According to Slavica, eighty-four Serbs were taken from their homes and jobs and killed between 1998 and 2001. Those that remained all moved to the upper part of Orahovac and in Velika Hoća, creating a “natural” division between Serbs and Albanians. “People in other Serb parts of Kosovo had no idea how bad the situation was here,” she says, “because we had no way of communicating with them.”⁴⁶ As a result of the rise of militant groups like the KLA, feelings of victimization rose among Kosovo Serbs, who continued to leave Kosovo in large numbers in the eighties despite official claims that the political situation was under control. An atmosphere of tension and insecurity (instead of outright violence) produced by these groups likely pressured

⁴³ Zdravković-Zonta, 4.

⁴⁴ Zdravković-Zonta, 16.

⁴⁵ Interview by the author, Orahovac, 14 November 2010.

⁴⁶ Interview by the author, Orahovac, 14 November 2010.

most Serbs to leave.⁴⁷ While the overwhelming opinion among Serbs classifies the KLA as a terrorist group, Kosovo Albanians see them as liberators. For Albanians, the KLA was the haul away from Serb suppression and the thrust toward liberty. When debating the violent means of freedom fighting Albanians defend the KLA, claiming that it would not have even been necessary if Serbia was a real democracy that did not suppress them. Both groups are very good at playing the victim, but incapable of even conceiving themselves as perpetrators.

On one hand, the historical victim status is desirable because “it affords emotional, symbolic and political resources, while being the villain implies guilt and punishment.”⁴⁸ On the other hand, as Florian Bieber mentions in *Nationalist Mobilization and Serbs Suffering*, “the self-perception of victimhood in Serbian nationalism provided a forceful motivation for mobilization for the wars.”⁴⁹ Victimhood rhetoric serves as a tool for invalidating the other; it is necessarily melodramatic, as it instills fear and hatred of the other with the desire to “destroy the destroyer.”⁵⁰ As victims, we want to oppress the oppressor. In this case, the perpetrator/victim dichotomy is no longer a direct dichotomy if the oppressed can also become the oppressor, and vice versa. This tells us that as the oppressed (which we have all been) we deserve justice, but as the oppressors (which we have also all been) we need to take responsibility. No Kosovo civilian is therefore exempt from justice nor from responsibility, and this is merely one factor to agree upon as a step toward active change.

We need to understand that *individuals*, regardless of ethnicity, suffered during the war in Kosovo. The chair of the Philosophy department, like many other Kosovo Albanians, understands that “both Albanian and Serb individuals were victims—Milošević was fatalistic for

⁴⁷ Mertus, 98.

⁴⁸ Zdravković-Zonta, 17.

⁴⁹ Bieber, Florian. “Nationalist Mobilizing and Stories of Serb Suffering.” *Rethinking History* 6:1 (2002): 107.

⁵⁰ Blain, Michael. “Rhetorical Practice in an Anti-nuclear Weapons Campaign.” *Peace and Change* 16, no.4, (1991): 356.

both.”⁵¹ However, the collective focus now cannot be to feel sorry for ourselves, or to blame each other. Individuals need to make the empowering move to renounce themselves as victims and assert themselves as managers of their present and future. Jurgen Habermas, however, notices the difficulty of coming to a consensus between people who have not only been in conflict with one another, but whose historical interpretations remain in conflict. He says: “Universalism relies on the classical Socratic distinction between knowledge and opinion, where the former is founded on truth while the latter is the result of provisional subjective assessment. Affirming the difference between knowledge and opinion, between objective understanding and subjective evaluation, serves the purpose of highlighting what separates temporary utilitarian agreements from proper consensus. If all we allowed were utilitarian agreements, it would be hard...to establish the boundaries between truthful communication and mendacious communication. Basically, it would be impossible to tell who is manipulating whom, who is telling the truth, and who is lying.”⁵² Due to this complex maze of incompatible truths, the past and therefore the present, appears irreconcilable.

If we consider personal experience as truth, and that there are as many truths as there are individuals, we acknowledge that we live in a pluralistic world that leaves us in uncertainty. So how can we establish any proper consensus when our personal experiences are bound to different perceptions of history? Can we even speak of universalism, or an objective knowledge, that is detached from subjective opinion? The closest we can come to this is in deconstructing our histories and ourselves, and allowing for the subsistence of as many distinct voices as possible so as to break out of ethnic-speak and toward Foucault’s “field of certainty.”

⁵¹ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 22 November 2010.

⁵² Borradori, Giovanna. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. University of Chicago (2003): 61-62.

5. Repercussions of International Presence

I expected to have an easy time assimilating in Prishtina, based on the preconception that being ethnically Albanian meant I would be automatically welcomed. To my dismay, I spent my first two days in Prishtina barely interacting with Albanians. The two contacts I made in Prishtina prior to my arrival were both American, and dare I say that I entered Kosovo more as an American than as an Albanian! Before meeting Albanians, I met Germans, Norwegians, French, Americans, Britons, etc. We drank wine and cooked Mexican food; we went on a hike; we talked about Pilates. I was invited to a book club where fifty-year-old American women get together to read and discuss American books. This whole state of affairs reminded me of books I have read about the British colonization of India.⁵³

With some exceptions, the internationals in Prishtina seemed to have their own social circles. Alana, a Fulbright American student teaching English in Gračanica, tells me that “penetrating the local population here is not easy.”⁵⁴ Alana goes to Albanian lessons twice a week, and works with Albanians and Serbs. For her, like many other internationals living and working in Prishtina, interaction with locals starts and ends at the professional level. Perhaps the main reason for the lack of integration, I thought, was not speaking the language. During my stay in Prishtina, however, I discovered that a vast majority of young Albanians speak English. My justification for the lack of communication between internationals and locals was that foreigners see Kosovo as a troubled place with troubled people, and will get involved with them as far as their jobs are concerned, but not much beyond that. Thus, it made me happy when Erich, a

⁵³ E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924), for example, is a novel that exposes the prejudices of British colonization in India. I found similarities between the “exclusionary” social circles formed by colonials in India, as presented in this novel, and those of internationals in Prishtina.

⁵⁴ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 16 November 2010.

German volunteer in Prishtina, told me that he decided to prolong his time there because he is in a relationship with an Albanian woman.

Americans feel undoubtedly welcomed in Prishtina—one of the main monuments is a statue of Bill Clinton, and American flags are often clustered along with Kosovo and Albanian ones. For some locals, however, the international presence seems excessive and unnecessary. Many believe that America is the sole reason Kosovo can even claim unilateral independence, and for this reason will always remain the weak American dependent.

Lëvizja Vetëvendosje! is the most vocal oppositional group to foreign intervention in Kosovo's affairs. The movement leader tells me that "the international community needs us more than we need them. These international organizations can't be who they are without something like Kosovo or Bosnia & Herzegovina to give them reason to."⁵⁵ For him, the declaration of Kosovo's independence is not enough. "Recognition of Kosovo's independence," he says, "is a formality that needed to happen, but we won't feel independence without sovereignty."⁵⁶ As the name of the movement suggests, progress in Kosovo cannot come from outside, but must be self-determined. While Vetëvendosje!'s aspiration to be the deciders of their own fate is understandable, as it is this exact sentiment that led them toward independence, it is not justifiable. Aside from continued international support in post-war reconstruction, state-building, and community aid in the form of NGOs (or financial support of local NGOs), foreign powers are still essential to Kosovo. The Philosophy chair admits that international intervention is still necessary: "They have helped us implement political pluralism and continue to create job openings. They are also doing a lot for Kosovo Serbs, such as positive discrimination and

⁵⁵ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 23 November 2010.

⁵⁶ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 23 November 2010.

territorial integrity.”⁵⁷ Most Kosovo Albanians share the professor’s view that the international community has done more good than harm, which raises questions as to why Vetëvendosje! is such a contender. If we were to infer, we can attribute Vetëvendosje!’s strong opposition of international intervention to its construal as an obstacle to what they really want: a United Albania.

6. Hopes and Fears of “United Albania”

Vetëvendosje!’s ambitions for a United Albania are not new, but have gotten central media attention lately as a result of the group’s recent involvement in politics. Their leader states that Vetëvendosje! has always supported a United Albania, but it has only been emphasized recently because different causes become dominant depending on time and context. “What exists now,” he believes, “is the Albanian need for a new state, not the Kosovo need for a new nation.”⁵⁸ According to him, a United Albania is in the interest of both Albania and Kosovo. This is because “the territorial boundary between Kosovo and Albania is not put there by us: it is unjust and accepting it means being violent to oneself.”⁵⁹

I was struck by the Albanian unification sentiment pertinent among Albanians in Kosovo, not because I did not know it existed but because I did not expect people to be so vocal about it. The sentiment is also not exclusive to Kosovo, but has support among other Albanian groups. This November, news began circulating about plans of a Greater Albania among Albanians in different Balkan countries. “The List for Natural Albania includes the groups and individuals who support the idea of a ‘natural’, or ‘greater’ Albania of one state for all ethnic Albanians in the Balkans, which would include parts of the territories of Macedonia, Montenegro, Greece, and

⁵⁷ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 22 November 2010.

⁵⁸ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 23 November 2010.

⁵⁹ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 23 November 2010.

Serbia.”⁶⁰ The concept of “one nationality, one nation” is certainly not fresh, but is a way of identifying that continues to support prescriptive identity as the decider of how we should group. Supporters of this unification of all Albanians within one state debate about the name, saying that it’s not really a “greater” Albania but a “natural” Albania. However they spin it, the basic goal is to unite all the territories where Albanians live into one nation, which means territory that is now part of Macedonia, Montenegro, Greece and Serbia will become Albanian. This implies a reconfiguration of Balkan borders, which would likely destabilize the whole Balkan region if it were to happen.

The policy analyst for FOL assures me that ideas about United Albania have never been anything more than a way of Albanians distancing themselves from Serbia. It seems that by tightening the grip on Kosovo, Serbia is encouraging sentiments of United Albania. “If Serbia accepted Kosovo, and the present situation, we have no need to do anything else. But the more they insist that Kosovo is part of Serbia, the more [Albanian] nationalism increases,” he says.⁶¹ The line of thinking that has maintained these sentiments, he continues, is this: “We cannot live with Serbia because they hate us, so we must look for other options. If given the choice of which to be adjoined to, it will not be Serbia, it will be Albania.”⁶² Although a United Albania is not likely to get international support (and is therefore unlikely to happen), it has been a longstanding fear among Serbs.

During the 1981 Albanian student protests, among many slogans about protection of worker and student rights was “We want United Albania,” which was the most controversial and therefore the one paid more attention to. The protests intensified Serbian fears of promotion of an

⁶⁰ Barlovać, Bojana. “Plans for Greater Albania by 2015, South Serbia Leader says,” *BIRN*, Belgrade: 3 November, 2010. Retrieved 4 December 2010. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/greater-albania-to-be-formed-by-2013-south-serbia-leader-say>.

⁶¹ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 3 December 2010.

⁶² Interview by the author, Prishtina, 3 December 2010.

Albanian nation within Yugoslavia, as it would challenge the territorial integrity of the country. Moreover, the media played a role in characterizing the protests as counterrevolutionary and heightened suspicion about internal and external enemies.⁶³ Still today, there are hopes and fears of United Albania, both based on a sentiment that is unlikely to materialize. “The predictable reality is that Serbs will need to accept Kosovo as a state, and we will work together to create a nation,” claims the analyst. He does not believe, however, that the creation of a Kosovo nation will automatically lead to a Kosovar identity: “We need to put decent effort into that.”⁶⁴

7. National Identity through State-Building

Despite sentiments of a United Albania, the majority of Kosovo Albanians are more concerned with creating an integrated Kosovo state. A well-known journalist and a professor of Balkan Politics at University of Prishtina are among the main supporters of a Kosovo nation, both of whom argue for the possibility of a national Kosovar identity that represents all ethnicities within it. According to the journalist, who writes for the newspaper *Koha Ditore*, a Kosovar identity exists and is progressing as the identity of a new nation, which goes beyond Albanian identity. He admits that ethnic and national identities are confused by Albanians, who used the national identity they created within Yugoslavia as a breaking point from structures that suppressed it. But what we need to push for now, he says, is “a distinct national identity, which includes territorial boundaries, a shared culture, values, and symbols.”⁶⁵ He explains that the modern state is identified by constitutional goals, not ethnic differences. If Serbs begin to participate in Kosovo’s social and institutional life, this journalist is certain that Serbs and Albanians can achieve a Kosovar national identity. “Kosovo Serbs would never accept being part of an ‘Albanian nation,’ but may accept being part of a political nation state, not based on

⁶³ Mertus, 32.

⁶⁴ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 3 December 2010.

⁶⁵ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 22 November 2010.

ethnicity,” he says.⁶⁶ Even though he knows ethnic differences will not disappear, he believes that they will be mediated under common laws and values. The creation of a Kosovar identity is therefore a positive constructive goal, where Albanians and Serbs have something to build together. He further asserts that forgetting our origins in creed for a common future, however painful, is a sign of progress. “State creation requires sacrifice; we must leave something emotional for something pragmatic.”⁶⁷

In *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, Ger Duijzings speaks of the superfluous nature of group identities. She distinguishes identity, which is multi-layered, from the constricted concept of ethnicity. “One can have more than one exclusive identity, and one can change identity more easily and more drastically.”⁶⁸ This acknowledgment allows for the possibility of creating a common identity without having to forget our ethnic differences, which is one out of many layers that makes us up. The question is whether a shared national/political Kosovar identity is desirable by all those living in Kosovo. Or perhaps the question before that is whether different people living in Kosovo can clearly define what being Kosovar means.

The director of TV Mitrovica and professor of Balkan Politics at University of Prishtina defines a nation as “a community of people organized based on interest, through different processes, in a society ready and capable of creating a state. It is a political construct able to consume and produce social values, which recognizes itself as such, and is recognized by others as such.”⁶⁹ Based on his definition, Kosovo is working toward, but has not yet achieved, nation status. According to the professor, who has written seven books about Kosovar identity, “every

⁶⁶ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 22 November 2010.

⁶⁷ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 22 November 2010.

⁶⁸ Duijzings, Ger. *Religion and Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. London; C. Hurts & Co., (2000): Chapter 1: 13.

⁶⁹ Interview by the author, South Mitrovica, 3 December 2010.

idea of nationhood starts with one ethnicity but in reality ends up as a multi- ethnic state.”⁷⁰ The idea of Kosovo as a nation, for example, began with an Albanian nationalist sentiment but resulted in a multi-ethnic state. Between 1971 and 1981, Albanians started to gain more rights in Kosovo, including getting educated in Albanian. The 1974 Constitution considered Kosovo an autonomous region of Serbia, which gave it equal footing with the republics of Yugoslavia, *except* the right to secede. These improved conditions created a more educated and ambitious Albanian population, “but also, by opening the door for hope, the improvements had tapped discontent.”⁷¹ In gaining more rights, Albanians became more aware of their condition within Yugoslavia, and were in a better position to fight for their rights. This growing awareness led to the student riots of 1981, which started out as student protests but escalated to demands for independence. Albanians, who existed as a nationality without a nation in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, were now fighting for a nation.

The professor declares that Albanians grouped based on ethnic identity in Yugoslavia because such was the context: as an ethnicity, or a nationality without a nation, they felt oppressed. Now that they have a state, their identity must be reconfirmed as members of a new state that represents multiple nationalities. “Now that we have a nation, it requires the development of a national identity that represents all ethnicities within the state,” he claims.⁷² Dominique Schnapper presents a challenge to this plan: “Regardless of their objective integration into larger units, national peoples remain attached to the historical community—the nation—forged by centuries of common history.”⁷³ But we should not take these nations of common history for granted—why can we not say that this is the beginning of a common history for the

⁷⁰ Interview by the author, South Mitrovica, 3 December 2010.

⁷¹ Mertus, 18.

⁷² Interview by the author, South Mitrovica, 3 December 2010.

⁷³ Schnapper, Dominique. “The Debate on Immigration and the Crisis of National Identity”, *The Politics of Immigration in Western Europe*, Paris: Gallimard, (1991): 138.

people of Kosovo, as one nation? Ethnic identity in the time being is very clear because it is connected to a past, whereas a Kosovar national identity is not because it is still in the making. The professor of Balkan Politics considers this a process of “Kosovar confirmation,” which is still incubated and “becoming.”⁷⁴ Identity is fluid and malleable, and needs to be reconfirmed in different ways with the passing of time. So while we cannot speak of a definite Kosovar identity as established in its entirety, we can speak of a Kosovar identity that is in the process of becoming. What is more, we cannot speak of *any* identity as fully established, if we assume change to be the only constant. Therefore, it is simply *easier* to support an identity that has been confirmed for a longer period of time than to participate in the creation of a new one. The easy road, however, does not seem to be at the advantage of the people of Kosovo.

Since the creation of a Kosovar identity requires citizens to identify with a political identity over a primordial one, work must be done in extinguishing cultural divisions currently in place. Contrary to popular assumption, this does not mean eliminating cultural differences, but creating a space that respects them and allows them to amalgamate. But even if we agree by the western model of the nation state—that political unity, not shared culture, constitutes nationhood—some scholars would argue that this political unity is centrally *expressed* in the striving for cultural unity.⁷⁵ Therefore, Serbs might be right in fearing cultural assimilation in a nation where the overwhelming majority of the population is Albanian. Unfortunately, both alternatives for Serbs require some sort of sacrifice; given the option of operating under Serb institutions within Kosovo (considered illegal in Kosovo) or in Kosovo institutions within Serbia (considered illegal in Serbia), their best chance of being represented lies in recognizing Kosovo’s institutions in order to get representation within it.

⁷⁴ Interview by the author, South Mitrovica, 3 December 2010.

⁷⁵ Brubaker, Rogers. *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*. Harvard (1992): 149.

As a new state, Kosovo has a lot of work to do in implementing and perfecting democratic structures. One of two co-founders of Lëvizja FOL declares that democracy is not the smartest system, and it is civil society that really makes changes. The ambition of FOL is to assist the state in reaching its goals by cultivating the potential of the people. “Democracy must be transparent and in service of the public,” he says.⁷⁶ FOL also works to increase Serb participation in elections, based on Habermas’s statement that “only such patriotism which is based on the free allegiance to the constitution on the part of each individual citizen can forge a progressive national alliance.”⁷⁷ In a modern nation, full citizens are those who participate in society’s social, economic and political forms. Now that Kosovo is able to make its own administrative decisions, it must do so with the participation of all citizens.

Albanians have not solved all their problems, but have created the conditions to do so, for example, by getting rid of an oppressive system. They are late in understanding democratic values, but no one is too surprised because democratic values are not part of their tradition. The chair of the Philosophy department notes that “there is a noticeable progression toward change. We are becoming an open society as opposed to a closed society. We understand that those close to us should be those who share our values, not our blood.”⁷⁸ Based on my observations, this kind of thinking is starting to take hold among Kosovo Albanians, but needs time to reach full progression. Keeping in mind that only two years have passed since Kosovo declared independence, it has a long way to go in the establishment of nationhood.

8. Crossing the *Ibar*: Developing Inter-Ethnic Communication on the Societal Level

Apart from the political, construction of a common identity needs to take place on the community and societal level. This is an area where we can breach beyond the unity of a nation

⁷⁶ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 19 November 2010.

⁷⁷ Borradori, 10.

⁷⁸ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 22 November 2010.

state under a constitution, before we can even *speak* of a multi-ethnic nation. “The social reconstruction of a community in a certain period can reach only the level of social functioning that is acceptable to the majority of its members. It is a level on which they recognize that some common interests cannot be accomplished through individual efforts, or through separate interest groups, or by the state, but that the members of the community need to reach an agreement.”⁷⁹ In *Neighbors Again: Intercommunity Relations After Ethnic Cleansing*, Dinka Corkalo notes four levels of renewal for post-war regions: renewal must begin on the individual level (coping with trauma), on the community level (re-establish network of social relationships and trust), the societal level (pursue common interests), and on the state level (rule of law that protects interests of all individuals).⁸⁰ Since social relationships in Kosovo have not yet been mended, significant effort must be placed in areas of renewal outside of politics and government.

One reason why the people of former Yugoslavia are ethnically divided is because after Tito, politicians mobilized the different groups based on nationality as a means of achieving their political goals. Before the war in 1999, nationalist politicians reconstructed national identities by introducing cultural elements like religious symbols, language purification, and national signs, often “as a way of threatening other national groups.”⁸¹ When their security was threatened, people sought refuge in their primordial ethnic identities and distinctions between self and other were consequently solidified on such grounds. This way of conceptualizing the self has therefore infiltrated collective memories of groups, and has become all the more difficult to reverse. People have found small differences among each other and used their imagination to amplify them. As commonalities are devalued, these small differences take force and end up characterizing our conceptions of ourselves and others. Keeping in mind the fluidity of identity,

⁷⁹ Stover, 152.

⁸⁰ Stover, 159.

⁸¹ Stover, 146.

however, it is possible to see beyond ethnic differences. The process requires us to first eliminate the fear of the other, which is more imaginary than it is real—this fear is simply a lack of knowledge about the other. FOL’s policy analyst points out that the “Serb fear of Albanians in Kosovo is an imagined risk as opposed to a real threat.”⁸² He believes that a kind of propaganda has filled their mentality, and condemns the fact that people are ready to believe what they are told instead of exploring reality.

The ethnically divided town of Mitrovica is an example of frozen ethnic conflict, characterized by fear and uncertainty of the other. According to several news sources, the town of Mitrovica has been the place of various violent outbursts since 1999. “[This] September alone, around 45 ethnically or politically motivated crimes were recorded in the town, mostly in the Serb-majority north, with the trend continuing into October.”⁸³ The Ibar Bridge is the literal divide between North and South Mitrovica, where you can see the “other” from across the bridge but do not dare to walk to their side. This either-or situation, of isolation or confrontation, indicates that interaction will inevitably be hostile, and one takes the passive role in avoiding interaction altogether. Unfortunately, this means people are avoiding instead of addressing the problem, and calls for alternative methods of interaction.

The first time I went to North Mitrovica, I asked Petar whether I should be concerned to be there, as an Albanian. He told me that it is only a concern for Serbs to go to South Mitrovica, not vice versa. I went to Mitrovica again two weeks later, this time approaching it from the south. In the van going from Prishtina to Mitrovica, I met four girls my age who go to school in Prishtina and were heading home for the weekend. They told me that they never cross the Ibar Bridge to the north, because enough attacks have happened there that they do not want to risk it.

⁸² Interview by the author, Prishtina, 19 November 2010.

⁸³ Baanders, Inge. “Blasts Shake Mitrovica as Negotiations Loom,” *BIRN*, Mitrovica, Pristina: 1 November, 2010. Retrieved 3 December 2010. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/blasts-shake-mitrovica-as-negotiations-loom>.

Keeping in mind what Petar told me, that it is a greater risk for Serbs to go to South Mitrovica than Albanians to go to North Mitrovica, I asked the girls if many Serbs come down to the south. “We don’t see many of them,” they said, “but it’s definitely not risky for them to come. No one here is looking for trouble.”⁸⁴ People from each side have preconceptions about the other side. They can confidently say that “*my side is safe, they can come here.*” But when speaking about the other side, each person gives their opinion of what it must be like, and for each side, the *other* side is uncertain and scary. This conception is not a result of personal experience of being on the other side, but rather an opinion fueled by past occurrences as presented by media and stereotypes. Moreover, this passive approach contributes to, and is fueled by, the confrontation-isolation dichotomy, keeping whatever opinion one has of the other unchallenged.

I crossed the Ibar Bridge from South to North Mitrovica, and the only thing that intimidated me was the presence of local and international forces on the bridge. Since it is not frequented by Albanians or Serbs, the bridge seems to function as a congregation of EU Police, Kosovo Police, KFOR and other international forces. If we mentally connect the presence of police with the presence of danger, we might be thwarted to approach the place altogether. Are the police there because there is a possibility of danger, or does their presence suggest the possibility of danger and instill fear among citizens? I felt uncomfortable crossing the bridge not because I was afraid of being shot, but because I had a dozen pair of police eyes following my every movement.

Hope for an integrated Kosovar nation lies in the many organizations working to restore a communicative system free of distortion. Orli Fridman compares what she refers to as “unstructured” and “structured” encounters between Kosovo Serbs and Albanians in a paper titled *Structured and Unstructured Daily Encounters in Kosovo*. She evaluates daily interactions

⁸⁴ Interview by the author, South Mitrovica, 2 December 2010.

(unstructured encounters) compared to interactions facilitated by NGOs like The Youth Initiative for Human Rights (structured encounters).⁸⁵ Through my observation, unstructured encounters in Mitrovica are characterized by an isolation-confrontation dichotomy. In Gračanica and other Serb parts of Kosovo, interaction with Albanians is minimal and limited to necessity. Noting the restriction of unstructured encounters between Serbs and Albanians, groups like YIHR, Center for Nonviolent Action, and Community Building Mitrovica create possibilities for structured encounters between the different ethnicities in Kosovo.

YIHR aims to increase communication between Serbs in Belgrade and Albanians in Prishtina (and more recently between Serbs and Albanians within Kosovo) through their Visiting Program. The program coordinator, who was once a participant in the Visiting Program, reveals that “more than two-thousand people have gone through the Visiting Program so far.”⁸⁶ The objective of the Visiting Program between Belgrade and Prishtina is to facilitate communication between ethnic groups and open up opportunities for constructive dialogue by giving young people a chance to get better informed about the other. This program is a big deal for Kosovo Albanians since Serbia does not recognize the Kosovo passport, restricting their freedom of movement to Serbia, and therefore their opportunity to create links with its citizens. The newest addition to the Visiting Program is concerned with freedom of movement *within* Kosovo, by giving people in ethnically-Serb regions of Kosovo the chance to go to Prishtina, and vice versa. The coordinator considers this program to be extremely successful, and notices that young people of both ethnicities are eager to learn about each-other. The following statements exemplify the realizations of youth that have participated in the Visiting Program.

⁸⁵ Fridman, Orli. *Structured and Unstructured Daily Encounters in Kosovo*; prepared for annual meeting of the Association of the Study of Nationalities, New York, (23-25 April 2009): 8.

⁸⁶ Interview by the author, Prishtina, 23 November 2010.

Aleksandar Tišma, a Belgrade student who participated in the Visiting Program, writes: “I realize that Kosovo has a future...Support for independent Kosovo is not support for either separatism or Albanians, but a warning that no national minority can be discriminated against, nor attempted to be ethnically cleansed. Kosovo functions as a sovereign state, with all the necessary institutions, and therefore independence is inevitable and desirable in order for this region to set free from the past and devote itself to the future.”⁸⁷

Furtuna Sheremeti, student from Prishtina who participated in the Visiting Program to Belgrade in 2008, also reflects on her visit to Belgrade: “All of us young people who were standing there in front of each other understood that it was not our fault if one member of our nation happens to be a terrorist, while we got along so well with someone that was supposed to be our ‘enemy’...Who would have thought that us Albanians would have so many things in common with our Serbian peers? Who knows, maybe in some future we will cooperate in certain areas.”⁸⁸

The co-founders of Center for Nonviolent Action (CNA) in Gjilan notice that cultural life in Kosovo is completely divided, and believe that organizations like CNA need to promote the exchange of ideas. With time, they believe structured interaction will manifest itself into open communication at the unstructured level. The main goal of their organization is conflict transformation through information and war crime awareness, the promotion of non-violent communication, and team work in decision making. They lead interactive workshops with young people, such as learning the language of the other as a means to increase communication, and creating documentary films that deal with issues affecting all citizens of Kosovo. Their motive is

⁸⁷ YIHR, Visiting Program Brochure, 8-9.

⁸⁸ YIHR, Visiting Program Brochure, 59-61.

to supply information in order to reduce fear of the other/unknown, by bringing people to places they have uncertainty about, for example.

The Community Building Mitrovica is another NGO working toward the creation of a peaceful and prosperous multi-ethnic Kosovo. “We envision Mitrovica as a safe environment where people live a normal fulfilling life, a space where accountable institutions and a strong civil society guarantee the rule of law, where there is respect for diversity and the opportunity to choose.”⁸⁹ Their methods of promoting peaceful co-existence include mediation of inter-ethnic dialogue and promotion of social integration. The Community Building Mitrovica is nudging Kosovo’s citizens toward peaceful and meaningful communication through programs like Women’s Center Miner Hill and M-Magazine. These sorts of activities aim to unite divided groups based on common concerns and interests, therefore creating a space for working toward a common identity. The Women’s Center was founded in 2004, where about 90 Albanian, Serbian, Bosnian and Turkish women continue to gather, to share their stories, and rebuild their community. The women also participate in workshops dealing with social issues, gender violence, psychosocial activities and health education.⁹⁰ M-Magazine is a multi-ethnic, trilingual, independent media source which contains human interest stories about Mitrovica, “always including perspectives from both sides of the Ibar.”⁹¹ This bi-weekly publication benefits from a multi-ethnic editorial staff and aims to provide people with unbiased information by presenting an assortment of perspectives on shared issues.

I found the existence of alternative dialogue very encouraging because it points to my generation’s recognition and necessity of addressing their problems. While programs like this can only reach small percentages of the population, their credibility lies in the development of

⁸⁹ CBM Brochure, 2006

⁹⁰ CBM Brochure, 2006.

⁹¹ CBM Brochure, 2006.

methods that aim to normalize relations and bring about a sense of belonging for everyone in the community. By cultivating the desire and enthusiasm of new generations to create a prosperous nation, these organizations are infusing optimism in the air. As the accounts of the two Visiting Program participants indicate, people are better able to reflect on their situation once they gain more information about themselves, others, and their choices.

9. Addressing the Needs of Other Ethnic Minorities: Roma, Turk, Bosniak, and Egyptian.

While my research did not focus much on the plight of other ethnic minorities in Kosovo, it is important to mention that there are efforts being made to re-integrate displaced persons, specifically the Roma population. The Roma community is the weakest ethnic group in Kosovo, and leaders understand that their integration is important in achieving a multi-ethnic nation. For this reason, Kosovo is required by law to deal with displaced persons who want to return. The main issues affecting the Roma community today are education rights, unemployment and property rights (97% of Kosovo Roma do not have property rights). The director of Community for Communities and Returns in Gjilan deals with displaced persons who want to return to Kosovo. He says that his organization is devoted to helping as many displaced Roma as possible, by providing them with housing, education in Serbo-Croatian (they must speak one of the official languages of Kosovo in order to be employed), and healthcare. He mentions that as they get more funding, they plan to help other Kosovo communities as well.⁹² A Pro Peace organizer tells me that Kosovo has a very small budget, but humanitarian projects should be given financial priority since they are essential actors in revitalizing the community.⁹³

The Roma population in Kosovo, explains the director of Community for Communities and Returns, participates in Kosovo's structures, so the main concern with this group is different

⁹² Interview by the author, Gjilan, 23 November 2010.

⁹³ Interview by the author, Gjilan, 23 November 2010.

from that of Serbs. “We can help them because they want to be helped,” he says.⁹⁴ Similarly, I noticed that the Turkish minority in Prizren is well-integrated, at least symbolically.⁹⁵ I did not have the chance to speak with anyone from the Turkish, Bosniak or Egyptian communities in Kosovo, but according to Albanians in Prishtina and Prizren, these groups all support Kosovo as a sovereign state and desire to be part of it as a nation.

. Conclusions

Our subjective personal experiences are our main filters of understanding history and constructing our identity. As subjects of power structures, our experiences are manipulated to fit collective memories; in individualizing us, these structures also totalize us based on dominant frameworks. Systems take into account our differences, and affirm them as means to establish themselves. As Michel Foucault states: “every relationship of power puts into operation differences that are, at the same time, its conditions and its results.”⁹⁶ In Kosovo, leaders who have used nationality as a power tactic have re-affirmed an ethnicized self-conception of individuals, causing ethnic differences to be at the core of the collective memory of groups. Not everyone in Kosovo can conceive of a common Kosovar identity because their personal experiences and interpretations of history rely heavily on this ethnic self-understanding.

Today, ethnic severances between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo are evident geographically, educationally, linguistically, and to a lesser extent, religiously. The goal for all citizens of Kosovo is to re-conceptualize their identity, not by giving up their culture but by integrating under a common nation. This passage can begin by addressing the needs of every individual, and obtaining a clearer definition of what being Kosovar will mean for both groups.

⁹⁴ Interview by the author, Gjilan, 23 November 2010.

⁹⁵ All street signs in Prizren were in three languages: Albanian, Serbian, and Turkish. An Albanians girl handed me a flyer about student rights on the street, which was entirely written in Turkish.

⁹⁶ Faubion, 344.

If Serbia continues to run parallel institutions in Kosovo, and Kosovo Serbs refuse to participate in Kosovo's institutions, then a common Kosovar national identity is not feasible. The implementation of this identity relies, first and foremost, on the participation of all citizens in state institutions. The institutions must, in turn, be very aware of the needs of all citizens, respect minority rights and cultural differences, and encourage inter-ethnic cooperation.

It appears to be very difficult for Kosovo Serbs to accept Kosovo as a sovereign state, partially because they feel villainized and unheard, partially because they feel it threatens the territorial integrity of Serbia, and partially because they are afraid of assimilating into a system that will suppress their religious and cultural distinction. Kosovo Albanians are strongly urging Serb participation in Kosovo's structures, within a system that promises to respect their language, religion, and cultural identity. In order for political cooperation to succeed, however, individual and societal concerns must first be met. There are many organizations in Kosovo working to restore trust between Serbs and Albanians, because the revitalization of trust is indispensable if we are going to speak about a thriving nation. However, the war generation is not the one who can make a clear break with the past, as their ethnicized self-perception is firmly grounded in personal experiences of war and loss. The most sustainable change toward a Kosovar identity will be gradual and slow, though it is already starting to take hold among many Albanians. Younger generations are actualizing the possibility of identifying based on shared values, not shared blood. The challenge for all of us now is to imagine what we could become, not what we have been.

The international community has played a major role in the development of Kosovo, but cannot be the main factor in the implementation of a Kosovar identity. The main players are the citizens of Kosovo themselves. They need to clearly define whether grouping under a common

national identity is the most pragmatic and reasonable option given the alternatives, and develop this identity as something beneficial to all, as something progressive from the current situation. This requires responsibility and effort, and difficult compromises for both Serbs and Albanians. They cannot continue to look to Serbia and Albania for answers or escapes. If Kosovo will succeed as a nation, it will be because all of its inhabitants desire it, not just the Albanian majority. More than desirable, though, compromise is now necessary.

. As I have learned through my experience, compromising one's ethnic identity does not mean losing it. Being Albanian has been very different for me than for Kosovo Albanians. Their sense of nationality is tied to a history of being without a nation, and they have clung to their nationality as a means of solidarity. This is vaguely comparable to what happens with immigrants in the United States: when they become the other (marked by a distinct language and culture), their sense of nationality increases, and they become more Albanian when they leave Albania than while living there. Although I took another (also common) approach—suppressing my Albanian identity—I paradoxically became more Albanian in the process. This is because in order to suppress it, I had to become aware of *what* I was suppressing—what it is that makes me Albanian— which I had never reflected on prior. I could only learn the meaning of Albanian in relation to something different—to something that challenged it and brought it into question.

The feeling among Kosovo Albanians is that they are more Albanian than Albanians in Albania. Although I will not get into the politics of whether Albanians are immigrants or natives to Kosovo, the claim that they are “more Albanian” finds confirmation in being dislocated from their nation, and existing as an “other” in the former Republic of Yugoslavia. Thus, while I have a very different personal experience of being Albanian than Kosovo Albanians, I have

experienced what they have experienced—a better awareness of what it means to be Albanian as a result of feeling displaced and nation-less.

It is reasonable to say that Kosovo Serbs are now in a similar position. They feel like the “others” in an Albanian dominated state, and their fear of assimilation causes them to put more emphasis in being Serbian, evident in the augmentation of Serbian symbols (the use of Cyrillic, the Orthodox faith, etc). We end up with a state where two nationalities are very aware of their ethnic identities—more aware than their ethnic counterparts living in Albania and Serbia. Therefore, cultural assimilation in Kosovo is neither encouraged nor desired. What *is* encouraged is the creation of a system that accepts and even celebrates these ethnic differences—a system of integration as opposed to assimilation. This may be difficult to imagine, especially for those who have personal experiences of war. However, the push toward such a system is already palpable in Kosovo, through the creation of a common national identity. In order for Kosovo Serbs not to end up as the “other”, they ought to participate in inclusive state structures that will represent their specific interests. The goal now is not to lament who we (as prescriptive ethnicities) have been, but to imagine what we (as descriptive groups) could be.

The dichotomy of self and other is something that is at the essence of identity, and it applies to all of us. We cannot understand ourselves without having an other to compare to, meaning that the other is as much part of us as the self. Because the self cannot build itself in itself, it needs to tend to the other as part of itself. In situations where our memory of the other has been politicized, we have to renounce ourselves in order to reveal ourselves anew. This requires us to be apt to the other instead of degrading the other, by first thinking outside of a system that has coagulated our interactions based on ethnicity. The next step is in defining

ourselves based on unanimous goals, focusing on issues that concern us all instead of those that divide us.

Limitations of the Study

My time in Kosovo was very limited, which greatly impacted the depth of my involvement with the issue of identity. A lot of my research depended on information other people told me, which I realize may have been affected by my ethnic identity. Though I was well received by all the people I spoke with, I understand that my identity affected what people chose to reveal, and how they chose to reveal it.

Due to my limited knowledge of Serbian, I had to rely on translators when interacting with/interviewing Kosovo Serbs. While some of them spoke English, most of the quotes I use in this paper are based on the translations, not the actual statements. Similarly, all Albanian accounts are also translations of the actual statements. Since I speak Albanian however, I conducted all the interviews in Albanian and translated them myself, so there is hopefully less lost in translation.

This paper is by and large based on my fieldwork and personal deductions, and can benefit greatly from additional secondary sources.

Recommendations for Further Study

The focus of this paper was on Serb and Albanian relations in Kosovo, but it could be significantly improved by exploring the challenges facing other ethnic minorities in Kosovo. Future studies can research the implications of a United Albania, a decentralized Kosovo, or a cohesive Kosovo nation for the Roma, Bosniak, Turk, and Egyptian communities in the region.

In addition, exploring religious differences and how they affect group divisions can add a noteworthy dimension to the study of identities in Kosovo. The importance of Orthodoxy came

up a lot during my research, but very few Albanians talked about being Muslim. This fact alone opens up a research topic on how different groups use religion to construct their identity—why it is more important for Kosovo Serbs than for Kosovo Albanians, how they perceive the other’s religion, what role this plays in the congealment of ethnic divisions, etc.

This study can also help researchers and activists who are unfamiliar with Serb-Albanian relations by providing background on the present situation. For those who have never been to Kosovo, it can serve as an informational guide on how to commence their inquiries. Furthermore, this case study can benefit from additional theoretical viewpoints in order to provide an assortment of approaches in understanding the issue of identity in Kosovo.

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Appendix A – Interview Questions

The kind of questions I asked my interviewees varied widely depending on who I was speaking with. When speaking with citizens, I asked the kind of questions I thought were relevant based on their job, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. When speaking with a Serb student, for example, I asked questions of the following nature:

-Where do you study?

-What language do you study in?

-Do you ever travel outside of your town of residence? If so, where and why? If not, why not?

-What do you do for fun?

Based on these questions, I wanted to gather whether they felt free to move throughout Kosovo, whether they had interactions with other ethnicities, and whether they felt fulfilled with their lives. The questions, of course, were also based on my preconceptions about the situation in Kosovo, and many of the answers served as either confirmation or rejection of my bias.

When speaking to religious leaders, conversations started out focusing on the meaning of Kosovo to the Serbian Orthodox religion. These conversations usually ended up into history discussions and the 2004 attacks of Serb monasteries by Albanians.

When speaking to writers and activists, the questions focused on the nature of their work and how it is useful to thinking about Kosovo's future. If I already had knowledge on their work, I would first start conversations with what I knew about them, and then proceeded to ask questions about how these positions are received, how they arrived to these positions, etc. If I was unfamiliar with what they did, I allowed them to speak about their work, and ask questions as they went along. When interviewing the Philosophy professor for example, I first asked him

about his job to gain better understanding of his position in society, then proceeded with questions like:

-How can philosophers influence the politics of Kosovo?

-What kind of frameworks can we use in speaking about identity?

-Why do you believe a national identity is the best option for Serbs and Albanians, given the circumstances?

I ended such interviews by asking some questions of a different nature:

-Have you traveled/worked outside of Kosovo?

-Have you gained any kind of insight about your identity by traveling that you think you would not get otherwise?

-Have you had any Serb students at the University of Prishtina? If yes, how many? If no, why not?

I acquired a lot of valuable information for my paper through informal conversations: in homes, cafes, streets, daily interactions, etc. I gained the most insight by being aware and observant instead of barraging people with questions that put them on the spot, or made them feel they had to respond a certain way. The combination of interviews and unstructured interactions gave me a more wholesome understanding of ethnic relations in Kosovo than simply reading about them would have.

Appendix B – Kosovo Map, by Ethnicity

