

Beyond Ethnic Binaries: Queering Peacebuilding



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When a Kosovo Albanian drag queen [stepped onto the stage](#) at Belgrade Pride in 2019, the moment carried more political meaning than many formal dialogue initiatives. Nervous about how a Serbian audience would react to an Albanian performer from Kosovo, Diva — one of Kosovo’s first drag performers — carefully chose an Albanian pop song that would not inflame nationalist tensions. Instead of hostility, the crowd erupted in applause. The

performance became a rare moment of connection across one of the Balkans' most entrenched divides.

The LGBTI+ community is often described as a “chosen family” to many, a symbol of acceptance and freedom within rooted divisions and marginalization. These epithets reach beyond the acceptance of someone’s gender or sexual identity. As shown above, the Queer community is very often the (only) one which will offer a friendly applause and acceptance even when the context suggests possible tensions.

Yet such stories rarely enter discussions about peacebuilding and interethnic dialogue.

WHO GETS LEFT OUT OF PEACE?

Groups that are marginalized in society, political, and public life are excluded from peacebuilding processes as well. This is particularly evident in the case of women: despite statistics showing that peace agreements are more likely to be sustainable and effective when women are actively involved, their participation in peace negotiations and peacebuilding missions has historically been low, while the progress in recent years has been slow.

While systematic data on Queer participation in peacebuilding remains scarce, a growing body of examples, practices, and approaches points toward the need for deeper analysis and suggests that Queer inclusion could lead to peace that is not only more sustainable, but more genuinely intersectional.

In the Kosovo-Serbia post-conflict discourse, discussions of inclusivity in peacebuilding continue to focus primarily on ethnic coexistence, overlooking how sexuality, gender identity, class, and heteropatriarchy shape everyday experiences of violence and exclusion. This exclusion, besides being highly political, also has epistemic consequences as it determines which experiences of conflict and peace are recognized as legitimate and which ones are dismissed as private, secondary, and irrelevant.



[Feminist standpoint theorists](#) argue that marginalized groups develop distinct forms of knowledge because they navigate structures of power from positions of exclusion. Queer people in Serbia and Kosovo experience conflict simultaneously across multiple levels, through nationalism, family rejection, institutional discrimination, economic precarity, and social marginalization. Being at the intersection of these overlapping systems of oppression offers a different perspective on how violence persists beyond the boundaries of ethnic division alone.

Moreover, feminist scholars have long [pushed back](#) against the artificial separation between wartime and “peacetime” gender-based violence, pointing out that such violence does not simply stop when formal conflict ends. The continuum of violence against LGBTI+ community is similar, it [troubles the very idea of peace](#) and has led Queer peacebuilding frameworks to question who gets to define security, and on [whose terms peace is built](#).

In this sense, Queer perspectives can improve how peacebuilding itself is imagined and practiced. Queer knowledge challenges dominant assumptions about whose suffering becomes visible, thus, could help to picture what sustainable peace can mean in deeply divided societies.

HAVE YOU HEARD OF QUEER PEACEBUILDING?

Rather than relying on rigid categories, Queer peacebuilding¹ draws attention to the overlapping and everyday forms of violence that persist beyond war and across intimate, institutional, and political spaces. [Queer peacebuilding](#), following Queer theory, rejects binary norms and structures, such as peace/conflict, combatant/survivor, male/female. This perspective could be applied in Kosovo and in Serbia, where public discourse still tends to frame conflict primarily through ethnic binaries: Albanian versus Serb, victim versus perpetrator, peace versus instability.

¹The academic concept of Queer Peacebuilding has been recently developed and formalized by a group of scholars, most notably Samuel Ritholtz, José Fernando Serrano-Amaya, Jamie J. Hagen, and Melanie Judge. It is defined as an approach that centers queer and trans perspectives on peace, bringing queer epistemologies to bear on how peace is constructed to rearticulate the concept in both theory and praxis.



Importantly, Queer theory does not deny these realities. Rather, it complicates them, asking what becomes visible when we examine how people live within and across these divisions.

By complicating these binaries, Queer peacebuilding helps produce more inclusive understandings of security and reconciliation, shifting the focus from *peace* as merely the absence of violence and presence of a formal dialogue, to *peace* as the ability to live safely and visibly in the society. In doing so, it exposes blind spots within existing peacebuilding frameworks, echoing calls for “[multipartiality](#)” in peacebuilding that recognize the importance of incorporating marginalized perspectives into how peace is conceptualized and practiced.

This, then, draws attention to forms of solidarity, coexistence, and interethnic cooperation that has (almost always) emerged outside formal political processes, particularly among communities that have themselves experienced exclusion and marginalization.

Queer communities in the Balkans have created forms of intersociety solidarity way before political institutions managed to do so. Activists from Prishtina, Belgrade, Skopje, Sarajevo, and Tirana have [collaborated for years](#) through Pride events and shared advocacy. These personal relationships, while being completely marginalized in politics and diplomacy, are built on mutual experiences of marginalization.

Activists argue that Queer people [identify less with nationalist narratives](#) because they have themselves experienced exclusion from the very societies demanding loyalty from them. For many, solidarity emerges not despite difference, but through shared vulnerability and resistance.

This collaboration did not necessarily emerge in the post-conflict context. Decades of collaboration between Queer activists started across former Yugoslavia, as Queer activists have been [building friendships, anti-war initiatives, solidarity networks](#), and even [celebrating weddings](#) across borders for decades.

These acts might be exactly what the general public expects from the dialogue.



[Research by the Youth Council of Serbia](#) suggests that attitudes among young people in Serbia, who have proved as strong change initiators, have shifted considerably over the past five years. Rather than centering the question of Kosovo's status, Serbian youth increasingly prioritizes reconciliation between Serbs and Albanians as the more pressing goal — with the formal question of recognition something to be worked out later. However, it is important to keep in mind that misinformation, nationalist narratives and mutual distrust [continue to shape perceptions](#) among younger generations on both sides. Nonetheless, for this generation, the normalization of everyday relations between ordinary people is not a footnote to the political process, but its most essential foundation.

That's exactly where the LGBTI+ community in both societies proved to be the most successful.

Such steps might appear small compared to the absence of such perspectives from formal negotiations, but they represent important forms of social peacebuilding precisely because they challenge dominant narratives about who belongs, who is dangerous, and who can coexist.

QUEER SHOULD NOT SIMPLY BE *PARSLEY* ADDED TO PEACE ACTIVISM

Nonetheless, Queer knowledge should be meaningfully included in peacebuilding. Queerness must not be solely added as "[parsley](#)" to peace activism: something sprinkled superficially to signal inclusivity without actually changing the policy frameworks.

Diversity rhetoric alone does not dismantle exclusionary structures, as can be seen in the Balkans, where [Queer people continue to face social and legal barriers](#) despite growing visibility and on-paper protections.

Queer peacebuilding shifts attention toward the everyday ways peace is lived, negotiated, and denied. It asks whether reconciliation can truly exist while heteropatriarchy, exclusion, and institutional marginalization continue shaping daily life. In this sense, peace is understood not only as political stabilization between



ethnic groups, but also as the possibility of living safely and visibly within society, institutions, and families.

Queer peacebuilding expands interethnic dialogue. Peacebuilding in Kosovo and Serbia cannot focus solely on ethnic coexistence. Building more cohesive societies requires confronting the multiple forms of violence experienced before, during, and after conflict. Women and LGBTI+ communities have faced disproportionate, and often distinct forms of violence across all these stages, making their exclusion from formal peace processes a structural issue.

Peace, understood — in Johan Galtung’s terms — as more than the mere absence of war, carries productive power.

Peace, understood as more than the absence of war, carries productive power. Every decision about who is included in peacebuilding, is also a decision about what kind of a post-conflict society is being built. If the framework being used to build peace reproduces the similar exclusions that enabled violence in the first place, then what is being built is continuity under a different name.