

**MILICA BOŽIĆ MAROJEVIĆ**

**BACK TO THE FUTURE OR HOW  
TO MAKE PEACE WITH THE PAST  
IN ORDER TO CREATE A BETTER  
TOMORROW TOGETHER**

MILICA BOŽIĆ MAROJEVIĆ

**Back to the Future  
or  
How to Make Peace with the Past in Order to  
Create a Better Tomorrow Together**

Belgrade, 2024

## **Book Series SQUARE**

### **Edited by:**

Luka Glušac

### **Title:**

Back to the Future or How to Make Peace with the Past  
in Order to Create a Better Tomorrow Together

### **Author:**

Milica Božić Marojević

### **Publishers:**

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade  
Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS  
Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe

### **Proofreader:**

Michal Sládeček

### **Cover design:**

Nikola Stevanović

### **Typesetting:**

Sonja Nikolić, Tijana Baltić

### **Place and year of publication:**

Belgrade, 2024

### **ISBN:**

978-86-82324-80-5

### **Replicate:**

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory,  
University of Belgrade

### **Production run:**

50 copies



This publication was created within the Regional Fellowship Program, implemented by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, in partnership with the Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS and the Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe, with the support of the Open Society Foundation Western Balkans, Erste Foundation, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The views expressed in the text represent the views of the authors.

# **Back to the Future or How to Make Peace with the Past in Order to Create a Better Tomorrow Together**

## **Inspiration and Motivation**

“I have always thought about Kosovo in the context of our<sup>1</sup> monasteries only. It never occurred to me that there was some other heritage there, particularly not one linked to Albanians. Especially outside my focus was the question of how cultural heritage influence can, or if can even contribute to overcoming ethnic conflicts and bringing young people closer together. I was born in 2002, and Kosovo was never a topic in my family. Not because it is some kind of taboo, but because it has nothing to do with us. We live in the present, and it itself brings us a series of current obstacles. I knew next to nothing about events that

---

<sup>1</sup> It is meant: Serbian. (author's note)

took place before and after 1999. It was only this course on the dissonance of heritage that made me ask myself why it is so, and the interviews with my peers both from Belgrade and from Kosovo were also helpful. I came to understand that, when you live in Belgrade and study Art History, it is like you are in a bubble, a safe place where there is no room for ugly and unpleasant topics. You do not have a realistic idea about how bitter and enraged some individuals are. The things I heard in the interviews and the information I read in polls disillusioned me. And that hatred that reigns is a consequence of lack of education – now I am certain of this.”

With these words, one of the participants of the course, which was created as part of the research project *Back to the Future. How to make peace with the past in order to create a better tomorrow together* within the RECAS Fellowship, began her final essay on the role of dissonant heritage in the reconciliation processes. This is an ongoing project that has three research directions. One concerns the role of heritage and education in the reconciliation process. The second includes the perspectives of art history students on the unwanted legacy of the past, while the third focuses on the lessons we learned by investigating the first two phenomena.<sup>2</sup> This paper focuses on that segment.

---

<sup>2</sup> It's about the project that was designed as a university course, during which students were supposed to become familiar with the phenomenon of heritage dissonance in general, the unwanted heritage of Kosovo, role of education in the reconciliation processes. The theoretical part was preceded by interviewing the students themselves about the knowledge they had on the subject of Serbian-Albanian relations before the course. That examination was important, so that the course could be adapted to them, but also so that the goals and outcomes of the course could be compared at the end. The answers obtained have shown that the first part of the course must be based on historical, geographical, and socio

The main research question, which forms the backbone of the project is: how can Serbs and Albanians, after everything that happened in recent decades in Kosovo, live together again? What I had in mind was not coexistence, but a true life together, where citizens of different ethnic and religious affiliations are united in all key aspects of life. The search for that answer led to further questions – how can we connect? What are our points of contact – both the positive and the negative ones; which culture of memory is currently being favoured, and which one should we cultivate? How can our heritage, or our past, help us to build a better future? Which heritage? Whose heritage? Why study it? For whom? Which stories to interpret? How to remember shameful events of the past? Who is included, and who is excluded from the public discourse, and for what reason? Can a constructive dialogue and spreading of knowledge about positive examples of interethnic cooperation be helpful? What is the role of the media? Where is the place for the young in all of this? And the crucial one – what is the role of education in all these processes? Since this is an ongoing project, some of the answers we already obtained, and some of them are expected in the future. Moreover, while I was thinking about this project, I had in mind that answers to these questions won't be relevant just for academia, but also for the activists working on reconciliation and dealing with the

---

logical context, as well as familiarisation with the heritage of Kosovo, and then on other basic postulates of dissonance in heritage, which was realised through the introductory classes. During the course, the students had numerous research tasks. The main one was surveying their fellow citizens about Serbian-Albanian relations. Based on the results of the tasks, scenarios were created for the TikTok channel, with the aim of sharing the knowledge they have gained with their peers and other interested parties, and with the idea that it can contribute to reconciliation processes in the region. (author's note)

past, educational specialists who deal with the dissonant past, heritage professionals, journalists and citizens in general.

## **Challenges and Obstacles**

Public spaces and their visual culture are active participants in public knowledge creation. This knowledge is primarily represented and recognised through heritage, i.e. monuments and/or various practices of memorialisation. How this space looks and what it represents in the minds of citizens is never accidental – this is always decided by the elite in power. Although this does not necessarily mean that these ruling elites will have a negative stance towards the previous regime or representatives of minorities in general, in the Western Balkans region this is the rule. Changes in the domain of political climate are very frequent here and can easily be traced in the culture of remembrance and heritage, as one of its representatives. Erasing the traces of the past and forgetting becomes even more evident when it comes to an unwanted legacy of the past. It seems that silenced and marginalised memories, as well as questionable histories, are dominant narratives in everyday life. Namely, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a time of all-encompassing turmoil – economic, health, religious, ethnic, political. This is evident even in countries which were not involved in direct war conflicts, so it is not surprising that the division between ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ can be heard more and more often. Roles of certain public figures are being re-examined, and the cancel culture is growing stronger. Although the experts insist that culture and art bring us together, how is it that they are actually dividing us?

In his Theory of non-education, Konrad Liessmann noted that non-education today is not an intellectual deficit, it is not the lack of information, it is rather a renunciation

of the desire to understand something at all. "Wherever knowledge is talked about today, it is about something different from understanding." (Liessmann 2008: 59) It is around this, at first glance a very harsh assessment, that the further theoretical plot of research was built. By focusing on young people in Belgrade, I have envisaged the project as an elective course on the subject of dissonant heritage, and it is still being implemented at the Department of Art History, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. It is attended by students, mostly born in 2002. This means that it is a generation which does not remember the controversial events first-hand but has formed its stance on them through family stories, education, and the politics of memory promoted by the elites in power. Although the problems faced by the youth are similar in Belgrade and Pristina or Mitrovica, the young people do not think about how to get to know each other better and how to cooperate, nor how to, by changing their own environments, together create democratic, multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, open, plural and inclusive societies. They do not really even think about each other, and the survey and interviews conducted on two occasions showed exactly that. Namely, before the beginning of the course itself, the students received a 'prior knowledge' forms, where they answered questions related to Kosovo, Kosovo Albanians, prejudices, current narratives linked to 'the other side', etc. This type of establishing the previous knowledge of the students on Kosovo and Metohija heritage and Serbian-Albanian relations was necessary – on the one hand, in order to bring the course closer to the participants as much as possible, and to enable comparative analysis of the different attitudes before the beginning of classes and after the end of semester, on the other.



The original idea was to implement the same course in parallel, in Belgrade and in Pristina. However, this is where I came across the first obstacles. For one, for months I did not receive any response to the emails I sent to my colleagues from the University of Pristina. Then I changed my approach and through a recommendation, or as Serbs would say – through a connection, I got in touch with a professor from a private faculty. She then explained that the atmosphere in Kosovo is still not a place good for that type of research, and that she is not certain that any university, be it state-owned or private, would simply agree to implement such a course as a part of its official curriculum and optional courses. She proposed a change of research – that we pay the respondents and overcome the problem in this way. However, this concept was inappropriate for several reasons. Firstly, it rendered meaningless the whole idea of the continued education of young people, and moreover, the comparative analysis segment would be lost. This is when I decided to modify the project and implement the first phase under this call, with students in Belgrade only.

It should, however, be noted that not everything was ideal in Belgrade either. Namely, the structure of students changed several times during the first few weeks. Some dropped out because the discourse was not patriotic enough, while others were drawn precisely because of that.

In any case, the original idea was to work with 20 students, but the final number was 26, because I did not want to reject anyone.<sup>3</sup> Out of this number, eight were girls,

---

<sup>3</sup> If this number sounds low, let me tell you that between 30 and 40 students enroll in the History of Art per year, and the selection of elective courses is rather wide. In that sense, the fact that a course is attended by more than two-thirds of the enrolled students is a huge success. (author's note)

and the rest were boys. The parents of the overwhelming majority of students have a secondary education and work in service industries, while only nine parents have a college or university degree.<sup>4</sup> The entrance survey showed that 18 students had never been to Kosovo, while the others had an opportunity to visit it in 2023, on an excursion when they visited Serbian monasteries only. Out of that number, two were afraid to go to Kosovo, while 15 respondents stated that their parents reacted badly to the possibility of visiting Kosovo. Some were even forbidden to travel. Except for three respondents, the other students had no previous knowledge of Kosovo, apart from that gained in history and geography classes, while the majority stated that they still had no significant prejudices related to living in Kosovo or relations with Albanians. Detailed questions about heritage prompted the most unexpected answers. Thus, the majority of students recognise as Albanian only the monuments erected after the bombing, and which they know through the media. Among those, the statue of Bill Clinton stands out, which was named recognisable by as many as 17 students. Not one student listed any example of the older cultural heritage. Seven respondents did not know of any element of intangible Albanian heritage, while others listed 'besa' (Albanian pledge of honour), folklore, polyphonic singing, and blood feud. Fifteen students do not personally know any Albanian, male or female, six had some casual contact which was always described as pleasant, whereas five respondents have neighbours or family members of Albanian origin. When asked what are the most common prejudices they have heard about the Albanian

---

<sup>4</sup> This data will prove to be very useful, as further research will show that generations of student parents are essentially the most likely to discriminate and that it increases proportionally to the education level. (author's note)

people, the majority listed hatred toward the Serbian people, then that they are dirty, that they mainly engage in criminal activities, and that they are uneducated and backward.

When thinking about what to show to their Albanian peers from Kosovo, the majority of students stated they would show them the same things as anyone else. Two students stated that they would be careful so as to avoid discomfort. Nine students were not sure whether there is an Albanian heritage in Belgrade. Pastry shops were listed as the only example to stand out in the others' answers.<sup>5</sup> Eight students use the word Shiptar in their everyday communication. Only four students did not know of any film featuring heroes of Albanian nationality. The rest mainly listed the following movies - Captain Leši, Besa, Hornet, Parade, The Balkan Line. When it comes to fine arts, the majority of students knew that Albanians are represented in paintings by Paja Jovanovic. Students associated mentioning of Albanians in literature with epic folk poetry. Things are much better when it comes to popular music. They all knew at least one performer. Dua Lipa and Rita Ora dominated. Seven students never heard of the story about Boro and Ramiz, but they did know the names of several streets in Belgrade named after Albanians - Kondina Street, Skenderbegova Street, Bekim Fehmiju Street, Esad Pasina Street, and Sadik Ramiz Street. Not one student was familiar with the dissonant heritage phenomenon.

In addition to this, and for the purpose of gaining a broader picture, we have organised discussions with leading artists, journalists, and cultural workers, who have

---

<sup>5</sup> Albanians in Serbia have long been associated with the confectionary trade, and in the past, it was one of the dominant activities they engaged in our climate. (author's note)

dealt with the subject of Serbian-Albanian relations in their work, as well as movie screenings. However, the lectures and the workshops did not exclusively focus on Kosovo – the students were presented with wider, world context of this phenomenon. This was of the utmost importance, so they would not get the impression that this is a new phenomenon, nor is it one exclusively linked to our environment. The expurgation of history and memory is a phenomenon that can be traced from ancient times to the present day.<sup>6</sup>

Week after week, the students were and still are performing their own independent media research, following regional news, social networks, and cultural production, and finding examples of dissonance in the interpretation of heritage. From these independent tasks, nine topics are identified at the moment and students decided to process and present them on the TikTok platform, under the title ‘Cultural good – cultural bad’.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> More about this in the book: Milica Božić Marojević (2015), *(Ne)željeno nasleđe u prostorima sećanja*. Slobodne zone bolnih uspomena, Beograd: Centar za muzeologiju i heritologiju.

<sup>7</sup> So far, three topics have been discussed and published, having more than 80 thousand views and rather interesting comments from the viewers. Clarifying the derogatory terms people use to call each other; common problems of young people in Kosovo and Serbia; connecting through music and Eurovision; the consequences of demolishing and destroying the cultural heritage of others, inter-ethnic friendships depicted in fine arts and on film; stories about old crafts, especially confectionery; romantic, love stories between Serbs and Albanians will be covered in the future. It is important to note that I did not in any way interfere with the manner of interpretation, nor did I try to correct their attitudes. My mentorship consisted of assisting them in finding relevant sources for the subject, as well as with fact-checking. It is also important to say that the students had the opportunity to present the results of their research at two international seminars. (author’s note)

Also, students conducted interviews in communities they come from, with family members, friends, and even citizens they did not know, on a sample of 260 respondents. We can divide them into four categories – children, their peers, their parents’ generation, as well as the population of their grandparents. If we were to summarise the results, we could conclude several facts – education, or the educational degree, does not have a direct link to a negative attitudes toward the Kosovo Albanians. Moreover, the greatest antagonism was shown by the highly educated population. On the other hand, the oldest respondents lead in tolerance and openness. They are followed by students of the arts and humanities. The generations of students’ parents are mostly reserved, whereas those who originate from Kosovo show significant intolerance.

In addition, surprising is the fact that the majority of respondents illustrated poor knowledge of history. Namely, even though more than half state that Kosovo is the cradle of the Serbian statehood, they did not know even approximative information about when Kosovo actually became a part of the Serbian state. One-third of the surveyed illustrated the absence of awareness of how much they are prone to discrimination. Namely, even though they would state that they are not prejudiced at the beginning of the survey and that they, for example, do not use the word Shiptar in everyday life, by the end of the interview they would still use it several times. In addition, 200 of the respondents do not see the term Shiptar as derogatory.

Although the knowledge about the cultural heritage in Kosovo is modest, in the sense that they cannot list it precisely<sup>8</sup>, the attitude that the Albanians are ‘appropriating’ or even ‘hijacking’ Serbian monasteries was very present. When asked how they do this, explanations

went in the direction of physical appropriation and the inability of the Serbian Orthodox Church to use them. False interpretation, as well as carelessness of the competent authorities, which is more than present, was not mentioned in any answer.<sup>9</sup> Also, mainly the monuments dedicated to 'evil-doers' were recognised as monuments of Kosovo Albanians. Only one respondent stated the following: "My foreknowledge is quite comprehensive as I like to be current with the events, and informed about Kosovo and Metohija. Of the Serbian monuments, the most significant are the Visoki Dečani monastery, Pečka Patrijaršija monastery, the Church of Bogorodica Ljeviška, and Gračanica monastery. The most significant and representative buildings of Albanian and Ottoman cultural heritage are, among others, the archeological location Ulpijana, Prizren, Zvečan and the Novo Brdo Kalaja, the great faith mosque and Carsi mosque in Priština, Bajrakli mosque in Peć and Prizren, Hadum mosque in Djakovica, Sinan-Paša mosque in Prizren, the Prizren league complex in Prizren, the residential architecture in Pristina, the building of the Academy of Sciences and Arts in Pristina, the building of the Institute for protection of monuments of Kosovo in Pristina, Tahir Beg Konak in Peć, the tower of Hadzi-Zeka, or Jasar Pasha in Peć and many others." These are the words of a professor of fine arts, born in 1933.

Knowledge of popular culture is at a higher level. Almost everyone knew an example, but we would single out the answer provided by a classroom teacher (age 52): "One of the best Yugoslav actors was the Albanian Bekim Fehmiju, who also acted in Hollywood and numerous Yugoslav

---

<sup>8</sup> For example, several answers listed Studenica and Žiča as monuments from Kosovo and Metohija.

<sup>9</sup> For more info see: Božić Marojević 2023.

movies. The singer of the band Zana was an Albanian, Zana Nimani. One of the hits of the band Bijelo Dugme was the song 'Kosovska'. It was created as a call for peace because the 1980s were the years when the Albanian desire to secede from Serbia was awakened. Unfortunately, I do not know Albanian literature or fine art." Several answers related to literature have shown that the terms 'Arbanas'<sup>10</sup> and 'arambaša'<sup>11</sup> are being mixed.

The biggest surprise was actually the children. Thus, a nine-year-old boy, who has never been to Kosovo, nor does he know where it is on the map or even how to correctly pronounce Albanac (sometimes, he uses the word Alban), stated that 'Albans are bad because they stole Kosovo from us.' This is the information he was given at school. What is certainly encouraging is the attitude of the young people, definitely. More than half of their answers showed that not everything is doomed, when they pointed out that individual guilt is the key, or that we should think that 'some monster who destroyed monuments, killed people or committed other crimes in the past, is not representative of all Kosovo Albanians, and it certainly does not represent the young people who we can be friends with in the future and work on developing a more just society."

## **Where Do We Go from here?**

The importance of heritage for the culture of memory, the ways to interpret its dissonance, the role of heritage in the reconciliation processes, as well as the creation of a better future through its use, have been my preoccupation for twenty years. It is these reflections that gave birth to

---

<sup>10</sup> The natives of Albanian, partly Montenegro, Dalmatia, but Greece as well, etc. The term was often used in the past to refer to Albanians.

<sup>11</sup> Leader of haidouks.

the project “Back to the future or how to make peace with the past in order to create a better tomorrow together”, supported by the call “Towards a culture of shared future in Southeast Europe” of the Regional network of centres for advanced studies of Southeast Europe.

When I was writing the project proposal last year, to be honest, I did not expect that the implementation would be followed by numerous dissonant events we were witnessing week in, week out: from the return of the land to the Decani monastery, then the anniversary of the March pogrom, which was presented in the majority of Kosovo media as a justified action, then the taking down of the Cyrillic signs with city names, to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NATO bombing, or, as we read it in Kosovo media, a quarter of a century since bringing the Serbian aggression to an end, as well as the initiative of Trump’s son-in-law to buy the ruins of the General Staff (while also buying land on the Albanian coast) – all were the topics we used to practice the interpretation of dissonant events. All-present tension grew as the new negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina approached, and it was mainly caused by the media and the politicians. This once again demonstrated that the peoples are actually hostages of the ambitions of the elites in power.

As already mentioned above and as I suspected at the beginning of my research, the findings of this project are not only going to be interesting for academic specialists. Namely, the responses of students and citizens in surveys and interviews showed serious deficiencies in educational programs. This means that the first thing to do is to change educational policies, textbooks, and educate teachers. We cannot influence the information children receive at home, but we must send them different messages in public spaces. This opens up space for informal education through changing cultural policies and the content that is



marketed. Positive examples of preserving the heritage of others, inter-ethnic cooperation in solving ordinary life problems, and joint struggle for a better everyday life are just some of the ways. Since our possibilities in the implementation of the project were limited, we tried to share our knowledge with young people in ways that were close to them. That's how we also managed to listen to the opinions of the general public. TikTok, as a model of transferring acquired knowledge and a model of communication between the young, proved to be an excellent solution. Specifically, the students saw the creation of video recordings and their placement on channels close to them as an additional incentive for research. This is evidenced by the careful selection of audio and video materials they used.<sup>12</sup>

Although in the domain of education I expect to have the greatest contribution, since this kind of work with students (in the context of topic selection and methodology) has not been carried out at universities in the region, I think that it can impact a wider audience. I strongly believe that these findings could, and I would dare to say, should be if not totally relevant, then at least interesting to decision-makers, creators of educational and cultural policies, non-governmental secretary who implements reconciliation activities, but also to other interested citizens.

Participation in seminars, conferences, and panels influenced the polishing of research methods. To a point, this was expected, because meeting with colleagues always provides a new perspective, and often it also serves

---

<sup>12</sup> We often did not like the attitude of the public. Namely, apart from derogatory comments, the channel was reported to us on several occasions, taken down, and banned. (author's note)

as a corrective. What I would like to single out as a particular success of the method I applied in working with students, as well as the results we have achieved in this way, is the fact that the panel in Tivat was attended by colleagues from Pristina, who initially expressed a certain reserve about participation during the writing of the project proposal, but when they saw the preliminary results, they suggested that we should apply together for participating at the Summer school of the University of Pristina. This kind of networking and cooperation is extremely important for academic communities.

Although this may sound improper and pretentious, the manner in which the students approached the research of the topic, the dedication with which they completed their tasks, as well as the discussions we had, both online and offline, live in classes, at seminars, but also on social networks, as well as the caution, but also (self)criticism applied in interpreting the sources – all of this I see as our small, joint victory over dominant narratives in the predominantly intolerant world we are living in, creating and working.

Finally, every society needs a vision of the future. It seems that it is still missing in the region and that cultural, educational, and every other policy is based on nationalist and exclusivist representations of the past. The rare judicial proceedings and the individual criminal liability did not lead to the absence of mutual accusations and elimination of collective guilt, nor did it lead to a change in the general public opinion or rapprochement of ethnic groups. In that context, awareness of the events that happened, even when it is based on the facts, is not sufficient in dealing with the past. The key to this is thinking that changes the culture of hostility in the direction of a culture of a shared future, and the ones who can bring this to life most efficiently are the young people.

## References

Božić Marojević, Milica (2023), "Opšti pogled na stanje i sudbinu disonantnog kulturnog nasleđa drugih u Evropi i svetu", in Dragan Vojvodić (ed.), *Zaštita, očuvanje i afirmacija srpskog kulturnog nasleđa na Kosovu i Metohiji*, v. 1, Beograd: SANU.

Božić Marojević, Milica (2015), *(Ne)željeno nasleđe u prostorima sećanja: slobodne zone bolnih uspomena*, Beograd: Centar za muzeologiju i heritologiju.

Liessmann, Konrad Paul (2008), *Teorija neobrazovanosti: zablude društva znanja*, Zagreb: Jesenski i Turk.

CIP - Каталогizacija u publikaciji  
Nародна библиотека Србије, Београд

316.722(497.115)(0.034.2)  
930.85(497.115)(0.034.2)

**BOŽIĆ Marojević, Milica, 1980-**

Back to the future or how to make peace with the past in order to create a better tomorrow together [Elektronski izvor] / Milica Božić Marojević. - Belgrade : University, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory ; Rijeka : Regional center for advanced studies of humanities, RECAS, 2024 (Belgrade : University Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory). - 1 elektronski optički disk (CD-ROM) : tekst ; 12 cm. - (Series Square)

Sistemske zahteve : Nisu navedeni. - Tiraž 50. - Napomene i bibliografske reference uz tekst. - Bibliografija.

ISBN 978-86-82324-80-5 (IPST)

COBISS.SR-ID 150096905

