



## Kosovo in the Yugoslav 1980s

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# Kosovo in the 1980s – Yugoslav Perspectives and Interpretations

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**Abstract:** The introductory article in this issue argues for greater consideration of the impact of the Kosovo crisis on political developments in other Yugoslav republics and on the entire federal state structure of Yugoslavia after Tito's death. It also calls for a closer examination of alternative paths that were considered by various actors to resolve the conflict but were not or could not be pursued. Such a discussion of developments in Kosovo in the 1980s in a broader Yugoslav perspective would, it is argued, also have the potential to contribute to a more complex understanding of the Kosovo crisis itself.

**Keywords:** Yugoslavia, 1980s, socialism, Kosovo, Serbia

## Introduction

Central to any understanding of the dynamics of political change in Serbia, Slobodan Milošević's rise to power, and the nature of the nationalist upsurge within Yugoslavia is a grasp of developments during late socialism in Kosovo. These developments have been thoroughly and variously studied. Most often, however, the focus of what transpired in Kosovo during the 1980s has predominantly concentrated on the political relations between Belgrade and Pristina, or on “intra-Serbian” dynamics, or on the complex evolution of the political climate and hierarchies within autonomous Kosovo. By contrast, Kosovo's role in the “Yugoslav 1980s”, or the way Kosovo was discussed and understood in the other Yugoslav republics, has received far less scholarly attention. Kosovo was an integral part of the fabric of the six republics and two autonomous provinces comprising the

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organisational framework of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Given the scarcity of scholarly studies on this subject, a reconsideration of how the Kosovo crisis reverberated across the other Yugoslav republics and the difficulty of finding a “Yugoslav” answer to the problem seems highly relevant.

All too often, developments following the Kosovo demonstrations in 1981 have been viewed solely in terms of rising nationalism and the “inevitability” of Yugoslavia’s disintegration. A teleology of failure, and the idea that Kosovo epitomised a condition of unbridgeable disputes, are inherent in this reasoning. Scholars, however, often ignore paths not taken and opportunities missed, which could have led to other outcomes. To examine alternative roads does not mean that nationalism was not a decisive factor here; rather, it stresses the necessity of shedding light on various scenarios the crisis gave rise to and of determining which actors were considering which particular solutions to the conflicts.

The idea of treating this question in greater detail emerged out of a network partnership initiated by the Chair of Southeast European History at the Humboldt University Berlin and funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), within which colleagues from various historical institutes in the successor countries of Yugoslavia cooperated from 2013 to 2020. In 2019, several initiatives involving this network took up matters related to 1989 in Yugoslavia. The 2019 doctoral school of the Centre for Cultural and Historical Research of Socialism in Pula, Croatia, dealt with, among other things, major late socialist economic and political trends in Yugoslavia (see [https://www.unipu.hr/ckpis/doktorska\\_radionica/2019](https://www.unipu.hr/ckpis/doktorska_radionica/2019)). The History Fest 2019 in Sarajevo was dedicated to the significance of the changes in Yugoslavia within the context of an ever-deepening crisis of socialism in Europe in 1989 (see [https://issuu.com/umhis/docs/program\\_hfs\\_2019\\_bez\\_prepusta\\_2\\_](https://issuu.com/umhis/docs/program_hfs_2019_bez_prepusta_2_)). In both of these events, scholars took a closer look at the linkages (often insufficiently problematised up until now) connecting the changes in Yugoslavia with the looming collapse of socialism in other countries in East Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe.

In the wake of a series of failed attempts to find a solution to the crisis of Yugoslav socialism, 1989 is associated in public discourse and particularly in the historiography with three turning points: the looming disintegration of the League of Communists, the emergence of the first opposition parties, and escalating nationalism in politics and everyday life. However, 1989 also witnessed comprehensive attempts once again to implement a state-wide reform programme. After a “leaden” period of ideological rigidity in the 1970s, there were a wide variety of efforts throughout the 1980s to address through reform a massive economic crisis that began to emerge not too long after Tito’s death in 1980. In the late 1980s, especially with the advent of Ante Marković’s government, these efforts also involved an unprecedented reorganisation of the economic system of socialist Yugoslavia. Increasingly, these efforts were also aimed at preventing not only

advancing economic disintegration, but even a political disintegration of the federation that suddenly no longer seemed unrealistic.

The intellectual background of prosocialist or decidedly pro-Yugoslav currents was hardly irrelevant at that time. It consisted of the remnants of humanist Marxism, defenders of a socialist civil society, supporters of market socialism, and above all the camp of the “communist renovators”. These turbulent times—and this has been quickly forgotten—yielded diverse discussions, within the party and its mass organisations and within dissident circles but most often in a grey zone between the (political-ideological) establishment and the institutions and forums undergoing major changes or in the process of emerging.

In a workshop entitled “Kosovo 1989 – Intra-Yugoslav Perspectives and Interpretations”, held at the Humboldt University in Berlin on 7–8 November 2019, experts from the region and beyond explored how the developments in Kosovo in the 1980s reverberated across Yugoslavia. The workshop quickly made it evident that a similar sort of joint “Yugoslav” or Serbian-Kosovar historiographical discussion on Kosovo in the 1980s is not yet possible in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. In Serbia or Kosovo, such discussions would probably meet with strong resistance—including from colleagues institutionally located there. Even in Bosnia-Herzegovina, such an event would have encountered great difficulties. For this reason, the conference in Berlin was one of the first events at which Serbian and Kosovar historians and social scientists discussed the late 1980s together. And they did so, as mentioned, with special reference to intra-Yugoslav perspectives.

## Kosovo in the 1980s

In March 1981, student protests erupted in Pristina, the capital of the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo, and spread in the weeks that followed, leading to violent demonstrations in several cities. Hardly anyone had expected the vehemence of this revolt. Only seven years earlier, in February 1974, Kosovo had gained the status of a Socialist Autonomous Province within Serbia and was given far-reaching autonomy rights. Kosovo, under the provisions of the 1974 constitution, was defined as an autonomous territorial political unit and as a constitutive element of federalism; it had its own constitution and internal organization and was a partner equal to other federal units in the procedure of issuing the federal constitution, including the right to vote (Rajović 1985; Cvetković-Sander 2011; Nimani et al. 2018). Furthermore, Kosovo had been receiving substantial financial support from the Federal Fund for the Crediting of the Development of the Less-Developed Regions. Consequently, the demands of Kosovo’s Albanians met with little understanding and less sympathy (Tromp-Vrkić 1996, 49).

The province's difficult economic situation was a major concern voiced in the protests. Its impressive economic growth since its integration into socialist Yugoslavia notwithstanding, Kosovo was economically drifting ever further from the rest of Yugoslavia, the northern republics in particular. This divergence was due in part to rapid population growth but was also a result of misguided investments in the province. Overall, socialist modernisation policies had brought about tremendous socioeconomic change. A region that until the 1950s had been characterised by "traditional" social structures had undergone profound evolutions in education, the economy (the mechanisation of agriculture, industrialisation, and mining) and in infrastructure (roads, telephone lines, factories, power plants, etc.) (Gaber and Kuzmanič 1989; Schmitt 2008, 237–96; Ströhle 2016a, 83–92). These processes were accompanied by a particularly high natural growth rate of the population and rapid urbanisation. From 1961 to 1981, the Albanian population in Kosovo almost doubled (from 646,805 to 1,226,736). During the same period, the Serbian population decreased from 227,016 to 209,498, its share of the total population plummeting from 23.7 to 13.2% (Horvat 1988, 181). The change in Kosovo's ethnic structure, which from the 1960s onwards was also stimulated by a large outflow of Serbs (and Montenegrins), became a topic of heated and controversial debate (Blagojević and Petrović 1989; Islami 1994, 30–1; Blagojević 1996, 212–43; Popović et al. 1990, 22; Clewing 2000, 17–63) and an issue subject to increasing nationalist instrumentalisation by representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as writers, intellectuals, and academics over the course of the 1980s (Sundhaussen 2012, 234–44, Dragović-Soso 2002, 125–7).

Rapid population growth meant that Kosovo lacked the economic capacity to absorb the marked increase of young people now seeking employment in the socialist economy. The situation yielded growing unemployment and also steered many young people to enrol at the University of Pristina (established in 1970) in numbers that soon far exceeded the university's capacity to instruct them properly (Canaj 2021). The lack of prospects for many young people contributed decisively to widespread discontent, which was interpreted not rarely as an indicator of social misery but also, by many, as political discrimination against Kosovo Albanians within socialist Yugoslavia (Mertus 1999, 24–8; Pula 2004, 801–3). Isabel Ströhle argues that economic crisis and inflation hit Yugoslavia at the exact moment when those segments of society who were locked into structural unemployment (the "Kosovo underclass") began catching up with the rest of Yugoslav society (Ströhle 2016b, 112–31). Slogans were directed against the mismanagement and corruption within their own ranks, but protesters also criticized structural economic injustices and demanded, as they had in 1968, that Kosovo be elevated to the status of a republic (Mišović 1987).

Swift and decisive action was taken against the demonstrations, legitimised by the infiltration of radical segments into the movement who demanded that the “Albanian territories” of Yugoslavia be annexed to Albania and that Yugoslavia’s Kardeljian self-managing socialism be replaced by Albanian Marxist-Leninist Hoxhism. Classified as “revisionist and counterrevolutionary”, the demonstrations were violently put down with the unanimous approval of the federal, republican and provincial authorities, and a state of emergency was imposed on the province (Hetemi 2020, 171–81; Petritsch and Pichler 2005, 81–6).

The events in Kosovo as discussed thus far had revealed the fault lines that became characteristic of the 1980s. By the late 1970s, leading political representatives of the Serbian republic in Belgrade were voicing the criticism that decentralisation had brought greater autonomy for the other republics within Yugoslavia, while Serbia was increasingly losing control of its own republic. Since Serbia was the only republic with two autonomous provinces in its territory, which were given additional self-governing rights under the 1974 constitution, political representatives were particularly alarmed by the demonstrations and the demands to elevate the province to republic status. What was initially negotiated as a matter of Serbian internal politics became an all-Yugoslav dispute over the constitution and the relationship of the constituent units, the republics and autonomous provinces, to the federation. Various Serbian politicians expressed the criticism that progressive decentralisation did not lead, as many claimed, to the strengthening of the Yugoslav working class as intended but rather to increasing particularism, which was reinforced by the attitude of the republics (dubbed “bureaucratic statism”) (Jović 2009, 192–5). In this situation, new actors increasingly stepped in; disappointed with the political leadership and concerned about the rapid economic decline, they critically questioned existing dogmas of socialist self-representation and formulated alternative solutions to the crisis. The reappraisal of the past that permeated all levels of Yugoslav scholarship, culture, and media during the 1980s was particularly pronounced in Serbia due to the more powerful impact there of the economic crisis and the disintegrative processes within the republic (Dragović-Soso 2002, 77–8; Sundhaussen 2012, 234–43; Djokić 2022).

The Albanian political leadership in Kosovo also came under massive pressure; they were suspected of not having taken decisive action against opponents of the regime—including “counterrevolutionary forces” obviously under influence from neighbouring Albania—and had to enforce draconian measures against members in their own ranks as well as intellectuals, academics, and all those suspected of supporting the protests (Clark 2000, 43–4). The fact that around 80% of the political prisoners in Yugoslavia in the 1980s were Albanians illustrates the scale of the persecution against them (Dragović-Soso 2002, 117). Many Albanians, including political activists, left the country for western and northern Europe

(Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Scandinavia) or the United States, where a powerful diaspora emerged over the course of the 1980s, especially in the wake of Milošević's rise to power in 1987. The diaspora subsequently played an important role in financing the parallel structures the Albanians established after Kosovo's autonomy was revoked in 1989 (Clark 2000, 95–121; Pula 2004, 797–826). The political pressure exerted a powerful impact on the population as a whole. The measures designed to inhibit Albanian nationalism further alienated Albanians from their political leadership and contributed to the consolidation of Albanian nationalism. At the same time, interethnic relations in Kosovo suffered a dramatic deterioration (Mertus 1999, 41–4).

The political leadership all over the country agreed that the events in Kosovo were of a constitutional nature. The debates sparked in the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) and in the republics and autonomous provinces reignited already existing conflicts over the state's constitution. These conflicts essentially revolved around the question of whether to continue the path taken towards decentralisation or whether the constitution should be reformed so as to eliminate the inequality between the republics complained about by Serbia. For a significant strand of the Serbian leadership, the events in Kosovo had resulted from increasing particularism, which not only paralysed relations within their own republic but was symptomatic of the situation of the federation. The system of workers' self-management was not questioned during this phase of the dispute, but the way it was implemented was. Political leaders in particular in Serbia observed critically that the republics and provinces increasingly tended towards internal centralisation, which led to closure, excessive bureaucratisation, and ultimately the politicisation of the economy. Outside Serbia, especially in Slovenia but also in the other republics, the political leadership resisted any moves towards recentralisation and called instead for a more consistent implementation of workers' self-management. The roots of the conflict in Kosovo, it was argued, lay precisely in the undeveloped mode of self-management that was considered the basis for democratic solutions to national conflicts (Jović 2009, 176–215). Seen from this angle, the main danger confronting Yugoslavia was not separatism but centralism, which was equated with a resurgent Serbian desire to be dominant within the federation. Thus Kosovo was regarded primarily as a Serbian issue (Gagnon 2004, 52–74). Moreover, Tito, who had always been the main decision-maker and arbiter in political disputes, had died one year before the demonstrations arose in Kosovo; his absence was also a decisive factor behind the deadlock in federal decision-making (Halder 2013, 297–308).

Against the backdrop of this impasse, the events in Kosovo increasingly served to mobilise new political forces and approaches within the Serbian leadership. Parts of the Serbian political elite turned their backs on the party leadership and sought

new ways out of the crisis. These political circles were primarily concerned with strengthening Serbian interest vis-à-vis the “others”. They imposed an orthodox ideological line on the local level and raised the issue of threats to Serbs. They directed attention towards Albanian nationalism and an alleged ongoing (demographic) “genocide” against Serbs in Kosovo. Much has been written about Slobodan Milošević’s rise to power: how he misused the Kosovo issue to mobilise the masses, how he toppled Serbian president Ivan Stambolić, eliminated the opposition within the party, streamlined the media, and became the dominant politician within Serbia (see among others Popov 1996; Cohen 2001; Vladislavjević 2008). Milošević’s political rise would not, however, have been possible without the support of relevant Serbian intellectuals, scholars, and artists. Some of the articles in this special issue provide detailed insights in this regard. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) also played a decisive role in this process. As early as 1982, some Church representatives in Kosovo called for the protection of the Serbian people and their sacred monuments in Kosovo, invoking the moral obligation to defend “the spiritual, cultural, and historical identity of the Serbian nation” (Dragović-Soso 2002, 125). The events in Kosovo provided an opportunity for the SOC to assert itself as a key defender of political, social and human rights for Serbs in Kosovo and to break out of its decades-long marginalisation. Although the SOC, in the early 1980s, confronted the political leadership for its alleged inertia and its lack of will to deal with the issue of the Kosovo Serbs, there was a visible convergence of Party and Church at the height of the nationalist mobilisation in Kosovo on the occasion of the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo (Anzulović 1999; Duijzings 2000, 176–202; Sundhaussen 2000, 65–88; Bieber 2005, 216–20). In the mid-1980s, these nationalist discourses were increasingly taken up in academic circles. By revitalising historical myths such as the Battle of Kosovo, by pointing to Serbian experiences during World War II under the Ustaše, and by referring to recent stories of Serbs being oppressed in Kosovo, the recrudescing nationalist discourses created an ever more politically complicated atmosphere throughout the Yugoslav Federation (Agani 1989, 111–35; Djokić 2002, 127–40).

This Serbian quest for hegemony over Kosovo clashed with Albanian claims to the region, which derived their legitimacy from theories based on autochthony, Illyrian origins, and continuity of settlement. Among Albanians, a strong sense of national identity had developed only from the 1960s onwards. The founding of Pristina University in 1970 and other important institutions of knowledge in particular marked the emergence of a consistent historical master narrative. Many Albanians learned for the first time about theories that “proved” their Illyrian origins and recounted the heroic deeds of Skanderbeg, their national hero. A major topic of Albanian historiography was the unjust division of the “Albanian territories”. The “trauma of the incomplete nation” became a powerful trope that incited opposition

to Yugoslavia. The crackdown on the University of Pristina following the 1981 demonstrations pushed ideological restrictions into the background, and Serbs and Albanians faced each other with equal confidence in the symbolic contents of their nationhood (Kostovicova 2005, 5–7; cf. Canaj 2021). However, the balance of power shifted increasingly toward Belgrade. The abolition of the autonomy of Kosovo and Vojvodina and the transfer of power to Belgrade marked the revocation of the constitution of 1974 and altered the power structure within the federation.

The experience of Kosovo in the 1980s had serious repercussions on various levels: within Kosovo, within Serbia, and within and between the other republics as well as the federation. The riots and the measures taken to curb Albanian nationalism contributed to a lasting deterioration of interethnic relations, not only in Kosovo but everywhere Albanians lived in Yugoslavia. Developments in Kosovo immediately triggered new debates about the country's constitution, the degree of decentralisation, and Serbia's peculiar position within the federal system. Moreover, the way decisions were taken revealed, for the first time, the consequences of Tito's absence, since it was he who—precisely in such delicate situations—had possessed the power to make binding decisions. Instead, the government focussed almost exclusively on ideological orientations and nationalist motives, and neglected the complex causes of the conflict. The severe economic crisis that gripped the country further contributed to disunity. The Kosovo crisis exposed the limits and constraints of socialist modernisation and brought to light divergent understandings of republican and federal interests. The ongoing power struggle between the political leadership of Serbia and the two autonomous provinces (Vojvodina included, see Tomić 2015) and the lack of consensus on the federal level stimulated intensive cultural activities and a nationalist upsurge. Kosovo provided fertile ground for a reappraisal of the past, for revisionism, discourses of historical victimisation, and irredentist claims. All these developments were part of the—in many regards contradictory—political dynamics of the 1980s. At the time it was not easy to assess the direction in which things were moving, with regard both to the situation in Kosovo and to the Yugoslav context as a whole—which became ever more intertwined. The contributions in this thematic issue shed light on these closely interwoven processes and provide insight into the hitherto scarcely researched dimensions and implications of the Kosovo crises.

## The Contributions to the Thematic Issue

The question of Kosovo within the context of the Yugoslav 1980s pervades this thematic issue: each of the 10 research articles, as well as both of the personal accounts (“Living Memories”), contribute to answering how the escalating



situation in this part of Yugoslavia during late socialism affected political developments, public opinion, and knowledge production within the Yugoslav state, including, of course, personal life trajectories. As a prism that reflects and refracts social, political, and economic conflicts in late socialist Yugoslavia, “Kosovo in the Yugoslav 1980s” offers insights and empirical research by reconsidering the developments of that era from a Yugoslav perspective.

Mrika Limani Myrtaj explores the role of the Kosovar Albanian Marxist groups in the 1981 protests in Kosovo. She traces their formation as dissident groups that supported anti-Yugoslav Hoxhism and interprets the reaction of the Yugoslav state as an act of coercive violence. Jure Ramšak takes up the 1981 protests and examines how the Kosovo crisis became a catalyst for political repositioning and public controversy in Slovenia in the 1980s and early 1990s. He shows, on the one hand, the attempts to establish a civil society initiative in search of a pan-Yugoslav solution. On the other hand, he explores how the crisis in Kosovo was used to pave the way for Slovenian independence. Radina Vučetić directs her focus towards Serbia and analyses how media and popular culture, along with leading Serbian institutions and intellectuals, joined in with Milošević’s propaganda by reviving the Kosovo myth. Using the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1989 as an example, she examines the shaping of anti-Albanian stereotypes in the creation of public opinion in Serbia during the late 1980s. Likewise, based on an analysis of Serbian media, Husnija Kamberović explores the negative images employed to accuse the political leaders of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Islamic Community (with its seat in Sarajevo) of fomenting unrest and spreading Islamic fundamentalism in Kosovo. He examines the reactions to these accusations and investigates how the Bosnian-Herzegovinian leadership perceived and responded to the escalating situation in Kosovo. The Kosovo crisis resonated strongly in the Croatian media and the field of knowledge production, as Branimir Janković shows, in contrast to the quite cautious reaction of the Croatian leadership. Janković analyses several books about Kosovo written by Croatian/Yugoslav authors in order to examine how they shaped dominant discourses and the media coverage in Croatia. Robert Pichler, adopting a comparative and entangled perspective on the Macedonian and Albanian nation-building processes, traces the roots of Albanian nationalism in socialist Macedonia. He shows how, against the background of rising tensions in neighbouring Kosovo, Macedonian officials failed to counter Albanian nationalism, which in the end only exacerbated social divisions between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians in the southernmost Yugoslav republic. Elife Krasniqi sheds light on the political engagement of Kosovar Albanian women from the mid-1970s up through the 1990s. She explores different forms of oppression and activism by focussing on gender, class, and national dimensions, thus giving a fresh account of a neglected topic.

Three additional research articles all investigate how leading Yugoslav cultural institutions confronted the developments in Kosovo in the 1980s. Casting an eye on the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Nenad Stefanov analyses its 1986 Memorandum on societal issues as a manifestation of a newly emerged ethnonationalism. He critically examines how the Academy, its authority grounded in its status as the country's leading scientific institution, legitimised the political measures of the authoritarian Milošević regime. Arban Mehmeti explores the relationship between the Writers' Association of Kosovo and its counterpart in Serbia during the late 1980s. He analyses how the escalating situation in Kosovo led to heated debates between both institutions in which, literally and figuratively, no common language could be found. Dino Mujadžević and Christian Voß draw attention to the Encyclopedia of Yugoslavia as a flagship project in the fields of culture and knowledge production during socialist times. They trace its transformation from a platform advocating Yugoslav federalism to a project reflecting decentralisation and nation-building, using the two articles on "Albanians" and "Albanian-Yugoslav relations" in different versions of the *Encyclopedia* as examples and thus elaborating on political struggles in Yugoslav academia.

The section "Living memories" brings together two personal accounts whose authors reflect on their experience of the late 1980s and 1990s within the context of the Kosovo crisis and consider how these developments influenced their life trajectories. Dubravka Stojanović recalls being a newly hired trainee historian at the Institute for the History of the Serbian Labour Movement in 1989. She witnessed many historians engaging in historical revisionism, while a few became active in the antiwar movement. Adriatik Kelmendi's account of the 1990s in Kosovo recalls how he witnessed, as a 12-year-old, the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1990, and thereafter was educated in Kosovo's parallel school system. Working as a journalist in Pristina during the 1999 NATO intervention, he experienced first-hand the loss of family members, friends, and property, and he goes on to recount how his family slowly rebuilt their lives after the war.

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