



# International Journal of Political Science and Public Administration

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Research Paper

Open Access

## The Presence of Populism in the Two Decades After the War in Kosovo

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### Article Info

Volume 1, Issue 2, September 2021

Received : 19 January 2021

Accepted : 17 July 2021

Published : 05 September 2021

doi: [10.51483/IJPSPA.1.2.2021.34-40](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJPSPA.1.2.2021.34-40)

### Abstract

The rise of an extreme movement, which has consistently produced violence and hatred in Kosovar society for more than fifteen years, undoubtedly increases the curiosity of any researcher of social problems to deal with the study of this issue. Of course, the study of social problems is extremely complex, especially in this time of globalization and extraordinary social mobility, therefore, each time, the opportunities for debate remained open. The paper addresses a very problematic topic, but that belongs to the social topicality, and not only in Kosovar society as one of the societies in transition, but also quite prominent in the most developed countries, and with a long democratic tradition. It should be noted that Kosovo is not only going through an economic transition, but more than that, the political and cultural transition has taken a special place. It should be noted that society's approach to the state and politics is crucial and has a tremendous impact on the process of economic transition. The paper deals precisely with the tools and methods that Kosovar political parties have used and are using to seize power, where the focus is on populism and the spirit of hatred created during the two decades after the war in Kosovo.

**Keywords:** *Populism, Transition, Politics, Kosovo, Economic transition*

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### 1. Introduction

The term populism has become one of the most used terms in daily politics in many countries of the world, but also in international politics. Given the complexity of populism as a concept, debates over populism continue to be open and highly controversial.

Different theorists and scholars give different assessments about the impact of populism on democracy and the socio-political changes that can come from populism. It is clear that the electoral successes of politicians and populist parties over the past decade have posed challenges to established and emerging democracies. Populists tend to see themselves as the exclusive representatives of 'ordinary' citizens and accuse political elites of betraying the people and disrespecting their 'real' interests. "By mobilizing around these key messages, populist parties have won a growing number of votes in multiple elections."<sup>1</sup> The same approach was used by the movement which has turned into a political

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<sup>1</sup> Populist government and democracy: An impact assessment using the Global State of Democracy Indices, in focus, No. 9, February 2020, p. 2.

party in Kosovo, Lëvizja Vetëvendosje. For years, Vetëvendosje has been the denier of many processes and achievements in Kosovo, while it has also clashed with international factors present in Kosovo. In addition to stigmatizing other political parties and politicians who have been in power, Vetëvendosje has organized a number of violent protests, where in the 2007 protests against the Ahtisaari package, two people lost their lives.

In fact, the leader of the Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, Albin Kurti, was also opposed to the signing of the Rambouillet agreement, which resulted in NATO attacks against the Serbian military-police forces, as well as against the Ahtisaari package by resulting in the declaration of independence of Kosovo on February 17, 2008. These, and others show that the opposition was out of frivolity and ambition for individual political gain.

## 2. What is Populism?

It is worth noting at the outset the statement of three authors: Acemoglu, Egorov and Sonin, who rightly state in their research entitled a political theory of populism, that recently there has been a resurgence of ‘populist’ politicians in many developing countries, especially in Latin America. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Kirchners in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Alan Garcia in Peru and Rafael Correa in Ecuador are some examples. “Populist labeling is often used to emphasize that these politicians use rhetoric to aggressively defend the interests of ordinary people against the privileged elite.”<sup>2</sup> But, this is already present in some of the developing countries on the continent of Europe, such as the Balkan countries, where the Republic of Kosovo was part of, and without exception, populism is finding a place in developed countries within the European Union. In this case, it should be mentioned that over the last decade some pairs of elections have turned their attention to populism in Europe. The French local elections of March 2011 returned the National Front to its level of support 10 to 15 years ago (about 15%). Finland’s April 2011 parliamentary elections made Finland the third party of the “True Finns” with 19%. Earlier, the entry of Geert Wilders’s party into the Dutch ruling coalition (his Freedom Party is now the country’s third party with 24 seats) and the Sweden Democrats’ progress in the parliamentary elections (5.7% and 20 seats) had already revived the debate hot on the rise of populism and placed it in a truly European context.<sup>3</sup>

A report from the University of Washington, entitled *The Global Impact of Populism on Democracy*, states that “populism is a mystically unified ‘nation’ against corrupt ‘elites’ and external enemies, and claims to be a charismatic leader with the power to express the will of the nation.” “It is therefore essentially illiberal, rejecting the diversity of identity and thought within society, and rejecting the fundamental principles of modern constitutional thinking: that democracy requires restrictions on the will of the majority and controls the decisions of the executive.”<sup>4</sup> Extreme political movements, which are present in the Balkan countries, which carry hatred in their ‘souls’, and anyone who is not a supporter of them is hostile and harmful to the country, as well as giving political opponents the most severe stigma, such as: Thieves, criminals, etc., represent typical populist movements, which unfortunately find fertile ground in poor countries, where the political consciousness of the population of those countries is to be desired.

It should be noted that populism is presented in different forms, adapting the model to the life and social circumstances of the country. In this way, populism can be described as the emergence of new political currents in different countries, as well as with different extremes, proclaiming development and prosperity from a new model of government, and undoubtedly, rich in popular slang for to persuade the civic masses. In this regard, it is rightly stated that, many concepts that are becoming known can start a new life—unlike the original theory and populism is no exception in this regard. Journalists, politicians and the general public embrace the concept of populism with new meanings, expanding its use. A wider audience often sees populism as a popular emotional and simplistic style of communication. “Another very common idea about populism is the perception of its use as promises that are unattainable, but sound so sweet to the ears of voters.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Bonikowski rightly states that, populist studies are not about judging whether such moral judgments are correct, but rather about understanding when this form of politics becomes widespread, why it is able to gain support public, how it affects existing political power configurations and what impact it has on political institutions and policies.”<sup>6</sup> Bonikowski goes on to point out that “most political strategies, populist calls not only diagnose a

<sup>2</sup> Acemoglu, Daron., Egorov, Georgy., and Sonin, Konstantin. (2010), A political theory of populism (November 5, 2010). MIT Department of Economics Working Paper. Forthcoming. available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1703342> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1703342>, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Yves, Surel. (2011). The European Union and the challenges of populism. *Policy Brief*. Notre Europe. No. 27, June, 1.

<sup>4</sup> The global implications of populism on democracy. University of Washington the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies. *Task Force*. 2018, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Grup Autorë sh. (2017). *The Rise of Populism: Lessons for the European Union and the United States of America*, The Centre for East European Policy Studies, The project was implemented with the support of the European People’s Party (EPP) Group at the European Parliament and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. University of Latvia Press Riga, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Bart, Bonikowski. (2016). Three lessons of contemporary populism in Europe and the United States, XXIII(I) Fall/Winter, 10.

political problem—in this case, the elites’ abandon the common good in favor of their own self-interest—but also offer a solution, namely the purchase of political power by the populist politician or party on behalf of the people. However, what complicates this simple political account is the continued populist delegitimization of democratic institutions. “The moral suspicion cast on allegedly corrupt elites often extends to the institutions from which those elites benefit, as evidenced by the frequent references in populist discourse to rigged elections and the power of special interests.”<sup>7</sup> After all, it is worth mentioning the conclusion drawn by Akkerman, who states that “as long as radical populism aspires to restore the full sovereignty of the people”, I would argue that the threat that populism poses to the constitutional dimension of democracy should not to be underestimated. “Without constitutional restrictions, democracy itself is becoming weaker, not stronger.”<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that “populism in fact covers a variety of political phenomena that transcend its historical roots, which can be found in the Russian anti-authoritarian movement of the second half of the XIX century and in the American roots policy of the 1890s. Populism was the name retroactively given to Russian intelligence which opposed the Tsarist regime and industrialization in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s; the populists, active in several different groups, wanted a better form of government for Russia than the existing Tsarist autocracy. In the United States, the People’s Party was an agro-populist political party, which for several years, 1892-96, played a major role as a left-wing force in American politics (in 1894 it received more than 10% of the vote in elections to the House of Representatives).”<sup>9</sup>

Lacking a unique definition among populists in terms of populism, from the various researches and writings of numerous authors, it can be easily concluded that populism is a deception that manifests itself in various forms and by various means to persuade popular masses for political gain. In this regard, it is worth noting that a newer approach considers populism, first and foremost, as a political strategy used by a specific type of leader seeking to govern based on the direct and unmediated support of his followers. Theirs. The approach emphasizes that populism means the emergence of a strong and charismatic figure, who concentrates power and maintains a direct connection with the masses. “From this perspective, populism can not continue over time, as the leader will sooner or later die and a conflict-ridden process to replace him is inevitable.”<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Political Parties in Kosovo and the Presence of Populism

Political parties in Kosovo, as well as in other Balkan countries, have undoubtedly used populism as part of political propaganda to come to power. In fact, even their ideologically proclaimed concept has been avoided when it comes to coming to power. Therefore, in this regard, it has been rightly stated in a study which states that “based on the experience of post-war political developments in Kosovo, there is a very strong impression that there is a very strong trend in some of these parties that to sacrifice their ideological commitments in order to seize power. The historical experience of the post-war period has witnessed in some cases major ideological rearrangements in Kosovo parties. Thus, the PDK, from a party that immediately after the war emerged as the center-left party, in the meantime has become a center-right party. On the other hand, AAK, in the first elections after the war has entered with a complete rejection of ideological commitment, adopting the election slogan “Neither left, nor right, but forward,” while today it is the center-right party.”<sup>11</sup> The authors Hofmeister and Grabow also note this precisely, emphasizing that, “another aspect that reflects this lack is the policies produced by the parties while they are in the institutions. These policies are often contrary to the proclaimed ideology. For example, in Kosovo, the governments dominated by the center-right parties LDK, PDK and AAK have continuously aggravated the basis of social schemes, as a result Kosovo currently has over 20 social schemes”<sup>12</sup>.

The presence of populism and its use for coming to power is very visible and is also killed by the analysis of the speeches of the candidates in the election campaigns. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that, based on the data released after analyzing the speeches of the candidate of “Lëvizja Vetëvendosje”, Albin Kurti, during the election campaign of 2017, it turns out that he mostly uses the type of population associated with nationalism. In 40% of cases, Kurti used the language of populism in his speeches they were related to the style of nationalist populism. Also in the speeches of the LDK candidate, Avdullah Hoti, there is also a great discrepancy in favor of populism over the few words about the European Union. While the candidate of the PAN coalition in the 2017 election campaign, Ramush Haradinaj,

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Tjitske, Akkerman. (2003). Populism and democracy: Challenge or pathology?. *Acta Politica*, 38(147.159), 158.

<sup>9</sup> Alberto, Martinelli. (2016). Beyond Trump populism on the rise. *The Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Cas, Mudde., and Cristobal, Rovira, Kaltwasser. (2017). *Populism a Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press. p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Integrimi i partive politike te Kosoves ne organizatat nnderkombetare te partive politike: Shpjegimi i vonesës, KIPRED, ANALIZËE SHKURTËR Nr.4/15 – Maj. p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Wilhelm, Hofmeister, dhe Karsten, Grabow. (2020). Partite politike Funkcioni dhe organizimi ne shoqerite demokratike, Konrad Adenauer ne Republikën e Kosoves Instituti i Prishtinës për Studime Politike. Prishtine, Envinion, 86.

can be considered as a leader with a better balance, appreciating populism with speeches on Kosovo's European integration<sup>13</sup>.

The ideological functioning of political parties in Kosovo, as in many other countries, is very unclear. "This is because the clear ideological lines and positions, more often than rarely, have lost the great weight they once had. "Nevertheless, ideological premises continue to be important in order to better understand the functioning and alignment of political parties within the political system."<sup>14</sup> However, what is particularly important to discuss is internal party democracy, which remains the essential problem of Kosovar political parties. It should be noted that the organization of internal elections of political parties has been and continues to be completely influenced and camouflaged by certain individuals or groups within the parties. In this regard, none of the political parties made an exception. It is worth noting that "by using internal democratic procedures to evaluate their decisions, parties strengthen the democratic culture in general."<sup>15</sup> This is due to the fact that democratic culture and decision-making are transferred from political parties to governing institutions. In this context, the lack of internal democracy of Kosovar political parties, and their political culture in general, has had consequences for the governance of the country. In addition, it is a concrete case of arrogance of the Democratic Party of Kosovo towards other parties, which remained in search of a governing partner for nearly six months after the 2014 elections. Similarly, it happened with the Vetëvendosje Movement, which became hostile to all other parties from the organization of violent protests, harsh language and arrogance, which in the 2019 elections found it difficult to form a coalition with the Democratic League of Kosovo, and moreover, arrogance and non-political behavior, made that Democratic League to leave the coalition with him.

The history of political development in Kosovo, the course of political events over two decades, from the end of the war in 1999 until 2020, show the creation of a non-democratic political culture, harsh political and non-argumentative language, and Excessive political populism for coming to power, as a lack of concrete development ideas.

Populism is also expressed in written documents proclaimed by political parties. One of the parties that has developed and risen precisely on populist ideas is the Vetëvendosje Movement. From its inception until now, harsh language stigmatizing all other political parties, and every politician who has held a position in power, has been its 'culture' of political behavior. Moreover, Vetëvendosje accused and saw as enemies the United Nations administration in Kosovo. The document that Vetëvendosje calls "Manifestos of Vetëvendosje!", Among other things, states that, "UNMIK administration in Kosovo is an anti-democratic regime."<sup>16</sup> This Vetëvendosje document further states: "How can it be otherwise with a system, the essence of whose actions is the negation of the will of the people? UNMIK's indefinite temporary nature has become unbearable. His power here is the antithesis of self-determination. That is why we do not have freedom even today"<sup>17</sup>. Recognizing our power to liberate ourselves from the Serbian occupier, recognizing our state-building opportunities, and moreover, our opportunities to build democracy in the country, the journey without the International Community, precisely the allies who invested in the liberation of Kosovo, an approach such revealed by Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, is the biggest political absurdity.

Ngritja politike e Vetëvendosjes nën parullat patriotike kundër Serbisë, nën akuzat për tradhëti të pushtetarëve, dhe me etiketime të ndryshme si të korruptuar, kriminel, hajdutë, etj, paraqet egzaktësisht populizëm, që i është përgjigjur gjendjes dhe rrethanave ekonomiko-sociale në Kosovë, eqë saktësisht i përgjigjet konstatimi i autorëve të lartëcekur, Acemoglu, Egorov dhe Sonin, të cilët theksojnë se "etiketimi populist shpesh përdoret për të theksuar se këta politikanë përdorin retorikën e mbrojtjes agresive të interesave të njerëzve të zakonshëm kundër elitës së privilegjuar"<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, this form of Vetëvendosje policy-making, which can undoubtedly be considered as a populist policy, is precisely answered by the statement of the theorist and professor of political science Jan-Werner Muller, who in his study states that, when in opposition, populists criticize governments. But more importantly, they also claim that they and they alone represent what populists often call "real people" or "silent majority." Consequently, they denounce all other claimants to power as fundamentally illegal. At stake is never a dispute over politics or even values, over that issue—which is of course completely normal (and, ideally, productive) in a democracy; on the contrary, populists immediately personalize and moralize political conflict: others, they insist, are simply "corrupt" and "crooked."<sup>19</sup> The statement that Vetëvendosje

<sup>13</sup> Alban, Zeneli., Gezim, Qerimi., and Dren, Gerguri. (2019). Kosovo's path Towards the EU and populism in the 2017 General Election, June, 149-151.

<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Hofmeister dhe Karsten Grabow (2020), *op. cit.*, p. 85

<sup>15</sup> Zhidas, Daskalovski. (2012). Demokracia e brenDshme partiake në Kosovë, Nga Qendra për hulumtim dhe ndërtim të politikave, Konrad Adenauer. Prishtinë. p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Document written by Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, named as the Manifesto of Vetëvendosje!

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Acemoglu, Daron., Egorov, Georgy., and Sonin, Konstantin. (2010). *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Jan-Werner, Muller. (2017). The rise and rise of populism?, for more see on: <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BBVA-OpenMind-Jan-Werner-Muller-The-Rise-and-Rise-of-Populism-1.pdf>



has a populist spirit in its spirit and functioning, comes from the description made by Professor Müller who, among other things, states: “It is less clear” that populists instill the idea that all citizens who do not share their conception of “the people” and thus, logically, do not support the populists, their status as belonging to the right people should be questioned. Think of Farage claiming, on the night of the fatal referendum, that Brexit had been a “victory for the real people;” he meant that the 48% who voted to stay in the EU may not be quite realistic—meaning they are not at all part of the real British people. Or think of Trump announcing at a campaign rally last year: “The most important thing is to unite people—because other people will not say anything.” In other words, the populist decides who the real people are; and anyone who does not wish to be unified under the terms of the populist is absolutely and completely excluded—even if it happens to have a British or American passport.”<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. The Consequences of Populism

There is no doubt that populist approaches have consequences, both in the context of economic development and in the context of political developments. As noted by the German Institute for Development, growing populist trends pose potential threats to sustainable global development. They can in some respects lead to significant obstacles when it comes to addressing issues of sustainable global development and jeopardize multilateralism as a whole. The first relates to the abandonment of efforts to promote integration. The second obstacle is seen at the level of multilateral institutions and international trade: withdrawal from international agreements and international organizations, and the weakening of a rule-based international order.<sup>21</sup>

It should be noted that “the correlation often made between the economic crisis and the rise of populism does not stand in empirical evidence; there are cases in which populism has grown without an economic crisis (in the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands), and there have been cases in which the economic crisis has not facilitated the growth of populism (Ireland and Portugal).”<sup>22</sup> However, populists also take advantage of the aggravated economic situation and crises, adapting the populist political approach to the economic situation. In such cases, populist leaders and parties present the economic crisis as a problem stemming from bad government policies, corruption and abuse of power, and so on. Such an approach has been used by the Vetëvendosje Movement for more than a decade, where everything is bad, and every social problem is attributed to the government and the political parties that have been in power.

From this approach, brought by the policies of Vetëvendosje Movement, Kosovo has suffered both internally and externally, creating political instability and slowing down the process of state building and strengthening democracy. In fact, the consequences of non-political behavior, violent protests, violence in the Assembly of Kosovo, etc., have caused a slowdown in the path towards integration into the European Union, presenting Kosovo as a country with political instability.

It should be noted that the coming to power of Donald Trump in the United States, as well as the victory of the “Leave” camp in the United Kingdom<sup>23</sup>, have been unexpected by many scholars and analysts, who have largely appreciated their populist approach, similarly, the victory of Vetëvendosje Movement was not expected either, but that, the last elections of 2019, establish it as the first party in Kosovo.

#### 5. Populism – Detrimental or Contributor to Democracy

Debates about the impacts of populism on the governing system of a country and beyond, or precisely on democratic governance as the dominant governing system in our time, are natural, given the different opinions that exist about populism itself, and the lack of a unique definition of populism. In this regard, Blog Admin rightly explains, arguing that “academics and experts” are so inclined to assume that populism is bad for democracy. However, some scholars and commentators argue that populism can help increase the quality of the democratic regime. This debate between the enemies and friends of populism has to do with the fact that we normally have the liberal democratic model in our minds. Liberal democracy is characterized by the coexistence of popular sovereignty and majority rule with constitutional courts and other institutional bodies that are neither elected nor directly controlled by ‘us, the people’. Therefore, the liberal democratic model relies on two different pillars that hold everything except a harmonious relationship. Given that populist forces support popular sovereignty at all costs, it is true that populism can have a negative impact on the liberal

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> German Development Institute, Populism: consequences for global sustainable development, Briefing Paper, 8/2019, for more see on: [https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/BP\\_8.2019.pdf](https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/BP_8.2019.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Rosa, Balfour. (2017). Challenges ahead for the European Union the (Resistable) rise of populism in Europe and its impact on European and international cooperation, *IE Med. Mediterranean Yearbook*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Beyond Trump Populism on the Rise. The Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). Introduction by Paolo, Magri. (2016). p. 7.

democratic regime, especially when it comes to protecting the rights of minorities and independent constitutional bodies. "However, it is important to keep in mind that populism can also have a positive impact on the liberal democratic regime, because it can help integrate the ideas and interests of the marginalized sections of the electorate into the political agenda."<sup>24</sup>

However, care must be taken in this regard, because different academics and scholars can easily understand the social, political and economic processes, but this can not apply to the broad popular masses which are influenced by different political concepts, in this nor from populisms that may be detrimental to the future of society and the state.

However, those who consider that populism has positive impacts on democracy may be right, as well as those who consider the opposite. However, it should be noted that this depends on the circumstances in each country, so in this regard it should be assessed that, if populism in the democracy of any country has had positive impacts, in other democracies may have negative impacts. It is also worth noting that populism can be 'proof' in developed countries and consolidated democracies, but this may not apply to countries in transition that have fragile democracies, such as Kosovo and other Balkans.

## 6. Conclusion

From what has been researched so far in this paper, logically emerge some conclusions from which we distinguish the most essential ones as follows:

- Populism is a very complex topic, different academics and scholars give different assessments about populism and its impact on politics, economics, democracy and society in general.
- Populist parties have found considerable support, especially in recent decades, not only in countries with pronounced political problems and fragile democracies, but also in developed and consolidated democracies.
- It cannot be accurately concluded that populism has negative impacts on democracy and general social developments. In reality, populism has obvious consequences in countries that are in transition and have deficits of democracy.
- The presence of populism in the Balkan countries is obvious. The factors that have contributed the most to this situation, without a doubt, are the state of economic and cultural transition, the ongoing interethnic conflicts, the lack of genuine democracy, etc.
- Vetëvendosje Movement in Kosovo is considered the most populist party, which since its inception has been a denier of many political processes in Kosovo, which have even resulted in the good of the country.

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**Cite this article as:** Fatmir HALILI and Sheqir KUTLLOVCI (2021). *The Presence of Populism in the Two Decades After the War in Kosovo*. *International Journal of Political Science and Public Administration*, 1(2), 34-40. doi: 10.51483/IJPSPA.1.2.2021.34-40.