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Hierarchies in Public Memory in post-war Kosovo: The Organisation of Memorialisation from Below

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Abstract
Public memory in Kosovo is commonly understood as organised primarily by state institutions at central and local levels. Yet, the role of non-institutional actors such as families and their social networks (memory from below) in shaping public memory remains largely overlooked. This article argues that families and their networks are not mere co-participants but significant actors through whom memorialisation is organised and made visible. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's framework of justice and a micro-level analysis of practices based on research conducted intermittently between 2009 and 2025, it shows how uneven access to resources and norms of sacrifice structure participation in memorialisation. In this way, it demonstrates how hierarchies of values structured around sacrifice for liberation and scale of loss in public memory are reproduced, sustained and contested, often being experienced as injustices.

Keywords: Memory, memorialisation, families, redistribution, recognition, representation.

Introduction

On June 14, 2025, in her Facebook page, Nesrete Vejsa-Nuka posted photos of her burnt parental home and wrote:

> Here, there was life. Here, the breath of my family members was cut short. Voices, laughter, children's games that echoed in every corner of the house […] 26 years ago, I found the cup with which I used to drink coffee every morning with my mother, my sister and the wife of my brother. I found a frying pan with which my mother cooked for her granddaughters, her grandsons, for us, for those who are no longer here today. That pan was never warmed again. And *sofra,*[1] which once was filled with joined hands and hearts, full of vitality and life. I entered the home, which was burnt to ashes. I remembered them. Here once life grew, but an entire world was extinguished; it is a wound that will never heal. Let us savour the freedom like our own eyes, because our freedom is their spilled blood, their life sacrificed, and their dreams cut in the middle.
> Today we celebrate the Liberation Day of our city.

[1] Low round dining table.

> Today we remember
> Today we honour
> Today, we promise that we will never forget them.
> Happy Liberation Day, my Gjakova.
> For those who no longer live,
> for us that remained,
> and for those who are yet to come.[2]

Between 1 and 2 April 1999, Serbian forces killed over 80 people in Gjakova. In the Vejsa family home alone, they killed twenty civilians: twelve children, seven women, and one man. The victims belonged to the Hoxha, Haxhiavdija, Caka, Gashi, and Nuçi families, who had sought shelter in the Vejsa household at the time, including eight members of the Vejsa family. Only a ten-year-old boy from the Vejsa family survived. After the killings, Serbian forces burned the house with bodies inside.[3]

After the war,[4] upon her return to Gjakova from Canada, where she lived as a refugee, Nesrete Vejsa-Nuka, a married daughter of the Vejsa family, found in the remnant of the burnt house a cup, a frying pan, and a window. In our conversation, she told me that from the salvaged window she began her improvised commemorative homage. She placed the window horizontally in an improvised basement on the ground, beside which she lit candles in memory of her loved ones. Over time, she reshaped and transformed the object until the municipality built a symbolic memorial plaque (*lapidar*) in 2021. This trajectory illustrates how families actively initiate and shape memorialisation practices, connecting the loss with sacrifice, and extending it to public forms of remembrance.

The commemorative practice of Vejsa-Nuka evokes the argument by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian that loss is inseparable from what remains: "[...] *for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained*."[5] In Kosovo, these "remains" are not only physical memorials, but also reflect how memorialisation and memory are organised through both formal and informal practices of remembrance, visible in the public space. They constitute public memory, which, following Edward S. Casey, is oriented both toward past events and toward the future preservation of their remembrance, and manifests in public spaces through material and non-material forms.[6]

In this article, public memory is understood as emerging through the interaction between formal institutional and non-institutional, informal initiatives and practices. These are often co-produced, uneven, and both structured by and productive of hierarchies of value based on sacrifice and merits for national liberation.

Public memory of the last war is manifested and shaped through a range of commemorative forms, including material forms such as monuments, plaques, memorial complexes, cemeteries, street names, museums, as well as non-material forms like commemorative events (*akademitë përkujtimore*), and other public interventions.

This article focuses on material forms of memory–referred to here as memorials, as the most visible manifestations of public memory, among Albanians in Kosovo. Alongside state-organised forms of memorialisation, the preliminary results of the research showed that a

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[2] Facebook. *Nesrete Vejsa-Nuka Facebook post of 14 June 2025* (accessed: 15 June 2025).
[3] Human Rights Watch. 2001. *Under orders: War crimes in Kosovo.* Washington, a.o.: Human Rights Watch, 219;
[4] In this article, war and post-war is referred to 1998-99 war and its aftermath in Kosovo.
[5] Eng L., David, and David Kazanjin. *Introduction: Mourning remains*, in *Loss: The politics of mourning,* edited by Eng L., David, and David Kazanjin. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1-27, 5.
[6] Casey, S. Edward. 2004. *Public memory in place and time*, in *Framing public memory*, edited by Kendall, Phillip R. Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 17–44, 33–35.

central role is also played by non-institutional initiatives and practices–memory from below. Specifically, by families of the martyrs, of civilian war victims, and of enforced missing people, and their social networks, which are friends (of war in case of martyrs), and wider community members.

Institutional memory at least in the immediate post-war period, shaped public memory by focusing mostly on memorialising the sacrifice and the glory of the nation through martyrs, projecting political presence and future, and only in recent years shifting attention to civilian victims, and to the enforced missing. Non-institutional or memory from below shapes public memory by making loss and grief visible through family and community-led initiatives, while revealing asymmetries in public memory across economic, cultural and political dimensions. Both forms shape public memory in Kosovo today.

While the article considers both institutional and non-institutional forms, particular attention is given to memory from below, as it exposes underlying inequalities. Drawing from empirical material, this article asks: How is public memory organised in Kosovo through specific practices and processes from a micro-level perspective? Who is counted as worthy of memorialisation? What do these ways of organising memory reveal about questions of justice?

I argue that, while memory from below is relatively independent from top-down state's imposition, it is not free from inequalities. The uneven access to resources, networks and norms of sacrifice and glory structure participation in memorialisation. These are experienced by most of the focus group participants and interlocutors as injustices, which they understand as resulting from the institutional framework and involvement. They also point to unequal recognition, which can be understood as reflecting embedded hierarchies, particularly in terms of sacrifice for liberation and the scale of loss, shaping inclusion and exclusion in public memory.

The empirical research material that I use in this article was gathered intermittently, beginning with findings from a focus group – part of the 2009/2010 project on *Collective Memory and Transitional Justice*,[7] which Elmaze Gashi and I conducted as part of *Alte Habitus* – Feminist Institute for Studies in Society and Culture, of which we are also the founders. Later research collaborations involved *Alter Habitus*, Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst (ZFD, now named ProPeace) and the University Program for Gender Studies. For this article, within this collaboration, I drew insights specifically from a research visit in Gjakova (2014).[8] Lastly, I conducted interviews with institutional actors, families of martyrs, of civilian war victims and war veterans in Ferizaj (2018), Drenas (2019), Gjakova (2025), and Prishtina (2019, 2021, 2025).

The findings from the focus groups gathered in a rather rudimentary report, hereafter referred to as the *Alter Habitus* Report,[9] remain important as, among other issues, they provide information on how public memory in Kosovo was organised before the Agency for the Management of Memorial Complexes of Kosovo (hereafter the Agency[10]) was founded in

[7] The project aimed to examine the politics and practices of collective memory in Kosovo–to document visually, map, and analyse memorials and monuments across Kosovo. The vision included the creation of an online database and interactive map tracing the actors, funding sources, and symbolic choices behind each memorial and commemorative site.

[8] Alter Habitus. *1st atelier: Private and public memory: Between archive and participation* (accessed: 6 May 2025).

[9] Alter Habitus. 2010. Collective memory and transitional justice program: Report of findings from the focus groups. Prishtinë: Alter Habitus.

[10] Agency for Management of Monuments and Memorial Complexes of Kosova, is mandated to oversee the design, construction, administration, and planning of memorial sites. Initially it operated within the Kosovo's Parliament,

2013. Together with findings from subsequent research stages, they point to an entangled dynamics between private and institutional forms of memory. Specifically, these insights show that memory from below, namely family and community-led initiatives and practices, play a central role in shaping public memory before and after the founding of the Agency. They also reflect concerns expressed by most of the focus group participants and interlocutors about fairness in memorialisation, which in turn point to issues of unequal access to resources, recognition and representation, experienced and often articulated as injustices.

The theoretical approach adopted in this article emerges from the empirical material, which prompted the use of Nancy Fraser's theory of justice, with its dimensions of *recognition, redistribution,* and *representation.* These dimensions are used as analytical tools for interpreting and discussing public memory in relation to questions of justice that this article examines, contextualises and contests.

For Fraser, justice is *parity of participation,* which requires social arrangements that enable all to participate as peers in social life. This entails the dismantling of institutionalised obstacles that prevent this parity of participation.[11] Fraser distinguishes three intertwined dimensions of justice: *redistribution* which refers to economic restructuring, namely the fair allocation of resources–class structure of society; *recognition* which addresses cultural or symbolic injustices, as well as the *status order,* or hierarchy of society, in which groups are valued unequally in terms of respect, honour;[12] and *representation*, introduced later in her work (2009 which concerns political membership, that is, *who* is included or excluded from decision-making, as well as the *framing,* that is, who is included or excluded from decision-making, as well *framing,* namely who counts as a subject of justice. The three dimensions are distinguished also in terms of the "what" of justice that involves the substance of justice, the "who"– frame of justice, and the "how"–procedures and terms that determine the *frame* or the "who."[13]

While theories of recognition such as Axel Honneth's[14] have emphasised the moral and intersubjective dimension of recognition, this article follows Fraser's framework, as it is broader in also analysing economic and political conditions under which participation in memorialisation is structured. This is particularly important in the context of Kosovo, where access to resources, institutional frameworks, and decision-making processes shape who is able to participate in shaping public memory.

In this article, redistribution refers to uneven access to resources (private or public) for building memorials, which produces selective recognition. Recognition points to the way certain martyrs are memorialised and to the effect this produces in the status order of their families. It also captures the way categories of civilian war victims and the enforced missing, in comparison to martyrs, are honoured through memorialisation in public memory. Lastly, representation in this article refers to inclusion and exclusion from public commemoration, as well as *framing,* that is, who is considered worthy of memorialisation and how such worth is hierarchised.

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and afterwards it moved under the competence of Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports. Republic of Kosovo. 2013. *Law on agency for management of monuments and memorial complexes of Kosova*. Law no. 04/L-146, 26 April 2023.

[11] Fraser, Nancy. 2009. Scales of justice. Reimagining political space in a globalizing world. New York: Columbia Press, 16.

[12] Fraser, Nancy, and Axel Honneth. 2003. *Redistribution or recognition? A political–philosophical exchange.* Translated by Golb, Joel / Ingram, James, and Christiane Wilke. London & New York: Verso, 3, 13-14.

[13] Fraser, *Scales of justice*, 5-8, 17, 55

[14] Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or recognition,* 3; Honneth, Axel. 2001. Recognition or redistribution? Changing perspectives on the moral order of society. *Theory, Culture & Society* 18(2–3), 43–55, 55.

To position this article within broader debates on memory in postwar Kosovo, the following section will give a brief review of thematic strands in scholarship on public memory.

Main Thematic Strands in Scholarship on Public Memory in Kosovo

Public memory in Kosovo is shaped through competing frameworks of recognition, largely structured around nation-building narratives, institutional practices, and, earlier, the international interventions. The existing scholarship discusses many of these topics, including how memory is shaped by an ethnic Albanian nation-building agenda, often at odds with the state's multiethnic aspirations.[15] Particular attention has been given to the commemorations of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), especially of Adem Jashari and his family,[16] and the Jashari memorial site has been conceptualised as a shrine underpinning a master narrative of Albanian sacrifice and resistance.[17] This resistance is understood as a legacy of the resistance movement, formerly known as *Ilegalja,*[18] symbolically codified through concepts such as *amanet* (legacy) and *besa* (honour-bound promise), producing a moral framework that legitimises political actors and structures contemporary struggles over authority and representation.[19]

In the immediate postwar period, public memory also became a point of friction between Kosovo Albanian memory politics and international actors, in relation to broader transitional processes.[20] Alongside the dominant focus, a substantial body of scholarship has examined gendered exclusions and hierarchies in post-war memorial politics, and artistic and activist interventions that contest these exclusions, while recovering erased histories.[21] It has further called for recognition of feminist methodologies, interventions, and civil society efforts that expand and challenge dominant forms of memorialisation.[22]

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[15] Ermolin, S. Denis. 2014. When Skanderbeg meets Clinton: Cultural landscape and commemorative strategies in postwar Kosovo. *Croatian Political Science Review* 51(5), 157–173; Baliqi, Bekim. 2017. Contested war remembrance and ethnopolitical identities in Kosovo. *Nationalities Papers* 45(6), 1003–1018; Baliqi, Bekim. 2021. *State and belonging: Collective memory and identity formation in post-war Kosovo*, in *Post-Yugoslav landscapes: Memory, politics, and belonging*, edited by Zimmermann, Andreas, and Gëzim Krasniqi. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 107–120. See also Baliqi, Bekim. 2017. The aftermath of war experiences on Kosovo's generation on the move – Collective memory and ethnic relations among young adults in Kosovo. *Zeitgeschichte* 44(1), 6–19.

[16] Adem Jashari, often referred to as the "legendary commander," was one of the founding figures of the KLA and is widely commemorated as a symbol of armed resistance, particularly following the 1998 attack in Prekaz (central Kosovo) in which Serbian forces killed most of his extended family, including women and children.

[17] Di Lellio, Anna, and Stephanie Schwadner-Sievers. 2006. The legendary commander: The Construction of an Albanian masternarrative in post-war Kosovo. *Nations and Nationalism* 12(3), 513–529, 517.

[18] Formerly known as *Ilegalja* or *Lëvizja Ilegale* [Eng. Illegal Movement], the movement comprised a range of groups and organisations that operated clandestinely in Kosovo from the aftermath of the Second World War until the outbreak of the 1998–99 war. These groups pursued different political programmes depending on the historical circumstances in which they operated. However, a common thread among them was the struggle against Yugoslav and later Serbian oppression of Albanians in Yugoslavia, particularly in Kosovo.

[19] Schwandner-Sievers, Stephanie. 2013. The bequest of Ilegalja: Contested memories and moralities in contemporary Kosovo. *Nations and Nationalism* 41(6), 953–970.

[20] Ingimundarson, Valur. 2007. The politics of memory and the reconstruction of Albanian national identity in postwar Kosovo. *History and Memory*, 19(1), 95–123; Weller, Nora. 2010. *The failure to face the past in relation to Kosovo*, in *Conflict and memory: Bridging past and future. Southeast Europe,* edited by Petritsch, Wolfgang, Vedran Dzihic. Baden: Nomos, 265–287.

[21] Gusia, Linda / Luci, Nita / Pollozhani, Lura, and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers. 2019. *Fragments on heroes, artists and interventions: Challenging gender ideology and provoking active citizenship through the arts in Kosovo*, in *Participatory arts in international development*, edited by Cooke, Paul, and Inés Soria-Donlan. London: Routledge, 105–123; Hoxha, Ait, and Kenneth Andresen. 2021. *Violence, war, and gender: Collective memory and politics of remembrance in Kosovo*, in *Europeanisation and memory politics in the Western Balkans*, edited by Tamara Pavasović Trošt, and Ana Milošević. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 263–283, 105-123.

[22] Luci, Nita, and Linda Gusia. 2019. *Inside-out and outside-in on dealing with the past in Kosovo: actors, voices and practices*, in *Unravelling liberal interventionism: Local critiques of statebuilding in Kosovo*, edited by Visoka, Gëzim, and Vjosa Musliu. London: Routledge, 132–147; Kraniqi, Vjollca / Islami-Hajrullahu Vjollca, and Krasniqi Korab. 2023. *Remembering to remember: Memorialisation and commemorative performance of missing persons in Kosovo*,

Wartime sexual violence has also received attention, with research examining how women's networks navigate between silence and advocacy,[23] and how art mobilises awareness about the topic, strengthens solidarity and seeks recognition for survivors.[24] It also shows how everyday nationalism continues to reproduce gender asymmetries.[25] The existing scholarly work, though to a lesser degree, also dealt with families of civilian war victims and of the enforced missing. This work showed how families reformulate and transmit the social memory of their missing children through various acts of remembrance, both as a means of coping with grief and as a form of resistance to societal forgetting.[26] Related work has explored memory activism and artistic practices around the missing.[27] Beyond these strands, other contributions have highlighted exclusion in public memory, such as the neglect of socialist-era memorials,[28] the marginalisation of non-violent resistance of the 1990s,[29] of civilian suffering,[30] and racialised exclusions.[31]

Existing scholarship has given less attention to how memory from below is organised at the micro level, particularly through family-led memorialisation, and to inequalities that shape these practices and public memory. To address this gap, drawing on Fraser's framework of justice, this article examines how access to resources, recognition, and participation are unevenly distributed, and how these inequalities shape public memory and complicate dominant institutional narratives.

Institutionally organised memorialisation

This section examines how memorialisation is organised in Kosovo, focusing on institutional actors and the competing powers involved. Institutional memory here is understood, following Richard Ned Lebow, as a top-down process in which elite constructions of memory shape the memory of groups and individuals, while still recognising individual memory.[32]

As shown in the *Alter Habitus* report, in the immediate post-war period, initiatives for memorialisation were primarily driven by martyrs' families and their social networks, often in collaboration with the Association of War Veterans (AWV), while municipal bodies were involved more inconsistently in granting permission or providing partial support. Funding relied on a combination of family resources, private contributions and occasional municipal support, often depending on the economic capacity and social networks of those initiating memorials.

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in *Conflicting remembrance: The memory of the Macedonian 2001 in context,* edited by Trajanovski, Naum, and Lidija Georgieva. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Office Skopje: Kontura, 106–124.

[23] Di Lellio, Anna. 2016. Seeking justice for wartime sexual violence in Kosovo: Voices and silence of women. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 20(10), 621–643.

[24] Di Lellio, Anna / Rushiti, Feride, and Kadire Tahiraj. 2019. "Thinking of you" in Kosovo: Art activism against the stigma of sexual violence. *Violence Against Women,* 25(13), 1543–1557.

[25] Krasniqi, Vjollca / Sokolić, Vior, and Denisa Kostovicova. 2019. Skirts as flags: Transitional justice, gender and everyday nationalism in Kosovo. *Nations and Nationalism* 26(2), 461–476.

[26] Berisha, Rozafa. 2017. 'Forgetting equals killing': Loss and remembrance of the missing children in post-war Kosovo. *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 35(1), 39–54.

[27] Kraniqi / Islami-Hajrullahu & Krasniqi Korab, Remembering to remember.

[28] Çarkagjiu, Petrit. 2011. *Dealing with the past and identity,* in *Considering the future perspectives on dealing with the past in Kosovo*, edited by Zysman, Karmyt, and Ballsor Hoxha. Pristhtina: forumZFD, 53–60; Gërmizaj, Valon. 2011. *Memorials and dealing with the past,* in *Considering the future perspectives on dealing with the past in Kosovo*, edited by Zysman, Karmyt, and Ballsor Hoxha. Prishtina: forumZFD, 77–93; Sahatçiu, Vesa. 2013. Monuments without a home. *K2.0,* 3 June 2013; Rogoś, Agata. 2019. Dynamics of the particular and the common: Monuments and patriotic tourism in socialist Yugoslavia: A case study of Kosovo. *Slavia Meridionalis* 19, 1–22.

[29] Gashi, Shkëlzen. 2019. Kosovo has wiped all memory of non-violent resistance. *BIRN,* 2 July 2019.

[30] Weller-Visoka, Nora. 2021. Silence is a victory for every genocide. *Prishtina Insight,* 15 June 2021.

[31] Gashi, Shkëlezen. 2020. Remembering Elizabeta Hasani. *Pristhina Insight*, 4 August 2020.

[32] Lebow, Richard Ned. 2006. *The memory of politics in postwar Europe*, in *The politics of memory in postwar Europe*, edited by Ned Lebow, Richard / Kansteiner, Wulf, and Claudio Fogu. Durham: Duke University Press, 1–39, 10.

At the municipal level, there were no formal criteria, procedures or standardised guidelines for constructing memorials, that were applied uniformly across municipalities in Kosovo. As a result, municipalities often relied on improvised practices, with responsibilities distributed across different municipal bodies. In most cases, Departments for Urban Planning were responsible for issuing permits or designating monument locations. While some consistency existed in urban areas, such practices were largely absent in rural settings.

Most cities, towns, and villages commemorated the heroism of "their own" martyrs by building memorials at sites where they were killed or in the places where they lived or grew up, reflecting a localised pattern of memorialisation. Especially in villages, often families memorialised martyrs in their private property.

Officials attributed all these disparities to the delayed establishment of municipal bodies. Even after such departments were formally established, procedural inconsistencies persisted. Often, the information regarding memorials by municipal officials did not correspond with the reality in the field.

Participants in the focus groups and interlocutors expressed dissatisfaction with how memorials were organised. In Gjakova, a participant noted that "memorials are built very fast, without strong criteria, with impositions, without fitting to architecture, without competition..." Similar concerns emerged again in later short research visits in Mitrovica (2009) and Gjakova (2014). These participants called for the establishment of legal frameworks and institutionalised forms of dealing with the past. Nevertheless, there were positive examples of institutional collaboration, such as in Kaçanik and Hani i Elezit, where municipal departments, local businesses, and the Kosovo Protection Corps[33] jointly created a martyrs' cemetery for both municipalities.

Later developments in memorialisation in Kosovo show increasing institutional involvement. In some cases, martyrs were initially buried in family cemeteries but were later reburied in collective martyrs' cemeteries. By 2010, the Marinë Memorial Complex in Skenderaj was the only site dedicated to all KLA martyrs. Initiated and funded by American humanitarian Benito Mares and approved by the municipality, it later received state support, particularly when the Agency intervened to prevent its total neglect. In recent years, other regional complexes, within Kosovo, have emerged, such as the one in Penuhë (Podujevë), which also includes a war hospital museum and was jointly funded by the Agency and the private Behgjet Pacolli Foundation.[34] There are joint cemeteries and memorials, as in the case of the memorial complex "27 April" in Mejë (Gjakova), which honours the memory of 377 civilians, including 36 children, victims of the largest massacre in Kosovo by Serbian forces on 27th of April 1999. While some of the bodies were found in mass graves in Batajnica and Rudnica (Serbia), many others remain among the missing.[35] The memorial complex was initially built by Gjakova municipality in 2013, and since 2017, the Agency has taken over the responsibility for its maintenance and protection. It now includes *kulla*[36] –the *Kulla* Museum, an amphitheatre, a cemetery, paths, parking spaces, and green areas.[37]

[33] The Kosovo Protection Corps was established as the transformed and demilitarized structure of KLA, redefined for a civilian emergency and reconstruction role, dissolved and reconstituted later as Kosovo Security Force.
[34] AMMKM. *The Martyrs of the Llap Operational Zone Memorial Complex – Penuhë, Podujevë* (accessed: 12 May 202523 June 2026).
[35] Zeqiri, Ardita. 2026. Kosovo marks national day of 1990s war missing persons. *Prishtina Insight,* 27 April 2026.
[36] "Kulla" from Albanian refers to traditional stone-built houses
[37] AMMKM. *Memorial Complex 27 Prilli – Meje, Gjakove* (accessed: 28 April 2026).

Before the Agency was founded, larger memorial projects were often undertaken by the Ministry of Spatial Planning. With the establishment of the Agency, all major memorial projects are now under its responsibility, at least formally. The Agency introduced some procedural changes, requiring municipalities to transfer all requests for memorialisation to the Agency. It also improved access to information through a database on its website.[38] The database provides a rough estimate – over 1,600 memorials across Kosovo[39] – with information at the municipal and village level (not always complete though) about the number of memorials per location, the year when the memorial was built, the number of land parcels, and who built the memorial, divided into the memorial categories. The categories of memorials include bust, memorial complex, lapidary, object of KLA war heritage site, commemorative plaques, statue, martyrs' cemeteries, and of civilian war victims, cemeteries of civilian war victims, and place where the martyr fell.[40]

Regardless of formal changes such as the requirement for memorialisation requests to be sent to the Agency, the practices have remained largely unchanged. The former head of the Agency (2018–2024), Bislim Zogaj, stated that both families and municipalities continue to build memorials. When Zogaj took over the management of the Agency, he said they had a small number of staff (increased by 2024) and a low budget. He criticised the state for not working to carry out an assessment to establish the necessary criteria, saying that "there is no proper hierarchy for the selection of memorials; in the end, it all depends on *who [the martyr] left behind* among friends [to organise memorialisation]." This suggests that memorialisation depends on who can organise it and support it. As Zogaj put it, "the main word belongs to the family." This highlights the important role that families have in shaping public memory, institutionalised also in practice as family members are included in commissions responsible for selecting memorial designs, alongside representatives of the Agency and professional experts. Zogaj reiterated that "the state should be more active." (2025).

The former Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, Hajrulla Çeku (since 2026 the Minister of Education), stated that the Ministry is implementing a three-step plan to improve the field of public memory, which, among other measures, includes drafting a law on the rationalisation of agencies, redefining the status and categories of memorials, developing policies for both existing and new monuments, creating common spaces and dates for commemoration, and supporting the design and construction of museums.

While memorialisation in urban settings has often involved institutional participation, the Adem Jashari Memorial Site remains the first and only memorial complex to be legally regulated, initially under the administration of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) in 2001. Last amended in 2018, the law is notable also because it protects the memorial complex from political interference. Revered as the legendary commander, Adem Jashari is deeply embedded in Kosovo's public memory through busts, monuments and street naming across towns and cities (to a lesser degree in Albania, and even less in Albanian populated areas in North Macedonia), with numerous squares and institutions bearing his name. In Prishtina, however, he is commemorated not by a monument but through a large photographic image displayed on the façade of the Palace of Youth and Sports. In 2010,

[38] AMMKM. *Agency for Management of Monuments and Memorial Complexes of Kosova* (accessed: 17 April 2025).
[39] Haxhiaj, Serbeze. 2021 Unregulated and unlicensed war memorial proliferate in Kosovo towns. *BIRN,* 26 March 2021.
[40] AMMKM, *Agency for Management of Monuments.*

debates over replacing Prishtina's socialist 'Brotherhood and Unity' monument with one to Jashari ended with only the square being renamed in his honour.

Competing memorials across Kosovo are visible if one looks only at the capital Prishtina, its main boulevard and its parallel streets,[41] as well as Velania Memorial Hill. They reflect the ongoing struggles of political parties for recognition based on their perceived merit in Kosovo's liberation and independence.[42] These struggles over merit for freedom, that is, over who is more deserving of memorialisation, are between armed resistance, typically signified by Jashari, and the non-violent resistance associated with Ibrahim Rugova.[43] In the main capital's boulevard, the KLA is commemorated with a statue of one of its founders, Zahir Pajaziti, erected in 2000, whereas symbolic recognition of the non-violent resistance period of the 1990s came later, first through a building-sized banner image of Rugova, approximately in the mid-2000s and then through a statue of Rugova, unveiled in 2013.[44] Although not initiated by a formal institution, the non-violent resistance is also represented by a sculpture "Cross-legged" made by a local artist in 2022. It was put in the city's main boulevard, on the ground below Rugova's poster, to honour acts of civil disobedience.[45]

The Jashari-Rugova memorialisation debate resurfaced again in 2024, in Prizren, the second largest city.[46] In Prishtina, in March 2025, during a solemn session of the Prishtina Municipal Assembly marking the 27th anniversary of the KLA's Epic, Mayor Përparim Rama, *Democratic League of Kosova* (*Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* – LDK), presented a token of appreciation to the Jashari family and announced the final location of the forthcoming memorial of Adem Jashari in Prishtina.[47] Given the predominantly LDK-led governance of Prishtina's municipality and ongoing polemics between the legacy of non-violent resistance and that of the armed struggle associated with parties that emerged from the war, this act can be read as a gesture addressing past tensions.

This focus on one form of recognition and representation, mostly through formal institutional initiatives, produced exclusions at different levels, including here women who have contributed to struggles for liberation, especially since the 1990s. Nevertheless, in recent years, institutional efforts have sought to address these exclusions through memorials to figures such as Xhevë Lladrovci and Hyrë Emini. The prominent 2015 *Heroinat*[48] memorial, funded by the Ministry of Culture, remains most contested. As Nita Luci and Linda Gusia argue, this memorial homogenised women's experiences and elevated them through the very violence that had marginalised and stigmatised them. Survivors of wartime sexual violence, they argue, were symbolically sacrificed in national commemoration, positioned not as rights-bearing subjects but as outsiders to collective memory.[49]

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[41] Krasniqi, Korab. 2024. Kosovo's landscapes of memory and memorialisation. *Heinrich Böll,* 23 October 2024.
[42] Ströhle, Isabel. 2006. Pristina's "Martyrs' Cemetery" – Conflicting commemorations. *Südosteuropa* 54(3), 404–426.
[43] Ibrahim Rugova (1944–2006) –Kosovo's president from 1991 to 2006 and was the leader of Kosovo's peaceful resistance in the 1990s. Rugova was a literary critic and later the founder and leader of Democratic League of Kosova (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës, henceforth LDK) – Kosovo's first political party, established in December 1989 following the revocation of Kosovo's autonomy in March of that year. Rugova was the winner of Sakharov Prize in 1998: European Parliament. *Ibrahim Rugova – 1998, Kosovo* (accessed: 23 June 2026).
[44] Peci, Edona. 2013. Kosovo welcomes first President's Statue. *Balkans Insight,* 30 September 2013.
[45] Bami, Xhorxhina. 2022. Artwork commemorating Kosovo protests 32 years ago unveiled in Pristina. *Balkan Insight,* 29 November 2022.
[46] Behluli, Mirlind. *Jashari apo Rugova: LDK-ja në Prizren kërkon ndërtimin e shtatores ish presidentit në vendin që iu nda komandantit legjendar* (accessed: 23 June 2025).
[47] Zymberi, Veronë. 2025. Kryeqyteti cakton lokacionin për Monumentin e Adem Jasharit. *Kallxo,* 5 March 2025.
[48] Luci & Gusia, *Inside-out*, 139.
[49] Luci & Gusia, *Inside-out*, 139.

Informal and hybrid practices of memorialisation: inequalities, hierarchies, and contestations

Turning to the informal and hybrid level of memorialisation practices, this section examines how martyrs' families and their social networks (memory from below) organise, sustain, and shape public memory. It discusses the underlying meanings and dynamics of these practices, revealing uneven conditions and hierarchies of public memory.

As the previous section showed, in the aftermath of the war in Kosovo, there were no clear procedures and guidelines for memorialisation. Memorials and commemorative events were primarily initiated and funded by martyrs' families and their social networks, in collaboration with, or independently from, the AWV. In many cases, friends of martyrs were also part of the AWV. It is difficult to determine whether most memorials were initiated and funded by families and friends, by institutions, or through a combination of both. However, as Ana Di Lellio notes, they were the main agents of memory.[50]

In practice, memorialisation from below unfolded differently across urban and rural settings. In urban areas, for instance, in Ferizaj and Gjilan, AWV frequently mediated between initiators – martyrs' families, and the municipality in the process of building memorials. Whereas in rural areas, at least in the immediate post-war period, families and their networks, by and large, bypassed municipal structures altogether. In many cases, memorials were built on private properties and supported financially by private donors such as martyrs' families, their social networks, business companies, or diaspora contributions, and it was taken for granted that the municipality would approve such undertakings. This reflects a widespread sense of moral imperative attached to sacrifice for liberation, which gave legitimacy to such initiatives and practices even in the absence of clear procedures. In certain cases, however, this brought to the surface problems regarding location. As monuments or memorial plaques were often built to martyrs in the places where they were killed, on public property, with the development of highways and roads, some of them would have to be relocated.

Similar patterns have been observed in other post-war countries in the region, as an investigative report by BIRN shows. The report hints at family-led memorialisation practices in Bosnia.[51] Nicolas Moll, a historian who has worked on issues of dealing with the past, noted that such practices often emerged from families operating within associations. As Anna di Lellio argues, these informal practices have been common in Europe since the First World War, when even the smallest village built a monument to its war dead. In post-Second World War Yugoslavia, however, war memorials became part of a top-down state-building program.[52]

Bislim Zogaj argued that families should no longer be the ones building memorials, especially given that the martyrs gave their lives for the country, and therefore, it should be the state that memorialises them. In all three interviews I conducted with him, he maintained that since institutions do not fulfil their responsibilities, "...the family becomes the main institution," particularly when they secure the funding for a memorial and build it on private property. Martyrs' families and their social networks thus represent a *distinct form of commemorative elite* shaping public memory in Kosova.

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[50] Di Lellio, Anna. 2013. The complexity of Kosovo's war memorials. *K2.0*, 3 June 2013.
[51] BIRN. 2013. Ballkani i mbërthyer nga shpërthimi kaotik i ndërtimit të monumenteve. *Balkan Insight,* 25 June 2013.
[52] Di Lellio, *The complexity of Kosovo's war memorials.*

While the lack of a strong state presence in terms of procedures and practices may suggest more open forms of collective memory, with no top-down imposition, and more space for families and their social networks to initiate and build memorials in public space, the research (2009-2010, 2014) also revealed citizens' frustration with the absence of such state involvement, which in turn produced inequalities. At the same time, citizens view the state as the ultimate authority to rectify the inequalities they experienced and often articulated as injustice. These inequalities emerge in a post-war capitalist context, marked by uneven access to resources, but also by embedded values that prioritise sacrifice for liberation and the scale of loss, which create a persistent hierarchy among categories of war. This hierarchy becomes visible in who is recognised, supported and included in public memory.

Zogaj pointed out that memorialisation and the organisation of commemorative events often depend on "who is left behind" the martyr to organise them. He recounted the case of a KLA commander known for his long contribution to the national cause, for whom no family member was left to initiate a memorial. Only years later did his war-time friends built one. Zogaj made a similar point for commemorative events: "If a martyr *has left behind* a friend who has authority, it is he who takes up the initiative" to organise the event. This shows that not only does memory from below shape public memory but often depends on it.

In relation to "who is left behind" within the family, a diary entry by Zekirja Cana[53] echoes the importance of "lineage". Cana wrote: "Long ago, when one would go for condolences or for respect [in the wake], the first question that was addressed to the family members [of the deceased], was: *did he die a lot or a little*?" [lit. from Albanian], that is, whether the deceased left a family behind. If so, the second answer would follow.[54] Given the structure of the Albanian family–patrilineal and patrilocal, this would primarily mean male lineage. This patriarchal feature is increasingly contested. Feminist scholarship and activism have highlighted women's contributions to both production and social reproduction, as well as to liberation struggles. As a result, it has become more difficult to leave women unacknowledged among "those who remain" after the deceased. In the context of this article, the examples of Vejsa-Nuka and Ferdonije Qerkezi (discussed later in the text) illustrate this.

Memorialisation is also shaped by economic factors. In Mitrovica, Elmaze Gashi and I spoke with an Albanian resident who, like some focus group participants, expressed frustration with how decisions about memorialisation were made. He recounted the case of a martyr who had not only fought in the war but had also been active in the national cause as part of *Ilegalja*. Because his family was economically disadvantaged, there was no one to initiate and fund a monument to commemorate him, through which he would be publicly recognised and honoured for his contribution to the liberation. The concern expressed in this case, as in the focus groups, was not that certain martyrs were unworthy of commemoration, but that others, whose engagement in the national cause had been longer and more sustained, deserved equal or even greater recognition.

As Fraser argues, unequal access to resources can prevent people from participating as peers.[55] In the context of memory, the issue is not the absence of recognition as such, but the uneven capacity to materialise it. In other words, martyrs without memorials are not necessarily unrecognised, but recognition remains unmaterialised due to economic

[53] Zekirja Cana (1934-2009) was a historian and distinguished activist for the Kosovo Albanian national cause, prominent for his work in the Movement for Blood Feuds Reconciliation (1990–1991) in Kosovo. During the 1990s Cana published his articles in the newspapers and magazines of that period chronicling the struggle of Albanians.
[54] Cana, Zekirja. 2000. *Ditari i robërisë, part I*. Prishtinë: Rozafa, 79.
[55] Fraser, *Scales of justice*, 16.

constraints, and in some cases also due to prioritisation and political power projections. This, in turn also shapes the status order of society, as both institutional or non-institutional commemoration of martyrs, weather material forms such as memorials or non-material such as commemorative events, not only honour the sacrifices of martyrs, but also elevates the status of their families. While grief for the loss is central, it is accompanied by pride in the martyrs' sacrifice for liberation. Nevertheless, the elevated status of martyrs' families does not translate into higher economic status but generates symbolic, moral, and in some cases political capital.

Rather than reducing *recognition* to *redistribution*, as Fraser argues, the two are analytically distinct yet intertwined in practice.[56] As seen in these examples, in memory from below, recognition as such is not reducible to economic factors. However, its materialisation in memorials (or commemorative events), especially in the absence of institutional support, is often conditioned by access to resources, affecting parity of participation. At the same time, access to memorialisation (materialised or non-materialised) is shaped by evaluative criteria through which loss and sacrifice are understood and compared, thereby shaping who is considered worthy of commemoration. The following example will examine another such criterion – the scale of loss, and how it shapes perceptions of worth in memorialisation, as well as the dynamics between family-led initiatives and the state's limited involvement in shaping public memory.

In 2014, in Gjakova, a group of Memory Atelier participants visited Ferdonije Qerkezi's *house museum*. Qerkezi turned her house, the very place from which Serbian police abducted her husband and four of her sons in March 1999, into a museum. The bodies of two of her sons were found in mass graves and were returned to Gjakova in 2005, while her husband and two other sons remain among the missing. The *house museum* was created at her own initiative and only later received institutional recognition and symbolic support. After the visit, a colleague and I spoke with passers-by in the city of Gjakova, two of whom had never heard of the *house museum*, something almost impossible today, given the revered status of both Qerkezi and the *house museum*. When we told them about *house museum,* they considered that families who had experienced a graver tragedy than Qerkezi's would be more deserving of this type of memorialisation, such as the Vejsa family. Although this did not appear to be a widespread belief, it reflected how recognition may also be tied to the scale of loss. While atrocities against civilians in Kosovo are numerous, many on an even larger scale, this comparison drew my attention to examine the case of memorialisation of the massacre in the Vejsa household closely.

A proper memorial (lapidary) for the massacre in Vejsa household was inaugurated only in 2021. According to Mevlyde Mezini-Saraçi, an LDK activist since the 1990s and director of Gjakova's Municipal Department for Culture, Youth and Sport during 2001–2004, efforts to commemorate through a proper memorial the 2 April massacres never ceased. Soon after the war, she and the neighbourhood's organising council, in collaboration with families, submitted requests to the Municipal Assembly. UNMIK initially blocked the initiative, said Mezinini-Saraçi, and later the requests were repeatedly transferred between municipal offices, with the final response stating that any memorial would have to follow urban plans. Mimoza Kusari MP, who, as the former mayor of Gjakova, inaugurated the Qerkezi house museum in 2016, stated that the Vejsa family had given the land, where the burnt house once stood, to a business company to build residential buildings. The land was given in 2012,

[56] Fraser & Honnth, *Redistribution or recognition*, 217.

and despite the family's decision to turn the massacre site into a liveable space, there remained a need for a place of mourning and remembrance, which was eventually materialised in the form of the lapidary.

At this point, it is difficult to specify the exact chronology of initiatives, institutional silences, and partial involvements. Nevertheless, this example shows the lukewarm involvement of institutions, in the sense that the municipality did not remove the private improvised memorial built in the public space, but it did not fully support a proper memorial either, until 2021, despite numerous requests. It also reflects the complexities and sensitivities surrounding memorialisation, but more importantly, it shows that even when municipal support is limited or entirely absent, families of civilian war victims, or even a single family member, as in the case of Vejsa-Nuka, often find ways to nudge institutions for their inaction. Finally, it shows that limited state involvement reveals the dimension of representation, specifically *framing*. This is reflected in the hierarchy of values, structured around sacrifice for liberation, where martyrs occupy the highest position, followed by civilian war victims, often differentiated by scale of loss, whereas the enforced missing remain in an unresolved position.

As Rozafa Berisha points out, drawing on Paul Sant Cassia's work on the Turkish Cypriot context, where a martyr (*shehid*) is defined as someone who has been killed, in Kosovo, martyrdom implies self-sacrifice through armed resistance. Families of missing children express that the others "s'ta dijnë" (do not sympathise), reflecting misrecognition rooted not only in institutional neglect but also in socio-cultural patterns that see such losses as private misfortunes.[57] This reflects their marginal and unresolved position within the hierarchy of value.

Analysing these practices from Fraser's perspective points to the need to analyse these hierarchies more explicitly, namely the *doxa,*[58] the taken-for-granted hierarchies that place martyrs above civilian war victims and the enforced missing, in both institutional and civil-society debates about justice and memorialisation.

Throughout the years, in my informal conversations, this hierarchy was contested and debated to some extent in the case of civilian war victims. Those seeking to emphasise the importance of memorialising civilian war victims often pointed out that NATO intervened in Kosovo because of the killing of civilians. In this way, they highlight the importance of commemorating civilian war victims, as well as practices that address (including commemorative ones) the enforced disappearance.

In recent years, a discursive practice has emerged that appears to aim at softening this hierarchical differentiation of values around sacrifices for liberation and the scale of loss. This practice relates to the nomenclature of categories, specifically regarding civilian war victims. Legally, a distinction is made between martyr and civilian war victim.[59] However, in everyday usage, in the media, and in public appearances by politicians, civilian war victims are often referred to as *martirë* (martyrs). Mezini-Saraçi notes that families of civilian war victims do not like the term "victim." While further research is needed to understand how this intervention affects families, my own observations suggest that it has not dismantled the underlying hierarchical meanings attached to these categories.

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[57] Berisha, Forgetting equals killing, 41–42.
[58] Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or recognition*, 49–50.
[59] Republic of Kosovo. 2011. *Law on the status and the rights of the martyrs, invalids, veterans, members of the Kosova Liberation Army, civilian victims of war and their families.* Law no. 04/L-054, 8 December 2011.

Returning to Qerkezi *house museum*, as an intersection of private grief and public testimony, this case reflects what Berisha shows in her analysis of parents' memory work for their children's loss. By materialising loss in the public domain, both as a means of coping and as a way of addressing the issue of the missing, parents become agents of collective memory construction. Furthermore, in their analyses of the Qerkezi *house museum,* Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers and Melanie Klinkner argue that victims' agency operates through social memory, showing how, in the absence of fully realised transitional justice, individuals and communities produce forms of remembrance that are truthful and socially meaningful.[60] In this sense, where broader frameworks of transitional justice remain inaccessible, and the Serbian state fails to confront its criminal past, including here the lack of information on mass graves, for both families of enforced missing and of the civilian war victims, memory and memorialisation become the site through which testimony, loss and grief as well as claims for acknowledgement and accountability are articulated and publicly expressed.

As these empirical findings show, the very *frame* of public memory is contested. This contestation concerns not only the "what" of justice – the substance, namely the uneven access to recognition through memorialisation, but also the "who" and the "how": who is considered worthy of commemoration and how such decisions are made. In this sense, the inequalities identified here are not only about redistribution and recognition, but also about procedures and political conditions under which decisions are made. Following Fraser, the principle of parity of participation[61] points to the need to evaluate both the social effects produced by memorialisation, such as the status order of society and hierarchy of worth and importance, particularly in terms of sacrifice for liberation and the scale of loss, and the conditions under which these outcomes are shaped and influenced.

Conclusion

This article examined practices and procedures of memorialisation in Kosovo, showing that public memory is shaped not only by state institutions, civil society activists and artists, but also, and often in determining ways, by martyrs' families and their social networks, and to a lesser extent by families of civilian war victims and the enforced missing. From this level– memory from below, the findings reveal inequalities that interlocutors often experienced as injustices. In this sense, justice in memorialisation does not imply equal and uniform outcomes and inclusion, but the removal of obstacles that prevent affected groups from participating on a par in shaping public memory.

Across both urban and rural settings, memorialisation often depended on who was left behind to initiate and sustain it, namely surviving family members and close wartime friends. Even after the creation of the Agency for Management of Monuments and Memorial Complexes of Kosova in 2013, memory from below continues to play a central role in shaping public memory. Yet inequalities emerged even at this level. The inequalities operate across economic (redistribution), cultural (recognition), and political (representation) dimensions, and intersect with top-down forms of organising memory.

Uneven access to resources meant that families and networks with greater means were more able to initiate and materialise memorials, while others with equal or even more significant contributions remained at the margins. Memorialisation, in turn, affects the status order by elevating martyrs' families symbolically, while families of civilian war victims and the

[60] Schwandner, Stephanie, and Melanie Klinker. 2019. Longing for lost normalcy: Social memory, transitional justice, and the 'House Museum' to missing persons in Kosovo. *Nationalities Paper* 47(2), 232–247.
[61] Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or recognition*, 28–29.

enforced missing were less frequently recognised in similar ways. This reflects a hierarchy of values linked to the dimension of representation, specifically the framing, which concerns who is remembered and how.

These findings show that inequalities in memorialisation are not only a matter of stronger institutional involvement and decision-making, or its absence, but are also shaped by broader social understandings of sacrifice and loss. In this sense, memory from below does not simply reflect existing hierarchies, but also exposes and contests the frames through which they are produced.

Rather than favouring one form of organising memory top down, or from below, the article approaches memorialisation through the lens of parity of participation, which Fraser identifies as central to justice. Such an approach does not deal with equality in the sense that memorialisation should include everyone in the same way, nor does it eliminate contestation or difference. Instead, it shifts the question to how memorialisation can be organised in ways that allow for more equal participation in shaping public memory. In other words, the article does not aim to prescribe a model for a just memorialisation but rather to analyse the conditions in which participation is structured, including access to resources, recognition, and inclusion in decision-making.

Finally, going back to Eng and Kazanjian's argument that loss is inseparable from what remains, this article shows that memorialisation remains the key site through which unresolved claims for justice are carried and expressed. For many families, especially those of civilian victims and the enforced missing, frustrations with inequalities in memorialisation are inseparable from the frustration and disappointment with the broader absence of accountability for Serbia's wartime crimes and the lack of progress in locating the missing. While this dimension lies beyond the scope of this article, it suggests that, in such conditions, memory becomes a key site where testimony, loss, and grief, as well as claims for acknowledgement and justice, are articulated and publicly expressed.

Note on author: Elife (Eli) Krasniqi is an anthropologist and writer. Her research has examined gender, family, patriarchy, social movements, and memory in socialist and post-socialist Kosovo. Her current research focuses on the historical presence of African populations in the Balkans from the late Ottoman period, with particular attention to the afterlives of domestic slavery and the intersections of gender, race, and class. Krasniqi conducted research and taught at the University of Graz (2019–2023), where she is currently a Seed Postdoc Fellow and Guest Researcher.

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