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Longing for Lost Normalcy: Social Memory, Transitional Justice, and the 'House Museum' to Missing Persons in Kosovo

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Abstract

In spring 1999, amidst a wider ethnic cleansing campaign, Serb police forces abducted Ferdonije Qerkezi's husband and four sons, who were never to be seen alive again. She subsequently transformed her private house into a memorial to the lost normalcy of her entire social world. We trace this memorialization process; her struggle for recognition; her transformation into an iconic mother of the nation and her activism, both for missing persons and against the internationally-driven Serb-Albanian normalization process in Kosovo. From a multi-disciplinary perspective, we critically reflect on the theoretical concept of "normative divergence" in intervention studies. We are guided by social anthropological (including immersive, historical-ethnographic, and semantic) analysis of the core tropes of social memory as both narratively and materially embodied by the House Museum. In systematically juxtaposing these to the normative transitional justice principles of truth, justice, non-recurrence, and reparations, and the overarching international intervention goal of reconciliation, we critically interrogate normative divergence per se. The ethnographic "thick description" of this case study—cognizant of context contingency, victims' agency and experience, cultural change, and social transformation—points to divergent meanings of these principles as resulting directly from the political and institutional failure to provide key transitional justice goals.

Keywords: missing persons; social memory; transitional justice; normative divergence; reconciliation; Kosovo

Introduction

The story of Ferdonije Qerkezi is heart-breaking but typical for the town of Gjakova/Đakovica[1] in West Kosovo during the spring of 1999. As part of vicious ethnic cleansing efforts, Serb police forces took her husband, four sons, and six other relatives, the youngest son not yet 14 years of age, from her home, and she was not to see any of these men and boys alive again. In 2005, the Red Cross returned the remains of two of her sons. To the present day, she is still waiting for official news regarding the other three men of her family. Furthermore, the male cousins and in-laws were never found. Since 2007, "Mother Ferdonije," as she is widely referred to among the Albanians in Kosovo, has dedicated her private house to the memory of her lost family members. Her House Museum tells the story of these events to both Albanian and international visitors. Her story has also been disseminated to a wider public through the media, online and through her NGO activism. Ferdonije is a leading activist of the nongovernmental organization *Thirrjet e Nënave*, "Mothers Calling," which is lobbying for answers and organizing protest actions around the issue of missing persons in Gjakova and in Kosovo at large.

Ferdonije's story, including the recollection of traumatic events as well as the material setting of her House Museum and the various forms that her story-telling takes, embodies important aspects of local and translocal Albanian social memory in Kosovo. In the following we demonstrate how this provides a collective system of meaning which, although not static, problematizes internationally and nationally institutionalized, transitional justice norms and practices that prioritize interethnic reconciliation over justice as a means to prevent the recurrence of violence. However, her story also poses an important challenge, because it addresses the post-war generation of young Albanians as well as her international visitors in ways that foster strong identification yet contain an educational message expressed in ethno-nationally adverse terms: as a warning of ever trusting the Serbs again. At the time of our observation, Ferdonije's message suggested segregation, not interethnic dialogue and the possibility of coexistence.

We are guided by the question, whether and how this case study provides empirical substantiation of Subotić's concept of "normative divergence" between local aims, on the one hand, and national and international aims, on the other. Ferdonije's activism and message seemingly challenges the imperative of "multi-ethnicity" enshrined in Kosovo's 2008 constitution; international and governmental policies, rhetoric and national strategies aimed at promoting Albanian-Serb dialogue, reconciliation, and political normalization; the efforts of regional reconciliation initiatives such as RECOM[2] led by prominent activists including from Serbia; and leading Kosovar civil society representatives who, since 2016 with presidential support, support transitional justice efforts in inter-ethnically inclusive terms (Ahmetaj and Unger 2017; Halili 2016; Shaipi 2016; CRDP 2017). Her work also contests the preventative role assigned to education in transitional justice through Dealing with the Past (DwP) initiatives. From an international, liberal, in contrast to an exclusively ethno-nationalist, perspective these aim at fostering diversity and reconciliation (Jones et al. 2015; Murphy 2017; Ramírez-Barat and Duthie 2017). Her story appears to challenge transitional justice norms which advocate human rights for all and point to humanity, rather than ethno-nationalist actors, as "subject and object of action" (Teitel 2011, 19).

Subotić's theoretical framework suggests that "divergent meaning" (2015, 375) of justice norms, factual truth establishment, and the pursuit of reconciliation explains why "in post-conflict states transitional justice processes on the grounds produce outcomes so different substantially from international expectations" (2015, 362). We thus expand her concept by asking, how can we better understand apparently incompatible systems of meaning; are these really incompatible, or what is it that makes them incompatible; and under what circumstances can they converge? Our findings are based on an interdisciplinary collaboration and debates in which, arguably, the two involved scholars represent the two sides of the dilemma: Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers is a social anthropologist with local, ethnographic micro-insights and Melanie Klinkner is a legal scholar with a principle-driven and rights-based perspective on transitional justice. We use both these disciplinary perspectives to interrogate the concept of norm divergence through the case study of Ferdonije's memorialization work.

In the first part, we explore both Ferdonije's agency and the semantics of her social memory construction. Here, we document and interpret her powerful message and its societal reach and impact mostly from an ethnographically-informed perspective. The subsequent section, then, compares the extent to which Ferdonije's endeavors comply with the core principles of transitional justice, including a rights-based focus on her experiences. Finally, we explore how the political context impacts the transitional justice process and normative priorities. Our conclusion critically revisits the concept of "norm divergence" and asks what we can learn from Ferdonije's case study regarding transitional justice outcomes that would not preclude reconciliation goals.

Although the "local turn" (MacGinty and Richmond 2013) in international studies and peace studies has increasingly favored ethnography as a method, there seems to exist little hermeneutically-driven "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of conflicting systems of meaning, nor theoretical guidance of how such interpretation need not betray social constructivist approaches

to agency, historical context, and possibilities for change (Vrasti 2008). Our first and most anthropological part uses selected semantic descriptions and interpretations of the cultural tropes evoked in Ferdonije's memorialization work in order to illustrate the embedded power, credibility, and emotional appeal of her agency and resilience through a specific form of constructing social memory. Drawing on anthropologists' and social psychologists' insights of how ordinary people (rather than elites or states, as in most of Subotic's analysis) remake their shared moral and social worlds after suffering horrendous violence and abuse, including in response to global and state policies (Das and Kleinman 2001; Eastmond 2010; Summerfield 2002), we thereby focus on vernacular concepts and their narrative and visual communicative potentials. Not just in the case of Kosovo, these are often found under the radar of, and sometimes in opposition to, national and international discourses and expectations. As significant local, cultural tropes, which stand in stark contrast to nationally institutionalized and international "normalization" and reconciliation ideals in Kosovo, Ferdonije's story reveals an implicit and explicit, emphasis on lost "normalcy" (family life) and lost social trust (beyond the family). We conclude this section with some empirical indications of what might trigger change to the intransigent message that we observed.

In order to compare Ferdonije's story, her activities, understanding, and experience with the core norms of transitional justice, the subsequent part adopts a conceptual, human rights based DwP framework derived from the Orentlicher Principles (UNHRC 2005) to fight impunity (Jones et al. 2015). Accordingly, we discuss Ferdonije's experiences (interspersed with ethnographic, historical, and wider, comparative insights) in reference to her Right to Know (what truth has been established about her case; are discrepancies between her memory and the historical documentation available?); her Rights to Justice, and to Reparation (what forms of justice and recognition has she received?). This section ends with a discussion of how these experiences have affected her own conceptualization of guaranteeing Non-Recurrence. We find few indications of norm divergence if "norms" are understood as justice principles, per se; yet we also document an incomplete justice process and its implications on the intransigence of her message.

How this relates to national and international visions of safe-guarding non-recurrence is the subject of the final empirical section. We explore the politically supported transitional justice process and its chances of closing or opening up opportunities for looking outward, beyond the hurt Self. Overall, the ethnographic micro-focus on social memory illuminates the precise ways in which, and reasons why, specific meaning, even if contradicting international aims, arises from local knowledge and resilience in compensation for a persistent lack of justice, recognition, sense of security, and trust in governance. Our conclusion, juxtaposing Ferdonije's concept of normalcy to the internationally facilitated Serb-Albanian normalization process, points to the need for further critical, interdisciplinary interrogation of normative approaches. It also questions the efficacy of conjuring up "'reconciliation' as a moral discourse with universalist claims" (Eastmond 2010, 3), that is an "international norm," before the need for justice, truth, and accountability of missing persons' families has been adequately addressed.

The House Museum

Consistent with the wider struggle and experience of parents of missing children in Kosovo (Berisha 2017), Ferdonije waited many years for formal, national recognition beyond "just words" (Qerkezi 2016, min. 36:00). She first decided to make her house a museum in September 1999, upon receiving the news that all of her missing loved-ones might be dead (Qerkezi 2016, min. 33:30). However, she continued to hope for a return, at least of the youngest one, until the remains of her youngest and her oldest son were returned to her in 2005 (Kelmendi 2016). After their burial and, upon her application only, the Ministry of Culture issued a commemorative wall plaque (RTV21 2015, min. 11:25–11:50). Although yet to be approved formally as part of

Kosovo's cultural heritage, she opened the museum to visitors in 2007 (Qerkezi 2016, min. 36:00). The plaque informs visitors that "from this house, local Serb police forces took and disappeared these martyrs of the people on 27th March, 1999…", followed by a list of all the missing men and their dates of birth.

Cultural heritage policy and its implementation has long stagnated over ethno-national divisions and a defunct council in Kosovo (Pasamitros 2017). Ferdonije's House Museum was first formally registered as a "monument" on the annually renewed "List of Cultural Heritage for Temporary Protection" in October 2015 (MKRS 2015, 29, no. 727 [004119]). Then-incumbent president of Kosovo, Ahtifete Jahjaga, visited the museum for the International Day of the Disappeared, on August 30, 2015 (Lajme 2015). On June 14, 2016, the anniversary of the liberation of Gjakova, the mayoress of Gjakova formally inaugurated the House Museum. Since then, a large information board greets visitors in front of Ferdonije's family home in the residential Aton Çetta Street. The board informs, in Albanian, that this is the "Traditional House of the Qerkezi Family" and a "Historic Museum 1999" (Lajmi 2016a).

Reference to a "Traditional House" (*shtëpi tradicionale*), regardless of the actual age of the monument, harks back to a cultural repertoire of Albanian metaphors which demarcates ethno-national belonging, identity, and the shared cause as well as classic patriarchal forms of family organization in Kosovo (Reineck 1993; Berisha 2015). Ferdonije's House Museum, the family's history and identity, present both modern and conservative, patriarchal features, which may relate to the family's originally rural background, on the one hand, as well as to opportunities and restrictions experienced during different periods of Yugoslav/Serb socialism in Gjakova, on the other.

Previously a center of anti-fascist resistance, Kosovo's most important Albanian Communist leaders under Yugoslav Marshall Tito hailed from the city. Although being one of the ethnically most homogenous urban centers in Kosovo, Gjakova thus enjoyed privileged industrialization efforts and state investments under Yugoslav Communist leadership (Ströhle 2016, 99).[3] When Milošević replaced modernization efforts and political-ideological allegiances with ethnic oppression from the 1980s onwards, the Albanians across Kosovo increasingly resorted to a "parallel system" of self-organization, which provoked processes both of retraditionalization and the ethno-nationalization of many cultural traditions (Reineck 1993). In 1999, as will be elaborated further below, the majority of the Albanian civilian population of Gjakova became a top target of Milošević's ethnic cleansing campaign. It "suffered the most intense violence against civilians of Kosovo's larger cities" (HRW 2001), perhaps exactly because of its previously relatively successful economic history.

Ferdonije's social and cultural worlds simultaneously contrast and comply with traditional patriarchal norms, identities, and practices. As previously shown for the patriarchal character of memorialization culture in Kosovo at large (Berisha 2017; Krasniqi 2007; Luci 2014, 106, 132), her iconic identity as a "mother" of, arguably, superhuman strength and capability to suffer, culturally asserts nationalized traditional-patriarchal ideals of women's social role as transmitters and guarantors of men's courage and heroism, simultaneously of the family and the wider nation. She aligns with this role when expressing explicit cognizance of her own strength in the face of overwhelming loss, suffering, and grief (Xhukolli 2017). Traditional cultural inclinations are also apparent in that she took recourse to traditional divination practices (fortune telling) to keep hopes alive of her sons returning after their abduction (Berisha 2015, 32). But Ferdonije did not hesitate to take recourse to a modern court system when she fought off her in-laws' attempt to claim her house based on patriarchal, customary prescriptions. Traditionally, a house would be exclusively passed down through the patrilineage, thus denying a widow without male heirs the right to inherit her late husband's house. Fedonije won the lawsuit (Berisha 2015, 31; Lajmi 2016b). In her new role as a national mother and the guardian of a museum to her lost loved ones, she has additionally consolidated her social and symbolic rights to the house.

In March 2016, we visited Ferdonije and the House Museum on an educational research trip, including six colleagues and some 25 students of both Pristina University and Bournemouth University. Ferdonije Qerkezi and two female relatives welcomed us in the reception room, the traditional *oda*,[4] here situated on the first floor. Seated in a traditional arrangement around the room, which is plastered with memorabilia and photographs of the lost men of the family and other significant exhibits, Ferdonije begins by telling us the story of the fateful events in a collected and detailed, albeit occasionally emotional, manner. Her style gives little routinization or formalization away to the outsider, although she has told her stories "a thousand times" (RTV 21, 2015, min. 7:11). There are tears when she talks about her loved ones and outright hatred, spite, and anger when she talks about *shkijet* (plural; or *shkau*, singular), a derogatory term for Serbs (or "the Serb") in Albanian. The loss of previous normalcy and the betrayal of normal human relations, such as cross-ethnic, friendly, social relationships invoked through traditional hospitality rituals such as coffee making, are central to her story.

In an extended version of her story, told in an Albanian documentary film (RTV 21, 2015), she recalls her traditionally arranged, yet consensual and happy marriage in 1970 at the age of 17 to Halim Qerkezi (1946–1999), about seven years her senior, which transferred her from one traditional, typically extended (Rrapi 2003), Albanian family to another. Her husband was a tailor (Gjakova's textile industry flourished at the time; Ströhle 2016, 99). As many other young families leaving the villages behind, the family seems to have enjoyed the privileges then available to the new working class. Ferdonije's narrative and visual recollections of normalcy during socialism are consistent with this period's emerging provisions of basic medical care, some travel, the acquisition of a television, white goods, and a car, regardless of ethnicity (as generally described in Ströhle 2016, 109, 159, 230). However, her description of normalcy is not one of nostalgia for Yugoslavia, but of family life and cohesion, including when these former benefits increasingly disappeared. She was the housekeeper and her husband the provider. Yet she is proud to have raised her sons to help in the household "just like girls," thereby abandoning patriarchal customary prescriptions (RTV21 2015). During the 1990s, when the Albanians lost access to formal higher education and state employment, the family proved to be resourceful. They opened a grill restaurant (*qebaptore*), which provided work for Halimi and their adult sons. "We had a total normal life, neither too much money nor too much work. As father Halimi always used to say, 'life in the middle is the best.'" In other words, "we had a normal life," Ferdonije recalled on camera (RTV21 2015, min. 5:50 to 6:00).

When Ferdonije recalls the events of March 27, 1999, there is also a particular emphasis on the betrayal of social trust by the local Serb policemen, who held the family hostage, before eventually abducting the Albanian men present. In the following summary of her narrative, the tropes of everyday hospitality rituals, which she extensively describes in relation to what amounts to an extraordinary and coercive situation of terror, are particularly meaningful. The narrative takes recourse to a comprehensive Albanian cultural concept, *besa*, which encompasses the honor of a house, its hospitality and generosity, trustworthiness and social obligation in social relationships beyond the family (Schwandner-Sievers 1999; Berisha 2015).

Here it is particularly significant that one relative present during the ordeal (abducted and killed later with all the other men), personally knew one of the policemen, Dragan Račić. This Serb officer was also an acquaintance of her brother-in-law, who helped the women track down Dragan later (Qerkezi, no date). The family thus knew about their torturer's origins (Montenegro, where he lived and worked), and that he had a habit of taking food without paying from the cousin's shop on a lofty promise to pay another time. Ferdonije recalls the intimidating behavior, during the long afternoon of the fateful day, of Dragan and three other Serbian policemen who, at some stage, were masked: on the one hand, they threatened the family at gunpoint, including a two-year old girl present, extorting money, jewelry, and the family's Opel Cadet, before eventually taking all the men into custody and ordering the women to leave for Albania (instead, the women sought refuge in the neighborhood); on the other, they gave chocolate to the children and 500 grams of coffee to the

women. Ferdonije also describes in detail how she first offered the policemen coffee with a medium amount of sugar, that these coffees were rejected and she was then asked to prepare "one sweet and one with no sugar" (Qerkezi, no date). She also mentions that the policemen ordered *raki* (white spirit) but there was only juice to give them. When, at one point of waiting on them, she accidentally sighs, Dragan assures her: "Don't be scared, Mother."

Social-psychological trauma specialists suggest that such style of repetitive story telling, meticulously recounting seemingly ordinary details, relate to coping mechanisms (Herman 2001, 195). In terms of our content analysis, for Ferdonije they highlight the abuse and destruction of normality. Offering coffee, giving sweets to children, and addressing each other through kinship terminology, is part of everyday social hospitality rituals, typical across the wider region. The cynical recourse to such normalcy within an extraordinary situation of terror and abuse, effectively marks the departure from, and destruction of, Ferdonije's world as she knew it before the events. Yet, at the time, the female family members left behind, including the two young wives of Ferdonije's two eldest sons, had no choice but to place their remaining hope and trust in the only available social link to the abductors: Dragan, the petty criminal local Serb policeman.

Ferdonije continues: several weeks later, when the women, with help of the brother-in-law, find and confront Dragan in his private house, he is "very hospitable, he said welcome" (Qerkezi 2016, 27:30). He offers coffee and raki, which they reject, and reminds them of the chocolate that he gave to the children (Qerkezi, no date). He rejects the medication Ferdonije has brought along to be passed on to her husband for his heart condition with the words, "we will take care of him, we have the pills he needs" (Qerkezi 2016, min. 28:50 to 29:10). He also promises that he would return a backdoor key of Ferdonije's house, pocketed during the event, once found, and the confiscated car (Qerkezi, no date). Lastly, he states he would protect them from NATO (at that time conducting air raids in Kosovo against Former Yugoslavia/ Serbia), and ominously tells them, "If I come to your house by this evening I will bring you news. If not, then, for the rest of your life, you will not know what happened to them" (Qerkezi, no date).

At this stage, Dragan operates within a wider context which sanctions Serb police and paramilitary activities of systemic annihilation and expulsion of Albanian citizens (see next section). However, his pretense of ordinary ways of social interaction makes a mockery of this last attempt to foster trust in basic interpersonal decency. Ferdonije is never to see him again, but she is told of a sighting "on 14 June 1999, the day of liberation of Gjakova, … [when he was seen] driving Halim Qerkezi's Opel Cadet" (Qerkezi, no date).

Ferdonije ends her story. Our mixed student group, for some moments, remains stunned in silence. Most participants in this visit have never encountered such first-hand narration of memories of torture, loss, betrayal, and destruction. Then, our Albanian colleague, sociologist Linda Gusia, breaks the silence and asks Ferdonije, on all our behalf, why she decided to turn her house into a museum. Ferdonije responds:

> [Once I understood that] everybody is dead, nobody is left, I decided this is their [my husband and his sons'] house. I wanted to leave this house as a heritage, as a memory of war, and tell the world what happened in the war and what the Serbs have done. Because *shkau është i pabes* ("the Serb [derogatory] has no *besa,*" "is not to be trusted," *with emphasis*]. They, *shkijet* ("the Serbs" [derogatory]) told me they would take care of them, but they took them all away. Those generations who are yet to come and those born after the war in Kosovo, they don't remember the war and don't know how it was, the war. The *shkau* is not trustworthy, and there is nobody worse than they are in the entire world, and I wanted people to know what they have done. They [the Serbs] continue still (Qerkezi 2016, min. 33:20 - 35:35).[5]

We ask who her message is intended for, and Ferdonije explains: for both, Albanians and internationals, but more for the internationals, because "I also want the internationals to know

what happened, because now they are actually increasingly supporting Serbia … and forgot what happened here" (Qerkezi 2016, min. 39:25 to 40:00).

We did not dare ask, but open source research suggests that Dragan was never brought to justice. In 2013, Serb media named a Račić Dragan in relation to an allegedly illegitimate, secret Albanian or EULEX list of potential indicted war criminals hiding in the divided city of Northern Mitrovica (InSerbia 2013). He had still not faced trial in 2016, when Ferdonije told Albanian media how unbelievable she thought it was that, "after sixteen years, international justice will not punish criminals who are known to everybody" (Telegrafi 2016). After the storytelling there is a discreet collection for the non-governmental organization (NGO), Gjakova-based *Thirrjet e Nënave*, "Mothers Calling," of which Ferdonije is a prominent member. This organization has long lobbied against government complacency for the rights of the families of Missing Persons across Kosovo to find out about the fate of their loved ones (Berisha 2017). Ferdonije's collection aims at raising the funds for translating a just completed anthology of the stories of Albanian families of Missing Persons, including her own, from Albanian into English. It is called (in translation) *The Truth about Serbian Crimes* (OJQ Thirrjet e Nënave 2015). Ferdonije previously told another anthropologist that, in this anthology, "a lot of parents have told the truth, as they have not [had] a lot of [opportunities] in which their stories could be heard" (Berisha 2015, 33). She also decided to include a previously untold detail: "that she saw the police hitting her son in the garden, which she did not tell anyone due to humiliation in case her son would return," (Berisha 2015, 33), a hope abandoned at this stage.

At the time of writing, Mothers Calling evocatively opposed the ongoing reconciliation initiatives with Serbia, led by President Hashim Thaçi, and threatened with nation-wide, "unending" protests. According to this civil organization's president, Nysrete Kumnova, before the last missing person has been returned to Kosovo and the criminals responsible held accountable, "there cannot be reconciliation with the Serbs … they took our children from our house!" (KOHAnet 2017). Ferdonije agrees, "the state has no right to speak in the name of the families whose soul the war crushed" and, she weeps, "we decide ourselves, because many of us still have open wounds;" and, as the fate of three of her loved ones is still unknown, "there can't be reconciliation now" (KOHAnet 2017).

After the collection, our group is invited to walk around the House Museum and look at and take photos of the exhibits in the museum, which occupies the upstairs rooms of Ferdonije's home. Exhibits presented in glass cabinets include the disintegrated clothes of Ferdonije's eldest and youngest sons, Artan (1974–1999) and Edmond (1985–1999). According to the accompanying text, after the boy's exhumation and upon her request, the UNMIK Office for Missing Persons returned these clothes to her on March 8, 2008.[6] Her story recalled frustration with the lack of previous follow-up and communication, when evidence of her family members' whereabouts emerged. According to Amnesty International, already in late 1999, the oldest son Artan's "identification card was found near Lake Shkozë (Shkoža), more than 30 km away from Gjakovë" (2009a, 2; 2009b, 36). Ferdonije's brother-in-law immediately travelled to the lake, where he found and recognized the bodies of four of the missing men, including Ferdonije's three older sons, laying "half in and half out of the lake" (2009a, 3; 2009b, 36); and Ferdonije later stated that she, too, had been at the site and recognized two bodies (2009b, 36). The brother-in-law informed KFOR (NATO's Kosovo protection forces) and revisited "the site with the ICTY investigator, who promised the bodies would be recovered and returned to the families" (2009a, 3). Eventually, in 2000, the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia) exhumed the bodies of Artan and Edmond at two different sites but released these to the family only in late 2005 (2009a, 3; 2009b, 36). Photographs pertaining to their burial and graves convey Ferdonije's grief. Images and posters of Mothers Calling's document their shared frustration at the lack of communication, delays, and an, overall, incomplete truth-finding process.

Anthropologist Berisha describes how the many photographs, pictures, and posters embody a "presence" of the lost loved ones for Ferdonije (2015, 34). Noteworthy about some of the exhibits

is also the pragmatic use of cling film to preserve and elevate the material details of ordinary everyday family life in its utter normalcy. The artifacts document a family comprising a parental couple with four sons, including two young adults who had just married, shortly before disaster struck. Their young "brides" (*nuset*), as is customary tradition, had joined the household. There are racks with shoes, freshly polished and each with a photo of their original owners attached; toys, beds, and a cradle; records of the boys' achievement in sports; everyday clothes as well as, proudly displayed, the wedding dresses of the two young brides. Simple, printed text sheets, in both English and Albanian, tell of the ordinary, everyday background of these items and their owners as well as to the gravity of the rupture when this normalcy was lost. One typical example is a football on one of the beds, wrapped in cling film with a portrait picture and a text relating to Ferdonije's third son, Ardian (1980–1999). The text informs the visitor about the local primary and secondary school Ardian had just completed. It adds, "during that time [at school] he was engaged in various activities. He excelled at football and was a really good player. Besides football, he helped his brothers Artan and Armend with their restaurant 'Orex.' In 1999, Serb police put an end to his work and education."

"Mother Ferdonije," as she is commonly referred to in Albanian media portrayals, has become the subject of several documentary films. A 2015 documentary film identifies her story as representative for "many Albanian families' most costly sacrifices and suffering for national liberation" and acknowledges her as "one of the proudest examples there are in Kosovo of remembering and never forgetting the days and events of the last Kosovo war" (RTV21 2015). Visually, narratively, and stylistically, the film situates Ferdonije and her story in the wider commemorative canon of (mostly male) Albanian martyrs to the cause of national liberation. In the black-and-white short documentary film "Ferdonija," filmmakers Bajri and Dauti (2016) work through the "aural and visual testimony" of Ferdonije's memory work, "recollecting and re-emerging through palimpsests of memory" (Cohn 2016) in an individualistically and artistically more sophisticated manner. For its genuine engagement with the depths of human grief, the film not only had the crew in tears during its making (Lajmi 2016b) but also attracted international acclaim.

In 2016, Kosovo-American photographer Artan Korenica published a picture of Ferdonije, called "I miss them" (*me mungon*). She sits at an ordinary dining room table with five empty chairs and a cooked meal, set for the entire family of six. This image went viral on social media across the transnational Albanian online community. Hundreds of commentaries (in Albanian) testified to the continuous identification potential and sharing of her grief. The photographer revealed the story behind this picture to a journalist. Until 2005, when the deaths of two of her loved ones were confirmed, Ferdonije cooked a meal for every missing family member every day. She still cooks meals for the entire family on festive occasions and the Day of the Missing (Kelmendi 2016).

To many Albanians in Kosovo, Ferdonije's storytelling serves as a vehicle for sharing and identifying with memories of ordinary, everyday family life and the grief over the loss of this normalcy vis-à-vis Serb betrayal and destruction of normalcy and trust. In our mixed Albanian/international group of visitors, the reaction by those listening to her story were those of empathy and compassion, but also of becoming part of her story as confidants. For some of us, there is also a sense of shame and acceptance for the international community's failings; astonishment at the lack of humanity generally; discomfort with her using a derogatory ethnonym and generalizing Serbian responsibility; and a feeling of impotence in offering feasible arguments to rebuild trust beyond ethnic divides and into the workings of the international community.

Yet within days after our visit, high profile international recognition suggested the possibility for a shift to a more inclusive and less intransigent narrative. On the last day of their Balkan Tour in March 2016, Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall visited Kosovo and paid their respects to the missing of the war of all ethnic groups. During a formal ceremony in the capital, Pristina, they listened to several individual stories and, abandoning protocol, hugged various

survivors, including Ferdonije (The Telegraph 2016, incl. video clip 0:49–-0:52). Subsequently, it was reported to us that, according to a distinguished local visitor, she modified her message: "she said that these actions had been carried out by humanity and should never be done again … it was clear that hatred (of the Serbs) was not her intent and she was very positive" (anonymous, international source). The same source suggested that families of the missing have joined forces in cross-ethnic protests at least once, since, although such incidents seem to be underreported. Ferdonije's calls for justice and accountability remain unchanged at the time of writing, as does her lack of trust in the juridical process, institutions, and politicians in Kosovo (Xhukolli 2017).

Transitional Justice Norms and Ferdonije's Experience

Transitional justice principles acknowledge the collective rights to know; to justice; to reparation; and they foresee various means to guarantee non-recurrence (Jones et al., 2015). Compatible with conflict transformation, DwP and, generally, a human rights based approach, these principles are thoroughly interlinked through the concept of "truth." According to the "Orentlicher Principles," Principle 2 (UNHRC 2005):

> Every people has the inalienable right to know the truth about past events concerning the perpetration of heinous crimes and about the circumstances and reasons that led, through massive or systematic violations, to the perpetration of those crimes. Full and effective exercise of the right to the truth provides a vital *safeguard against the recurrence* of violations. [emphasis added]

What efforts have been made to establish the truth in Ferdonije's case? Are there any contradictions to her story? Has there been any formal acknowledgement of these truths? How does her memorialization work and activism fit into above scheme? And how has her identity, social status, and message been affected by her experience of the transitional justice process?

To date, more than 1,600 people are still registered as missing from the last war (Ahmetaj 2016). From 1999 onwards, a number of actors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) have undertaken work in Kosovo and the wider region. In Kosovo, in 2006 the government took steps to bolster local capacity in dealing with missing persons through establishing the Government Commission on Missing Persons, yet such activities have been marred by ethno-political prioritizations at governmental levels (Ahmetaj and Unger 2017; Visoka 2016). In 2011, the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo passed a law on missing persons which tasks the commission to coordinate search and identification activities regardless of [the victims'] "ethnic background, religion or military or civil status" (Article 8; 1). It affirms survivors' right to know about the fate of loved ones, including the circumstances and locations of their deaths; as well as to their mortal remains (Article 5; 1). It also states the government's obligation to review all requests relating to missing persons and to inform family members of the outcome and results of these requests (Article 5; 3 and 5; 4) as well as protection from any threats or violence for seeking such information (Article 5; 4). In theory, Ferdonije's right to know her husband's and sons' whereabouts is thus clearly acknowledged in both Kosovo and international law. In practice, she has only received partial information about her missing family members. She has also been deeply frustrated by a lack of follow-up by the international agencies when there was the chance to uncover the forensic truth.

There is no factual contradiction between Ferdonije Qerkezi's narration of facts and a wide range of witness reports of war crimes committed in her hometown, Gjakova, during the relevant period in late March 1999. From the perspective of Kosovo Albanian survivors of the war, it is

representative for the fate of many. According to the OSCE's Kosovo Verification Mission, when NATO launched air strikes against the Former Republic of Yugoslavia from March 24, 1999, these correlated with Serb forces intensifying systematic ethnic cleansing efforts of Albanian citizen across Kosovo, including in and around the city of Gjakova (OSCE 1999, part III: 14; part V: 5).

Serb police specifically targeted prominent and wealthy citizens, which in Gjakova included a preference for shop owners and businessmen for the promise of loot (OSCE 1999, part IV: 15; part V: 5). Ferdonije's family owned a small restaurant and she believes this made them a specific target (Qerkezi 2016). Typically for Gjakova, people hid with relatives and neighbors in the city once expelled (OSCE 1999, part V: 6). From March 24 to early April (and, with less frequency, into May), reports of systematic human rights violations for Gjakova include events such as masked or non-masked Serb policemen, repeatedly recognized as locals, entering private Albanian houses; extorting valuables at gun point; confiscating documents; committing arson; shooting, beating, abducting, or expelling Albanian men; and shooting, raping, or expelling Albanian women and children (OSCE 1999, part V: 5–10).

Beyond this general consistency with events at the relevant time, RECOM's internationally validated Kosovo Memory Book confirms Ferdonije's individual loss. It distinguishes between two family members confirmed as "killed" and three as "disappeared" (HLC 2014, entries 9976–9980). It remains to be seen whether Mothers Calling, which previously rejected RECOM initiatives "as long as Serbs are also part of it" (Di Lellio and McCurn 2012, 12), will consider collaboration once the organization will enjoy the formal support by governments across the region, which it was so long denied (Visoka 2016). Relaunched in 2017, Western Balkan leaders are expected to sign a draft collaboration agreement, which would formalize RECOM and pave the way for more satisfying outcomes.

Other than this, there is a notable absence of any authoritative declaration and recognition of what happened to Ferdonije and her family, be that through an official inquiry or the prosecution of those responsible. Not only has forensic truth not featured in the context of an official justice process, "forensic humanitarianism" (Moon 2016)—encompassing efforts to find individual dead victims of atrocity crimes, return their human remains, and identify the cause, place, and circumstances of their death—has only partially been fulfilled. Regardless of some efforts on behalf of the international community to search for the missing described above, leading to the return of the remains of two of her sons, the story of Ferdonije and her family remains incomplete. This outstanding information, beyond the wish to preserve and pass on memory, gives her and her organization continued reason for activism.

Here, the Argentinian Mothers (*Madres de Plaza de Mayo*) and their attitude toward official exhumations following the Dirty War offer an interesting comparison. They perceived the exhumation program as part of the Alfonsin government's efforts to put an end to their activism and rejected forensic humanitarianism without justice (Fisher 1989, 129). Reasons included that they feared the exhumations undermined their individual purpose and reasons to fight, as it would render their demand that the disappeared should come back alive, "aparición de vida," impossible. As Rosenblatt hypothesizes that "[a]chieving certainty about a loved one's fate and mourning over a body are, in this formulation, not merely apolitical but actually *depoliticizing*: they turn *Madres*, members of an activist organization, back into merely *madres,* mothers in the conventional sense" (Rosenblatt 2015, 99).

This speculative conjecture is significant for Ferdonije's situation not just because she is still dealing with uncertainty as to the fate of her husband and two of her sons. It suggests that even the return of their bodies could not return this iconic mother of the nation to conventional motherhood in a situation of normalcy, of lived family life. As with the *Mothers of Srebrenica*, who tried to sue the United Nations and the Dutch government for their responsibility in the murder, not the disappearance, of their husbands, brothers, and sons (with partial success), the

forensic truth of recuperated bodies, although important, is not enough. Ferdonije's political activism also calls for the prosecution of the criminals responsible.

Post-war memorials, commemorations, and education, as mentioned above, are part of the transitional justice mix and fall not just under the right to truth, but to reparation, according to the DwP scheme employed. Barsalou and Baxter (2007, 4) specify the role of memorialization in transitional justice. Ferdonije's memory work complies with the following functions they establish: truth-telling and documentation (1); creating a specific place for the immediate family and/or larger society to mourn the victims (2); offering symbolic reparations to honor the victims of violence and reinstate their reputation (3); advancing educational purposes, including the retelling of history for future generations (7); and facilitating historic preservation of a specific era in a country's or community's history (8). However, Ferdonije's story appears to stand in contradiction to the following roles and functions of transitional justice: fostering democracy and human rights [for all] (4); promoting reconciliation by recasting the national identity or repairing damaged relations among groups (5); and encouraging civic engagement and education programs to engage the wider community in a dialogue about the past and promote discussions of a peaceful future based on coexistence (6). In summary, Ferdonije's story, as told to us, fails to convey a positive message on values of equality and equal rights that would extend to the Serb population at large. The educational value of her story is problematic in that it translates into a narrative warning to future generations which not only renders inter-ethnic dialogue an impossibility; rather, it reflects contrasting meaning and understanding in how a non-recurrence of violence should be secured.

Ferdonije has learnt from history that she, and Albanians at large, should never have trusted the Serbs. Distrust and segregation seems the most obvious safeguard against recurrence in such understanding, as conveyed in her educational mission. Her narrative draws attention to the failings in the search, recovery, and repatriation of missing persons at both the international or national level. She also has no basis for trust in the institutional frameworks designed to deliver forensic humanitarianism or render justice in contemporary Kosovo. Although the UK's royal couple's recognition of her plight might have addressed some of her need for symbolic reparation, perhaps even facilitated a (momentary or long-lasting) shift to a more conciliatory understanding, this can't compensate for the failure to bring Serb war criminals to justice. Ferdonije and Mothers Calling rightly call for accountability and the punishment of the perpetrators. Ferdonije's activism both responds to, and is based on, the fact that no one has been held accountable for her loss and no justice has been done. This makes Ferdonije's story all the more powerful.

From Lost Normalcy to "Normalization"?

Politics in Kosovo negotiate conflicting international and local demands. War memory is politicized at the national, regional, and international level. In particular, there is an apparent mismatch between current memorialization practices, informal forms of recognition, and governmental inefficiency in addressing the stated goals of fostering peaceful coexistence across ethnic lines and conflict transformation through dealing with the past (Sweeney and Ahmetaj 2015). The EU-facilitated political and technical normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, demanding reconciliation as a condition for EU accession and US support, stagnated in 2017 (Collaku and Shaipi 2015; Morina 2016a). Yet, while enlisting Kosovo's top government officials, it mostly ignored civilian concerns over war crimes and missing persons as well as demands for apologies and reparation (Ahmetaj 2016; Halili 2016). The need to formulate a comprehensive memorialization strategy, including the national government, is well established in Transitional Justice studies (Brett et al. 2007). However, "the Transitional Justice … and reconciliation processes in Kosovo are at a standstill at best" (CRDP 2018, 2). An Inter-Ministerial Working Group of Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation (IMWG), set up in 2012

to produce a National Strategy on Transitional Justice, failed to deliver. Rather, it produced "more division than actually trust among the different actors who were tasked to look into the question of dealing with the past in Kosovo" (Ristic 2017; see also Ahmetaj and Unger 2017; Visoka 2016). In 2016, the former Prime Minister and incumbent president of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, a former leader of the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), visited the graves of Serb victims of war and met with the families of Serb Missing Persons (Ristic 2016; Ristic and Osmani 2016; Shaipi 2016). This aligned with selected critical voices of civil society which have long called for wider ethnic inclusion in processes of dealing with the past, including in regard to the issue of missing persons (Ahmetaj and Unger 2017; Shaipi 2016). However, Thaçi's engagement has not been perceived as credible on the ground. Locally, he faced accusations of undermining "the values of the Kosovo people's war for freedom … [and] that the martyrs and the holy war of the KLA were being insulted" (Morina 2016b). He has also been accused of political opportunism toward the international community, given his own dubious track record of possible involvement in war crimes; and given the associated risk of prosecution he faces by the freshly established international Criminal Court for Kosovo (Ristic and Osmani 2016). In late 2017, he shifted again, now aligning himself with the Albanian nationalist opposition to the court, whilst risking his country's international support (Hopkins 2018). Meanwhile, Kosovo's public debates ignored the actual victims of those to be prosecuted (Robelli 2018).

In February 2016, when President Thaçi announced the founding of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Kosovo, both local and international observers remained apprehensive about its chances to deliver and succeed at all (Morina and Baliu 2017). At the end of December 2017, Thaçi introduced the preparation team, including several civil society representatives. A leading representative of the families of Missing Persons in Kosovo laconically welcomed the initiative, but remarked that it came rather late, nearly 20 years after the end of the war. He agreed with the ongoing need to establish the truth, but also narrowed the meaning of "reconciliation" from a wider, moral imperative of interethnic reconciliation to the survivors' and subsequent generations' psychological needs to "reconcile with the truth" of what happened to their families (Qamili 2017).

Conclusion

Ferdonije's case provides an important lesson in the effectiveness of victims' agency as mediated through social memory. It demonstrates how gaps in the achievement of transitional justice aims can be filled by simultaneously individual and social, truthful, even if non-conciliatory, remembrance. Ferdonije's story sheds light on the locally embedded reasons for, and meaning of, resistance to international pressures for reconciliation before justice has been achieved.

We firstly documented Ferdonije's social memory construction and activism. This provided insight into the culturally specific ways in which "the experience of victims and survivors can not only be represented but also be moulded…, resuming the task of living (and not only surviving)" whilst finding new purpose and "a renewed capability to address the future" (Das and Kleinman 2001, 4). Her new social status, social meaning, and social role in Kosovo's post-war memorialization process, has allowed Ferdonije to "make [her social] world intelligible" again and survive, both mentally and physically (Summerfield 2002, 1105). However, her new identity and activism as an iconic "mother of the nation," sharing her grief, fighting for justice and accountability and warning the next generation as well as international visitors from "trusting the Serbs" at large, appears incompatible with international transitional justice aims. This is particularly evident in the contrast of the core tropes of her commemorative narration—the irrecuperable loss of normalcy and distrust in the former enemy—vis-à-vis the internationally facilitated normalization process aimed at Serb-Albanian national reconciliation. However, the actual context of a still frozen, unsolved Serb-Albanian conflict, with the responsible institutions unable to deliver known criminals to justice across the former adversary lines, make her

intransigence seem rational. With no justice delivered to her, segregation understandably remains the most promising guarantee of non-recurrence. However, an instance of high-profile international, symbolic recognition (reparation) of her plight suggests that this meaning and message might be more malleable than its deep socio-cultural embeddedness might otherwise suggest.

Subsequently we explored the possible convergence or divergence of Ferdonije's and international transitional justice norms on the basis of a rights-based approach and found no discrepancy of "truths." However, we also found that her needs, just as those of most families of missing people across the wider region, had been "neither wholly unmet nor wholly met" (Gordy 2013, 174). We are therefore hesitant about affirming an incompatible "norm divergence" between international (liberal) and local (ethno-nationalist) transitional justice goals. Crucially, rather than treating Transitional Justice itself as a norm which may mean little to the survivor populations, or indeed alienate them, we have sought to unpack the notion by reference to a more nuanced rights-based approach. There remains not only a need to define more precisely the concept of "norms," which, from a legalistic point of view would also entail obligations; but our findings, from an anthropological perspective, also suggest that divergence must be sought in the details of respective "meanings" attached to principles such as the guarantee of non-recurrence. Local meaning is always contingent on the wider context and experience of the transitional justice process, which we explored in the last part. Our finding of relatively few norm divergence chimes well with studies in the wider context of RECOM that have sought to develop a more nuanced understanding of Transitional Justice and Reconciliation through ethnography (Di Lellio and McCurn 2012); text analysis (Kostovicova and Bicquelet 2018); and quantitative and qualitative methods (CRDP 2017). We hope that our "thick description" of social memory as both a system of meaning (local knowledge) and practice (activism) can contribute a deeper ethnographic understanding of the socio-cultural logic, and the ways in which this might underpin, the perpetuation of intransigence vis-à-vis political and institutional failure in delivering transitional justice.

Ferdonije's story interprets the transitional justice imperative of "not to forget" as a warning against ever trusting the Serbs again. Albeit incompatible with the non-recurrence measures transitional justice envisages, there are first subtle and sensitive indications that this position might shift if there is hope for genuinely achieving satisfactory transitional justice outcomes. As long as this is not the case, any overarching, moralizing prioritizing of inter-ethnic reconciliation (Eastmond 2010) cannot compete with local knowledge and systems of meaning, grounded in real experience, for which distrust and segregation emerge as the better non-recurrence guarantees. Without rectifying the many political and institutional failures of dealing with the missing in Kosovo, we conclude, with the words of political sociologist Eric Gordy (2013, 174), reconciliation might just remain "a fantasy."

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Notes

1 In the following, without prejudice, spelled "Gjakova" only—simply as this is how our exclusively Albanian respondents referred to the city. All translations from the Albanian are by Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers unless otherwise indicated.
2 RECOM stands for "Regional Commission for the establishment of facts about war crimes and other serious violations of human rights committed in the former Yugoslavia from January 1, 1991 until December 31, 2001" (RECOM 2017). Dedicated to truth-finding and the non-partisan, virtual memorialization, and truth for civilian victims of all sides (Visoka 2016), it has also promoted cross-regional debates and interethnic dialogue about war crimes responsibilities since 2005 with currently increasing national and international support.
3 We are indebted to one of our anonymous reviewers for several of these detailed insights.
4 "Oda" is an Ottoman and Albanian term for the formal reception room in a traditional village house. According to historical, customary law, only the men of the house would have received guests there (*oda e burrave*). Such tradition has long faded in urban contexts.
5 Simultaneous translation by Linda Gusia; revised including verbatim expressions.
6 Indicative of significance attached, the text highlights this date as "known as International Mothers' day;" although usually known as "International Women's Day."

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