**Podcast: ‘Recognition for missing people’**

**Bekim Blakaj on his two-decade-long activity on dealing with the past**

**Transcript**

**Besa**: This podcast was produced with the financial support of the European Union (EU). Kosovo 2.0 and the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC) are exclusively responsible for its content, and it does not necessarily reflect the views of the EU.

Hello, I’m Besa Luci and thank you for joining us for this conversation by Kosovo 2.0. This podcast is part of our monograph on the issue of missing persons.

The starting point of this monograph are missing persons from the recent war in Kosovo, as well as the suffering and oftentimes fruitless searching that their family members endure. As part of the monograph, we have also decided to include stories about the various ways people go missing as a result of repressive systems, be they political, social or cultural. So this monograph also includes women who continue losing their lives as a result of femicide, institutional negligence and oppressive mentality and migrants who, while looking for a better life or escaping political persecution, leave their home countries and frequently end up disappearing during their journey. These are only some examples of the approach we have selected for this publication.

When talking and thinking about missing people, it is important to go beyond the figures, beyond the numbers, to understand and document through the commemoration of specific events, stories and the individual experiences of every missing person. And this is precisely what we are doing with our monograph, which you can read, watch or listen to online.

But in this specific conversation today, we will focus on missing people from the war in Kosovo, and I have invited Bekim Blakaj, the Director of the Humanitarian Law Center in Kosovo, to talk about this. The Center, which is based in Belgrade and Prishtina, has been and continues to be one of the key organizations in the process of dealing with the past and transitional justice. In fact, this monograph itself is part of our joint project titled “Recognition for Missing People.”

Bekim, thank you so much for being here with me today for this podcast, and it is truly an honor to have you, considering the tireless work that you and the Center do to document the facts about missing people in Kosovo from the time of the war. Also, you have been with the Center for a long time, about 20 years...

**Bekim**: The day before yesterday was my 20th anniversary!

**Besa**: Wow! Maybe let's go back to the very beginning of your work with the Center; how did you start working there, how did you end up working there? I know your personal story somewhat — at one point you yourself were considered missing, you were arrested as a political prisoner. Can you tell us a bit about your story and the beginning of your work with the Center?

**Bekim**: First, I want to thank you so much, Besa, for the invitation to be in this podcast with you, and I am extremely happy that the Humanitarian Law Center in Kosovo and Kosovo 2.0 have a partnership for this project relating to missing people.

In fact, I mentioned that two days ago was the 20th anniversary of my joining the HLC. At that time, it was the branch office of the HLC based in Belgrade, and it was almost accidental that I started working at the Center because I was arrested in May 1999 by the Serbian police — specifically by the secret service sector of the Serbian police — along with a few friends.

We were students in Belgrade, and when the bombings started, it seemed like they initiated a sort of hunt for Albanians, especially students who lived in Belgrade, and we were arrested. As a matter of fact — yes, you mentioned it — my family did not know what had happened with me, they did not know that I was arrested, and they reported me as a missing person at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). So I was one of the people included in the missing persons list, but fortunately, I was found alive afterwards and evidenced as such by the ICRC in Serbian prisons.

Of course, that was an extraordinarily traumatic experience for me, but the way that I ended up at the HLC… My friends and I, who were arrested, were helped out a lot by the HLC, specifically Mrs. Nataša Kandić, and I am convinced — although we have never discussed this with Mrs. Kandic — but I am convinced that without the investigation done by the HLC, we might have really ended up as missing persons because we were held for almost one month as hostages, without anybody knowing where we were.

We were held in police detention, and a few friends of my friend, who were interested to see if we had been arrested, they were told at the police station that we had not been arrested and that they should mind their own business and not be too curious about us. So, in fact, we were illegally held for a month.

As I said, it was an extraordinarily difficult experience, but the HLC did an investigation and succeeded in documenting that we were arrested by the police, and this was the key moment that saved our lives — the documentation that we were arrested by the police.

**Besa**: The HLC and Mrs. Kandić had already started operating toward the end of the '90s. She was already, in general, documenting crimes in Kosovo…

**Bekim**: That’s correct. The Center was established in 1992 while the wars in Croatia and Bosnia were ongoing, so they already had experience when the war in Kosovo started. They documented severe violations that occurred, but beyond that, they helped civilians in various situations, and I can say that they possibly saved our lives and the lives of many other people in this way. I was released in 2000 following the fall of the Milošević regime. The revolution happened on October 5 in Belgrade, and I was released two or three weeks afterward.

**Besa**: When you were released, were you then reunited with your family? What was the moment like when you met them after being released?

**Bekim**: In the meantime, of course, my family found out that I was arrested because later they learned from the attorney, from the Center. So in the beginning they didn't know, but then they did. Of course, it was a very emotional moment, a tremendously emotional moment because back then my family, at least in later conversations with them, the hopes that they would ever see me again were low. So it was a very emotional meeting.

Afterward, I heard on the radio that Mrs. Kandić was in Prishtina — she was giving an interview — and I immediately decided to go and thank her personally for what she did for me and my friends. We met at the HLC's office here in Prishtina, back then they were by the Grand Hotel.

We talked at length about everything and at the end of our meeting in her office, she asked me if I was interested in joining the staff of the Center. And there was no doubt. Although I had no experience, I did not study law, I was from a completely different field, I accepted without knowing what exactly the future would hold. Twenty years later, I am still with the HLC.

Something that I would like to mention is — and I mention this rarely — is that, of course, during the period that I was imprisoned, which was for one year and a half, and the beginning was especially horrible because I did not know whether I would survive, I thought that I was the most unlucky person in the world and what I experienced was great pain. However, it did not take me long... when I started working with the HLC, maybe in the first few days that we worked in the field to interview family members of missing persons, then I understood that my story isn't even worth being mentioned.

I am here now, I am alive, and that was all, whereas there were families that had lost many family members — there were mothers who had lost their children. And I immediately understood that, in fact, I was lucky and not unlucky because others had experienced incredibly traumatic things, so severe that my suffering did not merit mentioning.

**Besa**: And the process of looking for missing people was in a different context back then because family members still had hope. They still hoped that they were perhaps in prison. And you yourself with your story, as someone who was missing for a while — you were in prison but then released — so many family members hoped that maybe their children, brothers or sisters, whoever was missing, may be found somewhere, maybe in Serbia.

Was there any specific moment or conversation with families, especially in the first years [after the war], 2000 and 2001, when that hope was still a part of the way that they dealt with the suffering and longing?

**Bekim**: Unfortunately, Besa, there were many such events, many difficult moments that are etched into my memory, and I can never forget them. As you said, the hopes of the families — especially in the first years after the end of the war — the hopes of family members of missing persons were that they may be found alive somewhere.

Although, if I'm not mistaken, it was the year the year 2000, the summer of 2000, when the ICRC was allowed to inspect all prisons in Serbia, so they visited every prison and documented the inmates and concluded who was being held in prisons. On the other hand, the other people who were reported missing and were not in prisons had a low probability of being found alive.

However, families are inclined — and this is completely normal — it is human to believe that a missing family member is alive somewhere. Even in cases when there was some circumstantial evidence that [missing] persons may have been killed, their families still hoped that… They ignored the evidence, and that is how human beings are, of course.

I remember, in the beginning, I worked as a researcher at the HLC for the Kosovo Memory Book, so my duty was to interview family members of missing and killed individuals and collect information about the circumstances of their disappearance or death and draft reports. So I had daily contact with various families, and after a few years — if I'm not mistaken it was 2002 or 2003, I am not entirely sure — the mass grave in Batajnica was dug up and the HLC monitored the process of exhumation. If I’m not mistaken I am the only Kosovo Albanian who participated.

It was one of the hardest experiences that I have gone through during my work at the HLC. The Center in Belgrade had issued a permit so that, together with my colleague from the office of the Center in Belgrade, we could go to the location where the mass grave was discovered in Batajnica. It was shocking for me because we needed to pass through two checkpoints where they examined us in detail.

Because there I understood that the mass grave was opened and the corpses of Albanian civilians were brought to a space located inside a military garrison, and within the garrison — within the territory of the garrison — there was a facility (or more facilities) of the special anti-terrorism units of the Serbian police. So now I think, how is it possible to transport corpses in large trucks? They needed to pass through two detailed checkpoints in order to be buried.

This, without a doubt, is the principal piece of evidence to prove that the state itself was implicated. So nobody, no paramilitary group could have done this; this was also proven at the Hague Tribunal.

Why am I talking about this? During our research in the field, I was speaking to family members of the victims, and, if I'm not mistaken, I spoke with a woman from around Gjakova who told me about her missing son. I remember her because she had incredibly high hopes that he was alive somewhere, in some secret prison in Serbia.

That day it transpired that, while I was there, they retrieved the corpses the way they were placed from one of the graves in Batajnica — irregularly, one on top of the other. The process was led by the International Commission for Missing People, meaning experts from the International Commission who were both pathologists and archaeologists. And my colleague from the HLC office in Belgrade told me that before he came — before he started leading the process with the International Commission for Missing Persons — it was done more haphazardly with various problems, but now they were doing it very professionally.

They used the small brushes to remove soil and dust in order to not damage the corpses. Then they examined them the way they were placed in the grave. They checked if they had anything in their pockets. In one of the pockets they found a type of wallet with an ID that included a name, the name of the son of the mother whom I spoke with. It was terrifying for me because I knew that she hoped that he would be alive, while I saw that…

**Besa**: Did you talk to the mother afterward?

**Bekim**: It was a huge ethical dilemma for me… regarding what I should have done. There were all sorts of cases that we encountered in the field… and no, I did not do it. I did not do it. As someone who was in the field all the time, I knew the consequences of different cases where some witness would talk about… they would show facts that someone was either killed or is missing and then have big problems with the families. But it just so happened that one of the first bodies that was submitted belonged to that boy, and the family learned about it soon after.

I know of another case, and this one was also very painful. It also happened in the region of Gjakova. An old gentleman from a village had given a lot to somebody in Montenegro to recover his son, who was allegedly at a certain camp. So he had been deceived, and an attorney from Gjakova brought him to my office and said, “Please talk to him because he is giving a lot of money.”

And I spoke with him… I told him that — it was the year 2004 or 2005 — I told him that, unfortunately, there aren’t any cases where they are found alive, that he should be careful not to give money until they at least offer sufficient proof that his son is alive. [The man] had married for a second time in his later years because he didn’t have children in his first marriage, so the age difference between father and son was tremendous. [His son] was stopped by Serbian forces as an 18-year-old and went missing from then on.

After I said this, he started crying... He started crying and said, “Now, nobody is buying my land, the land I have left, because I would have sold whatever land I have left for my son to find him.” It was extremely, extremely sad for me. I tried to talk to him and comfort him a little. In this case, it also happened that not long after our meeting, his son was identified and the body was handed over. He was also found in Batajnica.

These are stories that you can never forget, and you become tied to them. Unfortunately, this gentleman passed away a year ago at a very old age, but I know that after they found his son's body, he returned to living his life again. He picked himself up and continued his life. Of course, he had pain, but until the moment he learned that his son was killed, and he was handed his mortal remains, he in fact did not have a life.

He only lived with the aim of getting more money in order to give it to someone in Montenegro who lied to him all the time, saying, “I know him, we have seen him, we need to give some more money to the person in the camp in order to get him out,” and so on.

**Besa**: It seems that this is also an important part of the identification or location of missing people. I want to refer to a story of yours in an article that we published in 2016, an article that Dafina Halili from Kosovo 2.0 wrote. She interviewed you, and you shared a story of a young man, who, after finding his two brothers told you…

**Bekim**: Yes, [he said] “I was happy.”

**Besa**: “I do not remember ever being this happy in my life,” because his two dead brothers were found. So it makes you think what happiness could be for someone. Happiness does not exist as an identical process. Happiness for family members of missing persons is simply to know where they are, for their bodies to be returned and to be able to have a burial for them and continue remembering them. This story really touched me, I remember, when I read it back then, and I did once again today.

**Bekim**: I remember it exactly. I said it earlier — these moments remain in your memory permanently. I remember it exactly, when I did this sort of oral history interview with video and audio, and after he told me about the whole process, including the moment when he buried his brothers, I asked, “How did you feel that day?” A few seconds later, he said, “I do not remember ever being happier.”

I recall this memory very often, and I try to fathom the intensity of his pain before finding them, considering that he was happy when he buried his brothers. We cannot put ourselves in the shoes of family members of missing persons, but they surely go through extraordinary, permanent pain.

We have to keep in mind that they have been living for 21 years with this pain, and it is not coincidental that the right of family members to know about their missing relatives is guaranteed in international conventions. This is incredibly important because they have a lot of pain.

**Besa**: I would like to stop here and talk about trust. I think that the trust that the HLC has succeeded in creating with family members of missing persons… I think that, within the context of institutional negligence, in general, the HLC — the way I see it — played a very important role in communication, interviewing family members of missing persons, and documentation of all the information. How did you build this trust in the HLC, and how did it affect you personally? Maybe your experience played a part in the way that you approached interviews… I think that this trust is very important.

**Bekim**: I can say that we established a necessary rapport between us and family members of missing persons, but also of other victims of war, people who were killed, etc. The way we achieved this: I think that it is incredibly important — and we hold trainings with every new researcher that joins us — it is very important that when the first contact with a family is established, it has to be very honest, and there needs to be attention lest some kind of expectation is raised on their end.

There are many who went to them with various promises: “We will do this and do that.” This cannot be done. It is very important to explain to them what you are discussing with them, and we always — regardless of how painful it might have been sometimes and regardless of the resistance we were met with in terms of having a conversation or conducting an interview — we were blunt.

We said that we are collecting this data for a book, the Kosovo Memory Book. We are not an institution that will help you in shedding light on the fate of missing persons, we are not an institution that can do diggings and so on. To explain to them the importance of what we’re doing, without any sort of promise.

Consistency and systematic work [is also a part of it]. It does not happen that we do an interview and forget about them. We have kept in touch with family members, with a lot of them. When we worked on other projects, we consulted them, we invited them for meetings, we invited them… So, this was… this was one of the ways, or rather, reasons why we established a good cooperation with them and why they trust us.

**Besa**: And I think you have become a type of reference point for many family members of missing persons. Do you continue being such even today?

**Bekim**: Absolutely, absolutely. In the meantime, we have designed other projects. For example, last year we opened an exhibition to honor the children who were killed and went missing during the war, and it was incredibly easy to cooperate with [the families] because they know us. We visited their homes, we conducted interviews there and we maintained a cooperation and contact with them, and of course afterwards that built trust.

We did not have any problem working with them on this exhibition by family members of parents of children who were killed mostly — they do not have many items left from their missing children, but they offered them to us for the exhibition. So the cooperation only grew throughout the years. Now it has been more than 20 years of working in the field. We contact them and this long period of cooperation strengthened the relationship between us and the family members of victims.

**Besa**: You also mentioned the Memory Book earlier, which I think is a tremendously important publication and documentation that you have done at the HLC. The Memory Book includes the names of all individuals who were killed or went missing as a result of the war, and if I'm not mistaken, it's the only initiative, the only such documentation, in Kosovo. Institutionally speaking, there is nothing like this — there is no such database, no such documentation.

Can you tell us about it? As far as I know, there are two volumes of the Memory Book. Could you also tell us about the process of documentation?

**Bekim**: This is a project that I also mentioned earlier. As part of the project, we contacted families and… It is a project implemented jointly by the HLC in Serbia and in Kosovo. The aim of the project is to document all lives lost during and immediately after the war — so from January 1998 until December 31, 2000 — and to collect information about the circumstances of the deaths and disappearances of these individuals.

So far we have registered 13,535 individuals who were killed or went missing during this period of time, regardless of their status, whether they were civilians, members of the KLA or members of the Serbian police. The idea was to document lives lost, irrespective of their ethnicity.

Of course, for us, it was not enough to just have a list. Many lists have circulated. To us, it was important to have data about the circumstances of these events; and for over 8,000 of them we also have this data, about the circumstances of their death. We are still in the process of verifying certain data for 5,000 others.

The first Kosovo Memory Book was published back in 2011, and it includes all individuals who were killed or went missing during 1998 — there are 2,064 of them. And there — besides personal information on the victims — there is a short narration on how they were killed or disappeared, in what circumstances. So it's a story — not just a first and last name and personal data, but there is a story too.

We hope that the second book will be published in February of next year. Then we'll be left with two others. Although there has been progress with the fieldwork — we are pretty close — unfortunately for some cases it is quite difficult to get sources of information. In some cases, we had issues finding the families of the victims, especially in the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. In some cases, we were simply unable to find the families of the victims.

But I believe that in two or three years, this project will be brought to a close. It is important because we believe that, as part of this project, we will finally bring an end to the manipulations of the numbers and the denial of victims, which is most important. This was the idea from the beginning: Not only did we want to remember them as the people they were and not let them turn into figures, but also the narrative of the past needs to be correct and there cannot be denial of victims. Nobody should be able to say that there weren't this many people killed on one side or the other.

Meanwhile, the institutions… you are right, they did not do much. There are other publications, too, but in most cases they only contain lists. We looked through these publications and in many cases found mistakes that various authors made, or there were people who were mentioned twice or three times, or there were mistakes where they added lists that were about missing people from 1999 and some people from those lists happened to be alive, and so on. In spite of this, there were other initiatives too, but they weren't as detailed and didn't include data on the circumstances of the killings or disappearances.

**Besa**: I think that this is very important, that denial and manipulation are not allowed. This also ties back to the importance of documenting true history, especially when we look at it from today's context. Unfortunately we cannot say that societies in the region, or let's say in Kosovo and Serbia, have reached a point where there is an understanding between the two parties, because there is indeed a tendency to deny, to manipulate and not to accept the past.

What are the risks, that you see, that may come about if the true history fails to be told, especially in the context of today's nationalist movements?

**Bekim**: We don't need to go that far. In World War II, for example, in the region where we live, there were horrific crimes not only during the war itself, but also afterward — victims of communism, victims… respectively of crimes committed by nationalists of various peoples, some of whom supported Nazism or not, and so on. For the sake of Brotherhood and Unity, during the communist period, they mentioned them a little bit, but most of these crimes were swept under the rug and were left closed, hoping, it seems, that they would be forgotten and that Brotherhood and Unity would thrive.

However, in fact, this is the wrong approach because if parties are denied discussion about the facts of what happened, to lay them down on the table — “You did this,” and so on — then the parties will not take the responsibility and accept the victims, and they will automatically deny them. However, the people and individuals will not forget them.

In the absence of dealing with the facts, incorrect narratives and myths arise. For example, a concentration camp managed by Croatian nationalists — by the Ustaše — during Nazism in Croatia. Many Roma and especially Serb victims ended up in this concentration camp, known as the Jasenovac camp. Officially, in the past few years, if I'm not mistaken, the Croatian side said that, yes, the camp existed, we do not deny it, but they were treated well there and so on, and about 70,000 victims must have passed through there. For the same camp, the Serbian side says that people were mistreated and killed there and that there were 700,000 Serbian victims. The discrepancy is so large that there is no narrative that can draw them closer together.

What I want to say is that I am quite convinced that the bloody wars that happened in the '90s during the break-up of Yugoslavia, not only in Kosovo but also in Croatia and especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, were fed largely by those myths from the past. And every side said, “They did this to us, now is the moment to get revenge.”

This cycle of violence here in our region, not only in Kosovo, has been repeated time after time, every half century or something like that. The only way to prevent the repetition is to once and for all accept and deal with what happened, to lay down the facts and say that this happened.

For me, the first step toward a future reconciliation is when the past is accepted, when facts are accepted, when every side says, “Yes, these crimes were committed in our name from our side.” Afterward, of course there needs to be other actions, be they symbolic or otherwise. As many perpetrators as possible need to be processed in courts, victims need to receive reparations, there needs to be apologies and so on.

All of these need to occur in order to achieve, in some future, reconciliation, which guarantees peace or prevents repetition. Otherwise, if parties deny crimes committed, do not accept the victims of others, there could be a circumstance in the future when they will be eager to start another conflict. So I believe that the lesson from the past teaches us that all of these mechanisms need to be implemented. The past needs to be accepted first and foremost, with a special focus on clarifying the fate of missing people.

This is the most painful legacy of the war, not only in Kosovo but also in the region. There are over 10,000 people still missing in the whole region. The families of these individuals have the right to and need to know the truth because there also may be cases where the bodies were eliminated, there is no body to be returned because they were burned or… but at least families need to know the facts.

Those who are buried in individual or mass graves need to be found and handed over to the families, to have a burial ceremony, and then come other actions that are part of transitional justice theory: the prosecution of criminals, reparations and so on. Only this can guarantee a stable peace in the future and prevent the repetition of the past.

**Besa**: I think that the way you explained this is very important in terms of understanding transitional justice and dealing with the past because oftentimes it seems that they are taken for granted as concepts, but their meaning is not deeply understood. What does transitional justice mean? What does dealing with the past mean and why it is important? Especially in the work with citizens, with society, so that it doesn't remain just a debate and work done in the institutional or civil society level, but that they also work with the societies of all countries, including education, the way the past is taught, the role that the media plays, justice, the judicial system and so on.

In discussions with younger people, who do not remember the war, but who… in Kosovo and in the region, where the tendency is to learn a history only from one perspective, only from the perspective of their ethnicity, and a large number of them do not understand the importance of dealing with and accepting the past.

How do you see the younger generations? Since you've been working in this field for 20 years and have followed things throughout, how do we stand as societies and countries with the work with young people so that they have a more complex and wider understanding of what happened during the war?

**Bekim**: You are right Besa, transitional justice mechanisms should not be seen as mechanisms that replace other ones: so in the absence of war crimes trials, to create truth commissions. They need to be executed in parallel as much as possible. It is extremely important, as part of the fourth pillar of transitional justice, which includes institutional reforms, the country coming out of a war needs to undertake some actions, be they legal or otherwise, in order to guarantee citizens of their country that there will be no repetition of the past.

This is where what you mentioned comes into play — the education about the past. Around 2011, we at the HLC were contacted by an outreach office of the Hague Tribunal, and they had agreed with the Ministry of Education of Kosovo to hold some lectures in high schools. They invited us to do some presentations on our findings with the Kosovo Memory Book, and of course we joined them and held about 15 lectures in high schools of different municipalities.

We were surprised by how little young people knew about events that happened during the war. And this made us think that we should do something. We designed an unofficial and informal curriculum, and we reached out to the Ministry of Education and found good cooperation with them. From then on we held lectures and workshops in high schools.

First and foremost, I am happy that Kosovo institutions do not stop initiatives that come from civil society, which can contribute in any field, but in this case I'm talking about transitional justice. Our partners, civil society organizations in the region, did not have this luck. They were not allowed, by the institutions of respective countries, including Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia — especially in Serbia — to help with transitional justice processes, so this is positive [in Kosovo].

Secondly, as a matter of fact, unfortunately, children in high schools were not alive during the war, so they cannot remember anything from the war but create an idea of the events that happened during the war based on stories by family members or the media and less from history books. We have analyzed those history textbooks and they contain at most two pages about the wars in the '90s, and there is some very inaccurate data there, be it about the number of victims or anything else. The youth have nowhere to turn to learn what happened during the war, and naturally all of them create their own ideas.

But what left an impression on us is that they are much more willing to debate about the past, to discuss the facts, and they do not refuse outright. This was extremely surprising to us. In places where there were more crimes, for example in Drenica and Dukagjin where every family suffered, the youth in those places were much more open-minded and willing to discuss everything. This surprised us a lot, and it gave us hope.

The problem is that they are not offered enough information and space to debate. What can they hear today in our media? One-sided stories, possibly with hate speech, and of course they will create ideas based on that. So it is extremely important, it is maybe our last chance to invest more in the education of young people. Not only to offer them correct information about what happened in Kosovo or what came before or after it but also education in transitional justice mechanisms, so that they understand what transitional justice is.

As a result of a lack of understanding of these processes, there were also misunderstandings in our society, including court proceedings, other mechanisms. There was a type of misunderstanding and a type of resistance, and that exists today as well, unfortunately.

**Besa**: You mentioned the findings that came out about young people, because I remember a study done in the region that we referred to in Kosovo 2.0 — it had the same findings in the whole region of ex-Yugoslavia. Young people who come from families that lost someone, or from areas that were more affected by the war, are usually more open to discussing and understanding the other side; whereas people who have not lost anybody during the war or were not affected by the war have the tendency to be more exclusive and more rigid in their beliefs and not to accept opinions of the others. This could tell us about how individual experience is very important and plays a role not only in our formation but also the way that we think about the future.

Since we're nearing the end, let's go back to people who continue to be missing from the war in Kosovo. There are about 1,600 of them. The point is not to talk about numbers, but it does remain a large number. How do you continue working with families of these individuals, and what is the hope that continues feeding them?

Or maybe the anger at the same time because it has been 20 years and just now this issue has been included in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. I have read that many associations of missing people's family members are critical because their beliefs have not been taken into account, they were not consulted, they did not discuss with them before the issue made it to the dialogue. What do you think will happen in this process?

**Bekim**: We continue our regular work with the Kosovo Memory Book and other projects, and of course we are cooperating closely with family members of missing people. And you are right, there are over 1,640 people who continue to be missing. We have been one of the first organizations that, starting 10 years ago, recommended that Kosovo institutions try to include the issue of missing persons in the dialogue process with Serbia because, at least since 2015 when the last mass grave in Serbia was found — the one in Rudnica — there has been no progress in shedding light on the fate of missing people. All of the identifications that happened afterwards were symbolic.

We think that there needs to be a new quality and there needs to be more political willingness on both sides to open archives and give information about the fate of missing persons because [the process] has stagnated and the number is quite high. The dialogue is not very transparent.

There are reasons for this of course. One of them is that the main principle on which the Kosovar party entered the dialogue is that there will be no agreement, not any agreement, without achieving the final agreement, which is mutual recognition. That is why the agreements that have been reached are not being made public — because it is not clear whether they will be implemented or not if the final agreement is not achieved.

So all I have been able to understand — because the agreement on missing people was agreed upon between the parties — so all I could understand is that both sides agreed to create another body — although there have been joint commissions and so on — which will be led or supervised by an international one. I know that the opening of archives was also mentioned, but I still have not seen whether they have figured out what the mechanism will be that will push the parties to feel obligated to release them.

I'm afraid that this is all a repetition, we will treat it as a humanitarian issue, we will commit to it and so on, but there will be no mechanism that obliges parties to take more decisive steps. And I believe that families have understood this, and they have been disappointed tens or hundreds of times during these 21 years, and they're afraid that they'll be disappointed once again.

In spite of that, I do not want to judge prematurely. I hope that this final agreement will be achieved in the end and that the issue of missing people will once again be emphasized and there will be concrete actions for shedding light on the fate of missing persons.

**Besa**: Thank you so much Bekim. It was a sincere pleasure to discuss this issue with you. And for all others who were part of this conversation, a reminder: Kosovo 2.0's monograph on missing persons is now online, so I invite you to read, watch or listen to various stories at kosovotwopointzero.com.