

# PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE UNDER REPRESSION IN 1990s KOSOVO: A CASE STUDY OF AN ALBANIAN ARCHIVIST

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This study explores the precarious life of Albanians in Kosovo during the 1990s through the oral autobiographical narrative of a retired archivist at the Institute of Albanology in Prishtina. With four decades of institutional experience, the archivist offers a compelling personal narrative of cultural survival under systemic repression. The Institute, founded in 1953, became a target during the violent escalation of Serbian state control, culminating in the forced expulsion of its scientific staff in the early 1990s. This act not only displaced individuals, it also disrupted the scholarly continuity of one of Kosovo's key scientific and cultural institutions. The archivist's testimony captures this rupture while illuminating the broader landscape of institutional violence and state-sponsored erasure faced by Albanians in Kosovo. Her narrative highlights how intellectual communities responded by forming parallel academic structures sustaining scientific and cultural life. The study uses this oral history, an archive in itself, to interrogate the role of personal narrative in documenting institutional memory and reconstructing Kosovo's fraught historical landscape. By bringing her micro-narrative into dialogue with written sources, this work reflects on the violence, resilience, and fragility of life under occupation, while raising questions about memory, resistance, and the ongoing process of state-building in post-war Kosovo.

Keywords: precariousness, repression, narrative, institution, memory

## INTRODUCTION

Although the phenomenon of precarious life, due to job losses or irregular employment, was previously a concern for economists, sociologists, and statistical researchers, in recent years it has also become a focal point for anthropologists and scholars in memory

studies. Various political and economic factors that contribute to job losses are increasingly amplifying the insecurity of human life. Wars, natural disasters, rapid changes in the global economy, and even the coronavirus pandemic, which unexpectedly swept across the world in 2020, have become fertile ground for research in anthropology and related disciplines. As a result, precarious life is increasingly prevalent among individuals, at times as a temporary phenomenon, at other times as a permanent one. Nevertheless, it remains a phenomenon that calls for analysis and stimulates creative perspectives.

From an anthropological perspective, the phenomenon of precarious life because of insecure employment is increasingly being examined with particular attention to its human dimension and the harm experienced by individuals upon losing their jobs. In addition to the material damage, which is highly evident and directly affects the individual who has lost their job, the harm and insecurity caused by this situation also create social, psychological, and moral insecurities for them. Moreover, such a situation directly affects the individual's family, transmitting consequences across all aspects of life, from the material to the psycho-social. In specific cultural contexts, particularly in cultures where the nuclear family is not entirely detached from the traditional concept of extended families, and familial care and belonging still manifest themselves according to kinship ties, as is the case with Albanians in Kosovo (Latifi 2018: 147–167; Reineck 1991: 41–57), the impact of an individual's job loss and the insecurity it creates extends to a broader range of effects.

The consequences of job loss extend even further when it impacts an entire ethnic community, as it did with Albanians in Kosovo during the 1990s. Within a very short period, the number of unemployed individuals from public institutions surged to enormous proportions (Kostovicova 2005: 82–95). Though this was a political process, unfolding gradually over a decade, the long-term consequences became a form of social harm that directly affected individuals, families, and the wider Albanian community. The precarious life experienced by this community during these years became the painful reality of daily life.

Precarious life, a term that became widely recognized following Judith Butler's study *Precarious Life* (2004), refers to the insecurity caused by job losses due to political factors, as exemplified by the events of September 11, 2001, in the United States. However, for the Albanians of Kosovo, the experience of precarious life due to job losses began more than a decade earlier, with the revocation of Kosovo's autonomy by Slobodan Milošević's regime. The abolition of the province's autonomy by the Federal Assembly of Yugoslavia in the spring of 1989 was met with resistance in Kosovo and triggered a wave of strikes and protests, as workers opposed the political changes that were taking place (Limani 2024: 220). This act led to the violent expulsion of Albanians from public institutions, the administration, and other key state structures. Those who had coexisted for several decades with other nations within Federal Yugoslavia experienced extremely difficult living conditions between 1989 and 1999. This period culminated in the separation of Kosovo from the Yugoslav federation. While this outcome is internationally acknowledged, it followed a long

and arduous process that the Albanian population of Kosovo had to endure (HRW 2001: 27–35). Their precarious life, which was institutionally consolidated in 1989, was initially manifested through the loss of employment in public institutions, a process that gradually evolved over the years into a mass phenomenon nationally (Brestovci 2025). The mass dismissal of employees from public institutions occurred over a very short period; in fact, tens of thousands lost their jobs in a single day because they supported a strike organized by the trade unions.<sup>1</sup> This marked the beginning of a decade-long ordeal that affected families, institutions, and individuals in ways that are still felt today. The emotional and psychological toll of this period was profound, leaving scars that are difficult, if not impossible, to heal.

To address this issue, I have chosen to rely on the *idiographic method of interviewing*, a research approach that focuses on an in-depth study of a single case in order to understand its particularities and unique characteristics and to illuminate broader phenomena. Consequently, this approach entails the use of an interview as a means of shedding light on social and historical processes. In our case, this means that, by means of an intensive interview with a single individual, it becomes possible to uncover and explain the phenomenon of *precarious life* experienced in Kosovo during the 1990s. This approach is consistent with the practices of oral history and biographical research, where a single interview, critically examined and confronted with documentary sources and theoretical literature, can serve as a primary source for historical interpretation. Examples of academic work that employ a single oral interview as a primary source to explore broader social phenomena are well established in scholarly practice.<sup>2</sup> The subjectivity present in oral history interviews is regarded by oral historians as a unique opportunity to explore the historical subject. As such, it should be approached with attention to at least two additional

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<sup>1</sup> In an appeal sent to Amnesty International and representatives of the leadership units of the Yugoslav Federation on August 30, 1990, the President of the Independent Trade Unions of Kosovo, Prof. Dr. Hajrullah Gorani, wrote: "In 1989, the autonomy of the province was significantly reduced under the pressure of the Republic of Serbia, which aimed to gain more control over the entire territory of the republic. In June 1990, the autonomy of the province was effectively abolished by Serbia. The Parliament and government of Kosovo were declared invalid by the Assembly of Serbia, and Serbian officials were sent to take control of the province. On July 2, the ethnic Albanian members of the Assembly of Kosovo, which had already been declared invalid, adopted a declaration that Kosovo was an 'equal member within the Federal Yugoslav Federation.' Media in the Albanian language were banned by the Serbian authorities, and many ethnic Albanian workers were suspended or dismissed from their jobs. The Communist Party of Kosovo and its trade union, youth organizations, etc., have recently suffered a massive loss of members, and the ethnic Albanian population has increasingly begun to join 'alternative' organizations, including the Independent Trade Union Federation, which was established in July. The general strike, scheduled to begin on September 3, aims to serve as a manifestation of passive resistance by the ethnic Albanian population against Serbia's control over public life in the province. The strike will last 24 hours or one week, depending on 'the further development of the situation.'" The text can be found at the link <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur48/013/1990/en/> (accessed 23 January 2025).

<sup>2</sup> One such example is the life narrative of the grandmother of the Finnish ethnologist Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto. As a single narrative, it serves to examine the process of negotiating subjectivity while also unpacking issues such as labor, social class, gender, and social change in twentieth-century Finland (Koskinen-Koivisto 2013).

issues: the relationship between culture and memory, and the dynamics of the interview (Summerfield 2016: 2–15).

The idiographic approach was selected in order to conduct an in-depth exploration of the subjective emotional and social impacts experienced by individuals living in Kosovo and working within a national heritage institution during a period of political repression, specifically the 1990s. An interview was chosen as the primary method for capturing these experiences because of both its capacity to elicit reflective, memory-based accounts, and its alignment with qualitative research methodologies.

To examine the precarious life in Kosovo during the 1990s at the micro level and to understand its broader implications within a macro context, I will analyze the personal narrative of a female employee at a scientific institution in Kosovo's capital, Pristina, referred to as T.P.<sup>3</sup> By unpacking her account as an archivist at a national cultural research institute of the harsh and dehumanizing way she and her colleagues were dismissed from their positions and how they coped with their ensuing precarious existence, I aim to uncover the specific circumstances in which the precarious life of Kosovar Albanians was manifested over the course of a decade. The direct experience of humiliation, psychological and physical violence, and inhumane treatment – forms of oppression that triggered both resistance and a subsequent struggle for survival – constitutes a critical process that shaped their precarious reality during those years. Butler proposes that pain can be transformed into a source of solidarity and resistance. She argues that, by recognizing the pain of others and committing to oppose injustice, we can build a global community grounded in equality and justice. In this way, pain shifts from being a destructive force to becoming a constructive and transformative one (Butler 2004: 128–150). Through this lens, I will explore the nature of precarious life as endured by Kosovar Albanians in the final decade of the twentieth century.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

While there is room for debate about whether the concept of “precarious life” can accurately describe a historical situation that predates the term's formal articulation (Gasiukova and Shkaratan 2019: 116–125), I argue that the experience of Kosovo Albanians during the decade from 1989 to 1999 exemplifies many of the core characteristics encompassed by the notion of “precarious life” as articulated by Butler (2004). During this period, Kosovo Albanians were systematically expelled from their positions in public institutions due to external political developments. The consequences of this exclusion, both immediate and long-term, underscore the structural vulnerability that defines a precarious existence.

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<sup>3</sup> The retired archivist of the Institute of Albanology, who was very cooperative and ready to share her personal narrative, will be referred to in this article using altered initials in order to preserve her confidentiality.

While precariousness can be both subjective and objective, in this case it was primarily objective, as it stemmed from broader political circumstances. These conditions were the result of a systematic campaign of pressure directed at Kosovo Albanians, who at the time were citizens of an autonomous province that constituted a federal unit within the Yugoslav state structure.

The Yugoslav constitution granted Kosovo the status of a federal unit, but not that of a republic, thereby denying it the legal right to secede or to unite with another state (Malcolm 1999: 264–288). In the broader state-administrative structure of the former Yugoslavia, which consisted of six republics and two autonomous provinces, Kosovo held the latter status, a designation that implied subordination and dependence. This meant that Kosovo did not possess the right to secede from its parent republic, which in this case was neighboring Serbia. Unlike the republics, which were populated by constituent nations (*narod*), the autonomous socialist provinces were not regarded as bearers of Yugoslav sovereignty because they were primarily inhabited by ethnic minorities (*narodnost*), such as Albanians and Hungarians, peoples who were considered to have their national homelands outside Yugoslavia (The Kosovo Report 2000). This arrangement created a complex and often tense situation, particularly given that the majority population of Kosovo was ethnically Albanian, whose national identity historically, linguistically, and culturally was closely tied to Albania (Strohle 2021: 101–130). Consequently, the identity of Kosovo's majority population was defined by ethnic Albanians as indigenous residents of the province (Judah 2008: 2). However, Yugoslavia maintained strained political relations with Albania, which at times escalated to the closure of borders and a complete suspension of inter-state relations (Motes 1999). Nevertheless, for Kosovo's Albanian population, neighboring Albania was seen as the spiritual homeland of their nation (Gulyás 2012: 143). In this context, it is understandable that being Albanian in Yugoslavia did not represent an ideal political condition. These interethnic constraints within Yugoslavia, combined with its tense bilateral relations with Albania, led to widespread discontent among Albanians throughout the country, particularly given that Albanians also lived in other republics bordering Kosovo, namely Montenegro, Serbia, and Macedonia. The border regions adjacent to these republics were also inhabited by ethnic Albanians. The political situation for Albanians living in these republics was even more precarious, as they were categorized as ethnic minorities.

Nonetheless, for all Albanians in Yugoslavia, Kosovo – particularly its capital Pristina, where the University of Pristina was established in 1970 – served as a central hub for education and culture and was the primary space where young Albanians across Yugoslavia could gather and express their aspirations, ambitions, and youthful energy. These factors further contributed to the close monitoring of Albanian students by the Yugoslav authorities, especially given their cultural and emotional affinity toward Albania (Schmit 2012: 183–193). While the Yugoslav regime maintained strict political control over Kosovo, particularly due to the tense political climate, the same level of commitment was not observed in the economic sphere. As the southernmost province of Yugoslavia, Kosovo consistently received a disproportionately low share of economic investment from the

federal budget. Local criticism of economic discrimination in certain regions of Kosovo stemmed from widespread dissatisfaction with the socio-economic inequalities that became increasingly evident during socialism, particularly in comparison with the more developed Yugoslav republics (Strohle 2016: 112–131).

Before the establishment of the University of Pristina, a research institute for cultural and historical studies was founded in the city, modeled on similar institutions in other federal units of Yugoslavia. These institutes allowed both nations (*narod*) and nationalities (*narodnost*) to conduct scholarly investigations into their ethno-cultural identities. However, in contrast to the Yugoslav republics, where research institutes were typically specialized in particular humanistic disciplines (Čapo and Gulin-Zrnić 2014; Kurtović 2014), in Pristina all humanities fields were grouped under a single institution. This structure laid the foundation for what would become known as the field of Albanology (Doja 2014). The institute was established in 1953 following a decision by the Albanological Department at the University of Belgrade, and it was officially named the Institute of Albanology (in Albanian: *Instituti Albanologjik*) (Ismajli 2009; Ahmeti 2020).

The Institute rapidly developed to cover several academic disciplines, including history, linguistics, folklore, ethnology, and literature (Syla 1987). However, due to its focus on the study and promotion of Albanian culture in Yugoslavia, its activities were soon labeled as nationalist. As a result, the institute was shut down in 1955, merely two years after its founding (Clark 2000). It was later reopened in 1967, during a period of political liberalization at the central level of the Yugoslav state (Schmitt 2012; Kostovicova 2005).

After its reopening, the institute's activities focused on the collection, research, and study of Albanian folklore, as well as the language and history of Albanians in Kosovo and in other regions of Yugoslavia where Albanians resided. Research efforts were closely tied to fieldwork, which involved the gathering of materials, recordings, and documentation, and consequently their systematic archiving. Within a short time, a scientific archive was established to serve the internal needs of the institute. This archive housed materials collected by researchers during field expeditions. These resources were subsequently processed, deciphered, transcribed, and analyzed, eventually resulting in their publication. The folklorist Anton Çetta played a foundational role in initiating the archive, a responsibility later carried forward by T.P. the long-serving archivist of the Institute of Albanology and a key figure in the preservation of its institutional memory.

T.P., who was employed as an archivist at the Institute beginning on May 3, 1979, comes from an Albanian family originally from Montenegro. Her birthplace is the village of Martinaj, located in the municipality of Gusinje. The family relocated to Pristina during her early adolescence. According to her personal account, the principal reason for the move was her father's aspiration to have his children educated in their mother tongue, an opportunity that was not available in Montenegro at the time. T.P. completed her primary and secondary education in Pristina before enrolling in the Department of Albanian Linguistics at the Faculty of Philology, University of Pristina. Upon graduation, she was employed at the

Institute of Albanology as an archivist. In the years that followed, she pursued professional development in archival science through specialized courses and training programs. After 44 years of service, T.P. retired in September 2023 at the age of 65. The interview upon which this biographical note is based was conducted in February 2020, just one month prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kosovo, which led to a nationwide shutdown beginning on March 13 of that year.

In 1979, at the time the archivist was employed at the Institute of Albanology, the institute had been reestablished for twelve years, dating back to 1967. At that point, the institute operated through five departments, each comprising approximately three to five academic researchers, in addition to administrative staff working in the library and archive. The disciplines most closely associated with the archive included folklore studies, linguistics, and history, fields that required the handling of materials collected during fieldwork, such as documents, audio recordings, and transcripts. With the arrival of the new archivist, responsibility for the maintenance and care of these materials housed in the archive established several years earlier was entrusted to her. As she herself states:

Professor Anton Çetta had set up the Institute's internal scientific archive years before I joined, with the specific purpose of supporting the researchers' work. When I arrived, he handed it over to me, offering clear guidance on how to manage everything. I worked closely with him for a long time, and he taught me how the archive operated. He showed me how the *melotheque* and *phonotheque*<sup>4</sup> were organized, and how to properly catalog the materials collected from fieldwork. Over the years, we expanded the archive together, not only with materials from our own field expeditions, but also with contributions from external research collaborators. [...] Back then, we organized group research expeditions. Teams of scholars would travel to specific regions, splitting up to gather the materials assigned to them. I was in charge of preparing the equipment [and] providing tape recorders and other recording devices. The researchers would take these tools into the field and spend about two weeks on-site, gathering data. When they returned, they would bring back recorded materials. These were handed over to me in the archive, and I'd register each item. The transcription process took a lot of time, as the researchers did it themselves, with support from typists. I oversaw this process carefully to ensure that everything was accurate. Once they had been transcribed, we organized the materials systematically. We kept the original and one copy in our archive, while sending a second copy to the Kosovo State Archive. The workflow at the Institute worked very efficiently, and we all took pride in maintaining this process.

Thanks to the systematic work and dedication of the researchers at this Institute, comprehensive volumes were compiled and published on Albanian literature and writers, alongside studies of folklore genres (Dushi 2020: 73–91), history, ethnographic phenomena, and traditions, as well as language and dialects. The research projects were exclusively

<sup>4</sup> A *méllothèque* is a collection or archive dedicated specifically to music recordings, such as albums, instrumental works, or songs in various formats. A *phonotheque* is a broader sound archive that preserves all types of audio recordings, including music as well as spoken word, interviews, oral histories, and other recorded sounds.

focused on Albanians living within Yugoslavia's borders, while any attempt to establish cultural ties with Albania was strictly monitored and obstructed. The hand of the regime was merciless toward those who sought to demonstrate that Albanians in Kosovo shared the same national identity as their brethren in Albania. Contacts were severely limited and often outright prohibited, including strict surveillance of any movement toward the Albanian border. These restrictions extended beyond people to literature and any form of communication with Albanians across the border.

Under the politically charged atmosphere between Yugoslavia and Albania, this Institute, which was dedicated to researching Albanian national culture, survived politically and institutionally until the 1990s, when the political status of Albanians in Yugoslavia began to change dramatically. The revocation of Kosovo's autonomy status by Slobodan Milošević's regime in 1989 was accompanied by a "state of emergency" in the province. From then on, Kosovo's state administration was relocated to Serbia, with directives coming from Belgrade aimed at "disciplining" the Albanian population, who were now referred to as inhabitants of the "southern Serbian province" (for more on this, see Limani Myrtaj 2024: 220–228).

The first revolt erupted in 1989 with the miners' strike at the Trepça complex, where miners barricaded themselves underground for eight days in protest and resistance against the constitutional changes being imposed on Kosovo (Di Lellio 2025). The miners received support from students, who locked themselves in lecture halls and refused food. This was followed by public-sector workers marching on foot from all over Kosovo to Pristina to show solidarity with the miners and students. The general population began taking to the streets in various forms of protest, expressing their dissatisfaction through demonstrations. The escalating political crisis ultimately resulted in the imposition of violent measures within state institutions and the establishment of a police regime, which responded with force and imprisonment against anyone who resisted the coercive administrative actions (Clark 2000: 46–66).

Repressive measures were forcibly imposed across vital public institutions, including education, healthcare, media, law enforcement, and state administration. The refusal of employees to comply with these coercive directives led to the arbitrary closure of their institutions and the dismissal of thousands of workers from their jobs (Kostovicova 2005: 75–97). The Prishtina television station was shut down, along with public print media institutions, educational and healthcare facilities, and others. "Everyone became poor" according to Brestovci (2025). This widespread violence by the Serbian regime inadvertently catalyzed rapid grassroots mobilization among the Albanian population in Kosovo, giving rise to a policy of peaceful resistance. Under this model, Albanians established a parallel functioning society: private homes were repurposed as schools and medical clinics; humanitarian networks such as the Red Cross and "Mother Teresa" were mobilized; and journalists linked up with media outlets outside Kosovo, especially in sympathetic Yugoslav republics, to maintain access to information (Clark 2000: 95–117).

The Albanian diaspora in Western Europe and the United States played a crucial role in this process. It became highly organized and mobilized to provide material and financial support to their homeland under siege, helping their families endure increasingly dire conditions (Schmitt 2012: 250). The situation continued to deteriorate, tensions escalated, daily life became increasingly difficult, and the regime's violence intensified, culminating in sporadic killings of so-called "Albanian irredentists" in both villages and cities, individuals who were accused of disobeying police orders (Clark 2000: 53–54; Schwandner-Sievers 2013: 953–970). Alongside the pervasive political insecurity that endangered the lives of Albanian citizens daily, economic insecurity also deepened. A mass action organized by the Kosovo Workers' Union to resist state repression by staging a collective absence from work on a single September day resulted in the immediate dismissal of tens of thousands of workers. The following day, the newly installed Serbian administration delivered official notices informing them of their termination.

The notion of an insecure and unstable existence, driven by relentless political pressure, defined life in Kosovo during the 1990s. Resistance to Yugoslav, specifically Serbian policies was regarded as a patriotic act, and everyone remained steadfast in defending it. There were no doubts or hesitations. Even schoolchildren had begun to bully their peers whose parents had not yet taken a stand against these measures. The sense of solidarity with the resistance and the uprising implied a widespread form of activism (Krasniqi 2025; Brestovci 2025).

## **A MICRO-NARRATIVE OF A MACRO-HISTORY: REPRESSION, VIOLENCE AND SURVIVAL**

This study focuses on the experience of a precarious life caused by external political circumstances, explored through the personal perspective of a female narrator. By analyzing the personal narrative of a woman employed at a scientific institution in Pristina, particularly her story of the closure of the institution, we aim to understand how Kosovo Albanians experienced this process. The study seeks to uncover how they survived, how they organized themselves to overcome this difficult phase of their lives, and what emotional consequences this period of precarious life had for Albanian citizens of Kosovo during the 1990s.

The archivist fondly remembers the period before 1989 and talks with admiration about the work done at the Institute up until that time. Research activities were carried out in line with the broader standards of Yugoslavia, which included the exchange of literature, academic journals, and other materials with scholars from other republics. The researchers were proficient in the Slavic languages, so accessing literature in Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, or Slovenian was never an issue. However, the situation regarding literature from Albania was very different. Publications from Albania were completely off-limits.

Occasionally, Albanian literature would find its way into Kosovo, but it faced intense scrutiny, and not all of it was allowed to circulate. There were even instances of illegal exchanges, but those were risky, as anyone caught with “banned” materials faced serious legal consequences and punishment.

## THE NARRATIVE OF REPRESSION AND VIOLENCE

This professional atmosphere prevailed until 1989, when everything began to decline due to the political circumstances previously mentioned. How were these circumstances reflected in the perspective of the archivist, and how are they conveyed in her personal narrative?

The miners' strike, the arrival of factory workers on foot from other cities to Pristina, the shutdown of the television station, and the increasingly tense political situation – everything that was happening at the time we followed with deep concern. The shift in the Yugoslav system of governance resulted in the suspension of our funding. Our contributions were cut off, and we no longer received salaries. We all began to worry about how we would support our families. The year 1990 passed with some humanitarian aid, followed by limited support from the diaspora, until we managed to organize modest payments through the parallel state we, as Albanians in Kosovo, established... It was extremely difficult... You've taken me back to that time... Though I must say we were somewhat fortunate that we were not immediately evicted from the Institute's building, even though it was widely believed that it wouldn't be long. We were gripped by fear that the materials might be confiscated. That was when what became known as the 'Popular Movement' began, and staff started to retrieve the original manuscripts and documents they had worked on. Only copies of the files remained in the archive, as we were afraid to keep the originals. That was the moment our eyes were opened...

The Institute of Albanology, with its national cultural activities, had sensed the imminent danger approaching and had therefore begun to take measures for mobilization, at least to secure the archival materials and its rich library. The heritage built over nearly three decades was substantial and needed to be protected. The daily risk of closure faced by surrounding educational and scientific institutions was becoming more evident, and this served as a warning to the director and the leadership staff of the Institute. Moreover, he was receiving alerts from political actors that “soon, it will be your turn”.

The narrator continues her account:

Every day, we felt the fear and anxiety that we would be evicted from the building, so we decided to remove the library and the archive. All the staff of the Institute organized themselves, and overnight we moved the archive, along with all the files and materials stored there. We were greatly assisted by the younger generation of the Institute's staff. We carried the files, one by one, and delivered them to the home of a family in a neighborhood in Pristina. A geography professor offered his house and agreed to

shelter the Institute's archive. Soon afterwards, many volunteers, many people from the community, came forward and offered their homes to house the Institute's books. They also offered to help secure the library, books, manuscripts, and the folk costumes from the exhibition hall. We distributed the costumes among ourselves, and I took some home as well.

On March 8, 1994, it was the turn of the Institute of Albanology to be evicted from its premises. It was the last public institution still being utilized by Albanians, as, since July 1990, Albanians had been gradually expelled from all their public institutions. They were forced to vacate the spaces and buildings that had been constructed with their own contributions and the work of those employed in these public institutions. Through violence and police decrees, they had been driven out of nurseries, schools, universities, hospitals, factories, the media building, municipal and state administrative offices, and finally, it was the turn of the Institute of Albanology. This was the last public institution that had operated in a building that had been specifically constructed for the Institute in 1977. The Institute's staff, who were prepared and waiting for the order to vacate the premises, decided to remain at their workplaces and refuse to obey the orders of the Serbian state and police authorities to leave the Institute's building. Peaceful resistance was the only form through which they could express their revolt and dissatisfaction, even though they knew they were unequal in relation to the power and violence expressed daily by the state toward Albanians and the denial of their rights to live within that state.

And that day, they came. They were special units from Niš, but dressed in civilian clothes. They had broken down the large door at the bottom and entered, shouting: "Vi niste albanci. Albanci su u Albaniju. Vi ste šiptari" [You are not Albanians. Albanians are in Albania. You are Šiptars].<sup>5</sup> They were armed with rubber batons and blunt instruments, but not with firearms. They arrived after lunch, as some of us had gone home to rest before returning. A colleague of mine, an ethnomusicologist, called me and told me that they had entered, but the colleagues who were inside did not want to leave and were calling all of us to return to the Institute. This was around 6:30 in the evening. I came. When I arrived, the road to the Philological Faculty was blocked, the entire road to the Institute. I walked alone down the road, not a living soul in sight...

So, when you came, what did you find here?

When I arrived, the lobby was empty because many colleagues had gone upstairs and gathered at the director's office. People had started to find out that the researchers of the Institute of Albanology had locked themselves in their offices and were resisting leaving the building, so they had begun organizing to bring us food. The father of a colleague had come with bags of food. My sister had also gone to the bakery and

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<sup>5</sup> The term "Šiptar(i)" (or "Shiptar(i)"), when used in Serbian, carries a derogatory or pejorative meaning directed at Albanians who lived in Yugoslavia. Although the word originally derives from the Albanian endonym "Shqiptar" (meaning "Albanian"), it has acquired a strongly offensive and ethnically demeaning connotation in many regional contexts, particularly during and after the Yugoslav wars, and especially in reference to Kosovo Albanians. The term was not used to refer to Albanians from Albania, as it served to distinguish, and implicitly set apart, Albanians in Yugoslavia from those living in Albania.

had bought some bakery products for us. When they arrived, the special units had stopped them in the lobby and would not let them in. They had even beaten the colleague's father, the poor old man... but not only there, because they had also beaten our administrative workers at the gate. That's how they started to beat the people they found in the corridor. They beat the accountant until he was unconscious. Then they started to go upstairs, shouting and beating anyone they found on the way. The director was shot one floor below. They caught him and beat him too. Climbing the stairs and entering the offices, they were shouting and beating anyone they found. What violence and mistreatment... They beat all of us. They shouted, "Vi ste cigani. Svi napolje!" [You are Gypsies. Everyone out!], and they kept repeating, "Vi niste Albanci, vi ste Šiptari." They used violence. They pulled our hair, kicked us, and pushed us down the stairs. Their behavior and language were absolutely degrading... They didn't care whether you were a man or a woman because they mistreated all of us. They threw Professor Anton down the stairs and broke his finger. When I got downstairs, I saw the director covered in blood. They had broken his teeth. Another professor had dropped his glasses and couldn't find them. They beat all of us and forced us out through a small door, using physical violence against us. Afterwards, they even chased us as we ran away. They followed us all the way to the student dormitory. As we were leaving, I saw a police van arrive; they took some of them along with the director to the police station, beaten and bloodied. [...] That was the fate of the Institute. We went through a nightmare, didn't we? It was incredibly painful. But we were happy that we managed to save the archive.

After brutal and transparent violence, the academic workers at the Institute of Albanology were forced to vacate the facility. The violent act of doing so, despite the indignation it caused among the people, failed to make much of a splash in the media, since the Albanians were left without their own information media, and the world was unable to understand what was happening inside Kosovo. Systematic violence, the obstruction of educational and cultural development, the forced removal from school and university facilities and the many other obstacles that were evidence of an ethnic segregation that was being imposed on Albanians at all levels of education (Kostovicova 2005: 75–96) left no other path than their organization in a parallel education system. The Albanians chose passive resistance as a counter-response to the violence that the installed Serbian legal power was inflicting on them (Pula 2004: 797–826).

## NARRATIVE OF THE SURVIVAL PERIOD

During the 1990s, as Kosovo's Albanians were increasingly marginalized and excluded from public life, private homes across the region were transformed into makeshift schools. This response was voluntary, and its scale was immense. In Pristina, a city already home to a university, nearly every neighborhood saw at least one room of a private home repurposed for educational use (Shahini 2016). The life of the Albanian population in Kosovo, already marked by job dismissals and exclusion from the official workforce, was further burdened by the need to provide spaces for the education of Kosovo's children. But

despite the hardships, the generosity and solidarity of the people were unwavering, with even those with the smallest spaces offering them up for the cause (Gusia 2024).

A suitable space was also secured for the Institute of Albanology. A member of the Kosovo Academy of Sciences and Arts, from the field of medicine, who, after being dismissed from his position at the University of Pristina, had relocated to the United States, offered his two-floor house for the needs of the Institute's staff. The rooms, corridors, and hallways of that private home were converted into office spaces and meeting rooms, where the albanologists of Kosovo carried out their activities for the next five years, despite the limited spatial capacity and resources. The archivist recalls:

We continued our activities in a private home. All the staff of the Institute gathered there. The house of Professor Musa Haxhiu was provided to us. He personally offered his home for the continuation of our work. He generously made his home available, as he was not living in Kosovo. The archive was housed in a home in the Matëçan neighborhood, and we visited there as well, enabling us to access the archive whenever we needed, with open doors and no hesitation. In this house, which we moved into – though not small, it still counted as a private home – we continued our work without interruption. We managed to complete research projects and studies with our own resources and with the help of donors from the diaspora, but the work never stopped. Although we reduced the number of special publications, the regular scientific journal, across all three series, was never discontinued. We published it regularly... We spent years in Musa Haxhiu's house.

The conditions of institutional isolation significantly hindered academic development, but they did not stop it. Albanian intellectuals created informal networks for the exchange of knowledge and the preservation and continuity of academic life. Independent publications, conferences held in private homes, and other cultural activities were part of the effort to maintain academic and national identity in a reality of systematic oppression (Vickers 1998). The support of the Albanian diaspora in Western Europe and the United States was substantial, remaining steadfast and unwavering in its commitment to the families and community in Kosovo, thereby ensuring their survival.

For the Albanians of Kosovo, the final decade of the twentieth century represents a critical and extraordinarily difficult period, characterized by state repression, exclusion from public institutions, and the formation of an independent parallel system as a means of survival and peaceful resistance. With the exclusion of Albanian teachers from educational institutions and the prohibition of instruction in the Albanian language, the Albanian community organized an extensive network of parallel education. Most Albanian schools and the university were relocated to private spaces, where the educational process continued thanks to the dedication of teachers and the determination of parents and students. The University of Pristina, despite being expelled from its official buildings, continued to function as a symbol of intellectual and national resistance. In addition to education, the healthcare sector also faced massive exclusions of Albanian staff and severe infrastructural limitations. However, networks of doctors and nurses were established under the organization of the "Mother Teresa" association, providing services on a voluntary basis

in private offices and spaces adapted for this purpose. Support from the diaspora and international aid contributed to the functioning of this minimal but essential system for the population (Malcolm 1998).

## CONCLUSION

The 1990s in Kosovo were a decade of profound uncertainty, systemic marginalization, and existential precarity for the Albanian population. Following the revocation of Kosovo's autonomy by the Serbian regime in 1989, Albanians were systematically removed from public institutions, including schools, hospitals, media, and the civil service. What followed was a deliberate dismantling of the formal structures of social and political life for the majority population. In response, Kosovars undertook a remarkable effort to reorganize institutional life through parallel structures that mirrored the very systems they were excluded from establishing, with an unofficial government, education networks, alternative healthcare services, and grassroots civil-society organizations. This parallel society was not merely a reaction to exclusion, but a proactive strategy of survival and resistance. Teachers taught in private homes, doctors operated in makeshift clinics, and political actors convened in secrecy to maintain a sense of governance and national continuity.

These informal structures functioned under constant threat from the Serbian state, and yet they fostered a collective resilience that kept communities connected and invested in a shared future. Despite economic deprivation, police violence, and the psychological toll of life under occupation, Kosovo Albanians found ways to sustain their social cohesion and maintain a semblance of normalcy. The archivist's account of the experience of the Institute of Albanology is a micro-narrative of the macro-context that Kosovo and its institutions endured during the 1990s.

The reorganization of institutional life in Kosovo during this period reveals the dual nature of precarity: it was both a condition imposed by systemic oppression and a space from which new forms of solidarity and agency emerged. People were forced to live without the security of recognized rights or a reliable infrastructure, yet within that void they built a parallel world that reflected their values, identity, and aspirations for statehood.

The parallel system in Kosovo during the 1990s is a rare example of societal self-organization under repression. It not only ensured the survival of the national institutions of the Albanian community, but it also served as a foundation for political resistance and efforts toward self-determination. Despite extreme difficulties, this system demonstrated that a sense of solidarity and civic commitment could compensate for the lack of formal institutions.

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## PREKARNI ŽIVOT POD REPRESIJOM NA KOSOVU 1990-IH: STUDIJA SLUČAJA ALBANSKE ARHIVISTICE

U članku se istražuje nesiguran život Albanaca na Kosovu tijekom 1990-ih kroz usmenu autobiografsku priču umirovljene arhivistica koja je radila u Institutu za albanologiju u Prištini. S četiri desetljeća institucionalnog iskustva, arhivistica nudi uvjerljivo osobno svjedočanstvo o kulturnom preživljavanju pod sistemskom represijom. Institut, osnovan 1953. godine, bio je na meti političkih napada tijekom nasilne eskalacije srbijanske državne kontrole, što je kulminiralo prisilnim protjerivanjem znanstvenog osoblja početkom 1990-ih. To je dovelo do raseljavanja pojedinaca te poremetilo kontinuitet jedne od ključnih znanstvenih i kulturnih institucija na Kosovu. Svjedočanstvo arhivistica obuhvaća taj prekid, a istodobno rasvjetljava širi kontekst institucionalnog nasilja i brisanja pod pokroviteljstvom države s kojim su se suočavali Albanci na Kosovu. Njezin narativ ističe reakciju intelektualnih zajednica koje su formirale paralelne akademske strukture radi održavanja znanstvenog i kulturnog života. Na temelju ove usmene povijesti, koja je sama po sebi arhiva, u radu se propituje uloga osobnog narativa u dokumentiranju institucionalnog pamćenja i rekonstrukciji bremenitog povijesnog krajolika Kosova. U

radu se mikronaracija supostavlja pisanim izvorima, na temelju čega se promišlja o nasilju, otpornosti i krhkosti života pod okupacijom, uz istodobno bavljenje pitanjima sjećanja, otpora te još uvijek aktivnog procesa izgradnje države u poslijeratnom Kosovu.

Ključne riječi: prekarnost, represija, narativ, institucija, sjećanje