

KOSOVO CROSSROADS: A POST-WAR STATE IN LIMBO

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by Klevisa Kovaci

In a post-conflict context, Kosovo is the newest country in Europe. Following its independence in 2008, after the violent breakup of Yugoslavia and the bloody ethnic wars of the 1990s, Kosovo is at a crossroads. The events left thousands missing and crippled, with many remaining deeply scarred by incredibly traumatic violence, including conflict-related sexual violence. As such, Kosovo is in a delicate transitional phase in which everything is at stake: the development of its economy, accession into the European family, and the reintegration of an ethnically divided population.

Indeed, traces of the conflict are present throughout Kosovo. Memorial sites marked with flowers, plaques, name engravings and flags, as well as commemoration ceremonies are ubiquitous. Mines from the war have still not been entirely mapped out and removed. Mass graves – one which was believed to be under the territory of the University of Prishtina and the Serbian Orthodox church – have been discovered. Survivors of the conflict are struggling to come to terms with the conflict, as many continue to suffer psychological distress and have yet to receive reparations for the violence inflicted upon them. Refugees painfully recount their journeys as they were expelled out of Kosovo into the borders of Albania and Macedonia.

The legacy of the conflict manifests itself in the bitterness, hurt, despair and fatigue of both Kosovar Albanians and Serbs. These resentments materialise in the context of international diplomacy, with Serbia's continued antipathy towards the EU and US, as a result of their roles in leading the NATO bombing campaign in 1999 to end the war. Within Kosovo, pockets of communities defiantly raise Serbian flags and do not know or refuse to speak Albanian. A reinforcement of ethnic identities through a mentality of "us" against "them" is highly prevalent on both sides.

The conflict precipitated major problems that carry on today in all spectrums – economic, political and social. The war seriously damaged the economy, as many cities were destroyed or ruined – from the once prosperous city of Gjakova to the buildings of Prishtina. Furthermore, the country is riddled with economic corruption from an opaque post-war privatization process, similar to that in post-communist Eastern Europe. Like in other Balkan and Eastern European states, in Kosovo this has led to wealth that is commanded under the hands of a few, while inequality reigns. In fact, Kosovo has an unemployment rate of 30% and continues to struggle as the poorest country in Europe.

Another one of the greatest challenges that Kosovo faces post-war is asserting its sovereignty and statehood. Ongoing debates over where to delineate the border with Montenegro have led to parliamentary deadlock, while opposition party members protest by repeatedly tear gassing the parliament chamber to disrupt meetings. At the same time, even 16 years after the war, Kosovo remains in limbo in global negotiations; recognized as Kosovo, an independent nation-state by some, and as a territory of Serbia by Russia. This has caused a dilemma in the United Nations (UN) as P5 Security Council members cannot agree on what status to award it. Russia continuously blocks Kosovo's bid for recognition of statehood in the UN, and as a result, Kosovo is denied membership in the UN.

Kosovo's disputed status complicates matters for other impartial international organizations or parties. These entities are in the country to assist the population inclusively, but may not reference the state as either Kosovo or Serbia – they must maintain positive relations with the government of Kosovo, Serbia and allies. Needless to say, this makes logistics and political "correctness" a delicate and sensitive dance. On a practical day to day level, the status dilemma also manifests itself in high travel restrictions for Kosovars or foreigners in Kosovo. For instance, travel to Serbia is forbidden for those who carry a Kosovo stamp in their passport.

In response to these difficulties, the country is working hard to improve its status in the global theater, with European Union accession being its main aim. The country is putting in place robust laws and legal frameworks for democracy and human rights in conformity with EU recommendations. It is also undergoing separate political reforms such as greater transparency and capacity building for judiciaries. Yet, implementation of these laws and reforms remains slow and haphazard. Kosovo has, however, made some significant inroads with transitional justice, as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia apprehended and sentenced dozens of former commanders who committed war crimes on all sides.

The country's own efforts to improve its institutional structures and meet its challenges have been further complemented by considerable support from international organizations. They did much to end the war and to facilitate peacebuilding afterwards. EULEX (the EU Rule of Law mission), UNMIK (the UN mission in Kosovo), KFOR (NATO forces), and security forces in Kosovo are nearing the end of their missions after playing a stabilizing role post-war and providing much-needed aid. Yet, corruption scandals related to these entities, as well as accusations of infringement on state sovereignty, have nonetheless fostered tensions with the local population.

Given the amalgamation of different factors affecting Kosovo, the most necessary processes to implement and imbed are those of transitional justice, democratization, transparent privatization with media scrutiny, donor aid coordination and perhaps most of all — the reintegration of Albanians, Serbians and other ethnicities in the region. In Kosovo's transitional, post-war environment, the crimes against humanity that were inflicted on its country's people are not easily forgotten, like in Europe after the Holocaust. However, the healing process can only begin with the recognition of atrocities, victims and survivors on all sides. Should the attempts at post-conflict transitional justice fail, the population will lose its trust in both their own government and the international community at large, as has been seen in Albania for example. Therefore, the changes and processes taking place in Kosovo hold the key to healing the population and welcoming the country into a more peaceful Balkan region and Europe.



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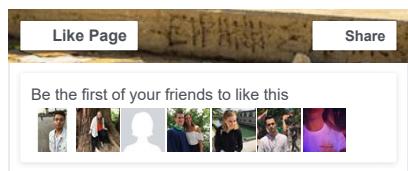
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