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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INCLUSION OF THE FORMER KOSOVO LIBERATION ARMY FREEDOM FIGHTERS IN BUILDING INSTITUTIONS GROUNDED IN DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN KOSOVO AFTER THE 1999 WAR

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ABSTRACT

Kosovo has been consolidating as a democratic state and society in the Western Balkans. The foundations of its democratic institutions, particularly its security institutions, can be traced to the period following the end of the 1999 Kosovo War. The role of the former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) combatants in the process of building a new democratic society and its institutions was critical to the country's subsequent success. When the KLA was demilitarized in September 1999, the international community recognized its contribution and accepted their involvement in building new state institutions. As a result, former KLA combatants formed political parties, participated in temporary governing bodies, took part in elections, and accepted electoral outcomes as a legitimate path to political power. Their participation in political life enabled the establishment of civil and democratic control over security institutions. Former KLA members also played a key role in the newly established Kosovo Protection Corps, which led efforts to integrate minorities into Kosovo's institutions and society. In addition, former KLA combatants played an important role in the creation of the Kosovo Police, contributing both professional expertise and institutional legitimacy. These developments represented significant achievements for a society emerging from a communist legacy. The former KLA combatant's participation provided much-needed legitimacy to the institution-building process. This article argues that the role of the former KLA combatants in building Kosovo's political and security institutions after the 1999 war was essential, as it provided local legitimacy, facilitated democratic oversight of security structures, and enabled the successful construction of inclusive state institutions.

Keywords: Kosovo Liberation Army, Combatants, Democratic Society, Institution-Building

INTRODUCTION

Building institutions based on democratic values in Kosovo following the 1999 war was a complex and challenging process. In particular, it was important to build institutions based on democratic values and principles, given the complex security situation and the communist legacy. It had to take place after a century of the ethnic conflict between Albanians, who made up about 92% of the population, and the Serbs, who made up about 4% of the population (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2025). The war also transformed the ruling elite from the Serbian minority to the Albanian majority. Kosovo was required to transition its political and economic system from communism and a state-controlled economy to capitalism and a free-market economy. In addition, there were significant disagreements among major world powers regarding the NATO intervention and, consequently, Kosovo's final political status (Clark, 2001). The situation got worse when Russian troops occupied the airport of Pristina without any agreement with NATO. (Clark, 2001) Nevertheless, peace was established, institutions were built, minorities were integrated, and Kosovo declared independence in 2008 and has continued to develop as a democratic state (Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2008). Today, one of the greatest strengths of Kosovo's institutions is that they are founded on democratic values such as freedom of expression, political pluralism, transparency, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.

A crucial factor in this process was the inclusion of former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in post-war institution-building efforts. Their participation in political, security, and public institutions provided local legitimacy to the emerging state, facilitated the inclusion of diverse social groups, and helped establish democratic civilian control over newly created security institutions. Rather than remaining outside the political system, many former KLA members became active participants in democratic governance and state-building processes. This article argues that the integration of former Kosovo Liberation Army combatants into Kosovo's political and security institutions was essential to the country's democratic transition and institutional consolidation after the 1999 war. In particular, their involvement strengthened the legitimacy of state institutions, supported the development of democratic oversight mechanisms, and contributed to the creation of inclusive and accountable security structures. Accordingly, this article seeks to answer the following research question: How did the integration of former Kosovo Liberation Army combatants contribute to the development and democratic consolidation of Kosovo's political and security institutions after the 1999 war?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature relevant to this article is multidisciplinary and can be divided into three main categories. First, the literature on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) provides important conceptual and policy frameworks for understanding the transition of former combatants from armed conflict to civilian and institutional roles in post-war societies. Second, the literature on the Kosovo War and post-war peacebuilding provides essential insight into the strategic, diplomatic, political, and military context in which Kosovo's democratic institutions emerged. These studies examine the role of international actors, the demilitarization of the KLA, security-sector reform, and the broader challenges of state-building in a post-conflict environment. Third, the historical literature on relations between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo contributes to understanding the deep-rooted nature of the

conflict and the social and political challenges that had to be overcome to establish a democratic and multiethnic society.

While a substantial body of literature examines the demilitarization of the KLA and the broader peacebuilding process in Kosovo, much of this work focuses on former KLA combatants as a challenge to be managed during post-conflict stabilization. Consequently, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining the extent to which former KLA members contributed positively to the construction of democratic institutions and the consolidation of the post-war political order. This article addresses that gap by analyzing the role of former KLA members as active participants in Kosovo's democratic transformation rather than merely as subjects of demobilization and reintegration policies. Their participation contributed to the legitimacy of newly established institutions, facilitated local ownership of reforms, and supported the development of democratic civilian control over the security sector. By focusing on the constructive role of former KLA members in institution-building, this study offers a different perspective from much of the existing literature and contributes to broader debates on post-conflict peacebuilding, reintegration, and democratic state formation.

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR)

There are several concepts and frameworks on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR). The United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) framework is among the most important due to its practical applicability. These standards were formulated by the cooperation of 27 different UN agencies between 2009 and 2014. It provides a conceptual understanding of how former combatants transition from armed conflict to civilian life. It is widely used in post-conflict settings and provides a useful theoretical and analytical framework for studying the integration of freedom fighters after war. The DDR process consists of three interconnected stages: disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. Each stage has its objectives, steps, and it is very process-oriented.

The World Bank in 2009 also developed a concept on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration. While the United Nations focuses on security and peacebuilding, the World Bank has generally viewed DDR through the lens of development, poverty reduction, and economic recovery. The World Bank argues that reintegration is not a short-term security activity but a long-term socioeconomic process by which ex-combatants gain civilian status and sustainable livelihoods, enabling them to become productive members of society.

In 2005, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) published the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) concept. This concept represents an important contribution to theory and practice because it emphasizes the connection between DDR, security sector reform (SSR), governance, and sustainable peacebuilding. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) developed its own concept of DDR. The IOM approaches DDR from a perspective that links reintegration, migration management, community recovery, and peacebuilding. While the UN framework emphasizes security and the World Bank focuses on development, IOM's distinctive contribution lies in its focus on sustainable reintegration at individual, community, and institutional levels.

Kosovo war and peacebuilding in Kosovo

The book "Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat" is a memoir by General Wesley K. Clark, the former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), who led NATO military operations during the Kosovo War (1999). The book provides a detailed insider account of NATO's decision-making, operational planning, and

execution of the air campaign against Yugoslavia. The book “Madam Secretary: A Memoir” is the memoir of Madeleine K. Albright, the U.S. Secretary of State (1997–2001), co-written with journalist Bob Woodward. The book is a key primary-source narrative for understanding U.S. foreign policy decisions during the Kosovo conflict and the broader Balkan wars of the 1990s. In relation to Kosovo, the memoir provides valuable insight into how senior U.S. policymakers interpreted the rise of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), NATO intervention, and the transition from conflict to post-war reconstruction and state-building.

The Master's Thesis “The March 2004 Riots in Kosovo: A Failure of the International Community. Published in 2007 by former KFOR Intelligence Officer Major Dalveit. The thesis examines the violent riots that erupted in Kosovo in March 2004, during which widespread attacks targeted Serb communities, religious sites, and minority populations. The thesis evaluates the performance of UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo), KFOR (NATO peacekeepers), and local Kosovo institutions in preventing and responding to the unrest. The central conclusion is that the riots represented a serious failure of international governance and peacebuilding, exposing deep weaknesses in Kosovo’s security environment and institutional development.

The article “The Role of NATO in the Demilitarization of Kosovo Liberation Army and the Establishment of Kosovo Protection Corps and Kosovo Security Force” published by Gashi and Molnar, examines NATO's role in the post-conflict transformation of Kosovo's security sector following the 1999 Kosovo War. The article analyzes how NATO-led KFOR supervised the demilitarization and demobilization of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), facilitated the creation of the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), and later supported the establishment of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF). The authors argue that NATO was not merely a peacekeeping force but a central actor in Kosovo's state-building and security-sector reform processes.

The article “Impact of the Reintegration of Former KLA Combatants on the Post-War Recovery of Kosovo” published by Barakat and Özerdem, examines how the reintegration of former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) contributed to Kosovo's post-war recovery after the 1999 conflict. The study evaluates the effectiveness of reintegration programmes implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), and KFOR. The authors argue that successful reintegration is essential not only for the welfare of former combatants but also for long-term peacebuilding, security, and economic recovery.

The article “The Role and Ramifications of the Kosovo Liberation Army's Reclassification in the Peace Process of Kosovo,” published by Cservolgyi, examines the consequences of the international community's decision in 1998 to reclassify the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) from an organization widely associated with terrorism to a legitimate actor in the Kosovo peace process. The study investigates how this reclassification influenced the trajectory of the conflict, negotiations, and Kosovo's eventual path toward independence.

The study “The KLA and the Kosovo War: From Intra-State Conflict to Independent Country, by Bekaj, examines the emergence, evolution, and transformation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) from an armed resistance movement into a significant political force in the process leading to Kosovo's independence. The work explores the historical roots of the Kosovo conflict, the rise of the KLA during the 1990s, its relationship with international actors, and its transition from armed struggle to political participation.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) report: What Happened to the KLA? examines the transformation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) following the end of the Kosovo

War in 1999. Rather than disappearing after formal demilitarization, the ICG argues that the KLA evolved into a complex network of political, security, administrative, and informal structures that continued to exert significant influence over post-war Kosovo.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) report: An Army for Kosovo? examines the sensitive and politically contested process of transforming Kosovo's post-war security structures into a potential national army. The report was written at a critical moment when Kosovo was moving toward final-status negotiations, and debates were intensifying over whether it should be allowed to establish its own armed forces.

Conflict between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo

The book, Kosovo: A Short History by Malcolm, is one of the most influential historical works on Kosovo's political and ethnic development. The book provides a long-term historical account of Kosovo from the medieval period to the late 20th century, with strong emphasis on Serb-Albanian relations, Ottoman rule, and the modern nationalist conflict that culminated in the Kosovo War (1998–1999).

The book, "Kosovo: War and Revenge" by Judah provides a detailed narrative of the political, social, and military dynamics that led to the Kosovo War (1998–1999), with particular attention to the rise of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), Serbian state repression, and the cycle of violence between Albanian and Serb communities.

The book, "The Albanian Question: Reshaping the Balkans", by Pettifer and Vickers examines the historical, political, and geopolitical dimensions of the "Albanian Question" in the Balkans. The book explores the position of Albanian populations in Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and southern Serbia, and analyzes how Albanian national aspirations have influenced regional politics and security.

There are many other works that are relevant, but the selected sources provide a good literature framework for this paper. Understanding the DDR concept and framework of the UN and other international organizations is very important because the KLA had to go through this process. Then, the literature on war and peacebuilding in Kosovo is also important because it provides insight into the events relevant to this paper. The literature on the Albanian-Serbian conflict in Kosovo provides insight into the deep ethnic conflict and hatred that existed in Kosovo after the 1999 war.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Kosovo was selected as a case study because it represents a very good example of the successful contribution of the former freedom fighters in building a democratic society. This article employs a qualitative research methodology, as it examines a historical phenomenon with political, security, ethnic, and cultural dimensions and implications. The study adopts a case study approach, focusing on Kosovo as a post-war society transitioning from a war-torn territory with a communist legacy to a system of democratic governance. This approach enables an in-depth analysis of how former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) were incorporated into newly established governance, defense, and security institutions, including the Kosovo Government, municipal administrations, the Kosovo Police, and the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC).

Data is collected from multiple sources to ensure triangulation and strengthen the analysis. Both primary and secondary sources are used, including:

- International agreements and frameworks (such as the Undertaking of Demilitarization and Transformation of the KLA and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244);
- UNMIK and Kosovo legislative documents;
- Reports produced by international NGOs and think tanks; and
- Academic literature on Kosovo's history, the war, and post-war reconstruction.

A historical approach is employed to contextualize the transformation of Kosovo's defense institutions from systems shaped by apartheid-like practices and a communist legacy into democratic institutions from 1999 onward, with particular attention to the role of former KLA combatants in this process.

The collected data is analyzed using thematic analysis. The key themes include:

- The legitimacy and public trust generated by the inclusion of former KLA members in new democratic institutions;
- The experience and professionalization that former combatants contributed to emerging institutions; and
- The risks associated with the exclusion of former freedom fighters from post-conflict governance.

The collection and analysis of data through this methodology contribute to a deeper understanding of the importance of including former Kosovo Liberation Army combatants in the process of building a democratic society in Kosovo after the 1998–1999 war.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Background

As Yugoslavia began to collapse in the early 1990s, armed conflicts erupted in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia. Although political repression in Kosovo had intensified earlier, the Albanian leadership initially pursued independence through peaceful resistance (Malcolm, 1999). Kosovo, as part of Yugoslavia, never stopped seeking its political rights since 1912 (Malcolm, 1999). Albanians were the only non-Slavic population in Yugoslavia and did not perceive themselves as free within a Slavic-dominated state. The democratic world, led by the United States, supported Kosovo's strategy of peaceful resistance. In line with this support, U.S. President George H. W. Bush issued a letter known as the "Christmas Warning" to Serbia in 1992 (Clark, 2001). So, as the war went on in other parts of Yugoslavia, Kosovo continued its peaceful resistance.

The war in Croatia and Bosnia ended in 1995 with the signing of the Dayton Agreement; however, the international community failed to persuade Serbia to include Kosovo in the peace negotiations (Holbrooke, 1999). Following the Dayton Agreement, Kosovo Albanians felt betrayed and lost hope for a peaceful resolution of the conflict with Serbia. As a result, support for armed resistance increased, led by the newly formed Kosovo Liberation Army (Pettefer & Vickers, 2007). Violence escalated during 1996 and 1997 and developed into an open conflict in March 1998. From that point onward, Kosovo became a war zone between Serbian forces and local Serbs on one side and Kosovo Albanians led by the KLA on the other (Judah, 2002). Serbia continued the war through massacres and the killing of civilians, employing methods similar to those used previously in Croatia and Bosnia. Although the conflict resulted in significant casualties and large numbers of refugees, most of them Albanian civilians,Kosovo Albanians increasingly viewed armed resistance as the only remaining path to freedom.

In March 1998, the international community intervened to mediate between Kosovo Albanians and Serbia in an effort to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict. In response to the increased escalation of the violence, the international community, through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1160, authorized the establishment of the "Contact Group," composed of the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy, to address the crisis (UNSC, 1998).

In January 1999, the Contact Group, mandated by the United Nations Security Council, organized a peace conference in Paris to bring an end to the war in Kosovo. After several weeks of negotiations and with no prospect of an agreement between the Albanian and Serbian sides, the international community presented a non-negotiable proposal. The message was clear: the party that refused to sign the agreement would face diplomatic and military consequences (Albright & Woodward, 2003). Although dissatisfied with the terms, the Kosovo delegation, led by the KLA, accepted the proposal. Serbia, however, refused to sign and instead used the opportunity to deploy additional forces in Kosovo. The Kosovo Albanian delegation consisted of senior KLA leadership, political representatives, and civil society actors, while Serbia's delegation was composed largely of second-level decision-makers, indicating that President Slobodan Milošević had little intention of reaching a peace agreement. Following Serbia's refusal, NATO, led by the United States, initiated an air campaign to compel Serbia to accept the agreement and halt the conflict (Albright & Woodward, 2003).

The NATO air campaign began on 24 March 1999 and lasted for 78 days, ending on 11 June 1999, when Serbia capitulated and signed the Kumanovo Military Technical Agreement. During the campaign, Serbian forces deported more than one million Albanians to Albania and Macedonia in an effort to alter Kosovo's ethnic composition before capitulation (Clark, 2001). Meanwhile, the KLA continued to fight on the ground and attempted to coordinate its operations with NATO air strikes (Clark, 2001). On 10 June 1999, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1244, which paved the way for the deployment of a United Nations mission and a NATO-led military force in Kosovo (UNSC, 1999).

Peacebuilding in Kosovo

On 11 June 1999, the war ended, and NATO forces entered Kosovo, followed shortly by the United Nations Mission. They were immediately confronted with the immense challenge of post-conflict peacebuilding. Much of Kosovo's infrastructure had been destroyed, homes had been burned, and essential public services were nonexistent. These included water and electricity supply, healthcare institutions, policing, civil registries, education systems, customs administration, legal frameworks, and the judiciary. The economy had collapsed, largely as a result of Serbia's scorched-earth policy. The war left approximately 13,000 people killed, 3,500 missing, more than 800,000 refugees in neighboring countries (Human Rights Watch, 2001), and over 600 minefields and 2500 dangerous areas (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2000). The key obligations of the international community based on UNSCR 1244 were to enforce the withdrawal of Serbian forces and the demilitarization of the KLA. The UNMIK and KFOR were also tasked not only with facilitating the return of Albanian refugees but also with protecting Serb and Roma minorities from retaliatory violence. Furthermore, the KFOR had to support humanitarian organizations to distribute food, provide health care for emergency cases, and work to restore basic services. To overcome these challenges, UNMIK and KFOR needed to establish alliances within Kosovo's population to gain legitimacy for the peacebuilding process (Mockaitis, 2004).

The demobilization of the KLA was an obligation with priority for KFOR based on UNSCR 1244 in order to secure a ceasefire and initiate institution-building. But it came out

that this was not an easy task to accomplish. By the end of the war, the KLA had developed a high level of organization and comprised approximately 20,000 armed members (International Crisis Group, 2000). Its structure included a central headquarters, six operational zones at the division level, multiple brigades, and supporting units such as special forces, military police, light artillery, communications, logistics, medical facilities, and a radio station (Krasniqi, 2006). Furthermore, after June 1999, the KLA expanded and filled the vacuum of power created from the withdrawal of the Serbian Forces and the slow establishment of the UNMIK. The KLA started to maintain public order, manage public services, and restore local governance, etc. Therefore, as a consolidated force, KLA refused to demobilise without ensuring a role in the building of a new democratic society. The KLA was willing to work side by side with KFOR and UNMIK, but not to demobilise and hand over the power that they already seized. This created tensions and friction with KFOR and UNMIK. (Dalveit, 2007) The KLA was widely regarded by Kosovo Albanians as a liberation force and enjoyed strong legitimacy among the non-Serbian population. Therefore, using force to demobilise the KLA was not an option, so KFOR had to find a way to demobilise it and gain the KLA's support in this process.

After many negotiations and tensions on 20 September 1999, NATO and KLA leadership agreed on the "Undertaking for the Demilitarization and Transformation of the KLA" in Kosovo. This document ensured that the KLA would demobilise, but it also ensured a role for the KLA in the process of building new Kosovo institutions. The agreement required the cessation of all KLA combat and law enforcement activities, except for self-defense. It imposed restrictions on the movement of armed KLA members near major roads and established a clear timeline and designated locations for the collection and handover of weapons to KFOR. It also regulated cross-border movements of armed KLA groups. Most activities were to be completed within 30 days, while full demilitarization, including the discontinuation of KLA uniforms and insignia, was to be achieved within 90 days. The agreement established a Joint Implementation Commission composed of representatives from the KLA, KFOR, and UNMIK to oversee its implementation (Undertaking of Demilitarisation and Transformation by the UCK, 1999) Beyond demilitarization, the agreement also addressed the transformation and inclusion of former KLA members and the KLA legacy in the construction of new institutions (Cservolgyi, 2022. It explicitly acknowledged the contribution of the KLA during the conflict and recognized the authority of KLA structures to nominate former members for participation in public administration and the newly created Kosovo Police. The agreement further envisioned the eventual establishment of a military force in Kosovo modeled on the U.S. National Guard, as part of Kosovo's broader political development (Undertaking of Demilitarisation and Transformation by the UCK, 1999). These provisions provided incentives for KLA leadership to support the international presence and conferred legitimacy on the process of democratic state-building (Gashi & Molnar, 2012).

Even though the international community agreed to include the KLA in the process of rebuilding democratic Kosovo, the goal to eliminate any KLA legacy from the new institutions remained their official and public policy. The international community used UNMIK courts to arrest and indict the KLA leadership. (ICG, 2005) This policy reached its peak in 2003 when KFOR commander MG Fabio Mini declared that he would destroy the KPC as he destroyed the Mafia in Italy. He ordered the arrest of many KPC leaders without any investigation or charges. (Dalveit, 2007) Their policy toward former KLA leadership was one of the key reasons that caused the March 2004 riots in Kosovo. (ICG, 2005) Despite this pressure, the former KLA combatants did not give up their involvement in the institution-building. They saw the KLA legacy as an obstacle to building a multiethnic and democratic Kosovo, but the practice proved them wrong.

The acknowledgment of the KLA's contribution and its inclusion in administrative roles transformed the organization into a key stakeholder in peacebuilding. Former KLA leaders were involved at the local level through temporary municipal administrations established by UNMIK and later in central governing bodies (Cservolgyi, 2022). This process facilitated the creation of political parties representing KLA values and ideology, notably the Democratic Party of Kosovo and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo. The emergence of these parties enhanced political pluralism and legitimized civilian oversight of defense institutions (Bekaj, 2010). By participating in party formation and electoral competition, KLA leaders embraced democratic pluralism and elections as the basis of political legitimacy, a significant shift given Kosovo's communist legacy (Cservolgyi, 2022). It is important to stress out that Serbs and other minorities were positively discriminated in the election process, by having guaranteed and reserved seats in the Kosovo Parliament. Although KLA-affiliated parties lost the first national elections in 2000 and 2001, they accepted the results, thereby making an important contribution to democratic consolidation (Central Election Commission). At the local level, the participation of former KLA members in governance and administration played a critical role in legitimizing UNMIK's decisions. Therefore, UNMIK decisions were implemented quickly, and this enabled the restoration of the basic services at the municipality level (Bekaj, 2010).

Special consideration given to former KLA members due to their expertise enabled many of them to join the newly established Kosovo Police. The police service, modeled on the U.S. policing system, was designed to be inclusive of all ethnic groups and social strata. U.S. experts within the OSCE mission established a police academy to train new officers (Jones, et al., 2005). Former KLA members contributed both operational experience and legitimacy to the police service. Their presence also helped reduce divisions between former KLA supporters and advocates of peaceful resistance within the Albanian community and facilitated the inclusion of the Serbian minority. As a result, the integration of former KLA members into the police supported the international community's objective of building a multiethnic Kosovo and reducing ethnic tensions, while providing legitimacy to a democratic police force in a post-war, post-communist context (Bekaj, 2010).

The establishment of the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC) allowed Kosovo Albanians to preserve the legacy of the KLA and the liberation struggle as a foundation of the new democratic society. Following the KLA's final demobilization on 20 September 1999, the KPC was established on 21 September 1999. It consisted of 3,052 active personnel and 2,000 reservists, all former KLA members. While the KPC inherited the KLA's legacy, values, structure, and facilities, its mandate was limited to civil protection tasks (UNMIK/REG/1999/8, 1999). Despite this restricted mission, the KPC was widely perceived by Kosovo Albanians as a national army. The Kosovo Security Force (KSF), established in 2009, inherited these same values (Gashi & Molnar, 2012). By creating the KPC, the International Community in Kosovo also ensured a structured organization gathering former KLA combatants, giving them a working place, a career path, and denying others the right to speak in the name of the KLA (International Crisis Group, 2006).

The KPC was created as a multiethnic organization under the authority of the head of UNMIK's civil administration (UNMIK/REG/1999/8, 1999). Although these principles were initially unpopular, they were essential for building a democratic defense structure. Former KLA leaders, now leading the KPC, accepted these principles and integrated them into the organization's culture. Later, this relation was also developed with Kosovo's civil and political institutions. This was not an easy task considering the communist legacy of Kosovar society.

The KPC continued to be shaped by these values, which underpin its legitimacy and effectiveness (International Crisis Group, 2006).

The KPC played a crucial role in rebuilding Kosovo as a democratic and multiethnic society. It led demining operations, search and rescue missions, and the removal of war debris (UNMIK/REG/1999/8, 1999). It also participated in sanitation efforts and the reburial of war victims, fostering a sense of dignity and respect among the population. Composed of former KLA members committed to public service, the KPC quickly became one of the most trusted institutions in Kosovo and retained this status until its dissolution in 2009 (Dalveit, 2007). Its cooperation with the international community facilitated the establishment of civilian democratic control, exercised through the Office of the KPC Coordinator, led by an international civilian authority.

One of the most challenging post-war tasks for Kosovo and the international community was persuading the Albanian majority to accept the Serbian minority as part of society, given the crimes committed during and prior to the conflict. Due to its legitimacy among Albanians, the KPC played a leading role in minority integration beginning in 2002 (UNMIK, 2002). As the KPC set standards for multiethnic cooperation, other institutions followed suit. Gradually, the Serbian community became more integrated into Kosovo's society and institutions, a process made possible largely through the leadership role of the KPC.

DISCUSSION

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) represents a compelling example of how the former insurgents can play a critical role in the process of building a democratic and multiethnic society. Even though one of the key obligations of the International Community was to demobilise the KLA and then build Kosovo institutions, it did not happen. The determination of the KLA to take responsibility for the future of Kosovo forced the international community to include them in the rebuilding of Kosovo as a democratic society. This was possible because of the previous cooperation of the KLA with the International community. During the conflict in 1998-1999, the KLA demonstrated its reliability as a partner of the international community by accepting and signing the peace agreement in Paris. There is no doubt that the KLA enjoyed uncontested legitimacy among the Albanian majority in Kosovo and was widely perceived by the Albanian population as a liberation force. The decision to extensively include former KLA members in building a multiethnic Kosovo enabled the international community to promote social cohesion despite nearly two centuries of ethnic conflict. (Malcolm, 2000) Indeed, the success of post-war democratic and multiethnic state-building in Kosovo largely stemmed from the international community's decision to allow former KLA combatants into political and institutional life (Barakat, S. & Alpasslan, O., 2005).

The comprehensive inclusion of the KLA in the process of building Kosovo as a democratic society provided legitimacy to post-war governance. Former KLA leaders established political parties, accepted electoral competition as the legitimate path to political power, and, notably, accepted defeat in the first two electoral cycles in 2000 and 2001. Furthermore, competition among former KLA leaders in elections contributed significantly to the development of democratic culture and freedom of expression in Kosovo (Cservolgyi, 2022. As former KLA leaders engaged in electoral politics, tensions between the KLA-oriented faction and the previously pacifist Albanian political wing gradually declined. In this way, both the domestic and international legitimacy of the KLA were effectively utilized by the international community to support democratic consolidation. (Oguz, 2016). To date, Kosovo has conducted multiple free and democratic elections and experienced several peaceful transfers of power, an outcome that remains relatively rare among post-communist societies.

The policy of integrating former KLA members into public and institutional life also reduced the risks associated with leaving organized armed groups outside the post-war political order. As a military organization emerging from conflict, the KLA possessed structured leadership, weaponry, and experienced personnel that could have posed a threat to security and public order if excluded. Marginalizing these actors could have increased the risk of renewed nationalist insurgency or civil conflict (Nilsson, 2005). Although certain actors within the international community, particularly within the European Union, attempted at times to undermine or marginalize the KLA leadership, such approaches prompted immediate public backlash and resulted in a loss of credibility (Dalveit, 2007) In contrast, the inclusion of former KLA members in institutions such as the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), the Kosovo Police, and public administration ensured continued engagement and reduced potential security risks. In retrospect, Kosovo could have easily descended into renewed ethnic unrest; however, by making former KLA combatants stakeholders in democratic state-building, the international community successfully mitigated this risk (Dalveit, 2007).

Granting the KLA a central role in peacebuilding and democratic development also influenced the handling of war crimes allegations. Although the number of alleged KLA-related cases was relatively limited due to the defensive nature of the organization's activities, all KLA members indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia voluntarily submitted themselves to judicial proceedings. In 2005, Kosovo's then-serving Prime Minister, Ramush Haradinaj, resigned from office and traveled to The Hague to face trial. Following two trials and eight years of legal proceedings, he was acquitted. Similar conduct was observed among other former KLA leaders indicted by international or domestic courts. Notably, voluntary cooperation with the Tribunal was largely unique to former KLA members, while accused individuals from other ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia often attempted to evade justice.

Although this willingness to cooperate was later subject to political misuse, it does not diminish the demonstrated readiness of former KLA combatants to face judicial accountability. (Pineles, 2025) Under International Community pressure, in 2015, Kosovo established the Kosovo Specialist Chambers (KSC) as a special court established in response to the 2011 report by the Council of Europe prepared by Swiss senator Dick Marty. (Kosovo Specialist Chambers, 2026) Once more, KLA leadership willingly agreed to go through judicial scrutiny for the fourth time after being investigated by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, UNMIK, Kosovo Prosecution, and EULEX. Since then, KSC arrested and indicted four key KLA leaders, and the trial is still going on six years after the indictment. President Thaçi was on his way to White House for an official meeting, but the KSC prosecution issued a public statement that President Thaçi will be indicted. The extensive length of the trial and the political interference of the prosecution in the agenda of President Thaçi stripped the KSC of legitimacy. The Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales (BHRC) published a preliminary review of the KSC and found serious breaches of fair trial, accountability, access to justice, and detention conditions. (BHRC, 2026)

Kosovo declared independence in 2008 and has since established itself as a democratic parliamentary republic. The country successfully transitioned from a communist political system to democratic governance and from a socialist economy to a capitalist, free-market system, including reforms in defense procurement and security governance (Bekaj, 2010). Despite ongoing ethnic tensions between Albanians and Serbs, Kosovo's commitment to democratic development remains its greatest strength. The Albanian majority approved a constitution that guarantees minority self-governance at the local level and provides reserved seats for minorities in parliament and government. Human rights and individual freedoms are

highly valued and protected by state institutions (Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, 2008). The international community's decision to fully integrate the KLA into the peacebuilding process, and the legitimacy it contributed, were therefore critical to Kosovo's overall success.

CONCLUSION

The project of building Kosovo as a democratic and multiethnic society after the 1999 war may appear straightforward in theory; however, the realities on the ground were exceptionally complex. The 1998-1999 conflict left Kosovo heavily devastated, with much of its infrastructure destroyed and essential public services severely disrupted. The basic necessities such as electricity, water supply, healthcare, transportation, housing, and education were either damaged or non-functional. Approximately 13,000 people lost their lives, thousands more were injured, and nearly one million displaced persons and refugees returned to communities that had been largely destroyed. Despite these enormous challenges, Kosovo, with the support of the international community, succeeded in laying the foundations of a democratic and multiethnic society. A crucial factor in this achievement was the involvement of former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) combatants in the peacebuilding and state-building process. Although the immediate priority of the international community was the demobilization of the KLA, former KLA members quickly emerged as indispensable actors in post-war reconstruction and institution-building. Their participation provided local legitimacy to newly established institutions and contributed to political stability during a critical period of transition (Cservolgyi, 2022).

The willingness of former KLA combatants to engage in the reconstruction of Kosovo generated positive outcomes in several areas. Many of the values and aspirations associated with the liberation struggle were incorporated into the development of new state institutions, particularly within the security sector. Their involvement facilitated the establishment of democratic and multiethnic institutions by fostering public trust and encouraging local ownership of reforms. Moreover, the progress achieved in institution-building enhanced the effectiveness and credibility of international peacebuilding efforts. The participation of former KLA members also contributed to the broader process of reconciliation and social stabilization. Today, Kosovo has developed into a democratic state founded on principles such as political pluralism, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and democratic civilian control of the security sector. While this achievement resulted from the combined efforts of domestic and international actors, former KLA combatants played a critical role in the development, legitimacy, and consolidation of Kosovo's political and security institutions.

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