



Memory at the margins of the official narrative in Kosovo

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Abstract: It is time to step out of the yoke of the official narrative of Kosovo's patriotic identity, to ignore it and offer in response other narratives, unofficial stories by ordinary people, narrations from the margins of the community affected by the war. Ultimately, non-monumental stories that belong to everyday life.

Which event deserves to be memorialised and which should be forgotten? Are there some important moments or initiatives that face collective amnesia? At the moment, in Kosovo rather spontaneous and random replies are given to these questions, as the country lacks a museum of memory and a specific regulatory law for [memorialisation](#) at the central level, which would provide on the standards and guidelines for relevant memorials. The only institution that is responsible for the maintenance and financing of complexes and memorials is the Agency for the Management of Monuments and Memorial Complexes ([AMMKM](#)), which according to Law No. [04/L-146](#) acts as an independent entity and has a list of almost all the memorials built after the Kosovo war (1998-1999). However, this list is not comprehensive and there are deficiencies in the [provision of information](#), as an overwhelming part is dedicated to memorials about the heroes or martyrs of the war.

In terms of memory of the Kosovo war and the dealing with the past, memorialisation is generally left to self-financing and personal initiatives, as explained below. The Association of Veterans of War, but also simply friends and

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family, spontaneously or with the consent of the respective municipalities, have commissioned to erect statues and memorials for specific individuals, generally men, who were distinguished for their merits and heroism in the war. The choice is rather arbitrary, and does not necessarily acquire the consensus of the local community.

Under this spirit of informality, busts of heroes have been built, and some more modest initiatives of house-museums and exhibitions have been organised to commemorate civilian victims or events where many people lost their lives. Although the memorialisation of the dominant and active groups such as soldiers and combatants in the struggle for independence prevails, there are many self-produced initiatives of memorialisation about events such as massacres and deportations. These initiatives result from the dedication of family members who with their patience and sacrifice have preserved every centimetre of the remaining physical spaces, which are the only tangible traces of the tragedy. In particular, thanks to this endurance and patience, today the younger generations and the general public can gain some means to deal with the past, through artefacts preserved as they were and as the victims left them. In parallel, these house-based museums and memorials offer stories and testimonies that, though fragmentarily, are able to evoke a period that should not be forgotten. For example, the House of the [Qerkezi Family](#) is a monument of cultural heritage preserved by the owner of the house, Ferdonije, who is one of the many family members of the missing persons of the Kosovo war. The [House Museum](#) of Fadil Muqolli, who for more than 20 years has managed to preserve the area, is a house now taken under the protection of the AMMKM. The [Museum of Martyrs](#) of the Berisha Family only in 2021 was transformed into a small museum at the location of the massacre itself, Pizzeria Calabria, an initiative of the family, which was realised with the help of a private donation.

An example of memorialisation revealing ordinary people's stories

In pursuit of this pathway, initially paved by the families of civilian victims, the Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo ([HLCK](#)) decided, with their support, to work on an exhibition dedicated to children killed and missing as a result of the Kosovo war. 'Once Upon A Time And Never Again' is the title of the [exhibition](#) inaugurated on May 13, 2019, and still open, with the hope that one day it will become a permanent project and we will not be compelled to return the items and personal belongings of those children to their families, leading to silence the stories that such items so diligently bring to life. Since this exhibition is dedicated to an interrupted childhood, its title begins like fairy tales do, but unfortunately it is a story of war atrocities, and it ends making a wish: never again.

The exhibition is divided into three sections or spaces, each contributing in learning and understanding the events. As soon as one enters the area, one can immediately face the wall of a long hallway, displaying the names of 1.133 children who lost their lives or went missing as a result of the Kosovo war. While

in the corridor the visitor can hear the voice of [Gramoz Berisha](#), a survivor of the cited Calabria Pizzeria massacre, in Suhareka, who tells the story of how he, as an 8-year-old child, managed to escape from the truck where the Serbian forces were transporting the dead bodies of his family members. The small room is deliberately left dark so that the public can somehow experience the confession of the journey that Gramoz made in the dark when he was not daring to open his eyes, otherwise the Serbian soldiers could notice that he was still alive.

In the main room of the exhibition spaces, the story of the Kosovo war is left to the items and personal belongings of children. Each of these items reminds of childhood, but also the historical period, namely the 90s and a kind of life that belonged to us, where it is easy to identify ourselves, with shoes' models, clothes and their inscriptions, or unique self-made wooden objects used as toys, which are indicators of the extreme poverty that was shared in silence.

Photographs from well-known photo-reporters of the time are also featured in the exhibition, and a series of video gifs are presented on 9 screens where one can see fragments taken from the television news of the time. At no point are images showing the violence or the evidence of the atrocities committed against survivors or victims. This is because at every moment both the camera and its shot turn into a weapon with a dual capacity to witness and humiliate the victim, freezing and documenting the very moment of such violence. Photographs, like any other item in the exhibition, have been selected with the specific purpose of telling these stories with dignity.

The desirable way forward

It must be noticed that in the last decade we are witnessing a sort of fever of archives, memorialisation and musealisation of everything. It is a trend widely spread all over the world. With the progress of photography and technology it has become easier to digitise collections and archives or to offer virtual exhibitions, while all these weren't possible 20 years ago.

Such an interest risks conditioning even the historic narrative, or the depiction of what really transpired. If earlier states had an interest in developing an official historic narrative of its generally patriotic identity, now with the opening, digitization and democratisation of a large part of the archives, and therefore of the memory, the official narrative has lost its glittering heroic shine.

In this context, it is worth considering that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we were involved in a historical moment that had never been imagined before, and we saw numerous removals of [statues](#) around the world, more precisely of statues or memorials dedicated to powerful individuals whose contribution was often related to exploitation through colonialism, slave trade and other violations of human rights. The phenomenon was addressed more in the United States of America where such a topic is not new, and reached its peak as a result of the wave of massive protests after the killing of [George Floyd](#).

In the countries of the former [Eastern Bloc](#), these kinds of removals happened only as a result of the fall of the governments concerned and the liberation from the oppression of tyrannical heroes and usurpers of peoples' manifesting spaces. The current time is the moment to advocate in Kosovo for a regulatory law on memorialisation able to remove peoples from the yoke of the official narrative, to ignore it and to offer in response other narratives, unofficial stories, accounts by ordinary people, statements by civilians, particularly women and children, narrations from the margins of the community affected by the war. Ultimately, non-monumental stories that belong to everyday life.

This step forward would be also in line with the principle addressed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Farida Shaheed, in a report of 2014:

memorialization should be understood as a process that provides the spaces necessary to those affected by human rights violations to articulate their narratives. Memorial practices should stimulate and promote civic engagement, critical thinking and discussion regarding the representation of the past, but equally the contemporary challenges of exclusion and violence.

Moreover, this step forward would be in line with what has been addressed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation & guarantees of non-recurrence, Fabián Salvioli, in a report of 2020 on memorialisation processes in the context of serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law as the fifth pillar of transitional justice:

The aim is to enable victimized populations to explain a brutal past without justifying it, thereby easing existing tensions and allowing society to live more peacefully with the legacy of past divisions. Without falling prey to a dangerous relativism or establishing a homogeneous way of thinking, different narratives and interpretations of past violence can coexist in a democratic society, and this feeds into the dynamics of social reconstruction. (para 37)