Asociacioni i Gazetarëve të Kosovës
Association of Journalists of Kosovo

ProPeace

Booklet



Dealing With the Past and Conflict Sensitive Reporting

Training of Trainers (ToT)

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Welcome!

A Message from the Organisers

We are delighted to welcome you to this publication, which features reflections and articles from journalists who participated in the Training of Trainers on Dealing with the Past and Conflict-Sensitive Reporting. This initiative, jointly organised by Pro Peace – Kosovo Program and the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AJK), represents a meaningful step towards responsible, ethical journalism in our country.

About This Publication

A collaborative effort bringing together journalists, trainers, and peacebuilding experts.





Our Shared Mission

Fostering dialogue, memory, and reconciliation through conflict-sensitive storytelling.

About the Academy

A Three-Day Training of Trainers Programme

The ToT academy brought together experienced journalists for an intensive three-day programme focused on dealing with the past and conflict-sensitive reporting. Through interactive modules, peer exchange, and practical media content creation, participants developed the skills and ethical grounding to train others in responsible journalism.

Objectives

Equip trainers with tools for conflict-sensitive, trauma-informed, and ethically grounded journalism practice.

Participant Profile

Journalists and editors, committed to responsible reporting and peacebuilding narratives.

Thematic Focus

Dealing with the past, memory, reconciliation, gender sensitivity, and follow-up media content production.

Timeline of the Training Academy

Academy Programme Overview

A three-day intensive Training of Trainers programme on Dealing with the Past and Conflict-Sensitive Reporting, combining theoretical frameworks with practical media production.

Day 1 Introduction & Journalism Memory

Foundational modules on journalism's role in historical memory, dealing with the past, and framing conflict narratives responsibly.

Day 2 Ethics & Sensitivity

Trainings on ethics, gender sensitivity, trauma-informed reporting, and protecting the dignity of survivors and sources.

Day 3 Media Production

Through hands-on photography production exercises, participants applied conflict-sensitive reporting principles, exploring how visual storytelling can contribute to ethical, balanced, and responsible narratives about the past.

Trainers and Key Insights



Prof. Dr. Dinko Gruhonjić



Trainer Profile

Prof. Dr. Dinko Gruhonjić is a distinguished journalist, academic, and media expert with extensive experience in conflict-sensitive reporting and transitional justice. He serves as a leading voice on the role of journalism in post-conflict societies, advocating for ethical, fact-based narratives that contribute to reconciliation and historical accountability.

Key highlights

Prof. Dr. Gruhonjić emphasized that journalism dealing with the past requires not only factual accuracy but also deep ethical responsibility, warning against the misuse of historical narratives for political or ideological purposes. He encouraged journalists to approach sensitive historical topics with integrity, critical thinking, and a commitment to public interest.

Adriatik Kelmendi



Key highlights

Adriatik Kelmendi discussed the challenges of journalism in polarized contexts, stressing that balanced and professional reporting is essential for fostering public dialogue and avoiding the deepening of social divisions. He highlighted the importance of maintaining editorial independence and resisting pressures that may compromise journalistic standards, particularly when reporting on sensitive societal issues.

Trainer Profile

Adriatik Kelmendi is a journalist, writer, television host, media executive, lecturer, and social activist. He was also among the first journalists to report on massacres in Kosovo during the war, contributing to early documentation and international awareness of wartime atrocities. Throughout his career, he has been engaged in political journalism, public debate, and media development, with a focus on professional standards and the role of journalism in democratic and post-conflict societies.

Serbeze Haxhiaj



Trainer Profile

Serbeze Haxhiaj is an award-winning investigative journalist and gender rights advocate with extensive experience in conflict reporting across the Western Balkans. She has reported on post-war societies, transitional justice, and survivor testimonies, bringing a trauma-informed and gender-sensitive lens to her journalism practice and training work.

Key highlights

Serbeze Haxhiaj highlighted the importance of a gender-sensitive and trauma-informed approach, noting that the way survivors' experiences are reported can directly affect their dignity, safety, and healing process. She encouraged journalists to prioritize empathy, informed consent, and ethical storytelling practices when working with vulnerable individuals and communities.

Ridvan Slivova



Trainer Profile

Ridvan Slivova is a professional photographer with extensive experience documenting conflict, memory, and social transformations across the Western Balkans. His work focuses on the ethical responsibilities of photojournalism in post-conflict societies, and he has contributed to numerous local and international exhibitions on visual storytelling and conflict-sensitive documentation.

Key highlights

Ridvan Slivova underlined the power of photography in shaping collective memory, emphasizing that photography is not only documentation but also interpretation, and therefore requires a high level of ethical sensitivity when covering conflict-related topics. Through practical sessions, he guided participants in applying conflict-sensitive reporting principles to visual storytelling, exploring how images can inform the public while preserving dignity and avoiding harmful representations.

Participants' Media Productions



*These media productions are products of the Academy for Reporting on Dealing with the Past and Conflict-Sensitive Journalism, implemented by Pro Peace – Program in Kosovo and the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AJK). The views expressed in these productions are the sole responsibility of the journalist and do not necessarily reflect the views of Pro Peace or AJK.

The names and articles in this publication are presented in alphabetical order for editorial clarity and do not reflect any ranking or hierarchy among contributors.

****Original articles are written in Albanian.***

The War That Continues Within Them: The Trauma of Journalists Who Reported from War Zones in Kosovo



Adelina Ahmeti

"I told myself: 'I have postponed confronting the truth for far too long, including what I witnessed 26 years ago.' I decided to visit the Jashari family compound. I arrived there, but I couldn't find the strength to get out of the car. I simply couldn't. Then I broke down and cried uncontrollably because all the scenes came back to me."

This is how Ilire Zajmi recalls her attempt to confront the trauma of reporting during the war. Tears continue to roll down her cheeks as she pauses for a few seconds to regain her composure before continuing her story.

During the war in Kosovo, journalists were among the first witnesses to violence, displacement, and the human consequences of the conflict. While documenting events on the ground and informing the public, many were repeatedly exposed to traumatic situations that left lasting effects long after the war ended.

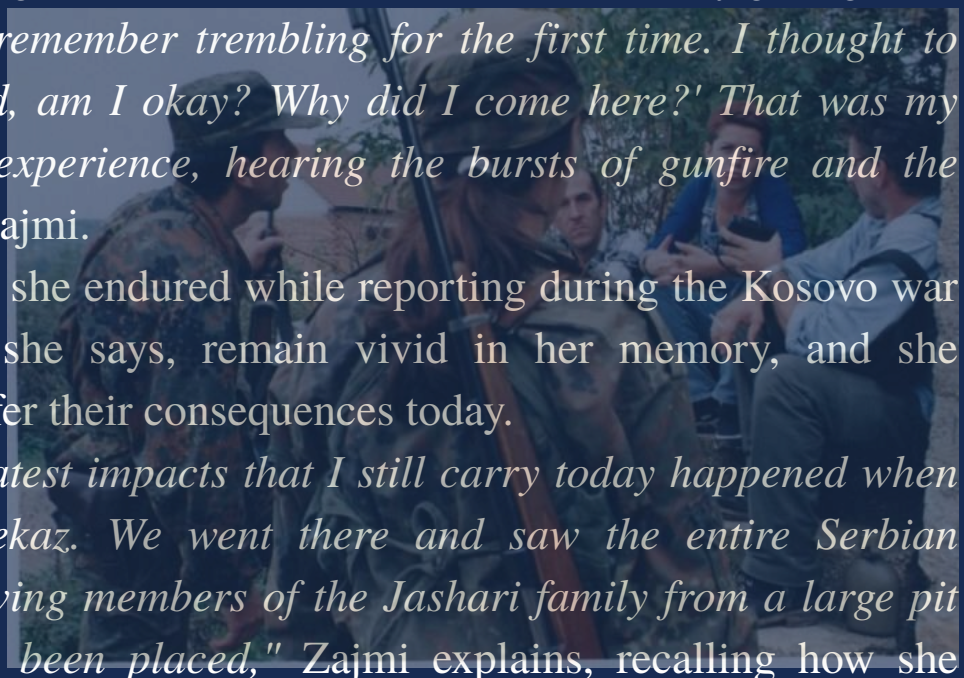
Yet, the impact of these experiences on journalists' mental health has remained a largely overlooked topic, often silenced by social stigma and the lack of public discussion about psychological trauma.

In 1999, Ilire Zajmi was 28 years old and worked as a journalist for both local and international media outlets.

A young journalist, unprepared for what awaited her in the field, Zajmi, together with other reporters, traveled across different regions of Kosovo to document and report on massacres, killings, forced expulsions, and the burning of villages by Serbian security forces.

She first entered the field during the fighting in the Drenica region in 1998.

The War That Continues Within Them: The Trauma of Journalists Who Reported from War Zones in Kosovo



"I*n several villages in Drenica, we had heard that fighting was taking place. I remember trembling for the first time. I thought to myself: 'Oh God, am I okay? Why did I come here?' That was my first traumatic experience, hearing the bursts of gunfire and the fighting,"* says Zajmi.

The experiences she endured while reporting during the Kosovo war in 1998–1999, she says, remain vivid in her memory, and she continues to suffer their consequences today.

"One of the greatest impacts that I still carry today happened when we went to Prekaz. We went there and saw the entire Serbian apparatus removing members of the Jashari family from a large pit where they had been placed," Zajmi explains, recalling how she observed the bodies of the Jashari family from a distance of approximately 100 meters.

As she recounts, it took her days to process and cope with what she had witnessed.

"Every time I tried to sleep, those scenes would replay continuously in my mind," recalls Zajmi. At the time, she was at the scene together with a colleague from Kosovarja magazine and an Italian journalist from La Repubblica.

Beyond what she witnessed in Prekaz, Zajmi also remembers the massacre in Rogova e Hasit.

"The police entered at six in the morning, took people from their bedrooms, killed and massacred them, then dressed them in KLA uniforms and placed weapons beside them. The entire scene had been staged," she says.

Zajmi emphasizes that the events she witnessed 27 years ago remain fresh in her memory and continue to resurface from time to time.

She says that she has discussed these memories, traumas, and emotions with colleagues over the years, but she has never received professional psychological treatment.

The War That Continues Within Them: The Trauma of Journalists Who Reported from War Zones in Kosovo

At the time, Musa Kurhasku, a journalist reporting for Albanian Radio Television (RTSH), covered massacres and killings in the Dukagjini region during the war. He also found himself reporting on tragedies involving members of his own family.

Kurhasku did not personally report on the death of his brother, who was killed by Serbian forces.

"I assigned one of my colleagues, my friend, to cover it. It wasn't because I couldn't handle it; it simply seemed unbelievable to me. I couldn't even trust myself because we had been extremely close," Kurhasku recounts.

He also recalls the years leading up to NATO's bombing campaign, saying that many of the situations he witnessed remain with him to this day.

"Until the day the war ended, and even afterward, we continued reporting because many things happened after the war as well. I was present at the Loqë massacre. To tell the truth, for two or three months I could not get rid of the smell of the dead bodies," he says.

Although 27 years have passed since the end of the war in Kosovo, Kurhasku says those experiences still follow him.

"You relive those experiences when you meet the families of the victims. Every time I attend massacre commemorations, I experience it all over again. I remember what we saw and reported during the war," he explains.

Ridvan Slivova is a photojournalist who documented the violence and repressive system of the Serbian regime in Kosovo through photography. He began taking photographs at a young age, initially focusing on artistic subjects.

In 1990, he took his first professional journalistic photographs when members of parliament declared Kosovo a Republic.

He recalls repeatedly witnessing painful scenes, but the first photograph he took of a victim remains among the most difficult experiences of his career.

The War That Continues Within Them: The Trauma of Journalists Who Reported from War Zones in Kosovo

"When the army arrived, and the news reached us, I immediately went out. That was the first photograph I took of a dead body. My photograph was published in several newspapers, including in Slovenia. When the newspaper was sent to me 80 days later, I realized that what I was doing was documenting history," Slivova explains.

After that, he reported from villages across the Drenica region, including Prekaz, Polac, Klinë, and Qirez.

"We often found ourselves in extremely dangerous situations where I didn't even know whether I would be able to go back out into the field the next day," he says.

One image that remains deeply etched in his memory is the column of displaced people from Gollak.

"It was the column of Gollak victims in Prishtina. Even today, I have revisited 90 percent of the places where I took photographs. The memories return immediately, but now it feels different. I only feel the scent of freedom. When I look at the camera I now carry openly, I remember that during the war we had to hide our cameras to avoid being discovered by Serbian police," he adds.

Slivova says that immediately after the war, he sought psychological help from a friend.

"I had collected around 200 photographs of massacres and persecution. Through long conversations, I tried to address my trauma together with him (a psychologist friend)," he says.

Gresa Miftari, a clinical psychologist, associates the experiences of journalists reporting from conflict and war zones with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and secondary trauma.

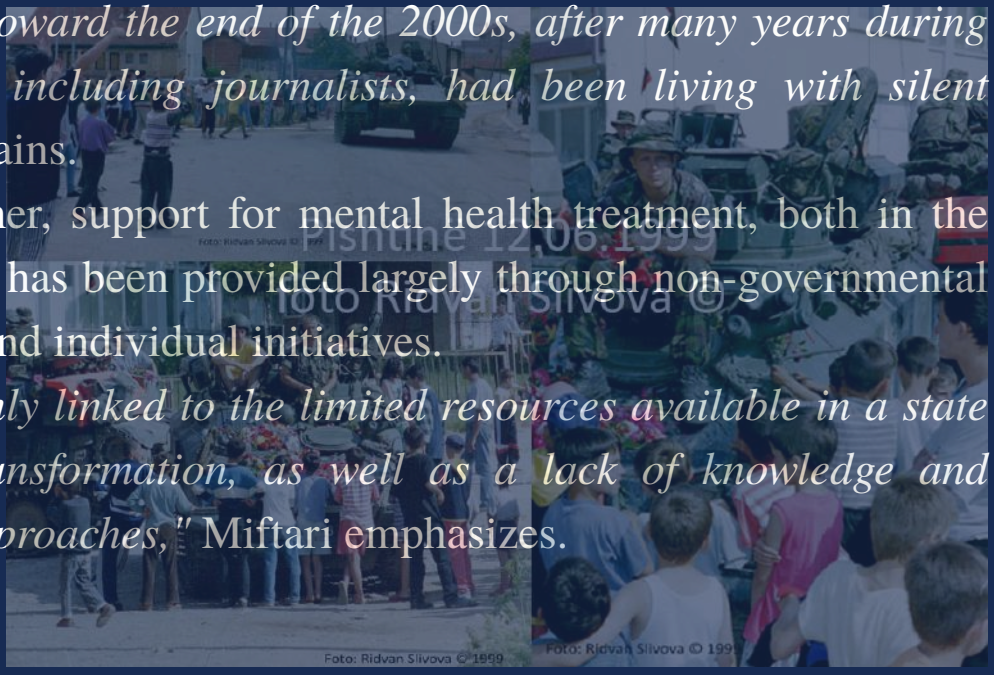
Miftari also explains why there was little focus on mental health treatment after the war, including for journalists.

The War That Continues Within Them: The Trauma of Journalists Who Reported from War Zones in Kosovo

"After the war, as a society, we focused more on economic and institutional reconstruction, while mental health was not a topic widely discussed in public. We also lacked well-established services for treatment and awareness. The first trauma therapy professionals only emerged toward the end of the 2000s, after many years during which people, including journalists, had been living with silent pain," she explains.

According to her, support for mental health treatment, both in the past and today, has been provided largely through non-governmental organizations and individual initiatives.

"This is certainly linked to the limited resources available in a state undergoing transformation, as well as a lack of knowledge and appropriate approaches," Miftari emphasizes.



Full link in Albanian: https://kallxo.com/lajm/lufta-qe-vazhdon-brenda-tyre-trauma-e-gazetareve-qe-raportuan-nga-zonat-e-luftes-ne-kosove/

“Sofa Full of Bullet Holes”: Kosovo Families Living in War Crime Scenes



Ardita Zeqiri

Stranded between traumatic memories and everyday life, many survivors of wartime massacres in Kosovo continued living inside the houses where their relatives were murdered.

In the living room of the Gërxhaliu house, in Studime village in Kosovo’s northern municipality of Vushtrri, the photographs of 13 family members who were murdered by Serbian forces on May 31, 1999, are carefully arranged across the family’s old sofa.

Seven of the victims were children.

“Here, I lived with Lisa,” Gërxhaliu told Prishtina Insight, referring to his daughter Elisa by her nickname. He was sitting in the room where the massacre took place.

Nexhmedin Gërxhaliu returned home from Germany in mid June 1999, several days after NATO troops entered Kosovo following a 78-day air bombing campaign.

A place that held countless childhood memories had turned into the site of a massacre.

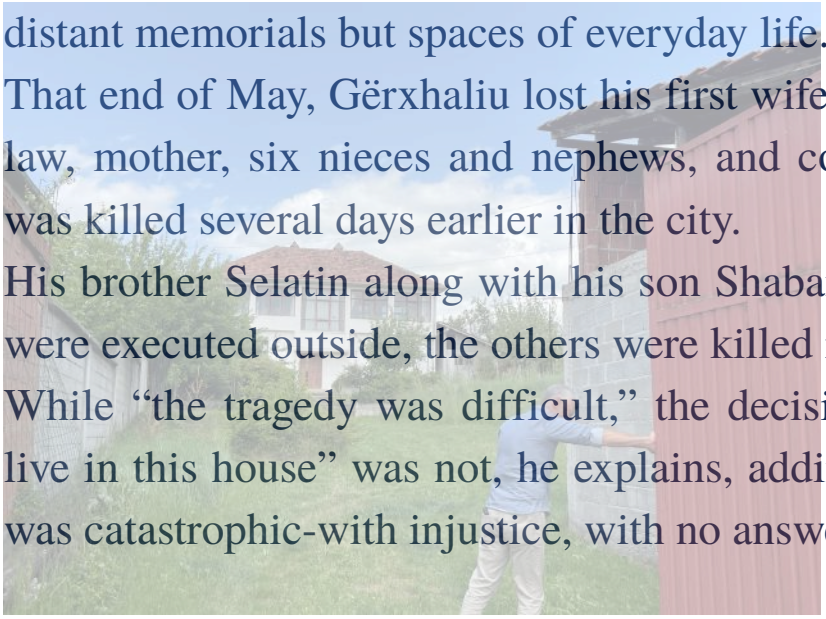
Gërxhaliu, now 64, and his daughter Elisa, now 20, would continue to live in the house where thirteen of their family members had been massacred for 19 years—until 2018.

The house has been empty since then and is set to become a museum. It is one of several sites in Kosovo linked to wartime massacres that institutions are attempting to preserve as memorials.

However, the Ministry of Culture told Prishtina Insight that the process has proven difficult. In some cases, survivors of massacres or family members of the victims continue to live at these sites, often because they have no other option.

“Sofa Full of Bullet Holes”: Kosovo Families Living in War Crime Scenes

For many survivors across Kosovo, wartime crime scenes are not distant memorials but spaces of everyday life.



That end of May, Gërxhaliu lost his first wife, son, brother, sister-in-law, mother, six nieces and nephews, and cousin. Another nephew was killed several days earlier in the city.

His brother Selatin along with his son Shaban, and cousin Xhemajl, were executed outside, the others were killed inside the house.

While “the tragedy was difficult,” the decision to “come back and live in this house” was not, he explains, adding that “life afterwards was catastrophic-with injustice, with no answers.”

The challenges of turning homes into memorials

Almost nothing has changed inside the Gërxhaliu house since that day in 1999.

Bullet holes are still visible on the walls. The furniture remains exactly where it was.

“Even the sofas are the same,” Gërxhaliu said. “We covered them because they are full of bullet holes.”

He now lives nearby but returns regularly to maintain the property. Living there, he said, was never frightening—it made him proud.

“While we lived here, we made peace with it somehow. Now that I come less often and stay further away, it feels heavier.”

For Elisa, too, the house never felt haunted. “For me and my father, it was never scary or traumatising to live here,” she said.

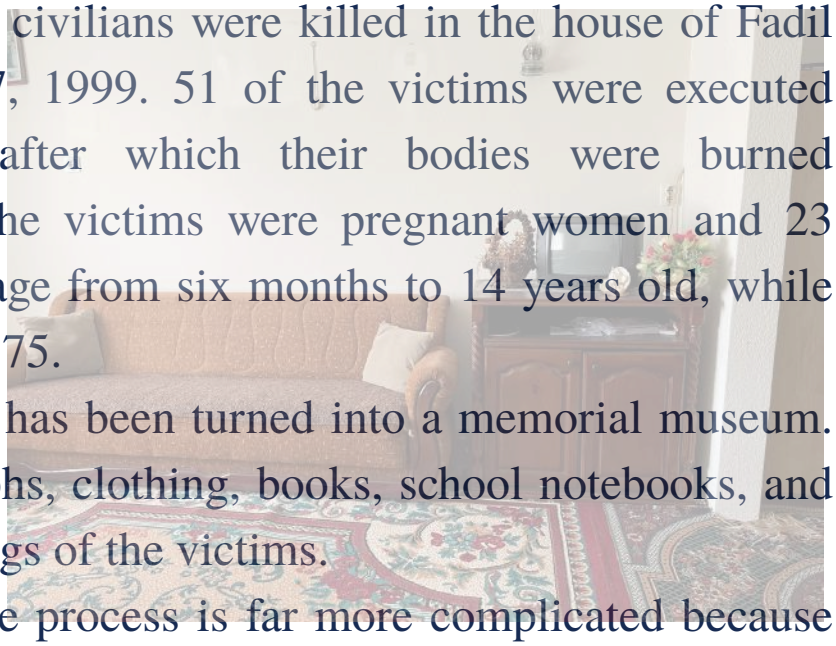
Yet, recalling growing up surrounded by absence while standing before the photographs of her half brother and relatives she never met, her voice broke while she recalled how she grew up seeing her father and aunts cry for the relatives they had lost. As the youngest member of the family still living in the house, she now feels the weight of carrying the family’s future on her shoulders.

“Sofa Full of Bullet Holes”: Kosovo Families Living in War Crime Scenes

“I am the last of this bloodline remaining in this house,” Elisa said, adding that “I’ve thought a hundred thousand times about how life would have been if they were alive.”

According to the Kosovo Ministry of Culture, conservation projects are carried out by heritage experts “with the aim of preserving historical authenticity and collective memory.”

The ministry told Prishtina Insight that the Agency for the Protection of Monuments has conserved or treated several houses associated with war crimes, including homes connected to the massacres in the villages of Likoshan, Poklek, and Recak.



In Poklek village, 53 civilians were killed in the house of Fadil Muqolli on April 17, 1999. 51 of the victims were executed inside the house, after which their bodies were burned repeatedly. Among the victims were pregnant women and 23 children, ranging in age from six months to 14 years old, while the oldest victim was 75.

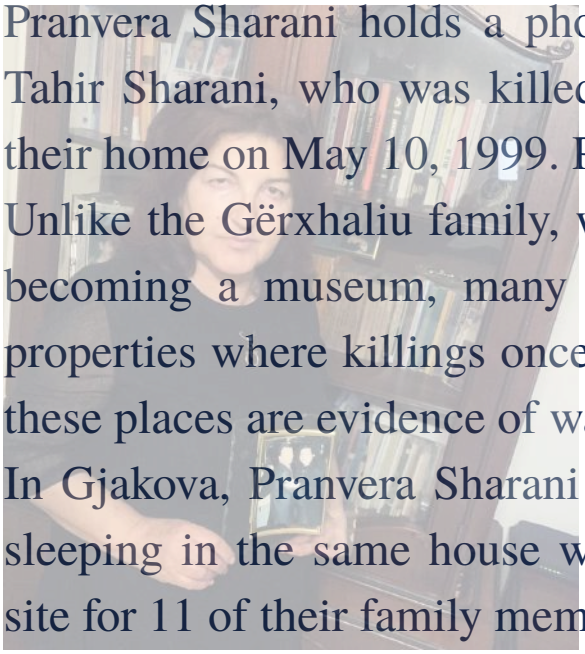
The house in Poklek has been turned into a memorial museum. It contains photographs, clothing, books, school notebooks, and the personal belongings of the victims.

Officials note that the process is far more complicated because there are houses that are still inhabited by survivors or relatives of victims.

“One of the main challenges of preserving and memorialising these houses remains the fact that some are still used as homes,” the ministry emphasised, adding that, “in certain cases, we have encountered disagreements from family members regarding how the buildings should be treated.”

“Sofa Full of Bullet Holes”: Kosovo Families Living in War Crime Scenes

“We live in the shadow of crimes”



Pranvera Sharani holds a photograph of her and her husband, Tahir Sharani, who was killed by Serbian forces in the yard of their home on May 10, 1999. Photo courtesy of Pranvera Sharani

Unlike the Gërxhaliu family, whose house now is on the way to becoming a museum, many families still continue to live in properties where killings once took place. Beyond being homes, these places are evidence of wartime crimes.

In Gjakova, Pranvera Sharani and her four children spent years sleeping in the same house whose courtyard was the execution site for 11 of their family members and neighbours in May 1999.

“I thought about leaving from the very first day,” she said, looking across the courtyard. “Do you see this yard? They were all lined up here. Sometimes when I get upset, I say: ‘We are walking on their blood.’ I still don’t know how I sleep here. We live in the shadow of crimes,” she told Prishtina Insight, recalling how she had seen her family members and other men from the neighbourhood lined up by Serbian forces.

“I saw them lined up,” she remembered. “The police dragged me out, asking where to find the money in the house. When I came out of the house again, I saw them against the wall. As I was leaving, I heard the gunshots.”

Three days later, she returned to the area with some of her neighbours. “We saw a municipal garbage truck carrying the bodies. A neighbour even recognised the clothes of her husband.”

On May 10, 1999 six members of the Sharani family were killed, including her husband Tahir, 43 at the time, brothers-in-law Skyfter, Mentor, and Isuf, and two nephews.

“Sofa Full of Bullet Holes”: Kosovo Families Living in War Crime Scenes

Five men from neighbouring families were also gathered and executed in their yard.

Pointing to a photograph of herself with her husband, Tahir, Sharani paused. “My husband… my life,” she said.

Pranvera’s sister-in-law, Luljeta, lives next door, sharing a yard. Luljeta lost her husband, Skyfter, 48 years old at the time, and their two sons, Valon, 22, and Visar, 20.

“When the army entered, I told my sons to hide,” Luljeta recalled in an interview for a BIRN documentary on missing persons aired on May 16.

“Valon told me: ‘Where can we hide, mother? The whole neighbourhood is surrounded.’ When we were forced outside, they stopped 11 men, while the women and children were ordered to leave,” she said.

At the time, her 15-year-old daughter had already fled with the other women and children.

Luljeta says the family spent years without knowing where the bodies had been taken, protesting repeatedly until they were eventually discovered in the Batajnica mass grave in Serbia alongside more than 700 other bodies of Kosovo Albanian men, women, and children that had been transported from different places in Kosovo.

“On December 23, 2003, they began returning the bodies in coffins,” she said.

“My brother-in-law Tahir’s body was returned with the first group. Four months later, on April 18, 2004, they returned the second group, which included Skyfter, Mentor, and Isuf.” Around three years later, on January 15, 2007, “which was also Visar’s birthday, they returned my sons.”

Pranvera had returned with her four children, aged between 7 and 14 years old, and eventually did some renovations on their house as it had been burnt. In 2002, she moved with her children to Prishtina where she worked as a history teacher at a primary school. “School and my students were my salvation,” she said.

“Sofa Full of Bullet Holes”: Kosovo Families Living in War Crime Scenes

Two years ago, after she retired, she returned again to Gjakova and settled in the same house. “It is painful to live in a place where you once had a good life, and then in five minutes everything changed.”

Today, she regrets renovating the house: “I think we should never have renovated it. It should have remained exactly as it was, as evidence of war.”

Trauma remains inside the walls

For many survivors, the violence tied to their homes went beyond the murders of their loved ones, yet many never received the mental health support they needed.

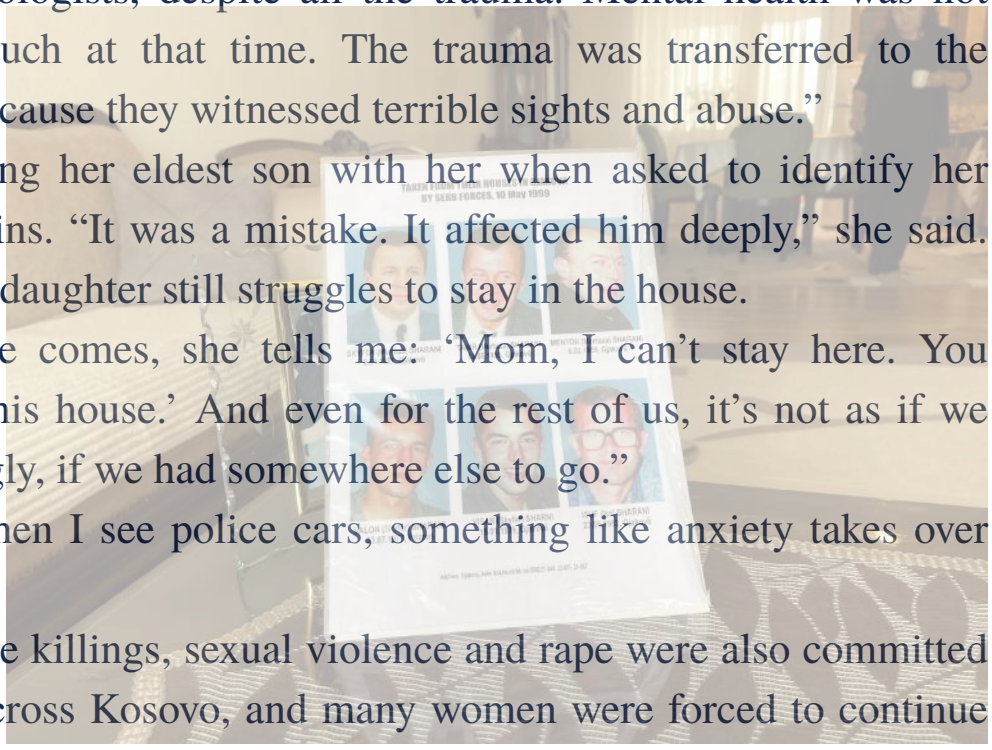
Sharani told Prishtina Insight that as war crimes’ survivors, “we never even had psychologists, despite all the trauma. Mental health was not talked about much at that time. The trauma was transferred to the children, too, because they witnessed terrible sights and abuse.”

She recalls taking her eldest son with her when asked to identify her husband’s remains. “It was a mistake. It affected him deeply,” she said.

Meanwhile, her daughter still struggles to stay in the house.

“Every time she comes, she tells me: ‘Mom, I can’t stay here. You cannot live in this house.’ And even for the rest of us, it’s not as if we stay here willingly, if we had somewhere else to go.”

“Even today, when I see police cars, something like anxiety takes over me.”

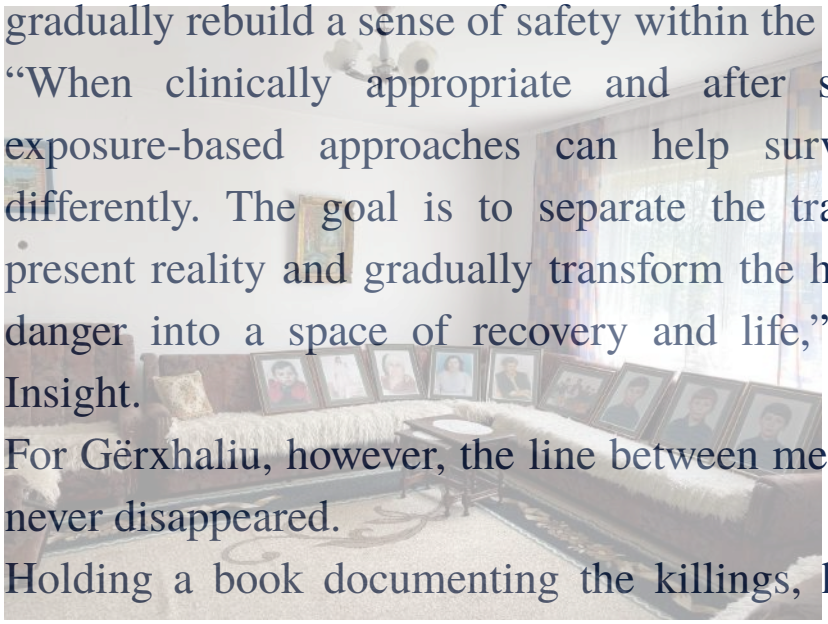


In addition to the killings, sexual violence and rape were also committed inside houses across Kosovo, and many women were forced to continue living within those same walls.

The Prishtina based NGO Kosovo Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims, KRCT, told Prishtina Insight that many survivors of wartime sexual violence still live in the homes where the sexual abuse occurred, often because economic hardship leaves them with no alternative.

“Sofa Full of Bullet Holes”: Kosovo Families Living in War Crime Scenes

“In these situations, the home often remains both a place of daily life and a constant reminder of trauma. This can trigger painful emotions, anxiety and feelings of insecurity,” the organisation explained, adding that with professional support, survivors can gradually rebuild a sense of safety within the same space.



“When clinically appropriate and after sufficient stabilisation, exposure-based approaches can help survivors see the house differently. The goal is to separate the traumatic past from the present reality and gradually transform the home from a symbol of danger into a space of recovery and life,” KRCT told Prishtina Insight.

For Gërxhaliu, however, the line between memory and daily life has never disappeared.

Holding a book documenting the killings, he looked again at the photographs arranged on the beds.

“The hardest part,” he said, “is when I come here and look at these photos.”

“When I open those doors down there,” he added, “it feels like I can still see the children exactly as I left them.”

Full link in Albanian: https://kallxo.com/gjate/reportazh/divan-plot-vrima-plumbash-kur-shtepia-eshte-edhe-skene-e-krimit-te-luftes/

Full link in English: https://prishtinainsight.com/sofa-full-of-bullet-holes-kosovo-families-living-in-war-crime-scenes-mag/

Atdhe Hetemi: We Will Finalize the Official Database of War Victims and the Missing Persons Within the Year



Besian Beha

The database containing accurate statistics on victims of the last war in Kosovo, along with the missing persons, is expected to be finalized within this year.

This was stated by the Director of the Institute for War Crimes, Atdhe Hetemi.

He said that following the completion of the database on victims and missing persons, work is also underway on compiling a separate database documenting all massacres in Kosovo. So far, 27 massacres have been identified, and the work is ongoing.

“For us, it is very important to have a database that shows the number of people who died, whether as victims or those who lost their lives in other circumstances. I believe this database will be launched this year. Another very important database related to victims is the database of massacres. We are working on it,” the Institute’s director stated.

Hetemi also noted that the Institute for War Crimes has so far collected more than 400 meters of physical archival material, over 18,000 hours of video recordings documenting war crimes, and more than 1 million photographs.

“The Institute for War Crimes has now become a trusted address for people who possess evidence,” Hetemi said during the interview.

Atdhe Hetemi: We Will Finalize the Official Database of War Victims and the Missing Persons Within the Year

Interview

At the beginning, could you describe the re-establishment of the Institute for War Crimes, considering that it previously existed but was later dissolved and functioned as a department within the Ministry of Justice?

Atdhe Hetemi: The Institute in its current form is being established for the first time. There were institutional initiatives in the past to deal with documenting war crimes, one of which was the Institute created within the Ministry of Justice, established by a ministerial decision. It functioned for about seven and a half years and was later dissolved by another ministerial decision. This means it did not have a proper legal framework and was therefore closed. The Institute for War Crimes committed during the war in Kosovo was established by law in November 2023, where I was appointed Director with a mandate to build the Institute based on the law approved by the Assembly.

What is the difference between how the Institute previously functioned and how it functions today?

Atdhe Hetemi: Today the Institute has financial stability, as it is established by law and has a dedicated budget line. It also has a proper legal framework, including its own law, internal regulations for functioning, and job systematization approved by the Prime Minister, since the Institute operates as an independent agency under the Office of the Prime Minister. During this period, we have also used a wide range of regulations, strengthening our methodological and ethical framework. In parallel, we have developed the physical infrastructure of the Institute, including our office in Prishtina, located in the Kosovo Archives Agency building. Here we also have the Institute's archival storage.

Atdhe Hetemi: We Will Finalize the Official Database of War Victims and the Missing Persons Within the Year

In addition, we have six regional offices across Kosovo. Our physical infrastructure has continually evolved over the past 2.5 years of our existence. We also have human resources—around 40 employees—although according to the systematization regulation, the Institute is planned to have 74 staff members. This year we had 46 approved positions through the budget, and we hope to increase this number.

Director, considering that the Institute was formed nearly 24 years after the war, how difficult was it to start from zero, given the challenges of documenting war crimes?

Atdhe Hetemi: It was not an easy process, and unfortunately, it still is not. However, the fact that there were previous attempts to document war crimes after the war, even if fragmented, helped us. There had been institutional initiatives that were later shut down, as well as efforts by civil society organizations. The media also played a very important role by reporting and collecting materials available at the time.

The first challenge was rebuilding trust with families of victims and survivors in state institutions. When we approached people to request testimonies or materials and introduced ourselves as a state institution, their reaction was often: the state has not managed to do this properly so far, why should we trust this Institute?

The second challenge was initiating cooperation with all actors who had contributed to documenting war crimes and making it clear that the Institute's role is to serve as a central repository where all materials are collected, and later as a reference point for researchers, journalists, academics, filmmakers, and others.

Atdhe Hetemi: We Will Finalize the Official Database of War Victims and the Missing Persons Within the Year

Despite these challenges, the Institute has established itself as an institution trusted by survivors, victims' families, civil society, institutions, and the media.

Progress has been modest, not solely due to the Institute's staff. However, their dedication has been significant, but also due to strong support from central institutions, the Government of Kosovo, and municipalities. The Institute has collected materials from 33 municipalities, as well as from survivors, families, media, NGOs, collectors, and individuals.

For someone unfamiliar with this field, what are the main objectives of the Institute—what do you actually do?

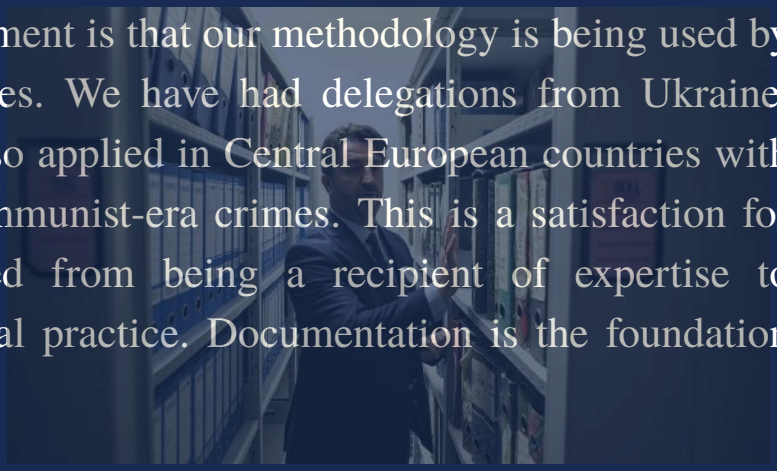
Atdhe Hetemi: First, it is important to emphasize that the Institute for War Crimes is a documentation and research institution, not an investigative one. Judicial institutions investigate war crimes.

The Institute's mission is, first, to document all crimes committed during the war by the Yugoslav regime in Kosovo, including crimes against humanity, economic crimes, psycho-social crimes, environmental damage, and crimes against cultural and spiritual heritage.

Second, it is equally important to document the resistance of Kosovar society through the Kosovo Liberation Army and civilian resistance during the 1990s against a brutal regime.

Third, it is important to document humanitarian assistance and solidarity shown by international actors and neighboring countries during the 1990s, including support in preventing further escalation of genocide and assistance provided to refugees in neighboring countries such as North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania. This contributes to historical truth and regional relations.

Atdhe Hetemi: We Will Finalize the Official Database of War Victims and the Missing Persons Within the Year



Another important achievement is that our methodology is being used by other post-conflict countries. We have had delegations from Ukraine, and our methodology is also applied in Central European countries with institutes documenting communist-era crimes. This is a satisfaction for us, as Kosovo has moved from being a recipient of expertise to contributing to international practice. Documentation is the foundation of sustainable peace.

How do you collect materials on war crimes? Do people approach you, or do you reach out to them?

Atdhe Hetemi: In the beginning, this was one of the biggest challenges—we mostly reached out to ourselves. Our methodology includes defined steps: identifying sources, approaching them, contacting them, informing them about the Institute's work, and creating archival funds in the name of each source to show respect for those who collected materials when institutions did not exist.

So far, we have 1,037 or 1,038 sources, including individuals, institutions, media outlets, and organizations. For each material, we create an archival fund in the name of the source.

In the beginning, I personally went into the field. Even today, I still do, although staff members now have more regular contact. There were cases where I was turned away from homes and told that people did not trust such initiatives. We always respected that reaction.

Today, however, trust has significantly increased. People now come to us voluntarily to submit materials, knowing that the Institute has the legal obligation and infrastructure to preserve them properly. Our archive meets international standards for protection against fire, water, and insects.

Atdhe Hetemi: We Will Finalize the Official Database of War Victims and the Missing Persons Within the Year

How much material does the Institute currently hold—videos, photos, documents?

Atdhe Hetemi: During the seven and a half years of the previous institution under the Ministry of Justice, only 12 meters of archival film material were collected. We inherited that.

In the last two years, the current Institute has collected over 405 meters of physical archival material. This comes from more than 1,037 sources across 15 countries.

In digital form, the previous institution had none. We now have over 21 terabytes of digital material, which corresponds to more than 18,000 hours of video footage documenting war crimes, and likely more than 1 million photographs.

These materials include evidence of massacres, destruction of infrastructure, forced expulsions, and more.

Do people still hesitate to provide materials?

Atdhe Hetemi: To be honest, I understand them. Although it may sound harsh, we still need to work harder to convince people that this is the right institution. Their skepticism is understandable.

Some expect compensation, which we cannot provide. Others believe keeping the material makes them more “special,” or they want to publish books using it. We have included a clause allowing donors to specify restrictions: materials can be given solely for preservation, and access can be restricted without prior consent.

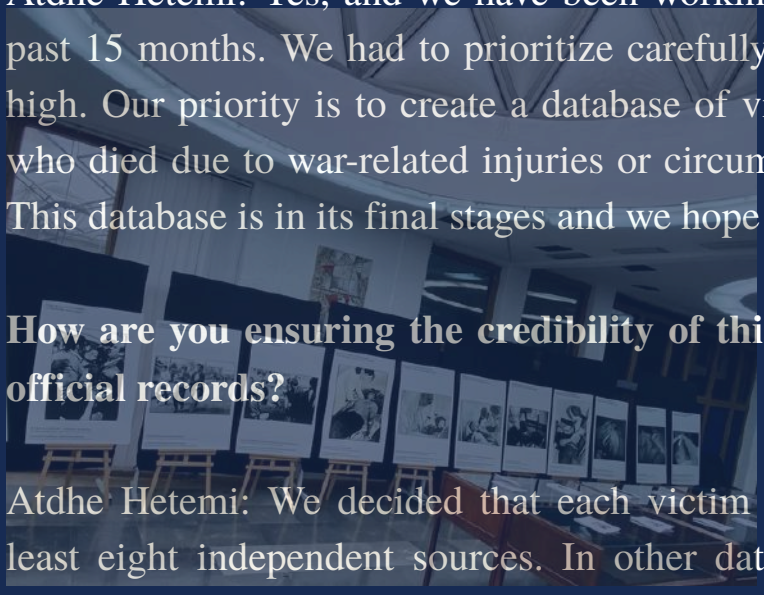
We also ensure that when researchers request access, they are put in contact with the original source for permission. This is part of how we build trust and human relationships.

Documenting war crimes is not only an administrative or academic process—it is deeply human.

Atdhe Hetemi: We Will Finalize the Official Database of War Victims and the Missing Persons Within the Year

Another issue: official statistics on the dead, martyrs, and missing persons. Is this also within the Institute's mandate?

Atdhe Hetemi: Yes, and we have been working intensively on it for the past 15 months. We had to prioritize carefully, as expectations are very high. Our priority is to create a database of victims: those killed, those who died due to war-related injuries or circumstances, and the missing. This database is in its final stages and we hope to launch it this year.



How are you ensuring the credibility of this data, given the lack of official records?

Atdhe Hetemi: We decided that each victim must be confirmed by at least eight independent sources. In other databases, three sources are usually enough, but we chose eight to ensure credibility. Sources include databases such as the Humanitarian Law Center, books by academics, databases by other organizations, civil registry data, medical forensic institute data, death certificates, as well as video, audio, photographs, and family confirmations. We aim to be as accurate and cautious as possible.

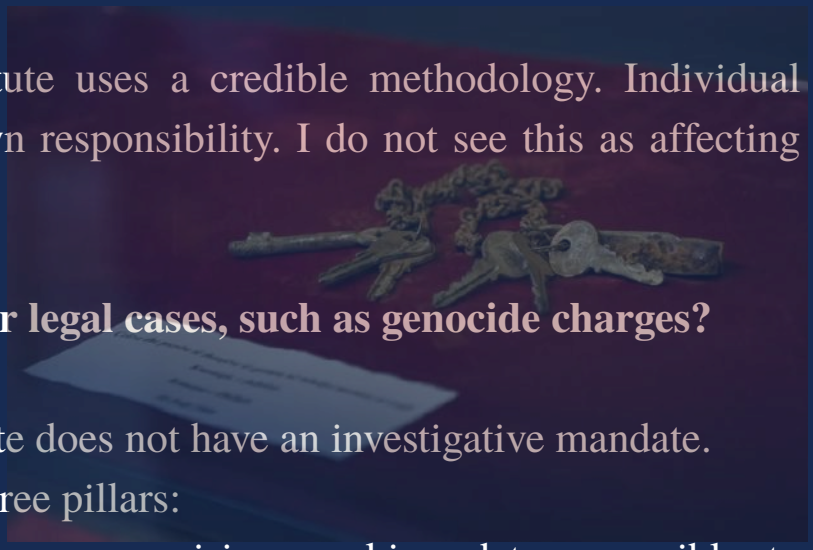
Will the database include name, surname, municipality, and cause of death, as well as classifications such as martyr or victim?

Atdhe Hetemi: At this stage, we have three categories: those killed, those who died from war-related injuries or circumstances, and the missing. Later, further classification will be made, such as martyr or hero.
The priority is to establish an accurate count of victims. For example, even deaths caused indirectly by war conditions, such as lack of medical care during childbirth, are considered war-related victims.

Atdhe Hetemi: We Will Finalize the Official Database of War Victims and the Missing Persons Within the Year

We are also working on a database of massacres, currently including 27 massacres, and later on mass graves.

Regarding public reactions to exhibitions and war statistics, does the lack of a unified database contribute to misunderstandings?



Atdhe Hetemi: The Institute uses a credible methodology. Individual initiatives remain their own responsibility. I do not see this as affecting the Institute's credibility.

Can such data be used for legal cases, such as genocide charges?

Atdhe Hetemi: The Institute does not have an investigative mandate. However, we operate on three pillars:
First, educational and awareness-raising, making data accessible to increase societal understanding of war crimes and resistance.
Second, cultural cooperation, working with artists, filmmakers, and institutions to use our materials in creative works.
Third, cooperation with justice institutions, providing requested materials for investigations or legal processes.
If a genocide case is ever pursued, we are obliged to share all relevant materials with competent authorities.

Full link in Albanian: https://telegrafi.com/atdhe-hetemi-brenda-vitit-e-finalizojme-databazen-zyrtare-per-viktimat-e-luftes-dhe-te-pagjeturit/

“I Have Something in My Stomach Too” – Seven Years of Life, Twenty-Eight Years of Memory



Besnik Gashi

In the courtyard of the Ahmeti family home in the village of Rezallë, in the Municipality of Skenderaj, the shell craters remain visible to this day. Bahri Ahmeti says they were intentionally left untouched as evidence of what happened there. On September 11, 1998, several members of the family were wounded, and seven-year-old Leutrim Ahmeti was killed.

On the day Leutrim was killed, the family was preparing to leave their home. The offensive had already begun, and grenades were falling from house to house. Family members had been instructed by the head of the household, Malush Ahmeti, that in the event of an offensive they should immediately leave their homes. Malush Ahmeti was at that time in combat zones in the mountains of Rezallë. Leutrim’s mother was taking belongings out of the house to carry with them as the family prepared to leave by tractor together with other members of the household.

The first grenade killed four-year-old Vjollca Ahmeti, whom Serbian forces had buried in a cornfield not far from the house. It seriously wounded 18-year-old Fatmire M. Ahmeti, as well as Shpresa Ahmeti, Fatmire F. Ahmeti, and Brahim Ahmeti.

Meanwhile, a second grenade exploded in the courtyard of Malush Ahmeti’s cousin. In the tractor that was in the yard, Ramadan Ahmeti, Elfije Ahmeti, and Xufa Ahmeti were killed, while Makfirete Ahmeti, Bajram Ahmeti, and Tahir Lladrovci were wounded.

Leutrim was in the yard while his mother was coming out through the living room door of the house.

“I Have Something in My Stomach Too” – Seven Years of Life, Twenty-Eight Years of Memory

His sister, Fatmire, was injured by grenade fragments.

“She still has the marks, and she still has pieces of shrapnel in her leg,” Bahri Ahmeti recalls.

Due to the grenades that had fallen in the Ahmeti family courtyard, all transport vehicles in the yard had been rendered inoperable. Leutrim had set off on foot, holding his mother’s hand, toward the school, as the family attempted to leave the shelling zone.

“Come on, come on, hurry,” his mother had told him.

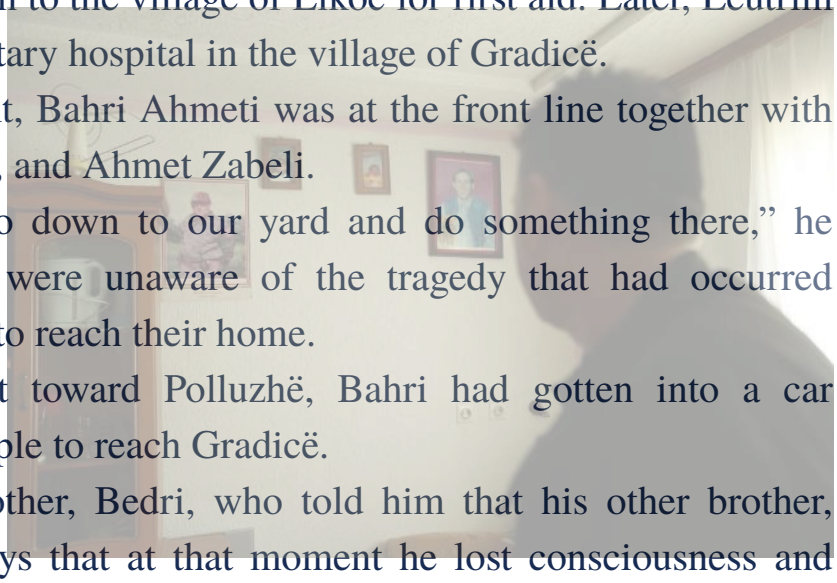
Leutrim stopped.

“Mother,” he said, Bahri recounts, “stop, don’t rush, I also have something in my belly.”

When his mother lifted his sweater, she noticed that Leutrim had been wounded by a grenade in the abdominal area.

“She said his organs had started coming out,” Bahri says, quoting his mother’s words.

Leutrim Ahmeti and other civilians wounded in the Serbian military offensive against civilians were taken to the village of Likoc for first aid. Later, Leutrim was transferred to the military hospital in the village of Gradicë.



Before the critical moment, Bahri Ahmeti was at the front line together with his father, Malush Ahmeti, and Ahmet Zabeli.

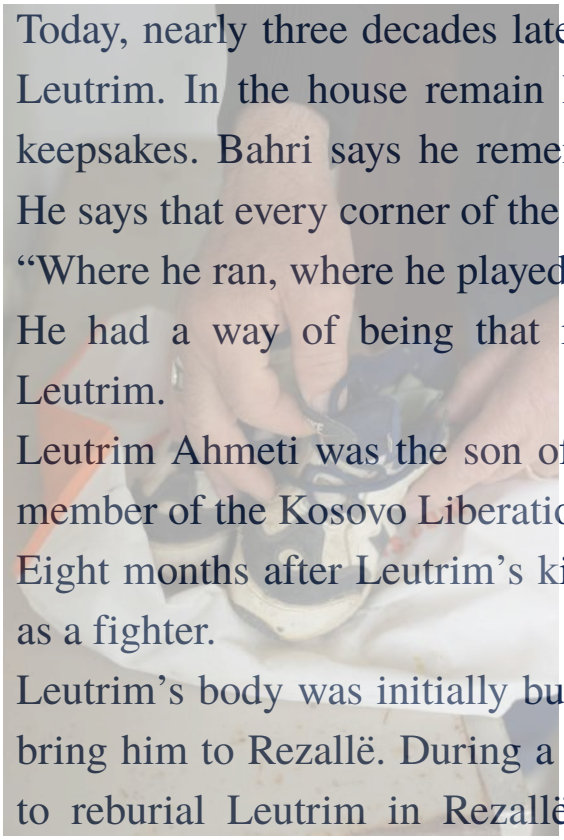
“My father told me to go down to our yard and do something there,” he recalls, noting that they were unaware of the tragedy that had occurred because they were unable to reach their home.

After setting off on foot toward Polluzhë, Bahri had gotten into a car transporting wounded people to reach Gradicë.

Bahri says it was his brother, Bedri, who told him that his other brother, Leutrim, had died. He says that at that moment he lost consciousness and attempted to take his own life.

“I went out and said, ‘Bedri, what happened?’ He said, ‘By God, Leutrim has died.’ At that moment, I lost consciousness. I didn’t know what I was doing. I grabbed the grenade pins. I wanted to kill myself. They grabbed me, took the grenades and all the weapons away from me,” Bahri says.

“I Have Something in My Stomach Too” – Seven Years of Life, Twenty-Eight Years of Memory



Today, nearly three decades later, the family still preserves memories of Leutrim. In the house remain his photographs, sneakers, and socks as keepsakes. Bahri says he remembers Leutrim as joyful and intelligent. He says that every corner of the yard reminds him of his brother.

“Where he ran, where he played on his bicycle… I remember everything. He had a way of being that made you love him,” Bahri says about Leutrim.

Leutrim Ahmeti was the son of the martyr Malush Ahmeti, who was a member of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

Eight months after Leutrim’s killing, his father Malush Ahmeti also fell as a fighter.

Leutrim’s body was initially buried in Gradicë, as it was not possible to bring him to Rezallë. During a ceasefire in the war, the family managed to reburial Leutrim in Rezallë, his birthplace. Bahri recalls how his father, Malush Ahmeti, used to say that he saw Leutrim in dreams, “saying, father, come take me,” before the reburial.

“My father told me he could not sleep properly, because he kept seeing Leutrim in his dreams saying, ‘Father, come take me.’ So my father said, ‘Until I bring Leutrim to my place, I cannot sleep properly.’ And we brought him and buried him [in Rezallë],” Bahri recalls.

Malush had left a final wish to be buried next to his son Leutrim. Today, his body rests beside his son.

Before the Serbian military offensive, Leutrim had started attending school in the village, which today bears the name of his father, Malush Ahmeti. On the memorial plaque, alongside Leutrim’s name as a student, other children killed in the war are also listed: Xufë and Elfie Ahmeti, Lulver Deliu, and Burim Zabeli.

Teachers who were killed are also commemorated on the plaque: Hajdin Aruqi, Isuf Aruqi, Isuf Rukolli, and Tafil Kabashi, as well as Rexhep Rukolli, a technical staff member.

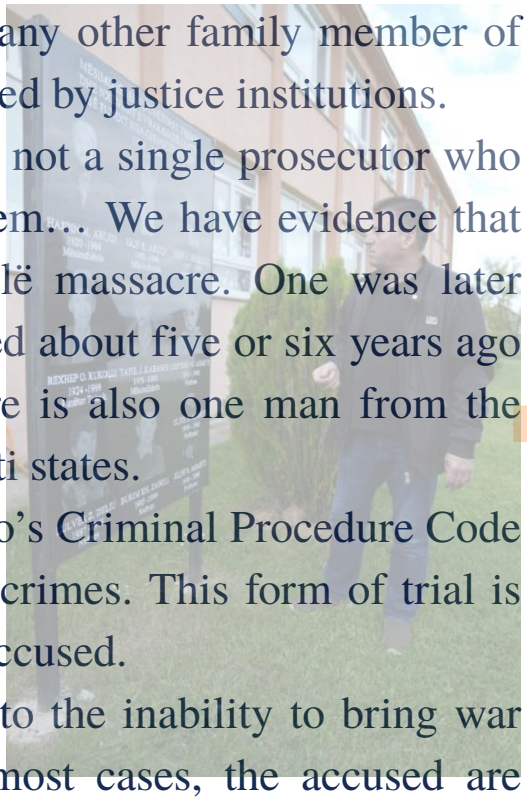
“I Have Something in My Stomach Too” – Seven Years of Life, Twenty-Eight Years of Memory

According to data from the Humanitarian Law Center in Kosovo (HLC), of more than 13,000 people killed during the last war in Kosovo, over 10,000 were civilians. Among them, more than 1,000 were children.
In 2019, the HLC opened an exhibition titled “Once Upon a Time And Never Again,” in memory of children killed during the war in Kosovo.

Crimes in Rezallë, Trials in Absentia, and the Absence of Justice

In the village of Rezallë in Skenderaj, 98 civilians were killed during the war in Kosovo. On April 5, 1999, Serbian forces surrounded the houses of families in the village and killed 44 Albanian civilians in a single location.
The victims were executed on a hill at the entrance of the neighborhood, where today a memorial stands in their honor. According to testimonies from local residents, the bodies were covered with sand in two layers and later transported to Rudnicë and Kizhevak, in an attempt to hide evidence of the crimes.
Of the 54 exhumed victims in 2014 in Rudnicë, the remains of 29 belonged to victims of the Rezallë massacre. From the mass grave in Kizhevak, during exhumations in 2021, remains of seven more victims of the same massacre were also recovered.
According to the Humanitarian Law Center, the Rezallë massacre was committed by the former Yugoslav Army (the 37th Motorized Brigade based in Raška) and other Serbian military and police units.
A relative of Ismet Rukolli, a victim of the Rezallë massacre, Rrustem Rukolli, filed a criminal complaint in 2016 with the Special Prosecution of the Republic of Kosovo against Dejan Randelović, commander of the 37th Motorized Brigade of the Yugoslav Army, and Ljubiša Diković, then commander of the brigade’s second battalion, holding them responsible for the massacre.

“I Have Something in My Stomach Too” – Seven Years of Life, Twenty-Eight Years of Memory



Bahri Ahmeti says that neither he nor any other family member of the victims in Rezallë has ever been called by justice institutions.

“There has still not been a single court, not a single prosecutor who has said, let’s take someone and try them… We have evidence that there are three survivors of the Rezallë massacre. One was later killed in the war. One, Misim Deliu, died about five or six years ago of natural causes due to old age. There is also one man from the Rukolli family who is still alive,” Ahmeti states.

Amendments adopted in 2021 to Kosovo’s Criminal Procedure Code have enabled trials in absentia for war crimes. This form of trial is conducted without the presence of the accused.

Trials in absentia are mainly held due to the inability to bring war crimes suspects before the court. In most cases, the accused are located in Serbia, a country with which Kosovo has no extradition agreement or judicial cooperation.

At the end of December 2025, the Special Prosecution of Kosovo filed an indictment against 21 individuals for the Reçak massacre, in which 45 civilians were killed on January 15, 1999.

Full link in Albanian: https://insajderi.org/edhe-une-kam-dicka-ne-bark-shtate-vite-jete-28-vite-kujtim/

Landmines Continue to Take Lives in Kosovo



Blerta Dalloshi Berisha

117 victims from mines after the end of the war

On April 24, 1999, five children from the Koxha family in the municipality of Kaçanik lost their lives near their neighborhood after entering a mined area planted by Serbian paramilitary forces.

The eldest was 15 years old, while the youngest was just three.

The father of Edon, Bekim Koxha, recalls how he was unable to attend his three-year-old son's funeral, as he was serving in the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

"I received the news that an explosion had occurred in the Koxha neighborhood. I was operating in the Zhark area, in the village of Biçec. I was a soldier of the KLA. When I received the information, I immediately set out. The road that leads to my home passes by the cemetery here. I immediately knew something had happened. I saw that five children had been buried, among them my son. When I arrived home, I learned that mines had been placed there and that the children had entered a mined area," Koxha said.

After the end of the war, Serbian forces left behind many mined areas, including in this municipality.

Just 30 kilometers from Kaçanik, in the Hani i Elezit area near the border with North Macedonia, Hamdi Lika, who leads the demining team of the mine and battlefield clearance organization The HALO Trust, is overseeing the tireless work of deminers in an area that is still contaminated with mines.

He told TV Klan that two people have lost their lives in this area, one in 2000 and another in 2006.

So far, 7,138 m² have been cleared in this zone.

Landmines Continue to Take Lives in Kosovo

“The total area of this field is around 7,883 square meters, while 7,138 square meters have been cleared. In addition, as an extension due to newly discovered mines—which can also be seen in the photo—an additional 13,313 square meters have been added. So far, eight PMA-2 mines and two MPR-2A mines have been found in this area,” said Demining Team Commander Hamdi Lika.

The clearance of this area is expected to be completed on September 2 of this year.

In June 1999, immediately after the war, 4,520 hazardous areas were identified, according to the Ministry of Defense.

“By demining teams from various organizations and the Kosovo Security Force, 66 million square meters have been cleared so far, and more than 96,000 mines and other explosive devices have been destroyed,” said Colonel Ahmet Sallova, Director of the Coordination Center for Demining at the Ministry of Defense.

Currently, there are 51 remaining hazardous areas, mostly located in mountainous and border regions.

The number of people who have lost their lives exceeds 100, while the number of injured is four times higher.

Since the post-war period, 117 people have been killed by explosive devices in mined areas, while 469 others have been injured.

It is expected that by 2030, the entire territory of Kosovo will be cleared of mines and other explosive devices left by Serbian forces during the last war in Kosovo.

Full link of the article and video reporting in Albanian: https://tvklan.al/minat-vazhdojne-te-marrin-jete-ne-kosove

I am looking for my lost home in Moravska



Fatmir Menekshe

“A Roma neighborhood, but today without Roma people. A once vibrant place, now empty. A place that once laughed, now weeps.”
With these words, Azir Jasari, a Roma journalist and researcher from Prishtina, begins his account. Through personal memories, he revisits the history of Moravska, once one of the largest Roma neighborhoods in Kosovo’s capital, a community that today has almost entirely disappeared in the form it once knew.

For Jasari, Prishtina is more than just the city where he was born and raised. It is part of both his personal and collective memory, a place that, in his view, has been transformed to such an extent that the traces of the former Roma community are barely recognizable.
"They changed our footprints, they demolished them, erased them, painted over them, and covered them with other colors," he says, describing a profound sense of loss of identity and belonging.

A Large Community at the Heart of Prishtina

According to figures cited by Jasari, before the Kosovo War, approximately 22,000 Roma lived in Prishtina and the surrounding areas, including Fushë Kosovë, Gračanica, and several nearby villages.
The Roma community in Prishtina was primarily concentrated in three neighborhoods: Moravska, Dalmatinska (Divanjolli), and Kolibarska. Moravska alone, located behind the City Theatre just a few minutes from the center of Prishtina, was home to around 10,000 residents.
"Alongside the Roma lived Albanians, Serbs, Turks, and Gorani. We lived like brothers. There were no conflicts among us, and life unfolded in a spirit of coexistence," he recalls.
Today,only physical reminders he retains from his life in Prishtina are the keys to his house and office.
"I still carry them with me."

I am looking for my lost home in Moravska

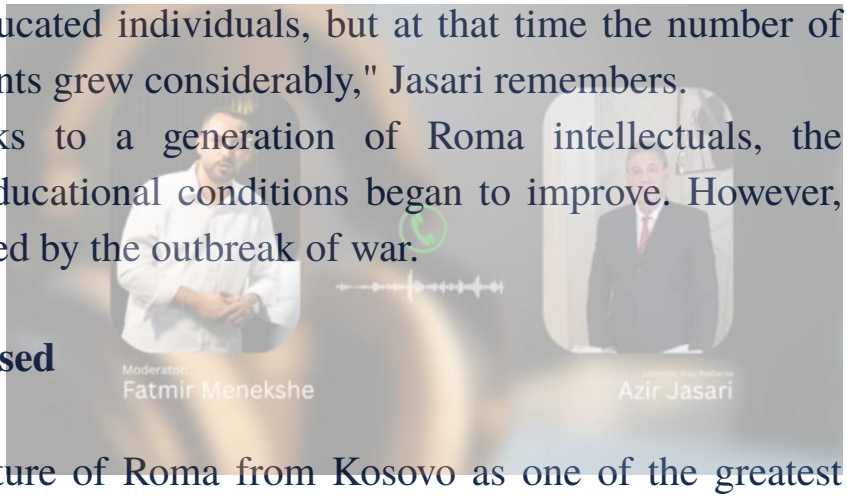
The Roma community included respected craftsmen, intellectuals, and educated professionals. Jasari also recounts the story of Sallqe, a renowned blacksmith who was said to have worked on the royal carriage of King Alexander Karađorđević.

From Marginalization to Emancipation

Although infrastructure in Roma neighborhoods was often poor—with limited access to water, sewage systems, and paved roads—the 1980s marked an important period of social advancement.

"There was a significant increase in education within the Roma community. There had always been educated individuals, but at that time the number of pupils and university students grew considerably," Jasari remembers.

According to him, thanks to a generation of Roma intellectuals, the community's social and educational conditions began to improve. However, this progress was interrupted by the outbreak of war.



An Exodus Rarely Discussed

Jasari describes the departure of Roma from Kosovo as one of the greatest and least acknowledged tragedies of the post-war period.

"The Roma represent the largest proportion of those who left Kosovo. Around 95 percent of the community was forced to leave," he says.

According to Jasari, between 150,000 and 200,000 Roma lived in Kosovo before the war, whereas today their number is significantly lower.

He emphasizes that during the conflict, the Roma found themselves caught between two opposing sides.

"One side considered us collaborators of the Serbs, while the other, because of our names and religion, viewed us as collaborators of the Albanians. We only wanted to remain Roma."

In his view, maintaining neutrality during the war was nearly impossible.

Fear, Abductions, and Violence

In his testimony, Jasari speaks of numerous cases of abduction, disappearance, and violence that, according to him, have remained undocumented.

I am looking for my lost home in Moravska

He recalls armed men with covered faces entering neighborhoods, forcibly taking people away, after which nothing more was heard about their fate.
"There were also many cases of sexual violence against Roma, but they were never reported," he says.
According to Jasari, the Roma community sought protection from international forces after the war, but felt abandoned and unheard.

The End of Moravska

Jasari remained in Prishtina with his family until June 29, 1999. He remembers witnessing Roma families being forced from their homes while their properties were set on fire.
"Every day people were leaving. The bus station was full. Far more people boarded each bus than it could hold. The scenes were heartbreaking."
Eventually, he too left with his wife and three children.
"It was very difficult to leave my home. My wife told me to take our photo albums. I said no, because we would return. But we never returned."
Today, the only physical reminders he retains from his life in Prishtina are the keys to his house and office.
"I still carry them with me."

Memory Against Oblivion

According to Jasari, much of the Moravska neighborhood has been destroyed or completely transformed. Many former residents no longer see return as a realistic possibility due to a lack of security and trust.
He also criticizes the lack of media coverage regarding the fate of the Roma community during and after the war.
"No one asked us whether we wanted to stay or leave. No one asked about our problems."
Yet his final message is not only a story of loss, but also an effort to preserve memory.

I am looking for my lost home in Moravska

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"Our neighborhoods were built on granite stone. They have survived many wars and have deep roots. Our grandparents are buried there. They will speak for us. We have sworn that we will never forget them."

For Azir Jasari, Moravska may no longer exist as it once did, but the memory of it remains an inseparable part of the identity of a community determined not to be forgotten. Its story serves as a reminder that coming to terms with the past cannot be complete without listening to the voices that have remained on the margins of history for decades.

Full podcast link in Roma language: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1w0hOZLALQ

The Traces of a Massacre and the Silence That Still Speaks at the Berisha Family Museum



Fisnik Minci

In the center of Suharekë, amid the ordinary bustle of a day in May, there is a place marked by a profound and sorrowful silence. For visitors, it creates the impression that time stopped forever in the spring of 1999.

The old aluminum doors, forced open and punctured by bullets, remain in their original condition. Faded bloodstains still mark the walls—dimmed by time, but not by memory. Bullet casings remain scattered across the floor, exactly where they fell on March 26, 1999, when Serbian forces carried out one of the most brutal massacres against Albanian civilians during the Kosovo war, killing 49 members of the Berisha family. Three others survived by sheer chance and lived to tell the world about the war crimes committed that day.

This site, located in the Shopping Center of Suharekë and formerly known as the "Kalabria" Pizzeria, was transformed five years ago into the Berisha Family Martyrs Museum. Today, it stands as a testament to collective memory, unhealed grief, and the determination to prevent oblivion from taking hold.

Baby Bottles, School Notebooks, and Bullet Casings

The original color of the walls remains untouched, blending with the silence that dominates the interior. Every photograph, every object, and every preserved trace carries its own story. Thanks to a donation from the Golden Eagle Foundation, the exhibits are protected behind glass, including the central floor display, which resembles a vertical showcase.

The Traces of a Massacre and the Silence That Still Speaks at the Berisha Family Museum

Among the objects visible beneath the glass is a baby bottle. Silent and ordinary in appearance, yet heavy with the weight of history. It serves as a painful reminder that even children were not spared in the massacre.

Further along, copies of school notebooks, drawings, and creative works made by Berisha family children are displayed. There are pages filled with innocent handwriting and school assignments marked with excellent grades. Nearby are photographs of clothing belonging to the victims, recovered following exhumations from mass graves in Kosovo and Serbia. These items stand as evidence of dreams cut short and of systematic efforts to conceal the crime.

On the left side of the entrance are the names of those who were killed. On the right are the names of the three survivors: Shyhrete Berisha, Vjollca Berisha, and Gramoz Berisha. Beneath them is an inscription: “Angels who returned from death to tell the story of sorrow.”

“The Crime Against Them Was Fivefold”

The museum is cared for daily by 72-year-old Hysni Berisha. He welcomes visitors with kindness and a calm demeanor that conceals years of exhaustion and the burden of memory. He walks slowly through the space, pausing beside photographs, occasionally touching an object before beginning his account—not only of what happened to the Berisha family, but also of the long struggle to locate the missing and preserve the truth.

“All the crimes committed in Kosovo during 1998–1999 were grave, crimes that wiped out entire families. What happened to the Berisha family was not merely a crime—it was genocide. According to international conventions, genocide is a crime committed against an ethnic group. I call it a multiple crime because they were executed in this building, loaded onto trucks, buried at the Yugoslav Army shooting range in Lubizhdë, dug up again with excavators, their bodies damaged, loaded into refrigerated trucks, taken to the Danube, and then transferred from there to Batajnica. In other words, the crime against those bodies was committed five times over. That is why I call it genocide,” Berisha says.

The Traces of a Massacre and the Silence That Still Speaks at the Berisha Family Museum

Within that small space, his testimony does not feel like a distant historical account. The traces remain—clothes, blankets, and personal belongings that seem to bear silent witness.

The museum itself was not created by chance. Family members decided that the site of the massacre should not be rebuilt and forgotten, but preserved as evidence for future generations.

“We wanted to show the crimes committed against our family, the pain we experienced, and to leave a legacy for the generations to come. We decided to create a museum precisely in the building where the massacre of the Berisha family took place, in what was once the Kalabria pizzeria. With the understanding and support of the owner, he offered us the premises so that we could transform them into a museum,” Hysni Berisha explains.

He rarely speaks about the challenges involved, preferring instead to focus on the achievement of preserving the site.

“For me, it was a great success that we managed to convince the owner to leave the building as a museum, so that future generations could see the crimes of war. Today, I am proud of this work and of the fact that we have preserved this place as a museum.”

“There Is No Dignity Without a Grave”

Yet pride does not diminish the pain. More than two decades later, the Berisha family continues to live with the absence of over twenty missing relatives.

“Even today, 24 members of the Berisha family remain missing. A family cannot have dignity until it has at least a bone, until it knows where to place a flower, where the grave is. We have prepared the gravesites and everything else, but 24 bodies are still missing,” he says.

Even so, hope remains part of daily life

The Traces of a Massacre and the Silence That Still Speaks at the Berisha Family Museum

“Hope never dies. When I founded the Association for the Investigation of War Crimes, I named it ‘Shpresimi’ (Hope), because we have always believed that we would reach the truth. We still hope. We wait for the day when all those who were killed will at least have dignity—a grave, a place where a flower can be laid, a place where families can come and remember them.”

Visitors who enter the museum often leave deeply moved. This is reflected in the museum’s guestbook, signed by numerous international and local personalities.

According to Berisha, most visitors cannot hold back their tears.

“The museum has a multidimensional character. Most visitors come from abroad—members of various missions in Kosovo, our diaspora, and guests who visit during anniversaries. Whenever people come and share our pain, even for five minutes, we feel some emotional relief. We feel calmer and freer because someone is listening to us,” he says.

Museums as Evidence Against Denial

For experts in transitional justice, places such as this play a vital role in preserving collective memory and confronting the past.

Bekim Blakaj of the Humanitarian Law Center in Kosovo says that memory museums play an important role in transitional justice because they serve as spaces where the experiences of victims and the consequences of violence are documented, preserved, and communicated.

“Transitional justice is not only about court proceedings. It is also about the right to truth, memory, and public recognition of suffering. In this sense, memory museums help society confront the past, challenge the denial of crimes, and foster a culture of respect for human rights. They also serve as educational tools for younger generations so that the crimes of the past are neither forgotten nor repeated. At the same time, memorialization creates spaces for discussion and reflection, which in the long term can contribute to sustainable peace and reconciliation.”

According to Blakaj, documenting and publicly presenting war crimes is essential for post-conflict societies.

The Traces of a Massacre and the Silence That Still Speaks at the Berisha Family Museum

“Without credible documentation and public acknowledgment of the past, there is always a risk of relativizing or denying crimes. Documents, photographs, testimonies, and artifacts preserved in museums and memorials create a collective archive of memory that gives voice to victims and contributes to establishing historical truth. Public exhibitions of these crimes also raise awareness and foster empathy toward victims.” Spaces such as the Berisha Family Martyrs Museum contribute directly to preserving collective memory.

“Very few crime scenes have been preserved in their original condition. One of them is the former Kalabria restaurant-pizzeria, where members of the Berisha family were executed. Because the site remains authentic, the museum makes memory more tangible and personal. It serves both as a place of reflection and respect for the victims and as a form of resistance against forgetting.”

Blakaj emphasizes that the testimonies of victims and their families must be treated with sensitivity, dignity, and responsibility within memorialization processes. Victims and survivors should not be regarded merely as sources of information but as active participants in shaping public memory.

“It is essential that their stories are presented authentically and without political instrumentalization. In the case of the Berisha family and many other cases where people remain missing, memorialization remains incomplete. The lack of information about the fate of the missing keeps families’ wounds open and turns memory into not only an act of remembrance but also an ongoing demand for truth and justice.”

Transitional Justice Between Documents and Reality

Kosovo’s Transitional Justice Strategy 2024–2034, drawing on data from the Humanitarian Law Center, states that approximately 13,000 people were killed during the war in Kosovo, while 1,597 people remain forcibly disappeared, including 109 children.

The Traces of a Massacre and the Silence That Still Speaks at the Berisha Family Museum

The document references massacres, forced expulsions, torture, and the systematic destruction of civilian life during the war, as well as domestic and international efforts to address the past through transitional justice.

“Previous truth-seeking initiatives failed to fulfill their mandates,” the strategy notes, adding that “societal transformation from a context of systematic violence into peaceful coexistence is difficult to achieve when victims lack adequate care and when the principles of transitional justice are not implemented.”

It further states:

“In Kosovo, various initiatives have been undertaken by local, regional, and international civil society organizations to address the past. Despite their importance, these initiatives cannot replace the need for Kosovo’s public institutions to address and promote transitional justice.”

According to Blakaj, Kosovo has made progress in transitional justice, but the process remains fragmented and incomplete. Important steps have included documenting war crimes, establishing the Institute for Crimes Committed During the War, drafting the National Strategy for Transitional Justice, and other initiatives.

“Nevertheless, we have not yet seen any serious institutional initiative aimed at strengthening memorialization and preserving collective memory. Above all, victims have never been placed at the center of transitional justice processes. As a result, many victims and their families continue to feel excluded, particularly because of the lack of full justice and the unresolved fate of the missing. For the past 27 years, the burden of preserving memory and advancing transitional justice has largely been carried by victims’ associations, family members, and civil society organizations.”

The Traces of a Massacre and the Silence That Still Speaks at the Berisha Family Museum

Without Justice, There Can Be No Sustainable Peace

Blakaj argues that strengthening Kosovo's culture of remembrance requires greater institutional commitment, support for museums and memorials, integration of education about the past into school curricula, and support for professional documentation and archival preservation.

"It is also important to create spaces for dialogue between communities and to involve young people more actively in discussions about the past. A culture of remembrance should be seen not only as a way of honoring victims but also as an investment in peace and democracy."

Meanwhile, Hysni Berisha speaks with disappointment about the lack of institutional support, though his greatest frustration remains the failure to fully deliver justice for war crimes and the continued denial of those crimes by authorities in Serbia.

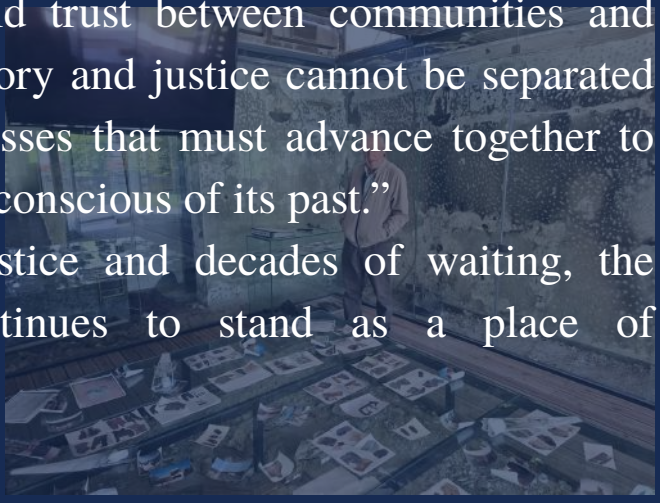
"The side that committed these crimes has never apologized. Instead, it continues to make accusations and blame our institutions. They accuse us as though we were the perpetrators and they were the victims," he says.

According to reports by civil society organizations and the media regarding the Suharekë massacre and other atrocities, six Serbian officials were convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague: Vlastimir Đorđević, Nikola Šainović, Dragoljub Ojdanić, Nebojša Pavković, Vladimir Lazarević, and Sreten Lukić, receiving sentences ranging from 18 to 22 years in prison. Meanwhile, the War Crimes Department of the Belgrade District Court tried eight individuals and convicted four of the accused involved in the massacre.

According to Blakaj, the absence of full justice directly affects reconciliation and remembrance.

The Traces of a Massacre and the Silence That Still Speaks at the Berisha Family Museum

“When crimes go unpunished, when victims do not receive the recognition and justice they deserve, and when people remain missing, the wounds of war remain open. Without justice and truth, it is extremely difficult to build trust between communities and achieve sustainable peace. Memory and justice cannot be separated —they are interconnected processes that must advance together to create a more just society that is conscious of its past.”



Despite the absence of full justice and decades of waiting, the Berisha Family Museum continues to stand as a place of remembrance against forgetting.

Full link in Albanian: https://tvprizreni.net/gjurmet-e-masakres-dhe-heshtja-qe-flet-ende-ne-muzeun-e-familjes-berisha

From Reçak to the NATO Bombing Campaign: Vjosa Sadriu-Hamiti's Account of War Journalism



Jehona Hulaj

During Kosovo's darkest years, when information was a matter of life and death, journalism was not merely a profession—it was a responsibility, a mission, and a daily risk. In an interview with Telegrafi, war journalist Vjosa Sadriu-Hamiti reflected on the 1990s, reporting from massacre sites across Kosovo, and the emotional burden carried by journalists covering conflict.

She explained that her journey into journalism began quite unexpectedly at the Kosovo Information Center (KIC), initially working as a German-language translator. However, she soon became directly involved in reporting on the events that were shaking the country.

"Every piece of information we received at the Kosovo Information Center was verified at least twenty to thirty times because we wanted to be a serious and trustworthy partner for international cooperation," she said.

One of the most difficult moments of her career remains her reporting from the Reçak massacre, an event that shocked international public opinion and altered the course of the war in Kosovo.

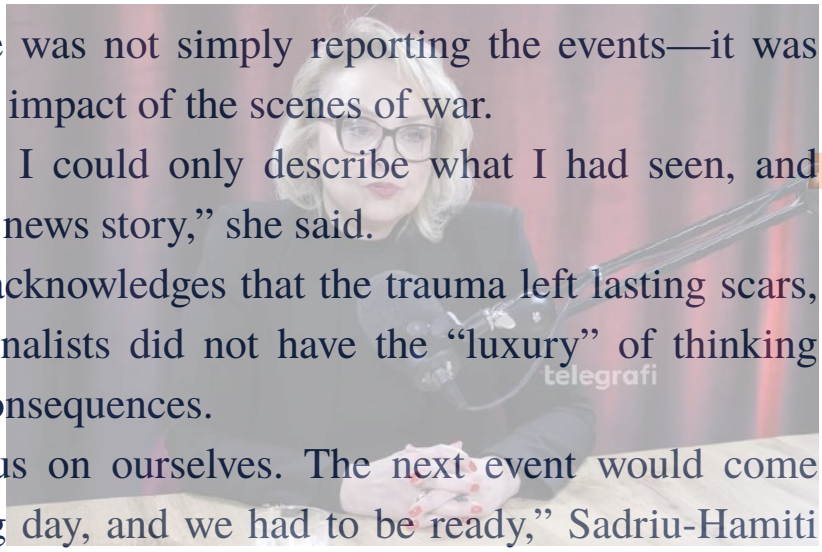
She recalled that on January 15, 1999, she had set out to report from the condolence ceremony following the killing of Enver Maloku. However, the situation changed suddenly when the first reports emerged about what had happened in Reçak.

"Right at the entrance to the village, the first body we saw was that of a man whose head had been severely damaged from beatings. That was the first photograph I took," she recounted.

Sadriu-Hamiti explained that technology at the time was extremely limited, and journalists worked under extraordinarily difficult conditions.

From Reçak to the NATO Bombing Campaign: Vjosa Sadriu-Hamiti's Account of War Journalism

"At that time, cameras did not even record sound. If you wanted to capture footage, you had to test everything beforehand," she said, recalling how photographs from Reçak were first distributed through the Kosovo Information Center before being picked up by international media outlets.



Yet the greatest challenge was not simply reporting the events—it was coping with the emotional impact of the scenes of war.

"I was not able to write. I could only describe what I had seen, and others would turn it into a news story," she said.

Looking back today, she acknowledges that the trauma left lasting scars, although at the time journalists did not have the "luxury" of thinking about the psychological consequences.

"We had no time to focus on ourselves. The next event would come immediately the following day, and we had to be ready," Sadriu-Hamiti said.

She also recalled the period of the NATO bombing campaign, when foreign journalist Elias Bierdel was secretly sheltered in her family's home in Prishtina while reporting from Kosovo for German public radio.

"We took that risk as a family because if the paramilitary forces had discovered that he was staying with us, the entire neighborhood could have suffered the consequences," she said.

In the absence of mobile phones and amid constant electricity outages, verifying information was exceptionally difficult.

"There were times when we would wait for hours just to get a telephone signal and make a call," Vjosa Sadriu-Hamiti recalled.

Despite the risks, Sadriu-Hamiti says that journalists of that era viewed reporting as a duty to their country. She emphasized that it was essential to verify information multiple times before publication because, as she put it, "we were Kosovo's voice to the world."

She also had a message for young journalists, particularly those reporting on sensitive issues or conflicts.

From Reçak to the NATO Bombing Campaign: Vjosa Sadriu-Hamiti's Account of War Journalism

"They should strive to be as objective as possible and avoid using hate speech. It is extremely important to report without fueling division," she said.

In conclusion, the war journalist stressed that despite its many challenges, journalism remains one of the fundamental pillars of democracy.

Full podcast link in Albanian: https://telegrafi.com/nga-recaku-te-bombardimet-e-nato-s-rrefimi-i-vjosa-sadriu-hamiti-per-gazetarine-e-luftes/

“I Was Born with a Plis, and with a Plis I Want to Die”



Lendrit Qeli

Survivor Bashkim Ramadani’s Account of the 14 Ashkali and Egyptian Victims Missing Since the Krusha e Madhe Massacre

On March 26, 1999, just two days after NATO launched its bombing campaign against Serbian targets, the village of Krusha e Madhe, located approximately 11 kilometers from Rahovec, became the scene of one of the most devastating massacres of the Kosovo war.

During three days of systematic violence carried out by Serbian forces, 241 Albanian civilians were killed and massacred, while 64 people remain missing to this day.

Among the victims were 14 members of the Ashkali and Egyptian communities who, according to survivor testimonies, refused to leave the village and remained alongside their Albanian neighbors until the final moments of their lives. More than two decades later, their families continue to live with pain, uncertainty, and the hope for justice, as their remains have never been found.

Many of the witnesses from that time are no longer alive. Along with them, important accounts of the crimes and the victims’ final moments have also faded away. Yet the memories preserved by families and survivors remain a living testimony to that tragedy.

One of those who survived the massacre is Bashkim Ramadani. He managed to escape, but lost his father and two brothers, who were executed during the tragic events of March 1999. Even today, 26 years later, the family still does not know where their remains lie.

“I Was Born with a Plis, and with a Plis I Want to Die”

“We lived through hard work and sweat. We did not have much, but we had respect and care for one another. We were like family with our Albanian neighbors. In times of joy and in times of mourning, we were always together,” Ramadani recalls.

But everything changed within a matter of hours.

With the beginning of the NATO bombing campaign, fear spread throughout the village. Residents were forced to flee to the mountains to escape attacks by Serbian forces. From a distance, the sounds of tanks and gunfire could be heard drawing closer and closer.

“After staying in the mountains until evening, I took the risk of approaching the village to see what remained of our home. All I could see was fire and smoke. The whole of Krusha was in flames. It felt as though our entire life was burning together with our houses,” he recalls.

Families spent the night hiding in the mountains, surrounded by uncertainty and fear. The following day, shelling and gunfire came even closer. In those moments of panic, Bashkim urged his father to leave with the family and move to a safer area. His father refused.

Shortly before their final separation, Bashkim asked his father to remove his white plis, fearing it would make him more easily identifiable to Serbian forces. His father’s response remained forever engraved in the family’s memory:

“I was born with a plis, and with a plis I want to die.”

Those were the last words Bashkim ever heard from him.

As the situation deteriorated and fears grew that Serbian forces would discover their hiding place, family members and villagers decided to split into smaller groups, hoping that at least some would survive. The idea was not to remain together in one location, fearing they could all be executed if captured by Serbian paramilitary units.

After the groups separated, Bashkim’s father and his two brothers remained together with several other men.

“I Was Born with a Plis, and with a Plis I Want to Die”

According to testimonies from surviving women who were present at the time, they too fell into the hands of Serbian forces. The paramilitaries immediately ordered the men to separate from the women and children, while the women and children were instructed to leave without looking back.

“Keep walking and do not dare turn your heads back. Keep your hands up,” the paramilitaries shouted as the men were detained behind them.

Moments later, bursts of gunfire were heard.

From that day on, the Ramadani family never saw Bashkim’s father or his two brothers again.

But the ordeal did not end there.

Bashkim Ramadani himself, along with dozens of other civilians, was later captured and taken to the village mosque, which during those days had been transformed into a site of torture, beatings, and executions. For nearly 24 hours, trapped inside the mosque, they lived through fear, screams, and the constant expectation of death.

“The mosque no longer looked like a mosque. It was like hell. There was blood everywhere, screams, and fear. Every few minutes they would take someone outside, and then we would hear gunshots,” he recalls.

He remembers the faces of terrified people, especially young boys only 14 or 15 years old—still children—crying in fear while waiting for their fate.

“The boys kept asking me, ‘Father, are they going to kill us?’ We tried to calm them down, but in the end, I lost hope myself.”

According to him, after hours of psychological torture and violence, no one inside the mosque believed they would leave alive.

“We had no hope left. We were simply waiting for our turn.”

The following day, Serbian paramilitaries and police officers forced the civilians out of the mosque and ordered them to run.

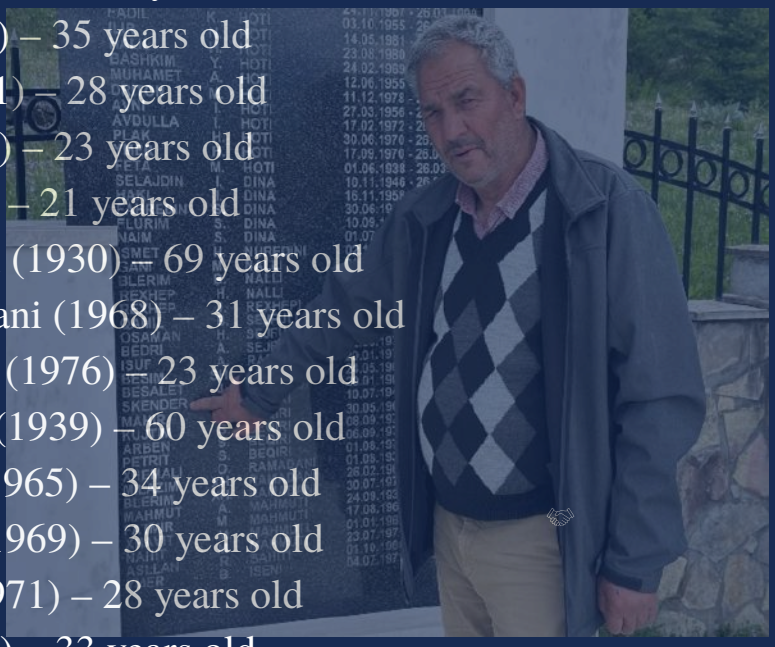
“They told us, ‘Go! Run!’ And while we were running, they fired their weapons at us from all directions. People scattered in panic, each trying to escape however they could,” Ramadani recalls.

“I Was Born with a Plis, and with a Plis I Want to Die”

Even today, he cannot fully understand how they survived.

“I still do not know how we managed to escape. We just ran toward the main road from Krusha e Madhe to Prizren, through fear, screams, and bullets.”

The Missing Ashkali and Egyptians of Krusha e Madhe



- Skënder M. Beqiri (1941) – 58 years old
- Mahir S. Beqiri (1964) – 35 years old
- Kujtim S. Beqiri (1971) – 28 years old
- Arben S. Beqiri (1976) – 23 years old
- Petrit S. Beqiri (1978) – 21 years old
- Xhemali O. Ramadani (1930) – 69 years old
- Milaxhim Xh. Ramadani (1968) – 31 years old
- Blerim Xh. Ramadani (1976) – 23 years old
- Mahmut A. Mahmuti (1939) – 60 years old
- Fatmir M. Mahmuti (1965) – 34 years old
- Xhavit M. Mahmuti (1969) – 30 years old
- Nahit M. Mahmuti (1971) – 28 years old
- Asllan R. Sahiti (1966) – 33 years old
- Ymer B. Iseni (1975) – 24 years old

They were not merely names on a list. They were fathers, sons, brothers, and neighbors who refused to abandon their village and chose to share the fate of their Albanian fellow villagers until the final moments of their lives.

For the families of Krusha e Madhe, the war has never truly ended. It continues in the silence of missing graves, in the ongoing search for justice, and in memories that time cannot erase. Because in Krusha e Madhe, the names of the victims are not simply part of history—they remain open wounds in a community still waiting for peace for the souls of its missing.

Full article in Albanian: https://rtv-prosperiteti.com/me-plis-kam-le-me-plis-dua-te-vdes-rrefimi-i-te-mbijetuarit-bashkim-ramadani-per-14-ashkalinjte-dhe-egjiptianet-e-zhdukur-ne-masakren-e-krushes-se-madhe/

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