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Transforming Conflict in Kosovo
Institutions must be enlisted to end ethnic dispute

By Elhami Shaqiri

The suffering of the recent war continues to influence relations between communities in Kosovo. Moving forward while remembering the past is a challenge that communities in Kosovo are facing.

Ethnic relations continue to be influenced by the violence of the 1990s. Those experiences do not belong to the past but remain an open wound, making reconciliation difficult. Hence, it is important to analyze thoroughly the root causes of the conflict between the Serbian and Albanian communities and then to reflect on them rationally with the aim of finding a resolution. It is important that members of the communities take an open-minded view of the future so that their past perceptions of each other change positively.

For the most part, transforming negative memories is about transforming negative perceptions, which unfortunately has been a major cause of conflict in the first place. Perhaps at this point the Franco-German case could serve as a model of moving forward. "Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer officially put an end to the calls for mutual destruction that had poisoned the existence of their countries for several decades, if not centuries. This change did not occur in the twinkling of an eye, of course. It required, among other things, profound modifications in the attitudes held by each country vis-à-vis the other." (Rosoux 2004, p.165) It is now 12 years since the war ended in Kosovo and perhaps it is time that both communities start a rapprochement. According to Rosoux, in the Franco-German case, "the authorities of the two states have systematically tried to avoid being locked into memories that are strictly national." (Rosoux 2004, p.165) Therefore, it is of great importance that the Serbian and Albanian communities should learn from the Franco-German rapprochement and avoid being locked into memories of their past.

Establishing positive relations between the conflicting communities in Kosovo still remains very challenging. "The shift from negative to positive feelings cannot be accomplished without a transition; in order to discover reasons why they can work together, the parties first have to get over the reasons why they fought each other." (Zartman 2005, p. 298) In this regard, considering that 11 years have now passed since the war ended, the transition period is probably reaching its end. Projects such as becoming members of the European Union and NATO could be an incentive for working together. Trade and economic cooperation is an important incentive to work together because it will result in gains for both communities.

To create future prosperity for all the communities in Kosovo, additional elements should also be considered. In regard to the past, it is crucial to separate facts from distortions. Those facts should be communicated

Left: A Kosovar girl celebrates the declaration of Kosovo's independence from Serbia in Pristina on February 17, 2008. Serbia has disputed the legality of Kosovo's independence declaration.

Right: Kosovo Serbs in the ethnically divided town of Kosovska Mitrovica march in protest of Kosovo's independence in February 2008. The protesters claim international support for Kosovo's independence violates U.N. Resolution 1244.

to the public so that people become aware of the truth. It is essential that political leaders from both communities agree to deal constructively with past issues, which in turn would enable communities to move forward and let residents get on with their lives.

Moreover, regional cooperation is a mechanism for building positive relations between countries of the region. All Balkan countries are multiethnic societies. Minority communities in one country are majority communities in another. For example, in Kosovo the Serbian community is a minority community, whereas in Serbia the Albanian community is a minority. In this context, the Ahtisaari Settlement indeed places great importance on economic cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia. The Ahtisaari Settlement states clearly that "Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia shall further develop economic ties between them." (Ahtisaari 2007, p.6) The same scenario occurs with Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro: Multiethnic societies should trade with one another and regard their minority communities as added value and important elements of economic cooperation.

In the Balkans, regional geopolitical dynamics unfortunately have created generally negative outcomes, which in turn have influenced relations even more negatively between countries. During the last decade, regional political dynamics reached their lowest level with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, followed by wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. For the most part, nationalism and rooted ethnic hatred provoked these regional wars, which in turn impacted even more negatively those same national dynamics. This vicious cycle continued for a long time in the Balkans because of political leaders who constantly breached international law and generally ignored diplomacy in dealing with political issues.

The EU is giving Balkan countries a clear signal on the prospect of future European integration. The EU has stated on many occasions that the future of the Balkans lies within the EU. This process depends on progress regarding EU accession requirements. Kosovo's status is certainly of great concern for the region as well as for the international community. In working out Kosovo's final status settlement, the international community has taken into account the historical perspective in the solution to end the cycle of violence between the communities in Kosovo and the region in general. The region is looking to the future and searching for a new vision based on security, stability and cooperation.

Furthermore, it is important to realize that regional doubts about the creation of "greater Kosovo" are ending as this issue is resolved by the Ahtisaari Settlement, which states that "Kosovo shall have no territorial claims against, and shall seek no union with, any State or part of any State." Now that Kosovo's status is largely settled, countries in the region should prioritize economic development and regional trade, as well as pursue an EU agenda evidently

supported by the majority of the region's citizens. Indeed, a long-term settlement in Kosovo will bring even more peace, stability and economic development.

It is important to realize that to achieve sustainable peace and stability in Kosovo, it is essential to preserve its unity and to promote integration between the communities. This, of course, takes time. But if Kosovo wants to be a stable and prosperous country, then it should move forward with conflict transformation. The people of Kosovo need to tackle the root cause of their ethnic conflicts to enable a peaceful and prosperous coexistence. Putting an end to long-lasting ethnic hatred and establishing a long-lasting peace requires political will and determination by both parties to the conflict. It is essential to establish respected institutions capable of facilitating conflict transformation. The accession of Kosovo and the region to the EU is an essential incentive to cooperation and conflict transformation. This is a common objective for all, an objective that will lead to a better future for all. ☐

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