

The Kosovo-Serbia Security Conundrum: Between the Rock and a Hard Place

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Abstract

The dynamics of civil-military ties between Serbia and Kosovo after the 1990s, as well as the broader Serbian and Albanian ethnic elements in the Western Balkans, are the main topics of this article. Many civil populations, from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to Kosovo, suffered as a result of the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s, which were sparked by Milosević's irredentist ambitions to divide the former Yugoslavia into Greater Serbia. They included war crimes in Croatia, ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, and outright genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Despite not sharing a border, Albania and Serbia are among the primary pillars of regional security. In the meantime, Kosovo and Serbia share a border, face ongoing civil-military tensions, and disagree over it. This has consequently resulted in a security conundrum that persists to this day and is thoroughly examined in this paper. Although they are seen as essential to the broader security of the Western Balkans, Albanians and Serbs are among the region's most populous groups and have sizable minorities in neighboring nations. Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia are still in the process of becoming hybrid democracies, with the rule of law not yet fully upheld. Although both Serbia and Albania have started the process of becoming full members of the EU, Serbia is not a member of NATO, a defense alliance. Due mostly to Serbian resistance, Kosovo is now neither a candidate for NATO membership nor for EU membership. NATO KFOR forces, however, defend Kosovo's territorial integrity. However, Serbia has recently purchased offensive weapons, and its current military spending exceeds that of the five Western Balkan nations combined, prompting concerns about the region's ongoing security challenges.

Keywords: Serbia, Albania, Kosovo, civil-military relations, security

The Kosovo-Serbia Security Conundrum: from the breakup of Yugoslavia to the Present

Introduction

The two most populous countries in the Western Balkans are Albania and Serbia. In addition, many of their ethnic relatives reside in the bordering states of their adjacent areas. However, Albania has not pursued an irredentist agenda regarding the neighboring territories inhabited by its ethnic kin, whereas Serbia has been actively pursuing one since the 1990s (Kalemaj, 2009). Furthermore, civilian populations in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo were targeted during the height of the military hostilities in Serbia during the Milosević regime. In addition to regulars like the Scorpion unit, a notorious police reserve group within the Internal Affairs of Serbia that massacred thousands of men and boys in Srebrenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and later in Kosovo, Serbian paramilitaries like Arkan's Tigers were responsible for the majority of the horrific crimes against these civilian populations.

Under Milosević's leadership, Serbia embarked on an irredentist ambition to establish "Greater Serbia" following the unavoidable breakup of Yugoslavia (Kalemaj, 2009), and state security actively supported irregular militias like Arkan's Tigers to wreak havoc among Bosnia-Herzegovina's civilian populations. Additionally, the regular Serbian army was utilized in Kosovo for ethnic cleansing of the civilian population, together with the presence of paramilitaries. The Kosovar Albanian KLA was established to oppose Milosević's actions, which had deprived Kosovo of its autonomy and pushed its elected civilian leaders into illegality. Later, the KLA and Arkan's Tigers were both reincorporated into their respective nations' regular forces as militias. Both were crucial to the circumstances that led to Kosovo's Declaration of Independence. In contrast, the Scorpion Unit was only disbanded in 1999, shortly after the end of the Kosovo War.

These changes and the complete reintegration of such militias into civilian life are examined in the current research. One of the unexpected conclusions, in contrast to the original theories, is that Arkan's Tigers and the KLA were blatant examples of demobilized militias, meaning they did not become army formations. On the other hand, the Scorpion unit was incorporated into the Serbian police force from the beginning, but Belgrade authorities disbanded it in 1999, immediately following the Kosovo War. While Arkan's Tigers eventually made their way back into the underworld, KLA was a shining example of a transition into civilian life through vocational education and training.

On the other hand, the Open Balkan initiative, which was founded by Serbia and Albania along with Northern Macedonia, has significantly strengthened the two nations' relations. On the other hand, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro have refused to take part. Additionally, the political leaders of Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro frequently lament Serbia's desire to destabilize them, frequently employing parallel structures or hybrid warfare to achieve its objectives.

Overall, this study makes the case that certain important security features have improved, but more work is needed to advance the relationship to a new level. The primary guarantee of peace and stability in the relations between the two most numerous populations in the region, the Serbs and the Albanians, as well as stability in general, would be the stabilization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, culminating in the eventual recognition of the Republic of Kosovo by Serbia.

Method

This is a comparative historical analysis, focusing on the events of the post-1990s to understand the current security dilemma in Serbia and Kosovo. As such, it relies on two main methodological techniques used in social and political sciences to explain large-scale results on a range of issues. The methods preferred here are comparison-- the study of similarities and differences across cases-- and history-- the examination of processes of change in their historical dimension (Bernhard & O'Neill, 2021). It does so in particular by direct comparison of the historical events as they unfold in both diachronic and synchronic axes of the last three decades, and it attempts to construct an analytical model to serve as a theoretical framework to understand such changes that also inform current policies of the respective states. The preference for qualitative versus quantitative methods in this article is primarily because quantitative approaches, such as surveys, would not capture the nuanced historical dynamics.

Analysis and findings from both the Serbian and Kosovar cases are taken into consideration before considering also civil-military relations and the role of external actors in the relations between the two states. Helping to understand such security conundrums is relevant both for theoretical and policy-making in the near future. Case studies of both Serbia and Kosovo and content analysis are frequently used to create a nuanced understanding of the empirical events, while mostly secondary sources are used to understand the dynamics of the conflict and the current state of affairs.

Literature Review

Role and function of paramilitaries

When thinking of paramilitaries and the role they play in warfare, the first step is the definition and operationalization of the term. The Oxford Dictionary defines paramilitary units as able of “[d]esignating, of, or relating to a force or unit whose function and organization are analogous or ancillary to those of a professional military force, but which is not regarded as having professional or legitimate status.” (“Paramilitary” Oxford Dictionary, 2011). In other words, it acts and behaves like a regular army but is not official and often not legal. It falls short of what Max Weber once considered to be the definite attributes of a state, which is the “monopoly of legitimate violence” (Weber, 2015), legitimate being the key word here.

In addition to being based on "just war" principles, which establish the moral bounds of how war activities should be regulated, paramilitaries are frequently employed as auxiliary forces to assist regular armies in carrying out extralegal actions. They frequently carry out excesses that are classified as crimes against humanity or war crimes. The role and impact of paramilitaries have recently been a focus of analysis in security studies, thanks to examples like the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-organized and financed group that has long been involved in conflicts across the globe (from Sub-Saharan Africa to the Middle East and most recently in Ukraine). The paramilitary

groups are known for engaging in “irregular guerrilla warfare” (Zelik, 2010) as multiple historical examples testify.

There are many studies that point out how paramilitary violence is organized. For example, as one author notes: “mass violence is often carried out according to clear divisions of labor: between the civil and military wings of the state, but also crucially between military and paramilitary groups”(Üngör, 2020). Paramilitarism thus can be seen and analyzed from the perspective of the parastate, that is to say, “the complex interaction between security agencies, political parties, and communities that constitute the sociological infrastructure behind paramilitarism” (Üngör, 2020).

However, the majority of the army's top brass are willing to distance themselves from paramilitaries because they do not acknowledge their actions, which is a fallacy known as plausible deniability. As a result, after the war is finished, the state apparatus and succeeding administrations can defend themselves before international tribunals for crimes against humanity or war crimes. In summary, this is what transpired with the formal distances maintained by the Yugoslav Army (JNA) with paramilitary groups like Arkan's forces during the conflict. Most significantly, when international courts brought charges against post-Milosević Serbia after the war, this is also what transpired. Here, the new Belgrade government disassociated itself not just from paramilitary activities but also from its former notorious generals, like Mladić, and wartime political figures, like Karadžić and Milosević.

Reintegration of paramilitaries in army units or civilian life/ political nexus

A state's national security may be at risk, and rebellion against the new government may result if paramilitary forces are not reintegrated into regular army formations, particularly during a war or conflict (Collier, 1994). The best possible course of action is to fully integrate the paramilitaries into civilian life, since this facilitates a more seamless transition and demobilization. As an observer correctly notes, we must evaluate the significance of former warriors' political assimilation (Nilson, 2005). He goes on to offer a more comprehensive definition of reintegration where this “is seen as a societal process aiming at the economic, political, and social assimilation of ex-combatants and their families into civil society” (Nilson, 2005).

This is the ultimate goal, but political scheming and other barriers prevent many societies from achieving it. The exceptions, however, support the norm. As two authors have already noted, based on an empirical study, “ex-combatants in more participatory communities tend to have an easier time with social reintegration and feel less of a need to organize among themselves” (Kaplan & Nussio, 2018). If they were given the right training and ongoing education, this may help them move into civilian life more easily. Examples of such successful reintegration into civilian life and strengthening of relationships with participatory communities include the aforementioned Colombian and former KLA militants from Kosovo. By fostering trust, this in turn generates social capital, which is essential for state institutions to prosper over the long term (Putnam, 2001).

However, political leadership may be impacted by various institutional kinds of military service, and vice versa. Political leadership has the potential to use the military not just during a military war but also in the future. This was especially true in Serbia, which initially benefited from having command of the Yugoslav Army (JNA). But during Operation Storm in 1995, they fled Krajina, Croatia, after collapsing before the newly formed Croatian Army. Even when fighting a paramilitary group like the KLA in Kosovo, they encountered challenges until NATO's intervention compelled them to stop ethnic cleansing.

Both Serbia and Kosovo have had significant challenges in integrating former paramilitaries in the post-war era. While some cases are still pending and many have been sought by international courts for war crimes and crimes against humanity, “stable civilian control over armed forces is a primary requirement for democratic consolidation” (Onen, 2019).

Analysis and Findings from the Serbian Case

Atrocities of Serb paramilitaries in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo

The main organized paramilitary group charged with perpetrating widespread war crimes against civilian populations in Bosnia-Herzegovina was Arkan's force. When a former administrative staff member of the Serbian Volunteer Guard testified at Slobodan Milosević's trial, a wealth of information regarding Arkan and his Tigers was revealed. Witnesses provided testimony regarding the connection between Serbian State Security and the Serbian Volunteer Guard (Stojanović, 2020). Arkan was a nefarious leader who was, after the war, gunned down, most probably to keep his mouth shut about the relationship he had with the Serbian security apparatus during the heyday of the Bosnian and Kosovo conflicts. As two authors neatly summarized his activity: “[t]he man whose name was synonymous with cruelty without pity, and mass murder: Captain Arkan - aka Zeljko Raznatovic” (Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000). The crimes of his ‘Tigers’ paramilitaries were well documented not only in Bosnia-Herzegovina but also in Kosovo. As the same authors write, when “Arkan reappeared in Kosovo, his Tigers sweeping through Albanian communities as they had in Bosnia. Villagers in Velika Krusha, where the remains of 20 incinerated civilians were found, insist that the massacre was the mark of the Tigers. As in Bosnia, Arkan was encouraged by the Serbian government. It was at this point during the Kosovo onslaught that the Hague tribunal elected to make the sealed indictment public” (Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000).

The Scorpion Unit was another well-known and notorious group that committed crimes against humanity and war crimes in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Although they were officially a member of the Serbian Interior Ministry, they effectively operated in a gray area and disregarded all provisions of "just law," making them a paramilitary organization. However, their crimes are made even more horrific by the fact that they were formally members of the Serbian state while participating in war crimes, rape, and the shooting of defenseless civilians while serving in the Interior Ministry's regular security forces. As Una Sabljaković argues: “An indicator of the connection between the unit and the Interior Ministry is the presence of ministry officials, specifically Vasilije Mijović, a member of the ministry's Anti-Terrorist Unit (known as the Red Berets and later, as the Special Operations Unit) in the same areas at the same time as the members of the Scorpions” (Sabljaković, 2022). This current article makes the case that a thorough examination of the Hague Court can reveal the function and significance of this infamous group as a war crime actor in the former Yugoslavia. Additionally, it can provide additional proof of state-sponsored organized violence and the effective execution of political directives by compliant military and security personnel, frequently coordinating their activities with paramilitary groups.

In The Hague Court, as Sabljaković tells us: “the witness's claims were cited in the first-instance verdict in the trial of the former head of the Serbian State Security Service, Jovica Stanišić, and the former commander of the State Security Service's Special Operations Unit, Franko

Simatović, who were accused of overseeing units that committed crimes during the Croatian and Bosnian wars, amongst other alleged crimes” (Sabljaković, 2022). This demonstrates how the top echelons of the security establishment gave their subordinates direct formal orders to organize collective crime against defenseless civilians, as exemplified by the Scorpion Unit. Scorpion Unit did not, however, only carry out war crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. In the height of ethnic cleansing, they also perpetrated horrible crimes in Kosovo. For example, “on March 28, 1999, 14 Kosovo Albanian civilian women and children were murdered in Podujeva. A member of the Scorpions unit was sentenced for his part in the massacre in 2005, and four more members were sentenced for their involvement in June of this year, at the Serbian war crimes court” (Hawes, 2009). Thus, as the New York Times reports: “During the Kosovo War, the Scorpions were placed under the command of the Special Anti-Terrorist Unit (SAJ). They were involved in the Podujeva massacre in March 1999, which resulted in the deaths of 14 Kosovo Albanians, mostly women and children” (“Former paramilitary fighters charged with war crimes in Kosovo,” 2008).

Reintegration of Serb paramilitaries in the Army and Security Forces

Despite acting like a paramilitary unit, the Scorpion Unit was formally a part of the Serbian Security Forces and the Internal Ministry of Serbia, as demonstrated by the evidence given in the section above. Since they had been a part of state structures from the beginning, reintegration was not necessary in this instance. Their crimes become even more heinous as a result, and they are held less responsible for the events that transpired after the war. With Arkan's Tigers, things were different. They were and acted like any other paramilitary organization. Even the notorious general Mladić of Bosnia-Herzegovina made multiple attempts to disassociate himself from Arkan and his "Tigers" due to the heinousness of their atrocities. Furthermore, he specifically ordered them to leave some areas. The "Tigers" activities in Kosovo during Milosević's ethnic cleansing campaign have received little notice.

Long after the war ended, infamous paramilitary leaders permeated the highest echelons of state security and caused chaos in their wake. Several elements, for instance, were later “convicted of the assassinations of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić and former Serbian President Ivan Stambolić.” One such member was the notorious "Legija," a former paramilitary commander and Special Operations Unit commander (Jovanović, 2007). These two notable Serbian political figures were assassinated because they were thought to be betraying the fight for "Greater Serbia" and betraying the Serbian people. Even today, there are still significant security threats from the military and political leadership who may adopt pro-EU and even pro-NATO, or at the very least, NATO-neutral, positions. For instance, if President Vucić accepts the Franko-German plan, which will de facto remove the obstacles to Kosovo's recognition as a republic in the medium term, the more radical opposition, including some former generals, threatens to betray Kosovo and the Serbian nation, despite the fact that he has been the most pro-Russian leader in Europe. Additionally, a pro-Putin motorcycle gang called the "Night Wolves" has established branches in Serbia and the so-called Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and they have already organized demonstrations in favor of Russia's annexation policy (“Russian biker group,” 2018).

Analysis and Findings from the Kosovo Albanian case

Activities of KLA in Kosovo during the war period

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), a paramilitary organization, began hit-and-run operations against Serbian police in Kosovo during the height of the Serbian army's repression and the elimination of any semblance of local authority. The transformation of KLA from a group initially condemned as a terrorist organization by high officials of the State Department (Craig, 1999), although never designated as such by the State Department, during the peak of the conflict, was quickly turned into a reliable partner of NATO. Since NATO concentrated solely on airstrikes between March and June 1999 to halt Milosević's regime's ethnic cleansing, it coordinated its actions with NATO. From the Albanian border, the KLA primarily attacked Serbian security forces while operating on the ground. Despite not having a vertical organization, they became stronger, especially after March 1999. While we must also mention “the civilian political structures that issued decrees in areas under KLA control,” the majority of regional commanders enjoyed complete autonomy inside their respective territories (Human Rights Watch, 2001). It further continues by emphasizing that:

By 1999, the main political representative of the KLA was Hashim Thaci, who represented the insurgency at political negotiations such as the Rambouillet conference in February 1999. In April 1999, Agim Ceku, an ethnic Albanian former brigadier general in the Croatian Army with close ties to the United States government and military, was appointed head of the KLA's General Staff, making him the chief military commander¹. He replaced Syleman Selimi, while both Ceku and Thaci sat on the KLA's General Staff, the main decision-making body of eighteen people, along with many of the other key members of the insurgency (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

The KLA soon took the form of a regular army, moving away from the early hit-and-run guerrilla tactics that were closer to its paramilitary features. The same reports elaborate that: “The KLA was organized into seven operational zones, each with a regional commander and chief of staff. Each region had brigades and companies, usually based around a village or series of villages. Rexhep Selimi was head of the military police, and Kadri Veseli was head of the KLA's secret service, which later became known as the Kosovo Informative Service (Alb. SHIK).” (Human Rights Watch, 2001). It was occasionally challenging to identify a central line of command within the KLA due to its regional splits. The degree of authority that the different commanders had over their men was not always evident, even within the operational zones. In KLA-controlled territories, the military police and tribunals were operating, albeit clumsily. Decisions could be communicated to the combatants thanks to the General Staff's ability to coordinate military operations and political activity across Kosovo. Additionally, it organized financial and logistical assistance from Albania and the Albanian diaspora in the US and Western Europe. In late 1998 and early 1999, KLA fighters demonstrated discipline by staffing roadblocks, verifying and identifying documents, and following orders from their superiors, despite numerous instances to the contrary. To give foreign journalists and human rights researchers access to areas under KLA control, a KLA office in Pristina—which the government has permitted to operate—distributed passes.

¹ The British press published unconfirmed reports in October 1999 that Ceku was under investigation by the war crimes tribunal for crimes committed by Croatian Army forces against ethnic Serbs in 1993. The tribunal neither confirmed nor denied the speculation, in accordance with its policy of not commenting on investigations.

There are no documented instances of KLA soldiers being disciplined for mistreating civilians or government forces ceasing to actively participate in hostilities in spite of these mechanisms (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

This last part should, however, be taken with a grain of salt, because other international reports, such as the Human Rights Watch Report, talk of various abuses of civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2001). This goes somewhat contrary to what political leaders of the KLA at the time professed. For example, in an interview given to the Albanian-language newspaper *Koha Ditore* in July 1998, KLA spokesman Jakup Krasniqi said: “[f]rom the start, we had our own internal rules for our operations. These clearly lay down that the KLA recognizes the Geneva Conventions and the conventions governing the conduct of war.” (Human Rights Watch, 2001). However, Krasniqi altogether Thaci and Veseli, the top political leaders of KLA at the time and holding the highest state offices after the war, currently are in Hague in Kosovo Specialist Chambers (KSC), facing charges on “war crimes of illegal or arbitrary arrest and detention, cruel treatment, torture, and murder, and the crimes against humanity of imprisonment, other inhumane acts, torture, murder, enforced disappearance of persons, and persecution were committed from at least March 1998 through September 1999” (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Due to its loose organization, the involvement of village defense units, and the constant influx and outflow of Albanians from overseas, it was challenging to determine the KLA's exact size. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), which was tasked with registering and aiding former soldiers during the war, may provide the clearest indicator. The IOM reports that as of March 2000, it had recorded 25,723 ex-combatants, though it's likely that noncombatants seeking aid inflate this figure. Also, some international volunteers are known to have fought with the KLA (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Reintegration of former KLA into civilian life

For purposes of the current study, I was unable to locate any proof of the former KLA members' reintegration into the Kosovar Security Forces based on the empirical data gathered for this paper. On the contrary, the KSF was developed entirely by the global community. In order to prepare the former KLA members for civilian life, the primary focus of reintegration operations was on their additional education and training. Numerous in-depth empirical studies have observed this (Barakat & Özerdem, 2005). Furthermore, the Kosovar instance has distinct features that fall within less problematic regions compared to Africa and Latin America, as an author who has done considerable field study on the reintegration of former combatants in Kosovo rightly noted (Özerdem, 2004). This is significant because the Kosovar scenario can provide an alternative viewpoint that can enhance current research on the reintegration of former fighters, especially when it comes to a concentration on civilian units rather than regular army forces or both, as in some other cases.

Another important dimension in the Kosovar case is the cost of the reintegration policies. The cost of the implementation of the reintegration strategy in this case lasted “from July 1999 to March 2001, averaged US\$8813 per project, or, in other words, US\$1130 per direct beneficiary” (Özerdem, 2004). This is rather modest, especially when recognizing the high effectiveness and the added value in the Kosovar economy through the multiplicative effect. Also, vocational

education and training were offered to these former combatants to facilitate their integration into civilian life (Özerdem, 2004). Stipends and scholarships were offered to the participants in order to motivate and offer them a viable alternative. Overall, Özerdem concludes that the KPC Training was created to train the 5052 KPC members who were chosen for the program; 2000 are reservists, and 3052 are active full-time members. A total of 5 hundred positions are designated for civilians and minorities, with 298 active and 202 reserve positions, respectively. The KPC's organizational structure is centralized command, meaning that decisions are made at the headquarters level and that the Regional Training Group (RTG) commanders receive implementation instructions to carry out. The KPCT sought to convert former KLA combatants into a civilian, uniformed, multi-ethnic corps in parallel with the structure and responsibilities that the international community had envisioned for the KPC. The training program's goals were to: (1) help rebuild Kosovo's infrastructure and community; (2) respond to any natural or human disaster that affects the population and territory of Kosovo; (3) conduct search and rescue operations; and (4) assist UNMIK and KFOR when needed (Özerdem, 2004).

Yet not every former combatant was happy with this transition into civilian life. Some of them resisted efforts at demilitarization and sought to create a hybrid organization, called KPC, in opposition to Article 9 of resolution 1244, which had stipulated a pure and simple demilitarization of the KLA. Some of them were even "recycled in the police" (Duclos, 2022). However, the same author concludes that "the UN's Special Envoy, Mr Ahtisaari, recommended both independence for Kosovo under international supervision and the transformation of the KPC into the KSF (Kosovo Security Force) ... The KSF's transformation into an army, at one time projected for 2013, has been pushed back, but nevertheless appears inevitable." (Duclos, 2022). It goes on to say that the creation of a Kosovar army is inevitable and a factor in stability. It has gradually expanded over the last decade. Currently, the KSF has around 2,500 members. After the transition period, this number is expected to increase to over 7,500 and include active and reserve members (Duclos, 2022).

To summarize, it is safe to say that the international community's combined efforts during the initial phase of Kosovar "supervised sovereignty," in conjunction with the government and governing structures of Kosovo, greatly aided the country's transition from former KLA combatants to civilian life. By doing this, they not only helped to mend relationships within the communities but also made better use of their prior abilities to focus on managing natural disasters and supporting UN and NATO missions in Kosovo when needed. This is also a fantastic approach that might be applied successfully in comparable circumstances involving the reconstruction and reintegration of former fighters into society after a conflict. In a nutshell, KLA's vocational reintegration success of former combatants represents a clear contrast compared to Serbia's paramilitary persistence. This, in turn, impacts each country's road toward democratization and the rule of law, as well as other state-building processes.

Recent Events and Current Relations in Serbia-Kosovo

Roads have been blocked by Serb demonstrators in northern Kosovo, and "unknown gunmen exchanged fire with police" on multiple occasions, endangering not only the stability of Kosovo but the entire region and possibly escalating tensions between Serbs and Albanians beyond repair. At the time, Kosovar Prime Minister Kurti accused "criminal gangs" of obstructing

highways and requested that the Kosovo Force (KFOR), an international peacekeeping force led by NATO, ensure "freedom of movement." Pristina's efforts to restore the rule of law in the Northern Mitrovica region have been met with violence and animosity by the minority Serbs in northern Kosovo, who believe that these actions are the result of anti-Serb sentiment.

The alleged Belgrade-backed radical Serbs in Northern Mitrovica have also incited violence, including car burning against Serbs who have attempted to follow Pristina-based laws, such as switching out Milosević-era license plates with Republic of Kosovo ones, as is the case throughout Kosovo. Additionally, the radical Serbs threw a stun grenade at EULEX, and the Serbian government requested "KFOR to let Serbia deploy military and police in Kosovo, but acknowledged there was no chance of permission being granted." (Kennedy, 2022). Vucić had called for the release of the Serbs who had been arrested in the northern part of Kosovo following the disturbances and provocations in Northern Mitrovica. Additionally, Vucić charged that Kurti, the prime minister of Kosovo, and Pristina's authorities were inflaming tensions by "innumerable unilateral actions." "[w]hen one would think we have something solved, another problem emerges," he continued (Kennedy, 2022).

In December, the Kosovo government replaced Belgrade-issued car license plates with Pristina-issued ones, prompting the resignation of Serb mayors in northern Kosovo municipalities, local courts, and some 600 police officers. Later, Belgrade declared it would no longer issue new Serbian car numbers, and Kosovo consented to delay the decision. Vucić demanded the release of recently arrested Kosovo Serbs "as they are held on trumped-up charges" and the pullout of Kosovo police, in line with an EU-brokered agreement that stipulates consent of Serb mayors in the area for that. "Kosovo police have nothing to do with the north...especially people armed...up to their teeth," Vucić said. "That causes uneasiness and fear among the Serb population." (Kennedy, 2022).

Belgrade and Pristina are holding talks in Brussels to try to normalize relations, and the EU has already presented a plan (Kennedy, 2022). Kurti's call for NATO intervention to deal with criminal gangs in the North is not even determined by the competencies of KFOR in Kosovo. With the Military Technical Agreement of June 9, 1999, a Security Zone with a perimeter of five kilometers was designated. According to this agreement, article 4(a) which specifies the obligations of KFOR states that, "to ensure a cessation of hostilities, under no circumstances shall any force of the army of the former Republic of Yugoslavia or the Republic of Serbia dare to enter this area, or stay within the territory of Kosovo, the Security Zone and the Security Air Zone. The local police are allowed to remain in that area (5 km inside Serbia's territory)." (Kennedy, 2022).

But it must also be stressed that nowhere in KFOR's powers is it stated that it has an obligation to address protests or the destructive behavior of citizens of the state of Kosovo. Moreover, after the consolidation of the Kosovo Police and the declaration of independence in 2008, Kosovo has assumed full obligations within its own territory (Mehmetaj, 2022). Nevertheless, this has not resolved the issue on the ground, since it is clear that Kosovo police and its security forces cannot exercise their law-enforcement activities in North Mitrovica, which remains autonomous in practice.

External Actors and Security Situation in Kosovo

The three most significant foreign actors in terms of security cooperation in Kosovo are the United States, Turkey, and the European Union, just like in other areas of influence. This is due to the larger political context of state-building as well as the intimate ties between Kosovo's

national security and regional and Euro-Atlantic security. The main donors to the Kosovo Force (KFOR), the NATO-led military mission tasked with promoting peace in the nation by preserving a generally secure environment for all ethnic groups north of Kosovo, are the United States, Turkey, and the European Union (Hansel & Feyerabend, 2018). Meanwhile, since it was first deployed in 1999, “KFOR currently consists of 3,347 troops coming from 27 countries, 2,105 of them from 17 EU member states. The US currently contributes 627 troops, while Türkiye, with 306 troops, is also among the biggest contributors. Kosovo is the only WB country where troops of neighboring countries, which are NATO member states, are deployed: 42 from North Macedonia, 26 from Albania, and 2 from Montenegro.” (Rausch et al. 2020).

Kosovo aims to become a NATO member. To serve this goal, in December 2018, the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) was formally transformed into a small professional army consisting of 5,000 active troops and 3,000 reserve troops. It has a ten-year transition period to build capacities before it can take over military functions. Kosovo’s aim to join NATO is supported, politically and through capacity-building, by the US, main EU member states, Turkey, and other NATO allies.” (Rausch et al. 2020). Additionally, strategic alliances with the Turkish Armed Forces and the Iowa National Guard in the United States provide capacity-building support for Kosovo Security Forces (“Elezi: Cooperation between the KSF and,” 2024). Furthermore, since 2008, one of the EU's biggest Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) operations, the EU Rule of Law Mission (EULEX), has been active in Kosovo (Rausch et al., 2020). Its mission is to monitor, advise, and provide technical assistance to Kosovan law enforcement and justice organizations. For the first time in a European-led mission, EULEX is primarily staffed by EU member states, with assistance from the US. China and Russia don't officially play a direct security role or influence on Kosovo (Shasha, 2020).

CMR effects on war- and peace-making in the Western Balkans

Both fighting and peacemaking in the Western Balkans have been impacted by civil-military relations (CMR). The Serbian and Kosovar CMRs were the main subjects of this research. During the height of the Serbian-Kosovar conflict and ethnic cleansing campaigns carried out by Milosević's army and other state units like Scorpions or paramilitaries like Arkan's Tigers, the Kosovar CMR also had some security ramifications for Albania. Additionally, a large portion of KLA operations took place in Albania, including training, conducting covert weapon trafficking, and looking for hiding places. In addition to opening its borders to displaced refugees, as it has done with other neighboring countries like Northern Macedonia, Albania provided security intelligence through its National Information Services and unofficially trained KLA personnel, despite its official neutrality in the conflict. The NIS director (Alb. SHIK), Fatos Klosi, has acknowledged this publicly on multiple occasions (“Fatos Klosi: SHIK s’i ka shërbyer kurrë Serbisë,” 2015).

After the war, several members of the Scorpion Unit faced charges for atrocities they had committed in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. In addition to Saša Cvjetan, who was charged for his role in the Podujeva massacre and was sentenced by a Serbian court to a twenty-year jail term (“Serb jailed for Kosovo killings,” 2004), in 2009, four more members of the unit were jailed in Serbia for their role in the massacre. It is important to note, therefore, that Serbian courts also held

them accountable, in addition to war crimes adjudicated by the International Tribunal of the Hague. Other members were convicted in later years, continuing until 2011. The same thing can be said, as noted above, of the Kosovar side.

In general, attempts at reconciliation were challenging and protracted due to the war crimes and the participation of paramilitaries and regular army or police personnel in committing war crimes against civilian populations. With some degree of success, attempts have been made in the aftermath of the battle to unite people via a variety of media, such as art and culture (Savić-Bojanić & Ilir Kalemaj, 2021). Nevertheless, efforts are still ongoing, and the current state of affairs has significantly improved as a result of both political and economic pressures, as well as the support of international players, especially the United States and the European Union.

Conclusions

This study examined the military and civil ties between Serbia and Albania as well as how the history of conflict may contribute to peaceful relations and post-conflict resolution, particularly between Serbia and Kosovo. In addition to leaving lingering wounds in the two countries' relations, Milosević's wars also hampered Serbia and Kosovo's current political ties. Although there has been some slight improvement in their trade and economic ties, the political impasse has prevented the two nations' relations from normalizing to this point. On the contrary, Albania and Serbia have completely normalized their political, economic, and other ties.

The two home states with the largest populations in the region are Serbia and Albania, both of which have sizable minorities in nearby nations. Both of them are regarded as essential to the Western Balkans' general security. The long-term stability of the entire region also depends on the Republic of Kosovo being fully recognized. In particular, their inherited security dilemma would be resolved if relations between Serbia and Kosovo were fully normalized. According to the information presented in the research, both Serbia and Kosovo faced significant challenges in integrating former paramilitaries. Stable civilian authority over the armed forces has always been a crucial need for the formation of democracy, even though many of them have been sought by international courts for war crimes and crimes against humanity, and some trials are still pending. Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia are still in the process of becoming hybrid democracies with a rule of law that is not yet completely upheld (Kalemaj & Kalemaj, 2022).

Under Milosević's leadership, Serbia embarked on an irredentist effort to establish "Greater Serbia" in the 1990s, and Serbian state security actively supported irregular militias like Arkan's Tigers in their war crimes against civilian populations in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Additionally, the regular Serbian army employed them all to ethnically cleanse the civilian population in Kosovo. Regulars like the Scorpion unit, an infamous police reserve force under the Serbian Internal Affairs, which slaughtered thousands of men and boys in Srebrenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and later in Kosovo, were also there.

The Kosovar Albanian KLA was founded in opposition to Milosević's policies, which had deprived Kosovo of its autonomy and pushed its elected civilian leaders into illegality. Although for various reasons, neither the KLA nor Arkan's Tigers were eventually reincorporated as militias into their respective nations' regular militaries. Both were crucial to the circumstances that finally resulted in Kosovo's Declaration of Independence.

In contrast to Arkan's Tigers, who were neither reintegrated into the Serbian military or police force nor into regular civilian life, the KLA was fully reintegrated into civilian life and

demobilized as a militia following the conflict. The majority of them were either caught by the police or died in shootouts, as in Arkan's own case, after joining underworld criminal organizations or operating drug rings. On the other hand, the Scorpion unit was incorporated into the Serbian police force from the beginning, but Belgrade authorities disbanded it in 1999, immediately following the Kosovo War. In summary, Serbia's paramilitary persistence stands in stark contrast to the KLA's success in reintegrating former soldiers into the workforce. This in turn affects other state-building processes as well as each nation's path toward democracy and the rule of law.

Although both Serbia and Albania have started the process of becoming full members of the EU, Serbia is not a member of NATO, a defense alliance. Due mostly to Serbian resistance, Kosovo is now neither a candidate for NATO membership nor for EU membership. However, NATO/KFOR forces guard the integrity of Kosovo's boundaries. However, Serbia has lately purchased offensive weapons, and its current military spending exceeds that of the five Western Balkan nations combined, prompting concerns about the region's continued security issues. Together with Northern Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania are currently founding members of the Open Balkan initiative, which has significantly enhanced ties between the two nations. Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, on the other hand, have protested their involvement. Additionally, the main political leaders of Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro frequently complain that Serbia wants to destabilize their countries and frequently uses parallel structures or hybrid warfare to achieve its goals.

In summary, this study made the case that while certain important security features have improved, more work is needed to advance the relationship. The primary guarantee of peace and stability in the relations between the two most numerous populations in the region, the Serbs and the Albanians, as well as stability in general, would be the stabilization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, culminating in the eventual recognition of the Republic of Kosovo by Serbia.

The current article not only sheds light on the ongoing Serbia-Kosovo security dilemma by exploring the root causes of the conflict, military and civil ties, as well as future geopolitical implications for the regions, but also seeks to inform how reintegration might inform other post-conflict regions. Different ongoing conflict areas from various volatile regions across the world, from sub-Saharan Africa to the Middle East and Latin America, may benefit from insights on successful reintegration techniques such as the ones used by the Kosovo Republic in the aftermath of the conflict. Seen from this light, the current paper adds not only empirical value but also informs policy-making in post-conflict zones.

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