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# A Resistance, Remembered? Remembrance, Commemoration and the Parallel System In Prishtina, Kosovo

Conner Gordon  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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*A Resistance, Remembered?*  
Remembrance, Commemoration and the Parallel System  
In Prishtina, Kosovo

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**Abstract**

Though the 1999 war that liberated Kosovo from Serbian control is over fifteen years in the past, memories of the 1990s still remain in a state of chaos. This paper approaches the development of these collective memories through interviews with Prishtina residents about the memories and legacy of Ibrahim Rugova's parallel structures in the 1990s. Though they draw from similar narratives as memories of the Kosovo Liberation Army's armed resistance, memories of the nonviolent resistance play a vastly different and largely underrepresented role in current Kosovar Albanian public discourse. Through competing deployments of resistance memories, disproportionate memorialization of Kosovo's violent resistance and a so-called "memory chaos" surrounding unsupported initiatives to deal with the past, memories of the 1990s and the parallel system are caught in a state of flux. This state of flux has revealed the tensions between past and present in Kosovo, and has left its impression upon the people who lived in the parallel system, the students who grew up in its wake and the activists tasked with keeping its memories alive.

## Introduction

A de facto memorial quietly stands within a neighborhood on the outskirts of Prishtina. Here the end of winter has almost come, but the frigid temperatures and freezing rain have not yet relinquished their hold on the city. Tucked away on the top of a hill, sandwiched between red-roofed homes and quiet residential streets, the memorial is both understated and unmistakably distinct. The structure itself is more ruin than building, a fire-blackened shell of brick and cement that stands three stories high among the surrounding homes. At certain points the outer walls have collapsed, leaving partial views of upended desks within. Inside, bits of masonry and discarded trash coat the floor, producing an uneven crunch underfoot. The blackened walls of the first floor almost conceal suggestions of chalkboards at the head of each room, but the unmistakable remains of scribbles and equations make their presence clear.

There is little to suggest the building's greater significance. Without knowing what to look for, it only appears to be a long-abandoned, burned-out home. Here there are no towering bronze men with automatic weapons in hand and ornamental bouquets at their feet, no plaques commemorating those lost in heroic struggles of the late 1990s. The only symbol in sight is a tattered Albanian flag, its faded black eagle draped over an exposed beam halfway up the northeast wall. Yet, for some, the home is a memorial just the same.

Any traces of color that the house once had have long since faded away. Nearly destroyed by a skirmish with the Serbian military in 1999 and never fully repaired (Participant Three, personal communication, May 4, 2015), its cracked cinder blocks and rubble-strewn floors almost suggest neglect or abandonment. Yet at each corner of the home, pillars of vibrant, metallic blue interrupt the muted greys. They stretch ten meters high, propping up a bright red wooden roof that shields the crumbling building from the elements. The two structures coexist in a way that borders on the

surreal, a fading skeleton of a house sheltered by a spidery, multicolored canopy with an enamel shine.

It is a building that could easily be thought of as meaningless, an abandoned structure among any number of abandoned structures in Prishtina. Yet its fading chalkboards and piled-up desks remain as testament to a critical period of Kosovo's history. During the 1990s, the building housed the Sami Frasheri parallel school, one of as many as 900 underground schools that formed the Albanian parallel education system (Clark, 2000, 98). A response to Serbian government policies that aimed to marginalize the Albanian population in Kosovo, the schools provided refuge for the thousands of ethnic Albanian students who were barred from attending school (Clark, 2000, 97). Run out of private homes by Albanian teachers expelled from their jobs, stocked with smuggled textbooks and supported by diaspora remittances and a voluntary taxation system, the parallel education system quickly grew to support as many as 330,000 students by 1997 (Clark, 2000, 99).

The Sami Frasheri parallel school, and the system that it once housed, represents one of the key moments of Kosovo's recent history. According to Howard Clark (2000), these events were spurred by the Serbian government's attempts to reassert its authority over Kosovo. Since 1974, Kosovo had enjoyed the status of semi-autonomous province under the constitution of Yugoslavia, "with rights and responsibilities equal to those of a republic including a veto within the presidency – except, crucially, the right to secession" (Clark, 2000, 39). However, when Slobodan Milosevic rose to power on a nationalist agenda, Serbia began to pursue attempts to strip Kosovo of these rights (Clark, 2000, 18-19). This aim ultimately led to the 1989 ratification of amendments to Kosovo's constitution that invalidated its autonomy as a province in Yugoslavia and placed under the control of the Serbian government (Clark, 2000, 48-52). Paired with widespread firing of Albanian workers from their jobs, the "Serbianization" of local institutions and an epidemic of police violence against Albanians, the policies implemented by Milosevic's government created a state environment

designed to gradually drive the Albanian population out of Kosovo and claim it as the symbolic and ethnic heart of Serbia (Clark, 2000, 72-75).

In response to the Serbian efforts of “quiet ethnic cleansing” (Clark, 2000, 71), Kosovar Albanian political leaders settled on developing the “parallel system” in the early 1990s (Clark, 2000, 80). Led by Ibrahim Rugova and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), this set of structures eventually formed the basis for the Kosovar proto-state that directly defied Serbian authority over the region (Kostovicova, 2002, 168-169). According to Clark (2000), these institutions, which included healthcare initiatives, parallel media companies, popular elections and cultural institutions along with the parallel education system, assumed a central role in the Albanian nonviolent resistance of the early 1990s (Clark, 2000, 95-122).

All over Kosovo in the 1990s, houses like the Sami Frasheri parallel school were critical in laying the framework for an independent state and Albanian national identity (Kostovicova, 2002, 169). Yet today the home sits unrepaired and largely unrecognized, the owners of the property its sole caretakers (Participant Three, personal communication, May 4, 2015). The only building of its kind that has not been destroyed or converted to another purpose, it is one of the few physical reminders of the parallel system in Prishtina today (Participant Three, personal communication, May 4, 2015). Its decay is a far cry from the various military memorials dotting Prishtina’s main boulevards, which extensively valorize the sacrifices made by members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in the late 1990s. In such an environment, where commemoration of the nonviolent resistance is almost nonexistent, how is the parallel system remembered today? What role do these memories play in Kosovar Albanians’ memories of the 1990s, and in what forms are they preserved? This paper will ultimately strive to answer these questions and explore the environment that memories of the Kosovar parallel system inhabit today.



## **Methods**

### *Process*

In evaluating the state of memories of the parallel system in Kosovo, it was necessary to collect data on more than just the memories themselves. As such, I aimed to interview individuals from a number of populations. First among these were individuals who were young adults or teenagers in the 1990s, and who had some sort of experience with the parallel system. Interviewing these individuals helped demonstrate which memories of the parallel system remain the most salient for those who experienced them. In order to determine how these memories are communicated about and taught in today's society, I then interviewed young adults who were too young in the 1990s to have many personal memories of the parallel system. By asking them about their perspectives on their own historical understanding of the 1990s, I aimed to explore what role memories of the parallel system play in Kosovo today. In order to further explore this topic, as well as examine how these memories are commemorated, I also interviewed activists who work with mnemonic and dealing-with-the-past (DwP) initiatives.

In total, six participants from these categories, four male and two female, were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format, with a set of preliminary questions used to guide the interview. For one interview (Participant Three), an interpreter was also present, as the participant did not speak English. Additionally, in order to protect the interviewees from repercussions stemming from opinions expressed during their interviews, the participants have been identified anonymously, with a number assigned to each participant (i.e., Participant One).

### *Perspective*

When approaching the preservation of memories like those of Kosovar Albanians' peaceful resistance in the 1990s, it is impossible to proceed without considering my own perspective. While it

is easy to distance myself from this work, to pretend to maintain some air of total objectivity, I cannot exclude myself from the processes I am studying. Indeed, even as an outside observer, my work is intrinsically connected to the memory-recording process. By recording and analyzing these memories, I too am playing a part in keeping this history alive. As a student collecting these memories, there is little that separates me from the individuals I am interviewing – those who preserve the history of Kosovo’s nonviolent resistance. In this light, I too become a voice for these memories and a carrier of their narratives – a position that demands an awareness of factors that influence my perspective.

Of primary concern is my motivation to research these topics in the first place. After all, the legacy of Kosovo’s nonviolent resistance is not simply underrepresented in modern Kosovar society – it is also a legacy comparatively under-researched. As such, it would be all too easy to unintentionally valorize the parallel system and its importance. While drawing attention to its underrepresentation is a valid research aim, it is another matter entirely to use my own research as an argument for its value within the context of Kosovo’s history. This is especially relevant given my position as an undergraduate researcher not native to Kosovo; there are dozens of Kosovar Albanian academics and activists currently working with memory in Prishtina alone, and it would hardly be my place to try and actively shape the representation of these memories, especially given my limited experience. It is my role therefore to catalog and analyze these memories, not to determine their value within the larger picture of Kosovar Albanian memories of the 1990s.

These dilemmas are further complicated by my academic focus on peace and conflict studies. Nonviolent resistances tend to be among the most romanticized of any movement within the field of conflict studies, and in some cases, the development of the parallel system is no different. As such, it is a very real possibility that my own research may unintentionally reproduce or reinforce this romanticized view, which would in turn represent the parallel system in a biased light. In order

to avoid this as much as possible, I have sought to find interview participants with critical perspectives on the parallel system. However, I must also take care to represent its legacy as accurately as possible, while being aware of its potential to play into romanticized narratives.

### **Literature Review**

While existing literature on the modern legacy of the parallel system is not particularly robust, the wealth of sources available on its history, strategy and role in forming Kosovar Albanian identities provides a revealing context for my research. In contextualizing my work in this manner, these sources have been particularly helpful in understanding the larger historical and social roles that the parallel system plays.

Of primary importance in contextualizing my research are sources that help define the historical role that the parallel system played in the 1990s. Of these sources, of particular help was Denisa Kostovicova's (2005) text, *Kosovo: The politics of identity and space*. Kostovicova's (2005) work, which examines the history of the parallel system through its societal, political and symbolic implications, offers an extremely valuable lens through which to understand the nonviolent resistance's impact on Kosovo. Additionally, Clark's (2000) work, *Civil Resistance in Kosovo*, has also proven particularly helpful. Clark's (2000) detailed analysis of the parallel system's development and structure, as well as the political strategies employed in aligning it with long-term goals of independence, positions it as one of the most important contextualizing texts for my research. Other broader historical accounts of Kosovo's more recent history, including Noel Malcolm's (1999) *Kosovo: A short history*, were also helpful in providing the historical framework for my research. In addition, Shkelzen Maliqi's (2011) work, *Why the nonviolent resistance in Kosovo failed*, provided an important historical analysis of the movement's shortcomings – an important component in analyzing why the movement is so underrepresented in contemporary society.

Also critical to framing my research is the work done on the formation of Albanian identities in Kosovo, especially after the events of the 1990s. It is here that the most relevant contextual research to my work lies, since formation of identity is so critical in determining which events are remembered and commemorated. Critical to this context is Vedran Obucina's (2011) "A war of myths: Creation of the founding myth of Kosovo Albanians." In it, Obucina (2011) details the fundamental components of Albanian identity in post-war Kosovo, namely how it ties back to longer legacies of Albanian history and the connection between statehood and nationhood. By detailing some of the key components of this modern identity, such as the heroic militarism of figures like Skanderbeg and education as resistance, Obucina's (2011) work creates an excellent framework for considering how the parallel system may play into these identity-forming processes. Other key works that focus on the construction Albanian identity, such as Kostovicova's (2005) text and Schwandner-Sievers' (2013) "The bequest of Ilegalja: contested memories and moralities in contemporary Kosovo" were also helpful in understanding the various factors that influence modern Kosovar Albanian identity formation.

Also of key importance in contextualizing my research is an understanding of the KLA-led armed resistance's legacy, especially regarding its role in identity formation and commemoration. The foundational text for my examination of this perspective was Anna Di Lellio and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers' (2006) "The Legendary Commander: the construction of an Albanian master-narrative in post-war Kosovo." Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers' (2006) work, which offers a detailed analysis of the myths surrounding "legendary commander" Adem Jashari, offers a nuanced look at how other forms of resistance have contributed to Kosovar Albanian identity today. Also important to my research was Valur Ingimundarson's (2007) "The politics of memory and the reconstruction of Albanian national identity in postwar Kosovo," which offers a number of valuable analyses regarding the connection between Kosovo's relatively fragile statehood and Albanian

nationhood, as well as the political struggles present in defining post-conflict Kosovar Albanian identity. Additionally, Schwandner-Sievers' (2010) "Invisible-inaudible: Albanian memories of socialism after the war in Kosovo" and Eli Krasniqi's (2011) "Memorials in Kosovo today" both offer excellent observations about memorialization and remembrance in Kosovo, especially how it relates back to militaristic narratives.

Also crucial to my research was an understanding of the larger theoretical frameworks involved in memory analysis and activism. Key to this background was Jasna Dragovic-Soso's (2010) "Conflict, memory, accountability: What does coming to term with the past mean?" Dragovic-Soso's (2010) examination of the origins of terminology like "dealing with the past" and "collective memory," as well as an analysis of how these terms have been defined and conceptualized in existing social memory studies literature, provided an excellent grounding for understanding the theoretical context of my research. Also helpful in this regard was John R. Gillis' (1994) "Memory and identity: The history of a relationship," which further expanded on the theory behind memory as a component of identity – an examination especially relevant in the context of postwar Kosovo. Both of these texts were particularly helpful in establishing existing research around collective memories as socially constructed entities, a lens of particular value to understanding how collective memories of Kosovo's nonviolent resistance are shaped.

Finally, grounding my research into current memory activism in Kosovo is the essay collection edited by Karmit Zysman and Ballsor Hoxha (2011), *Considering the future: Perspectives on dealing with the past in Kosovo*. Published by memory work organization Forum Ziviler Friedendienst (ForumZFD), the collection offers a number of important perspectives on the efforts to preserve and engage with postwar memory in Kosovo. Of particular note are the essays written by Arber Salihu ("Dealing with the past and history teaching"), Ballsor Hoxha ("Why can't I write?") and

Valon Germizaj (“Memorials and dealing with the past”), all of which approach memory issues in Kosovo through distinct and informative lenses (2011).

### **Data Collection & Analysis**

*Solidarity in Resistance, Solidarity in Sacrifice*

**“We have these discussions with friends of mine sometimes, and we’re all at odds. We’re all a little bit perplexed as to how we survived that era, and I don’t know.”**

**– Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015**

For Participant One, the Sami Frasheri parallel school is not simply a reminder of times past. It was also where he completed his secondary education. Now a worker with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and a part-time lecturer at the American University in Kosovo (AUK), Participant One attended the parallel school between 1992 and 1996. A self-described “typical child of the 1990s,” (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015), his memories of Kosovo under the “de facto apartheid era” imposed by the Serbian government (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015) speak to the mnemonic legacy that remains from the time of the parallel system.

Central to Participant One’s memories of the parallel system were the conditions of daily disruption and adversity that he faced. After Milosevic’s government revoked Kosovo’s constitutional autonomy in 1989, his parents were expelled from their jobs and he began his secondary education at the Sami Frasheri parallel school. The conditions of the schooling, which was held in a home on the edge of Prishtina, were particularly challenging. Participant One specifically remembered sitting on the floor or, if one was lucky, leaning up against a mattress in cramped makeshift classrooms with between 30 and 35 other students – “literally sitting like sardines next to each other” inside the home (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015). His

teachers worked for low salaries, and sometimes went without pay entirely. Outside of the education system, his family worked miscellaneous jobs to stay afloat, helped in part by “welfare benefits” organized through the parallel system (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015).

It was these adverse conditions, he said, that produced a particularly difficult educational environment. Over fifteen years after the 1999 war in Kosovo ended, he still finds that he notices “hiccups” in his education as a result of the living conditions of the 1990s. When describing these “hiccups,” Participant One said that:

regardless of how motivated and how hardworking our teachers were, and they were very hardworking and they worked for no salaries whatsoever at times, we were still under horrible conditions of course and the gaps in such unusual, abnormal even, upbringing are for all of us to see. (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015)

The difficult conditions described by Participant One were a common element in other stories of living under the parallel system. Participant Two, an activist at ForumZFD who grew up and was educated through a parallel school in Prizren, also focused on the harsh conditions of education in the 1990s when recounting his story. In addition to noting the overcrowded and underequipped conditions in which he was educated, Participant Two also noted the ever-present threat of police harassment. “If you would have been identified that you are a student and you are going into parallel education schools,” he said, “then they would mistreat you. They would stop you, they would tell you things, they would even, it happened that they would beat you” (Participant Two, personal communication, April 24, 2015). In order to avoid these beatings, Participant Two said he often hid his textbooks, which were illegal to possess, tucked under his shirt on the way to school. The harassment that Participant Two faced was also not limited to students, as he recalled several instances in which the police would arrive at the school, arrest professors and bring them to the police station for interrogation or beatings. The environment that these conditions, he said, produced a similarly hostile environment to that experienced by Participant One:

Of course there were many challenges. Of course the knowledge we generated through these experiences was not complete, of course we had to work twice as hard so we could accomplish something in our lives. (Participant Two, personal communication, April 24, 2015)

Though the conditions in which both men were educated were characterized as particularly harsh, both said that they contributed to a sense of greater solidarity among Kosovar Albanians. When describing life in the 1990s, Participant One said that:

For those who didn't go through that experience, it wasn't as if we went to school licking our wounds and crying about the horrible conditions in which we lived. No, it was almost like any teenager. There was a lot of spirit, there was a lot of optimism, there was a fighting spirit which kept us going through that time. (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015)

In fact, during his schooling in the parallel system, Participant One said he could not remember a single instance of a student acting out or disrupting the class. "Solidarity, that is the key," he said, "something that is missing, everyone will tell you, is missing today" (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015). Participant Two expressed similar ideas, noting that around 25 percent of Kosovo's population at the time went through the parallel education system, and that it provided them with a significant sense of unification. A notable source of pride under the parallel system, he said, also stemmed from its nonviolent nature, which helped "show the world that this place is under a very rigorous regime, and that we are striving to peacefully confront the situation, and peacefully resolve this" (Participant Two, personal communication, April 24, 2015).

Also of note is the degree to which the sacrifice of individuals was emphasized when memories of the parallel system were discussed. In both the recollections of Participants One and Two, the heroism and sacrifice of their teachers became a main point of discussion. For Participant One, in fact, this sacrifice seemed to constitute one of his strongest memories of the parallel system:

These teachers worked very long, they didn't work for money. Because money was peanuts. They may have earned perhaps tantamount of 70-80, 100 euros a month with today's money. But their dedication, hard work, commitment was really



something, I'm sure I'm never going to see it again. That happened in the 1990s and I actually get goose bumps just thinking about that, because their dedication was just amazing, and anything that the government or the institutions here do in order to remember the role that commitment is, nothing can be enough. (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015)

But it was not just teachers in the parallel education system that Participant One remembered in a heroic light. Also of note was his discussion of those who worked in other parts of the parallel system:

Doctors, so-called civil servants, and teachers, and nurses of course, their role was nothing short of saving the people from starvation, from illiteracy, from diseases. And really, their role is heroic, what they did during the 1990s. (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015)

Such potent narratives of sacrifice were also present in the words of Participant Two; in particular he recalled memories of professors often working without compensation, and on several occasions teachers or school administrators being taken to the police office for beatings and interrogations (personal communication, April 24, 2015).

The narratives of resistance, solidarity and sacrifice were not only present in memories of the parallel system's students. Participant Three, who worked at the school during the 1990s and helps maintain the property today, described similar narratives to those seen in the interviews with Participants One and Two. In acknowledging the difficulties present under the parallel system, Participant Three noted that the impetus to open the school stemmed from "bad feelings to see the pupils assimilated into Serbian regime" (personal communication, May 4, 2015). Also central to her depiction of the school's history was the solidarity of the family who owned it, who, according to her, came together and collectively decided to donate the home for educational purposes. This solidarity was also intertwined with narratives of sacrifice; the family's choice to donate the school, keep it running and singlehandedly maintain it after its destruction were of particular emphasis in her retelling.

The juxtaposition of adverse conditions, solidarity in resistance and heroic sacrifice brought up by Participants One, Two and Three seems to be a common element of postwar identity construction in the Kosovar Albanian context. This is made primarily clear through Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers' (2006) "The legendary commander," in which the authors write of the tragic form of resistance embodied in the Adem Jashari myth. Symbolizing themes of "resistance unto death, sacrifice for the love of country and immortality," (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers, 2006, 516), the myth prominently features both the violent death of the Jashari family and the "story of heroism in the face of a much stronger enemy" (516). These larger themes seem particularly similar to those of mnemonic narratives of the parallel system – an oppressed and marginalized group of people resisting an overwhelming force through solidarity and pride in the nation. The fact that both the Jashari myth and sentiments expressed by participants emphasized sacrifice as key narrative elements only reinforces the fact that these seemingly competing myths of violent and nonviolent resistance actually inhabit a complementary narrative structure.

This "solidarity in resistance" narrative present in both the violent and nonviolent movements is only enhanced when considered in light of Obucina's (2011) work, which analyzes such myths in a historical context. Such positioning, he argues, is particularly relevant in Kosovo's context due to its lack of "the Weberian principle of statehood: monopoly of legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order" (Obucina, 2011, 31). As a result of this lack of an established statehood, which Obucina (2011) argues is largely due to the presence of so many international actors in Kosovo, Kosovo Albanian identity is often heavily tied to larger historical narratives of Albanian nationhood (31).

It is in this historical context that the mnemonic narratives of resistance and sacrifice become particularly resonant. According to Obucina (2011), this is made clear by the similarities between the Adem Jashari myth and that of Skanderbeg, the hero of the Albanian resistance against

the Ottomans (36-37). Tying these two figures together through historical narrative, he argues, is key in positioning Kosovo's recent history into a longer line of Albanian identity (36). The same, he argues is true of the nonviolent resistance; according to Obucina (2011), "over the centuries various conquerors and governments refused to give education in Albanian language, fearing it could spread Albanian nationalism" (40). By linking the parallel system with this larger historical narrative of education as resistance, Obucina (2011) argues that Kosovar Albanians were able to establish the parallel system within a potent identity-forming continuity in Albanian history (40).

In some ways, then, it would appear that narratives of the nonviolent and armed resistances of the 1990s are fairly complementary in structure. However, while such narratives may be common for some, they are hardly universal. An interview with Participant Four, an activist at the Center for Research, Documentation and Publication (CRDP), revealed that the same memories could be restructured into entirely different narratives. While Participant Four also drew attention to the adverse conditions under which the parallel system existed, her assessment of its larger importance marked a significant departure from the narratives of solidarity presented by Participants One, Two and Three (Participant Four, personal communication, May 6, 2015). This became particularly clear in her discussion of the parallel system's educational quality and legacy. In discussing the so-called "hiccups" (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015) in educational quality brought up by Participants One and Two, Participant Four's perspective seemed much less tied to the connection between adversity and solidarity:

We had to keep education going and continue, regardless of the quality of education. That was the meaning of the parallel system. Just take people from the streets and put them somewhere, keep them in order. Everyone knew that that was not quality. Those who had money sent their kids outside (of Kosovo). Those who didn't, we were kind of obliged to keep on the education that way. (Participant Four, personal communication, May 6, 2015)

By portraying the parallel education system in terms largely separated from larger narratives of solidarity, Participant Four's perspective demonstrated a more critical departure from the mnemonic structures seen in other participants' perspectives. This departure was reinforced in her discussion of the technical quality of the parallel education system, which she stressed was "not an education per se," and even a "disaster" when it came to "doing like medicine, doing exact sciences, in these private buildings - it was like fooling yourself" (Participant Four, personal communication, May 6, 2015). Markedly absent in these narratives was an emphasis on the solidarity among Kosovar Albanians at the time – a component especially prominent in the memories of Participants One, Two and Three. In presenting the parallel educational system in this critical light, it is clear that the narratives of sacrifice, solidarity and resistance are hardly uniform, even when individuals are drawing from a relatively similar bank of memories.

*Under the Carpet*

**"I feel sometimes that everyone thinks that Kosovo started living in 1999, from 1999 up to now. As though the entire period from 1999 and beyond was kind of in a fog, didn't happen, didn't exist, let's not talk about it. Because we are so overwhelmingly thinking the current events and what happens since 1999 up to now, that period is somehow under carpet, and it doesn't get much attention."**

**- Participant Four, personal communication, May 6, 2015**

While not universal, it is clear that the narratives present in remembrance of the armed and nonviolent resistances sometimes tend to share a number of similarities, both in their characteristics and contexts within the formation of historical Albanian identities. Indeed, as Participant One pointed out, in some regards the LDK's parallel system and violent resistance under the KLA were "two sides of the same coin" (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015).

However, also clear is that this similarity is largely absent in how memories of the parallel system are commemorated or deployed in Kosovo today. Schwandner-Sievers (2010) noted a similar

trend when examining memories of Yugoslavia and socialism in postwar Kosovo, writing about the existence of “an Albanian messianic master narrative of militant resistance” that “has hegemonized Albanian public discourse and public spaces in Kosovo” (97-98). This is particularly clear when examining the memorials to events of the 1990s in Kosovo; according to Krasniqi (2011), larger-than-life, militaristic depictions of male KLA soldiers with weapons in hand are a particularly common design (6). The contrast between these memorials and non-memorialized spaces like the Sami Frasheri parallel school is particularly striking.

With such a visible domination of militaristic historical narratives within the public space, despite the similar nature in which it and the nonviolent resistance tend to be remembered, it is clear that factors beyond the memories themselves are at work. According to participant perspectives on the matter, this polarization is more a matter of current politics than those of the past. When discussing the prominence of these memorials, Participant One emphasized the competitiveness present in this polarization:

The portrayal of the commanders is sort of a bit of a competition. First between the different zones of the KLA, so that's what has happened. It is in the nature of the soldier, isn't it, to be a bit more forceful. And so they've been a bit more forceful in displaying their heroics, whilst people who have been less forceful in that regard have been left behind. (Participant One, personal communication, April 27, 2015)

Participant Two expressed similar sentiments, noting that many such monuments, in addition to being exclusive and discriminatory against Serbs, “are expressing vividly the violence on it, and they are done with, I don't know, maybe political influences and so on” (personal communication, April 24, 2015). In this context, it appears that the politics of the present is key in determining which aspects of resistance memory in Kosovo are brought into public space and discourse. This is consistent with Dragovic-Soso's (2010) discussion, in that “it is the present that defines understandings of the past rather than the other way around” (31).

While polarization of historical narratives marks memorialization of the 1990s for some, for others such remembrance is overwhelmingly defined by a lack of infrastructure to deal with the past. This, Participant Four said, was the primary issue facing activists' efforts to better understand Kosovo's recent history:

We know that the issues that we are dealing with are not very sexy issues. And we are looked as, from the government point of view, but also from large part of society as someone who wants to bring another truth, and you know that the truth is disturbing. People don't want to know another truth, they want to really sleep with the truth that they were told by narratives at home, or by our stupid history books, which are really not well written, and this is the issue over the region, not only in Kosovo. (Participant Four, personal communication, May 6, 2015)

The reasons behind this, she said, stems from a number of sources. Primary among them, according to Participant Four, is unwillingness on the part of Kosovo's politicians to pursue initiatives that deal with the past (DwP). Such initiatives, which aim to create "a repository of public knowledge about a traumatic past, including both official acts and discourses and popular memory," were a primary focus of Participant Four's activism (Dragovic-Soso, 2010, 34). However, according to her, such activism faces formidable obstacles. Specifically, Participant Four said that a number of politicians within the government have ties to war crimes and organized crime, and that pursuing DwP initiatives would threaten these individuals' power. Beyond these issues, however, are the obstacles created by political shortsightedness:

Unfortunately, not only in Kosovo but all over the region, we don't have political leaders who think beyond daily politics. We don't have a Willy Brandt here, we don't have leaders who would just think, jeopardize their daily mass politics and ambitions with a better future. Unless we have such leaders, then it's entirely the work of civil society to raise awareness, convince people that we have to think differently, we have to confront each other, we have to value each other, we have to recognize the suffering of each other. (Participant Four, Personal Communication, May 6, 2015)

These domestic obstacles, she said, are reinforced by low support among the international community, and specifically the United States and the European Union, to push for DwP initiatives in Kosovo (Participant four, personal communication, May 6, 2015). "I understand that they have

better jobs and they are tired of the Balkans,” Participant Four said, “but I think you can’t impose dialogues without asking governments to take seriously the issue of dealing with the past” (personal communication, May 6, 2015).

As a result of these obstacles, Participant Four said that the institutional capacity to deal with the past in Kosovo, as well as in the region as a whole, is quite low (personal communication, May 6 2015). The only actors working in this area, she said, are those from civil society, and that Kosovo’s government has done little to contribute to their efforts (Participant Four, personal communication, May 6, 2015). Participant Two brought up a similar point, noting that “in Kosovo you could see the scene of people and institutions who are working on dealing with the past kind of divided, not centralized, and everyone doing things the way they think it should be done” (personal communication, April 24, 2015). In this environment, according to Participant Two, any widespread capacity to deal with the past is left mired in “memory chaos” and unable to proceed effectively (personal communication, April 24, 2015).

The mnemonic environment outlined by Participants Two and Four is largely consistent with that put forth by Ingimundarson (2007). Stressing that such collective memories are socially constructed and negotiated between a number of actors (98), Ingimundarson’s (2007) work offers a lens into understanding where Kosovo’s “memory chaos” (Participant Two, personal communication, April 24, 2015) originated. Critical to this memory chaos, he says, is the political struggle between Ibrahim Rugova’s former party, the LDK, and the KLA-aligned Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) to preserve their own respective mnemonic narratives that grant them the most contemporary power (97). Within this context, the memorials to KLA fighters or politicians like Ibrahim Rugova are not simply historical markers; they also play a political role, staking out mnemonic territories and defining a constructed physical legacy of the past (Ingimundarson, 2007, 104). These political struggles, he argues, are further complicated by the mnemonic role of the

international community, which has also acted to try and sway such mnemonic constructions towards contemporary values of a multi-ethnic and “denationalized” construction of state identity (Ingimundarson, 2007, 118-119).

It is no wonder, then, that these struggles have produced a mnemonic environment that could be described as chaos. When these multifaceted struggles over Kosovo’s legacy are combined with low support for DwP initiatives, as pointed out by Participants Two and Four, the situation is only further complicated. While such confusion has already complicated efforts to understand the legacy of the 1990s, Participant Four said such problems would only worsen with time:

We are afraid that, less and less, people are interested in dealing with the past. Victims are dying, survivors are losing their memories about the past. If we don’t hurry and take the best of it, how are we going to write history? How are we going to educate our children about the past? (Participant Four, personal communication, May 6, 2015)

#### *The Next Generation*

**“Seeing that house in that condition made me somehow really think about this system, how it’s not working, and not the parallel system. Because they made us forget the parallel system and think only in this system.”**

**- Participant Five, personal communication, May 6, 2015**

The obstacles standing in the way of DwP initiatives about Kosovo’s recent history have not gone unnoticed. When examining their own upbringing and understanding of the period, students living in Prishtina today also have found gaps in their knowledge about the 1990s and parallel system.

It was a sunny, hot day when Participant Five, a sociology student at the University of Prishtina, first visited the Sami Frasheri parallel school with his class. After walking through the building and hearing a lecture about its past, Participant Five found himself drawn to the history he knew little about. “Actually, I really wanted to be on that school,” he said, “I felt somehow there was a spirit of them to want to educate themselves in their language” (Participant Five, personal communication, May 6, 2015). Noting the dedication of these students, their teachers and the



caretakers of the parallel school, Participant Five also pointed out the themes of solidarity underscoring his experience there (personal communication, May 6, 2015).

Having grown up in a village outside Mitrovica during the mid-late 1990s, Participant Five's memories of the period were primarily connected to his wartime experience as a child. While he never saw anyone killed, his experience of his family being forced to leave their home by Serbian soldiers resonated as one of his strongest memories of the 1990s (Participant Six, Personal Communication, May 6, 2015).

In comparison, though, he found his knowledge of the parallel system that preceded the war particularly lacking. According to Participant Five, oral history provided the basis for his understanding of the 1990s: "In our history, they (his schooling) taught us from the Ottomans, Turkish occupation of Albania. But, for this war, I heard more from my family members, from my villagers" (Participant Five, personal communication, May 6, 2015). His father's stories of demonstrations in the early 1980s in particular were instrumental in informing Participant Five about the events that led up to the parallel system. This lack of formal education about the parallel system and 1990s, he said, could also be seen in the fact that many people from his generation rarely talk about the events of the 1990s – it is the current political system and its problems, he said, that monopolizes many conversations (Participant Five, personal communication, May 6, 2015).

Participant Five's perspective was largely shared by Participant Six, a female sociology student at the University of Prishtina. Like Participant Five, Participant Six's memories of the 1990s were also centered on her wartime experiences. In particular, she recalled worrying about the survival of her family's chickens during the war, and how her parents wrote of her own contribution to the resistance as an infant:

It was (in) that card when it's written, '(Participant Six) is still so young, and she doesn't know what it is to have freedom or not, but she protests in her way by crying, 'Waaah' and 'Uuuh.'" It's very symbolic and it's like poem, but it has spirit of that time. (Participant Six, personal communication, May 9, 2015)

Also like Participant Five, Participant Six said that much of her education about the 1990s came from stories from her family, and that these narratives focused on the polarization between Serbs and Albanians before the war. However, despite her upbringing and knowledge gained from her family, Participant Six found her education about the 1990s to be lacking; despite being a “child of that decade,” she said that, “I did not know I did not have so much information about the 1990s. But when I came in the university, like reading and seeing the importance of that period, I realized that I do not have information about that period” (Participant Six, personal communication, May 9, 2015).

In discussing the reasons behind their perceived knowledge gaps about the 1990s and parallel system, both participants drew attention to the effects of current political and economic conditions in Kosovo. According to Participant Six, it is these economic and living conditions that make it more difficult to dedicate efforts towards DwP initiatives (personal communication, May 9, 2015). This, she said, contributes to the current state of memory work in Kosovo – “There is no one in Kosovo that is doing films, or that is doing exhibitions. Maybe not no one, but not in an institutional way – there are just some people, very marginalized” (Participant Six, personal communication, May 9, 2015). Participant Five also pointed to the lack of discussion about the 1990s and its legacy, namely as a result of current politics that have monopolized public discourse. “If you do not have facts, it cannot be remembered, you know that,” he said, “so seeing that house in that condition made me really sad, because nobody is interested in keeping the memories as it were” (Participant Five, personal communication, May 6, 2015).

The political obstacles surrounding student perceptions about DwP initiatives are not only domestic in origin. Participant Six also expressed that these problems are exacerbated by the priorities of the international community, that “maybe they gave the wrong message – maybe they

gave the message that we should vanish the past to build the future” (Participant Six personal communication, May 9, 2015). These priorities were also noticed by Participant Two, who noted “you can see it in Prishtina, not only maybe on monuments but also on the buildings which were inherited from socialist times. It is that we destroy the old to build the new, and this way contribute to constructing a new identity” (personal communication, April 24, 2015).

While reversing this erasure would clearly benefit remembrance of the parallel system and the 1990s in certain circumstances, analyzing its source reveals anxieties that pose tensions between remembrance of the old and creation of the new. These anxieties are best described by Ballsor Hoxha’s (2011) “Why can’t I write?” in which the author points to the manifestations of an unwillingness to deal with the past. Using foreign sitcoms as a lens for understanding traumatic memory, Hoxha (2011) writes that:

We can talk about anything, from high CIA officials to India extras, but not about ourselves, not about what bothers us, not about our society, not about what is hidden behind boredom. My dilemma therefore is: If we are able to participate in fictitious events from India, why aren’t we able to listen to what our presence tells us, the silence between us, especially when the episode ends? (22)

The themes Hoxha (2011) discusses are reflected in other essays, like Arber Salihu’s (2011) “Dealing with the past and history teaching.” According to Salihu (2011), the traumas imposed by the 1990s are truly existential in nature, and that approaching it without applying “selective truths” (11) is a particular challenge for Kosovo’s education system today. Given the gravity of these traumas for some, it is certainly understandable that affected populations would be more interested in creating new identities, rather than bringing back older ones that come packaged with residual traumatic memories.

Salihu’s (2011) discussion of such existential threats is particularly relevant, especially given Obucina’s (2011) analysis of the effects that formalized statehood has on Kosovar identity. According to Obucina (2011), central to the modern-ancient construction of greater Albanian

identity is the lack of formal state identity for Kosovo. As a state in many ways controlled and defined by the international community, Kosovo lacks what Obucina (2011) calls "the Weberian principle of statehood" (31) – a condition that could produce an existential uncertainty about the state's integrity. It is in this regard, where the state identity of Kosovo is constantly questioned and put under negotiation, that the past traumas of collective memories can continue and even be reinforced by lingering uncertainty. This seems to reflect back to Participant Five and Six's comments, as well as Dragovic-Soso's (2010) discussion, about present politics obscuring the past. If the very existence of one's state, a formational aspect of identity, is threatened by daily existential uncertainty, how can one expect affected individuals to focus on dealing with the past?

It appears, then, that politics alone are not the only obstacles to dealing with the past in Kosovo. Also at work are larger questions of postwar trauma and identity. Both Participants Five and Six had vivid and sometimes traumatic memories of the 1999 war, even as children. When such traumatic memories are so entrenched on the level of entire populations, as emphasized by Dragovic-Soso's (2010) work, it is clear that implementing DwP initiatives are more complicated than overcoming short-term political issues. Additionally, the added traumas posed by existential uncertainties about Kosovo's statehood, as well as the daily uncertainties caused by unstable political and economic conditions, only further blur the lines between traumatic past and traumatic present. In this context, dealing with the past is not simply a matter of implementing programs and overcoming political opposition; on the contrary, it is as much about healing conditions of the present as it is addressing the lingering traumas of the past.

*Moving Forward*

**“If you do not have facts, it cannot be remembered, you know that. So seeing that house in that condition made me really sad, because nobody is interested in keeping the memories as it were. I am not saying to go back in time and carry hate. That shouldn’t carry hate, you know. That should carry memories. That should carry the past. You should remember the past, what you’ve been through, or what your parents went through”**

**– Participant Five, personal communication, May 6, 2015**

Despite the tensions and obstacles present in collective memories about the parallel system and the 1990s, all of the participants offered potential solutions. Foremost among these were smaller acts of remembrance aimed to better commemorate underrepresented periods like that of the parallel system. Participant One, noting the sacrifice and dedication that the owner of the Sami Frasheri parallel school displayed during the 1990s, recommended that the school today be named after him (personal communication, April 27, 2015). Other acts of remembrance, such as financial compensation for former parallel system workers and a commemorative holiday honoring the parallel system, were also among Participant One’s suggestions (personal communication, April 27, 2015).

Also of concern for several participants was the creation of museums and restoration of neglected memory sites like the Sami Frasheri parallel school. While she had little faith in Kosovo’s government to rebuild the school, Participant Three expressed hopes that it would eventually be renovated and turned into a museum – a hope, she said, that she shared with the owners of the home (personal communication, May 4, 2015). Participant Two expressed similar wishes, noting that such memorialization “requires more institutional attention. Even though the place is now in the list of cultural heritage monuments, but there is no financial support of that” (Participant Two, personal communication, April 24, 2015).

Beyond singular initiatives to commemorate underrepresented events like the parallel system, participants also expressed the need to address structural issues with dealing with the past in

Kosovo. For Participant Four, foremost among these initiatives would be a renewed governmental focus on dealing with the past, both domestically and abroad. This renewed focus, she said, should take the form of “bottom-up” initiatives aimed at engaging with memory and establishing the facts about what happened in the 1990s. In addition to helping establish objective truths about the past, she said, a better understanding of the past could also help improve dialogues and relations with Serbia (Participant Four, personal communication, May 6, 2015).

Participant Six expressed a similar opinion, noting that institutional commitments to DwP initiatives could lessen tensions between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs. Beyond this, she said, cultural efforts like art exhibitions, films and media pieces about historical events like the parallel system could help “just to free the mind and free the spirit, because you can see that people are very tense, there is a collective tension” (Participant Six, personal communication, May 9, 2015).

Regardless of what form initiatives to deal with the past would take, Participant Five stressed that they must be accompanied by a commitment to find out the truth about the 1990s and events like the development of the parallel system. In order to do this, he said, preservation of memories, and sites like the Sami Frasheri parallel school, was key:

If you do not have facts, it cannot be remembered, you know that. So seeing that house in that condition made me really sad, because nobody is interested in keeping the memories as it were. I am not saying to go back in time and carry hate. That shouldn't carry hate, you know. That should carry memories. That should carry the past. You should remember the past, what you've been through or what your parents went through. (Participant Six, personal communication, May 6, 2015)

Doing so, he said, required efforts to better engage with younger generations about issues of memory and political activism. As an individual aiming to join civil society after graduating from school, he stated that it was his primary goal “to make the youth more innovative, to make them more workable, because, as I see, they are not that innovative. But that's not their fault, you know.

Here are a lot of needs, a lot of things to do. So I think we have quite a lot of a job” (Participant Five, personal communication, May 6, 2015).

### Conclusions

**“The generations that have studied here will remember every day of their life. Because I see it every day that the pupils that have studied here, they are married, they have children, they are taking their kids, and they take their kids here, and they are telling the story of this house school”  
– Participant Three, personal communication, May 4, 2015**

It is a day thoroughly unlike my first visit to the Sami Frasheri parallel school. A warm and sunny Thursday afternoon, nice enough to make the climb up the hill without a jacket. Today the path to the school is dry and free of snow, no wind whistling through the residential streets where children now gather in the late afternoon heat. Behind the home the fields surrounding the city expand for miles, their verdant greens reminiscent of a landscape painting or Windows desktop background.

Returning here in the spring feels different. The building is still hollow and imposing, its silhouette unmistakable when coming up the road. But today its empty frame is once again filled with the voices of students. This time they are undergraduates from the University of Prishtina, older than those who sat on mattresses and concrete floors here more than twenty years ago. Guided by Participant Three, they walk through the greyed rooms of the home, stopping to listen to her story and occasionally to take photos on their phones. I follow behind them, occasionally taking notes and snapping photos of my own – my own little memorials that I can carry with me when I return to the United States. For most of them, it is the first time they have visited this school, this de facto memorial that stands on the outskirts of Prishtina, and I find myself both hoping and knowing that they will not be the last to step into these former classrooms.

In some ways, this assessment seems overly optimistic. In fact, the analysis of current remembrance of the parallel system suggests a future that is hardly positive. While the ways that the nonviolent and armed resistances of the 1990s are remembered bear a striking resemblance, their presence within public spaces and discourses throughout Prishtina could not be more disparate. The lack of commemoration and remembrance of the parallel system in particular speaks not only to its gradual erasure from understandings of Kosovo's recent history, but also to the fractured and disjointed state of efforts to deal with and understand the legacy of the 1990s. Under such conditions, the lack of remembrance of the parallel system represents only one of many obstacles plaguing attempts to better understand Kosovo's recent history.

It is in this environment that the greatest, and perhaps most tragic, irony surrounding Kosovo's mnemonic situation exists. For without institutional initiatives to deal with the past, efforts to improve Kosovo's present situation, especially regarding its possible future regarding Serbia and the European Union, appear to be significantly hindered. Yet, without political and economic changes that reduce the influence of existential questions plaguing many, it appears likely that Kosovo's sociopolitical environment will remain relatively inhospitable to comprehensive efforts to deal with the past. Solving this tension is crucial to fostering an environment where dealing with the past is a practical and sought-after option, both for those in charge of memorializing the past and citizens concerned about the existential issues of the present. Yet, after talking with so many here, after hearing their frustration, the worry that such efforts may not be fully realized is all too real.

But it is this frustration that also provides a sense of hope for the future of memory work in Kosovo. For those involved in remembering, preserving and learning about memories of the 1990s and the parallel system, these frustrations are also motivations to action: motivations to push for the preservation of a shattered building, to hold the government accountable in implementing DwP



initiatives, or simply to learn more about the underrepresented parts of Kosovo's history. While institutional and widespread support for dealing with the past may seem far off, it is this variety of smaller actions that stand to play a major role in bringing them about.

It is in this context that mnemonic struggles to define Kosovo's recent past will continue. On one hand, current political and economic situations plague attempts to better understand and educate younger generations about the legacy of the parallel system and the 1990s. But where no institutional support exists, individuals and civil society groups continue to preserve and remember the past in their own ways. While the results of these efforts appear to be far from ideal, they represent the key means of remembrance about the parallel system and the 1990s today. And, until buildings like the Sami Frasheri parallel school become more than just impromptu memorials, it will be by these efforts that Kosovo's recent past will continue to be preserved for future generations.

### **Limitations & Further Study**

While the conclusions put forth in this paper are relevant in describing trends within a given population, several key aspects also limit them. Primary among these is the language barrier present in the interview-based data collection I employed. As an English speaker with no proficiency in Albanian, I was forced to seek out interview subjects who could speak English, or in one instance who could speak through an interpreter. This inherently limited my population sample to one not necessarily reflective of Kosovo's Albanian population as a whole, specifically to exclude older generations where English proficiency is not as widespread. Additionally, a language barrier is bound to hinder any oral narrative-based data collection, as certain ideas may be lost in translation or miscommunicated.

In addition to the obstacles posed by the language barrier, time constraints only allowed for a certain number of people to be interviewed. These people, many of whom have lived in Prishtina

for a significant period of time, may hold different opinions than someone from Kosovo's countryside, or someone living in a region where remembrance of the Kosovo Liberation Army is stronger. Additionally, almost all of the people interviewed either study social science topics or work in fields of political and memory activism. Due to these educational and professional backgrounds, they may hold opinions different from someone not educated as such. Ideally, any further research would broaden the population sample to include a larger variety of Kosovar Albanians, not simply those involved with memory work or activism in Prishtina.

Additionally, there are a number of other topics brought up by this research that could be well served by further study. In particular, a more exhaustive study of Kosovar Albanian postwar identity, especially in relation to current political, economic and societal circumstances, would add a welcome dimension to understanding remembrance of the parallel system. It would also be worth studying how remembrance of the parallel system is affected by gender differences; as Krasniqi (2011) pointed out, many forms of memorialization marginalize or exclude women (5), and as such a more detailed study of how Kosovar Albanian women remember the 1990s would also be welcome.

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