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Populism and Anti-Establishment Politics in Kosovo: A Case Study of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje

Bilge Yabanci*

Few studies have systematically examined the rising political and social unrest in the Balkans. This paper investigates the local dynamics and consequences of widespread anti-establishment discontent in Kosovo through the analytical framework of populism. By focusing on the case of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV), the paper sets out to consider two related questions: the unique populist style of the LVV and the complex reasons behind its electoral breakthrough and continuing support among various groups. Based on a qualitative documentary analysis of the party programme, manifesto, party publications, speeches of the leadership and interviews, the paper finds that the LVV successfully melds a populist political style, leftist/social democratic agenda and contentious politics as a means to disperse its message. The second part of the article offers three arguments to explain its appeal: structural factors (electoral availability and party system), societal dynamics (political and economic dissatisfaction) and the agency of the LVV (internal organisation, cohesion and leadership). The article contributes to the thriving literature on populism through a novel empirical scope, and to the literature on Southeast Europe through a focus on local agency, voter preferences and party system.

Keywords: Kosovo, Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, populism, anti-establishment parties, social movements

Introduction

Scholarly research on Southeast Europe has long been dominated by an almost exclusive focus on ethnic tension, EU integration and democratic transition. Given the European Union's (EU) commitment to an eventual enlargement towards the region, state-building and political conditionality have been subject to extensive analysis¹, while domestic political developments and social dynamics in the region, as well as the agency of political actors remained under-researched until recently.

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¹ For a review Yabanci, Bilge. 2015. The EU's Democratization and State-Building Agenda in Kosovo: An Analysis through the Fragmented Local Agency, in *An Agenda for the Western Balkans from Elite Politics to Social Sustainability*, edited by Papakostas, Nikolaos and Nikolaos Pasamitros. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 23-52.

While identity politics and ethnic tensions still occupy an important place, countries in Southeast Europe face several social, political and economic challenges. On the one hand, governing parties' increasing authoritarian attempts in monopolising power and undermining the rule of law and media freedom constitute a major predicament for democratisation. The EU accession prospect, linked to stabilisation logic and short-term incentives², has seemingly achieved little to tackle the new semi-democratic regimes in the region.³ On the other hand, there are promising bottom-up social movements not particularly driven by EU incentives or the accession prospect.⁴ Demonstrations, strike actions and riots have recently become a part of the political culture of the region. These movements may finally provide alternative forms of representation and political claims-making by creating solidarity against the corrupt patronage networks of governing elites. Under these circumstances, populism in many different forms is on the rise in Southeast Europe.

These developments challenge the ethnicised conception of state-building and the international community's perception of Southeast Europe.⁵ Paying closer attention to local and regional dynamics of protest, socio-political developments and mobilisation is crucial to examine the recent political and social unrest in the region, which the outside-in approaches dominating the literature cannot address. This paper aims to investigate populism in Southeast Europe by looking at an under-researched case: Kosovo's *Lëvizja Vetëvendosje* (LVV, Self-determination Movement). It focuses on its unique ideological stance, which embraces a populist style and a leftist/social democratic agenda, and the reasons behind its widespread appeal among diverse groups (e.g. the unemployed, youth, educated, war veterans).

The paper first seeks to contribute to the thriving literature on populism, which remains an ambiguous but a lavishly-used concept. The ambiguity of populism is mostly attributable to its nature as a political style with few core themes and many forms. Moreover, populist movements and political parties still suffer from limited empirical research beyond European populist radical right parties and the Latin American leader-centric populist movements⁶. The analysis of the LVV's left-leaning populism offers a novel empirical inquiry to the populism literature. The paper shows that populism can also become a pervasive and appealing political style without a far right ideology and without an all-powerful leader. It can appeal to a significant part of the electorate

² Renner, Stephan and Florian Trauner. 2009. Creeping EU Membership in Southeast Europe: The Dynamics of EU Rule Transfer to the Western Balkans. *Journal of European Integration* 31(4), 431-47.

³ Bieber, Florian and Irena Ristić. 2012. Constrained Democracy: The Consolidation of Democracy in Yugoslav Successor States. *Southeastern Europe* 36(3), 373-97.

⁴ Segert, Dieter and Vedran Dzihic. 2009. Das Jugoslawische Rätsel: Enklavendemokratie, Staatsschwäche und Probleme Externer Demokratieförderung. *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 3-4, 48-65.

⁵ Horvat, Srećko and Igor Štiks. 2014. *Welcome to the Desert of Transition! Post-Socialism, the European Union, and a New Left in the Balkans*. London: Verso.

⁶ See Mudde, Cas. 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Gidron, Noam and Bart Bonikowski. 2013. *Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda*. Working Paper Series 13. Harvard University.

where the party system is weak, the state's legitimacy is contested and social discontent is high.

Second, the paper also offers an alternative analysis of uneasy relations between citizens, political actors and international players in the region by seeking an answer to the question of why populist and anti-establishment politics have been on the rise in Southeast Europe. Research on party politics in Southeast Europe has been analysed through a focus on far right parties rather than populism *per se*⁷. This study demonstrates that the analytical framework of populism could bring to the fore local agency, voter preferences and the party system. Populism can offer a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the persistent problems of state- and nation-building compared to the top-down analyses in the literature.

Kosovo is singled-out as a case study because populism has a favourable political opportunity structure to flourish within the complicated political dynamics of a supervised state. Although the country has been mostly stabilised since 1999 and a civic conception of citizenship has been promoted by the international community for years; nation, identity and ethnicity are still highly politicised and contested in Kosovo. Moreover, Kosovo is the poorest economy in the region with the highest youth unemployment (around 55%) and its economy relies heavily on international aid and imports.⁸ A Western European-style party system (traditional left-right axis) and a democratic tradition is absent⁹. What is more, for more than a decade, the country was under international supervision (1999-2008 UNMIK and 2008-2012 ICO/EULEX) that was locally challenged as unaccountable and top-down.¹⁰

After its declaration of independence in 2008, Kosovo has become dependent on the continuation of international presence, especially the EU, not only because the EU is the biggest donor, but also Kosovo's clientelist and corrupted political class and weak state institutions have little interest in promoting the rule of law and civic participation. On the other hand, the continuation of international presence in Kosovo symbolises the contested statehood and international hegemony as well as the 'unaccountable and untouchable' alliance between international actors and Kosovo's political elite that has disenfranchised and disengaged citizens from political participation and

⁷ For example, Stojarová, Vera. 2013. *The Far Right in the Balkans*. Manchester: University Press; Dzombic, Jelena. 2014. Rightwing Extremism in Serbia. *Race & Class* 55(4), 106-10; Stojarová, Vera and Hana Vykoupilova. 2008. Populism in the Balkans: The Case of Serbia. *Central European Political Studies Review* 10(2-3), 95-112; Stefanovic, Djordje. 2008. The Path to Weimar Serbia? Explaining the Resurgence of the Serbian Far Right after the Fall of Milosevic. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31(7), 1195-221.

⁸ World Bank. 2013. *World Development Indicators* (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁹ Stojarová, Vera and Peter Emerson. 2013. *Party Politics in the Western Balkans*. Routledge.

¹⁰ Yabanci, Bilge. 2014. *Legitimation of EU Conflict Resolution through Local Actors: Cases of Kosovo and Northern Cyprus*. PhD-thesis. Bath: University of Bath; Visoka, Gezim. 2011. International Governance and Local Resistance in Kosovo: The Thin Line between Ethical, Emancipatory and Exclusionary Politics. *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 22(1), 99-125; King, Iain and Whit Mason. 2006. *Peace at Any Price: How the World Failed Kosovo*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press.

representation.¹¹ These circumstances has contributed to the society-wide dissatisfaction with existing institutions and elected politicians.

The first part of the paper is devoted to the conceptual framework of populism. The second section provides an in-depth analysis of *Vetëvendosje's* ideology and its political agenda, based on qualitative documentary analysis of the party programme, manifesto and party publications, such as newsletters, published since 2010. Press statements and the parliamentary addresses of the LVV deputies, especially the party leader Albin Kurti, were also consulted. Personal interviews with Kurti and party activists conducted in May 2011 in Prishtina during a fieldwork visit are also used to corroborate other sources. The final part turns to analyse three main factors explaining the transformation of the LVV from a youth resistance movement to a successful political party in the Kosovo Assembly, with a real potential to become the main opposition party in the future.

Populism

Populism is a *thin-centred* ideology that promotes a few core ideas, but remains as a highly-context sensitive political style.¹² As a thin-centred ideology, populism has four core characteristics: (i) it has a people-centric worldview which draws on the idea of the sovereignty of 'the people' against 'the privileged' elites, (ii) it emerges as a part of representative democracy, but capitalises on the criticism of its current weaknesses, (iii) it embraces a heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting set of ideologies which is very much defined by the context within which it develops, (iv) it is likely that it gains support among the segments of the society who feel disenfranchised or unrepresented by the existing parties/politicians.

The central and most defining feature of populism is its depiction of an antagonism between 'the people' and 'the establishment' or 'the elites' (politicians, intellectuals, judiciary, business, international organisations). While 'the people' are perceived as virtuous, elites are portrayed as corrupt, self-interested and alienated from the people.¹³ Populists put this dichotomy at the heart of their political struggle, and they usually discuss other problems such as economic growth, rule of law, and socio-economic problems in healthcare, pensions, urban development, and so on through the narrative of 'corrupt elites' who seize the control of the government, bureaucracy and justice to promote their own interests against the interests of 'the people'. For populism, "it is the people directly -its majority- that legitimise institutions with no other mediation than their actual will."¹⁴

¹¹ Vardari-Kesler, Alma. 2012. Politics of Protest in Supervised Statehood: Co-Shared Governance and Erosion of Citizenship. The Case-Study of the Vetevendosje Movement in Kosovo. *Southeastern Europe* 36(2), 149-77; Tansey, Oisin. 2009. Kosovo: Independence and Tutelage. *Journal of Democracy* 20(2), 153-66; Dzihic, Vedran and Helmut Kramer. 2009. *Kosovo After Independence*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

¹² Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2013. Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America. *Government and Opposition* 48(2), 147-74, 150-1.

¹³ Taggart, Paul. 2000. *Populism. Concepts in the Social Sciences*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

¹⁴ Urbinati, Nadia. 1998. Democracy and Populism. *Constellations*, 5(1), 110-24, 117.

Depiction of society through a relentless antagonism between ‘the people’ and the elites gives populist politics an essentially anti-establishment character. As discussed by Canovan, populism promotes “some kind of revolt against the established structure of power in the name of the people.”¹⁵ Usually, populist movements seek to dismiss the elected politicians as selfish, incompetent and unrepresentative and against the interests of the people.¹⁶ Populist parties and politicians depict themselves as outsiders, as ‘reluctant politicians’ and emphasise their movement-type nature.

However, populism is not consistent and clear in defining who belongs to the people. When populists refer to ‘the people’, they refer to a homogenous group, a constructed ‘heartland’ which is unitary and untainted by class, ethnic and religious divisions.¹⁷ Populists are hostile towards pluralistic definitions that would damage the unity of the heartland.¹⁸ It is not only the corrupt elites who are outsiders, but also the groups that highlight their distinction from the majority and harm the unity of the people, such as ethnic and religious minorities.

In multi-ethnic countries where there is an ethno-national cleavage, populist parties are likely to adopt an exclusionary attitude towards minority groups in order to promote an “organic view of the people as an ethically and culturally homogenous totality.”¹⁹ As a result, populists oppose liberal democracy, pluralism and protection of individual and group rights.

When constructing an antagonism between the people and the elites, populism usually relies heavily on symbolic strategies and performative acts to deliver its message to the masses. The standard repertoire of populist actors includes accusations based on inferences; generalisations and stereotypes; metaphors to define the ruling class, contenders or minorities; undiplomatic, aggressive, confrontational and polarising use of popular language when responding to criticism, and victimisation rhetoric when referring to ‘us’.²⁰ “Elections, plebiscites, mass demonstrations and [...] opinion polls” are used to gain and sustain support.²¹ Finally, populist leaders usually rely on personalistic and face-to-face relationship with the followers through mass rallies and demonstrations.²²

¹⁵ Canovan, Margaret. 1999. Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies* 47(1), 2-16, 3.

¹⁶ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 23.

¹⁷ Taggart, Paul. 2004. Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9(3), 269-88.

¹⁸ Filc, Dani. 2009. *The Political Right in Israel: Different Faces of Jewish Populism*. Oxon: Routledge; Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism*.

¹⁹ Filc, *The Political Right in Israel*, 12-3.

²⁰ Schedler, Andreas. 1996. Anti-Political-Establishment Parties. *Party Politics* 2(3), 291-312, 296-7; Hawkins, Kirk A. 2009. Is Chávez Populist? Measuring Populist Discourse in Comparative Perspective. *Comparative Political Studies*, 42(8), 1040-67; Barr, Robert R. 2009. Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics. *Party Politics* 15(1), 29-48.

²¹ Weyland, Kurt. 2001. Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics*, 34(1), 1-22, 12.

²² Weyland, *Clarifying a Contested Concept*; De La Torre, Carlos. 2000. *Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Second, populism does not necessarily harbour extremist ideologies with an aim to destroy the democratic system. On the contrary, as Canovan argues, populism has always been a 'perennial possibility' of representative democracies: "Populists see themselves as true democrats, voicing popular grievances and opinions systematically ignored by governments, mainstream parties and the media"²³. Populist movements and parties criticise the system from within through a different interpretation of democracy (unity over plurality, direct democracy over deliberation and checks and balances), rather than striving to destroy the democratic order. For instance, populist actors usually deny that their motivation in opposing constitutional rights and guarantees for minorities is driven by undemocratic ideas. By contrast, they promote a majoritarian approach to democracy as the ideal type of governance, claiming that 'privileges' granted to minorities would harm the unity and harmony of the society. Liberal democracy and pluralism are perceived against the sovereignty and equality of the people.

Therefore, it is misleading to use populism synonymously with the extreme right, although the latter often employs a populist style.²⁴ Yet, populism cannot be considered necessarily beneficial for representative democracies. Empirical evidence suggests that it can both undermine pluralism by 'contaminating' the mainstream parties' style²⁵ and promote it by extending political participation to underprivileged groups.²⁶ As Urbinati aptly states, "populism does not hold an autonomous conceptual identity, and both its character and its claims are parasitic to democratic theory. It can, however, serve to highlight the fact that democracy is not a simple and uncontroversial term either."²⁷

Third, populism is not a fully-fledged ideology with a universal and uniform content. As a thin-centred ideology, it characterises a style of politics that is compatible with other political ideologies (conservative, progressive or revolutionary) and economic programme (state-planned or neoliberal) and with diverse social bases and regimes.²⁸ In Europe the extreme right-wing variant of populism with a focus on anti-immigration and Eurosceptic discourse has been prevalent since 1980s.²⁹ In the US, populist parties have displayed ideological

²³ Canovan, *Trust the People!*, 2.

²⁴ See Stojarová, *The Far Right in the Balkans*, for a region specific study of how populism and far right have utilised together.

²⁵ Bale, Tim. 2003. Cinderella and Her Ugly Sisters: The Mainstream and Extreme Right in Europe's Bipolarising Party Systems. *West European Politics* 26, 67-90; Mondon, Aurélien. 2013. *The Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right in France and Australia: A Populist Hegemony?*. Surrey: Ashgate.

²⁶ De La Torre, Carlos. 2007. The Resurgence of Radical Populism in Latin America. *Constellations* 14(3), 384-97.

²⁷ Urbinati, *Democracy and Populism*, 116.

²⁸ Taguieff, Pierre-André. 2002. *L'illusion populiste: de l'archaïque au médiatique*. Editeurs Berg International, 84.

²⁹ Ignazi, Piero. 2003. *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Although far-right populism is prevalent in many West European countries, the variants of left-wing populism are also present as seen in the example of Syriza and PASOK in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Scottish Socialist Party in the UK. See Mavrogordatos, George. 1997. From Traditional Clientelism to Machine Politics: The Impact of PASOK Populism in Greece. *South European Society and Politics* 2(3), 1-26; Stavrakakis, Yannis and Giorgos Katsambekis. 2014. Left-Wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19(2), 119-42; Gomez-Reino, Margarita and Iván Llamazares. 2015. *New Left Populism in Contemporary*

varieties from agrarian roots to conservative movements.³⁰ In Latin America, the recent populist parties have adopted a leftist outlook.³¹ As Panizza claims, all ideological positions can share populism as “a flexible mode of persuasion to redefine the people and their adversaries.”³²

Finally, populism capitalises on the citizens’ dissatisfaction with the established parties and the political system.³³ The endurance and success of populist movements within a specific context is much determined by the two-way dynamic relationship between the populist actors who convey anti-establishment messages and the public, who receive, evaluate, accept or reject these messages.³⁴ The existing research shows that these parties usually attract voters who display a resilient dissatisfaction with the established parties or elected politicians³⁵.

To summarise, populism is based on the centrality of “the notion of sovereign people as an actor in an antagonistic relation with the established order.”³⁶ It “claims an unbounded supremacy of the “will of the people” over institutions and over the social strata that do not identify with the dominant group [...] its aim is that of blurring any mediation between leadership and the people so as to bypass indirect forms of politics. In this way a populist democracy ends up putting the demos above the laws.”³⁷ Populist movements, actors and parties share a common trait of being anti-establishment and anti-status quo. In this sense, it is independent of any particular relationship with democracy and ideological (left-right) affinity on its own. In this sense, populist parties exist within representative democracies and they do not seek an alternative to democracy; but they object to liberal democracy and its pluralist values and promote plebiscitary politics.³⁸

Otherwise, populism is highly contingent on the political and social context within which it emerges and develops. It can embrace diverse and sometimes ideologically contradictory economic and social policies. In other words, the type and the degree of populism that a movement or party adopt are dependent on the political and social structures. This chameleonic characteristic makes populism a concept that can easily travel across time and regions as well as across political ideologies and contributes to the ubiquity of populism.³⁹

Spain? The Upsurge of Podemos. Paper at the Contradictions: Envisioning European Futures Conference, Science Po, Paris, France: Council for European Studies, 8. July 2015.

³⁰ Kazin, Michael. 1998. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

³¹ Levitsky, Steven and Kenneth M. Roberts, 2011. *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left*. Baltimore: JHU Press.

³² Panizza, Francisco. 2005. *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London; New York: Verso, 5.

³³ Albertazzi, Daniele and Duncan McDonnell. 2008. *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

³⁴ Moffitt, Benjamin and Simon Tormey. 2013. Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style. *Political Studies* 62(2), 381-97.

³⁵ Pop-Eleches, Grigore. 2010. Throwing Out the Bums: Protest Voting and Unorthodox Parties after Communism. *World Politics* 62(2), 221-60.

³⁶ Panizza, *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, 3.

³⁷ Urbinati, *Democracy and Populism*, 119.

³⁸ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 151.

³⁹ Taggart, *Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe*.

Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV) from a Movement to a Political Party

The LVV's roots date back to the activities of the Kosovo Action Network (KAN) established in 1997 to organise mass student protests against the Serb oppression in Kosovo. Under the leadership of Albin Kurti, the LVV was formed in 2005 as a movement for self-determination. Kurti was an activist among the political ranks of the KAN and Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The turning point for the movement was the anti-UNMIK protests organised on the fifth anniversary of the mission. Thanks to these protests, the LVV gained widespread public recognition. In the following years, it transformed itself into an anti-UNMIK movement fiercely criticising the 'undemocratic' and 'technocratic' practices of the international mission in Kosovo. Between 2005 and 2008, the LVV claimed that final status negotiations restricted the universal and unconditional self-determination right of Kosovo Albanians by making this right subject to Serbia's consent.⁴⁰ The movement carried out '*Jo negociata, Vetëvendosje!*' (No Negotiations, Self-Determination) campaign against the Vienna status negotiations through which it increased its prominence throughout Kosovo. Since then, the LVV has progressively enlarged its Kosovo-wide mobilisation through local offices, publications and radio broadcasting and crystallised a clear anti-establishment stance. The failure of the Vienna negotiations to generate an internationally recognised independence provided another cause for the LVV to continue its 'anti-hegemonic' and pro-independence ideological consolidation.

Lëvizja Vetëvendosje defines itself as "a political movement organised according to the principles of civic activism and public inclusion in political decision-making and faithful to the founding principles of democracy, by which state sovereignty derives from the people and belongs only to them."⁴¹ Its mobilisation as a movement has always involved street protests, demonstrations and public shows. These actions initially targeted the UNMIK, but turned increasingly against the EU Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) after the declaration of independence in 2008.⁴² The movement perceives the EU mission as a continuation of the UNMIK's 'unaccountable' and 'undemocratic' governance over Kosovo under a new guise.⁴³

The year 2010 became the latest turning point in the organisational and ideological evolution of the LVV. It decided to register for the general elections as a 'citizens' initiative'⁴⁴ and participated in the 2010, 2013 and 2014 general

⁴⁰ Vetëvendosje. n.d. *Manifesto* (accessed: 20 March 2016).

⁴¹ Vetëvendosje. 2012. *Response to US Ambassador, Tracey Ann Jacobson*. 11. December 2012 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁴² Kurti, Albin. 2011. *Kosova in Dependence: From Stability of Crisis to the Crisis of Stability*. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 5(1), 89-97.

⁴³ Vetëvendosje. n.d. *ICO and EULEX: Powers, Chain of Command and Accountability*.

⁴⁴ This was an intentional choice to highlight LVV's disapproval of political parties and parliamentary politics and to reject accusations that the movement was becoming a part of Kosovo's establishment. Previously, LVV had also refused to register as a civil society organisation to distinguish itself from numerous NGOs dominating Kosovo's civil society landscape, because the majority of these NGOs receive financial and technical support from international donors. Strazzari, Francesco and Ervjola Selenica. 2013. *Nationalism and Civil Society Organisations in Post-Independence Kosovo*, in *Civil Society and Transitions in the Western Balkans*, edited by Bojicic-

and local elections. The campaign for the general elections was focused on opposition to international presence and the Kosovo-Serbia normalisation talks, demand for ‘unconditional independence’ as well as anti-establishment and anti-elite themes.⁴⁵ The message of the party resounded with a particular segment of the Kosovo electorate; and the movement gained 12.69% of votes and 14 seats within the 120-seat Kosovo Assembly. To the surprise of many international and local commentators, the LVV became the third largest group in the Assembly after the two oldest and most powerful political parties: Democratic Party of Kosovo-PDK (previously led by then Prime Minister and a former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) commander and the current President Hashim Thaçi) and the Democratic League of Kosovo-LDK (established by the revered resistance leader and the first President Ibrahim Rugova). In 2014, the LVV increased its vote share to 13.59% (16 seats), again coming third after the PDK and LDK. The 2013 local elections also brought rewarding results for the party. The LVV candidate Shpend Ahmeti won 51.8% in the second round of voting in Prishtina, the capital city that had always been ruled by a mayor from the LDK since the first local elections.

Populism, Anti-establishment Politics and the Ideology of Vetëvendosje

The departure point of the LVV’s populist style is its hostility to Kosovo politics and politicians on the one hand, and to the international actors that have had executive power over Kosovo on the other. These actors determine the LVV’s anti-establishment stance and are placed at the heart of its political struggle. The party argues that decisions about Kosovo and its people are made by a number of elected politicians in the government who act according to their own interests and their allegiance to international actors in Kosovo rather than Kosovo people. In this view, the government is both ‘illegal and illegitimate,’⁴⁶ running Kosovo as a ‘party-state.’⁴⁷ They are illegal because, instead of receiving approval from the people, they employ electoral fraud, clientelism and support from international actors to stay in power. They are illegitimate because they are corrupt and fail to represent people’s interests. In line with populism’s distrust of all ‘elites’, the LVV also perceives the judiciary, police, opposition parties, and local and international NGOs active in Kosovo as a part of the widespread scandals, nepotism, corruption and partisan decision-making.⁴⁸

As a response, the LVV promotes two remedies to end the monopoly of these elites over social and political issues. First, it encourages people as citizens to engage in politics actively, attending demonstrations and protests against the

Dzelilovic, Vesna / Ker-Lindsay, James and Denisa Kostovicova. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 117-34.

⁴⁵ Vetëvendosje. 2014. Newsletter No. 407: A Vetëvendosje Government Anti-Corruption Plan. 16. May 2014 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁴⁶ Lëvizja Vetëvendosje. 2014. For a Republic of the Majority. *Vetëvendosje*, 7. October 2014 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁴⁷ Kurti, Albin. 2014. Statement Made to the Media by Albin Kurti after the Meeting with President Ahtifete Jahjaga. *Vetëvendosje*, 29. September 2014 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁴⁸ Lëvizja Vetëvendosje. 2014. Kosova Needs National Unification Not Religious Separation. *Vetëvendosje*, 14. August 2014 (accessed: 20. March 2016); Vetëvendosje. 2014. Newsletter No. 398. 14. March 2014 (accessed: 20. March 2016); Kurti, *JISB Interview*.

government and the international community in order to promote direct engagement of people in politics, since the elected representatives cannot be trusted. In words of *Vetëvendosje*, ‘active and responsible citizenry’ -as opposed to patient and passive citizenry- would hold the small clique of governing elites accountable for their corrupted activities.⁴⁹ In line with the populist political style, the LVV’s main method of political mobilisation is public demonstrations against the government or international actors. These protests usually employ extraordinary tactics, such as blocking the entrances of the Assembly to prevent deputies from other parties entering into the parliament when voting on a law that the LVV opposes takes place; throwing red paint or piles of garbage at the facilities of the EULEX and the government buildings; destroying the property of the UNMIK and EULEX, and lately throwing tear gas canisters at the Assembly to disrupt its sessions.⁵⁰ The protest scenes are usually dominated by the symbols of Albania and the KLA, instead of state symbols of Kosovo.⁵¹

The crucial point to note here is that *Vetëvendosje* does not define politics as the representation of citizens in the parliament. The political arena is not limited to the representative institutions; it is the place where people can directly claim rights and express demands, specifically the streets. In a similar fashion, the party leadership responds to domestic and international criticisms about the method of its protests claiming that demonstrations are a democratic civic right to express disillusionment with ruling elites. The LVV as a populist movement and political party is suspicious of representative democracy as weak and open to manipulation by the elites, especially as practiced in Kosovo. In an interview, Kurti summarised the party’s stance on representative democracy clearly:

*“We think that representative democracy is not enough; direct participatory democracy ensures a more vibrant society. Representative democracy is illegitimate; it creates alienation and limits choice. The problematising of the issue was the initial face of our movement.”*⁵²

Secondly, as a remedy for the monopoly of the current political elites, the party promotes more power for the parliament over the executive. On this issue, Kurti stated in his addressing of the Kosovo Assembly that:

*“this [the Assembly] is our place, the place where we bring the voice of the citizens, the trust of the citizens, the interests of the citizens, and the will of the citizens, and we will continuously act in accordance with this.”*⁵³

⁴⁹ Vetëvendosje. n.d. [Party Programme](#) (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁵⁰ See for details Vetëvendosje; Schwander-Sievers, Stephanie. 2013. *Democratisation through Defiance? The Albanian Civil Organisation “Self-Determination” and International Supervision in Kosovo*, in *Civil Society and Transitions in the Western Balkans*, edited by Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Vesna / Ker-Lindsay, James and Denisa Kostovicova. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 95-116, 101-2.

⁵¹ Vardari-Kesler, *Politics of Protest in Supervised Statehood*; Schwander-Sievers, *Democratisation through Defiance?*

⁵² Nosan, Brad. 2012. [Kosovo’s Vetëvendosje Movement doesn’t Like Foreign Intervention](#). *VICE Magazine*, 15. August 2012 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁵³ Kurti, Albin. 2014. [Speech at Parliamentary Session](#). *Vetëvendosje*, 2. October 2014 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

As Kurti's statement implies, the LVV's suspicion of politicians and political parties obliged *Vetëvendosje* to represent itself as 'a messenger' of the citizens. For this reason, the party defines itself as a 'citizens' initiative' to differentiate from a traditional political party, and considers parliamentary representation as one of (not the main) the means to engage in politics. In fact, the LVV found itself in need to justify the decision to seek parliamentary representation in order to preserve its 'anti-establishment' and 'outsider' character:

*"Lëvizja Vetëvendosje remains a political movement, representing all of Kosovo's society and people and the Albanian nation. It aims at building a state of Kosovo, establishing a democratic system, implementing justice and developing our economy. Above all, we are a unifying movement and not a fractional political party."*⁵⁴

The decision to enter into parliamentary politics was rationalised as an attempt to 'infiltrate' into the system to transform it:

*"Besides its current methods of action and demonstration, Lëvizja Vetëvendosje will add another, participation in the elections. This is in order to fulfill our objective as quickly as possible. This change of strategy is not a replacement for our methods of action, but an addition to them. This is an additional method for the same concept and goal [...] The will of the people must be expressed everywhere and all the time [...] In Kosovo the will of a few has overtaken the general will because this will of the few has in its hands the state's institutions. This has to change."*⁵⁵

Moreover, *Vetëvendosje* seeks to delegitimise and replace any type of foreign presence in Kosovo. It perceives the international community as an unaccountable and patronising occupier that help the current political leaders stay in power.⁵⁶ The party criticises the international presence also as an ineffective and technocratic power that dictates laws and regulations from above, shaping the daily life of people without being held accountable for their 'mismanagement' and 'irresponsible' practices.⁵⁷ *Vetëvendosje* deputy Alma Lama's remarks below on the EU mission exemplify the perceived illegitimacy of foreign state-building in Kosovo:

*"After the declaration of independence, in practice, the UN was replaced by the EU and UNMIK by EULEX. However, this replacement was not a change of approach and purpose, and there was no paradigm shift. [...] European officials have cooperated and talked about fighting corruption so much and so long with precisely the most corrupt people in the country who have usurped government and state management functions."*⁵⁸

The LVV's populist stance closely shapes its policies and attitudes towards the Serb minority. *Vetëvendosje* opposes the ongoing Kosovo-Serbia talks.

⁵⁴ Vetëvendosje. 2010. *Newsletter No 221*. October 2010 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁵⁵ Kurti, Albin. 2010. *Press Statement on the Participation in Elections*. *Vetëvendosje*, 12. June 2010 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁵⁶ Schwander-Sievers, *Democratisation through Defiance?*.

⁵⁷ Lëvizja Vetëvendosje. 2014. *EULEXPERIMENT Began and Will End as a Failure*. *Vetëvendosje*, 30. October 2014 (accessed: 20. March 2016); Kurti, *JISB Interview*.

⁵⁸ Lama, Alma and Puhie Dërmaku. 2012. *Press Conference: EULEX is a Failed Mission*. *Vetëvendosje*, 31. October 2012 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

Accordingly, the 2013 Brussels Agreement was the previous Prime Minister Thaçi's personal agreement aiming to create a Serbian statelet inside Kosovo similar to *Republika Srpska*, in return for further empowering his clientelist and criminal group of politicians with the help of the EU.⁵⁹ In this view, the government conspires against people in violation of the constitution⁶⁰ by taking a part in the coalition between the EU and Serbia to "realise the serbianization of cultural heritage located in Kosovo"⁶¹ and "accommodating Serbia's interests to the maximum inside Kosovo".⁶²

The party's stance towards citizenship, national identity and minorities is also in line with its populist style. The LVV perceives the current ethno-national divisions as the fault of the international community that promoted ethnic dichotomy since 1999.⁶³ It claims that ethnicity has turned into a stigma for people because "instead of rights of the people, they [the international community] talk about needs of the communities."⁶⁴

Despite the criticism of the international community for promoting ethnic divisions in Kosovo, a closer reading of its programme and other party documents reveals that the LVV promotes a defensive Albanian nationalism. Currently, the Constitution of Kosovo avoids any ethno-national references and defines the country as "a state of its citizens" exercising its "authority based on the respect for human rights and freedoms" (Kosovo Constitution Art 1.2). The neutrality in the Kosovo Constitution towards the ethnic and national identities aims to encourage the integration of Kosovo Serbs and other minorities into a dominantly Albanian country. Contrarily, the LVV is profoundly intolerant of the multi-ethnic character of Kosovo and defines the state through the perspective of the majority. The party programme states that the party "is committed to the constitutional definition of Kosovo as a state of Albanians and all citizens of Kosovo [...] [and] returning the national Albanian symbols to the state of Kosovo."⁶⁵ Moreover, the party discards the constitutional principle (Art. 1.3) that forbids Kosovo's unification with any other state as a violation of the right to self-determination. The party aims to change these constitutive principles in favour of unification with Albania through a referendum.

As a result, the political and cultural rights granted to the minority communities, such as decentralisation, are fiercely rejected as 'another colonial imposition'. According to Kurti, decentralisation has enforced a division of Kosovo along institutional, political and social lines.⁶⁶ As an alternative, the party promotes an ambiguous policy of 'dialogue with Serbs of Kosovo as

⁵⁹ Vetëvendosje. 2013. *Newsletter No. 347*, 22. March 2013; Kurti, Albin and Shpend Ahmeti. 2013. Press Statement by Albin Kurti and Shpend Ahmeti on the Normalization Agreement. *Vetëvendosje*, 19. April 2013 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁶⁰ Vetëvendosje. 2012. *Newsletter No. 286*. 20. January 2012 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁶¹ Ymeri, Visar. 2010. Press Conference: The Constitution Remains Ahtisaari's and Not the Citizens. *Vetëvendosje*, 10. September 2012 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁶² Kurti, Albin. 2012. Letter to Martti Ahtisaari. *Vetëvendosje*, 9. September 2012 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁶³ Visoka, *International Governance and Local Resistance in Kosovo*.

⁶⁴ Kurti, *JISB Interview*, 92.

⁶⁵ Vetëvendosje Party Programme. n.d. (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁶⁶ Albin Kurti. 2011. Author's personal interview, Prishtina, 20. May 2011.

citizens of our Republic'.⁶⁷ However, it fails to outline the details of this alternative policy towards Serbs to integrate them into the independent Kosovo state. In practice, the party's exclusionary discourse blaming Serbia and Serbs for Kosovo's historical and current problems and the inconsistent policy objectives are far from establishing a dialogue with Kosovo Serbs. For instance, the party program states commitment to "affirming the national culture as the majority Albanian" while promoting "maximum cultural autonomy of national minorities".⁶⁸ However, the party often dismisses the cultural autonomy principle in relation to Kosovo Serbs. The autonomy guaranteed to the Serb Orthodox church is considered as an opportunity for Belgrade to control Kosovo.⁶⁹ It is against the political integration of minorities through local autonomy, reserved seats, and the right of Serbian municipalities to choose their own local rulers and cooperate with Serbia. In contrast, the party promotes special relations with Albania. While it claims to defend civic citizenship, party documents praise the KLA and veterans, urges the right to return and the right to vote for Albanian war refugees, while opposing the same right for the Serb refugees.⁷⁰

It is important to note that the inconsistencies and double-standards towards Kosovo Serbs in the party documents and discourse are disguised or softened through defending constitutional and legal equality for all Kosovo citizens including "national, religious, cultural and racial minority groups".⁷¹ In line with populism's promotion of a majoritarian approach to democracy, the LVV contends that in an ideal democracy, the will and rights of the majority should be prioritised. Rights and responsibilities should be proportionate to the size of the communities, regardless of the potential injustices that a minority community might face. This is also the reason for embracing direct democracy which ensures that every active and responsible citizen's vote is equal. The LVV leadership's letter addressing the Quint Ambassadors on the occasion of the end of official supervision of Kosovo aptly summarises the LVV's majoritarian logic:

*"The Ahtisaari Plan "established territorial autonomy for the 5% Serb minority in Kosovo, over approximately 20% of our territory. [...] This Plan has sought to transform Kosovo's identity by imposing its definition of us as a 'multi-ethnic society' without our consent, and by denying the reality that over the 90 per cent of our population is Albanian."*⁷²

In this sense, *Vetëvendosje's* approach towards identity and nation is different from the far-right extremism that is also widespread in the Balkans region.⁷³ *Vetëvendosje* does not openly promote internal homogenisation of population through assimilation, ethnic cleansing or forced migration. Although the party claims that it rejects seeing Kosovo through the prism of ethnicity, in line with populism's core features of homogeneous people and majoritarianism, it asserts

⁶⁷ Author's interview with Kurti.

⁶⁸ *Vetëvendosje Party Programme*.

⁶⁹ Kurti, *JISB Interview*.

⁷⁰ *Vetëvendosje Party Programme*.

⁷¹ *Vetëvendosje Party Programme*.

⁷² Kurti, Albin. 2012. *Letter to Quint Ambassadors*. *Vetëvendosje*, 8. September 2012 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁷³ Stojarová, Vera. 2013. *The Far Right in the Balkans*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Albanian political and cultural domination in Kosovo, while praising direct democracy.

In short, the analysis of party documents and speeches of the prominent members of the LVV shows that *Vetëvendosje's* ideological and political mobilisation is built upon a populist style: (i) an anti-establishment position and instrumental use of 'the mainstream parliamentary politics', (ii) hostility towards the government and the international community expressed through protests and the use of symbolism referring to memories and legacies of the Albanian resistance (iii) a contradictory stance towards the minorities shaped by Albanian nationalism. These issues combine the definitive elements of a populist style. Yet, *Vetëvendosje's* populism is by and large shaped by the contextual circumstances. The ethnic conflict and disputed national identities in Kosovo as well as Kosovo's contested statehood after the declaration of independence have defined who is a part of the virtuous and homogeneous people and where the arena for political struggle stands. In order to understand the contextual factors that shaped its ideology and political agenda, the next section turns to analyse the factors that explain the LVV's societal support.

Explaining the Success of *Vetëvendosje*

Despite the party's inconsistent policy proposals and double-standards in relation to minorities and its suspicion of representative democracy, *Vetëvendosje* has secured a stable group of supporters from different segments of society. *Vetëvendosje's* anti-EULEX and pro-independence narrative have articulated a diverse group of supporters including student activists, Albanian nationalists and war veterans. This section discusses three main factors that have contributed to the success of *Vetëvendosje's* political mobilisation since 2005 and its recent electoral gains.

Structural Factors: Party System and Electoral Availability

Structural factors have played an important role in the LVV's unexpected support among the electorate. Electoral availability refers to whether the traditional socio-economic and political cleavages shape the electorate's voting decision.⁷⁴ Accordingly, if a considerable part of the electorate has strong ideological party allegiance, there is little chance for a newly established party to gain success in electoral competition. In Kosovo, party allegiance is usually defined through clan-based family structures of the Albanian society, where loyalty provides individuals with access to services and socio-political benefits due to widespread nepotism and clientelism. Moreover, party leaders are very important figures, and the parties' electoral strongholds are usually the hometowns of the party leaders.⁷⁵ In general, voters make their electoral decisions based on ethnic affiliations rather than on the socio-economic pledges of parties.⁷⁶ These factors contribute to the lack of strong ideological allegiance

⁷⁴ Bartolini, Stefano and Peter Mair. 2007. *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates, 1885-1985*. European Consortium for Political Research.

⁷⁵ Krasniqi, Albert and Krenar Shala. 2012. *Strengthening the Statehood of Kosovo through the Democratization of Political Parties*, Policy Paper Series 2012/04. Prishtina: Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development.

⁷⁶ Stojarová and Emerson, *Party Politics in the Western Balkans*.

to the existing political parties and to the dissatisfaction of groups outside the close-knit patronage networks.

What is more, Kosovo's party system exemplifies a highly fragmented electoral competition. Every election witnesses the establishment of new parties or splits within older parties. Following the first elections in 2001, all Albanian parties formed a grand coalition. Contrarily, in 2004, the competition, if not hostility, dating back to the resistance years, between the two main parties -the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK)-shaped the main electoral cleavage in Kosovo dividing the electorate was divided into two main camps (LDK 45.42% and PDK 25.85%), with many small parties ranging between 8% and 1% of total votes. The 2007 elections once again witnessed a complete restructuring of the party system. After the death of Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of LDK, and the indictment of the leader of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), a revered former-KLA commander and then Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj at The Hague, the PDK, under the leadership of Hashim Thaçi, has become the most powerful party in the Assembly (34.3%).⁷⁷ Although the PDK has dominated the political scene in the country since the 2007 elections, smaller parties have been established, dissolved or merged with bigger parties at every election indicating a volatile electoral market.⁷⁸ After the 2014 elections, the coalition crisis lasted half a year before the two main political parties, LDK, PDK and 'Srpska Lista' established a fragile coalition. As a result of the large-scale electoral fragmentation, as a challenger party that has recently entered into electoral competition, the LVV has had structural opportunities to attract votes due to low party system institutionalization and lack of strong ideological affiliation of voters to political parties.

Another factor that has contributed to the electoral appeal of the LVV is the electoral system of Kosovo, which has a low threshold (5%) and reserved seats for the minority communities. This system makes a single-party government virtually impossible. Usually, the biggest party largest has to establish a coalition with smaller Albanian parties and the minority list. The situation has created a perception among the electorate that all established parties are 'the same' in terms of ideology, creating apathy towards politicians and parties. This situation provides the LVV with a favourable opportunity as an 'outsider', criticising the establishment and the elites to capitalise on the disenfranchised and resentful electorate.

Societal Factors: Political and Economic Dissatisfaction

Besides the structural factors that have contributed to the electoral appeal of the LVV in the last two general elections and the latest municipal elections, society-wide dissatisfaction with the current political and economic outlook of Kosovo is a major reason making the LVV an alternative to the established

⁷⁷ Election results were taken from [IFES Election Guide](#) and Reports of the [OSCE Election Monitoring Programme](#).

⁷⁸ Cohen, Lenard J. and John R. Lampe. 2011. The Transformation of Political Parties in the Western Balkans: From Embryonic Pluralism to Europeanisation, in *Embracing Democracy in the Western Balkans*, edited by Lenard J. Cohen and John R. Lampe. Pennsylvania: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 223-96.

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political players. According to a recent UNDP Public Pulse Report,⁷⁹ an overwhelming majority of Kosovo citizens (74%) is either ‘dissatisfied’ or ‘very dissatisfied’ with the political direction of the country. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, the low level of political satisfaction is a general trend in Kosovo.⁸⁰

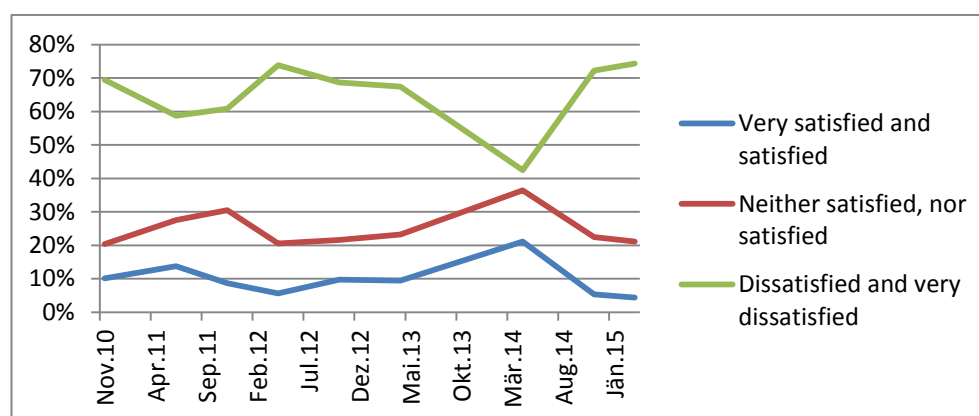


Table 1 - Political Satisfaction
Source: UNDP Public Pulse 9, 2015

Economic discontent is also very high: about 80% of the Kosovo Albanians are ‘very dissatisfied’ or ‘dissatisfied’ with Kosovo’s current economic direction, 52% of the population considers unemployment as the main problem in Kosovo. Political institutions suffer from a reputation crisis which has turned into a legitimacy crisis, due to feeble democratic performance of the government.⁸¹ There is a high perception of large scale corruption within public institutions including the healthcare system (52%), courts (43%), the central government (38%) and municipalities (34%) (Table 2).

	Nov-10	Jun-11	Nov-11	Apr-12	Oct-12	Apr-13	Apr-14	Nov-14	Mar-15
Healthcare	47.9%	40.7%	49.8%	43.3%	51.6%	50.4%	40.4%	56.2%	52.6%
Kosovo Electric Corporation	52.4%	47.9%	61.2%	47.8%	53.8%	48.8%	24.4%	39.1%	44.7%
Courts	49.7%	41.6%	55.6%	44.5%	47.5%	56.4%	32.2%	42.1%	42.9%
Customs	45.1%	42.3%	53.7%	43.2%	49.9%	58.9%	22.5%	33.4%	38.7%
Central Institutions	47.5%	41.4%	43.3%	39.5%	35.7%	46.1%	24.0%	37.5%	38.5%
Privatisation Agency of Kosovo	52.0%	40.5%	51.9%	49.4%	46.4%	48.7%	24.6%	34.8%	37.1%
Municipalities	32.9%	30.4%	31.9%	30.1%	32.2%	38.9%	20.6%	33.2%	33.8%
EULEX Police	22.9%	26.2%	27.1%	28.3%	28.7%	38.3%	11.1%	16.5%	32.2%

⁷⁹ UNDP. 2015. *Public Pulse Report 9*. Prishtine.

⁸⁰ Except for the brief period between April 2013 and April 2014, during which Kosovo and Serbia reached the first political agreement and Kosovo started formal negotiations for Stabilisation and Association Agreement, political dissatisfaction is very high.

⁸¹ Yabanci, *The EU’s Democratization and State-Building Agenda in Kosovo*.

Education institutions	14.4%	13.1%	17.3%	26.2%	23.5%	31.6%	13.0%	24.3%	29.3%
Tax Administration of Kosovo		24.9%	36.5%	38.1%	33.6%	42.5%	16.5%	28.0%	28.1%
Post and Telecom of Kosovo	34.0%	32.4%	46.6%	41.8%	45.1%	41.4%	15.4%	21.3%	25.9%
Banks	14.4%	14.9%	22.0%	20.5%	22.8%	37.5%	12.0%	17.0%	24.3%
International Organisations	14.7%	12.3%	20.3%	19.3%	20.8%	24.8%	10.8%	16.2%	20.4%
Kosovo Police	15.2%	15.5%	19.5%	19.4%	28.0%	30.3%	11.5%	16.1%	20.4%

Table 2 Perceptions of corruption

Source: UNDP Public Pulse 9, 2015

Moreover, only a minority of the population believes that the Assembly properly monitors the government (21%). Only 13% of respondents believe that the judicial system is independent of political influence and 12% agrees that the government works according to the priorities of the people.⁸² These figures demonstrate the overall citizen dissatisfaction with political parties, democratic institutions and the elected politicians. More importantly, a significant proportion of Kosovo Albanians (52%) do not believe that their vote can change the current situation implying also distrust and apathy towards representative democracy.⁸³ As citizens do not believe in the impact of their electoral choice on changing the corrupt system, the LVV's criticism of the representative democracy voices the concerns of a significant part of the electorate.

Furthermore, the LVV has gained reputation through its alternative socio-economic pledges. Stojarova argues that political parties in Kosovo "talk about success and wealth of Kosovo in the future, and integration into the EU", but fail to outline a roadmap for realising the objectives stated in their programmes.⁸⁴ Mainstream political parties in Kosovo did not come into existence with a clear ideology.⁸⁵ Their agendas were built on two main pillars: ethnic nationalism and independence. The two main parties, Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), attract voters mostly because of their leaders' historical role in the Kosovo conflict, rather than their differentiated ideology or policy propositions.⁸⁶ Smaller parties, such as New Kosovo Alliance (AKR) and Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), share similar political and socio-economic programmes with the two main parties, emphasising economic development and integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions.⁸⁷ Their socio-economic commitments are restricted to establishing a minimum wage and pensions, free education and textbooks for school children, improvements in public healthcare and social services for the disabled and elderly.⁸⁸ Their programmes and electoral pledges are far from

⁸² UNDP, Public Pulse Report 9.

⁸³ UNDP, Public Pulse Report 9.

⁸⁴ Stojarová and Emerson, *Party Politics in the Western Balkans*, 163.

⁸⁵ Xhemaj, Bashmir. 2013. *Political Parties in Kosovo*, in *Political Parties Functions and Organisation in Democratic Societies*, edited by Wilhelm Hofmeister and Kasten Grabow. Prishtina: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Prishtina Institute for Political Studies, 100.

⁸⁶ Xhemaj, *Political Parties in Kosovo*.

⁸⁷ Xhemaj, *Political Parties in Kosovo*.

⁸⁸ Stojarová and Emerson, *Party Politics in the Western Balkans*.

addressing discontent with the current economic and political situation, and aggregating citizens' interests.

On the other hand, the LVV has developed an economic development and socio-economic reform agenda based on a social-democratic outlook. Compared to the established parties' superficial socio-economic promises, *Vetëvendosje* details some specific economic objectives and the reasons for promoting them. First, it supports increased local production, a more egalitarian distribution of wealth, and social benefits for all. In order to achieve these goals, the party is against the privatisation of crucial sectors such as energy and telecommunications. Moreover, it supports state subsidies for enterprises, public investment and heavy taxation of higher income groups to increase domestic production and fight against poverty. Import-substitution is central to the party's economic outlook in order to overcome dependency created by foreign aid and import-based consumerism. The party documents and representatives often mention the emancipation of women, a hardly addressed issue by Kosovo politicians.⁸⁹ In contrast to the established parties, the LVV supports EU integration on the condition that all international supervision would leave the country and Kosovo would follow the same path offered to the rest of the candidate countries. Integration into the EU is 'balanced' through close relations with the Albanian diaspora and ethnic-Albanians living in the neighbouring countries.⁹⁰

None of the established parties have successfully developed an appealing political and socio-economic agenda to address the widespread dissatisfaction among the electorate, while *Vetëvendosje* promotes issues that have never been discussed or promoted by other parties. Considered together with the loose ideological affiliation and political apathy of unsatisfied voters, *Vetëvendosje* has filled an ideological and political gap in Kosovo's fragmented party system by asserting itself as the only party that genuinely promotes an alternative political system and economy.

Party-related Factors: The Agency of Vetëvendosje

Besides contextual opportunities, *Vetëvendosje*'s success is also related to its concerted efforts resulting from factors internal to the party, such as the organisational structure, leadership and method of communication or framing when conveying its message to the electorate. Undeniably, the party relies on its experience as a youth movement.⁹¹ Young activists organised on the streets and campuses, as well as through social networks, act as recruiting and socialisation agents of the party and generate bonds of solidarity among the members. The wide network of party volunteers sustains loyalty through demonstrations, film screenings, lectures and active involvement in the decision-making and electoral campaigns.⁹²

⁸⁹ Vetëvendosje. 2013. *Newsletter No. 350*, 12. April 2013 (accessed: 20. March 2016); Vetëvendosje. 2013. *Newsletter No. 359*, 14. June 2016 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁹⁰ Author's interview with Kurti.

⁹¹ Tilly, Charles and Sidney Tarrow. 2006. *Contentious Politics*. USA: OUP.

⁹² The mayor of Prishtina Shpend Ahmeti stated that "there are over 2,000 volunteers who worked to win Prishtina municipality" in 2013 local elections, in Vetëvendosje. 2014. *Newsletter No. 409*, 30. May 2014 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

Moreover, *Vetëvendosje's* organisation is more appealing for youth activists, especially compared to low intra-party democracy within other political parties. The leaders of political parties in Kosovo are the main decision-makers and their role cannot be challenged by the party members and committees.⁹³ Compared to these leader-centric parties, internal debate about the objective and future direction of the LVV is encouraged as a way to handle intra-party problems and disagreements.⁹⁴ To give an example, when deciding whether the movement should participate in the elections for the first time, the LVV had an extended period of intra-party deliberations where the party activists' opinions were heard for five months and the decision was finally taken by the representatives from local offices, secretariats and committees.⁹⁵ Often, party representatives, deputies and heads of committees assume a public spokesman role for the party besides the leader.

Moreover, contrary to Kosovo's 'strong leader, weak party' tradition, Albin Kurti stepped down as the leader of the party in early 2015. In his open letter to activists and citizens, he stated that he quit as the party leader to intensify and renew his involvement with the party's base activists and local organisations.⁹⁶ Kurti's decision has sent an important message to the electorate that the LVV takes its power from its social movement-type organisation and its supporters, not from the leader. The voluntary change in the party leadership has also strengthened the pledge of the party as an anti-establishment and outsider actor. For the first time in Kosovo, a party leader quit voluntarily with a claim to better serve the goals and ideology of the party.

Furthermore, the party's noticeable rhetorical style, typical of populist symbolism, also contributes to its visibility among the Kosovo electorate. The dichotomy between 'us', the victimised and disenfranchised citizens, versus 'them', the corrupt and divisive ruling elite and political parties, dominates almost all party documents.⁹⁷ The party programme and manifesto are strongly-worded documents with a conversational style asking questions through an emotional style:

*"The UNMIK administration of Kosovo is a non-democratic regime. What else can happen with a system when the essence of its mission is the denial of people's will? [...] By becoming a cog in UNMIK's machine, [Kosovo institutions/politicians] are not rightful representatives of the people's interest, because the fundamental interest of the people is the realization of its will. [...] We do not need pseudo-institutions because they mean we have no right to decide for ourselves. Depriving people of being the source of sovereignty will result in an increase of rebellion, the generation of crises and new wars."*⁹⁸

⁹³ Stojarová and Emerson, *Party Politics in the Western Balkans*; Center for Research and Policy Making. 2012. *Internal Party Democracy in Kosovo*. Policy Brief 20. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

⁹⁴ Vetëvendosje, author's personal interviews with party activists, Prishtina, May 2011.

⁹⁵ Vetëvendosje. 2010. *Newsletter No 221* (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁹⁶ Kurti, Albin. 2015. *Letër E Hapur E Albin Kurtit Drejtuar Aktivistëve Dhe Qytetarëve. Vetëvendosje*, 21. January 2015 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁹⁷This dichotomy is best exemplified in Kurti's first election rally speech in Pristina. See Vetëvendosje. 2013. *Newsletter No. 379*. 1. November 2013 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

⁹⁸ Vetëvendosje Movement's Manifesto.

The leadership also uses accusatory discourse towards foreign missions and politicians, using words like ‘traitors’, ‘shameful’, ‘deceitful’ and ‘corrupted’, and highly symbolic public performance. The party documents adopt a polarising language typical of the populist style, clearly dividing the society between ‘them’, the corrupt elites collaborating with Serbia and the international missions and hijacking people’s sovereignty, and ‘us’, the virtuous people and the source of legitimacy:

“Kosovo is sick of corruption, of the lack of democracy, stealing, violation of votes and civic rights, yet they lecture us about our international image, about how we appear externally, that supposedly our parliament functions and we are dealing with a popular majority. There is nothing further from the truth than this. We all know what is happening in Kosovo. We all know about the thieving, corruption and what happens in the Kosovo Assembly.”⁹⁹

The international and domestic criticism against the party is often dismissed through a defensive language using statements such as ‘malicious slander’, ‘unacceptable’, ‘biased’ and ‘childish’. The party’s defensive discourse has contributed to its non-conforming image:

“They told us we would change, yet we didn’t get rich, maintaining instead the coherence of our discourse and fidelity to our method. We did not deviate, we are not tired and we will not stop. Lëvizja VETËVENDOSJE! is open for all those who want movement.”¹⁰⁰

Besides the rhetorical style, the street activism of *Vetëvendosje* has increased interest in the party as Kosovo’s public sphere has become an active site for social movements in recent years. Corruption scandals, including EULEX staff, have triggered various cycles of demonstrations, strikes and riots.¹⁰¹ *Vetëvendosje* has asserted itself as the main propagator of this bottom-up activism to bring political action to the public sphere through these protests. On several occasions the party declared solidarity with protesters, called for participation and mobilised activists and further demonstrations.¹⁰²

Even the criticism of the government and international actors have been utilised by the party leadership to convey the LVV’s message to the public directly. Systematic arrest and imprisonment of the activists has become a publicised campaign for the LVV to challenge the government, to de-mythicise the praised democratisation and Europeanisation process, and to reveal the EULEX’s lack of accountability. For many activists and supporters of the LVV,

⁹⁹ Abazi, Boiken and Shpend Ahmeti. 2013. *27 June Is a Black Day for Kosovo*. *Vetëvendosje*, 27. June 2013 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Vetëvendosje. “Newsletter No. 307,” June 15, 2012.

¹⁰¹ Balkan Insight. 2013. *Kosovo Stages Mass Protest Over Corruption*. 14. March 2013 (accessed: 20. March 2016); Geoghegan, Peter. 2014. *Students Lead Wide-Ranging Protests in Kosovo*. *Deutsche Welle*, 13. February 2014 (accessed: 20. March 2016); Borger, Julian. 2014. *EU’s Biggest Foreign Mission in Turmoil over Corruption Row*. *Guardian*, 5. November 2014 (accessed: 20. March 2016); Hopkins, Valerie. 2015. *Set the Trojan Horse on Fire*. *Foreign Policy*, 4. February 2015 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

¹⁰² Lëvizja Vetëvendosje. 2015. *Jablanovic, out! Trepca Is Ours!*. *Vetëvendosje*, 20. January 2015 (accessed: 20. March 2016).

the choice is defined as 'being bystanders of the unaccountable and unknown relationship of the government and the EU' or 'taking the matters into hands through street actions'.¹⁰³

Without its active leadership and organisational capabilities, *Vetëvendosje* would not be able to turn Kosovo's political scene into a favourable context for electoral success. Thanks to its organisational network as a loose movement that is supported by young activists, its intra-party deliberation forums providing a sense of common responsibility to members and the emotional, defensive, visible and persuasive discursive style, *Vetëvendosje* has actively capitalised on the favourable political and structural opportunities. The LVV's action-oriented social movement character, combined with a clear populist style, gives a sense of empowerment and action to its supporters vis-à-vis the disenfranchisement that Kosovo's political system offers.

Conclusion

Populism and populist parties have attracted extensive academic and journalistic attention in recent years. The theoretical advances in the research on populism are nevertheless based on a disproportionate empirical focus on the radical right variants of populist parties or the leaders of populist movements. This paper argued that populism is a highly context-sensitive phenomenon; therefore, research on populism beyond the usual cases of populist mobilisation would offer much-needed novel empirical findings in the literature to help us understand different types and characteristics of populism, as well as the reasons behind the success or failure of populist parties.

This paper's approach towards populism is based on two arguments. First, populism is not a full ideology but a thin-centred one that revolves around core anti-establishment concepts: the homogenous people as the source of sovereignty and direct or majoritarian democracy. Otherwise, contextual factors determine how these core concepts are defined and how they are utilised for social and political action. Secondly, unlike the common usage of the term within the European context, populism should not be used with a necessarily pejorative understanding so as not to limit our understanding to a specific type of populism (right wing or leader-centric).

In the empirical part, the paper offered an analysis of *Lëvizja Vetëvendosje* within the framework of Kosovo's socio-political and economic context. First, it analysed the ideological mobilisation of the party as an example of a populist style. The analysis of the LVV's programme, manifesto, party documents such as newsletters, as well as the articles and speeches by the party leadership, showed that the LVV displays the core characteristics of a populist movement/party: hostility to elites and the establishment, including international missions in Kosovo, and people-centrism that determines the party's stance against representative democracy and minority communities, especially Serbs. The LVV's insistence on remaining as a movement and its emphasis on solidarity and unification among the people through active

¹⁰³ Author's personal interview with party activists and Albin Kurti, May 2011, Pristina.

engagement in contentious politics also demonstrate that populism is the defining political style of the party. This populist style has also allowed the LVV to convey its social, political and economic outlook to the Kosovo electorate through simple and direct messages.

The second part of the paper offered three main reasons for the rise of *Vetëvendosje* from a youth movement to a powerful and credible opposition party: the availability of the electorate, widespread political and social unrest, and the agency of *Vetëvendosje* in communicating with the disenfranchised electorate and dispersing its message through contentious politics. Its political style accommodates some inconsistent claims, especially towards minorities.

However, *Vetëvendosje*'s criticism of Kosovo's political circles and institutions often provide a correct depiction of the current problems of Kosovo, and brought together a diverse group of voters sharing a similar dissatisfaction with political institutions and rulers. Deep ethnic division, weak institutions that have failed to connect with citizens, international supervision responsible for making and implementing policies without citizen participation and the traumatic experience of the lack of recognised statehood have contributed to the appeal of the LVV's protest and anti-establishment discourse and actions.

Vetëvendosje's increasing popularity is related to the fact that its commitment to change the system (not only the elected leaders) resounds widely with the society's view of local politicians, international state-building and democratisation. Political leaders are not trusted by the ordinary citizens. Moreover, the international mission failed to bring corruption and clientelist structures at the top of Kosovo politics under control. As a result, the LVV's criticism of the government and the international community through a unique anti-establishment perspective has successfully addressed the frustration of the Kosovo Albanian electorate.

The analysis has also suggested that the electoral success of the LVV cannot be fully explained by analysing institutional variables, because Kosovo's political scene is pervaded by nepotism, clientelism and leader-centric political parties that favour mostly the LDK and PDK. The role of *Vetëvendosje*'s agency in translating the opportunities into success is undeniable. The internal organisation and cohesion, leadership, campaigning, left-leaning programmatic orientation as well as the creation of a public sphere through protests are decisive to explain its support. Given that many people do not believe that voting is the principal way to hold politicians and institutions accountable, the LVV's popularity comes from the power of a social movement.

Overall, the ideology, discourse, success and endurance of the LVV are shaped by political context, the electorate's readiness to accept a switch away from the established politics, and the organisational capabilities of such parties. In the future, the endurance of *Vetëvendosje* will be much determined by the electorate's choice which is, in turn, shaped by Kosovo's political and economic circumstances in the future. *Vetëvendosje* might find it difficult to sustain or increase its electoral appeal, if the rival parties start to generate alternative policies for the electorate regarding the economic and political issues that the LVV currently capitalises on. For the moment, competitors struggle to generate

novel policies to address citizens' demands, while international pressure and undemocratic and corrupt governance create more societal resentment. As long as *Vetëvendosje* melds a populist style with bottom-up mobilisation, it will continue to appeal to a considerable proportion of Kosovo's people. In the future, the LVV example might even inspire other populist movements and political actors in the region as undemocratic practices and monopolisation of power by elected governments as well as economic hurdles has created a similar dissatisfaction with political institutions and incumbents.

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