

Discourses of Conflict: Victimhood, Sovereignty, and Identity in Kosovo

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*“It seems that the violence in the former Yugoslavia is, in the end, not only the result of opposite and incompatible identities; it is perhaps even more the means to achieve them”*¹

Introduction: Some Preliminary Thoughts on the Intersection of Victimhood, Sovereignty, and Identity

The construction of identity on the basis of victimhood can be a dangerous thing. Although past events may legitimately support a particular group of people’s claim to a shared history of victimization, the deployment of this element as a focal point around which that group’s collective self-identification coalesces can yield pernicious results, particularly in terms of the group’s relations with others. Indeed, I do not believe it to be a stretch to claim that an identity constructed as such develops something of an ethos of infallibility within the group, in that any act may potentially be justified to the group if it is deemed to be in defence of the group’s perceived interests, since these are deemed to be perpetually under threat. As the group inherently identifies itself as having been the victim of odious acts of repression and subjugation at the hands of (O)thers throughout its history—and this is a key component of the group identifying itself as distinct in the first place—taking action, no matter how insidious, with the apparent goal of preventing another such episode from occurring can be legitimated. Political groups premised upon such identity constructs may thus come to “rationalize their domination” of the others against whom they posit themselves as ostensible victims.² Consider in this regard that currents of victimization may be seen to run through the justificatory arguments of a number of violent actors on the world historical stage, from both sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to the ethnic cleansers of the Balkans, to the Hutu *génocidaires* of Rwanda, back to the Germany of Hitler and beyond. Perhaps it is something of a cruel irony that where a particular group of people clearly identify themselves as historical victims of violence—be it physical or structural—further violence appears to follow through their pursuit of processes ostensibly geared toward altering this condition.

Unfortunately, it is also likely that a degree of victimhood permeates all human identity constructs, as what Dennis Sandole terms “chosen traumas” often comprise a central component of a political community’s foundational narrative.³ As a result, the “heavy hand of the past” weighs continuously upon the consciousness of such groups, thus ensuring that a sense of victimhood perpetually underwrites how the group conceives of itself.⁴ The negative effects of the proliferation of such conceptions of identity—such as the fomentation of the aforementioned ethos of infallibility—are augmented when two opposing groups that identify themselves as such come into conflict with one another, as such conflicts often become essentially intractable. Indeed, under such circumstances, each side comes to view any compromise solution as unacceptable, as it is construed as merely another example of the group falling victim to the subjugation of a threatening Other.⁵ As Sandole contends, “what makes such conflicts so intractable...is an intense collective memory of victimhood” on the part of both sides.⁶ Regrettably, this type of conflict is broadly representative of the myriad ethnic conflicts that have

¹ Ger Duijzings *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo* (London: Hurst, 2000) p. 33, emphasis original.

² Denisa Kostovicova *Kosovo: The Politics of Identity and Space* (London: Routledge, 2005) p. 13

³ Dennis J.D. Sandole “Virulent Ethnocentrism and Conflict Intractability: Puzzles and Challenges for Third Party Interveners” *Peace and Conflict Studies* 10 (1) 2003 p. 74

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73

⁶ *Ibid.*

proliferated in the post-Cold War global political environment, as the legacies of European imperialism and superpower interventionism have left a significant portion of the globe's population to identify themselves inherently as victims in some way or another.

Moreover, when such a conflict involves something so fundamental as territorial living space—and thus becomes manifest at the level of the international—this mutual antagonism is further exacerbated, as the intense animosity between the conflicting parties only increases the sense of reciprocal threat on each side. The cases of Israel/Palestine and the Former Yugoslavia illustrate this phenomenon all too well. A central contention of this paper is that such a condition results from the confluence of internalized narratives of victimization with the paradigm of statehood embodied in the dominant ontological conception of the international system, in which the sovereign state has come to necessarily represent “what and where the political must be.”⁷ The United Nations Charter itself explicitly underwrites this rendering of the international imaginary through its enshrining of the often contradictory concepts of sovereign equality and self-determination under Articles 1 and 2.⁸ This appears to affirm that no group can entrench and subsequently protect its political identity at the highest level, the international, devoid of its own sovereign state. The obvious implication of this narrative is that the full realization of a group's identity can only be achieved through statehood.

The imperative of statehood would clearly prove particularly attractive to groups who define themselves according to their shared victimhood, as statehood allows the group to legitimately engage in exclusionary practices—through the construction and defence of borders and the allocation of citizenship—that may be seen to insulate the group from further victimization at the hands of “outsiders” or “others” whom their national consciousness identifies as threatening. Indeed, the concept of the state permits, and even fundamentally requires, such exclusionary practices, since “the assertion of control over space implies its delimitation, which assumes exclusion.”⁹ The result is that, within a international imaginary in which sovereign statehood is prioritized, its zealous pursuit—often through violent means—becomes construed as a necessary exercise to establish and protect the political identity of the group, in that, under a statist conception of the political, the spatial segregation of territory upon which the concept of the state is premised is seen to “offer security to a national/ethnic group by...enabling the preservation of its identity.”¹⁰ Thus, when the territory upon which the putative state is to be established is disputed between two groups whose sense of victimhood is a profound component of their identity, the resultant conflict becomes essentially intractable in that a compromise resolution is rendered unacceptable for either side since it is seen to represent not only another potential instance of victimization, but also an existential threat to the group's identity writ large.

The basic conclusion to be drawn from this brief theoretical discussion may be summarized as such: In relations between two discrete political communities, the intersection of an identity politics framed under the rubric of victimhood with the metanarrative of the sovereign state that dominates modern conceptions of the political yields pernicious results for the security of both sides. In this capacity, this discursive interaction can be seen to play a major role in fomenting conflict between such groups in the first place, while also subsequently exacerbating and rendering intractable the conflict as it develops. This paper will explore these notions in depth

⁷ R.B.J. Walker “The Subject of Security” in Keith Krause & Michael C. Williams (ed.) *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p. 68

⁸ United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, Articles 1 and 2.

⁹ Kostovicova, p. 17

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.18

through an examination of the case of Kosovo and the extant conflict between Serbs and ethnic Albanians there. Kosovo is quite instructive in this vein, as narratives of victimization are essential to the identity constructs of each side, while each accordingly identifies the incorporation of Kosovo into a sovereign entity as an essential component of maintaining and protecting its respective identity as a discrete political community. Generally, I will attempt to demonstrate that the pernicious discursive interaction of victimization and statism provides a useful lens through which to view the essence of the Kosovo conflict, as the latter provides compelling evidence in support of the theoretical precepts that underwrite such an outlook, as discussed above.

In this capacity, the paper will proceed with a brief examination of the identity politics at play in Kosovo, focusing upon how each side views the region as their “homeland”, thus constituting an essential component of its identity, while also viewing the other side as a significant threat thereto. It will be emphasized that this political landscape has created a climate particularly amenable to the destructive interaction of narratives of victimhood and statehood. Subsequently, the paper will elaborate in further detail both how this interaction has been constituted historically, and how it continues to take place in Kosovo. This will be done by first illustrating how narratives of victimization are key to both Serb and Kosovar identity constructs, followed by a subsequent examination of the role of the concept of statehood in relation to the identities of each side. In the latter discussion, it will be contended that each group views the territory of Kosovo as an essential component of the state that is ostensibly required for the full realization and maintenance of its political identity. A discussion of how the elements of victimhood and statehood have coalesced in the Kosovo case to create an environment of mutual antagonism for which the only source of mitigation can be the forceful reaffirmation of the statist narrative through the inscription of borders concurrent with the wishes of one side or the other will follow, and the paper will conclude with a discussion of how the inferences that may be made from viewing the Kosovo case in the present light can be constructively applied to the problems of identity politics that have characterized the global political landscape in the post-Cold War era.

Identity, Ethnicity, and Kosovo as a “Homeland”

The crucial issue at the heart of the Kosovo conflict is the respective validity of competing Serb and Albanian claims that Kosovo represents their homeland. This is by no means a trivial matter, as the concept of the “homeland”—whether in the form of a state or not—is an essential component of any group’s distinct identity, in that it provides “the physical and symbolic anchor” for that identity.¹¹ Both Serbs and Kosovar Albanians view Kosovo as “the cradle of their national and cultural identity,” leading the resultant conflict to be framed within the context of a fundamental issue for both parties.¹² For Serbs, Kosovo is at the heart of their national cosmology, as the foundational myth of the modern Serbian nation is centred around the “chosen trauma” of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, in which the Christian Serbs were defeated by the Muslim Turks ostensibly as a result of their leader Prince Lazar’s choice to sacrifice his earthly

¹¹ Kostovicova, p. 16

¹² Miranda Vickers *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) p. xiii

kingdom for the promise of a heavenly one.¹³ The centuries of Ottoman subjugation that followed imbued Serb identity with a sense of noble victimhood, of which the territory of Kosovo served as the physical embodiment. Most Serbs thus continue to view Kosovo as an integral component of their homeland, believing that “the memory of their loss of Kosovo contains within it an obligation for its return.”¹⁴ As it was returned to Serb control in the late 19th century, its loss once more would constitute a seemingly unacceptable blow to the national consciousness.

Of course, Kosovar Albanians promote a countermyth. Drawing upon both ancient and modern elements, it stresses Kosovo’s Illyrian¹⁵ roots and lionizes the actions of the folk-hero Skanderbeg in leading Albanian resistance to Ottoman rule in the region—rather than cooperating with the Turks to subjugate the Serbs, as the latter claim.¹⁶ Moreover, the repressive actions of the Serbs in the post-Tito era—peaking with the advent of Milosevic’s Serb nationalism in the late 1980s—galvanized Kosovar Albanian identity as distinct and tied explicitly to Kosovo rather than to neighbouring Albania proper.¹⁷ As such, Kosovo also represents the territorial manifestation of Kosovar Albanian identity, in that it is the only homeland with which the latter identify. Its control by the ethnic Albanian population is thus deemed essential to the maintenance and protection of their identity.

The clash of these two competing narratives has resulted in each group identifying the other as a major threat to their respective identities as a consequence of their competing claims to rightfully inhabit and control the contested “homeland” of Kosovo. This volatile historical quarrel is exacerbated by the fact that each side views the other as “foreigners,” members of a diaspora who ought to renounce their claim to inhabit Kosovo and return to their true homelands to the northeast (in the case of the Serbs) or the West (in the case of the Albanians). For example, in response to the strong demographic arguments proffered by the Albanians—premised upon the empirical fact that approximately 90% of Kosovo’s two million inhabitants are ethnic Albanians—Serbs have condemned the Albanians as “colonisers” and “immigrants” who consequently “have no right to live [in Kosovo],” as the Serbs “have a historic right” over it.¹⁸ Albanians have responded that these “immigrants” were, in fact, “going home”, as the Illyrian tribe from whom they claim descent, the Dardanians, are claimed to have inhabited Kosovo long before the arrival of the Slavs.¹⁹ As a result of these contradictory narratives, the group in power in the region—be it the Serbs after the retreat of the Ottomans or the Albanians since the 1999 NATO intervention—has consistently pursued policies aimed at segregating the opposing group and ultimately driving them from the territory and back to their purported external homeland. Milosevic’s attempt at ethnic cleansing is the most odious and well-known example; however the Kosovar Albanian leadership that has ruled the region since 1999 (albeit under UN trusteeship until early 2008) has ostracized the remaining Serbs from civil society whilst taking little action

¹³ The importance of this event to Serbian folkloric tradition is immense. For a detailed account of the legend and its essential role in the construction of Serb identity, see: Christos Mylonas *Serbian Orthodox Fundamentals: The Quest for an Eternal Identity* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003) pp. 154-168

¹⁴ Kostovicova, p. 2

¹⁵ Ethnic Albanians identify themselves as descendents of a group of tribes known as the Illyrians in the time of the Roman Empire, who inhabited the Western Balkans prior to the arrival of the Slavs.

¹⁶ Valur Ingimundarson “The Politics of Memory and the Reconstruction of Albanian National Identity in Postwar Kosovo” *History and Memory* 19 (1) Spring/Summer 2007 p. 98

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99

¹⁸ Vickers, p. 2

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3

to curb the virulent anti-Serb sentiments endemic to the Albanian population that have often turned violent, driving many Serbs to depart for the Serbian heartland.²⁰

Consequently, each side has come to view the other as the principal threat to its identity due to Kosovo's vital importance thereto. This has created an environment particularly amenable to the pernicious interaction of narratives of victimhood and imperatives of statehood. With regard to the issue of victimization narratives, the antipodal positions of each side create discursive space for the further entrenchment of such claims within each group's consciousness by casting the other side as the threatening oppressor due to their rival claims to Kosovo. As regards the role of the state, the fact that the Kosovo question is related in particular to the "homeland" component of identity—and thus concerns the spatial demarcation of territory—has ensured that the issue of statehood emerged as the paradigmatic solution for the concerns of each side, as the modern conception of the political delineates the state as the *telos* of political identity formation. The remainder of this paper will be dedicated to exploring how the intersection of these two elements has both contributed to the development of the Serb-Albanian conflict in Kosovo, and inhibited its resolution by any means other than the Kosovar declaration of independence—a solution that was by no means ideal, as it serves only to reinforce the problematic centrality of statehood to contemporary articulations of the political. I will proceed with an examination of how narratives of victimization can be seen as central to both Serbian and Kosovar Albanian conceptions of identity.

Victimhood as Identity: The Cases of Serbs and Kosovar Albanians

In discussing relations between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, one commentator has claimed that "each nation has embraced a separate orthodoxy in which it is uniquely the victim and never the perpetrator."²¹ This is not surprising, however, in that a narrative of victimization—both historical and contemporary—pervades the group identity constructs of both Serbs and Kosovar Albanians. This has led to pernicious consequences within the context of the conflict that has arisen over the territorial control of Kosovo, in that it has allowed each side to portray the other as the chief antagonist at whose hands they are threatened or victimized, thus ostensibly legitimizing practices of violence and repression in response due to the ethos of infallibility that accompanies the internalization of such narratives. A more in-depth discussion of the current of victimhood immanent in each group's self-conception will begin to indicate how this has become possible.

Serbian Victimhood

A sense of victimization as a result of years of suffering is deeply entrenched within Serb consciousness. Central to what Duijzings refers to as the Serb "obsession with suffering" is the Kosovo myth, as the disastrous defeat upon which it centres—which also led to centuries of "enslavement" by the Ottomans—became the crucible of Serbian national and political identity.²² Under the nearly 500 years of subsequent Ottoman subjugation, the myth of Prince Lazar and his martyrdom on the battlefield in Kosovo became the focal point of "Serbianness,"

²⁰ See, for example, "Failure to Protect: Anti-Minority Violence in Kosovo, March 2004" *Human Rights Watch* 16 (3) July 2004 pp. 57-62

²¹ Duijzings, p. 203

²² *Ibid.*, p. 182

generating a narrative of sacrifice and suffering that came to underwrite the Serbs' construction of their own identity as a distinct people. As it is something of a religious myth, with Lazar playing a Christ-like role, it precipitated the fusion of Serb religious and national identity, which coalesced to imbue the Serb people with a strong sense of victimization and suffering that is traced back to 1389.²³ Indeed, as Mylonas indicates, “suffering...[became] foregrounded, embedded, and familiarised in the collective consciousness as innate properties of the [Serb] national being.”²⁴

Although spawned under the oppressive rule of the Ottoman Sultan, the sense of victimhood as an innate characteristic of Serb identity persisted after the Turks retreated from the region in the 19th century. Serb nationalists, in the process of consolidating the nascent Serb state, deployed victimization narratives toward their political ends, grounding the notion that Serbs required their own state—which included the hallowed land of Kosovo—in account of their years of suffering and victimization at the hands of the Turks.²⁵ This sense of victimhood was further entrenched by Serb experiences in the first half of the 20th century. The most prominent event here was the genocidal anti-Serb conduct of the fascist Croatian Ustasha during the Second World War, as a result of which hundreds of thousands of Serbs were sent to concentration camps where many were executed. The events of this period had a profound and lasting impact upon the national consciousness of Serbs, instilling a further augmented sense of trauma and victimization that has survived to the present day.²⁶

Despite the fact that Serb nationalism writ large was consigned largely to the background by Tito's astonishing ability to stifle Balkan jingoism, the narrative of victimhood and suffering remained an integral element of Serb identity, as evidenced by its centrality in the rhetoric and ruminations of Serb public figures in the post-Tito era. Indeed, the victimization complex caused many Serbs to view the imminent disintegration of Yugoslavia as merely another threat to their own particular identity.²⁷ This led the theme of perpetual victimhood and suffering to re-emerge as “a leitmotif in politics, academia, and the mass media” in Serbia throughout the latter portion of the 1980s, peaking with 1989 celebrations of the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo.²⁸ The victimization narrative was further cultivated through popular publications portraying Serb history as “a succession of defeats and losses”, while nationalist politicians began referring to Serbs as “the slaughtered people” whilst also proclaiming that the years of suffering “made the Serbs what they are.”²⁹ As Duijzings states, Serbs in the late 1980s once again “understood that they were the victims,” as they had always been since 1389.³⁰ This discursive climate spawned a virulent nationalism of which Slobodan Milosevic emerged as the political manifestation. Often hailed as a latter day Prince Lazar, he stoked the fires of Serb victimhood by “promising the Serbs an end to their humiliation” through the unification of the historic Serbian lands, and pledging to rid them of “Turks” (read: Albanians) and “Ustasha” (read: Croats).³¹ The insidious practical manifestations of these promises need not be detailed here; but they were clear to anyone who turned on CNN in the mid-to-late 1990s.

²³ Duijzings, p. 178

²⁴ Mylonas, p. 18

²⁵ Duijzings, p. 179

²⁶ Mylonas, p. 81

²⁷ Duijzings, p. 180

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.197

³¹ *Ibid.*

The key point is that narrative of victimization can be located at the heart of both Milosevic's motivations and the overwhelming support he received from the Serb populace, even well into the 1999 NATO bombardment. In the latter context, travel writer Greg Campbell, in Kosovo during the campaign, summarized his interpretation of the Serb spirit as "proud to be the eternal underdogs" in a constant battle against outsiders "intent on crushing their culture and their people."³² Thus, the Serb sense of victimhood, born out of the defeat at Kosovo in 1389 and perpetuated thereafter by the Serb national experience, remains a central component of contemporary Serb identity, inexorably colouring how Serbs have come to frame the territorial conflict with the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo today.

Kosovar Albanian Victimhood

Although more recently constituted, a narrative of victimization is also a central element of Kosovar Albanian identity. In fact, as in the Serb case, it is perhaps the fundamental component, in that the sense of victimization—chiefly at the hands of the Serbs—precipitated the development of the Kosovar identity as discrete from that of the Albanian ethnic group writ large.³³ The distinct self-identification of the Kosovars coalesced to a significant degree in the years of Milosevic's rule, as his revocation of Kosovo's autonomy in 1989, and the subsequent repressive policies—along with Albanian resistance thereto—served to galvanize Kosovar identity as both distinct and premised upon a sense of victimization at the hands of the Serbs.³⁴ Moreover, the failure of the international community to include a settlement for Kosovo in the Dayton Agreements of 1995—largely due to a desire to ensure that Milosevic cooperated—further entrenched the notion that Kosovars were on their own against an existential threat, precipitating the radicalization of the populace through the development of an ethos of infallibility that spawned the proto-terrorist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).³⁵ Moreover, a major point of pride for the Kosovars—which further solidified their collective identity as valiant victims—was the creation of a parallel governance, education, and healthcare structures throughout the 1990s that operated in spite of Milosevic's attempts to "Serbianise" the region by depriving ethnic Albanians of such services. The fact that Kosovars viewed themselves as "surrounded by marauding enemy nations intent on crushing their culture and stealing their land," yet were able to maintain at least some degree of clandestine autonomy in the face of the Serb oppression became a seminal component of their identity.³⁶ Ultimately, Milosevic's vicious campaign of ethnic cleansing solidified the victimization narrative within the consciousness of the Albanians, for understandable reasons. The horrors visited upon the Kosovars in the latter half of the 1990s accordingly provided a legitimate basis upon which Kosovar leaders "presented their people to the outside world as a wronged and victimized nation"—a sentiment shared pervasively by the populace.³⁷ It thus may be concluded that a distinct Kosovar Albanian identity was, in effect, forged out of a shared experience as victims of Serb rule, and that as a result, this identity is premised to a significant degree upon the notion of "continuous Albanian anguish

³² Greg Campbell *The Road to Kosovo: A Balkan Diary* (Boulder: Westview, 2000) p. 218

³³ Ingimundarson, p. 99

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Sven Gunnar Simonsen "Nationbuilding as Peacekeeping: Racing to Define the Kosovar" *International Peacekeeping* 11 (2) 2004 p. 291

³⁶ Campbell, p. 151

³⁷ Duijzings, p. 203

under Serbian hands.”³⁸ This narrative thus remains perhaps the essential component of Kosovar identity today, despite the fact that Serb repression is no longer the problem it once was.

This point is best exemplified by the opinions and actions of the Kosovar Albanians in the wake of the NATO intervention that severed Serb control. Still identifying themselves as victims, many Kosovars vehemently pressed for the prosecution of accused Serb war criminals and decried the apparently lenient sentences given at their trials.³⁹ However, they also strongly resisted the attendant prosecution of KLA radicals who had committed atrocities against Serbs in retribution, claiming that the latter should not “be put on par with the Serbian perpetrators” since their actions had been legitimate under the circumstances.⁴⁰ This is certainly a manifestation of the ethos of infallibility that I have claimed is characteristic of a victimized self-perception. Moreover, the apparent apathy of the ethnic Albanian leadership toward the anti-Serb pogroms of March 2004 only further indicates that a narrative of victimhood—wherein they are continually threatened by the nefarious plottings of the Serbs—has been internalized by Kosovar Albanians and thus continues to constitute a central component of their identity. The result is that protection from this apparent threat emerges as an essential imperative, and maintaining control over Kosovo has become framed as a necessary component of any such goal since it represents the “homeland” to which the Kosovars intrinsically tie themselves and their identities.

Mutual Victimhood, Mutual Antagonism

It is thus clear that both the conflicting parties in the Kosovo case define themselves to a significant degree in terms of their purported victimhood in relation to the other, and this has played a significant role in inhibiting a solution to the conflict in itself. In this capacity, something of a vicious discursive cycle has emerged, wherein the two groups’ conflictual interactions have only served to further entrench these discourses by allowing each to portray the other as the oppressor—albeit not wholly unreasonably—whilst never acknowledging their own reciprocal culpability. This only serves to exacerbate the hostility between the groups, which, in turn, leads each to frame any potential concession that may lead toward a settlement as an existential threat to the group’s identity. The notion of victimhood renders the defence of the group against such a threat an essential imperative, thus contributing significantly to the intractability of the conflict by rendering a negotiated solution quite difficult to conclude. The ultimate failure of status negotiations in the Kosovo case has certainly illustrated this difficulty.

The internalization of a victim identity by both groups has thus engendered in each an apparent necessity to defend and protect at all costs that which is deemed representative of their defined community from the threatening other. As has been discussed above, the territorial “homeland” is an inherently vital component of any such construct, and the way to defend that element, according to the extant conceptual narrative, is to delimit it through the construction of a sovereign state boundary. The next section will discuss how this idea has emerged as an essential component of both the Serb and Albanian positions vis-à-vis the Kosovo question, thus further contributing to the intensity of the conflict.

³⁸ Duijzings, p.9

³⁹ Ingimundarson, p. 108

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109

The Narrative of State Sovereignty and Kosovo

Under contemporary discursive conceptions of the political, “sovereignty, or the quest for sovereignty...is constitutive of nationhood” and “the sovereign state is the gauge and emblem of a nation’s freedom.”⁴¹ Thus, not only is the establishment of a sovereign state an essential means to retain material control of a group’s “homeland,” but it is also a symbol of the group’s ability to resist outside oppression so as to ensure the safety and perpetuation of its political community. The concept of the sovereign state thus proves an attractive paradigm for an ostensibly victimized group, in that it provides a political model that is necessarily premised upon the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. Indeed, the modern notion of statehood “presses toward single identities out of a situation of multiple and often diffuse identities” by necessitating that fully developed group—or “national”—identities be “congruous with spatial and political boundaries.”⁴² Under this discursive construct, the concept of sovereignty over territory appears to provide the ultimate defence against threats to the survival of the community by legitimating the exclusion—by force, if necessary—of those others deemed threatening. In short, under modern conceptions of the political, the capacity to exert sovereignty over the homeland becomes an essential component of a group’s political identity, as it protects the vital component of that identity that is the homeland whilst also demarcating a safe space within which the community can continue to exist. To the inherently victimized group, this is an imagined space where they will no longer be victims.

In light of the discussion of victimization as it pertains to the parties of the Kosovo conflict undertaken above, it is unsurprising that such discursive precepts have also informed both sides as regards the Kosovo issue. Indeed, as Kostovicova asserts, it is “the notion of national identity constructed around the quest for national control over the contested homeland of Kosovo” that constitutes the core of the conflict.⁴³ In this capacity, both sides view the territory of Kosovo as an essential component—in the case of the Albanians, the only component—of a sovereign state that will permit the establishment and maintenance of the aforementioned ‘safe space’ where their historical victimization can be transcended. Its incorporation under their sovereign control has thus come to be constructed as essential for the realization of this indispensable goal for both groups.

In the case of the Serbs, as has been discussed, Kosovo constitutes an inalienable component of the imagined Serb homeland, and the idea that Serbs possess a “sacrosanct right” to rule the region is paramount.⁴⁴ In the wake of Yugoslavia’s disintegration, for instance, many Serbs regarded the extant borders of the Serbian constituent republic—which included Kosovo—as the “legitimate territorial expression of their nationhood.”⁴⁵ Thus, any threat thereto also came to be framed as a threat to Serbian identity at large. A threat emanating from Kosovo itself elicited an even stronger response, since Kosovo is “at the heart of Serbianness” as a result of the essential relationship between the myth of Prince Lazar and the construction of Serbian identity.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the preservation of sovereign control over Kosovo came to be framed as essential for the preservation of Serb identity itself. Within modern political discourse, the only

⁴¹ Kostovicova, pp. 4, 11

⁴² Duijzings, pp. 23, 25

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205

⁴⁵ Kostovicova, p. 7

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2

way to truly accomplish this goal—to keep Kosovo Serbian and thus protect Serb identity—was to retain it within the bounded territory of the sovereign Serbian state. Only then could Serb identity be protected from further victimization by hostile (O)thers, thus ultimately transcending the victimhood upon whose endurance Serb identity has been historically constructed. Retaining Kosovo under the sovereignty of Serbia thus provided the only acceptable solution to the Kosovo status question for most Serbs. The strength of this conviction became clear in the status negotiations following the NATO intervention, wherein the Serb delegation, when pressed, was willing to grant the Kosovars quite a significant degree of autonomy, but would not even consider the prospect of Kosovo’s independence.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, independence became entrenched as the only acceptable option for the Kosovar Albanians following Milosevic’s revocation of Kosovo’s autonomy in 1989. This event “made statehood the centrepiece of their political imagination” as it became clear to the Kosovars that Serb repression would destroy their identity as a discrete political and cultural community by forcing them out of their homeland of Kosovo.⁴⁸ Indeed, there exists “an equally strong Albanian attachment to Kosovo as a fatherland,” and as such, its preservation under Albanian control—which can only be assured through the exclusionary processes of sovereign state creation—became framed as essential to the preservation of Kosovar identity itself.⁴⁹ In this regard, Kosovars do not view themselves as a diasporic group of Albanians whose true home is to the southwest in Tirana and its environs; rather, they see Kosovo as their *only* homeland.⁵⁰ Given the importance of the homeland element to group identity, the prospective loss of Kosovo has, in much the same manner as with the Serbs, become framed as unacceptable. It is believed, perhaps somewhat justifiably, that such an outcome would sound the death knell for the Kosovar Albanian community, in that it would fall victim to further Serb oppression and perhaps even renewed expulsion. As a result, the Kosovars came to view sovereign statehood as the only viable option to safeguard against this eventuality, in that modern discursive conceptions of the political have identified state sovereignty as a means to prevent just such occurrences from befalling a political community such as theirs.⁵¹

It is thus clear that the concept of the state has played a significant role in fomenting and entrenching the conflictual relationship between Serbs and Albanians over the issue of Kosovo, in that both sides subscribe to the pervasive notion that bounding it within the inscribed borders of a sovereign state is the most effective way to preserve their identities. Within this paradigm, “rendering group and state boundaries coterminous” is identified as the means to insulate the group from the threatening others who have victimized them throughout their history.⁵² The Kosovo case indicates that when the urgency of defending and preserving the essential elements of group identity is high—as is inherently the case with groups whose identity is premised upon a discourse of victimhood—the metanarrative of the state is likely to become the vital imperative upon which political positions and choices are premised. As state boundaries are by definition

⁴⁷ The official name granted to this stance was the peculiarly-termed “more than autonomy, less than independence.” See Tim Judah “Divorcing Serbia” *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 30 (2) 2006 p. 215

⁴⁸ Ingimundarson, p. 99

⁴⁹ Kostovicova, p. 4

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ On the notion of state sovereignty as the reified solution to the securing of particular political communities within modern conceptions of the political, see R.B.J. Walker *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁵² Robin Wilson “The Politics of Contemporary Ethno-Nationalist Conflicts” *Nations and Nationalism* 7 (3) 2001, p. 368

discrete and cannot overlap, the potential for a compromise solution is thus rendered largely impossible, and the conflict becomes intractable and amenable only to a binary solution that is in accordance with the wishes of one side and not the other—hardly an ideal circumstance to foster future collegial relations between the two groups. The recent independence of Kosovo, backed to a significant degree by the international community, provides an example of such a solution, while the vociferous Serb uproar in response illustrates the resultant danger for the future stability of the region caused by the resultant perpetuation of hostile relations.

Kosovo as a Site of Pernicious Discursive Interaction

The Kosovo case is thus quite instructive in demonstrating the pernicious consequences for inter-group relations when identity constructs premised upon a narrative of victimization intersect with the imperatives of statehood. Given the particular characteristics of the Kosovo case, this model provides a useful lens through which to view the conflict that goes some way toward explaining its intensity and thus also its apparent intractability. To summarize: the national cosmologies of both the Serbs and Kosovar Albanians are premised upon an account of victimhood, while sovereign control over the territory of Kosovo is framed as an essential component for the realization of a circumstance where that status may be ultimately transcended. From this case, it might be concluded that a group which deems itself the perpetual victim will view the exclusionary imperatives of the sovereign state as a path to group security, in that the purportedly threatening others can be effectively ostracized through the process of statemaking, thus ostensibly removing the threat to the group's identity apparently posed thereby. The zealotry with which both Serbs and Kosovars have pursued statehood in relation to the territory of Kosovo provides a compelling illustration of this point.

Unfortunately, this zealotry has manifested itself in violent, oppressive behaviour by both sides, whilst also precluding the conclusion of a settlement to the conflict suitable to both parties. Indeed, the antagonistic interaction between the two groups has only exacerbated the pernicious effects of the confluence of narratives of victimhood with imperatives of statehood. In this capacity, the mistreatment of the other group in Kosovo when one group is in control—whether it be the Serbs prior to 1999 or the Albanians thereafter—has served to strengthen the imperative to achieve statehood in Kosovo for both parties by further entrenching the sense of victimhood within their respective identities. Moreover, this latter effect has augmented the ethos of infallibility on each side, inhibiting the potential for any degree of reconciliation, as each side is very reluctant to admit any wrongdoing in relation to its actions toward the other throughout the conflict.⁵³ As Ingimundarson contends, “the portrayal of perpetrators and victims as equals—as in South Africa—as part of a healing process would probably be interpreted as a travesty of justice in Kosovo.”⁵⁴ The result is an environment in which harmonious cohabitation becomes near impossible, as evidenced by the ongoing strict separation between Serbs and Albanians, even in an independent Kosovo.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ingimundarson, p. 109

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Indeed, presently Kosovo's Serbs are consigned to a few limited districts in which they form the majority and are excluded almost entirely from the mainstream of a Kosovar society controlled by the Albanians. Interaction between the two groups remains very minimal, and relations remain hostile. See Matthew Price “Kosovo's Deep Divide” *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/3186800.stm> Accessed: March 26, 2008

A final pernicious consequence of this discursive interaction is that, within such a hostile political environment, the only potential solution that emerged as a viable means to prevent the perpetual exchange of violence between the two groups was to simply pursue a course of action that was congruent with the aims of one side, granting it sovereignty over the disputed territory whilst leaving the other with nothing. Such a solution was possible in the Kosovo case due to contemporary geopolitical realities, in that the international community, led by the major Western powers, could intervene forcefully—as NATO did in 1999—and essentially prescribe a solution in favour of the Kosovars—as many states did, first through the UN’s trusteeship, then through their recognition of Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence. Although perhaps pragmatic, the discursive effects of applying such a solution to an issue such as Kosovo are significant. Not only will this solution only augment the dangerous ethos of victimhood among the “losing” side—in this case the Serbs—potentially providing only a “band-aid” solution to the issue in Kosovo specifically, but, perhaps more importantly, a solution premised upon the concept of statehood for one side over the other serves only to further entrench the paradigm of state sovereignty as a necessary imperative for the full realization of a group’s identity within the international imaginary in general. As a corollary to the arguments presented in this paper, such a solution that fails to challenge the ontological status quo will go no way toward developing a discursive political climate that may serve to prevent the future emergence of conflictual situations such as that between the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo.

Thus, the Kosovo case provides a representative example of the pernicious interplay of narratives of victimization and the sovereign state, and the conflict between Serbs and Albanians there illustrates the most odious consequences that such a discursive interaction can bring about: the violent persecution of one group by the other, amounting to attempted expulsion from the territory—as Milosevic attempted toward the Albanians—or wholesale ostracism from civil and political society—as is the current plight of Kosovo’s Serbs; the creation of an environment so hostile that any negotiated compromise to end such acts becomes impossible; and the creation of a situation where the only viable solution appears to be one that serves to further entrench the very sources of the problem by exacerbating one side’s sense of victimhood while reaffirming the apparent value of statehood for the realization and protection of group identity. In light of these observations, it follows that only a change in how political communities *think* about what is required for the full realization and ultimate protection of their identity can pave the way for the avoidance of a similar situation of violence followed by intractability in future conflicts rooted in questions of identity politics.

Conclusion: Thinking Beyond the Statehood/Sovereignty Thematic⁵⁶

Given that the history of encounters between discrete groups of people has been characterized to a significant degree by conflict and oppression, the role of victimization narratives in the construction of group identities will undoubtedly continue to be a major element in the identity politics of the global community. Although such identity constructs can be dangerous in their own right—particularly through their fomentation of an ethos of infallibility within the group—the Kosovo case demonstrates that their interaction with the dominant

⁵⁶ Apologies are due to Jim George, as this turn of phrase is thieved from his piece “Realist ‘Ethics’, International Relations, and Post-Modernism: Thinking Beyond the Egoism-Anarchy Thematic” *Millennium*, 24(2), 1995, pp. 195-223

paradigm of the sovereign state results in the emergence of a particularly negative set of circumstances. Thus, to make any progress toward the transcendence of these problems, the discursive environment in which groups construct their identity and pursue its political realization must be altered. Indeed, this paper has demonstrated by way of the Kosovo case that conflicts premised upon identity politics such as this are rooted particularly in how each group *thinks* about both its own identity, and what is required to preserve the core components thereof. This thinking is informed by the dominant narratives of the modern conception of the political, chief among them the concept of the sovereign state. It follows that only the development of different ways of thinking about political identity could potentially work toward averting the emergence of an intractable conflict of the Kosovo type in the future, even if the two sides do nevertheless identify themselves as perpetual reciprocal victims. Thus, while it is difficult to fault the pragmatism of the international community in pursuing a solution that operated within the established discursive boundaries of the international system, such a solution nevertheless avoided addressing what this paper has attempted to illustrate are vital underlying issues at play in conflicts such as that in Kosovo—namely, the interaction of a particular conception of identity (victimization) with the dominant narrative of political organization (the state).

To successfully transcend such problems, the idea that the realization and protection of a group's identity *need not require the achievement of sovereign statehood* must be propagated within global political discourse. This is not a mere academic pipedream, however, as such ideas have emerged within the political thinking of some ostensibly oppressed minorities, most notably the Catalans in Spain. The Catalan example is quite instructive in this regard, as the major political figure in that community for the past two decades, Jordi Pujol, has repeatedly denounced aggressive lobbying for statehood as a futile exercise that will lead only to conflict and further suppression of the Catalan identity, rather than its protection.⁵⁷ The type of identity politics practiced by Catalan nationalists under Pujol and his disciples emphasizes that “it is possible to be a nationalist without seeking independence, and nationalities such as Catalonia can live and develop within the framework of larger political institutions.”⁵⁸ Such thinking has broadly taken hold in Catalonia, permitting a distinctly Catalan identity to flourish under a significant level of regional autonomy from Madrid, whilst also avoiding the pernicious culture of fear perpetuated by a violent either/or sovereigntist approach characteristic of Basque nationalism and the Kosovo conflict.⁵⁹ Of course, this is not to suggest that the cases of Catalonia and Kosovo are particularly analogous. Rather, the point is that a post-sovereign approach akin to that being pursued in Catalonia makes the crucial discursive move of divorcing the successful protection of political identity from the concept of the sovereign state, thus severing the tie between identity and statehood which emerged out of the nationalist fervour of 19th century Europe. This is a significantly positive step toward redrawing the discursive boundaries of what and where the political must be, and, in light of the arguments presented in this paper, it stands to reason that such thinking may have gone some way toward mitigating the intractability of the Kosovo conflict had it provided the dominant mode of thinking about political identity at the time of that conflict's emergence. Encouragingly in this regard, one commentator has convincingly asserted that the Catalan example represents a broader trend toward the “reframing” of sovereignty, whereby sub-state group identity claims are increasingly framed not in terms of secession and statehood, but rather through a combination of “greater autonomy and

⁵⁷ Wilson, p. 371

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Stephen Hugh-Jones, “Robust Basques and Regional Catalans” *The Economist* vol. 357 (8198) pp. 12-16

enhanced recognition *within* the state” and the pursuit of “some measure of discrete personality within the international institutions to which the state belongs.”⁶⁰ While a further discussion of such questions is beyond this paper’s scope, it may be concluded that if such ideas are able to diffuse to other sites of identity conflict—thus proliferating a move away from the conflation of political identity with statehood—perhaps the catastrophe of Kosovo will come to be viewed as an anachronism, rather than the norm, in a global polity where identity and victimhood are all too often inexorably intertwined.

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⁶⁰ Stephen Tierney, “Reframing Sovereignty? Sub-State National Societies and Contemporary Challenges to the Nation-State” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 54, January 2005, p. 162

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