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Research Article

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# Unstructured Daily Encounters: Serbs in Kosovo after the 2008 Declaration of Independence

Orli Fridman\*

This text focuses on Serb-Albanian relations in Kosovo in the aftermath of the February 2008 declaration of independence. It examines encounters between Serbs and Albanians taking place in the capital Prishtina. My analysis centers on those encounters from the point of view of Serbs from Kosovo, mostly those living south of the Ibar River in the area of the municipality of Gračanica, who work in the capital, commute daily into the city, and thus partake in the public and social life there. Such interactions are scarce, as Serb communities in Kosovo are mostly segregated and disconnected from the newborn state. Yet, they do take place on a small scale. I analyze daily encounters by looking at the imaginary and existing boundaries people have to cross if they choose participation over isolation. The text aims to uncover such practices, which may point to possible models for change of inter-group relations, as well as contribute to the discussions about conflict transformation in Kosovo.

**Keywords:** Kosovo, Serbs in Kosovo, Serb-Albanian relations, encounters, conflict transformation

## Introduction

Kosovo's population has been through tremendous changes since the departure of the Serbian State Administration from Kosovo and the Kumanovo agreement that ended the NATO bombing more than a decade ago. In the aftermath of the 1999 NATO intervention and UN resolution 1244, Albanian refugees returned to their homes in Kosovo, and the Serb population either left or became a minority in a new post-intervention Kosovo.<sup>1</sup> The situation is

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<sup>1</sup> Serbs were a minority in Kosovo even prior to the 1999 intervention, but remained under direct control of the Serbian forces. In post-intervention Kosovo (post-1999), the term 'enclaves' was introduced in reference to areas populated by Serbs south of the Ibar River, who live in isolation from the surrounding Albanian environment. See Tolvaišis, Leonas. 2011. *The 'New Reality' seen from the Enclave: Kosovo Serbs' Experience*, in *Kosovo: Independence, Status, Perspectives. Adjusting Regional Policies of Ethnicity and Borders*, edited by Janjić, Dušan and Ylber Hysa. Bologna: University of Bologna, 45-68, 45-47. The term was gradually replaced with 'Serb municipalities' in post-independence Kosovo (post-2008), when the Kosovar authorities initiated the creation of new municipalities with a Serb majority in compliance with the Ahtisaari Plan. See Krasniqi, Gëzim.

different in the four municipalities in the north of Kosovo and particularly in Mitrovica, a town divided by the Ibar River, where Serbs north of the riverbank constitute a significant majority and have territorial continuity with Serbia. In practice, since 1999, Serbia and Kosovo have both exercised partial sovereignty over the North,<sup>2</sup> which resulted in a condominium-like situation of overlapping Serb and Kosovar jurisdictions.<sup>3</sup> In other parts of Kosovo, however, the space is now dominated by Albanian symbols, language and culture, with Serbian language and symbols restricted to certain areas only. As according to Krasniqi, “after the war in Kosovo [...] Albanians had almost a total monopoly of the symbolic life in the territory of Kosovo.”<sup>4</sup>

A reversal of the former asymmetrical power relations has significantly changed the lives of Kosovar Serbs and Albanians, transformed the inter-group relations between them, and created a sense of a frozen conflict in Kosovo.<sup>5</sup> After a period of Serbian domination and oppression,<sup>6</sup> Kosovo is now largely dominated by Albanian politicians, Albanian language, politics and symbols, and is heavily engaged in the process of state building. The shift in the asymmetry of power relations in Kosovo, as discussed above, has also created a new reality on the ground, which culminated in Kosovo’s declaration of independence in February 2008. In this paper, this shift is approached and understood as crucial in reshaping both intergroup relations inside Kosovo and the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as in transforming everyday lives of both Serbs and Albanians during the past decade in Kosovo. Given this shift, new forms of relations between the majority and minority are formed inside Kosovo (even though mostly rejected by the presence of the Belgrade-run parallel structures in Kosovo), as well as potential new forms of relations between Serbia proper and Kosovo.

This text centers on one aspect of everyday lives of Serbs living south of the Ibar River by focusing on what I refer to here as to *unstructured daily*

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2012. Overlapping jurisdictions, disputed territory, unsettled state: the perplexing case of citizenship in Kosovo. *Citizenship Studies* 16(3-4), 353-66, 359.

<sup>2</sup> Civil administration, health, education, public services and land use regulation are all run by Serbian rules. According to the 2013 Brussels agreement, Serbia promised it would dismantle its governing structures on the territory of Kosovo, and that the four northern municipalities would be created under Kosovo Law. Serbs from the north and the rest of Kosovo would be granted autonomy over education, culture, health and urban planning. Big Deal. 2014. [Civic Oversight of the Kosovo-Serbia Agreements Implementation](#). *BIRN* (accessed: 25. April 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Krasniqi, *Overlapping jurisdictions*, 354.

<sup>4</sup> Krasniqi, Gëzim. 2012. State Borders, Symbolic Boundaries and Contested Geographical Space: Citizenship Struggles in Kosovo. Paper presented at the annual ASN World Convention, Columbia University, 19-21 April, 13.

<sup>5</sup> To put this in a broader historical context, “power has changed hands many times between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo’s turbulent history. Domination of one community over another emerged as a defining feature of Serbian Albanian relations in Kosovo, whether during the Ottoman period, the World Wars, or Communism.” Kostovicova, Denisa. 2005. *Kosovo: the Politics of Identity and Space*. London and New York: Routledge, 2.

<sup>6</sup> I refer to the late 1980’s and 1990’s to post-autonomy Kosovo. However, this period should be analyzed in the broader context of the collapse of Yugoslavia, the rise of nationalism and nationalist projects, and Yugoslavia’s political framework in relation to Kosovo. For an analysis of patterns of Serbian state violence in Kosovo see Ron, James. 2003. *Frontiers and Ghettos: State Violence in Serbia and Israel*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 65-87.

*encounters* between Serbs and Albanians taking place in the capital Prishtina.<sup>7</sup> My analysis centers on these encounters from the point of view of Serbs from Kosovo from the area of the municipality of Gračanica, who work in the capital, commute daily into the city and, as such, attempt to interact and partake in the public and social life. Such interactions are almost non-existent, as Serb communities in Kosovo are mostly segregated and disconnected from the newborn state. Yet, they do take place on a small scale. I do not attempt to offer here an analysis of the recent growing power of Serbian political parties in Kosovo, their participation in local and general elections and their role in forming coalitions. Instead, I focus on the perspectives of ordinary people in their everyday lives and on questions related to their sense of belonging, acceptance, and ability to be part of the new state.

Here, I analyze unstructured daily encounters by looking at the imaginary and existing boundaries people have to cross if they choose participation over isolation. In the daily short commute between Gračanica and Prishtina, those who work or study in the capital experience such encounters as a matter of negotiating everyday life; they do so by exiting their space (municipality) and participating in life in Kosovo, sharing work space with local Albanians or attending classes at the American University of Prishtina (AUK), which is predominantly Albanian.

My aim in this text is to uncover such ongoing dynamics, which may point to possible models for change in relations between Serbs and Albanians in post-independence Kosovo. If future processes of conflict transformation are to take place in Kosovo, such models may become useful and even central. I also aim to explore how the shift in power relations between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo has transformed relationships and encounters between members of those communities. Finally, the text should contribute to the discussions about post-conflict transformation in Kosovo by deepening the understanding of local perspectives towards the recent past, the recent war and intergroup relations.

In focusing on intergroup relations in Kosovo and on the issue of power relations, I do not claim that this is a region torn between Serbs and Albanians only, nor do I wish to oversimplify other existing divisions and issues among Kosovo's population and societies today; I also do not wish to ignore the rich history of other communities in Kosovo.<sup>8</sup> I do, however, focus my study here on Serb-Albanian relations in the context of the new post-Yugoslav realities, and more specifically the reality created in Kosovo after June 1999. While the literature about Serb-Albanian relations in Kosovo mostly captures relationships defined by conflict and victimization, competing narratives of the

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<sup>7</sup> All towns and cities in Kosovo have their local names in both Albanian and Serbian languages. Here, I use the English spelling for Prishtina. The Albanian spelling reads *Prishtinë* and the Serbian *Priština*.

<sup>8</sup> See Duijzings, Ger. 2000. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. London: Hurt & Company. This book captures realities that in many ways no longer exist in Kosovo after 1999. I particularly relate to his postscript comment in the Preface, as he explains that his manuscript was finalized before the start of the NATO actions against Serbia and that these were therefore not included in his account: "although these developments have put my work in a completely different light, I could not include them in my account. It is sad that this book now bears testimony to a world that may have ceased to exist" Duijzings, xii.

past, animosity and an on-going state of crisis,<sup>9</sup> my aim here is to uncover additional forms of relations existing today and which result from everyday needs and the change in power relations.

It is estimated that nearly 130,000 Serbs live in Kosovo today (out of 1.7 million total inhabitants),<sup>10</sup> which represents two-thirds of the pre-war Serb population. The majority of this number of Serbs residing in Kosovo lives south of the Ibar River. According to the European Stability Initiative (ESI), while almost all urban Serbs have left Kosovo (with North Mitrovica now the last remaining urban outpost), many of the rural Serb population have never left their homes.<sup>11</sup> Unlike in the north, where most Serbs refused to accept the new state institutions created after the 2008 declaration of independence, in other parts of Kosovo, there were and are some on-going steps that indicate change and participation in political processes and institutions of post-independence Kosovo. Yet, Serbs in Kosovo do not speak Albanian and were ultimately absent from the newborn state and the process of its creation, which leaves open the question of their integration into Kosovar society. Therefore, the situation can still be described as a frozen conflict.

The 2013 Brussels agreement, and especially its ambiguity regarding the creation of the association of municipalities and the question of integration, continues to contribute to these on-going challenges. Unlike in the north, in other parts of Kosovo, there are some steps that indicate change. Hence, the December 2010 parliamentary elections in Kosovo (the first to be held after the declaration of independence) already indicated a split among the Serbs in Kosovo, as the boycott of the elections was not unanimous. The high turnout of Serbs in the elections and their willingness to participate in Kosovo's institutions may have then already pointed to changes and movements within the Serb community south of the Ibar,<sup>12</sup> as these voters prioritized economy, employment and infrastructure development over security issues. According to the Helsinki bulletin, "for Serbs advocating participation in the elections, the focus was on practical issues which promote living and working conditions, whereas northern Kosovo's advocates of the boycott have united around the idea of contesting Kosovo's independence, just as they have been doing throughout the past decade."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Zdravković-Zonta, Helena. 2009. Narratives of Victims and Villians in Kosovo. *Nationalities Papers* 37(5), 665-92; Zirojević, Olga. 2000. *Kosovo in the Collective Memory*, in *The Road to War in Serbia*, edited by Popov, Nebojša. Budapest: Central European University Press, 189-211.

<sup>10</sup> According to the information available from the 2011 census, the population of Kosovo stands at 1,733,872. See the results published by the Statistical Office of Kosovo (accessed: 24. April 2015). Serbs in Kosovo were split in their participation or boycott of the census. Barlovac, Bojana. 2011. *Kosovo Serbs at Loggerheads over Census*. *BalkanInsight*, 30 March 2011 (accessed: 24. April 2015). About two-thirds of the Serb population live south of the Ibar River.

<sup>11</sup> Judah, Tim. 2008. *Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 102-104.

<sup>12</sup> On participation in the elections see: Lazarević, Tanja. *Kosovo Serbs, divisions getting deeper after the elections*. *Balcani e Caucaso*, 22 December 2010 (accessed: 24. April 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Early Parliamentary Elections in Kosovo. *Helsinki Bulletin*. No. 73, January 2011. For the November 2013 municipal elections in the northern municipalities and the June 2014 general election see *Big Deal*, 29-31.

## 1. About the Research

This article is part of a larger research project I conducted on Serb-Albanian relations. The project analyzed intergroup encounters between Serbs and Albanians from Kosovo and Serbia, with the goal of comparing *Structured Encounters* with *Unstructured Daily Encounters*.<sup>14</sup> The *Structured Encounter* part of the research analyzed meetings and projects initiated and facilitated by local as well as international organizations, with the aim of generating exchange and interactions between participants from Kosovo and Serbia proper who otherwise would not have the opportunity to meet each other and interact as equals. More specifically, it analyzed the *Visiting Program* as a site of structured encounters; the *Visiting Program* is a project initiated and facilitated by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), a Belgrade- and Prishtina-based NGO.<sup>15</sup>

Facilitated structured encounters between groups in conflict are a well-researched topic that is discussed and analyzed in Peace Research literature as projects in Peace Education.<sup>16</sup> Such encounters, which are taking place in various societies in conflict, are often designed as dialogue projects aiming to overcome distrust and hostility between members of groups in conflict.<sup>17</sup> Less researched, however, are *Unstructured Encounters* between members of societies in protracted conflicts.<sup>18</sup> Unlike structured encounters that are a matter of choice of participants, unstructured encounters are here understood as occurring as part of everyday life of ordinary people living in divided and/or mixed spaces. While much of the research on other conflict areas deals with such daily encounters in the context of mixed and/or divided cities and towns,<sup>19</sup> the challenge here is in the analysis of such encounters in a city like Prishtina, which used to be mixed, but after the recent war, is predominantly an Albanian city with almost no Serbs left.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The project titled “Structured and Unstructured daily Encounters between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo and Serbia” was supported by a grant provided by the Berghof Foundation.

<sup>15</sup> Fridman, Orli. 2013. *Structured Encounters in Post-Conflict/Post-Yugoslav Days: Visiting Belgrade and Prishtina*, in *Civil Society and Transitional Justice in the Balkans*, edited by Simić, Olivera and Zala Volčić. New York: Springer, 143-62.

<sup>16</sup> See for example: Bekerman, Zvi. 2007. Rethinking intergroup encounters: Rescuing praxis from theory, activity from education, and peace/co-existence from identity and culture. *Journal of Peace Education* 4(1), 21–37; Salomon, Gabriel. 2004. Does Peace Education Make a Difference in the Context of an Intractable Conflict?. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 10(3), 257-74. As I discuss in my 2013 chapter, empirical research on education for peace is scarce in the context of the Western Balkans, and particularly in the Kosovo-Serbia relations literature. See Fridman, *Structured Encounters*, 146-48.

<sup>17</sup> Beckerman, *Rethinking intergroup encounters*, 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> See for example the analysis of cultural encounters in mixed towns in Israel where Jewish and Palestinian citizens of the state live: Monterescu, Daniel and Dan Rabinowitz (eds). 2007. *Mixed Towns, Trapped Communities: Historical Narratives, Spatial Dynamics, Gender Relations and Cultural Encounters in Palestinian-Israeli Towns*. Burlington: Ashgate.

<sup>19</sup> See for example: Rosen, Rolly. (ed.). 2012. *Haifa Between Reality and a Vision for a Shared City*. Haifa: Shatil; Anderson, James. (ed.). 2008. *Divided Cities/Contested States Working Paper Series*. (accessed: 24. April 2015).

<sup>20</sup> “For the most part of the 1990s, Serbian symbols and the Cyrillic script dominated Prishtina. Despite the fact that more than 85 per cent [...] of the population of the capital city was Albanian, the landscape was almost completely Serbian.” According to Krasniqi, this drastically changed in the months after June 1999, when most elements of the Serbian symbolic culture and landscape in Kosovo were deliberately destroyed and a new Albanian dominated landscape emerged, representing and commemorating people and events that signify Albanian nationalism and

Therefore, I approach unstructured encounters in post-1999 Kosovo as part of the necessities and needs of Serbs working and/or studying in Prishtina and commuting daily to the capital. The purpose of the study is to shed light on such hidden practices and exchanges between ordinary citizens that at times take place away from the spotlight of the international actors and policy analysts.

This text, therefore, goes beyond the analysis of meetings of structured encounters that are initiated by the presence of the international community or by local civil society organizations. It offers a glimpse into unstructured daily encounters that also shape the relations between communities in Kosovo and that are often unheard of. It offers a contrast to much of the discourse on intergroup relations in Kosovo, which is shaped by the massive presence of the international community and is frequently reduced to the term *inter-ethnic relations*, a phrase that is emptied of the political context of minority-majority relations and identities whose power relations have been reversed. Terms such as *inter-ethnic society* and *inter-ethnic cooperation* shape meetings, such as the one between local Serb and Albanian leaders held in Prishtina just days before the declaration of independence, with the goal of “improving inter-ethnic trust...to reduce inter-ethnic tensions, encourage consensus on local issues, and ultimately help political elites of both communities take ownership and responsibility for the future of their communities.”<sup>21</sup>

Such meetings, hosted by international organizations, constitute structured and planned facilitated encounters between local politicians as they focus on an open discussion that may “encourage cooperation on non-status issues [...] and provide assistance in building a stronger multi-ethnic society in Kosovo.”<sup>22</sup> But here I ask: can such encounters help address the issues stemming from the change in power relations between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo? Can they shed light on the type of relationships and exchanges currently taking place in Kosovo, in a less formal and less structured way, not only between officials, but also between ordinary citizens?

Since the early 2000s when I began my research primarily in Serbia, but also in Kosovo, what struck me most was the change of the power relations between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. Coming from Israel, where the asymmetry of power is at the heart of the conflict, I could not but see these changes. Change was and still is occurring very rapidly after 1999. One participant in the study from Gračanica, in response to my e-mail sharing the first draft of my report on Structured and Unstructured Encounters in Kosovo, commented, “As you know, things in Kosovo are changing so fast, please make your paper stay “alive” and publish it ASAP.” This indeed remains a challenge for scholarly research in any post-conflict society and particularly in Kosovo. Yet my interest here is not in the analysis of the recent changes following the agreements signed between Kosovo and Serbia (in 2013), but in the everyday lives of ordinary people and the effect conflicts and agreements have had and still have

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nationhood. Krasniqi, *Citizenship Struggles in Kosovo*, 13-17.

<sup>21</sup> N.N. *Strengthening Interethnic Political Dialogue in Kosovo*. *PER* (accessed: 24. April 2015).

<sup>22</sup> N.N. *Strengthening Interethnic Political Dialogue*.

on their lives. Having said that, some of the changes that have taken place on the ground over the years are substantial for understanding the data and analysis presented below.

The data collected and analyzed for this project consist of informal conversations, in-depth interviews and observations that I began to gather during my very first visits to Kosovo and Serbia more than a decade ago. It then culminated in two main phases of field research that took place in 2009 and in 2010/2011. It included twenty-five in-depth interviews and informal conversations conducted in Belgrade, Prishtina and Gračanica. Interviewees included participants of the *Visiting Program* from Serbia and Kosovo, individuals who did not want to take part in projects of the structured encounters sort, as well as Serbs from Kosovo who commuted daily to Prishtina mostly from Gračanica, but also from North Mitrovica.

The data reflect on and show some changes already taking place in everyday lives of Serbs in Kosovo during and after my research. The initial text was written before and right after news broke of the signing of the April 2013 Brussels agreement, which often brought more ambiguity than clarity to people's lives. As the 2014 report analyzing the implementation of the agreements suggested, "most available documents do not explain the full details on how the agreements are to be implemented. This has led to misunderstandings while those whose lives are most affected remain in the dark about what has been negotiated on their behalf, and thus unable to exercise the rights stipulated in the agreements."<sup>23</sup> However, taking these changes into account, I continue and focus on the still small scale of daily encounters that are taking place and being shaped in Prishtina.

## **2. On the Road from Gračanica to Prishtina: Unstructured Daily Encounters**

In the discussion that follows, I analyze a number of sites I identified as sites of unstructured daily encounters during the course of my research. I became interested in members of Serbian communities in Kosovo who chose to explore (even if cautiously) integration over isolation, who chose to stay in Kosovo and not leave for Serbia proper,<sup>24</sup> those searching for opportunities and everyday practices for a current, as well as future, existence in Kosovo.

### **2.1 Sites of Unstructured Daily Encounters**

Here, I refer to sites that I came to consider as spaces generating daily encounters: a) the Albanian side of the Merdare border crossing between Serbia and Kosovo, controlled by local Kosovar Albanian forces; b) the American University in Kosovo (AUK) campus in Prishtina; and c) work spaces, mostly of international organizations in Prishtina. In my analysis, I mostly relate to the two latter sites, although the first one will also shortly be discussed as an interesting site of daily encounters. At these sites, some local Serbs experience

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<sup>23</sup> *Big Deal*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> I learned that even among those who chose to remain and live in Kosovo, many families have a plan B in place, which, among other things, includes an apartment or a house in Serbia proper. This has been the case even more so after the events of March 2004 in Kosovo.



daily interactions with Albanians, which I refer to here as *unstructured daily encounters*. Although these encounters are also facilitated or enabled by the presence of the international community and might not be possible otherwise, they still constitute more casual interactions that are worth our attention.

These spaces of daily unstructured encounters raise some acute questions. What do such encounters tell us about the future of Serbs who still live in Kosovo? What might such interactions suggest in terms of the future of a multi-ethnic society in Kosovo? Given the reversal of power relations in Kosovo, what will be necessary in order to create a space where the Serb minority can become an integrated part of today's Kosovar society? Is it only the responsibility of the majority to create these conditions? What might happen once the international community leaves Kosovo? Will Serbs choose to integrate themselves in the new Kosovo by learning Albanian, participating in local elections and local institutions, using Kosovo license plates, etc.?

## 2.2 The Border

The first site that caught my attention was the border control in Merdare, now one of the border crossing points between Serbia and Kosovo. For some years now, my frequent van rides from Belgrade to Prishtina and back drew my attention to the interactions between the drivers, the passengers and the border policemen, interactions to which I tried to give meaning and analyze. I think of these daily interactions as demonstrating the shift in power relations between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo that has occurred in the last decade. Those who used to be stopped at checkpoints, or who were expelled from the province in 1999, are now the ones in power and in control of what now functions as an international border.<sup>25</sup>

In June 2008, almost four months after the declaration of independence in Prishtina, I traveled with the daily minivan from Belgrade to Prishtina. As on many other such occasions in recent years, the minivan, run by a private company from Gračanica, was a reminder of the number of people who continue to commute between the two cities on a regular basis. Over the years I have met various regular passengers on this ride: Serbs from Serbia (mostly from Belgrade) who work for international organizations in Kosovo and reside in Gračanica (though in some cases in Prishtina as well); Kosovar Serbs who live in Serbia proper (since 1999); doctors from Belgrade working in the parallel Serbian institutions in Kosovo; Kosovar Albanians who are visiting colleagues in Belgrade, who are in need of medical treatment in Serbia or who wish to renew their documents; NGO activists, such as those from the Youth Initiative for Human Rights engaged in the Visiting Program.<sup>26</sup> On this occasion, as we approached the border crossing between Serbia and Kosovo, some of the passengers became more alert in their seats and made sure to have their travel

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<sup>25</sup> The situation on the borders in Kosovo changed significantly. As I was crossing the Merdare border a few times a year beginning in 2001, I was able to observe the changes and the implementation of the agreements on the ground. In December 2012, Serbia and Kosovo reached a landmark agreement on border control, opening two jointly managed posts at crossings that had been barricaded or circumvented for two years. See N.N. 2013. [Serbia and Kosovo: The Path to Normalization](#). *Crisis Group*, 19 February 2013 (accessed: 24. April 2015).

<sup>26</sup> On the rides and visits between Prishtina and Belgrade, as part of the Visiting Program. See Fridman, *Structured Encounters*, 150-152.

documents ready (Serbian ID cards or UNMIK passports).<sup>27</sup> Across the border there was now a big new sign (placed there after February 2008) welcoming passengers to the Republic of Kosovo; some of the passengers commented on this with dissatisfaction, almost disdain. The driver, a young man from Gračanica, crossed this border every day. He knew the Albanian border policeman, who now asked him to step out of the vehicle and present his travel documents and license. Together with the customs officer they proceed to inspect the bags in the back of the van, and I listened carefully to their conversation that was taking place in Serbian. The driver asked if they could speed up the inspection that day. The border policeman smiled and replied, “if you recognize Kosovo’s independence right away, we can skip this entire procedure, and you can go ahead.” The driver smiled back relentlessly, and once the inspection was over we were on the road again. I got off in the outskirts of Prishtina with another young man who had been visiting some colleagues in Belgrade. The rest of the passengers continued to the last stop, Gračanica.

In contrast to the common media portrayal of relations between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, focusing in particular on the tensions in Mitrovica, everyday interactions out of necessity, such as the one at the border described here, may indicate a more complex picture if we focus on the reversal of the former asymmetry of power. With this shift, while Albanian identity is fully practiced and celebrated in Kosovo, Serbian identity in Kosovo is now subordinated, especially south of the Ibar River.

In mid-December 2010, while on the bus to Prishtina, I again observed and noticed the discomfort of passengers who made this trip regularly. Waiting at the border may take some time and cause delays. At the border, the border policeman gets on the bus; the communication between him and the passengers takes place in Serbian, as always.<sup>28</sup> They have to show their documents and to answer some short questions, such as ‘Where are you going to? Why? What do you have in your bag?’ The passenger near me (who I later discovered was a journalist from Kosovo who writes for a daily newspaper in Serbia) replied to this last question defiantly: ‘I have two pairs of underwear, one apple and one orange.’ According to him, such questions are only meant to harass people and show who is in control today. As he stated, “This is my country, this is my home, and I am treated as a foreigner.”<sup>29</sup> In *Politika*’s weekend edition he later wrote about his interaction at the border:

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<sup>27</sup> After 1999, Serbs in Kosovo continued to carry Serbian passports and ID cards, but most Kosovar Albanians (who had been stripped of their documents by Serbian forces either before or during the NATO bombings) were issued UNMIK passports. After February 2008, the Kosovo government began to issue local passports and local ID cards (passports are only recognized by states that officially recognize Kosovo as an independent state). Many Serbs now carry both Serbian and Kosovo ID cards and use both at the border. While entering Serbia with Kosovar documents used to be difficult or impossible, this issue regarding freedom of movement was resolved by the Brussels Agreements. See *Big Deal*, 20-21.

<sup>28</sup> This is likely to change in the future once younger generations begin to hold positions at the border, since many of them will no longer speak Serbian. The older generation still speaks it due to its upbringing in Yugoslavia.

<sup>29</sup> His comment in fact did not relate to Kosovo only, but to all of his travels, movements and border experiences in today’s successor states of the former Yugoslavia. I often hear reference in Serbia to this feeling that traveling in the former Yugoslavian space still feels as if it is all home, but needing to cross borders and carry a passport imposes a sense of alienation.

- “Where are you going? [asks the policemen at the border]*  
*- I am going home*  
*- Where are you traveling from?*  
*- From home, sir”<sup>30</sup>*

### 2.3 The American University in Kosovo (AUK) Campus in Prishtina

The AUK campus is located at the outskirts of Prishtina, a short car ride from the city center. AUK is a private institution and the language of instruction is English. The student body mostly consists of Kosovar Albanians, although a number of Serbian students from Kosovo have received full scholarships to complete their undergraduate degree at AUK over the years. Students from different Serbian locations in Kosovo attend classes and fully participate in student life on campus. This has created a site of daily unstructured encounters, in which, in spite of being a minority on campus, students feel that this is a safe space for all the minute they cross the gate and walk onto the campus territory. Safety and freedom of movement are still among major concerns of Serbs in Kosovo. Passing the AUK gate, the students who otherwise will not walk freely on the streets of Prishtina, feel free to speak in Serbian and even practice their Albanian language, as broken as it may sound.

The sense amongst the Serbian students at the university is that it is their responsibility to meet Albanian students and break down the barriers. As Ksenija explained,

*“I feel like this is Kosovo, and we are here, and we exist, and we are trying to be equal; I am treated equally here. I do not feel threatened to be here...but after I cross the gate of the campus, outside, I feel threatened. When I come with a cab and it stops here I feel, ok, I’m breathing again.”*

### 2.4 Joint Work Spaces in Prishtina

For employees working in some international organizations and institutions, the office becomes a site of daily encounters, as does the nearby café where they take their lunch breaks. In such places, people whose lives are otherwise completely segregated, meet and interact. Yet even under such conditions, the reality outside (of the office space) is sometimes difficult to discuss openly and frankly. In some cases, humor is utilized as the solution to bypass contested or charged issues of daily politics; in other cases, avoidance is the approach/answer in addressing issues related to the past or even the present. At the same time, collegial and friendly relations are being created. This may be understood as dynamics where opportunities for making a living allow forms of normalization through economic ties and exchanges to take over, as everyday needs and necessities of both communities are in fact often similar.

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<sup>30</sup> The article, written in two parts and covering the elections in Kosovo, was titled: *Merdare, Line as a Border: Between us is Garbage*. See Rakočević, Živojin. 2010. *Merdare, Linija Kao Granica* (1): *Između nas je smeće*. *Politika*, 12 December 2010, 9.

### 3. Unstructured Daily Encounters: Challenges and Realities

#### 3.1 Language and Belonging

Language is a major obstacle for full participation of Serbs in everyday life in Kosovo. Most Serbs do not speak Albanian. Some hold limited knowledge of the language and can understand a little, but they are still unable to use it for everyday communication.<sup>31</sup> According to the 2008 constitution, both languages are recognized as official languages in Kosovo; however, for one to partake in the public and social life of Kosovo, the use of Albanian as the language of the majority of the population is now crucial and necessary.

In Socialist Yugoslavia, Serbo-Croatian was a mandatory language in all the republics as well as autonomous regions, including Kosovo.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, in addition to their mother tongue, many Albanians in Kosovo (as well as members of other nationalities in other republics) spoke Serbo-Croatian.<sup>33</sup> Some Serbs living in South Serbia (Preshevo) or in Kosovo had some knowledge of Albanian. In general, however, it is fair to say that most of them, even with limited knowledge of the language, could not fully communicate in Albanian. Among the generations of Albanians who came of age in Yugoslavia, many are still fluent in the Serbian language. Among the younger generations born right before or after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, who came of age during or after the war, many have either a more passive knowledge of Serbian or no knowledge whatsoever.

Language is a divider in Kosovo today more than ever. For nearly twenty years, children of the Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities have not received education in both official languages. In most cases, they continue to receive separate education.<sup>34</sup> This divide affects other minority communities as well, which are often forced to choose between one of the two systems, or whose linguistic rights in education have yet to be fully satisfied by the Kosovo authorities.<sup>35</sup> As a result, Kosovo's new generations speak only one of the official languages and cannot communicate with each other in their respective local languages.

Serbs who work in Prishtina or study at AUK and who commute daily from Gračanica or Mitrovica spoke about their need to improve their Albanian,

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<sup>31</sup> There are exceptions to this rule. Some Serbs do speak Albanian, but they are an insignificant minority and do not constitute a meaningful number or a trend.

<sup>32</sup> Greenberg, Robert. D. 2004. *Language and Identity in the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Equality of status was granted to three languages in Kosovo: Albanian, Serbo-Croatian and Turkish. Secondary schooling (for pupils aged 15-18) became available in Albanian. The four faculties established in the 1960s were expanded and upgraded into the University of Prishtina. Inaugurated in February 1970, this offered teaching in both Albanian and Serbo-Croatian. Clark, Howard. 2000. *Civil Resistance in Kosovo*. London: Pluto Press, 39. According to Noel Malcolm, Albanian was at least in theory given equal status to Serbo-Croatian in official and legal matters; since most of the key officials and judges were Slavs, however, there was little immediate change in practice. Malcolm, Noel. 1999. *Kosovo: A Short History*. New York: Harper Collins, 318.

<sup>34</sup> Kostovicova, *Kosovo: the Politics of Identity and Space*, 182-212.

<sup>35</sup> Through the adoption of the Law on Languages in October 2006, the Assembly of Kosovo harmonized existing legislation on the use of languages, and reaffirmed the commitment to ensure the equal use of both Albanian and Serbian as the official languages. See: OSCE. 2008. *Implementation of the Law on the Use of Languages by Kosovo Municipalities*. OSCE, 9 July 2008 (accessed: 24. April 2015).

although usually according to them, they do not have this opportunity as their colleagues at the workplace all know more Serbian (than they know Albanian) and speak it rather well. In structured encounters on the other hand, in round tables bringing Albanians and Serbs together, the participants may communicate in English with each other. Some point to the absurdity of this. Mladen, who commuted daily from Gračanica and who completed his degree at AUK, spoke of this in the interview we conducted at the cafeteria on campus. He wondered, “Why don’t we go back to the way it was here in the 1970s and 1980s when Albanians learned Serbian in school and Serbs learned Albanian?” Although he did acknowledge that “If you really want to live here today, do business, get a job, you must get the basics in the Albanian language.” The situation is not the same for Albanians, who no longer see the need to study Serbian, though Mladen insisted,

*“Maybe they [Albanians in Kosovo] do not need to learn Serbian but they should...except for Albania, where else in the region can you speak Albanian? Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia, Bulgaria...Kosovo is surrounded with the Slavic languages...it will become difficult without the Serbian language, just like it is difficult for me here without Albanian.”*

In his comments, he reflects on the challenges that have come with the change of the power relations in Kosovo discussed above (although in his case, this no longer includes the inability to accept). He also reflects on the power relations between the languages today: Serbian and Albanian. Mladen did confess that he felt more secure knowing some Albanian, which according to him “softens up everyone, and makes each encounter easier and completely at a different level of interaction.”

Not being able to speak Albanian, or understand it, indeed contributes to the fears of Serbs in Kosovo, which are already deep. Travelling to Prishtina, even the ten-minute car ride from Gračanica as one participant told me, was at the beginning like going to a foreign country. According to her, many young people from Gračanica have never been to Prishtina and “some youngsters do not even know they cannot purchase anything in dinars in Prishtina, and they only live five kilometers away.”

Not speaking Albanian may single one out as being different or as not belonging; there are many foreigners working for the international community in Prishtina who do not speak one word of Albanian either, but most of them live in their own circles and do not interact in spaces that require everyday encounters, such as in public transportation. The everyday and unstructured encounters require Serbs to leave their communities and travel to Prishtina by bus, cab or car. I have heard more than once, as an anecdote, the experience of pretending to be a foreigner, and not a Serb, to avoid discomfort or confrontation in such situations. Milena, who resides in North Mitrovica, time and again opts to take the bus to Prishtina from South Mitrovica, where the frequency is higher and the prices are lower (than for the bus leaving from North Mitrovica). She often stays till late in Prishtina after work. “My only problem,” she states, “is that I do not speak the language. It is not because someone will recognize me, but people are afraid, there is fear of Albanians.” In her desire to pursue all the opportunities available for her as a young woman,

she decided she had to work out her fear by staying in Kosovo and insisting on her freedom of movement, unlike some of her family members who ended up leaving to Serbia proper, or who stayed in North Mitrovica, but who never travel alone inside Kosovo. Earlier on, she used to present herself as a foreigner if approached, but not anymore:

*“If I speak in English, people would know that I am a Serb or a foreigner, they ask where am I from and I have to lie, but I no longer want to do so, it makes me feel uncomfortable... once a woman on the bus asked me ‘Is this the bus to Prishtina?’ I answered ‘It is.’ She started talking to me, and I told her that I do not understand Albanian very well because I am a Serb. She was quiet for a while and then she asked me ‘Are you afraid?’ I said: ‘Should I be?’ she said ‘No.’”*

This everyday commute, as many other aspects of life for members of the Serbian minority communities in Kosovo, is all about very small decisions, not necessarily big declarations; it is about negotiating everyday life, the disclosure of one’s identity, the language one can speak, music one listens to, etc.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.2 Negotiating Everyday Lives

In that sense, negotiating everyday life is about accepting the reality, but also avoiding larger statements and declarations. The week of the February 2008 declaration of independence was an interesting period for such negotiations with oneself. Ksenija and her friends at the AUK did not quite know how to react to the declaration of independence. Some of them thought they would have to quit their studies, but this did not happen. While Kosovo was experiencing the euphoria of independence, Albanians were celebrating and Serbs, at least south of the Ibar River, kept a low profile. The fear that the situation for Serbs would worsen did not materialize, and the day of independence itself, as Milena jokingly commented, ended up being just a lovely opportunity for another day off.

In mixed workspaces and in AUK classes, it also meant avoiding political discussions. On campus it did take its toll on the students’ level of participation in both academic and student life, as in Ksenija’s experience:

*“There was a class discussion about Obama and McCain, and their position regarding the independence in Kosovo...they [other students] were trying to get my reaction, see my facial expressions...I was on my laptop just trying to stay calm...I choose not to react, also not on Facebook discussions, I know I cannot make a difference, and if I enter a fight, the next day they would not say hello to me in the corridor.”*

But what came after still did not change the situation on the ground, in terms of everyday life and daily necessities. Is there a dilemma regarding the status of Kosovo and its acceptance? If so, how can one go about solving it? When

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<sup>36</sup> In speaking to Serbs from Serbia proper who came to work in Prishtina for international organizations after 2000, I often heard reference to the practice of playing with one’s identity, at times in complete disclosure and at other times in complete disguise. I do, however, see the fear of Serbs from Kosovo as deeper and different from the fears of Serbs from Serbia proper living in Prishtina. Taking a job in Kosovo for some Serbs from Serbia proper was described to me as an economic opportunity, an adventure, even at times as some sort of an exploration.

posing these questions I often heard: “politically for me Kosovo is Serbia until Serbia decides differently.” On the other hand, it is about being realistic: “even though I do not recognize Kosovo as a country, I am still aware that I have to follow the rules and the regulations here, I know I would not be able to work without an ID card...I am not losing my identity because of that.” In such small decisions, of which ID card to carry, which license plates to have on one’s car, which language to use on the bus, or whether to take a job working for an international organization in the capital and leave the Serbian municipality to go to work, lies the acceptance of the reality, of everything that may make life easier, or somewhat normal. The desire to have a normal life and the wish for *normality* were repeated often. It relates to the intergroup relations that were distorted, as well as to the sense of living in a laboratory that will be discussed below. But with this wish comes the dilemma that raises the question similar to Milan’s:

*“Am I giving something up, in order to be part of the system and the institutions in Kosovo? It is about little things I thought I would never be able to do, imaginary border one has to cross, working for an international organization, or maybe for an embassy...back in 2000 many of us said ‘Kosovo will never be independent, and we will never recognize it...but we do live here now, and as much as I may not like it, not accepting the reality would create more difficulties.’”*

The acceptance of what is necessary in order to attain a sense of life and normalcy may create a gap between declarations and actions, but it is all about everyday small adjustments. As Milan put it, “everyone has to adjust, even the Albanian students in my class, the first time when they heard a Serbian name present there, they had a kind of a reaction and after that, it became normal.”

### 3.3 A Sense of Marginality and of Being Forgotten

The sense of marginality Serbs now have in Kosovo, after the complete shift in power relations, raises the sentiment of being forgotten. Those who came of age during Yugoslavia or even in the 1990s have very different memories of life in Kosovo. Prishtina as Kosovo’s capital and urban center was a mixed city, where Serbs mostly resided in the center.<sup>37</sup> Prishtina in the 1990s was home to many Serb students, from Kosovo and from Serbia proper, who attended the University of Prishtina, which then had no Albanian students.<sup>38</sup> While for Albanians these were already years of oppression and therefore conflict, for Serbs, especially for young students attending the University of Prishtina, these years were perceived as the golden years. As Tajana, who studied at the University of Prishtina in the mid-1990s and who now resides in Gračanica, openly told me, they never felt anything bad happening until 1997-98. After 1999, there were barely any Serbs living in Prishtina. The situation has been reversed. Reentering the city is occurring on a very small scale. It carries a

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<sup>37</sup> Diversity in the former Yugoslavia was more characteristic of urban areas, though even in towns ethnic groups were concentrated in particular quarters (mahale). In Kosovo, Serbs and especially Montenegrins usually lived in the town centers, whereas the new suburbs were dominated mainly by Albanians as a result of rural-urban migration. Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> About the Kosovo parallel structures in the 1990’s, see Clark, *Civil Resistance in Kosovo*, 95-117. For the most in-depth analysis of the parallel Albanian education system in Kosovo, see Kostovicova, *Kosovo: the Politics of Identity and Space*.

sense of pain of being erased, not only in Prishtina, but also in other locations in Kosovo. On her way to the airport, Ksenija passes by her childhood house, which is now empty: “I saw nothing, I saw my childhood that was destroyed, deleted; I do not exist in that place anymore, they deleted me.” And yet Ksenija is determined not to submit to the great sense of frustration and anger that is consuming people all around her, which is how she refers to the atmosphere amongst her peers in Gračanica. She elaborates, “I was only a child when the war happened, and I cannot have my life back, but I can try and be here, and not leave, leaving is the easy way out.” She talks about the sense of responsibility she had as a student at AUK to meet Albanian students and to break down the barriers. The tension between the feeling of being erased and the need to still exist does not disappear, even in the attempt to be like every other young twenty-year-old wanting to go out and have fun. The decision to accept an invitation from a colleague from work to attend her birthday party in Prishtina on a Saturday night was not an easy one. Returning home after that night made it even harder for Ksenija:

*“I went there and I saw hundreds of people, having the time of their life, enjoying...I could not but think to myself ‘they took this place from me...they occupied it from us, it used to be mine and now it is theirs only...”*

Given these emotions, she did not feel safe there, and she spoke about the fact that she could not just be there normally: “with all the music and everything, I felt they are celebrating for what they took telling us ‘it is ours not yours anymore’.”

In some ways, the choice to leave Gračanica, to get a job in Prishtina, even to go out on a Saturday night and experience everyday encounters with Albanians makes Ksenija and others like her see and experience what many inside their segregated and isolated communities choose not to. This is possibly a more difficult path that they chose in their search and struggle for normalcy. The question remains – can these realities and identities coexist given their grievances towards each other and given the deep sense of loss not only of lives and property, but also of power, experienced by the Serbs who remained in Kosovo as a minority?

On a more practical level, the question remains: can Serbs, as well as other minorities, be included and represented in state institutions? The responsibility for such inclusion lies with both communities, as the decision of many Serbs not to boycott the elections can be understood as a response to the feeling of being erased or forgotten. Tajana, who now works for an international organization, stressed that according to her experiences, in many cases today in Kosovo, Serbs and Albanians face common problems when it comes to economic challenges, infrastructure problems, etc.; however, in the absence of internationals, she suspects that Serbs will be completely forgotten. In her experience, the Kosovar institutions simply forget to invite the Serbs to a forum or a conference about local issues and problems, and continue very well without their presence.

### 3.4 Are We All Kosovars?



The language that refers to inter-group relations in Kosovo, as framed mostly by the presence of internationals, still dominates the discussions and their representations. Locals, however, ask: “Can Serbs be included when referring to Kosovars?” or “Can Serbs become a vital part of the society and of the new state?” As I heard in many conversations, put quite bluntly, “if you say you are a Kosovar, that most likely means that you are an Albanian.”

As discussed above, terms such as ‘multi-ethnic society’ are addressed quite critically, mainly because they are concepts imposed from above and not a reflection of people’s choices. By looking at everyday lives in sites such as shopping centers on the outskirts of Prishtina or the Gračanica swimming pool, one can access another reality in today’s Kosovo, which is not just imposed or forced. As summed up by one interviewee, “you come on a Sunday morning and you can see a hundred Albanians, a hundred fifty internationals, and one hundred Serbs in the swimming pool; no one paid them to come, they came just because they feel this is the right place to be on a Sunday summer morning. For me that is multi-ethnicity.” According to this therefore, multi-ethnicity has to be initiated from below by everyday needs and wishes, and not by the internationals still present in Kosovo.

### **Closing Remarks**

I began my inquiry by contrasting structured and unstructured daily encounters between Serbs and Albanians as a platform for a broader discussion about Serb-Albanian relations in Kosovo. The need for change in thinking about the existing frameworks and discourses regarding these relations is clearly emerging. Through discussions about structured encounters, especially those initiated by internationals, it seems that many locals in Kosovo share the opinion that Kosovo is treated like a laboratory experiment, which produces more cynicism towards the top-down discourse of multi-ethnicity. As one participant in the study from Gračanica explained, “sometimes I feel like I am in a laboratory; outside there is an entire world and somebody is watching me...they are pushing things inside, so they will see how am I going to behave.” Such discourses of a multi-ethnic society are perceived by many as imposed from above, locking individuals in their ethnic identities only, and even contributing to prolonging the frozen conflict. In the analysis presented here, by focusing on unstructured daily encounters, I was able to shed light on hidden practices and exchanges between ordinary citizens, at times away from the spotlight of policy analysts and even social scientists.

By investigating unstructured daily encounters occurring as a result of everyday needs of Serbs in Kosovo, this text sought to offer a more complex approach to the study of Serb-Albanian relations and of conflict transformation in post-independence Kosovo. By analyzing daily encounters in the context of highlighting the change of power relations that occurred in Kosovo, this study emphasizes the need for an in-depth analysis of those relations in a manner that approaches Kosovo not only as a disputed territory, but also as the home of changing local communities, where the perceptions and experiences of local people should be taken into account.

The data presented here strongly reflect a process of negotiation of everyday life that occurs on many levels; therefore, one should not be necessarily searching for large statements and declarations, for example, about the recognition of the independence of Kosovo, but rather for smaller markers of change that are far more meaningful. In such cases, the real need for change stems from the everyday necessities of both communities that are in fact similar. Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo face many common challenges, especially when it comes to economic developments and opportunities. Both communities face the need for better infrastructure, jobs and for a sense of a better future and a normal life. Such needs, as defining unstructured encounters, may generate processes that go beyond the process of integration in institutions and towards integration in social life.

Lastly, the study points to a more multifaceted depiction of daily lives of Serbs in Kosovo today. It should therefore contribute to a more complex understanding of the Serbian communities in Kosovo and may shed light on different voices, not only those of victimization and fear, but also those of acceptance, change, and of overcoming fear. It also highlights the difference between Serbs from Serbia proper and Serbs from Kosovo in relation to the challenges and dilemmas they face in Kosovo today; the situation points to the under-representations of Serbs from Kosovo in decision-making processes that concern their own future.

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