

Kosovo: Two Decades After Operation Allied Force. Organized Crime, Ethnic Tensions, and An Economy in Reconstruction

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Abstract: This article seeks to examine the underlying factors that necessitated NATO intervention during the specified period, assess both the immediate and long-term impacts of this intervention, and analyze the elements contributing to the persistence of the conflict to the present day. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of the historical, political, social, and economic dimensions of the Kosovo conflict, the study aims to unravel the intricate nature of the situation. Additionally, it evaluates global efforts aimed at conflict resolution and explores the challenges that hinder the achievement of sustainable peace. Accordingly, this article addresses the following research question: Why, 25 years after the NATO intervention—hailed at the time as the only viable solution to halt ethnic cleansing and suppress opposition—does the Kosovo conflict remain unresolved and largely unaddressed?

Keywords: Kosovo, UNMIK, corruption, economy, conflict, ethnic tensions, organized crime, real estate crisis, gender inequalities, minorities.

Background

Reflecting the culmination of historical, ethnic, and political tensions that ultimately led to international military intervention, the Kosovo conflict stands as one of the most complex and contentious intra-state conflicts of the 20th century. Analyzing this dispute reveals that Europe has yet to establish effective mechanisms for addressing the

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Conflict Studies Quarterly
Issue 50, January 2025, pp. 31–48

DOI: 10.24193/cs.q.50.2

Published First Online: January 03, 2025

multifaceted challenges posed by intra-state conflicts. These challenges have the potential to fundamentally redefine core principles of public international law, international relations, and global security frameworks. NATO's intervention not only initiates a prolonged debate regarding the role of the United Nations but also raises significant legal questions surrounding sovereignty and statehood (Duke, 1998).

Between 1998 and 1999, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), composed of Albanian separatist fighters, waged a violent conflict against Serbian security forces in the Kosovo province of southern Serbia. The conflict was fueled by the ethnic and political persecution of the predominantly Albanian population by Serbian authorities, resulting in widespread violence and numerous atrocities. In examining the situation in Kosovo, it becomes evident that the circumstances surrounding this conflict are significantly more ambiguous and uncertain compared to most other intra-state conflicts that emerged in the post-Cold War era.

History provides numerous examples where victims have transformed into aggressors, and defensive actions have escalated into offensive campaigns. This dynamic is evident in the case of Kosovo, where both Serbs and Albanians, depending on the historical context and international perspective, have alternated between being perceived as victims and as perpetrators (Arbatov, 2000).

At the time, NATO's intervention was internationally justified on the grounds of upholding human rights and, more critically, preventing genocide. The North Atlantic Alliance argued that military action was necessary to halt the atrocities committed by Serbian forces against the predominantly Albanian population of Kosovo. Framed as an urgent response to avert an impending humanitarian catastrophe, the bombing campaign lasted 78 days. While the intervention succeeded in part by removing Serbian forces and curtailing the violence, achieving a durable peace proved far more complex and elusive than initially anticipated by global leaders.

Unbeknownst to many, the underlying conflict, coupled with the 1999 bombings, inflicted profound psychological pain on thousands of families, resulting in trauma that has since developed into a "generational legacy". These tragedies are not only difficult to heal but also continue to fuel ongoing ethnic tensions. Additionally, NATO's bombing campaign contributed to political instability in both Kosovo and Serbia, creating an environment where corruption has been allowed to flourish under the guise of relative calm.

Immediate Consequences of the Operation Allied Force

The most evident outcome of the bombing campaign was the cessation of armed conflict in Kosovo. A NATO-led multinational peacekeeping force was deployed to restore stability and ensure the safety of the population, while Serbian forces were mandated to withdraw from the region (Daalder, 2004). However, NATO's air campaign blatantly contravened the UN Charter, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, and the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act. These treaties explicitly prohibited the use of force against a third state unless authorized by

the UN Security Council and in accordance with international law. The campaign marked the first large-scale and devastating application of armed force in Europe since 1945, significantly destabilizing the foundational principles of the European international order established after World War II. By doing so, NATO set a controversial precedent, openly embracing a foreign policy approach rooted in the philosophy that “the ends justify the means” (Arbatov, 2000). In this context, while a humanitarian crisis characterized by a clear instance of ethnic cleansing within its borders was exposed and subsequently addressed, the sovereignty of the state in question was disregarded (Tziampiris, 2002).

NATO’s intervention in Serbia in 1999, regarded as the first of several Western-led discretionary operations or “wars of choice,” is viewed by some as exacerbating global instability and raising questions about the effectiveness of force for purportedly humanitarian objectives. Coupled with inaction during the Syrian crisis, interventions in Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), and Libya (2011) are seen by many nations as contributing to increased instability and insecurity under the guise of promoting fragile liberal values. These actions have inadvertently undermined the legitimacy of the US-led liberal international order, as many critics argue that Western foreign policy and military actions are driven more by self-interest than by a genuine commitment to fostering a stable and humane international system (German, 2019).

Since the 1970s and 1980s, NATO’s actions have gradually undermined the cooperative and constructive dynamics carefully cultivated through Moscow’s policies, including those developed during the 1990s. Additionally, all forms of engagement with NATO, including the Partnership for Peace initiatives, have been terminated. In private sessions, the Russian State Duma, for the first time since the mid-1980s, began to seriously deliberate the possibility of military confrontation with NATO (Arbatov, 2000). Following the events of September 11, 2001, Russia’s relations with its European neighbors experienced a temporary improvement. However, the NATO-led Kosovo campaign in 1999 had already created a rift in these relationships, a divide that continues to persist to this day (German, 2019). Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that US–Russia relations will recover in the aftermath of the events of March 24 (Arbatov, 2000).

At the conclusion of the war, approximately half of Kosovo’s total population—around 800,000 people—fled to Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Additionally, while estimates vary, up to 500,000 individuals were classified as internally displaced persons (UN, 1999). For an extended period, societal focus remained on addressing the protracted disputes between Serbian authorities and Kosovar Albanians, particularly to prevent a recurrence of such events.

The conflict also inflicted severe damage on infrastructure, with roughly half of Kosovo’s housing stock—approximately 100,000 units—either destroyed or rendered uninhabitable. Furthermore, the extensive bombing campaign is believed to have led to the abandonment of up to 75,000 properties (Valstad T. , 2004).

After seven weeks of bombing Yugoslavia, the extent of destruction was staggering: 100% of oil refineries, 70% of the defense industry, 60% of fuel storage facilities, all electrical transformers, and 40% of television and radio stations were destroyed. Among these was the Belgrade TV facility, where missile strikes claimed the lives of sixteen civilians. Additionally, 68 bridges were damaged, 70% of the roads and 50% of the railways were rendered inoperable, and two million individuals were left homeless. Of the estimated 1,500 total deaths, two-thirds were civilians. The damage extended to nearly 300 schools, hospitals, and other civilian structures, as well as 86 historical monuments. The bombing of chemical industries, oil refineries, and storage facilities caused severe environmental harm, significantly contaminating the Danube River—one of Europe's major waterways, which flows into the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean (Arbatov, 2000). The morality of NATO's bombing campaign has also been subject to criticism, given the standards and methods applied in the use of force. It is particularly striking that this operation, marked by its devastating impact, was described as "the first heroic war" (Luttwak, 1999).

The bombing campaign, conducted with a focus on aerial strikes and minimal risk to NATO personnel, prioritized operational safety for allied forces but had far-reaching consequences on the ground. This approach, while avoiding direct engagement, intensified debates about the proportionality and ethics of force used under the justification of humanitarian intervention.

While the campaign was publicly framed as a decisive measure to end ethnic cleansing, the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and the significant loss of civilian lives drew criticism for undermining its humanitarian objectives. The reliance on airpower alone, without a comprehensive strategy for post-conflict stabilization, raised concerns about the long-term implications of such interventions on the affected regions (Wise, 2013). Furthermore, the resulting damage to essential services and historical landmarks, coupled with the displacement of millions, challenged the effectiveness of the intervention in creating lasting peace. The characterization of the campaign as the "first heroic war" serves as a stark reminder of the complexities and controversies surrounding the use of military force in pursuit of humanitarian goals, highlighting its ethical and practical shortcomings (Luttwak, 1999).

The suffering of the Albanian population was mirrored and compounded by the severe hardship experienced by the Serbian population as the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo escalated. NATO's intervention, while showcasing advanced military capabilities, fell short of achieving sustainable peace and reconciliation. The lack of effective diplomatic engagement, particularly from Russia, highlighted the precariousness of the operation and underscored the potential for a historical failure if such efforts had been entirely absent (Arbatov, 2000). This conflict did not align with the principles of collective security; rather, it exposed the limitations of humanitarian intervention when executed through force alone. The campaign neither introduced a new ethical paradigm nor fostered a more humane international order. Additionally, it proved unlikely to weaken Serbian nationalism

or dismantle the foundations of the nation-state (Tziampiris, 2002). The intervention's inability to address the root causes of ethnic and political strife ultimately underscored the complexity of resolving deep-seated national and regional tensions through military means.

The Real Estate Crisis and Corruption in Public Administration

Upon regaining power, Serbian authorities confiscated the entirety of archival materials from public institutions and municipal cadastral offices in Kosovo. This event constitutes a significant and critical fact in the context of the conflict. As documented in numerous international reports and scholarly literature, these activities were carried out primarily by the Yugoslav Army, and in certain cases, with the involvement of Russian forces. One widely cited account describes how the Yugoslav Army arrived at the municipal cadastral office in Pristina with trucks and proceeded to seize all original cadastral plans, including updates, cadastral archival records, geodetic instruments, and personal computers (Todorovski *et al.*, 2016). Evidence from an interview with a former head of the Kuršumljia cadastral office, published in a local source, reveals that the President of the Republic of Serbia ordered the director of the Republican Geodetic Authority to destroy the cadastral archives. Following the withdrawal of the Yugoslav Army and Serbian police at the end of the war, the head of the cadastral office in Vranje, supported by local transport services, facilitated the transfer of cadastral archives from the Pristina office and ten other cadastral offices in Kosovo. These materials were subsequently transported for the purpose of destruction. Kosovo's public officials faced significant challenges as a result of these actions. The destruction of housing, the prevalence of squatters, and the outdated and incomplete property registration system created numerous complications in the post-conflict period. These factors have contributed to ongoing difficulties in land management, the enforcement of property rights, and the provision of adequate housing, hindering efforts toward stabilization and reconstruction (Cordial, 2008). Therefore, the international community recognized that the conflict had created significant gaps and deficiencies in land administration. These shortcomings were understood to impede effective governance, property rights enforcement, and reconstruction efforts in the post-conflict period, necessitating comprehensive interventions to address the resulting challenges (Valstad, 2001).

Prior to the war, Pristina had the largest population in Kosovo. However, in the aftermath of the conflict, the population of the city experienced a dramatic increase. By February 2000, the population was estimated to have reached approximately 500,000, a significant rise from the 1991 figure of 200,000, with an influx of around 200,000 new residents (OSCE, 2006). This rapid population increase resulted in an inevitable housing crisis. Following the war, the land administration system became severely dysfunctional, marked by the absence of a coherent land policy, discriminatory land laws, and a fragile regulatory framework that permitted the confiscation of public and private land by powerful individuals and groups. Additionally, inadequate information systems prevented the maintenance of accurate and

up-to-date records, while the state's limited capacity rendered it ineffective in providing assistance to refugees and displaced persons (Augustinus & Barry, 2006).

These challenges are aptly characterized as *institutional weaknesses*, which encompass a lack of consensus regarding societal direction, intense competition for power that undermines effective governance, limited legitimacy of political leaders, and non-participatory, dysfunctional political and judicial systems. The second category, *economic and social problems*, includes the destruction or degradation of social and economic infrastructure, the expansion of the informal economy, a return to subsistence-level activities, intergroup animosities, and disputes over land and property rights. Finally, the third component identified is the need to address critical *security concerns*. These include the widespread and unregulated distribution of significant quantities of weapons among populations that, under normal conditions, should be disarmed and reintegrated into society (Ball, 2001).

Vikman (1999) identified numerous reports of illegal land and property occupations, alongside evidence that criminal groups were exploiting the prevailing instability to seize control of houses and land. These findings highlight how post-conflict disorder created opportunities for unlawful activities, further complicating property rights and land administration in the affected regions. As a result of the large number of Kosovar refugees who returned to find their homes damaged or destroyed, many occupied properties that had been abandoned by Serbs and other minority groups. This situation gave rise to unauthorized *secondary occupation* of these properties, further complicating property rights and contributing to ongoing tensions and disputes in the post-conflict period (Leckie, 2000). The situation in urban areas proved to be considerably more complex, as significant numbers of Kosovar Albanians migrated from rural regions in search of employment and housing. Abandoned properties, initially designated to serve as humanitarian shelters, were often reallocated by local authorities. However, these reallocations frequently functioned as a form of patronage, with properties being assigned to individuals identified as political or military elites in exchange for their loyalty and support. This practice further entrenched inequities and exacerbated post-conflict challenges related to housing and property rights (Cordial, 2008).

The real estate crisis was significantly mitigated by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) (Weller, 1999). UNMIK played a key role in establishing functional institutions and restoring order, including efforts to stabilize the real estate sector. Although there was a concerted effort to clarify property rights, the absence of essential documentation made this task exceedingly difficult (Caplan, 2005). Prior to the war, the real estate market had been governed by discriminatory laws that exacerbated property-related challenges (Arbatov, 2000). In response, UNMIK, in collaboration with other international organizations, initiated comprehensive reconstruction and rehabilitation programs aimed at rebuilding infrastructure and housing (Daalder, 2004). These programs provided funding for the reconstruction of destroyed homes, the rehabilitation of damaged buildings, and assistance to displaced families (van der Molen,

2002). The success of these initiatives was crucial in preventing renewed hostilities and fostering stability among Albanians who had regained homeownership.

Another significant activity related to housing and property rights was the declaration of ruins by municipal commissions for properties that had been burned or devastated during the conflict in urban areas. In such cases, ownership of these structures was transferred to the municipalities, and the properties were designated as public land intended for reconstruction and development. Despite these measures, the destruction and burning of large, abandoned properties, particularly those previously owned by Serbs, continued even after the conflict ended. Similar to other abandoned properties, these assets were converted from private to public ownership and subsequently redistributed. However, this process often lacked transparency. Beneficiaries of these reallocations frequently included military commanders and members of the new political elite. Evidence supporting these claims can be found in court cases involving individuals accused of fraud and corruption related to property distribution. Some of these cases led to the imprisonment of high-ranking officials within the cadastral department. For instance, the superintendent of the municipal cadastral office in Pristina was sentenced to six months in prison for his involvement in such activities (Todorovski *et al.*, 2016).

The Psychological Impact of Trauma on Young Individuals

The psychological trauma endured by Kosovar Albanians, who were either direct victims of conflict-related violence or witnesses to it, has been extensively documented in numerous studies (Papadopoulos, 2004). Exposure to extreme acts of violence, such as murder, rape, and other forms of abuse, led to widespread cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Cardozo, 2000). Furthermore, the profound loss of family members and close associates contributed significantly to psychological distress (Garbarino, 1995). The fragmentation of communities and the disruption of social cohesion exacerbated these issues, particularly among young people. This demographic faced heightened isolation and difficulties coping with trauma, resulting in episodes of severe depression and long-term mental health challenges (Punamäki *et al.*, 2002).

The mental health of Kosovar Albanians was profoundly affected by forced displacement during the conflict. Over 800,000 individuals were compelled to abandon their homes and seek shelter in refugee camps or temporary accommodations, where they endured dehumanizing conditions (Judah, 2002). This loss of stability and security led to a significant increase in anxiety, depression, and other severe mental health disorders (Agger, 2001). Prolonged exposure to traumatic events commonly manifests as anxiety and depression. Among young Kosovars impacted by the war, symptoms of depression often include a pervasive sense of hopelessness, diminished interest in social activities, and persistent feelings of sadness (Garbarino, 1995). Anxiety, on the other hand, is frequently characterized by irritability, panic attacks, restlessness, and impaired concentration (Punamäki *et al.*,

2002). Traumatic experiences during conflict can also lead to severe behavioral issues and challenges with social adjustment. Young individuals may exhibit aggressive behaviors, social withdrawal, or difficulty maintaining interpersonal relationships (Macksoud, 1996). Furthermore, the impact of trauma can hinder academic performance and reduce the capacity to integrate successfully into professional environments (Garbarino, 1995).

Kosovar Albanian infants were particularly vulnerable to psychological trauma, with evidence indicating that exposure to violence and instability significantly disrupts emotional and psychological development during early childhood (Dyregrov, 2000). Similarly, the NATO bombardment had profound psychological repercussions for the Serbian population. The persistent threat of airstrikes and the widespread destruction of civilian and state infrastructure created an environment of pervasive anxiety and uncertainty. Prolonged exposure to danger, coupled with the loss of loved ones, contributed to a high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, and depression among Serbs (Đurić, 2013). Serbian youth were also significantly affected by the conflict, mirroring the experiences of Kosovar Albanian youth. The trauma resulting from bombings and personal loss led to elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Many Serbian children struggled with academic and social adjustment, exhibiting cognitive impairments and various behavioral difficulties (Dyregrov, 2000). These findings underscore the enduring psychological impact of the conflict on the younger generations of both ethnic communities.

Political Instability and the Fight Against Corruption

Kosovo, one of the most recently established states in the Balkan region, is often characterized as a state that has failed to achieve its intended objectives or remains only minimally functional. Its society is marked by deep ethnic fragmentation, and despite declaring sovereignty seven years ago, it continues to face significant challenges from both internal and external sources. The constitutional and institutional frameworks of this newly independent region were unilaterally designed by foreign actors, with little to no input from local residents.

To enhance stability and mitigate inter-ethnic tensions, international actors have urged Kosovo to adopt clear power-sharing structures and enact legislative protections for minority groups. However, despite the persistent efforts of the global community, Kosovo has struggled to establish itself as a fully functioning state. Scholars argue that the escalation of ethnic conflicts and the fragility of the state have been exacerbated by the very practices of power-sharing and the creation of ethnically defined institutions (Loncar, 2016).

Corruption remains one of the most pervasive and persistent challenges faced by Kosovo since its declaration of independence. This issue manifests in various forms, including nepotism, abuse of power, bribery, and electoral fraud (Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Despite repeated promises from successive administrations, anti-corruption efforts have proven

insufficient. The transition from a socialist system to a democratic society is inherently complex, a process further complicated by the rise of nationalist sentiments (Haug, 2015). Frequent elections and shifts in government have led to a lack of continuity in the implementation of public policies and state reforms. In the aftermath of the NATO intervention, Kosovo's primary political parties split into two categories: those that arose directly from the conflict, such as the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), and those advocating for nonviolent approaches, such as the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) (Krasniqi, 2016). Subsequently, the political landscape expanded with the emergence of the *Lëvizja Vetëvendosje* (LVV) party, a populist movement whose ideology is rooted in ethnic nationalism, hostility toward the ruling elite, and skepticism of the international community. This party's stance often reflects conflicted sentiments toward minority groups, further complicating Kosovo's political dynamics and social cohesion (Yabanci, 2016).

Kosovo's political system is classified as a "*semi-consolidated authoritarian regime*" characterized by widespread political corruption intertwined with local organized crime. The region continues to suffer from high unemployment rates, with approximately one-third of the population living in poverty. Moreover, the economy remains heavily reliant on remittances from the diaspora and foreign aid (Coelho, 2015). These systemic issues exhibit distinct features rooted in the governance structures of the 1990s when Kosovo was under Serbian rule (Krasniqi, 2016). Populist politics further complicate reconciliation efforts with Western institutions due to ideological divides between the general populace and the privileged elite (Yabanci, 2016).

The coalition between the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and the New Kosovo Alliance (AKR), which governed from 2011 to 2014, prioritized securing a majority in the Assembly over adhering to a coherent ideological agenda. This approach weakened governance and adversely affected economic and social welfare. A fundamental issue within Kosovo's party system is the lack of a clear framework for coalition partnerships, which results in uncertainty during election campaigns and contributes to a dysfunctional governance structure (Krasniqi, 2016). As a result, Kosovo operates under a "*restricted access social order*" maintained by implicit agreements between influential individuals and organized criminal networks. This system relies on patronage networks to distribute societal benefits and privileges. Efforts by the international community to strengthen Kosovo's institutions pose a threat to the privileges enjoyed by the governing elite. This powerful group, which monopolizes resources and resists reforms that could dismantle their entrenched structures, is a key factor in the state's ongoing fragility and institutional collapse (Capussela, 2016).

The politicization of the judiciary in Kosovo can be largely attributed to the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which relied on personal networks to appoint individuals to key positions within the new administration. From the outset, systemic corruption was evident within both the police force and the customs

service. Consequently, local courts and prosecutors were pressured to participate in corrupt practices, frequently resulting in the acquittal of prominent political figures (Coelho, 2015). Furthermore, the current leadership frequently employs accusatory rhetoric toward foreign legislators and UNMIK officials, referring to them as “politicians,” “corrupt,” and “traitors”. This populist discourse relies on polarizing language to divide society into two distinct factions: *them*—representing the corrupt elites who undermine national sovereignty by collaborating with Serbia and UNMIK—and *us*—representing the virtuous and legitimate voices of anti-corruption and national integrity (Yabancı, 2016). This divisive strategy reinforces societal fragmentation and undermines efforts toward institutional reform and reconciliation.

Ramush Haradinaj, the former Prime Minister of Kosovo, represents one of the most prominent cases associated with corruption. Despite being accused of criminal activities and corruption, he was acquitted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Similarly, Hashim Thaçi, the former President of Kosovo, faced allegations of war crimes and corruption, which ultimately led to his resignation and the initiation of international prosecution (Weller, 2009). These high-profile cases underscore the pervasive challenges of corruption and accountability within Kosovo’s political leadership.

Wise presents a compelling hypothesis, suggesting that despite having lived under undemocratic governance, individuals in post-communist societies often retain an attachment to certain characteristics of former authoritarian regimes (Wise & Agarín, 2017). This attachment may manifest as a preference for centralized authority, stability, and hierarchical structures, reflecting a deep-seated familiarity with, or reliance on, the systems that once governed their lives. Wise’s hypothesis underscores the complexities of transitioning to democratic governance, as historical experiences shape societal attitudes toward authority and political structures.

The inability of the independent region of Kosovo to assert authority over its entire claimed territory, particularly the northern areas where the majority population is Serbian, remains a significant and unresolved political challenge. The majority of the Serbian population in this region strongly opposed the separation from Serbia. In April 2013, the European Union initiated a reconciliation process aimed at resolving this issue through mediation between Kosovo and Serbia. However, the Belgrade government showed minimal interest and limited motivation to reach an agreement, as Kosovo’s proposals were deemed insufficient.

Consequently, the implementation of the agreement has been hindered by ongoing controversies over the establishment and status of a coordinating organization for municipalities with a Serbian majority. Belgrade and Kosovar Serbs advocate for this entity to be granted constitutional status, while Pristina and its supporters argue that it should function merely as an association (Capussela, 2016). This fundamental disagreement continues to impede reconciliation efforts and complicates the broader process of regional stabilization.

Minorities and Ethnic Tensions in Kosovo

Since Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, the majority Albanian population and the minority Serb population have continued to experience deep-seated tension and mistrust. The region's history has been characterized by the absence of effective and transparent institutions, coupled with inadequate security and stability. These factors have contributed to a significant depopulation of Serbs, leading to a demographic shift in which Albanians now constitute 93.5% of the population, while Serbs represent only 6% (Moraru, 2011).

A key factor contributing to societal divisions in Kosovo is the *Albanian fallacy*, which disputes the origins of the Serbs in the region. Albanians assert that they are direct descendants of the Illyrians, an ancient people who inhabited the Balkans long before the arrival of the Slavs and Serbs. This historical narrative reinforces the Albanian claim to a longstanding presence in Kosovo that predates Serbian settlement (Loncar, 2016). The competing historical claims and identity narratives exacerbate ethnic divisions and hinder reconciliation and unity within Kosovar society.

Despite extensive collaborative efforts by the international community, Kosovo remains an ethnically fragmented state, particularly along its borders. The northern region presents significant challenges, as the Serbian population remains both institutionally and physically isolated, identifying themselves as citizens of Serbia rather than Kosovo (Loncar, 2016). In contrast, the majority Albanian population, representing the largest Muslim-majority group in Europe, often finds its values in conflict with those of the Serbian Orthodox community (Wise & Agarín, 2017). Furthermore, Kosovo exhibits a societal divide between rural areas, where traditional and conservative values dominate, and urban centers, which are the focus of modernization initiatives. The overarching goal is to transform Kosovo into a secular and modern European state (Haug, 2015). However, the enforcement of policies described as *aggressive secularism* has deepened societal fragmentation. These policies are viewed as undermining Islamic cultural and religious values, thereby posing potential threats to state security and social cohesion (Püttmann, 2020).

The social and economic exclusion of Kosovar Serbs remains a persistent issue, characterized by systematic discrimination (Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Serbs frequently face workplace discrimination, barriers to property ownership, and limited opportunities for civic engagement. These exclusions perpetuate inter-ethnic tensions and foster deep-seated feelings of alienation (Capussela, 2016). As a consequence, the Serbian minority in Kosovo continues to live in segregated communities, particularly in the northern regions and southern enclaves (Ker-Lindsay, 2015). This segregation is further exacerbated by mutual distrust between ethnic communities and recurring instances of inter-ethnic violence, often classified as "*hate crimes*" (Capussela, 2016). For example, in North Mitrovica—a city divided between Albanian and Serbian populations—tensions remain high, and periodic conflicts continue to occur (Weller, 2009). These factors collectively hinder the development of social cohesion and impede efforts toward lasting reconciliation in Kosovo.

The systemic discrimination faced by Kosovar Serbs is further reinforced by legislative provisions that were designed primarily through the lens of Albanian state formation, rather than fostering inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation. These laws, enacted by government officials, aimed to secure Kosovo's full independence and international recognition, yet they failed to prioritize resolving the longstanding inter-ethnic conflict, which had persisted for over two decades.

This legislative approach reflects a reluctance to challenge international norms, while subtly promoting intolerance among ethnic and minority groups, thereby contributing to societal divisions. The government's strategic framing of Serbs as *the others* played a significant role in consolidating the Albanian nation-state. By leveraging international standards and reinforcing a divisive narrative of *us* versus *them*, a sense of distance and animosity between ethnic communities was cultivated, further entrenching societal fragmentation (Loncar, 2016).

This policy of societal division has posed significant challenges for Kosovar Serbs in accessing essential public services, such as education, healthcare, and social assistance. Numerous cases illustrate how the Serbian minority is compelled to rely on support from the Serbian government, as the services provided by Kosovar authorities are often insufficient or inaccessible (Capussela, 2016). Furthermore, Serbia's involvement has been a pivotal factor in reinforcing these divisions. Since Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, the government in Belgrade has regularly organized local elections in the northern municipalities, where the majority population is Serbian. This practice has further institutionalized the region's fragmentation and obstructed efforts toward societal integration and inter-ethnic reconciliation (Loncar, 2016).

Kosovo's political parties have adopted divergent approaches regarding minority participation and access to public services. While some parties have supported measures to promote Serb involvement in the electoral process and facilitate their access to essential services, others have vehemently opposed such initiatives. Notably, during the 2013 elections, a radical boycott campaign took place in the northern region, utilizing sabotage and intimidation tactics to deter Serbs from participating in the voting process. The primary argument for the boycott was that participation would legitimize Pristina's authority, thereby dismantling Belgrade's parallel governing institutions in the north and transferring control of the four Serb-majority municipalities to Kosovo's administration (Wise & Agarín, 2017).

In addition, gender equality remains a significant challenge in Kosovo. The promotion of women's rights has been hindered by persistent conflict and deeply rooted patriarchal traditions. The political instability following the collapse of socialism has further complicated these efforts (Haug, 2015). Within the education system, gender stereotypes continue to influence both the curriculum and teacher attitudes. Consequently, girls are often discouraged from pursuing careers in technical or scientific fields and are instead guided toward traditionally female occupations (Harris, 2022).

As a result, Kosovo Albanian women have largely been excluded from public life and have exerted limited influence on gender equality, particularly in the labor market. This situation can be attributed to Kosovo's lower level of industrialization compared to other regions of the former Yugoslavia and the enduring impact of patriarchal family structures in rural areas (Haug, 2015).

The Fragile Economy of the Region

Kosovo, as a newly established sovereign state, remains one of the least studied regions in terms of transitional economies and is the least researched country within the Balkan region. This distinctive situation arises from the fact that its institutions were created from the ground up with substantial support and collaboration from the international community (Kryeziu, 2018).

Despite these efforts, economic development in Kosovo is significantly hindered by widespread corruption. The lack of a transparent and predictable legal framework, combined with entrenched corrupt practices, acts as a major deterrent to foreign investment. This pervasive corruption has also eroded public confidence in political institutions, obstructed the acceleration of economic progress, and allowed for the undue influence of vested interests over state governance (Mustafa, 2020).

Research on transition economies indicates that many countries have struggled to establish competitive market economies due to the failure to effectively implement state reforms, build stable institutions, and create clear legal and regulatory frameworks for individuals and businesses (Kryeziu, 2018). Kosovo's economy exemplifies these challenges, remaining one of the most fragile in Europe. The country experiences persistently high unemployment rates and a notably low GDP per capita, particularly affecting the youth population. Kosovo's economy is heavily dependent on international aid and remittances from its diaspora, limiting prospects for sustainable growth and domestic development. This economic fragility has been exacerbated by corruption networks, which exploit institutional weaknesses and scarce resources to advance personal interests (Dzudzevic & Jashari-Sekiraqa, 2018). These conditions hinder the establishment of a resilient and self-sufficient economic system, perpetuating the country's vulnerability and delaying comprehensive socio-economic progress.

These conditions have fostered a political environment characterized by the systematic manipulation of institutions by organized groups and influential individuals. This manipulation is strategically employed to consolidate political power and exploit state resources, thereby obstructing progress toward reconciliation and sustainable development. Such actions have significantly undermined the democratization process in the region.

Kosovo's political and economic landscape is dominated by parties and individuals who promote populist narratives. This populist culture leverages claims of legitimacy to obscure corruption and facilitate state capture, ultimately eroding democratic norms

and governance (Boduszyński & Pavlaković, 2019). The entrenchment of these practices hampers institutional integrity, weakens public trust, and impedes the establishment of a transparent and accountable democratic system.

Corruption is widely recognized as pervasive within Kosovo's public institutions, affecting various sectors, including healthcare, the judiciary, central government, and municipal administrations. Empirical data indicates that corruption is particularly prevalent in the healthcare system (52%), followed by the judiciary (43%), central government (38%), and municipalities (34%) (Yabanci, 2016). These systemic issues undermine institutional integrity, weaken public trust, and significantly impair the delivery of essential services and effective governance. Addressing these entrenched forms of corruption is critical to advancing transparency, accountability, and sustainable institutional reform.

Kosovo's poverty rate exceeds that of most neighboring countries, disproportionately affecting households led by women, families with limited education, and ethnic minorities, in contrast to the Albanian majority (Mustafa, 2020). Despite a formal transition to a market economy over 15 years ago, Kosovo remains classified by the World Bank as a lower-middle-income country, reflecting limited economic growth and development (Uberti, 2015). In 2007, during the final year of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), the poverty rate reached a historic low, with 20% of the population living at subsistence levels. However, following independence, poverty levels rose again, albeit not to the extremes seen during the socialist era. Persistent income inequality has remained largely unaddressed, further exacerbating socio-economic disparities (Mustafa, 2020).

Current data reveals that 44% of Kosovo's population lives in poverty, while 14% experiences extreme poverty. Unemployment rates are particularly high, affecting 58% of women and 30% of men (Kryeziu, 2018). This dire economic situation has compelled a significant number of Kosovars to emigrate in search of better economic opportunities and security in other parts of Europe (Coelho, 2015).

In comparison to regions such as East Asia and Latin America, Kosovo remains economically underdeveloped. Additionally, while international donors have focused on advancing individual rights, their efforts have led to the establishment of numerous state agencies tasked with resolving legal disputes, particularly those concerning property rights and industrial assets (Uberti, 2015). These measures, however, have done little to alleviate the underlying economic fragility and inequality faced by the population.

Conclusion

Despite the absence of active warfare, Kosovo's situation cannot be described as genuine peace. Rather, the region remains entrenched in a *frozen conflict*, defined by unresolved political, social, and economic challenges. These challenges, compounded by ethnic divisions, political manipulation, and external geopolitical influences, prevent Kosovo

from achieving sustainable stability and development. While the cessation of violence marked a significant moment, it did not translate into long-term peace or reconciliation, and the conflict merely evolved into a new form of unresolved tension.

One of the key factors contributing to this ongoing instability is the pervasive corruption within Kosovo's institutions. A system that fosters corruption has been created by the close ties between political leaders and organized crime groups, resulting in the neglect of citizens' needs, regardless of their ethnic background. This system has led to the entrenchment of inequality and the perpetuation of a state that benefits only the political and economic elite, leaving nearly half of Kosovo's population living in poverty. In fact, more than 44% of the population is impoverished, with 14% living in acute poverty. Kosovo's economy, one of the most fragile in the Balkans, is far weaker than the economies of some Latin American or East Asian countries, highlighting the state's failure to create an inclusive and sustainable economy.

This economic fragility is intertwined with the failure to address the underlying ethnic tensions. The Serbian minority, constituting only 6% of Kosovo's population, remains marginalized and persecuted by the Albanian majority. Serbs continue to face systemic discrimination, particularly in accessing public services and healthcare, contributing to the persistence of ethnic conflict. The ongoing discrimination faced by Serbs reinforces the sense of alienation and division, hindering any meaningful attempts at reconciliation between the two communities.

The roles of Russia, Serbia, and Western powers further complicate Kosovo's path to peace. Russia's steadfast support for Serbia and opposition to Kosovo's sovereignty, combined with Serbia's continued influence over Kosovo's Serb minority, has prevented any significant resolution of the conflict. At the same time, while the West's intervention in the late 1990s temporarily halted the violence, it failed to address the root causes of the conflict or to foster true political and social integration. The international community's involvement has thus contributed to a situation where Kosovo is neither fully sovereign nor at peace.

International efforts, while instrumental in establishing basic governance structures, have often fallen short of fostering true reconciliation or sustainable development. The unilateral establishment of Kosovo's constitutional and institutional framework, without sufficient input from local communities, has led to a lack of ownership and legitimacy among the populace. The promotion of aggressive secularism has further alienated segments of the population, undermined social cohesion, and exacerbated cultural tensions.

It becomes increasingly evident that the conflict was never entirely resolved but rather evolved into a different form. The political manipulation by elites, exacerbated by organized crime, resulted in a situation where the original victims have now become perpetrators, perpetuating a cycle of division and mistrust. The Serb-Albanian divide remains entrenched, and Kosovo's ongoing instability reflects a broader failure to establish genuine peace, justice, and inter-ethnic trust.

In conclusion, Kosovo's condition reflects a frozen conflict where the cessation of violence has not translated into peace. The absence of active war masks the persistent ethnic divisions, institutional corruption, economic fragility, and societal mistrust that continue to plague the region. Without addressing these fundamental issues, Kosovo remains trapped in a state of unresolved tension and instability. Achieving genuine peace requires more than the absence of war; it demands inclusive governance, economic opportunity, social equity, and a commitment to reconciliation - all of which remain distant aspirations in Kosovo's current reality.

The Kosovo conflict serves as a stark reminder that reconciliation, dialogue, and sustainable development are essential components of any peace process. Military interventions and external solutions are inadequate substitutes for long-term strategies based on cooperation, social justice, and the rebuilding of inter-ethnic trust. Kosovo's situation exemplifies the complexity of ethnic and political tensions and the profound errors made by the international community in its approach to the region. As such, the Kosovo conflict remains a dark chapter in Europe's history, demonstrating the deep challenges of resolving ethnic conflict and the limitations of international interventions that fail to address the underlying causes of division. The future of Kosovo depends not on external interventions but on its ability to foster internal dialogue, address economic disparity, and build a society based on equality, transparency, and reconciliation.

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