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## **The Long Fight: How Serbian and Albanian Media Narratives Sustain Conflict in the Balkans**

Sarah Daknis

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**The Long Fight: How Serbian and Albanian Media Narratives Sustain  
Conflict in the Balkans**

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## I. Abstract



Map of the Balkans<sup>1</sup>

Kosovo, recognized for its profound historical and cultural roots, remains a contentious region claimed by both Serbia and Albania. Despite Serbia's territorial claims, the majority of Kosovo's 2 million inhabitants identify as Kosovo-Albanian, comprising over 90% of the population.<sup>2</sup> This paper delves into the pivotal roles played by Serbian and Albanian media narratives shaping the international community's perception of Kosovo's ongoing struggle for independence. In many instances, the U.S. media narrative casts Albania as the aggrieved party and Serbia as the aggressor, often omitting instances where Albania's actions were questionable. By examining both Serbian and Albanian media perspectives, this study aims to unravel the

<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald.

<sup>2</sup> Rogel, 169.

multifaceted layers of the Kosovo conflict, historical contentions, territorial disputes, and the profound impact of media portrayals on shaping international viewpoints.

## **II. Introduction**

In an era marked by rising global tensions and quests for independence—ranging from the longstanding conflict between Israel and Palestine to the more recent confrontations between Ukraine and Russia—the dynamics in Kosovo between Serbia and Albania have ascended to the forefront of international discourse. Amidst a backdrop of shifting geopolitical landscapes and entrenched historical grievances, the complexities of the Serbian-Albanian relationship demand rigorous examination. This thesis delves into the role and impact of media narratives, shedding light on their profound influence on perceptions and realities in the Balkans.

## **III. Methodology**

My trajectory into this research is deeply influenced by my personal exposure to the Kosovo conflict and the perspectives that shaped my understanding of it. As an American researcher, my initial encounters with the conflict were filtered through distinct lenses, leading to varied inclinations and interpretations. Engaging with narratives, testimonies, and experiences rooted in the Albanian community provided me with a different set of insights, challenges, and perspectives. This exposure inevitably influenced my inclinations, making me more sympathetic towards the aspirations and struggles of Albanian-identifying Kosovars.

The juxtaposition of the contrasting perspectives of those who are either more sympathetic towards Albanian-identifying or Serbian-identifying Kosovars underscores a significant observation: the profound impact of media narratives in shaping public opinion and perceptions, particularly outside the immediate conflict zones. In my experience, the American landscape predominantly resonates with narratives that align more closely with the Albanian perspective. This prevalence raises intriguing questions about the dissemination of information,

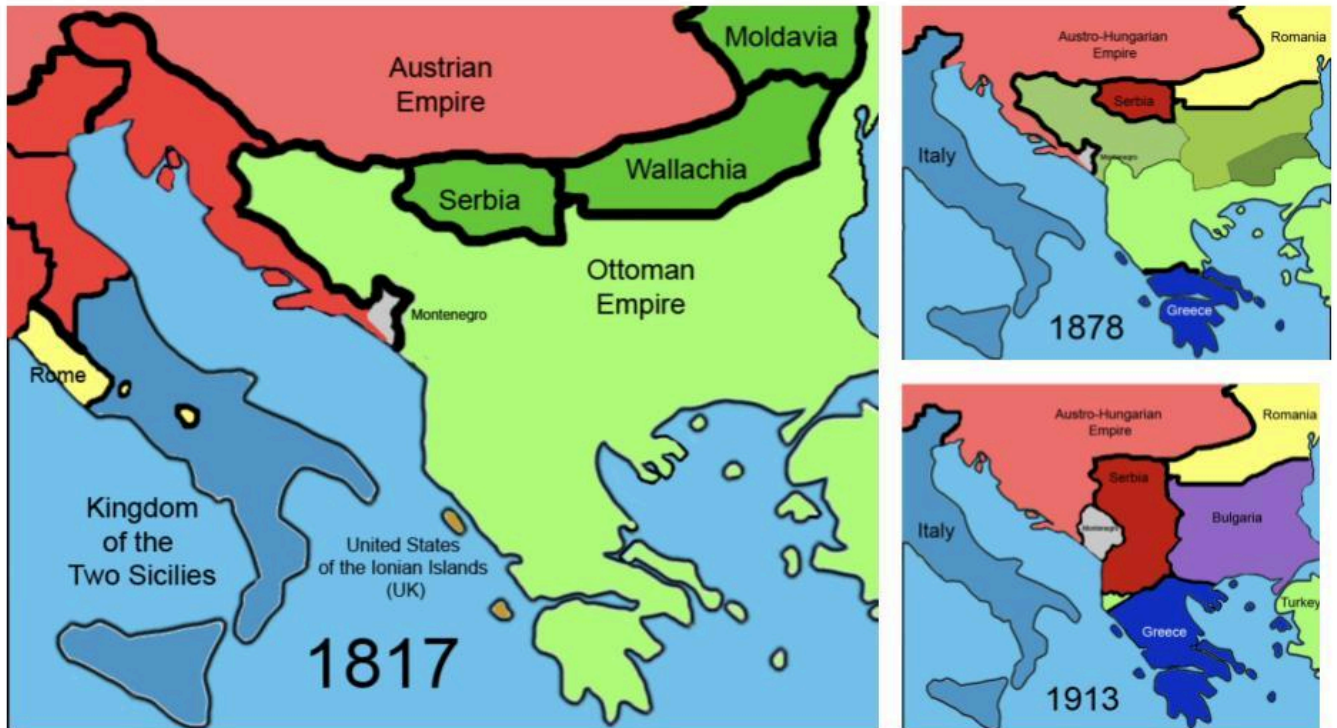
the construction of dominant narratives, and the implications for international understanding and intervention.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of media narratives between Serbia and Albania, it is essential to establish the historical context of Kosovo and familiarize ourselves with the various media devices employed to construct narratives. In this paper, I rely predominantly on secondary sources, a mix of modern and scholarly articles, and journals, to substantiate my arguments, providing a robust foundation of existing scholarship. Additionally, several primary sources are incorporated to offer nuanced contextual insights into the unfolding situation.

## IV. Background

### History of Kosovo

#### *Serbia's Presence in Kosovo from Medieval Times to the 20th Century*



Map of the Territory Expansion/Decline of Balkans<sup>3</sup>

In the early 7th century, Serbia settled in the Balkans, with a power base established outside Kosovo in the early 13th century. Serbia ruled Kosovo for around 250 years until the Ottoman Empire took over in the mid-15th century, completely removing the continuity between the medieval Serbian state and today's Serbia. While churches and monasteries remain from the period Serbia ruled Kosovo, there is no connection between the former Serbia and today's Serbia. When the Ottoman Empire's control of the Balkan lands ebbed, national states began

<sup>3</sup> "History of Central Europe and the Balkans..."



emerging, such as Serbia in 1817, gaining independent status from the European powers in 1878 (Rogel, 169). When the League of Prizren was organized in 1878, the goal was to thwart the expansionism of emerging national states in the Balkans. However, Serb politicians had already created a plan for Greater Serbia, a narrative with historical roots sometimes invoked in nationalist discourse to emphasize the idea of a unified Serbian homeland, which can contribute to tensions with neighboring countries. This Greater Serbia demanded that “Serbia include not only the lands where Serbs then lived but also those lands where Serbs may have lived or ruled in the past,” pursuing a nationalist goal that put Serbia into conflict with the Ottoman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

After World War I, Serbia experienced a notable surge in efforts to strengthen its nation-building initiatives. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was formed (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929). The Serbs now had everything they wished for. All the Serbs were together again in one state, including Kosovo, even if the 400,000 Albanians living in the land of Kosovo were not explicitly mentioned in the state’s makeup. However, Kosovo was incorporated into not a Serbian state but a Yugoslav one. Kosovo had a dual status as it was “called both a part of Serbia and also a unit of the federation” until Milosevic's destruction of the federal Yugoslavia.<sup>5</sup>

In 1921, the Kosovars petitioned the League of Nations for Kosovo to be included in Albania because they were unhappy with their lot, but the request was denied. During Serbian rule, Kosovo Albanians lost their privileges. They were “allowed only religious instructions and often had their lands expropriated to accommodate Serb colonists.”<sup>6</sup> Many Serbs identified Kosovo Albanians as Turks and encouraged them to emigrate to the new state of Turkey.

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<sup>4</sup> Rogel, 170.

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm.

<sup>6</sup> Rogel, 170.

During World War II, Italy annexed Albania proper, and various enemy powers partitioned Yugoslavia. Kosovo was divided among the Italians, Bulgarians, and Germans. After the war and the collapse of Italy in 1943, it was expected by the National Liberation Movement that a unified Albania-Kosovo would become a part of a Yugoslav federation.<sup>7</sup>

However, the post-1945 Yugoslav state proved disappointing for Albanians and Serbs as Kosovo was absorbed into Serbia. Still, because of the large Albanian population, the “autonomous region” status was given to promote equality among federal units. The Serbs suspected this new state structure had deliberately been put in place to keep Serbia weak.

In 1948, following the rift between Russia and Yugoslavia, the borders of Yugoslavia were sealed to both the East and West, effectively isolating Kosovars from Albania and largely confining Kosovar Albanians within Serbia/Yugoslavia, trapping them within this region. Only in the 60s did things start to change when Kosovo was upgraded to a “province,” was allotted financial assistance for economic improvement, and gained a “new constitution and also a new supreme court and authorization for a university in Pristina.”<sup>8</sup> These shifts and advancements favored the Albanians due to their significant presence in Kosovo, making them the primary beneficiaries. Conversely, Serbs found themselves increasingly marginalized as their influence in Kosovo waned. Nonetheless, Serbian nationalism experienced a resurgence in the 1980s.

### ***Kosovo from 1981 to NATO Intervention***

In 1981, what initially began as a modest student protest regarding student conditions quickly morphed into broader discontent, primarily focused on the perceived mistreatment of ethnic Albanians by the dominant Serbian majority. The situation escalated when Mahmut

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<sup>7</sup> Rogel, 170.

<sup>8</sup> Rogel, 171.

Bakalli, the head of the Communist Party in Kosovo, vocally advocated for deploying tanks to the streets, indicating the intensity of the unrest. His call underscores the gravity of the situation, as he articulated the sentiments of many ethnic Albanians who sought greater autonomy and recognition within the Yugoslav framework. As the tension simmered, by June 1991, this initial spark from 1981 had evolved into a full-blown conflict among the various nations comprising the former Yugoslavia.<sup>9</sup>

The core aspiration of Albanian nationalists during this period was clear: they envisaged Kosovo not merely as a subordinate province of Serbia but as a distinct republic within the larger Yugoslav federation. However, this vision clashed sharply with the intentions and preferences of the Yugoslav authorities. They perceived Albania's active engagement and support for the Albanian cause in Kosovo as unwelcome interference in their internal affairs, further intensifying the rift between the two entities. The Yugoslav authorities' perception of Albania's involvement served as a catalyst, deepening the divisions and setting the stage for the protracted conflicts that would define the region.

The level of influence the Albanian government had on the demonstrations is debatable. Students were observed carrying signs that read “We Are Enver Hoxha’s Soldiers,” which calls directly to Albania influencing these protests. Still, the number of demonstrators was small enough that many chose not to pay attention.<sup>10</sup> Albania used radio and television and sent books to encourage Kosovo Albanians to “unite with the motherland.” Beyond that, little else was used to assist the protestors directly, as that would have violated Albanian policy, according to Mertus.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Rogel, 173.

<sup>10</sup> Mertus, 37-38. Enver Hoxha is the former Prime Minister of Albania. He was in power until his death in 1985.

<sup>11</sup> Mertus, 37-38.

In 1989, after Kosovo's autonomy as part of the Yugoslav Federation was granted just 15 years prior, Kosovo's Provincial Assembly voted on amendments to the Yugoslav constitution that would "strip Kosovo of most of its autonomy and return that power to Belgrade," leading to unrest in Pristina and the city of Ferizaj/Urosevac and an opportunity for Milosevic to implement his new wave of nationalism and ethnic hatred among Serbs that would permanently damage ethnic relations in Kosovo.<sup>12</sup>

Surprisingly enough, while the war of the people in Yugoslavia lasted until November 1995, Kosovo was hardly involved, with a majority of the conflict happening in Kosovo after the war in former Yugoslavia ended. The Albanians "lived their lives, ran their schools and hospitals, and paid their taxes," all while boycotting elections in Serbia and choosing instead to challenge the legitimacy of Belgrade's government.<sup>13</sup> Most of the time, the Serbian police, who still patrolled Kosovo, had little to no time for the unruly province as they were busy with the siege against Sarajevo that lasted almost four years. Most of the West also ignored the Kosovars, even though in the pre-war years, many had stood and defended the Kosovars' human rights.<sup>14</sup>

In 1998, tensions in Kosovo rose tremendously. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), a group whose main goal was to secure the independence of Kosovo, increased its activity, leading to the Serbian police launching operations against what they were deeming a "terrorist" group. The increase in activity from the KLA comes as no surprise as they were active in earlier years, with charges against them for preparing guerrilla operations against Serbia and killing Serbs on a BBC Albanian-language broadcast. The organization was known for assassinating Serb officials, gaining popularity among the Kosovar people as they attacked Serbia. The KLA has been linked

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<sup>12</sup> Haxhiaj and M. Stojanovic.

<sup>13</sup> Rogel, 174.

<sup>14</sup> Rogel, 174.

to atrocities like kidnappings and the death of people in cold blood as a response to the 7,000 to 9,000 Kosovar Albanians who were slain by Serbian regime forces throughout the conflict. The Serbs are also claimed to have committed numerous rapes, devastated entire villages, and uprooted around a million people.<sup>15</sup>

As the KLA grew and the killing of Serbs continued, the support for the KLA increased substantially, and more and more “Kosovars were rejecting Rugova’s pacifist policies” in favor of violence against the Serbs.<sup>16</sup> Milosevic launched a ruthless military and police campaign against the KLA, which resulted in widespread atrocities against Kosovar Albanian civilians and an equally atrocious response from the KLA. Milosevic’s failure to agree to the Rambouillet Accords led the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to launch a military campaign to halt the violence in Kosovo. This campaign, however, consisted primarily of aerial bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (F.R.Y). After 78 days of bombing, Milosevic backed down, and shortly after that, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1244, which “suspended Belgrade’s governance over Kosovo, and under which Kosovo was placed under the administration of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK),” and which authorized a NATO peacekeeping force.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Simons.

<sup>16</sup> Rogel, 175.

<sup>17</sup> Office of the Historian.

## **International Involvement and Peacebuilding Efforts**

Not only did Kosovo experience severe ethnic and political conflicts, but the 1990s marked a tumultuous period in the Balkans as tensions were high between multiple ethnic groups with “surging nationalist sentiments.” One of the most poignant moments of this era was the siege of Sarajevo, a prolonged period of intense military blockade and violence against the Bosniak population by Bosnian Serb forces.

The Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, was subjected to “daily shelling and sniper attacks from Serb nationalist forces. This siege resulted in countless civilian casualties, widespread destruction, and a humanitarian crisis of immense proportions.

The international community, mainly Europe and the United States, viewed the siege of Sarajevo as a brutal manifestation of aggression, especially from the Serb side. The reputation of the Serb leadership was profoundly tarnished by besieged Sarajevo, suffering civilians, and the deliberate targeting of non-combatants. This strained Serbia’s relationships with neighboring countries, and significantly damaged its standing in the eyes of the international community.

As the decade progressed, the memory and impact of the siege of Sarajevo lingered, casting a long shadow over subsequent events in the region. When the Kosovo crisis erupted towards the end of the 1990s, the backdrop was painted with suspicion and distrust towards Serbian actions. By this time, Western nations, especially those in NATO, had a collective memory of the aggression exhibited by Serbian forces. Consequently, when NATO intervened in Kosovo, there was a prevailing sentiment that Serbia had once again overstepped its boundaries.

The international community made several unsuccessful efforts in 1998 to stop the use of violence in Kosovo, including two UN Security Council resolutions, but the efforts only resulted

in temporary impacts. Despite Russia's objection to any military intervention without UN sanction, NATO decided to intervene militarily in Kosovo due to the lack of improvement in the region. While NATO's air operation against Milosevic on March 24, 1999, was supposed to reverse the "Belgrade regime's horrific policy of ethnic cleansing and allow the displaced Albanians to return to their home in peace and security," the intervention in the Kosovo crisis raised a multitude of questions about state sovereignty and human rights.<sup>18</sup> Without the United Nations sanction, NATO's intervention violated recognized international laws and conventions, even though it did eventually force Milosevic to submit to demands to withdraw forces from Kosovo and laid the foundation for the implementation of peace in Kosovo.

Over 1.5 million Kosovars were ejected from their homes as a result of the ethnic cleansing effort carried out by Serbia; almost a million of them fled or were driven from Kosovo. The people of Kosovo endured immense suffering as a result. The international community launched a significant relief effort to aid the refugees and the most impacted nations. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) fostered close collaboration between donor countries, neighboring countries, and international and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).<sup>19</sup> The most important aspect of the humanitarian operation was the enormous participation of NATO, its member nations, and its partners. Despite not being a humanitarian organization, NATO successfully alleviated thousands of refugees' suffering thanks to its immense powers.

While their humanitarian status was remarkable, the ethical involvement of NATO is highly questionable. With no way to limit the amount of casualties, NATO's political objective was to stop all military action and violence. Their "target selection was reviewed at multiple

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<sup>18</sup> Chawla.

<sup>19</sup> Chawla.

levels of command to ensure that it complied with international law,” yet there is no way to ensure that not a single civilian is killed, which is what caused the international community to be concerned with the humanitarian consequences of this airstrike.<sup>20</sup> More Kosovars lost their lives than before, and hundreds of thousands were forced to flee their homes.<sup>21</sup>

The ethical shortcoming of NATO’s efforts lies in the lack of discrimination in selecting targets. They could not discern between civilian and military objectives as NATO’s campaign aimed at bombing strategic civilian targets with military relevance, such as oil refineries, and keeping “NATO planes out of range of anti-aircraft artillery and hand-held surface to air missiles.” Consequently, this targeting strategy led to significant civilian casualties among the Yugoslav population and extensive economic harm.

The NATO bombing also began the “coordinated and systematic campaign to terrorize, kill, and expel the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo,” organized by high-level Serbian and Yugoslav government officials.<sup>22</sup> In early 1999, there was an observance of a distinct military build-up in Kosovo and the arming of ethnic Serb civilians. During the NATO bombing campaign, there were unparalleled attacks on civilians and the forcible eviction of almost 850,000 ethnic Albanians from Kosovo.<sup>23</sup> The fighting was moving for the first time from rural to urban areas. Although the government effort appeared to be an attempt to destroy the KLA, it became evident that after the NATO bombing started, it was much more than that.

The then-Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia President Milosevic used the NATO bombing to further his plan to defeat the rebels and their base of support within the populace and

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<sup>20</sup> “Kosovo Air Campaign.”

<sup>21</sup> Chawla.

<sup>22</sup> Abrahams.

<sup>23</sup> Abrahams.



forcefully expel a significant percentage of Kosovo's Albanian people, all while waging a military assault. More than "80 percent of the entire population of Kosovo (90 percent of Kosovar Albanians) were displaced from their homes."<sup>24</sup> Areas with historic ties to the KLA were the scenes of multiple massacres of civilians, the destruction of homes and other civilian property, and torture and detentions. NATO's intervention only brought about the ethnic cleansing and displacement of Kosovar-Albanians by ethnic Serbians and the Serbian government.

However, the intervention in Kosovo and NATO's involvement was framed by the United States as a necessary step to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, given the alleged atrocities committed by Serbian forces against Kosovo Albanians. By this juncture, the Western narrative had largely united around Serbia being the primary aggressor in the Balkans. The cumulative effect of events like the siege in Sarajevo meant that by the time Kosovo's crisis unfolded, the international sentiment was firmly against Serbia. This historical context and the memories of past aggressions profoundly influenced the West's stance and actions during the Kosovo intervention, cementing a narrative where Serbia was portrayed as a repeat offender in Balkan conflicts.

### ***Failure of the U.N. Peacekeeping Mission***

While the initial involvement of the international community in the aftermath of the Kosovo War was ethically questionable, the effort made by international organizations after the war was significant in attempting to establish governance structures. After the conflict, the international community engaged in several activities, including the organization of internationally monitored elections, the protection of human rights and minorities, the

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<sup>24</sup> Abrahams.

restructuring of the economy, and the containment and restraint of the use of force by parties to the conflict. The UN placed within Kosovo the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the Kosovo Force (KFOR) to have a temporary administration that could provide the region with stability after the conflict and set up a peace force to be a leading support organization for the area.<sup>25</sup> UNMIK's main objective was to agree on a settlement with Serbia, but they failed.

However, many agree that the UN "failed to create a stable political system with working institutions to support a working administration."<sup>26</sup> A significant reason for this failure stemmed from UNMIK not involving the local population in their decision-making. Support for UNMIK became increasingly limited throughout the years because UNMIK marginalized the local population. After 1999, Kosovo had a high level of crime and aggression, much of which was directed against the minority population, mainly Serbs. The international community failed to stop "a new wave of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, despite the presence of 40,000 armed soldiers" and was unable to provide Kosovo's minority populations with adequate protections as a new wave of displaced Serbs and Roma from Kosovo were rejected in Serbia.<sup>27</sup> The Serbian government made it extremely difficult for displaced persons from Kosovo to "register their children in Serbian schools, and some local authorities were not willing to provide communal spaces for collective centers."<sup>28</sup> This displacement of the Serbian population caused the remaining Serb population to live in enclaves or divided cities; in particular, the northern town of Mitrovice/Kosovska Mitrovica became a focal point for renewed conflict. UNMIK's mandate lacked adequate provisions for safeguarding Kosovo's minority communities, contributing to heightened tensions rather than alleviating them.

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<sup>25</sup> EU Reporter Correspondent.

<sup>26</sup> EU Reporter Correspondant.

<sup>27</sup> "The Kosovo Report - Albania."

<sup>28</sup> "Federal Republic of Yugoslavia - Human Rights Development."

Despite the significant efforts of the international community, building democratic institutions and the rule of law in Kosovo was and has been challenging. Kosovo remains one of the poorest countries in Europe, with more than 40% of the population living below the official poverty line.<sup>29</sup> The country struggles with a high unemployment rate. This economy relies heavily on remittances from the diaspora and widespread corruption due to the aerial bombardment carried out by NATO. The rule of law is still in the making, and a Kosovo-specific concept of the rule of law is still beginning to take shape. The Republic of Kosovo, while making commendable progress, must intensify its efforts to establish a robust, democratic, and legal framework. This involves addressing lingering economic and social issues, and enhancing the quality of its legislation.

### **C. Challenges in Achieving Lasting Peace**

On February 17, 2008, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia. In its declaration of independence, Kosovo established itself as a democratic, secular, and multi-ethnic republic committed to non-discrimination and equal protection under the law.<sup>30</sup> The leaders of Kosovo pledged to protect and promote the rights of all communities. An invitation was extended to international presences, including a European Union-led rule of law mission and NATO, to assist in supervision until local institutions can assume these responsibilities.<sup>31</sup> Kosovo declared its commitment to respecting its international borders and refraining from the threat or use of force. Kosovo then proclaimed its commitment to peace and stability in southeast Europe, marking the end of Yugoslavia's violent dissolution, thus expressing a desire to establish good relations with all neighbors, including the Republic of Serbia, and work toward reconciliation and regional

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<sup>29</sup> BTI 2022 Kosovo country report.

<sup>30</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

cooperation. Finally, in this declaration, Kosovo urged all states to support and extend friendship based on this declaration, aligning its actions with international law and UN resolutions.<sup>32</sup>

While this declaration sounds like an excellent plan, Kosovo has had many challenges in achieving lasting peace, including ongoing tensions, political disputes, and the impact of external influences. Kosovo's status has been a significant obstacle to lasting peace. The United States formally recognized Kosovo as a sovereign and independent state on February 18, 2008. In addition to the United States, Kosovo has been recognized by most European states, Japan, Canada, and other states from the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Shortly after independence, "a number of states established an International Steering Group (ISG) for Kosovo that appointed Dutch diplomat Pieter Feith as Kosovo's first International Civilian Representative (ICR)."<sup>33</sup> However, Serbia, backed by Russia, refused to recognize Kosovo as an independent state after its declaration in 2008. This created extreme tension and hindered the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. China, Russia, and five EU states (Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece) do not recognize Kosovo's statehood, thus halting Kosovo's path to EU membership.<sup>34</sup> Despite the initial vision, Kosovo grapples with political disputes and external influences, underscoring the complexity of its journey toward enduring stability.

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<sup>32</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

<sup>33</sup> "A Guide to the United States' History of Recognition..."

<sup>34</sup> AJLabs.

## V. Case Study

### Serbian Media Landscape

After the rule of Slobodan Milosevic ended in 2000, Serbian media had a democratic transformation. It has been a slow transformation dependent on the “political will of the political elites.”<sup>35</sup> Serbia has issues with a weak media market, hidden media ownership, and inconsistent and adopted regulations with many delays. The State, however, withdrew from direct ownership over media through a privatization process in 2015.<sup>36</sup> The State still has significant influence over the media landscape as it is the largest advertiser in the country, and under every government so far, “owners of media buying agencies had close ties with the ruling party and politics.”<sup>37</sup> The association between media owners and the government has intensified economic and editorial constraints on Serbian media, including harassment of journalists and pressure from state officials, politicians, and influential individuals on outlets and reporters.<sup>38</sup>

In the realm of ownership, the Serbian media landscape mirrors that of many EU nations, blending public broadcasters with private media enterprises. Television is the most popular type of media in Serbia. Serbia hosts two public broadcasters: RTS, which operates nationally, and RTV, catering to the Vojvodina province on a regional scale.<sup>39</sup> Both broadcasters derive most revenue from subscription fees collected from households nationwide. RTV garners a significant portion of its funds from the state budget, influencing its editorial stance, autonomy, and impartiality.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “Serbia.”

<sup>36</sup> “Serbia.”

<sup>37</sup> “Serbia.”

<sup>38</sup> “Serbia.”

<sup>39</sup> “Media Landscape.”

<sup>40</sup> “Media Landscape.”

The Serbian media landscape is relatively small (APR).<sup>41</sup> However, it is quite saturated. There are “863 print media - daily and periodic papers, 309 radio stations, 211 TV stations, 432 Internet portals, and 57 “editor-formatted websites.”<sup>42</sup> Telecom operatives, such as the state-owned Telekom Srbija and privately owned SBB, have ventured into the media sector, either establishing or acquiring cable TV stations to diminish the influence of private TV stations critical of the current government.<sup>43</sup> The dominant leaders in the print media landscape include Ringier (owners of Daily Blic) and Mondo (publisher of the daily Kurir), who are mainly associated with tabloid publications. These groups also control popular websites such as blic.rs, kurir.rs, and espreso.rs.<sup>44</sup>

Amongst the old and young Serbs, younger people use the internet more daily, with “92% of the population between 15 and 30 years old reporting daily use.”<sup>45</sup> Additionally, “87% of the population hold social media accounts, with Facebook being the most popular,” even though television is the most popular and most consumed media type.<sup>46</sup> While the younger population consumes more media, they are the most distrustful of the press, as “only 13% of those under the age of 24 think that the news can be trusted, while this same attitude is held by 25% of people over 55 years old.”<sup>47</sup>

The state has a significant role and influence over the media market as it controls the media through mostly direct ownership. Media in Serbia is presented in a way that provokes public interest and excitement at the expense of accuracy. It is dominated by narratives and tabloid-style reporting, which makes the landscape susceptible to the proliferation of

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<sup>41</sup> “Media Landscape.”

<sup>42</sup> “Serbia.”

<sup>43</sup> “Media Landscape.”

<sup>44</sup> “Media Landscape.”

<sup>45</sup> “Media Consumption.”

<sup>46</sup> “Media Consumption.”

<sup>47</sup> “Media Consumption.”

misinformation and disinformation.<sup>48</sup> The primary media outlets in Serbia exhibit a pronounced polarization, often perceived as aligning with either pro-government or oppositional viewpoints. Independent media outlets tend to take a more critical perspective on the government but grapple with ongoing financial and editorial constraints as a consequence of not echoing the sentiments of the ruling parties.<sup>49</sup> The expansive Serbian media landscape is overshadowed by limited protection and financial stability for journalists, paving the way for politicians to exert significant control over most of these platforms.

### **Albanian Media Landscape**

Similar to Serbia, TV is the most popular form of media in Albania, with the internet following closely behind. The media landscape in Albania is a saturated market of newspapers, TV stations, and magazines with a prevalent narrative of “independence and commitment to the highest journalistic standards.”<sup>50</sup> In practice, many media stories align with the political and economic interests of media owners and political leaders, similar to Serbia. Freedom of speech in Albania is heavily politicized.<sup>51</sup>

The beginning of traditional media in Albania can be traced back to the end of communist rule. The country began expanding its media landscape, bringing a more significant number of news sources from political groups “producing ‘free-media,’ in a post-communist country to maintain their respective power.”<sup>52</sup> As a result, Albania’s emerging free press model is run by the approved views of the party in power.

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<sup>48</sup> “Media Landscape.”

<sup>49</sup> “Media Landscape.”

<sup>50</sup> “Media.”

<sup>51</sup> Bogdani.

<sup>52</sup> Bogdani.

Today, “90% of the news is controlled by four families owning all the top media companies.”<sup>53</sup> The interest of corporations is what ‘strengthens’ television stations and newspapers. The media landscape in Albania consists of 20 daily newspapers, 71 radio stations, and 70 television stations.<sup>54</sup> Albania has four national TV broadcasters, one public and three commercial broadcasters. The leading media include RTSH, Top Channel, Klan, and RTV Ora.<sup>55</sup> In July 2023, “82% of respondents used social media as a source to get news and information on social, political, economic, and similar local and global events every day,” with high usage amongst the urban population.<sup>56</sup>

As we see in Serbia, business owners have close ties with politicians and high-ranking officials in the country, so the media is controlled by political and corporate interests, making the work of journalists difficult. Journalists often must choose between reporting in favor of large corporations or reporting on ideas and events that counter political interests. Albania’s media and information transition from public resources to private possessions, significantly eroding civil society’s access to objective reporting over time.

Prime Minister Edi Rama exacerbates the political pressure put on journalists. In 2018, Rama announced an “anti-defamation package” that would bring “all online media under the control of parliament-appointed board.”<sup>57</sup> He introduced this law to combat fake news, but many believe it is in place to silence those opposing views and critics of his actions.<sup>58</sup> While there is a risk in Albanian media from the impact of disinformation, there is no real sign of concerted

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<sup>53</sup> Bogdani.

<sup>54</sup> Bogdani.

<sup>55</sup> “Albania.”

<sup>56</sup> “Media.”

<sup>57</sup> Taylor.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor.



efforts to produce fake news, simply news that reflects the political views of the owners or important political figures.

## Othering

In media, a process that refers to the tendency to portray certain groups or individuals as fundamentally different or alien from the perceived norm. This is called the process of “othering.” It often involves emphasizing or exaggerating differences, reinforcing stereotypes, and creating a sense of “us versus them.” Originally coined within the post-colonial theory, “othering” is derived from the concept of “the Other,” representing those outside the dominant social group.<sup>59</sup> One prominent aspect is the perpetuation of stereotypes, where certain groups are simplistically and often negatively depicted, reinforcing preconceived notions and biases. This process also includes the marginalization of specific perspectives through underrepresentation, which excludes diverse voices and experiences, reinforcing a sense of “us” being the norm and “them” as less significant.<sup>60</sup>

Dehumanization also plays a crucial role in the “othering” process. This involves using language or imagery that portrays the “other” as less civilized, less intelligent, or even a potential threat. Such dehumanizing portrayals contribute to the development of prejudices and discriminatory attitudes.<sup>61</sup> Exoticization is another facet of “othering,” wherein media emphasizes cultural or physical differences in a way that objectifies or fetishizes certain groups, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and contributing to overall alienations.<sup>62</sup> Selective representation of events or issues related to specific groups is also a part of the “othering”

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<sup>59</sup> Jensen, 63.

<sup>60</sup> Curle.

<sup>61</sup> Cherry.

<sup>62</sup> Staszak.

process. Media may focus on negative aspects while ignoring positive contributions or nuanced perspectives, shaping public opinion to reinforce biases, or vice versa. The language used in media coverage and the framing of stories can further contribute to “othering,” emphasizing the “us” and “them” distinctions, or framing issues in a manner that accentuates differences rather than commonalities.<sup>63</sup>

The impact of the “othering” process extends beyond individual perceptions, influencing societal attitudes and contributing to the perpetuation of inequality and discrimination. For example, a Serbian history textbook that college students use teaches young Serbs about the Balkan Wars in a way that downplays Serbian war crimes and portrays other ethnic groups as the aggressors.<sup>64</sup> By framing other ethnic groups in a negative light and suggesting they are primarily responsible for the conflicts, the textbook creates the “us versus them” narrative. This portrayal marginalizes and dehumanizes these other ethnic groups, emphasizing differences and fostering a sense of Serbian superiority or victimhood. Essentially, by selectively presenting historical events to cast blame on other ethnic groups, the textbook presents a skewed understanding of the Balkan Wars and the roles various groups played in them. The students reading this textbook will not learn that “Serb forces committed genocide at Srebrenica in 1995, killing more than 8,000 mostly unarmed civilian men” or other war crimes by Serb forces.<sup>65</sup>

Adding this phenomenon to media necessitates comprehensive efforts, including promoting diversity, inclusion, and accurate representation. Challenging stereotypes, providing a platform for marginalized voices, and fostering media literacy to encourage critical thinking among consumers are essential components of dismantling the “othering” process and fostering a

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<sup>63</sup> Curle.

<sup>64</sup> Bogdanovic.

<sup>65</sup> Bogdanovic.

more inclusive media landscape. The media actively contributes to the process of “othering” when entities and their relationships are “(re)constructed in narratives.”<sup>66</sup> Media narratives can cooperate in fostering specific relationships and work to reinforce or undermine them by problematizing them. Still, they can be neutral in reporting and preserving existing organizational relationships. Media constructs cohesive and divisive narratives based on a particular role. The first serves as the cornerstone of political and social cohesiveness, while the second widens the chasm between them. Hate speech is the most overt “othering” story. While it is generally not accepted in today’s media, media employs various techniques to subtly suggest “othering” in stories and incorporate contentious messages into the content structure.<sup>67</sup>

## **Frames**

The mechanism of “othering” within media is intricately woven into the selection and interpretation of topics, mainly through the lens of framing.<sup>68</sup> This multifaceted process involves deliberately curating certain facets of reality to amplify their prominence in communication texts. As a dynamic tool, framing is pivotal in shaping public understanding and steering the overarching media agenda.<sup>69</sup> It extends beyond mere topic selection, promoting specific definitions, facilitating casual interpretations, and instigating moral evaluations. As a result, a dichotomous narrative is reinforced since this process frequently results in the exclusion of one entity in favor of the other. Within the particular context of the “othering” process between Serbia and Kosovo, framing plays a pivotal role in building a narrative package that discourages and promotes certain perceptions of the “Other.”

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<sup>66</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Davie.

The gap between Kosovo and Serbia is articulated through various frames, each offering a distinctive lens through which the narrative is constructed. These frames encompass the ethnic frame, delving into the origins and ethnic narratives of the two entities (Serbian vs. Albanian); the nation/state frame, contrasting Serbia's integrity with Kosovo's pursuit of independence; the international supporter frame, highlighting the dichotomy between U.S. and Russian backing; the conflict frame, portraying one as an aggressor and the other as a self-victim; and the legitimization frame, depicting one as heroic and the other as a traitor.<sup>70</sup> These frames, deeply rooted in sources, are fortified through strategically incorporating stereotypes, creating a potent narrative matrix.

According to the Peaceful Change Initiative's "Analysis on Media in Serbia and Kosovo," in Kosovo, the frame most present in the narratives was the Kosovo independence frame, followed by texts that "contain US support towards the Kosovo frame," with about 2% Russia support towards Serbia.<sup>71</sup> The traitor and self-victimization frames are also present, "almost equally as the aggressor."<sup>72</sup> The language used in the most prevalent divisive narratives that the "Analysis on Media in Serbia and Kosovo" found is emotive or provocative, which harms Kosovo's relations with Serbia the most.<sup>73</sup> Such rhetoric accentuates already-existing disparities, widens societal divides, and fosters mistrust and even hostility among Kosovo's ethnically diverse populace. The number of emotional tales rises throughout the year, according to the Peaceful Change Initiative's examined media content, and they usually peak on February 17, the day Kosovo celebrates its independence.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 10.

<sup>74</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 11.

Again, in the “Analysis on Media in Serbia and Kosovo,” the Peaceful Change Initiative found that Serbia, Kosovo, and Albania are mostly “oriented towards division than cohesion” as media in Kosovo and Albania show more “intensive ideological work.”<sup>75</sup> In contrast, Serbia’s media is more “explicit towards Kosovo and its representation.”<sup>76</sup> Media in Serbia represents a more explicit message of Kosovo's opposition through its use of fake news, disinformation, and more robust emotional journalism. The Peaceful Change Initiative notes how Kosovo’s media narrative on Serbia-Kosovo relations focuses on a “specific extensive, tendentious narrative, which is more deeply interpreting the relation” between the two states rather than solely on the solid language of opposition.<sup>77</sup> The media’s role in shaping narratives and influencing societal attitudes in the Serbia-Kosovo dynamic has taken two distinct shapes between the Serbia-Kosovo dynamic.

Serbian media frequently emphasizes historical grievances, portraying Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia and often highlighting instances where Serbian populations in Kosovo feel threatened or marginalized. By consistently framing Kosovo-Albanians as aggressors or outsiders, Serbian media reinforces a sense of victimhood among the Serbian populace. This narrative not only fuels nationalist sentiments but also creates an atmosphere of distrust and hatred.

Similarly, Albanian media often focuses on the aspirations of Kosovo-Albanians for independence and self-determination, highlighting instances where Kosovo-Albanians face challenges or oppression from Serbian authorities or entities. This emphasis on perceived

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<sup>75</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 36.

<sup>76</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 36.

<sup>77</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 36.

injustices galvanizes support for the Albanian cause and fosters a sense of unity and resistance against perceived Serbian aggression.

Stereotypes, indicative of categorical thinking and group membership, transcend rational consideration, solidifying their adoption as unquestionable truths within the narrative.<sup>78</sup> This underscores the significant impact of framing, sources, and stereotypes in shaping the public's perceptions and understanding of the complex geopolitical situations, especially the Serbia-Kosovo dynamic. The interconnected nature of these elements exemplifies the nuances of the interplay between media representation and societal attitudes, ultimately influencing long-term perspectives on the entities involved. In navigating the intricate landscape of media narratives, recognizing these underlying processes becomes essential for fostering a more informed and critically engaged audience.

### **Narrative Dynamics in Kosovo-Serbia Relations**

Amidst the UN's international intervention in the Kosovo-Serbia war, Kosovo embraced the narrative that the independence of Kosovo was fulfilling "the will of the people." Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, in his speech declaring Kosovo's independence, emphasized that building a democratic and multi-ethnic republic will inherently involve the idea of representing and fulfilling the will of the people through democratic processes and governance.<sup>79</sup> With the "will of the people" narrative, Kosovo has established its hope of a future in a sovereign Kosovo, moving on from a nationalist point of view and instead embracing change, even if it goes against what it had once presented.

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<sup>78</sup> Understanding Divisive Narratives, 4.

<sup>79</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

In contrast, Serbia has not adopted the same modern mindset; instead, it maintains the assertive narrative that Kosovo belongs to Serbia and represents the view of Serbia and ethnic Serbians. Even after normalization talks led by the UN, Serbia's narrative reflects its stance that Kosovo was and is part of Serbia and that it is not independent. The narrative construction surrounding Kosovo serves as a means to reinforce and uphold Serbia's national identity, emphasizing the historical and cultural significance of the region to the Serbian people. Before gaining independence, Kosovo's narrative was explicitly about a separatist movement; now, with pressure from Serbia and its allies, Russia, Kosovo is battling for sovereignty but has evolved its narrative to show its fight and admittance to the international community. The political discourse often portrays Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia, emphasizing the perceived injustice of its separation and framing efforts for international recognition of Kosovo's independence as a challenge to Serbia's sovereignty.

Societal influences further shape Serbia's narrative construction regarding Kosovo. The portrayal of Kosovo as a symbol of national pride and historical heritage resonates deeply with the Serbian populace, fostering a collective memory that solidifies the narrative, something strongly emphasized during Milosevic's infamous speech on the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo.<sup>80</sup> The narrative, in turn, became a tool for rallying public support and fostering a sense of unity among citizens. This constructed narrative plays a crucial role in influencing the international community's perception of the Kosovo issue. Serbia's narrative reinforces its position, presenting Kosovo as an inseparable part of its national identity. For nations sympathetic to Serbia's historical claims and national identity, the narrative may reinforce skepticism or resistance toward recognizing Kosovo's independence. In contrast, those nations

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<sup>80</sup> Milosevic.

more inclined to prioritize the principle of self-determination might perceive Serbia's narrative as a challenge to Kosovo's right to sovereignty.



## VI. International Perception

### The United States' Perception of Kosovo

The onset of the Serbs' assault on Kosovar Albanians presented a critical test. The use of military power by the United States has been a significant topic of debate amongst Americans due to the "uncertainty about the purpose that ought to guide our foreign policy."<sup>81</sup> A common question is whether our foreign policy should be narrowly tailored to national interest or our democratic values and commitments to human rights compel us to adopt a more expansive role. Suppose the United States chooses to intervene abroad for humanitarian purposes. What, then, is the extent to which the US is willing to commit, even to the point of putting American soldiers at risk?<sup>82</sup> In previous involvement of the US military in international conflicts, there was often a "strategic or economic interest" that compelled the United States to intervene. However, with the Kosovo conflict, there was none.<sup>83</sup> Instead, the debate surrounded whether the Serbian "ethnic cleansing" was so offensive to our values that it warranted going to war or even would threaten the "moral basis of the international order."<sup>84</sup>

In 1999, at the Institution for Peace in Washington, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright presented her view of the Kosovo conflict in a major address. While she is not a journalist, simply a diplomat, her attempt to further US foreign policy goals presented itself to the world as a propagandist-leaning presentation, similar to something that a journalist might give during times of war. She said:

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<sup>81</sup> Starr.

<sup>82</sup> Starr.

<sup>83</sup> Starr.

<sup>84</sup> Starr.

Yugoslavia's collapse and descent into violence and brutality began in Kosovo. It was by proclaiming Serbia's right to supreme authority there that Slobodan Milosevic burnished his ultra-nationalist credentials and began his rise to power. And one of his first acts as President of Serbia, in 1989, was to strip Kosovo of the autonomy it had enjoyed under the Yugoslav Constitution. His policies of ethnic polarization and hate-mongering in Kosovo ushered in a decade of police repression and human rights abuses throughout Yugoslavia. Those policies led to the breakup of Yugoslavia and to the devastating conflict in Bosnia.

For ten years, Kosovo's Albanian population fought a courageous, non-violent campaign to regain the rights they had lost... But about one year ago, President Milosevic upped the ante by launching a brutal crackdown. Police and military forces were sent in to terrorize civilians, killing hundreds and driving hundreds of thousands from their homes. Under these conditions, many Kosovars abandoned non-violence and threw their support to the Kosovo Liberation Army, although its tactics, too, were sometimes brutal and indiscriminate.<sup>85</sup>

While most of her address contains elements of the truth, Albright's account is "filled with inversions, omissions, and simplifications."<sup>86</sup> US media often leaves out context and history before Milosevic's 1989 revocation of Kosovo's autonomy, taking a stance that acknowledges primarily the Albanian narrative that the Serbs were the only ones who committed any extensive violence. Many ethnic Serbs complained that they were driven out of the province by Albanian nationalists, something that Albania claims is happening to them and the United States is acknowledging. In her speech, Albright also relays information incorrectly, stating that

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<sup>85</sup> Albright.

<sup>86</sup> Hammond, 97.

Milosevic's 'brutal crackdown' was a provocation when it was instead a response to the KLA's first major military offense in 1998.<sup>87</sup> The United States consistently frames the narrative around Kosovo as Albanian-centric, championing a nation that faced Serbian aggression, especially as Serbia exhibited violence towards other ethnic communities in the Balkans. There is no denying how aggressive and horrifying Serbian violence was in the Balkans, hence why the United States established this narrative.

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<sup>87</sup> Hammond, 98.

## VII. Kosovo 2023: Banjska

On Sunday, September 24, 2023, in the village of Banjska, Leposavic, “55 kilometers (35 miles) north of the capital Pristina,” a Kosovo police officer was killed when a police patrol was ambushed.<sup>88</sup> The gunmen then fled to a nearby monastery where they barricaded themselves and “traded gunfire with Kosovo police for hours,” leading to the deaths of three Serbian men.<sup>89</sup> The attack and ensuing combat represent one of the worst escalations between Kosovo and Serbia in years. However, Serbian and Albanian media outlets present contrasting perspectives on the details and implications of this attack.

In an article by the daily newspaper Kurir, a prominent member of the largest media group in the Balkans and Serbia, the attack is portrayed differently, framing the incident as the murder of Serbian men by Kosovo police. The Guardian recounts Kosovo police saying in a statement that “at least three attackers had been killed and one arrestest during the firefight,” indicating no specific reason as to why three gunmen had been killed, just that the exchange of fire and defense of the Kosovo police killed them.<sup>90</sup>

However, Kurir points out that the incident upset Serbs from the north of Kosovo and Metohija because “Predsednik Srbije Aleksandar Vučić potvrdio je da su ubijena trojica Srba i obelodanio da su tzv. kosovski policajci dvojicu Srba ubili bez razloga snajperom, a da su jednom odbili da pruže pomoć i ostavili ga da umre (“Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić confirmed that three Serbs were killed and disclosed that the so-called Kosovo police officers killed two Serbs with a sniper for no reason and that once they refused to provide help and left

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<sup>88</sup> The Associated Press.

<sup>89</sup> France-Presse. “Standoff between Kosovo Police and Serbian Gunmen Ends with Four Killed.”

<sup>90</sup> France-Presse. “Standoff between Kosovo Police and Serbian Gunmen Ends with Four Killed.”

him to die.”)<sup>91</sup> Serbian President Vučić framed this incident as an attack on Serbia as the deaths of the Serbians were unjust. Kurir helps provide a narrative that accentuates the victimhood of the Serbian community, suggesting a deliberate portrayal of the incident as an unprovoked attack on Serbs, emphasizing the alleged brutality of the Kosovo police.

As discussed earlier in my paper, this narrative strategy aligns with the broader concept of “othering.” By framing the conflict in this manner, Kurir contributes to the construction of an “us versus them” mentality, reinforcing the notion that the Serbian population is fundamentally different from and tormented by the Kosovo police. The emphasis on victimhood and the portrayal of Kosovo police as aggressors serve to solidify stereotypes and contribute to a divisive narrative.

Conversely, the portrayal of the same event by the prominent Albanian TV station, TV Klan, takes a different angle. TV Klan labels the Serbian men involved as “sulumesi (attackers)” and associates them with “grupeve kriminale (criminal groups).”<sup>92</sup> This deliberate framing strategy constructs a narrative positioning the Serbian individuals as aggressors or criminals, casting the police as victims. Most Western news outlets tend to agree with this viewpoint, which differs entirely from Serbia's. The United States ambassador in Pristina strongly condemned the “orchestrated, violent attacks on the Kosovo Police” that day, insisting that the “Kosovo Police (had) full and legitimate responsibility for enforcing the rule of law according to the constitution and laws of Kosovo.”<sup>93</sup> TV Klan's choice of language highlights the complicated dynamics of media narratives and emphasizes the media's decisive role in influencing societal attitudes and fostering divisions between different groups. In both instances, the strategic use of language

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<sup>91</sup> Drama na kim: Trojica Srba Ubijena, incident počeo u 2.46, Vučić Poručio: Kurti Jedini Krivac!

<sup>92</sup> Celepija.

<sup>93</sup> The Associated Press.

contributes to perpetuating a polarized narrative, further emphasizing the need to assess media representations in conflict situations critically.

Serbia's allies have also reacted in a manner that coincides with the general view that Serbia has of Kosovo and the Kosovo War. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressed concern over the heated tensions between Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo. He believes that "a huge explosion is being prepared in the center of Europe, in the place where, in 1999, NATO attacked Yugoslavia, violating every imaginable (international) principle."<sup>94</sup> This statement further proves the idea that framing and wording create a divide between the two countries. Russia maintains a position that suggests that the Kosovo war was not Serbia's fault at all. Russia is asserting how the international community's involvement in the conflict is currently keeping Kosovo from becoming part of Serbia, the main goal of Serbia.

In the media coverage surrounding the events in Banjska, both Serbian and Albanian media present distinct viewpoints that align with their respective narratives. The Kosovar government called for sanctions against Serbia, while NATO/KFOR rejected the idea of taking on policing duties.<sup>95</sup> In this situation, the Kosovo police acted accordingly against an armed attack, but Serbia continues to create a narrative of victimization and blaming. These perspectives are rooted in their ongoing complexities and tension. Still, they are what one would expect from each side, based on their perceptions of the Kosovo conflict and how they handle it overall in the media.

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<sup>94</sup> D. Stojanovic.

<sup>95</sup> "Serbia – Kosovo 2023: The Disinformation War."

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the events surrounding Banjska in 2023, the complexities and deeply rooted narratives that continue to shape the Kosovo-Serbia dynamic are evident today. Although the Kosovo War has “ended,” the conflict is still occurring, with violence flaring between ethnic Serbs and Albanians. The Kosovo government’s policy to assert authority over all of Kosovo does not sit well with the ethnic Serbs living in Kosovo, as they want more autonomy. In 2022, before the Banjska conflict, ethnic Serb representatives in the divided city of Mitrovica, Kosovo, resigned in protest against a ban on Serbian-issued number plates.<sup>96</sup> Following the resignation, “local elections were held in April 2023, but were boycotted by a majority of the Serb population.”<sup>97</sup> NATO sent around 700 troops this year to Kosovo after some of its peacekeeping soldiers were injured in the clashes.<sup>98</sup>

The boycotted local elections and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine are contributing factors to tensions between Serbia and Kosovo intensifying. In February 2023, efforts were made to mitigate tensions when “envoys from France, Germany, the EU, the US, and Italy engaged with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić (SNS) and Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti (LVV) to encourage the signing of a normalization plan, resulting in the unsigned Ohrid Agreement.”<sup>99</sup>

Both Serbian and Albanian media outlets have perpetuated the animosities and tensions that persist between the two nations. The media landscapes tend to employ selective reports, dramatization of events, and sometimes misinformation to bolster their respective narratives, as seen in the comparison of Serbian and Albanian articles on Banjska. Such practices distort reality

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<sup>96</sup> Kovacevic.

<sup>97</sup> Kovacevic.

<sup>98</sup> Kovacevic.

<sup>99</sup> “Serbia – Kosovo 2023: The Disinformation War.”

and inflame passions, making reconciliation and dialogue increasingly challenging. By continually stoking the flames of division, both Serbian and Albanian media contribute to a cycle of mistrust, hostility, and escalating tensions.

The influence of media extends beyond national borders. The narrative that Serbian and Albanian media outlets propagate shapes international perceptions, influencing foreign policies, alliances, and interventions. By prioritizing nationalist agendas over objective journalism and sensationalizing events to fit pre-existing narratives, Serbian and Albanian media outlets contribute to the perpetuation of hostilities and hinder efforts toward reconciliation and peace.

While both sides vehemently advocate for their perspectives, the broader landscape reveals a more nuanced reality. Given the current political and societal milieu, the call for balance remains elusive. The remnants of historical contexts and generational divides influenced by different political eras perpetuate a state of dissensus. It's crucial to recognize that while many in both Serbia and Albania lean towards European integration, their political leanings and aspirations differ. Serbian nationalists and their Russian allies lean towards more autocratic structures, contrasting with a significant portion of the population in both countries that see a future within the European Union. As we navigate the narratives from Banjska and beyond, it is evident that the Kosovo-Serbia dynamic remains deeply entrenched in historical narratives, media biases, and divergent political aspirations, perpetuating a cycle of tensions, mistrust, and unresolved conflict in the intricate Balkan landscape.



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