

KOSOVO

Introduction

This article is primarily focused on the effects of the March 2004 riots, when over two days Kosovo-Albanian crowds attacked the Serbian minority and Orthodox and Serbian heritage in almost every municipality in Kosovo.

The fate of cultural heritage is revealed as a burning topic in the Balkans. As a sign of the long traditions of all the region's cultures, it has been a target of destruction but also of use and misuse. In countries where different groups are fighting on the basis of ethnicity, heritage can become a weapon and a provocation. Many of the region's museums, libraries, religious buildings, archaeological sites, and the like, have been destroyed in the former Yugoslavia during the last fifteen years to oppress these cultures and people connected to them.

In the case of Kosovo, I believe it is also quite important to mention that the Kosovo-Albanian people, who have been present in the area for centuries alongside Serbians and Turks, have three different religions. The majority of Albanians are Muslims but there are also quite a number of Roman Catholic Albanians and some Orthodox Christians, a fact that is rarely mentioned in international publications. As elsewhere in Europe, many people in Kosovo, especially in the cities, are not religiously observant. The March riots were not religiously motivated.

Background

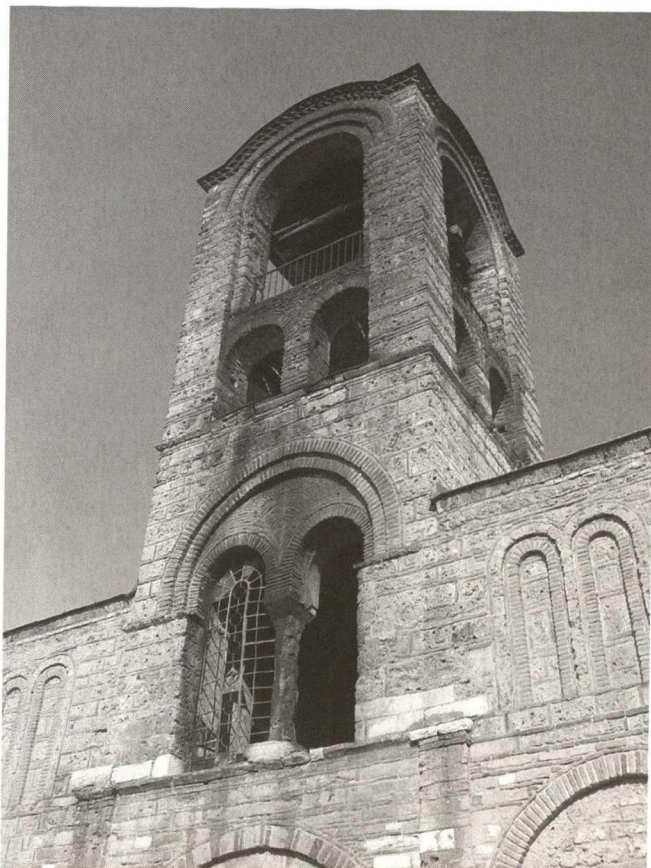
A large number of Orthodox and Serbian buildings were destroyed during the riots. While most of the attacked buildings were modern structures, there was also damage to some invaluable Byzantine churches. The riots seem to have been well organised and focused on symbols of the Serbian presence in Kosovo, no matter the historic value. It is unlikely that the rabble, nor perhaps even its organisers, could see the difference between a 14th-century church, which has escaped destruction for centuries and is a part of their own history, and a 20th-century copy built in large numbers primarily as signs of the Serbian presence in Kosovo.

Approximately 35 churches, chapels and monasteries in seventeen municipalities were destroyed or damaged in only two days. For most of both Kosovo-Albanians and international watchers, the riots and its brutality came as a shock. It was not obvious that the strong frustration towards the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) for not being able to solve the everyday problems of the people and the Kosovo's status with respect to Serbia, would turn into violence against the Serbian minority and their symbols.

The international military forces (KFOR), whose task it was to protect both Kosovo's peoples and their heritage, did not seem to know how to react in such a fierce situation. Much of the destruction could have been avoided if the soldiers had been better prepared. In many cases the mob even returned a day or two later to continue their violence.

During the following weeks there were determined and strong efforts to collect information about the situation for heritage from Serbia and from international heritage organisations, such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe and Cultural Heritage without Borders, but also from local Kosovar authorities and UNMIK.¹

In response to strong pressure by the European Union and the United Nations on the Kosovar parliament to financially support



The clock tower of Ljeviska church after the March 2004 riots

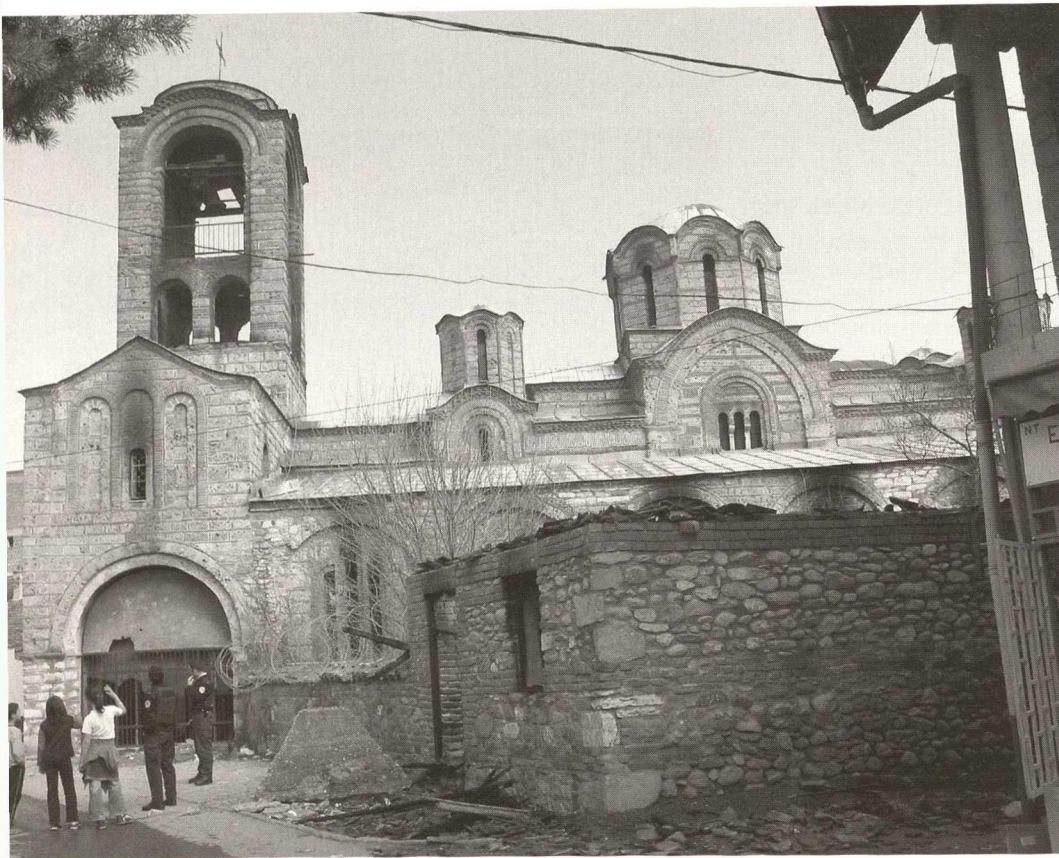
the reconstruction, the parliament decided in June to earmark 3.5 million Euros to repair the damaged Orthodox heritage. This funding will most likely be concentrated on the most significant buildings, as the total cost for restoration and reconstruction is at least ten times higher. Many priceless frescoes and iconostases (painted altar screens) are lost forever.

Analysis and overview of threats to heritage

There are a number of reasons why heritage is in danger in Kosovo. Some of it is of a political nature, such as the relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Another reason is the unemployment among young men, who are readily affected by extremist propaganda. Both factors are beyond the scope of this article, for more information the International Crisis Group's report 'Collapse in Kosovo'² is recommended.

Another reason is that the wars in Yugoslavia during the 1990s largely destroyed the existing infrastructure to preserve heritage. The exodus of Serb specialists from the heritage institutions, who withdrew along with the Yugoslav troops in June 1999 taking institutional records with them, has left Kosovo with largely dysfunctional institutions and museums.

A third reason is that many heritage places have yet to be restored, including hundreds of mosques and other Kosovo-Albanian heritage as well as Orthodox churches, that were damaged or



Ljeviska church in Prizren after the March 2004 riots

destroyed in the 1998–99 conflict. There are also a very limited number of international donors.

Case studies – three examples

Ljeviska church in Prizren

A Byzantine church of invaluable international importance, it has existed for centuries side by side 16th century mosques, such as that of Sinan Pasha, and Prizren's Roman Catholic cathedral, as a brilliant example of the different cultural influences along one of the important Balkan trading routes. The violence against it in March 2004, as if it were merely a building representing the contemporary Serbian presence, was a shock not only for Serbian and international experts, but for most Kosovo-Albanians as well. Until March 2004, the Ljeviska church had been protected through time by the local Kosovo-Albanian population, and seen as also representing their heritage. But now there is no guarantee that it will not happen again, if nothing radical is done to change people's awareness, including that of refugees from the countryside who have flooded into Prizren and other cities. The restoration of the Ljeviska church and other damaged Byzantine churches is the highest priority for Kosovo heritage authorities, UNESCO and the Council of Europe.

Kalaja district in Prizren

The Kalaja (Potkaljaja) district, a historic urban quarter of old houses located on the slopes leading up to the ancient fortress, was

more or less burnt down during the March riots. It used to be inhabited by a mixed, mostly Serbian population and many houses were already abandoned after 1999. Apart from this, the area is a strong symbol for Prizren, almost as much as the different religious buildings, as well as representing Serbs' right to be present in Kosovo beside other ethnic groups. It is of enormous importance that the area be reconstructed and that the former owners be able to regain their properties and that they feel safe to return.

New Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Gjakova

This is a 20th century church that represents the torture and horror of the 1998–99 war to the local Kosovo-Albanian population. Many Gjakovar families say they lost their loved ones in that church. Built in 1998 with municipal funds as a memorial to Serbian troops, it was already badly damaged after the 1999 war. Now it has been totally demolished. For most people in Gjakova it was just a relief to be rid of what they see as a symbol of terror. It is not very likely that it will ever be reconstructed.

Solutions to these threats, ideas that are emerging

The importance of preserving heritage that represents the presence of many different cultures is still obvious in the region. All the strength of this sector may and should be used towards positive developments - to unite instead of separating. A knowledgeable

and professional handling of different aspects of this heritage is an important aspect of peaceful and democratic development. Capacity-building has to focus both on the institutions and the players in the free market. With a regional approach both a higher standard can be reached, because of the actual expertise available in the region, and at the same time a network of competent professionals in the heritage sector can be rebuilt. Here the museums, archives and libraries have an important role to play.

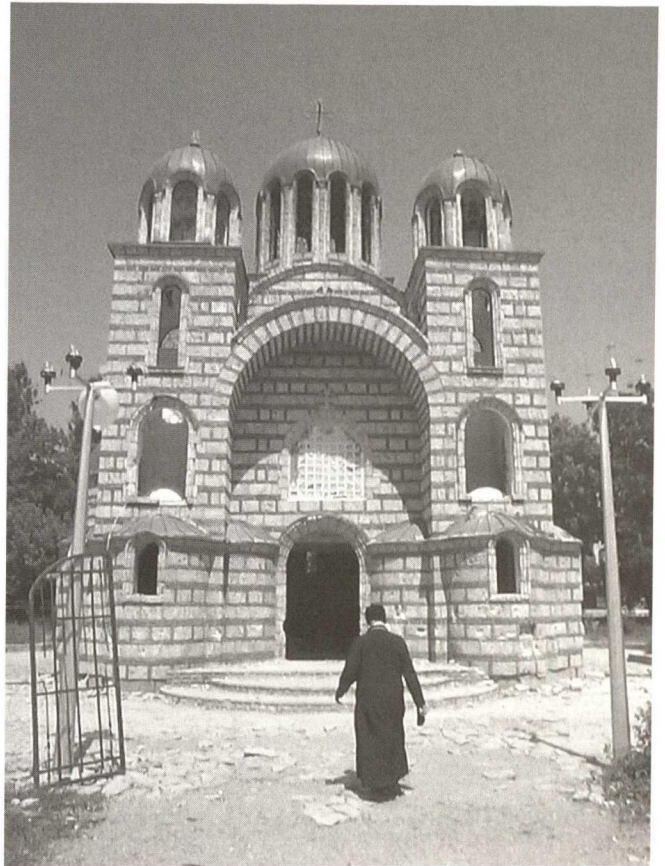
But it is not enough! There have to be strong efforts to achieve public awareness. Public understanding of the significance of heritage is an important tool for understanding other cultures. It is also essential for the day-to-day protection of heritage places. There are different options that must be worked on in parallel:

- The European Heritage Days, a Council of Europe initiative that has been running for almost fifteen years in most European countries, have not yet been tried in Kosovo. The concept has proven to be most effective in drawing the media's and public's attention to cultural heritage.
- Local NGOs have a key-role to play in making cultural heritage seen and understood by the community, especially those who might be very difficult to reach by authorities or through ordinary channels. If people feel that their shared cultural heritage is worth protecting, we have achieved much towards a more peaceful society.
- Restoration and awareness campaigns directly connected to restoration projects can energise local communities to create a platform for local development. In Kosovo, as in other places in the Balkans, the key word has been tourism, not mass tourism, but a small-scale sustainable tourism based on a rich heritage of diverse ethnic origins, such as Prizren town, the Decani monastery (added in June 2004 to the World Heritage list by UNESCO), the Orthodox Patriarchate complex in Pec/Peja and many others, in combination with an exciting natural heritage. This should create awareness among everyday people of the economic benefits of preserving all the different symbols of their dynamic past.

The privately owned, traditional vernacular architecture in Kosovo, much of which was damaged in the 1998-1999 war, is also in danger, but for other reasons - the desire to become 'modern' and difficulties in maintaining buildings properly.

In this case, target groups for capacity building are, apart from private owners, also craftsmen, architects, ethnologists and suppliers of materials who will gain expertise from practical repair works. Private owners of built heritage need a change in attitude, to be proud of this link to their ancestors, but also needed are different financial solutions to enable them to restore or maintain their buildings, if and when the interest is there. Heritage restoration, including not only major heritage sites but also traditional residences and historic urban centres, also has to be tied to economic development and tourism. This can provide a continuing incentive for the community to use, value and preserve the rich but endangered cultural legacy of this historic European region.

Dick Sandberg, Architect SAR/MSA,
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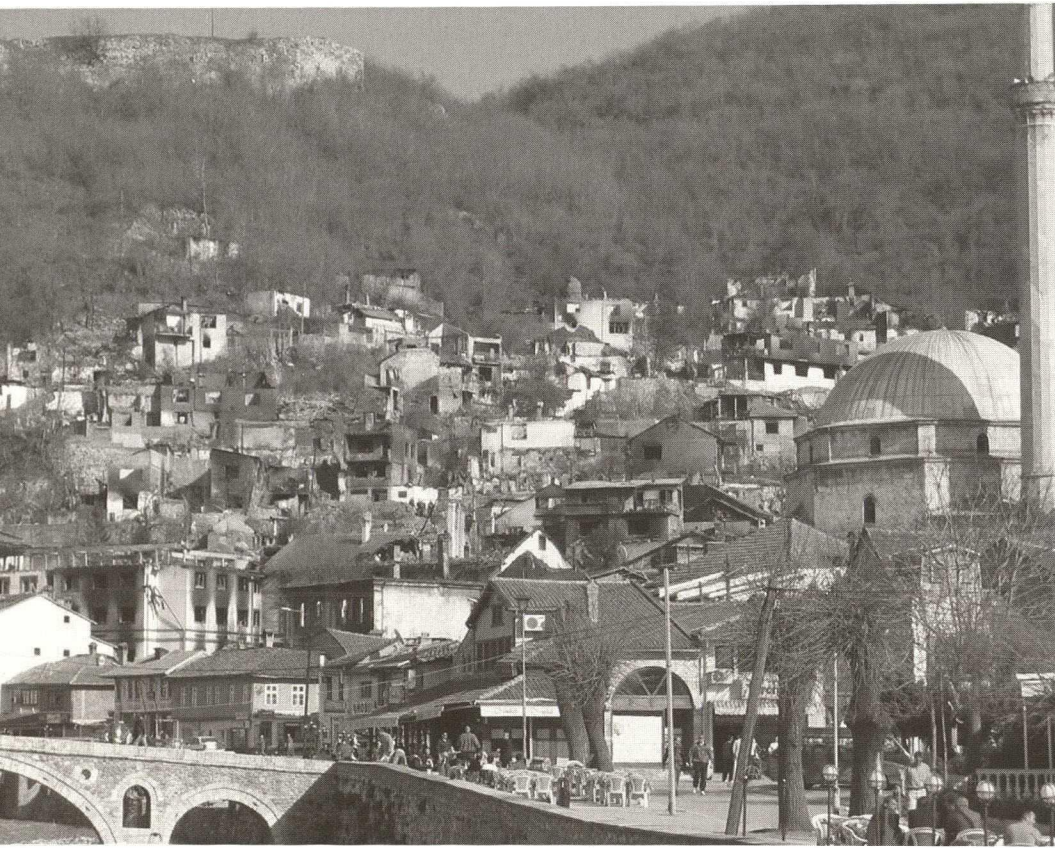
The New orthodox cathedral in Gjakova in 1999

The New orthodox cathedral after the March 2004 riots



¹ See CHwB local office in Kosovo website: <http://www.chwb.org/-kosovo>

² International Crisis Group website: <http://www.crisisweb.org/home/index.cfm?id=1243&l=1>



Prizren Potkalaja district after the March 2004 riots



Prizren Potkalaja district after the March 2004 riots