



by Klevisa Kovaci

The New Bridge in Mitrovica symbolizes the division of a city into two adversarial sides. The southern bank, where I stand with uncertainty looking across the river, is inhabited by Albanian Kosovars. The residents here, including my friend who is guiding me through his city, warns of the dangers of crossing over to the Serbian-dominated north. Ethnic tensions run high, and shootings have continued until recently, prompting international organizations and embassies to issue travel and security warnings for the area. Once used as a military checkpoint, the New Bridge today is patrolled by NATO-led Kosovo forces. Only a few people cross back and forth.

Against this backdrop, the governments of Kosovo and Serbia, polarized along national lines and lacking political will, have done little to desegregate the communities in Kosovo, diffuse tension, and encourage reconciliation between the two sides. Amidst these shortcomings, the way forward with the most potential seems to be through the civil society, interpersonal exchanges, and ultimately, the youth.

As we walk along the bridge, my friend explains that his aunt and cousin were shot by "the enemy." Stories like this are by the hundreds on both sides of the border. Earlier, two colleagues from the organization UN Women in Kosovo had recounted to me the trauma that they felt after being forced to flee their homes in Kosovo and seek refuge in Macedonia. And yet many Kosovar refugees remember stories of the warm welcome and assistance that they received in Albanian refugee camps. To this day their fondness for Albania is palpable.

Upon reaching the northern bank, Serbian flags flap in the wind. I find myself unable to move forward in what seem like intriguing but forbidding streets. Suddenly the weight of the past conflict feels heavy, and this marks one of my saddest experiences in Kosovo.

About 50% of ethnic Serbs in North Kosovo in 2015 stated that they do not wish to be part of Kosovo and 72% oppose the ongoing dialog between Serbia and Kosovo initiated by the European Union. (<https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI-Kosovo-Feb-2014-Public-Opinion-Research-on-Brussels-Agreement.pdf>) Currently only a minority of people consider reintegration while the majority cling to stereotypes, fear, and hate. Yet, before the war, Serbs and Albanians lived as neighbors, certainly speaking one another's language and even intermarrying. Older generations remember this period. My colleagues at work are impressively fluent in both Serbian and Albanian.

Today, the younger generation, who is key to reconciling the segregation, has grown up during a time of war or uneasy peace. The conflict has brought seemingly irreparable fissures between Serbs and Albanians. The youth has been raised seeing the other side as the enemy, embedding a negative image of their counterparts.

Recognizing the dire problem of segregation between the two main ethnicities in the country, as well as the government's absence in bringing together populations from both sides, grassroots and international NGOs now are seeking to bridge the gap of hostility and misunderstanding between Kosovar Serbs. The more novel and daring ones gather ethnic Kosovar Albanians, Serbs, and citizens of other ethnicities in discussion, exchange, and activities.

In July 2016, the Pristina-based NGO Youth Initiative for Humans Rights convened the conference on Youth Regional Reintegration in the Balkan. This event brought together dozens of young people of different nationalities represented in the Western Balkans in order to tackle the problem of segregation and conflict towards a more prosperous future.

At the forum, the Youth Initiative NGO described the impact that its youth exchange programs had on Serbian students. Speaker Jasmina Lazovic recalled the fear and apprehension that Serbian youths first feel upon their arrival in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. The families of these brave travelers often discourage the children from trying to cross the seemingly forbidden frontiers to the other side. But after such a groundbreaking and personal journey, the students return to Serbia, having broken through harmful stereotypes and apprehensions of ethnic Albanians and having challenged the prevailing negative views of "the other" in their communities.

There is a general consensus that cultural exchange, personal contact, and education foster understanding among people. This is especially the case with young people, who may be more open-minded and who certainly have the greatest role to play in breaking the harmful cycle of conflict. With 43% of the population under the age of 24, Kosovo has high potential (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kv.html>).

Yet, while Youth Initiative for Human Rights' efforts are admirable and certainly create a ripple effect, reintegration efforts must still take place on a wider scale in order to have a lasting effect. Reintegration needs to be embedded and mainstreamed in the education of young people, and this effort is largely in the hands of the governments of Serbia and Kosovo and schools, which do not address or cooperate for the most part on such a sensitive topic.

Today, Albanians scarcely speak Serbian and vice versa. School exchange programs between Serbia and Kosovo are virtually nonexistent even though both sides have vested interests in fostering understanding. The political will to conduct reintegration in the educational system, however, is lacking in both countries. Desire among educators is also largely absent, for whom the memory of the war is sensitive and fresh.

The way to break the perpetuation of distrust and animosity between Albanians and Serbs, then, is through bringing together youth of the various ethnicities in the region. The involved governments, as agenda setters with wide influence on nationalist sentiments on both sides, have a large part to play here in encouraging and facilitating such exchanges, rather than perpetuating nationalistic politics. Furthermore, reintegration entails acknowledgement of the past, including admitting injustices on both sides. While challenging and touching on fresh wounds, post-war reintegration of Serbian and Albanian youth on a large scale requires initiative on the part of the involved governments, organizations, and individuals. This would create room and opportunity for young trailblazers willing to cross physical and psychological borders to break through fear and stereotype in order to set the path toward safer, more peaceful relations in the region.



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