

# 'Gun Culture' in Kosovo:

## QUESTIONING THE ORIGINS OF CONFLICT



The Albanian flag waves behind the tip of a gun held by a KLA fighter during a ceremony in Likosane, Kosovo, in February 1999.

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This chapter aims to shed light on the relationship between 'gun culture' and armed conflict by investigating the links between ethnic Albanian 'gun culture' and Kosovo's descent into civil war during the 1990s. The chapter also briefly discusses four other cases—El Salvador, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—which reinforce the conclusions of the main case study.

The notion of 'gun culture' occasionally surfaces in the debate on small arms, particularly in connection with the issue of armed conflict. While rarely defined, 'gun culture' is sometimes treated as the very 'cause' of armed conflict—whether direct or indirect—particularly in the media. In the first case, 'gun culture' is presented as the main reason behind the widespread proliferation of small arms in a given society; in turn, this proliferation is blamed for the outburst of violence in areas that experience various forms of political instability. In the second case, this three-step relationship is collapsed into a two-stage process in which 'gun culture' contributes directly to armed conflict. In other accounts, 'gun culture' has been identified as the main reason for the failure of post-conflict recovery programmes.

Approaches such as these have mostly relied on untested assumptions rather than on systematic research. In addition, they have sometimes produced simplistic, if not patronizing, conclusions. These assume that it is easier for a society accustomed to the presence of arms to choose violent means of conflict resolution in the case of political instability. These simplistic readings draw a direct link between 'gun cultures' and 'cultures of violence'.

The notion of 'gun culture' lacks an established definition. Nevertheless, the term is commonly used to denote a particular set of 'reasons' for the presence and use of small arms in a given society—reasons that go beyond the 'economic' or 'utilitarian' needs of individuals and the dynamics of local or international markets. In this sense, 'gun culture' is used to indicate a given society's set of values, norms—both social and legal—and meanings that render the presence of firearms and their possession by private individuals acceptable and legitimate. For example, small arms possession among civilians—usually of firearms—can be seen as a symbol of status, of masculinity, or otherwise, as a source of security where state structures are unable, or unwilling, to provide it.

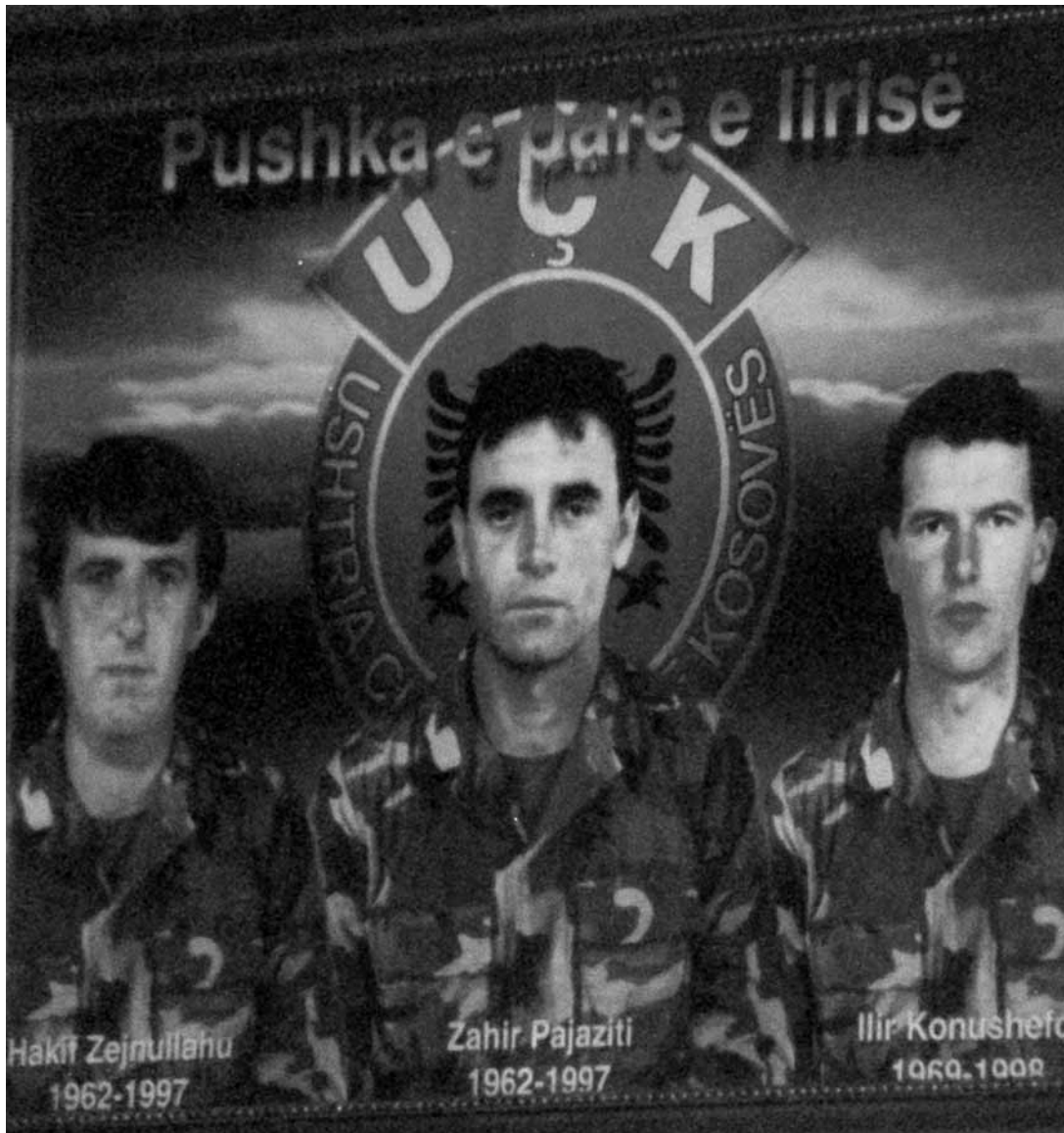
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The key conclusions of this chapter are the following:

- 'Gun cultures' do not automatically translate into armed conflict. If the relationship between the former and the latter is to be seriously investigated, the interplay between social attitudes regarding the presence of guns and economic, political, as well as historical processes and experiences must be taken into account.

- Broad references to 'gun culture' may have little meaning, given that different social groups often relate to firearms in distinct ways, with significant variations appearing along gender, class, age, and 'ethnic' lines. In this sense, 'national gun cultures' represent gross oversimplifications.
- Social attitudes to guns may change over time, so that it is not possible to speak of a stable permissive (or restrictive) gun culture. Like other cultural features, 'gun culture' is not a given, but the product of social and political interaction. As such, it may constantly evolve and be renegotiated by members of a given community.

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A framed KLA poster with the title *Pushka e parë e lirisë* (The first gun of freedom) shows three fighters who lost their lives.

As the case study shows, the current features of Kosovo's 'gun culture' are strongly linked to the recent war and the fact that initially isolated militant groups from mainly rural areas were able to gain legitimacy and momentum in a national and international political context. These militant groups actively tied their cause to Albanian history and elements of customary law—usually subsumed under the term *kanun*—of which they offered a militant interpretation that would resonate in parts of Kosovo Albanian society, particularly in rural areas. The same historical and cultural references, however, had been used by other Kosovo Albanian political figures to legitimate phases of pacification and reconciliation. The fact that most KLA leaders and much nationalist post-war Kosovo Albanian literature explicitly identified the KLA ideals, leaders, and tactics with the local traditions and customary codes of self-regulation was thus clearly part of a particular politics of (self-)representation and identity construction. Violent opposition to violent ethnic persecution, in other words, was not the inevitable consequence of a culture used to the presence of arms.