Statebuilding and Culture in Kosovo

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Kosovo’s statebuilding can be seen as having two dimensions: an internal dimension, whereby institutions have been built, and an external dimension, whereby Kosovo is seeking to be recognised as a state by partaking in international diplomacy and relations. The challenges that Kosovo is facing in being recognised and integrated fully into international relations have made the second dimension all the more important and subject to a rigorous strategy from the government. Such statebuilding also takes place in relation to culture, which has not attracted as much attention compared to more obvious statebuilding processes, like developing government institutions. By “culture” we mean a broader field of government policies and activities which, following Schuster’s definition, relate “to the arts (including the for-profit cultural industries), the humanities, and [...] heritage” (more details further below). While these activities are undertaken by both governmental and non-governmental actors, our statebuilding focus necessitates a greater discussion of the former. In what follows, we draw on a novel distinction between internal and external dimensions of statebuilding and discuss how they are linked to cultural policy. We do this through the analysis of two examples: Kosovo’s UNESCO bid as an external

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element of statebuilding, and the Kosovo museum as an example of more internal statebuilding. We complement this analysis with a discussion of the “Once Upon a Time and Never Again” exhibition organised by the Humanitarian Law Centre Kosovo (HLCK) an example of a cultural activity by a civil society actor² that might offer food for thought for more constructive ways of cultural statebuilding. Our focus on cultural matters that relate to statebuilding, such as the provision of cultural institutions that promote certain historical narratives (e.g. museum exhibitions) or diplomatic efforts to be recognised as a state in culture-focused institutions (e.g. UNESCO), adds to a debate which has focused more on other cultural matters, such as the preservation of cultural sites in the context of cultural heritage. By doing so we aim to complement existing knowledge and, based on our findings, make a series of tentative recommendations on how stakeholders in Kosovo can ensure that the state’s cultural policy contributes to constructive politics. In sum, we suggest that there is room for more nuanced, diverse and critical cultural policies and activities that could draw on existing positive action by civil society, and that, internationally, progress in the culture-related international integration of Kosovo can draw on past positive experiences.

Kosovo’s statebuilding can be seen as having two dimensions: an internal dimension, whereby institutions have been built, and an external dimension, whereby Kosovo is seeking to be recognised as a state by partaking in international diplomacy and relations. The challenges that Kosovo is facing in being recognised and integrated fully into international relations have made the second dimension all the more important and subject to a rigorous strategy from the government.

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² We refer here to civil society broadly defined, e.g. from loosely organised initiatives to more established Organisations.
In this part, we introduce the concepts of internal and external dimensions of statebuilding (i.e. the building of a state internally and the diplomatic efforts for its recognition externally) both generally and with reference to Kosovo in specific. It is on the basis of this distinction we choose two examples for more in-depth analysis in the next section: the Kosovo Museum, as an internal dimension of statebuilding and culture, and the UNESCO bid, as an external dimension of statebuilding. Then, in the section after, we juxtapose these to a third example outside the field of governmental cultural activities.

2.1 Statebuilding

For the purposes of this paper, we approach statebuilding as the process that encompasses the development of government institutions but also the building of a national identity\(^3\), i.e. state a

conception of what the country is and what it represents. If building institutions can be seen as the brick and mortar of a state, then nation-building can be seen as part of statebuilding relating more to a narrative about the identity of a state. Building of state institutions is undertaken by those who control a territory but it is also often assisted by external actors, most notably international organisations like the UN or the EU. Involvement of such international actors is often undertaken in the name of fostering peace in areas affected by conflict, the so-called post-conflict statebuilding. Beyond the academic discussion, linkages between peace and post-conflict statebuilding are also found in policy ideas, such as, for example, the 1992 UN Agenda for Peace by Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Such endeavours have often been critiqued for their western-centric or liberal conception of the state.

The history of Kosovo exemplifies these two distinct sources of statebuilding activity very well. Calls for independence started much earlier than the 2008 declaration of independence or even the 1991/2 efforts at independence. For example, the 1981 student demonstrations called for a Kosovo republic on a par with the other constituent republics of Yugoslavia, to give Kosovo greater self-government than it had hitherto had as an autonomous province of Serbia. These protests still influence today’s politics in Kosovo. Milosevic’s efforts to curtail the autonomy of Kosovo and the unravelling of Yugoslavia gave a fresh impetus to Kosovo Albanian efforts for a separate state during the 1990s. These attempts often drew on institutions and resources of Kosovo as part of Yugoslavia, including in relation to culture (see also later). Yet, this was a process led by Kosovo Albanians and without the involvement of external actors.

However, from the late 1990s and especially after the end of the war in 1999, Kosovo has also seen the extensive involvement of international actors that aim to assist the development of institutions locally. This involvement has happened along the lines of post-conflict statebuilding. In 1999, UNSCR 1244 provided for international assistance towards the “development of provisional institutions”.


7 See for example Bhuta N. “Against Statebuilding”, Constellations Volume 15, No 4, 2008


11 For a good selection of works on the involvement of international actors in Kosovo’s statebuilding see 2019 special issue Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding 13, No5, edited by Hehir, A.
democratic self-governing institutions to ensure conditions for a peaceful and normal life for all inhabitants of Kosovo". The EU also seeks to assist Kosovo in its European path, through institution building and improving relations with Serbia\(^\text{12}\). These aims become clear in focal EU documents about Kosovo. For example, the 2008 Council Joint Action that re-launched the EU’s presence in Kosovo underlined:

> the readiness of the EU to play a leading role in strengthening stability in the region in line with its European perspective and in implementing a settlement defining Kosovo’s future status. It stated the EU’s readiness to assist Kosovo in the path towards sustainable stability, including by means of a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) mission. (i.e. EULEX).

### 2.2 Conceptualising Culture

This process of statebuilding in Kosovo has been also linked to cultural policies and institutions, something that is rather typical of how states are built in order to accommodate their culture and identity.\(^\text{13}\) At least in a European context, the very concept of the state is thought to include certain cultural institutions, such as national museums and national galleries, which are governed by the state through its cultural policies.\(^\text{14}\)

Our use, then, of the term "culture" in this paper differs from an all-encompassing collection of ideas and reflections and, instead, focuses on cultural policies, following the aforementioned definition by Schuster. This definition is still very broad and encompasses work conducted by Ministries of Culture, Ministries of Education, heritage protection bodies and much more. For example, while this paper will focus on the clearly cultural matters of UNESCO membership and the Kosovo Museum, sport falls under the same ministry in Kosovo: the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport, and is also highly relevant to statebuilding.\(^\text{15}\)

According to Dubois, based on examples from Western Europe, "the evolutions of cultural policies result from the interaction between these two levels, the political and the cultural one. They mostly consist in adding new layers of institutions, orientations and discourses rather than in radical changes, in a way that contemporary cultural policies can be viewed as the sedimentation of previous ones. As a result, a national cultural policy encapsulates the main features of the national political and cultural histories."\(^\text{16}\)

In Kosovo’s case, the process of "sedimentation" has been complex, with far more radical changes taking place. Many of Kosovo’s major modern cultural institutions were founded under the Communist Yugoslav regime. For this reason they often reflected


\(^{15}\) See the Ministry’s website, accessible here https://www.mkrs-ks.org/?page=2

cultural narratives that promoted the “Brotherhood and Unity” of the constituent peoples of Yugoslavia. In the case of the Kosovo Museum, this meant that exhibitions under the Yugoslav regime often focussed on topics like the partisans’ military struggle in Kosovo, the worker’s movement, and the lives of Boro and Ramiz – Serb and Albanian partisans whose choice to die together was glorified by the Yugoslav authorities as an example of Brotherhood and Unity. The involvement of the majority community of Albanians in Kosovo’s cultural institutions was subject to change under the Yugoslav regime. Many of the cultural institutions were initially headed by Serbs in the 1940s and 1950s, with Albanians later gradually gaining increased access to the higher positions in these institutions during the 1960s and 1970s. This was related to Kosovo’s promotion from “region” to “autonomous province” in 1963, and a new constitution in 1974, which gave Kosovo much greater autonomy from Serbia.17 However, Albanians were once again excluded from most public institutions under the Milošević regime in Serbia during the 1990s.18

Many of Kosovo’s cultural institutions, such as the Kosovo Museum, have been reopened post-independence19. In the museum’s case, there is some continuity, in that it is located in the same building, but as the state has changed around it, so too has the narrative inside the museum. As we will see later, the main exhibition of the National Museum, which formerly rotated around various pro-Yugoslav and pro-regime topics, was re-organised during the 10th anniversary of independence in 2018 and is now partly dedicated to Kosovo Liberation Army’s (KLA) conflict with Serb forces and Kosovo’s freshly declared state thereafter20.

2.3 Internal and external dimensions of statebuilding

So far, we have concentrated on statebuilding, including in relation to government activities pertaining to culture, as a process through which a state is built internally. And yet, statebuilding can be seen as also having an external dimension. The building of state institutions internally is matched by an effort

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17 “Kosovo remained a part of Serbia but was almost a full federal entity: It had its own national bank, parliament, government, and police, and thanks to increasing Albanianization and the greater numbers of qualified Albanians now able to do the jobs, Albanians were more or less in full control of Kosovo”, Judah, T. (2008). Kosovo What Everyone Needs to Know. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 57

18 “The period between 1945 and 1966 was marked by the domination of the Serbian communist group and discrimination against Albanians...The period since the late 1980s to the summer of 1999 was marked by the dominance of the Serbian group, complete parallelism, and discrimination against Albanians”, Bieber, F. and Daskalovski, Z. (2003) Understanding the War in Kosovo. London, Frank Cass, pp. 58-61


20 Cultural policies in the context of statebuilding are also reflected in art and memorials in public spaces. For example, Kosovo’s NEWBORN monument, unveiled in 2008 at the declaration of Kosovo’s independence, has become an iconic symbol of the new state. It is a public artwork which has had its appearance altered numerous times to reflect the political priorities of the state of Kosovo and its population. In 2016, when the Kosovar government was seeking to have visa restrictions for the Schengen Zone lifted, the sculpture was painted with an image of barbed wire, reflecting how the lack of easy travel in Europe left many in Kosovo feeling trapped. In Landovice near Kosovo’s second city of Prizren, a highly symbolic form of monument replacement has taken place. The monument to Boro and Ramiz, Communist fighters who were used by Tito to symbolise brotherhood and unity between Albanians and Serbs in Yugoslavia was demolished in 1999 and replaced by a cemetery for Kosovo Liberation Army fighters. One set of fighters who symbolised the previous state has been replaced by a new set of military heroes, who serve as the foundation of the new state.
to recognise this process externally through the acceptance of the state as a member of the international community\textsuperscript{21}. In terms of culture, the construction of a state identity has both a domestic audience, in the form of a population that is united in how they view national identity, the boundaries of the political community and national priorities\textsuperscript{22}; and an international audience, in the form of other states, international organisations or non-governmental actors and bodies, or even the minds of individuals.\textsuperscript{23} What is particularly interesting in the case of Kosovo is that the lack of general international recognition (e.g. from all UN or EU members) has made this process of external statebuilding\textsuperscript{24} and strategies that seek to promote the state internationally all the more important. Rather than taking it for granted, like in the case of states who do not struggle for recognition and whose participation in international fora is not challenged, building Kosovo externally as a member of the international community is a major component of Kosovo’s diplomacy since independence, including on cultural fronts. When discussing Kosovo’s possible membership of the European Broadcasting Union in 2012, the then Foreign Minister Petrit Selimi made clear links between culture and external statebuilding when vividly, if somehow exaggeratingly, stated that “nothing is more important than the [Eurovision] Song Contest in nation-building”\textsuperscript{25}. Indeed, recent analysis by Murati and Schwandner-Sievers of Kosovo’s entries to the global contemporary art event the Venice Biennale further demonstrates the importance of culture in Kosovo’s diplomacy. With reference to Loveman’s discussion of the “War of the Wasps” in Brazil,\textsuperscript{26} Murati and Schwandner-Sievers observe that “the accumulation and normalization of a nation-state’s symbolic power and, hence, its legitimacy, is always an outcome of historical, social processes aimed at acquiring, both, internal and external recognition.”\textsuperscript{27}

In this context various cultural issues we have discussed so far address both domestic and international audiences. For example, while museums can be seen as addressing locals but also international visitors to Kosovo, the pursuit of recognition of Kosovo in international relations as another dimension of statebuilding has also been linked to cultural matters. So, while the flow of Kosovo’s recognitions by states stalled in the 2010s, this was somewhat compensated for by a greater participation in the field of sport.


\textsuperscript{22} Hudson, M. (1977). Arab Politics: The search for legitimacy, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT


\textsuperscript{24} Here, our understanding of external statebuilding then is different from external statebuilding as the building of state institutions by external actors, see Paris, R. and Sisk, T. D., eds. (2009). The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the contradictions of postwar peace operations, London, Routledge

\textsuperscript{25} EBU (2012). Kosovo Seeks Full EBU Membership And Song Contest Slot, accessible at https://www.ebu.ch/news/2012/03/kosovo-seeks-full-ebu-membership


Kosovo competed and won its first gold medal in the Olympics for the first time in 2016. In football, Kosovo became a member of UEFA and FIFA in 2016, allowing its team to compete in European Championship and World Cup qualifying matches. In these examples, Kosovo competes on an equal footing with generally recognised states. This can be seen as a way of using culture to gain implicit recognition prior to formal de jure recognition and using culture to compensate for the lack of progress in more typical diplomatic recognition as a state. This, however, is already causing uncomfortable situations for non-recognizers, especially Serbia, who will inevitably have to play against Kosovo in some sports despite not recognizing the country. For example, in 2018 the Serbian women's handball team was forced to move and then cancel a match against Kosovo for security and political reasons, which led to the Serbian team's expulsion from the qualifiers for the World Championship.

The examples mentioned so far are not exhaustive but they illustrate the implications that cultural activities and policies have for Kosovo's state-building processes internally, such as in the case of the Kosovo museum, but also externally, such as in the case of Kosovo joining FIFA. Informed by this novel distinction we propose between internal and external dimensions of statebuilding, the next section reflects on two examples whereby cultural matters interplayed with statebuilding both in terms of building Kosovo internally (Kosovo Museum) and getting state recognition externally (UNESCO application). We choose to focus on cultural aspects of statebuilding, such as historical narratives expressed via cultural means (e.g. museum exhibitions) or diplomatic efforts to be recognised as a state in culture-focused institutions (e.g. UNESCO). By doing so, we complement existing studies on cultural heritage in Kosovo, an area which has attracted the interest of stakeholders already. Because our analysis seeks to explore the impact that culture and statebuilding processes have in Kosovo and its position regionally and beyond, we look at Kosovo’s statebuilding but also responses from others, such as Serbia. Combining this analysis with reflections on the “Once Upon a Time and Never Again” exhibition as a constructive culture-related activity undertaken by a non-governmental actor, we discuss challenges and opportunities and a set of tentative policy recommendations for improving public cultural outputs in the final part of this paper.

National museums “have been at the centre of on-going nation-making processes, since their creation”. Many national museums in Europe were founded in the 19th century to establish the existence of a distinct people in order to justify the establishment of the nation state. Examples include the Hungarian National Museum founded in 1802; The Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremburg established in 1852, and the National Historical Museum in Athens founded in 1882. They have often been characterized as “temples” or “shrines” to the nation that reproduce the mythologies and uncritical historical narratives that underpin specific national identities. To this day, national museums have an important role in helping to solidify the concept of the nation during “dynamic state formations”.

Kosovo’s statebuilding has been a modern, although protracted process, beginning with the development of autonomous institutions while still a part of Yugoslavia, through UN administration toward full, though not generally, recognized independence. The national museum has been overlooked and even neglected for much of this time. The museum did not gain an official statute to replace the Yugoslav one until 2018, ten years after Kosovo’s Declaration of

32 The word ‘national’ does not feature in its official name, it is in often referred to as the national museum, including on the museum’s own Facebook page, accessible here https://www.facebook.com/museumofkosovo/


34 Ibid, pp. 1
Independence. This might suggest that national museums are not as central to statebuilding in the 21st century as they were in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the shadow of earlier, 19th Century national museums still hangs over many museums to this day. National museums are still frequently proposed or operated by "government agencies intent on creating or recreating a national canon often based on nineteenth century models of historicity". One result of this approach is that “European national museums set up powerful self-images and created equally powerful images of "others", which made them breeding places for enmities and conflicts”.

This focus on defining a national image and on distinguishing the nation from the other is visible in the Kosovo Museum, as it is in many other national museums in Europe.

We discern two main and interrelated ways in which the Kosovo Museum’s main exhibition is relevant to statebuilding purposes. Firstly, the statebuilding process itself is commemorated in the museum and is placed at the culmination of a historical narrative. Secondly, an “other” is clearly constructed in the exhibition through a strong focus on the recent conflict in Serbia, which is a strong opponent of Kosovo’s statebuilding process.

3.1 A Historical Narrative for the State

The most obvious reference to the modern statebuilding process in the Kosovo museum is in the final room of the main exhibition. Here, a plaque engraved with Kosovo’s 2008 declaration of independence is surrounded by an array of flags of the states that have recognised Kosovo. This demonstrates to the visitor the importance of international recognition of Kosovo as a state. The national symbols of the flags demonstrate how Kosovo’s status as a state, as expressed in the declaration of independence, is strengthened by the recognition of other states.

The fact that this room comes at the end of a broader exhibition provides added context to the role of modern statebuilding in Kosovo’s history. The exhibition is arranged chronologically, from ancient history through to the present day. According to museologists Mareović and Edson, chronological exhibitions tend to reinforce the idea of a single, true historical narrative that is not only correct but inevitable. As such, the modern state of Kosovo, represented by the Declaration of Independence, is implied to be a culmination of the previous history presented in the exhibition.

To give one example, the ground floor of the museum displays a selection of

archaeological items from prehistoric times to the medieval period, under the overall label of “Ancient Dardania”. Dardania was pre-Roman, Illyrian kingdom and then a Roman province that covers most of what is now modern Kosovo. This use of the name “Dardania” as a general term for Kosovo in earlier historical periods references to a contested interpretation of ancient history that draws direct continuity between Dardanians and Kosovo Albanians. Noel Malcolm, while acknowledging that, most likely, Albanians descend from ancient Illyrian tribes, has characterised the tendency to draw direct, clear continuities between the ancient inhabitants of the Balkan peninsula and modern Albanians as a “myth of origins and priority”.39 This historical narrative was used in the 1990s in order to emphasize Kosovars’ ancient heritage, such as when the name Dardania featured in a proposed, though never adopted, Kosovar flag designed by Ibrahim Rugova.40 While the primary push for Kosovo’s independence was based more on the political idea of self-determination than a historical claim to Kosovo’s territory, the use of the term Dardania was a deliberate evocation of a particular, contested interpretation of history that could serve as an additional justification of modern Kosovo’s efforts to break free from Serbia. By taking the visitor from “Ancient Dardania” at the beginning of the exhibition, to Kosovo’s Declaration of Independence at the end, the museum’s chronological exhibition suggests to the visitor that the modern state of Kosovo is in some way a descendent of the ancient Kingdom of Dardania. This use of a historical narrative to contextualise modern statebuilding is common. Most other European countries use historical reference points to support their modern state-building ideologies.

### 3.2 Conflict with Serbia

In terms of constructing an “other”, the second floor of the museum is primarily, though not entirely, dedicated to the Kosova Liberation Army’s struggle against Serbian forces, for independence. A large proportion of the floor displays uniforms and weapons used by the KLA and NATO, including guns, shells and other equipment such as maps and satellite phones. KLA guerrilla Adem Jashari’s personal possessions, including his motorcycle are displayed. One display case containing assorted weapons and a syringe is labelled “Evidence of Serbian violence, small arms, spears, syringes, traces of rape, etc.” This conflict-focussed section of the main exhibition clearly helps to place Serbia as “the other” against which Kosovo is defined. The main exhibition’s focus on the KLA serves to emphasise the military part of the conflict and obscure other aspects. It demonstrates that the KLA has been accorded an important role in the development of Kosovo’s identity as a new state. Such focus on the violent rather than peaceful resistance is also evident.

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outside the walls of the museum and remains a point of contention.\textsuperscript{41} Whether it is legitimate or not from a historical point of view, choosing to enshrine items linked to the KLA in the national museum suggests that conflict with Serbia is becoming an important element of the way modern state-building processes are given historical context in Kosovo.

These examples are selective, and they do not reflect the entirety of the main exhibition in the museum, or the full extent of the museum’s activities. To the museum’s credit, it has also challenged prevailing historical narratives and perception by focussing on historical events that are rarely presented publicly as a key part of Kosovo’s statebuilding process. Through temporary exhibitions, the museum has explored the large-scale protests organised by women’s groups in 1990s\textsuperscript{42}. It also contains a projector to show testimonies of Kosovo’s recent history gathered by the Kosovo Oral History Initiative.\textsuperscript{43} Nevertheless, the status of these topics as subjects of temporary exhibitions and/or much smaller parts of the exhibition compared to the number of exhibits dedicated to the KLA, reflects the fact that these events do not yet fit with current statebuilding efforts as well as, for example, a copy of Kosovo’s Declaration of Independence or military items from the conflict with Serbia. These choices that emphasise conflict and post-conflict statebuilding present Kosovo with a series of challenges that we discuss more in the conclusion.

\textsuperscript{41} See for example Gashi, S. (July 2019) Kosovo Has Wiped All Memory of Non-violent Resistance, Balkan Insight. Accessible at https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/02/kosovo-has-wiped-all-memory-of-non-violent-resistance/


\textsuperscript{43} The website of the initiative can be viewed here: https://oralhistorykosovo.org/independence-day/
Understanding statebuilding as entailing an effort to get a state recognised and accepted as a member of the international community, membership of international bodies becomes of great significance. Indeed, membership of international bodies can be seen as very important for state recognition. While international law scholars are careful to suggest that international organisations do not prescribe whether its member states will recognize or not, rather than whether membership of an international organization is recognition.

46 Council of the EU, 2851st Council meeting General Affairs and External Relations, Press Release, Brussels, 18 February 2008. Note, however, that what the extract seems to suggest is that international organizations cannot prescribe whether its member states will recognize or not, rather than whether membership of an international organization is recognition.
clear that membership of intergovernmental international bodies is a major step towards being recognised as a state, conferring legitimacy47, if not de jure recognition.48 In this context, Kosovo’s bid to join UNESCO was part of a broader post-independence strategy to apply for membership of international bodies and represents perhaps the apogee of culture-related external statebuilding. The government viewed membership as conferring Kosovo legitimacy as a state member of the international system49. The importance of UNESCO for getting state recognition can be seen in a few other examples. Taiwan has in the past tried to get sites in the UNESCO list of World Heritage50 and the Ministry of Culture has a dedicated webpage for “potential world heritage sites”51. Palestine joined UNESCO in 2011, which has come with benefits such as better access to the International Criminal Court52. Indeed, Palestine’s success in joining UNESCO seems to have made the Kosovo government optimistic for its application.53 Besides, the decision to apply for UNESCO membership was based on a strategy of joining international bodies, where the dispute with Serbia would not seemingly pose a problem, and of seeking membership of organisations whose voting system/membership could be beneficial to Kosovo’s acceptance (e.g. IMF, World Bank)54. Indeed, Serbia had no right to veto Pristina’s UNESCO membership bid and Kosovo could join even though it was not a UN member state. Kosovo needed to attract 95 votes – two-thirds of the total UNESCO membership – in order to win approval. But only 92 voted to accept its bid, with 50 voting against and 29 abstentions. Our analysis of this example highlights two themes: the UNESCO bid as part of external statebuilding, in some ways more diverse and less focused on the recent conflict than other cultural tools, such as the Kosovo Museum, and the reaction of others, especially Serbia, in the bid.

4.1 The Application as Statebuilding
Kosovo’s campaign for UNESCO membership is illuminative for how issues of culture were used to build a narrative about the state for international audiences.

47 Ker-Lindsay, J. (2012). The Foreign Policy of Counter-Secession, Oxford, Oxford University Press
52 Interview with diplomat, October 2018
53 Interview with diplomat, January 2021
54 See also Visoka, G., Newman, E., & Doyle, J. (Eds.). (2019). Routledge Handbook of State Recognition. Routledge, Abingdon. Interestingly, this was not the first or last time Kosovo was involved in UNESCO matters. Early in the history of the conflict with Serbia, UNESCO sponsored talks between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians on education matters (see also Bellamy, A. 2002. Kosovo and the International Society. Berlin: Springer). More recently and despite the failed bid to membership, Kosovo has been encouraged by the EU to meet the standards of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (see European Commission Staff Working Document, Kosovo* 2019 Report, Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (COM(2019) 260 final)).
Printed material of the campaign “Kosovo in UNESCO” opened with a short timeline of events decisive for Kosovo’s statebuilding that culminated in the application for UNESCO membership: Kosovo becoming a UN protectorate, the first democratic elections, the 2004 riots, the UN plan for an independent Kosovo, the 2008 declaration of independence, Kosovo joining IMF in 2009, ICJ’s opinion on independence in 2010 and Atifete Jahjaga becoming first female President in Western Balkans the year after, the 2012 recommendation that Kosovo merits independence, the 2013 Brussels agreement with Serbia and the joining of other international initiatives (e.g. International Olympics Committee, Venice Convention) and, finally, the application for UNESCO membership55. The campaign, which rested on a narrative of Kosovo as the “youngest state” in Europe and the Balkans, argued that “UNESCO membership would enhance Kosovo’s position in the areas of education, science and culture” as the “only way for a country to catch up with its regional partners”56. The campaign also articulated very explicitly the links between education and state-building in the context of peace promotion, to which Kosovo subscribed:

“One of the very first sentences of the Constitution of UNESCO perfectly captures the sentiment of the people of Kosovo in its post-conflict state-building efforts: since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. Kosovo wants lasting peace and solidarity that go beyond political and economic issues, and this can only be achieved through strengthening education”57.

4.2 Counter-Statebuilding?

Drawing on the concept of counter-secession58, i.e. the ways in which states like Serbia try to prevent the secession of former parts of their territory like Kosovo, we can think of Serbia’s reaction to the UNESCO application as counter-statebuilding, i.e. a clear effort to oppose statebuilding activities. Joining UNESCO was seen as an element of statebuilding both by Kosovo but also others, not least Serbia, and, therefore, offered yet another theatre for the conflict over Kosovo’s statehood to play out and for the efforts to build a recognised state to be countered. The then Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić claimed that the aim of Kosovo’s UNESCO bid was “to falsify history and to create a new state, a national and cultural identity which implies the total extinction of everything that testifies about the Serb presence [in Kosovo].”59 This statement shows how the Serbian leadership opposed membership of

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ker-Lindsay, J. (2012) The Foreign Policy of Counter-Secession, Oxford, Oxford University Press
UNESCO as a part of Kosovo’s statebuilding. Serbia also contended that Kosovo did not qualify for UNESCO membership because it is a UN-administered territory that cannot be considered a state under international law. In the same way that Kosovo’s bid was part of a broader effort to gain recognition, Serbia’s opposition to the bid was also nested in a broader de-recognition campaign, as acknowledged by the European Parliament. Once it happened, the rejection of the application was seen by the Serbian leadership as “a clear sign that we will not give up our southern province” and that “Kosovo is not a state” and “should not be allowed to apply for membership because it is part of Serbia.” Similarly, the government of Russia, which like Serbia tried to postpone the vote on Kosovo’s membership, reiterated that UNESCO was politicised by Kosovo in order to give legitimacy to a self-proclaimed state. States like Cyprus voted against the membership because of their non-recognition of Kosovo. Some have suggested that the failure to secure UNESCO membership has damaged the credentials of Kosovo more generally. Prominent within the campaign was cultural heritage, a sensitive issue for a long time, not least due to the Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo. One of the main lines of Serbia’s opposition to Kosovo’s UNESCO membership was that it entailed the risk of erasing Serbian religious and cultural heritage in Kosovo, despite the fact that four of the most important monasteries and churches are already under UNESCO protection as part of its World Heritage Site list. Serbian politicians have also deployed the issue of cultural heritage to argue against recognition in general and use it to condemn Kosovo’s political system. This shows how the technical issue of cultural heritage protection can become politicised to the point where it loses any real connection to the actual process of accession to an international body, and instead becomes tied up with cultural and historical debates. Kosovo decided to address these issues head-on in campaign material than sought to answer the question of whether Kosovo’s UNESCO membership can threaten the status of Serbian Orthodox church sites. According to the campaign, UNESCO membership would strengthen their status and provide additional guarantees for their protection. In this

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60 Ibid.
63 Irish, J. (November 2015) Kosovo fails in bid to gain UNESCO membership, Reuters. Accessible at https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-kosovo-serbia-unesco-idUKKCN0SY1YC20151109
narrative, Kosovo’s statehood and Serbian heritage in Kosovo are not incompatible but, rather, mutually reinforcing. In this regard, it is interesting that Kosovo tried to portray external dimensions of statebuilding as not threatening but in fact benefiting the Serbian side. Finally, the campaign also highlighted the existing framework for the protection of cultural heritage.

Interestingly, the idea that the Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo were under threat from the Albanian inhabitants of Kosovo was heavily promoted by actors from the broader society leading up to the vote on Kosovo’s UNESCO membership. A social media campaign entitled “No Kosovo UNESCO” was launched by students of the University of Pristina, in Mitrovica in the Serb-dominated north of Kosovo. It relied heavily on images and videos of the anti-Serb violence of 2004 to push the message that the Kosovar government could not be trusted to protect Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo. The Serbian Orthodox Church published a similar video on its official website.

All of these resulted in a worsening of diplomatic relations between the two sides. For Kosovo’s politicians, Serbia’s campaign against Kosovo’s membership was not in the spirit of the 2013 Brussels agreement. The then Deputy Prime Minister Hashim Thaci described Serbia’s campaign against the bid as “anti-European […] that goes contrary to all the achievements in the region in the last years.” For some, the decision of Kosovo’s Constitutional Court to review an agreement to normalize economic and cultural relations between Serbia and Kosovo shortly after the failed UNESCO bid could be seen as a revenge move.

Interestingly, states like Romania justified their vote against UNESCO membership on the idea that it could undermine the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, therefore interpreting the seeking of statehood as an intransient move. But the dispute over UNESCO has been seen as having long-lasting negative effects on the fragile trust that was building between Kosovars and the Serbian Orthodox Church and through initiatives like the Implementation Monitoring Council (see also later) that was also supported by the EU.

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68 See the campaign’s Facebook page. Accessible here https://www.facebook.com/pg/No-Kosovo-Unesco-956904291037756/posts/
70 An example of this is accessible here https://www.change.org/p/council-of-the-european-union-european-ombudsman-european-commission-oficina-del-parlamento-europeo-en-espana%C3%B1a-no-kosovo-in-unesco
71 Serbian Orthodox Church (November 2015) Why Kosovo cannot join UNESCO, accessible here http://www.spc.rs/eng/why_kosovo_cannot_join_unesco
76 Interview with diplomat, January 2021.
In this part, we reflect on the exhibition “Once Upon a Time and Never Again”, organised by the Humanitarian Law Centre Kosovo (HLCK) since 2019 in Pristina as an example of more constructive cultural activities that might offer inspiration also for government action⁷⁷, but we also draw on some other examples to illustrate further positive action. Based on the analysis of both such positive action and the opportunities and limitations discussed through the examples of the Kosovo Museum and the application for UNESCO membership, we offer a set of final remarks and recommendations in the next section.

The first aspect of the exhibition that is relevant to our discussion is that it offers a more nuanced reflection on the conflict in Kosovo. According to the HLCK⁷⁸, the exhibition seeks to address the fact the state has not given priority to the commemoration of civilian victims of war. By drawing on 40 personal items of 1133 children killed or still missing as the result of war in Kosovo, the exhibition serves to highlight civilian victims, and even more so children, which are neglected in other cultural activities, such as the exhibition of the Kosovo Museum, which focuses more on the military dimension of the conflict. The exhibition was inspired by

⁷⁷ Our analysis draws on a June 2021 discussion with the manager of the Documentation Centre Kosovo (DCK), Dea Dedi to whom we are indebted for the assistance.
the War Childhood Museum in Bosnia but chose to focus on children who were victims, rather than survivors as the museum in Bosnia does, reflecting that Kosovo has the greatest proportion of such victims during the Yugoslav wars. This is important for our analysis because it shows that more holistic reflections on the history of Kosovo do not need to neglect the violence, but rather discuss it in more inclusive and constructive ways. Other similar initiatives exist, such as the Kosovo Oral History Initiative, which is constantly collecting accounts of Kosovo’s history that demonstrate a variety of interpretations of recent history. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Cultural Heritage Without Borders (CHWB) have organized conservation initiatives across South Eastern Europe that bring together people from different communities for the common cause of preserving buildings and monuments of historical importance.

Secondly, the exhibition includes items from children of different ethnic communities in Kosovo. This is important for two reasons. On the one hand, it allows the exhibition to offer a more diverse, and therefore constructive, image of Kosovo’s history and present. On the other hand, the preparation of the exhibition allowed families from different communities to come together, discuss and reflect on Kosovo’s past and their personal stories. These discussions centred on discovering the commonalities in the family trauma. In this way, the organisers of the exhibition suggest it became a “symbol of reconciliation.”

Returning to the role of the state in culture and statebuilding, the exhibition is a good example of a cultural activity predominantly related to internal statebuilding. By bringing together families and visitors to discuss the past, the exhibition is, whether intentionally or not, contributing to the historical narrative of the development of Kosovo as a state. The aspect of the past that is focussed on is significantly different to that presented in the Kosovo Museum, however, it can still be seen as a contribution to Kosovo’s on-going internal statebuilding processes. Reckoning with the past and developing a narrative of what happened and which events are most important through cultural products like museum exhibitions are a vital part of this process.

The exhibition also has relevance for external statebuilding because its online presence allowed people outside Kosovo to visit, thereby showcasing Kosovo and its recent history to an international audience. While the exhibition was not organized by the state, for a substantial number of international visitors the history presented in the exhibition is a representation of the recent history of Kosovo. The online

79 https://warchildhood.org/
80 The initiative’s materials can be viewed on its website, accessible here https://oralhistorykosovo.org
81 See its website here: http://chwb.org/
presence was a mitigation strategy for the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic did not allow the exhibition to travel to Serbia and Bosnia, which was provided so “young people connect and create a joint culture of memorialization in the region by thinking openly and critically”.

Furthermore, cultural activities by NGOs, such as this exhibition, can supplement and be complementary to state-sponsored exhibitions, such as that of the Kosovo Museum. However, our analysis finds that there is a public need for the state itself to work towards cultural activities that are more inclusive, both in terms of content and participants. The families who contributed their children’s items to the exhibition, made a point to resist the hijacking of the exhibition by state representatives by excluding politicians from the exhibition’s opening. Nevertheless, in spite of this apparent distrust of politicians, the families are keen for the exhibition to be more permanently and clearly institutionalised and protected by the state. Some of the families view such a move as recognition by the state of their loss, which has hitherto not always been forthcoming, with some families unable to obtain death certificates for their children. They also believe that public institutions will better preserve their items for future generations to see, not least because the state is seen as stronger and more permanent than an NGO like the HLC. All these points highlight the unique place that the state has in the minds of its citizens but also its practical role and the need for more constructive cultural activities and policies by the state itself. In the following section we offer some more ideas towards this direction.

85 Interview with a member of the HLC Team, June 2021
86 Ibid
87 Ibid
In the previous sections we have looked at specific examples of how activities from the government in relation to culture and Kosovo’s statebuilding, complemented by a discussion of positive action taken by non-governmental actors. Here, we bring together these various parts of the analysis by highlighting some common themes and differences of how Kosovo’s statebuilding is conducted internally versus externally and some tentative policy recommendations.

Something that becomes obvious when we look at the case of the Kosovo Museum and of UNESCO together is how statebuilding is a constantly evolving process relating both to the past and the future of Kosovo. The Kosovo Museum is a good illustration of how cultural institutions look at the past, for example the Kingdom of Dardania, to build a narrative about Kosovo. Cultural processes that relate more to external statebuilding seem to have a more future-based outlook, in that they look at the promise of Kosovo’s international integration. For example, the UNESCO bid was motivated by the government’s strategy to strengthen the international recognition of Kosovo and its case was argued on the basis of the benefits that Kosovo and the region would enjoy as a result of membership of the organisation. Another finding is that the conflict with Serbia, and especially its physical and
military dimension, plays a central role in how culture has been used in the process of Kosovo’s statebuilding internally but not so much externally. Internally, we saw how the physical violence shapes the permanent exhibition of the Kosovo museum. While this can be seen as natural, given that the conflict constitutes a major part in Kosovo’s history and identity, we can still identify a challenge in the fact other forms of violence or more peaceful resistance is neglected in comparison. Another challenge associated with the over-focus on violence is the risk of perpetuating the conflict with Serbia not only at a diplomatic level (see above) but also in the level of people’s perceptions. Indeed, in some respects, the way in which the 2004 riots was used by the Serbian opposition to the UNESCO bid, both at the level of political leadership but also more organically by the public (e.g. twitter reaction) testifies to the problems that the over-focus on violence might create for relations between the two sides. Interestingly, on the Kosovo side, the UNESCO bid had a more balanced picture than the Kosovo museum- for example the historical timeline presented in campaign material was equally split between events related to the conflict and other historical events. Allowing more multifaceted historical reflections could go a long way towards a better reflection of the complexity of Kosovo’s society and politics, as well as possibly more constructive relations with neighbours, especially Serbia. The “Once Upon a Time and Never Again” exhibition focussing on items left behind by children war victims from across different communities is an example of a more nuanced reflection on Kosovo’s past and development as a state. Furthermore, cultural policies that move beyond, without neglecting, the conflict with Serbia might also have better chances of allowing outsiders to Kosovo to move beyond its post-conflict image. The UNESCO bid campaign was a positive move in that respect (see also previous paragraph), and there is indeed a validity in the claim of the campaign that Kosovo’s statebuilding does not have to undermine relations with Serbia and can, in fact, reinforce the protection of cultural heritage. This, however, relies on proper implementation of related provisions. Another important finding is that the issue of culture can be very politicised and create major diplomatic challenges for Kosovo – this appeared to be a central challenge in processes of external statebuilding, like the UNESCO bid, which unlike internal statebuilding, do not take place in isolation but in front of the eyes of others, like Serbia. Indeed, our analysis showed that the bid was another instance in which Kosovo’s efforts at recognition and Serbia’s counter-efforts at non-recognition played out with negative implications for Kosovo’s relations with Serbia as well as other countries. Issues of recognition are usually seen as relating to high politics, but, as we saw, cultural matters interplay with diplomacy and there are many other instances beyond UNESCO, such as sports events (see earlier) or music competitions like the Eurovision Song Contest, where the dispute over Kosovo’s statehood is reproduced. Therefore, thinking...
of ways in which Kosovo can pursue its diplomatic aims internationally without worsening relations with Serbia is not an easy task. A first step in this direction will be to pay more attention to how exactly diplomacy and cultural statebuilding might interrelate and how this can be done in a constructive way for Kosovo.

Lastly, although we focused primarily at the level of government activities and policies, our analysis served to highlight the importance of non-governmental initiatives in different ways. First, we can find examples of a less monolithic approach to Kosovo’s history and identity in NGO initiatives, such as the “Once Upon a Time and Never Again” exhibition and others. Secondly, we also saw that civil society\(^{89}\) can contribute to culture-related friction, such as the wider participation in the campaign to discredit Kosovo’s UNESCO bid by promoting the idea that the Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo were under threat. This highlights the importance of moving public perceptions towards a more constructive understanding of culture.

Before we move to more specific recommendations, we would like to bring the discussion of Kosovo back to the larger picture of statebuilding and culture. In many respects, our analysis shows Kosovo resembles similar processes of statebuilding that have happened or are happening elsewhere in the world. Conflict is the default way in which states are born, and, as a result cultural institutions like national museums, tend to tell stories of violence, of enemies and of liberations, towards building a uniting national narrative. In some respects, therefore, the challenges identified here and the recommendations suggested below follow an on-going global trend of thinking more critically about the content and the role of museums. Such examples include recent efforts to address the way in which museums deal with Belgium’s role in slavery, to mixed reactions, or the decision by the Amsterdam Museum to stop using the term “Golden Age” to refer to the 17th century on the basis that it overlooked issues such as poverty, war and human trafficking. Externally too, Kosovo follows others in using culture to develop its presence in the international community, although the challenges that exist in diplomatic recognition seem to have led to Kosovo’s governments placing greater emphasis on the recognition implications of international cultural links.

**Recommendations**

Our analysis has focused on identifying challenges that exist in the way in which Kosovo’s statebuilding and culture interrelate but also on examples of positive action from state-sponsored cultural activities but even more so from activities of non-state organisations. Drawing on this analysis, below we offer some recommendations for different stakeholders that shape the politics and society of Kosovo.

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\(^{89}\) We refer here to civil society broadly defined, e.g. from loosely organised initiatives to more established organisations.
Starting with national policy makers, we recommend that

- Emphasis is placed on how public cultural institutions and cultural activities can be used to promote a variety of different stories about Kosovo. This could allow a more constructive view of history. Without neglecting experiences of violence and of conflict, it will also contribute to a move away from both local and outsiders’ perceptions of Kosovo always in relation to times of conflict.

- A richer, more complex reflection on Kosovo’s history and future will also be aided by the promotion of plurality and diversity not only in terms of content but also in terms of participants to cultural activities (e.g. participation of different Kosovo communities). More inclusive cultural activities could also contribute to better relations between Kosovo and Serbia and progress in European integration.

- Such endeavours to think critically about Kosovo can build on existing activities from non-state organisations, like the “Once Upon a Time and Never Again” exhibition or Kosovo Oral History Initiative90.

- Towards this direction, national policy makers should invest in communication and collaboration with civil society, from which some of the aforementioned positive initiatives come (see also recommendations on civil society below).

This is important because, sometimes, such efforts by independent actors are undermined by governments which promote exclusionary historical narratives.

- Finally, national policy makers should invest in public communication campaigns that will allow the clear articulation of tangible benefits for the public that such endeavours have91.

As we have discussed, a range of positive developments in using culture to reflect on Kosovo in a more constructive manner have appeared outside strictly national policies and from initiatives of civil society, be they formal or less formal. It is therefore important that policies draw inspiration from such successful initiatives. This could also allow the participation of wider society in cultural activities that reflect on Kosovo. As a result, we recommend that

- Civil society engages with policy makers towards communicating constructive ways in which culture can be used to reflect on the complexity of Kosovo past and present, both locally and internationally.

- Experts produce reports and training that seeks to develop better knowledge of national and international policymakers92 and co-creative methodologies (see also footnote 86) on how culture and statebuilding connect in Kosovo and implications for society and politics and regional relations.

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90 The initiative’s materials can be viewed on its website, accessible here https://oralhistorykosovo.org. “The Making of the Museum of Education (Kosovo)” is another interesting project that seeks to foster co-creative, arts-based history education which deals with silenced histories, such as peaceful periods of resistance—see here: https://changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk/museum_education_kosovo/
91 Interview with diplomat B, February 2021.
92 The focus on expert consultancy builds on insights from discussion with diplomats locally (interview with diplomat B, February 2021).
Such action must also be supported by a range of international actors which are heavily involved in Kosovo, especially post-1999 (e.g. UN, EU, OSCE). These international actors have focused a lot on the issue of cultural heritage as an essential element of reconciliation. For example, the EU’s Action Plan on Implementation of a European Partnership for Kosovo, which provided for an Implementation and Monitoring Council on issues of religious and cultural heritage that brings together Kosovo and Serbian authorities and OSCE, CoE and UNESCO.93 The EULEX mission has also supported the establishment and development of the Kosovo Police Religious and Cultural Heritage Unit, which secures 24 religious and cultural heritage sites in Kosovo, mainly belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church. To an extent, this focus on infrastructure is a result of trying to satisfy the more immediate needs of institution building in Kosovo, but international policy-makers recognise that culture too is important if we view countries as artificial constructions94. In this context, there are ways in which international actors can contribute to a constructive culture-related statebuilding process internally as well as externally. In specific, we recommend that:

- They support national policy makers in the aforementioned recommendations towards constructive cultural policies (e.g. by supporting the development of greater channels of communication between civil society and policy makers)
- They develop a more sophisticated approach to cultural matters and their impact on Kosovo’s society and politics and relations with others, like Serbia. This can be done both in institutional ways, such as through the strengthening of existing posts or the introduction of new ones (e.g. at the EU office), and in policy, such as through the elevation of the issues of culture within the Brussels dialogue and in addition of the more specific issue of cultural heritage. Such an approach must reflect on existing projects with dubious results in Kosovo or the wider region, such as the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation (CDRSEE) textbooks that were criticised in Kosovo95 or the Greece- North Macedonia joint history council as part of terms of the Prespa agreement96 and a similar Bulgaria- North Macedonia commission which face a lack of progress97.

- Externally, international actors must also support Kosovo’s progress in developing international cultural links and draw lessons from the positive steps that have been taken in the past, where such progress has not had major negative implications for Kosovo or the region (e.g. Olympics, FIFA, see also other similar recommendations about non-recognisers developing civil society links in the area of culture98).

93 This was based on provisions of the Ahtisaari Plan.
94 Interview with diplomat A, February 2020.
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