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Kosovo's Competing Nationalisms: Theorizing an Internal Challenge to Rebel Victor Legitimacy

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Abstract

This article highlights the significance of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje's (LVV) left-wing Kosovar Albanian nationalist challenge to the authoritarian and patrimonial nationalist system of Kosovo's rebel victors. LVV used the political settlement's own legitimizing metanarrative – that of Kosovar Albanian nationalism – to bolster their own legitimacy while undermining that of post-war elites drawn from organizations active in the conflict of the 1990s. A methodology based on Discursive Institutionalism makes sense of LVV's position as both a challenger of rebel victors but also as a representative of the same ideological culture that underpins Kosovo's political culture. There are two key contributions here. Empirically, this study characterizes LVV as a nationalist challenge to the rebel victor parties rather than as a distinctively nationalist or a protest party. The second contribution is theoretical: peacebuilding and political settlements theories must take a more dynamic and agency-sensitive view of legitimacy creation than they have hitherto.

Keywords: Nationalism; Kosovo; political settlements; nation-building; legitimacy

Introduction

In the election of 2019, Kosovo's established rebel victor parties lost out to *Lëvizja Vetëvendosje* (Movement for Self-Determination). LVV (as we shall call them from hereon) won an even bigger landslide two years later. How did this former student movement win the support of so many Kosovar Albanians that they took the reins of government from the heroes of the struggle for independence?

Part of the answer lies in the *interpretation* of ideas. Ideas have certainly been recognized as salient to post-war legitimacy, for example in Clements' (2008, 2014) Grounded Legitimacy theory, rectifying naïve liberal universalism. However, without a means of analyzing the interpretation of those ideas by agents, these theories are at risk of essentialization, or assuming that a widely held ideology (such as nationalism) automatically creates prescriptions for legitimate governance. This article argues that established ideas must be regarded as critically important but that they must also be treated as mutable.

Specifically, they have to be interpreted and applied to become active discourses that (de) legitimize governance. They can yield a (startling) variety of such interpretations and applications. I propose the application of Schmidt's (2010) "discursive institutionalism" to maintain the salience of preexisting ideas ("background ideational abilities") while simultaneously demanding attention to the particular policy prescriptions actors develop from them ("foreground discursive abilities"). This application forms the methodology I apply to the case of Kosovo and LVV.

The case of Kosovar Albanian nationalism and the rise of LVV demonstrates very clearly how radically opposing interpretations can be made of the same body of ideas by opposing political agents. After "the war" – by which Kosovar Albanians almost always mean the conflicts of the 1990s

and especially the NATO intervention in 1999 (Ahmetaj 2020 Interview) – Kosovo’s politics was dominated by the legacy parties of the Kosovo Liberation Army, especially the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), which had led the (mostly) non-violent resistance to Yugoslavia/Serbia in the 1990s (Skendaj 2015, 136, Mustafa 2019, 167). I characterize these parties as the “old guard.” This is not because they were friends; indeed, there was both political and violent competition between them (see, for example, Perritt 2008, 31–32), but this is because they share broad similarities in how they legitimized their rule through hierarchical and patrimonial nationalism. Those similarities become obvious in contrast to LVV’s nationalism. They and their dominant figurehead, Albin Kurti, have long argued for an egalitarian and social democratic version of Kosovar Albanian nationalism (Visoka 2017, 115). Their emergence as a political force and rise to government showcases the power of that alternative interpretation. My point is that, nonetheless, it is simply another interpretation of the same nationalism. Kosovar Albanian nationalism remains central to the political culture even as the sides battle over the forms of governance it legitimizes. This illustrates the theoretical point. Equally, there is an empirical implication. The focus on interpretation characterizes LVV as a party with a distinctive agenda nonetheless grounded in a common, nationalistic political culture – in contrast to an especially nationalist party or as a protest movement without positive goals.

The article first reviews peacebuilding theories of legitimacy and distinctive forms of nationalism to make the argument that such theories need to be able to tackle the interpretation of ideas, then presents the utility of Discursive Institutionalism in doing so. Most of the article is devoted to the case study. The first section addresses the background and elements of Kosovar Albanian nationalism, which both LVV and the old guard share, while the remaining three address their competing interpretations of those elements to economic, political, and international intervention issues.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework: De-Essentializing Peacebuilding’s Models of Legitimacy

It (almost) goes without saying that legitimacy is crucial to peacebuilding and post-war outcomes more generally (for example, Jeffery, McConnell, and Wilson 2015, 183). However, what scholarship understands as constituting legitimacy – the *process of legitimation* – has changed significantly. Whereas the field was once dominated by the liberal peacebuilding assumption that legitimacy would spring from democratization and capacity-building (e.g., Jeong 2005, 84; Brinkerhoff 2007, 5), authors like Ken Clements (2008, 2014), we now see local ideas about governance as the *sine qua non* of post-war legitimacy.

The scholars who address this theme are quite eclectic, as we shall see, but Clements is worth focusing on because he presents it most explicitly and systematically in his Grounded Legitimacy theory (2014). According to Clements (2014, 15), government will be legitimate where it is “consistent with people’s sense of their needs, values and experience of the world” and for most people in most places that means government that respects the established traditions of established community groups. He argues that peacebuilders trying to create legitimate governance after war – statebuilders – have historically been absorbed with only the first of the three sources of legitimacy in Max Weber’s classic typology: rational-legal, authority derived from law and socialized norms. Charismatic and especially traditional legitimacy must also be considered, for they may be just as or even more important (Clements 2008, 4–7). His advice for international statebuilders is therefore to look at the possibility of “positive mutual accommodation” between local and international ideas about post-war governance (Clements 2008, 20). Although this theory is not widely cited, it clearly expresses an assumption shared by many scholars.

Some allies in empirical scholarship include De Waal (2015, 20), who has supported a similar approach in his analysis of the Darfur peace process, and Roberts (2009), who makes it a prescription for better peacebuilding in Cambodia. For Boege (2012, 95), the Bougainville

peacebuilding intervention has consolidated a lasting peace precisely because it included customary authorities and subordinated international methods in favor of a locally driven timetable. These examples vindicate Clements' theory that governance based on local norms are a – if not *the* – crucial factor in building legitimacy after war.

All this is a welcome rectification of liberal universalism, but the Grounded Legitimacy approach risks conflating important nuances in the experiences of people in post-war situations. The problem of “essentialization” is the notion that analytical objects – in this case, ideas – are an essential, immutable property (Verkuyten 2003, 372). I do not mean to suggest that Clements argues this or should be read this way – only that it is possible to do so if scholarship stops at identifying the ideas that legitimize politicians, their institutions, or policies. To push Grounded Legitimacy theory forward, we need to explain how ideas are contested and (re-)interpreted in battles over legitimacy.

This problem of essentialization can be exacerbated by prominent approaches to peacebuilding, such as Charles Call's (2012) “legitimacy-focused peacebuilding” and political settlements theory. The former, which provided the basis for the landmark UN-World Bank (2018) “Pathways for Peace” report, essentially runs that only the inclusion of major groups in the post-war political settlement can prevent conflict recurrence. In other words, people will feel a settlement is legitimate when their elites are included in that settlement. Political settlements theory has likewise proved very popular among academics (Barakat and Waldman 2017) and aid organizations (Bell and Pospisil 2017, 577). Organizations with power are the fundamental unit of analysis (Khan 2018, 643) and these are often characterized as discrete groups, including ethnicities and classes (see, for example, Ingram 2012). The particular distribution of power among organizations and their access to rents will determine different forms of peace and conflict (Behuria, Buur, and Grey 2017, 512–514). Neither of the theories necessarily dictate that group ideas are fixed. Still, the group is the fundamental analytical object, and that can intuitively suggest that group ideas are relatively fixed. In turn, that implies that groups have fixed conditions for what makes their leaders legitimate. Indeed, Goodhand and Meehan (2018) have criticized political settlements theorists for doing precisely that: calling for more attention to the legitimacy ideas within individual groups. It would consequently be helpful for these theories to have explicit tools to address the dynamics of legitimacy ideas within groups.

Nationalism is one such legitimacy idea, and it is of particular concern for this question for two reasons. It can not only highlight the problem of essentialization but is also among the most significant ideologies that underpin the legitimacy of contemporary governing arrangements around the world (see Stephens 2013, 2 for a review of this). I define nationalism here in Eric Hobsbawm's (1992, 9) classic sense, as an ideology that promotes the “public obligation” to the nation and its representative(s) above all other obligations, because this emphasizes the power of nationalism to legitimize. It also leaves open the question of what exactly this obligation might entail.

Nationalism in the contemporary Western Balkans can certainly be characterized as legitimating misogynistic, clientelist, and hierarchical political culture. Bosnia and Herzegovina's economy is often seen as patrimonial, with patronage networks structured around ethno-nationalistically defined groups (Pugh 2002). Further, many scholars have classically seen nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina as nothing more than a tool of elite manipulation to justify repressive policy, though the dominance of this view has rightly been challenged more recently (Newman 2014, 121–124). Nationalist authoritarianism is also reflected in the dominant parties of North Macedonia (Laštro and Bieber 2021, 621) and nationalist misogyny in Serbia, where intellectuals and media promoted a militaristic masculinity from the 1980s (Bracewell 2000, 566–567). My point is not that these characterizations are incorrect. The same tendencies can all be seen in Kosovar Albanian nationalism, too, as we shall see. Rather, when taken together, these arguments create a picture that could easily suggest nationalism is inherently patrimonial, hierarchical, and misogynistic, and hence that groups where nationalism is an important idea will support politics based on such programs. That is too simple a picture.

Examples from elsewhere prove it. We have already mentioned that the dominance of a top-down version of nationalism has been challenged, and some have done so in favor of “nationalism from below” (Seifert 2015, 214). In contrast to hierarchy, nationalism can also be democratic. Indeed, it was predominantly so before the late 19th century decoupling of left-liberalism and nationalism in the European world (Hobsbawm 1975, 358), and some theorists maintain the liberal conception into the 21st century (Moore 2001, 2–3). Contemporary liberal nationalist parties are certainly not unknown, such as Sinn Féin or the Scottish National Party from my own islands (Fazliu 2018). Patrimonialism is also not the only nationalist economic model. In the developing world, developmental nationalism stresses strengthening the nation through economic growth, as in the rhetoric of leaders such as former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia (Takagi and Khoo 2019, 107–108). It can even be feminist, such as those of late 19th century Bohemia and Scandinavia that promoted women’s suffrage on a nationalist basis (Evans 2016, 1011–1012). It can therefore be seen that nationalist ideology does not automatically produce particular prescriptions for legitimate government. This is crucial because it means members of groups in which nationalism is an important legitimacy idea may not interpret it in the same way. Scholars must look at nationalism – and any other legitimating idea – in a way that allows for different interpretations.

I propose an application of the framework from Schmidt’s (2010) Discursive Institutionalism to political ideas. The theory was designed with institutions in mind but the parallels are nonetheless helpful. For Schmidt (2010, 4), institutions act as both constraints and platforms for actors to develop new visions of the institutions. The “setting” of institutions does not automatically produce interests, but rather institutions are a context that shapes how actors form new ideas. This platform is what Schmidt (2010, 8) means by “background ideational abilities.” Agents formulate discourse that is conditioned by and references background ideational abilities. She calls the actual formulation “foreground discursive abilities” (Schmidt 2010, 16), and it is by this means that agents form their interests (Schmidt 2008, 308–209). Discursive Institutionalism is therefore a productive model for making sense of the development of persuasive arguments, which are shaped by established norms while also innovating upon them. Consequently, the terms of “background ideational abilities” and “foreground discursive abilities” are applicable to the development of political positions drawn from ideologies. A discursive approach respects the power of local ideas as an ingredient of actor interests as well as a resource they call upon in their arguments. In the next section, I apply this framing to the alternative interpretations of nationalism by LVV and their competitors.

Methods

To effectively demonstrate the validity and significance of the above argument, an in-depth case study that can properly reflect the complexities of intra-group dynamics is required. I achieved this through thematic analysis of literature and interview data, which I shall expand upon in this section.

Kosovar Albanian nationalism and the rise of LVV is a suitable and salient case study for three reasons. First, the particular events and actors relating to LVV’s electoral success showcase very clearly the different and competing strains within a single context’s nationalism. It is also relatively easy to study that complexity thanks to the wealth of secondary literature on Kosovo and the accessibility of relevant experts for interview. Finally, and most importantly, LVV’s recent victories represent a clear turning point in Kosovo’s history and hence deserves study and explanation.

I applied thematic analysis to both literature and interview data on LVV and Kosovar Albanian nationalism using the framework derived from discursive institutionalism described above. As required by thematic analysis (Nowell et al. 2017, 4), I developed my own relevant coding categories. These related particularly to factors that enabled LVV’s electoral successes, the common discursive themes of nationalism present in the context, and the explicit interpretation of those nationalist themes by different political actors. The literature data mainly consisted of academic literature on post-war Kosovo, the relevant reports of international organizations, primary documents produced

by LVV, and reports by local organizations. I supplemented this with semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with Kosovar Albanian academics, journalists, and politicians. In-depth, reflective conversations with experts were essential because the demands of the research question required that I understood the intersubjective narratives surrounding processes of legitimation in Kosovo. I approached interviewees by email and conducted the interviews via Zoom from November 2020 to February 2021. Anonymity was offered to all participants; those cited by name have given their explicit permission to be so.

Case Study: The Rise of Kosovo's Left-Wing Nationalists

I contend that LVV is defined a particular, left-wing interpretation of Kosovar Albanian nationalist, but one that is no less nationalistic for it. Its various policies are all commensurate with this ideology. The focus on interpretation highlights that they share the same “metanarrative” as their electoral rivals – to whom I refer as the old guard, vindicating the theoretical point that the same ideology can produce widely different prescriptions for legitimate governance.

Furthermore, the theoretical approach makes an important empirical point in that it more accurately characterizes LVV as a social democratic party *within* the nationalist political culture of Kosovo. It is not correct to single it out as a nationalist party as many internationals have (Participant 1 Interview 2020). Equally, Visoka's (2017, 126–129, 134) focus on the anti-international angle of LVV's platform leads him to assert that they take only a “negative” stance on issues, which is to say they unconstructively criticize everything. This may be accurate in terms of concrete platforms, and perhaps more so when Visoka was writing, but it needs the caveat that LVV is thoroughly, positively *for* the metanarrative of Kosovar Albanian self-determination. Let us turn to that metanarrative now.

Nationalist Political Culture: Background Ideational Abilities

I take the term “metanarrative” from Ingimundarson (2007, 98–99), for whom Kosovar Albanian political culture is underpinned by a series of assumptions about and commitments to self-determination. This metanarrative of self-determination provides the building blocks of major parties' background ideational abilities.

Foremost, there is the commitment to a separate identity with an independent state. “The war” is the keystone of the metanarrative. There was very little Kosovar Albanian political engagement in communist Yugoslavia at all until a serious external threat became apparent (Duijzings 2000, 6–7), but the discourse of ethnic self-determination as independence became dominant following the rise of Slobodan Milošević to the head of the Serb Republic within Yugoslavia (Vulaj 2015). The subsequent struggle is naturally hugely important to the psychology and identity of the older generation of Albanians living today, those who remember these events, but the stories of the time render them hugely significant to younger Kosovar Albanians too (Ahmetaj 2020 Interview). Certain conditions existed that facilitated an ideological conflict, particularly the experience of separateness within Yugoslavia, growing grievances with discrimination, and an older set of background ideational abilities provided by the late 19th/early 20th-century Albanian nationalist movement (see, respectively, Duijzings 2000, 1–10; Vickers 1998 145–220; and Ingimundarson 2007, 96). Nonetheless, the war itself was the “critical juncture” (in the sense of Collier and Collier 2002), the moment which produced the dominance of the metanarrative of self-determination. Now independence is a clear desire of the majority of Kosovar Albanians. There is a convincing link between the popularity of the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) among Kosovar Albanian respondents to surveys with policies that seemed to delay independence and increase with policies that seemed to accelerate it (Kelmendi and Radin 2018, 994–998, 1003–1004). Further, a plurality of protests by post-war Kosovar Albanians pertained to perceived attacks on their sovereignty, including via the international mechanisms of transitional justice (Kelmendi and Skendaj 2022,

9–10). Independence and the war are perhaps the two most important ingredients of the meta-narrative.

It is perhaps unsurprising that there is therefore a strong sense of “majoritarian entitlement” (Visoka 2017, 80–82). The commitment to self-determination is grounded in a sense of Kosovar Albanian homogeneity formed through the struggle (Skendaj 2015, 153). Importantly, this homogeneity was in part engendered by mass democratic action through the 1990s. There were strikes before 1991 and the secret referendum on independence in November that year – a reasonable estimate of turnout is 89% of the Albanian adult population (Skendaj 2015, 154). This Kosovar Albanian majoritarian nationalism is arguably in tension with broader Albanian nationalism, which would have to include the desires of Albanians beyond Kosovo too. However, for the most part, the relationship is generally ambiguous (Judah 2008, 118–119). Member of party presidency Tinka Kurti (Interview 2021) – and no relation to Albin Kurti as far as I am aware – told me that LVV balances a commitment to unification between Kosovo and Albania with a policy platform based specifically on Kosovar Albanian issues. Albin Kurti has been tellingly explicit that unification with Albania should follow the express will of the Kosovar Albanian people (von Laffert 2016). The extent to which Kosovar Albanian nationalists see themselves as part of a larger political community is therefore not particularly important: it all expresses the same feeling of entitlement of majoritarian self-determination.

The metanarrative also includes a positive orientation toward the West, who are seen to have helped liberate Kosovo. In essence, this friendly outlook is the result of the America-led NATO bombing of Serbia that forced the withdrawal of the Serbian (technically, Yugoslav) military from Kosovo. Where many nationalist movements in South-East Europe are skeptical of European integration, Kosovar Albanian nationalists are generally strongly pro-EU, and the US has traditionally been above criticism in public discourse (Participant 1 Interview 2020). We shall see later that this element of the metanarrative is sometimes in tension with the independence element.

Finally, and crucially, Kosovar Albanian political culture lionizes its war heroes. Both major parties, not including LVV, have their origins in the struggle, and modern leaders were often active participants. It is these two, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), who primarily constitute the old guard. The LDK rose to notability in the early 1990s through mobilizing civil non-cooperation resistance against Milošević’s Yugoslav administration. It was they who organized the independence referendum in September 1991 and, later, were the driving force behind the creation of a “parallel” state to serve Albanians when they were excluded from official institutions (Vickers 1998, 250). Their founding leader, Ibrahim Rugova attained symbolic importance as a sort of national “spiritual father” (Ingimundarson 2007, 100–101). The LDK went on to receive a plurality of votes in every election until 2007 and to be part of every government until 2010 (Skendaj 2015, 136). As for the PDK, they emerged from the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) alongside a number of smaller parties such as the AAK and NISMA. The KLA was only around 150 members strong in 1997 (Jonsson 2014, 179), yet it soon successfully monopolized Albanian violent resistance, especially after they forcibly integrated the remainder of the LDK’s military wing (Jonsson 2014, 182–183) and somewhere in the region of two million small arms became available on the black market following the institutional collapse of the Republic of Albania (Bellamy 2002, 63–64). While their role in the military defeat of Milošević was limited, and indeed were nearly destroyed several times by the Serbian/Yugoslav military (Perritt 2008, 43), during the 1999 NATO intervention they were very keen to present themselves as a partner in the conflict, and Kosovar Albanians generally accept this interpretation (Jonsson 2014, 184). The KLA was officially entirely disbanded after the war, but its spokesman, Hashim Thaçi, formed the PDK (Jonsson 2014, 186–188) while many personnel were integrated into the various security services (Dziedzic, Mercean and Skendaj 2016, 191–193). The PDK, in particular, dominated the Assembly after independence in 2008 (Mustafa 2019, 167). As we shall see later, the question of which party consists of the “authentic heirs” of the KLA remains a significant theme in political discourse (Schwandner-Sievers 2013, 953).

The below sections will discuss the use (and, arguably, abuse) of the above principles by the old guard and LVV in formulating their policies on economics, distribution of power, and relationship with the international intervention. To summarize, the principles are as follows:

- National self-determination
- Majoritarianism
- Pro-Western foreign policy
- Leadership of war heroes

We shall see that these background ideational abilities are what the foreground discursive abilities of the old guard and LVV draw upon. Their differences in interpretation are manifold, but this is a crucial, underlying similarity.

Economics: Patrimonialism vs Developmentalism

I begin with a discussion of economic issues because they are more important to my interviewees and Kosovar Albanians at large than constitutional and international issues (Gashi Interview 2020). My prioritization here is a (slight) corrective because this has not broadly been shared by academia and the international community.

The first thing to understand is that the PDK and LDK used their positions as leaders of the self-determination struggle to enrich themselves. Before their transition into the PDK, prominent KLA commanders established a successful “drugs for arms” trade, whereby they and their clients would help transport illegal substances such as heroin to West Europe in exchange for small arms during the war (Dziedzic, Mercean, and Skendaj 2016, 161). This traffic blossomed thanks to Kosovo’s terrain, which has made it a hotspot for smuggling since Ottoman times, and the rise of the Albanian diaspora in other parts of Europe (Proksik 2018, 406–407). Commanders used these proceeds to turn their operational zones into organized patronage networks (Dziedzic, Mercean and Skendaj 2016, 151). Perritt (2008, 93) points out that smuggling proceeds constituted a much lower proportion of the KLA’s income than remittances from the diaspora, but ex-KLA associates are still involved in organized crime and in certain times and places smuggling has even increased (Jonsson 2014, 189–190). Add to this Kosovo’s position as a transition point for marijuana and illegal migration routes (Proksik 2018, 405–406). The best estimates are that about 30% of the economy is informal in the post-independence period and that about half of that is associated with organized crime (Dziedzic, Mercean and Skendaj 2016, 190). That is certainly a substantial portion of the economy, but while such illegal activities may be the most exciting, there are other, perhaps even more important elements that the PDK and LDK dominate.

We must not forget the old guard’s use of the state institutions, too. Almost the very first thing that UNMIK did was dismantle the LDK parallel institutions and incorporate them into the new administration (Skendaj 2015, 55), as they also did with the KLA-cum-PDK provisional government and the various offices it had created or seized at the end of the war (Perritt 2008, 154). The LDK and, later, the PDK were taught by internationals how to build institutions, which they then used to create jobs, and thereby expanded their patronage system (Gashi Interview 2020). Elites were later able to use the privatization process to enrich themselves and the reliance on public employment to establish a clientelist system (Visoka 2017, 101–103). The LDK, in particular, benefited from the privatization program as public assets ended up in the hands of LDK client hands, and they were in effective control of government patronage until about 2008 (Ahmeti Interview 2021). Then came the turn of the PDK: they doubled the sale of public enterprises, selling them to party members below market price, and increased average civil service salaries far above the private sector (Mustafa 2019, 167–168). The result is that, as of 2015, there are proportionally 50% more central administration employees than the East European average, far too many more to merely be explained by Kosovo’s high unemployment rate, and attempts to reduce this have been

very strenuously resisted. In fact, Kosovo spends nearly a quarter of its annual budget on central administration, in stark contrast to the new EU member-state average of 13% (Skendaj 2015, 67–68). The elements of “fraud, grand corruption” and “white-collar organized crime,” including “procurement fraud” (Proksik 2018, 408), intersect with organized crime. It is also worth noting that this patronage economy was in part used to alleviate economic need following the war (Dziedzic, Mercean and Skendaj 2016, 151). Many still benefit from the largesse in the sense that there is often little other options. Indeed, the direct beneficiaries of PDK patronage are enough to make up 35% of all PDK votes (Mustafa 2019, 168). The parties’ struggle for self-determination thus enabled them to create and dominate a patrimonial economy.

In that sense, nationalism facilitated patrimonialism, but it has also justified it. It seems intuitive that the leadership of the state by war heroes could be matched by their leadership in the economy; and, indeed, the rebel victors often use their post-war power and status to consolidate economic control (Lyons 2016, 1028–1030). Governments certainly linked their economic policy to nationalist goals. Between independence and 2019, they only extended further benefits to veterans and survivors of the conflict (Mustafa 2019, 169–170). They also avoided economic criticism with nationalist discourse, openly stating that they could not improve the economy until independence and implying that growth would simply flow from status (Skendaj 2015, 142–143). Furthermore, patrimonialism interlinked with customary loyalties as clan leaders affiliated themselves with KLA regional commanders in return for patronage (Dziedzic, Mercean, and Skendaj 2016, 159). The KLA legacy parties can also present their criminality, at least during the war, as the kind of heroic banditry that so often features in Albanian folklore (Perritt 2008, 39). In these ways, the old guard used background ideational abilities, particularly of nationalism, to legitimize their patrimonialism.

One might be forgiven for thinking that LVV’s critique of this has nothing to do with nationalism. Certainly, in their discourse, nationalist slogans have retreated in favor of economic and anti-corruption policies (Ahmetaj 2020 Interview; Participant 1 2020 Interview). The 2019 elections saw LVV stand on a platform of anti-corruption, and, following their victory, they put it as one of their highest priorities in coalition talks (Prishtina Insight 2019). In 2021, they likewise emphasized the twin pillars of “jobs and justice” (Ahmeti 2021 Interview). However, I contend that LVV’s economic concerns and responses to it are deeply shaped by nationalist background ideational abilities. First, their developmental economic agenda is predicated on nationalist goals, a combination of “nationalism with social concerns” that has successfully popularized them (Visoka 2017, 115). Second, the grievances of ordinary citizens with the patrimonial system are in part a result of the expectations of the state born from the nationalist metanarrative. We will look at these points in turn.

LVV’s developmentalism is a nationalist economic program. Tinka Kurti (2021 Interview), a member of LVV’s presidency, told me that the party’s top priority is to benefit its citizens by making a fairer country, and, in that way, one “can relate the economy to nationalism.” To wit, it is development for the prosperity of the nation, a nationalist goal. This is by no means a recent occurrence that might be put down to electioneering. LVV has always included social democratic economics in their policy platform (Participant 1 2020 Interview) and always argued that the wholesale pursuit of privatization is not the way to achieve prosperity for the people of Kosovo (LVV Newsletter 2010), instead espousing a “developmental state” (Nosan 2012). It is also about the promotion of human rights, for LVV has long linked strengthening the human rights of the people of Kosovo to economic development (von Laffert 2016) – there are, after all, several economic provisions in the UN Declaration on Human Rights. Rather than the retreat of nationalist ideology in LVV’s platform, we should see their economic policy as an extension of it, and the focus merely as a change of emphasis.

As for expectations of the state, we mentioned the majoritarian element of the victor’s peace: there are expectations that the (independent) state will deliver for the nationality it represents. We cannot assume that people’s expectations of their state are and whether they want it to provide services at all; this is a mistake so often made by liberal peacebuilders seeking to legitimize states

through capacity-building (see Schmelze and Stollenwerk 2018). In this case, nationalism legitimates state intervention and generates demands on it. Survey data suggests that the public does expect job creation as a crucial human right (Skendaj 2015, 144–145). Public satisfaction with the performance of their politicians had been reasonably high before 2008, for the simple reason that most people accepted that ultimate responsibility for policy lay with UNMIK (Skendaj 2015, 63). Initially, independence precipitated a wave of optimism that dampened the resentments that had built up since 1999, but it did not survive even to 2015. The expected positive developments evidently did not take place (Participant 1 2020 Interview), and the economic situation continued (and continues) to look rather bleak. Even the celebrations of Independence Day have come to be overshadowed by economic disappointments and difficulties (Luci 2017). The old guard parties offer little more than discredited promises of crude numbers of jobs to be created (Ahmetaj 2020 Interview), and the rather weak defense that the new state needs more time (Skendaj 2015, 161–162). Their patrimonial model offers no policies that would alleviate the situation, such as expat reinvestment incentives or solutions to professional shortages (Gashi 2020 Interview). All in all, it has become harder to justify the patrimonial economics in terms of the metanarrative, whereas the developmental approach very much can.

The party therefore offers an economic alternative to patrimonialism that is still commensurate with the political culture. Rather than challenging or circumventing the background ideational abilities of the nationalist metanarrative, LVV use their foreground discursive abilities to present a social democratic interpretation of it. This particular combination of nationalist ideology and state redress of economic need has proven particularly popular with Kosovar Albanian voters (Visoka 2017, 115) and is a key element that distinguishes them from civically minded anti-corruption parties, all of which have tried and failed to garner much popular support (Participant 1 2020 Interview). It is also worth noting that the influence of their nationalism on their social democracy lends it a majoritarian edge, something which is even more obvious in their conception of democracy.

Leadership: Hierarchy versus Egalitarianism

The old guard justify their leadership in terms of their war hero status. We have seen that the struggle for self-determination gave its protagonists legitimacy to rule. Consequently, after the war, they have been keen to maintain and consolidate that legacy through domination of “fora of remembrance” (Ingimundarson 2007, 114–116). The KLA parties, in particular, espoused a discourse of “struggle, sacrifice, victory” to the domestic audience and monopolized remembrance ceremonies (Ingimundarson 2007, 104–105). It is indeed widely accepted among Kosovar Albanians that the KLA were crucial partners of NATO in the defeat of Milošević, despite their very limited military impact (Jonsson 2014, 184). Nonetheless, every party uses KLA insignia and promotes former KLA members (Participant 1 2020 Interview), and the question of which party consists of the “authentic heirs” of the KLA remains a significant theme (Schwandner-Sievers 2013, 953). These memorial actions, and associated promises to survivors, are certainly targeted to win votes (Ahmetaj 2020 Interview). These are performances to reinforce old guard claims to status as wartime liberators and, hence, to be legitimate representatives of the nation.

This privilege justifies the centralization of power, a hierarchical interpretation of nationalism. They reversed the great democratic mobilization of the early 90s by using their status to marginalize opposition and suppress discussion of socioeconomic issues in favor of the ethno-nationalist rhetoric, which benefits their legitimacy (Skendaj 2015, 155–156). At least since the end of the war, it is easy to see that the Kosovar Albanian population rate issues of “unemployment, poverty and corruption” as highly as international recognition (Skendaj 2015, 159). The power and prestige of these parties was such, however, that most people preferred to keep criticism in private (Skendaj 2015, 159–160, referencing an interview with the sociologist Fehmi in 2007) or express it through avoidance – there was a democratic turnout drop of 40% between 2000 and 2010 (Skendaj 2015,

141–142). Electoral choice remained broadly a matter of patronage and personalities, not policies (Visoka 2017, 101–103). We have a perfect picture of authoritarian nationalism grounded in reliving the war and suppressing criticism of those who won it.

LVV's position in this legacy is more dubious but, nonetheless, they try very hard to make their claim to it. There are three linked strategies: emphasizing their own wartime role, the claim to the legacy of the KLA, and denigrating that of others. The first is perhaps their weakest option, but it is true that Albin Kurti, the high-profile leader of the party and Prime Minister at the time of writing, was personally connected to Adem Demaçi, one of the great figures of the resistance movement in the 1980s and later the spokesman of the KLA (Perritt 2008, 33–34; Schwandner-Sievers 2013a, 106). Their second strategy is to present LVV as part of the KLA's legacy – a positive claim. The movement has made explicit use of specific historical and cultural references' in their performances; they celebrate flag day under the red and black Skanderbeg banner on the 28th of November, the date of independence of the first Albanian republic, also associated with the legends of Skanderbeg, and the supposed birthday of Adem Jashari (Schwandner-Sievers 2013a, 102–103). Prominent members pay their respects at KLA commemoration ceremonies and reference the oath of the fighters (Schwandner-Sievers 2013a, 103–104). Furthermore, historical connections are not necessarily as important as the values, as Tinka Kurti (2021 Interview) told me. Whether or not anyone can be said to be the “real” successors, what is important to her is that LVV continues the KLA's struggle. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, LVV makes the negative claim that the old guard parties are traitors to the KLA. After their dramatic entry into parliament in 2010, LVV denounced the then leadership as war profiteers and international puppets as opposed to true nationalist fighters (Schwandner-Sievers 2013, 961–962). They particularly brand the PDK as having betrayed the values of the KLA (Schwandner-Sievers 2013a, 114). In these ways, LVV stake their own claim to the legacy.

Unlike the old guard, however, LVV use their foreground discursive abilities to espouse a democratic form of nationalism, referencing the legacy of collective mobilization during the war. It sets itself up as the voice of the people against the authoritarian practices of the international community and established politicians (Visoka 2017, 117–118), as well as against the civil society groups funded by the internationals (Schwandner-Sievers 2013a, 96). Those people are the Kosovar Albanians. LVV is for a specifically Albanian state (Visoka 2017, 126–129) where the majority of people – who are Albanians – are free to decide the destiny of their country without outside interference. This could include joining the Republic of Albania, whatever minority opinions or those of the international community might be (von Laffert 2016). This majoritarianism is a crucial implication of their nationalist democracy.

A more civic party may emphasize a balance of special minority rights with the will of the majority. LVV, as a nationalist party, has stressed the need for homogenous, universal rights above minority rights and a centralized rather than consociational state (Visoka 2017, 126–129). While they do stress that multi-ethnicity is compatible with these principles, in practice LVV has not respected minority rights; and from the perspective of those minorities, the discourse of universal rights in an Albanian-dominated state looks very much like denying them their ethnic identity (Visoka 2019, 31–32). LVV's policy does not seek to revoke the rights of the non-Albanians, but this kind of nationalism with a commitment to universal rights may still reasonably be seen as a threat to those outside the nation.

LVV's majoritarian-egalitarian democratic platform extends to other social issues. To take just one example, their 2021 manifesto foregrounded anti-domestic violence legislation, an issue to which the old guard have given little attention (Kosovo 2.0 2022). That other policies have evidently been prioritized since their (re)election does not jeopardize the point that care for women's empowerment and other human rights issues is an important reason behind LVV's broad coalition of support (T. Kurti 2021 Interview). These human rights issues are not contradictory with LVV's nationalism; they are part of its commitment to the nation.

From a nationalist standpoint, they claim that the will of the people must be respected. The pertinent distinction, then, is not that LVV are nationalist but that they have endeavored to explicitly mobilize the democratic social ideas embedded in the nationalist metanarrative. As Albin Kurti (2011, 96) said, “The governance of Kosova must change – not only for the sake of changing those in power, but for the sake of changing the character of the state.” This means fulfilling the metanarrative, not changing it.

International Intervention: Transactional Compliance versus Assertive Sovereignty

The international intervention tried and failed to transform Kosovo in its own image. Old guard and LVV policies are different responses to that failure. They have used Kosovar Albanian nationalist ideas (background ideational abilities) to formulate quite distinctive responses (foreground discursive abilities).

Briefly, then, the international intervention’s vision for Kosovo’s governance challenged the metanarrative wholesale and, just as Grounded Legitimacy theory would predict, failed. This is despite the wealth of the international community – in the event it would disburse €3.5 billion in aid between 1999 and 2008 (Skendaj 2015, 52) – and its power. Faced with entrenched conflict, the legacy of serious human rights abuses, economic collapse and flourishing crime (see above), and the incompatible claims to sovereignty by the leaders of different ethnic groups, internationals tried various forms of intervention to improve the situation. As Visoka (2017, 6–8) categorizes it, internationals directly ruled through the UN mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) until 2008, supervised it closely through the International Civilian Office until 2012, and thereafter more indirectly supervised it through the EU Rule of Law mission (EULEX). EULEX initially had competencies to independently monitor and take judicial proceedings against corruption (Gippert 2017, 330) but after 2018 is confined almost entirely to monitoring. Whatever their successes, none of these bodies could get Kosovar Albanians to accept the international vision of the state. What was this vision? After a period of studiously avoiding the question and thus contributing to anxiety over status and a breakdown of relations between international intervention and the Kosovar Albanian public (Visoka 2017, 42), pro-independence internationals decided to engineer “multi-ethnicity as Kosovo’s collective identity” (Visoka and Musliu 2019, 23). We will discuss the constitution of independent Kosovo based on the “Comprehensive Proposal for Kosovo Status Settlement” (the Ahtisaari plan), more in a moment. The immediate point is that the attempted reconfiguration is widely condemned as inefficacious (for example, Rrustemi 2019).

The old guard’s response was a peculiar behavior, which I call “transactional compliance.” Essentially, they accepted international tutelage in return for state-building support (Visoka 2017, 2). It was, and is, a strategy of trading “rights and protection to minorities in exchange for consolidating symbolic and material aspects of statehood” (Visoka 2017, 84–85). In other words, they partially complied with internationally mandated policies in tension with nationalist ideology in exchange for state-building and protection. This does involve a genuine degree of compliance and PDK members, and leaders have sat trial in internationally led courts to face accusations relating to crimes against humanity on several occasions. Ramush Haradinaj resigned as Prime Minister (2005) and Hashim Thaçi as president (2020) to do so. On the other hand, those same leaders encourage narratives that these mechanisms, including their most recent incarnation as the Kosovo Specialist Chambers (KSC), are nothing other than an international attempt to denigrate their war heroes, rather than the result of rigorous international investigations into the crimes committed during the conflict of the 1990s (Hehir 2019, 275–276). The upshot is that any prosecutions will “provoke outrage,” increasing the popularity of the target (Hehir 2019, 282). Indeed, a large proportion of all protests by Kosovar Albanians since 1999 have been against the transitional justice mechanisms (Kelmendi and Skendaj 2022, 9). Yet the elite continue to sit trial, and Hashim Thaçi’s at the KSC is ongoing at the time of writing. Additionally, 43 MPs backed the initiative to rescind the establishment of the KSC in 2018, but top PDK officials (including Thaçi)

announced that it cannot be rescinded even though it is a “historical injustice” (Pristina Insight 2018). This kind of statement perfectly encapsulates the partial and carefully managed compliance of the old guard.

The element of compliance can be justified in terms of the metanarrative: both a stronger state and cooperation with allies are legitimate. It should also be said that transactional compliance did have its achievements, particularly independence. Although independence was not ideal for Kosovar Albanian nationalism – especially the symbols of the state and the privileges of minority parties (Bucaj 2019) – it can be seen as the best independence available. We have already mentioned the wave of optimism that accompanied it, despite any flaws, and Luci’s (2017) explanation for the dissolution of that optimism primarily references economic disappointments, not constitutional issues. It is also notable that LVV’s popularity suffered at the time of independence for predicting that it would not occur (Gashi 2020 Interview). Consequently, Kosovar Albanian nationalism can justify transactional compliance: cooperation with international allies, strengthening the state, and working toward independence are all positives.

In contrast, LVV have emphasized sovereignty to protest transactional compliance. Albin Kurti has lampooned the old guard as “international locals” (Kurti 2011, 92), the autocratic clients of the intervention. Indeed, LVV has regarded “all international policies in post-conflict Kosovo as tools for undermining democracy, self-determination and social emancipation” (Visoka 2019, 22). In other words, they have indiscriminately opposed everything the internationals have done since the war, regardless of what it is. LVV rejects the form of independence because of the *sui generis* legal designation of Kosovo’s independence. They contend it was established in reference to the universal right of self-determination, not on the Ahtisaari constitution and continual international supervision (Kurti 2011, 91–92). They also attack the EU-mediated dialogue with Serbia because they claim it opens up the possibility of more interference by Serbia in Kosovo’s sovereign affairs. Not only is the normalization process against sovereignty and centralization, then, but also against the will of the people. According to LVV, a popular referendum is enough to declare independence from Serbia, without need for dialogue (Visoka 2019, 26–28). LVV are emphasizing the sovereignty of the people and a democratic interpretation to oppose, rather than appease, the international intervention. They will not accept anything other than full sovereignty and rule out any meaningful compromise, even if it would achieve results, like improving Kosovo’s international standing or allay the fears of Kosovo’s Serbs.

None of this is to say that LVV rejects “the West” altogether. They still push strongly for EU and NATO membership (Taylor 2022). However, unlike the generally more muted, outwardly compliant approach of the old guard, they insist that they must do so as a fully sovereign state.

Conclusion

My primary conclusion is a theoretical point: a call for more investigation into the character of ideas and their usages. The case of Kosovo shows that nationalism, as with any other ideology, does not simply produce prescriptions for legitimate governance. There must be a new political-ethnographic research agenda that builds on Grounded Legitimacy theory to address the interpretation as well as salience of ideas.

Secondarily, my analysis of Kosovo has demonstrated that LVV’s policies are coherent with each other and with the general, nationalist metanarrative, contrary to suggestions that LVV do not belong in the same political culture as the old guard. What this argument does not explain is why LVV’s interpretations are more popular, except insofar as patrimonialism has become increasingly hard to defend. Another research agenda looking at the linkages of ideas with political economy is therefore necessary.

This offers two areas for future research, but what about Kosovo? If my argument here that LVV offers a genuinely popular means to improve Kosovo’s economy and clean up its politics is correct, then the efforts of Western policymakers to oppose them seem misguided. To take just one instance:

it is widely believed in Kosovo that the American embassy intrigued with the PDK and LDK to oust the first LVV-led government (Hehir Interview 2021). It is surely telling that this is a credible belief, whether or not it is true. Western partners may be better advised to conditionally support LVV's anti-corruption and human rights promotion efforts. This is not to say that LVV would be perfect partners and, indeed, they will certainly continue to demand more than the international community is willing to give without the consent of Serbia (and their partners in the UN Security Council). Rather, it would be just as Clements (2014, 14) prescribes: internationals must "work with the grain" in order to get results. This is another angle on, and argument for, others' recommendation of more constructive engagement with nationalist organizations in Kosovo (especially Kelmendi and Skendaj 2022, 17). By building a more constructive relationship with LVV, international organizations may even be able to persuade them to compromise on, for example, autonomy for Serb communities and respect for parliamentary process. This is not a prediction but it is certainly more likely to succeed than the politics of imposition and intrigue.

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