

"PEOPLE DEMAND CHANGE NOW": POPULISM AS A GOVERNING AND DECISION-MAKING IDEOLOGY

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Abstract

Populist parties, movements, and leaders have been an object of increased public attention during the last couple of decades worldwide. By opting for more issue-guided actions rather than traditional political ones, based on programs and ideologically close to the center identities, these political actors have grown in stature and are no longer on the fringes of decision-making processes. While right-wing populism has a close relationship with nationalism, conservatism, left-wing populism uses social issues and what it calls "class divide" and the promise of fighting "old orders" towards an equal society. Both strands of populism use the actual dissatisfaction of the people and presumed lack of responses of mainstream politics to new challenges in recent years (economic decline, migrant crises, COVID 19, EU post BREXIT). Populists rely heavily on the energy of their movement, protests and gatherings, and social media campaigns in their efforts to change what they often call a prevailing "unstable and unsuitable social order". Central and Eastern Europe has become a testing ground for the growing trend – predominant populist parties in power. What makes populism so popular? How did the parties and movements with ever-changing agendas managed to gain popular support, and move from fringes to the center of decision-making in politics and society? The latest such occurrence is the emergence of the "Self-Determination Movement" (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, LVV, in Albanian) as the main overwhelming political force in Kosovo. This paper discusses populism, right and left-wing, as well as a syncretic and/or synthetic version of it, an eclectic character, resulting in

potential to influence decision-making processes, and in the case of Self-Determination (LVV) and Kosovo specifically how a political party, created initially as a social and nationalist movement managed to gain over 50% of the vote by using both right and left-wing agendas and transforming its political positions to suit the ultimate goal - political power.

Keywords

Ideological transformation; Kosovo; populism; self-determination.

1. INTRODUCTION

Populism has been on the rise in the past couple of decades in Western Europe, North America, Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, and Russia. The study of populism - focusing on its roots, causes, appearances, demonstration, discourse, etc. - has been vast so far and mainly focused on the areas mentioned. The rise of populism has been noted in South-Eastern Europe and has been embraced by political parties and actors in this area as well. However, fewer studies are focusing on countries of this politically quite volatile area. This paper aims to focus on populism as a general concept of decision-making among political actors, dwell on the elements and differences that define what is commonly known as "right" or "left" wing populism, as well as focus on populism in South-Eastern Europe by trying to answer whether it is applied as a strategy or an ideology, or both. Finally, this paper focuses on populism in Kosovo, where the party in power, the Self-Determination Movement (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, LVV), has since its creation, skilfully and intentionally, used populist methods and rhetoric, from both right and left-wing agendas, to create a narrative in the country that its leader Albin Kurti and the LVV movement are the new future of Kosovo, the sole opponents of 'widespread crime and corruption in the country' (the elite) and protectors of Kosovo and its statehood. Kurti and the LVV have branded all opposing political parties as 'the old regime' (sometimes 'the old guard') also publically using terms as "criminals" and "traitors" for their leaders. The LVV has used a populist

discourse and methods focusing on opposing the international efforts and international institutions in Kosovo initially – especially before the declaration of Kosovo’s independence in 2008 – and eventually the Kosovar institutions, opposing Kosovo’s political establishment and institutions, blasting them as corrupt and clientelistic, opposing Kosovo's statehood by openly promoting the idea of unification of Kosovo with the Republic of Albania as the final goal of the LVV. In fact, the cause of unification was launched after Kosovo’s declaration of independence. The LVV has continuously opposed processes and institutions in Kosovo by applying populism that embraces both right and leftist ideologies to reach power. Openly or covertly, it has cooperated with other political parties while at the same continuing with efforts to discredit them as "old guard" or "others", as enemies of the people of Kosovo. The article aims to elucidate a model of populism used by the LVV that has commonalities between right and left political stances, that opposes and negates past and current political developments and purports to fight for the will of the people to justify its ultimate power-one-party rule. The paper is divided into several chapters that cover an overview of populism, its manifestation, and implementation, the use of right and left-wing ideas, agendas in the course of creating a political message appealing to popular masses. The focus is on this form of populism that is “fuzzy on the left-right spectrum”, Ivaldi’s phrase (2017: 357) that encompasses different ideological stances, from the right to the left spectrum, from nationalism to social equality, projecting the future by contesting the historical development, which is applied by the LVV in a bid to shape (the LVV’s mantra is of ‘transformation’) and govern Kosovo’s political, economic, social, and institutional sphere. The LVV has adopted recently an eclectic version of populism – with common features from both the right and the left in the ideological spectrum (Roodujin and Akkerman 2017) although initially a left-leaning organization - as this paper will demonstrate.

2. POPULISM DEFINED

What is populism today and how to define it appropriately? In the past decades, there have been plenty of contributions and discussions on the matter and views on populism. Margaret Canovan (Populism 1981) discusses seven different types of populism divided into two categories; farmers' populism and political populism. In the category of the 'farmers populism,' Canovan includes farmers radicalism (example People's Party in the US), farmers movements in Eastern Europe, and intellectual agrarian socialism (Narodniki Russia), while the category of 'political populism' includes populist dictatorships (Peron in Argentina), populist democracy (proponents of the referendum and direct participation), reactionary populism (George Wallace in the US), and politicians populism (creation of broad non-ideological coalitions that refer themselves to the "people"). Canovan specifically focuses on the discussion of what constitutes "the people" and how this is influenced by populist discourses emphasizing the link between 'appealing to the people and being 'anti-elitist as key elements of all populist movements. Populism, according to Canovan, is best seen as an appeal to "the people" against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society (Canovan 1999). The mobilization of "the people" by the populists is conducted through a discourse directed against existing power structures. In this discourse, existing elites question the authority of the people and populists are able to utilize a new form of politics that brings back popular sovereignty. The division of society between two homogenous and antagonistic groups - "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite"- is the focus of the ideology of populism which states that politics should be an expression of *volonté general* (general will) of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2016 p.6). Populism is anti-elitist and anti-pluralistic as well, since, according to claims of the populists, only they represent the people and only they have the moral right to do so (Muller 2016,38). Two consequences result from such a position. First of all, according to such a stance, only those who vote for populists are indeed "the real people", the pure, uncorrupt people; consequently, all those who oppose them do not belong to the pure people. Secondly, such a stance questions the legitimacy of political opponents (Muller 2016, 44). Regarding "the people"

there are further two descriptions in terms of social status (class, income, etc) and ethnic and/or cultural background. Populism thus is created away from the elites and closer to the 'underdog' (the masses) and the difference is created between left-wing, centrist, and right-wing populism (De Cleen 2017). For instance, left-wing parties such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and similar parties in Latin America emphasize the social dimension of the political conflict: pitting the poor against the rich, lower classes against the higher class. Right-wing parties are historically linked with ethnic and cultural distinctions. Centrist parties borrow positions from both sides, like the LVV in Kosovo, that has a leftist position regarding the poor while harboring an anti-Serbian position and, until very lately, a pronounced pro-unification with Albania nationalist stance. It is worth recalling that Albania and present-day Kosovo acted as a unified country only once in history so far (briefly during WWII) as a country allied to the Axis Alliance. The "borrowing" of ideas/positions that populists so freely use brings forward the thin nature of populism as a possible ideology. Mudde describes populism as a "thin" ideology at best since compared to "full" and "complete" ideologies (fascism, liberalism, socialism) "thin" ideologies such as populism have limited morphology that often combines with or is assimilated fully into other ideologies. Furthermore, populism is almost always linked to other political projects that are appealing to public opinion. (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). The problems of such "thin" populism are basic: Should one appeal and subject itself to the "people"? Are political lies ('promises') part of freedom of speech? But there are also practical ones: once they come to power, so-called populists, right or left (Orban, Chavez, Erdogan, Trump), often betray their rhetoric, create their own elite, and introduce elements of an authoritarian rule against pluralism (Muller 2016). Paul Taggart finds several key features of populism. According to him hostility towards internal and external establishments always characterizes populism (Taggart 2000). Secondly, the connection between "the people" and a heartland, or an idealized place for the people, is essential. Taggart further emphasizes the importance of the vagueness of populism and its lack of core values as its advantages when creating a clientelistic network of various interest groups within one organization. Furthermore, Taggart explains that populisms are characterized by an appeal to

a sense of urgency. These crises can be economic, as in Latin America, or identity crises, as in Western Europe with lack of belief in institutions and, for example, reaction towards immigration or recently with the response to COVID 19. Such crises often create an atmosphere of disbelief and loss of faith in governmental institutions or existing political establishments. Another key feature is political leadership in populism in which a leader uses the crises and conditions to steer the people to support populist discourses. Finally, the key feature of populism is its chameleonic nature to adapt to ever-changing situations. This feature and the anti-elitist drive are often regarded as the characteristics that allow populism to exceed the traditional 'right'/'left' divide. Ethnocentrism is typical for right-wing populism and egalitarianism typical for left-wing populism, while anti-elitism combines these two elements and suggests that populism can be both right and left at the same time. (Stanley 2008). When viewed as such, in terms of combinations of elements within a populist ideology, there are different forms of populism. Zaslove mentions three: radical right-wing populism, center-right populism, and left-wing populism (Zaslove 2008). The most commonly mentioned populism in contemporary scholarship is right-wing populism. It is characterized by anti-elitism, ethnocentrism or nativism, anticorruption orientation, anti-immigration stance, and economic egalitarianism (Ivarsflaten 2008, Mudde 2004 Rooduijn 2014). Also, contemporary scholarship recognizes several clusters of positions, or populist attributes, as key elements of modern populism that combined with the thin ideology core create concrete manifestations of populist ideology such as the anti-elitist orientation (Akkerman 2013, Pauwels 2010, Todosijevic 2020) and anti-minority orientation (Ivarsflaten 2008, Vand den Burg, Febema 2007). Regarding the economy, populists promote different forms of economic egalitarianism, especially the left-wing populism and also among representatives of right-wing populism (Derks 2006, Pawuels 2010) often manifested as policies for the people, like the PIS party in Poland. In the context of the European Union, the most prominent element of populists in their programs and stances is opposition to further enlargement of the Union, or in the case of Great Britain leaving the Union. These stances are often close to radical left-wing stances of anti-capitalism and anti-globalism. However, these

are some of the very broad characteristics of populist positions of political parties from the right, center, or the left, while further research on the positions of the citizens, the populous, is required to draw more thorough conclusions. Rooduijn in its latest research (featuring 15 populist parties in Europe) concludes that voters of populist parties in Europe do not share the same characteristics or identifying features. Since the rise of populism has been noted mostly in the past two decades, in the US and Europe, there is no sufficient research done so far to profile typical populist voters in these two continents. What researchers to some extent agree with are the reasons for such a rise of populism in Western democracies. This is explained by changes in democracies in the US and Europe following the end of the Cold War and stepping into post-industrial society (Mudde 2004). After the first wave of enthusiasm and the belief that with the prevalence of liberal democracy "end of history" is achieved and subsequently economic growth will continue, or at worst it will be stable. However, this has not quite materialized, as the 2008 World economic crisis was triggered by events in the US. Hence, the society faced not only possible opposing systems to democracy but democracy itself which brought the process of demystification of governing elites and political parties. Political parties no longer function as groups that serve to promote political ideas and interests but are more inclined toward the corporation style of operations between election cycles. This has resulted in something that can be branded as "governance", which is unknown as shapeless (something that governs us), rather than "government" that is accountable and identifiable as the responsible party (Dahrendorf 2003). Hence populism can no longer be viewed as criticism toward established governing political elites but perhaps as a neoliberal democratic answer to undemocratic elements of liberalism itself (Muller 2016). The rise of populism is not only a result of socio-economic, political, or structural changes or to be viewed as a conflict of different ideologies or points of view. It should also take into account the actual increase of political awareness of the citizens with the increase of communication and the media. The citizens not only expect more from politicians but feel more competent to judge what a certain politician can achieve even before his/her mandate is over (Mudde 2004). A higher level of education is important but is not the most necessary condition to understand

the complexity of the functioning of democracy even if one considers hypothetically that democracy had no flaws. Democracy seems complicated while populism is simple and is aimed at simplifying problems while citizens are inclined to accept these solutions as real. (Dahrendorf 2003). How citizens perceive issues becomes more important than facts and populists, with their manner of communication, encourage such perceptions. Ultimately, such perception of citizens regarding facts, that appears to influence them towards populism, is a consequence of another huge change in society in the last decades, the transformation of the media. As the media moved to be more commercial so did reporting of events from neutral and balanced to sensationalism and emphasizing the negative. The media have not only contributed to the rise of justified or non-justified criticism toward governing elites but have also created a stage for populists (often media owners) and enlarged their following. By doing so they have created a condition where the media and populists, consciously or not, are supporting each other. Or as former US President Donald Trump put it bluntly in 2017: "Newspapers, television, all forms of media will tank if I'm not here because without me their ratings are going down the tube". Modern world has been challenged by major perils in a space of little more than a decade. World economic crises, Arab spring and immigration flow, COVID 19, BREXIT, international terrorism, all of these events have shaken the foundations of democracies that were stable since World War 2. They have also shaken the belief of the people in the governments that are created by traditional political parties. This combination of the unsatisfactory state of the people in the societies of 21st century and the desire of populists to gain power regardless of the cost or with thin ideology have created a cyclical state in democratic societies. A state in which "people demand change now" and the populists are the real change and the answer is repeating over and over. And it is clear that populists have moved from fringes to the center of decision-making by exploiting the discontent, disbelief of the people by troubling global events of the last two decades.

3. POPULISM IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE - STRATEGY AND IDEOLOGY

The main proponent of the idea that populism is a political strategy is Kurt Weyland. According to him, “populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, institutionalized support from a large number of mostly unorganized followers” (Weyland, 2001). A similar stance is shared by Robert Barr who considers populism “a mass movement led by an outsider or maverick seeking to gain or maintain power by using anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages” (Barr 2009). Both these authors consider populist leaders as power-seeking politicians who act rationally in order to maximize their profit, measured in popular support, which leads them to engage in strategies of deideologization and other tactics as means to gain political prominence. Populist leaders are politicians who use a series of tactics in order to concentrate power and boost their personal leadership. Populist politicians are rational actors who use “mass demonstrations, plebiscites, most recent opinion polls as instruments to “whip up support from largely unorganized masses to win power and constantly invoke their broad mass support to boost their own influence and overpower their opponents ‘institutional bastions’” (Weyland 2001). The most recent case was the classic “hostile takeover” of the Republican Party in the United States by Donald Trump who used exclusionary ethno-nationalist appeals and antagonistic language openly appealing to white supporters by using anti-establishment and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Trump did this with a strategic goal regardless of poor ratings among other ethnic minorities in the US. In Europe populism, as explained earlier, existed mainly along the lines of rejection like anti-globalization, anti-NATO, and anti-immigration. These positions often unify right wing and left-wing populists that do not like each other but share these same sentiments. In the last decade immigration has been the main focus of political divisions in Europe, especially since the surge of immigrants coming to Europe from Middle East and Africa, following the ‘Arab Spring’ revolution and wars in Libya and Syria in the past

decade. Regarding the official stance of the EU towards immigration policy, old democracies and ex-socialist countries typically find themselves on opposite sides which is best explained by the examples of Germany and Poland since 2015. While Germany accepted a high number of immigrants, neighboring Poland accepted only a negligible number of immigrants. (Podobnik, Koprcina, Stanley 2018). This position of the Polish government also has the support of Polish citizens. In one of the latest surveys, more than 50% of respondents stressed the opinion that their government should not accept any asylum seekers from countries of Middle East and Africa. (Gallup World Poll 2016). The same poll revealed a similar pattern with Poland in a large number of ex-socialist countries of Europe where the percentage of citizens who would reject a single asylum seeker: Hungary 70%, Slovakia 61%, Czech Republic 56%, Romania 56%, Macedonia 66%, Serbia 49%, Latvia 57%, Croatia 40%, Albania 44%, Bosnia and Herzegovina 42%. It is paradoxical that the largest number of South East European countries, that have expressed their resistance to asylum seekers have in fact their own large diasporas abroad, mostly in the EU and in the United States. Anti-immigration, as a political position, has now been used by both right wing and left-wing populist movements across Europe, and has been embodied in electoral programs, as an ideology for change, among political parties of both sides of the political spectrum.

Populism has been very present in Southeast Europe (Balkans) as countries of this region all shared a common ideological background, having been Communist countries, but later chose different routes in achieving, what is again a common future system, the EU integration. Some argue that it is precisely this choice, or lack of – the EU accession - that has acted as a "pressure cooker" to populist temptations held at bay, even during poor socio-economic conditions and the period of post-communist transition (Pirro 2014, Brentin Pavasovic Trost 2016). Some consider that the EU with its constraints and regulations imposed on the countries of the region that have joined or are still at the accession talks process contributed to the perception of the transition regimes as "democracies without choices", fueling the backlash against "consensual politics" (Krastev 2007). It is because the EU policy of enlargement has often implied different tracks for different countries of the region offering a chance to populists to

attack such policies or the very notion of the EU. And, while in Western Europe such anti-EU attitude was common within the right-wing populist parties, the case was different in Southeast Europe where a rise of left-wing populist sentiment has grown in a similar pattern as it did in Greece or Spain. However, more specifically, populism in this area is being studied and viewed in the context of elements of an authoritarian manner of governance that has replaced democracy in the recent decade. The regimes of President Vucic in Serbia, Prime Minister Rama in Albania, until recently Prime Minister Gruevski in North Macedonia, and President (previously PM) Djukanovic in Montenegro, have been classified by many researchers and scholars as clean-cut populism ranging from illiberal democracy to authoritarianism. What is common for this specific region is a combination of populist politics, nepotism, clientelism, control mechanisms of the media, NGOs, through various regulations to legitimize power. And, while these regimes have never stated they don't want to join the EU, furthermore they have continuously stressed this aspiration, they failed to respect key pillars, like functioning democracy and society, fair and free elections, unbiased and unpressured functioning of the legal system, etc, of EU as a whole. So, it is this combination of being "inline", at least publically, with EU specific demands and overall values, while acting authoritarian and despotic domestically is something of a special trademark of Southeast Europe populist leaders. Some argue that populism as a method of governance is "finally something that has put Balkans ahead of Europe" (Stojanovic 2017) as all nations in the region have lived even before Communist rule under different empires in a system that has prevented individuals to become subjective, rational beings and molded them into submissive units - submission being an excellent base for populism. The second joint characteristic for this region is that populism is a reaction and a feeling of "disappointment by unfulfilled expectations from democracy" rather than the case in Western Europe where there is a disappointment "with democracy itself" (Markowski 2004). Ever since the fall of communism and the introduction of democracy in this region populism was present and has changed constantly. Not only is the rise of populist parties evident but also "mainstream parties" are applying populist strategies in electoral campaigns. The most prominent cases are the SNS in Serbia, the LVV in

Kosovo, the largest parties in respective countries, which have risen as parties of reaction against mainstream politics, but through populist rhetoric and actions have managed to become almost unchallenged. While the LVV will be treated in a separate chapter in this paper, the SNS is also an example of populism as a strategy and ideology aiming for political power. The SNS has always embraced the populist stance of representing "the people" against "corrupt elites" (political, economic tycoons, etc.), but it has also installed the belief that "foreign" powers are always involved in decision-making or pressure decision-makers and that they, meaning the SNS, would never yield to such pressure. "Only the people can order Serbia's PM" stated Vucic. (Slavujevic 2017). Think of the LVV's continuous stance that "they answer only to the people of Kosovo". Another distinction that combines the above-mentioned parties is that they hardly stick to their programs on main national issues. The SNS has had a different stance about Kosovo in their "10 principles of SNS" compared to the Brussels negotiations and the Brussels Agreement of 2013, while the LVV has propagated national unification with Albania only to state eventually, after the 14 February 2021 election win, that "Kosovo's constitution prevents such an occurrence." (Kurti 2021). The chameleonic change of stances happens when these populist parties are in power. Mainstream established parties also use populism, not as an ideology or within party principles, but as a strategy or using populist slogans in addressing political and economic issues. For instance, former Croatian PM Ivo Sanader of HDZ in 2003 used "people come before parties", their rival the SDP did in 2007 use "people are the power" or the DS in Serbia 2012 "a government to fulfill people's dreams". In the cases of Montenegro and Macedonia populist parties, DPS and VMRO-DMPNE, have applied what is by some called "state-sponsored populism" (Dzankic Keil 2017). In this case, a populist platform was used to gain power while governance control was orchestrated and established throughout all of the institutions. The DPS gained prominence as an anti- Milosevic party, pro-EU, pro-independence party at the start of the 2000s, thus being strongly supported by Western countries as well as minorities in Montenegro. When the DPS gained power, especially after the independence of Montenegro in 2006, it placed its members and allies in key institutions in administration and public-owned enterprises, developing strong

patronage and clientelistic networks. A strong connection between the DPS and the economic sector in the country remains visible as Bertelsmann Transformation Index report on the country highlights 'strong political influence on the market' (BTI 2014), adding that the 'long-lasting dominance of the ruling DPS impairs the functionality of institutions. The rule of the DPS was also characterized by issues of corruption. Several reports by Freedom House, BTI, and the European Commission have highlighted the inability and unwillingness of the DPS to fight corruption effectively (EC Report 2014). Populism thus is not the mechanism the DPS uses to stay in power. For that the DPS relies on a well-known system of party structures and alliances. Populism is a tool used by the DPS government to ensure dominance in Montenegrin politics by exploiting populist discourse of anti-elitist 'others', separate from Belgrade rule, 'Montenegro heartland' separate from Serbia, 'All values' no matter what left or right or center, "crisis" environment to provide itself as problem-solvers, 'leadership' justifying its rule as the only viable choice. A similar pattern was applied by VMRO-DPMNE under Nikola Gruevski in North Macedonia. For almost a decade this party applied practices of clientelism, disregarding the constitution and being driven in their political actions by citizen's expectations according to the opinion polls (Petkovski 2016). Gruevski and his party pitted themselves to the 'elites' elements of the former communist regime and beneficiaries of the privatization process. Paradoxically, liberal successes in the transition period and perhaps constant pressure to keep Macedonia out of wars of former Yugoslavia have created conditions for the rise of populism, creation of authoritarianism, and sacrifice of democracy for stability and security. What both these countries share is the outcome of these regimes: both fell only after a combination of strong internal opposition and at the very moment when the international community, the US and the EU, decided to pull the plug on their unconditional support in exchange for security and stability if the region.

4. ECLECTIC POPULISM OF LVV

The Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) in Italy has so far been the perfect example of populists using both traditional right wing and left-wing agendas by blending them and going beyond divides. (Mosca Tronconi 2019) Initially started as a party that was only interested in five issues, hence five stars, public water, sustainable transport, sustainable development, right to internet access and environmentalism, it gradually progressed to adopting anti-immigration policies, propagating the revision of the “Dublin Regulation”, becoming Eurosceptic and questioning the use of Euro currency in Italy. In mobilizing anti-establishment resentment Five Star Movement, spearheaded by their leader Giuseppe “Beppe” Grillo concentrated on three main targets: politicians, journalists and the banking/finance sector. The movement’s rhetoric has always been direct, vulgar, while their political opponents accused them of adopting positions bordering on fascism. (Manucci 2017) . The FSM has accused the Italian political establishment of serving only their own interests, bowing to pressures of the EU, claiming that “Parliament does not represent citizens”. The FSM has harshly criticized mainstream media and targeted individual journalists. It has further attacked the financial sector of Italy for “irresponsible nature of international investors, public money used to save banks instead of people in need and austerity policies imposed by EU through its domestic executors” In its 2018 Manifesto FSM stated their stance on immigration by promoting the change of “Dublin Regulation” under the slogan “Zero landings of immigrants. Italy is not the refugee camp of Europe”. In twelve years of its existence FSM has moved from a movement for change and improvement of public services, redistribution of wealth, which are position of the left side of the political spectrum, to opposing EU and restricting migration, which are positions of the right side of the spectrum. In fact, the FSM has blended these positions and moved beyond right- and left-wing populism to a more broad and diverse form of populism- an eclectic one. Such a form of populism finds a new illustration (in some respect, striking) in the mode of operations and policies advanced by the Self-Determination Movement (Lvizja Vetëvendosje, LVV) in Kosovo.

The history of political parties that have been established in Kosovo ever since the fall of Communism, including under international administration, shows that they are all born out of movements. The Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës, LDK), was created as an anti-communist movement seeking Kosovo's independence from Serbia, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës, PDK,) the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) are offshoots of the KLA (the Kosovo Liberation Army), and finally, the LVV, the Self-determination Movement was launched initially as a movement against several developments in Kosovo mainly against UNMIK (the UN administration of Kosovo), being opposed to negotiations and in favour of self-determination as its designation indicates. The differences that these political parties bear are based on the history of their creation and other than that they share little of right-center-left differences common in Western European political parties. But, the LVV differs for pioneering and promoting populist methods, strategy, shifting targets, and goals essentially trying to be different but also acceptable for all masses. In the context of what was previously recorded in the world, the LVV has features of nationalism and in terms of its creation, development, and activism, it shares similarities with populists in Eastern Europe. In terms of targets, it shares the leftism, anti-liberal capitalist, and anti-foreign dominance that resembles populists in Latin America (Smajlaj 2020). The recent history of Kosovo, the ongoing transition from a one-party communist system to a post-war society with an international administration, with the introduction of neo-liberal economic policies and privatization, still completely unresolved status issues with Serbia that hamper inter-ethnic relations in the country, has proven to be favorable for populists. Combined with the country's poor economy, which relies heavily on international aid, imports and remittances, and high youth unemployment (55%), it offered a context for the LVV to lay blame for such conditions elsewhere and their first target was the international (UN) administration and, second, other political parties operating with and in the existing system (Yabanci 2016). The LVV was created as a movement in 2005 under the leadership of Albin Kurti, Kosovo's current Prime Minister, declaring itself anti-UN administration in Kosovo and calling for self-determination of the people of

Kosovo. At that time all of the Albanian political parties in Kosovo strived for Kosovo's independence but chose to cooperate with the international administration and presence in Kosovo. The LVV chose not to do so and organized various activities and demonstrations against the international administration and Kosovo's Government actions, especially those applied to appease Kosovo Serbs, before the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008. The LVV defined itself as "a political movement organized 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 to them" (Vetvëndosje 2012). Initially, the LVV was against the system including the electoral system, and did not take part in the parliamentary elections of 2007. It did not sit still but organized a Kosovo-wide boycott elections campaign pitting itself as the true representative of the people while other political parties were "collaborators" of international presence in Kosovo. This approach is the most common feature of populist parties and movements that promote themselves as the real caretakers of the people in contrast to the existing regime and establishment. Since the boycott failed, the LVV shifted its strategy, ditched some of the anti-establishment attitudes, and has taken part in all of the elections ever since. The main reason why the LVV changed was the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008. For a long time, the LVV leader Albin Kurti had publically spoken against such an occurrence. Kurti's position was that Kosovo independence would never be allowed by internationals and that other Albanian political parties were fooling the people with empty promises. It is not the first time that Kurti was "swimming against the current" politically. As one of the representatives of the KLA's political office in 1999 Kurti and his mentor Adem Demaçi, were against 1999 Rambouillet Conference and talks on Kosovo that were followed by the NATO bombing of Serbia and led to Kosovo's liberation. He was against the Vienna Talks (2005-2007) on the final status of Kosovo that were followed by Kosovo's independence. Being wrong on both counts Kurti and the LVV decided to take part in the electoral process aspiring to change the system from within. In each election cycle the LVV grew slowly in number of votes gained: in 2010 12.69%, in 2014 13.59%, in 2017 27, 49%, in 2019 26, 27% and finally in 2021

47,85% (Central Election Commission Kosovo 2021). The rise and prominence of the LVV can be attributed to its discipline and organization, a permanent campaign mode that is different from other political parties in Kosovo. The LVV relies heavily on ideologically-driven committed campaigners on one side and a cult of personality feeding the passive authoritarian values of the masses on the other. (Smajlaj 2020). The LVV ideology is fluid and thin and relies on a combination of nationalism and leftism or radical leftism as explained by March and Mudde "radical left, which is radical first in that it rejects the underlying socio-economic structure of contemporary capitalism and its values and practices (ranging from rejection of consumerism and neoliberalism to outright opposition to private property and profit incentives" (March Mudde 2005). The LVV is heavily influenced by leftist-thinkers and literature including Marxists and neo-Marxists inspired by Slavoj Žižek and other contemporaries. When it comes to nationalism, the LVV opted to shift to a more extreme nationalism (anti-Serbia, anti- products and goods made in Serbia) to be closer to that category of voters in Kosovo since due to circumstances and the origin of other political parties it is obvious that a considerable dose of nationalism and the anti-Serbian sentiment was already present among those parties. The LVV went further and unification with Albania was until very recently another element of its program. The LVV is active in Albania and officially took part in general elections in April 2021, but failed miserably there. The quest for the right of unification with Albania, the struggle against the ubiquity of products from Serbia as well as against the wave of privatizations done in Kosovo under international supervision are considered a classic nationalistic dimension of the LVV. The radical right and left-wing parties are not very "dissimilar" to each other as they have a common denominator such as nationalism and Euroscepticism. However, what put the LVV initially on the left side of the axis was its own choice since "the radical critique the LVV makes to the regime in Kosovo includes the international dimension too, such as the UN, EU, and the US, and the geo-economy that reduces Kosovo to a periphery, in a market of last hand, similar to the former colonies of Asia or Africa, and this radical critique puts LVV intellectually and philosophically in the left of the spectrum" (Kellici Danaj 2017). The LVV divides society between 'evil elites' and 'pure people' and

the system as well between "the old guard or old regime" and "the change" a model typical for all populist movements. This division between "old and young" was initially very appealing among young voters in Kosovo. Later the LVV broadened its reach by including nationalist figures, some former political prisoners, former KLA members, and lastly recently Western-educated youth, including people formerly closer to centre-right political positions. It is important to understand that voting behavior in Kosovo relies heavily on inertia. Once a party is considered a winner (a status LVV reached in 2019) this motivates many to vote for them. Other parties have been losing ground slowly and recruiting for them was reduced to a little more than mere clientelistic appeal. In short, the analysis of party documents and prominent speeches of the LVV shows that this party's ideological and mobilization is built upon populist style: anti-establishment position and instrumental use of 'mainstream party politics', hostility towards the government and international community expressed through protests - violent or non-violent - using symbolism harking back to the Albanian resistance in the past, support for strong central state-run economy and social services (Yabanci 2016). The success of the LVV can be attributed to both the socio-economic-political context of post-independence Kosovo, the ongoing transition, and party-related factors and its organizational structures. The LVV used the wave of dissatisfaction of the voters in post-independent Kosovo mainly because other political parties, until then in power, failed to deliver on their unrealistically huge promises of a better standard of living, visa liberalization, tackling crime and corruption, etc. It is safe to say that with the achievement of independence a long chapter in the history of Kosovo was closed and another opened, and parties that bore the burden of that struggle against Serbia and for international recognition failed to reinvent themselves, find another cause for them, and create another appeal for the voters. The LVV used political and economic dissatisfaction within Kosovo, which has reached about 74% according to surveys (UNDP report 2015) and promoted socio-economic promises such as increased local production, more equal distribution of wealth, progressive taxation, free health care, and education, and tackling directly the dependency of Kosovo on imports and foreign aid and assistance. The LVV successfully asserted itself as the only party

to promote an alternative political system and economy while the rest relied on prior affiliations rather than socio-economic pledges, as is often the case in many Southeast European countries (Stojarova, Emerson 2013). The LVV prominence is also a result of internal party organization, campaign-style, use of social media in framing and conveying its message to the electorate. It has often used activists and volunteers to campaign and while the leadership used a direct, accusatory discourse against international representatives and missions in Kosovo and political opponents with words such as “traitors”, “criminals” “corrupted”, “shameless”, “deceiving”, etc., highlighting differences and intentionally polarizing the political and public opinion. The LVV activities and its journey brought them from street protests using all methods that populist movements have used in Europe before and following the landslide victory in the elections in February 2021 the LVV has created the Government and has the majority needed to attempt to make constitutional changes in Kosovo, as promised throughout the years of campaigning, and this seems to be the next challenge for the LVV and other political actors in Kosovo and those involved in Kosovo.

5.CONCLUSIONS

The rise of populism in the past couple of decades has transformed the political landscape in Europe overall. It has not just challenged democracy as a system and has transformed the rules of the game, moved boundaries of political correctness, transformed campaign styles, and expanded the outreach of messages. While researchers and scholars have been active in trying to explain in understandable terms this rise of populist parties as a flaw in current forms of democracies, questions have been raised as to whether this is influenced by the rise of instant omnipresent media, or whether this is another mode for nationalists from the right and left to advance their agenda by shifting and/or merging positions and messages in an opportunistic yet acceptable fashion for the society and masses that are living in an instant world where choices are fast and changes are continuous. Extensive research attention that populism has

achieved in recent years was directed in establishing similarities that movements have shown in Latin America, the US, and most noticeably in Europe. Central, East and Southeast Europe populist movements are almost all linked to nationalism as they are concepts so closely related. Both share 'the people' as a central signifier and also are bound to country and order. Nationalist populism or right-wing populism uses the link people-as-nation while left-wing populism uses people-as-underdog. The chameleonic nature of populist movements allows them to ever appeal to new supporters, while once in power they often move to a state-sponsored version of populism branded under 'direct democracy, implementing the will of the people as shown in election results or referendums as the populists' preferred choice when it comes to polls. In Southeast Europe, in Kosovo, the largest party, the LVV, has applied populism mainly as a strategy and means of operation using the socio-economic transitional context of the country and its organizational scheme of constant campaigning. The LVV's latest 2021 election slogan "All and straight" ('Krejt dhe drejt' in Albanian) was a message to its supporters that only by an overall victory and with direct changes, of laws and ultimately the Constitution, will the changes be made and the transformation of the society achieved. It remains to be seen whether the LVV will go through with its promises since obtaining all of the decision-making and legislative power could lead them to slide toward authoritarianism. It also remains to be seen how much will the international community, the US, and EU, that have extensively invested in a democratic and multiethnic Kosovo tolerate, or allow, the LVV governance along the lines of populist promises. One thing is for certain, if a return to authoritarianism will happen, in one way or another, then a long chapter of democratization since the fall of the Berlin Wall three decades ago will close in this part of Europe.

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