

Contested Space:

Kosovo and the Struggle for Congruence Between Territory and Identity

*"O, Dearest God, what shall I do, and how?
Shall I choose the earth? Shall I choose
The skies? And if I choose the kingdom,
If I choose an earthly kingdom now,
Earthly kingdoms are such passing things -
A heavenly kingdom, raging in the dark, endures eternally."*

The Battle of Kosovo

The Kosovo landscape unfolds like a half-wrecked dream, the slopes of the hills dotted with clusters of new construction and the skeletal remains of homes that were destroyed in the conflict that erupted there in the 90s. In the outskirts of the cities they're often situated next to one another, sometimes only a few meters apart. Kosovo is home to some 1.8 million residents, with a majority (92%) Kosovar Albanian population. The country is also home to a minority population of Serbs (6-8%), and the two have struggled to coexist for centuries. If creating a national identity is dependent on a uniform narrative about who its collective citizenry is in relation to the rest of the world, the story of the Kosovars is still one of parallel institutions. The unhealed psychic wounds of a population traumatized by war only entrench ethnic tensions between Albanians and Serbs more deeply and emphasize difference, not reconciliation.

Serbia's stake in Kosovo is old; there, Kosovo is still known as 'Old Serbia,' a recollection of a time when it was a cultural and administrative center under the Nemanjic dynasty of the Middle ages. The historic battle at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389, where the Serbs were defeated by the Turks, ushered in 500 years of Ottoman rule. The battle is still lodged in a very deep part of the Serbian imagination; possession of the territory where it was fought is often cited by Serbian leaders as a vital part of their national identity. According to Anne-Marie Thiesse, "Serb nationalists accuse the Albanians of having taken advantage of the Serbian kingdom's defeat by the Ottoman Empire in order to settle in Kosovo. Albanian nationalists retort that their own ancestors, the Illyrians, whom they claim as the founders of their nation, lived in the territory hundred of years before the Slavs invaded the Balkan peninsula. " (1999)

Kosovo is still a young country. Its most recent proclamation of independence (the first occurred in 1990, but was put down by Milosevic's regime) occurred in 2008. Its claim has stuck this time, but within the past five years the new nation has struggled to create a uniform Kosovar identity that unites the citizens living inside its borders. The Albanian flag is still a prominent symbol at political demonstrations and in public life, during football matches and on the street. Northern Kosovo, directly bordering central Serbia, is populated by a 95% ethnic Serb majority. In this region Serbian national symbols were still used, and citizens participated in Serbian elections,

which are boycotted in the rest of Kosovo, until 2013. During April of that year the Brussels agreement was reached and abolished parallel Serbian institutions in North Kosovo.

After NATO's intervention in the Kosovo war during the spring of 1999, the province was placed under international administration. The UN Security Council's Resolution 1244 established the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo. UNMIK utilized a four pillar approach to fulfill its mandate to "help the Security Council achieve an overall objective, namely, to ensure conditions for a peaceful and normal life for all inhabitants of Kosovo and advance regional stability in the western Balkans." Those pillars provide for initiatives in police and justice (United Nations-led), civil administration (United Nations-led), democratization and institution building (led by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), and reconstruction and economic development (European Union-led). UNMIK originally acknowledged Kosovo as part of Serbia, but with the declaration of independence in 2008 began to scale back its presence following Kosovo's adoption of its constitution and the establishment of European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX).

EULEX's presence is a third party player in the tension over control of Kosovo. Initiated to support and strengthen Kosovar institutions, EULEX developed an oft-cited Monitor, Mentor, and Advise approach to assist Kosovo in developing independent judicial and police systems. EULEX also investigates and prosecutes war crimes, terrorism, organized crime and corruption, and property and privatization cases, in addition to supporting the EU facilitated dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. However, there is little local trust in the institution. Criticized as ineffective for producing very few verdicts considering its massive budget of over 100 million euro a year, EULEX has also failed to address cases of high-level corruption among political elites in Kosovo for fear of destabilizing the region. EULEX is staffed by approximately 2500 individuals paid notoriously high wages, inspiring one local journalist, when asked what he thinks about EULEX's presence, to quip, "I think they are very good at earning high salaries." In urban areas like Pristina slogans have been stencilled by graffiti artists around the city that read "**EULEXPERIMENT**," or "EULEX - Made in Serbia," a reflection of the notion that EULEX is responsible for maintaining a troubled status quo in Kosovo to appease Serbia.

Kosovo still struggles for international recognition, having received diplomatic acknowledgment from 109 countries as of January 2014. Because it was denied recognition by the UN Security Council, it must pursue acknowledgment on a country-by-country basis. Serbia still does not recognize Kosovo as a sovereign nation, but rather as a UN-governed area within its own territory. In April 2013, the European Union brokered negotiations between the two as part of the Serbian (and potential future Kosovo) accession process. The result was the Brussels Agreement, and, as Nikolas K. Gvosdev noted in *Foreign Affairs* in April 2013,

Under the terms of the agreement, Belgrade acknowledged that the government in Pristina exercises administrative authority over the territory of Kosovo -- and that it is prepared to deal with Pristina as a legitimate governing authority. It did not, however, formally recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state, even as it promised to drop its objections to giving Kosovo

a seat in international organizations (if other states were prepared to accept Kosovo as a member). For its part, Pristina accepted that the Serbs living in northern Kosovo can, in large measure, run their own affairs, so long as they acknowledge that they are nominally part of Kosovo. The Serbs of northern Kosovo will also get their own regional police chief, and Pristina has pledged not to deploy Kosovar Albanian forces in the area.

Politics in Pristina have seen the rise of a Kosovar Albanian political movement that calls itself *Vetevondosija*, or the Self-Determination movement. The movement emphasizes the difficulties created by the international presence in Kosovo, and claims that administration by EULEX and the UN effectively robs the fledgling nation of its sovereignty. As Pristina's mayor, Vetevondosija member and Harvard graduate Shpend Ahmeti puts it, administering Kosovo in cooperation with international authorities "is like riding a bicycle with five people. The [international community] needs to let go - we may fall, but that is a part of learning." He points to the imposed nature of Kosovo's national symbols, in particular its flag, where red and black - the colors of the Albanian flag - were not permitted by the international community, and its national anthem, which has no words. This can be attributed to the divisive politics of preferring either the Albanian or Serbian language over the other.

Vetevondosija supports integration of ethnic communities through economic cooperation and development and educational institutions, subscribing to the belief that 'people integrate when they have to.' Vetevondosija representatives Albin Kurti and Glauk Konjufca stated that the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo need to be preceded by each country 'normalizing' itself first. "Dialogue and talking between Kosovo and Serbia is overrated - we fought over conflicting interests, not because we did not know one another," says Kurti, and Ahmeti later echoed, "the problem is that we have talked too much, that we know each other too well." He added, "Serbia has to deal with its past, and Kosovo has to deal with its corruption."

The 'past' that he mentions refers to war crimes perpetrated by Serbia against Kosovar Albanians. Former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević, along with other Serbian politicians and military officials were charged before the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, where it was found that Serbia had participated in ethnic cleansing and mass expulsion of Kosovar Albanians from their homes, in addition to killings, sexual assaults, and "persecution on political, racial or religious grounds." Close to 850,000 Kosovar Albanians were displaced during the conflict. Casualties are more difficult to determine, but it is believed that up to 10,000 Kosovar Albanians were killed or have gone missing. Ahmeti cited a visit to Gračanica by Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dacic in January of 2014, where the official was asked whether Serbia was sorry for the war crimes in Kosovo.

"He said, 'No.'"

The city of Mitrovica has become a symbol for the country's ethnic tensions since the war in 1999. At that time Serbians living on the south side of the Ibar river were displaced to the north, and the southern part of the town was flooded by internally displaced Kosovar Albanians. One of the two

bridges that offer passage between the north and the south is blockaded by rubble. The other remains open for trade. After the war the Serbian faculties of the University of Pristina were moved to North Mitrovica, further isolating the Serbian-speaking community. Each side of the city has its own mayor to correspond with its ethnic identity, the Serbian North and Albanian South. After Kosovo declared independence in 2008, Serbian police officers in the city refused to obey ethnic Albanian authorities, and were suspended.

Violent clashes have occurred between the citizens in the north and south, most memorably in an episode that occurred in March 2004 that illustrates Kosovo's ongoing struggle with media accountability. Three Albanian children drowned in the river Ibar on the 16th of March, and the local media reported that they had been driven into the water by Serbs who chased them with dogs. Though the facts of the incident were unconfirmed, news outlets widely reported that the children had been targeted for ethnic reasons. The case became more conflated when an interview aired on Kosovo's only public outlet, RTK, with Halit Berani, Chairman of the Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms in Mitrovica. He was not an eyewitness to the events, but nevertheless stated,

Today around 16:00 in the village of Caber, Zubin Potok municipality, while six children from the above mentioned village were playing, a group of Serb bandits attacked these children, the Serb bandits also had a dog, and swearing at their Albanian mother they forced the Albanian children to run away [...] We are used to these Serbian bandits. As well as that case, tonight at 19:17 in the suburb called "7 September" they threw a bomb near three multi-storey buildings. We think that is in revenge for what happened in Caglavica, the case that showed what the Serbs are willing to do when the situation is getting calm in Kosova. (Haraszti 10)

The OSCE later issued a report outlining the actions of the media in the aftermath of the children's deaths as inflammatory and unethical. Haraszti notes (2004), "Mr Berani's unchallenged allegations and the way the news presenter and the reporter qualified the incident led to yet another conclusion: that the incident was undoubtedly one of the most sinister possible character. RTK also chose to allocate a disproportionate amount of airtime to the content that spoke in favour of the fact that this was an ethically motivated crime: 258 seconds, while allocating only 12 seconds to the police spokesperson." The police spokesperson made statements to the effect that the incident was still under investigation, and no motives had been determined. The UN police also issued a public appeal requesting that people stay in their homes until the facts of the case were made clear and the children recovered; however, these appeals were never aired. The news sparked mass rioting by a reported 50-60,000 people that spread across several towns and led to gunfire, grenade explosions, and the burning of Serbian homes.

In January of 2014, hardline Serb politician Krstimir Pantic was elected mayor of North Mitrovica, and then subsequently forfeited his office when he refused to swear allegiance to ethnic Albanian authorities. A second round of elections was announced for late February of 2014. On January 15, candidate Oliver Ivanovic, who narrowly lost to Pantic, stated that Serbia would never accept

Kosovo's independence. Two weeks later Ivanovic was arrested under suspicion of committing war crimes at the end of the Kosovo conflict as part of the "Bridgewatchers," a Kosovar Serb vigilante group. Ivanovic's supporters claim the arrest was politically motivated in light of the upcoming mayoral election.

In the aftermath of the war, Serbs have been victims of retributive attacks by Kosovar Albanians. Both sides have been charged with war crimes. There are some estimations that the loss of lives on the Albanian side was much higher than the losses sustained by ethnic Serbs, and sometimes a rhetoric of imbalanced suffering slides even into acknowledgments of mutual wrongdoings - take the a statement from Pristina's mayor that the crimes committed by the two sides should not be equalized, because the Albanians were fighting back against their Serb attackers, and their victims were greater in number. It may well be true that more Albanians suffered, but does the weighing of suffering, the passing of blame from one side to the other do anything to prevent further conflict? Both populations are deeply scarred by violence, and both identify themselves to be victims in some way.

In a series of survivor interviews after the Kosovo war, one Albanian Kosovar woman (1999) related her experience of the violence in her community:

We were sleeping around six o'clock. My husband heard the noise and we ran. . . All our family ran for their lives. They started shooting at us. My husband was shot. One cousin also. My husband was shot for the second time and died. My second son was shot also, my husband 's brother as well. . . . We ran then, when I came back I saw my son dead. I couldn't check if he was alive or dead. I had to leave him there and try to save this woman and her daughter which were injured. [...] We hoped that we could bury the dead as they deserved, but the Serbs came with tanks and took our bodies from the mosque. They didn't want anyone to see what they'd done. . . . [...] Serbs did terrible things to our people. I have lot of pain. I have five others [remaining in my family] but my pain for the two [I lost] is so big. The international community helped us but I don't know what is going to be in the future. One thing we know. We don't want to see any Serb here. Our heart is burned. They killed, massacred raped our children. I can't imagine living with them any more.

Contrast this with the narratives of two Serbian soldiers - the first, identified only by the initial 'K.' (1999), when asked whether he felt sorry for the Albanian families that were separated in the conflict, stated,

I don't know . . . women and children . . . I wouldn't say that they were "feelings," it was a form of pity. There was a lot of innocent people . . . women, children, very old people. Barely able to move . . . they needed help, they didn't need to be caught up in this . . . we gave them food, drink. They formed the columns on their own . . . they were running from gunfire, from the bombs. The terrorists had their

organisations in every village, we had to eliminate them. Maybe that was the least painful way. The innocent would run, and the terrorists would fight us.

And later, "Kosovo is Serbia and you can't take it away."

Another soldier, identified as D. (1999), related the following story:

Early in the morning, we were given an order to take the village in front of us...that's how it was said...we have to take this village...we were told to take our places and wait for the support which was the police...They arrived, we had to take our positions and fire a few projectiles, after which the [police] would go into the village. This particular one was Albanian civilians, there were no terrorists, and because there was no planning, there was this big incident where one of the men, because one of his friends was killed in the previous night, took around 30 women and children, put them against the wall, and shot them. . . . When he heard the news that his first neighbor was killed in the bombing, he wasn't the same person any more, he went berserk. I was just passing when I saw a lot of civilians, mainly women and children. They were crouching. He was in front of them with a machine gun. From the noise of the motor I couldn't make out what he was saying to them, I just saw that he was shouting at them, he was probably saying that they were guilty for his neighbors death. He lifted his gun, and started firing at them. The women and children were just falling. When he finished his business, his crime, he turned around and went away. They were left there lying in the grass. [...] [T]hat picture will be in front of my eyes for the rest of my life.

One of the most troubling questions in Kosovo is why these two groups cannot learn to co-exist in the same space. At the same time, who could read the stories of the violence that undid the lives of so many people, and simply suggest that they 'just learn to get along'? Memory is long in Kosovo. Its history reveals layers of occupation and re-occupation, resistance and submission. We may lay out the facts - what conflicts have come before and laid the groundwork for tensions that still live on, what factions in still argue about who came first and from where; the stories they tell, and the wishes they express are incompatible with one another. Why an area can be contested for so long can be a difficult question to answer, so instead we work on examining *how*. We try to link cause with effect, and in so doing create a chain that stretches back across centuries, the chronology of a legacy of violence and contested space that has haunted the Balkans for ages. *Earthly kingdoms are such passing things*, and maybe, with time, a new generation of Kosovars will be able to to unite and move forward under the banner of its flag; but for now, there are still unresolved ethnic tensions that haunt the landscape, raging in the dark.

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