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The Unresolved Fate of the Missing

Ambiguous Loss and Intergroup Trust in Post-Conflict Kosovo

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1 August 2022

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Master's thesis

"Hope never dies. The families of the missing are always hoping. They all say the same thing: every day they wait for their loved one to open the door and enter the house."

- Sara Salihu, *Missing Persons Resource Center*

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the unresolved fate of missing persons impacts the trust between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, 23 years after conflict. Through a qualitative study based on 16 interviews conducted in Kosovo in the Spring of 2022, it finds that the issue of missing persons does not in itself foster distrust between the communities. Yet, by being increasingly politicized by both sides, and by playing into existing war narratives that are reinforced by a lack of contact between the groups, it continues to impact intergroup trust in Kosovo as long as it remains unresolved, and as long as families of missing persons are forced to experience ambiguous loss. While much research has examined how it impacts families to not know what has happened to a missing loved, this study contributes to a better understanding of the consequences of ambiguous loss on an intergroup level, and how the legacies of Kosovo conflict (1998-99) impact the relations between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo today.

Keywords: Kosovo, Kosovo conflict, missing persons, ambiguous loss, intergroup trust, dealing with the past

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Iva Vukušić, who guided me throughout this project. Your knowledge, experience, engagement, and approach to research have not only been of invaluable help for me to write this thesis but have also helped me in starting to find my way in the multifaceted and interdisciplinary domain of conflict research.

I want to thank my family – Elisabeth, Bruno, Wanja, and Esther – for being my biggest supporters and for inspiring me always. I also want to express my appreciation to my friends and classmates in Utrecht and beyond for all the constructive conversations, new insights, and well-needed coffee breaks.

A special thanks to Mieke and Lotta. You have not necessarily been very good for my discipline over these past six months, but you are doubtlessly the ones to thank for me staying sane and motivated throughout.

Last but certainly not least, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to everyone in Kosovo that contributed to my research in the Spring of 2022. A particular thanks to you that so generously shared your knowledge and experience through the interviews, helped me to find the right persons to talk to, and came with input and support in how to make this thesis handle the sensitive topic of missing persons in a fair way. My sincerest compassion with all those that are still waiting for answers about what happened to their loved ones during the last conflict, and those before. I cannot imagine the pain of living with such ambiguity.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

EU	European Union
EULEX	European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo
FRY	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro)
GCMP	Government Commission on Missing Persons
ICMP	International Commission on Missing Persons
ICRC	International Commission of the Red Cross
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia
KFOR	NATO Kosovo Force
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army (in Albanian: UÇK)
KSC	Kosovo Specialist Chambers
LDK	Democratic League of Kosovo
MPRC	Missing Persons Resource Center
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Yugoslavia)
UN	United Nations
UNMIK	UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
WGEID	UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

A note on names

In Kosovo, most cities hold both an Albanian and a Serbian name. Sometimes these are similar, such as for the capital of Prishtinë/Priština, but other times very different, such as for the city that Albanians call Ferizaj, but Serbians Uroševac. Given that the use of a certain name holds strong political importance, I will throughout this paper write out the city names in both languages. For the places that have anglicized names, however, these will be used. This means that I will refer to Pristina, and not Prishtinë/Priština, Mitrovica, instead of Mitrovicë/Kosovska Mitrovica, and Kosovo instead of Kosova/Kosovë in Albanian, or Kosovo-Metohija/Kosmet, as it is (sometimes) called in Serbian.

When it comes to people's names, these are written out in their original form. The only exception are International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) case names that appear in anglicized spelling, without diacritics, in accordance with ICTY documents.

Introduction
A war that continues

April 27, 2022. On the central Skënderbeu/Skanderbeg square in Kosovo's capital Pristina, black and yellow pansies form the number "1620". It is the National Day of Missing Persons, and the floral numbers are installed as a reminder that families of 1620 people are still waiting for news about what happened to their loved ones in 1998 and 1999. It has been 23 years since the violent conflict in Kosovo officially ended, but for the families of those who went missing and were never found, the war continues. "They are just living the war in a different way", investigative journalist Serbeze Haxhiaj tells me when we meet over a coffee in Pristina just a few days before the yearly memorial day[1].

During the conflict[2] and its aftermath, men, women, and children from all communities in Kosovo forcibly disappeared. While some were found alive in prison camps in early 2000, most were found in mass graves. As forensic expert Arsim Gerxhaliu points out, there is today little hope to find missing persons alive, yet families want to know what happened. "They just want to find something. A family member once told me that if you find only a finger of my son, you'll be my second God"[3]. Others keep hoping that one day, their lost brother, sister, child, or parent will return. As Sara Salihu at the Pristina-based Missing Persons Resource Center describes her experience with families of missing persons, "every day they wait for their loved one to open the door and enter the house"[4].

Regardless of the forms in which the families experience hope, having a family member still missing constitutes an open wound, a fresh memory, from a conflict that according to the history books ended more than two decades ago. As a member of the international community in Pristina tells, "It doesn't make a difference whether it's 2005, or 2010, or 2022. Every family member I've met stresses that there's not a single day when they don't think

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[1] Interview 4. For easy and readability, references to interviews are put in the footnotes throughout the thesis.
[2] In this thesis, the words "conflict" and "war" will be used interchangeably.
[3] Interview 15.
[4] Interview 11.

about their loved one and don't feel the pain"[5]. In the academic literature on missing persons, this phenomenon is called *ambiguous loss.* The term, coined by psychology professor Pauline Boss in the 1970s, refers to the open-ended kind of loss that occurs in families when a family member goes missing physically, but remains present in the families psychologically (Boss & Carnes, 2012). The phenomenon has been described as a "liminal space between life and death" (Jones et al., 2007, p. 110). Nataša Božilović from the Missing Persons Resource Center gives a good illustration of how this plays out in families of the missing, by talking about the Orthodox custom of lighting candles for your loved ones:

> "We Serbs have a custom, it's a religious thing. You light two candles, one for the living family members, and one for the deceased. And you light these candles in different places, for the living on the upper shelf, and for the deceased on the lower. I know many family members who are still lighting candles for their missing family members as if they were living. You know, even though the chances are close to zero that they are alive, they light a candle for them on the upper shelf."[6]

A significant number of studies have shown that ambiguous loss, as compared to losses where the fate of a person is known, can complicate families' grieving processes. A lack of closure can make it hard for families of missing persons to find a balance between grieving and living, between the past and the future, and between despair and hope (Rycroft & Perlezs, 2001, pp. 63). Not knowing whether the missing relative will return can prevent the reconstruction of family roles, rules, and rituals (Boss, 2002, p. 39). A lack of a grave to go to and a lack of a focal point for the sorrow often causes denial and psychological distress (Heeke & Knaevelsrud, 2015, p. 827). These patterns are seen in the grieving processes of many families of missing persons from the Kosovo conflict (Arenliu et al., 2019; Schwander-Sievers & Klinker, 2019), as this study will further elucidate.

But what impact does ambiguous loss have on a societal and relational level? While much research has been conducted on the psychological consequences of ambiguous loss, few

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[5] Interview 1.
[6] Interview 11.

studies have looked beyond the boundaries of the family and explored how the ambiguous loss of war victims impacts societies more broadly when it comes to dealing with the past and looking toward a more peaceful future. Two authors who have studied the impact of missing persons on intercommunity relations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cyprus respectively are Clark (2010) and Şahoğlu (2021). While Clark finds that the unresolved fate of missing persons may constitute a significant obstacle to good relations in Bosnia-Herzegovina by preventing families of the missing from moving on, prolonging their trauma, and fueling inter-ethnic mistrust (p. 429), Şahoğlu (2021), finds that, in Cyprus, it does not necessarily pose an obstacle to trust- and relationship-building, but rather the opposite, because families of missing persons from different communities experience that they share similar stories, and similar pain. Meanwhile, she finds that the unresolved war legacy does impact families' trust in politicians and institutions that, they claim, have not done enough to find and identify their missing loved ones (p. 35).

Both Clark (2010) and Şahoğlu (2021) emphasize that more research is needed on how the issue of missing persons from conflict impacts relations between groups in post-conflict spaces. In the context of Kosovo, where the issue of missing persons is highly present in society and politics, and where interethnic distrust and tensions between the main communities – Kosovo Albanians and Serbs – are still high, it is surprising that not more research has been done on the relation between the two. This is where this thesis aims to fill a gap and contribute to scholarship, by examining the following research question:

> *How does the ambiguous loss in families of missing persons from the Kosovo conflict*
> *(1998-99) impact intergroup trust in Kosovo in 2022?*

Trust is a phenomenon essential to initiating, establishing, and maintaining social relationships (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013, p. 1090), and a lack of trust is an often-cited source of prolonged intergroup conflict (Alon & Bar-Tal, 2016; Kappmeier et al., 2021; Sztompka, 2016). Understanding how the issue of missing persons impacts intergroup trust is thus not only of academic relevance, by filling a gap in the literature on conflict-related missing persons, but also of great societal relevance. Understanding how legacies of the past, in

particular the unresolved chapters, influence trust between Albanians and Serbs[7] in Kosovo today is essential for creating grounds for co-existence, and lasting peace. The happenings of the 1998-99 conflict are namely more than stories of the past. They are fresh and present in the memory of many survivors, and the fear of a new conflict in Kosovo has not ceased as the years have passed, but rather become more present again in the recent years. As Milica Radovanović, a researcher from the divided city of Mitrovica, where each community lives overwhelmingly on either side of the river Ibër/Ibar, tells:

> "The only thing I am afraid of is that another conflict is going to happen here. For these 20 years, a lot of things have developed, but I cannot see that things have gone in the direction of sustainable peace. It's not a frozen conflict, but it's negative peace, I think that's how they define it."[8]

The fear among people that recalling what has happened in the past could trigger renewed violence between Albanians and Serbs is present in Kosovo in 2022. "If you are not closing those chapters, they might not only now, but also in the future, be misused", an interviewee that prefers to be anonymous emphasizes[9]. Yet, little research has been conducted on how the atrocities of the last war, and how they appear in modern-day society and politics, influence the relations between the main communities. By examining how the 1620 still unresolved cases of missing persons impact trust between Albanians and Serbs, this thesis aims to contribute to an increased understanding of the societal consequences of ambiguous loss. It also seeks to add to the broader scholarship on intergroup trust and distrust in post-conflict settings, and to the understanding of how ambiguous loss and intergroup trust manifest and relate to each other in post-conflict Kosovo in particular.

At the same time, when dealing with the issue of missing persons, it must never be forgotten that the number, even when appearing seemingly beautiful in spring flowers, represents 1620 personal tragedies. The missing are loved ones. They are mothers, fathers, daughters, sons,

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[7] When referring to "Albanians" in this thesis, this means Kosovo-Albanians, and not inhabitants of the country Albania. When referring to "Serbs", this means Serbs living in Kosovo, if not indicated differently.
[8] Interview 5.
[9] Interview 2.

siblings, partners, and friends[10]. They are Albanian, Serb, Roma, Turk, Egyptian, Ashkalia, Bosniak, and Gorani[11]. Someone is sitting at their dinner table in 2022, still waiting for them to come home.

While it is of great need and importance to better understand the broader, societal impacts of the missing person problem, it should not be forgotten that the issue is fundamentally about the fates of humans, and that it is therefore foremost a humanitarian matter. This thesis fully acknowledges and supports that the main purpose of finding and identifying missing persons should not be to fulfill a principal, political or instrumental goal, but to give the families of the missing answers, and perhaps finally a grave where they can lay flowers and sorrow for their loved ones.

Research approach, methodology, and sources

Ambiguous loss is essentially about the personal experiences of families of missing persons (Boss, 2002; 2017), and trust is equally something that is constructed through the meanings that individuals and groups attached to the term, rather than something objectively and tangibly existing (Baier, 1986). Thus, rather than determining the extent of the relationship between ambiguous loss and intergroup trust in Kosovo, this thesis seeks to increase the understanding of the relation between the phenomena by exploring people's experiences. For this purpose, I conducted a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews recorded during a month-long stay in Kosovo, in the spring of 2022.

Research approach
Reality is multiple and relative, Hudson and Ozanne (1988) argue. Knowledge cannot be objectively determined but must be interpreted with consideration to the fact that it is socially constructed and influenced by the meaning people attach to things; how people

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[10] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) does not share information about the status (civilian or combatant) of missing persons in their database (ICRC, 2022). Recent disaggregated data has, however, led to the estimation that around 8% of the missing after conflict were part of armed formations (NSI, 2022, p. 11).
[11] The missing after the conflict in Kosovo also included Montenegrins, Macedonians, 1 Croat, 1 Hungarian, and 1 Slovenian (NSI, 2022, p. 11).

make sense of their lives and experiences (Mason, 2018, p. 8). As Schwandt (2003) phrases it, "What distinguishes human (social) action from the movement of physical objects is that the former is inherently meaningful. Thus, to understand a particular social action /…/ the inquirer must grasp the meanings that constitute that action" (p. 296). This *interpretivist* approach will be reflected in the empirical study of this thesis and is also key to choosing interviews as the main means of collecting data.

Epistemologically, this thesis seeks to explore and increase understanding, in contrast to positivist objectives of explaining causes and effects. Ontologically, knowledge is viewed as something relative, subjective, and context-dependent, requiring me as the researcher to interpret the meanings a certain situation holds for participants of a study, rather than interpreting their behaviors (Hiller, 2016, p. 103). Departing from an interpretivist research approach further implies that this thesis views the reasoning of individuals in social situations as essential for decoding the meaning of data (Nickerson, 2022), making interviews a suitable primary data collection technique, as it essentially gives space to the views, beliefs, motivations, and thoughts of the interviewees. Relevant personal experiences, as testified by victims of war themselves, will further be explored by including trial testimonies in the study.

Data-collection

The research question will be answered through an analysis of 16 semi-structured interviews with a total of 18 persons[12]. The interviews were conducted with persons of both Albanian and Serbian backgrounds, as well as two persons originating from outside of Kosovo, yet familiar with the post-conflict context and the missing person issue. The interviewees included human rights activists, researchers, journalists, government officials, international organization representatives, a forensic pathologist, and representatives from the Missing Persons Resource Center (MPRC), the only association in Kosovo representing both Albanian and Serbian families[13]. The interviewees had different experiences of the 1998-99

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[12] Two interviews were conducted with two persons at the same time; thus 18 persons were interviewed.
[13] Full list of interviewees is to be found in Appendix 1. Some interviewees have wished to be anonymous, and their names are thus not appearing in the list.

conflict and its aftermath but held as a common factor that they had been or are currently working with the issue of missing persons, and families of missing persons specifically.

Most of the interviews were made possible through *snowball sampling*. Before departing to Kosovo, I got in touch with as many organizations and persons as possible engaged with the issue of missing persons, found through relevant publications, websites, and activities they were involved in. Five interviews were planned this way, while the rest was planned after arrival, as interviewees connected me to other relevant persons. While snowball sampling does not guarantee representativeness (Sharma, 2017), this sampling method made it possible to get in touch with interviewees of both Albanian and Serb backgrounds and with different experiences of the conflict and the missing person issue. Given that generalizations of the data to a larger population were not the aim of the data collection, snowball sampling was considered an appropriate way of accessing data that would not have been possible to access through other sampling methods. Interviewing people of different professions and engagements furthermore enabled me to collect a broad range of perspectives regarding the experiences of families from both the Albanian and Serbian communities.

The interviews were between 45 and 75 minutes long and were conducted in person, in Pristina and Mitrovica, during a month-long fieldwork period. The conversations followed an interview guide created prior to departure[14], but the questions were customized throughout the fieldwork period. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, which let the sessions focus on the core topic of intergroup trust, but also allowed for discovery and exploration depending on what the interviewees naturally decided to bring up. While some interviewees touched more on technical aspects of locating and finding missing persons, others focused more on the experiences of families, or on the political discussion surrounding the issue. The interview guide, however, made sure that all interviews touched on the central questions of the research project. If the participants consented, the interviews were recorded. In other cases, only notes were taken, which remain on file with the author.

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[14] Interview guide/list of questions is attached as Appendix 2.

Two potential limitations to the data collection should be mentioned. First, *language*, and second, *location*. All interviews were conducted in English as I do not speak or understand Albanian or Serbian. This had an impact on the data collection since it made it impossible to conduct interviews with non-English speakers and in that way limited the possible interviewees, and secondly because the level of English among the interviewees differed, which potentially made the data less comparable. Nevertheless, conducting the interviews in English can also be considered an advantage for the study as it decreased the bias towards one of the communities. Albanian and Serbian being two widely different languages, conducting all interviews in a third language made it possible to approach members of the different communities on a more equal level.

Secondly, the fact that the interviews were all conducted in Pristina and Mitrovica may be viewed as a limitation as smaller towns, communities, and associations could have offered perspectives different from those of the more established organizations and professionals in the bigger cities. However, the interviewees of this study originated from various parts of Kosovo, and worked with families of missing persons from all parts of the country, which offered a broad range of perspectives even though the interviews themselves were carried out in two cities only. That no interviews were conducted in other locations was also largely a question of access, as most NGOs, human rights activists, journalists, and government officials whose information was accessible in English, or who I was connected with through other interviewees, were located in the capital Pristina.

Ethical considerations

The decision to not directly interview families of the missing was taken due to ethical reasons. Since the war in Kosovo, families of the missing have been visited by numerous judicial and humanitarian organizations to provide evidence for trials and blood samples for DNA matching. As several interviewees point out, families of the missing are tired and disappointed by the process of finding their beloved ones, and the healing of their trauma has not been prioritized. Many families are still desperately waiting for news about what happened to their family members, putting them in a particularly vulnerable position.

In this context, to approach families and ask them about their experiences of pain, loss, and trust for the purpose of this thesis, was deemed to potentially do more harm than good. Interviewing as a means of data collection, especially in conflict and post-conflict contexts, is namely inherently unpredictable. As Kostovicova and Knott (2022) argue, "Researchers are unable to predict the conduct and content of the interview. All depends on how the relationship with a participant develops, but also on how participants are embedded in their political, social and cultural environment" making it "hard to assess (and thus minimise) the forms of harm that might result from research" (p. 60). Given that I do not have previous experience of Kosovo, nor doing field research in a post-conflict context in general, I decided to take precautions when selecting who to approach for an interview.

Instead of approaching war victims who have not chosen to be spokespersons for the issue of missing persons, or representatives for organizations, all of the approached interviewees were persons that had actively decided to work with the issue of missing persons in one way or another. Yet, even though the interviewees were all persons who deliberately had chosen to work with the issue of missing persons and the legacies of the past, I had to stay aware of the personal as well as political sensitivity of the topic throughout the data collection process.

I made sure to make clear before the interviews that they were free to answer questions to the degree they wanted to, and that they could stop the interviews at any time. Further, the interviewees were clearly informed about the purpose of the research before the start of the interviews. Written or oral consent of participation was requested, and the conversations were only recorded if clear consent was given by the participants. The possibility to be anonymous in the study was also offered. 6 out of 18 interviewees wished to be anonymous and thus not quoted with their names in the thesis. Additionally, the possibility to review quotes before the publishing of the thesis was offered. 10 out of 18 wished to do so.

Data analysis
The recorded interviews were fully transcribed and together with the interview notes coded on recurring topics and themes. This was partly done by hand, and partly by using the

software *NVivo*[15]. The coding process relied on a combination of deductive and inductive coding. While the first set of codes was predetermined based on the theoretical literature on ambiguous loss and trust[16], new codes were inductively introduced when going through the data[17]. The coding was primarily used to identify the main themes in the collected data and gain a deeper understanding of it, laying the ground for the core part of this thesis; the two chapters presenting and discussing the findings of this research. The analysis was conducted in an explorative manner, examining the relationship between ambiguous loss in families of the missing and intergroup trust from different angles and with consideration to what was emphasized by the interviewees, linking the findings to relevant previous scholarship, and thereby creating a dialogue between ideas and evidence.

Primary and secondary sources

The data analysis is preceded by a background chapter and a review of relevant academic literature on ambiguous loss and intergroup trust, constituting the theoretical foundations for this thesis. While the theory chapter is based solely on scholarly articles and books, with the occasional inclusion of NGO reports and statistics when context is needed, the background chapter is based on a broad range of sources. The older history is derived from historical work, primarily the academic anthology *Understanding the War in Kosovo* (eds. Bieber & Daskalovski, 2003). The more recent history, and that of the 1998-99 conflict, is based on academic articles, NGO reports, as well as archives from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, which conducted a number of trials over two decades, of which some about crimes committed in Kosovo.

The purpose of including testimonies is to, through the experiences of witnesses, paint a picture of what happened during the war, and thereby provide a background to the issue of missing persons. As Vukušić (2022) argues, the investigations of the ICTY have been key to knowing how some events during the Yugoslav wars unfolded (p. 8), making the trial records of the tribunal an invaluable source for "understanding the violence that was unleashed in

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[15] NVivo is a qualitative data analysis computer software.
[16] E.g. ambiguous loss, trauma, intergroup trust, narratives, contact, security-based trust, collaboration.
[17] E.g. politicization, institutional trust, archives, working group, legal framework, discrimination.

the 1990s across the former Yugoslavia" (p. 5). The archives are, however, huge (Vukušić, 2022, p. 2). Relevant testimonials were therefore identified from three key cases that were handled in the ICTY after 1999. First, the Slobodan Milošević trial, being one of the most important cases given that Milošević was the president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY/Serbia and Montenegro) during the Kosovo stage of the war (before, he was the President of Serbia). The case ended on 14 March 2006 without a final judgment because of Milošević's death on 11 March. The almost 7 years of proceedings, however (out of which 3 were spent in trial), left a vast amount of evidence and testimonies (ICTY, 2006). The second case is Vlastimir Đorđević. Đorđević was the Assistant Minister of the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP) and Chief of the Public Security Department (RJB) of the MUP. He was sentenced to 18 years of imprisonment on 27 January 2014 (ICTY, 2014a). Third, the case of Nikola Šainović and others. Former FRY Deputy Prime Minister Šainović was, together with five others, accused of involvement in a broad violent campaign against Albanians, and in particular civilians, in 1999. All but one of the accused was sentenced to imprisonment of 15-22 years when the judgment was released on 23 January 2014 (ICTY, 2014b).

The context of present-day Kosovo, as well as the issue of missing persons, is supported by academic articles, NGO reports, news articles, and also the content of the 16 interviews, as well as the published material received during those interviews.

<p style="text-align:center">…</p>

Finally, the content of this thesis will be presented as follows. The *background and context* chapter will provide historical and contextual background to Kosovo as a disputed territory, and to the issue of missing persons from the conflict. The following *theory and concepts* chapter will lay out the theoretical foundations and conceptual definitions for this thesis, reviewing key literature on ambiguous loss and intergroup trust. Thereafter, I will present and analyze the *findings* from the interview-based study. This will, as mentioned, be done through two chapters, one focusing on ambiguous loss and war narratives, and the second on intergroup relations, institutional trust, and the politicization of the past. The last chapter, the *conclusion,* will answer the main research question, present the main takeaways of this thesis, and suggest avenues for further research.

Background and context
Kosovo two decades after conflict

On February 17, 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence, and broke away from Serbia. Today, 14 years later, the territory of the small, landlocked country in the center of the Western Balkans remains contested. While more than 100 UN member states have recognized Kosovo as a sovereign state (UNMIK, 2022), countries such as Russia, China, and most importantly, Serbia, do not view Kosovo as independent, but as a province in Serbia, as it was during the Yugoslav years before the federation disintegrated in the early 1990s[18] (Kosovo MFA, 2022; Dragović-Soso, 2008).

Figure 1: Kosovo in the Western Balkans. *Source:* BBC (2017)

Kosovo, with Pristina as its capital, is inhabited by around 1,8 million people (World Bank, 2020), out of which approximately 91% are Albanians, and 3,4% are Serbs[19] (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2021, p. 40). Most Serbs live in the north, where the largest city is Mitrovica. Other minority communities (5,6%) include Roma, Ashkalia, Egyptians, Bosniaks, Turks,

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[18] Kosovo and Vojvodina were according to the Yugoslav constitution provinces within the Republic of Serbia. The constitutional tensions regarding Yugoslavia's federal structure have been considered as one of the main contributors to the country breaking apart after the death of Josip Broz Tito (Dragović-Soso, 2008, p. 10).
[19] In the 1981 census, Serbs counted for 13,2% of the population of Kosovo, and in 1991, 9,9% (Statistical Office of Kosovo, 2008).

and Gorani (Minority Rights, 2018). Albanian and Serbian are the most commonly spoken languages, and both hold official language status (OSCE, 2014). A majority of Albanians are Sunni Muslims by religious affiliation, and most Serbs are Orthodox Christians (ICJ, 2001).

While this is not a thesis about the political status of Kosovo, a notion of the historically rooted dispute regarding the territory is fundamental for understanding the happenings of the 1998-99 war, and the interethnic dynamics in Kosovo today. This chapter will outline some key points in the history of Kosovo, the main features of the last violent conflict, and the context in which the people of Kosovo find themselves today. It will furthermore provide a background to the issue of missing persons, and how it has evolved in the past 23 years.

Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo

"Kosovo has two histories, often mutually exclusive and frequently antagonistic", professor of Southeast European history Florian Bieber writes (2003, p. 2). For the Serbs, Kosovo is often viewed as their *Jerusalem*, the cradle of their civilization. South Slavs, the ancestors of present-day Serbs, Croats, and Slovens, arrived in the Balkans in the 4th century CE, and settled in the plains and river valleys of Kosovo between the 7th and 10th centuries. In the late 12th century, Kosovo was incorporated into the Serbian medieval empire (Daskalovski, 2003, p. 12-13). Yet, while Serbs settled in the plains and valleys of Kosovo in the early Middle Ages, the mountains were inhabited by early Illyrians and medieval Albanians, the ancestors of modern Albanians (ibid). To Albanians, the early presence of their ancestors in Kosovo is a well-established fact. The Serbian empire of the 12th century is thus viewed as more or less an annexation and occupation of Albanian territory (p. 16).[20]

A key date in the history of both Albanians and Serbs is June 28, 1389, when the famous *Battle of Kosovo* in the Field of Blackbirds, today Fushë Kosovë/Kosovo Polje, was fought. Little is known about the specificities of this battle, but much has been told (Judah, 2008, p. 20). Yet, rather agreed on by historians is that on this day, the Ottoman Turks defeated the

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[20] Details about the early history of Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo is beyond the scope of this thesis. For further historical background, Malcolm (2018) *Kosovo: A short history,* and Bieber & Daskalovski (eds. 2003) *Understanding the War in Kosovo* provide a good overview.

Serbs, which caused Kosovo to fall under the Ottoman Empire for the next 500 years. Mass conversions to Islam, forced or voluntary, followed the invasion, and many Serbs migrated north (Daskalovski, 2003, p. 13). The Ottoman Empire saw the final end in the Balkans only in the late 19th century (Judah, 2008, p. 37). Serbia won back autonomy of its land in the 1860s, and regained control over Kosovo after the First Balkan War in 1912. Losing Kosovo again in 1915 during World War I to the occupation of Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria, the territory of Kosovo was in 1918 incorporated into the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovens, later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Between 1912 and 1941, around 300,000 Albanians were expelled from Kosovo, going from 90% to 70% of the population, as at the same time 14,000 Serbian families settled in the region (Daskalovski, 2003, p. 17).

After World War II, under which Yugoslavia, including Kosovo, was occupied by the Axis powers, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY/Yugoslavia) was established, and Kosovo became an autonomous region, later province, in Serbia. In contrast to other parts of Yugoslavia, there was little support among Kosovo Albanians to be part of the federation (Judah, 2008, p. 51). In the 1970s, however, when Yugoslavia went through somewhat of a "golden age", the effects were also to be felt in Kosovo, although Kosovo remained a poor area compared to the other parts of Yugoslavia. Kosovo Albanians were "freer than they had ever been in Yugoslavia and better educated and in better health than they had been in the whole of their history" (ibid., p. 55). This trend of (relative) freedom and prosperity did, however, not last long. After the death of Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito in 1980, things started to change quickly in the federation, and so also in Kosovo.

On 11 March 1981, protests started in central Pristina with demands (among others) for Kosovo to become a republic (Judah, 2008, p. 58). In the Yugoslav constitution enacted in 1974, Kosovo's status as an autonomous province was basically that of a republic in all but name, with Serbia having little control over Kosovo's economic, social, cultural, political, and legal affairs (Guzina, 2003, p. 31). However, the demands for independence from Serbia did not meet concessions. From a Serbian perspective, Kosovo's increased autonomy was at the expense of Kosovo Serbs, and the Serbian nation as a whole (ibid., p. 33). When Slobodan Milošević came into power in Serbia as the leader of Serbia's communist party in 1987 and

president of Serbia two years later, Kosovo's autonomy was soon to be stripped. In 1989, amendments to the Serbian constitution deprived Kosovo of its autonomous status, and after a counter-act by Albanians to declare Kosovo an "independent unit in the Yugoslav community, equal to other republics", the Serbian National Assembly dissolved the Kosovo government (Decree of Termination of the Assembly of Kosovo, 1990; Nikolić, 2003, p. 61).

The happenings in Kosovo at the end of the 80s have often been viewed as the beginning of the end for Yugoslavia (Silber & Little, 1996). Kosovo-Albanians, under Ibrahim Rugova and his Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), attempted to oppose the Serbian domination and increasing discrimination peacefully at the beginning of the 90s, but the political crisis soon came to escalate into full-fledged armed conflict (Judah, 2008, p. 70-74).

The conflict 1998-1999

Yugoslavia was breaking apart, violently, from 1991. First in Slovenia briefly, and then more dramatically in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, up until 1995. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed and wounded, and millions were displaced, especially in Bosnia, where the attacks on civilians were the fiercest (Silber & Little, 1996). In early 1998, the political crisis in Kosovo escalated dramatically. Kosovo had until that point remained tense and divided, but unlike other parts of Yugoslavia without mass violence. Yet, in 1998, clashes began between members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA, in Albanian: *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës,* UÇK[21]), which had formed to fight for Kosovo independence, and the FRY army, Serb police, and paramilitary groups operating in the region[22] (Nikolić, 2003, p. 63).

The KLA had become increasingly public already in 1996 and 1997, when they claimed responsibility for the killing of several Serb policemen and officials, civilians, and alleged Albanian "collaborators" (KLA press reports, 1997). The support for the group, however, grew substantially among Kosovo Albanians only in the spring of 1998, after the Serbian police on February 28 launched a massive attack on a village in Drenicë/Drenica where they

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[21] Hereafter referred to as KLA.
[22] Hereafter referred to as FRY/Serb Forces.

believed that KLA fighters were residing (Troebst, 2003, p. 12). Press reports suggesting that Serb forces committed atrocities against civilians in Drenicë/Drenica caused public outrage among Albanians and triggered a quick expansion of the KLA (Woehrel, 1998, p. 6).

Similar attacks continued in early 1998. In a witness statement from the ICTY Milošević trials, a witness from Brojë in the municipality of Skenderaj/Srbica in the Drenicë/Drenica region describes how Serb forces, after a happening where a Serbian policeman was killed, started shelling his village, forcing him and his family to leave their home (ICTY Prosecutor v. Slobodan Milosevic[23], 24 April 2002).

While already leading to both killed and displaced civilians in 1998, the Kosovo conflict entered a second, "much fiercer" round in 1999 (Troebst, 2003, p. 12). From September 1998 onwards, both parties applied an all-or-nothing strategy. While the Serbian forces under Slobodan Milošević went for total ethnic cleansing of Albanians from Kosovo, the KLA applied a high-risk tactic of provoking the Serbs to overreact, potentially triggering an international military intervention (ibid). The actions of the FRY/Serb forces eventually triggered intervention, after a failure to reach a diplomatic solution and in the face of an escalating humanitarian crisis (ICMP, 2017, p. 12). On March 24, 1999, NATO started an extensive bombing campaign against Serbian forces that lasted for 78 days (ICTY, 2006b). The Kosovo conflict officially ended on June 11, 1999, when Serbia withdrew its troops and the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) entered after the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement (1999) in Northern Macedonia on June 9.

The actions of the Serb forces during the conflict were characterized by excessive and indiscriminate force, and widespread and systematic mass murders. On March 26, 1999, in Suharekë/Suva Reka, Serbian forces killed 45 members of the Berisha family as witnessed by the survivors of the attack (ICTY v. Milosevic, 26 February 2002; 10 July 2002). Two days later, on March 28, Saranda Bogujevci, today a Kosovar politician, lost 14 members of her family, and was herself shot 16 times but survived, in Podujevë/Podujevo (today Besiana), as

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[23] Hereafter "ICTY v. Milosevic". The ICTY does commonly use anglicized spelling, without diacritics, in their case names.

she testified in front of the ICTY (ICTY Prosecutor v. Vlastimir Djordjevic[24], 9 March 2009). The crime with the highest number of victims during the Kosovo conflict occurred in April 1999, when around 350 civilians, all men, were killed in Mejë/Meja, Korenicë/Korenica, and other villages around Gjakovë/Đakovica (HLC, 2015, p. 7).

The transportation of bodies to clandestine mass graves in Serbia became a central feature of the war during the spring of 1999. In a Serb police general's diary (1999) the notes "no corpse - no crime", and "mopping up the terrain - the most important" are to be read, taken during a meeting headlined "president", implying that the notes were taken while in a meeting with President Milošević.
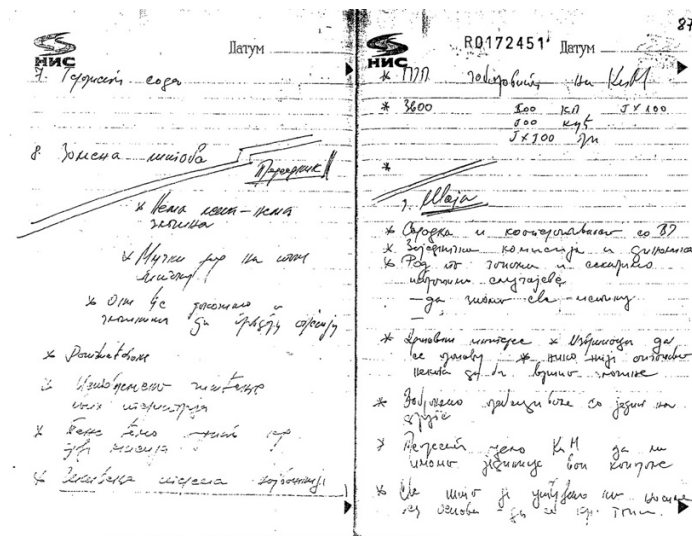
Diary excerpt/evidence material from the Milošević trials[25].

Evidence has been found for orchestrated operations of hiding evidence for war crimes by moving bodies from murder sites, many of which were planned in the president's office. In several cases, bodies were already buried in Kosovo, then excavated and taken to Serbian territory to be out of reach for ICTY investigators (ICTY v. Milosevic, 22 July 2002). One of the most well-known operations was the so-called *Depth two/Dubina Dva[26]*, a cover-up

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[24] Hereafter "ICTY v. Djordjevic".
[25] Diary excerpt with translation (1999) derived from the *Kosovo Sense Centar* website, gathering materials that were presented on the trials at the ICTY. The diary excerpt was discussed in court on 8 June 2005 (ICTY v. Milosevic, p. 40676-).
[26] Details about the operation can be discovered through Ognjen Glavonić's (2016) documentary *Dubina Dva*.

ordered by general Đorđević. Not long after it was put in place, a refrigerator truck with the remains of 86 dead bodies was found in the Danube River. The bodies were secretly taken to a military training center in Batajnica near Belgrade, where they were reburied. A majority of the bodies of the Berisha family, as well as 309 of the men killed in Gjakovë/Đakovica, were found in the Batajnica mass grave in 2001 (ICTY v. Djordjevic Trial Judgment, 2011; ICTY Prosecutor v. Nikola Sainovic et al. Trial Judgment, 2009; HLC, 2015).

More than 13,000 civilians[27] were killed during the Kosovo war (ICMP, 2017, p. 12; NSI, 2022, p. 11; HLC, 2022, p. 129), and nearly a million Kosovo Albanians were displaced (Troebst, 2003, p. 12). Importantly, however, the atrocities committed against civilians did not end on June 11. After the Kumanovo Agreement and the withdrawal of Serbian troops, many civilians from Serbian and other non-majority communities were killed and kidnapped by members of the KLA, as were Albanians that were believed to be Serb "collaborators"[28]. Burning and looting of homes belonging to Serbs, Roma and other minorities was a common feature in the conflict's aftermath (HRW, 2001). Crimes by the KLA were also committed earlier during the conflict and were dealt with in two cases before the ICTY, Limaj et al. (2005), and Haradinaj et al. (2008). While the prosecution had trouble proving the links between direct perpetrators and the accused commanders due to a lack of documents on the KLA command structure and witnesses feeling threatened and scared to share evidence, the judgments concluded that KLA members were responsible for a number of alleged crimes, among others those of abuse in the Llapushnik/Lapušnik and Jabllanicë/Jablanica prison camps (ICTY Prosecutor v. Limaj et al. Trial Judgment, 2005; ICTY Prosecutor v. Haradinaj et al. Trial Judgment, 2008). Trials against KLA members, among them former prime minister Hashim Thaçi, continue today through the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague, a separate EU-backed institution established as the ICTY was closing (KSC, 2022).

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[27] Out of which 10 000 were Albanians, 2000 Serbs, and 1000 from other ethnic groups (NSI, 2022, p. 11).
[28] The alleged war crimes committed by the KLA after the end of conflict were significantly brought into the spotlight trough a report written for the Council of Europe by the Swiss prosecutor Dick Marty (Marty, 2011). The report, by many Kosovo Albanians viewed as rather controversial, substantiated claims previously made by ICTY chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte and accused a number of high-ranking members of the KLA, which eventually contributed to the establishment of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague (Pineles, 2022).

Kosovo today

After the end of the conflict in 1999, Kosovo came under UN administration through Security Council resolution 1244. The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) had the main responsibility for building institutions after the war and ensuring conditions for a peaceful life for the people of Kosovo (UNMIK, 2022). As an interviewee tells me, "after the war everything had to be built up, institutions but also the very basic things, such as electricity, where to get a driver's license, where to get a birth certificate…"[29]. UNMIK was largely responsible for these tasks. With UNMIK still present in Kosovo, The European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) took over many of its state-building responsibilities after the declaration of independence in 2008, especially in supporting Kosovo's rule of law institutions (ICMP, 2017, p. 12). After 2018, however, most of these responsibilities have been transferred to Kosovo institutions (EULEX, n.d.).

The governance of Kosovo is today composed of two levels, the central and the municipal, with Serb majority municipalities in the north increasingly integrated into the system since 2013. Four parliamentary elections have been held since 2008, the last one in 2021, and have generally been deemed free and fair (BTI, 2022, p. 3-4). Institutions, however, remain weak and corruption is widespread (Freedom House, 2022). The current head of state is president Vjosa Osmani, and the head of government is prime minister Albin Kurti. Osmani and Kurti were elected largely on promises of combating corruption and organized crime, and for having pasts clean of involvement in the Kosovo conflict (BTI, 2022, p. 3).

The issue of missing persons

The legacies of the 1998-1999 conflict remain big topics in Kosovo society and politics, with missing persons as one of the major issues. A total of 6065[30] persons have been reported as missing to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as a result of the conflict. After adjustments early after conflict as persons were found alive, the number of missing persons was estimated to be around 4500 (ICMP, 2017, p. 11). As of March 2022, 23 years after

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[29] Interview 7.
[30] Total number of persons for whom a tracing request was opened with the ICRC by the families.

the conflict, 1621[31] persons remain unaccounted for (ICRC, 2022). Around 400 of these went missing between June 1999 and December 2000, that is, after the official end of the war. While the ICRC deliberately does not share data on the ethnicity of the missing, around 70% of the still missing are estimated to be ethnic Albanians, while 30% are Serbs or members of other minority groups (HLC, 2022, p. 130). The same goes for the status of the missing; the ICRC does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in their database (ICRC, 2022), but according to recent disaggregated data, around 8% of the total amount of missing after conflict were estimated to be members of armed formations (NSI, 2022; p. 11).

Compared to other post-conflict contexts, Kosovo is sometimes emphasized as a success story when it comes to resolving the fate of missing persons. The identification rate, 73%, is high compared to places such as Argentina, Cyprus, or Lebanon[32]. Several interviewees, however, highlight that this means nothing to the families of the 27% that have still not been found. It furthermore means little for the fulfillment of every family's "right to know" as granted by international law and human rights law, the ICRC highlights[33].

Many actors have been involved in the search for, and identification of, missing persons from the Kosovo conflict. Domestic institutions in Kosovo include the Kosovo Commission on Missing Persons (established in 2006), the Kosovo Institute for Forensic Medicine, and the Kosovo Specialist Prosecutor's Office (located in The Hague). In Serbia, the central actors are the Serbian Commission on Missing Persons (established in 1991) and the Specialist War Crimes Chamber and Prosecutor's Office. International actors include the ICTY, NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR), UNMIK, EULEX, the ICRC, and the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP). Additionally, numerous local organizations in Kosovo (and Serbia) have been working on the issue in terms of support to the families of the missing, reporting on the issue, and regularly scrutinizing the institutional processes (ICMP, 2017).

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[31] As of April 2022, when the fieldwork for this thesis was conducted, the number was 1620. Since then, a new tracing request was opened and thus the number in June 2022 is 1621.
[32] Interview 3.
[33] Interview 8.

While in Kosovo, the process of searching for, recovering, and identifying missing persons has been a process led by international actors (with UNMIK and after 2008 EULEX holding the main mandates), in Serbia, domestic institutions have held the responsibility for these tasks. Since 2014, however, the domestic Government Commission on Missing Persons (GCMP) in Kosovo has taken over most responsibilities from EULEX when it comes to resolving the fate of missing persons in Kosovo. While international actors are still active in the process, especially when it comes to coordinating donor efforts, the operational work of searching for and identifying persons is today coordinated within the GCMP (WGEID, 2019; ICMP, n.d.). The GCMP is led by Andin Hoti, son of the philosopher and activist Ukshin Hoti who was last seen in a Yugoslav prison in 1999 and remains missing (Haxhiaj, 2021).

A key arena of cooperation between the Kosovo GCMP and its Serbian counterpart has been the ICRC-chaired Working Group on Missing Persons established within the framework of the EU-facilitated Pristina-Belgrade dialogue, aimed at resolving political issues between Kosovo and Serbia, and at normalizing relations. The missing persons working group[34] was established in 2004 and since then, 52 sessions have been held. The purpose of the working group has from the beginning been humanitarian, with the sole aim to find and identify missing persons from the Kosovo conflict from all communities[35]. An obstacle in the process, however, has been the interference of political issues, as well as Kosovo's status. As Serbia does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state, no formal frameworks exist for cooperation or exchange of information on missing persons between Serbia and Kosovo, as there are between, for instance, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, or Serbia and Croatia[36].

Additionally, the war involvement of representatives is a recurring obstacle to the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue, and the working group specifically. Since June 2021, the work on missing persons is blocked due to a demand from the Kosovo Government to change the Serbian head of delegation, Veljko Odalović, for his alleged involvement in the war[37]. When I met

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[34] Officially "Working Group on Missing Persons related to the conflict in Kosovo". The working group has several operational sub-groups (ICRC, 2020).

[35] Interview 8.

[36] Interview 13.

[37] Interview 1.

with the GCMP in Pristina, they confirmed that Kosovo's delegation will not return to the dialogue before Odalović has been replaced. Meanwhile, they highlight the cooperation in the working group as crucial for bringing answers and justice to the families of the missing[38].

In recent years, the process of finding and identifying missing persons has stagnated. While early after the conflict, the number of identifications was very high, the progress has lately been poor, with only a few new concluded cases every year.

Certainly, one explanation for the decline is that the easiest cases were resolved first, and the most difficult cases are the ones that are left, as an EULEX representative underlines[39]. The
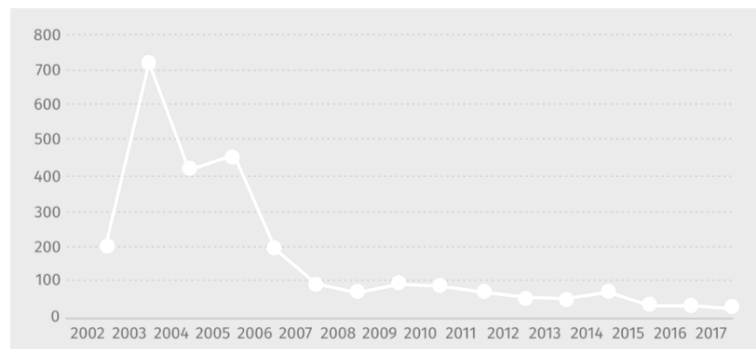

Figure 2: DNA-led identifications per year. *Source:* ICMP (2017)

reasons for the lacking progress, nevertheless, go beyond that and the current standstill in the Pristina-Belgrade working group. A lack of domestic capacity in Kosovo been one major issue (Mikellide, 2017), and the lack of reliable information regarding potential clandestine mass graves is another (Baumgartner & Ott, 2017). For the latter matter, the opening of *archives* is a central issue. While Kosovo authorities have long pleaded for Serbia to open wartime military and police archives, Serbian politicians have also called for KLA archives to be opened. Additionally, third countries present in Kosovo during and after the conflict are assumed to have archives that could reveal new information (HLC, 2022, p. 147).

Another challenge is the issue of misidentifications. Before the ICMP introduced DNA as the main method of identifying bodily remains in the year of 2000, more than 2000 persons were identified by "traditional methods" (ICMP, 2019). This means that they were identified only by looks, clothes, or belongings, which is assumed to have caused a significant number of

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[38] Interview 14.
[39] Interview 13.

errors[40]. A current issue is furthermore that there are mortal remains of 300-400 unidentified persons in the Pristina morgue that do not match blood samples from families of missing persons (HLC, 2022, p. 165). In order to solve this issue, and potentially find new matches, it would be necessary to return to many families that may already have buried a body, believing it was their loved one, and ask for DNA. The ICMP is working on the matter and believes that, despite it being a difficult process for many families, it is essential for the identification of the hundreds of cases in the Pristina morgue[41]. The issue, however, remains controversial and has been postponed for a long time because of the renewed trauma it might cause.

As of June 2022, 1621 cases of missing persons remain unresolved. 1372 are reported missing, while 249 are reported dead, with the body still missing. 131 of the cases were, at the time of disappearance, children below the age of 18, and 328 above the age of 65. Most of the missing (1358) are men (ICRC, 2022). As several interviewees point out, it is impossible to ever resolve all of the open cases, due to how the disappearances happened. Some were burned on the spot or in crematoriums, and others were buried in unidentified places without any traces, information or witnesses left behind[42]. Some families will never get answers, which an interviewee illustrates by the example of a family member from Mitrovica, who has three generations of missing persons in his family. "His great grandfather was missing from the 1912 war, his grandfather from the second world war, and now son, from this last war. He has not found any of them, so far"[43].

At the same time, the belief is still high that – through the opening of archives and by solving the issue of misidentified cases, among other things – hundreds of families can still receive the remains of their loved ones and get answers about what happened 23 years ago. As a EULEX representative says, "We can keep hoping that we can find all 1620 missing persons, but that's a *hope*. But the fact is that we are *confident* that this number can be lowered"[44].

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[40] Interview 15.
[41] Interview 6.
[42] Interview 1, interview 2.
[43] Interview 2.
[44] Interview 13.

Theory and concepts
A review of the literature

This chapter will outline the theoretical foundations for this research, including important conceptual definitions. First, the concept of missing persons will be defined, and theory on ambiguous loss will be discussed. Thereafter, key theoretical literature on intergroup and interpersonal trust, both on its emergence and its dimensions, will be reviewed.

Ambiguous loss

"When a loved one is here but not here, or gone but not for sure, the family as a whole, and the individuals in it, struggle as their story continues without an ending."

– Boss & Carnes (2012, p. 456)

The phenomenon of missing persons, whose fate and whereabouts are unknown, is a central feature in most contemporary societies transitioning from conflict or authoritarian rule. While in the 1970s, enforced disappearances were most widespread in Latin American countries, the issue has become increasingly global in recent decades (Kovras, 2012; Marta, 2021). The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) has processed over 59 000 cases of missing persons in 110 countries since its inception in 1980, with 46 500 cases in 95 states that have not yet been clarified (UN, 2021). The International Commission for Missing Persons (ICMP) has been active in missing person investigations in over 40 conflict and post-conflict countries since its founding in 1996, including Syria, Mexico, and most countries in the Western Balkans (ICMP, 2021).

Defining missing persons
In transitional justice[45] literature, a missing person is usually defined as any person who is unaccounted for as a result of an international or non-international armed conflict or internal violence (Crettol & La Rosa, 2006, p. 355). In most cases of such disappearances, the

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[45] *Transitional justice* is an approach to dealing with systematic or massive violence of human rights guided by four principles: truth seeking, the right to justice, establishing reparations for victims, and guarantees of non-repetition in a reformed future (UN, 2008; 2010). Transitional justice is also known as "dealing with the past" and has become a diverse and vibrant field within academia, policy, and practice (swisspeace, 2012).

fate and whereabouts of the missing persons are unknown for various reasons. They might have been arrested, abducted, killed on capture, or during massacres. They may also have been members of armed groups whose fate is unknown, refugees or displaced without means of communication, children who have been separated from their families, or people who died and whose identities were never recorded (ibid, p. 356). This broad definition of a missing person derives from International Humanitarian Law[46] and differs from the narrower concept of *enforced disappearance* encountered in Human Rights Law[47]. While an enforced disappearance refers to a person who is taken under the control of a state and never seen again, the missing person concept encompasses all disappeared, and not only those who have been explicitly arrested or killed by state actors (Robins, 2011, p. 24).

Ambiguous loss

Many scholars emphasize that the main victims of disappearances in conflict or internal violence, besides the missing persons themselves, are the *families of the missing* (Boss, 2002; 2007; Crettol & La Rosa, 2006; Kajtazi-Testa & Hewer 2018; Keough et al., 2004; Marta, 2021; Robins, 2010; 2011; Wayland et al., 2016). Left without knowledge about what happened to their loved ones, families can suffer from the agony of uncertainty for a long time after violence has ceased. The consequences may also go beyond the emotional-psychological, impacting families financially, socially, and legally, especially when the main breadwinner of a family goes missing (Crettol & La Rosa, 2006; Marta, 2021, p. 3).

While acknowledging the practical consequences of missing a family member after conflict, much of the academic literature on families of the missing focus on the psychological impact of not knowing what has happened to a relative and having to live without proper closure. The loss that these families experience is often referred to as *ambiguous loss.* The term was

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[46] *International Humanitarian Law* is also known as the law of armed conflict. It constitutes the legal framework that applies during wartime to protect people who are not or are no longer participating in hostilities. It also restricts the methods and means of warfare to cause as little humanitarian suffering as possible (IJRC, n.d.).

[47] *International Human Rights Law* lays down obligations which states are bound to respect trough international treaties and conventions (OHCHR, n.d.). "The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance" entered into force in 2003 and has been ratified by 67 countries and signed by 45 (OHCHR, 2022).

coined in the 1970s by psychologist Pauline Boss and has thereafter become widely used in academic literature for describing the open-ended kind of loss that families might experience when a relative disappears in either body or mind (Boss & Carnes, 2012).

Boss (2002) distinguishes between two types of ambiguous loss. In the first type, persons are physically absent but remain psychologically present. This may be the case when a person goes missing during a violent conflict, and their remains are not found when the conflict is over. In the second type, a person is physically present, but instead psychologically absent. This may be the case when a person suffers from addiction, dementia, or depression, and becomes emotionally or cognitively unavailable to those around them (p. 39). This paper is naturally concerned with the first type of loss, where a person is physically absent. Previous literature on missing persons has frequently used the concept of ambiguous loss to describe the loss of families that are left behind when relatives disappear during conflict or unrest and never return (Heeke & Knaevelsrud, 2015; Robins, 2011; Wayland et al., 2016).

Ambiguous loss has been described as a "liminal space between life and death" (Jones et al., 2007, p. 110). Many authors argue that the open-ended and infinite character of ambiguous loss can complicate families' grieving processes, given that closure is hard when the fate of the missing person is unresolved. Ambiguous loss takes its toll on families of missing persons "physically, cognitively, behaviorally and emotionally" (Betz & Thorngren, 2006, p. 361). It might be challenging for families of missing persons to find a balance between grieving and living, between the past and the future, between despair and hope (Rycroft & Perlezs, 2001, pp. 63). Not knowing whether the missing relative will return can furthermore prevent the reconstruction of family roles, rules, and rituals (Boss, 2002, p. 39).

A study by Heeke and Knaevelsrud (2015) finds that relatives of missing persons suffer from higher psychological distress than relatives of persons with confirmed losses, particularly in terms of depression and prolonged grieving reactions. One of the reasons for this might be that traditional grieving rituals, such as burials, are made impossible when a person is still missing (Heeke & Knaevelsrud, 2015, p. 827). As Boss (2002) describes it, many families need to "see the body and participate in rituals to break down denial, and cognitively begin to

cope and grieve" (p. 39). This makes the opening of mass graves, identification of bodies, and the uncovering of the circumstances that led to the disappearances necessary steps for families to complete their mourning process (Crettol & La Rosa, 2006, p. 362).

Resolving the fate of missing persons has by scholars been highlighted as a crucial part of properly dealing with atrocities of the past in post-conflict settings (Crettol & La Rosa, 2006; Kinsella & Blau, 2013; Kovras, 2012; Kovras & Loizides, 2011; Marta, 2021). Families' right to know what happened to their relatives is also declared in the core principles of transitional justice (UN, 2010). Yet, little research has been conducted on the impact of unresolved missing persons on a societal level and the relations between groups. While often argued that the missing person issue is "not only a matter of personal and individual pain" but also "an obstacle to building just peace" (Bomberger, 2016), most research on missing persons and ambiguous loss has been limited to the affected families, and the psychological consequences of missing a loved one. Little is known about how the personal pain and lack of closure impact intergroup relations and long-term peace on a societal level in post-conflict spaces.

Clark (2010) is one of the few authors that has focused specifically on examining the link between missing persons and post-conflict relations. Through an interview-based study in Bosnia-Herzegovina, she concludes that the unresolved fate of missing persons potentially constitutes an important obstacle to good intergroup relations, for three main reasons: by preventing families of the missing from moving on, by prolonging their trauma, and by fueling inter-ethnic mistrust (p. 429). Şahoğlu (2021), on the other side, has examined the case of Cyprus and finds that the issue of missing persons does in fact *not* pose an obstacle to trust- and relationship-building in the country, but rather the opposite, because families of the different communities experience that they "share similar stories". Rather, the issue might impact families' trust for politicians and institutions who, according to the families, are not doing enough to resolve the fate of the missing (p. 35). Both authors, nonetheless, argue that more research is needed on the matter to support either of the conclusions and that the relationship is likely to be largely impacted by context.

The question of how the unresolved fate of missing persons from violent conflict impacts societies on an inter-community level remains under-researched. It is here that this thesis aims to make its main contribution, by examining how the ambiguous loss in families of missing persons impacts trust between groups. Building trust is often highlighted as a key part of post-conflict reconciliation (Bloomfield, 2006; Clark, 2010; 2012; Kappmeier et al., 2021; Kelman, 2005; Rettberg & Ugarriza, 2016). Trust, however, is also a phenomenon of its own. The empirical study of this thesis will *not* focus on whether trust is a necessary condition for societies to build peaceful relations, presuming that forgiveness and reconciliation between previously hostile parties is always the end goal, or the ultimate wish of survivors. Again, the purpose of this thesis is to explore how the trust between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo is impacted by the unresolved fate of missing persons, and thereby contribute to an increased understanding for how societies and intercommunity relations are affected by the issue of missing persons and the loss it entails for affected families.

Intergroup trust

"We inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted."

– Baier (1986, p. 234)

There is little disagreement among scholars about the power of trust, or the lack of it, as a socio-psychological mechanism strongly impacting human relations (Kappmeier, 2016, p. 134;). While trust is something intangible, and as the quote above indicates, usually "only noticed when scarce or polluted", it is also key to initiating, establishing, and maintaining social relationships (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013, p. 1090), and a key concept when it comes to understanding how individuals interact, within and between groups (Adolphs, 2002).

Lack of trust is an often-cited source of prolonged intergroup conflict (Alon & Bar-Tal, 2016; Kappmeier et al., 2021; Sztompka, 2016), and trust-building is viewed as foundational when it comes to successful peace processes (Malik, 2003; Kelman, 2005). In post-conflict and transitional contexts, establishing trust between individuals, groups, and institutions is argued to be crucial for preventing renewed conflict (Dempster, 2020). What creates trust,

and what dismantles it, is a frequently discussed topic in the literature on conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding. At the same time, there is little data on how specific post-conflict phenomena, such as the issue of missing persons, impact trust.

When it comes to missing persons from conflict, the reviewed literature shows that many authors view unresolved cases of missing persons as potential obstacles to peaceful relations between groups (e.g. Clark, 2010; Crettol & La Rosa, 2006; Heeke & Knaevelsrud, 2015). Meanwhile, little research has solidly examined how the missing person issue impacts the relations between groups, and even less so trust specifically. Juhl (2009; 2016) has through her research on missing persons in Bosnia-Herzegovina concluded that intergroup distrust poses an obstacle to cooperation in resolving the fate of missing persons (2006) and that the missing person issue is largely fueled by distrust in the country's public discourse (2016). Similarly, Strapacova (2016) argues that intergroup distrust has a major impact on Kosovo's possibilities of addressing past atrocities. But how do trust and distrust emerge in the first place, and what does trust consist of?

Defining intergroup trust

There are many definitions of trust, albeit with recurrent elements. Ross and LaCroix (1996) suggest that trust is about "one party's willingness to risk increasing his or her vulnerability to another whose behavior is beyond one's control" (p. 315). A central element of this definition is *risk,* implying that a person or group dares to expose itself to the other, who can or may harm, even when there is uncertainty about the outcomes of such exposure (Juhl, 2016, pp. 5-6). Trust is thereby inherently about risk-taking, and about making oneself vulnerable to another party (Rotella et al., 2013, p. 115).

Later authors have expanded this definition to also emphasize the element of *expectations* about the other party's behavior. Alon and Bar-Tal (2016) suggest that trust is about "lasting expectations about future behaviors of the other (a person or a group) that affects the own welfare (of one person or of own group) and allow for a readiness to take risks in relation to the other" (p. 312). Lasting expectations that the other is not out to harm oneself, even when in possession to do so, is a key indicator of trust, according to Alon and Bar-Tal (2016, pp. 312-316). Importantly, the expectations of certain behavior are more about the *intention* of the

other party, rather than the actions. While the other party may refrain from hostile behavior due to lacking ability, or because of the consequences their actions will lead to, a party may still perceive hostile intentions, and thus experience distrust towards the other (Alon & Bar-Tal, 2016, p. 312).

Most scholars agree that trust is about a relation between at least two parties (Juhl, 2016, p. 5). When adding the group element to the definition of trust, as in *intergroup trust,* we assume that individuals are group members who identify with their group and because of this identification form shared views of the world (Turner et al., 1987 in Alon & Bar-Tal, 2016, p. 316). Intergroup trust or distrust is thus based on some kind of shared beliefs. Alongside these, Alon & Bar-Tal also argue that contextual collective experiences have a strong impact on the formation of intergroup trust or distrust. "Of special significance are major powerful and relevant to group members experiences, such as wars, conflicts, revolutions, strong political alliances, disasters, injustices, or rebellions" (2016, p. 317).

Combining the definitions by Ross and LaCroix (1996) and Alon and Bar-Tal (2016), and adding the group element, this thesis will rely on the following definition of intergroup trust: "one group's expectations about the future behavior of the other, and the readiness to take risks in relation to the other, whose behavior is beyond one's control".

Dimensions of intergroup trust
More recent authors have expanded the definition of intergroup trust to specify its different dimensions. Kappmeier et al. (2020) conceptualize it into five types, as illustrated in the figure on the next page: competence, integrity, compassion, compatibility, and security (p. 112). While competence and integrity are about the *trustworthiness* and characteristics of the other, compassion and compatibility refer to *intergroup relations* and grounds for coexistence. Security constitutes its own dimension.

Competence-based trust refers to an evaluation of the other's capacity and effectiveness, meaning that the other handles things competently, is able to deliver upon agreements, and if they know and state facts correctly. Integrity captures how the other's intentions are perceived, including to what degree their behavior is attributed to a moral code. Key

concepts under integrity are the perceived honesty, good intention, and promise fulfillment of the other group (Kappmeier, 2016, p. 143). Compassion is about perceived intentions concerning care and consideration towards one's own group, and compatibility encompasses the degree to which groups can relate to each other, such as through traditions, values, and language. Influenced by both compassion and compatibility, collaboration is a further important concept within intergroup relations. Collaboration is about openness with information, receptivity, and a group's general willingness to collaborate (ibid.).

Security is about the sense of risk of harm, physical or emotional, from the other group. Security *underlies* the other types of trust in the model, implying that a lack in one of the four other dimensions could weaken the moral compass of a group, potentially justifying committing atrocities towards the other, and eroding the security-based trust.

Kappmeier (2016) and Kappmeier et al. (2020; 2021) argue that trust is a multidimensional concept, and hence must be studied as such. The dimensions of trust as presented through their model are highly *interdependent*. Furthermore, Kappmeier et al. emphasize that trust is not to be considered *binary*, as in trust versus distrust. Rather, a group can develop one type of trust while still facing weakness in another type. Key to the multidimensional concept of trust is that it is about *perceptions*, that is, how individuals or groups perceive and experience

Figure 3: The dimensions of trust.

the intentions and behavior of the other. A study of trust is therefore mainly interested in the experiences of individuals, that if shared with a larger group, can, to some degree, represent the views of a group. The comprehensive, albeit parsimonious, model presented by Kappmeier et al. provides a tool for analyzing intergroup trust in post-conflict settings, enabling a "more resource-based, as opposed to deficit-based" approach to studying intergroup relations (Kappmeier et al., 2021, p. 95).
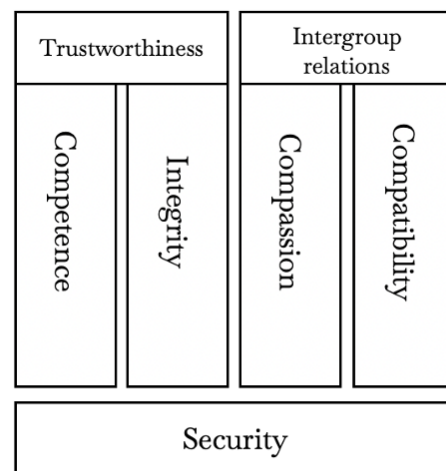
The emergence of intergroup trust and distrust

Sztompka (2016) argues that there are two main theoretical approaches to understanding how trust and distrust are built; one focusing on history, and another focusing on the structural context. Sztompka views the two theoretical approaches as complementary, rather than competing (p. 16), which will also be the starting point of this thesis. As the missing person issue is historically rooted as well as affected by the current political and institutional context in Kosovo (and Serbia), looking at both of these dimensions is key.

The historically rooted approach assumes that trust and distrust are built from *below*, are path-dependent, and emerge in a long cumulative process made of beneficial and harmful experiences in mutual relationships. While a history of peaceful and fruitful cooperation and coexistence fosters trust, a history of acrimonious violence and wars serve to destroy trust. A history of mutual support and coalitions against outside enemies build trust, whereas a history of disloyalty and broken agreements produce distrust (Sztompka, 2016, 15). Rotella et al. (2013) further argue that groups who have collectively suffered from discrimination or oppression may also develop a deep sense of *victimhood* impacting their trust in others. The feeling of victimhood may stay as a historical trauma impacting trust even with those who did not experience the discrimination or were not directly affected by the event (p. 115).

The more structurally focused approach views trust and distrust as purposefully formed or reinforced from *above*. Trust and distrust are perceived as emerging due to the imposition of secure or insecure environments for mutual relationships. Order, predictability by means of a rule of law, consistent policies, and efficient and transparent administration, foster trust. On the other hand, anarchy, anomie, arbitrariness of law, and weak, inefficient, and secretive bureaucracy, foster distrust (p. 16). The structural context – in particular the state institutions and politicians – may furthermore impact how groups view their history, their victimhood, and their relation to other groups. Perceived victimhood and distrust may in that way be passed on to future generations through *narratives* emphasizing injustices that a group has suffered (Rotella et al., 2013; Noor et al., 2008).

Segregation or lack of *contact* between communities may further influence intergroup trust (Tam et al., 2009; Whitt, 2021). As Tam et al. (2009) emphasize, contact may namely "provide a means for more accurately assessing risk from outgroup members and thereby generating more appropriate trust in terms of an informed and rational decision rather than encouraging a blind or irrational leap of faith" (p. 57). Sztompka argues that distrust rooted in rational calculations about the trustworthiness and intentions of the other, even if subjectively exaggerated or biased, is especially hard to rebuild (p. 18).

According to Tam et al., (2009), trust is something sensitive and often temporary. "It can take only one betrayal to instigate distrust, and once distrust is aroused, it is resistant to change", they argue (p. 46). Trust is also demanding. "...many trustworthy behaviors must be demonstrated before a person is deemed trustworthy; but only one untrustworthy act can deem a person untrustworthy" (Rothbart and Park, 1986, in Tam et al., 2009, p. 46).
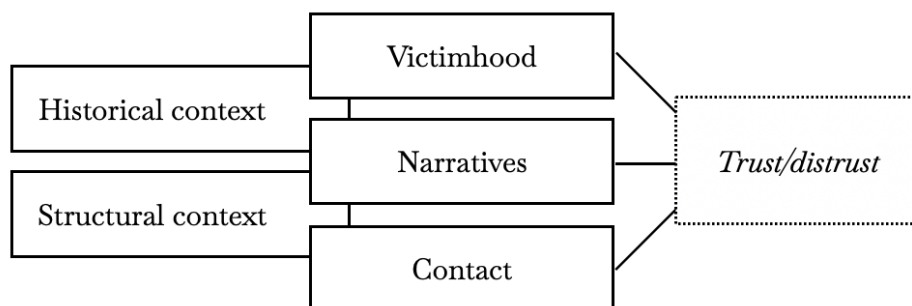
Figure 4. The emergence of trust and distrust.

Based on the reviewed literature, intergroup trust is, in essence, a relational component that influences how groups view *the other* in relation to the own group. In turn, trust might be an important component for building peace, and the lack of it might be a source of prolonged conflict and tensions. Intergroup trust includes the most basic trust of relying on the other group to not do physical or emotional harm, but good intention, efforts of cooperation, and grounds of co-existence are further dimensions of trust. Both the historical and structural context influence how trust and distrust emerge, and the aspects of victimhood and trauma, narratives, and intergroup contact are key factors that can impact levels of trust and distrust, as illustrated in the figure above.

Different stories, shared pain
War narratives and ambiguous loss in Kosovar families

"The pain of a mother doesn't have a national background", an interviewee with many years of experience working with Albanian and Serbian families of missing persons tells me[48]. It may sound like the most obvious thing, but in a post-conflict setting such as Kosovo, the views on who is a victim, and who has the right to suffer, are all but uniform. Neither are they apolitical. This chapter will illustrate that, while there are examples of families of missing persons from different communities coming together, realizing they experience the same kind of ambiguous loss, the contrasting narratives surrounding the 1998-99 conflict are in the bigger picture still creating strong divisions along ethnic lines, fueling distrust among both families of the missing and the communities at large.

The never-ending wait

It has been more than two decades since the conflict in Kosovo killed over 10,000 civilians, displaced close to a million, and resulted in the disappearance of around 4500 Kosovo-Albanians, Serbs, and members of other ethnic communities[49]. For the families of the 1621 persons whose fates remain unresolved, the war has stayed not only in their memories, but in their daily lives. "It just changes your life", an interviewee. "I think every family member I've met really stresses that there's not a day where they don't think about it and that they don't feel this pain"[50]. A majority of the interviewees share similar stories about their experiences with families of missing persons; stories of agony, unhealed trauma, and difficulties in dealing with *the unknowing* in their daily lives. While most express that families find very different ways of dealing with the unknown fate of their loved ones, "what is synonym for all of them is a long, lasting, never-ending suffering", Kushtrim Koliqi, theater and film director and head of the non-governmental organization *Integra,* emphasizes[51].

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[48] Interview 7.
[49] This thesis focuses on the relations between Albanians and Serbs but fully acknowledges that there are also missing persons of other ethnicities, primarily Roma, Ashkalia, Turks, Egyptians, Bosniaks, and Gorani.
[50] Interview 1.
[51] Interview 10.

When I met Koliqi on a sunny spring day in central Pristina, he was just setting up a theater show that aimed to illustrate how not knowing what has happened to a loved one can play out in a Kosovar family. The play, "*Babai dhe Babai*" (Albanian for "Father and Father") was about to premiere just two weeks later, and he shared the plot with me. It is a story about a mother and a daughter who live with the psychological construction of their missed husband and father, a character that appears in the theater, but only exists in their minds. The mother in particular refuses to acknowledge that her husband is missing. "It's a mental problem. They create their own world in this small house where the father still exists". Towards the end of the play, however, the daughter confronts her mother and says that the father has not been around for twenty years. "It's a very, very emotional piece", Koliqi tells[52].

The refusal to acknowledge that a missing relative is gone, and will not come back, is something that several interviewees point out as common among families of missing persons. Just as the theoretical literature on ambiguous loss has highlighted (e.g. Heeke & Knavelsrud, 2015; Boss, 2002), interviewees trace this largely to the lack of closure, and the lack of a place for sorrow, a grave to go to. As Ilaz Gashi, a government employee who was himself missing after the conflict, but later found alive in a Serbian prison camp and brought back to his family in Kosovo, says that families of missing have open emotional wounds, but also "open graves that need to be filled"[53]. Nora Ahmetaj, human rights researcher and activist from Pristina, similarly emphasizes the importance of finding the remains of missing persons, in order to finally give families a place for sorrow:

> "At least, you know, for the families it would be a satisfaction because they would finally have a place to grieve for their loved ones. They would move on with rituals, it's very important to follow the rituals of burying someone. It would stop the agony that they have lived with for 23-24 years. And finally, they would find peace, or somehow start a healing process. You know, it's like take a breath, it's easier when you can go to a grave and just cry."[54]

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[52] Interview 10.
[53] Interview 14.
[54] Interview 3.

According to a majority of the interviewees, most families care more about finding out what happened, and receiving the remains of their missing relatives, and less about seeking justice. Some interviewees do mention that there is also a wish among families to see the responsible for the disappearances of their loved ones prosecuted, "finding out who did it, killed them, kidnapped them, organized it"[55], but generally, the primary objective and wish of families seems to be to know the truth about what happened, and to be relieved from the uncertainty of not knowing if their loved one was killed 23 years ago, or if they are still alive somewhere. As Nataša Božilović, program coordinator at the Missing Persons Resource Center (MPRC), expresses it:

> "They want more truth than justice /.../ they want to recover bodies of their missing family members, remains and to bury them, you know, just to know the fate. Then there are institutions that will deal with it [the judicial aspects] afterward. So, the truth is actually more what they're asking for, than justice."[56]

The unknowing, the *ambiguousness,* indeed seems to be what makes the losses of families particularly hard to deal with, as academics through previous studies have also underlined (e.g. Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Rycroft & Perlezs, 2001). The practical consequences of missing a family member are then added to it. Ahmetaj says that she feels empathy especially with the wives who are missing their husbands,

> "...cause it is still very patriarchal [in Kosovo]. Once the husband is missing, the family of your husband doesn't support you, you face property issues, reparation is very often not given to them by their in-laws, society and communities are not very supportive /.../ very often they [the wives] would tell you, you know, I forgot that I had a husband, I have so much trouble to keep family together and to deal with daily problems."[57]

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[55] Interview 5.
[56] Interview 11.
[57] Interview 3.

Shared pain

The daily struggles as well as the painful, ambiguous, grieving processes of families are not related to which ethnic community they belong to. There are missing persons, and hence also families, belonging to every ethnic group in Kosovo, and *the pain is the same*, most of the interviewees emphasize. The Pristina-based Missing Persons Resource Center (MPRC) has worked under this motto since 2017 and remains one of the key initiatives when it comes to brining families from different communities together to share experiences, and advocate for increased efforts to search for, and identify, persons still missing. The MPRC was founded by two elderly men, Bajram Qerkinaj, an Albanian missing a son, and Milorad Trufunovic, a Serb missing a brother. "They were meeting already 15 years ago. And they were shouting at each other, and accusing each other…", an interviewee tells. Yet, when the two men actually started talking to each other, realizing that they shared the same kind of pain, they started working together, and "became the main drivers in creating this joint organization [the MPRC], where Albanians and Serbs worked for the same cause"[58].

When I meet with Nataša Božilović & Sara Salihu, program officers at the MPRC, they tell stories of how families of different backgrounds joining their activities were reluctant to collaborate at first, but eventually could find common ground. The MPRC started out with separate meetings with Albanian and Serbian families, and when they first brought them together, "we didn't have cups or anything, or glasses or whatever, in our office, we always used plastic cups, because we were afraid that something might happen". Božilović and Salihu say that it was really hard to bring the families together in the beginning, but as soon as the families started talking to each other, "when they had the opportunity to express their feelings, to share their experiences /…/ in a very, very, friendly, and neutral environment", it was surprising how quickly the families accepted each other, despite the language barrier[59], and despite the initial skepticism to working together.[60]

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[58] Interview 1.
[59] Albanian and Serbian are widely different languages. Most Albanians do not speak Serbian, and vice versa. The MPRC works with translation in their meetings.
[60] Interview 11.

Many interviewees bring up the MPRC as one of the key examples when it comes to how the issue of missing persons has brought families of different ethnicities together, rather than further apart. As a representative from a Pristina-based peace organization expresses it, the environment in the joint meetings between families from different communities is often better than in the society at large:

> "They had common goal that they were working towards. So, what could be seen is actually that the relationship in these meetings was much better between the family association, than was happening outside in the political scene. Because in the political scene both parties tried to blame the other side, use it for their political agendas, and so on. But once you were in the meeting with the family members, you see that the pain is the same, the wish is the same, the goal is the same, so it does not matter if they are Albanian or Serb."[61]

The pain is the same, and thus also the *aim*, namely, to continue to search for the hundreds of people that are still missing. In the meetings organized by the MPRC, families of different ethnicities have not only met to share their experience, but also to advocate together for increased efforts to search for their loved ones. There is a big disappointment in both Serb and Albanian families with how institutions and politicians have handled the issue of missing persons over the past two decades. While Kosovo, as mentioned, has a high identification rate when it comes to missing persons compared to other post-conflict contexts[62], this means little to the families still waiting for news. Families from all communities believe that more could have been done, which has created a strong distrust among some families towards state institutions such as the GCMP and the Kosovo Police, but also the internationals actors that were in charge after the conflict, primarily UNMIK and EULEX[63]. This distrust is not only directed towards the government authorities of the other community, but also towards their own institutions[64]. Yet, in the bigger picture, the institutional distrust is rather often divided along ethnic lines: "Albanians are putting guilt on the Serbian authorities, of course. Kosovo-Serbs are holding Kosovo institutions responsible"[65].

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[61] Interview 2.
[62] 73% of the missing after conflict have been identified, see background chapter for details.
[63] Interview 1, interview 7.
[64] Interview 2.
[65] Interview 6.

Narratives and victimhood

An interviewee calls the MPRC "an incredible example of joint advocacy"[66], but reality is that the initiative is relatively alone in its kind. The MPRC is the only organization gathering families from the Albanian, Serbian, and other communities in the same room, and many families do not want to be part of their activities[67]. In addition to the MPRC, there are in Kosovo around 25 other so-called family associations, advocating for the rights of families of missing persons. Albanian and Serbian associations do not generally collaborate with each other and commonly refuse to work with the MPRC, for the reason that the resource center works with all communities[68]. According to Koliqi at *Integra,* some (Albanian) family associations claim that the MPRC are trying to equalize the crimes committed by Serbian and KLA forces during the war by collaborating with Serbian family associations[69]. As another interview expresses it, "Albanians are saying that we, as Albanians, didn't go to Serbia to kill someone, but Serbs came to Kosovo to kill us"[70], and for some Kosovo-Albanians, collaborating with Serb families of missing persons, is equal to collaborating with the ones responsible for their losses. In regions such as Gjakovë/Đakovica, that were particularly hit by the violence of Serb forces during the war, the reluctance to collaborate is particularly strong. "They were really a target of atrocities and now they have a particularly hard stance towards Serbs and towards anything related to reconciliation[71]".

This argument of not wanting to collaborate with the "perpetrators" is widespread among Kosovo-Albanians. On April 20, 2022, the Serbian human rights activist Nataša Kandić, known for her work in advocating for families of missing persons from all communities, was going to talk at a meeting with the Government Commission of Missing Persons (GCMP) where several family associations were present. Yet, when Kandić started to talk, the Albanian associations left the room, an interviewee that was present at the meeting tells me[72].

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[66] Interview 13.
[67] Interview 11.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Interview 10.
[70] Interview 2.
[71] Interview 1.
[72] Interview 7.

Another interviewee, working for the same organization as Kandić, tells me that she was surprised. "It's understandable that they [families of the missing] are easily touched by things and especially when you discuss the issue", she expresses, yet "it was a surprise even for us, because Nataša Kandić is known to have been the lead in documenting and working and advocating for victims, including missing persons after the Kosovo war /.../ but they say she's Serbian, we don't need Serbians. They are the guilty one who did this, why should somebody from Serbia come and tell us how we should handle the issue of missing persons?"[73]

Clearly, the ambiguous loss in families, and the vulnerable position they find themselves in by daily waiting for news about their family members, is a factor playing in when they decide who to collaborate with, who to trust, and who to listen to. "What we hear from families is that this unknowing, when you don't know about your loved one /.../ you get easily touched"[74]. Nonetheless, most interviewees argue that this has a relatively small impact. As illustrated by the example of the MPRC, the pain and the truth-seeking of families can also constitute a unifying element between the communities and is thus not *per se* something that divides them. What interviewees rather point out as the reason for (Albanian) families being unwilling to collaborate (with Serbian families) is the argument that was brought at the meeting where Kandić was going to speak; "they [the Serbs] are the guilty one who did this". In Kosovo, the war narrative holds a strong "aggressors-victim binary" as an interviewee expresses it[75]. "When you talk about the war, you come back to this narrative that exists among the ex-Yugoslavian countries. Whose fault was it? Who was the victim? Who was right, who was wrong? Who suffered, who didn't suffer?"[76]

Among most Kosovo-Albanians, the story of the war is clear and unquestionable: the Serbian forces attacked, and the KLA were martyrs who liberated Kosovo. This narrative is not only present in how many people, and politicians, talk about the war. It is also visible. Streets in Pristina and Mitrovica are named "UÇK" (Albanian for KLA), and house walls are covered in

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[73] Interview 9.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Interview 7.
[76] Interview 9.

enormous portraits of former KLA fighters and commanders, some of which are today in The Hague, indicted for war crimes. As investigative journalist Serbeze Haxhiaj tells me, "There's a mindset created that your criminals are criminals, and my criminals are heroes"[77].

Kadri Veseli and Hashim Thaçi on walls of buildings in Pristina (left) and Mitrovica (right). Both are currently indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity at the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague (KSC, 2022).

While it is a fact that a majority of the victims during the Kosovo conflict were Albanian, and the same is true for the persons that are still missing in Kosovo today, several interviewees underline that the one-sided narrative among Kosovo Albanians fuels the distrust between the communities. Common in Kosovar politics today is that non-Albanian victims are rarely mentioned. A good example is one that many interviewees point out, namely that politicians regularly "play" with the number of missing persons:

> "Either they mention that there are 1620 missing persons but leave it up to you to understand that they were all Albanians. /.../ or what they do is that they mention the actual number of Albanian missing persons, so, they minus those from non-majority communities."[78]

> "When our politicians mention the number, more than 1600 people are still missing, they are spinning this number that all of them are Albanians. /.../ They are playing with the data, even with the issue of missing persons, and there are very rare cases when politicians are

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[77] Interview 4.
[78] Interview 9.

deconstructing this number /.../ in the sense that there are missing persons from all ethnic backgrounds. Of course, most of them are Albanians because that was the war, you know, and that was the scenario of Kosovo war. But they are playing."[79]

Another interviewee emphasizes that there is a similar manner of only talking about the "own" victims in Serbia:

"...mostly the narrative here is that we have 1600 people missing, and especially in public, in official contexts, nobody mentions that there are around 500, or more than 500, from Serbian and other communities. They just use this general figure saying that it's Serbian crimes. /.../ it's the same in Serbia, they only mention missing persons that are Serbs, not the others."[80]

The one-sided narratives are also to be witnessed in the memorization of war victims. For many years, memorization, and commemoration after the war in Kosovo focused mainly on fallen KLA soldiers and those they considered martyrs, but in the last years, civilian victims have been given more space, an interviewee tells[81]. In most parts of Kosovo, however, it does often exclude non-Albanian victims. One example is a market in Mitrovica that was bombed during the war. At this incident, a young Roma girl was killed, but was not included on the memorial plaque alongside the Albanian victims. Another example is a bridge that was bombed by NATO, where a bus with civilians was just driving. While stating the names of the Albanians that were killed, the Serbian names were excluded[82]. Milica Radovanović, researcher at the *New Social Initiative* (NSI) in North Mitrovica, says that talking about non-Albanian victims is a taboo topic in Kosovo, "but the topic that is even bigger taboo, that nobody's even mentioning, is those Albanians who were killed by the KLA". Those crimes do simply not fit the Kosovo Albanian image of the KLA as heroes and liberators[83].

Many interviewees that work actively with the issue of missing persons and other war legacies witness that if they try to nuance the one-sided narrative and talk about victims from

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[79] Interview 10.
[80] Interview 4.
[81] Interview 9.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Interview 5.

the Serb community, people are quick to argue that they are trying to equalize the crimes that were committed during the conflict by the Serbian and KLA forces. Haxhiaj tells that after she published a story about an incident where 14 Serb civilians were killed; a crime that nobody was prosecuted for, an editor in chief of a major private media channel in Kosovo questioned her work. "She asked, why are you dealing with the issue? Did you forget what the Serbs did?"[84]. Activists that highlight that all victims were not Albanians are quickly called traitors or spies. "We are used to this kind of labeling, you're a traitor, you're trying to forget and forgive"[85].

The swift accusations of trying to equalize guilt make it hard for the narrative to become more nuanced, among activists in Kosovo, but also in the political sphere. Radovanović brings up the example of when prime minister Albin Kurti at the beginning of his mandate once said publicly that "the killing of a Serbian granny in Pristina" is also a crime, and that the person that killed her should be found guilty and be sentenced. Later, a video of Kurti's political advisor was leaked where he was stating that there were crimes committed towards members of non-majority communities by some members of the KLA. The statement got harsh reactions among Kosovo-Albanians, accusing the advisor of saying that KLA was a criminal organization. As a consequence, Kurti fired him, and "after that, he never mentioned the Serbian granny killed in Pristina ever again"[86].

A same kind of one-sided narrative and sentiment of not acknowledging the full picture of what happened during the war exists in Serbia, several interviewees emphasize. Mass graves of Kosovo Albanians that were found in Serbia are rarely memorized, Koliqi tells. "Not even a sign /.../ not even a small memorial. They just find it out then they started to build things around there just to kind of erase all the wrongdoings". Kosovo Serbs, primarily following Serbian news media and turning to Serbian politicians, tend to avoid conversations regarding the crimes committed by the Serb forces during the conflict. "I have the feeling that even

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[84] Interview 4.
[85] Interview 10.
[86] Interview 5.

some of my colleagues, they just don't like to go on that path /.../ they know that they have been doing lot of wrongdoings against us Albanians, but they just don't go"[87].

"In any war, nobody is perfectly innocent", Radovanović says, "but when for this many years you're building these public narratives that we are saints, they are criminals, we did nothing wrong, they did nothing wrong... you can't expect people to think differently"[88]. The distinct narratives surrounding the war, the self-victimization, and the opinion bubbles on both sides, fuels the distrust between the communities, and makes the groups less prone to collaborate. "Blaming the other side is the easiest", an interviewee says[89], and as Sztompka (2016) has previously highlighted, views of the trustworthiness or intentions of the other party, even if subjectively exaggerated or biased, creates distrust that is especially hard to rebuild (p. 18).

Intergroup contact

That a lack of contact fuels contrasting narratives, which in turn fosters distrust between groups, has been underlined in previous literature (Tam et al., 2009; Whitt, 2021; Sztompka, 2016), and is clearly visible in Kosovo in 2022. Serbs and Albanians live immensely segregated since the end of conflict, and contexts where members from the different communities meet are few. Initiatives such as the MPRC have been successful in creating a "friendly and neutral environment", enabling conversations and exchange, but the society at large remains divided – physically and relationally[90]. As an interviewee phrases it, "they really live apart from each other, and this gives a lot of space to the narrative promoted by politicians, you know, the narrative of fear, the narrative of the other bad guy"[91].

An example of the lack of contact that several interviewees mention is Graçanicë/Gračanica, a city located only 20 minutes from Kosovo's capital Pristina, but where many young Serbs have never been to Pristina, or never talked to an Albanian[92]. Another striking example is

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[87] Interview 10.
[88] Interview 5.
[89] Interview 12.
[90] Interview 11.
[91] Interview 1.
[92] Interview 9, interview 10.

Mitrovica, where the river Ibër/Ibar divides the city in a Southern Albanian-dominated part, and a Northern Serb-dominated part. While the tensions in and around Mitrovica, as well as the KFOR military presence, has decreased since the end of conflict, "there are not barricades on the bridge /.../ you can come to North Mitrovica, and I can come to the South, and in 99% of the cases nothing will happen"[93], the city remains divided. While in the South, you will see mosques, Albanian flags, and portraits of former KLA-fighters, as soon as you cross the bridge to the North, hundreds of Serbian flags wave in the wind up the main walking street. I even get a text on my phone, "Welcome to Serbia". All signs are in Serbian, and in the cafés the prices are in Dinar, instead of Euros, which is the official currency in Albanian-inhabited parts of Kosovo. "When you pass this bridge, you come into another reality", as Radovanović that lives and works in North Mitrovica phrases it[94]. "Many of the Serbs have not crossed the Ibar since the 90s, and almost none of the Albanians have gone to the North"[95].

The "New Bridge" over the river Ibër/Ibar. After the war it was used as a military checkpoint between the Serbian enclaves and the rest of Kosovo, but today it is open for pedestrians to freely cross. Yet, it remains a symbol for the division of Mitrovica, and is patrolled by KFOR and the Kosovo Police.

While the tensions around the Serbian enclaves in Kosovo are today lesser than after the end of conflict, and while it is significantly more common to sometimes hear someone speak Serbian in a coffee shop in Pristina, compared to ten years ago[96], "in the public, the divisions are going deeper and deeper", Koliqi argues[97]. Several interviewees emphasize that there are

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[93] Interview 5.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Interview 1.
[96] Interview 7.
[97] Interview 10.

today young people that did not experience the war themselves, but that have a strong distrust and negative sentiment towards members of the other community.

Radovanović says that regular young Serbs and Albanians in general simply never meet. "I have friends that are Albanians, but that's because I'm working in the NGO sector. But most people my age, like my high school friends, they didn't have the opportunity to meet anyone"[98]. The narratives that young people learn are thus the ones they hear from their parents, they read in school, and that they hear from politicians[99]. Serbs are informing themselves from Serbian radio and tv-stations, while Kosovo Albanians from Kosovar news channels[100]. History books in the Serbian enclaves tell a different story of the war in the 90s, than do Kosovo Albanian ones[101]. From a young age, Albanians and Serbs learn that the members of the other group are not to be trusted. "You know, the numbers are high on victims, the language use used in the textbook toxic, it's discriminatory. So that's where they start", "you highlight the losses Kosovo have lost or Serbia /.../ and you deny that there were also crimes committed by your side[102].

As has been argued in scholarship, the perceived victimhood and distrust is passed on to future generations through these narratives that emphasize injustices that the groups have suffered (Rotella et al., 2013; Noor et al., 2008), while excluding the experiences of the other group. Today the distrust between Serbs and Albanians manifests in many ways, and exists even on a basic security-level, which Kappmeier et al. (2020; 2021) argue underlies other types of trust. As a Kosovo Albanian interviewee tells, her family still reacts when she says that she is going to North Mitrovica for work. "They ask, are you stupid, why? Because many of them have never been there. What they hear is about violent incidents /.../ they think it's a chaos. And as soon as you go there will be attacked. And the same also sometimes going to Serbia. People are quite unsure and unsafe because they believe this hatred and you will be

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[98] Interview 5.
[99] Interview 3.
[100] Interview 5.
[101] Interview 7.
[102] Interview 9.

attacked"[103]. As another interviewee says, "I think the trust they need to have is that the other one doesn't do harm to the other one. I think that's a minimum requirement /.../ You don't need to talk all day long about politics, you just need to be sure the other one leaves you in peace". This type of trust – trusting the other not to harm – still lacks[104].

While the interviewees highlight the lack of contact, and its consequences in terms of which narratives that are fostered, they also tell stories of what happens when Serbs and Albanians actually meet, similar to the story of the MPRC. An interviewee working for an organization that regularly holds lectures on transitional justice for young people from both communities tells about a group of young Serbs from North Mitrovica that were invited to Pristina for a lecture. The organization asked the group after the lecture if they wanted to join for some food around the central square, but they were quick to say no. They were clear about that they were just there for the lecture and wanted to go home again after. After the lecture, however, they agreed to have a quick lunch somewhere in the neighborhood. "And then, when we were talking, they were actually open, it was actually nice, because many of them had never been to Pristina and they had a totally different idea of how it was, and that's all connected to this toxic narrative that is created"[105].

Another interviewee tells a story about families of missing persons specifically. Serbian and Albanian families were invited to a conference on missing persons in Lillehammer, Norway, a few years ago. The interviewee that was involved in the trip tells that on their way to the airport in Pristina, he had to organize separate taxis for the Albanians and the Serbs, "they didn't want to sit in a bus together". After the days in Lillehammer, however, travelling together was no problem. "They sat and discussed, you know, so the contact improved their positions and relationships. Without having any contact, it is difficult"[106].

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[103] Interview 9.
[104] Interview 1.
[105] Interview 9.
[106] Interview 6.

Loss and trust

The issue of missing persons, and the consequential ambiguous loss, seems to potentially both unify and divide families of the missing. As the example of the MPRC shows, it can bring families from Serb and Albanian communities together to realize that they share similar experiences and a common distrust towards institutions that have not done enough to find their loved ones, similar to the findings of Şahoğlu (2021) in her study on missing persons in Cyprus. It might, however, also, by prolonging the suffering of families, fuel intergroup distrust as it becomes part of larger war narratives, as Clark (2010) has also found through her study in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Whether resolving more cases of missing persons would foster more trust between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo is not a given according to the interviewees. Some argue that "as long as there is this situation or this kind of atmosphere, I am afraid that the [missing persons] issue cannot be secondary or tertiary, it is one of the main issues that separate us and create tensions among us"[107], and that families of the missing clearly say that "without finding our loved ones, it is impossible to have improved relations between the ethnicities"[108]. Other interviewees state that the missing persons issue is an issue among many that influence intergroup relations, but that it is not a main driver, and that resolving more cases would thus not per se have a general positive impact on the trust between Albanians and Serbs[109].

What is mentioned in every single interview, however, is how the issue of missing persons is regularly – and increasingly – being exploited by politicians in both Kosovo and Serbia to reinforce their narratives around the war, for political interests and gains. This *politicization* of past atrocities, they argue, is one of the most important factors fueling distrust between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo today. Several interviewees also mention how the lack of cooperation between Serbia and Kosovo regarding the issue of missing persons spills over on the public opinion, and thus creates an obstacle to better relations between regular Serbs and Albanians. The next chapter will dive deeper into these findings.

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[107] Interview 4.
[108] Interview 6.
[109] Interview 5.

This chapter has shed light on how ambiguous loss plays out in families of the missing from all ethnic communities and continues to impact their daily lives on different levels; the emotional, the social, and the practical. It has also illustrated how Serb and Albanian families can realize that they share similar experiences, and advocate for a common cause, once they actually meet and talk to each other in a neutral, friendly, and facilitated setting. Yet, still, both the physical and relational division between Albanians and Serbs remains strong. The communities live apart from each other, turn to different politicians, media sources, and education systems, and hold contrasting narratives regarding what happened during the Kosovo conflict, who was the aggressor, and who was the victim. As one of the most painful legacies of the Kosovo conflict, the missing persons issue is a central part of the narratives, and thus continues to impact the relations between Albanians and Serbs. Nevertheless, this chapter has shown that it is not necessarily the missing persons issue in itself that creates distrust between the communities, but rather the way it is brought forward and interpreted through different narratives in a highly segregated society.

The past, the present, and the politics
Institutional distrust and the politicization of the past

> "Two things have to be distinguished. Criminals or those perpetrators who have committed crimes during the war, and then ordinary people. You know, the crimes should not be generalized, because there are people, individuals, who have committed those crimes, not the whole nation. And once people start thinking like this, then many problems will be solved. But then again, *it's the leaders who are not letting people heal and move forward.*"[110]

The contrasting war narratives that still divide Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, 23 years after violence ceased, are not simply products of history. Neither is the strong distrust between the communities something inherent to their relationship. A reoccurring topic in the interviews - something that every single interviewee in this study mentions – is how the *politicization* of the past is a main driver for fueling one-sided narratives, and thereby distrust, in Kosovo today. This chapter will address the impact of politics on the relationship between Serbs and Albanians. It will argue that the issue of missing persons does not in itself fuel distrust between the groups, but by being used as a game tile in contemporary politics, it continues to influence intergroup trust between regular Kosovars as long as it remains unresolved, and as long as families are forced to experience ambiguous loss.

Some clarifications must first be made regarding Kosovar politics. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo live largely separated from each other. This counts not only for the geography, but also for politics. As Radovanović from Mitrovica says, most Serbs living within the territory of Kosovo view themselves as "from Serbia", rather than "from Kosovo", and thus also consider Belgrade as their political capital[111]. According to a member of the international community in Pristina, around 90% of Serbs in Kosovo rely on Belgrade "as their protector and as their duty holder"[112]. While 92% of Serbs in Kosovo hold personal documents issued by Kosovo institutions, a recent trend study conducted by NGO Aktiv shows that 60% of the Serbian community does not trust any politician or political

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[110] Interview 11.
[111] Interview 5.
[112] Interview 1.

party in Kosovo, and almost 50% see themselves leaving Kosovo in the next five years (Aktiv, 2021). While a Serbian party with close ties to the Government of Serbia, *Srpska Lista,* is represented in the Kosovar parliament[113], the government in Kosovo consists of the largest Kosovo Albanian party, *Vetëvendosje[114],* holding office in coalition with non-Serb minority groups. The Kosovo government does thus not have any direct Kosovo Serb representation, and a majority of politicians and officers are of Kosovo Albanian origin (BTI, 2022). When discussing the Kosovo government, it should be remembered that it is primarily representing the interests of Kosovo Albanians.

Institutional distrust

Families from both communities can unite in their disappointment with the work of institutions in Kosovo and Serbia in the search for their missing loved ones. Among Kosovo Serb families, the institutional distrust towards the authorities in Pristina is, however, particularly strong. "Pristina as a capital of a new state could not yet gain the trust and goodwill of the Kosovo-Serb citizens"[115], and when it comes to the issue of missing persons, Serbs' distrust of Kosovar institutions has grown substantially over the years.

One of the reasons that Serbian family associations do not trust, and are reluctant to collaborate with, Albanian associations is the discrimination they face in the Kosovar institutional system. Božilović at the MPRC mentions as one example that if a family member from the Serb community needs assistance from an official in an Albanian-majority municipality, it often happens that they face certain obstacles because he or she is Serb. Officials' selective treatment is often justified through different alleged administrative and logistical excuses[116]. Radovanović from the NSI further emphasizes the issue of the discriminatory legal framework in Kosovo regarding missing persons. There is namely the law on missing persons (Republic of Kosovo, Law No.04/L-023), and another on other

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[113] In the 2021 elections, Srpska Lista received 5% of the votes. The party holds 12 (out of 120) seats in parliament.
[114] Vetëvendosje received 50% of the votes and holds 58 seats in parliament.
[115] Interview 1.
[116] Interview 11.

survivors from the Kosovo conflict[117] (Republic of Kosovo, Law No. 04/L-0 4). Everyone that went missing between January 1, 1998, and December 31, 2000, is considered a missing person, and his or her family are granted some type of reparation. If the missing person is found, however, the missing does no longer go under the status of a missing person, but as that of a civilian victim. Civilian victims of war are those who were killed between February 27, 1998, until June 20, 1999. Radovanović highlights that, since most Kosovo Serb missing persons went missing after June 1999, this means that "if you're a missing person, your family can get the assistance, but /…/ the moment when the body is discovered if you were killed after June, the family is not granted any compensation"[118].

Božilović and Salihu at the MPRC say that Kosovo in principle has a very good and inclusive legal framework, but that the system in practice takes little consideration to the rights of minorities. "We have very good laws, good policies, and procedures. But nobody is actually fulfilling those laws in the rights way"[119], says Božilović. Radovanović similarly states:

> "When you go through Kosovo legal framework, everything is right, non-majority communities have a lot of rights, everything is perfect. But institutionally, they have no respect for these laws. Even officials say that "the constitution was imposed on us; we didn't want it". You know, what kind of a message are you sending to non-majority members with saying that."[120]

Just as the memorization mentioned in the previous chapter, the current institutional system and political leadership in Kosovo discriminates against Kosovo Serbs, several interviewees, both of Serb and Albanian origin, point out. This creates an environment – or structural context – where trust is particularly hard to build from the Kosovo Serb side. As Sztompka (2016) argues, the imposition of insecure environments for mutual relationships from "above", through inconsistent of discriminatory policies, fosters distrust. Similar arguments

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[117] Full name: "On the status and the rights of the martyrs, invalids, veterans, members of Kosova Liberation Army, civilian victims of war and their families".
[118] Interview 5.
[119] Interview 11.
[120] Interview 5.

are encountered in the interviews. "As long as the state of Kosovo doesn't really care and make efforts to fulfill the rights and needs of the Serb minority, they cannot build up trust towards Pristina"[121]. In turn, building up trust towards the Albanian community in broader terms becomes challenging.

No corpse, no crime

While there exists a certain distrust towards the Kosovo state institutions among Kosovo Albanian families of missing persons as well, their distrust towards the Serbian state is certainly of a different and more substantial kind. Deeply rooted in historical relations and the atrocities committed during the war by the Serbian forces, this distrust also has a more structural-political element. The trauma among Albanians of how they have historically been treated by the Serbian state, not only during the war, but also earlier, certainly lays the foundation for the strong distrust among Kosovo Albanians against the Serbian state that exists today. However, the actions, and especially the unwillingness to cooperate, of Serbian politicians, is something that constantly fuels this distrust. The opening of archives is a key topic, mentioned by all interviewees, including Kushtrim Gara, head of the Kosovo GCMP[122].

The lack of reliable information on potential grave sites has long been deemed as one of the main obstacles when it comes to lowering the number of missing persons. Archives from the war are often highlighted as the main solution to this problem. In the Pristina-Belgrade working group, archives have been a major topic but also a major point of controversy. On the Serbian side, this namely relates strongly to the crimes that were committed during the war, and the orchestrated efforts to move bodies. The Kosovo delegation's request to open archives that could reveal where missing persons are hidden, would also reveal details about crimes, and potentially open up for new judicial processes. While few know what precisely is to be found in potential archives, the belief among Kosovo Albanians is strong that there are still major gravesites to be discovered in Serbia proper, and that the Serbian state is protecting the archives that could hint at such sites. As researcher Nora Ahmetaj tells:

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[121] Interview 1.
[122] Interview 14.

"They didn't wanna put legacy, they didn't wanna put footprints anywhere. So, either they
took them with big refrigerators, put the corpses and put them to Serbia. Or they just buried
them in unidentified locations. So, we came to believe that most of the bodies are still in
Serbia proper."[123]

Another interviewee points out that the orchestrated efforts of the Serbian forces to hide
bodies is not a speculation, but a fact:

"You cannot say this was not organized, because killing someone here and then transporting
bodies to certain locations in Serbia, and we are not talking hypothetically, there were graves
found in Serbia. So, it's not done uncontrolled. There was a plan. What do you do, when do
you do, where do you bury, and so on. So, there should be some documents somewhere
documenting this."[124]

Indeed, new gravesites have been discovered thanks to the release of previously protected
archives of the Serbian state. After an agreement in the EU-facilitated Pristina-Belgrade
dialogue in 2021, the remains of 11 persons were discovered in a mass grave in Kiževak near
the southern Serbian town of Raška[125]. An interviewee working with DNA identifications,
however, argues that Serbia only releases information that could lead to such findings when
there is enough pressure from outside. "Serbia has information, but it's dependent on the
political position towards the EU, the United States, if they are releasing info from time-to-
time"[126]. According to information from the ICRC, the Ministry of Interior in Serbia has
released some information, but the Ministry of Defense so far not[127].

While the ICRC urges both Kosovo and Serbia to focus on commitments and actions they
need to undertake, instead of looking and complaining what the other side is (not) doing, the

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[123] Interview 3.
[124] Interview 2.
[125] Interview 5.
[126] Interview 6.
[127] Interview 8.

topic of archives often leads to a blaming game[128]. While the Kosovo GCMP and government regularly request the Serbian authorities to be more open with their information, the Serbian counterpart usually reacts stating that they will only open their archives when the KLA does so. Whether the KLA had structured archives is unclear. Several interviewees point out that the KLA was a guerilla group without a clear chain of command, that the group did not have any organized archives, and that the information is simply very scattered and not organized in the same manner as by the Serbian state. "It's a big question, does UÇK have archives, but in my eyes it's basically a Serbian move to block the access to archives", one interviewee says[129]. Meanwhile, many interviewees highlight that, even if the archives of the KLA are not as organized as the ones of the Serbian state, there are sure people in Kosovo that know something about missing Serbs. As Koliqi says:

> "I'm quite certain that the Serbian government do have those organized archives cause we know how the war was organized, we are talking about organized military interventions. And when it comes to the Kosovo archives there are these different gossips and narratives, but I never know if there are real archives, but I think even if there are no real archives, there are real people who have witnessed those wrongdoings."[130]

Regardless of the forms in which KLA archives may or may not exist, the argument of Serbia having information that they are not releasing about potential mass graves, continues to fuel the distrust towards the Serb community from the Albanian side. The archive discussion on a political and diplomatic level influences the public opinion heavily. The lack of cooperation regarding information keeps people "barricaded along ethnic lines"[131]. Haxhiaj also says that there seems to be more hope for the Serbian victims to still be found, thanks to the specialist court currently conducting several trials with former members of the KLA. "I think that the trials in the special court will reveal some of the cases. I am not sure that they will tell a hundred percent where they buried people or what happened, but I think that some information will leak from those trials", she says[132]. Given that no trials are anymore held

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[128] Ibid.
[129] Interview 1.
[130] Interview 10.
[131] Interview 4.
[132] Ibid.

against commanders from the Serbian forces, she expresses that she has less hope for new information about Albanian victims, as it is a risk to take from the Serbian state to release information that may shed light on previous crimes. Radovanović argues that politicians on neither of the sides benefit from opening archives:

> "Because then we will find out something that we didn't know before. Maybe we will find out that some people who are maybe now in you know, in power, made some decision. I mean, I'm only speculating, I don't know what those archives, but they have no reason to open them that will, you know, bring them anything good. Except that you did the right thing. Cause maybe some people who were around them were in some positions."[133]

The archive issue fosters distrust beyond what Kappmeier et al. (2020; 2021) call security-based trust. Rather, it influences the components of trust related to whether the Serbian state has good intentions towards Kosovo-Albanians, if they deliver upon agreements, and whether they are open with information and are willing to collaborate. Several interviewees argue that if Serbia would be more open with the information they have about potential graves, this would increase the trust between Serbs and Albanians as the Serbian state would show that they are willing to collaborate, and that they have good intentions. It would be a "positive sign that also our neighbor country is starting to deal properly with the legacies of the past", Koliqi argues[134]. Meanwhile, some interviewees argue that the opening of archives could also have a contrary effect, by again turning the spotlight to atrocities of the past:

> "...resolving more cases means there's better cooperation, that's good, but resolving more cases also means, most likely, that one or two mass graves are found. And whenever you find a new mass grave, it just shows and reminds every one of these terrible crimes. It's just, point with the finger towards Belgrade, you see, another mass grave. It is progress, I think every time a mass grave you might have 10 or 20 people, but every time then at least thousand missing person families have hope that the remains of their beloved ones is there, and so 98 or

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[133] Interview 5.
[134] Interview 10.

95 percent of those will again be disappointed. So, it's a tradeoff. It's a progress on the one side, but renewed pain and renewed accusation on the other side."[135]

Koliqi says that information about new graves can certainly have an effect on emotions but argues that "there are ways and mechanisms to mitigate those", and that "everybody knows about those crimes"; that the archives do not shed light on something that was not at all known by the public. Keeping the archives closed, on the other hand, keeps suspicion and distrust high. "When you are not opening those, it means you are hiding something"[136].

The happenings during the Kosovo conflict, and in particular the orchestrated efforts of hiding the bodies of killed Kosovo Albanians – *no corpse, no crime*[137] –, is something that stays in the collective memory in Kosovo, in the stories about the war, and fosters distrust between the Serb and Albanian communities. The reluctance of politicians to cooperate and share information, nevertheless, drives this distrust more than the fact that the atrocities have been committed in the past. The distrust linked to historical events has namely not been decreasing as years have passed, but rather the opposite. As a local representative at an international organization says, distrust has been increasing in the last years, especially with the new Kurti government[138]. She, as well as a majority of the other interviewees, trace this to an increased politicization of the missing persons issue and other war legacies.

The politicization of war legacies

"Politicians on both sides are using this /.../ as numbers, when they need them, and then they [the missing] are actually people. They have names and surnames. Someone is sitting at their dining table and missing a certain person. But unfortunately, politicians are using this mainly when they want to blame the other side"[139].

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[135] Interview 1.
[136] Interview 10.
[137] The words were found in a Serb police general's diary in the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict. The notes, titles "President" were most likely taken during a meeting with President Milošević (Kosovo Sense Centar, n.d.).
[138] Interview 7.
[139] Interview 2.

How politicians handle the issue of missing persons in the political debate and diplomatic relations is a recurring topic in the interviews. All interviewees mention the politicization of the missing persons issue as a key problem, not only for the collaborative process of finding and identifying missing persons, but also for the prospects of better relations between regular Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. The interviewees argue that the frequent mentioning of war atrocities and the missing person issue specifically in public speeches increases the divide between the communities as the narratives politicians present are, as discussed, usually one-sided. The political framing of the missing persons issue makes it hard for both families and the society in general to move forward, by constantly being reminded of what was done to members of their communities and families, shaping their opinions and attitudes.

According to several interviewees, the politicization of war legacies has increased in the past few years. While both international and local non-governmental organizations, not least the ICRC facilitating the bilateral working group on missing persons, regularly remind of the importance of keeping the issue of missing persons a humanitarian one, a non-politicized issue "with strong political support"[140], the current government in Kosovo has according to an interviewee moved "in the complete different direction"[141].

> "What we feel right now and with the new government, but also Madam President really made clear very strongly in public that they don't accept that we just forget about it. They really want to address the injustice; they basically woke up the topic again. It was never fully asleep, but it lost attention over time and now they really bring it again on the top of the agenda. /.../ President Osmani and Albin Kurti constantly, almost every week, refer to this number [of missing persons] but they say it in a way so it kind of includes that it's only Albanian families suffering because Serbia doesn't cooperate, which makes it a very hot topic again on the political scene"[142].

As previously mentioned, it is common that politicians both in Kosovo and Serbia only talk about missing persons belonging to their own community, and barely ever publicly discuss

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[140] Interview 12.
[141] Interview 1.
[142] Ibid.

the atrocities committed by their own side during the war. Yet, the politicization of the issue goes beyond the tweaking of victim statistics, and the aggressor-victim binary. The missing person issue has been increasingly in the headlines in Kosovo lately, but not framed as an issue to be fixed through increased political will and operational efforts, but rather as a tool to blame the other side. As Koliqi puts it:

> "Unfortunately, this issue is politicized not in the level to be a political issue to be fixed, but to be used and misused as a political credit. To accuse each other, and to offend each other. And that's problematic because I think only with political will, this issue can be resolved, especially when it comes to the archives and the information circulating in these two domains of the states in Kosovo and Serbia."[143]

While both governments plead for increased collaboration, it is more often posed as a threat or ultimatum rather than an invitation to the other part. A good example is the Kosovo delegation's withdrawal from the working group on missing persons in June last year. The representatives of the Kosovo GCMP clearly state that they will not return to the working group before the Serbian head of delegation, Veljko Odalović, who they accuse of war involvement, is replaced[144]. Božilović at the MPRC says that this had a great impact on the public opinion, and families of missing persons in particular. Before prime minister Kurti brought up the issue of replacing Odalović, no families would complain about Odalović and his work in the Pristina-Belgrade working group. Yet, after that the Kosovo delegation left, many Albanian families took on a harsher stand towards the Serb delegation.

> "The families have changed their opinion, there are families will now have the same opinion as Mr. Kurti regarding this issue. This is how it affects, how much it affects /.../ When the politicians are saying, we won't work, we won't take another step forward until Serbia replaces the person who is responsible for missing persons. What can you say? What can families say? How can family say, okay, we will cooperate?"[145]

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[143] Interview 10.
[144] Interview 14.
[145] Interview 11.

According to Božilović and Salihu, what politicians say and how they frame war legacies has an immense impact on the public opinion in Kosovo. "If one government is saying that the other government, the leaders for the government have been involved in some crimes during the war, they're of course, you know, it affects you as a family member, then you lose trust", Salihu expresses. This is even to be seen in their meetings with families of missing persons. "The more radical statements, you know, the leaders give, the more the families go more apart. I have to say that last year, there was some setback, actually, in the cooperation between the families and between the communities in general". Yet, they also say that it is unsurprising that politics has such a big impact. In both the Albanian and Serbian communities, following the political development is a part of daily life: "In every home in Kosovo, regardless of nationality, on every television there is always politics being talked. So, people are very informed, very much informed on everything that is going on, and people are eager to hear something new."[146]

An interviewee says that "going forward is to go backwards"; in order to solve present issues and move forward, politicians have to deal with the past in a proper way[147]. Meanwhile, interviewees argue that rather than dealing with past atrocities such as the missing persons issue in a helpful way, the longer the issue is lingering and the fate of missing persons remains unresolved, it is used by politicians on both sides to blame the other. It is a "cruel, easy topic to misuse, to control political agendas. Because it's feelings. It's something that also touches people who have not families who are missing"[148].

Common lately has been that Kosovo politicians publicly say that they are not going to stop looking for missing persons until the last person has been found. While all persons will never be found due to a variety of reasons, as has been highlighted in the background and context chapter, this rises the expectations among families of missing persons. "Until we find the last person, it's quite poetic. But of course, it gives more hope to the families of missing persons.

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[146] Interview 11.
[147] Interview 12.
[148] Interview 9.

If they fail, the disappointment goes up", Koliqi says[149]. This rhetoric does, however, not only rise the expectations of families, but also increases the blame on the Serbian authorities, and the distrust towards the Serbian community in Kosovo. When the Kosovo government says that they will not stop looking for the missing until the last person is found is namely often mentioned in the same sentence as putting the responsibility for the slow process of finding and identifying persons on Serbia, and their unwillingness to collaborate. As an interviewee phrases it, this is misleading:

> "You hear quite often from Kosovo politicians that we urge Serbia to tell us where are the remains of 1600 Kosovars. But that's wrong, cause in this number it's not only Kosovars. There are also Serbs. So, this also shows how insensitive and with lack of knowledge that they are actually *using it for political reasons.*"[150]

There is no interest in the current governments in Kosovo and Serbia to take on a more reconciliatory approach, and thereby foster better relations, interviewees argue. In Serbia, Kosovo is considered part of their territory, and politicians do certainly not meet with Kosovar politicians on an equal level. To most Serbs, the Kosovo government is viewed as separatist and illegitimate[151]. From the Kosovo side, Serbia is viewed as the aggressor that has still not asked for forgiveness for the crimes that were committed in the 1990s, and that allows criminals to stay in powerful political positions. The status issue, i.e., the independence of Kosovo and its future, certainly also plays in. As Haxhiaj says, Kosovo politicians "are trying to push their political agenda by blaming only Serbia for the crimes and trying to make more public sentiment against Serbia. Serbia is the main problem when it comes to Kosovo, cause even when it's not related to Serbia and war crimes, they see Serbia as still being the main threat to the statehood of Kosovo"[152].

With the previous Kosovo government under Hashim Thaçi, the political framing of the war seemed to ease a bit, and the harsh rhetoric as well, interviewees say. There was somewhat of

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[149] Interview 10.
[150] Interview 2.
[151] Interview 12.
[152] Interview 4.

a momentum when it came to reconciliation under Thaçi, who also suggested to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to deal with the atrocities of the past in a democratic way[153]. Since the new government came into power, however, the tone harshened again, not least regarding missing persons. While the Kurti government is the first in Kosovo without previous involvement in war violence and the KLA, this has according to an interviewee caused them to feel a need of "proving their patriotism", and thereby paradoxically fueling a one-sided war narrative even more strongly than previous governments[154]. Radovanović from Mitrovica tells that the relations between the communities were probably better under Thaçi, than they are now:

> "I can see that from the time they got in power, the public discourse got so poisoned. So, you can feel the tensions way more than a few years ago. And that's maybe an awful thing to say of me, but this guy, Hashim Thaçi that is now in the specialist chambers, that he was doing dealing with the past and transitional justice, the guy that is held for war crimes, was doing it better than this guy that has his hands clean of corruption, whatsoever. I don't say that he was great. But this thing that Kurti and Osmani are doing, their public discourse and the narrative and the things that they are saying, are way worse than what the person suspected of war crimes was saying."[155]

While this standpoint is something not everyone would agree with, it is clear that the recent turns of statements regarding responsibility for violence, and the fact that so many persons who went missing during the war are still not found, have fueled distrust not only on a political level, but also in the public. As stated in the literature, trust between groups is something delicate (Tam et al., 2009), and demanding; "...many trustworthy behaviors must be demonstrated before a person is deemed trustworthy; but only one untrustworthy act can deem a person untrustworthy" (Rothbart and Park, 1986, in Tam et al., 2009, p. 46). Similarly, only one radical statement by a leader, a politician, can remind Kosovo Albanians of "what the Serbs did", and fuel the distrust between the communities. As Božilović phrases it, "just

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[153] Interview 9.
[154] Interview 12.
[155] Interview 5.

one wrong move of a politician might cause a huge wave"[156]. Meanwhile, it could also work the other way around, if there was a political interest of fostering good relations between the communities. Božilović illustrates with a recent example:

> "I shared with Sarah the video of Prime Minister Kurti, when he gave a statement before orthodox Easter, wishing Happy Easter to Serbian community in Kosovo in Serbian language. I mean, that itself had a very positive, positive effect on me personally, and other people from my surrounding, you know, it was like, wow, this is very good. It's very respectful. So that's what I mean, when I say politicians... only this small gesture of him wishing Happy Easter to Serbs, you know, it's it was like, wow. And then imagine if there's a negative statement. What kind of effect it has."[157]

Trust in the past and present

For the trust between Albanians and Serbs, the missing persons issue is a big topic, Ahmetaj argues. "It's not the only topic, but it's one of the hottest"[158]. Many interviewees argue that normalization in the Kosovo-Serb relations without resolving more cases will be hard. At the same time, they argue that the issue in itself does not *per se* fuel distrust. It is how politicians frame it, how it plays into the narratives, that makes it so influential on an intercommunity relation level. In the exploration of the impact of missing persons and ambiguous loss on the trust between the communities one question must, however, be asked: *Did trust even exist before the 1998-99 conflict took place?*

"There is no trust", Serbeze Haxhiaj tells me. "Not only in the political aspect, but also in the private aspect, people don't trust. It's not only 23 years since the war ended, but also there was something created before, maybe 3 or 4 decades before, that the trust between Serbs and Albanians was broken. I heard from my grandparents and my parents that we cannot trust the Serbs, because you know that Albanians were for a long time surpassed under Serbia and Serbian rule. So, it is a long story which separates ordinary Serbs and Albanians."

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[156] Interview 11.
[157] Interview 11.
[158] Interview 3.

According to a member of the international community in Pristina, it is also not to be forgotten that the relations between the communities have deeply rooted discriminatory elements. Even racist. "It's not the same between Serbs and Croats. Albanians are considered as being different people. Historically, ethnically, genetically /.../ Then, throughout the Yugoslav times, Albanians didn't have the same rights. The decades long discrimination fell on the Albanian side. And it's also deeply rooted into Slavic views, you know, it's not brother people, no, it's the others"[159].

Yet, while the relationship between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo certainly started to form way before the war at the end of the 20th century, as illustrated, the war clearly scattered was what there, or what was left, in terms of neighborly relations. Before the war, Nataša Božilović from the MPRC tells that Serbs and Albanians were living together to a much greater extent. "I was living here in Pristina, I went to school here. I had Albanian neighbors. You know, there was never ever a conflict or anything. Nobody was even, I mean, thinking of it. Until it started. And it started because of politics."[160]

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This chapter has elucidated how the distrust between Albanians and Serbs today is not only a product of history, but also of current structural conditions and politics. The institutional discrimination that exists towards the Serb minority in Kosovo, regarding the missing persons issue but also in general, makes it hard for the Serbian community to build up trust to Pristina as a political capital, and to the Kosovo Albanian community. On the other hand, the lack of collaboration from the Serb side to share information regarding missing persons, and the lack of recognition of the terrible crimes that were committed during the war, keep the sentiment towards Serbia, and Serbs, immensely negative among Kosovo Albanians. Lastly, but crucially, the way in which the missing persons issue has been politicized in both Kosovo and Serbia makes it a constant trigger of renewed animosity and distrust.

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[159] Interview 1.
[160] Interview 11.

Conclusion

How does the ambiguous loss in families of missing persons from the Kosovo conflict (1998-99) impact intergroup trust in Kosovo in 2022?

By exploring this question, this thesis has sought to better understand the consequences of ambiguous loss on an intergroup level, and how the legacies of the last conflict in Kosovo impact the relations between Albanians and Serbs today. On the path of doing so, several sub-questions have been addressed: How does it impact families of missing persons to still not know what happened to their loved ones? How does it impact their behaviors and attitudes towards other communities? Is the missing persons issue a driver of intergroup distrust, or does it in fact bring families of different ethnicities together?

It is clear that the unresolved fate of missing persons continues to be a pressing issue in Kosovo more than two decades after conflict, most importantly for the families that have still not received any information about their loved ones. The agony of uncertainty and never-ending wait for answers makes the war continue for many families. While there are examples of families from the Albanian and Serb communities meeting and realizing that they share similar experiences of pain and loss, as illustrated by the joint advocacy efforts of the Missing Persons Resource Center, this remains an exception. Most families of missing persons have little trust for families from other communities and remain ethnically divided – just as the society at large. This study has shed light on the segregated reality of present-day Kosovo, where Albanians and Serbs continue to live apart from each other and hold contrasting narratives regarding the crimes and suffering of 1998-99; perceptions reinforced by a lack of contact and different political realities.

While the relation between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo has certainly improved in some respects since the end of conflict, the distrust between the groups remains strong. This thesis has showed that there is a lack of trust even at the most basic *security* level, as in sense risk of physical or emotional harm. Even more prominent is the distrust when it comes to what

Kappmeier et al. (2020) call *trustworthiness*, the dimension of trust that includes elements such as good intention, honesty, and promise fulfillment, and *intergroup relations*, as in grounds of coexistence, willingness to cooperate, openness with information, and care and consideration for the other group. As demonstrated in this study, distrust in these dimensions is upheld both by the institutional discrimination against the Serb minority in Kosovo, and the lack of cooperation from the Serbian state when it comes to investigating the fate of the many still missing Albanians that were forcibly disappeared by Serbian forces, as well as poor judicial follow-up prosecuting those responsible for war crimes. The lack of recognition of crimes that were committed by the own forces during the conflict, and a strong aggressor-victim binary, remains an obstacle for trust building on both sides.

This thesis argues that the missing persons issue, and the ambiguous loss in families of the missing, does not in itself foster distrust between the Albanian and Serb communities. The issue, nevertheless, plays a central role in the narratives surrounding the Kosovo conflict both in Kosovo and in Serbia; one-sided stories of the war, fostered by a lack of contact between the communities, and political instrumentalization of past atrocities on both sides. While the issue of missing persons is in principle a humanitarian one, an issue of human suffering, of families that are waiting for answers in order to finally be able to close a chapter, politicians on both sides have, as Božilović and Salihu at the MPRC express it, "taken the process hostage"[161]. This has made it an influential topic not only for the affected families, but for the Kosovar society and intergroup relations at large. While families of the missing remain those who are most affected by the issue, the topic has increasingly become exploited by politicians in the broader political discussion on war legacies, to blame the other side and fuel the perception of victimhood among the own population.

In Kosovo today, the trust between Albanians and Serbs is evidently dependent both on the historical context, and the structural conditions. History cannot be undone, and the suffering of the last war cannot be erased, but a majority of the interviewees in this study have argued that the contemporary politics make it hard, not only to handle the past, but also to move

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[161] Interview 11.

forward. As scholars have previously highlighted, rebuilding trust between groups that base their distrust on rational calculations, even if subjectively exaggerated or biased, is especially challenging (Sztompka, 2016, p. 18; Tam, 2009, p. 57). A context where both politicians and institutions in addition to the lack of contact also actively foster certain war narratives and perceptions of victimhood impacts how groups view their history and their relation to other groups, which provides additional obstacles to building trust (Rotella et al., 2013; Noor et al., 2008). The way in which the missing persons issue is politicized in Kosovo and Serbia today, and instrumentalized because of its sensitive nature, it will most likely continue to influence trust between Kosovars of different ethnicities as long as it remains unresolved, and as long as families are forced to experience ambiguous loss.

While initiatives such as the MPRC remain rare, an implication of this study is that they are immensely important for trust building. As demonstrated through several examples, once members of different communities meet and talk to each other, distrust and animosities are often dismantled. Without these meeting points, facilitated arenas of interaction, building trust is difficult. A further key implication is that politicians and other leading figures play a crucial role both when it comes to the process of resolving the fates of missing persons, and the future development of the relations between Albanians and Serbs. Which politicians that are in leading positions, and which approach they take when it comes to dealing with the past, will be of great importance in Kosovo in the coming years. As Koliqi from *Integra* expresses it, Kosovo needs "politicians that have guts and courage to deal with the legacies of the past, not because it's a noble venture, but because it's necessary"[162]. Meanwhile, it does certainly not only matter *if* politicians address the past, but *how* they do it. A comment by Radovanović from the *New Social Initiative* in Mitrovica captures this in a striking way:

> "It is really important to talk about the past, but you have to talk about the past in the right manner. Sometimes I am just saying, shut up, please impose this rule that officials are banned to talk about the past or five years, just leave that for academics. I only feel like that because they are using this to score points, to fuel a certain public opinion."[163]

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[162] Interview 10.
[163] Interview 5.

Another crucial point that Koliqi addresses is that Kosovo must stop comparing its efforts to deal with the past with those of Serbia, but work on the legacies of the war for the sake of Kosovo's own future. "A lot of Albanians are saying that look, Serbia is doing nothing, why should we do anything? So what, shame on them /.../ we're doing it for our society, for our own good".[164] If Kosovo aims to pursue as a multi-ethnic and democratic state, as stated in its constitution[165], and symbolized by the six starts in its flag[166], it should certainly be of interest for its leadership to deal with the past with consideration to, and representation of, all its ethnic groups, independent of the developments in Serbia.

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To study how the missing persons problem and consequential ambiguous loss impacts trust between Albanians and Serbs is to study how the past impacts the present. Yet, a challenge, and thus a limitation, in the exploration of this question is the interconnectedness of the phenomena. Ultimately, the issue of missing persons cannot be separated from the larger war history when studying its relation to trust. As an interviewee phrases it:

> "I think it's hard to discuss the missing person issue, separately from everything else, essentially, it's so connected. Both ways. When you talk about the war, of course, you talk about missing persons, and you talk about missing you talk about the war."[167]

While repeatedly argued in this thesis, and by the interlocutors, that missing persons should foremost be a humanitarian issue, it cannot be overseen that it is intrinsically to some degree political, just as the war, its consequences, and the institutions that are supposed to deal with them are. Nevertheless, this also means that it could have political leverage and impact intergroup relations if the missing persons issue would be less instrumentalized, and if more cases would be resolved thanks to improved cooperation and information exchange. As has

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[164] Interview 10.

[165] *Article 3 (Equality Before the Law):* The Republic of Kosovo is a multi-ethnic society consisting of Albanian and other Communities, governed democratically with full respect for the rule of law through its legislative, executive and judicial institutions (Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, 2008).

[166] The six stars in Kosovo's flag symbolize its six major ethnic groups: Albanians, Serbs, Bosniaks, Turks, Roma, and Gorani.

[167] Interview 9.

been addressed, just as better cooperation could pave a path for increased trust, the discovery of new mass graves could, however, also remind people of the atrocities that were committed during the war, and thereby fuel distrust. More research on the potential trust building and relationship shaping effect of resolving the fate of missing persons would be needed in order to draw conclusions on the matter.

This study also opens up for other interesting avenues for further research. One would be to look more closely at the political *framing* of the missing persons issue, and how the way in which historical events are presented to the public influence intergroup trust. While this thesis has touched on this topic, and highlighted the strong impact of politicians, it would certainly be of academic interest to look more closely at the performances of political leaders in Kosovo and Serbia, and how the frames they use influence the public opinion. This thesis is limited in the way that it has only studied what others tell about the political realities, and not the political actions as such. A study focused on framing could potentially generate a deeper understanding for the role of politicization in the war legacy-trust relationship.

Another interesting avenue would be to look at how war *narratives* are passed on to future generations that have themselves never experienced violent conflict. An interviewee tells me that she experiences that the new generation, born after the end of conflict, is sometimes even more hostile towards other communities, than are those who experienced tragedies or losses themselves[168]. Why is this? To study more closely how the politicization of war legacies impacts different generations could offer new insights into how historical events impact intergroup trust as compared to the contemporary political context. Exploring how the *collective memory*, or *trauma*, within communities impacts their trust for other groups could offer further insights to this inquiry. Including a broader sample of interviewees, with different (or no) experiences of the war, would add depth and nuance to such research.

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[168] Interview 13.

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Appendix 1
List of interviewees

1) Member of the international community in Kosovo.
2) Country director for Kosovo at a non-governmental peace organization.
3) Nora Ahmetaj, human rights researcher and founder of the Center for Research, Documentation and Publication (CRDP).
4) Serbeze Haxhiaj, investigative journalist and Kosovo correspondent for the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN).
5) Milica Radovanović, project officer and researcher at the North Mitrovica-based civil society organization New Social Initiative (NSI).
6) Country coordinator at an international organization.
7) Human rights officer at an international organization.
8) Representative from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Kosovo.
9) Kushtrim Koliqi, human rights activist, theater and film director, and executive director of non-governmental organization Integra.
10) Program manager at the Kosovo branch of a regional organization.
11) Nataša Božilović & Sara Salihu, program coordinators at the non-governmental organization Missing Persons Resource Center (MPRC).
12) Local employee at an embassy working with the issue of missing persons.
13) Valentina Vitali, human rights advisor at the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX).
14) Kushtrim Gara & Ilaz Gashi, head of secretariat/civil servant, Government Commission on Missing Persons (GCMP).
15) Arsim Gerxhaliu, forensic pathologist, previous director of the Institute for Forensic Medicine (IFM).
16) Dardan Hoti, freelance journalist and researcher.

The interviewees without names are interviewees that have requested to be anonymous.

Appendix 2
Interview questions

1) I would like to start by asking you to introduce yourself and tell a bit about how you/your organization works with the issue of missing persons.
2) How do you perceive that the unresolved fate of missing persons from the conflict influences Kosovo today? How does it impact the families? How does it impact Kosovo on a societal level?
3) Which institutions have been and are currently responsible for finding and identifying missing persons? Who leads those institutions?
4) What role does the cooperation between Serbia and Kosovo play when it comes to resolving the fate of the many still missing?
5) What obstacles are preventing better cooperation and better results?
6) Who do the families of the missing consider most responsible for the unresolved fates of missing persons?
7) How do you perceive the relations between Kosovo-Serbs and Kosovo Albanians today? Have they changed since the end of the conflict in 98-99?
8) How do you perceive the trust between the communities? In general, and when it comes to families of the missing in particular?
9) What would you say that this trust/distrust is mainly fueled or influenced by?
10) Would you say that the issue of missing persons impacts how the groups perceive each other in terms of trustworthiness? (Honesty, good intention, promise fulfillment, care, consideration)
11) Would you say that the issue of missing persons impacts how the groups perceive each other in terms of compatibility and cooperation? (Relations, shared values, openness with information, receptivity, willingness to collaborate)
12) Do you perceive the unresolved fate of missing persons as a key issue in the relations between Kosovo-Serbs and Kosovo Albanians today?
13) Do you believe that resolving more cases would have an impact on the relations/trust between the communities?