

**Sovereign Not Sovereign:
Independence, Indeterminacy, and the New National Symbols of Kosovo¹**

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Abstract

One challenge of post-conflict state-building is the creation of a new symbolic repertoire—a flag, anthem, monuments, and memorials—with which citizens can identify. Kosovo’s new symbols are specifically designed to represent the state as a youthful, multi-ethnic democracy with European aspirations—part of a bargain Kosovo’s political leaders made with the international community in 2008. In return for abiding by international prescriptions for state-building, including strict rules for the designs of the new flag and anthem, Kosovo could unilaterally declare independence from Serbia, receive recognition from a majority of world countries, and join international organizations like the EU, UN, and NATO. Yet as Serbia contests Kosovo’s sovereignty, blocking its membership in these organizations, the deal falls short. Almost sovereign, Kosovo’s citizens are the ones who suffer: poverty is widespread, political corruption and organized crime are rampant—tied to the very same local political leaders and international state-builders who proclaimed Kosovo’s new beginning—ethnic divisions are reinforced, and strict visa policies make it difficult for many citizens to even leave the country. The new flag and anthem are unable to communicate their intended meanings.

This paper considers how the internationally sponsored design competition for Kosovo’s flag and anthem serves as a site of struggle among the international community, local political elites, and individual citizens over the construction of national identity, a key aspect of the project to create a stable state and future member of the EU. I examine how international organizations put forth the rules, how local politicians (re)interpret them, and the individual citizens (mis)interpret them. The analysis illuminates the indeterminacy of power and power relationships in terms of the forms, the dynamics among actors, and the particular struggle over national identity. Despite the ways in which Kosovo’s citizens are excluded from their own state and nation-building project, they exercise power over the actors who exclude them. This raises the question, who is really writing the rules?

Introduction

On June 13, 2007, eight months prior to unilaterally declaring independence, the Kosovo Unity Team, a United Nations-backed organization responsible for the status negotiations with Serbia, announced a competition for the design of Kosovo’s new flag and emblem.

Kosovo Unity Team announces the COMPETITION FOR THE FLAG AND EMBLEM OF KOSOVO

The competition for Kosovo's flag and emblem is open to all those interested, without restrictions. Entrants should bear in mind that the people of Kosovo should be able to identify with their flag and emblem. Accordingly, the flag and emblem should reflect a commitment to a common future in a spirit of respect and tolerance in Kosovo.

To comply with Article 1.7 Comprehensive Proposal for Kosovo Status Settlement (a.k.a. Ahtisaari Plan), which stipulates that “Kosovo shall have its own, distinct national symbols, including a flag, seal and anthem,” to “[reflect] its multi-ethnic character,” the Unity Team posted strict selection criteria and specific rules for what the designs could and could not include (“Kosovo Unity Team Announces the Competition for the Flag” 2007). The rules read as follows:

Participants in the competition are encouraged to submit proposals for a flag and emblem of Kosovo that:

- *Are simple in design and color scheme, without words, slogans, or mottos;*
- *Are unique and original;*
- *Are easily [recognizable]; and*
- *Reflect the aspirations of the people of Kosovo for integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.*

Any submission must adhere to the spirit and letter of the Comprehensive Proposal for Kosovo Status Settlement. To comply with the Comprehensive Settlement Proposal in specific terms, all submissions:

- *Must not represent or approximate the flag or emblem of any state, or the flag or emblem of any political party, movement or institution of Kosovo, or imply any allegiance to any ethnic community of Kosovo;*
- *Must not utilize the representation of any eagle symbol, particularly with regard to such depictions in the symbols of other states; and*
- *Must not solely utilize red and black color schemes, or red, white and blue color schemes.*
- *The flag should be rectangular and of the proportions of 2:3.*

The competition remained open for fifteen days, attracting nearly one thousand entries (“Kosovo Starts Selection of its Future Flag and Emblem” 2007), with entries from as far as New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States (Wander 2008). Applicants were also encouraged to submit a brief description and rationale behind the design, of no more than one hundred and fifty words, in any of the official languages of Kosovo, including English. The Unity Team went on to select three finalists: the first included one with a blue field containing a white map of Kosovo

surrounded by five yellow stars; the second was a tricolor of red, white and black vertical stripes, and the third was identical to the second but contained a black spiral in the middle of the white stripe² (Charter 2008).

The winner was then supposed to be determined by a two-thirds majority vote in the Kosovo Assembly (“Kosovo to Pick a State Flag” 2008). The first place proposal would be awarded €10,000, second place €7,000, and third place €5000 (“Kosovo Unity Team Announces the Competition for the Flag” 2007). The finalists, however, never received their prize money (de Mendoza 2008). In fact, according to a 2008 report published by the International Crisis Group, Kosovo’s flag was actually selected and modified “with strong U.S. involvement behind closed doors” (International Crisis Group 2008: 4). Made in Turkey and flown in by Turkish Airlines on the morning of February 17, 2008—the day Kosovo declared independence (Yinanc 2008)—it was simply brought into parliament following the declaration, placed behind the speaker’s chair, and then adopted by a quick and up or down vote (International Crisis Group 2008: 4). Bearing resemblance to the first submission, Kosovo’s new flag is blue with a gold map of Kosovo underneath six white stars.

In March 2008, about one month after Kosovo declared independence, the Kosovo Assembly announced another competition for the selection of the new national anthem. The rules stipulated that the “composition should be distinguishable, unique and original” (“National Anthem of Kosovo” n.d.). As the competition for the flag forbade any colors or icons symbolizing a specific nationality, the rules for the anthem forbade any resonance with music connected to a specific ethnicity or cultural heritage. The rules further mandated that the length “should not last less than 30 seconds or more than 60 seconds” (“National Anthem of Kosovo”

² A symbol from the fourth century Kingdom of Dardania, a Roman province inhabited by the Thraco-Illyrian tribe of Dardani, believed to be the ancestors of Kosovo’s Albanians (Charter 2008).

n.d.). Finally, in compliance with the Ahtisaari Plan's commitment to multi-ethnicity, the rules stipulated that while "texts can be included as well in the application, in any official language of the Republic of Kosovo," the selected composition would not feature any official lyrics (Pavković and Kelen 2016: 306).

In the words of one government official, "if we put the anthem in Albanian, the Serbs would not see that anthem as their own" (cited in "Kosovo Adopts Wordless National Anthem" 2008). "Having no words [is] simpler than coming up with multilingual versions," political advisor, Muhamet Hamiti explains. "This is the least controversial alternative" (cited in MacDonald 2008). Three months later, in June 2008, to coordinate with the day that Kosovo's new constitution was ratified, the Kosovo Assembly adopted the Hymn of the Republic of Kosovo—a fifty-five-second wordless anthem written by Kosovo composer Mendi Mengjiqi, entitled, *Europe*.

This paper considers how the internationally sponsored design competition for Kosovo's flag and anthem serves as a site of struggle among the international community, local political elites, and individual citizens over the construction of national identity and the project to create a stable state and future member of the EU. Through semiotic and content analysis of the competition rules and the symbols' designs, two constitutive forms used by actors to control, co-opt, or contest official meanings associated with the national past and future, I examine how international organizations put forth the rules, how local politicians (re)interpret them, and the individual citizens (mis)interpret them. The analysis illuminates the indeterminacy of power and power relationships in terms of the forms, the dynamics among actors, and the particular struggle over national identity. Despite the ways in which Kosovo's citizens are excluded from their own

state and nation-building project, they exercise power over the actors who exclude them. This raises the question, who is really writing the rules?

The conceptual basis for this paper is not rooted in one literature but forges dialogue among seemingly disparate areas of sociology, engaging meaning-centered and cultural analysis to bridge the literature on national symbols and identity with theories of political power and state formation. Meaning-centered and cultural approaches, like Cerulo's study of national symbols (1995) or Billig's work on banal nationalism (1992), often fail to problematize the concept of power, reproducing extant theories, like Bourdieu's work on symbolic power (1989). At the same time, power and agency, especially in the traditions of Weber and Foucault, are widely theorized by scholars of politics and state-building—but these approaches do not consider shifting cultural meanings across time and space (Reed 2017). As a result, this paper does not contain a traditional literature review, but its contribution emerges from the analysis. The findings reveal the value of indeterminacy—the power and agency that actors, namely those actors who are excluded, exercise in a state that is both sovereign—and not sovereign.

In addition to considering the competition rules and the designs for Kosovo's flag and anthem, the empirical analysis includes textual discourse, such as newspaper and journal articles from international publications such as the *New York Times* and *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*; regional publications like *Balkan Insight*, and local publications like *Gazeta Express*, *Kosovo 2.0* and *Prishtina Insight*; the competition rules, texts from Kosovo government websites, brochures, and press releases; official reports and meeting minutes from the United Nations, European Union and other independent, international agencies like the International Crisis Group. The data also includes photographs, documentary film, and social media posts, personal blogs, and websites.

Background

Located in Southeast Europe and bordered by Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Albania, Kosovo is inhabited by ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse groups, including a majority community of Albanians, who constitute 90% of the population, and minority communities of Serbs, Roma, Turks, Bosniaks, Gorani, and other South Slavs (CIA World Factbook 2018). A site of deep ethnic divisions, especially between Albanians and Serbs (who each have competing claims to the land), Kosovo has undergone numerous political reconfigurations and changing symbolic landscapes, dating back to antiquity (Judah 2008: 4-8).

After World War II, Kosovo was made part of Serbia in the newly established Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, led by Marshall Tito. Kosovo Albanians were prohibited from displaying the Albanian flag, red with a black double-headed eagle in the center, yet after the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution was passed, Kosovo obtained the status of Socialist Autonomous Province and experienced relative sovereignty, symbolized by the adoption of the Yugoslav flag for the Albanian minority, red with a black double-headed eagle with the Yugoslav emblem of a yellow star in the upper left corner (Ante 2010: 338). This period of relative sovereignty ended in 1989, when Slobodan Milošević, president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and its successor, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, abolished Kosovo's autonomous status, depriving Kosovo's Albanians of their rights and creating apartheid-like conditions (Judah 2008: 49-51, 55-57, 66-68).

Despite the oppression, Albanian nationalism continued to rise, stirring protests and demands for Kosovo's independence. In 1991, Kosovo's Albanian political leaders declared the state's *de facto* independence, establishing a "parallel" or "shadow state" called the Republic of Kosova, symbolized by the Albanian flag. Although the motivation behind the parallel state was nonviolent, civil resistance, factions within the political leadership led to the formation of the

Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), a small guerrilla army which carried out a series of insurgencies against the Milošević regime (Judah 2008: 68-99, 77-99).

In the wake of the Bosnian War, the international community attempted a diplomatic solution to the Kosovo conflict, but after peaceful negotiations failed, Serbia conducted a massive counterinsurgency in February 1998, and the escalation of violence resulted in the NATO intervention in March 1999. After the three-month bombing campaign concluded, the United Nations Security Council coordinated an interim administration, placing Kosovo under the aegis of the international community. During this time, the official flag of Kosovo was the flag of the United Nations, blue with the emblem of the UN, a white map of the world in between two olive branches.

In March 2004, UN Special Envoy and former president of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari, was appointed in 2005 to determine Kosovo's final status, facilitating a series of negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia. Serbia refused any settlement other than the return of Kosovo to Serbia, maintaining that the land was an integral part of the Serbian nation, whereas Kosovo's Albanian leaders refused anything other than independent statehood, in light of the brutality and ethnic cleansing directed at Albanians (Weller 2009: 23-28, 29-41). After two years of desultory negotiations, in 2007, Ahtisaari and a team of policy-makers crafted the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement, known as the "Ahtisaari Plan." The Ahtisaari Plan equipped Kosovo with a complete guide for state-building according to international and EU convention, stressing liberal-democratic political principles, such as multi-ethnicity, universal human rights, special protections for minorities, and a market economy, so that Kosovo would meet the criteria for membership in the EU and someday join.

Serbia rejected Ahtisaari's proposal, but Kosovo's Albanian leaders struck a deal with the international community: submission for sovereignty. That is, they would adhere to all of the tenets of the plan, the international community would maintain a civil and military presence, and

in return, Kosovo could unilaterally declare independence and receive recognition from the majority of Western and European countries (Judah 2008: 115). On February 17, 2008, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia, and although its status remains contested, as of 2018, Kosovo is recognized by one hundred and sixteen UN member states and twenty-three European Union member states. It is a member of international organizations like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), the International Judo Federation (IJF), and the Olympics (“Kosovo Thanks You” 2018).

Forming the New Kosovo: The Actors and their Projects

In sociology, constructionist approaches to national identity maintain that identities are formed through the negotiation and ascription of meanings to different forms. The literature demonstrates how forms like flags, anthems, monuments, memorials, and master-narratives function as communication strategies, mediating different social perspectives—namely the relations between political elites and ordinary citizens. Depending on the contexts in which they appear and the actors who give them exposure—whether they are displayed in official state functions, times of national celebration or grief, on battlefields, at sporting events, or at protests—national symbols advance particular projects by conveying messages through their visual and musical syntaxes (Anderson 1991; Bodnar 1992; Billig 1995; Brubaker 1996, 2000; Cerulo 1995; Collins 2004; Hall 2006; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Kolstø 2006; Pavković and Kelen 2016; Zubrzycki 2013, 2017).

Flags and anthems are designed with “specific political bonds in mind,” Karen Cerulo explains. Elites attempt to “structure real social relations by imposing symbols depicting desired relations,” and the symbols are thus “blueprint[s] for that which leaders [think] should be” (1995:16). However, in new states especially, national symbols often “fail to fulfill their most important function as promoters of national unity,” Pål Kolstø points out, bringing “to the fore

strong divisions” (2006: 679). National symbols have thus been alternately viewed in the literature as sites of cohesion, “rallying points,” in the Durkheimian tradition, and as destabilizing elements vis-à-vis the realities they depict, serving as forms of contestation and agents of societal change.

In Kosovo, the new repertoire of symbols does not serve as a blueprint for what local leaders think should be—but what international organizations like the EU, UN, and NATO think should be. Since the early-1990s, international actors have emphasized political reform and the construction of new states as a solution for the violent conflicts that took place in the former Yugoslavia (Bieber 2011: 1793). Gezim Krasniqi describes how the Western Balkans and post-communist Europe have generally become prime sites for the international community to test theories of democratization, identity politics, and Euro-Atlantic norms, as they are understood as strategies of stabilization in these deeply divided societies. Multi-ethnicity is particularly viewed “as the recipe for healing the wounds of war and to help overcome interethnic divisions” (2013: 4).

In the last two decades, the EU has taken a lead role in these projects, replacing organizations like the UN and NATO (who oversaw the transitions in the immediate aftermath of the wars), and advancing a two-fold strategy of state-building and European integration (Bieber 2011: 1783). In addition to promoting multi-ethnicity and Western, liberal-democratic values to stabilize violence, the emphasis on EU integration provides a model for state-building according to the requirements for EU accession, allowing the international community to use the principle of conditionality, or benchmarks, sanctions, and rewards, to monitor the states’ progress (Bieber 2011: 1793).

Kosovo follows the precedent of post-conflict Bosnia, the first former-Yugoslav state to be reconstructed by international actors. The Bosnian flag features a blue and yellow color scheme with white stars, and its anthem also has no official lyrics, representing a multi-ethnic state with “no single nation to participate in the necessary unison singing” (Pavković and Kelen 2016: 83).³ Whether or not these models ultimately serve their goals, the particular attempt to build stable states by transforming collective identity involves restructuring the societies’ cognitive, emotional, and moral frameworks.

In order to communicate their intended messaging, Kosovo’s symbols are designed to constrain and frame collective meanings associated with the national past and future, transforming the very cognitive, emotional, and moral meanings which shape the nation’s self-understanding (Anderson 1991; Cerulo 1995; Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991; E. Zerubavel 1997; Y. Zerubavel 1995). The particular constraints on how the past is commemorated and how the future is framed are thus part of the international community’s strategic approach to post-conflict state-building. By managing the meanings associated with Kosovo’s national identity, the international community believes it can manage the state.

Of course, it would not be enough for international actors to merely put forth their framework, just as it would not be enough for the Unity Team to merely assert the rules of the competition. In order to ensure the fruition of this project, the international community needs agents to act on their behalf—to support, mediate, and provide a meaningful framework for citizens to identify with it. Therefore, Kosovo’s new flag and anthem mediate the relations among three types of actors: international organizations, who impose the symbols; local

³ In addition to Kosovo and Bosnia, San Marino and Spain also have lyric-less national anthems, and the anthem of the European Union is a wordless version of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* (Govan 2016).

politicians, recruited by international organizations to give the forms exposure and reproduce the intended messaging; and individual citizens, the target audience—though they have no say regarding the forms designed to symbolize their own democracy.

For Isaac Reed, this dynamic of recruitment and exclusion is the basis of all power relationships (Adams 1996; Reed 2017; Reed and Weinman 2018), as they come down to “a person needing allies to complete projects and, second, a person needing to control those allies, to keep them acting in and with the project” (Reed 2017: 93). “Power is the ability to send someone to act on your behalf, elsewhere in space and time, and to bind that person to pursue your project” (2017: 93). At the same time, power is also a matter of managing those who are *not* recruited—those who are outside of the dynamic of sending and binding—as these actors are potentially disruptive to the project (2017: 88). Therefore, as the target audience, Kosovo’s citizens inevitably remain “essential to precisely those relations of power from which they are excluded” (2017: 88).

To advance the international community’s project, key agents recruited include local political elites like Hashim Thaçi, Ramush Haradinaj, and Agim Çeku—all former Kosovo Liberation Army military leaders-turned-politicians, who are in power today. Whereas international organizations want a stable, multi-ethnic Kosovo and a future member of the EU, the local agents also have their own project—namely to maintain power. Their project involves another vision for Kosovo identity altogether, one that appears to directly contradict the international project because it is rooted in a particular, ethno-national narrative about the past and future. Therefore, as Kosovo elites’ project contends with the international community’s, they will have to coordinate their goals in order maintain power both as local political leaders and as agents acting on behalf of international organizations.

In the Bosnian case, the government contracted the selection of the flag and anthem to Spanish diplomat, Carlos Westendorp y Cabeza, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (Pavković and Kelen 2016: 151). By holding a competition in Kosovo, the inclusion of citizens⁴ would appear to make the overall selection process more democratic and inclusive—in line with the broader political goals for the new Kosovo—but it is also paradoxical, as individual citizens are routinely excluded by local politicians and international organizations from their own state-building project.

Whereas Kosovo's political leaders were democratically elected, citizens really had no say in the submission-for-sovereignty bargain that was made with the international community prior to declaring independence. They had no say in the framework for their new identity. Although the Unity Team's rules stipulate that the designs for the new state symbols must "reflect the aspirations of the people of Kosovo for integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions," these aspirations really belong to international organizations. Outside of the relationship between international organizations and local political elites, the project of individual citizens is simply to be heard, to stake a claim in their own state and nation-building project. Their understanding of the collective past and future can both adhere to or directly contest the goals of international actors and local politicians.

As the competition for the flag and anthem serves as a site of struggle for actors and their contending projects, the success of the international community's project depends on how and if local politicians carry out their tasks, and how and if citizens adhere to the rules—and identify with the symbolic forms. The success of local elites' project depends on their ability to negotiate the international community's demands and realign them with their own. The success of

⁴ Submissions came in from all around the world, including non-citizens, such a design from American politician and president of the Albanian American Civic League, Joseph DioGuardi.

individual citizens' project involves making their voices heard and getting both international actors and local elites to hear them.

In the following sections, I examine how the competition rules and the symbols' designs advance the international community's goals of building a stable state through the implementation of a new national identity for Kosovo—one that breaks with the ethnic violence of the past and reorients Kosovo's future as a multi-ethnic state and member of international organizations. At the same time, I consider how these efforts are interpreted—and whether or not they accomplish actors' intended actions. I analyze how local political elites (former Kosovo Liberation Army leaders turned politicians, like Hashim Thaçi, who are tasked with carrying out the international community's project, (re)interpret the forms, sustaining and undermining the international community's project in order to advance their own. I also demonstrate how individual citizens (mis)interpret the rules, negotiating and subverting the meanings of the symbols and the state they represent.

The Competition Rules — Framing the Future and Constraining the Past

Based on the requirements of the Ahtisaari Plan, the rules provide a specific blueprint for the symbols' designs. They can be divided into two main categories: obligations and prohibitions, or positive rules for the symbols must include and negative rules for what they are banned from featuring, respectively. By requesting and barring certain actions, the rules create visual and musical boundaries which frame the look and feel of the forms, and by implication, the meanings associated with them. They also provide specific temporal and spatial boundaries, both for the physical designs of the symbols and the national identity and state they symbolize. The five obligations commit the symbols syntactical and thematic content towards a particular vision for Kosovo's future, whereas the three prohibitions create specific restraints on how the

national past is communicated—illuminating an important connection between indexicality in time and space and the cognitive, emotional, and moral frameworks which govern identity (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002; Wagner-Pacifici 2017; Young 2000; E. Zerubavel 1997). Where do the competition rules and the symbols themselves begin and end?

First, the obligations which stipulate that the designs be “simple” and “easily recognizable,” yet “unique and original” create specific boundaries for the symbols’ syntactical elements that assume people will accept their meanings. The rules demand what Cerulo describes as “basic visual syntax.” Basic visual syntax is constituted by a limited range of primary colors, the color white to avoid clash, and simple ornamentation, with “few superimposed emblems or signs on the field.” (As opposed to basic syntax, embellished visual syntax is “variable and ornamental, involving stark color contrasts and multiple focal points”) (1993: 247-248). Because flags are designed to convey messages, the use of basic syntax presupposes that citizens accept the legitimacy of the codes and will be more inclined to accept the intended messaging. In Cerulo’s terms, basic syntax represents “normative communication”—as the designs “assume, or demand, the population’s familiarity with a strong set of shared expectations, conventions, and common assumptions—a singular focus” (1993: 251).

In the original version of the new Kosovo flag, submitted by Mentor Shala and Besnik Nuli (Ermolin 2012: 158), the design contained a blue field with a white map of Kosovo, encircled by five yellow stars. Four stars are the same size, with the largest star (nearly as big as the map itself) (intended to symbolize the Albanian community), resting at the top (“Kosovo to Pick a State Flag” 2008). In the final version, modified by local designer and former Kosovo Liberation Army fighter, Muhamer Ibrahim (‘Kosovo Flag’ n.d.), the blue field remains, and there are six white stars, all equal in size, arranged in a curve above an enlarged, gold map of

Kosovo. In his words, the blue field “represents the aspirations of the people of Kosov[o] to move ahead towards Euro-Atlantic institutions” (“Prime Minister Thaçi Meets Designer of Kosova Flag” 2008), “the golden yellow [color] [...] represents Kosovo as a rich and peaceful country” (cited in Heimer 2008), and the stars represent Kosovo’s ethnic communities: Albanian, Serb, Bosniak, Turk, Roma, and Gorani. “There are larger and smaller communities,” Ibrahim remarks, “but they are all equal in the new state of Kosovo” (cited in Heimer 2008).

Similarly, *Europe* contains a basic musical syntax, a “stable and fixed musical structure,” “confined to the foundational elements,” free of “variation or ornamentation” and “offer[ing] the most concise, direct method of fulfilling the rules upon which Western tonal music is based” (Cerulo 1993: 247-248). Composed in the key of G, *Europe*’s chords are inspiring and uplifting. Like a Christmas carol or majestic march, the 4/4 time signature offers a conventional and slow-moving rhythmic structure. By drawing on these Western themes, *Europe* sounds like any modern, European national anthem. “The feel of the composition is very nineteenth century,” Pavković and Kelen write, like a “new tune calculated to fit in with anthems generally, as if it were one the listener had always already known” (2016: 176).

Second, in addition to the type of syntax and the values it presupposes, the positive rules prescribe temporal and spatial boundaries which are connected to the meanings associated with the national future. The obligations require that the symbols “reflect the aspirations of the people of Kosovo for integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions,” further specifying that the flag must be “rectangular and of the proportions of 2:3” and the anthem no “less than 30 seconds or more than 60 seconds.” Coordinations in time and space are “at the basis of any effort to coordinate human action” (E. Zerubavel 1997: 102)—they are how actors “get their bearings,”

especially when “relations and identities are in the process of transformation” (Wagner-Pacifici 2017: 23).

Instructed to “reflect the aspirations of the people of Kosovo for integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions,” the designs of the symbols are intended to tell Kosovo’s citizens who they are, where they are, and where they are headed. “Discourses on a ‘European future for Kosovo’ have accompanied the post-war reconstruction processes and the state-building ideologies,” Vjollca Krasniqi explains, “instilling hopes among Kosovars for a ‘European’ future for their country” (V. Krasniqi 2014: 143). As the international community puts forth the requirements, local politicians like Hashim Thaçi are tasked with advancing these new meanings.

Thaçi is specifically associated with the rhetoric of youth, entrepreneurialism, and the future, in order to forge the image of a young society that is “free of any ethnic or confessional discrimination” and “where integration into the Western-oriented cultural and political discourse is willingly accepted” (Ermolin 2014: 170). “Future values have triumphed in our region,” then prime minister Thaçi notes; “we are building European realities, a region without borders” (cited in “One Year — The Government of the Independence of Kosovo” 2009: 176). In addition to the thematic orientation towards a European future, the rules prescribe syntactical coordinations in time and space for the time limits of the anthem and the shape and dimensions of the flag.

Although there was also no explanation for the particular time constraints (Pavković and Kelen 2016: 308), “time structures,” like beginnings, middles, and endings, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi writes, particularly “help construct a context, thus reflecting and affecting the way in

which a collective perceives [...] itself” (cited in Olick et al 2011: 376). Pavković and Kelen note,

One can only assume that the designers of the competition had in mind the use of the anthem on the international stage. As a symbol, the competition designers wanted the anthem to be brief in duration and not to be associated in any way with a national or ethnic group or political movement or institution in Kosovo or abroad. In short, it was to be a brief and nationally empty symbol of an independent state. (2016: 306)

The requirement for the flag to be of the proportion 2:3 also follows the convention of the majority of world flags.⁵ Historically, a flag’s proportions are integral to its function. During medieval times, flags used to be taller than they were wide for display purposes, but their widths began to increase in the seventeenth century as they were flown on merchant ships and navy vessels. Being wider than they were long made the flags more visible and impressive to allies and enemies (Knowiton and Sales 2016: 1). These boundaries make it so that Kosovo’s symbols will appear like all other national symbols—a flag like any European flag, an anthem that sounds like its already been heard.

As the obligations for the flag and anthem provide a moral map for the future, they constrain and reinterpret the collective meanings associated with the past, which is where the Unity Team’s prohibitions come into play. Unlike the obligations, the prohibitions demand inaction. They particularly constrain meanings associated with ethnic identities connected to the past. The first negative rule stipulates that submissions for the flag “must not represent or approximate the flag or emblem of any state, or the flag or emblem of any political party, movement or institution of Kosovo, or imply any allegiance to any ethnic community of Kosovo.” The second demands that the symbols “must not utilize the representation of any eagle

⁵ In addition to the competition rules, by law, Kosovo’s flag is required to follow these specifications. See Kosovo Law No. 03/L-132 for the State Protocol of the Republic of Kosovo, Article 15, State Flag. *Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo*. Retrieved February 4, 2016 http://www.gazetazyrtare.com/e-gov/tr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=351&Itemid=28.

symbol, particularly with regard to such depictions in the symbols of other states; and must not solely utilize red and black color schemes, or red, white and blue color schemes” (the colors of the Albanian flag and the Serbian flag, respectively).

By banning the state symbols from featuring existing cultural and ethnic references communicated by colors and images, the Unity Team’s prohibitions are intended to neutralize the ethnic divisions believed to be at the center of past violence, so that the state and its citizens can move on. This impetus is reflected in the preamble to Kosovo’s declaration of independence, which pledges to “move beyond the conflicts of the past and [realize] the full democratic potential of our society” (Kosovo Declaration of Independence 2008). In addition to the symbols, the Ahtisaari Plan requires other political measures and group rights like decentralization and local self-governance for Kosovo’s different ethnic communities. This sort of multi-ethnic accommodation is intended to stabilize the country in the aftermath of ethnic conflict and prevent future violence. After the anthem was adopted, Thaçi tells reporters that *Europe* is important because the members of Kosovo’s different ethnic communities can “own” it. Turning away from the past and towards the future, *Europe* also provides a “sense of closure as Kosovo continues to build a state” (cited in “A National Anthem for Kosovo” 2008).

The Unity Team’s rules have been a major source of “ridicule for [the symbols’] lack of meaning to the people of Kosovo,” Anita McKinna explains (2012: 18). “Never in my life [...] in designing not only flags or logos [did] we have this limitation,” lamented graphic designer, Shyqri Nimani (cited in de Mendoza 2009). “When you say to an artist: ‘don’t do this, otherwise you’ll be disqualified,’ of course you restrict their creativity,” said Fadil Hysaj, head of the Kosovo Commission of Symbols (cited in de Mendoza 2009). “I can’t believe that these are the choices for the flag,” Pristina resident, Shqipe Abazi tells international reporters, referring to the

finalists from the competition. “None of the designs have anything to do with [our] people. [...] It’s a big deal—how many times does a country get to choose a flag?” (cited in Wander 2008).

When the new flag was first adopted, it was not well-received by citizens nor was it embraced as the symbol of independence (V. Krasniqi: 2014: 147-148). Instead of communicating meanings that people can accept, both the syntax and the temporal and spatial coordinations are disorienting. “I can’t relate to [the flag],” artist Bardhi Haliti writes in his blog (2008).

Who are we trying to be? Whose ass are we kissing? Are the stars the best icons to represent these six communities? Do these six communities not have any history that we have to borrow history from the European Union in order to create our own identity? (2008)

Albin Kurti, activist and former leader of the political opposition, the Self-Determination Movement, dubs it the “click flag” “because it was made with a few clicks on a keyboard.” And the stars, he jokes, “are really Velcro stick-ons, just in case one of the minority communities decides to leave” (cited in McKinna 2012: 18).

“As far as the anthem goes,” Kosovo musician and director of the annual Pristina Jazz Festival, Ilir Bajri opines in an interview for the blog *Kosovo 2.0*, “I’d be more interested to discuss the need for an anthem. Why do we need one? What does this anthem symbolize and what should it symbolize?” (cited in Zhegrova 2013).

‘I think it’s a bit strange and maybe even a little funny, because the anthem has been expressed as a need of the people to musically identify a new state, a new being, but the parameters on how the anthem should be composed were set by international organizations, or by internationals who essentially ruled Kosovo.’ (cited in Zhegrova 2013)

Baki Jashari, director of the Kosovo Philharmonic Orchestra adds, “obviously it will be a handicap [...] to have an anthem without lyrics. I really can’t imagine singing an anthem without words” (cited in de Mendoza 2009).

Europe's composer, Mendi Mengjiqi discusses his frustration with the rules, adding that he thinks the rules defeated their own purpose—as an anthem based on local music is potentially more unifying for Albanians and Serbs, fulfilling the requirement of multi-ethnicity. Fahri Beqiri, Director of Kosovo Folk Ensemble *SHOTA*, explains

‘[...T]his land has many characteristics regarding the rhythms, regarding the melodies and their Oriental influences, and the influences are really big not only in Albanian music but in Serbian music as well. [...B]oth Albanian and Serbian melodies have the influence of Oriental music which northern Europe doesn't have’ (cited in de Mendoza 2009)

But, Mengjiqi laments, “‘I didn't use modes of Albanian music because [...] I wasn't allowed to make music like Albanian or Serbian or any other [...] It had to be something unique... like... Europe’” (cited in de Mendoza 2009).

While local leaders advance the international community's project, they also play by their own rules. Their project for the new Kosovo identity is rooted in an entirely different vision than multi-ethnicity and Euro-Atlantic integration. For these actors, their basis for national identity in the new state is tied to the memory of the 1999 war and an ethno-nationalist mater-narrative emphasizing Albanian military struggle against Serbs. In order to achieve this project—which appears to directly contend with the international community's project they have been recruited to advance—Kosovo's political elites simultaneously reinterpret rules and reorient the forms' meanings.

“*Baç u Kry*” (“Uncle, it's Over”)? The Ongoingness of the Past

In Diego de Mendoza's 2009 documentary, *Branding Kosovo*, journalist Krenar Gashi explains how Kosovo's first independence icon had nothing to do with the flag, anthem, or general image of a multi-ethnic state with European aspirations—but to the image of the late Kosovo Liberation Army commander, Adem Jashari, who is featured wearing a traditional

Albanian *plis* (skull cap), with the slogan, “*Baç u Kry*” (“Uncle, it’s Over”)⁶ (de Mendoza 2009). Gashi discusses how in the weeks leading up to Kosovo’s independence, “*Baç u Kry*” first appeared as a banner on the side of the Pristina Grand Hotel, and then morphed into a massive branding campaign, as the slogan and image were reproduced on billboards, tee shirts, bumper stickers, coffee mugs, internet memes, and graffiti.

According to Anna di Lellio and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, the image of Jashari and the narrative of his death serve as the anchor for the construction of Kosovo Albanian identity and the political foundation for the new state (2006: 513-514). What they call the “pan-Albanian master-narrative” condenses the war into a single event, the massacre of Jashari and his entire family, by Serbian forces in the rural village of Prekaz, Kosovo in March 1998 (just weeks before the NATO intervention). Immortalized as the “Legendary Commander,” Jashari has come to represent Albanian heroism and military sacrifice in the face of Serbian oppression—the central tropes of the Kosovo independence struggle and new national identity (di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006: 514). The narrative “give[s] meaning to the collective trauma of the more recent war experience,” offering Kosovo Albanians the “shared self-understanding as an oppressed nation looking for political and psychological deliverance” (2006: 514).

As ethnic Albanians constitute over 90% of the population, alongside imagery connected to Kosovo’s new identity, tropes of Albanian military sacrifice and martyrdom dominate the cultural landscape. Representations of the Jashari narrative are everywhere. In addition to the independence slogan, “*Baç u Kry*,” one often sees the image of Jashari carrying an automatic weapon and wearing military fatigues. Albanian flags and images of eagles are abundant;

⁶ In de Mendoza’s documentary, “*Baç u Kry*” is translated as “Dude, it’s Done” however I use the more common translation, “Uncle, it’s Over” (e.g. Beaumont 2008). Gashi explains how the term ‘Baç’ is a term of respect for an older male, such as a family member (de Mendoza 2009).

monuments of Albanian folk heroes, like Skanderbeg (fifteenth-century Albanian military commander), Mother Teresa (Catholic missionary of Albanian descent), and the late Ibrahim Rugova, President of the Republic of Kosova “parallel state” during the 1990s, all stand in Pristina’s main square. Coordinated by Albanian political elites like Thaçi, Haradinaj, and Çeku—the dominant symbolization strategy in the new state emphasizes certain epochs and versions of the past, like ancient Illyria (Illyrians are believed to be the ancestors of Kosovo’s Albanians) and the legacy of Albanian armed struggle against Serbs (Ermolin 2014: 160).

The literature on Kosovo Albanian identity construction demonstrates how the ubiquity of ethno-nationalist forms do not ultimately contradict the new state’s values of multi-ethnicity and European integration, but sustain them, as ruling political elites strategically integrate the new forms into pre-existing frameworks with which people already identify, namely the memory of Albanian military sacrifice and the suffering inflicted by Serbs (Boguslaw forthcoming; Boguslaw 2019; Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006; Ermolin 2014; Ingimundarson 2007; V. Krasniqi 2014). More specifically, when it became clear that Kosovo’s only viable path to independent statehood would mean adhering to the Ahtisaari Plan, politicians like Thaçi, Haradinaj, and Çeku began to integrate the pan-Albanian narrative with the framework for the new Kosovo, creating a stable trajectory from Jashari’s death in 1998 to the declaration of independence in 2008—when the new Kosovo was born.

Hashim Thaçi and his party, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) have been especially successful in coordinating the two narratives, deploying what Valur Ingimundarson calls a “double strategy,” which aims at “winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of Kosovo’s Albanians through memory,” while “placating the ‘international community’ by projecting a [...] future image of itself” (2007: 104). However, departing from Ingimundarson, the strategy requires

more than using the future to appeal outwards and the past to appeal inwards. It involves the integration of both concepts, repositioning Kosovo's European future within the legacy of Albanian armed struggle against Serbs (2007: 104). Independence, in the words of then prime minister Thaçi, is the “natural epilogue to our long, painful and historical journey [...] and our future is certain under the common roof: European Union and NATO” (cited in “One Year — The Government of the Independence of Kosovo” 2009: 176)

During the ceremony for the presentation of the new flag, Thaçi remarked, “I feel very happy about the spirit, the mind, the sacrifices, [...] and the ideals behind this flag.”

‘It is the hand of a former freedom fighter of the Kosovo Liberation Army that has designed it [...] [This is] the new flag of the state of Kosovo which waves outside of the UN offices and all over the world.’ (cited in de Mendoza 2009)

Here, Thaçi reorients the flag's meanings in time and space. In emphasizing how the flag was designed by a former KLA soldier, Thaçi positions the meaning of the flag within the commemorative framework of Jashari and Albanian military sacrifice, yet by also introducing it as the flag which will “wave outside the UN offices and all over the world,” he positions it externally, towards Kosovo's future as a member of international organizations. Integrating the flag into both frameworks for the new state and identity, the flag becomes a literal “blueprint” for Kosovo's European future, while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that Kosovo Albanians' past struggle is now “over,” as “*Baç u Kry*” asserts. Through this temporal and spatial reorientation, Thaçi rewrites the rules, creating a different cognitive, emotional, and moral map to forge the basis of national identity in the new state.

While “everyone was celebrating under this motto and this sign [*Baç u Kry*]” Gashi recounts, “it was [...] known in advance that everything [representing] one ethnicity (or the other) [...] would be moved away from the celebration of independence. We knew that because

Kosovo was getting independence based on the international plan” (cited in de Mendoza 2009). In fact, the agreement among Kosovo Albanian elites connected to the selecting of both the flag and anthem was that adhering to the rules was a small price to pay.⁷ What mattered was that Kosovo was declaring independence. In fact, they assumed that they would simply adopt new symbols later.

Of course, not “everyone” was celebrating under this motto and this sign. As the framework for Kosovo’s past, present, and future, elites must exclude other citizens with competing narratives in order to maintain it. Kosovo anthropologist Nita Luci explains how the dominance of the pan-Albanian narrative and the legacy of Adem Jashari “leave[e] no room for [other] painful stories and experiences of war” (2014: 177). Two groups whose experiences of the Kosovo war have been particularly suppressed by the dominance of the Jashari legend include participants in the peaceful resistance during the 1990s (led by Ibrahim Rugova, president of the unofficial Republic of Kosova) and the survivors of the Serbian regime’s practice of widespread, systematic rape during the war (DiLellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006: 520-522).

These citizens must compete for their place in the cultural and political landscape, because, there is “no space for public disagreement” with the Jashari legend, and “any public criticism of the legendary commander amounts to blasphemy” (DiLellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006: 514, 521). According to Luci, this “marginalization of other experiences is often claimed as a necessity” by political elites “in order to build reconciliatory relations and promote a strategy of ‘forgive and forget’” (N. Luci 2014: 177). In other words, elites like Thaçi invoke

⁷ These elites include government officials from the Kosovo Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, political leaders, as well as designers, musicians, and artists.

the international community's project to further silence experiences that do not align with the legacy of Jashari and Albanian military struggle.

Excluded from their own state and nation-building project, citizens also see through the attempts to realign the symbols' meanings. For example, while the six stars on Kosovo's flag officially demarcate Kosovo's six ethnic communities, one alternative interpretation associated with Thaçi is that the six stars also represent the six countries of the Albanian diaspora. In an interview, Albion Basha, an eighteen-year-old from Pristina, tells journalist Die Morina that he believes the new flag is "purely political." "I think that the red-and-black flag belongs to all Albanians, while the blue one belongs only to Hashim Thaçi. The flag in our hearts is the [Albanian] one" (cited in Morina 2017). Political activist Rron Gjinovci adds, "the Kosovo flag is a disaster and a product of a non-democratic process of adopting it" (cited in Morina 2017)

Despite (or rather, in light of) the temporal and spatial coordinations constraining the past and framing the future, the international community's project is critiqued by citizens for being "a representation of Kosovo's infancy, where Kosovo sees itself as a child, is treated as a child and in essence needs to be educated as a child," Kosovo journalist, Besa Luci writes (B. Luci 2016). Ströhle notes how the language of "infantilization and invalidation feature prominently in the policy discourse on post-conflict and post-colonial societies," and in the Kosovo case, international political, and economic support is tied to Kosovo's willingness to "play by the rules of the club" and its "unquestioned acceptance" of the Ahtisaari Plan and its prescriptions (2012: 232, 236). But no matter how willing Kosovo is to "play by the rules of the club," its European future does appear to be arriving anytime soon (Bieber 2011: 1793).

Florian Bieber explains that Kosovo's contested status prevents membership in the European Union and other international organizations such as the UN and NATO. First, not all

EU members recognize Kosovo, and moreover, the EU's strategy of conditionality—the prospect of EU accession for countries in the Western Balkans based on compliance international standards and reforms, is “irrelevant” in Kosovo. Not only has the EU never offered Kosovo the prospect to engage in such reforms, it “lacks the leverage to reward [Kosovo's] compliance” (Bieber 2011: 1793).

Not only does Kosovo's contested status block its membership in international organizations, reports of widespread political corruption and organized crime, connected to the very same leaders like the Thaçi and Haradinaj and the international state-builders who proclaimed Kosovo's new beginning, further prevent Kosovo from meeting benchmarks towards EU accession. In 2009, Kosovo was put on the ‘black’ Schengen List, making it difficult for citizens to leave the country without a visa (Shaini 2016).

At the edges of the EU, Kosovo's uncertain political status creates difficult conditions impacting citizens' identities. With a population of just under two million, over 30% of its citizens live below the poverty line, and 60% of the youth are unemployed (CIA World Factbook 2018). As for international community's specific intentions for the state, the goal of multi-ethnicity is unachieved—ethnic divisions have been reinforced by the same political measures intended to neutralize them, and the country is divided into ethnically homogenous enclaves (McKinna 2012: 20). This raises the question, despite the slogan, *Baç u Kry*, to what extent are the struggles of the past, indeed, “over?” To what extent can local elites maintain it or the international community constrain it?

Based on the competition rules, the visual and musical modes which should orient the new symbols' meanings in time and space are instead, suspended in time and space—much like Kosovo's citizens. The temporal and spatial disorientation produces anxiety about “being barred

from participation in the social world” (E. Zerubavel 1997: 103). ““We are not only telling the Europeans who we are, but at the same time we also want to tell it to ourselves—to convince ourselves that we are Europeans,”” Kosovo journalist Artan Muhaxhiri writes (cited in Ströhle 2012: 238). Unable to look back or move forward, the symbols’ meanings inevitably get “stuck in culture and history” (Wagner-Pacifici 2015: 26). As Bardhi Haliti ruminates, “I still can’t decide if the part about having no lyrics is ridiculous or cool” (2008).

Who is Really Writing the Rules?

Although the Unity Team put forth the rules, elites like Thaçi not only reinterpreted the meanings of the symbols, they also assumed that they would change the symbols later. However, in both competitions, the majority of submissions did not even adhere to the selection criteria in the first place. In the competition for the anthem, submissions which did not make the shortlist included Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy*—the anthem of the European Union—which was played when Kosovo declared independence and at other official ceremonies prior to the adoption of *Europe*, as well as ruler-breakers like *Himni i Flamurit* (“Hymn to the Flag”), the national anthem of Albania, and the folk song, *Kur Ka Ra Kushtrimi N’Kosovë* (“When the War-Cry Descends on Kosovo”), the anthem of the unrecognized Republic of Kosova which existed from 1990-2000 (Pavković and Kelen 2016: 309). More striking is how the vast majority of submissions for the flag also explicitly broke the rules.

Filmed during the competition for the flag, De Mendoza’s documentary shows hundreds of flag submissions scattered across the desk of Fadil Hysaj, head of the Kosovo Commission of Symbols. Pointing to the smaller pile, he explains, “these are the flags of those who accepted the rules” (cited in de Mendoza 2009). What we see are submissions that utilize red and black color schemes, double-headed eagles, and other motifs connected to Albanian history and culture, such

as the black spiral, an ancient Dardanian symbol, in the third finalist's design (Charter 2008).

Hysaj also notes that many proposals used red and black color schemes, adding the use of white, so as to technically remain within the confines of the rules (de Mendoza 2009). On February 27, 2008, the Kosovo Art Gallery in Pristina held an exhibition called "Symbols of Kosovo," featuring all of the flag proposals, now featured on the website, *Flags of the World*.

Because citizens' submissions did not follow the rules, it raises the question, who is really writing them? That is, who is really in control? Both essential yet disruptive to the extant power dynamic between the international community and local elites, the entire project for the new Kosovo state and identity hinges upon citizen's uptake—how they interpret the rules, how they identify with the symbolic forms and their meanings, and whether or not they accept them at all. Not only did the majority of submissions for the design competition explicitly violate (or cleverly work around) the Unity Team's rules, Vjollca Krasniq's 2014 study found that less than a third of citizens identified with their new national symbols. The overwhelming majority of citizens identified exclusively with their respective ethnic flags. Only about half of the Kosovo-Albanians surveyed reported that they even knew the national anthem, while only 2% of Serbs said that they knew it either (V. Krasniqi 2014: 148: 161). Unable to communicate their intended meanings, these forms do not promote interethnic identification, and the European future they depict remains an impossible fantasy.

One reading of the power relations among the three actors is that because citizens are excluded, they are voiceless and powerless. Instead, my findings illuminate the opposite: citizens are extremely powerful. The competition for the flag and anthem and the ensuing struggle show how citizens not only exercise agency in violating the rules or refusing to identify with the forms and their meanings—these actions delegitimize and disempower the other two actors' projects.

Neither the international community nor local elites can manage the state by imposing a new identity—national identity is not something that can be imposed. The international community also cannot manage the local leaders they recruit on behalf of this project, and even though citizens suffer the consequences of limited mobility and strict visa policies—the specific aspirations for integration into the European Union were never their aspirations.

Therefore, as international organizations and local elites continue to vie for authority over the administration of the state and the new national identity, they prove themselves incapable of controlling either category, rendering themselves powerless in the advancement of their own projects. In 2015-16, the mass exodus of citizens in fleeing Kosovo to seek economic asylum in the EU further demonstrates citizens' agency. Their action of flight delegitimizes the projects of local and international actors who cannot ultimately monopolize citizens' movement, the direct action further create logistical problems for the European countries faced with the influx of migrants. The one thing neither international nor local actors cannot administer or control is the people.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined how the rules for the competitions and the designs for Kosovo's national symbols are part of the broader power struggle among international organizations, local political elites, and individual citizens vying for authority over (and agency in) the construction of national identity in the new Kosovo state. As the rules obligate and constrain actions, specifically how official meanings associated with the national past and future are communicated, I have demonstrated how all three actors use these forms to either control, co-opt, or contest meanings. Despite the ways in which they are excluded, the findings reveal the power that Kosovo's citizens have and the agency that they exercise, shedding light on the

indeterminacy of power and power relationships on three different levels: 1) the forms - how Kosovo's symbols and the competition rules both represent relations of power and are themselves forms of social control, subject to innumerable interpretations and misinterpretations, 2) the dynamics - shaped by the shifting interrelationship of recruitment, exclusion, and subversion among the actors, and 3) the struggle over national identity - involving unsettled transformations of actors' power positions that impact the symbols' meanings and the social realities they represent. The findings also show that identities cannot be imposed, either by external organizations or by local elites—and that social meanings cannot be managed. After all, the meanings of national symbols are always changing, depending on the contexts in which they are used and the actors who give them exposure.

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