

Personal Reflection: Growing Up in Kosovo After the War

When I was a child, I often found it hard to understand why people around me would become frightened so quickly, especially during simple events like a power outage or the sound of a loud crack. To me, these moments seemed brief and insignificant, yet the fear they caused was very real. I was born in 2003, several years after the Kosovo War ended, but the country was still struggling with many serious crises. For a very young child, these were complex and confusing circumstances that I couldn't fully grasp.

What I clearly remember are the sad and worried faces of my family members as they watched the news on television. The images they saw were full of violence, chaos, and terror that had become part of everyday life in Kosovo. Near our home lived a Serbian family in an old house made of large brown stones. At that time, I was only one year old, so my memories from that period are vague and limited but I know that they had felt the tensions and had already been displaced from Kosovo.

In 2004, major unrest erupted across Kosovo, and although I was very young, I have heard many accounts of how difficult that time was. On March 17 and 18 of that year, violence broke out suddenly, leaving hundreds injured and at least 19 people dead. The unrest was sparked by reports claiming that three Kosovo Albanian boys had drowned in the Ibar River after being chased by a group of Kosovo Serbs. This tragic event stirred fear and anger among the population.

From what I recall and from stories shared by others, the situation escalated in Podujevo where citizens took to the streets carrying Molotov cocktails, protesting violently and targeting the Serbian Orthodox Church of St. Elijah. This moment marked a turning point for many Serbian families, as many fled and never returned to Podujevo. Today, to my knowledge, there are no longer any Serbian residents living in that area.

In the years that followed, there were efforts at negotiation and moments of calm, but smaller conflicts and tensions continued to surface. One significant escalation occurred in 2011, when several police officers were killed in northern Kosovo, including Officer Enver Zymberi. By then, I was older and more aware of the political and social environment. I saw videos, photographs, and heard firsthand accounts of the anger and bitterness that many Kosovars felt toward Serbia. For those who had lived and worked under the former Yugoslav state, the turn of events felt like a deep betrayal, as aggression was directed against Kosovo Albanians.

Growing up during this time, I developed both physically and mentally amid constant uncertainty and fear. There was always the possibility that conflict could erupt again, threatening the lives of people I loved—and possibly my own. The memories of war were never far away; every week on television, I saw scenes of battle or commemorations for fallen UÇK soldiers. My generation is closely tied to the war's legacy, as we were among the first born after it. Many of my peers aspired to become soldiers or police officers, inspired by their families' stories of struggle, sacrifice, and the pursuit of justice.

Despite moments of hope that things were improving, new challenges continually arose. One of the most intense moments I remember was the attack in Banjskë on September 23–24, 2023, when police officer Afrim Bunjaku was killed. This period was filled with tension and fear, especially as it was a few months apart with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Fortunately, with the support of international partners and the rule of law, Kosovo was able to overcome this crisis as well.

Living and growing up in post-war Kosovo has been extremely difficult. Fear, tension, and unrest were constant companions. I believe that both those who lived through the war and those born afterward carry deep emotional wounds caused by the ongoing struggles of the post-war era.

As a historian and a citizen of Kosovo, I feel truly fortunate that we have reached a point where we can begin to write our history objectively. It is my hope that future generations will be able to document our story in times of peace, helping to build a more stable and just society.

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