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Mediation as Translation

Reflections on the EU Dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, from the Perspective of the People of Mitrovica

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Introduction

This chapter intends to share the personal reflections of two peace dialogue practitioners[1] about the possible contribution of the arts in a mediation process. It relates to the specific context of the conflict in the divided and disputed Mitrovica region in the northern part of Kosovo. This small territory is subject to mutually exclusive claims of the governments of Kosovo and Serbia, as the local Albanian and Serbian communities are polarised among each other. The chapter sketches key features of the conflict today, the needs of citizens and state responses, as well as mediation attempts. It further reflects on what could result from the inclusion of citizens – alongside state representatives and diplomats – and explores the role art and culture could play in that regard. Finally, since both authors have conducted Track 2 and Track 3 local dialogue initiatives, they share some reflections based on projects they have developed, focusing on the importance of translation and interpretation, as applied to languages, and also to wider elements, such as perceptions or cultural codes. It calls for the inclusion of the citizens of the region in the EU dialogue process, by connecting local Track 2 and 3 initiatives with official Track 1 negotiations, using arts and culture to that end.

The Kosovo Conflict Today

Some 22 years after the war ended, and 13 years after Pristina authorities declared independence, the form of the state of that small territory is still not clearly defined. Nevertheless, Pristina officials claim Kosovo is fully independent and Belgrade representatives declare it is still a province of Serbia. Legally, Kosovo is an independent and sovereign state according to its constitution, an autonomous province of Serbia according to Serbia's constitution, and an entity under interim international administration according to the UN (Resolution 1244). While mutually contradictory, all three texts affirm the territorial unity of Kosovo. However, rather than being wholly independent or fully integrated with Serbia, Kosovo is *de facto* divided; none of the above definitions matching reality. Since 2011, Kosovo and Serbia have been engaged in an EU-led mediation process, the *Brussels Dialogue,* that aims at the 'normalisation' of their relations.[2] If

the recognition by Serbia of Kosovo's full independence and sovereignty is the ultimate goal of its government, the Serbian authorities maintain that they will not recognise it as an independent state but rather pursue the 'normalisation' of their relations in economic terms.

In practice, the larger part of Kosovo (essentially inhabited by Kosovo Albanians, with Serbian-populated enclaves) functions mostly as an independent state, while its northern part, adjacent to Serbia (with some Albanian enclaves), operates in many ways as part of Serbia. The northern part of Kosovo,[3] centred on the divided city of Mitrovica, is the point of confrontation of these systems, where the contradictions are most apparent, and the conflict latent with regular outbursts of violence.

Several interwoven causes are at the root of this conflict: the Serbian and Albanian communities of Kosovo are deeply divided, and they have different cultural and religious traditions. They also have distinct languages, which further hampers communication and understanding. Although both are Indo-European languages, only Serbian belongs to the Slavic branch. In practice, mutual comprehension is very limited. Conflicting perceptions and interpretations of the present and of the past also impact relationships. History is generally not understood in its factual (past) context, but as a justification for present claims, with concepts from present times projected onto past realities. A key, yet underestimated, root cause lies in the deep and long-term crisis of de-industrialisation that led to massive unemployment: with the nearby Trepca mines and heavy industry, Mitrovica slipped from being the richest to the poorest region in Kosovo. As a result, the northern part of Kosovo, once a thriving centre, became a small and remote peripheral area, a 'double periphery' from Belgrade and Pristina, both parts being completely dependent on the resources from these centres. Hence, the unresolved social crisis feeds the political conflict. This is also the tiny 2000 km² hotspot of the Belgrade-Pristina confrontation, part of wider 'East-West' tensions, a challenge to the EU's enlargement strategy for two decades.

Independent of community affiliation, or state loyalty, the citizens in that context face important and specific needs, which

are largely unmet: profoundly low unemployment (especially among the young), and poor public services, with unequal access to them (notably in each community's own language). Services often rely on string-pulling or petty corruption, leading to dependency on institutions, political parties or individuals of rank or status. Ordinary people on both sides of the divide, above all seek a normal, predictable life. Instead, citizens – feeling helplessly trapped in a conflict unfolding way beyond them – still wait for their state to achieve a conceivable shape: for Kosovo Albanians, the long-awaited independent state – seen as a condition *sine qua non* for the non-recurrence of past domination and atrocities – is neither definitely settled nor fully recognised internationally. On the other side, Kosovo Serbs fear that the state they believe they live in (Serbia) is dissolving around them or that it may use them as a negotiation chip, to be opportunely traded against some better political advantage. The anxiety of not knowing the fate of the state one is living in is aggravated by the fear of other communities, who are often perceived as a threat to one's integrity and aspirations for a state that grants secure, wealthy and normal living. In psychological terms, this has a strong impact on individuals, many of whom also suffer from war-related trauma and have already experienced, with the disappearance of Yugoslavia, what the destruction of a state involves.

State responses to this situation, rather than addressing their citizens' needs, appear to use these to oppose communities, hoping to create new leverage on the ground, or to be more focused on gaining international validation of their views. Nevertheless, politicians often claim their actions to be the 'will of the people', presenting their decisions as being in the best interest of their community. Consensus within a community (which may also know internal divisions)[4] is not shaped by public debate around the genuine interests of individuals or social groups that are freely expressed and democratically represented at the political level. Instead, it is achieved by attracting citizens with abstract patriotic ideas, and homogenising communities through the fear of the other or with antagonistic narratives. Even the EU mediation process is used to fuel the conflict, as any progress is domestically presented as a diplomatic victory or a forced necessity, but not as a gesture of legitimisation of

mutual interests. In that process, victimisation[5] plays a key role, where a community is described by its own politicians as the immutable victim of the other community, presented as the eternal executioner.

For the State, especially Serbia in its relation to Kosovo Serbs, the citizens are used on the forefront of the political struggle.[6] In this condition of constant patriotic mobilisation, no social contract has emerged in the more than two decades following the war. It is as if officials were saying to citizens: "let us first win the conflict, and then we will have plenty of time to talk about social arrangements. Meanwhile, stand your ground on the barricades and protect the nation". Communities are still polarised, with minimal communication, and are defined one against the other, not on the basis of their genuine interests (i.e. use of own language) combined with interests that would reach beyond communities (e.g. economic development, environment). In a way, the conflict has hampered a true democratisation, and the definition, within a democratic framework of interest of individuals, communities, and ultimately the whole of society. Democratisation was also seen as a possible effect of an eventual EU integration. Yet, after great hopes, citizens were not only disappointed by the EU's perceived empty integration promises or poor performance on the ground (e.g. its EULEX7 rule of law mission), but also by an endless mediation process with uncertain results. As a consequence, citizens feel excluded from the *Brussels Dialogue,* despite sophisticated democratic parlance.

In a way, the transition towards pluralist democracy, started in 1989 in Berlin, did not reach the northern part of Kosovo. The democratisation of this part of Europe has been significantly hindered by the wars in the former Yugoslavia and frozen in the Kosovo status conflict. Political parties, despite democratic coating, appear to remain in a communist single-party mindset. The people often don't know what is the responsibility of institutions or of the party or its leaders.

Mediation Attempts

Different mediation attempts have tried to settle the long-lasting Kosovo issue. During the war, a failed NATO mediation in

Rambouillet (France) led to the Alliance's intervention against Yugoslavia. Ending the war, UN Resolution 1244 established the interim UN and NATO presence in Kosovo, with the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces. However, it ambiguously referred to Kosovo's final status as "substantial autonomy",[8] a formulation interpreted by Serbia as an assurance of its sovereignty over Kosovo. In a way, this has set a trend to base the arbitrations between Serbia and Kosovo on the notion of "constructive ambiguity",[9] a concept developed by Henry Kissinger, which mirrors the tensions within the Helsinki Accords (1975) between the principles of "territorial integrity of states" and "self-determination of peoples" that they stated.[10] In 2005, UN mediation led to the Ahtisaari proposal which, along with a detailed state building plan, recommended Kosovo's independence. Turned down by Serbia, it was endorsed by Pristina, which proclaimed Kosovo's independence in 2008 on that basis. This unilateral move caused a deep crisis among parties and renewed hostility and division between communities.

In 2010, the UN[11] welcomed "[…] the readiness of the [EU] to facilitate a process of dialogue between the parties; the process of dialogue in itself would be a factor for peace, security and stability in the region, and that dialogue would be to promote cooperation, achieve progress on the path to the [EU] and improve the lives of the people", leading to a breakthrough in 2013, with the *Brussels Agreement*.[12] Both parties linked the normalisation of their relations with their own EU integration path. However, for Pristina the key stake is the full recognition by Serbia of Kosovo as an independent and sovereign state throughout its whole territory, whereas Serbia continuously states that it opposes any kind of Kosovo independence, considering 'normalisation' as pertaining solely to economic relations. Nevertheless, the agreement paved the way for the integration of the Kosovo Serb community into the Kosovo legal framework and produced some tangible results, with agreements on practical issues. This positive momentum was soon lost, however, by the selective implementation of agreements by the parties and one-sided interpretations. In 2018, Serbia's and Kosovo's Presidents even informally agreed, with obvious consent of the then EU mediators, to partition Kosovo along ethnic lines and exchange territories. Such potentially harmful

attitudes of political leaders, including the EU, along with inflammable public discourses of local leaders, turned the promising normalisation into renewed tensions among communities. Despite fresh impetus from J. Borrell and M. Lajčák,[13] the EU faced the difficulty of re-crediting its dialogue as the sole process, and even faced an offhand Trump administration mediation competition.

In our view, a key result of the dialogue was to channel the conflict into a formal diplomatic process, bringing Pristina and Belgrade closer and releasing citizens from the psychological burden of conflict management. However, over time, this rather secretive top-down process remained unreadable for many and delivered far less than expected. As A. Demjaha notes: "[...], the EU's ambivalent, inconsistent and often ambiguous position has increased confusion and tensions. Conflicting interpretations and contradictory narratives of Kosovo and Serbia exacerbated differences. [...]., its end result so far has been the empowerment of ethno-nationalists, both in Belgrade and Pristina, while at the same time limiting benefits to communities in Kosovo".[14] The open-ended nature of the *Brussels Dialogue* also means unpredictability and uncertainty for the citizens, and ambiguity – that might once have been 'constructive' – developed as a source of tension for both populations. As shown by K. Gashi et al., it is not only the content and outcomes of the dialogue that are ambiguous, but also its very meaning to parties and mediators.[15]

Furthermore, the dialogue's secretive nature makes it much closer to the state than to the citizens: it seems to remain a top-down process, at the Track 1 level, with few Track 2 and 3 connections, that does not foster democratic engagement of societies towards an acutely needed social contract, nor really "improve[s] the lives of the people" as intended by the *Brussels Agreement*. In other words, it doesn't seem to offer an alternative horizon to the nationalist narratives. This is reinforced by the fact that no citizens from the northern part of Kosovo, not even Kosovo Serbs, are present in the dialogue. As the citizens appear to be captives of the patriotic policies of their own states, the dialogue appears to be locked up by state protagonists through its incapacity to develop connections to the societies it

aims to serve. As observed during the *Arts in Peace Mediation* discussions, the implementation of eventual peace accords is a very sensitive and often neglected phase of mediation processes, frequently leading to the perpetuation of conflict. From our perspective, the future implementation of a Belgrade-Pristina agreement would benefit from including Kosovo societies in the process, in clear, sustainable and appropriate ways, by connecting the Track 1 processes with Track 2 and 3 initiatives.

Benefits of Citizens' Inclusion in Mediation Processes

A recent study indicates that despite agreeing with the dialogue, citizens have very different understandings of its goal.[16] This is due, among other reasons, to the fact that they mainly access information through media in their own language, which mostly reflect divergent readings of the conflict, and that there are no real places for a debate at the inter-community level. In a way, there is no social dialogue about the governments' dialogue. However, citizens concur that the dialogue lacks transparency and impact, and that they have little benefit from it. Citizens "do not view the process to mean normalisation between the two societies [...]" but rather between states, and that agreements "do not see[m] to be translated in the same way in the society as a whole". Hence, a normalisation agreement cannot supplant the necessity "for a process of reconciliation and healing" among citizens. In such an obvious discrepancy, what could be the way forward? Observing that there is as much distance between governments as there is between the process (including parties and mediators) and the citizens, it would be meaningful, in our opinion, – for the sake of the process and of the implementation of its results – to try to bridge both gaps in parallel. While the major efforts are put on the former, any new engagement should also support the latter.

As of 2013, renewed efforts by civil society organisations (CSOs), with their ability to encapsulate and convey citizens' needs, have facilitated inter-community cooperation in Kosovo, which developed after the first results of the *Brussels Dialogue* partially lifted the social stigma burdening reconciliation initiatives. Their relative independence and flexibility proved to be an asset in overcoming characteristic institutional passiveness

or rigidity. Exchanges emerged between interested individuals within civic initiatives, but were often limited by their circumstantial nature (donor-driven projects, availability of funds), deep ethnic distrust, and social pressure to hold back from substantial dialogue, actively supported by those political actors maintaining conflict dynamics. It also proved uneasy to recruit skills to deal with sensitive and complex processes such as dealing with the past, building confidence and trust, developing empathy, etc. Despite setbacks, the civic engagement produced initiatives with significant and positive impact in increasing inter-community understanding and appreciation. The work of the Kosovo Humanitarian Law Center, for instance, by promoting transitional justice and addressing human rights violations is, in that regard, exemplary.[17]

However, the emerging dialogue between Kosovo communities is not structured as a direct support to the EU dialogue. It appears disconnected, even if EU institutions or member states support civic initiatives. What seems to be most needed is a clear and durable relation between civic initiatives and the *Brussels Dialogue*. In other words, to include them in the process as genuine Track 2 and 3 initiatives aimed at supporting Track 1 negotiations. And – as in any relationship – building trust between both processes is essential. As well, a specific emphasis on the Mitrovica region seems key to us in answering the specific features of this conflict. It is worth noting that similar processes elsewhere have accepted interesting initiatives to include the civil society, such as the Civil Society Support Room in the Syrian talks.[18]

The Potential for the Arts to Include Citizens

Nationalist activists have recognised the appealing power of art and culture. Patriotic street art frescoes, especially visible in northern Mitrovica's city centre or nearby Zvecan, benefit from high exposure. They articulate clear political messages to citizens in the public space, suggesting the city is under siege, calling for resistance or sacrifice. Some – with obvious technical mastery – illustrate angry soccer hooligans in front of Serbia's coat of arms[19] or fighting with Kosovo, EU and NATO police;[20] 1998 Serbian soldiers in uniform flying the national flag;[21] orthodox

high clergy;[22] or some that even glorify commanders sentenced of war crimes.[23] Illustrative works – with an occasional use of formal codes of medieval orthodox church frescoes, suggesting a continuity in resistance – are accompanied by slogans such as "There is no way back from here"; "It is worth dying violently for this land" or, simply, "Fuck the police".

On the other end of the ideological scope, some civic initiatives also recognised the value of art in trust-building, producing admirable results. As of 1997, in the wake of war, Belgrade and Pristina artists joined in the exhibition *Përtej* ('beyond' in Albanian) in Belgrade.[24] Today, a prominent initiative is the regional *Mirëdita – Dobar dan* Festival.[25] Since 2014, it aims at bringing Kosovo and Serbia cultural scenes closer to one another, by exchanging quality works (cinema, photography, literature), and with debates in Belgrade or Pristina, on social and political issues. The festival is a good example of peer-to-peer cooperation between artists from Kosovo and Serbia that contributes to the creation of a unique framework for artistic expression and dialogue. Similar results were achieved through the festival *FemArt* – by *Artpolis Pristina*,[26] which promotes feminism and gender-equality through artistic expression. *Femart* succeeded in connecting a number of feminists and civic activists from Kosovo and Serbia. Furthermore, both co-authors have also used art in the context of their peacebuilding activities. Miodrag Marinković has regularly used *Forum Theater* techniques[27] to instigate the artistic engagement of young people to discuss various social issues, such as ethnic intolerance and ethnic stereotyping. Olivier Haener accompanied youngsters in reflections and practical works through the teaching of the practice of photography at the *Aktiv Art Centre*[28] in Mitrovica. They explored the relationship between the photographer and his/her subject during the act of photo shooting. This led to shifts in perceptions triggered by visual work relating to local communities' relationships. In particular, they spontaneously noted that one sees the other through a lens, but also the other way round.

Both examples show the spectrum that can be covered by artistic and cultural acts and practice. However, the inclusion of art in reconciliation initiatives remains a sensitive process. Artistic expression, which is emotional and subjective in essence,

can sometimes lead to replicating conflict, especially when it directly addresses the different and opposing conflict narratives. As mentioned above, these narratives often aim at stimulating feelings of victimhood and target legitimate fears or past traumas. Some cultural interventions even proved counterproductive, with exchanges slipping towards rivalry about which community supposedly suffered the most, or accounts of differing numbers of victims.

Currently, a variety of issues limit the full development of artistic cooperation in Kosovo. First, its basic framework is unsuitable: very few, if any, artistic exchanges are undertaken with only local means, i.e. without international donor funding. Hence, the framework is almost exclusively project-based, shaped by corporate management (timeframe, pressure for results, controlled resource use etc.), ending-up in with projects inserted into a trimester or fiscal year, with no certainty of continuation and limited maintenance of established connections. Fragmentation of efforts and difficulty in establishing a sense of local ownership further limit the achievement of a critical mass. The modest Kosovo reconciliation process also takes place in a highly complex environment, with immense social pressure on its stakeholders. For decades, ethnic relations between Serbs and Albanians were built around the conflict and its narratives, contributing to detached and adversarial societies, each with its own views on what had happened in Kosovo, and each with a strong sense of victimisation. Under such circumstances, initiatives that open a space for the articulation of genuine interests, views of 'the other side', in artistic or any other forms, are often met with strong social disapproval, counter-narratives and political manipulation.

Yet, adequately conceived, they can substantially contribute to the development of Track 2 and 3 initiatives, and bring divided Kosovo populations closer. Approaches based on art and culture can prompt citizens to shift their perspective and develop alternatives or additional identities to the solely conflict-oriented identities. This won't concern all of society but will focus on specific social strata and categories with an aim of attaining a critical mass able to bring about social change. The shifts in perception will help in making the citizens' genuine interests

more visible, starting with elements of the observable reality over the abstract or mythical notions filling the mainstream political discourse. At the start of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, a graffiti on Sarajevo's main post office claimed "This is Serbia". Shortly after, another graffiti answered "This is the post office, idiot".[29] Removing the deforming lens of populism that portrays the social reality only in ethnic terms is the first step towards building a common understanding of what citizens want and need (while respecting the specific nature, needs and sensitivities of all communities and cultures). This can, ultimately, lead to a durable social contract. Despite diverging views on history and its use to justify present national claims or allegedly irreconcilable destinies of Kosovo communities, serious and professional local platforms are hosting debates on present social and political issues of importance, some of them using high-quality translation. In Mitrovica these include, for instance, the show *Sporazoom* by the NGO *Aktiv,*[30] the debates on the news portal *KoSSev,*[31] or *Kosovo 2.0*[32] in Pristina.

Thus, in the experience of both authors, the facilitation of artistic or other forms of cooperation in that context speaks in favour of undertakings that do not directly address the conflict or its narratives. Rather than trying to counter polarising narratives (e.g. "Don't fuck the police"), it should focus on the needs of individuals, with regard to their social-, gender- and age-related concerns within peer groups. The conflict, as such, should not be the focal topic of the meetings, but addressing instead the needs of those who are present as individual persons, as professionals; answering them together is crucial in building trust. Notably, it gives an opportunity to explain different interests, sensitivities, needs, hopes, fears, and worldviews or to mitigate narratives. But doing things together – rather than only talking – and ideally developing common professional activities, answers material and societal needs at the same time, creating substantial motivation for those involved. A key facilitating factor in bringing together people across the divide is that they share a common practice or professional background (in our projects, forest owners, journalists, students, entrepreneurs, and musicians were involved in discussion with their peers). In addition, high-quality translation proved key in mutual (linguistic and emotional) comprehension. Such an indirect

approach can lead to the expression of shared views, concerns or challenges by participants, nurturing the necessary trust to later address more sensitive issues.

This type of approach can help non-ethnic identities of participants to surface and be expressed, and be understood as multiple, cumulative and non-exclusive. In that sense, the *Mirëdita – Dobar dan* Festival, opportunely mentions the great Yugoslav artist of Kosovo Albanian origin, later established in Belgrade, Bekim Fehmiu[33] (1936–2010) as a role model, presenting him as "an Albanian, Kosovo, Belgrade, Yugoslav and world actor".[34]

Interviews with art practitioners who have performed in the Mitrovica region also hint at the importance of not addressing the conflict directly. In 2021, the Swiss visual artist Sophie Guyot projected stylised images of historical inhabitants that lived in Mitrovica from the 1920s until the 1980s on the city walls, with the support of the local NGO *Aktiv*.[35] For her, art can make an important contribution, precisely in NOT talking about the conflict. Addressing issues that are important to citizens with quality art work – as for anyone all over the world – , is what can help transcend the conflict. As an external actor, she is also aware of "some naiveté of mine", which can be an advantage in trust-building, being less constrained by local loyalties. Developing projects with local artists or cultural actors from both sides of the divide can also help activities to be less prone to social pressure. Ursula Burger, a literary translator from Croatia, who co-organised the theatre and poetry festival *Krokodil* in Mitrovica in 2013,[36] shares this opinion, adding that developing a continuity of artistic and cultural activities in a peacebuilding perspective is essential for trust to be expanded effectively. For Lulzim Hoti, Director of the local NGO *7 Arte*,[37] setting an ambitious, yet realistic, objective in a mid-term future would greatly help to shape a foreseeable horizon and mainstream efforts across the civic sector. He suggests, for example, preparing a common candidacy for Mitrovica as the *European Capital of Culture*[38] within a 15-year timeframe.

As for the Mitrovica local initiatives involving art and culture, there is a vivid, yet limited, scene around some pioneering NGOs such as *CBM Mitrovica*, which organises storytelling events

across the divide that also include artists;[39] the NGO *7 Arte* that develops programmes specifically for young people through mural painting and art festivals such as *Green Fest* or a city lights festival; the NGO *Link* has also edited a monograph of ancient and recent photographs of the city and citizens of Mitrovica[40] and supported street art;[41] while the *Mitrovica Museum* sometimes organises mutual artistic events.[42]

The Importance of Translation

From their own experience in reconciliation initiatives in the Mitrovica region, both authors conclude that translation and interpretation play a vital, yet widely underestimated, role in the resolution of that type of conflict. Despite not being seen as one of the major arts, translation and interpretation play a key role in mediation. Beyond bare words, they convey and make understandable to someone the intentions, references, aspirations, fears, hopes, doubts, dreams maybe of someone else. And vice versa. It is also about making cultural codes, perceptions, representations and needs understandable and accessible to each other (including mediators). The translator – from Latin 'translātor' "the one who carries over" or "one who transfers a thing" – has the responsibility to stay true to both interlocutors, while crafting sense with words that are unintelligible to each of them. Interpreters have to decode a perception of reality and recode it, with accuracy and sincerity, into another perception. In polarised environments, this can be highly sensitive. They have to be careful of the trust they are given. As discussed in an *Arts in Peace Mediation* encounter, it is often about smuggling words through the front line and making understandable – beyond orders, flags and loyalties –, the humanity of the other. As observed in these encounters, diplomats crafting agreements have the same responsibility: beyond the words, they are entrusted with trust.

In the Kosovo context, with languages that do not allow for direct mutual comprehension, due to there being no more teaching of the one language in the other community, communication opportunities are rare and limited to few English speakers or to people above 50, who are able and willing to speak Serbian, once a common language. Without reliable translation, in which

people can trust in very sensitive moments, no group cohesion can be reached. Lessons from these projects indicate that translating very practical activities help participants to develop a regular working relationship, allowing for trust to be built through regularity and the progressive development of a feeling of group belonging. The triangular dimension of trust-building proved crucial, as each participant could develop their own relations with the mediation team, as well as with other participants. Other trust-related elements include maintaining professional, fair and efficient standards that help dialogue participants gain and maintain trust in the process and in each other. In the implementation phase, it proved of key importance for the project to produce tangible results that are in accordance with the needs expressed earlier in the process.

Yet translation is not only a means; it can also be the goal of an initiative. In this way, the Mitrovica local NGO *Center for Affirmative Social Action* (CASA) developed the initiative *Barabar* – an archaism for 'equality' or 'fairness', in both the Serbian and Albanian languages. It aims to use art in the promotion or creation of positive examples (from past or present times) of cooperation between divided communities. In that sense, it does not aim to reconcile differences, but rather to affirm their normality, and thus, promote the appreciation of ethnic distinctiveness. The expected result is not only increased social cohesion and space for dialogue, but also increased trust.

Within this initiative, the project called *The Dictionary of the Words that Need no Translation* promotes intercultural linguistic literacy among the young. Hence, some 50 young people from various ethnic communities received the seemingly simple task of finding matching words shared between the dissimilar Serbian and Albanian languages.[43]

They were thus exposed to narratives that promoted shared social and historical contexts from which these words originated, and to neglected ethnic and historical connections between Serbs and Albanians, at times when communication and cooperation were common (e.g. from the 1950s or 1970s). Sequels include a national contest of *Poems that Need no Translation* (where young artists compete with poems created with words

from the *Dictionary*) or the exhibiting in public space of these words (expressed through artistic installations) as public demands of young people, regardless of their ethnic background, towards the decision-makers. This can contribute to transforming the angle from which community needs are observed, from the current ethnic viewpoint and age-based angle. A careful and innovative approach in the engagement of ethnic groups in artistic activities can have an immensely positive impact on the community, leading to more openness towards other communities.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, we observe that citizens from both communities from the northern part of Kosovo are only marginally included in the *Brussels Dialogue* that aims at 'normalising' the Belgrade and Pristina relations, as well as improving "the lives of the people" as claimed by the *Brussels Agreement*. This mirrors the distance at which both governments keep their own citizens. The process appears to be confined to the governments. It is often unreadable for citizens, limiting their possbility for support or participation. In our opinion, it would be meaningful – for the sake of the process and of the implementation of its results – to try to bridge both gaps in parallel. The process could seek to include citizens, in order to bring communities closer to one another, but also closer to the process itself. What seems to be needed most is a clear and durable relation between civic initiatives and the *Brussels Dialogue*. It seems important to include civic initiatives in the process as genuine Track 2 and 3 initiatives aimed at supporting Track 1 negotiations. Moreover, a specific emphasis on the Mitrovica region and the inclusion of its communities' representatives in the dialogue seems key to us in answering the specific features of this conflict. In doing so, an approach that uses artistic and cultural elements could, if designed appropriately, play an important supporting role, in particular in translating perceptions and stimulating narratives of normality, helping transcend the conflict into becoming a durable social contract.

NOTES

1 Please see the Authors' section to access their biographies. Olivier Haener authored a field research article on the causes of conflict in Northern Kosovo (2010–2011): Un Kosovo unitaire divisé (A unitary divided Kosovo). Miodrag Marinković authored many research articles on the position of the Serbian community in Kosovo as well as on the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, including *Characteristics of the Open Society in the Kosovo Serb Community and On the Road to Nowhere – A Soundtrack for the Brussels Dialogue.*

2 Cf. European External Action Service: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/349/Dialogue%20between%20Belgrade%20and%20Pristina

3 In this chapter, the term is used in its geographical sense, covering the seven municipalities of the Mitrovica region (listed here with their Albanian and, then, Serbian names, according to the administrative practice): Mitrovicë/Mitrovica South, Vushtrri/Vučitrn, Skenderaj/Srbica, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica North, Zveçan/Zvečan, Leposaviq/Leposavić, Zubin Potok. Demographically, the first three have a Kosovo-Albanian majority, while the last four have a Kosovo-Serb majority. The region has ca. 225,000 inhabitants and covers 2000 km².

4 See e.g. Miodrag Miki Marinković Kosovski *Srbi sa obe strane reke: Podele o kojima se ćuti,* (Kosovo Serbs on both sides of the Ibar River: unspoken divisions), Radio KiM, 11.10.2021, www.radiokim.net/vesti/analiza/kosovski-srbi-sa-obe-strane-reke-podele-o-kojima-se-cuti.html.

5 The linguist H. Zdravković observes that the narrative schemes in both Serbian and Albanian communities in Kosovo is very similar in their structure while symmetrical in their content. See Helena Zdravković, *The vernacular discourses of historical victimisation of Kosovo Serbs and Albanians,* Balcanica, Belgrade, no. 36, 2005, p. 111 (www.balcanica.rs/balcanica-xxxvi.html).

6 As in the September 2021 'number plates' crisis', cf., *Na barikade na severu Kosova 'po dužnosti'* (On Northern Kosovo barricades ex officio), Radio Free Europe, 23.09.2021 (www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/barikade-kosovo-duznost/31475025.html).

7 The European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), launched in 2008, under the Common Security and Defence Policy of the European Union, cf. https://eulex-kosovo.eu/.

8 UN Security Council Resolution 1244 [http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1244].

9 Maya Jegen, Frédéric Mérand, *Constructive Ambiguity: Does it Work?* Comparing the European Union's Energy and Defence Policies (2014) conclude that "Ambiguity is found to be an attractive strategy for political entrepreneurs when member state preferences are heterogeneous and the EU's legal basis is weak. It is likely to be effective, however, only if it is embedded in […], a formal-legal context".

10 Signed by 35 heads of states, incl. G. Ford (USA), L. Brezhnev (USSR) and J. Broz, Tito (SFR Yugoslavia). See Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Final Act*, Helsinki 1975 (www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/c/39501.pdf)

11 See UN General Assembly *Resolution 64/298* (2010) (https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/64/298).

12 See e.g. https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/repository/docs/FIRST_AGREEMENT_OF_PRINCIPLES_ GOVERNING_THE_NORMALIZATION_OF_RELATIONS,_APRIL_19,_2013_BRUSSELS_en.pdf.

13 Respectively the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue.

14 Agon Demjaha, 'The Impact of Brussels Dialogue on Kosovo's Sovereignty', in: David L. Phillips, Lulzim Peci (Eds), *Threats and challenges to Kosovo's sovereignty,* Columbia University, Institute for the Study of Human Rights, and Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), New York, Pristina, October 2018, p. 14. (www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Threats AndChallenges_Vers-FIN_(1)_94986.pdf).

15 K. Gashi, V. Musliu, J. Orbie *Mediation Through Recontextualisation: The European Union and The Dialogue Between Kosovo and Serbia.* In European Foreign Affairs Review, 22, No. 4, 2017, pp. 533–550 (https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/8554525/file/8554529.pdf).

16 See *Perception on Kosovo – Serbia Dialogue and Identity issues,* Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) and Belgrade Center for Security Policy (BCSP), February 2021 (www.qkss.org/en/Kosovo-Security-Barometer/Perception-on-Kosovo-Serbia-Dialogue-and-Identity-issues-1405).

17 http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?lang=de.
18 see https://cssrweb.org/en/
19 Cf. https://kossev.info/survey-75-of-serb-citizens-would-consider-the-recognition-of-kosovo-as-treason.
20 Cf. www.flickr.com/photos/77904706@N07/8632529002.
21 Cf. www.mdr.de/heute-im-osten/kosovo-mitrovica-132.html, slide 2].
22 https://radiokontaktplus.org/vesti/kosovska-mitrovica-mural-kao-omaz-patrijarhu-pavlu-i-mitropolitu-amfilohiju/30316.
23 Cf. www.flickr.com/photos/77904706@N07/8632991348/in/photostream.
24 www.czkd.org/en/cycle/pertej-en.
25 https://mireditadobardan.com/en/home/
26 https://femart-ks.com/about/
27 Developed by the Brazilian theatre practitioner, drama theorist, and political activist Augusto Boal (1931–2009), See A. Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed, London: Pluto Press, 1979.
28 www.ngoaktiv.org/project/aktiv-art-center.
29 Cf. https://furaj.ba/ovo-je-posta-budalo/
30 www.ngoaktiv.org/news/sporazoom-transitional-justice-reality-or-utopia
31 https://kossev.info/reset/ or https://kossev.info/na-38/
32 https://kosovotwopointzero.com/
33 Cf. Bekim Fehmiu on Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com/name/nm0270443/).
34 Cf. https://mireditadobardan.com/sq/per-festivalin/.
35 Cf. www.stardustmemoryproject.com and www.ngoaktiv.org/news/stardust-mitrovica-opening-event.
36 Cf. www.krokodil.rs/2013/10/festival-u-mitrovici/.
37 www.7-arte.org.
38 https://ec.europa.eu/culture/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/european-capitals-of-culture.
39 www.cbmitrovica.org/publication/news/storytelling-night-with-miljana-and-nora.
40 https://linkkosovo.org/en/publikacija/old-new-mitrovica/.
41 https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/21/street-artists-brighten-up-kosovos-divided-mitrovica/.
42 http://www.facebook.com/muzeuimitrovices/
43 They have, for example, identified the words ‘barabar’ (mentioned above, which gave its name to the project), the exclamation ‘hajde’ (used to prompt movement, development or to grant one’s consent, similarly to ‘let’s’ in English) or the expression ‘mašala/mashallah’ (here in Serbian/Albanian written forms, yet pronounced the same way, meaning originally ‘by God’s will’, is colloquially used to approve a positive or happy event). During a workshop, young Albanian participants invited their Serbian peers to join by combining the three words in “Hajde barabar, mašala”, which could be translated as “Let’s be equals, that’s great”.

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