THE DISCURSIVE SUPPORT OF INTERETHNIC CONFLICTS IN KOSOVO: TRANSITION FROM MEDIA TO SOCIAL MEDIA

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In Kosovo, ethnic identity played a central role in sustaining interethnic conflict until the current decade. Despite the efforts of the international community to reconcile the parties and mediate the political dialogue with Serbia, mistrust between ethnicities has been sustained by a history of tensed relations, identity politics, but also, to a significant extent, through the media and after the digitalization of communication – through social media. The paper problematizes on the role that mass media and social media have played in the ethnicization of conflicts and manifestation of ethnic hate speech, arguing that while the former has been subject to regulation and professionalization, the latter remain to a significant extent spaces that support the continuation of conflict and even the mobilization of groups.

In describing the framework of interethnic relations in Kosovo, the history of interethnic relations and the dynamics of post-war events are briefly presented. Subsequently, through the case study and the method of documentary analysis, the paper addresses the role played by the media in amplifying conflicts in the case of the events of March 2004 and the more recent contributions of social networks in the unhindered promotion of ethnic hatred in the case of a political subject – the import of Serbian products into Kosovo.

Finally, an argument is built in favour of the need for a more proactive approach of international organizations and local institutions in Kosovo in combating ethnic hate speech promoted via social networks, which can increase tensions in the fragile security environment of the Western Balkans.

Keywords: ethnic; identity; Kosovo; mass-media; social media;

INTRODUCTION

In the Western Balkans, conflicts based on different ethnic identities have persisted in the current decade. In the context of the war started by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, the unresolved issues of the Western Balkans have returned to the attention of the international public and political decision-makers, given the fragile security situation in the area and recurring tensions between the parties. In Kosovo, the political situation between Belgrade and Pristina remained tense due to the parties' disagreements to implement previously assumed commitments, and the lack of steps to communicate and negotiate in order to find practical solutions. The mediation of dialogue by the European Union has not progressed, as the adoption of unilateral measures by the parties leading to recurrent escalations of hostilities is characteristic. However, the process was also hampered by the lack of a clear vision and consensus at Union level (Clingendael, 2022, p. 9) on potential solutions that could motivate the Belgrade and Pristina to move forward in dialogue.

The current paper problematizes on the role that mass media and social media have as spaces for maintaining interethnic conflicts in Kosovo, by promoting and supporting identity politics, as well as by the possibility of expressing animosities and spreading hate speech. The current research is an attempt to capture the transition of interethnic hate speech from traditional media in Kosovo to the online sphere – especially to the more permissive and unregulated social media. In our research approach, we will contextualize in the first part of the paper, aligning ourselves to a constructivist world view, the conflict between the Serbs and the Albanians in Kosovo, that will be followed by a brief dynamic of post-war events, which have shaped current realities. They are relevant for understanding the functioning framework of the media in the years following the end of the conflict, as well as in problematizing the manifestation of tensions between ethnicities in social media, after the development and regulation of local mass media, and professionalization of practitioners in the field.

In the second part of the paper, we will address the contribution of mass media and later social media in supporting interethnic conflicts in Kosovo, using the case study and the method of documentary analysis to exemplify situations in which

such platforms contributed to the exacerbation of tensions, and the manifestation of interethnic hatred.

The positioning we assume corresponds to critical constructivism, analysing discursive representations of identity – relevant through the way of producing meanings associated with subjects and generating interpretative dispositions (McDonald, 2006, pp. 59-72). Constructivists explained the dynamics of events in the post-Cold War international environment, arguing for the prominence of identity, culture, and norms in the study of security (Katzenstein, 1996). Through constructivist theorists affiliated with the Copenhagen School, the study of security has been extended into several sectors, with large-scale collective identities constituting the reference object of societal security (Buzan, 1997, pp. 15-17). Barry Buzan, a theorist associated with the school of thought, proposed four potential sources of societal threats that affect identities, and for our study we believe that the *"vertical competition"* (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 121-122) threat provides a framework for understanding the interethnic conflict in Kosovo. It implies either the existence of an integrationist project – *"pressure from above"*, or of a regionalist/separatist project – *"pressure from below"*, in the internal environment of the state. A retrospective analysis of interethnic tensions in Kosovo and their escalation into war shows the prominence of identity and the attempt to challenge it as a legitimate source of insecurity for individuals, groups, but also for the state.

For Kosovo Albanians – the project of self-determination and recognition of Kosovo as a state represented the desideratum of an *"imagined political community"* (Anderson, 1991, pp. 5-7), not recognized as a nation within Yugoslavia. The identity of Kosovo Albanians was subject to the threat posed by the majority, through projects of assimilation and homogenization of the majority ethnicity. For Serbs, however, segmenting the state according to nationality was an unacceptable idea, given the ethnic and national mosaic specific to the Balkans, thus shaped by historical realities and years of imperial domination. In the case of the Serbian state, the separatist desires of Kosovo Albanians represented a challenge to the *"idea of society"* which, as Mitzen (2006, p. 352) argued, occupies a central role for the ontological security of the state, motivated to defend not only its physical security, but also its national identity.

Since the end of the Kosovo War, identity politics has served elites to maintain hostilities between groups and support for their own projects. Its use has been permeable in an environment with a history of interethnic conflict, where the parties still consider themselves restricted by the contrasting desires of the *"other"*.

It is rooted in the sense of groups that they have been wronged and oppressed, therefore demanding more rights (Identity Politics, 2002). Recourse to the constitutive myth of ethnicity in Kosovo has had a mobilizing force, legitimizing policies favouring one's own ethnicity.

We believe that traditional media, new media and social media have played an important role in promoting and legitimizing identity politics in Kosovo, as well as in discursively supporting interethnic tensions. They have contributed to the ethnicization of conflicts by transmitting frameworks of interpretation of reality that have victimized their own community, justifying efforts to obtain rights at the expense of the *"other"* who is blamed and made responsible for hostility and even violence. However, media content would not have been effective without anchoring it in the conflicting past of ethnicities, identity politics and small-scale everyday events with potential for exploitation.

ETHNIC NATIONALISM IN THE KOSOVO CONFLICT

The formation of nation states according to the criteria of ethnicity and nationality was in the Western Balkans, in the 20th century, a determining factor of bloody conflicts in the region. The breakup of the Ottoman Empire allowed the creation of new nation states, motivated by the desire of ethnicities to be recognized as nations and have their own state. The creation of states according to the principle of nationality was a recipe for violence in Eastern Europe (Mazower, 2019, p. 148). The dominance of *"ethnic nations"* – based on ethnicity and linguistics in the Balkans, as opposed to the *"civic nation"* – more common to Western Europe (Schnapper, 1998, pp. 150-153), justifies the substrate that favoured the emergence of ethnically motivated conflicts. Ethnic nations were formed in Eastern Europe, in the context of the existence of ethnic groups who were under the domination of three main ethnicities – Russian, Ottoman and Austrian. The latter, in their struggle for autonomy and independence, implicitly sought ethnic homogenization by transforming other ethnicities (Smith, 1986, pp. 131-145). The formation of Eastern European nations was based on the feeling of inferiority of linguistic groups that lacked their own political organization, and held an idealized and mythologized history (Schnapper, ib.).

The emergence of interethnic conflicts between ethnic Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo must be seen in the broader context of regional trends in the Balkans. Although, in Kosovo, the coexistence of the two ethnicities dates from before the 20th century, we will turn our attention to the dynamics of tensions starting

with this period, marked by the spread of nationalism. According to Smith (1998, p. 1), nationalism helped in cultivating peoples' attachment to the nation, strengthening their desire for self-determination and formation of states according to own will. The theorist further argued that the nation is still an abstract construct, and it is ethnicity that creates the sense of belonging, being rooted in emotion resulting from constitutive myths, symbols, values, and historical memory – foundations of ethnic identity (Smith, 1986, pp. 14-16).

The decade 1912-1922 was marked by violent clashes between the nations of the Balkans. In the former Ottoman province of Kosovo, the Serbs avenged the period of Ottoman-Muslim rule by exterminating the Albanian population. The methods used were consistent with the regional trend of liquidating the Ottoman provinces that remained in Europe, according to the principle of nationality (Mazower, p. 150). The Nazi occupation also exacerbated interethnic conflicts, with escalations of fighting between Albanian and Yugoslav partisans. By 1950, the ethnic composition of the Balkans had changed significantly, and ethnic homogeneity had increased, while in Kosovo, many Serbs had left the region (Ib., p. 158).

Under President Tito, Yugoslavia maintained unity by mediating tensions within the federal state apparatus. The country retained the Habsburg distinction between *"nation"* and *"nationality"*, and Albanians represented the largest nationality in Kosovo – where they made up 85% of the population and a national minority in Macedonia – where Albanians made up 20% of the population. While Macedonians and Bosnian Muslims had been recognized as distinct nations of Yugoslavia, Albanians retained their nationality status. In the period preceding and after the fall of communism, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic pursued a policy of supporting Serbs in Kosovo and Vojvodina, amid rising Serbian nationalism and attempts to increase Serbian influence in Yugoslavia (Ib., pp. 172-175).

Serbian policies meant to ensure ethnic domination – which implicitly through mass expulsions in Bosnia, coupled with limiting rights for the Albanian population in Kosovo, led to escalations of ethnically motivated violence in the Kosovo region. It was driven in part by discriminatory policies, but also by frustrations resulting from the fact that Kosovo Albanians did not suffer the same fate as that of other ethnicities that were recognized as nations and created their own state with the split of Yugoslavia. As early as the 1980s, pro-independence movements had emerged among Kosovo Albanians and received international attention. In 1998, the UN Security Council condemned the activities of the Federal Forces

of Yugoslavia against the Kosovo population, as well as the terrorist actions of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) (Orakhelashvili, 2008, p. 3). Interethnic tensions in Kosovo have escalated into the genocide of the Kosovo Albanian population, and the mediation of the conflict by the international community has failed. It led to the bombing of Serbia by the North Atlantic Alliance between March and June 1999, forcing an end to hostilities between ethnicities and Serbia's acceptance of the terms provided by the Kumanovo Agreement and[1] UN resolution 1244[2].

DYNAMICS OF POST-CONFLICT EVENTS IN KOSOVO

UN resolution 1244 provided for the withdrawal of Serbian military, paramilitary and police forces and the rapid deployment of an international military and civilian security presence in Kosovo. The latter would ensure, in addition to tasks aimed at restoring a security environment in the region, the demilitarization of the KLA – formed by Kosovo Albanians.

The resolution mandated the presence of a UN interim administration mission – UNMIK, aimed at contributing to ensuring conditions for peaceful life for the inhabitants of Kosovo and regional stability (https://unmik.unmissions.org/mandate), and a military peacekeeping and security force- Kosovo Force (KFOR), led by NATO. KFOR initially consisted of 50,000 troops, and gradually reduced its troop numbers to several thousands, adapting to improved security conditions in Kosovo. The two international organizations have been joined since 2008 by the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo – EULEX, whose initial responsibilities were to support the Kosovo authorities in the areas of police, justice and customs exchanges, through monitoring, mentoring and advice. The mission initially had extensive tasks in particular in prosecuting and sentencing serious crimes, in addition to supporting the formation of multi-ethnic and independent institutions (https://www.europarl.europa.eu).

Interethnic tensions in Kosovo could not be fully mediated by the presence of international organizations, despite efforts to do so. The Serbs – previously as the politically and institutionally dominant nation in Kosovo, have moved into the position of a dominated nation. Kosovo Albanians gradually gained more rights

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[1] Military Technical Agreement between the International Security Force Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Republic of Serbia, 1999, https://peacemaker.un.org/kosovoserbia-militarytechnicalagreement99, retrieved on 12 August 2023.

[2] UN Resolution 1244 of 10 June 1999, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/274488, retrieved on 12 August 2023.

and freedoms, but also support in forming their own institutions, conditioned on the inclusion of minority members in them.

Just a few years after the establishment of an international presence in Kosovo, a significant episode of interethnic tensions occurred between Kosovo's main ethnic groups. In March 2004, Albanian violence was triggered by reports that three Albanian children had been drowned by Serbs in an act of ethnically motivated hatred. Kosovo Albanians acted by destroying Serbian vestiges, committing acts of violence against both Serbs and other ethnic minorities – Romani and Ashkali. The event remained in the collective mind of the Serbian community as the *"March Pogrom"*, being of great significance for Kosovo Serbs also due to the failure of UNMIK and KFOR to ensure their protection (*Failure to Protect*, 2004). The violence resulted in the deaths of 19 people, 900 injuries, 700 burnt houses belonging to Serbs and Romani people, 30 churches and two monasteries destroyed, as well as the displacement of 4,500 people (Kenneth, 2015, p. 5).

Further efforts to maintain stability and security in Kosovo were marked in 2007 by UN Representative in Kosovo Martti Athisaari's proposal to the UN Security Council to recognize Kosovo's independence with international supervision. While the proposal was supported by Pristina, the USA and some EU members, it was rejected by Serbia, Russia, China, India and some EU member states (Orakhelashvili, p. 3). The UN Security Council ultimately did not accept the proposal for independence. On 17 February 2008, Pristina unilaterally declared Kosovo's independence, not recognized by Serbia and several UN member states. Two years later, the International Court of Justice issued an opinion that the statement did not violate international law, nor did it challenge UN resolution 1244 (International Court of Justice, 2010, no. 25). In the context of the unilaterally declared independence, the deployment of the EULEX mission in Kosovo, agreed in 2007, was contested by Serbia and other states, considering that it contravenes resolution 1244, representing part of the transition to internationally supervised independence. The international presence in Kosovo has been challenged in various forms, especially since 2008. For Serbia, the evolution of the situation in Kosovo challenged resolution 1244, while the authorities in Pristina – motivated by the ambition of creating their own institutions, saw another role in terms of the presence of international organizations.

In 2010, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution[3] welcoming the EU involvement in facilitating the process of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina,

aimed at supporting security and stability in the region and promoting peace and cooperation with a view to advancing towards EU integration (European Union External Action Service). The agreement subsequently signed in Brussels in 2013, facilitated by the EU, represented a breakthrough in mediating relations, marking the establishment of the process called the *"Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue"*. It was followed by a series of agreements on technical issues aimed at leading to the normalization of relations. Technical concessions did not lead to structural political settlements on the conflict as a result of hostile actions by the parties. They included: Kosovo's introduction of tariffs on products imported from Serbia in response to talks on changing *"borders"*, Serbia's international campaign to withdraw recognition of Kosovo's independence, and the vote against accepting the province among Interpol members, but also other international organizations. The dialogue stalled after 2018 and negotiations were reopened for a brief period in 2020.

In 2021, tensions escalated again due to the lack of consensus on license plates recognition at the common border, actually proving broader structural instability between the parties (Clingendael, p. 2). Interim mediation solutions through representatives of the international community were not lasting. Pristina authorities imposed the measure of re-registration of vehicles with Serbian license plates and tried to gain control over Kosovo Serb-dominated North Kosovo. The situation escalated into street battles with the security forces and, later in November 2022, into the mass resignation of political representatives of Serbian municipalities in the North. Amid crises in Serbia in 2023 linked to mass shootings, Pristina authorities held elections in April in northern municipalities, boycotted *en masse* by Serbs, which resulted in the election of Kosovo Albanian mayors following the turnout of less than 5% of voters. In May 2023, Kosovo authorities attempted to establish elected Albanian mayors in the northern municipalities by force. It ultimately resulted in clashes between Kosovo Serbs, security forces, which left wounded implicitly KFOR soldiers. In response to the situation, KFOR increased the number of troops in Kosovo at the end of May, while international partners, imposed sanctions on Kosovo authorities for actions that did not comply with the solutions discussed in order to advance in the dialogue with Serbia (Prelec, 2023).

The disagreements of the Kosovo and Serbian parties on some of the points agreed in 2013 are even more pronounced, with the Kosovo side refusing to establish an Association/Community of Serbian Municipalities in northern Kosovo,

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[3] UN General Assembly Resolution No. 64/298 of 2010.

as it had pledged (Clingendael, p. 5), contesting the status it would have. While the prospect of EU integration should serve as a force of attraction in determining the Serbian state to make concessions on Kosovo, identity aspects prove stronger in the impossibility of giving up the province. Kosovo is part of Serbia's identity (Ib., p. 7), of the ontological security of the state. Moreover, despite the benefits that could be brought by European integration, giving up Kosovo would be an unpopular decision among the Serbs.

The developments in the internal political environment of states, as well as the interethnic conflicts between the Serbs and the Albanians have been intensely exploited topics in the local media over time. The framing of events by the media and later by the social media played an important role in how reality was portrayed. We believe that the media have played a central role in institutionally sustaining tensions between ethnic groups, hampering reconciliation efforts. This role of the media must be understood in close connection with the historical past of the region. According to Andersen (p. 8), the media played a binding role for the Yugoslav Federation, but also later in its separation when the transition from *"unity and brotherhood"* to ethnic nationalism took place. During the Balkan Wars, they were used to foster ethnic hatred, but also as tools of resistance movements.

MEDIA, SOCIAL MEDIA AND ETHNICISATION OF CONFLICTS IN KOSOVO

The power of mass media to influence public opinion has been evaluated differently by mass communication theorists. Media models and theories are grouped according to the intensity of their effects on the public into models and theories of weak, limited and strong effects. Theories of weak effects minimized the influencing power of the media, arguing that the media are used by individuals to satisfy their own needs. The theories of limited effects have recognized the power of individuals to select, while supporting the existence of a media agenda *("agenda model")* or a third party that intervenes in the act of reception *("two-step flow model")* (Coman, 1999, pp. 109-128). McQuail (1983, p. 183) argued that strong effect theories presented an exaggerated view of effects production, disregarding variables such as the external conditions of media-consuming audiences, or their internal characteristics. The digital age has fostered the diversification of media types and the emergence of social media. They have brought with them the possibility of creating even more diverse realities, in which algorithms themselves can play the role of gatekeepers. Social media are still largely environments that are not subject to regulation, unlike the media and professionals in the field, who are regulated by bodies that can sanction their work.

In assessing the potential of Kosovo's media to alienate ethnic Serbs and Albanians and encourage the escalation of tense situations into ethnically motivated violence, we support, similar to McQuail, the importance of the context in receiving media messages, or transmitted through social media, and the characteristics of ethnic groups in Kosovo, among whom distrust and even hostility towards each other are justified by the history of an ethnic war.

The contribution of Kosovo media to the escalation of hostilities during the violent events of March 2004, documented by the OSCE[4] report, provide an eloquent perspective on its power of influence in tensed contexts. Media coverage of the ethnic killing of Albanian children by Serbs, during the evening of 16 March, in a society with a recent history of bloody interethnic conflict, has been an amplifying factor of violence. According to the report, without sensationalist and reckless reporting by some Albanian media outlets – such as the public service RTK[5], RTV 21 television, and Albanian-language publications *Bota sot* and *Epoka e re*, the violence would not have reached its intensity and brutality at the time. The effervescence of the protests was also enhanced by the context characterized by several interethnic incidents in the same month, which had not reached the same magnitude. Kosovo Albanians had protested on the day of the incident against the conviction of former KLA members for war crimes, youth had organized a demonstration against violence following the throwing of a grenade at the residence of Kosovo politician Ibrahim Rugova[6], and Kosovo Serbs in Serbian enclaves south of the Ibar River had blocked main roads connecting Pristina with southern and eastern Kosovo – following the wounding of a Serb in Caglavica, shot from a moving car (OSCE, 2004).

Media coverage of the deaths of Albanian children likely tripled the number of protesters engaged in violent demonstrations on 17 March, bringing the number to between 50 and 60,000 – compared to the previous day, when Albanians had protested against the criminalization of KLA militants. Albanian media reported the event without any confirmation of Serbian guilt. Moreover, they favoured the citation of Albanian experts, as well as perspectives supporting Serbian guilt,

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[4] Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.
[5] Radio and Television of Kosovo.
[6] He served as president of Kosovo institutions.

while UNMIK and UN police communiqués either did not make headlines at all or had little presence in the coverage of the event. The media used strong emotions for mobilization and popular outrage, representing a tool for manipulating feelings. They served extremist individuals who wanted to escalate the situation (Ib.). Kosovo journalists have been criticized by international analysts and researchers for the manner of reporting on the event, given that since the end of the war they have been supported by international media to develop their own system by organizing training and professionalization courses. Post-event reports from international organizations (Amnesty International) blamed local media for the escalation of tensions, but also criticized the international community for failing to rebuild Kosovo after the war, including the media field. The journalistic profession has been labelled as unprofessional in crisis situations Andersen, pp. 6-7).

Kosovo's newsrooms contents have prioritized top political topics on Kosovo's future for many years. Despite journalists' frustrations, many topics they deemed important were left out to leave room for news on the Kosovo status issue instead (Ib., p. 113). At the same time, Kosovo's media outlets have historically faced both political pressure and self-censorship in reporting corruption issues against local politicians. Instead, national objectives were prioritized, to help continue dialogue and maintain international support (Ib., p. 124). Kosovo's media has been characterized as highly politicized and politically controlled (Ib., p. 133), media coverage being thus affected over time. Also, post-conflict reconstruction objectives have cancelled journalistic correctness in newsrooms, so as not to affect Kosovo's progress (Ib., p. 125).

In Kosovo, Albanian-language media production dominates, reflecting the ethnic composition of the population. The civil service is obliged to produce materials both in Albanian and in the languages of the Serbian, Bosnian, Turkish and Roma minorities. These contents frequently consist of translations of material produced by Kosovo Albanian journalists (Ib., p. 136). Despite the development of media in Kosovo, journalists are still plagued by political pressure and intimidation (Hoxha, 2020, pp. 4-6).

After the war and especially after the incidents of 2004, Kosovo's media developed, leaving less room for propaganda and ethnic hatred. Formally, the structure of media owners is transparent, but the true owners are not known with certainty (Ib., p. 2). Andersen argued that the media were no longer centred on deepening interethnic conflicts, but on sustaining one's own ethnic and national identities (p. 150).

The media landscape is diverse today in Kosovo, with 20 TV channels operating in 2018 – the medium that continues to be the most popular, 83 radio stations, as well as numerous web portals. Social media is also popular, with Facebook being the most used platform. Since the time of the Mustafa government (2014-2017) the platform has been used as the main medium of communication with the public. While mass media have diminished their role in fostering interethnic conflicts in Kosovo, content disseminated through social media has not followed the same standards. In 2019, Facebook claimed to have deleted 212 pages, groups and accounts in Kosovo and Macedonia, which engaged in inauthentic behaviour, but the social network is not as effective at monitoring and sanctioning ethnic hate speech in the comment sections or stopping propaganda or hate speech (Hoxha, pp. 7-13).

Another feature specific to the use of social media networks in Kosovo is the existence of pages supporting certain political actors, which have the role of accusing the media, criticizing them of propaganda. Such a case was flagged in the report of the South-East European Network for Media Professionalization (Ib., pp. 13-14), which exemplifies pages and groups on Facebook created to support the Prime Minister of Kosovo institutions, Albin Kurti, labelling media content unfavourable to him as disinformation campaigns and war against democracy. One of the reported groups, "#ndaldezinformatat" (#stopdisinformation), was administered from Sweden and Kosovo and used banners labelling media unfavourable to the Kurti government as propaganda.

Hate speech also remains present in social media groups, where offensive terms are used on an ethnic or gender basis without repercussions. In Kosovo, polarization between citizens remains visible on social media, and becomes evident in events of interest to the region (Ib., p. 18).

The current trend in Kosovo lies in a professionalization of the mainstream media, which have learned from reporting experiences characterized by ethnic bias, the consequences of providing discursive support to the tensions between ethnicities. It does not, however, exclude the total lack of media framing in which the *"other ethnicity"* bears the blame for the unfavourable daily experiences of kin members, but this way of reporting is no longer the norm. According to Hoxha (Ib., p. 19), Kosovo's media currently operate on the model of *"national identity building"*, with conflict reporting and substantial international intervention leaving no room for hate speech. Social media, on the other hand, faces a tendency

to promote hate speech and propaganda, often visible in the comment sections and when the issue at hand is a topic of regional interest, as we will exemplify in the last part of the paper.

IMPORTING SERBIAN PRODUCTS INTO KOSOVO: AN ETHNICISED POLITICAL CONFLICT THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2018, Pristina authorities took the step of introducing tariffs on imports of products from Serbia and Bosnia of 10%, which they later increased to 100%, in sign of protest after Serbia blocked Kosovo's accession to Interpol. The repressive measures also involved blocking products from states that do not refer to Kosovo according to the name considered constitutional by the authorities – *"Republic of Kosovo"*. The decision was criticized both by the Serbian side – as a step hindering dialogue, but also by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Policy at the time, Federica Mogherini, who characterized the decision as a violation of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), calling for an immediate revocation of the decision (Koleka, 2018).

However, the measure was only cancelled in March 2020, in the context of the pandemic, by the interim prime minister of Kosovo institutions at the time, Albin Kurti, who instead requested a certification of the quality of products exported from Serbia while allowing vehicles with license plates issued by Kosovo to freely enter Serbia[7]. While the decision was appreciated by the EU, it has been challenged by the political opposition ever since its implementation was rumoured, with Ramush Haradinaj – Prime Minister of Kosovo institutions at the time of the introduction of the tariffs, arguing that they should not be lifted without Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's independence[8].

The announcement of the tax lift was not popular with all Kosovo Albanians. Protest actions against the consumption of goods in Serbia were common, a prominent and active one still belonging to the Facebook group *"Besa Besë"*, which spread under the motto *"Mos bli prodhime serbe" ("Do not buy Serbian products")* contents anchored in ethnic hatred, which equates the purchase of these products with guilt for supporting those who killed the ancestors of Kosovo Albanians. The

group[9] has been active on Facebook since September 2021, managing to gather around 112,900 members and expanding on Tik Tok as well. In the description of the web page it is exposed that the money earned by Serbia from selling its own products in Kosovo supports the Serbian army that will return to Kosovo, while not buying these products represents patriotism (Ib.).

Among the types of contents promoted by the group are: messages designed to encourage loyalty to Albanian origin, implicitly manifested in the purchase of products (we exemplify by the slogan *"love yours!"*), contents promoting stores that do not sell Serbian products, images with text in which Serbian soldiers are depicted threatening with weapons Albanians, pictures from shops indicating Serbian products on shelves that are not to be bought, memes appealing to the Internet audience in which it is explicitly requested not to buy Serbian products, video in which a child asks the parent not to buy products of Serbs who killed their family, content praising the export of products from Albania at the expense of those from Serbia. The content and reasons invoked against the purchase of Serbian products are diverse, but the use of ethnic hatred as a mobilizing factor is a constant, which in the permissive environment of social media does not seem to have been sanctioned. Also relevant are the reactions of the group members to these contents, many of which have received hundreds of likes and shares, but also laudatory comments[10]. The video contents promoted through the Tik Tok page[11] are similar, have thousands of views and alternate messages transmitted by children, with images from wartime, or other urgings in which the idea of not buying Serbian products is conveyed. In such social media contents related to the campaign aimed at discouraging the purchase of Serbian products by Albanians, the ethnic identity of Serbs is represented discursively within the limits of the foreshadowing of the historical enemy, who is not absolved of atrocities against Kosovo Albanians and who still seeks to harm them.

We believe that the example set out above is symptomatic of the potential of social media to spread ethnically based hate speech unhindered. Such pages and groups operate through online platforms without being subject to regulations similar to those imposed on the media. The popularity of the exemplified page

[7] Kosovo lifts all tariffs on Serbian, Bosnian goods, Deutsche Welle, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/kosovo-lifts-all-tariffs-on-serbian-bosnian-goods/a-52975561, retrieved on 15 September 2023.
[8] *Haradinaj once again provoking: "Abolishing taxes would be a capital political mistake"*, Telegraf, 2019, https://www.telegraf.rs/english/3119354-haradinaj-once-again-provoking-abolishing-taxes-would-be-a-capital-political-mistake, retrieved on 15 September 2023.
[9] https://www.facebook.com/groups/2281262918681383/, retrieved on 15 September 2023.
[10] The author consulted the contents published on the Facebook group's page open to users, through non-participatory observation, without joining as a member of the group and using the automatic text translation function.
[11] https://www.tiktok.com/@besabese390, retrieved on 12 September 2023.

is also significant, engaging a number of members amounting to almost 10% of Kosovo Albanians – without being able to be sure that they represent unique users, or that they are indeed inhabitants of Kosovo. Thus, if in the past local media in Kosovo proved their potential to mobilize the masses, we believe that social media have now taken their place, disseminating opinions and ideas almost unhindered, under the guise of freedom of expression in a democratic society. They play a significant role in the transgenerational transmission of interethnic conflict, serving the objectives of political actors, apparently not involved in these processes.

CONCLUSIONS

In our view, in the Kosovo region the interethnic conflict has been sustained since the end of the war through identity politics that found a permissive environment in a society in reconstruction, where the pluralization of the political sphere and the attempt to attract adherents took place simultaneously with the development of mass media.

The media have played an important role in supporting interethnic conflicts in Kosovo, but with their evolution and regulation, and professionalization of journalists with international support, significant progress has taken place, which has limited the discursive support for interethnic tensions. The mistakes of the Kosovo media – evident in the events of March 2004, as well as international pressure, played a significant role in its education and correction, which led to the development of a democratic media system. However, it remains significantly subservient to the *"nation-building"* project and marked by political pressure, as Kosovo continues to push for independence and membership in organizations such as the EU and even NATO.

With the development of social media, their use was early adopted by the Kosovo public[12], and the region's political representatives quickly understood their potential. If in the past they depended on the media to promote their own policies, the possibilities of social media offered an easier alternative to achieve such goals. They came with the advantage of publishing content almost unhindered. The permissiveness of the platforms has brought about a transition of ethnicization of everyday conflicts and ethnic hate speech from the media to social media.

When discussing issues concerning the contrasting desires of ethnic Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, continued animosities and tensions are observable and manifest in these environments.

The capacity of social media to mobilize and spread propaganda and disinformation should be of particular concern in regions such as Kosovo, with a recent history of interethnic conflict and security situation characterized by fragility. We believe that international organizations responsible for maintaining security and stability in Kosovo should be more proactive in matters related to the local information environment, implicitly by supporting local institutions to find an answer to the challenges posed by social networks. While at the physical level local institutions are responsible to engage in direct and constructive dialogue with members of all ethnicities, actions to prevent the ethnicization of conflicts and support for ethnic-based hatred in the local information environment are also necessary, given their proven potential to escalate tensions and violence.

The control and regulation of content, as well as the sanctioning of hate speech, spread via social media, is, in our view, a necessary demarche in Kosovo, which would support the efforts to reconcile the parties. The functioning of pages and groups in social networks that foster interethnic conflict by appealing to the collective memory of war, similar to the one we exemplified in our case study, is contrary to these efforts, given the significance of ethnic identity for the inhabitants of the region. In a society with a recent history of violent interethnic conflict, leaving social media unhindered under the pretext of freedom of expression represents a risk whose mitigation should represent a complementary direction in the effort to reconcile the parties.

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