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Kosovo after the Conflict The influence of Religion in Politics

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UNIVERSITY OF BUSINESS AND TECHNOLOGY



Faculty of Political Sciences, International Law and Diplomacy

Kosovo after the Conflict
The influence of Religion in Politics
Bachelor Degree

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UNIVERSITY OF BUSINESS AND TECHNOLOGY



Faculty of Political Sciences, International Law and Diplomacy

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The influence of Religion in Politics

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1. INTRODUCTION

In looking at our societies today, we cannot ignore the impact and influence of the drastically changing religious picture on the geo-political situation of countries and regions. Ecology, demography, rights, economy, personal life, international relations, all these elements are in one way or another striking by the disorders that have come about in the religious sphere.

Kosovo before 1999 was part of Yugoslavia, in which series of struggles for independence started in 1990 in Slovenia, 1991 Croatia, 1992 Bosnia and Herzegovina and then Kosovo. Each of these conflicts have been described as “ethnic conflicts”, even though Serbs, Croats and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina shared the same language and a common Slavic origin apart from Albanians in Kosovo, but none of them shared the same religion or religion heritage.

Peter Black Senior Historian at US Holocaust Museum said:

“In the Balkans, religious identification became part of the national identity, as expressed through language and the communication of the national myth. Thus being orthodox is part of being a Serbian”¹

Kosovo conflict had both ethnic and religious components. 90% of the population was Albanian in Kosovo, Albanian language was the only language not related to other languages in the area.

The paper will explore how much the religion influenced the conflict and what role religion plays in after conflict Kosovo and its politics. How much, in what way and how the international presence influenced any kind of religious extremism in Kosovo.

¹ Peter Black Senior Historian at US Holocaust Museum(article “Religious Identity at the Heart of Balkan War”, page 1)

What part did religion play before and after the conflict into the Kosovo politics?

I will as well go into the role that media played and plays with influencing religion in the post conflict Kosovo.

As in every conflict it's never one single cause, it was same with the conflict in Kosovo it was never a religious conflict, rather it involved ethnicity, national aspirations, economics and years and years under constant repression which brought the conflict.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kosovo is a secular state / republic recognized now by more than 100 states. Starting from the fact that it is a state since 2008 it is very difficult to find written literature, statistics or books therefore I am going to mostly rely on articles, different analyses and publications as the only literature that can be used in this case.

Not much is known or written on the topic I will elaborate, there are a lot of gaps that I will try to fill by analyzing different views of mainly written media on how and is religion affecting politics in a post conflict Kosovo.

There are researches that see Kosovo as a future of Islam extremism and there are the opposites of that that see Kosovo as part of the European Union and see Kosovo and Kosovars as very moderate Muslims. I am going to try to bring light into all possible views that concern the religion and its effect into politics and effect on how Kosovo is seen by international community.

3. A BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before the Ottoman conquest of Balkan the whole area including Kosovo was mostly Christian. From 1389 until 1912 Kosovo was officially governed by the Muslim Ottoman Empire and, as such, a high level of Islamization occurred.

In 1912 Kosovo was conquered by the Kingdom of Serbia. After the World War II Kosovo was part of Yugoslavia and therefore governed as socialist secular country. Before the conflict of 1998-99 approximately 90 percent of Kosovo population was Albanian Muslims, the remaining 10 percent of Kosovo population Orthodox Serbs, Roman Catholic Albanians, Roma and Turks. The recent conflict as said before was not based on religious hatred though such feelings do play a role in the struggles. It rather is a conflict incited in large part by Serbian politicians at the national level but the Serbian Orthodox Church has deep historical ties with Kosovo and had deep ties with the Milosevic's regime too, and approved the politics of the same regime.

The known historian Noel Malcolm has noted than in the recent conflict, that the Orthodox side

“constantly employs religious rhetoric to justify the defense of sacred Serbian interest”²

² Noel Malcolm (Kosovo A short History, Harper Perennial, 1998 page 45)

The Serbian and Albanian religious communities have been more willing to talk to each other than other sectors of Kosovo society. As early as March 1999, before the NATO bombing intervention, the representatives of the three religious communities in Kosovo (Muslim, Orthodox and Roman Catholic) had a joint meeting in Prishtina that was organized by World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) to facilitate the dialogue. The representatives expressed opposition to misuse the religion for political reasons on all sides and call all parts to not use the religious symbols to promote violence and intolerance.

Kosovo Albanians have never before and even now define their national identity through religion but through the language and have a very relaxed approach towards any forms of the Islamic religion. Three religions – Islam, Orthodoxy and Catholicism, have longed coexisted in Kosovo.

4. THE ROLE OF RELGION BEFORE AND ON THE CONFLICT

Kosovo was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1455 to 1912. Majority of Albanians was known to be Christians, but gradually in time which was almost 500 hundred years the assimilation/ converting took part. A process of Islamisation began shortly after the beginning of Ottoman rule but it took a considerable amount of time - at least a century - and was concentrated at first on the towns. A large part of the reason for the conversion was probably economic and social, as Muslims had considerably more rights and privileges than Christian population, so people in a way were forced into islam.

The most important Ottoman victories over Christian forces in the Balkans occurred in 1364, 1371, 1386 and 1396. But it was the Battle of Kosovo on June 15/28th, 1389, which passed into Serbian national mythology as the decisive clash at which the Ottomans destroyed the remains of the Serbian empire. The anniversary of the battle has been the most important date in the Serbian 'national calendar', though in reality it was a draw, as both sides suffered heavy casualties and had to withdraw at the end of the day. Under the Ottoman rule (which lasted until 1912) Kosovo's Christian population contracted and its Muslim population expanded.

A major reason Albanians became Muslims was to escape Turkish violence and exploitation, an instance of which was a crushing tax that Christians would have to pay if they refused to convert. Hence leaders of the Albanian national movement in the 19th century used the rallying cry "The religion of Albanians is Albanianism" in order to overcome religious divisions and foster national unity.

Even though Skanderbeg achieved success at resistance to the ottomans harvest was unproductive and famine was widespread. From 1443 until his death led the resistance against the Ottoman Empire. Skanderbeg gained an almost mythical reputation in literature and was often cited by future generals and leaders as the perfect example of defensive warfare against a superior foe, his record was certainly impressive with 25 battles of which he was victorious in 24. The Albanians' resistance to the Turks led by Skanderbeg to in the mid-15th century won them acclaim all over Europe. Apart from continues resistance among the biggest transformation was that the Albanian population gradually began to convert to Islam, in order to gain considerable advantages in the Ottoman trade networks, bureaucracy and army.

After the Ottoman Empire Kosovo was conquered by Serbs and Montenegrins, who killed or drove out thousands of Kosovars between 1912 and 1925. After the Austria-Hungary's end, the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes set up a Triple Kingdom which became Yugoslavia in 1931. The new multi-ethnic state accomplished little to assimilate, reconcile or expel its Albanian-speaking minority in the interwar years.

With the end of the World War II ethnic Albanians who wanted Kosovo to remain united with Albania staged a revolt, which was crushed by the Partisan army of Yugoslavia's new communist government. In July 1945, a Communist-dominated assembly unquestioningly voted for the 'voluntary' union of Kosovo with the Republic of Serbia within a Yugoslav Federation.

Yugoslavia's Albanians were treated as a 'national minority' with no right to a republic of their own. The new Yugoslav regime attempted to 'win over' the Kosovars by establishing hundreds of new Albanian schools and cultural institutions. At the same time, Albanians were subjected to

extensive surveillance and harassment by the state security police, and between 1945-66 over 200,000 emigrated to Turkey. The after war government of Yugoslavia granted Kosovo the status of an autonomous region (and later autonomous province) within the republic of Serbia, but it also continued to suppress nationalist sentiments among Kosovar Albanians.

It is important to mention that Yugoslavia was a socialist federal country and therefore religion was almost forbidden or better said neglected as in every socialist/communist countries.

Some people think that all the conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia were religious:

“the peace negotiations between the Orthodox [Christian] Serbs, the Catholic Croats and the Muslim Bosnians had collapsed again. And there is no doubt that the religions that are so involved here had neglected in the period of more than forty years since the Second World War to engage in mourning, honestly confess the crimes which had been committed by all sides in the course of the centuries, and ask one another for mutual forgiveness....I think there can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions!”³

Although this comment was about Bosnia a lot of people think that Kosovo was similar.

The struggles for independence started in 1990 in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and then Kosovo.

But the conflicts and war in 1999 rose out of ethnic tensions, not religious ones. These were fights not between Muslims and Christians but between Albanians and Serbs again, most Albanians are Muslim and all Serbs are Orthodox Christian, the distinction is crucial Kosovo's Albanian Muslims and Albanian Catholics get along perfectly well with one another; in fact, during the war, they fought side by side.

But unlike the rest of the ex- Yugoslavia the Kosovo conflict was more of the ethnic conflict even though others would argue that the religious component was important too.

Serbs for example have tried to blame the Muslim jihadists for the war in 1999 and the violence

³ Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, (commenting in 1993 on conflict within the former Yugoslavia).

in 2004.

When the NATO intervention in Kosovo began in 1998, it was fairly common, even all over the world, to hear the Albanians in the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) denounced as terrorists, jihadists and otherwise as Islamists. Given that Kosovo Albanians are 90 percent Muslim, this was probably a expectable development from sides who did not know much about Kosovo.

As in a lot of ethnic conflicts I agree that there is never one single cause and it was the same case in Kosovo, there were more than one cause including ethnicity, national aspiration, economics, and years and years of repression which brought the conflict.

I have to mention that Kosovo's type of Islam is among most liberal ones, before 1999 you could see much less covered women than any other big city in Europe. A lot of westerners say that the only thing that you could see majority here are Muslims it's by the minarets.

The Albanians have been culturally European for all of recorded history.

"The Greeks hardly regard them as Christians, or the Turks as Moslems, and in fact they are a mixture of both, and sometimes neither," Lord Byron wrote of them almost 200 years ago.

Even during the conflict when Kosovars were desperate for any kind of help they rejected jihadist fighters that were ready to come unlike the Bosnia. Because our war was never a religious war, it was a war for freedom.

5. THE ROLE OF RELGION AFTER THE CONFLICT

After the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia in the spring 1999, after 79 days of bombing, the Serbs agreed to the NATO cease fire plan that would allow almost 1 million Kosovars to return to their homes under the protection of NATO forces and under the administration of the United Nation.

The United Nations Security Council established UN Resolution 1244. This resolution established

the UN's presence as the interim government in Kosovo. The resolution also provided Kosovo

with a more formalized constitution, with the major goals of being able to represent all minorities in the government. The establishment of the provisional governmental institutions through fair and democratic elections in 2001 marked the beginning of a new political era in Kosovo. However, social discontent, economical backwardness and political instability has caused from time to time tensions which have managed to be used by radicals to attain an ethnical dimension. Above all, the issue on the final status of Kosovo significantly has reflected the post-99 political life in Kosovo.

While individual politicians may be influenced in their attitudes or decisions by Islamic beliefs, only one political party - the Justice Party (Alb: Partia e Drejtësisë) includes in its party programme a commitment to traditional Islamic values. They have tried in 2010 for Islamic religious teaching in state schools for children from families with a Muslim family background but this was rejected by the Kosovo Assembly.

In March, 2007, after seven years of Kosovo being under a United Nations protectorate, UN Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari proposed independence.

The plan required a sort of supervised independence for Kosovo, without expressly using the word "independence" among its proposals. Under the plan, Kosovo would gain self-governance under the supervision of the European Union, and become obligated to expressly protect its minorities' rights by means of a constitution and a representative government.

On 17th of February 2008 Kosovo unanimously declared independence and the declaration of the independence was adopted by the Kosovo Assembly. From February 2008 until now 110 countries have recognized Kosovo.

Only 19 Muslim majority countries have recognized it as a sovereign state, most of the leading nations in Western Europe.

The lack of enthusiasm for Kosovo shown by many Arab and Muslim countries should be taken as evidence that allegations of radical Islamist tendencies in the Kosovo independence movement

could be wrong.

However, Kosovo remains a Muslim-majority state, and since the end of the conflict in 1999, the country has been targeted by extremist Muslim preachers and flooded with fundamentalist literature.

In the post war new countries Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia as in almost every post war countries population out of the economic, social problems and traumatic experiences started to turn more towards religion.

Immediately after the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo started a trend of financial help coming from Arab countries and Arab organizations, as a first step financing the reconstruction and construction of all destroyed mosques or all religious institutions and financing Islamic communities. In the next chapter I am going to concentrate mainly on the rise of the religious extremism in Kosovo.

6. THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

The rise of religious extremism in many of our societies is one phenomenon which not only positions a strong danger and threat to people's lives and security and to the union of a more democratic and pluralistic political life but has also reached such an largeness where terror controls and solutions have become even more difficult to achieve.

Historically, the Balkans has always been understood to be a fire box of religious and political tensions since at least the 1878 Congress of Berlin.

In a recent book entitled Islamic Terror and the Balkans by Shaul Shay provides some much needed attention to the Balkans as a channel for the spread of the Islamic jihad into Europe.

As reported by Shay, Islamic charities in the Balkans, from Saudi Arabia, Iran and other Arab states, have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars as well as military equipment and supplies to jihadist organizations in the Balkans.

Shay further reports that Al Qaeda set up a secret organization, CIRKL, to help move contributed funds to Mujahidin movements and other terror organizations in order to establish terrorist infrastructures throughout the Balkans.

Most of the Albanians in Kosovo and as well the neighbor Albania and Albanians in Macedonia are Muslims but they generally have been secular, and were known for being modern Muslims. A lot of experts are seeing now an increasing radicalization in some part of Islamic community's within Balkan countries including Kosovo.

It is a trend seen now in all regional countries and is raising concerns, stricter forms of the faith had taken root after the war, following the influx of Islamic aid agencies and the schooling of local clerics in Arab countries.

Some officials say they believed as many as 50,000 people in the territory had begun following more conservative forms of Islam. The biggest group are thought to be the wehabis the followers of a radical islam. The Wahabi movement originated in Saudi Arabia in the early 18th century and advocates religious intolerance towards other religious groups, including moderate Muslims. It first emerged in the Balkans during the 1992-1995 civil war in Bosnia, when thousands of mujahadeen fighters from Muslim countries came to fight on the side of local Muslims.

Some people think that the Islamic infiltration of the Albanian speaking areas started even before the NATO led intervention of 1999. . The trend of beards, short pants, and headscarf started to be noticed more and more after 1999. There been few attacks one after the other on the more moderate Muslim clerics. One of them was Hamit Kamberi Imam at the Mitrovica mosque who was attacked and beaten on 21 January 2010. A group of extremists wanted to replace him as a mosque leader based on their devotion to the official Saudi sect while Kamberi wanted to stay true to the traditional Islam the Islam they first learned from the Ottomans.

Kosovo started to face a major threat of political islam that is mainly coming from the Middle east Islamic states and organizations, which started building mosques and investing in Kosovo so

they could change the people's approach to religion. There is number that was going around on different media that Saudi Arabia built in Kosovo around 400 mosques after 1999. They are as well trying to get students to study in Islamic schools through different scholarships. At the same time Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates are making big economic investments in different sectors in Belgrade.

In 2010 in Kosovo banned wearing a scarf at the public schools. Vetevendosje, one of the political parties who actually are known for being modern and mostly young was one of the parties which was not against the wearing of the scarf in public schools.

Immediately after the parliaments voted for the ban, there were protests organized by groups of the extremists in the center of Prishtina, their demanded the decision to be revoked.

Education minister at that time Enver Hoxhaj stated:

"This decision is in line with the country's constitution," referring to a clause stipulating that Kosovo "is a secular state and is neutral in matters of religious beliefs".⁴

Hoxhaj as well added: "If there are citizens who think our decision is not in line with the constitution, then they have to ask the constitutional court and we will respect the court's decision."⁵

We have to emphasize that headscarf's are not allowed in elementary and secondary public schools but they are in universities, it is the same even in Albania a country as well with majority Muslim population, but it is not the same in Bosnia and Herzegovina where headscarf's are allowed. People who are against the wearing of headscarf's argue that it's normal because under age 18 they are children and most of the times its not them who decide but they are influenced by their parents or others.

The new wave of the religious clerics are complaining that the secular constitution it's

⁴ Enver Hoxhaj (article Headscarf ban upsets devout Muslims in Kosovo, June 24,2010, Reuters)

⁵ Enver Hoxhaj (article Headscarf ban upsets devout Muslims in Kosovo, June 24,2010, Reuters)

discriminative towards the religious, they want religion even into schools and they of course want and demand easing restrictions and bans toward religious symbols. Their followers also say that they face difficulties in the job market too.

The loudest of them all is the cleric Shefqet Kraniqi the imam of the main mosque in Prishtina who is known of his purely extremists speeches full of hate, full of racial , gender and national discrimination all over all social networks. He claims that there is no religious freedom in Kosovo.

One of the other BIK's Imam Irfan Salihu's addresses women not opposed to premarital relationships as "whores and sluts" prompted a public outcry. While Ali Vejza, the senior BIK imam in Prizren, distanced himself from Salihu's comments, the country's first openly Islamist political party, Levizja Bashkohu ("Islamic Movement Unite," LISBA) and an allied youth group expressed public support for the remarks. Senior government officials, including the Kosovo Assembly group of Women denounced the imam's comments and called for the BIK to distance itself from them. Female officials who spoke publicly against the imam's views faced additional public criticism and intimidating language. BIK representatives reported their internal disciplinary body issued Salihu a warning about his behavior. Imam Salihu continued to serve as head of Suzi Celebiu Mosque in Prizren during the year.

In the meantime the previous minister of interior once said that years ago when he was the Prime minister he has tried to promote the law against the "radical sects" but he stated that concerns about human rights disadvantaged his attempts.

The head of Islamic Community if Prishtina Naim Ternava has made it to the news to many times now for leading a corrupted organization and he was even called "Stalin Ternava" by Stephen Sylejman Schwartz scholar of Islam and executive director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism, based in Washington, USA.

"Schwartz, in an e-mail interview with Koha Ditore, insists that the removal of Tërnavë is a

prerequisite for addressing the problems within the Islamic Community of Kosova, and for combatting outside influences that have introduced extremism into Albanian Islam, which has traditionally been moderate and tolerant, and an example for the whole world. He calls Tërnavë a dictator, while restating plagiarism charges against the head of the BIK in gaining a master's degree ”

Schwartz, a well-known American journalist who in 1997 became a Muslim, is the author of many books, among which some have dealt with Albanian issues and been published in the Albanian language. His book *The Other Islam [Islami tjetër]* was issued by the Koha publishing house.

Schwartz argues that the main problem is the dictatorship of BIK from Naim Ternava since 2005, Ternava is the one who encouraged the entry to Kosova of Wahhabis and the brotherhood Radicals. Ternava is the one who refused to act against physical attacks of other clerics by the Extremists, he has been the one in charge of discharging the modern clerics and professors.

Schwartz also said:

“Albanian Islam, which I consider, after travelling twice around the world, to be the best example of Islam of which I know, is under threat by extremists. The situation is calm in Albania, conflictive in Kosovo, and disastrous in Macedonia and Serbian Sanxhak. But I believe the mass of Muslim believers in the Albanian lands will resist the radical infiltrators. These fanatics have no idea with whom they are dealing. Albanians are a nation of heroes. The people that produced Isa Boletini, Ismail Qemali Vlora, Bajram Curri, Avni Rustemi, Shaban Polluzha, the Jashari family, and, above all, Qerime Shotë Galica, will not surrender to radical Islam”⁶

Ternava was elected for the third time as Head of Kosovo Islamic Community (BIK) in a very controversial campaign where he managed to change the community constitution and get another five year term and he still aims to change the ban on wearing scarfs in the public schools. He was

⁶ Stephen Sylejman Schwartz (Koha Ditore, September 8, 2013)

accused of leading the whole manipulative campaign and elections himself.

In April 2014 Mufti Ternava made a deal with United Arab Emirates for another 8 new mosques. Mufti Ternava as well is seen as having delegations from Dubai and other Middle East countries where his aim is to build more and more mosques , but mosques are not the bad thing but his desire is to convert Kosovo to Sharia law. This will damage the opportunity for visa liberalization and damage are chances to enter the EU.

The Kosovo Islamic community and the dealings of Mr. Ternava in the last elections it seemed profiling itself as a political party with a purpose of keeping the power at any price.

BIK was also accused of interfering in the religious organizations of Presevo Valley.

Mr. Ternava has been acting like a leader of a political party, and mostly been criticized my media and has been accused as well for trying to displace the loyalty of the Kosovo Albanians from the national identity to the religious identity.

Another evidence of extremism and their corruption is the fact of asking for a piece of land from Prishtina municipality located in center of Prishtina to build “The central mosque of Prishtina”. They were street protests from Islamists demanding for this, of course supported by Mr.Ternava directly. And this mosque would accommodate more commercial than religious needs, with 80 shops and 900 parking spaces. Prishtina is a city of 200.000 has already 22 functioning mosques. The start of this mosque reflects the Saudi-influenced Wahhabism that Ternava is accused of supporting and which has produced a lot of mosques with its totally different architectural forms which have nothing to go with Albanian Islam but gives an impression of Saudi Arabia.

As this happens in Kosovo the number of Albanians fighting in Syria every day is higher and higher, they say until now it’s 100 to 200 hundred joined the terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq and so far 40 have been killed these are not exact verified numbers though.

First is started with construction of the mosques and then worries started with the new clerics who were trying to brainwash the young people, one of this clerics was Enes Goga who delivered

blazing speech about Syria with quotes from Prophet Muhammed, where he asks people to go to Syria because it is a chosen land from Allah, a land where live all the great believers of Allah. In July 2014 everyone was shocked when one of the ISIS fighters Lavdrim Muharremi from Kosovo beheading a Syrian soldier and then showing pictures with his head on his hands. After this Lavdrim Muhaxheri was included in the US government list as “specially designated global terrorist”

In August 2014 a report from the United States and the United Nations Security Council said that a dramatic increase in the number of fighter from Balkans in Syria and Iraq is becoming a problem that we should be worried about.

As mosques, wearing a hijab, young people fasting every day more and more is something you can see, it is recruitment and indoctrination that is happening deep inside society mostly in a lower classes and among people who are not aware of the process they are being part of it.

The recruitment process is difficult to track down, but in a country where the unemployment rate is almost 50%, where 60% of the population is under 30, lack of opportunities, lack of occupation, so it's more than one factor which pushes young people to fight abroad.

Actually this problem remained unnoticed until fighters were killed in action returned to their homes, few from Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania.

Even though I think that the biggest number of Albanians fighting over in Syria are mercenaries who fight for money rather than for their ideology or religion. As a mentioned all the economic, cultural , social reasons which easily push young people to find ways to earn money, or support their families, and reason which makes them vulnerable and easy targets.

Another crucial reason as well could be the identity crises, which is a much more complex reason, the crisis of defining who they are, can they attach and feel like it's their flag (to the blue and yellow flag) or do they still feel closer to the red and black flag, are they Kosovars or Albanians or both. They fought for independence and sovereignty and now they feel that they are

not running their own country. They feel that their country is still is run by foreign embassies helped by corrupted and criminal government. And some of them might feel that only religion is giving them a clear sense of belonging.

But Kosovo society in general still believes that religion and state should be separated.

After the UN Security report in 2014 only then the crises were felt only than Balkan prime ministers responded to changing their criminal law, detaining suspects and started trials against some of them. The changes to laws in all Balkan states means citizens are banned from fighting abroad and they face prison sentences from 5 to 15 years.

In March 2014, the Kosovo Assembly passed the draft law on the ban of Kosovo citizens joining any armed conflicts out of Kosovo but society is conserved about the future of the bill due to first the dissolution of the parliament, than early elections, and then months of inability to form a government and in the end a formed government with pressure from international community, a government which seems to be not functioning.

But apart from all these concerns steps were taken towards this problem, a major police operation started in summer 2014 that resulted in 40 people arrested in 60 locations in wide Kosovo. Apart from people, explosives, weapons and ammunitions of different calibers were seized during these operations, among the arrested ones was the imam of Pristina mosque Shefqet Krasniqi.

The same Shefqet Krasniqi who vulgarly attacked the figure of Mother Teresa and called for certain Arabic formulas to be inscribed on the Kosovo flag, as it is on the Saudi banner and the Taliban equivalent. He even went so far to complain that with Kosovo governed by a woman who does not wear a hijab, the population is destined to” hellfire”.

But some people argue that even these arrests and campaign was taken by the government in order to distract attention from other problem like corruption and crime and in order to keep the power.

The arrested have denied of being involved in terrorist organizations ISIS or Al-Nusra. Most of

them were held in custody for 30 days for threatening the national security and the constitutional system. They were other arrested imams too among them the imam of Gjilan, who is suspected to be one of the main supporters of Jihad. Based on police reports there are 96 people in total under investigation.

The Kosovo government and as well its President are openly against and they repeated that they will not allow Kosovo to be a shelter of any extremism. Secularism was developed in Kosovo during the communism times and a result of softer Islam from the Ottoman Empire times and majority of people hope that it will stay like this.

Both the President Mrs, Jahjaga and at that time Prime Minister Thaci have expressed that :

“Kosovo will be no safe haven for terrorist” (A.J)

“In Kosovo there will be no place for extremism and terrorism. Kosovo is a free and independent country that will, with the help of European Union and the USA, continue to fight for good and against the evil” (H.Th).

The Kosovo government has declared an uncompromising fight against all extremists.

The first trial against these fighters opened in Kosovo in August 2014, similar actions were taken in other regional countries too.

At this time a group of young Albanians publicly burned an ISIS flag in Prishtina. Where they stated that this act was directed against criminality by terrorist not against any religious feelings among ordinary Muslims.

The previous Minister of Foreign Affairs in one of his interviews emphasized his and his governments Pro- Western attitude:

“Secularism is a sacred value of the Kosovo state , with a past history, expressed in concrete acts” refereeing to the ban on the Islamic scarf.

“Albanian nationalism has always been secular nationalism, our patriotism has always been secular patriotism” (Zeri, interview).

Immediately after this he was attacked for his remarks by LISBA a small but loud Muslim fundamentalist party. They labeled him as a “profiteer” and an Islamophobe.

The next was the leader of AAK Ramush Haradinaj has expressed respect for all regions but he expressed disliking for the new radical Islam followers and their beards. (Bota Sot Interview).

He was the next to be attacked by LISBA they were less rude than with Minister Hoxhaj, they said that all great Albanian personalities had beards, among them mentioning Adema Jashari, Ismail Qemali etc. And they offered him a free course by high level teachers on “history of his people”. Unlike Hoxhaj the AAK responded with:

“your beards are not the same as those of Ismail Qemali and Adem Jashari. These figures had clean beards, and honored the tradition of Scanderbeg and reminded them of the statement of Vas Pasha “The religion of Albanian is Albanianism”

“Islam is 500 years old in Kosovo and has lived in perfect harmony with the other religions of Albanians “AAK stated and “Muslim Albanians don’t need people like those of LISBA to rediscover Islam for them”.

6.1 Motivation of joining a war which is not theirs

As I mentioned above it is not one factor or reason motivation people to join these extremists groups, there are social, cultural, religious and financial factors which attract mostly young people. High unemployment, poor education systems are among factors that as well influence younger generation to fight abroad. But as well I think that there are a lot of Islamic organizations which claim to be humanitarian that attract people too.

There are proofs of a lot of these kind “humanitarian” organizations recruiting fighters from Balkan mainly via Istanbul and sending them to Syria.

A lot of propaganda involved, brainwashing of young poor people who have no other way out,

and of course among the main reason being money. There are families among Kosovar families that admitted that for sending their young children to the mosque they receive money, they receive even more if their daughters wear hijabs.

6.2 What are the risks?

It is influencing the process of visa liberalization; it might change the view of EU and US towards Kosovo and of course the most important the possible integration to EU.

Other risks which should not be underestimated either are the risks that people who come back from this war and their families will face, they will face depression, they could create groups to gather new followers. Most of Balkan democracies are young democracies that are fragile and this could lead to a boomerang after their own wars.

The other problem is that some of the fighters after going to Syria and after they see the reality and realize that they were manipulated, they decide to leave and come back, most of them after they come are afraid of their own and their family lives. And in a state like Kosovo where they will not have the protection of institutions or any kind of security for their families some of them after they come back they have no other solution other than hide or move out of Kosovo.

A lot of families of young people killed in Syria are in deep shock, most of them can not believe that their sons could raise their hand against any Americans. Most of them think and believe that we own our lives to Americans. Some of them were noted saying:

““We owe our lives to them,” They liberated us, helped us. There is nothing nobler than someone saving your life.” said 53-year-old Elmi Buqa, a resident of Sojeva village close to Bondsteel. ”

Queuing in the morning fog at the entrance to Bondsteel, a Kosovar contractor said: "When I see

a U.S. soldier, knowing what they did for me and my family, I feel ashamed at what my compatriots are doing in Iraq and Syria." (Reuters F.B)

7. THE ROLE OF MEDIA

The mainstream media play a very important role in provoking religious extremism. Some Western media tend to make a very simple stereotype of Muslim societies as characterized by the women wearing the burka and the men with a big beards. Then there are media which tend to equalise individual with community and religion with nation: when a Muslim commits a crime, then all the Muslims are criminals; when a religious group of a country does something harmful, they then say that the whole nation is terrorist. We must see and learn not to generalize and not to stereotype.

In Kosovo there are seven daily newspapers, 176 broadcasters, 21 TV station and 83 radio

stations, these are the data from one of the OSCE reports on media in 2013.

The main challenges that media in Kosovo face is the freedom of the media and the safety of the journalists. The journalists deal with every day pressure and threats especially the investigative journalists. Even though freedom of media is guaranteed by law, everything on papers looks great but much more work should be done on the ground, such as investigation and prosecution of physical attacks against journalists, and for changes to the Criminal Code related to the criminal liability of media and protection of journalist sources. Threats, violence against the journalists as well as weak law enforcement in this case weak judicial prosecution of criminals remains the most serious challenges to the freedom of media.

APJK reported 27 cases of attacks, with 7 threats and 9 violent attacks, against journalists in 2011, none of which were prosecuted, whereas in 2012 it reported 24 cases, with 10 threats and five violent attacks.³

In 2010, APJK reacted through public denouncement on instances of general interference on the work of the media on 32 cases, in 2011 on 27 cases and in 2012 on 25 cases.⁴

Additionally, there are no official statistics indicating the efficiency of the prosecution of cases of violence or intimidation against journalists.

The threats in different cases came from government officials, where journalists are called directly from the members of the Assembly to express their dissatisfaction with a certain story, there cases where the University Dean entered one on the offices of the daily paper to loudly deliver threats of violence and no measures were taken against him from the University.

Journalists receive threats almost in daily basis, when a dean on a University and members of Parliament do it what we expect from others, they receive threats for their families too, threats from businesses threatening to pull out their advertisements if certain reporting continues.

So almost no alternative is left for a lot of journalists in Kosovo. They are completely left on their

Own, while Kosovo institutions are taking little action to address these challenges to the freedom of media.

“Job instability and low salaries create an environment in which many journalists may feel, rightly or wrongly, that bringing a story, keeping their job, and receiving a salary at the end of the month is more important than the integrity of their story or the strength of their ethical reporting.”⁷

Despite all the danger that they are facing certain media and journalists continue to deliver outstanding performances and outstanding journalist pieces that proves that there is still willingness to develop quality and willingness to bring the truth to the public.

This willingness needs to be sustainably encouraged through professional education and training opportunities, as well as adequate support by the regulatory bodies and institutions.

Among the journalist that have been very actively writing about political Islam in Kosovo are Visar Duriqi, Arbana Xhara , Artan Haraqija where some of them have received death threats.

Visar Duriqi has received even threats of beheading since some radical groups have accused him of apostasy. Apostasy is punishable by death in some Muslim countries and Kosovar Muslims who accept a radical interpretation of the Koran agree that death is an appropriate fate for apostates.

He has asked the government for protection but received nothing in return.

In one piece that they wrote together Artan Haraqija and Visar Duriqi edited by Avni Zogiani brought into the light the corruption of the mufti Naim Ternava and the institution he is leading, the funds that he is receiving from different Arab organizations , the organization that are known publicly for supporting and funding terrorism. And for all their claims they have evidence that everything is proven. Documents wired to the State Department with proofs that organizations that Mr. Ternava is receiving money are organizations supporting terrorism. The so called

⁷ Journalists' perception on freedom of expression and media (20 August 2013)

Al Waqf Al Islami recently allocated 20 thousand euros for a mosque in Podujevo municipality and this was confirmed by the representatives of the Islamic Community in Kosovo.

But then the construction of the mosque was blocked from the Head of Islamic community of the Podujevo region who suspected that the mosque will be used to push forward the extremist religious agendas. But Head of BIK immediately suspended him in order to receive the money.

For the head of BIK it is not the first time he is being accused for this, among journalist that have been writing about him regularly is American journalist Stephen Schwartz. He has been open about points that link Ternava to radical movements.

In the meantime there are still imams in BIK who remember the time of ex mufti Rexhep Boja with nostalgia, some of the radical imams that are now in Bik at his time were suspended but only to be back when Ternava took over.

In their article they bring more fact and links with different terrorist organization from England but as well they mention the harsh accusation at that time Minister of Interior Affairs accusing the international community in Kosovo for not allowing to stop these dealings saying that internationals are experimenting with Kosovo.

Then they go on about the links of one of the aka non-governmental organizations in Kosovo AKEA and its links to the Muslim brotherhood, those who know it and the state agents who were following their work are convinced on its links to the Muslim brotherhood. And all the interviews with any representative of the AKEA are done by their terms, no questions allowed only what they want to say for public. Since as they say they took an oath for not speaking publicly. But some of them who have left the organization and spoke more openly said that apparently they had 3 stages and 2 were already finished successfully and the third one started in 2014 and expected to be done in 2017. In the first faze they recruited 50 now they grew into 80 members and they aim mostly young people who just finished high school or university. apparently 30 imams from the Kosovo Islamic Community became members of AKEA. Part of

their program is as well opening working groups in every faculty to increase the religious awareness of Islam which by them is needed in Kosovo.

They also mention that AKEA's plans are to start with a newspaper, TV and a portal.

And when one of the modern, blog, portal, and multimedia published in three languages launched a campaign "Kosovo 2.0 talks sex" in December last years, the topic should have covered the LGBT life in Kosovo just before it started a group of some 100 men with beards ad short pants despite the police forces being there could go in and destroy everything and beat up few employees. Unfortunately this showed how easily endangered the basic human rights are in front of the religious extremism.

Amnesty International has condemned the attack as an attack of freedom of expression as well as an attack on media freedom and called upon authorities/ government to act strongly against the discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender equality.

The involvement of Albanians in ISIS has not escaped the attention of more influential global media and commentators. On August 7, David Gardner, a Middle East expert and reporter for the London Financial Times, pointed out that when, at the beginning of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, corresponding with the end of June, the "Islamic State" proclaimed its authority over all the Sunni Muslim believers in the world, the text was "translated into English, French, German, Turkish, Russian - and Albanian." Gardner asked, "Why... take the trouble?"

Media has played and is playing a very important role in all this as it does in almost everything else .Media in Kosovo have still a long way to go, it is obvious very difficult to operate in a country where rule of law is constantly struggling, where we need EU to help us with everything, where corruption is the highest in Europe, where your life might be in danger for just bringing a truth to a public opinion.

But at the same time some argue that after the wars in Ex-Yugoslavia most of the media and their

reporting in Balkan have turned to Islamophobia and this is what is dominating at the moment. I think that certain problems /issues need to be brought up in order to trigger governments to take steps to improve things for the better. Therefore until now media in Kosovo concerning the religious extremism has done a lot but there is much more they can do in the future.

8. WAS THE RELGION THE CAUSE OF THE SRBO -ALBANIAN CONFLICT ?

“Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and the most important religion”⁸

These differences mentioned on Samuel P Huntington’s book exist, they are products of the centuries, and they will still exist between different nations and civilizations. There were and there is no exception between Serbs and Albanians. And it is very true that most of the times these differences have brought conflicts and wars.

“As the ideological division of Europe had disappeared, the cultural division of Europe between Western Christianity on the one hand , and Orthodox Christianity and Islam, on the other has reemerged”⁹

It is true as well that conflict lines between Muslims and Orthodox and Christianity had been going on for centuries. Concerning the conflicts in ex- Yugoslavia the western media and public showed sympathy and support first for the Bosnian Muslims and after for the Kosovar Muslims. In Bosnia it took a bit longer to act in their defense which was not the case for Kosovo. As I mentioned above under the Ottoman rule, which lasted for 500 years Kosovo’s Christian population constricted and Muslim population expanded. But Albanians embraced Islam gradually in time of centuries. The Ottoman rules lasted until 1912 , in the same time Serbia and Montenegro occupied major part of Kosovo where happened a lot of atrocities, and at the end of

⁸ Samuel P. Huntington “The clash of Civilizations”, Foreign Affairs, 1993, p 25)

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington “The clash of Civilizations”, Foreign Affairs, 1993, p 30)

there was a settlement that happened which allowed Albania to become an independent state but Kosovo was left under Serbia.

Between 1912 and 1925 Serbia and Montenegro killed or drove out of Kosovo thousands of Albanians. But even after this and an influx of more than 60,000 Serbian colonists, the Albanians still outnumbered the Serbs.

Following the division of Yugoslavia in April 1941, most of Kosovo was united into an Italian-controlled Albania. Germany swiftly filled the vacuum created by Italy's capitulation to the Allies on September 8th, 1943. After Kosovo was finally 'liberated' by Yugoslav Communist 'partisans' in late 1944, thousands of Kosovars were killed and/or expelled.

Therefore Kosovo was left under Serbia/ Yugoslavia and given the rights of national minority with no rights to a republic. Again between 1945 and 1966 more than 200,000 Albanians emigrated to Turkey. Albanians in Kosovo got the university in their language only from 1974. Economically as well was one of the most disadvantaged regions of the ex- Yugoslavia, the differences between Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia in comparison to Kosovo were huge. Kosovo's GSP per capita was only 30 % of the Yugoslav average.

In 1981 major student protests started in Prishtina, demanding the status of the republic and the right for secession, this is when everything started, at least 10 were killed and thousands imprisoned, hundreds injured. In mid-1990 Serbs took control of Kosovo radio and television and then gradually everything else, industries, schools, closed down all the media and newspapers. Schools and universities were all taken, hospitals, factories everything, and Albanian workers were all expelled. After that most of the Kosovars embraced the non-violent resistance almost for 10 years until the conflict was overwhelming. And when Serbian forces have started the ethnic cleansing, rape and murders of the ethnic Albanian civilians, after hundreds and thousands were forced to flee their homes to the neighboring countries NATO led by the US started the bombing of Serbia and its military.

The religious identity was always present in the Balkans, the major population of Albanians in Kosovo were and are Muslims, converted Muslims from Ottoman time, than Muslims who lived for decades in communist/social country, in this time they were struggling, to have human rights, rights to education in their language, rights to their ethnic and national culture and identity more than rights for religion. Being a Muslim was never a part of being Albanian, they are Christian and Orthodox Albanian but we are all Albanians, and religion was not our identity. But at the other side it is true that Serbs always tried to identify us through Islam.

I think and I agree that the religion was part of the conflict between Serbs and Albanians but never the cause of it.

9. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that certain rise of religious extremism it might be a future problem not only in Kosovo but in the region too. As mentioned above, poverty, poor education, dysfunctional government makes people more prone to the extremism and prone to brainwashing from so called humanitarian organizations that convince them that that the right way of doing things, that this is the real Islam.

The government is not addressing the root causes of extremism: poverty, a poor education system, and a dysfunctional government. Changes should start from our education system which is inadequate and it leaves people liable to religious propaganda.

It is not that government is not doing anything at all on this issue they undertook numerous interfaith initiatives to promote religious tolerance and respect between religious communities,

beginning with the formation of Interfaith Kosovo, a web portal supported by the foreign ministry and international partners, including the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. The portal promoted increased dialogue among religious communities, civil society, and the public. As part of that initiative, the government organized the “Interfaith Conference – Peje/Pec,” which brought together religious leaders from the country’s five primary religious groups and international interfaith participants.

What is harmful and we should by all means try to stay away in Kosovo is the “politicization” of religion or the “wrong use” of religion as political tool. Because in a lot of countries even non-believers use religion to gain political power.

Government should come up with more solutions involving national and as well international actors. Balkan could face serious security challenges from all these fighters returning back, they should have agendas on how to deal with certain situations before they arise.

In any case if these fighters are fighting for money or for ideologies could create problems like creating groups upon their return and to spread the ideology of war into new political parties or movements and damaging the democracy which anyway is very fragile in this region.

In the meantime we should not forget civil society organizations which as well need to be more proactive in Kosovo , they should continue fighting for peace, security, human rights, equality, freedom of speech.

But at the same time all these things happening in Kosovo, I don’t think that at any moment that religious extremism is affecting the general pro –European politics of our government, it could be that is making the process towards EU slower than we want, but it won’t change the direction and the dedication of majority of the population and its government.

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