



History, Politics and the Complexity of Kosovo Albanian Identity

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Abstract

National identity remains one of the most challenging identities to research and define, due to lack of common agreement on linguistic and conceptual definitions, but also due to the ever-changing dynamics of identities. Research is further complicated as identities do not necessarily reveal what we are, but rather what we think we are. The national identity of Kosovo Albanians, especially after the declaration of independence in 2008, became a debatable issue revealing the competition between the new Kosovo state identity reinforced by legal and constitutional requirements, but also the new state symbols, versus the national Albanian identity, as a collective identity of all Albanians, rooted in history, symbols and common myths. Through Schils reproductive theory and comparative methods, the paper analyzes the complexity of the Kosovo Albanian identity from a linguistic, sociological and constitutional perspective, but also argues that the identity complexity is heavily attributed to historical and political circumstances leading to the independence of Albania and the independence of Kosovo, a century after. Selected survey results for PhD thesis purposes of the author are used to illustrate the identity sentiments of the Albanians in Kosovo. The importance of the paper is to generate further discussions and wider research on the Albanian identity, and optimally provide options in harmonizing the national and state identity.

Keywords: identity; Kosovo; Albanians; national; history; politics.

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1. Introduction

Hofstede [1] and other interculturalists use the famous “Onion metaphor”, to describe the complex phenomenon of who we are. The metaphor however, although a cliché at first sight, fits all identities by describing that only by peeling away layers and layers, does one get to the very core, in revealing the substance of what one is. However, this as will be elaborated by this paper, is not always the most important revelation. What makes identity, ethnic and national identity, perhaps the most complex phenomena under research, is not merely revealing the core but rather, revealing what that core actually means to the people. In this context, the first layer, for most citizens in Kosovo, the Albanians, seems to reflect the new proud Kosovars, under the new Kosovo flag, intoning the melody of the ethnically unbiased national anthem, supporting the new Kosovo football team. However, as Connor [2] rightfully remarks, “It is not what is, but what we think is that makes an identity. In the case of Albanians from Kosovo, this revelation becomes even more complex, considering the ever changing historical and political realities in a geography that was altered countless times, over a course of a little more than 100 years. My story would illustrate this complexity quite well. I was born as an Albanian, in 1979, in Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, or what is known today as the Republic of North Macedonia, which was one of the 6 Republics in former Yugoslavia; soon thereafter, equipped with a Yugoslav passport to vouch for this citizenship identity. In 1985 as a five-year-old, we moved to Prishtina, the capital of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo at that time, which along with the province of Vojvodina, was a constitutional unit of former Yugoslavia. I spent most of my childhood and youth, in marathonic efforts to preserve and defend my Albanian national identity (which may be similar to the ethnic identity for Western Europe readers, but more on this further below in the text). In 1999, after the end of the war, followed by Kosovo’s liberation, I belonged to Kosovo as an entity under the international protectorate of the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo, (UNMIK) [3] receiving the UNMIK passport, as a reflection of the new reality in Kosovo, under the UN SC Resolution 1244 [4]. On 17th of February 2008, along thousands of citizens, I was in the streets celebrating the declaration of Kosovo’s independence. In such political circumstances, with the continuous change in legal and political identities, the Albanian identity, as the most familiar and unchanged identity, seemed as the most sensible and comfortable primary identity for the majority of Albanians in Kosovo.

2. Why can’t we fit in the typical common identity “molds”?

Small talks starting with: “Where are you from”; or, “Are you a local”, and last but not least, “Are you a Kosovar”, usually end with at least an hour of a history lecture to even slightly describe who an Albanian in Kosovo is or may be. Albeit still complex, Albanians see themselves within the identity molds available to a certain extent; matters become even more complex, when identity of the Kosovo Albanians is perceived by others or from the outside. Determining the identity of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo is complicated furthermore by language, terminology and semantics, in general. To this day, there is no common agreement regarding definitions of nation, ethnicity, people, citizenship, and much less, the difference between all the above-mentioned concepts. For ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, the main identity is the national identity, similar to what the discourse acknowledges as the ethnic identity. However, it is not only the language unclarity that is at play here: the Albanians in Kosovo conceptualized themselves as Albanian, which was the only and sole unique identity. Up until Albania declared its independence in 1912, Kosovo as the territory, together with the northern

part of Albania, belonged to the same administrative territory within the Kosovo vilayet, under the Ottoman Empire. Albanians in the territory of Kosovo were part of the joint Albanian national movement striving for an independent Albania, in the boundaries of the vilayets, namely the vilayet of Kosovo. However, as Kosovo was annexed by Serbia, and thus remained outside of mainland Albania in 1913, began a long struggle of defending the Albanian identity, now under threat. While in independent Albania, the national identity was homogenized with the state identity, for the Kosovo Albanians, a new segment of the national movement was born, as a continuation of the pan-Albanian historical movements, albeit with a different purpose: the liberation of Kosovo from the Serb occupation and the unification of Albanian lands. Such a movement grew stronger despite the change of political systems in the Serb-Croatian-Slovenian Kingdom, to continue in the former Yugoslavia and lastly, culminating in the 90-ties under Serbia's rule, up to the liberation of Kosovo in 1999 and the declaration of independence in 2008. The creation of the new state of Kosovo logically required new state branding: introduction of symbols such as the flag, passport, anthem and other symbols to reflect the Kosovar identity: a multi-ethnic, legal and denationalized identity. In this complexity of identities, the identity "molds" seem narrow to provide comfort. Regardless, let us look into some theoretical identity models, based on the Schil's [5] method of "reproductive intellectuality", adapted to the Kosovo context.

3. Kosovo Albanians between "nation" and "state": geography identity and constitutional aspects

Until 1912, Kosovo Albanians lived in the vilayet of Kosovo, part of one joint administrative territory under the Ottoman empire. The new political reality that was brought on by the independence of Albania in 1912, meant that a considerable part of what was considered the Albanian nation, remained outside of the borders of an official administrative Albania, hence providing a specific case whereas administrative borders do not match the national borders. Mehmet Vokshi in the '30-ies, would call to "...first and foremost, (we need) to define approximately the borders of Albania, or better to say, the borders of the Albanian nation", [6]. In this political complexity, the geography identities aggravated the limbo between "nation" and "state" for Kosovo Albanians, who considered being Albanian a continuation of the national identity which had fueled the independence movement and aided the construction of the state and thus national identity of independent Albania. Geography identities paired with cultural and mostly language identity, have an utmost significance to people's definition of identity. Billig, [7] in a correspondence for PhD research purposes, emphasizes the grammar of languages that uses proper nouns for nation-states such as Kosovo, Germany, Italy, and collective nouns for the nation or its citizens. Therefore, according to this logic, one would assume that Germany has Germans, Italy has Italians, whereas Kosovo has Kosovars. However, there are exclusions, such as for example the case of the United Kingdom. In the same correspondence, Billig states that we do not refer to the people in the United Kingdom as "Unitedkingdomians" but rather as British, English, etc. Heywood [8] also illustrates the lack of terminology definition and the wrong synonymity used between nation and state, with the example of the United Nations. While this is an organization of states, Haywood argues, this does not necessarily mean that all nationals of states are represented in this organization. Furthermore, Heywood claims that while the ethnic group surely has a joint identity, however it does not have a political aim as the nation does. If one would analyze the identity of Kosovo Albanians in relation to the thesis of the political aim or the lack thereof, the Albanians, including those in Kosovo, had a political aim indeed. Furthermore, Kosovo Albanians also had a joint political vision expressed in political acts and documents. There are only a handful of countries in the world which display a harmony

between the nation and state. According to Goldstein [9] ethnic groups are large groups of people who share heritage, language, culture, religion and a joint identity. Goldstein also claims that it is ethnic groups who form the foundation for national sentiments, which leads us to the understanding that ethnic groups are the initial cells of nations, as it is through these nationalist sentiments that the political aims are born from, and which are a feature of nations. In this sense also, despite the declaration of Kosovo independence in 2008, the Kosovo Albanians remain a nation and not simply an ethnic group in a state, in which they are the majority. For comparison purposes, let us look at Greece for example. The population of Greece, an EU member, is comprised of 93% Greeks with the rest, being foreigners. The issue of Northern Cyprus on the other hand, and in particular the case of the national identity of Greek Cypriots and the Turk Cypriots, continues to be very specific, and provide for an interesting discussion in comparison to the Kosovo Albanian identity. Discussions which attempt to problematize the issue of the Kosovo Albanian national identity, along with the persistence to declare the state identity as one and only, challenges the examples of the Greek Cypriots. The national interest for Greek Cypriots remains the Enosis, unification with Greece [10]. Additionally, if we compare the Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus with the Constitution of Kosovo, the latter seems to be quite discriminatory to the majority ethnic group in Kosovo, the Albanians. Constitution of Cyprus [11] in article 4, point 4, allows the Greek flag to be displayed alongside the neutral flag of the Republic. Whereas Article 5, allows the Greek, respectively the Turkish community, to celebrate national Greek or Turkish holidays. To ensure a strong state and civil identity, the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo [12] is entirely neutral from a national perspective. The tendency to use the term society, and in this case a multi-ethnic one, allows for the Kosovo society to be named non-nationalist [13]. Although such an unbiased Constitution would serve a civil “nation” instead of a Kosovar (ethnic) nation, one is unsure about how the sense of belonging could be nurtured in this case, as Matoshi [14] interestingly remarks that “in a neverland, no one cares for the spirit of Constitution”. In fact, a Constitution which fails its very core purpose: to represent the will of the people, and even mobilize it when the need arises, also fails to ensure a feeling of belongingness and patriotism within its citizens. The Swiss Federal Constitution [15] is another comparative example in this context of statehood vs. nationhood discussion. This Constitution defines the national language, in the absence of a distinct Swiss language (article 4), which is a significant element and even perhaps a decisive one in determining the identity of various communities in Switzerland. Furthermore, the Swiss Constitution in the provisions regulating the statehood, defines that citizenship belongs to all that have been granted citizenship by the relevant municipality and canton (article 37). If there would be a hypothetical comparison to Switzerland and Kosovo, then within this context, this would mean that we are Albanians but at the same time Kosovar as well by citizenship, thus sharing with other communities the joint identity in this case. For illustration purposes, according to Swiss Demographics [16] the Swiss population is 8,236,303 out of which Germans comprise 65%, French 18%, Italian 10%, Romansch 1%, and others 6%, of the population. In a country with such heterogeneity whereas approximately 36% of the population are others, it would be expected for the Constitution to reflect the diversity. However, in the case of Kosovo, with an almost absolute ethnic homogeneity, a Constitution even more civil than the Swiss, seems rather utopian. While the Swiss Constitution refers to the Swiss people, the Kosovo constitution uses the term “Kosovar” only when differentiating between local and international judges, (Article 151). If Massimo D’Azzeglia would once state: “We have made Italy, now we must make the Italians”, in the case of Kosovo, this statement would have been the other way around: Albanians (and not Kosovars) created Kosovo.

4. Nation, national, nationalism: linguistic, sociologic and psychologically driven identities

The Dictionary of the Albanian language [17] defines nation as “sustainable community of people, historically formed, based on the community of language, territory, economic life and psychological formation, expressed in the community of culture: the Albanian nation”. According to, [18] Sami Frashëri had given fame to the word “nation” referring to the Albanian nation in the Albanian language, during efforts to differentiate between the *millets* and *kvmijets*, as religious concepts. Nationality on the other hand, is defined as “a community of people with a common origin or heritage, one language, one territory and belonging to one nation; having a nation, national belonging; people, population”, [19]. The pure linguistic definition seems to suffice for the identity of Albanians in Kosovo. Similarly, Bauer’s [20] thoughts, on how the state commands us from the outside and the nation lives from within, leads us to a sort of a conclusion that while the nation may seem as something more natural, the state is perceived as an artificial product, which also suffices for the definition of the national and state identity of Kosovo Albanians. The Sociology Dictionary [21], quotes Hugh Seton Watons, who claims that “there cannot be any scientific definition of nation, although this phenomenon has existed and will exist in the future”. According to Social Identity Theory [22] psychological elements are key to the behavior of a group. It is of particular significance for the study of national identity because although not a pure specific theory on national identity, it however, sums up a general theory on group identities. And so, Tajfel, in order to illustrate this theory had used the example of nation stating that the nation can only exist if a body of people feel that they are indeed a nation [23]. National identity according to [24] on the other hand, is characterized by two determining features: continuity surpassing time and difference with the others. Otto Bauer [25] defines the nation to be “a product of a great transformation, one that has dissolved all other communities into industrial modern societies which require solidarity based on a superior and abstract culture of emancipation”. However, it is interesting to note how Bauer begins his exposition on the nation in “Mapping the Nation”, by stating that “very few of us (German), can actually pronounce or say the word “national” without an obvious emotional tonality”, thus revealing the emotional and psychological aspect of identity. National identity, as the “primary identity of people” perhaps more than any other identity, is strengthened psychologically on a daily basis, with the aid of symbols such as flags, rituals and other various traditions which remind people of a common heritage. For Connor Walker [26] the essence of the nation is the “consciousness or being conscious of oneself”. considers every attempt to study the nation must contain two defining aspects: the territorial aspect, the idea that the people have a certain territory, regardless whether it was given rightfully or not; and secondly, the nation or the “community of myth, memory and symbol”. And it is precisely this perception of what it may be, or what people think they are, that has made individuals and communities believe in the glory of their nation and thus seek freedom, independence and self-determination.

5. An internal view on national identity: how do we see ourselves?

Returning to the somewhat biological discourse on defining the nation, Gellner [27] argues that nationalism may be explained through the perspective of how we see ourselves. So, according to Gellner, it is simply natural that people wish to live within their own kind, and not wish to live as part of a culture that may be different. Jewish people will for example remain connected to the nation, regardless of them being in Israel, USA or Latin America, and regardless of any other cultural and state identity [28]. If one analyzes Gellner’s thoughts on

nationalism as a sentiment, within the context of Kosovo, this interpretation would go into two directions. If Gellner is right, then Albanians in Kosovo only became a nation when the independence was declared. This would mean that Albanians were not a preexisting nation that had contributed to the creation of the Kosovo state. And this would be also true if we would agree with the language terminology that defines the nation and the state as synonymous. However, considering the historical and political circumstances which culminated in 1912 with the independence of Albania, and in 1913, with the recognition of the new administrative boundaries of Albania, in a territory drastically reduced (only containing few territories out of the four vilayets under the Ottoman Empire), we would have to oppose Gellner's idea. The Albanians from the region of Kosovo, had been active participants and even key figures in the national renaissance movement, as key figures represented at the League of Prizren. The national sentiment had existed parallel to the national consciousness which maintains the argument that Albanians in Kosovo felt as one nation, even before the independence. Up until the declaration of independence of Kosovo, the political aims of Kosovo Albanians had been demands for equal status in former Yugoslavia, then liberation from Serbian occupation and finally, independence and self-determination. The last, also defines Gellner's national sentiment, whereas the Albanians aimed Kosovo liberation, progressing to unification with Albania, based on a process that was according to Albanians, unlawfully, terminated. The idea of the Kosovar nation cannot be substantiated by any historical or political moments. On the other hand, an idea to differentiate between the Albanians in Kosovo and those in Albania, was a product of nationalistic regime, especially during Rankovic's times [29]. In one of the correspondences with the esteemed professor Walker Connor, [30] we agreed that geographical proximity, regardless of administrative boundaries between Kosovo and Albania, was of a significant importance. The case of Kosovo and Albania, Connor tells me, does not relate to the so called "off-shoot nations" [31], since they occur only at a certain psychological distance from the mainland of origin, such as the case of Quebec and France. Technically, as revealed by Connor, less than 10 % of states in the world today are homogenous. Despite this fact, authorities continue to refer to states as nation-states, which is not the correct definition [32]. The unclarity between the concepts of state and nation, and in particular when these two concepts are interchangeably used as synonyms, may be interpreted by Breiully's idea [33] that in the beginning, there was the political solution of citizenship. And it was only through participation in liberal and democratic institutions, that there was a sense of commitment to the state created. In this sense, Breiully is convinced that political rights and not the cultural identity was important. Perhaps this was also the idea being the creation of a Kosovar supra-national statehood, whereas all ethnic groups would be comfortable: not as ethnic identities but simply as citizens with political rights, aiming for the commitment to the new state. Connor [34] uses an imaginary analogy to illustrate the imaginativeness around the nation and/or the state. He considers that in a land of Alice's Wonderland, whereas nation means state, and whereas the nation-state usually means multi-national state, and whereas nationalism means being loyal to the state, and whereas ethnicity, primordialism, pluralism, tribalism, regionalism, communalism, parochialism and sub-nationalism usually mean being loyal to the nation, one should not be surprised that in essence, the nature of nationalism remains under-researched. Most small states today include many nations and nationalities, depending on the perspective under analysis. The states that have emerged from former communist regimes, such as the Soviet Union or the former Yugoslavia, provide many examples of these state constructs. In this case, loyalty to the nations, and not necessarily states, is a reflection of much less state-creation, but rather, state-destruction. Lord Acton [35] describes the difference between nation and state, by stating that this difference is expressed in relation to

patriotism. He clarifies further by stating that our connection with the race is natural, thus physical, whereas our obligations towards the political nation (the state in this case) are ethical. So, if one could sum up a hypothesis based on Acton's thoughts, that it would be that if the nation could exist without the state, as only a subject deriving from the instinct of self-preservation, then this would mean the end of oneself [36]. In the case of Kosovo, Albanians had existed one century without their own state, however fanatically preserving their nationality, always different from the state, even in former Yugoslavia, which then led to the last war in 1999 and Kosovo's liberation. A nation does not necessarily need a state to be preserved. It needs the idea and the vision of such as state, as in the case of Kosovo.

6. Who do Kosovo Albanians think they are?

Discussions on identity, or furthermore, identity differences between being Albanian or Kosovar, remain one of the most heated debates, formally and non-formally. In times when the Kosovo football team [37] is the new positive surprise of the European Championship, having only lost to England, pride in the blue colors, the Kosovo flag and anthem, are on the increase. In addition, awaiting new pre-term elections, a good portion of the public pre-election debates focus on whether one of the opposition parties recognizes the Kosovo flag or not, as opposed to the traditional Albanian flag [38]. However, all these discussions must be seen from a perspective of regional and cultural identities rather than national identity differences. Cultural identities are present in and within all nations. Furthermore, even countries that were separated because of ideological differences, eventually became united: such as the examples of two Germanies. Based on a survey conducted in 2016 for purposes of the author's PhD thesis on identity of Albanians in Kosovo [39] it seems that 79% of Albanians in Kosovo think about identity, frequently and sometimes. In addition, the most significant identity marker for Kosovo Albanians is the nation (75.7%). Additionally, 32.8% of the Albanians in Kosovo feel more Albanian than Kosovar, whereas 19.4 % feel as much Albanian as Kosovar; and, 13.5% feel as much Kosovar as Albanian. The question "How will you raise your children in the future", received interesting responses: 41.5% of the respondents will raise their children as Albanians, whereas 14.1% will raise their children as Kosovar; 33.4% of the respondents will raise their children as Kosovo Albanians. However, as a prediction perhaps of successful qualification of the Kosovo football team, the most interesting responses were received on the question: "If Kosovo and Albania would play in a football match, who would you support?": 33.9% would support the state (Kosovo) team, whereas 14.2% would support the Albanian (national) team. Respondents who would support both teams at the same time are 46.7%. Regarding Kosovo's status in the future, 41.7% believe that Kosovo should be unified with Albania; 28.7% see Kosovo as an independent Republic in the future, whereas 28.2% see Kosovo as an EU member in the future. One of the most interesting differences between respondents was the age variable and the impact in national sentiments: feeling more Albanian as opposed to feeling more Kosovar. The younger the respondents, the more Kosovar they feel, and the older the respondents (30-55) the more Albanian they feel. Unsurprisingly this is attributed to collective memory and experience, whereas those in the age group of 30-55 and older had personal experiences in the apartheid and in the war, having been raised with the myths and symbols, which were passed on generation after generation. In addition, although the majority of the Albanians in Kosovo find being Albanian the most dominant identity, this somewhat is diluted when it comes to supporting the football team.

7. Conclusions and ways forward

Identity is fluid and adaptable to the ever-changing times. This is true for most of the Balkan nations, and perhaps even more so for the Western Balkans, and the former Yugoslavia. However, despite the euphoria of a unified Yugoslav identity, Albanians in Kosovo, but also in Macedonia, failed to internalize such an identity, clutching firmly onto the Albanian identity: the one they knew, they remembered and the one they were denied of, since the independence of Albania. New historical and political realities call for new identity adaptations, such as the dissolution of former Yugoslavia and the creation of new states and nations. Such was the case of Kosovo, the last entity in former Yugoslavia to become liberated and gain its independence. However, although the Albanian national liberation movement was understandably reformed and adapted to circumstances, the independence of Kosovo was only a part of the vision towards complete self-determination which was eventually to lead to unification with Albania. A little over a hundred years later, dramatic political changes and major shifts in the overall geostrategy in the Balkans, seem to have been a little too late for the translation of the idea of a unified Albanian nation-state into reality, at least for Albanians who remained outside of independent Albania. Identities for Albanians in the Balkans, have grown in different directions, heavily influenced by extreme ideologies in Albania and in former Yugoslavia. In addition, unifications nowadays have more of an economic meaning rather than political, thriving for unified common market and a larger security and safety area, as EU integrations strive to be. In this context, potential unification of regions in the Balkans may find a way in the enlargement policies and as part of EU memberships. Further research on identities, or better yet, research on modifications of these identities under political and historical changes, may serve as fertile ground for answers or at least documentation of answers. It would also be quite interesting to research the “Kosovar identity” as a shared state identity of all ethnic groups in Kosovo. As stated in the beginning of this paper, it is not what is but what people think is. In this sense, Albanians in Kosovo remain to be Albanians, as their primary national identity, however also proud owners of Kosovo passports and avid supporters of the Kosovo football team. The same Albanians cry tears of joy when Switzerland beats Serbia in a football match, and one of the players celebrates the goals, with the double-headed eagle. In the lack of a unified community, football may serve as Anderson’s “imagined community” [39] whereas all Albanians perceive themselves as part of the same group. However, the trend may change more rapidly rather than gradually, as Kosovo’s state brands receives more exposure internationally: in politics, sports and pop-culture.

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