

Divided memories- divided youth: How war remembrance affects ethnic identity and political attitudes among youth in Kosovo?

Bekim Baliqi

Introduction

War remembrance and traumatic experiences of the violent past- by losing family members, witnessing atrocities, being displaced from homes etc., plays crucial role in the aftermath process of peace-building. They shape significantly socio-political developments and ethnic relations in the post-war societies.¹ The collective memory, among other purposes, has also function of commemoration -to honour and mourn the victims- and to provide lessons about the past for the present and coming generations. In the post-war and deeply divided societies, war remembrance and commemoration are not only reminders of the past, or sites of memory; they become also the means of identity formation.² Furthermore, memory of war shape present and future relations between former conflicting parties, whereby contested memories may hinder constructive dealing with the past, transitional justice and therefore consolidating of a common polity.³

The experiences of Kosovo's citizens of the former Yugoslavia and later on of Milošević regime, particularly the experiences of the latest war, are crucial in forming their collective memory and thus in constructing identity. Present ethnic relations and political behaviour are profoundly based on memories of the violent past, regardless of having directly experienced or not these war events. My main assumption here is that identities and political attitudes of the Kosovo youth are shaped enormously through influence of war remembrance in three distinct but interlinked ways. Firstly, because of the ongoing political disputes, mistrust and lack of reconciliation, political elites of both groups promotes discourse of victimization and portrays other ethnicity as an enemy. Promoting war remembrance as a legitimizing tool to gain and preserve political power. Secondly, they are being exposed to one-sided and ethnocentric interpretation of the violent past, transmitted by official and semi-official narratives, memorialisation and historiography. And thirdly, separated and antagonist education system- based on stereotypes and prejudices for other ethnicity, influence the children and

¹ Nigel C. Hunt, *Memory, war and trauma*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

² T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper, eds., *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, (Routledge: London, 2000)

³ Cillian McGrattan, Stephen Hopkins, "Memory in Post-conflict Societies: From Contention to Integration?", *Ethnopolitics*, (2016)

younger generations to maintain contested memories but also to reinforce their ethno-political identity and attitudes.

War remembrance and political power

The theoretical framework of this paper consists of approaches that deal with politics of memory, particularly war remembrance, and their relationship to political power and identity issue. Since this research, deals with war remembrance, it is important to outline that *“the study of war memory is concerned with its official orchestration and embodiment in ceremonial and physical reminders, and with the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that determine which aspects of collective and individual experience are admitted to public recall and commemoration.”*⁴

In the process of state-formation and nation-building, the war remembrance became, ‘grammar of nationalism’ in the political discourses and cultural means in public sphere.⁵ The nexus between collective memory and political power is usually constituted through legitimacy. Political legitimacy is achieved in the evoking of the past by promoting certain public meaning that could be instrumental for certain political purposes. In case of post-war societies, these memories are contested between former conflicting parties but often also between various political forces within a group. In other words, war remembrance is ongoing struggle of different political elites in (re-)constructing certain version of the past, by aiming its public articulation and recognition in order to gain legitimacy and power. Another important aspect in this research is the process of generational legacy of war remembrance from the personal experience of survivors to the memory of their descendants. It is in fact what Marianne Hirsch describes with the a notion ‘postmemory’, which refers to those who actually experience an event, pass on second-hand memories to those too young to experience and could not actually remember them.⁶ In our case study, focus is in the late 90’s generation that have some personal ties to the war experiences, particularly to the generation ‘born during a war’. Although this generation were children and do not truly possess direct experiences, war remembrance has affected their political attitudes and identity in different ways.⁷

⁴ Ashplant et.al., Ibid. 10.

⁵ Wolfgang Hoepken, “War, memory, and education in a fragmented society: The case of Yugoslavia”, *East European Politics & Societies* 13,1 (1999): 190-227. here 191.

⁶ Olick et.al., *The collective memory reader*, 346.

⁷ Study conducted about mental health immediately in aftermath of the war reports that 39.5% of adults respondents that they experienced war trauma. See Cardozo, Barbara Lopes, Reinhard Kaiser, Carol A. Gotway, and Ferid

Politics of remembrance and ethnic identities

Post-war public memorials and narratives in Kosovo are centred predominantly on heroism of the fallen soldiers and sacrifice for the 'liberation war' of the survived war veterans. This memorialisation is manifested in diverse and ongoing commemorations, naming of public spaces, and through other remembrance symbols and rituals related to the war. In this sense, war remembrance serves also as ideological foundation for the emergence of the state. In case of Kosovo symbolically entitled as Newborn, exposed by typographic monument erected in the centre of the Prishtina on the day that Kosovo declared its independence. Besides that, admiration of the heroism, glorification of epic events, sites and values of the 'liberation war' (luftës çlirimtare) forms significant part in the forging of national identity and political legitimacy. In this context, the war is interpreted as a glorious affirmation of the nation. This narrative is converted basically into enduring struggle for political freedom and statehood. The war events became extensive and essential component of meta-narrative, both in private/popular (in families, among friends, communities) and in public/state (mass media, educational system, political discourses) sphere. Thus, the crucial role in the articulation of the memories has a state. For Kosovo Serbs, memory of the recent war has certainly another connotation and completely different interpretation as that of the official and dominant version of war remembrance.

Kosovo's post-war narratives and commemoration are ethnically exclusive and consequently there are diametrically different and contested war remembrances. As a result, it has increased mistrust among communities and separated further public spaces through mono-ethnic monuments, street- and school names. The ethnic conflict through these commemorative symbols in public space continues. Therefore, almost entire communist Yugoslav past and especially memorials of the Serbian regime are replaced with the commemoration tribute to Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) fighters, prominent leaders and Albanian national figures.⁸ In the aftermath of war many of the main streets, squares and schools in Kosovo are named or renamed in honour of the fallen soldiers. The most eminent is figure of Commander Adem Jashari, whose name and monument is present almost in every city across Kosovo, including international Airport and main military barrack in Prishtina. In contrary to this cultural landscape, in areas populated predominantly by Kosovo-Serbs, the school and street-names are merely in tribute to Serb national heroes, for example in the town of Gračanica

Agani. "Mental health, social functioning, and feelings of hatred and revenge of Kosovar Albanians one year after the war in Kosovo." *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 16, no. 4 (2003): 354

⁸ Denis S. Ermolin, "When Skanderbeg Meets Clinton: Cultural Landscape and Commemorative Strategies in Postwar Kosovo." *Croatian Political Science Review*, Vol. 51, No. 5, (2014): 157-173.

is erected huge monument of Battle of Kosovo soldier Miloš Obilić. And in north part of Mitrovica, giant statue of medieval prince Car Lazar is recently raised. The conflicting war remembrances affects enormous political resentment and ethnic distance, in the sense that it emphasises not only substantial and symbolical gaps, but also spatial division between former conflicting parties.⁹ Besides that, there are memories of the war that are suppressed or at least marginalized, because they do not fit in the frame of dominant or official narratives. One of the most common war experiences of the Kosovo society, is that of expulsion of the people from their homes and mass deportation during and immediately after the war. This traumatic experience of the violent past is mainly from NGO's or artistically treated, in photography exhibitions, novels as well documented in dozen films and short films¹⁰ and documentaries.

An inclusive and shared politics of remembrance in Kosovo currently is promoted merely by NGO's who aspires to liberate the past from ethno-nationalist tendencies by including all sides of the conflict and by constructing local, bottom-up or virtual memorialisation.¹¹ There are various organizations, initiatives and performances of younger generations in which they deal with the violent past, going beyond competing victimhood and rival narratives, aiming to promote public engagement and an inclusive reconciliatory efforts.¹² It remains, however, open and questionable if the dealing with the past that could overcome ethnocentric war remembrance, under these circumstances is really possible.

Memories, attitudes and education

One of the central challenges facing post-war societies is that conflicting identities stand in the way of various efforts to rebuild and improve common education system. Division of the Kosovo's society along ethnic lines particularly is evident in the schools and Universities. The pupils and students are taught in parallel education systems, in separate facilities and in total different curriculum.¹³ Furthermore they are educated in conflicting curricula, as the content analysis of the history textbooks this demonstrates. According to comparative analysis of the Serbian and Kosovar history

⁹ Carl T. Dahlman and Trent Williams, "Ethnic Enclavisation and State Formation in Kosovo." *Geopolitics*, Vol.15 (2010): 406–430.

¹⁰ To mention only some of the internationally prominent ones films that deals with this issue from different perspectives, like films "Kukumi", "Agnus Dei", "Three windows and a hanging" and short films "Column", and Oscar nominated from 2015 "Shok".

¹¹ Gëzim Visoka, "Arrested Truth: Transitional Justice and the Politics of Remembrance in Kosovo." *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 8:1 (2016):62-80.

¹² Arnaud Kurze, "#WarCrimes #PostConflictJustice #Balkans: Youth, Performance Activism and the Politics of Memory." *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 0 (2016): 1–20.

¹³ Denisa Kostovicova, *Kosovo, the politics of identity and space*. (London: Routledge, 2005)

school textbooks, there are systematic and profound differences of their content, regarding the way in which the past of Kosovo is presented.¹⁴ Human rights abuses during the 1990s against Kosovo-Albanian in the Kosovar schoolbooks were presented as massacre by the Serbian regime, while Serbian textbooks do not mention any of these abuses.¹⁵ For the wartime period, the textbooks presents only their 'own' victims and crimes of the 'other side', but not the ones committed by their forces. Same pattern of presentation occurs also with the issue of expulsion and displacement. Hence, distorted interpretation of the past in the history textbooks, re-affirms official politics of memory and promote further dominant national narrative of the past among young generations. This kind of 'competitive victimhood' and historical victimisation narrative, by presenting own ethnic groups as victims and the other as aggressor, are well evidenced also in other comparative studies.¹⁶

Educated in different and often in conflicting curricula, as the case with the history textbooks illustrates, children and youth continues to be divided not only in regard to the past events but also about it present meaning.¹⁷ Separated education systems and conflicting textbooks, reflects the relationship between political struggles and identity formation, by strengthening ethno-nationalistic attitudes among youth of both ethnic communities. Therefore, proper improvement of the history textbooks could be decisive step in creating inclusive form of the civic war remembrance that improves ethnic relations and acknowledges commemoration of the 'others'. In addition, different youth initiatives, performances and contributions that deals constructively with the contested memories in the way that bridges rather deepens divisions within society, should encouraged and supported.

Conclusion

The politics of remembrance in Kosovo is marked by contested interpretations and representations of the war events and experiences, manifested through ethnically separated public memorialisation. The elaboration in this paper shows that younger generations, respectively children born during this period, are very influenced by narratives and symbolic commemoration, naming of public spaces,

¹⁴ Shkelzen Gashi, "Kosova 1912-2000. In the History Textbooks of Kosova, Albania and Serbia," in Sabrina P. Ramet, Albert Simkus, Ola Listhaug eds., *Civic and Uncivic Values in Kosovo. History, Politics and Values Transformation*, (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016): 237-273.

¹⁵ Ibid. 259.

¹⁶ Luca Andrighetto et.al., "Reducing Competitive Victimhood in Kosovo: The Role of Extended Contact and Common Ingroup Identity", *Political Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 4, (2012), 513-529.: Helena Zdravković-Zonta "Narratives of Victims and Villains in Kosovo." *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 37:5 (2009): 665-692.

¹⁷ Danilo Mandić, "What Kind of Burden is the Burden of History? How Young Adults in Serbia and Kosovo Use History to Understand and Experience Nationalism." *Ethnopolitics*, (2015): 1-21.

schools, and history textbooks related to the war event. This 'one-sided' remembrance and victimisation are used by dominant political forces to mobilise and manipulate masses by increasing ethno-national sentiments and gaining power. Because it is closely linked with an identity issue, war remembrance is an ongoing process of contestation, and is likely to remain enduring social marker and political activity.

The general conclusion can be drawn from the paper: the contested war remembrance affects the Kosovo's younger generations in twofold way; firstly, they reinforce ethno-political attitudes within their ethnic group, and they increase mistrust and enmities to other ethnic group. The lack of political will and responsibility to promote inclusive culture of remembrance, than lack of reconciliation and efforts to deal with the past, especially through transitional justice and civic education, are further reasons that contribute to divided war remembrance and consequently to the deepening of ethnic cleavages between communities, particularly among youth.

ⁱ Associated Professor at the University of Prishtina, Faculty of Philosophy- Department of Political Science, bekim.baliqi@uni-pr.edu