

Why Care About Kosovo?

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A quarter century has passed since Kosovo broke away from Serbia after a brief but bitter civil war. NATO abandoned its defensive mission and intervened “out-of-area” to oust the Serbian military and later force Kosovo’s independence. The new nation is very different than the once disputed and battered territory.

Nevertheless, the scars of war were evident on my recent visit. Kosovo’s losses, though less than in some other conflicts, such as Ukraine, were still painful. Some 13,000 people died and more than a million people were displaced. Kosovars must address the ethnic and religious divisions which remain and continue to hamper their advance. Helping light the way is the group Hardwired Global, which works around the world to break down barriers between communities and peoples.

Although the war is long over, Pristina and Belgrade remain at odds politically. The latter refuses to recognize Kosovo’s secession. Nearly half of the world’s governments, including five members of the European Union, also reject Kosovo’s statehood. Most consequential is Russia’s refusal to allow Pristina to join the United Nations. This gives Moscow continuing influence in Serbia, unsettling the European Union as war rages in Ukraine.

Moreover, deep divisions remain within Kosovo. Belgrade’s defeat led to violence against the once dominant ethnic Serb population and flight of many to Serbia. The remaining ethnic Serbs are concentrated in Kosovo’s north, adjoining Serbia, and they continue to resist Pristina’s authority. This has led to violence between ethnic Serbs and Albanians, and military posturing by both Belgrade and NATO, which retains an occupation force in Kosovo. While no one expects hostilities to erupt, the specter of further violence has increased regional tensions.

Kosovo cannot escape its history. Memorials to dead heroes abound. Politics long was dominated by former insurgents. Even today the country is rated as only “partly free” by Freedom House. Some of the victors participated in criminal networks, causing Europeans to call Kosovo a “black hole.” Although this problem has eased, the economy remains weak despite substantial outside aid and investment.

Children have no direct memory of the war but live with the war’s reality. I visited a school named after a graduate who died fighting as a member of the Kosovo Liberation Army. His bust stood outside and several paintings of him were hung inside. There are few moderating counterpoints to promote reconciliation among former enemies.

Kosovo was historically home to moderate Islam, but Kosovars with whom I talked worry about growing fundamentalism. One complained that “Islamic radicalism is growing among the young

and was promoted from outside.” Another called the situation “very dangerous.” He cited the malign role of Turkey, which he believed had superseded Saudi Arabia in promoting extremism. Both governments have constructed mosques and supported imams.

A third Kosovar believed his country had made “space available for Islamic radicalism,” and that “Kosovo gets into trouble when it flirts with Islamists.” According to Kosovo Online: “An increasing number of Albanians in Kosovo believe that political Islam is the only solution to the accumulated world problems. Data from recent research indicate that in the past 25 years, dozens of young Albanians from Kosovo have been educated in religious schools in the Middle East. Many of these schools promote radical Islam, and some of their followers have been convicted in Kosovo for promoting terrorism.”

Indeed, Kosovo may be Europe’s most worrisome flashpoint outside of the continent’s borders with Russia. The lack of normalization of relations between Pristina and Belgrade makes it difficult to bring either into the European Union. Efforts to fully integrate the Balkans into the larger continental order remain stalled.

Into this world has stepped Tina Ramirez, founder of Hardwired International. A former congressional staffer and political candidate, she has spent years fighting against religious persecution in other nations. I have traveled with her to South Sudan, Kurdistan, and most recently Kosovo. There are many good organizations which stand up for the oppressed, some of which I have also accompanied overseas. Hardwired, however, is unique with its focus on education to combat intolerance, hatred, and all manner of “isms.”

Hardwired noted that Kosovo’s history has left “a fractured society with limited prospects for social and economic development.” One common strategy is to isolate communities, which often lessens current tensions but fails to mitigate long-term hostilities. Alternatively, in Kosovo, warned Hardwired, “imposed secularism has only increased tensions, particularly among conservative religious communities.” Such efforts inadvertently reinforce the message of extremists.

In contrast, Hardwired confronts contending beliefs head-on, offering respect while encouraging not just toleration, but understanding and cooperation. The focus is the classroom, and the process begins with teachers. I watched adults of varying beliefs and from diverse communities discovering, first, the possibility, and second, the necessity of working together despite diverse beliefs.

The process usually begins with religious minorities recognizing the importance of supporting one another. Members of religious majorities also come to realize the moral worth of those who believe differently, and the importance of treating them as equals. It is impossible to reach everyone, of course, but I was struck on my visit to Kosovo with the number of teachers and trainers who talked about how Hardwired’s curriculum helped transform their personal thinking.

One told me that she changed her mind and came to understand “why I should respect” other believers. “Now I am open to learn about them.” Indeed, she added, “we need to cooperate with

one another. Religion doesn't matter." Another teacher spoke of his students, who learned to be "respectful of people of other religions, races, and other things."

Such stories were oft-repeated. Most impressive were the admittedly skeptical who came to embrace the Hardwired training program. The organization does not try to convert people to Christianity. The program is effective because it respects the beliefs of all and focuses on creating a safe environment for everyone. In such a world Christians and others are freer to talk about their faith. Hardwired does not attempt to suppress belief but instead seeks to increase communication and understanding among faiths. Its objective is to thereby ease religious and political conflict.

Kosovo is steadily increasing the number of teachers equipped to lead their students in lessons on the importance of respecting the lives and dignity as well as freedom of conscience of all. This in turn helps ease the mistrust and fear still evident among many children as well as adults. Teachers and students then hold events for their families and larger communities. In this way Hardwired seeks to transform the nation.

Obviously, there are few shortcuts to overcoming years of conflict and hatred. Students sometimes were skeptical, even hostile, at the start. Yet most eventually were moved by the training. The most powerful remedy to the divisions evident in Kosovo and elsewhere is to bring people together to confront their fears and hostilities. One of the teachers spoke of flashbacks from the war. He lost a cousin and his family was forced to move: "We suffered a lot. So the training affected us personally." Another spoke of how the lessons forced him to decide "how I will implement diversity and pluralism in my own life."

Of course, it isn't enough to have a good message. People must listen to it. In this case students generally respond well. One teacher noted how "kids ask if they can do it again." Other teachers noted how the program caused participants to break out of their cliques and work together and in groups. She asked Hardwired to do more: "We desire that the students have another challenge so they can expand themselves." She saw a "mind change" in those who participated in the program.

Today, Hardwired operates mostly in ethnic Albanian areas, since it has established a cooperative relationship with local educational officials. Ramirez hopes to expand into ethnic Serbian areas. Students there also need to learn how to engage "the other." Such training may be the best hope for eventual willingness of both communities to live together in not only peace, but also harmony.

Hardwired's work obviously doesn't negate the need for a political *modus vivendi* between Kosovo and Serbia looking toward the future rather than the past. Nevertheless, Hardwired's training is helping to construct a foundation for political reconciliation. The only way to ensure permanent peace is to convince all major groups that their success requires mutual respect and cooperation. It is a lesson that Americans need to take to heart as well.

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