There is Nothing Here:
Growing up in post-conflict Kosovo

Fabienne Coenders, Msc

Kosovo is not only Europe's youngest state, having declared independence from Serbia in 2008, but is also home to Europe's youngest population. The average age is only 27.8.
Drawing from focus groups conducted in the summer of 2018, this policy brief identifies key insecurities for Kosovar youth and addresses their attitudes toward the Kosovar police

In early 2015, approximately 50,000 mainly young Kosovars left for the EU, Germany in particular, in the hope of building their future (or at least finding work for a liveable income). The reason for this sudden mass emigration was said to be caused by (false) rumours about Germany loosening up its asylum policy. "People traffickers have apparently been selling the myth that Fortress Europe was preparing to open its doors"[1].

Kosovar Albanians wave goodbye to family members as they board a bus to Serbia in Prishtina [2]

Young Kosovars have plenty of reasons for wanting to leave their newly founded country in the Balkans. Wages, although steadily increasing, are among the lowest in Europe and youth unemployment rates are ranked as the highest in the world, averaging around 57.3% [3]. A girl from Prishtina painfully described it as follows:

"Since we were kids, I guess, you could hear grown-ups talking: 'There is nothing here, you have to leave.' There is this idea integrated that we have to leave in order to be successful."

In the summer of 2018, the Kosovo Youth Study was conducted to identify common insecurities for those who are growing up in post-conflict Kosovo. As part of the ICT4COP project, the identification of these insecurities is can be used to inform community-oriented policing [COP] strategies in Kosovo.

What are key insecurities for youth?

- Job-related insecurities *mainly dealing with the struggles of finding a job in combination with poverty and other economic insecurities*

- Drug-related insecurities *related to both dealing and consumption of narcotics*

- School- related insecurities*, with violence as its most poignant aspect*

- Physical insecurities *of feeling and being unsafe*

- Inequality, where gender and ethnic tension between Albanians and Serbs (in addition to looks, religion, and political preference) play an important role.

Youth from Mitrovica in the North are particularly concerned with Serbian "troublemakers" who roam mainly the Northern part of the city. Youth describe seemingly random attacks by Serbs when crossing the bridge and having to 'watch your language' on a whole new level: "When we go there, we barely speak Albanian, because if they hear you speaking…!"

The Ibar River that divides the city into its infamous Northern (Serbian) and Southern (Albanian) sides symbolically underlines the ethical tension. The division is even visible in the local police force, where Albanian police officers work in the South and Serbian police officers are employed in the North, backed by international forces such as the NATO-led peacekeeping Kosovo Force [KFOR]. However, youth noted that:

"KFOR isn't going to stay here forever, neither is the international police. Then we'll be left with these police men who have never actually, maybe, been on the northern side. You have to know what you're doing."

How do youth view the police?

Although there are cases and examples of police efforts to help tackle youth insecurities, the general view of the police in Kosovo leaves room for improvement. If the Kosovar Police is to live up to its vision, "to provide Kosovo a competent police service in all aspects of its strategic priorities, trusted from people of Kosovo and proud of its performance"[4], they need to get in touch with the by far largest generation of the country: Kosovar youth. In general, youth' attitudes toward police tend to be negative. When youth talk about how they see the police, they mainly refer to the way they have or – more often – have not performed in helping them with the insecurities they deal with. This performance-based perspective is also an often-cited

criterion for their (dis)trust in authorities like the police:

"If I heard [about] more cases [where] the police succeeded and they'd done their job then I'd be more trustful. But that's not the case."

While most arguments for youth' attitudes toward police are related to their perception of police' performance, the next best thing relates to procedural justice. The procedural justice perspective argues that attitudes toward police revolve around one's view on the fairness in the decision-making process and way in which authority is exercised in general. Even when police are unable to resolve a particular situation or insecurity, the way in which police present themselves (e.g. when handling a case) is strongly determent of youth' attitude toward police. Kosovar youth was not born this morning:

"I think they [police] helped reduce some problems that were apparent here but, then again, it's impossible to not have anything bad happen here [in Kosovo]."

Key Lessons

- Key insecurities for Kosovar youth are often related to unemployment, drugs, school, physical dangers and inequality.

- For many young Kosovars, "there is nothing here", driving them to leave the country.

- Police help in reducing youth insecurities leaves room for improvement.

- Attitudes toward police seem to be mainly based on performance and procedural justice

Notes
1. Alexander, H. (2015). Exodus from Kosovo: Why thousands have left the Balkans. The Telegraph. Retrieved 06/05/2019.
2. Trading Economics. (2018). Youth Unemployment Rate [Kosovar data from Kosovo Agency of Statistics]. Retrieved 06/05/2019.
3. Photo by Armend Nimani/AFP '
4. Kosovo Police. (n.d.). Vision/Mission. Retrieved 06/05/2019.

The Author

Fabienne Coenders MSc (in name of Prof. Thomas Feltes) leads the Regional Work Package for South Eastern Europe as well as the cross-cutting Work Package for Youth in the ICT4COP project and is a researcher at the Department of Criminology, Ruhr-University Bochum (Germany).
She earned her bachelor in Sociology and research master in Social and Cultural Science from the Radboud University of Nijmegen (the Netherlands).

The Project

The ICT4COP research project seeks to understand human security in post-conflict settings by researching community-based policing and post-conflict police reform.
The Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) is the project coordinator.

Contact: Neil Gordon Davey, Dissemination Manager, NMBU neil.gordon.davey@nmbu.no

www.communitypolicing.eu