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*Women in state building and  
democratization processes in Kosovo  
a new proposal for a more inclusive society*

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The war in Ukraine awakened many traumas of war and conflict in the Balkans, reminding us that we are indeed still at a, albeit it latent, phase of peacebuilding.

However, looking more in depth at the states of the Western Balkans it also becomes apparent that there is the need of democracy building, particularly in relation to institutions and the way they function, and democracy consolidation when it comes to the broader political and civic space. While the processes of democracy and peace building are largely harmonious and in theory should be part of the same processes, in practice peacebuilding has sometimes been used as an excuse to curtail the building of democratic norms and institutions.

The concept of democracy and its application has evolved and keeps evolving: initially only including propertied men in the cities of Ancient Greece, democratic institutions and countries only started to include women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – but the picture becomes more blurred if we also consider the inclusion of other ethnic or racial groups. The state-building processes, initiated after the fall of Yugoslavia and of the communist regime in Albania, were an opportunity to build democracy anew and to deal with the atrocities of the war. However, it resulted in an imperfect path, where the new democratic systems were building on contradictions and exclusions- especially when it comes to the role of women in the new democratic regimes.

The paper focuses on the case of Kosovo as the newest state and democracy in the region, analyzing its path towards democratization and offering a key to understanding the present conundrum which affects the state both domestically and internationally, building on the post-independence development of women activists.

### ***Kosovo: the role of women in state building and democratization processes***

When Kosovo declared its independence in February 2008, its institutions had already gained a certain framework and structure. Indeed, the institutions of the country had started building even before the end of the war which saw the country separate from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In the 1990s, the parallel institutions of Kosovo had covered the institutional framework for the functioning of any state, only it had done so in the shadows of informality as a response to the ever increasingly oppressive regime of Slobodan Milošević. The organization behind this institutional and political mobilization was the so called *Ilegalja* [the illegal] movement, which included politicians, activists, and the intelligentsia. The movement has been a precursor of the state building process started already in the 90s with the parallel system, and that followed after the war and had a decisive role in training the new political elite which would govern the state<sup>1</sup>. However, women were left out of the state building process, despite having played an active role in the *Ilegalja* movement. They were crucial to mobilizing communities, particularly women, as an example stands the *Bread for Drenica* march in 1998, when women marched with bread to Drenica as a protest to the increasingly violent methods of the Milosevic regime that had left people starving<sup>2</sup>. This exclusion led women to feel mostly betrayed by the new political framework that was developing. A report by the Kosovo Women's Network which outlines the experiences of

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the women mobilization before the war, see: Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, *The bequest of Ilegalja: contested memories and moralities in contemporary Kosovo*, Nationalities Papers, 14 October 2011, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00905992.2013.767792> and Elife Krasniqi, *Same Goal, Different Paths, Different Class: Women's Feminist Political Engagements in Kosovo from the Mid-1970s until the Mid-1990s*, Contemporary Southeast European Studies 69 (2-3), <https://bitly.ws/33Wf2>

<sup>2</sup> Serbeze Haxhiaj, *Bread for Drenica: When Kosovo Women Marched to Break a Serbian Siege*, Balkan Insight, 15 March 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/15/bread-for-drenica-when-kosovo-women-marched-to-break-a-serbian-siege/>

women activists and politicians since the early 2000s in Kosovo, shows how they had to continuously strategize and push for their inclusion in the processes of building the new state<sup>3</sup>. Particularly important in this time was the inclusion of women in the UN led process which would define Kosovo's new status, as well as the development of what came to be known as the Ahtisaari Plan<sup>4</sup>, the blueprint which enabled Kosovo's independence in 2008. In their efforts, the women activists particularly made use of the language of the UN Resolution 1325<sup>5</sup> which emphasizes the inclusion of women in peace building and their inclusion and integration in political processes. This oftentimes meant advocating and pushing for being included at the discussion table on Kosovo's status and future legal and institutional framework as an independent state. As the testimonials by women activists show, they were often left as a last part of the agenda or an afterthought in the process, both by international and domestic actors. Despite the provisions included in the UN Resolution and their organized efforts at inclusion, the first decade of state building in Kosovo largely excluded women. Kosovo was seeking to build the framework for its democracy and the subsequent politics of inclusion was largely focused on marginalized communities such as the non-majority ethnic groups within Kosovo's new borders, particularly the Serb community which still had considerable populations remaining in several parts of the country. The language of inclusion was not utilized more broadly in envisioning shared and inclusive spaces for multiple actors, including minority women who were double marginalized within the system.

As a result, women were largely missing from both projects, those of democracy and those of peace building. Where they were included, as the activists attest, women were largely relegated to the field of "women's issues" (with no definition of what those might be)<sup>6</sup>. International actors, such as UN representatives, when meeting with women activists would direct them to talk on "women's issues" instead of inviting reflections by women of what they thought the future of the country should look like<sup>7</sup>.

### ***The alternative spaces of feminist activism***

A new dynamic started taking shape in post-independence Kosovo. The Kosovo of the 2010s particularly was marked by an ever-increasing though not all-encompassing inclusion of women in politics, culminating with the first woman president, Atifete Jahjaga, in 2011. In the last national elections of 2021, Kosovo also saw the highest number of women members of parliament being elected to serve in the Assembly, exceeding the assigned quotas<sup>8</sup>. However, the true progress was made as a result of the mobilization of women activists, of both the post-war and the post-independence generation.

A significant political move towards the inclusion of the concerns of feminists was the inclusion of women who had been victims of sexual abuse and rape during the war into the legislation on veterans and their social rights, so that they too could get support from the state. With rape having been a widespread war strategy, the estimated number of victims of rape is

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<sup>3</sup> Facts and Fables: A collection of stories about the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in Kosovo

<sup>4</sup> Or the *Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement*, United Nations, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Kosovo%20S2007%20168.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Security Council Resolution on women and peace and security, <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/105>

<sup>6</sup> Facts and Fables: A collection of stories about the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in Kosovo

<sup>7</sup> Facts and Fables: A collection of stories about the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in Kosovo

<sup>8</sup> <https://exit.al/en/representation-of-women-in-kosovos-parliament-increased-without-reliance-on-gender-quotas/>

between 20,000 and 45,000 women<sup>9</sup> (the number for men is not known due to additional societal stigma)<sup>10</sup>, this was not an easy feat. Discussions in Kosovo's parliament included derogatory language of women victims of abuse and a very deep disregard of victims (both men and women), forcing them to relive the trauma. The callous language, which showed the deep lack of understanding of the concerns and experiences of women (and men) victims of rape in Kosovo's society, led many women activists to mobilize. Various protests were organized in the capital of Prishtina, including art installations by Haveit, an art collective, such as "The Examination" in 2013, as part of a protest organized by the Alter Habitus Feminist Institute for Studies in Society and Culture.<sup>11</sup>

One poignant event was organized with the support of the President of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga, and an artist Alketa Xhafa-Mripa, who organized the gathering of women's skirts which were later hung in drying ropes across a football stadium in the centre of Prishtina. This installation is important for several reasons. Firstly, the skirts were gathered as donations by hundreds of women to represent the women victims of rape. Secondly, the choice to hang these skirts in a football stadium was a direct overtaking of gender stereotypes: a space generally considered to be for the exclusive use of men, such as the stadium, welcomes a symbol typically associated with femininity - like a skirt - and an act generally associated with women - that is to hang the laundry. Thirdly, and most importantly, it was a clear remark on the failure of the state to address the concerns of women and protect them. As the artist noted, this was like "air[ing] dirty laundry in public"<sup>12</sup> in order to encourage the discussion of war time rape and its aftermath in public.

It is important to note that this installation stands in synchronous relationship with much of the post-independence activism against gender-based violence has against which women have mobilized in Kosovo. One of the lasting mobilizing activities is the organization of the 8<sup>th</sup> of March marches under the banner "MARShojmë, s'festojmë" since 2012 [We march, we don't celebrate]. These marches gather hundreds of women and have also included artistic interventions, such as poetry, installations, and performances.

### ***The issue of gender-based violence and social justice in post-independence Kosovo***

The issue of gender-based violence in Kosovo has become increasingly salient in the post-independence years, due to the numerous cases of domestic violence, to which the state has often been unprepared.

One such case was that of Diana Kastrati, a woman who was killed in 2011 by her ex-husband although she had formally complained to police fearing for her life. Only in 2019 did her family get any closure, when the Basic Court in Prizren, with an innovative ruling, determined that the Republic of Kosovo was responsible for her murder in failing to protect her<sup>13</sup>. This decision was only possible due to the consistent advocacy by feminist activists who have worked in establishing the premise that domestic violence and violence against women is not a matter to

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<sup>9</sup> UN Women, Dressing up a soccer stadium for survivors in Kosovo, 10 July 2015 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2015/7/kosovo-dressing-up-a-soccer-stadium>

<sup>10</sup> Kosovo War Rape Survivors Tell Stories of Pain and Courage, 20 July 2021 <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/20/kosovo-war-rape-survivors-tell-stories-of-pain-and-courage/>

<sup>11</sup> Haveit, The Examination, Prishtina Insight, 2013, <https://prishtinainsight.com/old-friends-artists-tomorrow-mag/haveit/>

<sup>12</sup> Mark Tran, Dresses on washing lines pay tribute to Kosovo survivors of sexual, The Guardian, 11 June 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/11/kosovo-sexual-violence-survivors-art-dresses>

<sup>13</sup> Blerta Iberademaj, Court awards family of Diana Kastrati €95,000 in compensation, Prishtina Insight, 11 September 2019, <https://prishtinainsight.com/court-awards-family-of-diana-kastrati-95000-euros-in-compensation/>

be relegated to the private sphere but one which concerns the public, and where public institutions bear responsibility.

Since then, Kosovo has made further steps in improving the legislative framework for the protection of victims of violence. Notably, in 2020 the Kosovo Assembly voted for the adoption of the Istanbul Convention, against domestic violence and the impunity of perpetrators, into its Constitution<sup>14</sup>. However, the number of cases remains high and is increasing, with 166 cases being reported in August of 2022 alone, while 2,489 cases were reported for 2021<sup>15</sup>.

It is estimated that 85% of the victims of violence are girls under the age of 18<sup>16</sup>. In 2023 Kosovo passed the first draft reading of a new law on protection from domestic violence. However, as Amnesty International notes, women and girls still face considerable challenges in accessing justice and support services<sup>17</sup>. While gains have been made by women politically, the issue of violence against women, and the societal and legal framework that it connects to, remains the litmus test for the new democracy of Kosovo and more broadly.

### ***Kosovo's soft diplomacy***

The mobilization of women and artistic movements related to gender issues, led Kosovo to acquire global visibility through art. One important example is Dua Lipa, a world-renowned singer with Kosovar origins, who shares her background and roots on every occasion. She is also the patron of a yearly summer festival bringing global artists to Kosovo, including Mahmood, the Italian artist, as well as giving a stage to young Kosovar artists<sup>18</sup>. Rita Ora, too, has promoted Kosovo, and has filmed a music video in its capital<sup>19</sup>. These public figures have greatly contributed to what may be called a soft diplomacy.

Another key contribution to this soft diplomacy of Kosovo is the work of several women directors, who have garnered international attention including Blerta Zeqiri, Blerta Basholli, Kaltrina Krasniqi, Norika Sefa. It is also important to note that the work of these directors centers on female experiences during the war and after, such as the movie *Zgjoj/The Hive* by director Blerta Basholli, which won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance<sup>20</sup>.

The key position of women artists and activists in changing the landscape and the vision that others have of Kosovo has formed much of its soft diplomacy abroad, and domestic change at home, and thus has the potential to become its hope for the future. Considering that this role that women have played consciously or not has contributed towards a change of perceptions and biases at home, it seems to be the opportune moment to structuralize these shifts into a larger framework which would be beneficial towards both democracy and peace building. That potential can be best structuralized within the framework of a Feminist Foreign Policy.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-Womens-Rights-in-Western-Balkans-2022.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International, *Kosovo: From paper to practice – Kosovo must keep its commitments to domestic violence survivors*, 30 August 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur73/7123/2023/en/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://sunnyhillfestival.com>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DH182aLsVig>

<sup>20</sup> Claire Armitstead, *One woman's war story: Hive, the real-life Sundance hit set on Kosovo's feminist frontline*, The Guardian, 6 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/mar/06/hive-film-kosovo-fahrje-hote-blerta-basholli-interview>

### *A new proposal for the integration of a Feminist Foreign Policy in the Kosovo context*

With both top foreign policy positions, that of the President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani, and of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Donika Gëvalla-Schwarz being filled by women politicians, Kosovo is well placed to introduce a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), particularly as it shows that it has the ground work to do so based on many years of feminist activism. While not only women advance such policies, they can be champions in pushing for change as has been the case of Germany has shown in 2021.

A feminist foreign policy for Kosovo means an inclusive way of doing politics, and as such is also an instrument of building democracy. It could hold great potential for several reasons. First, a Feminist Foreign Policy marks a large shift in the way of doing politics both domestically and internationally. As posited by the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, such a policy “requires a feminist approach to all parts of foreign and domestic policy, as even the most feminist approach to foreign policy would be undermined by ‘business as usual’ in other policy areas”<sup>21</sup>. Much of Kosovo’s foreign policy has centered around recognition of its statehood, but there is now a need for the development for a more robust foreign policy, and the feminist approach could provide a new way forward, centering on equality and development through a feminist and environmental lens. A feminist foreign policy would be best placed because it tackles power relations both within the state and outside it and urges the adoption of post-colonial, intersectional feminist perspectives on equality broadly speaking<sup>22</sup>. For Kosovo, a country that still contends with unequal power relations with its neighbors and the region, such a perspective is particularly attractive.

This leads to the second benefit. Kosovo is trying to establish itself in equal footing with countries of the region and beyond. Quality is the core value of the feminist approach. The adoption of the feminist paradigm could lead Kosovo to position itself and its statehood abroad, creating new network with countries that are pursuing the same path – Canada, France, Mexico, Spain, Luxembourg, Germany, Chile, and the Netherlands – while other governments, including Slovenia, have declared commitment to pursue it<sup>23</sup>. The list includes a key non-recognizer of Kosovo’s independence within the EU: Spain. Pursuing the Feminist Foreign Policy centers around partnerships, and as such, new avenues of mutual cooperation can open for Kosovo with countries which advance an FFP. This might not necessarily mean outright recognition, but it does mean looking into ways of cooperation which would benefit citizens of both countries, starting with freedom of movement.

Lastly, pursuing a Feminist Foreign Policy would also send a strong message to the women at home in Kosovo. It would show a commitment to the values of justice, equality and solidarity, to which feminist activists in the country have dedicated their lives.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Study-Feminist-Foreign-Policy-for-the-European-Union.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: A 2021 Update, <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Defining-Feminist-Foreign-Policy-2021-Update.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Brief-Feminist-foreign-policies-en\\_0.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Brief-Feminist-foreign-policies-en_0.pdf)