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Abstract

This thesis offers a new angle on the demise of the rules-based international order. It argues that in contrast to many other popular explanations, NATO-led intervention “Operation Allied Force” in the Kosovo War of 1999 marked a turning point in the post-Cold War international order. After the Dayton negotiations failed to address Kosovo's status, Kosovar politics became increasingly radical until a full-scale insurrection was eventually launched by the KLA. At the same time, Milosevic attempted to stay in power by exploiting the Kosovo issue. The situation escalated to a point where NATO intervened in the conflict without UN Security Council authorization, hence breaking international law. The thesis reveals how NATO changed its purpose from a defensive alliance to a global security actor in the process and how Kosovo affected its later interventions in the 21st century. It argues that the Western camp set a dangerous precedent by intervening illegally in a foreign conflict which Russia subsequently exploited for its own invasions, invoking Kosovo every time it intervened in other countries militarily, which culminated in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It was NATO's intervention in Kosovo that constituted the original sin which initiated the gradual destruction of the international order.

German Abstract

Diese Masterarbeit beleuchtet den Niedergang der regelbasierten internationalen Ordnung von einer neuen Perspektive. Im Kontrast zu zahlreichen anderen Erklärungsversuchen wird in dieser Masterarbeit die These vertreten, dass die NATO-Intervention „Operation Allied Force“ im Kosovokrieg 1999 einen zentralen Wendepunkt in der internationalen Ordnung nach dem Kalten Krieg darstellte. Nachdem die Statusfrage des Kosovo während den Verhandlungen des Dayton-Abkommens ignoriert wurde, nahm die Politik unter den Kosovo-Albanern stetig radikalere Züge an, bis schließlich die „Kosovarische Befreiungsarmee“ einen weitgehenden bewaffneten Aufstand in der Region initiierte. Währenddessen unternahm Slobodan Milosevic den Versuch in Serbien weiterhin an der Macht zu bleiben, in dem er den Kosovokonflikt für seine eigenen politischen Zwecke ausnutzte. Diese Situation eskalierte bis zu einem Grad, in dem sich die NATO verpflichtet fühlte, ohne der Autorisierung des UN-Sicherheitsrats militärisch im Kosovo zu intervenieren. Die Masterarbeit zeigt auf, wie sich die NATO im Zuge ihrer Intervention im Kosovokonflikt von einem Verteidigungsbündnis hin zu einem global agierten Sicherheitsakteur gewandelt hat und wie diese neugefundene Rolle spätere Interventionen im 21. Jahrhundert beeinflusste. Die These argumentiert, dass mit dieser illegalen Militärintervention ein gefährlicher Präzedenzfall gesetzt wurde, welcher anschließend seitens der Russischen Föderation für ihre eigenen geopolitischen Zwecke missbraucht und der Kosovo wiederholt als Rechtfertigung für russische Militärinterventionen in anderen Ländern genannt wurde. Diese gipfelten mit der Invasion der Ukraine im Jahr 2022. Die Masterarbeit zeigt auf, dass es die NATO-Intervention im Kosovo war, welche die schrittweise der Zerstörung der internationalen Ordnung eingeleitet hat.

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Introduction

"The grotesque disparity between cause and effect"¹

The war that erupted in Kosovo at the very end of the 20th century has often been overlooked in academic discourse as it is overshadowed by other, more well-known events that took place either shortly before or briefly after the Kosovo War had been concluded. From the outset, the war appeared very familiar as it displayed typical characteristics of a 20th century conflict: a violent fight between two groups of people over the same piece of land, nationalistic aspirations and rhetoric, guerilla fighting, ethnic cleansing campaigns, massacres of civilians, mass displacements of people, the forceful redrawing of national borders. Thus, the Kosovo War was fought by methods, over national identities and saw the intervention of a military alliance that were all either applied, formed or established in the 20th century.

In this regard, Kosovo seemed to constitute the final war of an old era, and not the first war of a new one. However, the armed conflict would hold significant ramifications for the 21st century, both on a systemic and extrinsic level. In fact, it was not necessarily the war itself but NATO's intervention in it that broke the international "rules-based" order, as "Operation Allied Force" launched against Yugoslavia in March 1999 constituted the first intervention by an external power which was conducted without the formal authorization by the UN Security Council.

Therefore, the Kosovo War of 1999 represented a paradox, namely a foreign intervention which was enacted to stop and prevent further state-sponsored ethnic violence and persecution, proved to be lethal to the legalistic and institutional global order that had been built after the end of the Second World War. These ramifications were both diverse in nature and manifold.

First, the war triggered the emergence of a novel but contended legal doctrine, the "Responsibility to Protect", which challenged essential and

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973): viii.

widely accepted norms of international policy, predominantly state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs of other nations.

Second, NATO was fundamentally transformed as the military alliance dropped its original defensive strategic doctrine and embraced its newly institutionalized role as a globally acting security and risk manager, expanding both in size and scope over time.

Third, during and after the events in Kosovo, the Russia Federation felt ever more humiliated, isolated and excluded from the changing post-Cold War security architecture in Europe. Consequently, Russia perceived the Western-led intervention in Kosovo as a precedent which it routinely fell back to as it started to pursue its national interests and aspirations in an increasingly aggressive and coercive manner. The logic the Kremlin derived from NATO's intervention in Kosovo was simple yet comprehensible. In its essence, the Russian foreign policymaking circles asked themselves the following questions: if they can do it, why cannot we do it too? If they intervene in the internal affairs of other sovereign nations, why cannot we proceed in a similar manner? If Western powers can bypass the UN Security Council and patently break international law, why do we have to respect the same rules and legal procedures? Fourth, the war left a deep imprint in both Serbia and the later breakaway Republic of Kosovo, has changed the national character, political culture and partisan narratives surrounding the national memory culture in both countries. The thesis is structured as follows.

In Chapter I, the post-Dayton political scenery in both Serbia and Kosovo will be examined. The fragmentation among the Kosovar Albanian population and the subsequent rise and consolidation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as well as the increasing authoritarian nature of Slobodan Milosevic's regime in Serbia as he attempted to stay in power by entrenching his political system are explored.

Chapter II discerns the escalatory spiral which evolved in Kosovo at the end of the 1990s between the KLA and the Serbian Security Forces and the failed attempts to find a diplomatic settlement for the crisis in Kosovo.

Subsequently, the chapter delves into the war itself, the motives and reasons behind NATO's decision to conduct Operation Allied Force and describes how the Kosovo War ultimately unfolded.

The third and final chapter constitutes the largest and most extensive section of the thesis as the long-term legal and global and regional political consequences are studied. It commences with the legal fallout of the war as it contributed significantly to the emergence of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. This is directly followed by subchapters tackling the effects the war had on NATO itself, as well as on the U.S. foreign policymaking rationale. Moreover, three case studies are provided which showcase how the principles which were derived in the aftermath of the Kosovo War were later reapplied by the Western camp in its military involvements in armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. Additionally, a considerable section of Chapter III is devoted to the effects of the Kosovo War on Russia, its reorientation in foreign policy, national doctrine and strategic interests.

In its essence, this extensive subchapter tries to discern the "Kosovo lesson" of Russia which it drew from the conflict and would use in its subsequent war. Parallel to the three Western-led military interventions provided in the preceding subchapter, the Russian armed interventions in Georgia, Crimea and Ukraine serve as case studies to highlight how the Kosovo War was constantly referred to by the Russian leadership and ultimately exploited as a justification for the coercive pursuit of its national interests.

In Chapter III subchapters i. and ii., the international relations theories of Constructivism and Realism are applied to complement the thesis with an interdisciplinary component and discern the political developments of the Russian Federation through a theoretical lens. The last section of the third chapter returns to a regional analysis of the political developments that occurred in Kosovo and Serbia after the conclusion of the Kosovo War of 1999. It deals with the end of Milosevic's regime and how during and after its fall, a memory policy regarding the conflict evolved in Serbia that has sustained a national victimhood narrative. Moreover, the subsection deals with the political and societal developments that took place in Kosovo after

the war, and how these led to the eventual consolidation and declaration of independence of the Republic of Kosovo in 2008.

The significance of this thesis rests on the causal chain that could be established between the enforcement of Operation Allied Force and the wars and military interventions that followed over the course of the 21st century. This link triggered a spiral that culminated in the eventual breakdown of the international post-Cold War order and continues to fuel the confrontation between the Western camp and Russia to this day. All roads lead back to Kosovo indeed.

Chapter I: Post-Dayton Politics and the Road to War

A. Kosovo After Dayton: From Peaceful Resistance to Armed Struggle

After the province of Kosovo had its autonomy revoked during Slobodan Milosevic's "Anti-Bureaucratic Revolution" in 1989, a durable and well-institutionalized political class took shape among the Kosovar Albanian population in the succeeding years, nonetheless. Its origins could be traced back to the intellectual circles that were formed in the University of Pristina, especially among the Association of Philosophers and Sociologists of Kosovo and the Association of Writers of Kosovo. Eventually, these scholarly circles crystallized a common political position which was later expressed in an official public statement. In the declaration, Kosovar Albanian national political aspirations and objectives were laid out.²

The main demand proclaimed was that Kosovo's status in the Yugoslav constitutional framework ought to be elevated to the one of a republic. If this demand was not met by Belgrade, the only other choice that was declared was full secession from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In December 1989, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) was founded and Dr. Ibrahim Rugova, the President of the Association of Writers of Kosovo was chosen as the party leader. The LDK quickly became the spearhead for all other Kosovar Albanian opposition parties that were formed in the meantime.³ The main policy Rugova and his party pursued in order to achieve Kosovar independence was the prevention of armed resistance in the Kosovar Albanian camp and adhering to a passive and non-violent mode of opposition. Furthermore, the LDK attempted to internationalize its political struggle by looking for the involvement of the international community and structurally refused to recognize the legitimacy of Belgrade authorities in the province.⁴

² Mirsad Krijestorac, "Role of an Agent in (un)Keeping the Multiethnic State Together: The Case of the Secession of Kosovo," *Alternatives Turkish Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 2 (2015): 14.

³ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 408-409.

⁴ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 348-349.

However, Kosovo had already been placed under martial law by the Yugoslav authorities since 5th July 1990, as the province was taken over by the Serbian interior ministry after Kosovo's autonomy had been removed. Moreover, Milosevic had embarked on the mission to fire and bar virtually all Kosovar Albanians from work and prohibit any sort of political movements or representations. As a result, more than 115,000 Kosovar Albanians were removed from their jobs ranging from schools, hospitals, universities and the public administration. The forcefully vacated jobs were swiftly taken over by ethnic Serbs. Additionally, their financial savings were scraped after the Bank of Kosovo was declared bankrupt. The Albanian language disappeared from public discourse as the newspaper "Rilindja" was shut down and all TV stations had to switch to Serbian.⁵ Moreover, around 750,000 people lost their social insurance and were refused medical services by Serb-run state clinics and hospitals.⁶

In July 1990, the so-called Kosovo Assembly proclaimed the province of Kosovo to be an independent and equal republic within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. As an immediate reaction, the Belgrade authorities dispersed the Assembly and declared it an illegal entity.⁷ In June 1991, after the republics of Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence from Yugoslavia, the LDK switched its political objective to seeking full Kosovar independence from Yugoslavia rather than trying to achieve mere republican status within it.⁸ Consequently, in September 1991, the Kosovar Albanian opposition proclaimed the "Republic of Kosovo" and declared itself as a fully sovereign and independent country. By holding a referendum a few days after Kosovo's declaration of independence, 99.87% of the ballots cast favored Kosovar independence.⁹ In May 1992, the shadow "Assembly of Kosova" elected Ibrahim Rugova as President of the "Republic of Kosovo".

⁵ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country*, 410.

⁶ Miranda Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 262.

⁷ R. Craig Nation, *War in the Balkans, 1991–2002* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2003), 225.

⁸ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*, 350.

⁹ R. Craig Nation, "War in the Balkans, 1991–2002," 225.

One of his most pressing priorities was the continuation of the so-called shadow society or Kosovar parallel state, unofficial networks of that attempted to mimic official state-run institutions after the Kosovar Albanian population was excluded from all types of employment and services. Accordingly, shadow societies attempted to provide medical services and school as well as university education for the remainder of the 1990s.¹⁰

Despite this precarious situation, Ibrahim Rugova and the LDK continued the path of non-violent resistance. He urged the Kosovar Albanian population to remain patient, as the interests of Kosovo will be considered and respected by the international community, once the Yugoslav break-up wars were settled.¹¹ However, other political developments should cross his plans.

i. Kosovo's unresolved status in the Dayton framework

While the signing of the Dayton agreement proved to be the successful conclusion of the three-year long war in Bosnia, it also turned out to be a massive blunder for the quest of finding a workable solution for the Kosovo crisis. In fact, the signing of the agreement had the indirect effect of escalating the situation in the province and hence contributing to a trajectory that would ultimately end with outright war four years after its successful enactment.¹²

The reasons for the exclusion of the Kosovo issue during the negotiations and signing of the Dayton agreement are manifold. Firstly, finding a working compromise between the parties in the multiple issues at hand regarding Bosnia had already been complex and arduous. Adding the issue of the status of Kosovo in the negotiations would have lessened the likelihood of ending the Bosnian War. Secondly, Slobodan Milosevic was regarded as one of the key figures in the successful conclusion and implementation of the Dayton agreement. Any discussion on Kosovo, so the Western negotiators figured, would have only antagonized Milosevic, who then might have abandoned his role as a "peacemaker" in Bosnia. And thirdly, Kosovo was not considered to

¹⁰ John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country*, 410.

¹¹ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*, 348-349.

¹² Peter Russell, "The Exclusion of Kosovo from the Dayton Negotiations," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11, no. 4 (2009): 499.

be a pressing issue, as outright armed hostilities and open war at that point in time were nonexistent in the region.¹³

Moreover, the international community reasoned, that only once the hostilities between the key parties of the Bosnian war have ended and a post-war order has been established in the region, it would be possible to address the comparatively minor issue of Kosovo.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it is striking how this pressing matter was neglected by the negotiating parties as Kosovo had already played a fundamental role in the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Accordingly, some policymakers in the Western camp believed Kosovo to be a primary concern that was key in the quest for finding a feasible solution for the remnants of Yugoslavia. Their voices, however, were left unheard as ending the Bosnian War was made the top priority during the negotiations at Dayton and any issues that might prevent or lessen the likelihood of reaching an agreement were either muted or ignored.¹⁵

It was only in one singular regard that the issue of Kosovo was taken into account within the framework of the Dayton agreement. The economic sanctions levied against Serbia by the international community were merely suspended instead of being entirely removed, as their complete removal was made contingent on Belgrade's commitment to guarantee basic human rights to all minorities living in Serbia, namely in the province of Kosovo.¹⁶ Nonetheless, only the so-called "outer wall of sanctions", which excluded the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from all international organizations, as long as the Kosovo issue remained unresolved, had stayed fully intact.¹⁷ This overly pragmatic negotiating style, however, had yielded unintended ramifications that swung open the door for more radical voices to be heard in Kosovo and beyond.

¹³ Richard Caplan, "International Diplomacy and the Crisis in Kosovo," *International Affairs* 74, no. 4 (1998): 750-751.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Petritsch and Robert Pichler, *Kosovo-Kosova: Der lange Weg zum Frieden* (Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag, 1999): 125.

¹⁵ Peter Russell, "The Exclusion of Kosovo from the Dayton Negotiations," 493-494.

¹⁶ Wolfgang Petritsch and Robert Pichler, *Kosovo-Kosova: Der lange Weg zum Frieden*, 125.

¹⁷ Enver Hasani, "The 'Outer Wall' of Sanctions and the Kosovo Issue," *PERCEPTIONS: Journal of International Affairs* 3, no. 3 (1998): 4.

ii. The Fragmentation of the Kosovar Albanian Political Establishment

The marginalization of Kosovo in the accords of the Dayton agreement did not only represent a missed chance to resolve the dispute but also undermined Ibrahim Rugova's policy of non-violence and passive resistance.¹⁸ The political pressure on the LDK, which until Dayton was perceived as the only comprehensive representation of the Kosovar Albanians, was mounting from all sides as Rugova's approach lost all credibility among many of the Kosovar Albanian population. The LDK had failed to achieve its goal of internationalizing the conflict and to drawing the necessary attention to its struggle within the international community.¹⁹ Its expectations of being rewarded at Dayton for its rejection of violence and patience did not materialize. Rugova's following main plea was not answered:

*"We want to show our friends abroad that democratic processes are at work in Kosovo, so they will eventually recognize our independence."*²⁰

Adem Demaci, leader of the Parliamentary Party of Kosovo (PPK), who demanded a more offensive yet peaceful political strategy, spoke for many Kosovar Albanians when he described Rugova's approach as passive "Gandhism", which was excessively reliant on international support.²¹ Essentially, Rugova and the stratagem of his party had utterly backfired and perpetuated the political status quo. As Timothy Garton Ash summed up:

*"So long as Rugova kept the lid on his own people, and so long as we felt we had to deal with Milosevic over Bosnia, we weren't going to push him [Milosevic] on Kosovo."*²²

According to this line of reasoning, it was precisely the absence of violent resistance in Kosovo that compelled the international community to find a swift solution in Bosnia while deeming the situation in Kosovo as

¹⁸ Peter Russell, "The Exclusion of Kosovo from the Dayton Negotiations," 505.

¹⁹ Aidan Hehir, "Independence, Intervention and Great Power Patronage: Kosovo, Georgia and the Contemporary Self-Determination Penumra," *Amsterdam Law Forum* 1, no. 2 (2009): 90–103.

²⁰ Peter Russell, "The Exclusion of Kosovo from the Dayton Negotiations," 498.

²¹ Wolfgang Petritsch and Robert Pichler, *Kosovo-Kosova: Der lange Weg zum Frieden*, 128.

²² Peter Russell, "The Exclusion of Kosovo from the Dayton Negotiations," 498.

unimportant and non-essential. As the then Kosovar Prime Minister Bujar Bukoshi stated:

*“You can create moderates or you can create radicals, [...] and this is a situation that can create radicals.”*²³

His assessment would soon turn out to be true as the number one lesson some sections of the Kosovar Albanian society drew from the Dayton agreement was that political violence works and is rewarded by the international community accordingly. The fact that Bosnian Serbs were able to carve out a state of their own within Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Republika Srpska, by violent means, suggested to an increasing number of Kosovar Albanians that the only language the international community recognizes and consequently rewards is the one of armed struggle. This conviction intensified after numerous EU member countries recognized the newly drawn Yugoslavia in April 1996.²⁴

Instead of supporting the Kosovar Albanian cause, as Rugova had hoped for, the international community pushed for some sort of compromise or middle way between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, which would guarantee both the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia as well as establish Kosovar Albanian self-determination.

As then British ambassador to Yugoslavia Ivor Roberts quipped:

“With the Dayton Agreement we saw all parties eventually signing up to a solution and what we want to work towards now is a similar arrangement for Kosovo which will inevitably mean compromise on both sides, flexibility and statesmanship. We have to find a way of finding a middle path between the requirement for self-government of the people of Kosovo and respect for international borders laid down in the Helsinki Convention. ... An Albanian may say to me “but we do not accept these borders” and I understand why

²³ Ibid., 500.

²⁴ Miranda Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo*, 292-295.

you say that. But I have to say that that is not a view supported by the international community. That is therefore a reality you have to live with."²⁵

Soon after Dayton and the subsequent breakdown of political consensus among the Kosovar Albanians, however, a new and until then unknown group entered the political landscape that would alter the struggle for Kosovo's independence entirely. It neither had the intention to find a political compromise nor continue the policy of non-violent resistance. This group called itself the Ushtria Clirimtare e Kosoves (UCK) or Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).²⁶

iii. The Consolidation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)

The origins of the KLA are not entirely known. The general public first learned of its apparent existence in 1996. It is assumed that its founding members were originally from the Albanian diaspora of Switzerland, a segment that was considered to be one of the most radical among the Albanian population. Initially, many people in Kosovo believed the group to be part of some sort of Serbian conspiracy, a fictitious entity employed to justify higher levels of political repression perpetrated by Belgrade against the Albanian population of Kosovo.²⁷ Until early 1998, Ibrahim Rugova himself called the KLA a Serbian invention.²⁸ At the beginning, the KLA was loosely structured by local militants who mainly operated from the Drenica and Djakovica regions.

Its members perceived themselves to be stepping in their ancestors' footsteps, as they would carry on the centuries old struggle against Serbia's dominance over Kosovo. This was illustrated by the oath, or "Besa" all new members of the KLA were required to swear:

²⁵ Ibid., 294.

²⁶ Richard Caplan, "International Diplomacy and the Crisis in Kosovo," 757–58.

²⁷ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace* (London: Routledge, 2005): 36.

²⁸ Wolfgang Petritsch, Karl Kaser, and Robert Pichler, eds., *Kosovo: Mythen, Daten, Fakten* (Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag, 1999): 206.

*“In front of my flag I give my besa and my life that I will die for freedom and for my land and I will obey my army. If I betray my comrades, they have the right to kill me. Now I am a soldier who fights for freedom.”*²⁹

The lessons this newly founded militant organization drew from the post-Dayton order were clear. International attention to the Kosovar struggle for independence can only be attracted via a violent struggle, with rising levels of violence against a stronger adversary, which might provoke crimes committed by the Serb side against the civilian population.

As historian John Fine assessed the rationale behind the KLA intentions:

*“...the violence that erupted in 1998 in Kosovo ... was in great part brought about by the United States and its allies, which at Dayton showed that violence pays, by awarding the Bosnian Serb aggressors with a mini republic in Bosnia while ignoring the nonviolent Kosovars entirely.”*³⁰

The first act of violence that could be attributed to the KLA took place on 11th February 1996, as the gates of Serb refugee camps were attacked with hand grenades in several cities in Kosovo.³¹ It was estimated that the KLA initially consisted of not more than 150 core members, which after their first attacks against refugee camps commenced with a sequence of shootings and bombings in several regions against Serbian police stations, military barracks as well as targeting civilian infrastructure.³²

In April 1996, KLA members murdered eight people, which was viewed as the first successful step of its goal of destabilizing the region. In the subsequent weeks, the organization avenged the murder of a Kosovar Albanian at the hands of an ethnic Serb by perpetrating the killings of six Serbs in the regions of Pec and Decan. Although the KLA did not immediately claim responsibility for the attacks, a letter was eventually published, in which the KLA admitted having overseen the previous attackpublicotal, 31 attacks in 1996, 55 in 1997, and 66 attacks in the

²⁹ Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000): 99.

³⁰ Peter Russell, "The Exclusion of Kosovo from the Dayton Negotiations," 500-501.

³¹ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace*, 36.

³² R. Craig Nation, "War in the Balkans, 1991–2002," 226.

beginning of 1998 were attributed to the KLA.³³ On 28th November 1997, KLA members first openly appeared in public at the funeral of an elementary teacher, slain by Serb forces. In front of a crowd of twenty thousand people, the three masked members announced, that the KLA was the sole force that fought for the “liberation and national unification of Kosovo”.³⁴

Despite this significant surge in violence and its first public appearances, the LDK kept denying the existence of the KLA and instead saw Serb extremists to be standing behind those attacks, which were trying to provoke more radical responses from the Kosovar side in order to legitimize a harsher and more repressive Serbian line against the Albanian population of Kosovo.³⁵ However, this blatant denial of reality was no longer sustainable as unforeseen events in the neighboring state of Albania had had direct ramifications on the situation in Kosovo.

In the spring of 1997, Albania descended into utter anarchy. State authority essentially collapsed. The reason for this implosion was the uncovering of a massive financial pyramid scheme committed by the President of Albania, Sali Berisha, in which hundreds of thousands of Albanian citizens had lost their savings. Initial mass protests turned into riots which eventually culminated in a full-scale civil insurrection against the Albanian state itself. Among other things, army weapons depots were looted, many of which were swiftly smuggled over the border into Kosovo.³⁶ From that time on, the KLA possessed the means to pursue its armed resistance on a large scale, especially as an increasing number of recruits joined the ranks of the militant organization.³⁷

³³ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace*, 36.

³⁴ Wolfgang Petritsch and Robert Pichler, *Kosovo-Kosova: Der lange Weg zum Frieden*, 131.

³⁵ Miranda Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo*, 293.

³⁶ Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge*, 120, 127-128.

³⁷ Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, 320.

B. Serbia After Dayton: Regime Survival and Political Strategy

i. Economic Grievances and Milosevic's Authoritarian Consolidation

After he signed the Dayton agreement, Milosevic returned to Belgrade triumphantly. His decision to sign the accords did not only improve his standing in the international community but bolstered his appeal vis-à-vis the Serb nationalists as well, as Milosevic succeeded in the task of carving out a separate Serb-ruled political entity in the newly constituted Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, his success and enhanced domestic as well as international reputation were only of short duration, as the Serbian economy kept shrinking. Although the Yugoslav break-up wars were concluded, the national economy remained in a rut as foreign capital was blocked from entering the country due to the preservation of the so-called “outer wall of sanctions”.³⁸ Milosevic's political momentum receded as well, as he could not adapt his policies from a wartime to a peacetime political environment. Against the backdrop of Serbia's dismal economic performance and the failure of creating a “Greater Serbia” in the previous wars, the political pressure on Milosevic kept mounting.

Widespread dissatisfaction with the government had been building up among the Serbian population over the past decade. Yet, these popular grievances were suppressed in times of constant war and fear. In the second half of the 1990s, however, they were finally unleashed and further exacerbated by the fall of Communism in eastern Europe and the relative decline of Serbian living standards.³⁹

Nonetheless, Slobodan Milosevic could not democratize the Yugoslav political institutions if he wanted to stay in power. Instead, he doubled down on his authoritarianism. Milosevic increasingly dominated the political sphere by applying a blend of decrees and micro-management. In the meantime, his wife, Mira Markovic, was adept at securing her husband's rule, by removing the nationalist faction of the ruling party from power. Moreover, she was the

³⁸ Adam LeBor, *Milosevic: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002): 291.

³⁹ V. P. Gagnon Jr., *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004): 67.

key figure in founding a rebranded neo-communist and pro-Yugoslav party, the Yugoslav United Left (JUL), which was essentially directly controlled by herself.⁴⁰ After clinging on to the means of power in the political sphere, Milosevic started to target independent radio and television stations as well. In early 1996, he nationalized the TV station “Studio B” and revamped it by firing journalists and changing its program. By the middle of the following year, fifty-five stations were closed down in total.⁴¹

The main reason why Milosevic could act politically in this arbitrary and authoritarian fashion had largely to do with the nature of the Serbian economic institutional framework, as he was able to gain or inherit the control over most of Serbia’s economic assets. Once his authority over them was established, Milosevic was swift to form a tight connection between the state and private sector and essentially set up mafia-like structures in the form of client-patron relationships. In this way, he was able to fundamentally buy loyalty as this system guaranteed that the Serbian private sector was essentially in the hands of his political allies. Nonetheless, Milosevic was keen to preserve some level, or at least the image of democracy, as he did not commit to the goal of establishing an outright dictatorial system.⁴²

ii. Rigged Local Elections and Mass Protests

In November 1996, one year after the signing of the Dayton agreement, local elections were held across Serbia. After the majority of cast votes was counted, it became clear that Milosevic’s party had lost massively in many large cities across the country.⁴³ The opposition parties had won a majority in over thirty-four local councils, which in total represented more than sixty percent of the entire Serbian population. However, the official voting commission blatantly rejected these stunning electoral results and declared thirty-three seats which the political opposition had won as void.

⁴⁰ Adam LeBor, *Milosevic: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002): 292–294, 297–298.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁴² Vjeran Pavlakovic, "Serbia Transformed? Political Dynamics in the Milosevic Era and After," in *Serbia Since 1989: Politics and Society Under Milosevic and After*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 14–15, 21.

⁴³ Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge*, 132.

Furthermore, it called for new local elections which were supposed to take place at a later date in the same month.⁴⁴

As a response to Milosevic's election theft, various student organizations started to stage mass anti-government protests across Serbia that would eventually continue for more than three consecutive months. These large-scale demonstrations constituted the clearest manifestation of the frustration and anger that had built up against the rule of Milosevic and his regime that an increasing number of Serbs held responsible for corruption, economic mismanagement and the spread of poverty among the average Serb population.⁴⁵ Moreover, many demonstrators wished to make a mark, and show the international community, that the people of Serbia were not in favor of war and dictatorship, but simply ordinary people who wanted to live in peace and relative prosperity instead.⁴⁶ Therefore, the daily mass demonstrations showcased the popular yearning for a change of the political-economic system of the country.⁴⁷ It was under these circumstances, that for the first time ever Slobodan Milosevic's rule appeared unsteady.

To free himself from this precarious situation, Milosevic became even more authoritarian. He regarded alleged external conspiracies and malevolent foreign forces as being culpable for the mass protests, who pursued the objective of trying to destabilize the country.⁴⁸ One month after the first demonstrations erupted, Milosevic described the demonstrators as "pro-Fascist" forces, whose unauthorized gatherings will not be tolerated any longer.⁴⁹

Eventually, rifts appeared in his own camp, as Milosevic started to banish party officials who showed solidarity or expressed sympathy for the protestors' aspirations. He gave the green light to all police units to violently suppress demonstrators. Splits also started to take place behind closed doors,

⁴⁴ V. P. Gagnon Jr., "The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s," 67.

⁴⁵ Adam LeBor, *Milosevic: A Biography*, 300–301.

⁴⁶ Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, 306.

⁴⁷ V. P. Gagnon Jr., "The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s," 67.

⁴⁸ LeBor, *Milošević*, 301.

⁴⁹ Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge*, 132–33.

as his wife, Mira Markovic, was in confrontation with the chief of the secret police, Jovica Stanisic, as the latter was against using police force to disperse the protests. Milosevic's and his party's conduct was not without ramifications on a global level, as the Western camp resorted to so-called "smart sanctions", which were exclusively levied against important individuals of his regime. Typically, these specific sanctions entailed a travel ban to Western countries as well as locking in private assets which were being held abroad.⁵⁰ With pressure on him and his regime elevated, Milosevic eventually caved in to a certain extent. For instance, he accepted his electoral defeat in the key city of Nis, after several members of his party laid out the schemes they applied to commit patent election fraud. In the end, he conceded fourteen of the largest nineteen Serbian cities to the political opposition.⁵¹

Additionally, the entire political situation shifted in a higher gear, when Milosevic's Montenegrin main ally, Prime minister Milo Djukanovic split ranks with Slobodan Milosevic and expressed his support for the opposition parties publicly instead. In the following year of 1997, Djukanovic was able to prevail in the race for the Presidency of Montenegro against Momir Bulatovic, who used to be a close ally of Milosevic. As Montenegro enjoyed the same representation as the Socialist Republic of Serbia in the federal parliament as well as in the federal defense council of what was left of Yugoslavia, Milo Djukanovic's electoral victory constituted a significant challenge to Milosevic's rule in Serbia. To many, this new situation marked a considerable change as the nation's hardliners had apparently exceeded their limits of power and were bent on losing further clout in the country.⁵²

However, Milosevic attempted to strike back by ordering police units to raid the universities, strongholds of the protests, and enacting a new law that handed direct control over the entirety of Serbian academic jobs to his Minister of Education.⁵³ Furthermore, he benefited to a great extent by the

⁵⁰ Adam LeBor, *Milosevic: A Biography*, 190–191, 301–303, 362.

⁵¹ V. P. Gagnon Jr., "The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s," 68.

⁵² Mladen Dragasevic, "The Newest Old State in Europe: Montenegro Regaining Independence," *ZEI Discussion Paper* no. 174 (2007): 8–9.

⁵³ Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 307.

opposition's incompetence of forming a coherent front against Milosevic as it intrinsically differed in its political convictions, ideologies and policy objectives. Adding to these difficulties was that many among the Serbian population regarded the opposition parties in a similar way they saw Milosevic, namely as authoritarian and corrupt individuals, craving for power and influence in the country.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, Milosevic's grip over Serbia's domestic political institutions loosened as the decade further progressed. To salvage his own position and retain control over the country, Slobodan Milosevic attentively monitored the political situation in the province of Kosovo, where an imminent armed conflict led by a then unknown militant group was apparently brewing. The issue which he was able to effectively exploit to rise to the heights of Yugoslav politics in the late 1980s, might throw him another lifeline, so his reasoning went. However, the facts on the ground in Kosovo had by then already changed fundamentally.

As secret police reports dispatched from Kosovo were piling up in Belgrade, the true nature of the situation was revealed. Namely, Serbia faced a grave threat to its national security, which this time did not stem from Kosovar Albanian mobsters, but instead from a serious and lethal guerrilla fighting force,⁵⁵ which increasingly clashed with the police and turned entire areas of Kosovo into no-go zones for Serbian security forces in the process.⁵⁶

These circumstances prompted Slobodan Milosevic to mobilize his country politically and to prepare it for an armed clash against the KLA. The means he utilized for these objectives, such as the control of the press and media landscape, and the exploitation of nationalist tales and symbols had been familiar for many years. However, it was Milosevic's constant readiness

⁵⁴ Vjeran Pavlakovic, "Serbia Transformed? Political Dynamics in the Milosevic Era and After," 25.

⁵⁵ Adam LeBor, *Milosevic: A Biography*, 310.

⁵⁶ Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, 320-321.

and proclivity to use harsh and raw power with which he attempted to prevail in Kosovo another time.⁵⁷

Slobodan Milosevic's decision to double down against the KLA and Kosovar Albanian population eventually escalated the situation in Kosovo to a degree where the international community felt compelled to intervene, first diplomatically, later militarily. Therefore, the Kosovo issue was back on center stage.

⁵⁷ Vjeran Pavlakovic, "Serbia Transformed? Political Dynamics in the Milosevic Era and After," 20-23.

Chapter II: Escalation, War and NATO Intervention

A. Failed Diplomacy

As the political situation between Belgrade and Pristina further deteriorated in early 1998, the conflict in Kosovo was eventually transformed from a political standoff between the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and Milosevic, into a full-scale insurrection, spearheaded by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), causing a buildup of troops in Kosovo of the Yugoslav Army (VJ) and the Serbian Interior Ministry special police (MUP) in the process.⁵⁸ Poised at fully destroying the KLA, it was now only a matter of time until the situation would escalate. At the beginning of the armed conflict, the US State Department outlined their main policy, consisting of the demand that no border can be changed unilaterally, as well as deeming the activities of the KLA as “terrorism”, while labeling actions undertaken by the Serbian forces as “police violence”.

Between February and October 1998, KLA and Serbian security forces clashed with each other in a cyclical manner, as KLA offensives led to Serbian reprisals against the Kosovar Albanian population. On 28th February 1998, after KLA fighters killed four Serbian policemen, a battle would ensue in the village of Likoshan, causing the death of 16 KLA members and mass protests of the Albanian population in Pristina that were violently put down by the Serbian riot police.⁵⁹ This first spout of violence culminated in the so-called “Drenica Massacre”, as 80 Albanians, including women and children, were killed by Serbian forces during clashes with the KLA in the villages of Prekaz i Ulët (Donji Prekaz) and Llausha (Lauša) at the beginning of March 1998.⁶⁰

To legitimize his actions and strengthen his stance, that the Kosovo conflict constituted a Serbian internal matter only, Milosevic called for a

⁵⁸ James Gow, "The War in Kosovo, 1998–1999," in *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative*, 2nd ed., (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2013): 305.

⁵⁹ Stefan Troebst, "The Kosovo Conflict, 1998," in *Die Konfliktentwicklung auf dem südlichen Balkan I*, Information zur Sicherheitspolitik, no. 17 (Vienna: Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, June 1999): 7-8.

⁶⁰ James Gow, "The War in Kosovo, 1998–1999," 307.

national referendum dated for 23rd April 1998. The issue at stake was if a path of international mediation on the Kosovo issue should be pursued. 97.73% of the ballots cast agreed with the stance of the Serbian government, that Kosovo is a domestic issue only. Furthermore, 42% of the Serbs participating in the referendum were in favor of driving the Albanian population out of Kosovo, while only a tiny fraction, 1.8% were in favor of Kosovar independence.⁶¹

This equipped Milosevic with a strong mandate to continue ethnic cleansing operations in Kosovo, which eventually reached a climax in mid-October 1998. At that time, the UNHCR deemed 200,000 people as refugees within Kosovo, with an additional 92,000 displaced people outside the region.⁶²

i. Holbrooke Agreements & OSCE Monitoring Missions

Although Milosevic was regarded as an essential factor for any potentially stable diplomatic solution by the Clinton Administration⁶³, a consensus was gradually formed among some members of the “Contact Group”, consisting of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia, that only a threat of force would prompt Milosevic to embrace more moderate objectives in Kosovo. However, disagreement was still present on which strategy should be implemented to reach this political goal. Fears circulated within the “Contact Group”, that a forceful separation of Kosovo from Serbia could potentially destabilize other parts of the Balkan region, as the ethnic Albanian minority of Macedonia might be induced to demand political unity with Albania and Kosovo and hence create a greater Albania. Moreover, Kosovo independence might also fuel separatist forces in the only recently created nation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, with Kosovo serving as a model of how to achieve unity with Croatia and Serbia respectively.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, in October 1998 NATO authorized airstrikes against Yugoslav security forces should they not pull out of Kosovo. Simultaneously, U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke was dispatched to Belgrade, to broker

⁶¹ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace*, 39.

⁶² Stefan Troebst, "The Kosovo Conflict, 1998," 1.

⁶³ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace*, 34.

⁶⁴ Richard Caplan, "International Diplomacy and the Crisis in Kosovo," 755.

a political settlement with Milosevic. After tough negotiations, Milosevic caved in to U.S. demands and agreed to reduce the size of the Serbian security forces by one-third.⁶⁵ Moreover, he greenlighted the deployment of two thousand OSCE international observers in Kosovo led by U.S. Ambassador William Walker. However, this number of OSCE observers was never fully reached.⁶⁶ Yet, an unstable agreement and ceasefire was achieved which, however, was not meant to last.

ii. The Racak Massacre and Its Consequences

After the number of Serbian security forces was reduced in Kosovo to fulfill the accords reached in the Holbrooke-Milosevic agreement, the KLA was swift to exploit the situation by resuming attacks and taking control over deserted Serbian military positions in the region, spawning a series of killings committed both by Albanians and Serbs as a consequence.⁶⁷ The Serbian side reacted by recommencing the ethnic cleansing of Albanians which would eventually reach a turning point. After the murder of six Serbian civilians and three Serb policemen by the KLA, Serbian forces encircled the village of Racak on January 15th, 1999. After shelling the village, Serbian police units entered the hamlet, indiscriminately killing and executing at least forty-five of the Albanian inhabitants.⁶⁸

After William Walker and his team of OSCE observers condemned the actions undertaken by the Serbian security forces as a massacre and an “unspeakable atrocity”, Milosevic attempted to expel him from the region. Additionally, he denied entry to the head of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, Judge Louise Arbour to the country, deeming the Racak massacre as KLA propaganda. These developments made Richard Holbrooke, who until the massacre had the initiative within the Clinton

⁶⁵ Norris, John. *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo*. Westport, CT: Praeger, (2005): xx-xi.

⁶⁶ James W. Pardew, *Peacemakers: American Leadership and the End of Genocide in the Balkans* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011): 209.

⁶⁷ Norris, John. *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo*. xi.

⁶⁸ James W. Pardew, *Peacemakers: American Leadership and the End of Genocide in the Balkans*, 212-214.

administration, lose clout vis-a-vis Secretary of State Madeline Albright, who from the very start favored a more confrontational approach towards Milosevic and the crisis in Kosovo. From this moment on, the United States embraced a firmer and tougher stance concerning Milosevic. As Albright's spokesperson, James Rubin stated:

*"Milosevic has been at the center of every crisis in the former Yugoslavia over the last decade. He is not simply part of the problem; Milosevic is the problem."*⁶⁹

This attitude paired with increased levels of violence committed by Serbian forces against the Albanians after the Racak massacre, further prompted the Clinton administration to both find a diplomatic settlement to stop the violence in Kosovo, as well as readying NATO forces for war.⁷⁰ While all member countries of the "Contact Group" agreed that some level of credible threat of force might be necessary, the European members pursued one last attempt to prevent war by pushing for another diplomatic initiative. As French President Jaques Chirac declared:

*"We must make one more attempt to negotiate a political solution. We Europeans must take responsibility for Europe."*⁷¹

This Anglo-French initiative was followed through a couple of weeks after the Racak massacre at the French châteaux of Rambouillet.

iii. The Rambouillet Negotiations

The conference was held between February 6th and February 23rd, 1999, and was co-hosted by the British and French foreign ministers who represented the Contact Group as well as the EU. The main objective of the negotiations was to prevent Serbia from continuing its fight against the KLA and stopping its ethnic cleansing campaign against the Kosovo Albanian population. To

⁶⁹ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace*, 47-49.

⁷⁰ James W. Pardew, *Peacemakers: American Leadership and the End of Genocide in the Balkans*, 217-218.

⁷¹ Mark Smith, "Kosovo Conflict: U.S. Diplomacy and Western Public Opinion," *CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy*, Paper 3 (Los Angeles: USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2009), 13.

achieve this objective, the Contact Group and EU followed the main purpose of finding an agreement that would lead to the disengagement of Serbian security forces from Kosovo and substituting them with the deployment of an international force spearheaded by NATO to the region. Moreover, the Western camp had the intention to lay the foundation of the self-government of Kosovo.⁷² As NATO General Secretary Javier Solana already stated on 28th January 1999:

*“... [A settlement that] will provide an enhanced status for Kosovo, preserve the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and protect the rights of all ethnic groups.”*⁷³

The Albanian delegation at Rambouillet consisted of both LDK and KLA members and was led by Hashim Thaci. The Serbian negotiating team was composed of rather minor Yugoslav political figures and Slobodan Milosevic was absent during the entire duration of the conference.⁷⁴ From the onset of the negotiations, NATO seemed willing to intervene in Kosovo, as bomb threats were made consistently towards the Serbian delegation, in case they refused to sign an agreement.⁷⁵

At the conference, U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright was present as well and offered three different outcomes to the Albanian negotiating team. If they refused to agree to a diplomatic settlement, they might lose the support offered by the Western camp. If the Albanian delegation signed, yet the Serbian side did not, would essentially greenlight NATO military intervention in Kosovo. If both delegations were to sign an agreement, NATO would have been able to deploy peacekeepers to the region and war could have been avoided.⁷⁶ After several weeks of arduous negotiations, the Albanian delegation eventually signed the agreement in mid-March 1999. Milosevic, on the other hand, rejected the Rambouillet accord outright, as the

⁷² James Gow, "The War in Kosovo, 1998–1999," 312, 326, 343.

⁷³ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace*, 50.

⁷⁴ Marc Weller, "The Rambouillet Conference on Kosovo," *International Affairs* 75, no. 2 (1999): 216-218

⁷⁵ Milan Rezun, *Europe's Nightmare: The Struggle for Kosovo* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001): 49.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

provision of pulling the Serbian security forces out of Kosovo and essentially handing the region over to NATO would have made him and his regime lose all legitimacy among the Serbian population.⁷⁷ With Milosevic's decision, the path was clear for NATO to turn its bomb threats against Serbia into reality.

B. NATO, War Strategies and the Reasons for Intervention

i. Humanitarian Considerations

Humanitarian concerns over the Kosovar Albanian population constituted one of the key pillars, at least officially stated, of NATO's justification to directly enter the conflict. Among NATO member states, the conviction prevailed that the state-sponsored violence, the ethnic cleanings and displacements of thousands of people, which were witnessed in Kosovo in 1998 were not allowed to be repeated. Moreover, frustration among U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright, who in her former role as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, had failed in pushing for an international intervention to stop the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, contributed to a firm stance against Milosevic's actions in Kosovo in the Clinton administration. This complemented the overall change that took place within the international community, where after the ethnic violence and genocides previously witnessed in Bosnia and Rwanda, the readiness to interfere in states' internal affairs increased, in order to protect endangered groups and uphold human rights in despotic states.⁷⁸

As Richard Holbrooke wrote in his memoirs:

"There will be other Bosnias in our lives - areas where early outside involvement can be decisive, and American leadership will be required. The world's richest nation, one that presumes to great moral authority cannot simply make worthy appeals to conscience and call on others to carry the

⁷⁷ Stephen T. Hosmer, *The Conflict Over Kosovo: Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001): 16-17.

⁷⁸ Paul Latawski and Martin A. Smith, *The Kosovo Crisis and the Evolution of Post-Cold War European Security* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003): 14, 27-32.

*burden. The world will look to Washington for more than rhetoric the next time we face a challenge to peace.”*⁷⁹

Therefore, the NATO intervention in the Bosnian War in 1995, and the consequent swift surrender of Bosnian Serb forces and the signing of the Dayton agreement in the same year, decisively undergirded this line of reasoning.⁸⁰

ii. NATO Credibility

However, the willingness of the United States and NATO, to readily intervene in the Kosovo conflict, cannot be exclusively traced back to humanitarian concerns, as a whole array of practical considerations guided Western decisionmakers as well. The most prominent reasons among them featured the role of NATO in a post-Cold War world, as well as the degree of U.S. involvement in European security issues.⁸¹ In this regard, the Kosovo war did not take place in a vacuum, but instead in a time in which the entire security architecture of Europe was irrevocably altered as among other things, the nature and aims of NATO and the transatlantic community changed. It was in this moment of great political upheaval, in which Milosevic’s actions and objectives in Kosovo directly countered the prevailing political vision in the Western camp, namely of a Europe that is “whole and free”, with NATO serving as the arbiter of this vision.⁸²

Therefore, Milosevic challenged the very core of NATO’s ongoing existence, as the alliance sought for a new purpose and profile, in order to stay relevant in a world in which both the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact had no longer existed. To achieve this aim, NATO attempted to develop a new concept that would be adequate in reacting to the security challenges of a post-Cold War order. It quickly adapted the stance, that NATO must operate

⁷⁹ Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge*, 123.

⁸⁰ Petritsch, Wolfgang, and Robert Pichler, *Kosovo-Kosova: Der lange Weg zum Frieden*, 271.

⁸¹ Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804–2012* (New York: Viking, 1999): 659.

⁸² Norris, John. *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo*, xxiii.

beyond the territories of its member states, to be able to preserve its role of a global security player. The rationale: “NATO must go out of area or it will go out of business”⁸³, was officially conceptualized in April 1999, at NATO’s 50th anniversary summit, where the pledge to preserve NATO as the core foundation of the European security architecture was reaffirmed.⁸⁴

It was in this context that most NATO member states reasoned that the alliance is destined to lose its credibility, in case it chooses not to intervene militarily on humanitarian grounds in the Kosovo crisis, especially as it had already proclaimed its intention to launch an air campaign against Serbia. Therefore, NATO presented its first “out of area” operation as a moral necessity to protect the Kosovar Albanian population from human rights abuses perpetrated by the Serbian security forces.⁸⁵

iii. NATO Intervention, its Costs and Strategy

On 24th March 1999, NATO launched its military operation against Yugoslavia titled “Operation Allied Force”. On that day U.S. President Bill Clinton announced to the public, that:

*“[Milosevic] has rejected the balanced and fair peace accords that our Allies and partners, including Russia, proposed last month – a peace agreement that Kosovo’s ethnic Albanians courageously accepted. Instead, his forces have intensified their attacks, burning down Kosovar Albanian villages and murdering civilians. As I speak, more Serb forces are moving into Kosovo, and more people are fleeing their homes. ... Kosovo’s crisis now is full blown, and if we do not act, clearly it will get even worse.”*⁸⁶

In NATO, the rationale prevailed that it would take only an insignificant scope and scale of bombing, to force Milosevic back to the negotiating table.

⁸³ Ronald D. Asmus, Richard L. Kugler, and F. Stephen Larrabee, “Building a New NATO,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 4 (1993): 28-31.

⁸⁴ R. Craig Nation, “*War in the Balkans, 1991–2002*,” 278–279.

⁸⁵ Misha Glenny, “*The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804–2012*,” 657-659.

⁸⁶ Norris, John. *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo*, 6-7.

As U.S. Secretary of State Albright stated on the day “Operation Allied Force” was launched:

*“I don’t see this as a long-term operation. I think it is something that is achievable in a relatively short period of time.”*⁸⁷

It was in that spirit that NATO declared various war aims within the first week of its bombing campaign. These ranged from intending to make Milosevic sign the Rambouillet accords and destroy the Yugoslav forces, to forestalling a human disaster in Kosovo and containing the conflict in the region.⁸⁸ The achievement of any of these goals necessitated the rupture of Serbian supply routes into Kosovo and hence deny access to Serbian forces to the region. Accordingly, the major objective was the destruction of infrastructure by aerial bombardment such as bridges, roads and railways as well as targeting refineries and army communication facilities.⁸⁹

However, the ambiguity surrounding NATO’s war goals paired with its resolve not to deploy any ground troops in Kosovo, turned the war into a costly endeavor, both in a material as well as operational sense. This was due to several reasons. First, the striking of infrastructure targets via NATO’s air campaign was characterized by collateral damage, meaning deaths among the Serbian civilian population, a toll that as the war dragged on increasingly appeared as a measure of general punishment.⁹⁰ Moreover, the effectiveness of the bombing campaign was reduced due to bad weather conditions as well as due to the high level of risk aversion concerning potential casualties among NATO troops. Accordingly, NATO military planes were instructed to fly at very high altitudes in order to stay out of the range of Serbian antiaircraft guns. Under these conditions, the imprecision of NATO air strikes and hence the number of accidents that occurred as military targets could not be properly verified increased.⁹¹ Moreover, NATO’s overwhelming airpower proved to

⁸⁷ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace*, 56.

⁸⁸ Misha Glenny, “*The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804–2012*,” 657–658.

⁸⁹ Milan Rezun, *Europe's Nightmare: The Struggle for Kosovo*, 56.

⁹⁰ Misha Glenny, “*The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804–2012*,” 657–658.

⁹¹ Milan Rezun, *Europe's Nightmare: The Struggle for Kosovo*, 56.

be ineffective against the small and fast-moving Serbian paramilitary and security forces operating in Kosovo, which were not stopped from ethnically cleansing Albanians from the region.⁹²

Among the most significant accidents caused by the circumstances surrounding NATO's air campaign was the strike of a Serbian passenger train on April 12th, killing ten civilians, the use of cluster bombs in the city of Nis on May 7th, resulting in twenty civilian casualties, as well as the bombing of the Dragisa Misovic Hospital in Belgrade, which led to the killing of eighty-seven civilians. However, the most consequential mishap took place on May 8th, 1999, as NATO warplanes accidentally struck the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, resulting in the death of three Chinese diplomats.⁹³

The costs of the war on the tactical and material level were also significant. In fact, it is argued that in a bomb for bomb calculation, "Operation Allied Force" constituted the costliest military operation in history. To give a few examples, one cruise missile was tagged at \$1 million, a Hellfire missile at \$42,700, and a 2,000-pound bomb cost \$26,000. Ninety percent of all bombs and missiles utilized against Serbia were those types of precision-guided weapons. The delivery of twenty-four Apache attack helicopters from Germany to Albania alone cost \$700 million. These expensive weapon systems were mostly used to strike Serbian military targets that ran at a much lower cost.⁹⁴ Furthermore, the economic damage inflicted on Serbia and Kosovo were estimated to be between seven and ten billion dollars, while the neighboring countries of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia experienced a short-term drop in their GDP of five percent.⁹⁵

iv. Serbian War Strategy and the Conclusion of "Operation Allied Force"

Against the backdrop of the commencement of NATO's air campaign, Milosevic ordered his troops to systematically deport all Kosovo Albanians

⁹² James W. Pardew, *Peacemakers: American Leadership and the End of Genocide in the Balkans*, 226.

⁹³ Human Rights Watch, "Appendix A: Incidents Involving Civilian Deaths in Operation Allied Force," in *Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2000): <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/nato/Natbm200-02.htm>.

⁹⁴ Milan Režun, *Europe's Nightmare: The Struggle for Kosovo*, 56.

⁹⁵ Misha Glenny, "The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804–2012," 660.

from the region. This course of action was named “Operation Horseshoe” and led to the expulsion of over 850,000 people, which constituted eighty percent of the entire Kosovar population. Milosevic’s ethnic cleansing campaign did not exclusively serve the goal of tilting the demographic balance in Kosovo to Serbia’s favor, but also to export the conflict to neighboring states, as he hoped that Albania and Macedonia would fold under the pressure of hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding into the two countries.⁹⁶

Alongside extending the conflict beyond the region, Milosevic attempted to acquire time and secure freedom of maneuver for his forces operating in Kosovo. To achieve these two interrelated goals, he tried to diminish the cohesion within NATO by exploiting the rifts between its member states that appeared over the civilian deaths caused by NATO’s air campaign. From this inner discord, Milosevic derived the rationale that NATO’s resolve as well as the scale of its aerial assault are both limited. Initially, this logic seemed to have been proven right as Serbian forces could not have been prevented from launching successful advances against the KLA in Kosovo, as NATO’s air campaign only had a minor effect on their operations on the ground. Initial success on the Serbian side, however, was swiftly reversed, as NATO had in fact developed plans for a multi-layered air warfare beforehand. Accordingly, the scope of military targets was gradually increased until the Serbian capital Belgrade itself was attacked.⁹⁷

On May 13th, 1999, this war plan was publicly announced and implemented over the succeeding days as NATO systemically struck the Serbian economic infrastructure including its electricity grid. As the weather conditions improved as well, the number of NATO warplanes involved in “Operation Allied Force” expanded from 200 to almost 500 at the conclusion of May.⁹⁸ The increased military pressure was supplemented by higher levels

⁹⁶ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace*, 60-62.

⁹⁷ Barry R. Posen, "The War for Kosovo: Serbia's Political-Military Strategy," *International Security* 24, no. 4 (2000): 14, 17-33.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

of economic pressure when the international community simultaneously levied sanctions including an oil embargo on Serbia.

Against this backdrop as well as his wish not to diminish the cordial relations between the Russian Federation and the Western camp, Russian President Yeltsin pushed for a swift conclusion of the NATO military intervention against Serbia. On May 6th, 1999, at the G8-Summit in Bonn, the foreign ministers of all participating nations agreed on a set of comprehensive principles that ought to be followed to put an end to the Kosovo war. Among others, these included an immediate stop of violence and repression in Kosovo, the withdrawal of all military, police and paramilitary units from the province, the deployment of an international security force under an UN-mandate that would implement the agreed upon objectives, the return of all refugees and displaced people from Kosovo, as well as the launch of a political process that would both provide substantial autonomy to Kosovo while also respecting the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia.⁹⁹

Finnish President Matti Ahtisaari, Russian delegate to the Balkans Viktor Chernomyrdin, and Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott were tasked to transform these principles into a concrete peace plan. On June 2nd, 1999, Ahtisaari and Chernomyrdin traveled to Belgrade where Milosevic agreed on the peace provisions. The Serbian parliament ratified the agreement on the following day. After rocky negotiations between NATO and the Yugoslav Army, the “Military Technical Agreement” was signed on June 9th, 1999, in which the technicalities of the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo were determined. One day later, on June 10th, 1999, The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1244, which was based on the agreements reached the preceding days. Henceforth, the Kosovo war was officially concluded.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Petritsch, Wolfgang, and Robert Pichler, *Kosovo-Kosova: Der lange Weg zum Frieden*, 297-298.

¹⁰⁰ R. Craig Nation, “*War in the Balkans, 1991–2002*,” 259.

Chapter III: Geopolitical Consequences and Great Power Lessons

A. International Law Dimensions

“To those for whom the Kosovo action heralded a new era when States and groups of States can take military action outside the established mechanisms for enforcing international law, one might ask: Is there not a danger of such interventions undermining the imperfect, yet resilient, security system created after the Second World War, and of setting dangerous precedents for future interventions without a clear criterion to decide who might invoke these precedents and in what circumstances?”¹⁰¹

The U.S.-led NATO intervention in Kosovo carried both immediate as well as long-term consequences, in Europe and beyond. On the one hand, no agreement concerning the actual war aims regarding Kosovo existed among the NATO member states, as the alliance did not explicitly conduct its military intervention to establish an independent state of Kosovo. On the other hand, the alliance tested out a new concept, namely the dogma of “Humanitarian intervention”. Fundamentally, this doctrine is defined as the right to engage as an external power in the internal matters of a sovereign state to halt crimes against humanity against its own populations.¹⁰²

These international ramifications are multi-layered in nature as they have led to novel concepts in international law, a reconfigured and reset purpose of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have contributed to the overhaul of the U.S. foreign policy rationale, as well as have contributed to developments in the geopolitical stratagem of the Russian Federation. This chapter delves into all these key aspects.

The main focus will be on the “R2P” concept, what it is, how it came about and, how it was applied by both the United States of America and the Russian Federation in multiple conflicts that sprang up as the 21st century progressed. Subsequently, a dynamic was created between both nations that significantly contributed to the deterioration of bilateral relations and mutual

¹⁰¹ Alex J. Bellamy, *The Responsibility to Protect: Towards a Living Reality* (United Nations Association UK): 8.

¹⁰² Misha Glenny, “*The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804–2012*,” 669.

political understanding, as both the United States as well as Russia have drawn different lessons from the geopolitical and institutional developments that were triggered by the U.S.-led NATO intervention in the 1999 Kosovo War.

In its essence, this chapter argues that the armed NATO intervention in Kosovo contributed massively to the philosophical foundation of later wars and military interventions of both the United States and Russia in countries such as Afghanistan, Georgia, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Ukraine.

i. The Legal Formation of the “Responsibility to Protect” Concept

The NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 raised one fundamental question which would bear long-lasting consequences for the international state system. Namely, under what conditions may the use of force of an external party against a sovereign state be justified in order to protect parts or the entire domestic population of the same state? This question led to the creation of a novel concept: The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a term first coined in 2001, merely two years after the conclusion of the war in Kosovo. It was officially approved by heads of State and Government at the World Summit in 2005. In its essence, the concept of Responsibility to Protect attempts to establish a global order which is void of crimes against humanity, genocide, ethnic cleansing and war crimes as it presses all members of the UN to protect all its populations from these crimes. Using this definition, the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo was deemed “illegal but legitimate”.¹⁰³

Nonetheless, first attempts to define or justify the principle of foreign intervention in the internal affairs of other nations dates back to earlier times. In 1859, philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote in his essay “A Few Words on Non-Intervention”:

“Whether a nation is justified in taking part, on either side, in the civil wars or party contests of another; and chiefly, whether it may justifiably aid the people of another country in struggling for liberty; or may impose on a

¹⁰³ Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect*, 5-11.

country any particular government or institutions, either as being best for the country itself, or as necessary for the security of its neighbours."¹⁰⁴

Despite these earlier conceptualizations and definitions of "Humanitarian intervention", the "Responsibility to Protect" principle is unique in several aspects as it 1) considers armed intervention as an ultima ratio measure, 2) must be authorized by the UN Security Council, while unilateral military actions undertaken by one or multiple states is deemed illegal, 3) exclusively applies to a fixed set of occasions such as crimes against humanity and genocide, and 4) does not grant states the right to armed intervention but instead assigns a responsibility, namely to protect.¹⁰⁵

In 1999, the year of the Kosovo War, UN General Secretary Kofi Annan quipped:

*"State sovereignty, in its most basic sense, is being redefined ... States are now widely understood to be the servants of their people, not vice versa."*¹⁰⁶

However, this evolved understanding of state sovereignty conflicted with its conventional and customary comprehension, namely that sovereignty entitles states to the right to non-interference in its domestic issues and discourses by any external powers. This concept was enshrined in Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, adopted in 1945.¹⁰⁷

ii. The Framework of the Articulation of "R2P" and Its Legal Ambiguity

The development of the "Responsibility to Protect" principle, however, was made only possible by a unique set of geopolitical circumstances that were present in the 1990s and early 2000s. As the USSR had dissolved in 1991, the United States became the last remaining global superpower which was

¹⁰⁴ Margherita Liverani, "A Comparative Analysis of the Western and Russian Approach to Responsibility to Protect: The Case Study of Syria" (LUISS University, 2020): 4.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁶ Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect*, 8.

¹⁰⁷ Vesselin Popovski and Nicholas Turner, "Legality and Legitimacy in International Order," Policy Brief, United Nations University, (2008): 2.

unleashed from the constraints imposed in them by the former bipolar international system of the Cold War.¹⁰⁸ Subsequently, it was poised to spread its core values, such as democracy and human rights across the globe.¹⁰⁹ At its core, the conviction prevailed that it is both feasible and desirable to change the behavior and values of other countries, especially as after the collapse of the Soviet Union, more liberal democracies emerged in the former Eastern bloc. From this political development, the rationale derived that an increasing number of countries were open to the imposition of Western values, which would then adapt their domestic as well as foreign policies in the process accordingly.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, a consensus soon emerged among many non-Western nations, that the spread and imposition of Western values via the doctrines of “Humanitarian intervention” and “Responsibility to Protect” would hand global powers, specifically the United States of America, a high level of impunity as no credible guarantee could be discerned that it would not abuse its hegemonic power for its own national interests and purposes.¹¹¹ Consequently, many nations in the non-Western camp regarded the United States with caution and suspicion, as they viewed the “R2P” principle simply as a tool to arbitrarily mark other countries as “good” or “bad” and intervene in their national affairs according to their own strategic and economic interests.¹¹²

Their concerns seemed to be legitimate, when for example then U.S. President Bill Clinton justified the NATO intervention in Kosovo by stating:

“...is not only the morally right thing for America, it is the right thing for our security interests”¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Gorana Grgic, "An Evolving Legacy of the Kosovo Intervention," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2019): 3.

¹⁰⁹ Martha Finnemore, "Changing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention," chap. 3 in *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 5.

¹¹⁰ Liverani, "A Comparative Analysis," 7, 125.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹² Gorana Grgic, "The Evolving Legacy of the Kosovo Intervention," *US Foreign Policy* (2019): 195.

¹¹³ Liverani, "A Comparative Analysis," 12.

Then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Tony Blair uttered a very similar conviction when he declared during his “Chicago Speech” in 1999, that:

*“No longer is our existence as states under threat. Now our actions are guided by a more subtle blend of mutual self-interest and moral purpose in defending the values we cherish. In the end values and interests merge. If we can establish and spread the values of liberty, the rule of law, human rights and an open society then that is in our national interests too.”*¹¹⁴

This reasoning, however, clashes directly with certain key principles that were established with the adoption of the UN Charter, which explicitly prohibits the use of force against any nation with the sole exception when three criteria are met. First, in case the state in which military force is used consents to it.¹¹⁵ Second, states are permitted to use military force as an act of self-defense in case of an attack by one or multiple states on its territory. And third, when the use of military force is authorized by the UN Security Council via a concrete resolution.¹¹⁶

However, none of these benchmarks were fulfilled in the case of NATO’s intervention in Kosovo, as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia did not concur to the use of force, there was no authorization granted by the UN Security Council, and NATO could not credibly argue along the lines of having acted in self-defense as none of its member states faced an armed attack on their sovereign territories by any other non-member state. Therefore, the NATO intervention in Kosovo constituted a normative rupture as it opened the debate between the mutually exclusive concepts of legality and legitimacy with regards to military interventions.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Tony Blair, "Doctrine of the International Community," speech to the Economic Club, Chicago, April 22, 1999:
<https://archive.globalpolicy.org/empire/humanint/1999/0422blair.htm>.

¹¹⁵ Grgic, "Evolving Legacy," 193-194.

¹¹⁶ Fernando G. Nuñez-Mietz, "Legalization and the Legitimation of the Use of Force: Revisiting Kosovo," *International Organization* 72 (2018): 741; Popovski and Turner, "Legality and Legitimacy," 741.

¹¹⁷ Grgic, "Evolving Legacy," 188-194.

B. Transformation of Western Interventionism

i. The Evolved Rationale of NATO

“You remember de Gaulle’s definition of NATO: “An organization, imposed upon the Atlantic Alliance, which amounts to nothing else than the military and political subordination of West Europe to the United States of America.” In the meantime, I must admit I felt a little ashamed when, in Belgrade, having been asked why this president (Milosevic...) readily receives an American and not a Frenchman, a Serbian member of the democratic opposition answered: “At any rate, it’s better to talk to the master rather than to his servants.”¹¹⁸

To be able to understand how NATO changed after its intervention in Kosovo, how its mission and purpose were revamped, it is important to first consider the situation the organization found itself in at the beginning of the 1990s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, NATO underwent a fundamental transition. The organization attempted to adapt to this new post-Cold War environment by drafting the “Strategic Concept” of 1991. In this document it was acknowledged that the strategic environment has changed dramatically as the world today is filled with “diverse and multi-directional risks”. Consequently, the original purpose of the organization, namely the (self-)defense of its member states in case of a conventional war with the Soviet Union, had lost its relevance, as the new geopolitical environment necessitated competencies in crisis management and conflict prevention.¹¹⁹

Yet despite these formal acknowledgements, the 1991 Strategic Concept could not, by itself, resolve the fundamental question of why NATO should continue to exist. In this regard, applying a neorealist theoretical approach is again useful. According to this theoretical approach, alliances are temporary entities that serve the objective of deterring and/or defending against a

¹¹⁸ Miron Rezun, *Europe's Nightmare: The Struggle for Kosovo* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001):

¹¹⁹ James Sperling and Mark Webber, "NATO: From Kosovo to Kabul," *International Affairs* 85, no. 3 (2009): 491-511, 500.

common adversary. Therefore, alliances are contingent on the existence of a specific threat that, so the theory accords, will dissolve as cooperation between the former allied members falls apart as soon as the common threat has ceded.¹²⁰ In this scenario, alliances lose their overall purpose and possible disputes or conflicts could arise between the former allied powers once the institutional structure that held them together has disappeared.¹²¹

Applying this theoretical method to the situation NATO found itself in at the end of the Cold War, one may attest that the alliance's purpose of being had utterly vanished as the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev embarked on a fundamental reformist course in which the Communist states in eastern Europe were dismantled, the Warsaw Pact dissolved and subsequently the potential threat of conflict with the former Eastern bloc became highly unlikely. Furthermore, the financial burden of sustaining NATO turned untenable.¹²² This constituted a situation which made many policy analysts conclude that NATO has surpassed the point where its existence is still relevant or warranted for and the organization's subsequent dissolution ought to be expected.¹²³

Therefore, and despite the acknowledgements made in the 1991 Strategic Concept, which attempted to reformulate NATO's role, the organization had experienced significant turmoil as no consent existed among its member states on questions such as what specific novel functions NATO should embrace and how the command structure ought to be adapted accordingly. Against this backdrop, the dissolution of NATO seemed quite realistic.

However, Kosovo changed all of this. To quote from a report of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly that was written after the conclusion of "Operation Allied Force":

¹²⁰ Celeste A. Wallander, "Institutional Assets and Adaptability: NATO After the Cold War," *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 705.

¹²¹ Josef Joffe, "Is There Life After Victory? What NATO Can and Cannot Do," *The National Interest*, no. 41 (1995): 19.

¹²² John S. Duffield, "NATO's Functions after the Cold War," *Political Science Quarterly* 109, no. 5 (Winter 1994-1995): 765.

¹²³ Robert B. McCalla, "NATO's Persistence after the Cold War," *International Organization* 50, no. 3 (1996): 446.

*“Virtually everything that has been said about the Alliance's roles and mission will sooner or later have to be reconsidered in light of this event.”*¹²⁴

In contrast to the United Nations and OSCE, NATO constituted the only international organization that was able to effectively intervene in the Kosovo War, thereby indirectly proving certain key tenets of the Realist theoretical approach, namely the inherent anarchical state of the international system and the absence of a unitary global authority, correct.¹²⁵ Moreover, Operation Allied Force showcased the internal cohesion of and intense cooperation between NATO allies. This combination of multiple factors helped NATO to strengthen and underscore its image of being a vital part of the post-Cold War European security architecture.¹²⁶ NATO embraced this reconfigured role by writing it down on paper in the form of strategic documents. In April 1999, the alliance released a new strategic concept that built on the previous ones drafted after the end of the Cold War but redefined NATO's understanding of crises. As the new NATO strategy read:

*“[NATO] will seek, in cooperation with other organizations, to prevent conflict, or, should a crisis arise, to contribute to its effective management, consistent with international law, including through the possibility of conducting non-Article 5 crisis response operations.”*¹²⁷

It was this institutional overhaul that embedded NATO's newly established broader mandate, which was much more extensive than the original treaty had envisioned, which set the template for its subsequent interventions in the 21st century. Moreover, the new strategic concept argued that it was necessary for NATO to conduct its intervention in the Kosovo War despite no formal mandate by the UN Security Council to be able to defend the “western values”

¹²⁴ Sperling and Webber, "NATO: From Kosovo to Kabul," 498.

¹²⁵ Philip Spassov, "NATO, Russia and European Security: Lessons Learned from Conflicts in Kosovo and Libya," *Connections* 13, no. 3 (2014): 31.

¹²⁶ Paul Latawski and Martin A. Smith, *The Kosovo Crisis and the Evolution of Post-Cold War European Security* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 61.

¹²⁷ Dovydas Rogulis, "NATO Military Interventions in Kosovo, Libya, Afghanistan and Their Impact on Relations with Russia after the Cold War" (West Virginia University), (2014): 26.

on which NATO rests on. While speaking about the new strategic concept, President Clinton quipped:

*“What NATO did here this weekend [NATO 50th Anniversary Summit April 1999], was to reaffirm our commitment to a common future, rooted in common humanity.”*¹²⁸

Therefore, it was there, at the 50th Anniversary NATO Summit where NATO fully embraced its new role and embarked on its new purpose of spreading and promoting democracy and “western values”, as the task to defend them against the supposed Soviet threat in Europe was finished. Henceforth, this development constituted a fundamental shift away from NATO’s original rationale towards its revolutionized mandate of managing a diverse set of potential security challenges. To tackle any potential future challenges and security risks, it was mandated to reframe the organization as an alliance of shared values, complemented and expressed by a tight transatlantic bond which merges the security interests of Europe with those of North America.¹²⁹

In the light of this new strategic doctrine, Operation Allied Force composed the first action of “collective defense against outside aggression”, in which no territory or national interest was in fact defended but instead the values and principles shared by all NATO member states such as freedom, democracy and human rights. Furthermore, it was purported that this specific set of values ought to be spread to other regions in Europe as well, while any kind of charge against them will be regarded as an attack against NATO itself.¹³⁰

That the alliance’s novel purpose and identity was in fact born by blatantly breaking international law by launching its bombing campaign against Serbia without UNSC authority seemed to be an irony that nobody wished to contemplate. However, as fundamental the Kosovo War was on NATO’s core identity and institutional purpose, the Western-led intervention was highly

¹²⁸ Spassov, "NATO, Russia and European Security", 29.

¹²⁹ M. J. Williams, *The Good War: NATO and the Liberal Conscience in Afghanistan* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 29-30.

¹³⁰ Paul Latawski and Martin A. Smith, *The Kosovo Crisis and the Evolution of Post-Cold War European Security*, 163-165.

formative for the independently drafted foreign policy of its most powerful and important member state, the United States of America. The next section will delve into this issue and attempts to discern which specific rationales were drawn within the U.S. foreign policymaking circles.

ii. Effects on U.S. Foreign Policy

As much as the Kosovo War of 1999 marked a vital turning point in the rationale and stratagem of NATO, the war also proved to be a critical juncture for U.S. foreign policy as Operation Allied Force subsequently altered its character in the process. Given the fact that the Kosovo War took place chronologically between the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 terror attacks, it is essential to understand the specific ramifications the war had on the discussions and trends surrounding U.S. foreign policymaking, especially since 9/11.¹³¹

In fact, the Kosovo War represented a genuine volte-face in the approach to U.S. foreign policy for multiple reasons. First, Operation Allied Force was not primarily pursued to fulfill strategic or economic calculations, but instead to achieve ideological aims. Second, the war was not waged to preserve NATO's defensive nature but instead to enlarge the military alliance in Europe while at the same time almost completely disregarding Russian and Chinese national interests.¹³²

This could not have been more distant from the foreign policy tenets which were crafted during the Cold War era, as those established, that war should only be waged in the pursuit of clearly defined strategic and geopolitical interests. The Kosovo War, however, marked not only a change in the reasons why the United States are supposed to go to war, but also how it should conduct its corresponding military strategies. As the traditional U.S. approach to war was characterized by the aim of demonstrating and implementing straight and overpowering military force, the new foreign

¹³¹ Dunn, David Hastings. "Innovation and Precedent in the Kosovo War: The Impact of Operation Allied Force on US Foreign Policy." *International Affairs* 85, no. 3 (2009): 531.

¹³² Kurth, James. "First War of the Global Era: Kosovo and U.S. Grand Strategy." In *War Over Kosovo: Politics and Strategy in a Global Age*, edited by Andrew J. Bacevich and Eliot A. Cohen, 93. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

policy rationale that evolved over the course of the 1990s, held that it is air power alone that could effectively achieve U.S. military and political objectives. Even though the Kosovo War did not single-handedly affect this shift in military doctrine, it nonetheless helped to solidify this novel way of warfare.¹³³

Therefore, the Kosovo War embodied the apex of American humanitarian interventionist thinking, a brief military conflict that succeeded past ones such as those Western/U.S.-led armed interventions in Kuwait in 1991, Somalia in 1992, and Bosnia in 1995. Unconstrained from the rigid strategic environment of the Cold War, the United States was able to form a new foreign policy identity, one that portrayed itself as a force of and for global stability. In its essence, the American unipolar moment in the 1990s caused the humanitarian interventionist principle to gain an increasing influence in U.S. foreign policymaking until it essentially replaced the foreign policymaking requirements of the Cold War.¹³⁴

In this regard, it is important to make a direct connection to the prior discussion on the evolved interpretation of international law and some of its most basic principles. During the Kosovo War, the United States demonstrated that it reserves for itself the right to intervene with its armed forces in the domestic affairs of other sovereign nations, even without the authorization of the respective country, if it perceives the nation in question to be incapable of guaranteeing or upholding basic human rights and individual liberties for its own population. In its essence, the United States enshrined the idea in its foreign policymaking apparatus, that national sovereignty is a conditional subject, contingent on national obligations to concepts such as human rights and justice.¹³⁵

¹³³ Cohen, Eliot A. "Kosovo and the New American Way of War." In *War Over Kosovo: Politics and Strategy in a Global Age*, edited by Andrew J. Bacevich and Eliot A. Cohen, 38–62. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

¹³⁴ Dunn, David Hastings. "Innovation and Precedent in the Kosovo War: The Impact of Operation Allied Force on US Foreign Policy." *International Affairs* 85, no. 3 (2009): 532.

¹³⁵ Brown, Seyom. *The Illusion of Control: Force and Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, (2003): 30.

It is no overstatement or hyperbolic claim if one considers the effects of the Kosovo War on the U.S. foreign policy rationale to have been fundamentally transformative and long-lasting. To underscore the significance of this essential change in foreign policymaking, it is appropriate to analyze Operation Allied Force by applying the principles of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, a strategic concept that emerged in the wake of the post-Vietnam and post-Gulf War U.S. foreign policymaking circles respectively.

The doctrine established eight specific questions which ought to be answered accordingly during the decision-making process to launch a military intervention or not. These are the following: 1) Was an essential national interest endangered? 2) Did the US and NATO have a clear and reachable goal? 3) Were the risks and costs completely and genuinely analyzed? 4) Were all other non-violent policy tools fully exhausted? 5) Was there a plausible exit strategy to prevent indefinite entanglement? 6) Were the consequences of US and NATO actions fully considered? 7) Was the action supported by the American people and Congress? 8) Did the US and NATO have genuine broad international support?¹³⁶

However, none of these eight required thresholds were met by the planning and execution of Operation Allied Force. The purported war aims of the NATO air campaign turned out to be basically empty shells, with no specific objective at hand, leading to the subsequent continuation of the bombing mission without pursuing any measurable aims on the ground in Kosovo in the process. Additionally, no vital U.S. national security interest could be at stake as the decision to limit all military operations to air power from high altitude only and to be heavily disinclined to deploy forces on the ground from the outset was itself an implicit acknowledgment of this fact.

Moreover, no operational planning for alternative options was made, as U.S. decision-makers placed most of their expectations in the effectiveness

¹³⁶ Galfano, Major Christopher J. "Operation ALLIED FORCE and the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine: An Analysis." Master of Military Studies thesis, United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, (2008): 3.

of a brief demonstration of air power, that would make Milosevic cave in briskly, an assumption that was only exacerbated by the U.S. Air Force's constant emphasis on the supposed heavy damage precision weapons would inflict on Serbian troops on the ground. Additionally, Operation Allied Force was void of any viable exit strategy as the entire campaign was intended to last only for a two-to-three-day period and was never meant to physically halt Serbian forces from ethnically cleansing Kosovo. As General Wesley Clark stated himself in a television interview in March 1999:

*"It was always understood from the outset that there was no way we were going to stop these paramilitary forces who were going in there and murdering civilians in these villages."*¹³⁷

Besides having the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine left widely unfulfilled, Operation Allied Force represented the peak of multiple developments among U.S. foreign policymaking circles, predominantly concerning the American use of force. The origins of these specific developments could be traced to the times of the Cold War in which a decision-making system was created that had allowed the Commander-in-Chief, namely the respective U.S. President, to arbitrarily and single-handedly decide on the use of force. However, this decision-making mechanism was intended to only be used in times in which national survival was at stake. With the end of the Cold War, however, the Clinton administration was able to conserve this system and apply it in its decisions to employ military power in the Kosovo War, a conflict in which the existence of the United States was nowhere close to be at stake.¹³⁸

This mechanism, granting essentially unrestrained and unchecked war powers to the U.S. executive branch, explains why and how the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine could be shunned in the Kosovo War of 1999. The realization that the presidential war power was indeed limitless and could be sustained in times in which great power rivalries were gone has been Kosovo's most

¹³⁷ William M. Arkin, "Operation Allied Force: 'The Most Precise Application of Air Power in History,'" in *War Over Kosovo: Politics and Strategy in a Global Age*, ed. Andrew J. Bacevich and Eliot A. Cohen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 6, 9, 28.

¹³⁸ Andrew J. Bacevich, "The Use of Force in the Clinton Era: Continuity or Discontinuity?" *Chicago Journal of International Law* 1, no. 2 (2000): 376-378.

consequential and long-lasting legacy. Therefore, the Kosovo War managed to give a structure that had already existed before a new reason to endure. The following subchapter will delve into the issue of how the changed rationale of both U.S. foreign policy and NATO were employed after Kosovo in the Western-led military interventions in Afghanistan, Libya and Syria.

iii. Influence on Later Military Interventions

a. Afghanistan

It was in Kosovo where NATO was able to forge its new strategic identity. However, it was in Afghanistan, merely two years after Operation Allied Force in the aftermath of 9/11, where NATO embarked on its first “out of area” operation and the alliance’s reconfigured purpose as a multinational peacekeeper was tested on a global scale.¹³⁹ Regarding the Western-led intervention in Afghanistan, NATO’s new role was reuttered at the 2002 Prague NATO Summit, where the military alliance established its first main objective of its mission in Afghanistan, namely, to help the Afghan government safeguarding the city of Kabul and its immediate vicinity. Soon later, its scope of operation was eventually widened as the alliance was additionally tasked with establishing security across the country predominantly by battling insurgencies, preventing the formation of anti-government militias and fighting narco-trafficking.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, as in the previous conflict in Kosovo, NATO conducted its Afghanistan campaign to manage risks and insecurities instead of engaging in a conventional military conflict. The alliance portrayed its actions as proactive and anticipatory which pursued the main political goal of preventing further terrorism after the 9/11 attacks.¹⁴¹

In 2003, NATO officially became part of the UN mandate in Afghanistan by assuming command of ISAF and hence turned into the main force of the

¹³⁹ Edward Newman and Gëzim Visoka, "NATO's Engagement with Kosovo and the Logic of Successful Security Practices," *International Affairs* 100, no. 2 (2024): 633.

¹⁴⁰ Dovydas Rogulis, "NATO Military Interventions in Kosovo, Libya, Afghanistan and Their Impact on Relations with Russia After the Cold War" (MA thesis, West Virginia University, 2014), 29.

¹⁴¹ Heng, Yee-Kuang, "War as Risk Management: A Study of the Transformation of War in the Post-Cold War Era." University of St Andrews, (2004): 182.

international community's effort to provide security and stability in Afghanistan. This was the moment when the post-Kosovo identity of NATO as a crisis manager became formally operational outside Europe for the first time. Moreover, Kosovo set another precedent in Afghanistan as NATO reinvoked its supposed credibility issue, should the alliance not be able to successfully complete its assigned mission. As then newly assigned National Security Advisor in the Obama administration, General James Jones claimed:

*"NATO's cohesion, effectiveness and credibility will be shaken and the rationale for NATO's expeditionary, out of area, role would be undermined."*¹⁴²

Hence, the Western-led intervention in Afghanistan showcased the legacy of the Kosovo War to a great extent, as NATO's novel role as an "out of area" crisis and risk manager and the evolved U.S. foreign policy rationale were applied and tested for the first time. However, it was not until another Western intervention which was conducted in Libya in 2011 that one of the most transformative legacies of Operation Allied Force came to the fore, namely the invocation of the Responsibility to Protect principle.

b. Libya

Over the course of the Arab Spring, civil unrest eventually spread to Libya in 2011, which quickly put the Qaddafi regime under serious strain as they turned out to be the largest eruption of mass protests in a long time. Initially, however, Qaddafi's security forces were able to quell the protests by resorting to a high degree of violence, as entire neighborhoods in the Libyan capital of Tripoli were destroyed. Soon, images from Qaddafi's bloodshed swiftly spread all over the world, which eventually forced the international community to act and intervene in the civil conflict.¹⁴³ Unlike in the Kosovo crisis of 1998, in the case of Libya it took the international community only

¹⁴² James Sperling and Mark Webber, "NATO: From Kosovo to Kabul," *International Affairs* 85, no. 3 (2009): 501.

¹⁴³ Alison Pargeter, *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012): 214-234.

several weeks to intervene militarily in the conflict, thus implementing a key lesson of the Kosovo conflict.

On 26th February 2011, the international community requested the end of violence which it described as potential crimes against humanity and enacted sanctions against Libya by adopting UN Security Council resolution 1970. As the violence did not subside but instead escalated further, on 17th March 2011, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to invoke the Responsibility to Protect principle via Security Council Resolution 1973. The decision mandated the protection of the Libyan population and the enforcement of a no-fly zone in Libyan airspace. It was intended to limit military operations to air operation and to pursue the constrained objective of protecting human life, not to enact a regime change or to become involved as a direct party in the civil war in Libya.¹⁴⁴

NATO's military intervention was dubbed "Operation Unified Protector" and was conducted through three subsequent phases during the civil war. In the first and initial phase of NATO's air campaign, the alliance struck Qaddafi's forces as they advanced towards the rebel stronghold of Benghazi. In the second phase, NATO continued its air strikes as the fighting between rebel and government forces reached a purported deadlock. In the third phase of the conflict, however, NATO still proceeded with military operations as rebel forces were able to flip the tables on the battlefield as they first stopped the advance of Qaddafi's forces and soon moved themselves into territory that was formerly controlled by his security forces. It was precisely the third and final phase that proved to be the most critical one in the conflict as NATO exceeded the authority that was granted to it by the UN Security Council. The continued air campaign was unwarranted as civilian life was not threatened any longer by government forces. In fact, the war turned into the opposite, where it was the advancing rebel forces that started to pose a threat to the Libyan population. Therefore, as in Kosovo 1999, NATO violated international law by breaching Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter and against

¹⁴⁴ ISS Situation Report, "Libya and the Responsibility to Protect: Between Opportunistic Humanitarianism and Value-Free Pragmatism" (Institute for Security Studies, 6 March 2012), 2-3.

UN Security Council resolution 1973 as the mandate did not cover regime change.¹⁴⁵

Due to the sustained NATO bombing of Qaddafi's forces, rebel forces could briskly gain control over several strategic areas and cities as they further advanced to Tripoli until they eventually managed to encircle and later capture the Libyan capital. Qaddafi's regime was overthrown and he himself killed on 20th October 2011.¹⁴⁶

Libya constituted the third time that NATO ventured beyond and outside the territory of its member states. The precedent of and the consequences Kosovo carried for the international system were clear. NATO intervened in both instances via an air campaign for humanitarian reasons. Moreover, in both cases international law was violated, in the case of Kosovo from the very start, while in Libya via overstepping the UN Security Council resolution. Thus, Operation Unified Protector proved that the Responsibility to Protect doctrine is a shaky concept that can be readily applied for other purposes than for those it was originally invoked. In the aftermath of the regime change in Libya and against the backdrop of the escalating situation in Syria, Russia voiced the concern that Libya could serve as an example for future NATO interventions in the name of the "R2P" principle.¹⁴⁷ However, the application of Western humanitarian interventionism was brought to a breaking point in the next country that descended into chaos and violence as the Arab Spring spread to Syria.

c. Syria

Whereas the illegal Western-led intervention in Kosovo had spawned the development of a new norm in international law, it was in Syria where the R2P principle fully collapsed, as the lack of consensus in the international

¹⁴⁵ Geir Ulfstein and Hege Føsum Christiansen, "The Legality of the NATO Bombing in Libya," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2013): 161-169.

¹⁴⁶ Alison Pargeter, *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi*, 240.

¹⁴⁷ Geir Ulfstein and Hege Føsum Christiansen, "The Legality of the NATO Bombing in Libya," 170.

community made the prospect of another armed intervention unrepeatable. While the original mass protests in Syria escalated into mass violence, a highly divided UN Security Council convened its first session on the matter in October 2011. Due to the Chinese and Russian veto in the UNSC, who accused the Western powers of using “pseudo-humanitarian” arguments, no resolution was reached although the Council unanimously expressed concern over the increasingly detrimental humanitarian situation in Syria.¹⁴⁸ As Russian official stated:

*“Learning from that bitter experience [Libya], we are against any U.N. Security Council resolutions that could be interpreted as a signal for military interference in the domestic processes of Syria.”*¹⁴⁹

Their veto was the attempt to gain the initiative in the UN Security Council by defying the R2P doctrine and insisting on the principle of state sovereignty. It was at this time where both China and Russia perceived the R2P to be merely a policy tool which the Western camp exploits to conceal the pursuit of their national interests, it invokes to topple regimes which stand against their policies.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, the reason that enabled Operation Allied Force in Kosovo in 1999, namely the Western powers’ willingness to proceed without consent in the UN Security Council and NATO breaching its UN mandate in Libya poisoned the conditions for any future consensus.

Here, one of Russia’s key approaches in foreign policy making came to the fore as they rigidly stuck to a statist approach and considered the West to be distrustful as they would exploit or only selectively apply the R2P norm. Russia’s dual sovereignty approach and realist approach to international relations also presented themselves, as the Russian leadership stressed the importance state sovereignty holds over the universalist norm of humanitarian interventionism. It was due to this reason why Russia continually blocked the

¹⁴⁸ Justin Morris, "Libya and Syria: R2P and the Spectre of the Swinging Pendulum," *International Affairs* 89, no. 5 (2013): 1274-1276.

¹⁴⁹ John W. Dietrich, "R2P and Intervention after Libya," *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2013): 346.

¹⁵⁰ Jonathan Pugh, "The Effect of the Intervention in Libya on the International Debate about Syria," *E-International Relations*, (2017): 4.

Western powers attempted resolutions regarding Syria in the UN Security Council. Thus, Russia incorporated its staunch position against the R2P doctrine in its general strategic culture.¹⁵¹

The progression starting in Kosovo and leading subsequently to the Western interventions in Libya and Syria revealed a fundamental paradox. As the humanitarian interventionist endeavor which only materialized by bypassing Russia's consent in 1999 reached its limit in 2011, the Russian strategic culture that was formed in Kosovo and solidified in Libya and Syria, eventually evolved from reluctant defiance to the intentional destruction of the R2P norm. The next part analyzes how this happenstance influenced the Russian foreign policy reorientation and how Western-led interventions served as a template for Russia's own geopolitical aspirations.

C. The Reaction of Russia and Its Reorientation in Foreign Policy

*"Take the recent past: in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when were told that our concerns about NATO's potential expansion eastwards were absolutely groundless. And then we saw five waves in the bloc's eastward expansion. Do you remember how it happened? [...] It happened at a time when Russia's relations with the United States and main member states of NATO were cloudless, if not completely aligned... Sometimes I wonder: why did they do all this in those conditions?"*¹⁵²

i. Perceived Humiliation and Exclusion

Among the Russian leadership, NATO's intervention in Kosovo was not solely perceived as a mere regional intervention in the Balkans, but rather as a clear demonstration of Russia's diminished place in the post-Cold War European security order. The Kosovo crisis revealed that the institutional architecture through which Russia had hoped to conserve its influence,

¹⁵¹ Doğanhan Dağı, "The Russian Stand on the Responsibility to Protect: Does Strategic Culture Matter?," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2020): 379-381.

¹⁵² Jonathan Haslam: „Hubris, The Origins of Russia's War Against Ukraine,” *Head of Zeus*, 2024, 258.

namely via the consultation with NATO, preserving a central role for the OSCE, and above all else the primacy of the United Nations Security Council, could be bypassed when its position clashed with Western strategic interests.¹⁵³ In this sense, Kosovo represented a moment in which Russia's formal status as a permanent member of the Security Council did not translate into actual influence over European security decisions as it had done in the past.

A constructivist reading is particularly useful here because Russia's reaction cannot be explained only by material weakness or military insecurity. Constructivism emphasizes that state perceptions are socially produced through historically rooted self-other relations, rather than being objective responses to external facts.¹⁵⁴ Applied to Russia, this means that NATO's intervention mattered not only because it altered the balance of power in Europe, but because it communicated to Moscow that the West did not recognize Russia as an equal participant in defining the rules of the European order. Thus, the chaotic domestic situation that Russia experienced over the course of the 1990s and its decline in military power and the projection of it played in fact only an inferior role to its lack of recognition among other great powers, especially the United States.

An ontological-security analysis reinforces this constructivist reading by framing Kosovo as a crisis in the "security of a meaningful post-Soviet Russian Self." In this interpretation, Russian leadership conducted a continued effort to reestablish the ontological security lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Kosovo became one of the key moments in which that unstable post-Soviet identity was challenged by the Western "Other."¹⁵⁵ The significance of Kosovo therefore lay not only in Russia's exclusion from the decision-making process that led to war, but also in the way this exclusion

¹⁵³ Philip Spassov, "NATO, Russia and European Security: Lessons Learned from Conflicts in Kosovo and Libya," *Connections* 13, no. 3 (2014): 9.

¹⁵⁴ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Sources of Russia's Fear of NATO," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52, no. 3 (2019): 3.

¹⁵⁵ Jonas Gejl Pedersen, "The Russian Quest for Ontological Security: An Inquiry into the Reconstruction and Translation of the 'Russian Self' in Relation to the Military Intervention in the Kosovo and Ukraine Crises" (PhD diss., University of Copenhagen, 2019), 18.

destabilized Russia's self-understanding as a great power entitled to recognition by other great powers.

This perception was especially damaging as Russian policy in the late 1990s had not been built on isolation from the West. Under the Russian Foreign Minister at the time, Moscow pursued an inclusive multipolar foreign policy strategy, which constituted an attempt to rein in NATO while at the same time remaining involved in European security institutions.⁵ To Russia's top priorities counted the quest to acquire an equal voice in European security decision-making, a more pronounced role in the OSCE, and the preservation of Security Council authority over the use of force.¹⁵⁶ Hence, Kosovo struck at the very core of this national strategy. NATO's decision to act without the authorization of the UN Security Council suggested that Russia's participation in Western security institutions had produced a consultation without control, a partnership without veto power, and a recognition without any practical influence.

This can be perceived as a transformation, a "rite of passage for the Russian Self," in which Russia moved from imagining its post-Soviet greatness "because of the Western Other" to reconstructing it "in spite of the Western Other."¹⁵⁷ Kosovo did not exclusively display Russia that NATO could and will act without it but helped transform the West from a possible source of recognition into the very opposite against which a more assertive "Russian Self" could be defined.

This is precisely where the constructivist element deepens the argument. As has been argued elsewhere, Russia's foreign policy cannot be understood through power, security, and prestige alone, as it is equally shaped by values, and ideology of national interest, including post-Soviet ideas of "Russianness" and the reestablishment of a strong state. Therefore, Russia's relationship with the West was contingent on more than just material calculation. Moscow has repeatedly sought Western recognition, and when the West had challenged Russian values or status claims, Russia tended to

¹⁵⁶ Dov Lynch, "'Walking the Tightrope': The Kosovo Conflict and Russia in European Security, 1998-August 1999," *European Security* 8, no. 4 (1999): 2-3., 23.

¹⁵⁷ Pedersen, "Russian Quest for Ontological Security," 139.

move away from cooperative behavior and instead shift towards a more defensive and assertive postures. In the case of Kosovo, the refusal of the Western powers to view any Russian objections as decisive strengthened the perception in the Kremlin that cooperation with NATO did not produce recognition, but subordination.

The sense of exclusion was already visible during the Rambouillet process. Russia's mediator complained after the Kosovar delegation had signed the proposal that Russia was not involved in the first draft of the document.¹⁵⁸ This perception highlighted a more extensive Russian fear, namely that decisions on the future of Kosovo and the European security structure were being made within Western institutions, while Russia was being asked either to endorse them after the fact or alternatively accept diplomatic isolation.

The launch of Operation Allied Force on 24 March 1999 transformed this frustration into a deeper strategic rupture. It has been argued that the start of the campaign swiftly undermined the three main institutional strands of Russia's European strategy: Russia-NATO engagement, OSCE-centered conflict management, and Security Council primacy.¹¹ A Russian special envoy expressed this view in stark terms, arguing in May 1999 that NATO's approach:

*"...clashes with international law, the Helsinki agreements and the entire world order that took shape after World War II."*¹²

Hence, NATO's intervention was understood in the Kremlin not solely as an attack against Serbia, but as an attack on the procedural foundations of the post-1945 international order.

This was also why the Kosovo crisis carried such an intense emotional and symbolic charge in Russia. A retired General Staff officer writing in *Krasnaya Zvezda* titled his article "March 24, We Awoke in a Different World." This piece of writing essentially argued, that NATO's conduct had awakened Russia to the reality that it had no influence, that it was as isolated

¹⁵⁸ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Change and Continuity in Russia's Foreign Policy," *Russian Analytical Digest* no. 109 (2012): 1.

as Yugoslavia, and that it faced a permanent NATO threat.¹⁵⁹ The image of awakening in a "different world" is significant because it suggests that Kosovo was understood not as an isolated diplomatic setback, but as a revelation of Russia's true post-Cold War condition.

At that time, the Russian Prime Minister warned a senior American diplomat that Russia's post-Kosovo psychology resembled the one of Germany after its defeat in the First World War, adding further that "No Hitler will come to power here, but the psychology is similar." This warning has been interpreted as evidence of a broader hysteria and sense of humiliation among Russian elites and society, which suggested that Kosovo intensified ontological insecurity by making Russia's unequal relationship with the West socially and politically visible.¹⁶⁰

Constructivism also helps explain why this moment became embedded in Russian foreign-policy identity. It has been argued that Russia's discourse of multipolarity should not be reduced to strategic maneuvering alone. Rather, Russia's resistance to Western liberal norms is substantiated by a sense of betrayal by the West, thus providing an alternative vision of world order that contests the spread and imposition of liberal values.¹⁶¹ This is relevant to Kosovo because the intervention was interpreted as evidence that the West's language of democracy, human rights, and humanitarian protection could conceal coercive domination. Therefore, Kosovo did not exclusively affect Russian national interests as it rather reconfigured the meaning which Moscow attached to the Western-led order.

Another interpretation leads in the same direction. In this account, Kosovo showcased Russia's inability to translate declarations, diplomatic initiatives, and great-power claims into feasible political outcomes.¹⁶² This made the crisis especially humiliating, since the Russian President had personally taken initiatives to resolve the conflict peacefully and had associated Russian prestige with the defense of Yugoslav security.¹⁶² NATO's

¹⁵⁹ Lynch, "Walking the Tightrope," 12-23.

¹⁶⁰ Pedersen, "Russian Quest for Ontological Security," 177-178.

¹⁶¹ Xymena Kurowska, "Multipolarity as Resistance to Liberal Norms: Russia's Position on Responsibility to Protect," *Conflict, Security and Development* 14, no. 4 (2014): 2.

¹⁶² Arbatov, *Transformation of Russian Military Doctrine*, 22.

eventual decision to proceed regardless of Russian concerns fully exposed the wide gap between Russia's self-image as an indispensable European power and its actual inability to shape the very same situation.

The humiliation was exacerbated by the broader strategic context. NATO's first post-Cold War enlargement had taken place only days before Operation Allied Force began, with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joining the alliance on 12 March 1999.¹⁶³ From Moscow's perspective, the first major act of the newly enlarged NATO was an offensive military campaign against Serbia, a traditional Russian partner, outside NATO territory, and without UN Security Council authorization.¹⁶⁴ The temporal proximity of enlargement and intervention reinforced the belief that NATO was no longer a defensive alliance but an expanding Western security bloc capable of acting coercively in Europe without Russian consent.

Therefore, Kosovo highlighted Russia's limited political influence in much the same way that the 1998 financial crash had revealed Russia's economic weakness. With NATO bypassing the Security Council and the OSCE, Moscow faced the reality of Western-led institutions asserting predominance in the European and global security orders, directly undermining Russia's ambition of a multipolar order which rests on strict observance of the UN Charter and the primacy of international law.¹⁶⁵ Hence, NATO's intervention in Kosovo merged material weakness, diplomatic exclusion, and normative grievance into a single strategic experience.

Scholarly analysis also shows that this sense of humiliation was expressed through demands for practical recognition. A high-ranking Russian general insisted that NATO's acknowledgement of Russia's role in the Kosovo settlement must appear not only in words, but also in specific action, complaining that Russia was instead "being made to ask for an area to look after in Kosovo."¹⁶⁶ From a constructivist perspective, this fusion of weakness

¹⁶³ Tracey German, "A Legacy of Conflict: Kosovo, Russia, and the West," *Comparative Strategy* 38, no. 5 (2019): 4.

¹⁶⁴ Lynch, "Walking the Tightrope," 13.

¹⁶⁵ Derek Averre, "From Pristina to Tskhinvali: The Legacy of Operation Allied Force in Russia's Relations with the West," *International Affairs* 85, no. 3 (2009): 6.

¹⁶⁶ Vladimir Brovkin, "Discourse on NATO in Russia During the Kosovo War," *Demokratizatsiya* 7 (1999): 26.

and grievance is crucial. Drawing on leading constructivist theory established, certain practices create a structure of identities and interests rather than another. In the Russian case, the 1990s contained two competing legitimacy narratives, one in which Russia could integrate with the West, and another in which Russia defined itself in opposition to the West.¹⁶⁷ Kosovo fundamentally strengthened the second narrative vis-à-vis the first one. It made the adversarial interpretation of Russia's place in the world more plausible as it showed that the West's professed partnership did not include Russian equality in moments of crisis.

This does not mean that Russia immediately abandoned engagement with the West. On the contrary, Moscow still tried to reinsert itself into the settlement process by working through the G8, the UN framework, and the diplomacy of the special envoy and international mediators. Yet even this partial return to diplomacy was ambiguous. Russia contributed to bringing the war to its conclusion, but it engaged mostly after NATO had already established facts on the ground.¹⁶⁸ The Russian troop movement that later followed to Pristina airport briefly generated domestic pride, but it ultimately exposed Russia's weakness further, since a small and undersupplied Russian contingent found itself isolated while NATO took control of the broader operation.¹⁶⁹

Therefore, Kosovo spawned a long-term policy lesson in Russian foreign policymaking circles. Namely, that Western institutions could act without Russia when Moscow's preferences obstructed their objectives, and humanitarian language could be applied to justify the circumvention of the UN Security Council. In the Russian political narrative, NATO's campaign appeared as a strategically driven intervention disguised as humanitarian action and undertaken in violation of international rules. This interpretation did not merely deepen suspicion toward NATO. It also helped generate the

¹⁶⁷ Sergey Radchenko, "Nothing but Humiliation for Russia': Moscow and NATO's Eastern Enlargement, 1993-1995," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 6-7 (2020): 45.

¹⁶⁸ Konrad Pawłowski, "Strategies and Goals of Russian Diplomacy during the Kosovo Conflict (1998-1999)," *Annales UMCS Sectio K* 24, no. 1 (2018): 43-44.

¹⁶⁹ Lynch, "Walking the Tightrope," 23.

later Russian claim that the West had itself weakened the legal constraints it expected others to obey.

Hence, a constructivist angle illustrates why exclusion, and humiliation had become politically productive in this very manner. They did not exclusively describe Russia's objective loss of influence as they also helped to constitute a new understanding of Russia's identity and role. It has been argued that Russia's multipolarity discourse constructs the image of "a mistreated great power" that has overcome weakness and now possesses normative resources for justifying foreign-policy choices.¹⁷⁰ After Kosovo, this image became easier to sustain. Russia could present itself not merely as a weakened state, but as a wronged great power resisting a Western-led global order that had revealed its own hypocrisy and double standards.

The exclusion and humiliation produced by Kosovo therefore mattered less as a single event than as a formative interpretive framework. It encouraged Russian elites to view NATO enlargement, humanitarian intervention, and Western democracy-promotion as interconnected elements of a security order in which Russia was no longer regarded nor included as a partner which is equal in its standing to the Western powers.¹⁷¹ The long-term consequence was not an immediate break with the West, but instead a deepening conviction that Russia had to resist NATO-centered European security, defend Security Council primacy, and eventually reclaim agency in its "near abroad". In this respect, Kosovo turned into one of the pillar moments through which Russian foreign policy transitioned from frustrated participation in the Western-led order toward a more defensive, status-conscious, and revisionist posture.

ii. The reconfiguration of Russia's foreign policy

This section focuses on the exact reasons of how the aforementioned shift in Russia's foreign policy took place and which rationale has been used by the Russian policymaking apparatus in later military interventions. It is the aim of this subchapter to first lay out the framework and most essential

¹⁷⁰ Kurowska, "Multipolarity as Resistance to Liberal Norms," 2-5.

¹⁷¹ German, "A Legacy of Conflict," 2.

components of Russian foreign policy. Subsequently, this section attempts to discern how the Kosovo War of 1999 formed the foreign policy discourse into a particular security instrument, which consists of two separate yet intertwined elements. This rationale is called the “dual approach” to state sovereignty. Namely, Russia started to strictly adhere to the Westphalian concept of state sovereignty and the preservation of the authority of the UN Security Council to defy Western interventions, while simultaneously pursuing a flexible application of the same principles in post-Soviet territories.¹⁷²

In its essence, the Russian Federation adheres to the following key concepts while advancing its foreign policy. It bases its policies on the perception that it ought to be great powers which, by pursuing their national interests, constitute the keystone of international order in the process. Furthermore, the Russian logic of foreign policymaking holds, that each state and especially great powers must recognize each other's hegemony in a clearly defined territory over which each possesses a sphere of influence. This particular geopolitical lens was lucidly expressed in various officially issued documents such as in the Foreign Policy and National Security Concepts of the Russian Federation.

To illuminate this point, it is worthwhile quoting the Foreign Policy Concept of the year 2000, adopted merely one year after NATO's intervention in Kosovo. In this document, the Kremlin considered the following points as preeminent to its foreign policy:

“Promoting the interests of the Russian Federation as a great power and one of the most influential centers in the modern world [by] ensuring the country's security, preserving and strengthening its sovereignty and territorial integrity and its strong and authoritative position in the world

¹⁷² Ruth Deyermund: „The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-first Century Russian Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 6 (2016): 958-959, 983.

community [in order to promote] the growth of its political, economic, intellectual, and spiritual potential.”¹⁷³

Therefore, Russia deeply grounds its foreign policy and regards global affairs through a Realist lens. It is precisely this theoretical framework which helps one to understand how and why Russia perceived NATO's intervention in Kosovo, its subsequent expansion to countries of the former Soviet bloc in eastern Europe, and the “R2P” concept not exclusively as legal questions, but much rather as components of changing geopolitical circumstances which were perceived to be detrimental to Russia's national interests. Hence, it is necessary to apply the IR theory of Realism, especially of Structural realism, for this matter.

Structural realism attempts to explain international politics via a systemic structure consisting of two main parts. The first one holds that states operate in an anarchic self-help system as no central global authority exists. The other part concerns the distribution of power between states, especially the number of great powers on the international stage. In this context, however, anarchy does not mean a disorderly situation, but simply the absence of any higher authority which state actors may consult if they need protection. Given these structural conditions, the actors operating within this system set state survival as their most essential priority and are simultaneously responsive to any tilts in the relative power between them. This second element, namely the distribution of capabilities, also lays down the type of polarity which is present in the state system. It can range from power being concentrated in solely one or two states as well as being dispersed across multiple great powers. However, there is disagreement over the exact ramifications for state behavior of these structural incentives, as two different approaches are derived from this framework, namely offensive and defensive realism. Offensive realism holds, that given the inherent insecurity of the international systems, states tend to maximize their power and strive for dominance over other states. Instead, the latter defensive realist approach postulates that states

¹⁷³ Jeffrey Mankoff: „Russian Foreign Policy, The Return of Great Power Politics”, Council of Foreign Relations: 12-13.

primarily seek security by pursuing rather (self)-restrained national objectives as the attempt to maximize power might trigger balancing measures by the other states.¹⁷⁴

Therefore, NATO's intervention in Kosovo gave this realist and sovereignty-centered Russian foreign policy approach its first fundamental test after the Cold War ended, as Operation Allied Force against Yugoslavia placed the two principles of state sovereignty in the Westphalian sense and humanitarian intervention in direct tension.

This friction became evident in Russia's consequent discourse over the "Responsibility to Protect" concept. As a matter of fact, the Russian leadership did not outright reject the principle of civilian protection itself, as they rather interpreted it through a pronounced state-centered lens. This perspective holds that the primary duty to protect civilian populations should remain with the sovereign state at hand, while the international community ought to play a supporting role via capacity-building, prevention, and assistance and do so only if it is requested by the respective sovereign state.¹⁷⁵

Hence, the Russian leadership did not deny the importance of protecting populations outright. Instead, it was the notion that humanitarian claims would suffice to justify coercive actions from external forces against sovereign states that the Kremlin strictly opposed.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, Russia agreed on two of the three key pillars of the then newly forming "R2P" Concept, namely the prevention and state responsibility element while considering the third element, the enforcement of human rights, only as legitimate if the intervention is proportionate, backed up by a UN Security Council resolution and all other options had already been exhausted.¹⁷⁷

In this context, it was especially Russia's insistence that any coercive action undertaken in the name of "R2P" requires authorization by the UN

¹⁷⁴ Steven E. Lobell, „Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies (2017): 1-8.

¹⁷⁵ Charles E. Ziegler, “Russia on the Rebound: Using and Misusing the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Relations* 30, no. 3 (2016): 348.

¹⁷⁶ Ziegler, “Russia on the Rebound,” 348.

¹⁷⁷ Derek Averre and Lance Davies, “Russia, Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: The Case of Syria,” *International Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2015): 831.

Security Council that is most relevant not only to NATO's intervention in the Kosovo conflict itself, but also to the long-term international consequences of this coercive action.

During the rising tensions between NATO and Belgrade in early 1999, the Russian leadership kept insisting that any use of force against Serbia must be authorized by the UN Security Council while also openly stating that Russia would use its veto power in the Council to block such resolution. In this regard, it is crucial to acknowledge the purpose of this rigid demand, as purely legalistic reasons do not reflect the genuine intentions behind this specific course of action. Rather than trying to exclusively uphold international law, Russia predominantly pursued strategic objectives as its veto in the UN Security Council functioned as a tool to preserve its great-power status and potent player in global affairs. At that time, one of its most pressing aims was to prevent or restrict NATO's room of action, be it in the Balkans or in any other regions that were not included in the military alliance's officially mandated areas of action.¹⁷⁸

Given these circumstances, Operation Allied Force posed not solely a threat to the preservation of international law, but also to Russia's power within the UN Security Council framework, which dealt a serious blow to its confidence and standing as a great and influential power on the international stage. Moreover, NATO's intervention in the Kosovo crisis signaled to the Kremlin that other NATO interventions might follow which would not be authorized by the UN Security Council as well.¹⁷⁹

Once, so the Russian reasoning went, NATO acted outside the constraints of the UN Charter, Moscow increasingly interpreted humanitarian intervention enforced via the "R2P" Concept as a vehicle that could be easily manipulated and exploited by Western actors to justify unilateral military actions and later serve as a potential pathway to regime-change politics across the world.

¹⁷⁸ Dov Lynch, "'Walking the Tightrope': The Kosovo Conflict and Russia in European Security, 1998-August 1999," *European Security* 8, no. 4 (1999): 66.

¹⁷⁹ Roy Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 69.

After Operation Allied Force, however, coercive actions committed by NATO that would be both unauthorized and bypass the UN Security Council were not the only major concern in the Kremlin. This legal challenge was complemented by a certain spatial dimension, namely NATO's gradual expansion in Eastern Europe. These two simultaneous developments made it even more urgent for the Russian leadership to pursue their objective of limiting and countering "out of area actions" undertaken by NATO, a concept that was laid out in the alliance's new Strategic Concept that was published at the Washington Summit in April 1999.¹⁸⁰

As then Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov stated:

*"We should not create a precedent when NATO acts outside the territories of its member states without the relevant decision by the UN Security Council."*¹⁸¹

This statement embodies a genuine turning point, as Kosovo changed the very meaning and purpose of NATO itself, a transformation that triggered fears within the Russian leadership. Among others, these anxieties concerned the real possibility that NATO might expand into territories of the former Soviet Union, not only by admitting new member states, but also by performing "out of target actions" in Europe as well as beyond. As a matter of fact, NATO's coercive action via Operation Allied Force during the Kosovo crisis appeared to prove every concern expressed by the Russian leadership right, as NATO after Kosovo was increasingly perceived as an aggressive military alliance that is bent on expansion, equipped with attack forces and offensive operational plans. Consequently, NATO's military intervention prompted the Kremlin to cement its opposition of continued NATO engagement in Europe.¹⁸²

This was due to the fact that it appeared to many among the Russian leadership, that NATO did not change its core mission after the end of the

¹⁸⁰ Dov Lynch, "'Walking the Tightrope': The Kosovo Conflict and Russia in European Security, 1998–August 1999," *European Security* 8, no. 4 (1999): 67.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁸² Vladimir Baranovsky, "The Kosovo Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 4 (2015): 258-259.

Cold War, namely countering and containing Russian power in Europe, a narrative that only grew in potency when NATO embarked on its expansion in Eastern Europe while simultaneously enhancing and upgrading its military capabilities. As an unintended consequence of these endeavors, political voices in Russia that had favored a more cooperative and consolidating approach to the Western camp were increasingly marginalized in the Russian political discourse. On the flipside, more confrontational and irredentist powers grew in strength,¹⁸³ which sensed some sort of great power move behind NATO's expansion, which followed the strategic goal of solidifying U.S. military hegemony in Europe and the attempt to elbow Russia out of the newly developing European security architecture.¹⁸⁴

In this context, it is helpful to once more consult a theoretical approach by applying Structural realism to this matter. A realist reading of NATO's continued existence, its later expansion and Russia's reaction to it would argue, that after the alliance had forfeited its original purpose, it turned into a tool to enhance and extend U.S. grip over the defense and foreign policies of European countries. As John Kornblum, U.S. senior deputy to the undersecretary of state for European affairs quipped:

*"The Alliance provides a vehicle for the application of American power and vision to the security order of Europe."*¹⁸⁵

Henceforth, NATO expansion added to the increasingly realist orientation of Russia's foreign policy, by locking in the zero-sum rationale of the Cold War era. According to a realist reading, the enforcement of NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe, paired with its intervention in the Kosovo War and wider activities in Russia's "near abroad", prompted the Kremlin to interpret international politics increasingly in terms of competitive power, strategic rivalry, and the need to defend its position against encroachment by external

¹⁸³ Jeffrey Mankoff: „Russian Foreign Policy, The Return of Great Power Politics“, Council of Foreign Relations, 164-165.

¹⁸⁴ Jonathan Haslam: „Hubris, The Origins of Russia's War Against Ukraine“, Head of Zeus, 2024, 68.

¹⁸⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 20.

powers. Hence, the end result was a foreign-policy outlook that became more effectively shaped by an expansionist logic, hegemonic competition, and realist assumptions about state survival under conditions of systemic anarchy, as NATO's actions reduced Russia's ability to pursue its national interests.¹⁸⁶

These changes in outlook and perception were soon translated into official policy documents which stated that Russia faced a growing number of dangers, of which the most profound stemmed from the Western political camp. As a passage in the National Security Concept which was drafted briefly after the first round NATO expansion and Operation Allied Force read:

“Elevated to the level of strategic doctrine the shift of NATO to the practice of force deployment outside its area of responsibility and without UN Security Council sanction is prone with the threat of destabilization of the whole strategic situation in the world.”¹⁸⁷

Moreover, the updated version of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept published in the year 2000, stated that it is not exclusively NATO's eastward enlargement, but also certain countries and international entities that strived to impair the work of other international organizations, namely the UN and OSCE that started to pose a serious risk to Russian national security. Nonetheless, the same document read that Russia was still willing to cooperate with NATO, if the condition, that no use of force, weapons or troop deployments were undertaken by the alliance in the national territories of its new member states. Henceforth, the effects of the Kosovo War on Russia's strategic doctrine did not constitute an isolated factor, as they must be discerned within the context of other events and developments, most importantly NATO expansion, the application of unilateral force, and the weakening of the UN-centered order. At the turn of the millennium, these factors were fused into a single strategic challenge, which Russia has

¹⁸⁶ Scott G. Feinstein and Ellen B. Pirro, “Testing the World Order: Strategic Realism in Russian Foreign Affairs,” *International Politics* 58 (2021): 818-819.

¹⁸⁷ Alexei Arbatov, *The Transformation of Russian Military Doctrine: Lessons Learned from Kosovo and Chechnya*: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, (2000), 15.

attempted to adequately address in the context of great power competition ever since.¹⁸⁸

At this stage, however, Russia's post-Kosovo sovereignty discourse should not be viewed as a simple contradiction between principle and practice. Rather, it developed into a differentiated model in which a strict Westphalian understanding of sovereignty was defended outside the former Soviet space, while a more flexible and regionally specific conception was pursued within it. Outside the post-Soviet regions, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the legal equality of states were treated as the foundations of international order. This held especially true when it was directed against and in opposition to Western-led interventions and the broader post-Cold War shift toward more conditional interpretations of state sovereignty. Inside the former Soviet space, by contrast, the sovereignty of neighboring states was treated in a more hierarchical way, since external intervention in these states was interpreted not only as a challenge to their autonomy, but also as a threat to Russian security and regional influence. In this sense, the dual approach did not reflect mere incoherence, but a strategic attempt to defend national interests, balance against Western power, and sustain Russia's status within an emerging multipolar order.¹⁸⁹

This broader pattern also helps to explain why NATO, after initially being viewed in the early 1990s as a possible community Russia might join, came to be seen instead as a civilizational and geopolitical frontier of the West.¹⁹⁰ Once sovereignty had been recast in this differentiated way, it could also be used more instrumentally in Russia's regional foreign policy. Rather than applying sovereignty as a universally fixed legal principle, Moscow increasingly treated it as a flexible vocabulary that could be defended,

¹⁸⁸ Tracey German, "A Legacy of Conflict: Kosovo, Russia, and the West," *Comparative Strategy* 38, no. 5 (2019): 434.

¹⁸⁹ Ruth Deyermond, "The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-first Century Russian Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 6 (2016): 958-974.

¹⁹⁰ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Sources of Russia's Fear of NATO," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 2 (2018): 109.

relaxed, or reinterpreted according to the requirements of security, status, and geopolitical competition.¹⁹¹

This flexibility was especially visible in the post-Soviet space, where concepts such as self-determination, genocide, protection, and sovereignty itself could be selectively reconfigured to fit political circumstances without any need for doctrinal consistency. Simultaneously, this specific instrumentalization did not mean that sovereignty ceased to matter completely. On the contrary, it became more politically useful precisely because it could serve both as a shield against Western intervention at the global level and as a justificatory resource for asserting Russian authority in its claimed sphere of influence. The significance of the Kosovo precedent, therefore, lies less in any direct legal analogy than in the fact that it supplied a contested normative repertoire which Russia could later mimic, invert, and redeploy for its own geopolitical endeavors in Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine.¹⁹²

Hereby, it is essential to remember the underlying themes behind Russia's changed foreign policy and defensive doctrine and outlook of international affairs as they are applied in the subsequent section to three specific Russian military interventions of the 21st century. As the 20th century came to a close, the Kremlin perceived to have been severely misled by the Americans since the Soviet Union dissolved, as the United States first promised not to expand NATO eastwards, while after having done so, it claimed the purpose of the alliance has changed when in fact it did not. On top of that, NATO unilaterally bombed Serbia during the Kosovo War, an intervention that was regarded as a unilateral pursuit of U.S. national interests.¹⁹³ It did not take long, however, until the Russia itself would utilize

¹⁹¹ Vasile Rotaru, "'Mimicking' the West? Russia's Legitimization Discourse from Georgia War to the Annexation of Crimea," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52 (2019): 311-314.

¹⁹² Valur Ingimundarson, "The 'Kosovo Precedent': Russia's Justification of Military Interventions and Territorial Revisions in Georgia and Ukraine," LSE IDEAS Strategic Update, (2022), 5-14.

¹⁹³ Jonathan Haslam: „Hubris, The Origins of Russia's War Against Ukraine", *Head of Zeus*, 2024, 107-107.

the legal and political ambiguity that were triggered by Operation Allied Force for its own geopolitical purposes.

iii. Lessons from Kosovo and their Influence on Russian Interventions

This section argues that the Western intervention in Kosovo and the evolving international legal norms surrounding it were first adapted and later concretely applied by the Russian leadership as the Kremlin increasingly used it as a playbook for the pursuit of its own national interests. By referring to concepts such as humanitarian protection, national self-determination, and international legality selectively, Russia aspired to conceal its geopolitical objectives with legal and moral language, thereby mimicking Western argumentative patterns while factually pursuing national strategic goals.

a. Georgia

Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008, merely nine years after Operation Allied Force and in the same year the "Republic of Kosovo" formerly declared independence from Serbia, marked the first application of the post-Kosovo argumentative playbook by the Russia Federation. As the Kremlin accused the Georgian government of committing a genocide against the populations of the two secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Given these grave human rights violations, so the Russian leadership argued, it is the Kremlin's most pressing priority to halt a pending humanitarian disaster by officially invoking the "R2P" Principle. Concerning this alleged situation in Georgia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated, that it made it:

*"...unavoidable for us to exercise responsibility to protect."*¹⁹⁴

In August 2008, not long after this and similar statements were made by the Russian leadership, Russia launched its war against Georgia. This was an exceptional development as it constituted the first Russian military offensive against another sovereign nation after the conclusion of the Cold War. Russia described its armed intervention not as such, as its military actions were

¹⁹⁴ Roy Allison, "Russia Resurgent? Moscow's Campaign to 'Coerce Georgia to Peace'," *International Affairs* 84, no. 6 (2008), 1152.

portrayed as a peacekeeping operation in the framework of the “R2P” Principle, which became unavoidable after Georgian troops had dispatched troops to South Ossetia to regain control over the region. Any accusations that Russia was poised to enact a regime change in Georgia were dismissed by the Kremlin, as it even denied the fact that Russia fought an open war against Georgia.¹⁹⁵

Long before the outbreak of armed hostilities between Moscow and Tbilisi, however, Russia had already entrenched itself deeply into the two separatist northern Georgian territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia by dispatching peacekeepers in the two regions. The motive behind this move was to lock in the status quo, favoring the pro-Russian separatist forces in the process. This was primarily done by encouraging the secessionists to implement state building measures and delegating multiple administrative tasks to Russian institutions to a point where the governance of the two regions resembled some sort of Russian hierarchical supervision. At the same time, the Georgian authorities were hindered from regaining control over the regions, as Russian peacekeepers were able to establish virtual supervision of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian borders to Georgia proper.¹⁹⁶

Here, the first clear parallel to the Kosovo conflict can be drawn. Both in Serbia and Georgia existed ethnic minorities, which lived concentrated in specific regions of the two countries and pursued the goal of autonomy and eventually secession from the respective central national authorities. More importantly, however, the Kremlin enacted a volte-face as it flipped Kosovo from a contested issue into an argument that Russia could exploit for its own political purposes. As Russian President Vladimir Putin already stated in 2006:

“If someone thinks that Kosovo can be granted full independence as a state, then why should the Abkhaz or the South-Ossetian peoples not also have the right to statehood? [...] I am not saying that Russia would immediately

¹⁹⁵ Roy Allison, *Russian Intervention in Georgia* (2008): 150.

¹⁹⁶ Nicu Popescu, “‘Outsourcing’ De Facto Statehood: Russia and the Secessionist Entities in Georgia and Moldova,” CEPS Policy Brief no. 109 (2006): 1, 6-7.

*recognize Abkhazia or South Ossetia as independent states, but international life knows such precedents ...*¹⁹⁷

In fact, the recognition of Kosovo's independence by the vast majority of Western countries in 2008 functioned as the key trigger for Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, after the Russian armed forces were able to gain full control over the two territories after its victory in the Five-Day War against Georgia. A second parallel that can be drawn between NATO's Operation Allied Force in Kosovo of 1999 and Russia's armed intervention in Georgia of 2008 was the political rhetoric utilized by the Russian leadership in the build-up of the brief Russo-Georgian War to justify its armed intervention as it was almost identical to the rhetoric used by Western leaders regarding the Kosovo conflict.¹⁹⁸

The Russian side was quick to depict Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and his attempt to regain political control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Slobodan Milosevic, who would oppress Ossetians in precisely the same fashion as Milosevic attempted to ethnically cleanse Kosovo from its Albanian population. As Ron Asmus, a U.S. government specialist on the Caucasus put it:

*“Moscow’s terminology and rhetorical line of defense were almost a mirror image of the West’s rationale on Kosovo... It was payback time for a grievance that Russia had borne against the West for nearly a decade.”*¹⁹⁹

Therefore, the Russian political rhetoric attempted to bolster the interpretation, that the declaration of independence of Kosovo and its recognition as such by other nations had set a precedent, which would also grant the right to secession to former Soviet autonomous regions.²⁰⁰

Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind the larger motives that laid behind Russia's peacekeeping and humanitarian interventionist rhetoric as

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. 7.

¹⁹⁸ Philip Short, *Putin*, London: The Bodley Head, (2022): 501.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 502.

²⁰⁰ Valur Ingimundarson, *The 'Kosovo Precedent': Russia's justification of military interventions and territorial revisions in Georgia and Ukraine*, LSE Ideas (2022): 8.

the reasons of conducting a war against Georgia went far beyond any immediate events that took place in South Ossetia. Instead, the underlying intention behind Russia's war was to halt Georgia's then continuous westward trajectory, a development that ensued with accelerated pace after Georgia's and Ukraine's accession to NATO was openly considered at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest. At the same time, Russia made it explicitly clear, that it would do anything in its power to stop NATO from expanding further eastwards, into a region Russia considered a vital part of its sphere of influence. As President Putin stated in 2008:

*"We view the appearance of a powerful military bloc on our borders... as a direct threat to the security of our country. The claim that this process is not directed against Russia will not suffice. National security is not based on promises."*²⁰¹

Russia's decision to launch its war against Georgia was successful in the sense that it not only achieved the de facto independence of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia but also ended any further discussions on another wave of NATO expansion to the country. Henceforth, the case of the Russo-Georgian War suggests that Kosovo did not evolve into a clear or generally accepted legal precedent for self-determination. Rather, its more durable legacy was political and strategic, in that it handed great powers an applicable script for portraying armed interventions as a vehicle to save and protect endangered populations.²⁰²

As has already been established, the war against Georgia represented the first Russian foreign military intervention in the 21st century. In 2014, however, political turmoil in another neighboring country of Russia offered the Kremlin the opportunity to once again enforce and support an armed intervention and pursue its national and great power interests in the process. The legal concepts which were already used in the case of Georgia were again

²⁰¹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Sources of Russia's Fear of NATO," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 2 (2018): 105.

²⁰² Aidan Hehir, "Independence, Intervention and Great Power Patronage: Kosovo, Georgia and the Contemporary Self-Determination Penumbra," *Amsterdam Law Forum* 1, no. 2 (2009): 99.

selectively applied and invoked by the Russian leadership, as Kosovo set another precedent for the secession of Crimea and its consequent annexation by the Russian Federation.

b. Crimea

The next opportunity which Russia swiftly exploited for its own geopolitical gains arose when in late 2013, mass protests broke out in Kiev, after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich declined to sign the long-anticipated association agreement with the European Union.²⁰³ Eventually, the large-scale demonstrations, the largest since Ukrainian independence, culminated in a political movement, called the “Euromaidan”. What started out as peaceful protests would later escalate to riots and uprisings in early 2014, an intensification that ultimately led to the flight of President Yanukovich and after his formal impeachment, the formation of an interim Ukrainian government which called for new elections.²⁰⁴

While these events unfolded in Kiev, popular pro-Russian protests sprang up all over the Crimea, which culminated with separatist forces gaining control over the Council of Crimea in Simferopol on 27th February 2014. On the same day, armed men, which were swiftly dubbed “Green men” emerged across the Crimean Peninsula. These disguised and unlabeled armed troops were able to quickly seize control over Crimea’s critical civilian and military infrastructure.²⁰⁵

Soon after it became evidently clear that the “Little green men” were Russian soldiers and not, as claimed by the Kremlin, self-organized local self-defense units. In fact, an additional force of 6000 Russian soldiers was deployed to the Crimea before armed troops essentially seized the

²⁰³ Megan MacDuffee Metzger and Joshua A. Tucker, “Social Media and EuroMaidan: A Review Essay,” *Slavic Review* 76, no. 3 (2017): 169.

²⁰⁴ Gary Wilson, “Secession and Intervention in the Former Soviet Space: The Crimean Incident and Russian Interference in Its ‘Near Abroad’,” *Liverpool Law Review* 37 (2016): 157.

²⁰⁵ Jonas Gejl Pedersen, *The Russian Quest for Ontological Security: An Inquiry into the Reconstruction and Translation of the “Russian Self” in Relation to the Military Intervention in the Kosovo and Ukraine Crises*, 223.

Peninsula.²⁰⁶ This movement of troops shortly before the seizure and secession of Crimea indicates that Russia had meticulously planned and prepared military operations only weeks after Ukrainian President Yanukovych was ousted from power, as the armed intervention was additionally accompanied by wide Russian media coverage and propaganda measures. Due to the scrupulous planning undertaken by the Kremlin, both the Ukrainians themselves as well as the Western camp was taken by surprise, especially as the Crimea was occupied without any major clashes between pro-Russian separatist and regular Russian forces on the one side and Ukrainian Security Forces on the other.²⁰⁷

Once the Russian Federation had consolidated its control over the Crimean Peninsula, a referendum was held on 16th March 2014, in which 97.5 percent of voters favored secession from Ukraine. On 21st March 2014, Russia officially annexed Crimea and incorporated it into its national territory.²⁰⁸

As in the case of Georgia, Russia's "Dual Approach" to sovereignty and its realistic worldview may be applied to the issue of Crimea as well. Although President Yanukovych canceled the pursuit of Ukrainian membership in NATO and extended the lease of Russia's maritime base in Sevastopol, Crimea when he was still in power, the Kremlin grew increasingly worried over the possibility of closer economic and political ties between Ukraine and the Western countries. After Yanukovych's ousting and the strengthening of the Ukrainian nationalist bloc around Arseny Yatsenyuk in the interim government that followed after his flight, the Russian leadership had sufficient reasons to believe that the path of future Ukrainian NATO

²⁰⁶ Vasile Rotaru, "'Mimicking' the West? Russia's Legitimization Discourse from Georgia War to the Annexation of Crimea," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 53, no. 3 (2019): 312.

²⁰⁷ Barbara Pisciotta, "Russian Revisionism in the Putin Era: An Overview of Post-Communist Military Interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria," *Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 50, no. 1 (2019): 95.

²⁰⁸ Jonas Gejl Pedersen, 223.

membership will be resumed and Russia's military access to Crimea annulled.²⁰⁹

According to a structural realistic reading of the events, the Euromaidan revolution was perceived as a direct threat to Russia's sphere of influence and national strategic interests which had to be faced by preempting the possibility of Ukraine becoming an integrated part of the European security architecture. As former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski already stated:

„Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire.”²¹⁰

As much as Realism may explain key elements of Russia's actions and intentions regarding the annexation of Crimea from a theoretical lens, Kosovo was once more invoked by the Kremlin as a legal and political precedent to justify and legitimize its decision to annex the peninsula.

In fact, the Russian leadership referred more often to legalistic arguments rather than to the pursuit of its national security interests, as the Kremlin insisted on having simply enforced UN principles with its undertaken actions, most prominently the right of self-determination and the Responsibility to Protect principle. Moreover, Russia directly compared the secession and annexation of Crimea, to the Western intervention in the Kosovo conflict, exploiting it for its own national objectives and interests.²¹¹ Here, it is worthwhile to quote Russian President Vladimir Putin at length, who on 18th March 2014 uttered the following words in his speech to the State Duma:

“Moreover, the Crimean authorities referred to the well-known Kosovo precedent, a precedent our western colleagues created with their own hands in a very similar situation, when they agreed that the unilateral separation of

²⁰⁹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, “The Sources of Russia's Fear of NATO,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 2 (2018): 106.

²¹⁰ Elvina Jusufaj, “The Kosovo Precedent in the Secession and Recognition of Crimea,” *ILIRIA International Review* 1 (2015): 279.

²¹¹ Vasile Rotaru, “‘Mimicking’ the West? Russia's Legitimization Discourse from Georgia War to the Annexation of Crimea,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52, no. 4 (2019): 320.

Kosovo from Serbia, exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country's central authorities."²¹²

President Putin continued:

*"They wrote this, disseminated it all over the world, had everyone agree and now they are outraged. Over what? The actions of Crimean people completely fit in with these instructions, as it were."*²¹³

However, Russia's claim that Kosovo had set a legitimate precedent that could be applied to Crimea was nonetheless a selective argument, as Moscow relied on the 2010 opinion by the International Court of Justice, which decided that Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 constituted no violation of international law.

As the Supreme Council of Crimea declared on 11th March 2014:

*"We, the members of the parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the Sevastopol City Council, with regard to the Charter of the United Nations and a range of other international documents and taking into consideration the confirmation of the status of Kosovo by the United Nations International Court of Justice on 22 July 2010, which states that a unilateral declaration of independence by a part of the country does not violate any international norms, makes this decision jointly."*²¹⁴

Yet the ICJ's judgement was contingent on the distinct legal environment that was established by UN Security Council Resolution 1244 regarding Kosovo. It was not meant to be interpreted as a general legal vehicle which may be used in other and similar cases such as the one of Crimean secession. It was Russia which arbitrarily bent this legal ruling for its own purposes.²¹⁵

²¹² Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

²¹³ Ibid. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

²¹⁴ Florian Bieber, "The Long Shadow of the 1999 Kosovo War," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70, no. 2 (2022): 182.

²¹⁵ Valur Ingimundarson, "The 'Kosovo Precedent': Russia's Justification of Military Interventions and Territorial Revisions in Georgia and Ukraine," *Strategic Update* (2022): 11.

Moreover, the secession took place under imminent Russian coercive pressure as the referendum was essentially influenced by the threat of force as the seizures of all military infrastructure in Crimea and simultaneously held military exercises by the Russian military along the Ukrainian border showcase. These underlying circumstances made the comparison to Kosovo to which the Russian side constantly fell back to implausible as they did not turn the situation at hand into a case in which a people realized its right to self-determination.²¹⁶

Nevertheless, from a realist and geopolitical perspective, Russia's armed intervention in Crimea was a strategic success, as the Kremlin was able to sustain the access of its naval fleet to the Black Sea and simultaneously gain effective control over additional territory which it was soon to directly connect to the Russian mainland and by legitimizing its actions by claiming to prevent the alleged oppression of ethnic Russians in the Crimea.²¹⁷

This episode as well as the preceding one in Georgia 2008, showed to the Kremlin that the post-Cold War order can be successfully challenged and tilted to its own net national gain, when coercive action is legitimized by an arbitrary and selective reading and application of the "R2P" Principle. This rationale did not only lay the foundation but would also be re-employed a few years after the annexation of Crimea, in a much larger and more profound escalation that Russia embarked on with its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The last section of this subchapter will deal with the Russo-Ukrainian War and how Russia's selective reading of "R2P" and humanitarian interventionism was perverted to an extent that it attempted to justify its invasion with it.

c. Ukraine

Many Western analysts, policymakers and political commentators were surprised when Russia initiated its invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022,

²¹⁶ Leonaitė and Žalimas, "The Annexation of Crimea and Attempts to Justify It in the Context of International Law," 57, 62.

²¹⁷ Scott G. Feinstein and Ellen B. Pirro, "Testing the World Order: Strategic Realism in Russian Foreign Affairs," *International Politics* (2021), 823.

as such scenario was considered to be rather unlikely. However, the invasion had already been politically prepared by the Kremlin before the first Russian tanks crossed the borders into Ukraine. On 21st February 2022, merely three days before the start of the war, Russia recognized the two eastern Ukrainian Oblasts Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states. The next day, the Russian Federation Council greenlighted the use of force against Ukrainian troops as soldiers of the Russian Federation were deployed to both regions.²¹⁸

Right before Moscow dispatched its “peacekeepers” to the two contested Oblasts, Russian troops had already been amassed at the Ukrainian border while the Kremlin demanded “security guarantees” from Kiev. Nonetheless, the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as two sovereign state entities, separate from Ukraine, served as the Kremlin’s instigator to launch its attack on Ukraine.²¹⁹ Two days later, the invasion commenced as Russian troops poured over the Ukrainian border.

As in the examples of Georgia and Crimea, the Kremlin’s alleged legitimacy for the invasion of Ukraine relied strongly on the unresolved status of Kosovo, which the Russian leadership did not solely juxtapose to its own actions, but rather regarded as a valid precedent which was created by the West itself. As a matter of fact, President Putin repeatedly asserted the claim that, if NATO had the right to intervene in the internal affairs of another sovereign state by invoking humanitarian protection without explicit UN authorization, Russia could assert a similar role by militarily intervening in Ukraine to “demilitarize” and “denazify” the country and hence defend its Russian-speaking populations of the Donbas in the process. Therefore, Kosovo was utilized in Russian rhetoric as a means of flipping the Western claims about legality and legitimacy back against the West itself. This allowed the Kremlin to portray its undertakings as consistent with the logic

²¹⁸ Sofia Cavandoli and Gary Wilson, “Distorting Fundamental Norms of International Law to Resurrect the Soviet Union: The International Law Context of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *Netherlands International Law Review* 69 (2022): 387.

²¹⁹ Roy Allison, “Russia’s Case for War against Ukraine: Legal Claims, Political Rhetoric, and Instrumentality in a Fracturing International Order,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 71, no. 3 (2024): 272.

that NATO had already established in the post-Cold War global framework.²²⁰

In this sense, Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine may be viewed as the apex and logical conclusion of its distorted reading of the UN Charter, which is enmeshed in legalistic international law terms as for instance the right to self-defense and the right to self-determination have been repeatedly uttered by the Russian side.²²¹

However, Russia's coercive actions which have been launched since 2022 against Ukraine differ outrightly and fundamentally from NATO's intervention in Kosovo in many regards, such as in the objectives pursued and the legal context surrounding both cases. Operation Allied Force was launched by NATO to prevent ethnic cleaning operations perpetrated by Serb Security Forces against the Kosovar Albanian population, not to enact regime change in Yugoslavia or to annex territory of any kind. Russia, on the other hand, did not only question but threaten Ukraine's independence and sovereignty with its coercive actions, by annexing, occupying and invading Ukrainian national territory since 2014.²²²

Therefore, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine constitutes the latest and most severe outgrowth of its willingness to coerce other countries by applying its justification rationale, consisting of bogus legal claims, such as protecting persecuted minorities or recognizing other peoples' right of national self-determination.²²³ In the end, the cases three cases of Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine showcase that Kosovo failed to establish an universally accepted legal consensus. Instead, it created a contested political and normative vacuum that Russia has repeatedly sought to exploit for its own strategic purposes. Henceforth, the meaning behind Kosovo is that it prompted Russia to equip itself with a disputed and arbitrary justificatory

²²⁰ Sylë Ukshini, "From Kosovo to R2P: The Legacies of NATO's 1999 Intervention," *Canadian Journal of European and Russian Studies* 19, no. 1 (2026): 27-46.

²²¹ Andrea Maria Pelliconi, "Self-Defence As Remedial Self-Determination: Continuity in Russian Narratives to Justify Imperialism and the Use of Force," *Netherlands International Law Review* 71 (2024): 256.

²²² Sylë Ukshini, 42.

²²³ Andrea Maria Pelliconi, 403.

terminology that was used on multiple occasions in the pursuit of its increasingly radical national interests.

D. Serbia and Kosovo

The last chapter of this thesis deals with the immediate and long-term consequences of the Kosovo War for both Serbia and Kosovo. In doing so, it circles back to the central argument laid out at the very beginning, namely that the international community's involvement in a territorial dispute between two peoples claiming the same province set in motion a series of developments that fundamentally altered the post-Cold War order. These consequences manifest two distinct but interconnected levels. The first concerns the domestic political transformations that the war triggered in both societies, namely the collapse of the Milosevic regime in Serbia and the turbulent emergence of a post-conflict state in Kosovo.

The second pertains to the narratives of victimhood, legitimacy, and statehood that both sides constructed in the war's aftermath and which have continued to shape their respective political identities and bilateral relations to the present day. Taken together, these two dimensions reveal how a regional conflict of limited geographical scope produced consequences of lasting significance, not only for the two parties directly involved, but for the broader framework of international norms and interstate relations that governed the post-1989 world.

i. Domestic political consequences of the war

a. Serbia

„From babies in maternity wards and the seriously ill in intensive care, to the troops of the air defence forces in their trenches and the border guards on the borders. No-one will forget the heroism of the defenders of the bridges, the

citizen defenders of the factories, markets, of their jobs, their state, their people. The people are the heroes. “²²⁴

These were the words that Slobodan Milosevic uttered when he addressed his nation in a TV broadcast speech on 10th June 1999, after the conclusion of Operation Allied Force. It was at the same time that Serbian newspapers officially declared that Serbia won against NATO, as defeat on the battlefield was framed as a moral victory at home. Grand declarations and media propaganda were attempts by Milosevic to stay in power politically and shift the Serbian national memory away from the war in Kosovo itself and focus it on NATO’s bombing campaign against Serbia instead. Therefore, Milosevic declared the 24th of March, the day the first air raids commenced, a national symbol of Serbia’s heroic defiance against NATO, which was commemorated on 23rd March 2000 at the Monument of the Unknown Hero at Mount Avala. Nonetheless, these measures proved to be hapless attempts by Milosevic’s regime as discontent and civil unrest grew among the Serbian population, especially among those who had lost relatives in the Kosovo War. These dynamics were eventually transformed into a political movement that was poised to enact political change in the country.²²⁵

Consequently, the political pressure grew for Milosevic, whose regime in the meantime descended into utter lawlessness, which forfeited any deference to law and fundamental civil rights. Civil chaos and violence descended over Serbia as major cities, predominantly Belgrade, experienced a chain of gang-like shootings that left multiple deaths in its wake. The assassinations featured most prominently Yugoslav Defense Minister Pavle Bulatovic, Goran Zugic, then National Security Advisor to President Djukanovic of Montenegro, and Zeljko Raznjatovic, leader of the infamous Serbian paramilitary force “Arkan’s Tigers”.²²⁶ Moreover, in an act of cold blood, Slobodan Milosevic

²²⁴ Slobodan Milošević, “Address to the Nation,” June 10, 1999, in “Milosevic Congratulates Serb Army,” *BBC News Monitoring*, June 10, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/366116.stm>

²²⁵ Elisa Satjukow, “The Making of 24 March. Commemorations of the 1999 NATO Bombing in Serbia, 1999–2019,” *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70, no. 2 (2022): 293.

²²⁶ Sabrina P. Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milošević*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 343–345.

organized the abduction and killing of the former President of Serbia and his once political mentor Ivan Stambolic, who was executed by Special Police Forces and mobsters in Vojvodina, once he started to pose a potential viable challenge to Milosevic's grab on power.²²⁷

Despite these serial shootings, anti-government protests sprang up across the country that were able to attract large crowds of people such as in the town of Lesovac, where on 5th July 1999 around 20,000 protestors demanded Milosevic's resignation. Soon after the first mass anti-regime gatherings, a petition demanding the end of his regime was circulated in the country and signed by 12,000 people, while a second one was able to draw the support of 150,000 signatories.²²⁸

The issue eventually came to a head at the 2000 federal election, held on 24th September 2000, when the presidential candidate of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), Vojislav Kostunica, was able to garner 48.22 percent of the vote while Slobodan Milosevic received only a little more than 40 percent of all ballots cast. Given the fact that neither candidate passed the required 50 percent vote threshold, the Yugoslav Election Commission called for a second round of voting. However, the 25,000 election monitors of the opposition party claimed that Kostunica was able to gain 55 percent of the vote, which prompted him not to participate in the second electoral round and his party to call for a complete blockade of Serbian state institutions. On 4th October 2000, the Serbian Constitutional Court canceled the election results, triggering mass protests on the next day in the process, as over 500,000 demonstrators gathered in the Serbian capital and started to occupy governmental buildings and television stations. What was later dubbed the "Bulldozer Revolution", forced Slobodan Milosevic to step down as the Constitutional Court declared Vojislav Kostunica the electoral winner after all.²²⁹

²²⁷ Misha Glenny, *"The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804–2011,"* 677.

²²⁸ Sabrina P. Ramet, 355.

²²⁹ Joshua A. Tucker, "Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and Post-Communist Colored Revolutions," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (2007): 536.

However, the fall of Milosevic and his extradition to the War Criminal Tribunal in The Hague did not constitute a full democratic fissure in Serbia, as key elements of the Milosevic regime's constitution were left intact. As a matter of fact, the new democratic forces in power did not embark on a mission to overhaul Serbia's constitutional system, as they only passed cautious and limited reforms of the political system. Consequently, most of the army, police and state apparatus personnel were still comprised of people that were part of Milosevic's regime. The main reason why none of the new political forces in Serbia attempted to genuinely reform the political system was due to the fact, that the new political forces were unable to form an effective reform consensus. Moreover, not a single party was able to gain a majority sufficiently large enough to affect real political change. Soon, these circumstances fostered a rising polarization between the different reformist sections that would ultimately fizzle out the reform process and lead to more divisions among the new democratic forces.²³⁰

In the second subsection these tensions will be further elaborated and viewed from a different angle, namely by examining how narratives of victimhood, legitimacy, and statehood continued to affect Serbian political discourse after the immediate regime change.

b. Kosovo

While Operation Allied Force led to the eventual downfall of Milosevic in Serbia, NATO's involvement in the war would hold very different consequences for the region of Kosovo. In the months immediately after the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1244, a considerable humanitarian crisis broke out in Kosovo, characterized by chaos, widespread violence against ethnic minorities, and a general breakdown of state institutions in the region. This mayhem was exacerbated after all remaining Yugoslav troops withdrew from the region, as they were compelled to do by the passed UN Resolution. In the fall of 1999, the OSCE recorded "348 murders, 116 kidnappings, 1,070 lootings and 1,106 cases of arson within the first four months of their

²³⁰ Violeta Beširević, "'Governing without Judges': The Politics of the Constitutional Court in Serbia," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 12, no. 4 (2014): 959.

mission.” The violence was especially severe for ethnic minorities, predominantly for Serbs, made up over one third of all murder victims.²³¹

In the first year of international rule over Kosovo alone, between 600 and 800 Serbs were killed in the region. Those members of ethnic minorities that were not outrightly killed had to face daily threats and persecution. Concurrently to the eruption of widespread chaos and violence in the region, Kosovo experienced one of the largest movements of refugees ever recorded, as those Kosovar Albanians that fled from Milosevic’s troops returned home. This anarchic and tumultuous situation was worsened by the lack of preparedness of the KFOR and UNMIK personnel that was stationed in Kosovo.²³² These frequent instances of interethnic violence only subsided in 2000.

These circumstances immensely hindered the state building measures which the international administration started to launch by establishing “Kosovo’s Provisional Institutions of Self-Government” (PISG), a political entity which was supposed to be both ethnically diverse and bilingual. Due to the then widespread violence against ethnic minorities, threats being levied by the Serbian government against Kosovar Albanians, and the refusal of ethnic Serbs to cooperate in the state building measures, did the slowly developing governing entity turn out to be disproportionately populated by Kosovar Albanians.²³³

In this regard, one of the most crucial issues rested on the transformation of the KLA from an armed guerilla force/terrorist group to a non-violent political party. However, this proved to be a challenging endeavor as most KLA members disfavored complete disarmament as the organization’s very identity revolved around its militarism and armed struggle. Nonetheless, its leader Hashim Thaci reconfigured the KLA as a political party by founding

²³¹ Werner Distler, “Securitising the Present through the Prism of the Past: State-Building and the Legacy of Interventions in Kosovo and Serbia,” *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70, no. 2 (2022): 273.

²³² Dana M. Landau, “The Quest for Legitimacy in Independent Kosovo: The Unfulfilled Promise of Diversity and Minority Rights,” *Nationalities Papers* 46, no. 3 (2018): 445.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 445.

the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK). Other high ranking KLA leaders followed suit soon after by either joining the PDK or founding another political party, the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK). Despite KLA's transformation, the group was swift to display its still militarized character to keep its supporters contented. This was made by boisterous statements such as:

*"Nowadays with the building of today and the work for the future of Kosova, the primary duty, which should not be left aside by any means, is giving the great figures of the war the place they deserve."*²³⁴

Therefore, the postwar order in Kosovo was characterized not exclusively by an institutional reconstruction effort, but perhaps more importantly by competing claims to legitimacy, which were rooted in international state-building and in the symbolism of wartime sacrifice and armed resistance.

ii. Narratives of victimhood, legitimacy, and statehood

a. Serbia

It would be a mistake to underestimate the tremendous impact of NATO's bombing campaign on Serbian politics and society. The effect of Operation Allied Force has been both integral and long-term on the formation of Serbia's postwar and post-Yugoslav national identity, bearing repercussions across multiple issues ranging from its bilateral relations to Kosovo and its path of European integration in the process. Most importantly, the Kosovo War triggered a change in Serbia's memory politics, as a national narrative of victimhood became to be fostered and sustained after 1999.

As already mentioned before, Serbia's victimhood narrative was primarily launched by Slobodan Milosevic himself, who attempted to detach NATO's bombing campaign from the war and from the atrocities that were committed by Serbian forces in Kosovo. Instead, the NATO air raids were framed as a blatant and unilateral act of aggression against Serbia and its people. After Milosevic was overthrown, Serbia entered a new face of its

²³⁴ Isabel Ströhle, "The Politics of Reintegration and War Commemoration: The Case of the Kosovo Liberation Army," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 58, no. 4 (2010): 500.

memory politics, as the freshly elected democratic forces attempted to balance its quest of rehabilitating Serbia and the role it played in the Yugoslav breakup wars with its objective of sustaining the victimhood narrative revolving around NATO's bombing campaign. Nonetheless, the new political forces in Serbia stopped openly commemorating 24th of March as a Remembrance Day, while still preserving the political narrative. However, the issue took another turn when the original narrative of victimhood was re-launched under the auspices of Aleksandar Vucic with his subsequent rise to power in 2014.²³⁵

Under his presidency, the 24th of March was once again moved in the national limelight, by holding annual, deliberately sensationalized commemorations, which are held each year in a different city in Serbia. These yearly theatrical displays serve as a vehicle for engaging in a factually distorted and hyperbolized memory policy, which fully embraces the Serbian victimhood narrative while at the same time undermining the legitimacy of the Kosovar state. In multiple bombastic speeches, President Vucic has consistently emphasized Serbian war casualties, especially civilian ones, while utterly ignoring Kosovar Albanian war deaths. Moreover, he has juxtaposed NATO's bombing campaign against Serbia with Kosovo's declaration of independence, which allegedly "ripped away" the region from the Serbian nation in an illegal act of aggression. Vucic's speeches include statements such as:

*"You killed us because of this Kosovo [...] You killed our children, but you didn't kill Serbia – because no one can kill Serbia."*²³⁶

²³⁵ Elisa Satjukow, "The Making of 24 March. Commemorations of the 1999 NATO Bombing in Serbia, 1999–2019," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70, no. 2 (2022): 290.

²³⁶ Anton Vukpalaj, "From Memory Politics to Mnemonic Diplomacy: Serbia's Strategic Use of the 1999 NATO Bombing to Challenge Kosovo's Statehood before and after Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 73, no. 2 (2025): 273.

This rhetorical style follows the method of first presenting Serbia as an innocent victim, while in a subsequent step portraying oneself, in this case President Vucic, as a redeemer who strengthens the Serbian people.²³⁷

However, it is not only the head of state of Serbia and his party that engage in this selective memory politics. The Serbian media apparatus constitutes a crucial actor in proliferating the narrative of victimhood as well. This is done by constantly highlighting innocent Serbian casualties, to whom justice is yet to be served and who were killed in a criminal act of foreign intervention. Moreover, the media puts to use the “othering” method, through which NATO is portrayed as a much larger and more potent entity that utterly overwhelmed Serbia. As “Politika”, one of Serbia’s most circulated daily newspapers wrote in an article in 2019:

*“We [Serbs] were alone, faced with the biggest military force in the world, with a coalition of rich and powerful, with 22.000 tons of bombs and rockets, and with their clear goal: to defeat us, to humiliate us and to give one part of our territory to someone else.”*²³⁸

However, the preservation of the victimhood narrative does not constrain itself to dramatized speeches and newspaper articles only, as other means are applied as well to perpetuate NATO’s air campaign in the Serbian collective memory. The reconstruction or rededication of buildings destroyed during the war was another policy tool which was levied to sustain the victimhood narrative. For example, the building of the state-run broadcaster Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) was transformed into a temporary war memorial. Later, its eventual reconstruction was framed as a symbol of national pride and resilience while also conjuring up the self-victimization regarding the NATO “perpetrator”. Furthermore, it was decided that the former headquarters of Serbia Military General Staff, which was severely damaged

²³⁷ Sandra Obradović and Caroline Howarth, “The Power of Politics: How Political Leaders in Serbia Discursively Manage Identity Continuity and Political Change to Shape the Future of the Nation,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 1 (2018): 10.

²³⁸ Anđela Draganić, “REMEMBER TO NOT FORGET: Construction of the Serbian Collective Memory through Media Reportage of the Commemorations of the Kosovo War,” *Maastricht Journal of Liberal Arts* 12 (2020): 73.

during Operation Allied Force, was not to be rebuilt. These symbolic measures pursue the aim of locking in the collective memory of the war among the Serbian population and to simultaneously prevent it from letting go of the past.²³⁹

Therefore, the Serbian victimhood narrative that was created and conserved after 1999 was not only remembered, but also politically weaponized as it was utilized as a counterpoint to Kosovo's own postwar narrative of suffering, justice, and statehood.

b. Kosovo

While Serbia embraced its one-sided political narrative, portraying themselves as innocent victims that were attacked from an external power in an illegal and unjustified fashion, the Kosovar Albanian side adopted a political narrative after the conclusion of the war themselves as well. According to the Kosovar Albanian story, the fact of Serbian oppression and Milosevic's ethnic cleansing campaign in Kosovo entitled them to the right of secession²⁴⁰. However, this claim which evolved under the auspices of the international community in Kosovo remained covered with difficult questions concerning a wide range of issues such as its legality, sovereignty, and legitimacy. Here, it is important to consider the relationship between the international community which was present in Kosovo at the time and the local population.

Originally, the majority of the Kosovar Albanian population welcomed the NATO troops as liberators, while the UN administrative mission in the region was regarded as providing vital support for the economic, political and social reorganization of the region. However, once Kosovo became gradually stabilized, rifts started to appear as an increasing number of the population of Kosovo viewed the broad presence of the international community as an impediment to their political aspirations. Consequently, demands for self-

²³⁹ Aleksandar Staničić, "Media Propaganda vs Public Dialogue: The Spatial Memorialisation of Conflict in Belgrade after the 1999 NATO Bombing," *The Journal of Architecture* 26, no. 3 (2021): 373-383.

²⁴⁰ Wolff and Rodt, "Self-Determination After Kosovo," *Europe-Asia Studies* 65, no. 5 (2013): 806-807.

determination grew louder while the dissent on key issues between the Kosovar population and the international community as well as disputes within the international actors themselves became more pronounced over time. Dissent eventually turned into popular resistance, a development that proved to be explosive considering the backdrop of the widespread impoverishment and ethnic tensions between ethnic Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo.²⁴¹

These underlying political circumstances ultimately caused multiple spurts of repeated ethnic violence, as the Kosovar Albanian drive for resistance degenerated into outright riots which primarily targeted ethnic Serbs and UN institutions. For instance, in the year 2004, Kosovar Albanian large-scale revolts caused the killing of nineteen people while thousands more had to flee their homes and Serbian churches and monasteries were attacked and destroyed. Consequently, the tense domestic situation turned the quest of finding a workable solution for the status of Kosovo into a more pressing issue for the international community.²⁴²

However, the facts on the ground were highly unfavorable for a feasible political settlement, as the Serbian objective of keeping Kosovo as its national territory and the Kosovar Albanian standpoint of not wanting to return living under Serbian tutelage proved to be incompatible positions. None of the propositions concerning the principles of Kosovar governance were able to break this political deadlock. Eventually in early 2007, the status quo prompted Martti Ahtisaari, then Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations, to suggest that the most feasible option would be to grant full sovereignty to Kosovo and have the region's political independence managed by international society, as the region had not yet possessed the necessary capabilities for addressing its multiple challenges,

²⁴¹ Gëzim Visoka, "International Governance and Local Resistance in Kosovo: The Thin Line between Ethical, Emancipatory and Exclusionary Politics," *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 22 (2011): 100.

²⁴² Dana M. Landau, "The Quest for Legitimacy in Independent Kosovo: The Unfulfilled Promise of Diversity and Minority Rights," *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 3 (2017): 445-446.

such as achieving a full democratic transition, and protecting the ethnic minorities living in the region. As Martti Ahtisaari stated:

*“... I have come to the conclusion that the only viable option for Kosovo is independence, to be supervised for an initial period by the international community.”*²⁴³

On 17th February 2008, one year after the Ahtisaari plan was officially announced, Kosovo declared its independence, a political decision that was naturally and ardently opposed by Belgrade, as well as by the Serbian minority in Kosovo. Despite the international commitment to supervise Kosovo's independence, the international community was highly divided on the new status of Kosovo, as its newly gained national sovereignty was not universally supported nor condoned. Furthermore, the Kosovar declaration of independence was not backed up by a respective UN Security Council Resolution, as the Russian Federation sided with Serbia by opposing the independence of Kosovo. Additionally, the authority of the new Republic of Kosovo, concurrently to its declaration of independence, was not recognized both among Serbian policymakers as well as among the Serb minority in Kosovo. Moreover, the latter was quick to gain control over important public institutions of those areas where Serbs constituted the ethnic majority.²⁴⁴

Due to these multiple factors, the Republic of Kosovo has experienced a perpetual shortage of national legitimacy, a deficit that has contained both an internal and an external component. On the one hand, NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and continued troop presence as well as the latter's independence declaration of 2008, constituted two blatant breaches of well-established foreign affairs standards, namely the non-involvement in the domestic affairs of other sovereign states and the preservation of territorial integrity. On the other hand, the domestic challenge has been comprised of the Kosovo Serbs' rejection of Pristina's political authority and sovereign legitimacy which has subsequently undermined the creation of a well-

²⁴³ Colin Warbrick, “Kosovo: The Declaration of Independence,” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2008): 678.

²⁴⁴ Hilde Katrine Haug, “The Political Landscape in Kosovo since the Declaration of Independence,” *Südosteuropa* 58, no. 1 (2010): 42-44.

operating national state. In this specific domestic challenge lies the paradigm of Kosovo's legitimacy narrative, as the country has failed to grant full minority rights and hence has not lived up to all provisions of its independence.²⁴⁵

However, the issues surrounding Kosovar sovereignty and independence went beyond international relations principles and questions concerning the rights of ethnic minorities as the main impediments to its political stability dated farther back than its declaration of independence. After the UN administrative mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) had set up its presence in the region, the international administration quickly selected new local political elites to govern over the country. This was to serve UNMIK's main objective, to create the conditions for political stability in Kosovo. Yet the local political elites that were chosen by the international community, massively gained in clout as they were able to preserve and expand their corrupt and clientelist power structures. Therefore, the goal of consolidating regional stability significantly impeded the full democratization and economic development of Kosovo.²⁴⁶

As the Kosovar elites were able to seize political parties and state institutions and subsequently exploit them for their personal material benefits, the consolidation of the Republic of Kosovo experienced considerable amounts of state capture. To stay in power politically, the political elites retrieve rents from public institutions and hand them to their respective clients and supporters. The primary sector in which these schemes have been performed is in the assignment of public contracts, through which business deals are exchanged for political loyalty and party financing. These schemes are common to such an extent that according to a 2013 UNDOC report, more

²⁴⁵ Dana M. Landau, "The Quest for Legitimacy in Independent Kosovo: The Unfulfilled Promise of Diversity and Minority Rights," *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 3 (2017): 449.

²⁴⁶ Adem Beha and Gëzim Selaci, "Statebuilding without Exit Strategy in Kosovo: Stability, Clientelism, and Corruption," *Region* 7, no. 2 (2018): 97.

than fifty percent of recorded business bribes were made at the behest of state officials.²⁴⁷

In October 2005, a letter from the UN Secretary General to the President of the UN Security Council in which the then situation in Kosovo was reviewed read:

*“The development of new institutions is undermined by a strong tendency among politicians to see themselves as accountable to their political parties rather than to the public they serve. The political parties tend to consider new institutions and the civil service as “their” domains. Appointments are, therefore, regularly made on the basis of political or clan affiliation rather than competence.”*²⁴⁸

Therefore, these institutional deficiencies were not a temporary byproduct of post-conflict disorder but were deeply embedded in Kosovo's underlying political economy instead. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the economy of Kosovo relied heavily on foreign transfers to the country, primarily in the form of remittances and economic assistance granted by the international community. These financial transactions eventually reached a scale where in 2006, over one third of the overall GDP of Kosovo consisted of foreign aid and remittances. Moreover, over four billion dollars of financial assistance were sent to Kosovo between 2000 and 2003 alone. This overt dependence on foreign financial support only intensified the rent-seeking activities of the political elites as they could afford to rely less on the economic development of Kosovo, which made them become even less politically accountable to the people in the process.²⁴⁹

In conclusion, the Kosovar claim to statehood was placed on shaky foundations as its national sovereignty has been continually defied by a considerable size of the international community. Furthermore, those public

²⁴⁷ Joseph Coelho, “Seizing the State under International Administration: The Case Study of State Capture and Corruption in Kosovo,” *Southeastern Europe* 42 (2018): 114-115.

²⁴⁸ United Nations Security Council, *A Comprehensive Review of the Situation in Kosovo*, S/2005/635, (2005): 9.

²⁴⁹ Nicolas Lemay-Hébert and Syed Mansoob Murshed, “Rentier Statebuilding in a Post-Conflict Economy: The Case of Kosovo,” *Development and Change* 47, no. 3 (2016): 15-19.

institutions that attempted to back up Kosovo's independence were quickly hollowed out by the very dynamics of the post-conflict order that were supposed to consolidate them. The outcome is a state whose legitimacy narrative surpassed the political and economic realities on the ground. Consequently, Kosovo is left to this day somewhere between formal independence and the persistent challenges to its national self-governance.

Conclusion

NATO's Operation Allied Force, although brief and limited to an air campaign, proved to be a highly impactful moment for the subsequent progression of the dawning 21st century. It constituted the first time the authority of the UN Security Council was patently breached as NATO did not receive an official UN mandate. Instead, the military alliance bypassed it and embarked on an intervention in another sovereign country that was illegal by international law. Hence, the UN Charter was broken by its very own creators as they shattered the post-Second World War legal and institutional global order. The thesis has established how this unilateral decision to intervene in the Kosovo conflict lit a fuse that runs from the bombing of Belgrade in 1999 to the trenches in the Donbas in Ukraine in the 2020s. Kosovo broke the international system.

Chapter I highlighted how the exclusion of the Kosovo question in the Dayton Agreement led to the breakdown of the political consensus among the Kosovar Albanian camp, resulting in the rise of the KLA that were quick to expand their scope and scale of operations against Serbian civilians and security forces in Kosovo. Chapter II demonstrated that the diplomatic initiatives predominantly undertaken by the United States led to no viable solution, partly because Milosevic remained staunch and uncompromising in his positions, partly because the diplomatic offers made proved to be unacceptable to the Serbs. However, the consequences that manifested after Serbia's eventual defeat in the Kosovo War proved to be both diverse and manifold.

For one, Operation Allied Force birthed the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, a legal principle that gradually eroded the most basic legalistic norms of international law such as state sovereignty and non-interference and was later both unilaterally and selectively applied in other armed interventions. In the process, NATO abandoned its original purpose and *raison d'être* as a defensive alliance protecting the national territory of its member states against potential Soviet and Warsaw Pact aggression. It forged its new identity by embracing its new role as an internationally active security

and risk manager, embarking on so-called out-of-area operations in the process. Furthermore, the rationale and goals in U.S. foreign policymaking changed significantly as well as it were not exclusively strategic and geopolitical interests anymore that were the main priority in the State Department. Instead, and in compliance with NATO, humanitarian and ideological objectives played an increasingly significant role in foreign policymaking.

Chapter III also displayed how Kosovo was used as a blueprint for humanitarian interventionist endeavors in the later Western entanglements in Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, embedding the policy principle that international law can be bent or bypassed by those nations that are powerful enough to do so. On the flipside, the Russian Federation, first humiliated and excluded in the buildup, execution and aftermath of NATO's intervention in the Kosovo War of 1999, proved to be an adaptive learner, as the Kremlin explicitly exploited Kosovo as a justification for its own wars from Georgia to Ukraine. As the 21st century progressed, the Russian leadership increasingly ingrained the simple yet devastating rationale: "If they can do it, we can do it too" in its foreign policy approach.

In Serbia, the war in Kosovo resulted in a durable national victimhood narrative that prevents reckoning with the 1990s. In Kosovo, it produced a state whose claim to sovereignty is recognized by only half the UN member states, whose institutions were hollowed out by the very post-conflict order meant to consolidate them, and whose political economy is sustained by foreign aid and captured by clientelist elites. The thesis attempted to explain via the international relations theories of Constructivism and Realism why Russia reacted to Operation Allied Force the way it did. The former theory helped to explain how its humiliated and excluded perception triggered a response driven by identity, while the latter offered a demonstration why Russia projected its national power in its "near abroad" once Kosovo set the precedent.

In fact, Kosovo revealed something truly foundational, namely that the post-Cold War order was never robust or durable as it entirely relied on

the willingness of the great powers to abide by international law and not breach, bypass, or violate it in the pursuit of their national interests. Ample evidence for this is provided by the fact that in most instances after NATO's intervention in Kosovo, both the Western camp as well as the Russian one either directly pointed to Kosovo as a justification for their own actions or acted upon the institutional identities and legal norms that were created in the process. Herein lies the original contribution of this thesis as it established the causal chain between Kosovo and the in total six case studies of Western and Russian military interventions that followed. It traced down this sequence via a threefold analytical approach, discerning the local origins of the conflict, followed by an examination of the system-level ramifications and the regional aftermath of the war.

Kosovo was the original sin that proved to be nothing but poison to the 21st century international order. It was not the Iraq War launched in 2003 that broke the international system and post-War consensus. Neither was it the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 or the full-scale war in Ukraine that Vladimir Putin has been waging since 2022. It was NATO's Operation Allied Force which was conducted to stop ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity in Kosovo. In short, the attempt by NATO to conserve the rules-based international order was the one that shattered it. By unleashing dynamics which would reveal to be hard to contain once they were set free, an escalatory spiral was ignited in which both the Western camp and Russia started to repeatedly violate international law and hence chip away at the very keystone of global order. This is the grotesque disparity between cause and effect which this thesis has laid bare. All roads lead back to Kosovo.

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Appendices

a. Chronology

March 1989: Slobodan Milosevic revokes Kosovo's autonomy during his "Anti-Bureaucratic Revolution"

December 1989: Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) is founded.

July 1990: Kosovo Assembly proclaims Kosovo as an independent republic within Yugoslavia.

September 1991: Kosovar Albanian opposition proclaims the "Republic of Kosovo".

November 1995: Dayton Agreement signed, Kosovo question excluded from negotiations.

11 February 1996: First confirmed KLA attack in Kosovo on Serbian refugees.

November 1996: Serbian local elections held, opposition wins majority in thirty-four councils, Milosevic's commission rejects results, triggering mass protests.

Spring 1997: Albania descends into civil anarchy, army depots looted, weapons smuggled into Kosovo.

Early 1998: Kosovo conflict escalates from a political standoff into a full-scale insurrection led by the KLA.

March 1998: Drenica Massacre, Serbian forces kill approximately 80 Albanian civilians.

October 1998: NATO authorizes airstrikes, Holbrooke-Milosevic agreement reduces Serbian forces and 2,000 OSCE observers deployed to Kosovo.

15 January 1999: Racak Massacre, Serbian forces kill at least 45 Albanian civilians.

6–23 February 1999: Rambouillet negotiations are convened.

24 March 1999: NATO launches Operation Allied Force against Yugoslavia without UN Security Council authorization.

2 June 1999: Ahtisaari and Chernomyrdin present peace plan to Milosevic in Belgrade.

10 June 1999: UN Security Council adopts Resolution 1244, Kosovo War is officially concluded.

5 October 2000: “Bulldozer Revolution” overthrows Slobodan Milosevic.

2001: NATO invokes Article 5 for the first time in its history, launches military operations in Afghanistan

2004: Large-scale Kosovar Albanian riots, nineteen people killed, thousands displaced, Serbian churches destroyed.

17 February 2008: Kosovo declares independence from Serbia.

August 2008: Russia invades Georgia and recognizes Abkhazia and South Ossetia while citing the Kosovo precedent.

March 2011: NATO launches Operation Unified Protector in Libya and invokes the R2P framework.

27 February 2014: Pro-Russian separatists seize the Council of Crimea, Russian “Little green men” appear on the peninsula.

21 March 2014: Russia officially annexes Crimea, citing the Kosovo independence precedent.

24 February 2022: Russia launches full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

b. Dramatis Personae

Slobodan Milosevic

- President of Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.
- Initiated the revocation of Kosovo's autonomy and the subsequent military crackdown.

Ibrahim Rugova

- President of the self-declared Republic of Kosovo and leader of the LDK.
- Known for his policy of non-violent resistance and creation of a shadow state.

Hashim Thaci

- Political leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).
- Head of the Kosovar Albanian delegation at Rambouillet and founder of the PDK.

Adem Demaci

- Leader of the Parliamentary Party of Kosovo.
- Critic of Rugova's non-violent approach

Vojislav Kostunica

- Serbian opposition leader who defeated Milosevic in the 2000 election.
- President of Yugoslavia following the Bulldozer Revolution.

Mira Markovic

- Wife of Milosevic and leader of the JUL party.
- One of the most influential advisors and key figure in his regime.

Milo Djukanovic

- President of Montenegro who split with Milosevic in 1997, challenging his grip on the Yugoslav federation.

Bill Clinton

- President of the United States who authorized the launch of Operation Allied Force.

Madeline Albright

- U.S. Secretary of State and leading advocate for NATO military intervention in Kosovo.

Richard Holbrooke

- U.S. Ambassador and envoy who brokered the 1998 ceasefire agreement.

William Walker

- Head of the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission

Tony Blair

- British Prime Minister
- Articulated the moral rationale for intervention in his 1999 "Chicago Speech" on global security.

Javier Solana

- NATO Secretary General who oversaw the alliance's transition into an active global security and risk manager.

Martti Ahtisaari

- President of Finland and later UN Special Envoy
- Co-negotiator of the 1999 peace plan
- Author of the 2007 Ahtisaari Plan.

Viktor Chernomyrdin

- Russian special envoy who engaged with Western mediators to secure Milosevic's agreement to withdraw forces from Kosovo.

Yevgeny Primakov

- Russian Prime Minister during the Kosovo War.
- Harsh opponent of NATO acting without a UN Security Council resolution.

Boris Yeltsin

- President of Russia who pushed for a swift end to NATO's air campaign while attempting to preserve relations with the West.

Vladimir Putin

- President and former Prime Minister of Russia.
- Repeatedly invoked the Kosovo precedent to justify Russian military interventions in Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine.

Mikheil Saakashvili

- President of Georgia whose attempt to regain control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 led to a Russian counter-intervention.

Viktor Yanukovich

- President of Ukraine whose refusal to sign an EU association agreement in 2013 triggered the Euromaidan revolution.

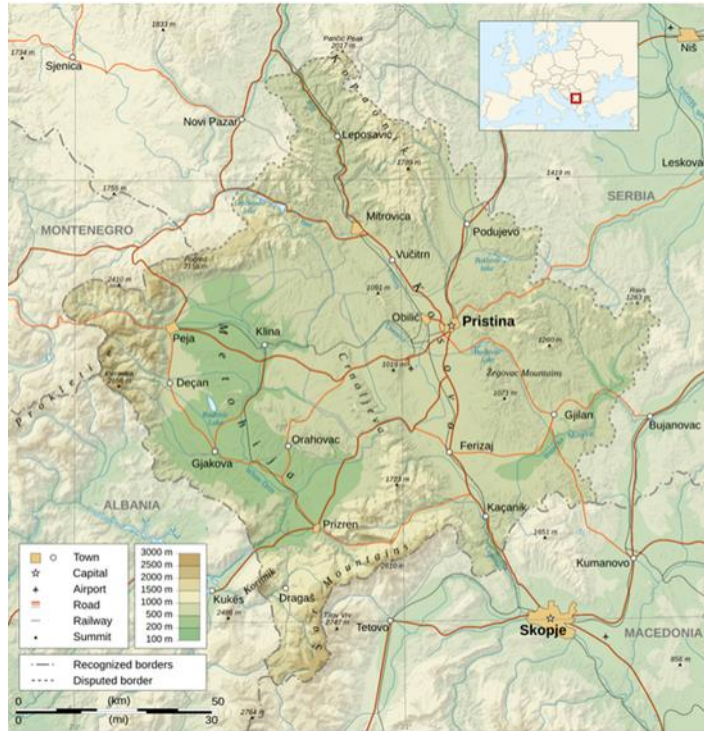
c. Maps

Figure 1: Map of Former Yugoslavia



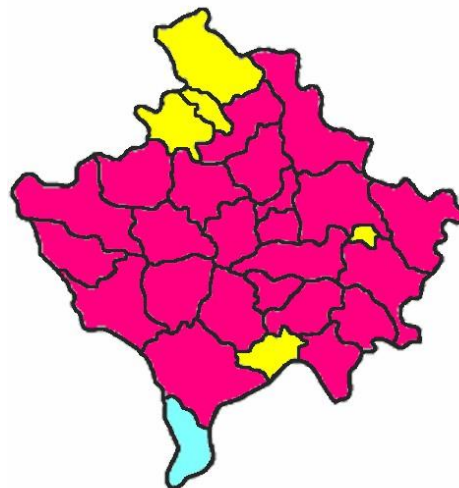
Source: United Nations Department of Public Information, Cartographic Section, "The Former Yugoslavia," Map No. 3689 Rev. 9, March 1997.

Figure 2: Map of Kosovo



Source: Sémhur, "Kosovo map-en.svg," scale not given (Wikimedia Commons, 2008)

Figure 3: Ethnic map of Kosovo (1991)



Ethnic map of Kosovo (1991)
 ● - Albanian majority
 ● - Serb majority
 ● - Muslim (Gorani) majority

Source: Ethnic Map of Kosovo, Municipalities (1991)." Scale not given. Wikimedia Commons. Accessed June 3, 2026.

Figure 4: Civilian and Military Targets hit by NATO during “Operation Allied Force”



Source: Philippe Rekacewicz, "From Zastava to Chinese Embassy: Main Targets of the NATO Bombing in Serbia and Montenegro (and Kosovo)," scale not given (*Le Monde diplomatique*, 2000),

Pledge of Honesty

*On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit
this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received
unauthorized assistance on it.*

Leo Hirnschrodt

Vita

Leo Hirnschrodt is an Austrian graduate of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, where he studied international affairs with a focus on European history and the area studies of China, the Middle East, Russia, and the Western Balkans. He was born in Salzburg, Austria where he lived until he moved to Vienna to embark on his academic studies in 2019. Hirnschrodt earned a Bachelor of Science in Economics from the Vienna University of Economics and Business in 2024.

His academic and professional interests range from economics, history, and philosophy to business consultancy, risk advisory, and public affairs. He gained professional work experience in the fields of economic research and lobbying during internships in both Vienna and Brussels. After his graduation from the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna in June 2026, he will continue his professional endeavors in these fields.

He is fluent in English and German.

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