



WORKSHOP: War and Identity in the Balkans and the Middle East
WORKING PAPER

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Title: Making and breaking collective identities. A comparison of Iraqi-Kurdistan and Kosovo

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MAKING AND BREAKING COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES. A COMPARISON OF IRAQI-KURDISTAN AND KOSOVO²

Abstract: The Autonomous Region of Kurdistan in the north of Iraq and Kosovo in the south of Serbia are two landlocked regions, which have challenged the known international order by aiming to secede from their parent state. The people of both regions have been subject to crimes against humanity, systematic discrimination and oppression to various degrees over time by the parent state. While both entities have been deprived over decades from economic and social progress and development, the consolidation of a “distinct” collective identity has evolved at full speed after 1992; nation-building becoming more “successful” than state-building. However, precisely these processes have been the ones, which have fuelled contentious dynamics and burdened the already strained relationship with the parent state, being responsible for new spirals of violence. In order to understand these dynamics of violence, this paper aims at contrasting the way the Iraqi-Kurdish and Kosovar collective identities have been built around founding myths, the demonisation of the *Other* and negation of the identity of the parent state despite decades of cohabitation, and the re-activation and alteration of the memory of previous conflicts. This paper constitutes the first step of my dissertation project, shedding light on the role of external actors in the varying degrees of successfulness of achieving consolidated statehood and recognition based on the structured focused comparison between Iraqi-Kurdistan and Kosovo.

INTRODUCTION

The present working paper deals comparatively with the processes of building and consolidating collective identities in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan in Iraq, as well as in Kosovo. The depiction of this issue is part of my dissertation project which deals with the role of international actors in the process of (successfully) achieving consolidated statehood by the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan (Iraq) and Kosovo. While the question of recognising political entities as fully-fledged states might appear on a certain level a rather theoretical issue, the consequences of this act (or of the absence of it) have a real, and empirical impact and shape not only the relations between international political entities but also between individuals.

The process of recognition as part of international politics has great influence on the way an actor shapes its collective identity and builds its internal image² and chooses which out-groups

² This working paper is embedded in my dissertation project, which I have started in April 2018 at the Freie Universität Berlin. I have elaborated my dissertation project from the lessons I have learned, while writing my masters’ thesis at the University of Potsdam, where I dealt with the topic of the “Consolidation of collective identities through international economic cooperation. The case study of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq”. For the sake of transparency, I want to note that I have already presented aspects of my master’s thesis in 2016 at the Euroacademia international conference “Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities” (<http://euroacademia.eu/presentation/how-to-be-or-not-to-be-an-iraqi-kurd-processes-of-identity-consolidation-beyond-national-and-ethnic-rhetoric-in-the-autonomous-region-of-kurdistan-in-northern-iraq/>). The current working paper, draws on my initially drafted thoughts, while developing them further and contrasting them with a second case study, namely Kosovo.



it wants to delimit itself from. Both Iraqi-Kurdistan and Kosovo have dialectically built their collective identities during the interaction with various international actors, a process during which, the tracing of identity boundaries has to be renegotiated each time. This means, that the features of the Kosovar collective identity underlined while interacting with the European Union might differ from the ones strengthened while interacting with Serbia. This stands also true for the Iraqi Kurds, who nurture different shared stories or memories when being part of an interaction with Turkey, than when interacting with Iraq.

While consolidated statehood in an Weberian sense³ might seem theoretically to be at the core of the aspirations of obtaining internationally recognised independence and sovereignty, this working paper will show, that the political elites in both Kosovo and Iraqi-Kurdistan have chosen to favour nation-building before state-building mechanisms. The analysis will be based on a short theoretical discussion of the processes of collective identity building and consolidation in the context of nationalism and nation-building measures. Afterwards, this working paper will discuss the ways the Iraqi-Kurdish and Kosovar collective identities have been built around founding myths, the demonisation of the *Other* and the institutionalisation of a collective imagery. In a last step, the conclusion will compare and contrast the developments identified in the Middle East and the Balkans in order to point out similarities and find explanations for processes or events with a divergent unfolding.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Despite its inflationary use, (social) identities are useful tools for providing help to individuals to orient and place themselves within a given social system while they interact with other subjects. During such an interaction process, individuals undergo simultaneously two antagonistic needs: to be unique in comparison to others as well as to find commonalities they can share with fellow individuals. While believing to share similar or even the same characteristics with some, individuals will at the same time perceive these as being distinctive

³ Characterised by two components: (1) the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given territory and (2) an administrative capacity to implement and enforce decisions within said territory.



from the features of others. Thus social identities build up around such identified alleged distinctive features in strict delimitation to others or the Other.

Within this process of ascribing features to oneself as well as attributing characteristics to others, a social group is being shaped together with notions such as membership and belonging. These two elements gain great importance, when the number of interacting individuals grows to such an extent, that a direct, personal social interaction cannot be guaranteed any longer between all the members of such a group. In a case like that, their belonging is being reaffirmed through the reiteration of known and accepted shared meanings and self-conceptions (Stets/Burke 2000). This transforms the social group into an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991).

When the members of a social group or “imagined community” arrive at a moment, where they exhibit the capacity and will to act in the name of the shared meanings they ascribed to their group and which feed their feeling of belonging, pursuing thus the enforcement or implementation of the group’s interests (such as the aspiration to independence based on the belief of belonging to a distinctive, in comparison to other authentic and unique group), we speak of collective agency and collective identities (Donahoe/Eidson 2009).

In comparison to social identities, collective identities tend to be more fluid, even non-binding and sometimes even short-lived. Nevertheless, these emergent collective identities can prove to be sometimes resistant over time, so that the original shared meanings become consolidated and institutionalised. This institutionalisation process requires, nevertheless, high material resources for the preservation and further re-enforcement and diffusion of the shared meanings and allegiance to the incipient collective identity. The replicability and resilience of these common understandings are being sustained through instruments such as a specific narrative, myths, the media, the educational systems, societal norms, rituals or institutions, etc (Rueschemeyer/Hau 2009). Of particular interest for this working paper and for understanding the collective identities displayed by Iraqi-Kurds and Kosovar Albanians is having a closer look at two particular, concrete forms of collective identities: ethnic and national identities.

The framing of ethnic identities and ethnicity has been strongly coined by an essentialist understanding since the beginning of the 1950s. While using biologically derived arguments might be quite frowned upon today, it is still not rare to reduce the complexity of day-to-day realities by defining ethnicity based on the idea of shared ancestry and heredity traceable back



to early history, traditions, language, customs, religion, or similar appearance (Luutz 1999). Additionally, an ethnic is being strengthened by a common “proper name”, as well as shared historical meanings of a common past, including heroes, events, and their commemoration (Hutchinson/Smith 1996:6). Academically, this ontology has been superseded by Frederik Barth’s interpretative approach, that a collective is unique and distinguishable less due to having the same origin or religion, but more on tracing the same delimitations between groups and maintaining and reproducing the same shared stories within the own social entity (Barth 1969).

While ethnic and religious identities are primarily an expression of social identities, they can become collective identities through political mobilisation or instrumentalisation. The mobilisation of pre-modern ethnic identities to ethnic nations can be seen as the underlying principle of today’s modern European nation states and has coined not only the mainstream understanding of national identities, but also the legal definitions at international level. While this eurocentric world view has been facilitated by relatively homogeneous entities and the emergence of nationalism at the end of the 18th century by the American and French revolution (Aziz 2015), there has been both the normative expectation as also the subsequent attempt of further transferring these processes to Africa and Asia.

Nevertheless, the emergence of nationalism in other parts of the world occurred with an essential delay of more than a century, while in Western societies, it has been, additionally, accompanied and facilitated by a simultaneous advancing of both industrialisation and modernisation. The processes of industrialisation and modernisation have also developed later in other places such as the Middle East or the Balkans. Due to a partially imposed top-down (and often external) character, the collective national identities emerging in the Middle East, the Balkans or other parts of Asia and Africa are still stuck in their consolidation phase sparking bitter contentious dynamics and violent clashes.

Paradigmatic examples for this are the case studies of this working paper. Both the emergence of Serbia and Iraq as the original modern parent states, as well as the emergence of the Iraqi-Kurd and Kosovar Albanian collective consciousnesses go back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Of extreme importance beside the already mentioned “delay” is also the high ethnic and sectarian heterogeneity which has characterised not only the Ottoman Empire but also the subsequent



established “nation” states, which were caught between two apparently contradicting positions: that of consolidating a strong ethno-national collective identity while accommodating large ethnically and religiously different social groups, sometimes harbouring own nationalistic aspirations.

Some of the first established nation states were able to link their originally ethnically coined claim to an abstract notion like citizenship, an ideology or a particular political programme. This brought forth the notions of the same rights and obligations for all members of the community and established a relationship of horizontal equality as citizens under the aegis of an abstract political entity. However, nationalism in the Middle East and the Balkans seems to still be fuelled by competing and mutually exclusive ethno-centric considerations.

National identities represent one of the highest levels of institutionalisation of the shared understandings and stories constituent for the cohesion of one’s inner-group. This has been achieved through: the implementation of a mandatory general education system, the introduction of a common communication medium such as a standard language, symbolic public ceremonies, rituals or memorials or the establishment of a public administration, which is carrying out tasks in the name of the new entity through issuing visa, maps, developing infrastructure or further regulating the social cohabitation of the collective’s members (Rueschemeyer/Hue 2009: 235).

This paper aims at identifying the most common shared stories and further mechanisms which are in use in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan in Iraq and Kosovo to enforce a distinguishable collective identity, (supposedly) clearly different from the previous (perceived as hostile) parent state, and thus not only worthy but also entitled to achieving independence from the point of view of the population and the government of the two socio-political entities under scrutiny.

In order to be able to recognise said shared stories and their relationship with building and consolidating collective identities, it is necessary to have a closer look at the smallest elements collective identities are being built around. Constituent for “making and breaking” collective identities are first of all boundaries, as the demarcation line traced between two groups in order to distinguish them from each other. While international politics is mostly interested in the literal use of boundaries as a delimitation between two territories, this paper pleads for a more theoretical and abstract grasp, as a demarcation of categories of the mind. These boundaries do



not only separate, they enable at the same time the creation of a social bond on either side of the demarcation.

Based on these interpretations, Charles Tilly (2005) understands collective identities as having following four main characteristics: (1) a boundary; (2) within-boundary relations; (3) cross-boundary relations; and (4) a shared understanding about the own group, the group of the other, the boundary in itself and the interactions. These shared understandings are being further complemented by memories, observable routines and stories, which contribute to the stability of a collective identity.

Jenkins (1996) suggests however, that boundaries and a certain sense of belonging are not enough for the creation of a collective identity, if they lack the recognition of the other across the “line”. While recognition might not be a constitutive feature for the creation of a collective identity, it surely has a decisive impact on real life events and international politics.

On a philosophical level, recognition enables interacting parties to acknowledge, that they, as members of the interaction, are liable to the same binding rules and norms (which they themselves agree on for the given interaction). In the same line of logic, Alexander Wendt, transports this abstraction to the realm of international relations, claiming that, “[i]n short, two actors cannot recognize each other as different without recognizing that, at some level, they are also the same” (Wendt 2003:560). This apparent paradox, might offer an explanation of the long lasting fixation on nation-states in the international arena, where the entire system is still structured along nation-state lines, even though there have been developments towards a growing relevance and prevalence of non-state and transnational actors on a global level.

The issue of recognition is essential not so much for this working paper, but for my superordinate dissertation project, where I ask among other questions, what types of recognition there are beyond the current perceived dichotomy of either being recognised or not. The question of recognition plays, nevertheless, only a subordinate role within the present working paper, as a tool of verifying to what extent the ascription and self-ascription of interacting actors overlap.



CASE STUDIES

The Autonomous Region of Kurdistan (Iraq)

Deciding to name the first chapter of the analysis “The Autonomous Region of Kurdistan” instead of “The Kurds”, as might have been expected, since this working paper is dealing with the making and breaking of collective identities, might come surprisingly. This choice has been, nevertheless, deliberate. On the one hand, by using the constitutional name recognised by both the Iraqi federal government as well as the international arena, this paper is not trying to judgementally overlook the independence aspiration of any actor, but instead wishes to start this analysis from the present status quo of a federal setting enshrined in the 2005 constitution of Iraq. According to this, not only were the three governorates of Dohuk, Sulaimaniya and Erbil bundled together to form an autonomous region, but the solely Arab “character” of Iraq has been dissolved, acknowledging at least on a theoretical level Kurdish as language and culture.

While this might be the “official” name for the three bundled governorates, informally people refer to the same entity as “Iraqi Kurdistan”, “South(ern) Kurdistan”, as well as much more problematic attributions such as “Kurdish region”, or “region of Kurdistan”. Especially the latter two designations might seem misleading since they might be understood to imply an ethnically rather homogeneous territory. On the contrary, the autonomous entity in northern Iraq, features a high density of various religious and ethnic groups (Kurds, Turkmen, Shia and Sunni Arabs, Yezidi, Assyrian-Chaldeans, Shabak, Kakaiya or Mandaeans (Ferhad 2011) of (alleged) different descent, with self-ascribed own cultural and traditional customs.

The question of a “common proper name, to identify and express the ‘essence’ of the community” (Hutchinson/Smith 1996: 6), is symbolically not such a trivial issue, since it is being normatively expected that ethnic and religious minorities should not be less protected in the event of an eventual independent Kurdish state in the north of Iraq; in an ideal case, these minorities would even identify with the overarching collective identity which would lay down the basis of a potential Kurdish nation state. When confronted with this issue, one parliamentary staff member expressed euphorically in an informal conversation we were having, lead by borderless enthusiasm, that the Kurdish political elite would not cling on the nomenclature of “Kurdistan”, they could also call the state-to-be “Mesopotamia” if this is the



prerequisite for keeping everyone happy and for them “receiving” the deeply longed for state. I find this remark to be interesting enough to mention it here since I regard it, as a concentrated evidence for the ambiguities of Kurdish nationalism: it can be interpreted either as a high level of immaturity or as a very advanced and sophisticated philosophical mastery, which has already surpassed ethno-national features and moves at high speed to a cosmopolitan notion of citizenship. Either way, my interlocutor seemed to be positively aware of what is normatively being expected of the Kurdish political elite from a Western perspective.

It is not clear yet, to what extent the Iraqi-Kurdish political elite genuinely tries to build an inclusive collective identity nor to what extent it is successful. Nevertheless, Carole O’Leary reports of more than 100 interviews led with Kurds, Assyrian-Chaldeans and Turkmen, who claim to identify with a “new sense of Kurdistani [collective]identity [...] precisely because it accommodates pluralism or cultural diversity by not threatening deeply rooted ethno-linguistic identities” (O’Leary 2002:23). Nevertheless, it is unclear, if this new collective identity is indeed wide enough to peacefully accommodate all the different ethnic and sectarian groups or whether its emergence is only being nurtured by similar traumatic experiences, victimhood and most importantly the same enemy-image: the Central-Iraqi state.

While claims regarding the emergence of an overarching “Kurdistani” collective identity are highly contentious, it appears, that neither the supposedly easier question concerning a social Kurdish identity is that clear. There seems to be an as of yet undecided debate (more in politics than in academia) on who “the Kurds” really are. Jacob L. Shapiro, an analyst at Friedman’s second think tank (created after Stratford but representing the same spirit), Geopolitical Future, writes under the permanent rubric “Reality Check” trenchantly and provocatively “We need to start by stating that there is no such things as ‘the Kurds’. There are Syrian Kurds, Turkish Kurds, Iraqi Kurds, Iranian Kurds and others as well. There are well over 100 Kurdish tribes throughout Kurdish-inhabited areas in the Middle East alone. There are Kurds who speak Kurmanji, Sorani, Pehlewani, Gorani and a number of other languages and various regional dialects. There are Sunni Kurds, Shiite Kurds, Jewish Kurds and Yazidi Kurds” (Shapiro 2016).

As a think tank, which describes itself to be “dedicated to predicting the future course of the international system” (Geopolitical Futures n.d.), Shapiro’s article transports a clear political message and takes a position detrimental, at least for the time being, to the aspiration of the political elite in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan. His foreign-ascription addresses many “essential” elements of an ethnicity but seems to confuse social and collective identities. Most



interesting is his image of “the Kurds”, from which he normatively would have expected homogeneity. Given all the enumerated differentiation, the Kurds, are (due also to further aspects he elaborates) “Not Quite a Nation”, as the title of the article states. It remains enigmatic, why a “Kurdish nation” as precursor of the desired state, could or should not be as diverse as most of any other contemporary societies we know of. He bases his critique on the observation, that allegiances among Kurdish people remain to a much higher extent tribal than national.

This grasps perfectly the dilemma of the Kurdish political elite, in the absence of an alternative to the known Western nation-state, to try to consolidate through nationalism the shell of a nation, which they cannot fill with the same structures, as a future state would be based on different social relations than Western nation states are being built on. This dilemma holds also true for the Balkans.

While a sort of unity seems to prevail over the idea that “Kurdish” is to be seen as an ethnicity, opinions are divided due to the realities on the ground, where people, who identify themselves as being “Kurdish” reside inside the territory of four different internationally recognised countries: Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. The acclamatory objective of an independent Kurdish state, goes back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, where the idea of an independent Kurdish state had been articulated in the Treaty of Sevres (1920), which has later been replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne (1924) without fulfilling nor following up on this initial idea. Since then, “the Kurds” have developed four apparently different collective identities (while their social identity might still be identical or at least largely overlapping) due to the different socio-political and historical conflicts they, as citizens within the borders of four different states, were caught up in. As different collective identities, they seem to be mobilising their collective action in pursuing different goals both on the short-term as well as on the long-term⁴.

This “Lack of Kurdish Unity” (CIA 1963) seems to be an endemic problem to Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East, since it has been literally stated as such by a secret CIA special report from the 21st of June 1963, which has been approved for release in 2006. The short assessment following the continuous clashes between the Kurdish rebellion and Baghdad’s

⁴ Currently it appears, that the four collective identities mobilise to achieve either a better autonomous recognition or an independent state, nevertheless, there are no credible voices calling for building one independent state, but as the reality of the Kurds in Syria and that of those in Iraq shows, the tendency moves towards four different entities without any realistic perspectives of a future merger.



military apparatus in the 1960s in Qasim's Iraq, underlines that "[t]ribal feeling is still stronger than national feeling" (CIA 1963).

Given the so-called "brother-war" from 1994 to 1998 between the two main political parties inside the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan (the KDP and the PUK built along tribal and clan ties), which has led to the erection of two separate administrations. Now these are in a not so successful process of merging since 2006. It appears striking that so little has changed in the course of several decades. While apart from the references to the already dissolved Soviet Union, the report seems to be a timeless piece, except one huge difference: numbers. The 1963 report speaks about "some four million Kurds located in contiguous areas of Iraq [800,000], Turkey [2,000,000], Iran [750,000] and Syria [250,000]" (CIA 1963). Today analysts estimate this figure to amount to 20 to 35 millions world-wide⁵.

Esman and Rabinovich's already highly criticised understanding of ethnicity based mostly on a common descent and language is being often used in order to dismiss Kurdish nationalism as flawed. As with every claim of ancestry going back to the earliest of times, there is disunity regarding the "true" origin of "the Kurds", which has been chronicled and explored linguistically. David McDowall clears up that "[t]here is no doubt that a Kurdish people had existed as an identifiable group for possibly more than thousand years, but it was only in the early years of the twentieth century that they acquired a sense of community as Kurds" (McDowall 2004:1-2). He further places this emergence in a regional context, where a sense of national community among Turks and Arabs was enfolding concomitantly, while noting, that "[u]nlike the Turks and Arabs, the Kurds were fatally disadvantaged because they lacked both a civic culture and an established literature" (ibid.:2). Moreover O'Shea (2003:190) claims that the history of the Kurds would be insufficiently recorded, since history is being usually written by winners or hegemony.

Furthermore, critics also note, that the Kurds fail to exhibit two essentialist ethnic features: a common territory and a common language. Despite the dispersal over vast territories of many countries, "Kurdistan" emerges as a place in the imagery of people of Kurdish descent beyond international borders. A further place with real territorial outlines of high importance for the Kurds, are the mountains. The intimate interdependency between them is expressively

⁵ There are many reasons for this huge range, such as the inability or lack of will of the administrations of the four internationally recognised states hosting citizens of Kurdish origin (with Turkey not listing Kurdish as a separate ethnicity in their census), or the fact that sometimes the diasporas are being also counted in an attempt to either inflate the figures or as these are expected to return in the case of the establishment of a Kurdish state.



portrayed by the saying “no friends but the mountains”, which many people of Kurdish origin tend to attribute to themselves as a particularly powerful image of victimisation and mistrust of others. Besides this belief rooted also in several perceived and actual deceitful political actions against their groups (starting with the non-implementation of the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 to the referendum of 2017), the mountains play also a central role in the Kurdish imagery being subject to several myths with their varied interpretations. According to one such myth, the Kurds are descendent from children, who while hiding from Zahhak, a character in ancient Persian mythology, have found refuge in the mountains. McDowall underlines the peculiarity that the myth refers to children rather than a couple, which he interprets as a possible hint, “that they may not all be of one origin” (McDowall 2007:4).

The debate regarding language as the central mechanisms of “generating ‘imagined communities’ to build particular solidarities” (Aziz 2015:50) reflects the heterogeneity on the ground. This applies not only to the spoken language, Kurdish consisting of a group of dialects of a common origin with Sorani and Kirmanji being the two most prominent ones, but also to the written language, where the Kurdish dialects are being put down in Latin, Arabic, Persian or Cyrillic script dependent on the alphabet in use in the country hosting the respective groups of people of Kurdish origin. Aziz reports about a strategy of the Kurdish Regional Government to foster and strengthen a unified script (Aziz 2015).

While the issue of diverging linguistic features does not disqualify the (ethno-)nationalist claims of the Kurds, it does however underline the extent to which the social Kurdish identity does not necessarily overlap any longer with a common Kurdish collective identity. At the same time it reflects the still unripe character of the undergoing nationalist process in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, as well as the disparities which are still in place between the normative European coined nation state and the conditions on the ground. Nevertheless, the most problematic issue regarding the emergence of an Iraqi-Kurdish collective identity remains in the either real or at least perceived disunity inside the political elite and their continuous power struggle. It is especially this power struggle, together with external events (such as the now shrunk threat posed by the so-called Islamic State), which undermines the established institutional framework and weakens and even sabotages the consolidation of their collective identity and thus the prospects of an own independent state.



Kosovo

In Q&A sessions after presenting thoughts and ideas related to the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, I have often been asked if I can name a contemporary socio-political entity similar to Iraqi-Kurdistan, which has been successful in its independence and self-determination claim-making and whether the comparison can be drawn to Kosovo? While I am still in an incipient phase of my research and I cannot satisfactorily answer this question yet in its entirety, I usually point out to the different interpretations of “success” related to the topic of state consolidation and recognition.

The declaration of independence of Kosovo from 2008 has been precipitated by a partially positive resonance of this action. While regarded as a *sui generis* case, Kosovo is preponderantly being also portrayed as a success story, of an oppressed secessionist movement, which has achieved international recognition. The two main actors telling this story, the Kosovar political elite, as well as the Western countries, fail, however, to mention, that Kosovo is - even after a decade - only recognised by slightly over 50% of the United Nations’ member states. Palestine, on the other hand, has been recognised by more than 70% of the UN member states and there is barely any one who would regard this case as successful.

The exclusively political statement regarding Kosovo does, however, have only little in common with the claim of “standards before status”, which allegedly measures the performance of an aspirant-state based on qualitative criteria of a normatively charged state concept. It also has little in common with how the collective identity of the Kosovar Albanians has emerged and has been consolidated in the decades previous to the declaration of independence.

The partition of Kosovo from its original parent state, Serbia, has been preceded by the shifting of social boundaries and the delimitation from the Other on as many levels as possible: ethnically, linguistically as well as religiously. Albanians regard themselves as Shqiptare, the descendants of an ancient Durrës tribe. In order to support their non-Slavic “essence”, it is widely believed among Albanians, that their roots can be traced back to as early as the Iron Age (1,000 BC) or even earlier, to the multi-tribal Illyrians (Dan 2011:253). This claim (which is being regarded as plausible inside academia) is being used to underline, the fact that the Albanians were already there, when Slavic tribes have been driven away from central Europe by the Avars in the 6th century A.D (Dan 2011). This otherness is being strengthened through



linguistic features as well, as the Albanian language is considered to be an independent Indo-European language branch, different from the Balto-Slavic part of the language tree.

While a lot more contested, the imaginary construction of “late-comers” is also filled with shared understandings by the Serbs. They claim, that Albanians came to Kosovo only at the end of the 17th century, to fill up the void caused by a forced exodus of Serbian victims (Jing 2012:79). This is a good example of how the myth of continuously inhabiting a certain territory, from the earliest time is being combined with the imagination of victimhood and historically-rooted suppression by the “abhorrent” other.

Indisputable is, however, that the entire history of the middle-ages is full of tales and chronicled battles of pre-modern kings, knights, dukes, emperors and the like, on their journey of conquering territory and imposing their religion, language or simply, will. The Balkans have been thus the central arena for the collision of several empires, such as the Byzantine or the Ottoman, with the local population. It is a history of short-lived victories and defeats, rapidly changing alliances, as well as repeatedly changing social identities. Duijzings writes in this regard: “instead of [...] ‘ethnic’ societies”, about a “‘frontier’ society, in which periods of confrontation alternate with periods of contact and cooperation across ethnic and religious boundaries” (Duijzings 1999:1)

The religious controversies which have been rediscovered and are being reinterpreted today, go back to the 14th and 15th century, with the arrival of Islam to the Balkans and its missionary antagonism to the encountered Christian Orthodox-church. Today’s high polarisation has, however, not always been the case, as Duijzings’ (1999) study about “Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo” shows. He follows up on ethnographic studies of the area, which have pointed out that ethno-religious border-crossing and syncretism are widespread phenomena and not exceptions to the norm. Furthermore, Duijzings’ research shows that neither ethnic nor religious identities across the Balkans are as fixed “as our experience in Western Europe suggests” (Duijzings 1999: 12) given that conversion, reconversion, as well as “‘mimicry’ (the outward adoption of an identity for the sake of survival” (ibid.: 14)) have been common processes given the “weakly developed” infrastructure of the religious institutions of that time.

Not only religious structures were weak all over the Balkans and most prominently in Kosovo, but the general institutional framework, economical setting and degree of pre-state authority projection, as Kosovo had been located geographically at the periphery of the Ottoman Empire.



Not only were territorial borders constantly changing at the periphery of an empire, but also the social ones.

This back and forth has given birth to one of the best known, most repeated and thus stable myths in the Serb-Albanian conflict: the Battle of Kosovo from June 15, 1389. Both Serbian and Kosovo Albanian nationalisms are based on a mythologically romanticised interpretation of this battle, tying territorially each respective ethnicity to Kosovo. Serbian warriors led by Prince Lazar have dramatically lost the battle against the Ottoman Empire of Murad I, at Kosovo Polje (“Field of the Blackbirds”), a battle which is being state-managed as the active, valiant Christian resistance before a vanquishing Muslim intruder. Since Kosovo has become thereafter part of the Ottoman empire and most of the Albanian population had been (forcibly) converted to Islam, a popular demonisation of the Kosovar Albanians by the Serbs is that of Christianity traitors (Ingimundarson 2007).

Despite this loss, writers and poets had started to take up this motif, thereby endorsing the emergence of a Serbian culture and creating the myth of Kosovo as the cradle of Serbian civilisation. Cultural survival, suffering, victimhood and the struggles against an invader and intruder have all become subsequently part of a shared imaginary engrained in the collective memory and identity of today’s Serbian nation. Interestingly, these same claims are being repeated by right-wing supporters all over Central and Eastern Europe since 2015, as a historically-grown legitimisation of rejecting Muslim refugees. The reliability of this myth can be explained through the fact, that it has been institutionalised in 1889, shortly after Serbia’s independence. Today, the holiday still commemorates those “who had sacrificed their lives for their faith and the fatherland” (Bouzan n.d.:34).

Victimisation, sacrifice and the resistance against the same actor, this time staged as the Turks, are popular motifs supporting the Albanian national emergence, the Albanian myth being built around the national hero, Skaderbeg. Nevertheless, the religious aspects of his resistance struggle were minimised or even circumvented, as they do not necessarily fit into the overall picture, with both Albanian and Kosovo Albanians being predominantly Muslim (Ingimundarson 2007).

While Skaderbeg’s national character is being depicted in both Albanian as well as Kosovo Albanian textbooks, Kosovo Albanians have found during the consolidation process of their distinct collective identity an own national figure and hero: Adem Jashari, allegedly one of the



KLA founders and a fierce fighter against Milosevic's troops, who has lost his life in 1998, together with 50 further members of his family after clashes with Serbian forces. In comparison to the imagination built around the Battle of Kosovo, which has been institutionalised in the collective memory of the Serbs only centuries later, the stories around Jashari have been engraved in the Kosovar shared memories short time after his dead (Bouzan n.d.).

In 2004, the Assembly of Kosovo, under the auspices of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has established through the adoption of a law, the erection of the "Adem Jashari" memorial complex in Prekaz. This memorial site has according to the law "an ontological, anthropological, historical and cultural and civic significance for [...]Kosovo and the *wide Albanian nation (own emphasis)*" and "covers the area of the graves of *national martyrs (own emphasis)*, where bodies of the members Jashari family rest, the location inhabited [sic!] by the family, the Jasharaj neighbourhood and the other area they used for armed resistance aiming to protect their dignity and defend Kosovo" (UNMIK 2004).

This wording points to an important element, which has not been discussed yet: the relationship between the emergence of the collective identity of Kosovo Albanians and other ethnic Albanians living in Albania and Macedonia. According to Valum Ingimundarson, the Kosovar Albanian newspaper Java had invited intellectuals, journalist, soldiers, writers and politicians as well as local and international scholars to write opinion pieces on the topic of Kosovar identity. As one could expect, the pieces and positions were diverse. They ranged from "the recognition of a specific Kosovar Albanian territorial identity to a plea from Albanian militants for a pan-Albanian identity, including the ethnic communities of Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Southern Serbia" (Ingimundarson 2007:110f).

While there is no serious Kosovo Albanian political movement, I am aware of at the time of writing this working paper, mobilising towards the unification of Kosovo with Albania, which exists as a separate independent state since 1912, there is a serious politicised and conflict-loaded situation in Macedonia with constant clashes between its citizens of Albanian and Slavic ethnic background. During a short visit to Macedonia in 2013, it was not seldom to hear concerned voices speaking of the threat of proclaiming a third Albanian republic, which would lead to the disintegration of Macedonia.



The identity search the Kosovo Albanians are trapped in can also be seen in the way the Albanian Flag day is being interpreted in Kosovo. While the 28th of November stands first of all for Albania's independence day, this particular day has been traditionally interwoven with further nationalistic tools for fostering a collective imagery, since the 28th of November is also being portrayed as the day Skanderbeg has allegedly raised the "Albanian" flag resisting the Ottoman empire. The mythological power of such symbols is being exploited even further in Kosovo, where it is claimed (without any credible proof though), that this for Albanians extraordinary day would also coincide with the birthday of the Kosovar "hero", Adem Jashari. This not only induces the idea of a pan-Albanian belonging but it also makes enough space for the Kosovo Albanian collective identity to distinguish itself under the aegis of "Albanianhood".

Should the idea of an pan-Albanian collective identity really not be an item on the political agenda of any serious actor, the relationship between an Albanian and an Kosovar Albanian identity, remains of interest. While the overlapping of these two identities might be maximal in its social dimension, these identities can be clearly distinguished as collective identities. While both collective actors go back to the same "golden age", central to a national identity formation, the Kosovo Albanians have incorporated their struggle of the last two decades into their collective memory, imagery and identity, making it the most salient part, they are building their political project around.

Valur Ingimundarson (2007) identifies in his study of the "Politics of Memory and Reconstruction of Albanian National Identity in Post-War Kosovo" two distinct strands of Kosovar Albanian nationalism, one feeding itself from nineteenth-century nationalist discourses, and the other trying to build the collective identity in delimitation to a new actor-constellation (and *weltanschauung*): the "Euro-Atlantic" structures. The "traditional" identity is being enforced through classical tools such as the "reification of the myth of an ancient past and of a continuing independence struggle, highlighting heroism, sacrifice, victimhood and trauma" (Ingimundarson 2007:95), while the "modern" part of the identity is trying to emulate a "post-modern civic vision" (ibid.), using the same tools of a shared imagery build around more recent events and wounds, thus demonising even further their original parent state, Serbia. This civic modernist identity perspective does, however, fail to actively show, how it could accommodate ethnic and religious minorities in Kosovo (such as Ashkali, Roma, Gorani, Turks, Bosniaks and Serbs).



Given the extremely short period of time of only one decade from the transformation of the non-violent resistance of Rugova into the armed struggle of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the subsequent declaration of independence, it remains doubtful that the Kosovo Albanian collective identity is solid. With an unstable and unfortified collective imagery, which is being propped by institutions in their emergence phase, it is highly likely for future circles of contentious to constantly (re-)ignite. In this line of thought two relevant research areas emerge: it remains relevant to ask, about the role international recognition played in these processes, as well as, about the influence on the Kosovar Albanian collective identity, of the own institutional apparatus initiated at the beginning of the 1990s.

CONCLUSION

Despite having a slightly different starting position, with the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan part of an Iraqi federal setting and denied the recognition of its independence-referendum results, and Kosovo a former autonomous Region of Serbia, whose declaration of independence has been, nevertheless, recognised by around 100 existing states, the two entities share a series of common features: both are landlocked territories with an active aspiration for completing a secession-process from their original parent state, both have weak political institutions and are economically dependent either on oil-rent (Kurdistan Region) or on foreign aid (Kosovo). Interestingly, the series of commonalities goes beyond matters of form, strong resemblances being observable also at the procedural level with both case studies building their collective identity along similar identity building and identity consolidating mechanisms and experiences.

To a certain level, these observable parallels arise from a common historical point of departure, since both Iraqi-Kurdistan and Kosovo have been provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the past. The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century has provided a vacuum, which has given space to emergent nationalist aspirations. In their respective immediate geographical area, neither the Kurdish nor the (Kosovo) Albanian were, however, the predominantly nationalist movements, each competing with much more powerful (or at least better internationally interconnected) nationalist sentiments and actors (Turks, Arabs or Slavs). Thus, both regions under scrutiny have become objects rather than subjects.



Besides weak structures, as well as social and economic underdevelopment, the two entities share a further similarity with historically engrained roots: both the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan and Kosovo encompass a highly heterogeneous society with various ethnic and religious groups, which need to be accommodated under the auspices of the emerging collective identity. This puts pressure on the rhetoric of an exclusive ethno-nationalism as it has been aggressively practised in the Balkans and to a lesser extent in Iraqi-Kurdistan. Nevertheless, both case studies have been promoting their uniqueness in comparison to their parent-state, from which they frenetically tried to delimit themselves on every possible level. As classical underdogs, this delimitation has been complemented by the portrayal of the own group as victims to continuous persecutions and the demonisation of the Other.

Interestingly, both entities have begun in the early 1990s to build own administrative structures. This has led to the improvement of the capacities of institutionalising and reinforcing shared stories, collective memories and common understandings about one's own group, about the Other, as well as about the antagonism between these parties. Nevertheless, state-building has proven to be less successful in comparison to nation-building, the later being fuelled by myths, commemorative practices or folkloric believes. The administrative and political alignment besides being in its incipient phase, has suffered from a poor consolidation also due to disunity among the political elite. This is a common reproach especially against the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, where critics fear, that tribal allegiances prevail over national ones. In the case of Kosovo, a certain disunity can be seen regarding the clashing nationalism strings employed in the public discourse. Either way, both entities feature unripe collective identities, which are much more trapped in historically rooted conflict with their (former) parent state, than willing to engage in future-oriented claim-making processes.

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