Yugoslav Collapse and NATO‘s Precedent for Violent Border Changes

NATO and EU „jurists“ are trying to tell us that Kosovo is a case „sui generis“ — aka unlike any case before or after it. Well, how convenient, since it is the first case that NATO used to justify bombing foreign territory (Serbia). Today we are going to put a very close focus on Kosovo, the history of the conflict, and what it is all about. Joining me is Dr. Sandra Davidovich, a scholar of Yugoslav history and modern Kosovo. Links: Sandra's Google Scholar page: https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=or-IsvEAAAAJ Neutrality Studies substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com Goods Store: https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:33 Sandra's Connection & Research Interests 00:02:21 History and the Yugoslav Framework 00:10:42 Ethnic Identity vs. National Projects 00:23:16 Foreign Intervention and the Road to 1999 00:37:51 NATO’s Role and the 1999 Bombing 00:48:42 Northern Kosovo and the Secession Dispute 00:58:03 Reconciliation and Future Outlook

#Pascal

Hello, everybody. This is Pascal Lottaz from Neutrality Studies, and today I'm talking to Dr. Sandra Davidović, who researches Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia. Sandra, welcome.

#Sandra Davidović

Thank you for having me, Pascal.

#Pascal

Well, thank you very much for saying yes. You know, I’ve wanted to cover the issue of Kosovo for quite a while. You’ve just been there, you’ve got a personal connection with it, and you’ve made it your field of study under someone who’s also been on this channel before, Susan Woodward. Could you maybe tell us a little bit—first of all, what’s your connection, and what are you looking at right now in your research?

#Sandra Davidović

Absolutely. So my main connection is that I'm from the region I study. I was born in Serbia—actually, I was born in the former southern republic of Yugoslavia. As I was growing up, I was observing a lot of interesting events that eventually triggered my interest in political science,

particularly in the conflicts in the region. And then I was lucky enough to encounter some scholars who have been studying the region for quite some time, both in the region—particularly in Serbia—but also in the United States, where I'm currently conducting my PhD research.

And while I was initially interested in studying the breakup of Yugoslavia, over time my focus really shifted to the issue of Kosovo, which is itself a complex and protracted conflict. Currently, I study the role of non-state political orders and their contribution to complex civil situations, which, in the context of the Yugoslav breakup—and particularly in the case of Kosovo—have had some relevance that we can discuss further throughout the conversation. As you mentioned, I've been to North Kosovo recently to study the security environment following the decay of institutions in the north. And yeah, that brought me here, so I'm looking forward to sharing some of my insights.

#Pascal

Thank you. Can you give us a rundown for people who aren't familiar with the history—especially the recent history—of Kosovo? I mean, present-day Serbia still claims it as part of its territory, but there was an independence movement, and a lot of EU states and others recognize it as an independent state. And de facto, there's a government in Pristina that controls the territory, right? So can you give us the key historical dates and events that help us understand where we are today?

#Sandra Davidović

Sure. I'd start by saying that the issue of Kosovo—the problem of Kosovo in modern times—has been studied primarily through two frameworks. At least, I've identified two main frameworks in the ongoing research. One would be in the context of the Yugoslav crisis, right? So, the collapse of Yugoslavia, and there Kosovo has been perceived as one more example of secessionism, similar to what happened in, let's say, Croatia or Slovenia, or even perhaps as the final phase of the Yugoslav breakup. And I'll go back to that. On the other hand, especially following 1999—which is the year most people associate with Kosovo—it's often discussed through something called *sui generis*.

Kosovo is usually presented as an exceptional case that really defies existing political, legal, or even cognitive frameworks. Now, I would say that the Kosovo problem—or Kosovo crisis or conflict—actually represents a fairly typical territorial dispute between two national groups: the Serbs on one side and the Albanians on the other, each claiming their right over this piece of land on different grounds. This dispute can be traced back at least to 1913, when the territory of today's Kosovo was incorporated into the Serbian state. That's when it became part of the Serbian national project.

And from there on, on the side of the Albanian national elites, there's this commitment to correct what they've perceived as a historical injustice. This continuity of conflict reemerged throughout the 20th century in different forms, and that commitment has been pursued using different strategies. I

say this because, as someone who comes from the region, I know how detrimental it has been to study the region and the conflict in Kosovo by reducing it to single-cause explanations or to certain events or individuals. So it's useful, perhaps, to begin by contextualizing a little bit.

#Pascal

It is, because it's—well, as with anything in the Balkans, it's quite complex. And depending on who you talk to, they'll say, "Oh no, you're framing me completely wrong." There's really no way to talk about the Balkans without making somebody angry, which is quite fascinating. But what—can you tell us what the situation is today? So, Kosovo is de facto split off from Serbia. In northern Kosovo, there's still a sizable Serbian population; in the rest of Kosovo, it's mainly Albanian. The Serbs there in Kosovo would still want to join Serbia. But can you give us a rundown of what it looks like today?

#Sandra Davidović

Yes, I'm glad you mentioned both points. The first is that it's difficult to talk about this—and it's even harder for me than for you—because I come from the region, and that region is rife with conflict legacies and traumas. My interest has been driven by the need to contribute to a better understanding of it and, hopefully, to make the region a better place. I'd like to emphasize that my approach to studying the conflict has always been inspired by people who have studied this region with both integrity and empathy. And I think today's conversation certainly requires the same.

Going back to your second point, I'd say it's difficult to understand where we are right now if we don' t go back and unpack several phases of Kosovo's conflict. But you made an interesting point when you said we have all these competing countries, and I think it's important to underscore that. The Kosovo issue has been framed through the notion of human rights, through humanitarian interventionism, through the right to self-determination, and through all kinds of normative and even ideological frameworks. Nevertheless, I'd like to emphasize that, in its essence, it's a conflict containing mutually exclusive claims over the same territory—claims to sovereignty.

And if you think about the case of Kosovo in that way, you can certainly find similar dynamics elsewhere in the world—like the conflict over Kashmir or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The European Union, and Europe in general, is full of secessionist movements. I say this because of the tendency I mentioned at the beginning—which we can unpack later—to frame Kosovo as a solitary space, as an exceptional conflict that somehow defies everything we know about conflicts and therefore has to be studied differently. And the policies applied somehow have to differ from the usual ones that are part of peacebuilding and state-building agendas.

#Pascal

Yeah, and you know, it's quite interesting, but a lot of people have problems with the idea that two things can be true at the same time. On the one hand, obviously, Kosovo is Kosovo, and the history

of Kosovo belongs to Kosovo and Serbia. You know, the case is the case. On the other hand, some of the dynamics are repeating, right? We see that in other cases. We see how the Basques in Spain and Catalonia in Spain have independence movements. We see how Corsica has an independence movement. Obviously, they're different; they have different developments. But we see how political developments can be quite similar—which, by the way, is one of the reasons why Spain doesn't recognize the independence of Kosovo. As far as I know, they still don't, because Spain is very aware that if they do that, they're just giving additional arguments to their own separatists to break away.

On the other hand, we have the European Union which, when it comes to Kosovo, says very clearly it' s its own state, and we need to support them—as well as NATO. But when it comes to the Donbass region, for eight years they were very adamant about saying, no, state sovereignty takes precedence over independence claims. So we have a lot of problems that need to be unpacked. One more thing—sorry that I'm speaking so long—but I also talked to the Bosnian scholar Zlatko Hadžidedić, and he made a very important point: these ethnic differences—Serb, Albanian, Bosniak, Croat—are relatively recent inventions, he says, about 150 years old. What is, in your view, the impact of not nationalism, but the perception of ethnic belonging?

#Sandra Davidović

Well, I would say this has been a contest between two national ideas. Now, the role of ethnicity—just the category of ethnicity—is a bit of a tricky one, and I'd rather stay away from it. But the idea of the nation-state and national awareness is very much part of the story in Kosovo, and it has been since the mid-19th century, when nation-states emerged in the Balkans. You know, this dynamic of different national projects colliding with one another has been present throughout the entire region. In this particular case, we have the territory of Kosovo contested between two national groups.

What I'd like to stress now is how this dynamic evolved throughout the 20th century—under what forms, within what normative frameworks, and what some of the solutions were for the essential conflict. Pretty much since 1913, there's been this commitment, as I mentioned, among Kosovo Albanians to change the situation on the ground, which they did not accept. The incorporation of Kosovo into the Serbian, and later the Yugoslav, state was seen as not the best solution for the Albanians. Then we have the 20th century, with all its changes, creating different opportunities and constraints for this grievance to be articulated in various forms again.

One important context—probably the most important one, going back to the story from the beginning—would be the Yugoslav state, and particularly the Yugoslav crisis. I'd like to identify several phases that might help your viewers think in terms of a timeline, at least my timeline. So, we have this commitment, this contest between two groups. But speaking in modern times, since we probably don't have time to go back through all of history, if we think of the state of Yugoslavia—and by that I mean the post–Second World War socialist Yugoslavia—we again see the incorporation of Kosovo into the state. And then there were several phases in which this problem reemerged.

I would, for the sake of today's conversation, focus on the decade of the 1980s—a very consequential decade for the whole country's destiny and eventual breakup, but especially for the Kosovo issue. And then the decade of the 1990s, which ended with the 1999 bombing of Kosovo. That marked the end of this phase, but it also marked the beginning of a new phase of the problem, which, after the military intervention was over in 1999, now included international administration over Kosovo. That entailed a very broad and comprehensive peace and state-building mission from then on. So, three decades to look at and to understand the dynamics of what we call the Kosovo problem.

#Pascal

Yep. And before we started recording, you told me that it's really important to understand the level of what foreign interference is doing to this conflict—how it impacts the conflict. And, you know, the bombing in 1999 in Serbia was over Kosovo, of course, right? But you can maybe explain that in a moment. Just—the 1980s are a very interesting period. That's also the period, of course, when Tito died. And Tito was a fascinating character, especially for me, studying neutrality and non-alignment, because he was such a popular figure. I mean, his funeral—I think it was the largest funeral of a state leader, with heads of state attending from both the East and the West. So, can you maybe tell us more about the '80s?

#Sandra Davidović

Absolutely. I'll just go back to the point you made at the beginning—that is, the role of foreign interventionism. So, if we agree that there has been a continuity of the contest between two groups over the same territory, we would certainly have to incorporate into that dynamic the continuity of foreign interventionism in the Balkans. Because when I mentioned that there were these different national projects colliding with one another, which eventually led to certain conflicts in the Balkans, the resolution—the so-called resolution—of these conflicts over territory in the Balkans has rarely happened without foreign interventionism.

And if we can find a single element that connects the early Kosovo crisis—or even its historical aspects—with the one today, it would be that of foreign interventionism. And that foreign interventionism has changed the normative, or even ideological, frames on which it was justified. But it was never really outside the picture, except maybe—well, not maybe—except for the duration of the Yugoslav state, which, through its neutral position, managed to prevent at least intrusive political interventionism. So, in a way, as long as Yugoslavia was stable, the Kosovo issue was contained and, in a way, controlled or pacified within the state itself.

When the state entered a major economic and then constitutional crisis, which evolved into a full political conflict, the Kosovo issue re-emerged—first in the form of demands for self-determination, which took different shapes, and then in the 1990s through a direct request for secession. So, in a

way, the Yugoslav crisis created a political opportunity for the ongoing, long-standing, complex conflict to re-emerge and take on a new form, which in the 1980s was still framed in the language of constitutional reform, representation, and the right to self-determination—or, more specifically, the request to turn Kosovo from a province into the seventh republic of Yugoslavia.

#Pascal

Can you explain that—the republics, the province, and the autonomy status?

#Sandra Davidović

Yeah, perhaps we skipped a few steps for those who aren't familiar with the whole context of the Yugoslav state. So, after the country was formed, it had six republics, right? One of which was Serbia. But then, within Serbia, the communist leadership decided to form two provinces—one in the north and the other in the south—and give them first the status of a region, what we would call an oblast. For those who follow the Ukrainian conflict, that word is familiar. And then that position, or status of oblast, was progressively developed into an autonomous status in the mid-1960s. Eventually, it was developed into a near-republican status, though it was still officially a province.

By 1974, under the famous Yugoslav constitution, Kosovo—like Vojvodina—had already assumed a near-republican status. I'd like to make a quick distinction for those who aren't familiar with Kosovo, the Yugoslav federation, and its complexity, especially its tendency to decentralize the decision-making process. Kosovo was a province within Serbia, which itself was a republic, or a federal unit, within Yugoslavia. But the important distinction between, say, Croatia and Kosovo was that Kosovo, as mentioned, did not have official republic status. That meant it did not have the constitutional right to national self-determination, which the other peoples—those in the republics—enjoyed within the constitutional framework.

And second, possible opinions were that Kosovo Albanians enjoyed the position of a national minority, not the position or status of a constituent nation in Yugoslavia—like, again, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia. So there was a difference between a province and a republic. But as mentioned, I believe even on this channel before, by 1974 Kosovo had achieved similar rights, or almost a republican status. It enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, including a seat in the federal presidency and, technically, the possibility to veto decisions equal to those of Serbia, which was a republic—except that it did not have the right to secede.

#Pascal

Right. So it was an integrated part of Serbia, but it had very special rights within Serbia, almost like a republic, even though Serbia was only one of the six republics of Yugoslavia. I mean, that's just the complexity of the political framework. But it was a relatively successful framework, especially, as you mentioned, in preventing intervention. And the Balkans were such a melting pot for a long time.

You know, the Austro-Hungarians intervened, and from the south, the Turks had been intervening for a long time. So intervention in the Balkans, and around Kosovo—again, a melting pot—is nothing new at all.

Now, one of the things was that Tito was successful at really dialing that down. And thanks to a former foreign minister of Malta, I know that the reason the Non-Aligned Movement never had a central secretariat was because Tito said no. He said, if we do that, the Soviets will infiltrate it and take it over. So Tito was very aware, not just of Western and Eastern intervention, but of intervention from both sides. Now, once Tito died, and then these crises at the end of the '80s emerged—which a lot of people thought were very different from the crises in the Soviet Union—how did that then lead again to interventionism from the outside, or from which sides was the region intervened in?

#Sandra Davidović

Well, I would say from different sides, but most notably from the West. Now, to understand why the West even intervened, we have to unpack a bit of the decade of the 1980s, which was—and I know this has been discussed, so I don't want to go over it too much—a decade of major economic crisis for Yugoslavia. It then had to pursue constitutional reforms in order to implement some of the requests by international economic organizations, most notably the IMF. Now, the question is, how did this impact Kosovo exactly? Well, it impacted Kosovo because the Serbian leadership started contemplating constitutional reforms within the republic itself, and one of the options was, of course, re-centralizing, at least to a certain extent.

The other thing was that Yugoslavia faced a major economic crisis, which every republic felt. Yet Kosovo, being the least developed part of Yugoslavia—which is very important to emphasize—felt this the most. Why? Well, a huge part of Kosovo's development following the Second World War was funded through the Federal Investment Fund, which was established by the Yugoslav authorities to reduce those famous regional inequalities that were so painful for everyone in Yugoslavia. And Kosovo, by the way, was the largest recipient of those funds' investments. From what had been a fairly underdeveloped agricultural society, it became highly industrialized. Nevertheless, it still remained the least developed part of Yugoslavia.

For instance, Kosovo's GDP was constantly around 30% of the national average and about one-eighth of Slovenia's GDP. When you combine these two pressures—one that could potentially undermine Kosovo's autonomy and the other that created real socioeconomic grievances in the 1980s—you get a fertile ground for those long-standing aspirations to reemerge. So what had been an actual socioeconomic crisis really boosted these nationalist claims, or at least those grievances were expressed through the language of nationalism. And in 1981, we had the first major demonstrations, led by students, by the way, which then turned into a demand for Kosovo to become a republic—exactly one year after Tito's death.

For the Yugoslav leadership, this event—taking place at the beginning of such a painful decade and containing nationalist slogans—was perceived as a failure, a major shock. It was seen as nationalist, anti-revolutionary activity in Kosovo, something Yugoslavia had already faced in the past. By the end of the ’80s, these demonstrations were evolving, and by the beginning of the ’90s—well, to speed up the story—they became articulated through the language of secessionism. This was already the decade of the ’90s, which some describe as the age of secessionism, at least in the case of Yugoslavia.

#Pascal

Yeah, I mean, the ’90s were the decade when Yugoslavia completely broke apart, right? And then we had several Yugoslav states. In the end, it was just Serbia and Montenegro left in the last Yugoslav framework. Then we get to 1999, right? And then comes the armed conflict in Kosovo, with the rest of the Yugoslav army fighting inside Kosovo against armed groups—the UÇK, right? And then comes the interventionism, then the bombing. Can you maybe tell us about the role of NATO? Because in other discussions, that was pointed out to me as the moment when NATO kind of decided, you know, “out of area or out of business.”

And they decided to go out of area, to intervene in this conflict. They did so with something that was even shown once on German TV as “It Started with a Lie”—the lie that there were mass executions in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, and that the Serbian army was carrying out a second Srebrenica. The story was that the West had to intervene on humanitarian grounds, to save the Albanians from what was described as the Serbs’ campaign of extermination. Can you speak to that?

#Sandra Davidović

Yes. However, I do have to make a quick introduction to 1999, because it’s crucial to understand how we came to see a military solution as the only solution for the crisis—which was real. So, at the beginning of the ’90s, there was dissatisfaction among Kosovo Albanians with what had been a reduction of their autonomy. Just to remind you, in 1989 Kosovo’s autonomy was reduced. I can go back and explain how that happened—among other reasons, because a lot of people begin the story of Kosovo with 1989. But since you asked about NATO’s military intervention, I’ll move forward and say that the initial response among Kosovo Albanians was to boycott the Serbian state.

For them, the reduction of Kosovo’s autonomy—and I would underscore “reduction,” because it wasn’t a revocation; I can elaborate on that as well—was perceived as a security threat. And at first, and this is very important, Kosovo Albanians organized politically around the figure of Ibrahim Rugova, who was a writer, a respected individual, and someone who pursued nonviolent or passive resistance, very much opposed to armed struggle or armed conflict. This was for both ideological or normative reasons, but also strategic ones, because Kosovo was far from being in a position to actually fight the Yugoslav forces. From the beginning of the ’90s until pretty much the Dayton Conference, it was Rugova’s leadership that accumulated mass support among Kosovo Albanians.

So this was transformed by 1995 into a proper national movement, now with a clear political goal: Kosovo's separation from whatever was left, whether Serbia or Yugoslavia. And then, while Rugova certainly enjoyed a lot of support and actually engaged in many creative forms of boycotting the Serbian state—including forming parallel state institutions, which is exactly what we have now in the north of Kosovo—the disappointment among Kosovo Albanians with his achievements, and particularly their sidelining in the context of the Dayton Conference, where Kosovo was not mentioned as part of the final solution for the Yugoslav crisis, completely changed the political sentiment among Kosovo Albanians. I think there was an understanding that peaceful, nonviolent resistance wouldn't really lead to any kind of international intervention.

#Pascal

They felt left out—the Kosovo Albanians felt excluded from the settlement that Dayton ultimately delivered.

#Sandra Davidović

Yes. And the goal was precisely the opposite—to attract international attention and, ideally, get some form of intervention, right? So, in a way, Rugova did not deliver on that promise. And this exactly set the stage for the rise of what would become the UÇK, or as you said, the Kosovo Liberation Army—a paramilitary organization that gave up on passive resistance and decided to pursue an armed struggle against Yugoslav and Serbian authorities. Their goal was the same, but they simply did not believe that nonviolent resistance would lead anywhere.

Rather, they decided to pursue armed attacks. Over time, they developed into a proper insurgency with the goal of provoking violence from the Yugoslav authorities—ideally to trigger some kind of massive retaliation, with many civilian casualties and population displacement—all to attract international intervention. This made sense strategically, because without that, the chances for the KLA, especially in the mid-90s, to gain any military advantage against the Yugoslav authorities, and later the Yugoslav army, were non-existent.

#Pascal

So the understanding was quite simple: we were too weak to secede militarily from Serbia on our own. But if we managed to bring in the Europeans, if we managed to bring in somebody from the outside to fight on our behalf, then we might win. And that worked.

#Sandra Davidović

Yes, from the perspective of how interventionism got involved, this would be the way to think about it. Of course, I don't intend to deny the real grievances that existed on the side of the Albanian people. Now, the question here is more about how these grievances were articulated. As we

mentioned, in the first half of the ’90s there was one approach and one strategy. In the second half, we see an escalation, and then by 1998, what had been relatively low-scale fighting between the Yugoslav authorities and the KLA evolved into a major clash—a proper kind of typical insurgency campaign—with larger numbers of civilian casualties and population displacement.

And in 1998, the goal was finally achieved, because that’s exactly when Kosovo’s problem became internationalized—that is, when international actors began their more proactive involvement, both the United Nations and, most importantly, NATO and its leadership. Unlike some other cases of the Yugoslav breakup, I think that in the case of Kosovo, the role of NATO was simply crucial.

#Pascal

Can you explain that? What did NATO actually do? Because the intervention—the bombing of Serbia in 1999—didn’t happen right away. There was a build-up to it. Can you walk us through that build-up?

#Sandra Davidović

Yes. In 1998, we had clashes first between the Yugoslav police units and then the army. By the summer of 1998, it really became violent. There were about 2,000 casualties on both sides and around 100 to 200 thousand people displaced within or leaving Kosovo. This was perceived by the UN as a potential security threat—a threat to international peace and security. So the UN started issuing resolutions, particularly one that invited both sides to, you know, agree to a ceasefire.

#Pascal

Those were Security Council resolutions, I suppose.

#Sandra Davidović

Yeah, yeah. To reach out or engage in some form of political dialogue and allow access to humanitarian organizations. So both sides were condemned—the terrorist activities of the KLA and the excessive use of force by the Serbian army. They were both invited to work on resolving this peacefully so everyone could return to their normal lives. Nevertheless, in parallel with the UN’s preparation and engagement in Kosovo, NATO began its own, I would say, parallel engagement, especially in the fall of 1998. NATO started to become vocal about a potential military intervention, issuing the so-called activation order—meaning it would bomb Yugoslavia, or Serbia, if the UN resolutions were not respected. And in a way, there were references to the UN, but as we’ll talk about later, the UN was essentially sidelined, because the 1999 intervention was conducted, as you mentioned, without UN Security Council authorization—which really set an interesting and significant precedent, if you will.

#Pascal

Yeah, but NATO keeps saying, "No, no, no, we're acting based on the Security Council resolutions. We're kind of implementing what the Security Council decided should happen." Can you explain that logic?

#Sandra Davidović

I think that logic was simply about using the UN framework to justify what had already been a fairly firm decision to intervene militarily in Kosovo, for several reasons. I'll give you one example where we can compare NATO's decision to move on its own and still engage in some form of multilateralism. This was an attempt to find an alternative to a military solution. So, in the fall of 1998—a year when there were some casualties, but nowhere near enough to threaten international peace and security—there was a first breakthrough in terms of talking between the sides, led by the U.S. special envoy Richard Holbrooke, a big name in the Balkans.

He managed to broker a deal with Slobodan Milošević—the famous Milošević–Holbrooke deal—which actually allowed the resolution that had been mentioned many times to be implemented. It also made it possible to establish some form of international mission in Kosovo for the very first time in the fall of 1998. That mission was set up under the OSCE umbrella. Nevertheless, the entire life of that mission was, in my view, marked by a complete lack of political commitment to its work in Kosovo, because the mission lacked funding, staff, and any real support or contributions from the states that were supposed to back its efforts on the ground.

Just to give you an example, three years after its establishment, the mission was not even close to having half of the required international verifiers, who were, by the way, supposed to monitor whether this ceasefire agreement would be implemented. Reading the papers from that time—especially those that are becoming more and more accessible now—you can argue that there was no real political interest in supporting the OSCE. The OSCE was seen as a kind of performance of multilateralism, where Russia and the U.S. had a relatively equal standing. But the actual political support from the United States was really for NATO, and NATO's central role in the case of Kosovo was, in my view, non-negotiable.

#Pascal

Non-negotiable in what sense? Like, they had a political outcome they wanted and weren't willing to move away from that? Or how do you mean?

#Sandra Davidović

I would say they made some credible commitments at the beginning of the crisis, and that on the side of NATO and U.S. policymakers there was an understanding that they had failed—or hadn't

intervened—in cases like Rwanda, or that they intervened too late in Bosnia. These failures, they felt, now had to be used in a way that would enable a quick and decisive military intervention. Because the conflict was framed in the language of human rights, it became non-negotiable to intervene to prevent what was described as a humanitarian catastrophe.

#Pascal

Yeah, although what came out later, of course, was that those claims about killing fields in Pristina and mass executions in football stadiums were completely made up. They just didn't happen. So what was the central claim—that Milosevic would not back down—that in the end led to the decision to start flying airplanes over Serbia?

#Sandra Davidović

So we have, between this attempt to resolve the crisis diplomatically through the Milosevic–Holbrooke agreement, another so-called attempt at Rambouillet, near Paris, to try to solve the problem diplomatically. I don't know how much you want to go over that, but eventually the justification was found on humanitarian grounds. As you mentioned, there was this understanding that the U.S. and civil authorities claimed Serbia was carrying out an organized campaign of ethnic cleansing and even genocide. I think the movie you mentioned—the German one—used the term "genocide." And so NATO had to step in to stop this catastrophe. Right. The thing is, of course, why? What happened later—was the catastrophe really prevented?

And of course, a serious question would be whether the situation on the ground throughout 1998—which was a very important year because we had attempts to resolve this problem diplomatically—was really as severe as claimed. I don't want to deny that there was a real crisis. The question is whether this crisis truly constituted a threat to international peace and security, especially when measured against other cases of human rights violations elsewhere. And even so, why were there no alternatives to a military solution? Why was it so crucial to intervene militarily, and why in that way? Honestly, I can only answer the "why" question by assessing the outcomes of the intervention.

#Pascal

I was about to say that, because one of the outcomes is NATO's largest military base in southern Europe—today in Kosovo. Is that something you'd say was on their minds, or were you thinking of other outcomes?

#Sandra Davidović

Well, there were a lot of reasons why this commitment had to be fulfilled. I think that, of course, securing more influence is better than not securing it. On the other hand, the main outcome, if you will, was a violent change of the border of a sovereign state, which created an important legal precedent for the cases we're studying these days, right?

#Pascal

Yeah, Ukraine.

#Sandra Davidović

Exactly. And by the way, in the context of the Yugoslav state, Serbia was the only republic whose borders were changed without its consent. And just to remind those who still think that Kosovo is the same as Croatia—in the case of Kosovo, we have the granting of the right to national self-determination to a minority, which is exactly what the Badinter Commission said they wouldn't do in the case of, let's say, Serbs in Croatia. So, the decision of the Badinter Commission at the very beginning of the Yugoslav crisis—the arbitral commission that set certain principles for how the dissolution of Yugoslavia would proceed, established by the European Communities, I think you discussed this before—was that only republics, meaning majorities, would get some kind of self-determination.

When the same thing was considered for, let's say, Serbs in Croatia, who made up a decent portion of the population, that request was rejected on the grounds I mentioned—that minorities are not given the right to self-determination. But that's exactly what happened in the case of Kosovo. And of course, the influence that NATO has in the region is certainly part of that outcome we can talk about today. Now, what exactly Kosovo represents today in terms of its statehood, its political, economic, and multi-ethnic standing is something we can go on discussing. What we know is that while the NATO intervention was justified on the grounds of humanitarian concerns—which were maybe, to some extent, real—I cannot say that.

I don't know. What we have, following the 1999 takeover of Kosovo by the UN and NATO, is that when the military intervention was over and the agreement was signed between the different sides, the UN took over responsibility to rule Kosovo indefinitely. Then we had another round of ethnic violence, this time against Serbs. From June 1999, when the bombing was over, about 230,000 to 250,000 Serbs left Kosovo for good—most of them permanently. Some remained in the northern part of Kosovo, which has functioned for almost two decades as a somewhat autonomous region, somewhere, I would say, between central Serbia and the rest of Kosovo.

#Pascal

One of my best friends in Switzerland is one of the 250,000 who left and never went back. And he says, look, this was a horrible period. The Serbs of northern Kosovo, in the end—in his words—they understand why the Albanians wanted to secede. But fine, if that's the outcome, then fine. But then, in that case, let us in northern Kosovo, the Serbs, secede and rejoin Serbia. Why would that not be allowed if the first one was allowed? And that's where he says this is a huge hypocrisy on the part of NATO and the EU—that they don't support the northern Serbs' right to secession from current Kosovo. So where are we at the moment? What's the rationale for why they cannot secede?

#Sandra Davidović

I would say there is no real rationale. It's just, I would say, a political application of the principle that was adopted in the early 1990s. And I think this fits the broader pattern we've seen in other republics of Yugoslavia. In the case of Bosnia, you had the secession of Bosnia and then a counterclaim to secession by Republika Srpska. In Croatia, you had the secession of Croatia and then a counterclaim to secession by Republika Srpska Krajina. I usually frame that as competitive state-building.

And that is what happened in Kosovo following 1999. The Serbs in the north quickly understood, at least in early 1999, that they were protected neither by Belgrade, which had withdrawn from Kosovo, nor by the international community. They were watching images of their fellow Serbs and other non-Albanians leaving Kosovo, following the convoys of police and military. When I did some interviews, many people mentioned that it was like a flashback for them—reminding them of the images they'd seen on TV during the ethnic cleansing in Croatia. So for them, it was a real security trap. They quickly realized in the north—and this is very interesting, theoretically—that they had to start organizing security on their own.

And they began organizing on their own to defend what they saw as their safe hub in the northern part of Kosovo, with North Mitrovica being the stronghold of the Serbs in Kosovo, and the bridge in the city dividing the northern from the southern part of the city and from the rest of Kosovo. It helped that they were geographically separated from the rest of the territory. This was the beginning, in 1999, of what I call the emergence or building of a parallel or alternative political order in the north. However, as you mentioned at the beginning, the same right that was given to Kosovo—although I'm not sure we should even call it a right—was not given to the Serbs in the north. Quite the opposite: the European Union has played an enormous role in dismantling this parallel order, despite its contribution to stabilizing this part of Kosovo, and I would argue, Kosovo in general.

#Pascal

And, you know, it really has to be emphasized how frightening it is when you realize you've become a hated minority in a state and houses are being burned. The history of the '90s in Yugoslavia is a

history of ethnic cleansing—one side driving out the other, burning houses, destroying livelihoods to make sure those people don't come back. And that's what started happening to the Serbs in northern Kosovo. What you're pointing out is that they began building these parallel structures to create at least a minimum level of security for those areas, although that's never perfect because the demarcation lines aren't straight. The divisions run even through villages, which then leads to violence. So, where are we today?

#Sandra Davidović

Well, it's not a perfect solution—there are no perfect solutions, especially in the Balkans. It was a practical response to the security vacuum that emerged with the simultaneous withdrawal of the Serbian–Yugoslav institutions and security forces, and the slow, painful establishment of the international administration in Kosovo. So, no perfect solution, but it was a way of defending yourself, right? And as you mentioned, the result was basically removing even that imperfect solution.

#Pascal

Where are we today? Serbia still claims Kosovo and still says it has a responsibility toward the Serbs in northern Kosovo. The authorities in Pristina say, "No, of course not." The EU and NATO say, "No, of course not." So, where are we today, and how does it work? Especially, what's life like for Serbs in northern Kosovo and for Albanians in the rest?

#Sandra Davidović

Well, Pascal, I would begin by saying that there is a huge ethnic gap between the two communities, and there has been a gap ever since. All of these policies—no matter how much we can criticize them—for the people who live there, the only real indicator of their success is whether they can live better, in a more tolerant, more developed, peaceful, successful, stable environment, however you want to call it. At the end of the day, when you go and do your fieldwork, you realize how much the things you study and write about impact someone's past, present, and future. And in that context, it is painful to observe what is going on in Kosovo.

I would say it's a fairly dysfunctional political system, divided along ethnic lines. With what we mentioned—the dissolution of the parallel institutions in the north—even that degree of stability the Serbs had through their self-organized parallel system, which was, by the way, largely funded and supported by Serbia but did begin as a grassroots movement, if you ask me, is now gone. The European Union, which became the main state-builder and mediator in what's known as the Brussels Agreement and the negotiations under the EU umbrella, has assumed that the north represents a black hole in the region, and that the path to long-term stability and peace in Kosovo would be to undermine and dismantle these institutions and eventually integrate the Serbs, if necessary forcefully, into Kosovo's political and legal system.

And from the perspective of state-building, this makes sense. But from the perspective of peace-building and thinking about long-term stability, it was a flawed or badly calculated assumption, because precisely with the beginning of the dissolution of order in northern Kosovo, we actually saw an escalation of conflict. And my research—now, to go back to your initial question—has been to understand the relationship between institutional development in northern Kosovo and conflict stabilization. Unlike the EU, I argue that the more order was developed, the more the region became stable and peaceful.

By the way, North Kosovo managed to remain the least affected part of Kosovo in terms of post-conflict violence. Since 1999, they managed to avoid being, you know, persecuted, expelled, and so on. So there was relative peace there. From 2013, we entered a phase of dismantling these institutions again. And guess what? In 2023, we saw a major escalation of conflict—six casualties. In my view, that outcome, no matter how many other interpretations and layers that conflict has, is a direct consequence of the EU's strategy of forceful integration of the North.

#Pascal

It's kind of a sad note to end this video on. Is there one more thing you think we should keep in mind when we talk about today's Kosovo and what's happening there—especially considering how recently these violent clashes and the sovereignty disputes with Serbia have developed? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

#Sandra Davidović

Of course, I'd love to finish on a more positive note, because despite everything I've said, I remain very much an optimist, and I believe the region has much more to offer. I'd like to zoom out now and bring back Kosovo, the region, and the importance of thinking about all this—with all the criticism I've highlighted—as part of regional reconciliation. And while a lot of what we mentioned was really on the negative side, I do believe there are different ways of reconciliation that can be pursued.

And there I have to mention, or maybe draw your attention to, the Serbian student movement that's been developing over the past year. It has offered an interesting form of reconciliation in the context of Serbia, although it's also attracted attention across the region. I say this because, as someone from the region who's very aware of my own biases and projections—both personal and national—I was really impressed by how they've managed to create a space where different groups, both social and ethnic, can participate in what has been a genuinely civic movement. They've managed to unite different nationalities within Serbia in a more genuine and authentic way.

And they managed to escape the labels that previous generations couldn't—those of ideological or national affiliation. Rather, they avoided those old traps and created a genuine space where people were invited in. This particularly applies now to the almost famous connection between the Serbian

and Bosnian communities, which is important in the regional context. And I do believe that these new generations have more to offer, and that this is one example of how reconciliation can be done, because I think they've changed society and taught us how to connect with one another in a much more effective way than many non-governmental organizations have managed in the region over the past 30 years.

#Pascal

I'm glad to hear that, because I think the antidote to divide and conquer is to try to talk and unite—not unite in the stupid sense under one leader, but under common groups, common interests. There are a lot of common interests across these borders, real and imagined. So, Sandra, for people who want to follow your research, where should they go? Is there a place where you publish? Do you have a Twitter handle or something?

#Sandra Davidović

Not really, but if they really like reading, for some reason, academic articles, they can find some of my work on Google Scholar. I've done some research on privatization in Kosovo and other aspects of state-building, and they can also reach out to me if they have questions.

#Pascal

Okay. Everybody, please find Sandra's academic work on Google Scholar—just Google her name. If you want to get in touch with her, let me know. Sandra Davidović, thank you very much for your time today.

#Sandra Davidović

Thank you for having me.