



TOPIC 4: Regional Conflicts

Teaching and learning aids

Actual centers of conflict

Background and perspectives in the Kosovo conflict

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1. Background

1.1. Who was in Kosovo first?

If we want to understand the origins of the present Kosovo conflict we have to go back in history. According to the views of external experts there is a “war about collective memories”. There is at least a dispute among nationalist historians on both sides.

The history of the Kosovo conflict is in any case older than the politics of Slobodan Milosevic, who after 1989 redeemed his pledge to “win back Kosovo for Serbia”. On the 600th. anniversary of the decisive battle against the Turks in 1389 Milosevic gathered together almost 2 million Serbs on the battlefield of Kosovo Polje on 28th. June, 1989. The speech he held here is regarded as the precursor of the war in the former Yugoslavia.

The autonomous status that Kosovo had held in the Yugoslav state of many nations was suspended by Milosevic, the province was put under the central power of Belgrade, and from 1989 onwards Kosovo was practically ruled by martial law.

Both with the Serbs and with the Albanians schoolbooks have played a not insignificant part in reproducing and hammering in the contradictory interpretation of history. Since 1999 the UNO administration (UNMIK) has neglected to undertake a true reform of the school curricula. In the same way there has been no initiative to persuade the different national groups to overcome at last their conflicting views of their own identity.

The historical bone of contention is this: „Who was in Kosovo Polje first?“ This is the idea behind it: the longer a history of settlement by one ethnic group has lasted, the more legitimate is its claim to ownership of the territory.

1.2 Serbian interpretation of history

The Serbs call Kosovo „Kosovo-Metohija“. The name Kosovo derives from the Serbian word *Kos*, which means *blackbird* in English. For this reason “*Kosovo ploje*” is often called the “Blackbird Field” in Germany. The word *Metohija* comes from the Greek and means *monasterial property* or *monasterial land*. It is noticeable that most geographical designations or place-names in Kosovo are of Serbian origin, while the Albanian place-names are mostly derived from Serbian ones.

Kosovo was the heartland of the Serbian empire, which was created by the nemanjid dynasty in the 12th. century. The Serbs maintain that Kosovo had been settled only by Serbs from the Middle Ages on, and for them Kosovo is the cradle of the Serbian nation. This assertion is, however, false, since the medieval Serbian

state had first been developed in “Raska” north of Kosovo, in an area between the present-day Montenegro in the west and Bulgaria in the east. It was from here that Kosovo was gradually conquered from the 12th. century on.

In the 13th. and 14th. centuries Kosovo was, it is true, the geographical, but not the political heart of the medieval Serbian state.

This period also saw the building of numerous Serbian monasteries in Kosovo Ploje which still remain standing today. In the 13th. century the seat of the Serbian church, which has been independent since 1219, was transferred to Peç in the western part of Kosovo Ploje. The patriarchate of Peç symbolizes the ecclesiastical independence of Serbian orthodoxy. Although the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox church has his residence today in Belgrade, he still bears the title “Patriarch of Peç”, and his office and orders are bestowed on him, symbolically at least, in Kosovo.

An important role in the Serbians’ clinging to Kosovo is played by the myth of the Battle of Kosovo Ploje in June, 1389. In this battle Ottoman and Serb armies clashed. Both army commanders lost their lives, and the defeat of the Serbian army marked the beginning of the downfall of the medieval Serbian state. In the following centuries many legends developed around the Battle of Kosovo Ploje, as well as a national myth that has hardly anything in common with the few historically founded facts. There are doubts, too, regarding the European significance of this battle, as historians remind us that it was not the Battle of Kosovo Ploje that opened up the way to Europe for the Turkish conquerors but the earlier Turkish victory on the Maritza (Bulgaria) in 1371.

It is also a historical fact that the army of the Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebeljanovic did not only consist of Serbian troops, but also of troops from all the Christian peoples of the Balkans. Prince Lazar’s army did not, therefore, have a “*national*” Serbian character, quite apart from the fact that the concept “national” did not take on its present-day meaning until the 19th. century and so does not apply to the Middle Ages.

In the course of the second great war between Austria and Turkey (1683-1699) the Habsburg troops retreated after advances and uprisings in Serbia back behind the Danube and Save rivers. They were followed by large numbers of Serbs to southern Hungary out of fear of Turkish reprisals.

Historians on both sides are in dispute: Who were the refugees? The members of which groups of the population fought on the side of the Habsburgs against the Turks? How many people left Kosovo at that time (the numbers vary between 70,000 and 300,000)? And above all: Was it this migration that caused a complete change in the ethnic structure of Kosovo?

Numerous Serbian historians are of the opinion that Kosovo was settled exclusively by Serbs before 1690, and that only because of refugee movement (which according to this theory only involved Serbs) did the Albanian settlement of Kosovo begin.

The so-called Kosovo Ploje myth only became politically significant in the 19th. century, when the religious and popular myth was blown up into a political and territorial claim to Kosovo.

At the London conference in 1913 which ended the first Balkan War - the course of which ran in favour of Serbia -, an important role in the solution of the territorial problems of the Balkans was played by the argument that Kosovo was a “*holy land*” for the Serbs. The Serbian point of view managed to win the day to a great extent, and Kosovo, which already at that time was mainly inhabited by Albanians, was made part of the Kingdom of Serbia.

This mixture of historical myths and territorial assignments at the conference table led to what the Serbs very euphemistically call “ethnic cleansing” at the end of the 20th. century.

1.3 Albanian interpretation of history

The Serbian nationalism of the 19th. century went along with the awakening of Albanian nationalism.

The League of Prizren, which was founded in 1878, was the first expression of Albanian nationalism. Its demands were in comparison moderate: reunification and administrative autonomy of the Albanian territories. In Prizren the Moslems were in the great majority of the League in 1878, but Roman Catholic delegates were also present. This shows that the political birth of Albanian nationalism had no religious character.

From the moment the two forms of nationalism began to take form and present their demands, which in regard to Kosovo were completely irreconcilable, both sides set to work to re-write the history of the region - each in its own way and incompatible with the other side.

In this general mobilization of the past and re-interpretation of history the Albanians clearly had the worse cards. The place-names in Kosovo are predominantly Slav. Since the Albanians cannot deny this fact, they make the colonization by force on the part of the Slavs since the Middle Ages responsible for this and emphasize the fact that the Serbs did not come into these regions until "much later".

The Albanians maintain that they were in Kosovo first, as they were the descendants of the ancient Illyrians and therefore the original population of the region.

The Illyrian people had in fact populated a large part of the western Balkans in antiquity, and indeed so lastingly and successfully that most peoples in this region can trace their ancestry back to the Illyrians to a greater or lesser extent, particularly in the coastal areas of Albania, Montenegro or Dalmatia.

Certainly there is nothing that could speak for a privileged relationship between the Illyrians of antiquity and the Albanians of today. This relationship, which is given prominence by nationalist Albanian historians, is used first and foremost to stress the "*original population character*" of the Albanians, who want to present themselves in this way as "*Europe's oldest nation*".

It is a historical fact that Slavs (to whom the Serbs belong) only immigrated to Kosovo from the sixth and seventh centuries onwards. The fact that Serbian history has its origin in Kosovo is from the point of view of militant Albanians merely the result of "colonial" conquest. And this leads Albanian nationalists to the conclusion that the Serbs have "no right of any kind" to Kosovo.

The Serbs in their turn argue that the Albanians' superiority in numbers is only a 20th. century development. This phenomenon, they say, has no natural causes but is to be explained by the massive invasion of Albanian immigrants from the mountainous regions of northern Albania. It is also claimed that the extremely fast growth of the Albanian population comes from an Islamic or nationally consolidated plan to outnumber the Serbs and thus drive them out of Kosovo.

A further "trump card" for the Serbs, which the Albanians refuse to recognize, is the existence of Orthodox churches and monasteries.

The holy places of the Orthodox Church, according to the arguments of the Kosovo-Albanian nationalists, were built on the ruins of Roman Catholic churches and monasteries that were already there before.

Since the Kosovo Albanians were only converted to Islam very late - in the 17th. and 18th. centuries - some of the nationalist groups were able to portray the Islamization of Kosovo as a "coincidence of history". These views are particularly representative of followers of Ibrahim Rugova, the first President of Kosovo.

It is also claimed that the true religion of the Kosovo Albanians is Roman Catholicism and that it is the Catholic religion that distinguishes the Kosovo Albanians from the Albanian population of Albania. In this ideological construction the tiny 5% Albanian Catholic community (60,000 Catholics) of Kosovo takes up a privileged position, just like communities that have remained faithful to the “Crypto-Catholic” tradition. The latter pretended to convert to Islam under the Ottoman rule in order to escape discrimination, but had preserved their Catholic faith.

According to the views of Serbian Orthodox monks, who are cooped up in monasteries that have been converted into fortresses and have to be protected by Nato forces, the Albanian extremists are following a double strategy of denial: since June, 1999 nearly 150 Orthodox places of worship have been devastated, desecrated or completely destroyed; in addition to that the Orthodox identity of the monasteries still intact is now questioned by the Albanians.

These polemics make it clear that the struggle for collective memory just as before is still in full swing.

1.4 History of the 20th. Century

In the 20th. century there alternated periods of domination of one people over the other. After the Balkan wars of 1912/1913 the Turks had to withdraw from Kosovo, and the region became part of the Serbian kingdom. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which had been dominated by Serbs since 1918, also followed a decisive policy of centralization and Serbification of Kosovo, to the disadvantage of the Albanian population. This was avenged in the Second World War.

With the aid of the German occupation Kosovo was split up into several parts. The north with its mines was under direct German administration, another sector was occupied by Bulgaria, and the largest part of Kosovo was assigned to “Great Albania” and so in 1941 came under Italian rule.

The multinational partisan army of Marshall Tito was only able to gain a firm footing very late in Kosovo: during the Second World War in Kosovo the Chetniks - Serbian ultranationalists – were in the front line against the occupation forces with their Albanian collaborators.

Following this, in the first years of socialist Yugoslavia, from 1945 there stood out again a new Serbian predomination. The new Yugoslavian constitution of 1974 – with its extensive rights for autonomy for Kosovo - made possible, however, a short period of blossoming for the Albanian population. Between 1974 and 1981 Kosovo experienced a “golden age” under the direction of local communist leaders, who were mostly Albanian.

This unstable balance was nevertheless very soon called in question once more by the development of national Albanian demands. Those who took part in the mass demonstrations of 1981, which were quelled by force by the Serbian police and the Serbian military, demanded that the province of Kosovo should be raised to the status of a federal state of Yugoslavia. This was seen by the Serbs as a first step towards complete secession.

From this moment on, there developed movements in two political directions – the demand for independence in a separate republic of Kosovo and the annexation to Albania – alongside one another. Whereas the professors of the University of Pristina, founded in 1968, emphasized Kosovo’s special identity, their students demanded the annexation of Kosovo to a “Great Albania” in underground movements. These underground movements were controlled by the stalinist Albania of Enver Hoxha. They gave rise in the 1990’s to the UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army).

On the other hand, the strategy of “passive and non-violent resistance” of Ibrahim Rugova (the Ghandi of Kosovo) and his “Democratic League of Kosovo” (LDK) led to the development of an Albanian counter-society. This was first and foremost a reaction against the violence which started from Belgrade and not aimed at co-existence with the Serbs. This destroyed any chance of reconciliation in the future.

Altogether the year 1989 represents a decisive turning-point in the developments in Kosovo. The famous Kosovo Ploje speech by Milosevic with its intimation of “winning back Kosovo for Serbia” was from then on the mainline of Belgrade policy.

Firstly leading Albanian politicians were deprived of office and several organizers of strikes and protest rallies were arrested. The Albanian protest against the loss of autonomy, which still found expression chiefly in hunger strikes and demonstrations, was finally responded to with the declaration of a state of emergency in Kosovo. From 1990 martial law was practically imposed in Kosovo.

A systematic „ethnic cleansing“ of the whole public administration and police took place. A similar development also started in commerce and industry. Here the Albanians were first eliminated from the administration and management levels and then the process was extended to further sectors. In the same way Albanian doctors and nursing staff were dealt with in the medical services and finally the whole of the media sector was brought under Serbian control.

The interventions in the educational system were particularly serious. With the introduction of Serbian curricula and the prohibition of Albanian text-books the Albanian language was almost completely suppressed in teaching. In the curricula for history, literature and language Albanian aspects were almost completely removed. Albanian songs and dances were banished from music lessons and finally as a prerequisite for enrolment at secondary school an entrance examination in Serbian language and literature was introduced. In protest against these discriminations there was soon a complete Albanian boycott of the public school system and the setting up of an unofficial parallel educational system financed by private funds, which, however, suffered from poor financial equipment and international isolation. Since practically no sector of public life was spared from anti-Albanian measures, there arose in Kosovo a parallel Albanian underground state with its own Parliament and government, its own medical service and educational system and an independent economic system free of Serbian influences.

At the beginning of the 1990's the Albanian resistance to Serbian policy developed along relatively peaceful lines in spite of a few violent incidents. Possible reasons for this are the supposed hopelessness of violent resistance in view of the existing ratio of forces, as well as fear of repressive measures by Serbian special units. Nevertheless there did develop a culture of civil, non-violent resistance. Through it the Albanians tried deliberately to separate themselves from the calumnies of Serbian propaganda and at the same time to show the international community that the violence sprang exclusively from the Serbian side. Like the Serbs previously the Albanians, too, saw themselves in the exclusive role of victims.

Since, however, the hoped-for international reaction failed to materialize, the radical forces among the Albanians were able to have their way for a certain length of time. With the rise of the UCK from the middle of the 1990's and the thereby clearly changed character of the resistance, it became evident that the renunciation of violence in the first phase had not been due to a fundamentally pacifist attitude, but rather that it had been a case of rational expedient decision. As a consequence of the UCK offensive from 1998 there began the phase of open conflict. The expulsion procedures carried out by the Serbian security forces between 1998 and 1999 in reaction to the provocative actions of the UCK led to a refugee catastrophe which eventually forced the international community to intervene. According to information from the UNHCR, by the end of the Nato air attacks 848,000 Albanians had been driven out of Kosovo.

2. On the present situation in Kosovo

The Kosovo conflict entered a new round in December, 2005.

Kofi Annan, the UN General Secretary, recommended to the UN Security Council the opening of negotiations on the future status of Kosovo, which had been under UN administration since 1999.

In the spring of 2002 the former German UN administrator, Michael Steiner, developed a concept whereby Kosovo should first reach a number of democratic standards before any definite status for Kosovo could be decided upon: more *democracy, freedom of movement, constitutional state and protection of minorities*, but also *economic improvement*. This concept is termed "*standards before status*".

Kai Eide, the UN special envoy for Kosovo, in October, 2005 presented a report on the situation in which he defined the present situation in the province as "untenable". Kosovo had so far fulfilled the democratic standards required by the UN only "unhomogeneously"; the prospects of a peaceful, multi-ethnic society were "gloomy" and the economic situation was "desolate". According to information from the World Monetary Bank nearly 40% of the inhabitants of Kosovo live at present on only 1.50 Euro a day, the unemployment rate is over 60%, among young people as high as 80%.

The Eide report takes severely to task not only politicians and institutions in Kosovo, but also Serbian politicians and the government in Belgrade. Among other things it states:

„The police and the judicial system in Kosovo are fragile institutions. The further transfer of jurisdiction to Albanians in this region should therefore be undertaken with the greatest caution. The presence of international policemen with executive powers will continue to be necessary. International judges and public prosecutors will also be indispensable to Kosovo's legal system in the coming years.”

The report also contains further points of criticism:

Corruption and organized crime are widespread. Politicians would regard the institutions and public services as their own property, and posts would be filled according to political or clan affiliation. In the attempt to create a multi-ethnic society very little had been achieved. The return of Serbian refugees was at a standstill. Serbs were still subject to infringements of the law. In order to recover their property, people who returned had to contend with lengthy legal procedures.

Since the withdrawal of the Yugoslav army and the arrival of the KFOR peace-keeping troops under Nato (about 20,000 soldiers) in June, 1999, according to unconfirmed reports some 2,500 Serbs and other non-Albanians have been murdered or been abducted and disappeared. In March, 2004 pogroms against the Serbian minority broke out, with 21 people losing their lives. About 50,000 Serbian civilians left Kosovo after 1999 for fear of acts of revenge by the Albanians. Over 200,000 members of minorities were driven out of the province in the same period (writes the Junge Welt, 10.10.2005) How uncertain the situation in Kosovo is still considered by these displaced persons is shown by the fact that only 12,000 of them have been able to make up their minds to return, and of these only 5,000 Serbs.

Kosovo (which is about half the size of the German region of Hessen) at present has c. 2.4 million inhabitants. After the last census in 1991 Kosovo had about 2 million inhabitants, of whom 1.6 million were Albanians (82%), 194,000 Serbs (10%), and 8% members of other minorities such as Roma, Goran, Bosnians, Turks and Montenegrins.

In 1918 the proportion of Albanians was 30%, in 1945 50% and in 2004 88%.

In 1961 227,000 Serbs lived in Kosovo (24%); in 1991 there were 194,000 and at the present time there are supposedly only about 100,000 left (c. 5% of the entire population). The demographic structure of Kosovo has therefore undergone a massive shift in favour of the Kosovo Albanians. Such a strong increase in population on its own provides a considerable potential for conflict in a country as economically underdeveloped as Kosovo, without the large number of ethnic lines of conflict.

According to Kai Erdé Kosovo cannot remain permanently under international administration, but in sensitive areas international supervision will continue to be necessary. The EU should take greater responsibility in this than it has done so far.

Eide sums it up: “We stand not in front of the last, but only in front of the next stage in international presence”.

The Albanian and Serbian fronts for the December negotiations have been clearly staked out: the Kosovo Albanians want complete independence and international recognition of their statehood, in the way that the former Yugoslav separate republics did. The Kosovo Serbs and the government in Belgrade, however, want the region to remain as part of Serbia with a still-to-be-defined autonomy.

In October, 2005 the US Senate unanimously passed a resolution on Kosovo, calling upon Belgrade and Pristina to find a compromise solution. In this resolution there is, however, no mention of possible independence for Kosovo.

In the autumn of 2005 it was reported that the Kosovo Albanians obviously want to create a *fait accompli* before the December negotiations start. The Kosovo Parliament would pass a bill of unilateral declaration of independence. “The will of the majority of the population “ would be expressed, it was stated in a parliamentary bill. And this “unshakable” will means: for Kosovo there is no question except of political independence. In the Kosovo Parliament there are, however, only Albanian members of Parliament, since in 2002 the Serbian Members of Parliament decided to boycott the Kosovo Parliament. This move had been preceded by another provocation that had not been sufficiently dealt with by the international peacekeeping forces : the lobby of the Parliamentary building had been decorated with frescoes depicting only scenes from the history of the Albanian people and thereby not taking into account the history of the other peoples in Kosovo.

So nothing has changed. Now as before each of the two population groups insists on the exclusive character of its own rights to Kosovo. Accordingly the presence of the “others” can only be the result of usurpation, force or colonization.

Belgrade on the other hand has given to understand that Kosovo could be granted “more than autonomy, but less than independence”, whatever that may mean.

This diametrical opposition between Albanians and Serbs, i.e. “complete political independence and sovereignty” on the one hand and “high level of autonomy but no independence” on the other, is difficult to bridge in negotiations.

Both ethnic groups live in parallel worlds and cannot agree either over the past nor for the future on an acceptable version of facts or aims, as each side suspects the other of being collective murderers. There is no civilian society capable of compromise, just as there are no neutral mass media.

3. Perspectives

3.1 Standards before Status

The UN concept of „standards before status“ for Kosovo so far has not produced any great progress in the last 5 years. And there is the danger that the Albanians see a source of the deadlock in the international

administration of Kosovo, particularly as this administration up till now has been strictly intent on not anticipating definite matters of status.

But it is important for the Albanians to know that Belgrade is losing all possibility of influence in Kosovo and so questions of security and property can at last be bindingly resolved under international law. The Kosovo Serbs also have to bear in mind that they must in the long run co-exist with an Albanian majority.

If they do not accept this, then their only options are separation of Kosovo or emigration.

3.2 Separation of Kosovo

Some observers see the simplest solution of the conflict in the partition of Kosovo. But for a series of Serbian enclaves or “exclaves” an undivided land would be impossible without transfer of population and exchange of territory. This could give rise to a new refugee problem; the viability of a remainder of Kosovo would be limited and maintenance from the international community could turn out to be necessary. If annexation of South Kosovo to Albania were tried, this could give rise to an Albanian-Serbian antagonism; finally a precedence would be created which could also be a danger to the fragile structure in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia.

3.3 Status before Standards

Conceding full sovereignty to Kosovo without strict conditions from the international community would also be a dangerous precedent and neither would it solve the socio-economic problems of the population of Kosovo.

The International Crisis Group, the think-tank established with the EU in Brussels, demanded in January, 2005, that in the question of status the following 4 fundamental rules absolutely must be observed:

1. absolute protection of minority rights in Kosovo;
2. no return of Kosovo to the Belgrade government
3. no unification of Kosovo with Albania or any neighbouring state or territory (the integration of Kosovo in the EU is in prospect)
4. no partition of Kosovo

A concrete timetable for political independence with the above-mentioned conditions could, in the opinion of some observers, prevent the partition of Kosovo into a Serbian north and an Albanian south, as exists de facto at present and is maintained by force in Mitrovica.

Above all, there would be an end to the provisional state of affairs, which in Kosovo makes the solution of all its problems difficult, starting from the registration of the inhabitants for elections right through to the “Field of Blackbirds” red wine, which cannot be exported because the country of origin has to be stated on the label. The Kosovo wine-growers would rather tip their harvest into the river than print “Federal Republic of Yugoslavia” on the labels.

If the international community of nations were to bring itself to a rapid recognition of Kosovo under international law, without guarantees with respect to human rights and extensive political rights for the Serbs (and the other minorities), then this would in all probability mean a mass exodus of 100,000 Serbs.

4. The Kosovo conflict and values

At the climax of the so-called „ethnic cleansing“ of Kosovo, i.e. driving out the Albanian population, Nato intervened in 1999 with air-attacks against Serbia in order to protect the right to a home-country, albeit without proper legitimation from the UNO. This action, which set morality above law, created new yardsticks that now have to be valid for the right to existence for the Serbs who have remained in Kosovo, too.

But how and through whom is the right to existence best guaranteed? Is it now as before the ethnic, as homogeneous as possible national state within the framework of the rules of international law accepted on all sides? Or can it in future also be regions with partial autonomy, whose security needs and economic advancement lie in the hands of transnational institutions?

The Foundation for Science and Politics, which advises the German Federal Government, in 2005 suggested the following model: the creation of a de facto (but not de jure) independent multi-ethnic Kosovo (a republic) inside a democratic and re-federalized Yugoslav alliance of states (the 3 republics option of the EU) with simultaneous, step-by-step, regional integration and association with the EU (privileged partnership).

Nevertheless in May, 2006 Montenegro rejected with more than 55% of the votes the federation with Serbia and after this is moving first of all in the direction of a national state. This example will also influence the position of the EU in Kosovo, for how can the EU refuse the Kosovar majority population rights that it has to accept in Montenegro? It can be seen here that majorities in democracies also establish rights, and are these rights worth less than those of minorities?

The UNO - and in the Balkans particularly the EU - are forced more and more into the role of referees in the field of tension between morality and law, and this also holds increasingly for economic questions.

Since both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs just like Albania and Serbia, too, seek medium-term association with the EU, mainly because of economic interests, the EU has a very important influential role in the solution of the Kosovo conflict.

Any peaceful final solution to the Kosovo conflict will only be successful with considerable financial resources and in terms of time the indefinite presence of international peace-keeping forces, including the USA.

In the collection of materials there are the results of an opinion-poll among a representative part of the population carried out in Kosovo in December, 2004.

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