Europe's youngest country, the Republic of Kosovo, carries a reputation of being one of the most religiously tolerant nations in the world. Albanian Muslims form the majority of Kosovo’s population; however, their history remains tied to their relationship with the Jews of Kosovo and Southeastern Europe. To discuss the history of Albanians and Jews in Kosovo, the Ackerman Center hosted a special lecture event, featuring three guest speakers: Her Excellency (H. E.) Mrs. Teuta Sahatqija, the current Ambassador of Kosovo; Ms. Vasfije Krasniqi, a survivor of the Kosovo War; and Ms. Ines Dimiri, a subject matter expert on the history of Kosovo.
H.E. Sahatqija (right) provided an overview of Kosovo’s history from the Second World War to the present. Since its independence in 2008, Kosovo has seen tremendous growth. Its past, however, is steeped in conflict. Following the First World War, Kosovo formed part of Yugoslavia. In 1941, the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia led to an eruption of violence, ethnic cleansing and the death of most of the Jewish population. Kosovo’s Jewish population, however, experienced growth, as Kosovo became a safe haven for Jews fleeing persecution.

H. E. Sahatqiqa also shared how the Albanians in Kosovo saved not only the majority of their local Jewish neighbors but also hundreds of Jewish refugees. Within the Albanian Muslim culture, she explained the concept of besa, an unbreakable oath of loyalty, solidarity, hospitality and generosity. Their commitment to besa, and the tenants of their faith prompted them to provide aid no matter the cost. During the Holocaust, Albanian Muslims risked their lives to supply Jews with resources and shelter, welcoming them into their homes as family members. In an anecdote, H.E. Sahatqiqa shared that an Albanian man even gave up his life to save a Jew to honor besa.

Perhaps the most notorious acts perpetrated against the Albanians was the rape of 20,000 women. To commemorate the victims, the Republic of Kosovo installed the Heroinat Memorial (bottom). H.E. Sahatqiqa spoke about the government’s efforts to provide institutional support for the victims and combat the taboo that suppresses their voices out of fear. Due to cultural stigma, survivors of these assaults remained silent.

Second Photo: Following the lecture, H.E. Sahatqiqa (left) gifts the Ackerman Center with the book, Besa: Muslims who Saved Jews in World War II, and a photo of the Kosovo landscape.

Bottom: The Heroinat Memorial features the face of an Albanian woman made up of 20,000 medallions, which, upon close inspection, reveal the image of an individual woman.
Vasfiqe Krasniqi Goodman (below), was one of the 20,000 sexual assault victims and courageously came forward as the first survivor to speak publicly about what happened to her to raise awareness, and seek justice against her perpetrators. At the age of sixteen, she was brutally abducted from her home and raped twice by Serbian officers. She described the difficulties she encountered in her struggle to hold her attackers accountable. Denied justice from the UN, she appealed her case to the Supreme Court, which acquitted both perpetrators. “To this day,” she said, “no one is behind bars.” Despite this risk, one victim had the courage to come forward. Krasniqi Goodman continues to serve as the voice of the 20,000 victims in an effort to break the taboo and encourage other survivors to testify. She is a leader in the “Be My Voice” campaign, a movement to raise awareness of and provides aid to wartime victims of sexual assault.

Ines Demiri (top right), the third speaker, discussed the history of Jews in Kosovo and their relationship to the Albanians. Since the 15th century, Jews were active members of society and enjoyed religious freedom. Jews and Albanians lived and worked together and spoke the same languages. Their histories, Demiri explained, are inseparable.

She spoke about how the Albanians saved the Jews of Kosovo, including her grandmother, mentioning several by name. A number of them are among Yad Vashem’s “Righteous Amongst the Nations,” which honors the non-Jewish individuals who risked their lives to aid Jews during the Holocaust. She remarked that the history of the Holocaust in Kosovo remains largely unexamined due to a lack of access to historical archives. However, the relationship between Jews and Albanians persists. In Kosovo, she described how the politics are free of anti-Semitism and how it promotes diversity and tolerance. The Jewish community and Israel were among the first to denounce the ethnic cleansing practices against the Albanians during the Kosovo War, demonstrating that their bond has stood throughout history.