

**The Precarious Presence Of The Victim-Oppressor Antinomy  
And The Opposing Narratives Of The Past  
In The Albanian-Serbian Communication  
In The Modern Kosovo  
(Some Reflections Inspired By Helena Zdravković's Research)**

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**ABSTRACT**

One of the most prominent issues related to functioning of modern Kosovo are problems, rooted in history, with Serb and Albanian relations. The lack of such attitudes as understanding, respect and trust is apparent. The problem of malfunctioning communication between the Serb and Albanian inhabitants of Kosovo has a distant and compound origin. While exploring it, one should notice that the vast majority of generations of Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs have for decades used the conflicting historical narrative (exploiting a range of aspects from quarrels over ethnogenesis, ancient and medieval history, to modern history events) instrumentally. They have formulated their image of “the Other” on the basis of specific inventory of stereotypes and myths, with highly unfavourable image of the ethnically different neighbour. The approach to the self and one's own community is extremely divergent. The latter is viewed as heroic, proud, better, having more advanced culture. Own cultural, economical, territorial or political aspirations always appear to be morally justified – aspirations of others do not deserve approval as they are unjustified. In modern times, the feeling of entanglement in unyielding, perpetual conflict of interests of the two nations can be seen in Serbs and Albanians from Kosovo. There appear to be efforts on both sides in acquiring the victim identity and using this self-determination in social discourse in a deliberate and calculated way which has been depicted blatantly by Helena Zdravković – an American specialist in the field of social discourse who comes from Serbia. Following her research, the author of this text signals the issues exemplified above. The text presents opinions on whether (and on what condition) it is likely for the antagonized communities to cease fights about the history and reject the blinding stereotypes of the simplified notional opposition of victim – victimizer, in order to turn to the dimension of pragmatism and dialogue which can result in cooperation on the plane of creating Kosovo statehood, free from social and political distortions.

**Key-words:** *Kosovo, the past, serbian-albanian relations/ conflicts, victim-oppressor antinomy.*

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One of the most vital issues related to the functioning of contemporary Kosovo are, deeply rooted in history, the problems of present-day Albanian-Serbian relations. A deficiency of such attitudes as: understanding, respect and trust, can be noticed in these relations. The co-existence of Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, who comprise respectively approx. 92% and approx. 5,3% of its population<sup>1</sup>, obviously cannot blot out all the remaining issues that are relevant to every-day functioning and

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<sup>1</sup> *Enti i Statistikës së Kosovës:* <http://www.ks-gov.net/ESK/esk/index.htm> (2012.05.28).

development of this Balkan organism. This subject, however, remains essential not only due to historical burden but. Also it is of importance of designing the European future in Kosovo itself (and all the countries it borders). Its significance cannot be omitted during looking into the matter of local security either. Similarly, it seems to be crucial to the question of elaborating democracy and lawfulness in Kosovo as well and founding an efficient socio-economic system in Kosovo.

Naturally, the problem of defective communication among the Albanian and Serbian inhabitants of Kosovo did not occur suddenly when the Serbian-Albanian conflict over the status of Kosovo in Yugoslavia was growing (the years 1998-1999), or when Kosovo the sovereignty was declaring (February 2008). The genesis of the Albanian-Serbian tensions in Kosovo is remote. It can be said that they constitute a specific historic legacy which deserves to be described in detail in separate, elaborate analyses.

For a very long time, a vast majority of the Kosovar Albanians and Serbs has been forming their image of "the other ones", according to a specific cluster of stereotypes and myths (the baggage of 19th-century experiences is of special importance in this matter<sup>2</sup>). The picture of ethnically foreign neighbours is extremely unfavourable here. The representations of themselves and their own community are completely different. This group is perceived as: heroic, proud, better, of higher culture. Own cultural, economic and territorial aspirations have been always seen as historically and morally justified. The aspirations of the others have been invariably considered noteworthy, as they are found groundless<sup>3</sup>.

In the most recent times, in both the Serbs and Albanians from Kosovo, the feeling of being involved in an overwhelming, constant conflict of these nations' interests has become visible. What is also noticeable is the pursuit of both sides to adopt the victim identity and use such a term in the public discourse in an intentional and calculated way. Helena Zdravković explicitly pointed it out. She is an American research worker coming from Belgrade, who specializes in the problem of social communication. She is an author of a book entirely devoted to the problem of using the victim identity by the Albanians and Serbs in contemporary Kosovo<sup>4</sup>.

On one hand, the attitudes assumed by the representatives of both nations mentioned, and on the other hand, factors of outer provenance (however, being linked to *modus vivendi*, assumed by the Kosovar Albanians and Serbs) belong to the major problems which at present constitute an enormous hindrance for the communication of the Albanians and Serbs from Kosovo, who live in the same country, but next to one another, as if they were in two parallel worlds. These problems are:

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<sup>2</sup> Wojciech Szczepański, Mity i stereotypy. Stosunek elit serbskich do Albańczyków z wilajetu kosowskiego (1878-1912), *Przegląd Zachodni*, Vol. 324, No. 3, p. 143-156.

<sup>3</sup> Krastjo Mančev, Rola stereotypów narodowych w historii narodów bałkańskich, *Dzieje Najnowsze*, No. 2, 1998, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Helena Zdravković, *Politika žrtve na Kosovu. Identitet žrtve kao primarni diskurzivni cilj Srba i Albanaca u upornom sukobu na Kosovu* (Beograd: Srpski genealoški centar, 2005, pp. 284).

- mythisation and sacralisation of the historical connections of their own nation with the territory of Kosovo, which is also linked to adopting the role of “heirs”, obliged to remain in Kosovo despite any inconvenience,
- not striving for any review of the *imaginarium* inherited after the previous generations, where all the negative images, features and roles were always attributed to “the other ones”,
- the possibility to treat the other side from the perspective of strength (available one time for Serbs, the other time for Albanians),
- treating the possibility to make use of the external forces’ back-up (Serbia – in the case of the Kosovar Serbs; the majority of western world and pro-Albanian circles functioning there – in the case of the Albanians from Kosovo) as an alternative to a dialogue with the other side, which is even reluctantly imagined,
- putting pressure by the representatives of one’s own community or external “allies” so that they did not give up the current confrontational attitudes,
- building an image of “a fortress under siege”, “a bastion” and exposing one’s own myths and auto-stereotypes without reference to contemporary realities or group interests,
- fear to lose one’s own identity in a dialogue with the other side or during any form of closer relations with it,
- the memory of fresh harm recently experienced during the conflicts personally or by close ones,
- various lost personal expectation.

Auto-characteristics formed by the Kosovar Albanians and Serbs – in which the matters of ethnogenesis and priority of colonisation on the co-habited by them part of the Balkan Peninsula are undertaken - separate them from the dialogue. Whereas the look at the two most numerous nations living in Kosovo not as at “immemorial”, definitely shaped, coherent or stable, but as at relatively young and being constantly shaped might constitute the new optics of perception and understanding the state of the permanent Albanian-Serbian clashes in Kosovo. In the case of both Albanians and Serbs the influence of historical experiences on factual mutual treatment is objectively high. However, the gradual uncovering of myths and stereotypes conditioning mutual perception and considering the “we – them = victims – persecutors” dichotomy in appropriately revealed historical, cultural and social contexts, enables to some extent understanding the tension accompanying the Albanian-Serbian relations in Kosovo. Tensions, that occur as early as on the discursive level, which is worth remembering. A closer look at the ways in which the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo form the narration about themselves and “the other ones” is extremely important. The image of their own community (together with a strong identification with it) as a group which is harmed and the image of the contradicting other community (“persecutors”) in the case of Serbs and Albanians greatly influences both the reality of every-day relations between neighbours and the character of political contacts of the representatives of both nations. Depicting the pursuit of the Albanians and Serbs from Kosovo to show the external world their own ethnic community as a victim of the other neighbouring group, as well as underlining the phenomenon of deriving advantages from this type of self-naming, belong to H. Zdravković’s exceptional scientific merits. She has convincingly proved

that the characterised autocracy remains in total agreement with a belief – authentic and deeply rooted in collective memory – which determines self-identification in both the nations mentioned. The majority of the representatives of both groups is able to recall much “evidence” to prove their belief. The catalogue is opened with historical testimonies of various qualities. The “data” from self-observation add up to it. It is closed with any products of one’s own thoughts. Similarly, the need to struggle with “the others” in order to achieve a real advantage of “my own” over “the strangers” is easily explained.

Analysing, after H. Zdravković, different discursive strategies as well as contexts and situations they are useful in, one should pay attention to the question of rhetorical conventions, used by the Kosovar Albanians and Serbs, which are also used to inform about the location of one’s own and “the other” communities and the interactions happening between them. Certain subject threats, which may be defined as especially exploited in the Serbs and Albanians’ narrations about the reality of their co-existence in Kosovo in the past and now, are also worth identifying. As an example, two subjects that are especially eagerly mentioned by Albanians and Serbs to characterize their own location and the location of “the other” community, should be pointed out: Albanians 1) “Albanians are the victims of history.”, Albanians 2) “Albanians used to have peaceful attitude and they are oppressed without any reason”; Serbs 1) “Serbs are the slaves of the current situation”, Serbs 2) “Albanians had everything in Kosovo and in former socialist Yugoslavia”<sup>5</sup>. Various matters are included into the statement. However, how many expressions in these Albanian and Serbian, seemingly impossible to be previously arranged, “truths about Kosovo” as well as one’s own and “the other’s” fate on this Kosovar land are as if copied from one story to the other! As previous experiences show, the fact that it impedes the intercultural dialogue between the Albanian and Serbian elites from Kosovo, instead of facilitating it, is a paradox. It is explicitly marked in Kosovo in a dully undertaken discourse about one’s own and “the others” rights to shape the socio-political order of the country.

A chance for a dialogue between the two conflicted sides may be created by the knowledge of the real Albanian and Serbian picture of one’s own reality and the relations with the ethnically foreign neighbours. However, there is a condition that goes hand in hand with the knowledge about:

- the culture of the two conflicted communities,
- myths, auto-stereotypes and stereotypes about “the others” rooted into the members’ thinking,
- the factors which may intensify, or soften, the mutual aggression.

Although the above arguments stress so much the significance of the past and determining the reality of the present by the way in which it is remembered, one may hope that providing for the pointed out assumptions is able to transfer the Albanians and Serbs’ from Kosovo (who think their relations over) attention from the *stricte* historical dimension (reflecting on the facts and the myths which were created around them) towards the context of life realism. Thanks to this – as Bojan Žikić stated when

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<sup>5</sup> Zdravković.

he was reviewing H. Zdravković's research analysis – a possibility “to transfer the issues initiated by so named discourse on the micro-spheres, where the victim/culprit dichotomy may be gradually replaced by an interaction within the spheres of a common people's practical interests” would appear<sup>6</sup>.

However, it is far away from this in contemporary Kosovo. And the route seems to be almost impossible to go through; can it be imagined, though, that the Albanians and Serbs from Kosovo suspend their historical arguments and engage in solidarity in the task of creating a free from social and political pathologies Kosovar state (which is then not acknowledged by one of the sides)?

Looking at Kosovo from the outside, despite all the objectively existing difficulties, the declared in 2008 independence of Kosovo could be conditionally treated as a factor stabilizing the Albanian-Serbian relations in the province<sup>7</sup>. Even if such a point of view was undertaken, which is fairly easy for somebody from outside of Kosovo or the Albanians living in Kosovo, but difficult and unilateral for the Serbs, it would not remove a big problem that is complicating the above judgement. It is, unquestionably significant, even if we forget about the distant past, burden of the Serbs and Albanians' mutual misdeeds, which are included in the balance of the last few years of the history of Kosovo. Both the Albanian and Serbian image of the injuries inflicted a few or more than a few years ago, hence still vivid and unhealed, is underlined with strong, still not clarified, emotions. These emotions naturally hinder taking the effort to inaugurate and lead a real Albanian-Serbian dialogue. It should be underlined, even though it sounds idealistically, that every day without the escalation of violence, without the slander campaign, without the politicians stirring up the tension, without closing eyes to discrimination and taking by certain groups of interest extra-legal actions in order to achieve particular aims at the expense of common good – may only bring changes for the better and hope for replacing bad emotions with good will and positive engagement.

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<sup>6</sup> Zdravković.

<sup>7</sup> P. Sokolowska, Niepodległość Kosowa jako czynnik stabilizujący relacje serbsko-albańskie w Kosowie, *Przegląd Zachodni*, Vol. 337, No. 4, p. 155-177.

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