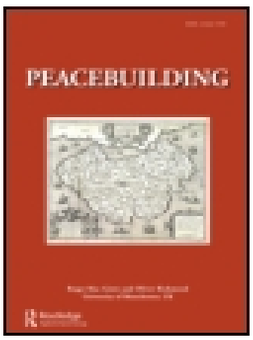

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'Good personhood' in Kosovo: a Serbian perspective from below

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ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates the everyday experiences, perceptions and practices of ordinary Serb citizen outside the cluster of majority Serb villages and cities in Northern Kosovo. Through employing an emic perspective, it explores their quotidian social reality in which Serbian identity is negotiated and made meaningful. Through a focus on the everyday understanding of 'good personhood', the main aim of this research paper is to disentangle local values and uses of 'being a(good) Serb' from the externally imposed post-war discourse in Kosovo. The results of this research paper advocate are thinking of the role of Serbian communities in Kosovo and reveal that a newly pragmatic form of performing the Serbian identity has been inconspicuously emerging in Kosovo, challenging earlier assumptions of a purportedly homogenous ethno-nationalist identification preference.

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Introduction

This article investigates the everyday experiences, perceptions and responses in quotidian practices of ordinary Serbs with regard to their understanding of 'good personhood' and how the latter is enacted and restored under the parapet of the currently heightened ethno-nationalist tensions in Kosovo. Situated outside the Serb-majority area of northern Kosovo, the place chosen for this study is geographically located in Central Kosovo, here anonymised as 'The Village' due to the sensitive information provided during the fieldwork and security issues respondents might face in their own community and outside The Village for being outspoken. Entirely inhabited by ethnic Serbs, The Village counted more than a thousand inhabitants before the 1999 Kosovo War. In the summer of 1998, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) attacked the area around The Village, which suffered the loss of hundreds of ethnic Serbs and kidnappings in the aftermath of the war period.[1] Nowadays, the population is only a few hundred people, but it still represents a significant cultural centre for most Serbs in Kosovo and Serbia due to its rich history and cultural heritage.

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[1]Krieger Heike, *The Kosovo Conflict and International Law: An Analytical Documentation 1974–1999* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109.

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From this locally nuanced perspective, this article aims to understand how a restored sense of 'good personhood' understood as a set of shared moral values and practices would reveal unharvested reconciliation achievements and potentials in remote areas of Central Kosovo?

While the main purpose is to shed light on the everyday attempts of local people to renegotiate and readjust their relations with the respective 'other', either Serbs or Albanians, the main presumption is that inconspicuous, yet salient, 'good performance' among Serbs has emerged in Kosovo, particularly outside the northern areas of the country. Within The Village, indeed, people share space for social interactions[2] where their everyday struggles over the moral definition of 'otherness' can be observed in opposition to the moral hierarchies and ideologies that have emanated from the war and post-war power structures.

In the attempt to avoid the pitfall of identifying Kosovo Serbs as members of a group sharing a static and homogenous set of cultural and political identity across the country, it is acknowledged that The Village does not resemble the peculiarities of the majority of the Serb settlements in northern Kosovo. However, based on the consideration and findings that villages and rural areas in Southeast Europe are globalising due to labour mobility, consumption and architecture,[3] this article treats the Village neither as a 'global village' nor as an enclave. It rather addresses the issue of spatialisation by identifying the chosen place of the fieldwork as a liminal space, one where urban phenomena are barely visible and quotidian practices are typical of a traditional lifestyle, performed on the margins of the core society and across the still ethnic dividing lines in Kosovo.[4] Against the pitfall of treating the symbolic territorialisation of The Village and areas around as spaces for competing ethnic communities aiming to ascertain their group identity and ethno-national claims,[5] this study thus considers The Village far from being an enclave or, alternatively, a segregated area similar to northern Kosovo.[6] In doing so, this article aims to avoid prejudicial information about the significance attached to ethno-national belonging, civic identity and social background of the local inhabitants and their place of residence. In fact, freedom of movement to and from The Village has historically been restricted for both Serbs and Albanians only for its geographically isolated position and underdevelopment typical for any rural area in Kosovo.

Given this token, a particular focus is placed on the interplay between the competing parallel citizenship regimes and ethno-national narratives that Kosovo Serbs are forced to navigate pragmatically and renegotiate on a day-to-day basis.

Drawing on Michael Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism'[7] it is argued that Serbian identity is not removed from the realm of everyday life because daily indicated and meaningfully performed in all its different facets. More precisely, locals tend to pragmatically compromise their Serbian-ness in the attempt to live a "good life" through what

[2]Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990).
[3]Ger Duijzings, 'Urban Ethnography. An Introduction', *Südosteuropa* 66 (2018): 2–3.
[4]Denisa Kostovicova, *Kosovo. The Politics of Identity and Space* (Oxford – New York: Routledge, 2005).
[5]Anna Di Lellio and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, The Legendary Commander: The Construction of an Albanian Master-Narrative in Post-War Kosovo , *Nations and Nationalism: Journal of the Association of Ethnicity and Nationalism* 3 (2006): 513–29.
[6]Fitim Salihu, Voices from the Borderlands , *Kosovo 2.0.*, March 3, 2019, https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/voices-from-the-borderlands/?fbclid=IwAR2_DpT-Pvvda6VeSSpcODLWcU3sTpUptRHUlBjlkgYzlDXkRy6wQA4zWGk.
[7]Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

they consider "good practices". Contrarily to what recent cases have shown in North Kosovo, in "The Village" Serbian-ness neither resemble any form of disloyalty nor represent a kind of flag consciously waved with fervent passion. It is instead a primarily psychological phenomenon functioning in support to locals' sense of ontological insecurity. Since Serbian identity was put in jeopardy and disrupted from the wartime onward, only regressive forms of object-identification are performed in The Village, which daily occur in the form of collective emotions as well as individual attitudes towards the same symbols of Serbian-ness. The latter tends thereby to be fairly remote from most of the activities of day-to-day social life in the Village, in which ordinary life is affected by nationalist sentiments only in fairly unusual and often relatively transiting conditions. It is here of particular interest to understand better the scope and choice of local Serb citizens to construct their identity vis-à-vis relations with the ethnic other whether they are free to ignore or not respond to situated 'otherness' or rather affirm it, in the wider, divisive context of contemporary Kosovo. In sum, such local attitudes pose Serbian identity in contemporary Central Kosovo far from being the bearer of nationalist attitudes, but they constitute a barrier against nationalism.[8]

Among others, locals were found largely aware of 'everyday citizenship dilemma' due to the parallel jurisdiction of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Kosovo.[9] In fact, respondents referred to all issues of the competing citizenship regimes as problematic. For all respondents in The Village, it is not only challenging to align themselves with the *de facto* hegemonic Albanian definition of Kosovar citizenship. It is as equally complicated and socially impeded to perform their Self[10] with symbols of Serbian national identity in relation to an effectively ceased, hence non-existent, state membership. In the light of respondents' readiness to ignore certain dilemma to foster inclusion and resilience constructively, it is also argued that concepts, practices and institutions of citizenship of minority groups in contested-national building cannot be only focused on components of collective identities, privileges of political membership and social claims for constructing a people in a particular way. As described below, the locally nuanced study of The Village shows that it is not necessarily meant that a group shares collectively the views and the behavioural patterns ascribed to it,[11] and that, everyday compromises of identity are wider than those of nationalist claims.

While in the most urban enclaves in northern Kosovo ethnic Serbs have always been dependent on Serbia's support through its so-called parallel structures,[12] this study also argues that in other Serb communities living in rural areas across Central Kosovo, a much more positive acceptance of Kosovo's constitutional framework is performed.[13] By emphasising human agency and choices in light of everyday identity dilemma rather than predetermined ethnic labels employed in different localities, The Village offered quite different options for identity negotiations. Hence, there might be the risk of

[8]Ibid., 44.
[9]Mazur N. Kumric, Framing the Concept of Citizenship in a Contested Nation-State: Reflection on Kosovo , *Pécs Journal of International and European Law* II (2015): 70–88.
[10]Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.
[11]Alexander Cheskin, *Russian Speakers in post-Soviet* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 140.
[12]Morgan Meaker, 'Without Accountability, There is no Closure', *New Eastern Europe*, no.3–4 (2017): 32–37; and Denisa Kostovicova, Mary Martin and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 'The missing link in human security research: Dialogue and insecurity in Kosovo', *Security Dialogue* 43 (2012): 574.
[13]Gëzim Krasniqi (University of Edinburg), 10 August 2018, Skype interview, 38 min.

generalising or suggesting monolithic responses to the respective context and settings. To counteract such risk, this study qualifies the realm of the everyday as a more authentic field of studying human agency,[14] identifying The Village as a space where moral and ethical (re)considerations of everyday relations are daily subjected by self-interest and compromised with other Serbs as well as the ethnic other. Therefore, this article pays specific attention to dissonant voices, which are paramount to counter the idea that deprivation automatically fuels hatred and exclusion resulting from the frustration of being excluded,[15] yet without discarding the plurality of voices among ethnic Serbs in Kosovo. In fact, the focus on the realm of everyday life and human agency in The Village challenges any assumptions that Kosovo Serbs may have ever represented a monolithic group of ethnic hard-liners doomed by isolationism, victimisation and marginalisation.

At the very end, this article will address two caveats. Firstly, the political debate over the territorial swap may dangerously overlook local readjustments in everyday inter-subjective relations. The latter may remain unnoticed as a result of wider media coverage which at respective national levels, tend to replicate only the post-war hegemonic ideologies, and which, at international level, omit ordinary processes that do not fall within the paradigm of interethnic conflict. Secondly, not all concepts taken from the study of everyday life at grassroots level may lend themselves to useful insights. Here, there might be a risk of potentially adding 'too culturalist' stereotyping or essentialising ideas of good-neighbourliness which have both sometimes been used to explain war and post-war culture in the former Yugoslav successor states[16] without due consideration of the specificity of the local context and its history.

Researching the everyday life of post-conflict societies

This article aims to advocate for a rethinking of the role of Serbian communities in central Kosovo and beyond. It thus questions standard etic (external) representations and constructions at both national and international levels, and the ways in which these ascribe particular views and societal roles to this group by juxtaposing the respondents' subject position (emic perspective) to such assumptions. The case study of The Village suggests that only better knowledge of, and a greater sensibility to, distinct local factors allow addressing the specific needs and sensibilities of the local subjects appropriately.[17] In this respect, the entire methodological strategy was not only aimed at gaining a deep enough knowledge of the socio-cultural context of The Village and thereby asking proper questions and interpreting the answers received[18] from the respondents. It was also aimed at pre-empting any unnecessary ethnicisation from the outside and allowing non-ethnic identifications to emerge 'from below', if and where relevant, assessing local expectations for a local experience of peace.[19] This was not to suggest that concepts of

[14]Randazzo Changing narratives? Shifting discursive conceptualisations of post-conflict peace-building (PhD diss., University of Westminster, 2015).
[15]Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 1995).
[16]'After a Historical Nightmare', in *Neighbours at War: Anthropological Perspectives on Yugoslav Ethnicity, Culture, and History*, ed. Joel M. Halpern and David A. Kideckel, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 401–2.
[17]Endre Begby and J. Peter Burguess, Human Security and Liberal Peace , *Public Reason* 1 (2009): 91–104.
[18]Gearoid Millar. 'Engaging Ethnographic Peace Research: Exploring an Approach', *International Peacekeeping* 5 (2018), 597–609.
[19]Ibid., 599.

identity were not a relevant parameter of analysis in exploring the social role of civic identities. Rather, it was hoped to trace out inconspicuous, yet dynamic, processes of how Kosovo Serbs make sense of lived experiences and political processes in which they are enmeshed by exploring the realm of everyday life and making new discoveries, either by accidents or by suspending earlier assumptions.[20] Since there is little doubt that knowledge of the sub-national context is necessary for the design, planning and eventual implementation of peace interventions,[21] the choice to look at the realm of everyday life 'from below' evoked whether or not such time-sensitive and locally nuanced findings would unravel unharvested local power dynamics regarding reconciliation processes at grassroots level.

The underpinning research benefitted from an understanding of local context and general knowledge of The Village acquainted through previous work. In June 2018, two weeks of intensive fieldwork and observation of most of the local practices in The Village, such as the diploma awarding ceremony at Saint Anna School, the 'Vidovdan' and alike, engaged a total of 25 locals. Following the research ethics guideline of Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski', Bulgaria, all respondents were given a Participant Information Sheet and an Interview Consent Form to assure in advance their voluntary participation, their right to remain anonymous, their right to withdraw at any time, and their informed consent. While the majority of respondents (n = 22) concluded the interview after expressing their willingness to remain anonymous, only a few of them (n = 3) withdrew after the first questions were posed. All respondents were Serbs, with the exception of only one ethnic Albanian occasionally encountered and who voluntarily decided to be interviewed.

As a male researcher and an outsider, this article results from a male bias study as it was difficult to approach people in general, and women in particular. The former was found very sceptical and expressed their personal concern about sitting for an interview at first, while, the latter was not visible in the public life of The Village during the day. Although a few female locals (n = 4) decided to participate voluntarily since they had a public role in The Village, this study lacks gender balance among the respondents. Since almost no literature was found about The Village, it was thought not to focus on a specific target-group of potential interviewees. Granted, field observation was conducted as a tool for knowledge construction and with the aim to collect information from below even through occasional dialogue with locals. In addition, a semi-structured, theme-guided strategy was designed to conduct in-depth interviews as part of a mix-method approach based on a qualitative research to undertake with an ethnographic sensibility.[22] In-depth interviews were conducted around the main research question regarding 'who is a good person?' (i.e. *ko je dobar čovek?*), which caused at first some consternation because the main question was originally formulated in English. Because of this, in-depth interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter who translated from Serbian to English in order to avoid any pitfalls of misinterpretation of questions. Since Serbian language was considered the first language spoken by potential interviewees among Kosovo Serbs, all interviewees (n = 25) were native speakers of Serbian language who

[20]Duijzings, 'Urban Ethnography. An Introduction', 4.
[21]Millar. 'Engaging Ethnographic Peace Research', 598.
[22]Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith, 'Comparison with an Ethnographic Sensibility', *American Political Science* (2017): 126–30.

had the chance to conduct the interview in Serbian. The majority of respondents were residents of The Village, while, conversely, only a few (n = 3) were not permanent residents because enrolled in various degrees at the University of Priština, which is also referred to as the University of Kosovska Mitrovica after being relocated to North Mitrovica. Inevitably, there is a certain amount of sample bias as a result of this group composition. In this regard, a large number of issues among interviewees have not been only pointed out, but also addressed differently, shedding new light on a large number of subtopics related to 'good personhood'. However, the need to embrace an ethnographic sensibility was thought to venture externally imposed discourse over majority–minority relations in Kosovo and methodologically investigate the potential of Serbian readiness to speak up against authority – no matter whether Serbian or Albanian – and forms of hegemonic knowledge. Relatedly, this research strategy was not only employed for letting interviewees speak freely about factors and topics they considered relevant, but for gleaning the meanings of the moral-philosophical concept of 'good personhood' that respondents ascribed in the local context they live in. While conducting in-depth interviews, this turned positively out to fulfil a centrally paramount aim of the entire fieldwork and research. In fact, hidden aspects and diverse contradictions were unravelled by respondents who conveyed a bigger picture on what people 'say', what people really 'think' and what they practically 'go through'[23] after undertaking personal strategic actions for solving practical problems in their everyday life, such as securing employment in an almost non-existing job market.[24]

Everyday life in the village: a critical analysis from below

The parallel citizenship regime along with Serbia's interferences within Kosovo's domestic politics play a critical role among Kosovo Serbs in The Village. While travel visa restrictions remain the most prominent issue voiced, locals expressed more concern about a potential double discrimination they may continue to face if they would be left behind any agreement based on ethnic-majoritarian lines. The majority of ethnic Serbs living in The Village and holding a Serbian passport do not have the identical status of those Serbian passport holders residing in the Republic of Serbia. Although both categories of citizens are considered Serbian citizens, those residing in Kosovo are, unlike the latter, subject to specific and more complicated procedures for obtaining travel visas or updating their expired Serbian documents (e.g. Passport, ID, Driving licence) to the new Kosovar ones. In particular, the caption 'Kosovo' on the front page of their Serbian passports obliges Kosovo Serbs to interact with the authorities and embassies in Pristina even though the same passports have been issued by the Coordinate Directorate within the Ministry of Interior in Belgrade.[25]

In The Village, many locals expressed a deep sense of double discrimination. They mention, both, the stigma ascribed to them by Kosovo Albanians in the aftermaths of the 1999 Kosovo War and the paradoxical difference of treatment they face in comparison with all Serbian passport-holders by the Republic of Serbia. This citizenship dilemma was

[23]Duijzings, 'Urban Ethnography. An Introduction'.
[24]Simmons and Smith, 'Comparison with an Ethnographic Sensibility', 128.
[25]Kumric, Framing the Concept of Citizenship in a Contested Nation-State: Reflection on Kosovo , 86.

one of the most discussed controversial topics among the respondents, evidently caught in a situation of having to navigate the mutually contradictory Serbia-aligned parallel system and Kosovo's constitutional framework. Although officially having the same rights and benefits as anyone else regardless of ethnic belonging in Kosovo, Serbs remain trapped in-between. A few locals from The Village have begun to apply for the new Kosovar documents in the attempt to escape such limbo situation and improve their life accordingly. As two respondents explain:

> "*I have Kosovo documents* [. . .] *I went to apply for a Kosovo driving license, and I refused to keep my Serbian one*." (Respondent no. 10, female, adult)

> "*I do not have a Serbian passport, only the Kosovar one. I do not care* [about it]*"* (Respondent no. 6, male, adult)

The increasing willingness among Serbs to obtain Kosovar documents has previously been suggested to oppose external assumptions that ethnicity favours societal and spatial divisions among the population.[26] Rather than emphasising interethnic dispute, locals in The Village expressed fear for the ongoing economic stagnation and threatening political instability. By looking beyond the hegemonic discourse, it becomes clearer that spatial separation between The Village and the Albanian-majority towns, which has worsened economic conditions within the village after the 1999 Kosovo War and 2004 turmoil, does not entirely depend on ethnic factors. In fact, both policy vacuum in the third sector, which remains yet underdeveloped all over the country, and the incapacity of local politics to tackle poverty-related issues, are currently impeding locals to perform actively in the public sphere and thrive in the third sector. Frustration over the economic situation prevailed in all interviewees:

> "*It is a matter of opportunities. I do not wish my kids to stay* [in The Village]. *Only 500 people live here. Young people cannot live without jobs*" (Respondent no. 8, male, adult)

> "*I would like to travel, perhaps twice a year, and coming back. I cannot afford it right now. Although I work hard, the situation here is tough*" (Respondent no. 6, male, adult)

Given the economic insecurities, people displayed a vivid criticism against the political state of affairs at large and political dissatisfaction with Srpska Lista (Serbian List), the main Serb minority political party in Kosovo. Throughout the fieldwork, the majority of the interviewees highlighted their personal disappointment and disagreement with most of Serbia's interferences in Kosovo, which have been permanent in the northern areas and overwhelming in the central, southern and eastern regions of Kosovo. This political dissatisfaction with Serbian political representatives and their attempts to interfere through manipulating ethnic Serbs, stands in direct contrast to ethnically stereotyped assumptions that Albanians in Kosovo and even international commentators typically have ascribed to Kosovo Serbs by usually depicting them as a potential security threat. Hence, the question arises whether related assumptions, such as that Kosovo Serbs tend to self-isolate and marginalise themselves from the majority ethnic Albanian population in the public sphere, also cannot be upheld. Previously, ethnographers and researchers have employed such assumptions to analyse the multiculturalism of the urban areas of

[26]Ibid., 75.

North and South Mitrovica/Mitrovicë in northern Kosovo as exceptional, while overlooking local attempts of adjusting to interethnic coexistence and dialogue in Southern Kosovo. In contrast to urban spaces of northern Kosovo where political disaffection is far from being openly expressed, the case of The Village demonstrates how particularly in rural milieus of South Kosovo, although left behind in policy plans and academic investigations, locals negotiate and constrict their collective identities in support of interethnic coexistence and well living. This is evident from critical, and sometimes even sarcastic, reflections such as these:

> *"If you have a Serbian passport, it is good for you, otherwise you are like a Kurd in Turkey"* (Respondent no. 1, male, adult)

> "*I have been forced to quit my job position. Perhaps, I was too good at working there* [ironic tone of voice]. [. . .] *Look here* [showing the daily copy of the Serb newspaper "Jedinstvo", ed. "Unity"] "Politika je Matematika, a ne narodna poezija" [ed. Politics is Math, not popular poetry]. *When you have an enemy to blame, you can always find an excuse*" (Respondent no. 6, male, adult)

> "*On the wall there is* [a graffiti of] *Šešelj. I do not like him as a person. We have got many troubles because of him*" (Respondent no. 2, male, teenager)

As evident from the last citation, 'banal'[27] Serbian symbols of national identity can be ubiquitous in the everyday physical environment of The Village. However, this form of nationalism unfolds neither a vernacular discourse directed against the ethnic "other" nor disloyal attitudes towards Kosovar formal institutions. The wide range of banal signifiers (e.g. a Serbian flag hanging at the entrance of the village, graffiti dedicated to Šešelj, and religion-related reminders and symbols) do not impinge on those few and rare social encounters across the ethnic divisions inside as well as outside the village. More likely, they reproduce a standard set of traditional symbols, customs and beliefs typical for the traditional culture of all Serbs in Kosovo and beyond.[28] Contrary to what the symbolic display of ethno-national Serbian identity in the physical environment might seem to suggest, Serbs from The Village explicitly expressed readiness to engage increasingly with people from outside, regardless of their ethnicity. However, the visible presence of such ethno-nationalist signifiers lent itself to a continuation of distrust towards Kosovo Serbs in the eyes of Kosovo Albanians' and, thereby, to their positional weakness. The following statements suggest that ordinary locals of both sides of the ethnic division are, in fact, little likely to become potentially involved in ethnic turbulences and security-related events.

> "*I do not like the term community because it divides* [people]. *There are good and bad people. I do not draw lines along blood or ethnic belonging.*" (Respondent no. 6, male, adult)

> "*Although I am the only one Albanian and Muslim working in* [The Village] *I do not have issues. We watch football matches together* [. . .] *this is what we do together daily*" (Respondent no. 4, adult, Albanian, self-described as Muslim)

In discovering inconspicuous issues of everyday life and analysing with the interviews their opinions about, less promising statements are revealed. In fact, 1999 Kosovo war-

[27] Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.
[28] Ivan Čolović, *The Politics of Symbols in Serbia. Essays in Political Anthropology* (London: Hurst & Co., 1997).

related issues were never far away, particularly in the field of education and citizenship. It was here clear that the majority of interviewees' opinions towards these emotive issues were not collectively addressed in a negative way. However, there is the need to put them in context of the specific location, situation and generation. Some adolescents and young adults, whose families had decided to move out of the village and settle in Mitrovica/Mitrovicë in northern Kosovo or in Serbia and who were interviewed during their holidays back in their home village, suggest a consolidation of ethnic divisions and perpetuation of stereotypes which were likely to originate from their places of normal residence. This stood in contrast to most attitudes found during interviews in, both, the ethnically divided urban area of Mitrovica/Mitrovicë and among the stationary villagers of The Village.

> "*I have no contact with* [Albanians]. *I speak a bit of Albanian but I do not have Albanian friends*. [Albanians] *pass by* [The Village], *but they do not stay*" (Respondent no. 2, male, teenager)

> "*I do not interact with Albanians outside* [The Village]. *I tried once to speak with them, but I do not want to do it again. Sometimes they come here, doing something that in my opinion is connected with the local Mafia* [i.e. corruption]" (Respondent no. 11, female, university student living in Mitrovica/Mitrovicë)

These young people, unlike those post-conflict societies where youth resilience is regarded as future hope compared to attitudes among the older generations and their living memory of violence,[29] continued to impose an ethnically stereotyped view of 'the other' – namely, Kosovo Albanians, fuelled by distrust and fear. Tragically, few have had much more chance to ever meet 'the other'. Contrary to the older generation, who learnt the other's language in school during Yugoslav time, they have lost a common language. In contrast to the attitudes of these young people (respondent no. 11 and no. 2), members of the older generation, in particular, were eager to readjust everyday relations and promote an idea of well-living together with the 'others'.

This variety of attitudes and opinions in The Village shed some light on the role that Serbia plays among Kosovo Serbs within the country. While cultural affiliation with Serbia is vividly reflected in the physical environment through various signifiers of 'banal nationalism', there are also everyday performances of Serbian socio-cultural heritage and traditions which are not, per se, nationalist (e.g. the use of the Serbian language, respect for traditional holidays and rituals, Christian worshipping). At the same time, political dissatisfaction with Serbia-sponsored political institutions, such as Srpska Lista (Serbian List) and the parallel citizenship regime, is increasing in The Village. Within this mosaic of Serb identification possibilities, only a few interviewees considered Serbia and its parallel institutions the only 'guarantors' and 'protectors' of the Serbian communities and their rights. Others considered the role of Serbia in Kosovo as simply self-defeating. Moreover, many Serb respondents considered the realm of everyday life a mutually accessible space in which positive encounters and interactions could be restored. These

[29] See Cheskin, *Russian Speakers in post-Soviet Russia*; Alexandra Glavanakova, *Trans-Cultural Imaginings: Translating the Other, Translating the Self in Narratives about Migration and Terrorism* (Sofia: Critique and Human Publishing House, 2016); and Igor Savinas, The Conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Peculiarities of the Perception of the Conflict outside of the Region , *In the Margins of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: In Search of a Solution* (Vilnius: Public Agency, 2015), 102–22.

respondents played the role of 'extrovert insiders'[30] while positioning themselves against their political representatives in terms of ethnic representation, and against the (parallel) institutions that are charged with providing the current conditions of Serbs in Kosovo.

Broadly, there seems to be a correlation between job security and attitudes towards the ethnic other. Respondents dependent on Serbia-sponsored institutions and organisations, defined the Albanian claims over Kosovo as 'provocative' and the attitudes through which Kosovo Albanians interact with Kosovo Serbs as 'inaccurate'. This became evident when conducting interviews inside the Serbia-sponsored school in The Village. The latter is the only functioning public school in The Village, in which right to education is guaranteed in Serbian language and offered in accordance with the Serbian curriculum to several dozens of local pupils. In turn, the school provides employment for a couple of dozens of Kosovo Serbs from the wider administrative area of the Municipal Town. Exactly those respondents who complained about the state of affairs and everyday encounters with ethnic Albanians within their place of residence, were from among those respondents who neither reside in The Village, nor spend their entire everyday life there. Undoubtedly, they also suffered less from economic deficits than their Village-based peers did. Thus, expressing their positioning as subaltern to the hegemonic Albanians at large, their statements reveal the prevalence of a prejudicial 'us-and-them' dichotomy, which informs their practices and attitudes in the realm of everyday life. Among them, ideas such as a rampant criminality among ethnic Albanians as well as conspiracies of Kosovo-government-sponsored policies aimed at keeping Serbs underdeveloped are salient. The differences and frictions between Serbs from within and outside the village, is evident in the following statement, a typical example reflecting also the situatedness of these Serb attitudes towards the Albanian 'other'.

> "*The school functions in accordance with the educational system of the Republic of Serbia*. [Kosovo Albanians] *do not even know their system. This is neither good for us nor for them. They want to play their tough role for defending something they are not aware of*. [Kosovo Albanians] *came here to put barcodes on everything inside this school* [. . .] *This was done on purpose, so in the future they will come and rule*" (Respondent no. 9, male, adult, living inside the village)

> "*They wanted to prove that everything belongs to them. I know there are good Albanians, but they cannot speak up* [. . .] *I wear a golden cross that I hide because it is a provocation in the eyes* [of Kosovo Albanians]. *There are no problems, but we live under a system that suffocates us*." (Respondent 10, Female, Adult, living elsewhere in the municipality)

CMAR_A_298649CMAR_A_298649The 'us-and-them' dichotomy is evident in such statements and it assigns problems such as corruption to one side only, even where attempts are made to see 'the other' in more benevolent light. However, the experience of a local Serb from The Village documents both the experience of corruption and a critical view of corruption on the side of local Serb politicians:

> "[Serbian politicians in the Municipal Town] *don't like me anymore since I stopped supporting the party. To get votes, they give you something. Hunger drives politics*. (Respondent 6, Male, Adult)

[30]Slobodan Naumović, The Ethnology of Transformation as Transformed Ethnology: The Serbian Case , *Ethnologia Balkanica* 6 (2002):21.

Those respondents who stated some critical opinions towards the Serbian authorities, tended to be neither politically involved in, nor economically depended on, Serbia's parallel system in Kosovo. They seemed aware of the 'no-way back' regarding to Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo. Above citation, however, demonstrates that respondents were acutely aware of being situated in-between the externally Serbian parallel system and the internal Kosovar institutions. Although they spoke up against the Serbia-sponsored institutions and initiatives organised in The Village, a clear link is made between destitute living conditions and dependencies. Serbian institutions and organisations send donations and humanitarian aid to support the reconstruction of houses and guarantee schooling in The Village, while reinforcing the villagers' isolation and spatial division.[31] Such economic and political dependencies have to be weighted up against security risks emanating from village outsiders who are not aware of the final balance that needs to be maintained.

> *"Once*, [a couple of Serbs from Serbia] *came to* [The Village] *and tried to set an Albanian-Kosovo flag on fire. I stopped them. They will leave afterward. I will stay with my family instead. I told them: "if for you guys 'Kosovo is Serbia', you are welcome here! Why don't you live with us here?"* [ironic tone of voice]" (Respondent no. 8, male, adult)

However, not all local attitudes were as proactively conciliatory. There were some respondents who displayed passive conciliatory attitudes which, arguably not representative for the majority of respondents, positioned themselves into a subaltern role of 'We, the Serbs' – the 'good' but 'inferior' – against 'them, the Albanians' – 'the evil' but 'superior', in Kosovo today. In the attempt to simplify the post-1999 realm of the everyday and counteract any Kosovo Serbs collective escapism, these interviewees displayed resigned, defiant and ethnocentrically informed ideas of the Serbian-Albanian division, which, however, still highlighted prospects of peaceful coexistence.

> *"I am sure half of Kosovo's population will leave the country, maybe we will restart to live alike our ancestors did"* (Respondent no. 7, male, adult)

> "*At school I repeat to the kids that the condition under which we live is "peace". Let's call it peace, but this peace has come only from one side* [implying the Serbian side]" (Respondent no. 9, female, adult)

Considering The Village as geographically located within a Kosovar area with one of the higher numbers of Kosovo Serbs who had been kidnapped and murdered during the Kosovo war and immediately after the capacity of some respondents to criticise the 'ghetto mentality' of local Serbs could come as a surprise. Yet, when recollecting events and autobiographical wartime memories, or even when touching upon more recent political issues (e.g. former KLA combatants in charge of post-conflict transition, Municipality Agreement), conciliatory attitudes of reaching out beyond the ethnic divisions can be found, based on concrete social interactions in real life or in virtual spaces such as Facebook.

> *"Look here* [scrolling his Facebook page] *I have UÇK guys as friends. I served the Serbian Army* [in 1999 Kosovo War]. *We shot at each other; luckily, we missed each other. Now we are*

[31] Randazzo Changing narratives? Shifting discursive conceptualisations of post-conflict peace-building .

friends. I can tell you without any doubt: war is the paradox of everything (Respondent no. 6, male, adult)

Such attitudes tend to go along with criticism again, both, externally imposed ascription from the Albanian side and from exaggerated Serbian paraphernalia in northern Kosovo. In this, again, frictions between insiders and outsiders (here of, both, the village and the country) were apparent:

"*I did not go today to Vidovdan. I went last year, but I refused to celebrate this year. I am tired of Serbs coming with their flags and banners: "Kosovo je Srbija* [Kosovo is Serbia]." (Respondent no. 8, male, adult)

The refusal to celebrate 'Vidovdan'[32] along with the denial to continue to support Srspka Lista (Respondent 6) did not only demonstrate individual agency directed against the political situation. These actions also reveal a willingness to compromise an exclusively ethno-national defined Serbian identity. Similar to the above-mentioned decision of respondent no. 8 to stop a few 'foreign Serbs' to set an Albania-Kosovo flag on fire, such acts and utterances signify the rejection of a simple 'Serbs-against-Albanians' dichotomy. However, this dichotomy is still transmitted in the history books currently in use for primary and high school students in Kosovo through the archetype of two opposite ethno-nationalist myths, Albanian and Serbian. These position the two communities against each other as 'occupants-against-survivors' or 'oppressor-against-oppressed', and there are subtle indications that such opposition is still being perpetuated by some, even if insisting to be cross-ethnically tolerant (on shaky grounds):

"[. . .] *I do not say to the kids to hate* [Albanians], *but only to be alert, because we can't forget. If we forget, something could be repeated again* [. . .]" (Respondent no. 10, male, adult)

Various historical reasons, including segregated schooling during Yugoslav times,[33] have always minimised the chances for actual interethnic contact with Albanians in The Village. Its Serb inhabitants usually had to venture beyond the village boundaries in order to meet the ominous 'other'. However, nowadays such traditional lack of contact seems not to impinge on local readiness for reconciliation with 'otherness'. Apart from the situation of, and attitudes described around, the school, something is currently moving towards more interethnic relations between Albanians and Serbs in The Village. Within this historically homogenous place, these are not taboo anymore, as also this perspective of an Albanian, interviewed in the village, suggests:

"I have Serbian colleagues with whom I work well together. We have different daily shifts, so we cooperate at work" (Respondent no. 4, male, adult, Albanian and self-described as Muslim)

[32]The celebration of Vidovdan refers to the 'Battle of Kosovo' occurred in 1389 on today's territory of Kosovo and plays a central role in Serbian identity construction.
[33]Kostovicova, *Kosovo. The Politics of Identity and Space*, 170.

What restores *'good personhood'*

> Due to the epistemological significance in Serbian language and the normative aspect that the adjective "good" (i.e. *dobar*) in locally performed Serbian culture of The Village, during the interviews respondents misunderstood at first the question "*who is a good person?*" Therefore, the question was formulated anew and posed differently: "*how do you define good personhood in Kosovo?*" Hence, in the attempt to give a more precise opinion, respondents treated the second question on two levels: as explained above, they once again began to address the complexities of their everyday life with regard to a wide range of overlapping circumstances affecting them, including not only Kosovar politics and authorities but also economic stagnation, social disadvantages and exclusion. Secondly, respondents largely linked "good personhood" with ideas of "good practices" to carry out for living *with* and *nearby* people in respect of their human dignity. Respondents thus associated "good personhood" with ideas of "good life" while considering the latter as a general set of values to integrate in their ethical attitudes in social interactions with others. Interestingly enough, respondents excluded ethnically-defined as well as externally-imposed societal ascriptions of ethno-national identity, thereby subjugating politics and ethnicisation of contemporary Kosovo's socio-political landscape to people's moral choices. In other words, respondents understood the question in terms of "*how does, and could, a good person perform?*", or "*what can a good person do for being such?*", rather than asking themselves: "*are Kosovo Albanians good people?*", or "*are their claims over Kosovo good for us?*"
>
> "*I want to tell you in Serbian* [language]: *"we're all different, but under God's eyes, we are all "of the same meat*" (Respondent no. 4, male, adult, Albanian and self-described Muslim)
>
> *I think that even a good person possesses "a hidden wolf within himself, which needs to be tied", otherwise temptations overcome his goodness"* (Respondent no. 10, female, adult)
>
> *"You cannot do harm unto others. Be honest, correct and respectful with the person next to you, he will do the same with you"* (Respondent no. 9, male, adult)

This general reference corresponding with shared ethical values and moral principles for social interaction was not only understood as a means for restoring 'good personhood' and as care for the Serbian selfhood in Kosovo – namely, for their own community. It was also thought as care for 'the other' in order to establish 'good relations'. Rather than trying to define 'good personhood', the question brought the respondents to reflect on potential creative solutions for their everyday problems and how to response to poverty, underdevelopment and feelings of being ostracised by the majority of Kosovar population. They seemed to be primarily concerned with correct, civic practices of self-care and for others. For instance, instead of remaining stagnant or sceptical to potential change, locals were willing even to promote local businesses for tourists, such as a bike-sharing system for visiting The Village and family types of wine tourism within the Village. In their eyes, being 'good people', or, more precisely, honest people, meant to 'perform in a good way' with everyone. Respondents saw in the notion of 'good personhood' the potential for counteracting the bitterness of everyday life rather than performing only a mechanical act of 'being a good person', which was embedded in the quotidian practices in the rural fabric. This was very indicative of the way respondents looked upon the notion of 'good personhood' while discussing social and civic responsibility. The latter was understood as an alternative remedy for restoring interethnic relations with the others. This ethical self-formation was defined as typical for the everyday life in The Village even during the Yugoslavian time, where a sort of rural companionship and

human relatedness between Serbs and Albanians living around, was always present and vivid. While there was a silent understanding that the wartime had compromised the country in general and the areas around The Village in particular, it seemed that potential turmoil or political crises can have very little influence on locals and their local identity.

At the same time, however, the mentioned civic responsibility was expressed often within a certain socio-historic-cultural conditions. Despite the fact that everyday performativity of Serbian identity in The Village did not show disloyal forms of nationalism, it might come as a surprise that the majority of respondents employed some religious rhetoric in their moral deliberations of 'good personhood' and associated practices. Although such ubiquitous use of Orthodox Christian symbols and paraphernalia was included in the words of respondents, not all of them expressed ethno-nationalist sympathises in exploring commonalities across the dividing lines based on religious rhetoric (with an exception of respondent no. 11).

> "[. . .] *I stopped supporting Srpska Lista* [Serbian List]. *I am not interested in naive political issues. Here and now, there is a country and it is my country, and there are people to live together with*" (Respondent no. 6, male, adult)

> "*A good person cares about family, not about Serbian-ness or Albanian-ness. If someone attacks my family or my house, I will defend it*". (Respondent no. 7, male, adult)

> *"I do my best and not play that dirty game*" (Respondent no. 8, male, adult)

While respondents rhetorically referred to spiritual and religious Orthodox traditions with good practices, '*so that whatever we do is for God's pleasure*' (Respondent no. 10, female, adult), many seemed knowledgeable about the fact that religious institutions carry some responsibility in projecting ethno-national divisions across the post-Yugoslav communities.[34] Hence, the good orthodox/good Serb double bind identity was once again mediated through shared moral values and good practices to be performed in the everyday life. The good Orthodox Serb seems to reveal inevitably a good citizen of Kosovo, too, whose words are always followed by 'good actions' aimed at filling the vacuum of meaning and solidarity in The Village. In the attempt to disentangle the local knot of economic and political stagnation, 'performing the good' meant for respondents nothing but repair relationships with the 'ethnic other' by forging and foreclosing relationships as the primary condition on which full-fledged reconciliation could be built.

Similar to other fieldwork conducted in the Western Balkans, such as in post-war Bosnia[35] or Croatia,[36] respondents in The Village were found primarily concerned with the potential 'bad performance'. The latter, in moral terms, can injure a person's dignity even within his own community. It thus emerged that a sense of responsibility and self-criticism was not only towards 'the ethnic other' but also, and specifically, towards those belonging to the same community. Within a context dominated by poverty, economic underdevelopment – including abysmally high unemployment rates – and overwhelming fear of double exclusion, respondents depoliticised the realm of the everyday they live in. Relatedly, other important

[34]Nonka Bogomilova, *Religion in a Secular Context: Balkan Projections* (Sofia: Paradigma, 2015), 128.
[35]Zora Kostandinova, And When the Heart is Sick, the Whole Body is Sick. Repairing the Person and the Urban Fabric through Everyday Sufi Ethics in Post-War Sarajevo , *Südosteuropa* 1 (2018): 69–93.
[36]Caroline Leutloff-Grandits, Housing Relations After an Ethnic War: National and Social Dimensions of Home in the War-Torn Region of Knin/Croatia , *Ethnologia Balkanica* 6 (2002): 95–117.

driving factors included the need and the wish to reconsider 'the other' – no matter whether Serb or Albanian and whether situated inside or outside of The Village – as holding great responsibility for improving everyday life and building a common future in Kosovo.

Conclusion

Within the limits of this study, on the basis of the in-depth interviews conducted and data collected from field observations in The Village, the findings of this article are twofold.

Firstly, many local Serbs were found to navigate pragmatically in-between the Serbia-sponsored system and the Kosovar institutions. Where reminders and signifiers of Serbian-ness exist, they might be criticised and contested by some community members. Within the Village, indeed, respondents largely refused to employ an 'us-versus-them' dichotomy and even found critical towards the community they belong to, its members and its representative organisations. They thereby demonstrated how certain political trajectories and outdated paradigms concerning Kosovo's interethnic separation and ethno-nationalist claims need to be reconsidered. While the transfer of power to local institutions has been so far delayed, thereby impeding locals from being engaged in a discussion regarding Kosovo's political future and socioeconomic status,[37] in turn understood in need of 'therapeutic intervention',[38] this study suggests that there might be potential in trusting and empowering local actors for future decision-making processes. In other words, this article points out that there may be enough space and level of trustworthiness for engaging with, consulting, incorporations and even empowering, local actors and institutions[39] within certain remote rural areas of Kosovo.

Secondly, in an attempt to illicit what, in local people's perceptions of everyday encounters restores 'good personhood', this study drew attention to many respondents' willingness to abandon rigid constraints of ethno-nationalist ideology and leave room for 'good practices' that, on a daily basis, may allow for increased social interaction and the sharing of common ethical values and political institutions accordingly. Although ethical responsibility towards the 'ethnic other' might here result solely from a situationally sensitive process within The Village in Central Kosovo, other Serb responses to everyday identity dilemmas can capture other everyday struggles to restore personhood through 'good practices'.

Beyond any misplaced idealism, the findings also point to the role of economic and security stress and untoward dependencies as potential spoilers of 'good practices' and open-mindedness towards 'the other'. Both chances and obstacles cannot be understood without acknowledging the realities on the ground first,[40] whereby local dynamics are deeply ingrained in the war-reflected legacy and can, in turn, inform the central places of power. It seems particularly relevant here to consider the de facto low degree of social interactions and exchanges of knowledge and services between members of different ethnic background in The Village, including young people's lack of a common language.

[37]Gëzim Visoka, 'International Governance and Local Resistance: The Thin Line between Ethical, Emancipatory and Exclusionary Politics', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 22 (2011): 99–125.
[38]Caroline Hughes and Vanessa Pupavac, Framing Post-Conflict Securities: International Pathologisation of Cambodia and Post-Yugoslav States , *Third World Quarterly*, no. 26 (2005): 889–973.
[39]Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, 'The Local Turn in Peacebuilding: A Critical Agenda for Peace', *Third World Quarterly* 34 (2013): 763–83.
[40]Randazzo, Changing narratives? Shifting discursive conceptualisations of post-conflict peace-building (PhD diss., University of Westminster 2015), 79.

In fact, there was not a single respondent from The Village who did not know what it means to perform as a 'good person' even in rare interethnic encounters. Such knowledge seems a societal precondition on which all intra- and interethnic encounters should be based because containing a fruitful ground for mapping new forms of everyday peace. Within this, rural structure of Kosovo's population can determine a potential level of resilience and peace to a political crisis. The central presumption of this article was that, following the social dynamics of remote rural areas outside the Serb-majority clusters of North Kosovo, the question regarding 'what restores good personhood in Kosovo' was about to provide a central, moral domain to think about and respond to in practice. Beyond being just a research tool, enacted and restored sense of 'good personhood' anticipates ethno-political implications within a Serb-majority milieu in Kosovo, whereby everyday responsibilities towards 'the other' are valued in practice, especially in times of uncertainty.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the methodological strategy might serve as a pilot case study for future comparisons with other Serb situations across the country in order to better explore the issue of Serb selfhood within the Kosovo legal framework and political landscape. Venturing the parapet of externally imposed discourse from local people's everyday perspectives of 'good personhood' in their place of residence might potentially serve in the context of Kosovo's contested statehood, as an indicative case study of the human potential for Kosovo to succeed in its long-term state-building without dismissing the central role of people and their identities.

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