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Theorising 'Good Personhood' in Rural Kosovo: Inconspicuous Coexistence and Local Serb Responses to Security and Identity Dilemmas

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Abstract

This paper explores the everyday experiences, perceptions, and practices of Kosovo Serbs residing in the rural fabric of Southeast Kosovo with regard to security-related issues. Building on previous qualitative social research conducted in Central Kosovo, it particularly investigates how local responses of ordinary Serbs reflect a certain pragmatic performativity in the face of Kosovo Albanians. In-depth interviews and focus groups were held with locals, while field observation was conducted to construct locally nuanced knowledge about the relations between ordinary Serbs, their identity, and the surrounding landscape. Similar to the Central Kosovo study's findings, the results confirm that in Southeast Kosovo, local Serbs neither displayed nor unfolded forms of vernacularism or disloyalty toward Kosovo Albanians. Conversely, they were found reflecting on potential creative solutions for tackling poverty and underdevelopment in the hope of avoiding replications of post-1999 Kosovo War ideologies emanated by respective national media coverages and political rhetoric. Moreover, it is argued that security experts have de facto overlooked untapped processes of present-day interethnic coexistence and resilience between Serbs and Albanians in the rural fabric by largely giving salience to the tense atmosphere in the Serb-majority urban clusters of North Kosovo. In fact, results also show that Kosovo

Serbs pragmatically perform an account of quotidian practices for restoring a sense and self-image of ‘personhood’ in the eyes of the ‘ethnic other’. Employing a research approach that aimed at avoiding unnecessary ethnicisation, this paper sheds light on a peace potential and true civic responsibility that emerged spontaneously from Kosovo Serb voices. Overall, the paper lays the ground for debating the notion of ‘personhood’ as a lens through which to unravel inconspicuous yet present interethnic coexistence in post-conflict Kosovo.

Keywords: identity dilemmas; Kosovo; personhood; Serbian minority; security;

In a time when the future of critical research with regard to security studies is at stake (Browning & McDonald, 2011), Kosovo is beyond doubt one of the most challenging yet pertinent post-conflict scenarios to take into consideration. Together with Bosnia and Herzegovina, the question of Kosovo's statehood not only pertain to the future of democracy across the Western Balkans, which are still considered the centre of potential instability (Wunsch, 2018, p. 119), but also explores the intertwined issues of securitisation and stabilisation in the long-term peacebuilding of neighbouring countries (Peci et al., 2014, p. 10).

When in 2013 the Kosovo–Serbia 'normalisation talks', known also as Brussels Dialogue, were launched under the auspices of the European Union, the aim of the European External Action Service and its High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy was to reach a durable reconciliation between the two countries. Some results were achieved between 2013 and 2015. The rationale behind choosing topics with practical consequences for people living in Kosovo and with no links to statehood or symbolism (Bieber, 2015, p. 387) was to size up acceptable issues and break them into smaller technical ones. However, a certain degree of ambiguity was noted when it came to further implementation on the ground (Visoka & Richmond, 2016). As a result of this, Kosovo's international status remains dependant on Serbia, whose lack of political will to recognise the newest country of Europe impedes the latter from attaining its UN membership and moving toward completing its accession to the European Union. In this vacuum, the EU-facilitated dialogue left room for some legally ambiguous agreements allowing political elites to express triumphalism after each round of talks (Emini & Stakić, 2018, p. 3), yet overlooking both needs and aspirations of local populations who neither perceive nor benefit from the effects of the progress proclaimed in high politics.

In August 2018, the contentious proposal for a 'territorial adjustment' between Kosovo and Serbia was taken into consideration as a way to move forward and fully achieve, in theory, an all-in-one-piece solution. Instead, in practice a so-called 'land swap deal' would have been implemented by redrawing border territories along ethno-majoritarian lines, namely, by compromising about 10% of Kosovo territory through a territorial exchange of the Serb-majority municipalities in North Kosovo and its population of 50,000 citizens with the Albanian-majority municipalities of Bujanovac and Preševo in southernmost Serbia. Such a 'land swap proposal' received further criticism within the European Union and Southeast Europe because it was foreseen to be a dangerous precedent for the whole region.

After being stalled for eighteen 18 months, the Brussels Dialogue reconvened under the

auspices of the European Union despite the fact that the 'land swap proposal' had neither been brought forward for final implementation, nor entirely rebutted in light of the EU-led negotiations (Dragojlo & Bami, 2020). At present, Serbia and Kosovo are still a long way from normalising their interstate relations and settling their contrasting positions (Tadić, 2019, p. 245). Both domestic narratives are nationalist, identitarian, and structured according to a zero-sum logic that portrays one side either as a winner or as a victim of an 'enemy other' (Emini & Stakić, 2018, p. 2). In light of the uncertain developments that the Kosovo–Serbia 'normalisation talks' might show in the near future, one could easily assume that full-fledged securitisation of Kosovo's domestic affairs would require Kosovo Serbs to tone down their claims and demands or, alternatively, find another avenue to secure their future in Kosovo. As often proposed in similar scenarios (Pentassuglia, 2018, p. 302), a longer-term sustainability of full integration and securitisation of ethnic Serbs might be achieved by (re)conceptualising their group identity in relation to the Kosovo's de facto hegemonic Albanian power structures.

Given this token, this paper hopes to galvanise the debate over the ongoing process of reconciliation by shifting the perspectives on security-related issues. In this instance, it is argued that many ethnographers and security experts have so far given high salience to the tense multicultural atmosphere in the Serb-majority urban clusters of North Kosovo, thereby overlooking present-day interethnic coexistence and resilience in rural areas in 'the South of the Ibar River'. In doing so, they have either legitimised some contentious solutions such as the 'land swap deal' in 2018 or revitalised an 'either/or mindset' approach to Kosovo's peacebuilding.

Against this pitfall, it is first and foremost noted that inconspicuous, albeit present, local readjustments of interethnic relations have traditionally been, and currently are, taking place at the grassroots levels beyond North Kosovo. Hence, the choice to look particularly at the rural fabric of Southeast Kosovo is inspired by the successful accomplishment of previously conducted small-scale research among Kosovo Serbs in one of the most remote rural areas of Central Kosovo (Trupia, 2019). Focusing on ordinary Serbs and their day-to-day local responses to identity and security dilemmas, this paper shall advance a time-sensitive, socially different, and locally nuanced comparative analysis not only for rethinking the rural/urban nexus, but also for exploring how constructively both Serbs and Albanians revitalise random encounters and intersubjective relations across their places of residence.

Granted that in North Kosovo, the Serbian community remains entangled in a Belgrade-sponsored parallel regime system (Meaker, 2017), this paper focuses knowingly on two Serb-

majority rural areas located geographically in the region known as 'the South of the Ibar River' in the attempt to explore spontaneous desire and quotidian aspirations of reconciliation that emerge from the realm of everyday life. In doing so, the notion of 'good personhood' was employed as a methodological tool for venturing along the parapet of the political debates over the Kosovo–Serbia 'normalisation talks'. In particular, it shall investigate how ethnic Serbs perform constructively toward Kosovo's legal framework and its power institutions in compliance with a set of traditionally shared values that such a notion was associated with.

From a theoretical viewpoint, the notion of 'good personhood' resembles a rather normative perspective if juxtaposed with a post-conflict scenario and peacebuilding. However, considering the status of a minority group of Kosovo Serbs, and the two competing citizenship regimes emanating from Belgrade and Pristina, the scholarly orientation of the notion of 'good personhood' digs into legal and political dilemmas of Kosovo's citizenship among ethnic Serbs, as well as ethical responsibilities toward choices and their course of actions (Taylor, 1985). This paper shall explore whether 'good personhood'—understood here as a relational construct and conditional state of value defined by the society (White, 2013, p. 74)—renders Kosovo Serbs ethically neutral when not corrupted by inequitable institutions perverting their will and behaviour, or conversely, provokes tensions due to their peculiar minority status outside its ethical universality (Mairet, 2018, p. 16). In the attempt to explore how ordinary Serbs can mobilise and promote themselves as a trustworthy community, the main assumption was that inconspicuous quotidian 'good practices' reflect a certain ethical-moral sense of respect and dignity toward the 'ethnic other'—revealing unharvested peace potentials on the margins of Kosovo's society. Eventually, this may not only lead to a reconsideration of human security with regard to minority-majority relations in Kosovo, but it may also create space for understanding new emancipatory forms of civic potentials for achieving durable peace between Kosovo and Serbia.

Nevertheless, it is worth addressing two caveats here. Firstly, local Serb responses and day-to-day struggles of renegotiating identity dilemmas in the face of everyday security issues are not presented here as an attempt to theorise a framed set of practices applicable in all contexts where reconciliation and healthy interethnic relations are lacking. Nor was this paper articulated in such a way that the reported local capacities of Serb communities in Central and Southeast Kosovo show an ultimate universal truth that can (re)order the social fabric of Kosovo. Instead, the notion of 'good personhood' was exclusively employed to configure a new and pragmatic term whose viability in the field of peace and security studies lies in

unravelling locally nuanced and nonprescriptive features of dynamics in interethnic coexistence and resilience within the rural milieus of Kosovo. Second, it must be acknowledged that a critical approach toward previously researched issues has long been portrayed as an exclusive and elitist exercise whose tools have been considered as exceptional (Felski, 2012). Considering that the fieldwork was conducted among ordinary Serbs, the critical analysis of Serbs' 'good practices' can be situated within the variant of praxeology typical of remote and rural areas. Within these areas, social practices are unavoidably and innumerably intertwined, and a vast array of distinct accounts could feed into a much broader understanding in future research (Austin et al., 2019).

With these points in mind, this paper asks to what extent a locally nuanced and unharvested interethnic coexistence in the so-called Southern areas of the Ibar River can provide for a reconsideration of approaches to security in Kosovo, and considers untapped potentials and prospects of full-fledged reconciliation with Serbia.

Following this introduction and the methodological approach below, this paper proceeds as follows: The first section focuses on the discrepancy between the high politics approach to securitisation in Kosovo and the grassroots perspective that emerged spontaneously from below. The second section focuses on perception of (in)security and local responses of ordinary Serbs to it. In both of these sections, events regarding the tandem identity-and-security will be recollected in reference to the two rural milieus of Central and Southeast Kosovo. Building on this, the third section discusses the viability of the notion of 'good personhood' according to the reflections and opinions that local Serb respondents expressed. Based on this analysis, the paper concludes that the employment of such a term could methodologically help to avoid unnecessary ethnicisation and better unravel untapped civic and peace potentials for interethnic coexistence and resilience in Kosovo and the region.

1. Methodology

In attempting to rethink a defiant and ethnocentrically informed assumption of the Serbian–Albanian division in the contemporary social fabric of Kosovo, this paper looks methodologically at the realm of everyday life. Within this, the routine of Kosovo Serbs allows for deeper knowledge and greater sensibility of information as well as everyday practices and shared values in interactions between local Serbs, ethnic Albanians, and the institutional framework of Kosovo. Undoubtedly, the realm of the everyday qualifies as a more authentic field for investigating human agency rather than one which focuses solely on political rhetoric

(Randazzo, 2015, p. 83).

The research methodology is based on a mixed-method approach of qualitative social research with ethnographic sensibility (Simmons & Smith, 2017, p. 126) which was developed on the ground through a semi-structured, theme-guided interview questionnaire comprised of open questions. In August 2019, an intense field observation was conducted by partaking in public events inside Serb-majority rural clusters in Southeast Kosovo. This study took place following previous employment in fieldwork conducted in Central Kosovo among local Serbs in another village. This previous study[1] will be taken into consideration in the following sections of this paper in order to advance a comparative analysis of how a similar articulation of identity negotiations is enacted pragmatically by local Serbs attempting to tackle everyday issues outside the much-debated scenario in North Kosovo.

In line with the theme of security this which paper is concerned with, I use only obtained information and filed data which exclusively link everyday identity dilemmas with respondents' takes on feelings of (in)security in the realm of everyday life. Thus, this paper shall address the issue of spatialisation with regard to the Serbian minority group in rural Kosovo, while also proposing a locally nuanced comparative perspective that shall (re)consider untapped civic potentials of interethnic relations in the rural areas in the 'South of the Ibar River'. To ensure better reliability of these research findings, this paper also relies on a combination of various sources of qualitative research and reports that currently constitute the vast literature concerning minority groups in Kosovo and its tense relations with Serbia.

Following the research ethics guidelines of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria), all respondents were informed about their right to freely participate in the interview along with their right to withdraw at any moment, to not respond to questions that might provoke discomfort, and to choose anonymity as an option. Each interviewee was given a Participation Information Sheet (PIS) and an Interview Consent Form (ICF) prior to beginning the interview. For the purpose of this paper, only specific information and data which were extracted from the interview material and which touch on security-related issues will be explained in the following sections. In addition, each interviewee will be pseudonymised as 'respondent' to not only ensure anonymity, but also to avoid any potential political implications which respondents might be exposed to. Considering the high sensitivity of the issues discussed with locals during in-depth interviews (n=30), the names of the rural milieus and respective municipality where fieldwork was conducted will be replaced with 'the village' and partially anonymised. The paper builds upon a round of in-depth interviews and one focus group

organised within three Serb-majority rural localities in the district of Gjilani/Gnilan (Southeast Kosovo) compared with previously conducted fieldwork in the district of Prizreni/Prizen (Central Kosovo). This information is specified in order to better convey contextual information of Serb-inhabited rural areas. The voluntary participation of female Serbs (n=7) in the focus group points to the issues for a male researcher and outsider in engaging with a female audience in remote rural area with shrinking or barely existent public spheres, and sheds light on some intersectional aspects of intra-group dynamics within the Serbian community in Kosovo and beyond. Furthermore, this focus group was extremely relevant for minimising male bias in data and information from previous experiences in Kosovo's rural areas. It is hoped that future research can better address the gender perspective of the Serbian communities residing in rural areas.

It should be kept in mind that the bulk of the research behind the present paper was carried out between 2018 and 2019—prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The arguments put forward were formulated on the basis of first-hand information and knowledge construction collected from local residents who were not chosen according to a sampling strategy. Respondents were simply invited to participate for an interview in a place of their preference after random encounters during the participation-observation phase of the fieldwork. During the in-depth interviews, the aforementioned 'good personhood' was strategically proposed to all interviewees with the sole intent of avoiding any unnecessary ethnicisation. In this regard, it was methodologically paramount to listen to personal takes regarding subsequently quotidian actions of ethnic Serbs in the attempt to give potential respondents the chance to speak up about broader themes spontaneously emerging from below (emic approach). In relation to issues of security and securitisation, all interviewees were asked to reflect on which factors or local circumstances (Longhurst, 2016) they themselves would think of as constitutive for reviving and/or restoring a sense and self-image of 'good personhood' in their place of residence.

Notably, such opening questions caused consternation due to the unfamiliarity of the interviewees with this moral-philosophical concept. In light of this epistemological concern, the question itself was simplified as follows: "*Who is a good person for you, in Kosovo?*" (in Serbian: *ko je dobar čovek za vas, u Kosovu?)*. Both before and following this adjustment, interviewees immediately associated the notion of 'good personhood' beyond the sphere of politics by endowing themselves with a normative tool by which describing community matters and aspects of their everyday life and identity dilemma.

2. Securing Kosovo from Within: An Ordinary Serbian Perspective

In the eyes of Kosovo Albanians, Serbian communities' claims to self-determination are demands made by a people whose kin-state seemingly remains in conflict with Kosovo's international status. While on one hand it is proven that not all nation-building projects have turned out wholly capable of recognising some form of group identity from within (Kul'ková, 2018, p. 384), on the other hand, it is also proven true that Kosovo Serbs are members of one of the two most competing ethnic communities ascertaining group identity and ethno-national claims to space in Kosovo (Di Lellio & Schwandner-Sievers, 2006).

Nevertheless, as an associated political analyst at the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) pointed out, there are no longer security issues on the ground that can fuel interethnic violence in Kosovo[2]. In the meantime, Serbia has never advanced any serious security threat across the country despite the fact that its position as a non-recogniser has played in favour of the sponsored parallel regime system it established immediately after the 1999 Kosovo War. Despite this, the majority of Kosovo Serbs residing in the South of the Ibar River have over time shown a willingness to reconcile with Kosovo Albanians as well as to integrate themselves into Kosovo's legal framework. In Central and Southeast Kosovo, the majority of those interviewed were found with personal documents (passport, ID, driving license, etc.) issued by institutions based in Pristina or nearby municipalities. They had decided to replace expired documents previously issued by Serbian authorities in order to avoid potential problems with Kosovo's authorities and to navigate paperwork or bureaucracy in running or opening local businesses.

In the attempt to protect the legal and constitutional rights of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo, the proposal to establish an Association/Community of Kosovo–Serb Majority Municipalities (A/CSM) in the interest of protecting legal and constitutional rights of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo has always sparked criticism[3] within the country (Kostić et al., 2020, pp. 2–3). When mentioned, many respondents complained about a wide range of everyday issues and dilemmas they constantly face regardless of the institutional framework they should comply with in Kosovo. Rather than identifying security as a matter of concern, respondents were largely concerned about feelings of insecurity connected with living outside the Northern areas of Kosovo, whereby public and private institutions or offices do not often communicate in the Serbian language. One of the respondents expressed disappointment about not being able to understand bank notifications for a retail loan on their phone because they were written only in Albanian. Since the Serbian language is officially recognised by the constitution of Kosovo,

the respondent could not explain why bank notifications are only written and sent in the Albanian language (respondent 9). Relatedly, another respondent proposed rhetorically to recognise and introduce the English language into Kosovo's constitution. Arguing that English is the lingua franca between international actors and Kosovo's locals, the respondent proposed to recognise English as an official language to move beyond impasses that Serbs face in the realm of the everyday (respondent 15).

Yet another respondent openly accused local politicians of patronising the community they (seemed to) speak in praise of without tackling the real issues of every Serb in Kosovo—marginalisation and underdevelopment; which nullify entrepreneurial initiatives in the local context (respondent 8), and high taxation; which does not correspond to any sort of service or benefit for the needy (respondent 1). In the same vein, all respondents expressed a negative stance concerning Belgrade's political attitude toward Kosovo in general and toward Kosovo Serbs in particular. Similar to what was noticed in Central Kosovo, Serb respondents in Southeastern villages were critical towards the political tactic which sees Srpska Lista (Serbian List) operating as the main minority party in Kosovo on autopilot from Belgrade (Triantafyllou, 2018, p. 367). Rather than accusing Kosovo Albanians for this existential limbo, both self-criticism and political dissatisfaction toward Serbian representatives were genuinely verbalised and clearly showed the two facets of the same problematic state of affairs.

Interestingly, respondents did not feel motivated to associate the proposed image of 'good personhood' with Serbian authorities or institutions. On the contrary, they bitterly echoed the ongoing process of marginalisation for which they held Serbia's obstruction against Kosovo's statebuilding responsible. To a certain extent, respondents verbalised anything but a spontaneous critique of the shrinking civic space in light of the rampant concentration of power into the Vućič-led Serbian Progressive Party (Wunsch, 2018, p. 118). In Kosovo, Belgrade has so far ostracised critical voices from prominent leaders of the Kosovo Serb community. Among others, Rada Trajkovic and Marko Jaksic were, respectively, not invited and refused attendance of the Working Group of the Internal Dialogue on Kosovo. The latter was publicly announced by Aleksander Vućič who expressed his desire to move away from a nationalist approach toward Kosovo and accept the reality on the ground without a mythical approach but also without giving up what Serbs have every right to. Out of the 19 roundtables, only three were organised and took place in Kosovo: twice in North Mitrovica/Mitrovicë and only once in Gračanica/Graçanica. Within the Internal Dialogue, intolerance and hostility toward critical voices and opposing opinions certainly did not encourage participation, and the overall

atmosphere was not different from roundtables held in Serbia in general and Belgrade in particular (Tadić, 2019, pp. 252–254).

Despite this, Serb respondents were found committed to a sort of pragmatic responsibility regarding community identity dilemmas. In fact, within the Southeastern villages, local compliance with a traditional set of basic rules that has kept locals always open to dialogue with the ethnic other (Burema, 2012, p. 9). Hence, the debate on the use of the term 'enclave' regarding the socio-cultural circumstances which Serbs continue to experience in nonSerb-majority areas of Kosovo should be combined with the post-wartime debate on 'disenclavisation' (Fort, 2018). Both approaches lie in securing communities at risk, yet they seem to misrepresent the reality on the ground given the absence of any security risks (Trupia, 2019, p. 139) and mistakenly present Kosovo Serbs as a homogeneous community. On the contrary, access and freedom of movement from/to rural villages where many Serbs remained following the 1999 Kosovo War and continue to reside today are neither restricted to outsiders nor impeded from inside. Largely ignored by Belgrade, respondents were more concerned about a sense of cultural and economic oppression rather than security threats that they might face. As one respondent argued, Serbs residing in the village do not face any restriction of movement in going downtown and hanging out there, yet they might feel psychologically under pressure by Kosovo Albanians who tend to look at them once they gather and speak in Serbian (respondent 1).

However, as in Central Kosovo—where not everything was found to be harmonious (Trupia & Schwandner-Sievers, 2019)—the majority of interviewees in the villages of Southeast Kosovo shared a deep feeling of double discrimination by both Kosovo's institutions and Serbian organisations. This perspective should be considered in comparison with the opinions of a group of local Serb women who pointed out that discrimination against Kosovo Serbs is simply an issue-within-an-issue. As they collectively expressed, Serb women are definitely discriminated twice: firstly, they are less likely than their husbands, brothers, and male relatives to find a secure job inside or outside the village, and secondly, they face discrimination as members of the Serbian community in Kosovo (respondent 16, 17, 18).

Aware of the fact that they possess the same rights and benefits as anyone else in Kosovo, all respondents were largely found outspoken against the current marginalisation which politics has been unable to tackle since the end of the war. Moreover, a few respondents showed a certain ideological continuum with a typical form of Serbian nationalism applied to the 'Kosovo knot'. For example, the use of the pejorative term 'šiptar' (literally meaning

'Albanian' in the Albanian language) to refer to Kosovo Albanians (Tadić, 2019, p. 252) occurred not only in the roundtables organised by the Working Group of the International Dialogue in Serbia but was also present in the informal vocabulary of a few young respondents. It was noticed during the fieldwork that Serb respondents who used this pejorative term in the village did not associate it with any sort of negative prejudice or stereotype. Based on this observation, it could be assumed that the term penetrated from externally imposed media ascriptions into locals' everyday language, thereby replacing the Serbian term 'Albánac' for indicating an 'Albanian person'. Tellingly, a young Serb respondent confessed to once being addressed as 'šiptar' while working in Central Serbia because they were unprepared and unskilful in the workplace (respondent 20). This personal experience highlighted how the pejorative term 'šiptar' did not refer to a specific image informed by enmity toward ethnic Albanians in the villages. Albeit problematic due to its everyday usage among Serbs, the term itself was more likely to transcend ethnic affiliation and be associated with perceived cleavages of skilfulness or ascriptions of simple-mindedness among residents of rural areas. Indeed, during interviews, the use of the term 'šiptar' did not damage the social image of 'good personhood' among local Serbs.

3. Perception of (In)Security in the South of the Ibar River

Granted that in Kosovo perception of security varies between urban and rural areas, the social fabric of the latter is beyond doubt sustained traditionally by local compliance with everyday practices and shared values. They both render possible interethnic coexistence and a far better atmosphere than the one found in urban areas, where tense political relations between Serbia and Kosovo have an impact on local populations.

This typical spatial dichotomy unfolded itself in in-depth interviews with Kosovo Serbs in the Southern areas of the Ibar River, where the respondents' associations and perceptions of the image of 'good personhood' beyond ethnic lines were more viable than they were in urban areas. While it is true that Serbs from rural areas have an intense and stronger impression that Albanians appear negatively on media when compared to the representation of Serbs residing in urban areas (Kostić et al., 2020, p. 21), it is also true that the lack of 'urban mentality' (in Serbian: *gradski mentalitet*) often impinges on a full restoration of the social fabric in rural Kosovo (respondent 13). In Central Kosovo a respondent was found sceptical about their daughter's decision to move to North Kosovo to study and search for better job opportunities in the future (Trupia, 2019, p. 148). Likewise, many respondents in Southeast Kosovo

expressed the feeling of being afraid downtown. More precisely, they did not specifically refer to acts of violence or harassment by ethnic Albanians, but rather expressed fears of being potentially targeted in the same way Kosovo Albanians had been during the Yugoslavian time. Paradoxically, some Albanians continue at the same time to be afraid of belonging once again under Belgrade's rule (Kul'ková, 2018, p. 385) in light of the regional and international stand-off over the status of Kosovo's independence.

When in 2014 the government of Kosovo officialised the transformation of the Kosovo Security Forces into the Kosovo Armed Force—a process finalised in December 2018—with the mission of protecting national integrity, providing military support to civil authorities in disaster situations, and participating in international peacekeeping operations, Kosovo Serbs were opposed to and suspicious of the transformation. Although Serbian minority representation was guaranteed within the civilian security institution, Serbs themselves considered the Kosovo Security Forces as an unnecessary institution. In fact, Serbs saw NATO'S KFOR body and its operations as enough to handle potential threats in the field of security. While the establishment of the Kosovo Armed Force was associated with increased frustration among Kosovo Serbs, Serbs themselves simple perceived such a national force in a negative light because of its potential use against the Serbian communities in Kosovo (Triantafyllou, 2018, p. 363).

Touching upon this issue, Serb respondents in Southeast Kosovo did not emphasise or express particular concerns about the Kosovo Armed Force. A sense of 'good personhood' was recalled by respondents (n=3) in opposition to the moral hierarchies and ideologies emanated by the post-war power structures in Kosovo. Yet, the same respondents also recalled two peculiar events during which they felt powerless and discriminated on the ground of being identified as Serbs. The first event took place overnight a few weeks before the fieldwork, while the second had happened the weekend before the fieldwork was conducted. In the first event, a Serb respondent complained about a few robbers from the nearest Albanian town who stole his cattle under the cover of night. Although the respondent managed to film them through a security camera legally installed in the backyard of the house and a report was filed at the police station, the identity of the two robbers was not disclosed. During the interview, the local Serb argued that the Kosovo Armed Force face a high level of internal corruption and that, when it comes to reporting crimes committed against Serbs, they turn a blind eye (respondent 19). The other respondent, recalling the second event, contested the rise of street checks that the Kosovo Armed Force had started to conduct within the Serbian village without a particular

reason. To the respondent's mind, the Kosovo Armed Force did so on purpose in order to put some pressure on the locals. In fact, while checking IDs and personal documents, police officers had subtly referred to their equipment and power to move personal identification procedures at the nearest police station outside the village (respondent 10). Yet another respondent added that such tension between local Serbs and police officers is nothing but the result of political debates over security and securitisation that have remained dominated by militarised narratives, heroism of soldiers and war crimes, in turn interwoven with domestic affairs in Kosovo (respondent 14). This subjective position revealed once again that local Serbs are often knowledgeable and outspoken about political issues and their implications at the grassroots level. Once again, in Southeast Kosovo's villages, respondents did not foresee human security issues between Serbian communities and Albanians. Rather, similar to the information obtained in Central Kosovo, all respondents were found simply concerned about the ongoing economic stagnation and underdevelopment they have to cope with on a daily basis. Trapped between a policy vacuum and local corruption, a few respondents admitted to having tried to smuggle some products through the forest leading to southernmost Serbia, but the presence of Kosovo Armed Force patrolling that borderland had stopped them from succeeding (respondent 15).

As mentioned above, when a focus group was organised in one of the three villages, it seemed that Serbian women had an undoubtedly tougher life than Serbian men. While they largely excluded being under the threat of Kosovo Albanians because of their ethnicity, they confirmed that they felt uncomfortable outside the village when speaking Serbian and surrounded by people they are not accustomed to. This psychological burden, as a female respondent readily affirmed, subtly conveys to their children a wrong message about the life of Serbs in Kosovo in relation to the ethnic other (respondent 16).

In general, both in Central and Southeast Kosovo, Serbs felt much more secure within the villages rather than downtown and in Pristina. During field observation, it was also noticed that respondents were not particularly disturbed by or very critical toward the sheer number of monuments dedicated to the UÇK Army (in English: Kosovo Liberation Army) and its affiliated Albanian combatants that mushroomed outside the villages along with paraphernalia that vividly resemble pictures or mottos of the 'Great Albania' and Albanian culture. For instance, a respondent pointed out a house of newly arrived Albanian neighbours where a very big flag of the 'Autochthonous - Great Albania' was waving. The respondent presented it as a kind of provocation, which was explained by the fact that the new Albanian neighbours had

bought that property from a Kosovo Serb family who had fled to Serbia (respondent 19). Among all respondents, almost everyone argued that both Serbian and Albanian communities do not feel much attachment to the 'blue flag', namely the official flag of Kosovo. In spite of the 'six stars' on the flag—symbolising that Kosovo is a multiethnic country—both Serbian and Albanian communities are much more attached to Albania's and Serbia's flags, perpetuating a message of narrow and competing identities in Kosovo, Serbia, and Albania, and leaving little room for other excluded minorities (Wenke et al., 2019, p. 29). "How it could be different in a place where years and years of politics and international interventions have not guaranteed a liveable multi-ethnic state?" a Serb respondent rhetorically asked (respondent 1).

In Southeast Kosovo, Serbian villages seemed to get closer and closer to Albanian-inhabited towns as the latter are slowly but surely expanding toward their peripheral areas. Although this phenomenon confirmed that rural areas in Southeast Europe are globalising due to labour mobility, changing patterns in rural consumption, and different forms of architecture (Duijzings, 2018, pp. 3–4), the economic situation of local Serbs has been worsening since the 1999 Kosovo War. However, this has little to do with security issues. As two respondents pointed out, the 1999 Kosovo War did not hit the Serb-majority rural areas in which Serbs managed to live decently during the wartime (respondent 1) and in the aftermath. Since peacekeeping operations were led by international actors and many NGO projects on the ground, local Serbs had the opportunity to rent small studios and apartments, host foreigners, organise guided visits to cultural heritage sites, and so forth. However, as time passed by, local politicians have managed to pursue anything expect votes and let young people leave for Serbia or Western Europe (respondent 3). Concerned with filling the resultant vacuum, a few respondents criticised the project-oriented vision of NGOs: accusing them of remaining dependent on Western donors and transferring ethnocentric views of inter-ethnic relations on the ground rather than addressing the reality of everyday interactions (Devic, 2006, p. 258) and related problems. As a result of this, a few respondents were found very critical towards local Serb youths who monotonously expect something in return from someone without doing any kind of business (respondent 6). Arguing that NGOs have had limited impact on bringing attention to local issues of concern, particularly when these were related to local/international interactions (Chip Carey, 2010, p. 255), they were doubtful about the rationale behind the modus operandi of these NGOs and of the international community (respondent 7). In fact, a respondent argued that international organisations are involved in illegal affairs with the local

authorities in Kosovo regardless of the ethnic or political membership they might belong to, and claimed that this is why, in the very end, Kosovo will not get out from the international protectorate since people working for it earn enough money that they can only pretend to do their best for the country (respondent 9).

Once again, respondents did not touch upon security if not directly asked to comment on it. Worthy of note here are the less promising statements expressed by very few respondents (n=2) reinforcing a certain degree of stereotypes against Kosovo Albanians. In using Serbian nationalist rhetoric (e.g. *nema predaje*: literally meaning, "no give up" with reference to Kosovo) and expressing their wish to see the Serbian troops back to Pristina (respondent 21), they moved beyond the questions posed and immediately addressed the crucial role of Serbia in the tense relation between the US and Russia (respondent 9). Interestingly, yet another local Serb who was previously interviewed affirmed that it is very easy to understand who is engaged in politics in the village, assuming the political affiliation of the respondents previously interviewed. When it comes to understanding whether a Kosovo Serb is interested in the Srpska Lista's affairs, those who play the role of 'the nationalist' or of 'the proud Serb' knowingly touch upon issues arguably related to high politics as a yardstick to measure the bitterness of everyday life of Kosovo Serbs. Others, who avoid talking about the political responsibility and incapacity of the local Serb politicians to solve problems, are most probably in touch with them (respondent 1).

4. Repairing and Restoring Personhood in Rural Kosovo

In Central and Southeast Kosovo, a sort of traditional compliance with neighbourliness has continued to revive human trust and mutual understanding in the rural contexts more than in urban areas. For local Serbs, performing positive and pragmatic actions in the face of the ethnic other meant to stay with the troubles and learn how to be truly present (Haraway, 2016, p. 1) while dealing with uncertainty and underdevelopment. Yet, according to some outbidding theses, the chances for moderation generally diminish in places where ethnicity is salient. In this view, while moderate positions will tend to compromise with opposing group identities, more radical in-group voices which accuse the former of betraying the interests of the community (Székely, 2018, p. 146) might always emerge.

However, as noticed in both rural contexts, ethnic Serbs are keen locals whose identity dilemmas do not impinge on their social performativity. This was ultimately the main reason why the open question of (restoring) 'good personhood' was largely associated with a set of

shared moral values and practices that may potentially unveil untapped peace potentials and unharvested civic responsibility toward Kosovo institutions. Despite the fact that insecurity was framed in terms of economic uncertainty by male respondents and a sense of discomfort by female respondents, both remote rural areas display a far better atmosphere than the tense multicultural division in North Kosovo. Commenting on factors and circumstances in which one should perform well in times of uncertainty, personal reflections of Serb respondents once again shed light on issues of spatialisation of Serb-majority areas in Kosovo. Some recalled the aftermath of the 1999 Kosovo War by stressing that the villages were not hit the hardest despite the cruelty and violence that unfolded in other Serb-majority areas in Kosovo during the conflict. In the first post-war years, local Serbs managed to rent their small apartments in the villages to international people working for international organisations and local NGOs. Displaced Kosovo Serbs from nearby regions found refuge easily, and different small shops began to satisfy the demands of the newcomers (respondent 1). Albanians from Kosovo who continued to reside in the nearest towns around the villages also did not have issues to come along. Some local Serbs were even employed in Albanian-run small businesses, and vice versa. These inconspicuous yet present intersubjective relations within the local job market were also discovered in Central Kosovo, where Albanians worked together with local Serbs in a remote rural area (Trupia, 2019, p. 154).

As a key to repairing personhood and restoring the post-war social fabric, this sort of local pragmatism, which gives Serbs the ability to cope with the bitterness of their everyday life, is paramount for debunking assumptions that Kosovo's internal stability as well as security capacity building depend on legal constrains and conflicting political agenda with Serbia. Although respondents expressed serious concerns against the backdrop of the Kosovo–Serbia 'normalisation talks', which were not easily dismissed or simply underestimated during the interviews, respondents were outspoken about other controversies often ascribed upon Kosovo's Serbian minority. While addressing everyday issues of navigating between a high and prevailing sense of injustice, unemployment, marginalisation, and their sense of belonging to the Serbian community in Kosovo, they employed neither a particular vernacularism toward Kosovo Albanians nor seemed prone to disloyalty against Kosovo's power institutions. On the contrary, they approached the opportunity of repairing personhood by associating it with various ideas of living a 'good life' through 'good practices'. The latter was verbalised as a general toolkit of values and ethical attitudes to use while interacting with the other Respondents did not particularly try to define 'good personhood' but rather dealt with the open

question by reflecting on potential creative solutions for responding to poverty, underdevelopment, and collective sorrow over being ostracised by the population of Kosovo and forgotten by Belgrade. In doing so, they did not mention any specific security issues, but they immediately directed anew their opinions toward the sphere of the political. From this viewpoint, it seemed that respondents were primarily concerned with complying with a sort of correct civic practice which combines self-care with care for others.

When combining their sense of political dissatisfaction with the potential of restoring personhood, respondents took for granted that practices and attitudes of a 'good person' (in Serbian: *dobar čovek*) are easily vulnerable to corrupt actions of politicians and inequitable institutions. In the eyes of respondents, a sense and self-image of personhood could be wholly restored and repaired only if there is a 'good person' nearby, or more precisely, if an 'honest person' "behaves in a good way" with everyone. This was particularly salient among respondents who drew a connection between unethical behaviour or 'bad actions' and engagement with and/or an involvement in politics. Hence, respondents largely despised politics—recommending a sort of personal neutrality that would help in turn to avoid troubles as politics itself destroys everything on the ground (respondent 3). If seen through the lens of the traditionally religious background of Serbian communities in Kosovo, it could not come as a surprise that respondents' criterion of presenting an unethical behaviour or 'bad actions' was nearly associated with a certain religious description of sin. Similar to opinions expressed by local Serbs in Central Kosovo, almost all respondents in Southeast Kosovo rhetorically referred to spiritual and religious Orthodox traditions interlinked with a subjective duty of "doing whatever for God's sake" (Trupia, 2019, p. 150–155). At the same time, many nevertheless seemed knowledgeable about religious institutions carrying some responsibility for projecting ethno-national divisions across the post-Yugoslav communities and the implications thereof (Bogomilova, 2015, p. 128).

Considering also the limited public sphere in rural contexts, the different environments where in-depth interviews and the focus group took place were familiar to respondents. When touching upon peculiar events, 'good practices' were promptly taken into consideration and permitted to be told without any sort of censorship or whisper. During the focus group, female respondents affirmed their willingness to establish an informal group of caregivers in the village for the elderly and needy whose sons and daughters lived abroad or settled down in Serbia. Presented as a way to become independent from a largely male-dominated labour market in Kosovo, they were eager to provide a service that younger local Serb women could

never think of offering to the local community. In doing this—while they accused the mayor of the village, a representative of the Srpska Lista, of having ignored their idea to turn their grassroots activity into a public healthcare station—they also accused local politicians of doing nothing for the real needs of people (respondent 16, 17, 18).

This gender perspective interestingly shows how particular interests that are sought out from within the Serbian communities by their own members are worth considering in order to develop a greater sensibility towards intra-group dynamics and a better understanding of how often local Serbs can benefit from, but also be restrained by, their own minority status in Kosovo. For example, the fact that female respondents mentioned suffering from sexual harassment by Albanian and Serbian men in a similar way while looking for a job (respondent 17, 18), is here instructive. In fact, local Serbs do not always portray the 'one-side victim narrative' constructed around the 'enemy other', yet they can pragmatically constrict their identity to avoid further patronisation by local politicians and restore their self-image of personhood in the eyes of Kosovo Albanians by openly expressing their dissatisfaction with their institutional representatives.

All of these factors shed light on the role that Serbian identity and cultural heritage play in rural places of residence and beyond. In Southeast Kosovo, nationalist graffiti resembling Serbia-related identity and ethno-nationalist signifiers are less present than in North Kosovo (particularly in Northern Mitrovica, where spatial division remains a major concern) and Serb-majority villages of Central Kosovo. Traditional symbols and signifiers of Serbian identity, especially those with reference to Kosovo, were not highly visible within the villages. The relationships between the identity of local Serbs and the surrounding landscape was much less manifest than in other Serb-majority areas of Kosovo and often absent. Only very few Cyrillic scripts were visible on public buildings (e.g., primary schools, public offices, banks, and health stations) and religious places (e.g., churches, mural icons, and personalised family home altars in private spaces) served as a reminder that a different community from the Albanian inhabited the rural areas.

In addition, a correlation between local performativity and a traditional set of symbols, signifiers, and religious beliefs typically shared by ethnic Serbs (Čolović, 1997) gives the impression of a banal representation (Billig, 1995) of Serbian nationalism. The latter might thus appear dangerous only if not properly contextualised in the rural environment of Kosovo. Especially if combined with less promising statements, the latter appeared 'banal'. As an example of this, a young Serb recollected a personal experience when wearing a t-shirt with

the motto "Kosovo is Serbia" on it. Once arriving in downtown, a few men asked about the reasons for wearing that t-shirt since Kosovo is not Serbia anymore. As genuine as surprising, the respondent's reply was that "since you [Albanians] wave the flag of the 'Great Albania' and the latter does not include Kosovo at present, I wear this t-shirt with this motto" (respondent 7). Confessing to have taken off the t-shirt upon suggestion by those men, apparently of Albanian origin, the respondent encountered no issues on the way back home.

Another respondent (20) revealed that Albanians tended to provoke a couple of young Serbs even though they used to play with them during one of the long-term projects developed in the area. Without any doubt, the large number of everyday issues and identity dilemmas that local Serbs need to deal with, confirm that their local responses within the rural fabric show, on average, a higher degree of local readiness for peaceful coexistence with Kosovo Albanians (Kostić et al., 2020, pp. 30–31). Not only do they reflect upon the locally nuanced Serb behaviour and civic responsibility, which varies between those Serbs residing in rural and urban areas, they also display another important facet of the North Kosovo–South of the Ibar nexus when it comes to issues of integration and resilience of Serbian segments of Kosovo's society. When present and performed, a certain degree of disloyalty seemed to neither hold much traction among the majority of Kosovo Serbs, nor impinge on the level of human security or have access to roundtables or official events where use of force might be seriously revoked or taken into consideration. In fact, many young respondents seemed eager yet still doubtful about staying in touch with same age Albanians (respondent 3) in the hope to learn the language for having more employment opportunities (respondent 4) or simply sharing personal interests (respondent 5).

Conclusion

Drawing upon personal stances and general definition of the notion of 'good personhood', this paper does not solely address security per se. Thanks to the employment of the notion of 'good personhood', it was possible to let respondents reflect upon interlinked issues of security and securitisation without unnecessary ethnicisation. In this, they have largely confronted, on a personal level, how they are as yet incapable of feeling and perceiving security in their everyday life due to a sort of impossibility of coming to terms with Kosovo's historical events. This is why, in the very end, respondents' association of 'good personhood' with a set of pragmatic responses to security and identity dilemmas broadly suggests that "what restores" interethnic relations builds at the same time upon a central, moral domain of performing civic

responsibility toward Kosovo's institutions and ethnic Albanians. Tellingly, this perspective may debunk rigid ethnicity-centred assumptions of the socio-cultural situatedness of Serbian minority in Kosovo. Indeed, in both rural localities of Central and Southeast Kosovo, local Serb respondents associated the image of 'good personhood' with a quotidian modus operandi for "performing in a good way" (Trupia, 2019, p. 142) typical of rural areas. In light of such associations, respondents largely noted that an account of social practices and values are already pragmatically performed in order to revitalise the rural fabric. Moreover, this sort of constructive performativity toward the 'ethnic other' cannot but facilitate local renegotiation and constriction of collective identity amid rocketing poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment, while navigating between two competing citizenship regimes emanating from Belgrade and Pristina, respectively.

Among others, one of this paper's most relevant findings draws attention to those quotidian experiences as well as personal aspirations and pragmatic responses that local Serbs are keen to perform in the attempt to secure their livelihood in their places of residence. As argued above, reflecting on which factors or specific circumstances might fully restore interethnic relations helped respondents to deal with the notion of 'good personhood' and associate the latter with performing reliably and constructively in the realm of everyday life. Relatedly, local Serbian respondents neither displayed nor unfolded a peculiar local performativity stemming from the post-1999 Kosovo War ideologies, which constantly replicate Serbia and Kosovo's respective national media coverages and political rhetoric. On the contrary, they were found discursively outspoken and critical toward such an externally imposed political discourse over majority-minority relations. Although phenomena of state capture were visible and salient at the grassroots level, most respondents were sceptical toward them and aware of patronage policies and how some resources are made available by Serbia-backed institutions and representatives in Kosovo. In this regard, the viability of the notion of 'good personhood' found space in the way local Serbs were open to performing constructively rather than reinforcing ethnic division by supporting Belgrade's spoiler tactics in Kosovo. To a certain extent, it seemed that heightened political discourses did not gain consensus in either Serb-majority rural milieu, while conversely, political dissatisfaction and distrust toward media and politics (Kostić et al., 2020, pp. 22–23) were not only on the rise, but also able to keep local Serbs distant from discourse of interethnic enmity even when recollecting events of the 1999 Kosovo War. Here it seems clear that Serbia's influence was not only losing power (Burema, 2012, p. 9), but also loosening within certain segments of Serbian communities which remain

exposed to the hardest economic uncertainty and underdevelopment within the rural fabric.

Considering that not everything was found harmonious and less promising statements were verbalised (respondent 9, 21), this paper does not exclude radical or disloyal attitudes that ethnic Serbs might perform in Kosovo. How radicals, nationalists, or ordinary Serbs with disloyal behaviour can be (re)considered for rethinking security in Kosovo, remains an open question. Particularly the question of disloyal behaviour should be properly addressed in relation to the extent to which these actors may be worth relying on for the police, military affairs, and other bodies operating in the field of security (Austin et al., 2018, p. 9) in Kosovo. However, when touching upon security issues and related identity dilemmas, respondents once again confirmed that in the rural fabric of the South of the Ibar River, interethnic coexistence has been constantly restored by a tandem of local resilience and traditional compliance with the 'ethnic other'.

This locally nuanced and socially different perspective emerged spontaneously through the voices of local respondents and excluded security from Kosovo Serbs' social concerns. The rural fabric constitutes a spatial milieu where moral and ethical reconsiderations of everyday intersubjective relations are more likely to be constricted as a way forward, satisfy self-interest and cope with poverty-related issues at the grassroots level. In fact, both in Central and Southeast Kosovo, local Serbs were found equally challenged in their place of residence while attempting to align themselves with the de facto hegemonic Albanian institutions of the country and with the Serbia-promoted parallel regime system. In this sense, the challenge of securitisation among Kosovo Serbs seemed that of enlisting support for their everyday struggles of opposing political patronisation and its elite-driven specific interests and goals. This insight could suggest to the European Union to stop turning a blind eye to the Serbian government (Wunsch, 2018, p. 119) and to Kosovo and Serbia's tendency to place North Kosovo at the centre of interstate normalisation.

Notes

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[2] Interview conducted in August 2018 at the ECMI office in Pristina.

[3] It is noteworthy that the A/CSM was deemed potentially unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Kosovo in a decision issued on the 23rd of December (Judgement on Case No. KO 130/15) despite being envisaged by Articles 4–6 of the Brussels Agreement which state that the Association/Community should have 'full overview' in key areas of public life in Serb-majority communities.

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