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# **The role of epistemic communities: local think tanks, international practitioners and security sector reform in Kosovo**

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# **The role of epistemic communities: local think tanks, international practitioners and security sector reform in Kosovo**

## **Abstract**

Security sector reform (SSR) in Kosovo remains complex and challenging. The existing approach is heavily driven by international agencies. This article addresses the question: what role is played by local research in Kosovo's SSR? This study focuses on the challenges that local research poses to internationally led SSR in Kosovo, and the contribution that local researchers make to the decision-making of international practitioners. In Kosovo, local research organizations produce research analysing and critiquing international SSR and offering alternative approaches. The study builds on existing studies of epistemic communities and research use in policy-making and new evidence based on the author's interview survey of researchers and policy-makers in Kosovo. The article argues that focusing on the interaction between local researchers and international policy practitioners provides valuable insight into the construction of Kosovo's SSR. The study deconstructs the structures, processes and agencies at the heart of the local/international relationship. It explains how local research on topics of security, justice and rule of law, and its interaction with international practitioners, challenges international SSR and contributes to international SSR decision-making.

Keywords: local research; security sector reform; Kosovo; international rules; policy-making

## Introduction

This study explores the ways in which local research challenges international approaches to security sector reform (SSR) in Kosovo, and contributes to the work of international SSR practitioners.<sup>1</sup> This study addresses three main questions. Firstly, what is the role and impact of local research organizations in SSR in Kosovo? Secondly, to what extent does local research constitute a challenge to the international approach to SSR in Kosovo? Thirdly, how does local research contribute to the decision-making of international practitioners working towards SSR in Kosovo? Existing studies of policy-making and research use emphasise the importance of research agency and how, through researcher interaction with policy-makers, researchers lodge ideas onto policy-making agendas (Haas 1992; Shaxson et al. 2012; Jones et al. 2012; Morton 2015). In Kosovo, local researchers communicate recommendations to practitioners working towards SSR that attempt to adapt international SSR approaches to the local context. This understanding of research agency fits into the study of international intervention, and particularly the focus on the ongoing negotiation, competition and engagement between local and international actors following international intervention (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2016, 220). This scholarship has provided a detailed analysis of international and local engagement, uncovering the challenges local and international actors pose to the normative procedures of international intervention (Autesserre 2014; Mac Ginty 2015; Richmond and Pogodda 2016a; Elbasani 2018). In Kosovo, the rules and intentions of international intervention have not translated easily into the local context, and have instead been met by local challenges and adaptation (Selenica 2018; Troncota 2018; Tadic and Elbasani 2018; Beysoylu 2018; Triantafyllou 2018; Jackson 2018; Kursani 2018).

Kosovo provides a highly relevant case for inquiring into the challenges that local research directs towards international SSR, and the contribution local research makes to international practitioner decision-making. International SSR in Kosovo was led by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) administration from 1999-2008, with input from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) peacekeeping mission, and supported by other international organizations. After the declaration of independence in 2008, the

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<sup>1</sup> This article describes international SSR policy-makers as ‘international practitioners’. These are defined as the international staff members of international organizations, including advisors, programme managers and policy officers who are responsible for the design and implementation of internationally led SSR in Kosovo.

European Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) took over the responsibilities of UNMIK, and launched its mission to monitor, mentor and advise SSR. International SSR took the shape of a succession of overarching programmes, targeting the reform of justice institutions, the police, civil emergency, the customs services and military potential. Though international actors would assume a less direct role in Kosovo's security sector after independence, they still play an important role in projects and activities today.<sup>2</sup> The authority of the UNMIK mandate has been guaranteed by United Nations Security Council resolution 1244, and justified on the basis of security concerns and the partial international recognition of Kosovo's independence.

This international SSR infrastructure has raised criticisms that this has led to substantial control over the SSR process and created a context where local ownership over the design, management and implementation of SSR is inconsistent or ignored by international organizations; leading to local dissatisfaction with the international presence and international security policy documents not grounded in the local context (Visoka 2012; Qehaja and Prezelj 2017). As such, local actors, including civil society organizations (CSOs), have raised questions towards the limited inclusion of local expertise throughout internationally led SSR (Visoka 2012; Qehaja and Prezelj 2017).

In Kosovo, the years surrounding independence in 2008 have seen the emergence of local research organizations, consisting of think tanks, investigative organizations, and CSOs who produce research.<sup>3</sup> The author's interviews with researchers from legal and security institutes in Kosovo found that there is a consensus that local research into SSR has been motivated by a desire to challenge international SSR that is perceived to have achieved limited success and lacks grounding in the local context (interview with Kosovo Law Institute (KLI) researcher, 17/08/17; interview with Group for Legal and Political Studies

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<sup>2</sup> International actors offering ongoing support to national institutions have included: An International Civilian Office (ICO); international embassies; the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Programme (ICITAP); EU Office; international advisors; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); and partnerships with various non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

<sup>3</sup> Local think tanks and CSOs who produce research on SSR issues in Kosovo include: the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED); Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS); Group for Legal and Political Studies (GLPS); Kosovo Law Institute (KLI); Kosovo Stability Initiative (IKS); Forum for Civic Initiatives (FIQ); Institute for Advanced Studies (GAP); NGO Aktiv; Centre for Peace and Tolerance (CPT); Institute for Development Studies (INDEP) and Balkan Policy Institute (IPOL). Investigative organizations carry out monitoring and reporting on the performance and ongoing process of SSR, and include the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). The KLI and GLPS also carry out monitoring and reporting activities, alongside the production of research publications.

(GLPS) researcher, 24/08/17; interview with Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) researcher, 14/09/17). Local research organizations include local researchers, consisting of advisors, consultants, journalists, and academics, who exhibit an in-depth knowledge of the security context. Commissioned by international and local agencies, think tanks and researchers publish perception surveys that reflect the security concerns of local communities, and research papers that communicate recommendations for the reform of national security institutions established through international SSR, and the ongoing process of internationally led SSR.

Based on the author's empirical research in Kosovo, the article seeks to demonstrate that SSR in Kosovo is weakened by a marginalization of the local research community. The study identifies and explains that local research constitutes an untapped potential that could strengthen Kosovo's SSR. It also provides evidence that local research provides a challenge to internationally-led SSR, but one that affords positive benefits for international practitioners. The analysis is based on evidence gathered through an extensive interview survey. This survey included 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with local researchers working for local research organizations in the field of SSR, and practitioners from international organizations engaged in SSR. A combination of local and international sources, including local publications, allows for a detailed analysis of researcher-practitioner interaction, and an understanding of the contribution of local research from researcher and practitioner perspectives.

The following section of the article provides an overview of the literature on knowledge formation in SSR policy-making in Kosovo and introduces the analytical approach. The next section turns to the main case study. In focusing on engagements between local researchers and international practitioners, the analysis assesses the extent to which local research constitutes a challenge but also contributes to international approaches to SSR. Finally, the paper concludes by detailing the key findings and drawing out their implications.

### **Knowledge formation in international SSR in Kosovo**

Kosovo's SSR is highly complex. Multiple local research organizations operate with specific organizational characters, interests and objectives within an overall shared epistemic role relative to international security agencies. The wider study of SSR is increasingly concerned with similarly complex contexts of policy-making, explaining how security governance is

produced through knowledge formation based on social interaction between multiple actors (Schroeder and Chappuis 2014; Mannitz 2014; Bevir 2016). The literature suggests that ‘a precondition for effective interaction and partnership with local actors is the recognition of existing local knowledge’ in security provision (Mannitz 2014, 279). Nonetheless, research is rarely identified as a form of local knowledge that can challenge international SSR and contribute to the knowledge formation of its practitioners. Studies of British policy-makers utilization of international research in the statebuilding of Afghanistan, Nepal and Sierra Leone provide helpful insights, but reference to local research remains limited (Varisco 2014; Waldman, Barakat and Varisco 2014).

Existing analysis of knowledge formation in SSR policy-making in the context of Kosovo focuses on how international practitioners base decisions on informal sources of knowledge outside of the formal goals and instructions of organizations (Graeger 2016; Distler 2016). In the absence of a functioning formal cooperation between the EU and NATO, headquarters and field mission staff have engaged each other regularly on an informal basis, providing a ‘community of practice’ that challenges formal EU-NATO cooperation (Graeger 2016, 495). Consequently, shared practical knowledge and values have been pivotal for the development of field cooperation between EULEX and NATO Kosovo Force staff, and more important than formal ‘Berlin Plus’ arrangements which outline EU-NATO meeting formats (Graeger 2016, 495). In addition, international practitioners generate knowledge of SSR in Kosovo by engaging informally with local actors (Distler 2016). For German UNMIK police officers, the most important mode of knowledge formation behind negative attitudes of the UNMIK police mission comes from informal engagements with local actors and experienced internationals, rather than official trainings and information (Distler 2016, 340).

Local knowledge also has a role in the knowledge formation of international SSR (Holohan 2016; Sahin 2017). Sahin (2017) demonstrates how different outcomes of SSR ‘ownership’ in Kosovo have resulted from the different patterns of power relationship and interactions between local and international actors. For example, during the ‘internationally supervised’ SSR of the post-independence period and the development of the National Security Strategy (NSS), the Kosovo government was seemingly pressured to approve the international document, only to later resist its implementation and initiate a new internal review process (Sahin 2017, 23-24). A study on international engagement with local populations in the Serbian enclaves within the Thezren and Banshik municipalities in Kosovo shows also that limited forms of engagement, cooperation and collaboration do not result in

trust, which impacts on the success of security governance (Holohan 2016, 347). These studies demonstrate that focusing on local-international engagements can point to how local-international interaction impacts on SSR, identifying the local end of intervention as a site of both local challenge and international learning.

The study of ‘peace formation’ places more attention on the contribution that local CSOs make to international statebuilding, and is defined as ‘the mobilization – formal or informal, public or hidden, indigenous – of local agents of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, development, or peace actors in customary, religious, cultural, social, or local governance settings’ (Richmond and Pogodda 2016b, 9). Peace formation ‘may seek to realise aspects of the international liberal peace architecture or strongly oppose the liberal peace for its failing to incorporate local needs and aspirations into its peace- and statebuilding strategies’ (Richmond and Pogodda 2016b, 2). As part of this process in Kosovo, community-based CSOs have put forward alternative peacebuilding practices that are representative of local communities (Visoka and Richmond 2017, 122). Although the focus on peace formation in Kosovo has not considered the contribution of CSOs in the specific context of SSR, it identifies how civil society has been able ‘to facilitate their locally rooted peace and reconciliation initiatives’ for peacebuilding more broadly (Visoka 2016, 79). The present study follows on from this in inquiring into the challenges and contribution of local research to knowledge formation in international SSR.

At the core of the present study is an analytical approach that draws upon two principal concepts, ‘epistemic community’ and ‘research contribution’, to analyse those challenges and contributions that local research brings to international SSR. ‘Epistemic community’ is defined as ‘a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area’ (Haas 1992, 3; Sugden 2006). Local researchers hold ‘recognized expertise’, and can challenge the SSR policy-making process by directly identifying interests to policy-makers or by illuminating important issues (Haas 1992, 4). Through engagement with international SSR practitioners, local researchers also challenge international ‘epistemic practices’, understood as the ways in which international policy-makers form knowledge on topics of SSR (Bueger 2015, 6-7). Evidence from existing studies has indicated that, by contributing new ideas, local researchers can help to formulate international SSR policy (Haas 1992, 15; Sugden 2006, 14-15). Important here are ‘intermediary functions’, where researchers push ideas onto policy-makers agendas and contribute to the shaping of the policy-process (Jones et al. 2012; Shaxson et al. 2012).

Research has an ‘informing function’, which refers to the creation and communication of ideas, making them more accessible and usable (Shaxson et al. 2012, 12). For example, publishing research outputs online or communicating complex ideas in a user-friendly style. Additionally, a ‘relational function’ improves relationships between actors whilst enabling dialogue (Shaxson et al. 2012, 12). Accordingly, the communication of research findings can lead to the development of informal researcher-practitioner relationships. During this process policy-makers work with discretion by seeking out researchers as sources of information external to the procedures of their organization (Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). In turn, practitioners can learn from their engagement with researchers, leading to an increased awareness, enhancing of skills and changes in behaviour, each of which contribute to the decision-making process (Morton 2015, 411). Nonetheless, decision-makers have a variety of incentives and reasons for consulting epistemic communities (Haas 1992, 15; Sugden 2006, 16). For example, in a sensitive and complex post-conflict policy-process, such as SSR, research is often utilized to advance selective or political agendas, which may implicate local research into broader political interests and divisions (Waldman, Barakat and Varisco 2014).

### **Local research: Challenging the practice of international SSR in Kosovo**

Kosovo gained independence in 2008. The decade of independence has created new space in which local research organizations have come to establish a form of policy-oriented research ‘epistemic community’ (Haas 1992). This change has taken time to take root. The legacies of a political transition from communism and the conflict in 1999 meant that Kosovo lacked the historical presence of a research sector (interview with local university academic, 18/09/17). While individual experts and CSOs provided a source of advice in the post-conflict years, the development of local research organizations was hampered by the post-conflict context, meaning local security research organizations in Kosovo have grown from scratch. Consequently, as Qehaja and Prezelj (2017) indicate, local actors, including civil society representatives, have been effectively excluded throughout key processes of post-conflict SSR. Their study of the National Security Strategy (NSS) identifies a top-down process of policy making, where International Civilian Office (ICO) officials challenged the locally driven nature of the process and opted to generate a new strategy that had little input from

local actors (Qehaja and Prezelj 2017, 411). Yet, local researchers and their studies can provide a policy-oriented field of research that supplies helpful insights and forms a substantive component of knowledge formation within this context of marginalization. By evaluating institutional performance, questioning the reforms of international actors, investigating potential abuses, identifying new policy alternatives and challenging normative international knowledge and practice, local researchers bring much needed input and embody internationally led SSR into the local context where it unfolds.

### *Local monitoring and evaluation of institutional performance*

A range of interviewees from local SSR-focused think tanks stressed the role of research, particularly public opinion surveys, as a tool to monitor the performance of security and justice institutions (interview with Kosovo Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED) researcher, 15/08/17; interview with KLI researcher, 17/08/17; interview with GLPS researcher, 24/08/17; interview with KCSS researcher, 14/09/17). Evidence supporting this testimonial data can be found in publications from these organizations, a good example being the KCSS's 'Kosovo Security Barometer' (KSB). Published since 2012, the KSB provides annual measurements of public opinion trends and levels of trust towards national security institutions and the international security community, as well as the key security challenges facing Kosovo (KSB 2015).

The importance of local monitoring and public opinion research is best explained by noting evidence regarding the weaknesses of Kosovo's SSR. Local research is important in a context where local political elites and patronage networks have flourished under internationally designed statebuilding to co-opt and capture the governance of national institutions (Visoka 2012; Jackson 2018; Tadic and Elbasani 2018; Elbasani 2018; Jackson 2018). A study on SSR oversight for example, has highlighted the weaknesses of security sector accountability and transparency, disputing the effective performance of internal oversight and research mechanisms (Qehaja and Vrajolli 2012). Specifically, the study emphasizes the absence of discussion over security policies within parliamentary committees for security sector oversight, and limited judicial oversight over the legality of Kosovo Police (KP) and Kosovo Intelligence Agency (KIA) practice (Qehaja and Vrajolli 2012, 24-25). Interviews with local researchers confirm a shared perception that there is an 'oversight void' in the sector, indicating how local think tank research monitoring challenges security and

justice institutions (interview with GLPS researcher, 24/08/17; interview with KCSS Researcher, 14/09/17). In general, local researchers have self-consciously adopted a challenging stance, questioning the functioning of intelligence agencies, the capacity of security and justice parliamentary committees, the amendments of judicial bodies, and the ongoing presence of UNMIK and EULEX (interview with KIPRED researcher, 15/08/17; interview with KLI researcher, 17/08/17; interview with GLPS researcher, 24/08/17; interview with KCSS researcher, 14/09/17). This shared challenge via the monitoring of local researchers provides evidence of a critical function of policy-relevant expertise that highlights the existence of an epistemic community (Haas 1992; Sugden 2006).

### *Questioning the legitimacy of local and international institutions*

A related mechanism through which local researchers and the expertise they offer challenges the existing SSR institutions is questioning the legitimacy of national institutions and the ongoing international presence. Quite often, the critique of think tanks challenges the extent to which SSR is able to represent public security concerns without effective oversight, which subjects security priorities to the vested interests of a small selection of decision-makers (interview with UNDP practitioner, 26/09/17). Building on queries over levels of trust, perception surveys provide information on how and to what extent citizens can engage with various security institutions, and solicit policy improvements which reflect broad public security concerns (interview with former Forum for Civic Initiatives (FIQ) activist, 12/09/17). A FIQ publication that surveyed perceptions of insecurity across Albanian and Serbian communities in Kosovo, for example, identified poverty and socio-economic issues as priority public security concerns (FIQ 2007a). As such, local researchers function as an epistemic community by challenging how institutions define security issues and illuminates salient dimensions of public concerns to decision-makers (Haas 1992, 2). Interviews confirm that such input proved useful for national security institutions. A local researcher explained how, ‘some of the institutions, namely the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) and police, were desperately waiting for the results every year’, and that KSF and KP practitioners are consistently invited to attend KCSS conferences and roundtables (interview with KCSS researcher, 14/09/17).

## *Investigating judicial corruption*

Organizations such as the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), the KLI and GLPS, also challenge the delivery of security and justice by reporting into judicial corruption, an issue which features at the top of citizens concerns (KSB 2015: 12). Interviews with local researchers and journalists noted the importance of investigative research skills and how they inform ‘tactical’ collaborations between investigative organizations, think tanks and media platforms (interview with civil society activist, 04/08/17; interview with former BIRN Kosovo editor, 20/09/17). Such collaboration meets the criteria of epistemic community, where professionals from different backgrounds adopt common practices to direct professional competence (Haas 1992, 3; Sugden 2006, 13). Here, interviewees indicated that the investigative organisations involved have moved from observing the professionalism of judges during trials to ensuring that they uphold principles that counter favouritism and discrimination (interview with civil society activist, 04/08/17; interview with EU Office official, 13/09/17).

The challenges of investigative research are also directed towards international judicial practices, and have identified malpractice in the EULEX delivery of justice as much as they have questioned the suitability of international approaches to the Kosovo context (interview with KLI researcher, 17/08/17; interview with BIRN journalist, 18/08/17). This research challenge contributes to the persistent allegations of inefficiency local actors direct towards the EULEX mission (Elbasani 2018). In this regard, KLI and GLPS researchers have advocated for legal amendments on the issue of anti-corruption, aiming to contribute to the development of a sustainable accountability strategy. Although they support the European standards put forward by EU actors as part of the European integration process, they also consider whether related reforms should be altered to better suit the local context (interview with KLI researcher, 17/08/17; interview with GLPS researcher, 24/08/17). Local researchers’ oversight over institutional performance, national and international, is increasingly recognized by the international organizations. A practitioner explained that the Kosovo EU Office draws on the findings of local researchers to inform their monitoring of the judicial performance of national institutions, while yearly EU Progress Reports utilize the inputs of civil society, including researcher insights (interview with EU Office Official, 13/09/17; Yabanci 2016, 354).

### *Providing local policy alternatives*

Insights from local researchers monitoring and reporting activities often translate into policy-recommendations that advocate for the adaptation of international SSR to the local context; emulating how epistemic communities introduce policy-alternatives to the policy-process (Haas 1992, 16, Sugden, 2006, 13; Morton 2015; Bueger 2015). Many leading researchers in Kosovo are educated in Western European and North American universities, and while they appreciate the values of ‘international approaches’, they also advocate for adapting the values and objectives of SSR to the local context (interview with KCSS Researcher, 14/09/17). For example, local researchers participating in government working groups suggest the adaptation of broad government strategies, such as the anti-corruption strategy, by providing recommendations on specific legal amendments (interview with KLI researcher, 17/08/17; interview with BIRN journalist, 18/08/17; interview with GLPS researcher, 24/08/17). Additionally, the KCSS and KIPRED have been active in providing recommendations on issues of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), which concerns the international and national programmes that seek to prevent radicalization. For example, a KCSS publication that relies on interviews with radicalized individuals has produced recommendations on how to adapt existing CVE approaches to also consider the reintegration and rehabilitation of radicalized individuals (Kursani 2015). Showing appreciation for the alternative CVE pathways put forward by KCSS research, international practitioners note that while international research helps to inform the broad design of CVE strategies, it is local research that helps to adapt the broad CVE strategies to the context of Kosovo (interview with UNDP Practitioner, 26/09/17).

Local CSO alternatives thus serve to evidence locally legitimate modes of peacebuilding, and might differ from that offered by international and domestic policy-makers (Visoka and Richmond 2017, 111). Indeed, local researchers do provide innovative ideas in the context of SSR. For example, throughout the Saferworld partnership with FIQ, local researchers are incorporated as an integral element of the joint design of local security initiatives. A former Saferworld practitioner commented that local researchers understanding of the local context enabled them to challenge international preconceptions and provide creative solutions regarding the countering and collection of small arms and light weapons (SALW) (interview with former Saferworld practitioner, 14/06/17). As highlighted in a FIQ research publication, ‘Through the cross-hairs: A survey of changing attitudes towards small arms in Kosovo’, SALW control and collection in Kosovo is a highly sensitive issue, where

people hold onto weapons as they are motivated to protect their family and community in a context of post-conflict insecurity (FIQ 2008, 9-10). FIQ insights helped to bridge the gap between local community concerns and central-level SALW policy-making and thus facilitated the adaptation of international security policy to the specific needs and concerns of the local communities (interview with former Saferworld practitioner, 14/06/17; FIQ 2007a, 41). In the FIQ example, local researchers mirror the ways in which epistemic communities provide important advice under ‘uncertain’ policy-making conditions, uncovering knowledge of emerging security issues at the local level that international policy-making mechanisms cannot generate (Haas 1992, 4; Sugden 2006, 12).

### *Challenging normative international knowledge and practices*

The epistemic community framework indicates that local research not only provides new knowledge on SSR, but challenges the normative ‘epistemic practices’ of international organizations and their SSR practitioners (Bueger 2015). Here, ‘epistemic practices’ are understood as the international practices that produce and maintain knowledge of SSR (Bueger 2015, 6-7). Quite often, international expertise, training and experiences of peacebuilding in various contexts are considered a form of knowledge more valuable for programme design than local expertise (Autesserre, 2014). In this context, local research in Kosovo actively challenges the international practices of knowledge formation represented by EULEX, UNMIK and OSCE practitioners. EULEX is considered to be particularly closed to formal engagement with local think tanks due to the sensitivity of SSR, and, in order to preserve secrecy, it prevents local researchers from looking at the EULEX Operational Plan (OPLAN) (interview with EULEX Official, 05/09/17; interview with EU Office Official, 13/09/17). Thus, local researchers are formally unable to critique EULEX in any depth. Interviews also reported a lack of trust towards civil society among EULEX management, emphasized by a reluctance to share information and fears of information leaks or accusations of political bias towards a particular community (interview with former EULEX Official, 26/06/17). EULEX practitioners are even discouraged from talking to local researchers and participating in interviews, despite guarantees of anonymity (interview with EULEX Official, 05/09/17). Similarly, UNMIK is described as very centralized and dictatorial, resulting in little formal cooperation with local think tanks (interview with UNMIK advisor, 28/08/17). Other UNMIK practitioners described how internal research mechanisms were unable to

collate the findings of local research and discern lessons for practice (interview with former UNMIK legal Official, 18/07/17; interview with UNMIK Official, 06/09/17). In addition, an international practitioner indicated that in the early post-independence years the UNDP was structured to maintain a centralized decision-making process and keep external enquiries away from its staff, namely any questioning and critique by local researchers (interview with former UNDP practitioner, 08/06/17). Interview testimonies also indicated a common acknowledgement of a reported reliance on international sources, with EULEX, UNMIK and OSCE practitioners indicating that their missions were largely self-sufficient, and when it came to the recruitment of expertise external to the mission it relied on foreign consultants ahead of local expertise (interview with former OSCE advisor, 26/07/17; interview with UNMIK advisor, 28/08/17; interview with former EULEX Official, 14/09/17).

Nonetheless, the practices that produce and maintain knowledge ‘is never complete, but requires ongoing maintenance work’ (Bueger 2015, 7). My interviews provide evidence that resonates with the literature on discretion in policy-making, with international practitioners possessing attitudes and taking action that seeks out local researchers as sources of information external to the normative policy procedures of their organizations (Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). An international practitioner framed an attitude more open to local researcher engagement as follows: ‘if you go in with an attitude of ‘I’m here to help’’, immediately there is a hierarchy attached to that, if you go in with an attitude of ‘I’m here to learn’’, there isn’t’ (interview with former Saferworld practitioner, 14/06/17). In international interventions, these practitioners are ‘exceptions’ to the rule: ‘they socialize with local people rather than with other expatriates, stay on site for years and develop an in-depth understanding’ (Autesserre 2014, 251). Critical of top-down, international approaches to policy-making, in Kosovo these practitioners indicated that even high quality international expertise requires grounding with local expertise (interview with former OSCE advisor, 26/07/17; interview with UNDP practitioner, 26/09/17). Other international practitioners expressed how their personal interest and fascination with the local context were key to their engagement with local sources (interview with former UNDP Practitioner, 08/06/17; interview with former UNMIK legal Official, 25/07/17; interview with ICITAP advisor, 30/08/17).

International practitioners also show an awareness of policy-making ‘uncertainty’ and understand the benefits of consulting the external sources of epistemic communities (Sugden 2006, 13; Bueger 2015, 2). In Kosovo, SSR practitioners referred to this uncertainty by describing the weaknesses of the research mechanisms of their organizations. In response to

the absence of an internal research mechanism within EULEX, an official recalled how staff lacked an understanding of the security perceptions of the community they aim to support (interview with EULEX Official, 05/09/17). Another international practitioner explained the weaknesses of international research, indicating that they lacked sufficient time and budget to develop a detailed understanding of the local context, and are only able to create a ‘distorted view of what was going on’ (interview with former EULEX Official, 14/09/17). As such, international approaches to SSR are perceived to lack an empirical basis, underlining practitioner’s aspirations for alternative, and local sources of knowledge. Hence, policy-makers interact with various sources of information as a means to cope with the uncertainty of policy-making (Lipsky 1980). In Kosovo, interviewees highlighted their engagement with local researchers as a vital source of local expertise, considering this interaction a valuable method to rectify the problem of limited organizational learning (interview with former UNDP practitioner, 08/06/17; interview with UNDP practitioner, 26/09/17). Despite the closed nature of the bureaucracies of international missions, an interviewee indicated that there were individual EULEX practitioners who have been very open to communicating with and taking up the ideas of local researchers (interview with civil society activist, 04/08/17). Another interviewee confirmed this in emphasizing that international practitioners often acted against internal instructions to participate in interviews for local research projects, and would also maintain an ongoing communication with local researchers (interview with EULEX Official, 05/09/17).

### **Local research: Contributing to the decision-making process**

Local actors have played an important role across the design, implementation and amendment of international statebuilding in Kosovo (Elbasani 2018; Jackson 2018; Tadic and Elbasani 2018; Beysoylu 2018; Selenica 2018; Troncota 2018; Triantafyllou 2018). The literature on policy-making and epistemic community outlines the networked process of decision-making, highlighting the importance of collaboration, relationships and interaction between researchers and practitioners as part of the policy process (Haas 1992; Evans 2001; Sugden 2006; Jones et al. 2012). An important component of this interaction is the ‘relational’ function of research communication that improves connections between researchers and practitioners (Shaxson et al. 2012, 12). In Kosovo, this knowledge based interaction takes the form of collaborative relationships, learning and contextualization, and the identification of

local actors and concerns. Yet the potential of these exchanges to shape the policy-making process is often hampered by international perceptions of the credibility of local research and the marginality that international practitioners afford to sources of local knowledge.

### *Contributing through collaborative relationships*

Local researchers placed significant emphasis on their ability to forge relationships with international practitioners, considering personal relationships as more important than rudimentary forms of outreach, such as conferences, roundtables and social media, in the communication of policy recommendations (interview with KIPRED researcher, 15/08/17; interview with KLI researcher, 17/08/17; interview with GLPS researcher, 24/08/17; interview with KCSS researcher, 14/09/17). For researchers, therefore, relationships with policy-makers are considered an important means to enhance the challenges local research poses to international SSR and the contribution local research can make to SSR. This follows notions theorized in the literature on discretion in policy-making, where from the citizen's viewpoint (in this case the researcher's viewpoint), the roles of 'street-level bureaucrats' (or, international practitioners) can be as extensive as the functions of governments (the policy-making process) (Lipsky 1980, 12). An international practitioner confirmed the importance of productive relationships with local researchers as a means to understand the local security context: 'this internal functioning you can only get by having lengthy discussions with people who trust you and who are trustworthy as well' (interview with former OSCE advisor, 26/07/17).

Interviews indicate that researchers also show significant agency and creativity in the building of collaborative relationships with international practitioners. As noted by Jones et al (2012, 60), an awareness of the values and beliefs of an audience are integral for knowledge interaction, where 'arguments are often framed to resonate with key constituencies or to move them to action'. A local interviewee recalled mapping out international practitioners working on SSR by considering how open they might be to the recommendations of local research, as opposed to those practitioners who comply with the barriers that international organizations put up to limit engagement with local researchers (interview with former FIQ activist, 12/09/17). This agency is amplified at the level of the think tank executive director, who often act as the bastion of their organizations and as contact points for international practitioners. Local interviewees indicated that executive directors have to work proactively

to uphold the critical analysis of their research, while softening the reactions of international practitioners to criticism in order to maintain ongoing communication (interviews with KCSS researcher, 14/09/17; interview with former BIRN Kosovo editor, 20/09/17). This reflects an understanding that the critical recommendations of research and the challenges these pose to international SSR are more likely to be received if they are communicated constructively. International practitioners confirmed that they were more inclined to develop a professional relationship with a local researcher that presented measured arguments and showed consideration for a broad range of perspectives, whilst they also considered more confrontational messages as counterproductive (interview with former EULEX Official, 26/06/17; interview with EULEX official, 05/09/17).

The consistent interaction within researcher-practitioner relationships represents a persistent and established cooperation in the ‘issue area’ of SSR (Haas 1992). Following the everyday engagement between local researchers and international SSR practitioners, the ‘relational’ function of research consolidates, with local researchers and international practitioners gathering around security issues and co-producing knowledge (Shaxson et al. 2012, 12). For example, with a positive relationship in place, an international practitioner indicated that they would ‘carefully read everything’ that a local contact had produced (interview with former UNDP practitioner, 08/06/17). A local interviewee followed this by stating: ‘more than anything you have these networks that have been built between individual organizations, but also individuals in general with international networks as ways to basically get input to a process, it’s a great achievement’ (interview with civil society activist, 04/08/17).

Informal researcher-practitioner linkages provide another important element of the networks that contribute to policy-making (Jones et al. 2012). In Kosovo, informal relationships have increased in frequency and in importance for local researchers and international practitioners. An interviewee recalls the attendance of roundtables on SSR hosted by local think tanks, indicating that ‘once you are on that list and your name is known, it expands’ (interview with NATO source, 30/08/17). For example, relationships that either stemmed from conferences, or started through funding partnerships between think tanks and donors, become more consistent as they grow into a series of more informal engagements (interview with EU Office Official, 13/09/17). Following these informal linkages and the fostering of trust and respect, decision-makers may turn to specialists ‘to ameliorate the uncertainties and help them understand the current issues and anticipate future trends’ (Haas 1992, 13). This was confirmed by interviews with UNDP and OSCE practitioners who seek

out local researchers as security specialists for immediate and streamlined advice on security issues that can be incorporated into the process of security policy design (interview with former OSCE advisor, 26/07/17; interview with UNDP practitioner, 26/09/17).

### *Learning and understanding the local context*

The research contribution literature suggests that local research can shed light on complex issues to raise the awareness of policy-makers and inform them about the context of policy-making (Haas 1992; Sugden 2006; Morton 2015). Interview testimonies reveal that, stemming from relationships with local researchers, international practitioners generate new understandings of the context of SSR in Kosovo. Firstly, international practitioners learn by deepening their understanding of the political context of SSR in Kosovo. International practitioners indicated the utility of engaging with research from a broad range of local think tanks, and regardless of concerns over research credibility and quality, the findings and arguments would offer an insight into the political positioning of different local actors to strengthen their ‘political compass’ (interview with UNMIK advisor, 28/08/17; interview with ICITAP advisor, 30/08/17; interview with UNMIK Official, 06/09/17). This includes an understanding of how local security actors, national institutions, and local communities understand and interpret security issues in comparison with international actors (interview with UNMIK Official, 06/09/17; interview with EU Office Official, 13/09/17).

Secondly, international practitioners learn from local research by developing an anthropological understanding of security. Where a stronger political compass reflects a deeper awareness of the political positioning of local actors, anthropological knowledge refers to the understanding of local cultures and communities. Regular engagement with local researchers was described by interviewees as a means to access local political knowledge, including detailed insights into society and newly established national institutions (interview with former UNDP practitioner, 08/06/17). This learning stems from the access of local researchers to information that internationals cannot reach, which supports SSR by creating a ‘massive insight that goes way beyond your ability to ever understand what is going on’ (interview with former Saferworld practitioner, 14/06/17). The local understanding of language, culture and community ensures that local researchers possess the means to access an understanding of security at the community level, where, as outlined earlier in the article, they can interpret research findings according to the security perceptions and fears of local

citizens. International SSR advisors indicated that through formal and informal conversations with local researchers they gained insights into the different interpretations local communities and international organizations held over the concepts of security and defence, leading to their questioning of what international SSR in Kosovo means for the local population (interview with SSR advisor, 20/07/17; interview with Former OSCE advisor, 26/07/17). As such, anthropological knowledge generation reflects the ‘redefinitions of preconceived interests’ and the ‘identification of new interests’ (Haas 1992, 15).

### *Identifying local concerns and reframing policy issues*

After learning, researchers contribute to policy by helping policy-makers identify interests and frame issues, a process which is reflected in Kosovo (Morton 2015, 411). Following international practitioner’s engagement with local research, interviews reveal that practitioners are more apt to considering the local context and show critical thinking about the implications of SSR activities. An international practitioner noted how FIQ research informed their understanding of local conditions that shape and distort the intended outcomes of international conflict prevention programmes (interview with former UNDP practitioner, 08/06/17). Furthermore, as Autesserre (2014, 251) notes, the international practitioners who operate with a deeper understanding of the local context can make peace interventions more effective. For example, a FIQ report, ‘Kosovo at the Crossroads’, conducted a conflict analysis that ascertains the drivers of conflict in Kosovo communities, summarizing that communities take security into their own hands due to a lack of confidence in international judicial procedure, and that individuals hold onto weapons due to feelings of insecurity (FIQ 2007b, 6). Reflecting on this publication, an international practitioner indicated that they carried forward the implications of FIQ analysis into UNDP conflict prevention initiatives, emphasising that international engagement with local communities is a requirement for successful programme design (interview with former UNDP practitioner, 08/06/17).

Following an increased awareness of the local security context in international practitioners, local research can lead to changes in decision-making (Morton 2015, 411). Interview testimonies suggest that local researchers have shaped the decision-making process of international practitioners in the development of CVE and SALW control strategies. UNDP and EU practitioners indicated that they developed CVE strategies using the knowledge of local researchers, for example, KCSS research on the role of gender and

women in radicalization, responses to foreign fighters who were returning to Kosovo, and how radicalization occurs through the internet in Kosovo (interview with EU Office Official, 13/09/17; interview with UNDP practitioner, 26/09/17). Additionally, local research has proved important to developing an evidence based approach to SALW control. For example, an international practitioner indicated that the recommendations of FIQ and KCSS researchers and reports (FIQ 2008; KCSS 2009) were crucial to developing an approach to weapons collection and understanding of community safety, by remaining sensitive to public fears over the ceding of weapons (interview with UNDP practitioner, 26/09/17).

### *Credibility and competition of the local research community*

Practitioners question the credibility of research, which can limit the contribution researchers can make to the SSR policy-debate (Sugden 2006, 14). In Kosovo, various international practitioners indicated that they deemed the ability of local researchers and think tanks to work through coalitions as a sign of credibility that encourages practitioner engagement with local research (interview with EULEX official, 05/09/17; interview with UNMIK Official, 06/09/17; interview with UNDP practitioner, 26/09/17). As Jones et al suggests, ‘being a member of such a community grants a certain level of credibility, greater than that of an actor who is perceived to be a ‘lone voice’ on an issue’ (Jones et al. 2012, 64). Still, the different actors within an epistemic community may not always constitute a uniform actor (interview with local university academic, 18/09/17).

In this context, interviews identified several forms of inter-think tank competition. For instance, an international practitioner commented that local researchers offered different interpretations of the causes of religious radicalization, options for the prevention of radicalization, and the rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign fighters who had travelled to Syria and Iraq (interview with ICITAP advisor, 30/08/17). In addition, practitioners expressed concern over the community representation of research, showing awareness to the different perceptions of security between researchers of Serbian and Albanian communities in Kosovo, respectively, and also observing that local sources rarely make reference to additional minority groups<sup>4</sup>, such as the Gorani and Roma (interview with former UNDP

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<sup>4</sup> To illustrate the different communities in Kosovo, the European Centre for Minority Issues in Kosovo (ECMI 2013) provides the following population data: Albanian community, 86.63%; Serb community, 7.8%; Bosniak community, 1.54%; Turkish community, 1.01%; Roma community,

Practitioner, 08/06/17; interview with former OSCE advisor, 26/07/17; interview with UNDP Practitioner, 26/09/17). While these examples show that there is competition between think tanks in the realm of ideas, there is also evidence of competition for the donor funding that is required to conduct research. International practitioners commented on this competition and how it stimulates further division, indicating that there have been occasions where local think tanks attempt to undermine others in private conversations with donors who support local research into SSR (interview with SSR advisor, 20/07/17; interview with former civil society activist, 16/08/17).

Competition and rivalry can also render local research coalitions, such as the ‘Forum for Security’<sup>5</sup>, more fragile, and further undermine practitioner perceptions of research credibility. In Kosovo, the ‘Forum for Security’ has provided local analysis of security issues in a field that local researchers considered to be dominated by internationals (interview with GAP Institute researcher, 12/09/17; interview with KCSS researcher, 14/09/17). For example, in 2013, a ‘Forum for Security’ research publication included input from FIQ, GAP, the KLI and Institute for Development Policy (INDEP), and as a joint publication attempted to add weight to challenges directed at a Kosovo Security Strategy development process considered to lack inclusivity and transparency (Rushiti 2013). Despite this, interviews note that there was no formal requirement to share research ideas within the coalition, and consequently, organizations could not tap into coalition work (interview with GAP researcher, 12/09/17).

In other instances of research partnership, it has proved difficult to create a common discourse in researching security and justice. Such division is evident during the participation of local researchers from a variety of CSOs in government working groups for legal amendments for rule of law and anti-corruption strategies. Here a local researcher noted how the overall message was undermined as organizations offered different interpretations of the same issue (interview with GLPS researcher, 24/08/17). Shared discourses are also difficult to establish in SSR research that involves researchers from both Kosovo-Serbian and Kosovo-Albanian communities. For example, despite productive cooperation between Kosovo-Serbian and Kosovo-Albanian researchers, it has been noted that there can be differences over approaches to community safety, and even the spelling of names throughout research publications (interview with Aktiv researcher, 06/09/17).

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0.84%; Ashkali community, 0.83%; Egyptian community, 0.61%; Gorani community, 0.58%; Montenegrin community, 0.01%; Croat community, 0.01%.

<sup>5</sup> The ‘Forum for Security’ serves as a discussion platform among think tanks in Kosovo, aiming to bring together key stakeholders on security and justice issues to advocate for policy development. It was established in June 2010 by FIQ, in partnership with the KCSS.

### *Incorporation and reflections on local research remain an exception*

Practitioners, however, often fail to recognize the need to understand the context of policy-making, the actors and interests involved, as well as the contribution that related knowledge can make to the decision-making process (Haas 1992, 14). As indicated by Autesserre (2014, 251), international practitioners open to incorporating local ideas into programme design are likely to be exceptions to the norm. Likewise, the majority of UNMIK and EULEX staff working towards SSR in Kosovo are perceived by local researchers as following the executive statements and directives of higher ranking officials (interview with former FIQ activist, 12/09/17). Internationals over-reference to stability and high politics in SSR often reverberate broad geo-political concerns more than the priorities and interests of local actors (Qehaja and Prezelj 2017). An international practitioner recalled being told that ‘if there is no stability, Brussels will be on the phone with me asking why not. If there is, everything is as it should be’ (interview with EULEX Official, 05/09/17). Consequently, an emphasis on the stability objectives of EULEX ensures that local research is deemed too sensitive or partisan to engage with (interview with EULEX Official, 05/09/17).

Quite often international SSR practitioners do not consult local research because of their perceptions of its policy-irrelevance, a lack of awareness of research availability, and limited time to comprehend research findings (Stone 2002, 289-291). As one practitioner explained: ‘I think more now there’s a lot more confidence in Kosovo’s civil society, but there is still an attitude amongst some internationals that they are either there for the ride... a safe environment and they get good pay... or they know a little bit more’ (interview with former Saferworld practitioner, 14/06/17). Some interviewees were unaware of the presence of local SSR research, or could not recall any engagement with local researchers (interview with UNMIK official, 06/09/17; interview with former EULEX Official, 14/09/17). This might reflect international practitioners lack of experience in working with civil society or civilian experts in SSR (interview with ICITAP advisor, 30/08/17). The rejection of local research might also result from a deliberate decision. Here, international SSR practitioners identified negative perceptions towards local researcher reputation and the methodological quality of local research as reasons for limited engagement (interview with UNMIK advisor, 28/08/17; interview with EULEX Official, 05/09/17; interview with UNMIK Official, 06/09/17).

Practitioners exercise of policy-making discretion does not necessarily prioritise engagement with local research (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). Here, technical international SSR experience was often considered more valuable than local knowledge of the security context. For example, practitioners commented on the presence of an attitude that experience in different contexts of international intervention, such as East Timor, provides enough intellectual grounding to work in SSR in Kosovo (interview with UNMIK advisor, 28/08/17; interview with UNMIK Official, 06/09/17). Following more cynical interpretations of research utilization, there are instances where practitioners show a tendency for anti-intellectualism that mitigates against the use of local research (Stone 2002, 290). Here, the interview testimonies of international practitioners included criticisms of other international practitioners. For example, individuals within international organizations who considered their role within an international organization as a professional opportunity, and were mostly concerned with their next contract (interview with former EULEX Official, 14/09/17). Other practitioners were described as considering their role as a social opportunity, prioritizing where in the Balkans they might holiday, rather than dedicating time to learn about Kosovo (interview with former EULEX Official, 24/08/17).

As indicated by a study on the utilization of research by British policy-makers working towards statebuilding in the contexts of Afghanistan, Nepal and Sierra Leone, research in post-conflict contexts is often used retrospectively or selectively to fit predetermined programmes (Waldman, Barakat and Varisco 2014, 134). Similarly, in Kosovo, interviews indicate that international practitioner engagement with local research often represents the managing of local researcher expectations, rather than meaningful research use. An international practitioner noted that while they did seek out local research, this was only indirectly, occurring through a watering down process where subordinate office staff would summarize local research findings (interview with UNMIK advisor, 28/08/17). On other occasions, local research was used to justify international policy briefs, rather than making reference to critical findings which might express dissatisfaction with the UNMIK role in SSR (interview with UNMIK advisor, 28/08/17).

## **Conclusion**

This article has brought forward new empirical evidence to help develop a closer understanding of the complexities of SSR in Kosovo. The paper has analysed the challenges

local research poses to international SSR, and the contribution it can make to international SSR practitioners. Firstly, it demonstrates that local research, through monitoring, reporting and analysis of the performance of national security institutions and the ongoing international SSR presence, challenges international approaches to SSR and the knowledge formation of international practitioners in Kosovo. Secondly, it shows that local research has a role to play in the policy-process of SSR, and contributes to international practitioners working towards SSR. While selective forms of utilization can obstruct an engagement with local research and complicate the contribution of local research to international SSR, the analysis identifies instances where practitioners learn from local researchers and develop context sensitive decision-making processes.

The analysis of the contribution of local research organizations to international SSR adds an important study to research into international intervention in Kosovo, where the challenges posed by local research organizations towards international intervention has not been previously considered. The findings show the benefit of combining an analytical approach of epistemic community and research contribution to explore previously undervalued engagements in policy-making in a post-conflict context, in this case highlighting the role of local researchers. In addition, identifying the challenges and contributions of local researchers in international SSR begins to raise questions to the structures, cultures, and practices of international missions, organizations and practitioners working towards SSR. Some international practitioners have indicated that they interact with and use local research, considering it a valuable means to generate a deeper understanding of the local context and an important foundation for decision-making and the design of SSR activities. Therefore, despite concerns over the credibility of local research, the findings question the instances where international SSR practices obstruct practitioner engagement with local research, or prioritise international sources of expertise. The findings also question those SSR practitioners who do not value an engagement with local researchers. It indicates that local research can make a contribution to international SSR, and suggests that international SSR might find utility in opening up to a deeper engagement with the challenges of local researchers.

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