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Kosovo Chronicle 5 – War Veterans

by CRDP

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War veterans

Two decades after the bloody wars of the Balkans, a key question remains: what became of the waves of warriors who participated, fighting for one side or another? Some of those in positions of command ended up on trial, either at The Hague tribunal or in local courts. But the majority of soldiers returned home. Their lives took different trajectories - some tragic, some mundane. But virtually all face a common challenge.

The Past (1999-present)

The initial estimate of KLA¹ combatants was 8-10,000. However, by November 1999 the number of registered combatants was more than 25,000. After examination of the caseload, 16,229 were expected to require social and economic reintegration support through a Reintegration Fund² of the Information Counselling Referral Service (ICRS)³. The main two components of the Fund were 'Employment through Vocational Training and On-the-Job Training' and 'Employment through Livelihood and Enterprise Development' programmes. In the latter part of 2000, ICRS also started to include the 'Psycho-social Therapy' category (ICRS, 2000, 2000a, 2000b; KPCT, 2000, 2001; IOM, 2002).

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) began working on the rehabilitation of the former fighters in 1999. According to KosovaPress, a Kosovo news agency, the IOM registered more than 25,000 former fighters in Kosovo and helped to get them engaged in the rebuilding process after the war. Initially, about 4,500 former fighters became part of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF). But the KSF itself has been undergoing a period of transformation and professionalization.

Their status was defined in [Law No. 04/L-054 ON THE STATUS AND THE RIGHTS OF THE MARTYRS, INVALIDS, VETERANS, MEMBERS OF KOSOVA LIBERATION ARMY, CIVILIAN VICTIMS OF WAR AND THEIR FAMILIES](#). Article 12, paragraph 2 of this law specifies that "the rights in benefits for veterans of KLA and criteria of qualification for recognition and realization of their benefits shall be regulated by special law".

However, their status and entitlements are yet to be defined by the Kosovo institutions. Throughout CRDP research, we asked around about why this came to be. Some cited the large number of veterans that had enlisted in their organizations' list as the reason that Kosovo state doesn't yet have an actual institutional approach towards this category of population. This number is thought to be overstated, and "the internationals" (who are usually blamed for everything) had asked for an update of veterans' official list.

This gruelling process is to be handled by the Governmental Commission for the Evaluation of veterans' KLA status, who had started an application procedure for all veterans, martyrs (their families) and war invalids of KLA to be registered. Last month, [it was reported that over 50 thousand people had applied to obtain this status](#). According to the head of veterans' organization, it will take around two months to evaluate all the submitted applications.

The head of the Organization of KLA War Veterans, branch in Prishtina, Brahim Mehmetaj said that the number of those who are applying to receive the veteran status is two times greater than the number which has been registered in this branch.⁴

¹ Kosovo Liberation Army

² A fund established by ICRS to identify and develop additional opportunities for demilitarized KLA combatants facing specific reintegration difficulties within areas unassisted by other organizations.

³ ICRS is an IOM-implemented Information Counselling and Referral Service, designed to assist demilitarized KLA combatants to reintegrate back into civilian life. It ran from July 1999 until spring 2002. ICRS was funded by Japan, the Netherlands, Germany, UK, Canada and USAID

⁴ <http://www.kosovapress.com/archive/?cid=2.92.160130>



General

Veterans are a far more complex group than most civilians are able to perceive. In the course of war and combat, soldiers/combatants go through three different roles at the same time: perpetrators, witnesses and victims. In all three positions, they can be easily wounded and traumatized, coming away with mental and physical problems that may last for the rest of their lives, apart from heavily burdening the lives of their immediate families and tainting the next two generations. (Yael Danieli /Dan bar-On).⁵

Unfortunately, it is in the role of perpetrators that they are almost exclusively perceived, no matter if they are “heroes” (as in Kosovo and Croatia) or “losers” (as in Serbia). Once the war is over, their own civilian population tends to see them as a constant threat to life in peace, while international organisations involved, and most local peace-builders alike, have them down as “spoilers” of agreements and sustainable peace.

Accordingly, they are seen and named as “time-bombs”, “loose guns”, problem groups etc. Of a DDR⁶-program, the Reintegration part is the most complicated and the least measurable. The overall, secretly recommended way to deal with veterans after a phase of disarmament and demobilization, and some more or less formal endeavours of Reintegration is to isolate and marginalize them, undermine their credibility and keep them from access to power (Bloomfield) - thus involuntarily augmenting their problems by further pressuring the “time-bomb” and widening the gap between veterans and civilians.

In fact, in every post-conflict situation, veterans do have problems, and they do tend to behave in problematic ways:

- Many are traumatized (victim position!) and do not seek or do not find help. According to individual mentality and temperament, the results are depression, self-isolation, impatience, high irritability, alcohol, drugs, domestic violence, towards self and/or others - from amok to suicide
- After their combat experience, even those who are less or hardly traumatized, tend to engage in violence easily, and most of them still harbour weapon(s) plus ammunition
- Through unemployment and by their problems to find – and keep – a job, they feel humiliated and disrespected in their traditional male role as providers
- After they have been desensitised to violence as part of the military training, and after extremely violent combat experiences, they often have problems negotiating their way within the complex value-system of a civilian society
- The Conspiracy of Silence (Danieli): Many veterans (as well as victims) find it impossible to honestly share what they have (not) done, or seen, or been done to, or they don't want to “burden” their loved ones. Those around them don't ask, for fear of disturbing or for self-protection from unwanted news. So, many veterans prefer to be silent and to isolate, thus widening the already existing gap between veterans and civilians
- They nourish extremely high, unrealistic expectations
 - of the government: to take complete care of them in exchange for their sacrifice
 - and of civilians: to recognize and respect them, for the same reasons. Therefore, as a result, there is a high level of frustration with both government and civilian populace. ⁷

But they also carry a strong potential for sustainable peace:

- In Transitional Justice: They are the missing pieces to the puzzle of “What really happened” (in all three of their three roles)
- For both TJ and DwP⁸-strategies: They can help with finding the remains of Missing Persons and shed light on war-crimes, even, with anonymity and other means of support, they may enter a witness protection program
- For peace-education: Telling their story to youth, from all three perspectives and including their problems and trauma (to avoid glorification of war)
- For peaceful community life: Become highly respected citizens, able to mediate in family and community conflicts
- Exchanging experiences and opinions between peace activists and former soldiers, and working on tearing down the stereotype that only peace activists are for peace, and that warriors are for war
- Wielding great authority with other veterans of problematic behaviour

⁵ [http://books.google.com/books?id=thoNwuDmHEQC&pg=PA97&lpq=PA97&dq=\(Yael+Danieli+Dan+bar-On\).&source=bl&ots=Lv5um8c9ve&sig=grbxFwfRFhcOoXH4dTed3n47HNQ&hl=en&sa=X&ei=nzxEUpSAJsTLsgaFs4CgAQ&ved=0CCqQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=\(Yael%20Danieli%20%2FDan%20bar-On\).&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=thoNwuDmHEQC&pg=PA97&lpq=PA97&dq=(Yael+Danieli+Dan+bar-On).&source=bl&ots=Lv5um8c9ve&sig=grbxFwfRFhcOoXH4dTed3n47HNQ&hl=en&sa=X&ei=nzxEUpSAJsTLsgaFs4CgAQ&ved=0CCqQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=(Yael%20Danieli%20%2FDan%20bar-On).&f=false)

⁶ Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

⁷ An interview with Ursula Renner (Trauma-therapist of war veterans)

⁸ Dealing with the Past

- Having reached emotional stability (usually after intensive trauma-work and psycho-education, they may even be willing and able to take part in cross-border dialogue or other activities with former enemy-veterans.⁹

With the necessary investments and specific approaches to their needs and situation, we have experienced them to be a positive factor of change. This vision still needs awareness-raising and advocacy with all kind of direct and indirect stakeholders of sustainable peace.¹⁰

Various authors (Becker a.o.) insist on veterans completely shedding their veteran identity to become fully integrated. Not necessarily right though, since for most of them being a veteran will always be a major part of their personal identity. It had too much of an impact on their lives to be given up.

In this regard, and according to trauma therapists who dealt with war veterans from Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina, it is important to throw light on their veteran identity. This will help them to open up and work through fear, trauma, myths, and preconceptions, thus to give other parts of their personal identity a bigger part such as: Those of a husband, a father, a useful member of a changed society, where they may even find a new sense of purpose in life because they have been veterans, as in veteran-counselling and peace-education.¹¹

Considering the situation of veterans in Kosovo today

Veterans in Kosovo are a large proportion of male – and partly female – population, probably from their late twenties up to all sorts of age, including:

- All ex-members of KLA, UCPMB¹² and other (paramilitary) formations
- Active members of KSF (Kosovo Security Force)
- Active members of law enforcement (police)
- Active members of other state and private security
- Members of the government
- Members of criminal structures
- Members of all other social strata

Some of them are in very influential positions, in or out of the government. If you add to each of the veterans another 3-4 persons as family members, you have an enormous number of persons directly or indirectly afflicted by war (trauma), which will taint most of their decisions in some way. "With nearly all former combatants still of a working age, the stagnant economic situation has severely hampered their reintegration. Many were deprived of the sort of educational opportunities that they could have expected to enjoy, and have been left to improvise careers".¹³

"There is also a tendency to focus on the economic dimensions of reintegration, meaning that instances of post-traumatic stress have not received the attention required." Maliq Ndreca is a veteran who now works as a guard at a superstore. "The integration was done more individually. Some of the former fighters went abroad, some found jobs on their own, many even repented for participating in the war because they fought for ideals, not for anything else," he told *SETimes*.¹⁴

Therefore, even in drafting the current problematic law, it is important of involving former combatants in a public debate in order to find constructive solutions on how to deal with the past and the future. They are marginalized part of society and if not involving them as part of solution, they will pose a permanent threat to democratization of society.

Conclusion

Veterans threaten upcoming elections on 3rd November in Kosovo. KLA veterans have threatened to block the elections if their verification process does not end within the month of October of 2013. In one of their meetings, they have considered blocking voting centres during next local elections in Kosovo in November 3. The veterans have pointed out that all time frames foreseen for their verification have passed. The head of War Veterans Organization of KLA, Muharrem Xhemajli, has expressed his severe discontent, by regarding the head of Commission for Verification of the Veterans, Agim Ceku, as irresponsible. In addition, the heads of "War Veterans Organization" claim that since the end of the war,

⁹ An interview with Ursula Renner (Trauma-therapist of war veterans)

¹⁰ An interview with Ursula Renner (Trauma-therapist of war veterans)

¹¹ An interview with Ursula Renner (Trauma-therapist of war veterans)

¹² Ushtria Clirimtare per Presheve, Medvegje dhe Bujanovc

¹³ Ian Bancroft, founder of the organization Trans Conflict, which works on the peaceful resolution of conflicts in the region. Retrieved from http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2012/05/08/feature-02

¹⁴ http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2012/05/08/feature-02

21 veterans have committed suicide. However, the Council for Protection of Rights of KLA claims that this number is 43. This number is cited in an article, whose source is a report from KTV and Koha Group.¹⁵ This same article, the Council for Protection of Rights of KLA claims that the number of suicide within the veterans is 44.¹⁶

Bancroft agrees that there is little desire among former fighters to see combat again. "Many struggle to cope with the trauma of the last war; for which they receive very little assistance. Most now have families and, indeed, mortgages. Many feel deceived and disappointed by what they fought for in the early-1990s, and would be extremely reluctant to take up arms once more," he explained.¹⁷ Yet, the discontent between the former KLA combatants and the institutions is not over yet. And the neglect of war veterans poses threat not only to the Kosovo society but to the entire region.

Kosovo Liberation Army believed they were fighting for freedom, but 14 years after the war with Serbian forces, some of Pristina's 'heroes' are struggling for survival.

¹⁵ September 24 2013, Newspaper: Zëri

¹⁶ Source: Bota Sot Newspaper

¹⁷ http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2012/05/08/feature-02