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EMBRACING CHANGE? ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF GENERATION Z IN SERBIA ON KOSOVO ISSUE¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the perspectives of Generation Z in Serbia on the ongoing issue of Kosovo, a topic central to understanding future regional dynamics amid efforts towards normalization and reconciliation. Despite growing up in a post-conflict era, Generation Z remains influenced by historical ethnic and political tensions, particularly around national identity. The key research question addressed is: *How does Generation Z in Serbia perceive and influence the Kosovo issue?* To explore this, we employed a qualitative approach, conducting eight focus groups and ten in-depth interviews with Serbian youth. Our study sheds light on the deeply entrenched ethnocentric attitudes within this generation, with a strong emphasis on identity, nationalism, and resistance to normalization. Contrary to expectations of a more progressive outlook from younger cohorts, the findings reveal that Kosovo is perceived predominantly through a nationalistic lens, suggesting that Generation Z's radical views could pose challenges to future reconciliation efforts.

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KEYWORDS: Generation Z, Serbia-Kosovo relations, Kosovo issue, national identity, conflict resolution, normalization

INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the role of Generation Z in Serbia on the ongoing issue concerning Kosovo. Amid a historical conflict marked by deep ethnic cleavages and political disputes, understanding the perspectives of the younger generation is key to anticipating future trends in this complex regional context. Our research pivots around the critical question: *“How does Generation Z in Serbia perceive and influence the Kosovo issue?”* This question is particularly significant considering the efforts towards normalization and reconciliation between Serbia and Kosovo.

The significance of memory in shaping these perspectives cannot be overstated. The past is not merely a collection of events but a narrative that is passed down and embedded within the consciousness of each new generation. For Generation Z in Serbia, the memories of the Serbian-Albanian conflict are mediated through education, media, and familial stories, creating a complex interplay between personal and collective “memory”. These memories are often colored by the historical narrative of loss, inter-ethnic hatred, and the unresolved status of Kosovo, which still dominates Serbia’s political landscape.

The history of relations between Serbs and Albanians can be traced back a whole century, revealing a clear thread of continuity in conflicts. However, the current relations are primarily based on the changes that have taken place in the past three decades. After Serbia adopted constitutional amendments that revoked the autonomy of Kosovo established in socialist Yugoslavia, years of repressive policies against Albanians followed, who responded with passive resistance and a boycott of Serbian institutions (Imami 2017). Until 1995, there was a „quiet resistance” of the Albanian minority in Kosovo. However, the non-violent character of the boycott advocated by the Democratic Union of Kosovo under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova was soon abandoned due to the formation and later active action of armed resistance formalized in 1998 by the „Kosovo Liberation Army” (Bataković 2012). The escalation of the conflict led to the internationalization of the issue. The failure of the Rambouillet agreement was the pretext for NATO’s military intervention, which ended with the „Military-Technical Agreement” signed in Kumanovo.

Afterward, UN Security Council Resolution 1244 was adopted as the document that represented „the only legal foundation on which the international administration over Kosovo was based” in post-war Kosovo (Hasani 2003, 215). The first post-war years were marked by the impera-

tive of the UNMIK mission and later EULEX to demonstrate the success of state-building and justify the earlier military intervention (Kapusela 2016). In 2001, Kosovo received a Constitutional Framework that was valid until 2008, when it unilaterally declared independence. The position of the international community, „standards before status,” was changed at the beginning of 2006, when the first official negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina took place. Following the failed status negotiations in Vienna, the UN Secretary-General appointed Finnish diplomat Ahtisaari as a special envoy to lead the subsequent mission. From the start of his mission, Ahtisaari did not hide his belief that Kosovo’s independence was the only outcome of the process (Ker Lindzi 2009, 171). Shortly after the presentation of Ahtisaari’s plan, Kosovo unilaterally declared independence in 2008, recognized by the USA and most EU countries, including Germany, France, and Great Britain (Assembly of Kosovo 2008).

After declaring independence in February 2008, Kosovo Albanian representatives considered the issue of statehood closed, while political life in Serbia continued to be dominated by efforts to block full international recognition of Kosovo. The result is that even after 15 years, there is no consensus among EU countries on recognizing Kosovo’s independence. This position is primarily influenced by their sensitivity to separatist movements within their own borders and their aim to uphold strict norms regarding the establishment of new states (Newman & Visoka 2023).

On the ground, the predominantly Serb-populated north of Kosovo continued to live in a parallel system, adhering to Serbian institutions. Pristina’s attempt to assert sovereignty over this part of the territory led to escalating tensions on the ground. To avoid open conflict, the European Union initiated the dialogue process between Serbia and Kosovo in 2011 (UN GS Resolutions A/RES/64/298). Soon, the so-called Brussels Agreement of 2013 was reached, which included the formation of the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM) and its general responsibilities, then the integration of the existing police and judicial institutions in the north of Kosovo with the institutional framework of Pristina, followed by local elections, which would be held for the first time in accordance with Kosovo laws (Government of the Republic of Serbia, Office for Kosovo and Metohija 2013). The intention was clear: to integrate the north of Kosovo into Pristina’s institutions and, in return, obtain autonomy for the Serbian community (Surlić 2014).

Since the ASM has not been formed for over a decade and due to frequent incidents on the ground, international actors proposed a new agreement to unblock the process. In early 2023, mediators introduced the so-called “Franco-German proposal”, which became an unsigned agreement due to Belgrade’s rejection. Nevertheless, both parties have

committed to respecting this agreement, including a clause requiring compliance with all points. The preamble flexibly combines „different views” on status while mentioning the inviolability of borders, respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, and the protection of national minorities as basic conditions for peace (EEAS 2023). Article 4 brings a significant change, stating that no party can represent the other internationally or act on its behalf, emphasizing that „Serbia will not oppose Kosovo’s membership in any international organization” (EEAS 2023). This has been interpreted as a hint that Serbia, through future abstention regarding Kosovo’s membership in international organizations, might implicitly recognize its independence (Vučić & Đukanović 2024, 23).

The new agreement has not resulted in substantial changes in public perception, and consequently, Serbia and Kosovo continue to struggle with the complex process of normalization. The manner in which young people recall and interpret the conflict is likely to shape their involvement in this ongoing process. A critical understanding of the past, as viewed through the perspective of the current generation, is essential for anticipating whether they will support or challenge ongoing efforts aimed at achieving lasting peace and reconciliation.

In this context, our research seeks to examine how Generation Z in Serbia perceives and influences the Kosovo issue. By exploring their “memories” of the conflict and the narratives they engage with, we aim to elucidate the potential impact of this generation on the future trajectory of Serbian-Albanian relations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The attitudes of Generation Z respondents towards the topic of Kosovo are primarily conditioned by events from the recent past. The creation of “memories” that they have not personally experienced regarding the 1999 conflict, the NATO intervention, and the subsequent unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo permanently shapes the generation expected to be key in changing the relationship between Serbs and Albanians. For a theoretical understanding of the perceptions of Generation Z, it is essential to define memory in the process of facing the past. Since the analysis of respondents’ attitudes showed that dominant narratives about Kosovo are repeated even among Generation Z, it is concluded that the “proclaimed” culture of memory has shaped their attitudes towards national identity, reconciliation, and normalization of relations. This culture of memory perpetuates a strong emphasis on national sovereignty and territorial integrity, with Kosovo being viewed as an inseparable part of Serbia. This narrative (NationalS 2022; Belgrade Center for Security Policy 2022) is further reinforced by concerns over the security of the Serbian popula-

tion in Kosovo and a widespread rejection of recognizing Kosovo's independence, which is often perceived as a betrayal of national interests. The emotional attachment to Kosovo as the "heart of Serbia" deepens this stance.

Memory undoubtedly transcends international and national mechanisms of facing the past, conditions interethnic reconciliation, and determines the future relations between Serbs and Albanians. Additionally, memory, in its most extreme manifestations, can encourage the repetition of a conflict-ridden past or be suppressed for a higher goal.

This paper starts from the hypothesis that memory is not only subject to change but is also a powerful agent of change, especially among Generation Z, who do not remember the conflict. Relying on the works of Aleida Assmann, we conclude that memory is indeed a key element in transformative processes that require flexibility. We particularly rely on two premises. The „plasticity” of memory as a „transformative quality” where individual memory itself is changeable and transient, and collective memories are also fundamentally dynamic (Assmann and Shortt 2012, 5). The second premise relates to the past, which has no influence on the current society, but the representation of past events in a particular cultural framework and political constellation experiences its creation, movement, and acceptance (Assmann and Shortt 2012, 5).

In the process of confronting the past, memory plays a crucial role, as “truth is directly linked to memory”. It serves as a bridge between the past and the future, acting as “a medium for a new shared narrative about the past that integrates previously divided perspectives” (Assmann and Shortt 2012, 1). Memory of the past, particularly regarding victims, is often enacted through commemorative activities. However, the issue with memory is that the events of war crimes are “integrated” into collective memory primarily to initiate or complete a process of “mourning”, rather than to genuinely reflect on what actually happened in the past (Savić 2006, 97). Post-conflict societies often witness “memory wars” where battles are fought over the remembrance of crimes and their victims. Instead of fostering a form of remembrance grounded in values that promote social cohesion and solidarity, the high emotional intensity surrounding these memories frequently leads to their most blatant forms of instrumentalization, typically within the political sphere (Petrović 2009, 132).

In this paper, we do not focus on the consequences of failing to deal with the past. Instead, based on empirical findings, we demonstrate that Generation Z, which does not remember the conflict, is also a participant in the “memory” of the conflictual past. However, their role is not expected to be commemorative but rather ritualistic, engaging in the repetition of established “truths”.

Since “memory” has not led to a cathartic effect that would enable an escape from the post-conflict vicious cycle, many authors advocate for amnesia as a strategy. In defending the idea of forgetting, Richard Miller points out, using the example of Bosnia, that the survival of the state within its existing borders and “in a form worth preserving will depend on the consolidation of Bosnian nationality” (Miler 2009, 224). In this sense, the unifying idea of a political nation requires a significant degree of forgetting as a prerequisite for its construction. This deliberate amnesia is seen as necessary to move beyond divisive historical narratives and to foster a cohesive national identity (Miler 2009, 224). In the case of Serbian-Albanian relations and the possibility of a lasting agreement between Belgrade and Pristina, it is not feasible to speak of consolidating a unified nation. However, it is certainly about the necessary construction of conditions for normalizing relations and establishing a minimum called negative peace.

The organized effort to forget the past can be interpreted as a higher interest aimed at achieving social cohesion. Officially erasing memories of conflicts, as an “act of forgetting”, represents a form of amnesia that is directly linked to amnesty (Berk 1999, 91). However, a legitimate question arises: Is it even possible to impose forgetting on a society? Or, as Burke asks, is it conceivable that between the public and the private, groups as “collective, yet unofficial” entities can, like individuals, repress what is “unpleasant to remember?” (Berk 1999, 91). There are alternative strategies that do not advocate for forgetting, but rather for adapting the past. Some authors emphasize that state institutions, in the interest of the nation-state, have the ability to create an official narrative that frames war memories (Bagnjelav 2012, 27).

In the case of the analyzed Generation Z, it has been observed that such strategies, if they existed at all, did not bear fruit. The attempts at forgetting or adapting the past have not weakened the official narrative or the obligation to remember the “hostility” between Serbs and Albanians. Nevertheless, many of the respondents’ answers, despite their expressed support for the dominant narrative, suggest that there is still space within this imposed “memory” to create niches where, through certain interpretations, change is possible.

Generation Z, as the first generation that does not have direct memory of the conflict, emerges as a legitimate agent of change in the dominant narrative surrounding the conflictual past. Our focus on memory rests on the assertion that memory and the present have a mutually dependent relationship. On one hand, memory of the past has the power to legitimize the present; on the other hand, the present shapes the functional dimension of memory, giving it a specific interpretation. In this process of

adapting the past to the present, “differences are omitted, and unintended consequences are transformed into conscious intentions, as if the primary purpose of those past heroes was to bring about the present – our present” (Berk 1999, 92). Three dominant strategies can be identified in how current relations influence the complex burden of memory: 1) memory as a renewal of conflictual relations; 2) memory as the promotion of particular truths; and 3) memory leading to reconciliation through the accommodation of narratives or forgetting. As Assmann notes, “whether we are dealing with memory or with renewal depends on whether the goal of ritual commemoration is to erase or maintain the difference between the past and the present” (Asman 2011, 301).

Based on empirical findings, we conclude that the majority of Generation Z respondents are consciously or unconsciously encompassed by the strategy of memory as the promotion of particular truths. These results are not surprising when considering that commemoration is not aligned with memory as the accommodation of different narratives. Commemoration is, in fact, segmented across various political and social groups that, through official state institutions, civil society organizations, movements, and other forms, strive to promote and ensure recognition of “their” memory of the war (Banjeglav 2012, 8).

Although attitudes from focus groups and interviews create the impression that dominant narratives lean more towards renewal rather than memory, deeper analysis has led us to conclude that this memory is nonetheless a dynamic category with room for change. Transformative qualities are reflected in the expressed need to organize mutual visits, debates, and the desire for Kosovo to be included in different political, economical and academical initiatives despite the status dispute.

METHODOLOGY

Employing a qualitative methodology, we organized eight focus groups with young individuals in Serbia, specifically targeting those belonging to Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2005, a generation that does not have direct memory of the 1999 war. Respondents included students from various faculties and levels of study, as well as individuals engaged in non-governmental organizations, artists, media professionals, scientific-research organizations, members of political parties and others socially engaged, regardless of their ideological profile. Additionally, all respondents were recognized for their involvement or engagement with the topic of Kosovo through their social or professional activities. The principle of gender equality was especially respected in the selection process, as women made up 18 out of the total 40 respondents. Each focus group lasted up to 120 minutes and a total of 40 respondents participated in the sessions. Addi-

tionally, we organized 10 in-depth interviews with participants who had previously taken part in the focus groups, were willing to delve deeper into their viewpoints, and helped clarify or expand on the insights shared during the focus group discussions.

This generation, having grown up in a post-conflict era but still under the shadow of historical tensions, provides unique insights into the contemporary socio-political landscape. The focus groups were designed to delve deeply into the opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of these young individuals towards Kosovo, with a particular emphasis on issues of reconciliation, nationalism, statehood and the prospect of normalization. Through these discussions, we aimed to capture the nuanced perspectives of Generation Z, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of their stance on the long-standing issues between Serbia and Kosovo.

Furthermore, the research was designed to categorize respondents into three distinct groups: liberals, who are fully open to Serbian-Albanian dialogue, cooperation, and normalization of relations, and who accept Kosovo's self-proclaimed independence; centrists, who support dialogue between the two sides but hold reservations regarding the status of Kosovo, advocating for normalization to result in a mutually acceptable solution; and conservatives, who reject examples of cooperation and communication, express skepticism towards dialogue, and oppose any form of acknowledgment of Kosovo's independence.

Building on these categorizations, our study adopts an interpretivist approach, grounded in the methodological insights of Frederic Schaffer, to explore how Generation Z in Serbia perceives and influences the Kosovo issue. The aim is to elucidate the meaning and use of key concepts such as "reconciliation," "national identity," "Kosovo statehood," and "normalization" as they are understood and practiced by individuals within this generation.

To achieve this goal of elucidation, rather than imposing predefined theoretical constructs, our approach focuses on uncovering and interpreting the shared meanings embedded in the lived experiences of Generation Z. Drawing on Schaffer's assertion that "the goal is elucidation, not reconstruction" (Schaffer 2016), we aim to bridge the divide between the social world and the everyday language used by its participants. This involves engaging directly with the vocabulary, narratives, and contexts of Generation Z, allowing their voices and perspectives to shape our understanding rather than reshaping their realities to fit external frameworks.

Our interpretive methodology is built upon three key practices (Schaffer 2016). *Grounding*: In contrast to the one-sidedness of positivist reconstruction, our approach attends to the broad range of ways in which Generation Z understands and interprets concepts such as "reconcilia-

tion” and “national identity.” This practice involves engaging with the language games and lived practices of young people in Serbia to ground our analysis in their everyday experiences. *Locating*: Moving away from the universalism of positivist reconstruction, we focus on investigating the linguistic and historical particularity of the concepts we study. By locating these concepts within the specific cultural and historical context of Serbia, we aim to reveal the nuanced meanings they hold for Generation Z in relation to the Kosovo issue. *Exposing*: Finally, we seek to bring to light how everyday and social science concepts are embedded in structures of power. This practice involves exposing how the concepts of “Kosovo statehood” and “normalization” are not only shaped by historical and linguistic contexts but also by the broader politics that condition and influence their use.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS ON THE KOSOVO ISSUE

The conceptual frameworks presented in this analysis shed light on the complex and multifaceted perceptions of Generation Z in Serbia regarding the Kosovo issue. Through a contextual analysis of focus groups and interviews, these frameworks highlight the interplay between imposed memory, national identity, and current political realities. „Remembering so it does not happen again” has generally evolved into a political and cultural imperative (Assmann 2012, 63). From this perspective, *The Burden of the Past* explores how the memory of the 1999 conflict and subsequent events continue to shape young people’s views, revealing the tension between reconciliation and national identity. *Kosovo Statehood* then examines Generation Z’s perspective on the question of Kosovo’s independence, uncovering a dominant narrative of perceived injustice and resistance to the idea of a separate Kosovo state. Finally, the discussion on the *Normalization of relations* addresses the challenges and prospects of improving relations between Serbs and Albanians, focusing on how political dialogue is perceived by young citizens on an everyday basis. Each section offers insights into how past events influence current attitudes and future possibilities for final settlement between the two societies.

THE BURDEN OF THE PAST – BETWEEN RECONCILIATION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

The topic of Kosovo in the “memory” of Generation Z manifests its transformative dimension. On the one hand, it is undeniable that the framework of the 1999 conflict and the declaration of unilateral independence in 2008 shaped the dominant negative narrative. However, there is also a

perspective that views the past as something unknown that significantly burdens the present. The “plasticity” of memory is reflected in the demand for open discussion about the past:

I believe it would be highly effective to implement activities aimed at educating young people about the events and the core of the crimes that occurred in Kosovo, because we cannot reconcile two sides if one of them is unaware of what truly happened (Focus group I, December 2023).

Respondents indicated that the burden of the past affects not only them but also their families and even younger generations.

I think this is a very important topic, one that weighed heavily on my parents and continues to weigh on me. We all bear this burden of the past, including my brother, who is ten (Focus group V, February 2024).

One participant, born in 2000, noted the generational disconnect, saying:

I was born in 2000, so I haven't experienced any of the wars from that period. I think that my generation, as well as younger ones, have barely any understanding of the '90s because it isn't covered in schools, nor does anyone talk about it. The only information I got was from my parents and people who went to school with me (Focus group III, January 2024).

Young people do not avoid historical topics but believe that a necessary prerequisite for reconciliation is for both sides to become familiar with each other's stories, gaining a broader perspective.

They might accept that Kosovo was part of Yugoslavia but not Serbia. This interpretation surprised me. Imagine Albanians hearing a Serbian interpretation of Kosovo and Metohija and beginning to understand why Belgrade is so resistant to recognizing their statehood, how Serbs perceive Kosovo and Metohija (Respondent 2, April 2024).

The mutual correlation between “memories” produces various outcomes, ranging from “coexistence to discord and conflict” (Assmann and Shortt 2012, 5-7). In the case of Generation Z, there is a recurring view that “coming to terms with the past” is designed to impose guilt on the Serbian people as a collective.

To me, the issue of confronting the past seems like an imposition of some kind of collective guilt on my people, which is why I believe there is no environment conducive to objectively addressing these topics (Respondent 3, April 2024).

Additionally, there is a perception that such confrontation inevitably entails discomfort, even for generations who had no direct connection to past events:

Confrontation, as a word, generally implies an unpleasant connotation. It refers to an uncomfortable revelation about something. It suggests a sense of collective responsibility, or rather, a feeling of collective guilt, where, for instance, as a Serb, I might feel uncomfortable learning about what was done in the name of the Serbian people in Kosovo (Focus group VII, March 2024).

Although Assmann and Shortt connect memory inextricably with forgetting, asserting that both individual and collective memories are subject to selective or partial forgetting (Assmann and Shortt 2012, 5-7), some respondents perceive this “selectivity” as a deliberate or intentional process, unlike contingent forgetting.

When you say ‘we are confronting the past,’ you confront the fact that in ‘91 or ‘90, the university or freedom of the media was taken away from the Albanians, but then you don’t go back to ‘71, when Serbs were deprived of any opportunity to exist in Kosovo and Metohija, nor do you go back to ‘45, where you see something else happening... and then you realize how this process unfolds when you take one segment of the past and emphasize only that (Focus group II, December 2023).

However, voices were also heard advocating for the need to create a shared perspective on the past, which aligns with the premise that both memory and forgetting can contribute meaningfully to communities, provided the necessary social and institutional frameworks are in place:

I think we need to work on creating a common narrative, but that is impossible without institutional support. Now, more than 20 years later, we have a historical framework through which these events can be viewed as something that happened and can be interpreted (Respondent 4, April 2024).

KOSOVO STATEHOOD

Starting from the premise that the representation of past events within a specific cultural context and political constellation undergoes processes of creation, movement, and acceptance (Assmann and Shortt 2012, 5-7), we can conclude that the issue of Kosovo’s statehood significantly burdens members of Generation Z, shaping a dominant narrative of humiliation and injustice. It is evident that respondents are well-informed about the unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 and possess a clearly defined political stance.

If terrible things occurred in the 1990s and if the government in Serbia at the time was autocratic, sponsoring crimes through financial and logistical support, and even at times directly, with armed forces

committing crimes both in Kosovo and other parts of the former Yugoslavia, nevertheless, after 2000, Serbia embarked on a process of democratization and confronting its past. Advocating that the only solution is for Serbs and Albanians to simply separate and live in two different states is the part I disagree with (Focus group I, December 2023).

Particular criticism was directed at the absence of any alternative to the idea of two states, which are seen as having no option but to mutually recognize each other. In other words, there is no discussion of any other modality for accommodating differences.

I find it frustrating when there is an anthropological assumption that Serbs and Albanians are so distant as peoples, with an inherent historical hatred between them that is impossible to overcome, and that there is simply no other solution but for them to live in two separate states (Respondent 7, April 2024).

Members of Generation Z are formally in favor of cooperation with young Albanians, but they have strong reservations when that contact is framed as cooperation between “Serbia and Kosovo”.

It bothers me when people write ‘Serbia and Kosovo’ for several reasons. Officially, we do not recognize Kosovo and Metohija as a separate state. There are still some institutions there that operate as the Republic of Serbia. I can’t accept Kosovo as a completely equal entity to Serbia (Focus group IV, January 2024).

When I see that a text neither includes Kosovo with an asterisk nor refers to it as Kosovo and Metohija, it immediately becomes unacceptable to me for any kind of cooperation (Respondent 9, April 2024).

I’m not against some kind of contact between the Serbian and Albanian communities, but I don’t like it being presented as contact between Serbia and Kosovo, as Kosovo was not a state in 2008 and still isn’t today. Contact with the Albanian community should exist, perhaps on neutral ground where these relations could develop (Focus group IV, January 2024).

Some see no room for cooperation due to the status dispute, believing cooperation would imply recognition of Kosovo’s independence. Cooperation must be status-neutral, as mentioning Kosovo as a state is perceived as an insult.

Even if we cooperate with them (Kosovo), it isn’t international cooperation. For international cooperation, there’s Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, etc. The narrative doesn’t hold up legally (Respondent 4, April 2024).

Among Generation Z youth, there is a pronounced opposition to any mention of Kosovo in the context of statehood, accompanied by clearly defined arguments explaining why they believe Kosovo's status is unresolved or disputed.

Albanians living in Kosovo and Metohija have no interest, due to the full support they receive from the international community, in negotiating anything less than independence. In such a context, it is simply not possible to engage in dialogue with one side that has already achieved and almost fully realized its interests (Focus group II, December 2023).

The dominant political discourse (UNMIK Media Observer 2022; Kosovo Online 2024) is also recognized, in which Kosovo's potential membership in the UN is seen as a red line that must not be crossed.

I think it's fine that the U.S. has recognized them, but the United Nations is the ultimate authority, the final instance. Until they are recognized as a full member of the United Nations, we simply have nothing to discuss. Whether they want to cooperate or not based on that is not really our problem (Respondent 4, April 2024).

At the same time, young people are aware that there is no easy solution, and that aside from independence, the potential reintegration of Kosovo into Serbia's constitutional framework would also be equally unacceptable to the majority of citizens.

When asked, 'Would you agree to Kosovo being part of Serbia if an Albanian were to become the Prime Minister of Serbia?' in 95% of cases, the response I hear is 'no!' This is also equally unacceptable to people in Serbia, just like the idea of an independent Kosovo (Focus group VII, February 2024).

If we were to ask people in Serbia, 'Would you accept Kosovo's independence if there were a referendum tomorrow?' I believe around 10-11% of citizens would say 'yes' (Focus group I, December 2023).

Finally, there is a strongly negative attitude towards initiatives and programs that promote cooperation between the two societies if this implicitly entails the acceptance of Kosovo as an independent state.

For example, the 'Mirdita, Dobar Dan' festival. I am never against understanding between peoples, but when something like this is organized in Belgrade, and there is no effort made, even minimally, to respect the Constitution of this country – flawed or otherwise – it strikes me as a form of disrespect (Respondent 3, April 2024).

PERSPECTIVES ON THE NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS

If the normalization of relations is interpreted in the broadest sense as any form of cooperation between the two societies that transcends past conflicts, then the testimonies of Generation Z members do not offer a positive outlook on this process, which has been formally institutionalized as the dialogue between the two sides, mediated by the EU since 2011.

The University of Prishtina with a temporary seat in Mitrovica and the University of Prishtina are like two different worlds. There is no contact between these universities or their faculties. I realized this when I visited both universities, and it was simply unbelievable to me (Focus group VIII, March 2024).

Negative experiences from visits to Kosovo are present, with most visits limited to Serbian communities and cultural heritage sites, without interaction with Kosovo institutions. There is a prevailing belief that the dialogue is a one-sided process in which Belgrade continuously makes concessions, while on the other side, it encounters increasing radicalization from the Albanian side, particularly towards the Serbian community living in Kosovo.

I think that this negative attitude towards the topic stems from the fact that, for years, people have felt humiliated by our constant concessions and efforts to be the constructive side, without receiving any reciprocal response, not only from the authorities but from a completely radicalized society. Just the other day, we were driving through Peć on our way to a monastery, doing nothing – no flags, no displays – just Belgrade license plates, and they waved their hands in the shape of an eagle and mocked us. I honestly don't see, in such a context, how I could have anything to discuss with such radicalized people, unfortunately (Respondent 3, April 2024).

They show a willingness to reconsider the connection between the sensitive topic of Kosovo and national identity itself. Through their visits, they realize that the negative stance is imposed through memories, but they do not harbor real negative emotions. This confirms that the interweaving of memory and forgetting makes a tangible contribution at the individual level, though within the framework of established cultural, political, institutional, and social contexts (Assmann and Shortt 2012, 5-7).

I fully agree that Serbian students should visit the University of Prishtina, even engage in discussions with representatives of the official institutions of the self-proclaimed republic, to understand how the Albanian community in Kosovo interprets itself and its statehood. However, it would also be beneficial for Albanian students and young people here

to gain an understanding of the narrative that prevails within Serbian society (Focus group II, December 2023).

They also demonstrate an awareness of the necessity for their generation to propose a new approach in relation to the dominant narratives. They believe that major issues, such as the status of Kosovo, will not be resolved, and that over the past 20 years or more, there has been a missed opportunity to make smaller, but mutually acceptable steps.

The issue of property, concerning both those who are current users of property in Kosovo and Metohija and the former owners, i.e., those whose property has been expropriated – this aspect of the dialogue, I would support immediately. I believe we should start with that (Respondent 1, April 2024).

Members of Generation Z see a particular problem in the fact that the dialogue has become disconnected from the citizens and is presented exclusively as a political process imposed by international actors, rather than as a genuine need for the lasting normalization of relations between the two societies.

I believe that this dialogue is quite non-transparent and that political elites should work to make it more transparent and accessible to the public. I also think that citizens are too focused on one side of the story, as they are informed exclusively through either Serbian or Albanian media, and therefore lack a complete understanding of the perspectives of the other side (Respondent 10, April 2024).

CONCLUSION

The research findings indicate that Serbian Generation Z holds a conservative attitude, with substantial emphasis on identity matters and a pronounced tendency to adhere to an ethnocentric standpoint on the issue of Kosovo. Contrary to expectations of a more progressive outlook from the younger generation, our results indicate a persistence of entrenched views, suggesting that Kosovo remains an ‘identity’ issue deeply rooted in nationalistic sentiments. This persistence of traditional narratives, especially among a generation that did not experience the conflict firsthand, underscores the enduring influence of memory and historical narratives on collective identity. Furthermore, the research revealed no significant differences regarding gender or age within Generation Z.

Moreover, although the initial conclusions suggest that young people lean to the so-called “right” or “conservative”, a more in-depth analysis reveals that they are “centrist-oriented”, open to cooperation, particularly in non-official settings with “ordinary people”. They acknowledge a lack

of knowledge about the “other” side and show particular interest in topics relevant to their peers, such as education. Despite being influenced by the more recent conflicted past, there is a recognition of the necessity for dialogue and respect for the perspectives of the Albanian side.

The study highlights the importance of official memory culture and collective memory as a crucial factor in shaping attitudes and suggests that future research should focus on the generations that do not remember the war. Understanding how these generations engage with and reinterpret historical narratives can provide insights into potential avenues for normalization of relations and reconciliation. The conservative views held by Generation Z could present challenges to future efforts aimed at resolving the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. Therefore, it is imperative that future research and policy interventions target educational strategies that address historical narratives and promote intercultural understanding among the youth in Serbia.

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