

# SHAPING IDENTITY THROUGH THE CULTURE: KOSOVO BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND STATE



## Cultural Studies

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### Abstract

This research provides a reflection of Kosovo’s statehood after declaring independence on 17th February 2008, and the challenges which it faces while building a cultural and ethnic identity. This study explores how Kosovo is still in the depths of state, ethnicities and multiethnicities. Culture is regarded as a determinant of forming an identity. This work argues that the Kosovar identity is in the process of being built but is still bounded by multiethnicity and cultural nationalism. Using historical examples and current views on Kosovar identity, standing between Ethnicity and State, this research makes the connection between culture and identity.

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural identity, as a combination of national, political, cultural, religious identity, and family factors, distinguishes one country, one state, one nation, from the others.

Culture encompasses all behaviors, lifestyles, arts, beliefs, and institutions of a population that has passed them from one generation to another.

For a society like the Kosovar one, emerging from a complex socio-political and cultural period, there is a question that has been important for a while now.

*Is there a new identity being created in the Republic of Kosovo?*

This research tries to provide an answer to this question by analyzing some of the most important factors that determined our journey until now, where we have arrived.

The second decade of independence is ending, but the debate over Kosovo’s new identity remains open. The day of 17<sup>th</sup> February 2008 gave way to the creation of a new nation in the Balkans. However, the proclamation of Kosovo as an independent Republic is steadily creating a new image. This image is mostly spread globally by Kosovar artists.

Culture is playing a tremendous role in presenting the new state, but not a new nation, as a few opinion makers in the country prefer to call it. The influence of the Albanian nationality continues to be a decisive factor in the national identity of the people of Kosovo.

During these 16 years of independence, cultural changes have not been so rapid as to confirm the formation of a new identity. With the emerging of hard challenges of statehood, issues such as identity, despite their particular importance, they may not have gained proper attention.

The new Republic is trying to consolidate its foundations without excluding the construction of a new identity. The symbols, like *flag*, *seal* and *anthem* endorsed in 2008, are not deeply rooted in the minds of Kosovars. They consider themselves Kosovo Albanians, even though they coexisted with a very different flag, the red-and-black one. On the other hand, they do not even remember the melody of the Kosovo State Anthem, which has no text. This is not the case with the National Albanian Anthem, which is known from everyone, and is played, in almost every public event. Despite the differences in cultural environments in Kosovo and Albania, the identity discourse was strongly influenced by advancing and strengthening communication between the two states. People of art and culture are increasingly present in the respective countries, due to influence of social media and social networks.

*But is this a new value of a new nation, or an added value of the same nation, which lies on both sides of the border?*

The progress of this cultural development can leave its mark on the identity issue, and this requires constant research and in-depth analysis. This study attempts to shed light on the identity trend, given not only cultural, but especially socio-political circumstances.

## **KOSOVO AS A NEW STATE**

Kosovo was declared independent on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2008, after a long way to statehood. The majority of Kosovo's population is *Albanian*, but there are as well minorities like *Serbs*, *Turks*, *Bosnians*, and *Roma*. These inhabitants of the Kosovo territory are called Kosovars. Kosovo Albanians did not accept to be called anything else but Albanians, whilst, on the other hand, Kosovo Serbs consider themselves Serbs, but not Kosovars.

This research comes to the conclusion that now the Kosovar Identity is not something strange to Kosovo citizens. There are some Albanians that accept to be called Kosovars. Even though Serbs are not pleased to be called Kosovars, they are aware that there is room for the discussion of the Kosovar Identity issue. Other minorities living in Kosovo, whose mother countries are not situated next to Kosovo's borders, consider themselves as Kosovars.

Kosovo, as a state, now has its own representative symbols, like *flag*, *anthem* and *seal*. To conclude, Kosovo is not a national state but a civic one. In Kosovo, the state identity is in the making, but regarding the national identity, there is a need for more time in order to be formed, or it may never happen.

As a new state, Kosovo is trying to structure its own identity through new symbols – flag, anthem and seal. The primary question of this study has focused on the term Kosovar Identity, which has already been introduced as a necessary step towards creation of the new Kosovar state.

*The Kosovars – now citizens of the independent state, declared on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2008- Who are they?*

This study was primarily focused on the actions that were undertaken in order to construct the identity of Kosovo after the independence.

The population map of Kosovo is split between an Albanian majority and minorities like Serbs, Turks Bosnians, and Roma. As a way of living of a whole society, culture shows who we are among different peoples and nations. When we use the term culture in everyday life, we often think of it as the equivalent of “high elements of the mind” - art, literature, music and painting. (Giddens, 1997, p.42)

Kosovo’s total population is 1,585,566 million in the following ethnic proportions:

- 91.76% Albanians (1,454,963 number of inhabitants)
- 2.31% Serbs (36,652)
- 1.69% Muslims and Bosnians (26,841)
- 1.57% Roma (24,937)
- 1.22% Turks (19,419) (ASK, 2024)

On 17<sup>th</sup> February 2008, after a long persistence of Albanians as a majority, Kosovo declared its independence. But the Serbian minority is against the independence, since they want Kosovo to be ruled by Serbia.

*United States of America* and the majority of the *European Union* countries have recognized Kosovo as an independent country.

## **NATIONAL IDENTITY AND STATE IDENTITY**

Despite two books ‘Who is Kosovar? Kosovar Identity’ and ‘The Kosovo European Identity’, that include essays from national and international researchers on the Kosovar Identity, there is almost no other piece of work that deals with this issue. In the above-mentioned book, I have used a lot of essays written from different scholars like Paul Garde, Shkëlzen Maliqi, Mehmet Kraja, Aasmund Andersen, Anna Di Lellio, Migjen Kelmendi, Besnik Pula, etc.

On the other hand, there are lots of international books relating to the question of identity, nation and state. Using these books made it possible to address the question of the Kosovar Identity and to compare it to other cases of National and State Identity constructions.

Anthony D. Smith is one of the most important contemporary scholars of nationalism. He is the author of many books on the subject of national identity, including his book “The National Identity – the Rise of the Nation”, which was used for this study. Distinction between ‘civic’ and

'ethnic' types of nations and nationalism, and the idea that all nations have dominant 'ethnic' center are theories that were relevant for this study.

Another scholar that added value to my research was Anne-Marie Thiesse, author of five books about identity, from which her book on Creation of National Identities in Europe was in scope of interest. It helped to prove that the coincidence between state and nation is almost impossible.

The Kosovo state is trying to be a multiethnic state and according to the Swiss historian, Urs Altermatt, if in Europe the multiethnic society is becoming real – the state is becoming a categorical imperative. “*Ethnonationalism in Europe*” was the book that was used from this author.

The American political scientist, Samuel Huntington was helpful with his examples about nationalism and national identity that he gives in his scholarly article “Who are We?: America’s Great Debate.”

There are as well other authors that are used for this work, like Benedict Anderson, Anthony Giddens, Brian Jenkins and Spyros Sofos, Philip Schlesinger, Stuart Hall and other scholars.

## **CULTURE, NATION AND STATE**

The state is a political and geopolitical entity. The nation is a cultural and ethnic entity. According to the most prominent author on nation and nationalism, Benedict Anderson, the definition of the nation is: “it is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (2006, p.6). Benedict proposes *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (2006, p.6).

This is a case of the Kosovo Albanians and Albania Albanians. Both feel Albanians, but for many centuries they lived in different states.

But in the Albanian case, living in two different states was a political decision. The nation and national identity are not products of political laboratories or momentary circumstances, but autonomous phenomena, taking their sources in the ancient history (Xhaferi, 2005, p.222).

Anne-Marie Thiesse says that the coincidence between state and nation is ‘*a priori*’ impossible (1999, p.x). She refers her thesis to the ethnic cleansing that has happened in ex-Yugoslavia in order to create pure ethnic states.

In the regions where the ethnic model is dominant peaceful means to confront limits of human nation and state boundaries do not exist... to achieve peace, human boundaries must be displaced (Garde, 2007, p.x).

We have become used to distinguishing between two opposing concepts of the nation: the French concept, based on free, rational allegiance of the individual to a political collectivity, and the German concept of objectively determined membership of an organic body.

The nations that have built their states earlier, where the identification of the state with common nation and language was undisputed, as in the case of the French or the British, have preferred the identification of the nation with the state, as the German or the Italian, who preferred the cultural-ethnic concept of the nation in order to preserve their inner cohesion.

Taking into consideration statements given by the Kosovo officials, politicians, analysts and opinion makers, the second concept is more likely to be preferred by the majority of the population who live in Kosovo. Since Albanians accomplished their desire to be independent and have their own state, in these margins they would be called Kosovar, but in the same time they do not want to give up their National Identity - Albanian Identity.

Someone who lives in the state where the nation is older than the state itself cannot have other identity from the identity that his/her ethnic community has (Garde, 2007, p.x)

According to Garde on an ethnic nation, nationality cannot be determined by state. A hundred-year-old Albanian, who lives in Kosovo, during his life, has been a citizen of five different states: Ottoman Empire, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro and now Kosovo, but thought of himself only as Albanian and nothing else.

During the communist regime, Kosovo, as an autonomous province, managed to develop its cultural identity through the establishment of the University and important institutions of art and culture. Although ideologically charged with censorship of the communist system, the media played their role.

Prishtina, as the capital city, managed to create its own cultural network, with writers, critics, and scholars, who would later become engaged in political matters.

Culture consists of the values that members of a group adhere to, the norms they respect, and the material goods they create (Giddens, 1997, p.42).

Albanians, as a majority, though deprived of building a normal communication with their mother country, as they considered Albania, kept alive the spiritual and cultural connection with the other side of the border.

The only window remaining to survive culturally from the Serbian repression was the Albanian identity.

Our identity was forged on the basis of resistance and sacrifice. The developments of the 1990s culminated in the fight for freedom, NATO intervention, and the deployment of the international community in Kosovo.

The mass exodus of 1999 tested the relationship with fragile Albania, reaffirming a close cultural and human bond on both sides of the border.

A new chapter, though unclear, had also been opened for Kosovo's identity. The political representatives were aiming for independence, and everyone knew it was a matter of time for such a goal to become reality.

All parties wanted the new state of Kosovo, but none ever spoke of a new nation. A discourse that, in fact, remained in the tight groove of a group of opinion makers who were stirring fierce debate in public with their ideas.

## **NATIONALISM**

Nationalism as a political ideology uses the idea of 'nation' to achieve political goals, and may be the most potent ideology in existence. (Andrews, Saward, 2013, p.x).

Benedict Anderson proposes that nationalism must be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which — as well as against which - it came into being (Benedict, 2006, p.12).

Many anthropological studies have concluded: the less threatening 'they' are, the less unification will exist among 'us' (Andersen, 2005, p.44). In our case we can translate this statement into the other way around: the more threatening 'they' are, the more unification will exist among 'us'.

Throughout the centuries, Kosovar Albanians were threatened by different occupations. In this way Nationalism had filled in the gaps (Altermatt, 2002, p.x). This made possible the unification of the Kosovar people around the Albanian Identity. This was the only tool that made them survive. The latest conflict in Kosovo shows that many of the Albanians were ready to die for their country. This kind of nationalism was known among Albanians as patriotism and, as such, it got positive evaluation. But according to Altermatt, patriotism is an integral national consciousness contrary to nationalism that is ethnocentrism.

In this context, we cannot go further without talking about the Cultural Nationalism which is defined as of the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

“Poets and scholars began to emphasize cultural nationalism first. They reformed the mother tongue, elevated it to the rank of a literary language, and delved deep into the national past. Thus, they prepared the foundations for the political claims for national statehood soon to be raised by the people in whom they had kindled the spirit” (Kohn, 2024).

Nevertheless, for many centuries in a row, Kosovo Albanians fought for the red and black flag, with a double-headed eagle in the middle; they swore under their national anthem – *rrëth flamurit të përbashkuar...* - and now they have accepted the existence of the new Kosovar symbols that are new Flag, new National Anthem and new Seal.

Kosovar Albanian politicians say that this will help to identify the new Kosovo state in the international arena, and the idea does not stand for creation of a new nation.

But, some analysts like Migjen Kelmendi, the ex-publisher of the ‘JAVA’ weekly newspaper, do not hesitate to talk bravely about the Kosovar National Identity. Exploration and disputation of Kosovar Identity seems to be an additional endeavor in researching of what was called the European Identity (Kelmendi, 2007). For Kelmendi, the word Kosovar was like another word for the word European, because both of these concepts do not have an ethnical meaning. According to him, these concepts have to be materialized and given sense.

## CONCLUSION

People of the Balkans were overwhelmed by nationalisms and patriotisms, what made them hate each other for a long time. The debate has been open since 1999, in the wake of NATO troops and United Nations coming in Kosovo, whilst the vagueness about Kosovar Identity is still large. In fact, nationalism has been dominating everywhere in the Balkans. Balkan nations were packed with nationalism and their history enlightened that they had a conflict spirit before and after the Ottoman Empire collapsed.

Michael Ignatieff distinguishes two types of nationalisms: *ethnic* and *civic*. According to him, the first one is aggressive and exclusive, and the second one is inclusive and makes possible the integration of other cultural groups in one political unit. The Balkans, as a region, is composed of the prevalent ethnic nations.

Albanians fed their nationalism in order to be treated equally with other Yugoslav Republics and managed to survive since they stuck together around the Albanian Identity. This socio-ethnic orientation, this endurance, makes it hard for the term ‘Kosovar’ to exist as a political entity.

Developments after 17<sup>th</sup> February 2008, however, proved that ‘Kosovarism’ could not be easily avoided. Being a new Republic, with new state symbols, the presentation to the world could not be done through another state.

On the political level as well, the internationals that ran the negotiation process which led to the declaration of independence made sure that they did not allow any symbolic interconnections in the selection of the Kosovo flag, seal and anthem.

Due to the creation of a more acceptable environment for minority groups, especially for the Serbs that rejected the state of Kosovo, the Ahtisaari package almost excluded the term ‘Albanian’ from use.

Such a concession could have also been incorporated in the Constitution of the Republic, if the debate had not been prompted in advance by the Kosovo media.

However, for the Albanian majority and the minorities, except for the Serbian one, this process was satisfactory, understandable, and credible. Serbs ‘breathed’ back then, and even today, with their state Serbia on their minds.

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