

Bridging the Divide?

The challenges and possibilities of crossing borders for coexistence in divided city of Mitrovica: A narrative ethnography

Kosovo is the youngest state in Europe and its future is considered an important global political issue. The roots of the "Kosovo Albanian desire" for its own state are deeply rooted in the story, which could celebrate a short success in February 2008. At the same time, this desire conflicts with Serbian self-understanding, which declares and claims Kosovo as "own Serbian" territory. This clash and battle of nationalistic and territorial self-images and narratives between the Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, the circle of violence and revenge, the intervention of international community and the lacking of diplomatic and open-minded leadership on both sides are reasons why Kosovo and its people are still today stuck in a transitional period eight years after the Declaration of Independence and seventeen years after the Kosovo war and the NATO intervention.

Even though the young state was officially built on the idea of a democratic and pluralistic society, the every day life regarding the coexistence and the peace-building is much more challenging. These circumstances have especially an impact on the economic situation of the country, causing the lack of employment opportunities and the lack of future perspectives, which explains the increased migration attempts of the people from Kosovo to the EU in the recent years. At the same time corruption and criminal activities, such as human, drug and firearm trafficking, are flourishing and having a negative impact on the economic development of the country. The status quo of Kosovo and the long-lasting transitional period without a functional and democratic rule of law are a perfect starting point for criminal activities and therefore imposed and favored by many.

This is especially the case in the city of Mitrovica, which is located in the Northern part of Kosovo, near to the (administrative) border between Serbia and Kosovo. The once flourishing and multicultural city was divided after the Kosovo war along the river Ibar to the Kosovo Serbian and to the Kosovo Albanian side, creating space and opportunities for negating the existence of the other, for manifesting the nationalistic self-images, claim and narratives and for parallel structures without coexistence. Or at least this is picture of Mitrovica widely broadcasted in the media.

The question posed by my dissertation is whether encounters between the Kosovo Serbian and Kosovo Albania sides beyond the political, ethnical, religious and everyday polarized situation in Mitrovica can take place. In addition, my dissertation discusses under which circumstances these encounters can be involved als also if oder how these (transcultural) encounters can contribute to a peaceful coexistence in Mitrovica in the context of a highly conflicting history.

But first and foremost this dissertation is interested to bring out the stories from everyday life in Kosovo and Mitrovica; the stories that aren't usually heard. For collecting these stories I have been traveling to Kosovo and to Mitrovica since 2009 and doing field research there for longer periods of time. I am especially interested in the stories under the surface, which differ from the main narrative of Mitrovica being only a place of conflict. To paint another picture of Mitrovica I have been working with the concept of *transculturality* and other concepts from Cultural Studies, as well as with concepts from conflict and peace studies, to point out what is taking place between the Kosovo Albanian and the Kosovo Serbian fronts and how the politics of identity are being manifested in the Mitrovica context. At the same time I attend to emphasize the challenges, but also the possibilities, of coexistence and of pluralistic society in the Mitrovica context. My research highlights the narratives, experiences and ideas of unique stakeholders from the Mitrovica (civil) society, who keep putting effort re-uniting Mitrovica. The aim of this dissertation is to emphasize „the exceptional“, these individuals and their stories in order for them to become a part of a new discourse concerning the divided city of Mitrovica. These stories cannot be a part of any discourse until they have been told.