

BAC, U KRY! Space, Albanian Commemoration and the Gheg Variety as a Linguistic Symbol of State Independence in Postwar Kosovo

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Abstract

This paper investigates the reconstruction of Albanian identity in Kosovo after the region's transformation to state independence in 2008. The cultural environment emerged as a site of ethnic appropriation and contestation in the longstanding interethnic struggles between the Albanians and the Serbs. The study examines the socio-symbolic and linguistic manifestations of national identity in Pristina, the capital city of Kosovo, through the lens of Linguistic Landscape Studies. The first aspect of the study investigates M. Theresa Boulevard, the central promenade of the city and a site of memory and commemoration, to highlight how the period of South Slavic hegemony in Kosovo and the recent interethnic war resulted in a redefinition of Albanian identity. The second aspect of the study focuses on the written manifestation of the Gheg variety of Albanian as a symbol of Kosovo's independence. Through this dual focus on memory and language, the study aims to arrive at an understanding of how new national and political self-identifications are shaped in contexts that have undergone ethno-political conflicts and socio-political shifts. We argue that the symbolic configuration of Kosovo suggests a redefinition of Kosovo-based Albanian identity following the transformation to state independence. The study contributes to an understanding of the multi-layered redefinition of Albanian identity in Kosovo, calling attention to language and memory in the process of constructing national identities in postwar contexts.

Keywords

Albanian identity; Kosovo; memory politics; Gheg variety; Linguistic Landscape Studies

Introduction

This paper examines the renegotiation of Albanian identity after the postwar transformation of Kosovo to state independence in 2008. In the longstanding interethnic struggles between the Albanians and the Serbs, the cultural environment emerged as a site of ethnic appropriation and contestation. While

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throughout the twentieth century the ethnic Serbs had the upper hand in shaping the cultural configuration of Kosovo, the interethnic war at the turn of the millennium reversed the traditional power hierarchies. After NATO military forces ended Serbian rule in Kosovo, a period of socio-political and ideological uncertainty commenced. Indeed, during the phase of international supervision (1999-2008), the geopolitical position of Kosovo remained ambiguous: On the one hand, the entity turned into a protectorate of the United Nations (known as UNMIK) with provisional government structures and a legislative framework founded on democratic notions of civic inclusion and multi-ethnicity. In part, this turned tangible the Albanian aspirations for independence from Serbia. Yet, on the other hand, negotiations between the political leaders in Belgrade and Pristina yielded no results, as both parties refused to compromise in their political stances. The status quo maintained under the international supervision of UNMIK resulted in the Albanian appropriation of the socio-cultural and symbolic spheres (Krasniqi 2013, Demaj 2022, Demaj 2023). In this context, two different ideological routes took shape, creating tension between the vision of the Albanian majority elites and that of the international community. Defined in Ermoli (2015) in terms of a discrepancy between civic and ethnic notions of national identity, by the time Kosovo attained national independence (2008), the symbolic configuration of the entity corresponded with the national ideological discourse of the ethnic Albanians (Demaj 2022, Demaj 2023).

Against this backdrop, the study zooms in on Kosovo Albanian expression(s) of ethno-national identity as manifested in two dimensions of the built environment in the capital city of Kosovo, Pristina. The central aim is to suggest the reconfiguration of a Kosovo-based Albanian identity following the transformation of Kosovo into an independent country in 2008. Throughout the twentieth century, the Albanians of Kosovo have aspired to ethno-political unification with the perceived motherland, Albania. In the face of South Slavic hegemony, and in the ethno-nationalist spirit of the early twentieth century, the shape of the Albanians' self-perception was that of a single nation separated by political borders. In this paper we argue that in the context of the recent transition to national independence this ideological discourse is revalued and provided with a multilingual redefinition that focuses on the Kosovo Albanians' experience of prewar Serbian oppression and war. This contention calls forth a dual examination of the symbolic configuration of the public space. This study entails a comprehensive exploration of the cultural and symbolic configuration of public space, centering on Linguistic Landscape Studies (LLS) as a lens for investigating socio-symbolic and linguistic manifestations of national identity. LLS has emerged as a fruitful

domain for examining societal multilingualism, extending beyond language to encompass images, cultural symbols, signs, and objects. Expanding on this semiotic understanding, our research begins by investigating M. Theresa Boulevard in the city center, examining its role as a site of memory and commemoration, particularly in relation to the redefinition of Albanian identity following South Slavic hegemony and the interethnic war in Kosovo. Additionally, we focus on the written manifestation of the Gheg variety of Albanian as a symbol of national independence in the post-independence sphere. By delving into the dual aspects of memory and language, we aim to attain a comprehensive understanding of how these intrinsic features shape the struggle for national and political self-identification within an ethno-nationalist rhetoric.

The linguistic landscape as a site of memory

This paper is grounded in the theory and methods of Linguistic Landscape Studies (LLS), a strand of sociolinguistic research that emphasizes the interplay between language and space in understanding societal aspects of language and multilingualism (Barni & Bagna 2009; Shohamy 2015, Shohamy 2012). The notion of the linguistic landscape (LL) has evolved over time, initially focusing on written language display in urban public spaces (Van Mensel, Vandenbroucke & Blackwood 2016), but more recently embracing a semiotic perspective that considers the intricate relationship between language and other meaning-making phenomena in shaping identity in place (Jaworski & Thurlow 2009, Lou 2009). In line with this semiotic strand, our study explores the material environment as a symbolic fabric of group identity and belonging, drawing in part on the work of Ben Rafael (2016), who suggests that both the material and symbolic manifestations of space play a role in shaping individual and collective senses of belonging. Previous research in LL has similarly highlighted the link between space and identity, often focusing on settings affected by intergroup conflict or socio-political transformations. For instance, Ben Rafael et. al's (2006) study of Jerusalem emphasizes the symbolic configuration of space as a representation of a city's identity, often aligned with the national ideologies and narratives of ruling political elites. Similarly, Waksman and Shohamy (2009) illustrate how the symbolic reconfiguration of Tel Aviv during its centennial celebrations reflected a Jewish-centric narrative, thereby excluding the narrations of other population groups.

The symbolic configuration of identity in the built environment may give rise to a distinct dimension of space known as the commemorative landscape.

Referencing Baker (2012), commemorative practices are deeply intertwined with everyday life, taking the form of both mobile and immobile objects such as monuments, statues, street signs, and ceremonial events (Baker 2012: 26). The physical environment conveys a historical narrative that can foster a collective sense of belonging, or conversely, can marginalize certain segments of the population. This is particularly pronounced in contexts of ethno-political dispute and intergroup contestation, and where the memorial landscape serves as a tool for reinforcing the current political legitimacy of the state, thereby excluding the offending community from shared representation. Several scholars have examined the commemorative spaces of different geopolitical contexts, employing a semiotic and linguistic perspective to analyze the cultural landscape. Examples include Woldemariam (2016) in Ethiopia, Trumper-Hecht in Israel (2009), Guilat and Espinoza-Ramirez (2016) in Spain and Rani (2016) in Mumbai. In more recent years, LL researchers have also devoted attention to commemorative naming practices, as evidenced by studies conducted by Buchstaller and Fabiszak (2021), Tan & Purschke (2021), and Rubdy (2021), among others.

Albanian identity politics in the twentieth century

Competing memory politics in Kosovo's turbulent interethnic past

The Albanians and the Serbs have traditionally constructed their ethno-national identities and concomitant historical heritages in Kosovo in competition with one another (Kadric 2016). Bordering Kosovo in the north and south respectively, each ethnic group has traditionally sought national identification and political unification with either Serbia or Albania as their motherland (Pavlovic 2009). Congruently, mutually exclusive claims over Kosovo's ethnic belonging on either side of the fence should be viewed simultaneously as a devaluation of the historical claims of the ethnic other (Demaj 2023). The Serbian historical interpretation tailors the Kosovo narration to the foundational mythos of the Serbian nation, which is traced back to the medieval Serbian kingdom (1217–1346) under the Nemanjić Dynasty (1166–1371), and related to the authority of the medieval Christian Orthodox Church. During the Middle Ages, Kosovo became the *cpuе* (English: “heart,” or more commonly, “cradle”) of Serbian civilization, and proof of the perceived early existence and historical endurance of a unified Serbian nation in the territory.¹ Indeed, at the height of its sovereign power

1 Detrez (1996, 1999) emphasizes in this respect that the concept of the nation did not exist in medieval times as medieval kingdoms were in principle ethnically heterogeneous societies.

under Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (1331–1355), the medieval Kingdom of Serbia expanded its modern-day borders of Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia to Albania, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Greece (Judah 2008: 19–20). Territorially, Kosovo was situated in the middle of the Kingdom (Detrez 1999: 17), and the medieval Serbian Church, upon which the Nemanjić royals cemented their royal authority, thereby uniting the previously dispersed Serbian tribes around the common Christian institution, was located in Kosovo. The name the Serbs traditionally give to Kosovo by reference to its Serbian medieval heritage, *Kosovo i Metohija* (English: Kosovo and Metohija), and at which the Albanians take particular offense, can be traced back to the fourteenth century, as *Metohija* in Serbian refers to the monastic possessions erected by the Nemanjić royals in the region. These include the monasteries of Gračanica (1315) in the present-day municipality of Pristina, and Visoki Dečani (1333) near the city of the same name. Today, many Serbian nationalists claim the existence of Serbian monasteries in the built landscape of Kosovo as indisputable evidence of their early existence in Kosovo.

In Serbia's ethno-territorial campaign at the end of Ottoman reign in the late nineteenth century, emphatic accent was put on the Serbian interpretation of the Christian rebirth (Payton 2006). Undoubtedly, the most retold Serbian legend elucidating this point, relevant for the ideological packaging of Kosovo's conquest in the first Balkan War (1912), is the *Battle of Kosovo* (1389). Under the command of Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (1329–1389), who ruled in the north of Kosovo, the legendary battle was fought between a (multi-ethnic) coalition of Serbs, Montenegrins, Bulgarians, and Albanians against the invading Ottoman troops of Sultan Murat I (1362–1389) in the fields of Kosovo Polje/Fushë Kosova on June 28, 1389. By the time of the Turkish invasion in the western Balkans in the mid-fourteenth century, the great medieval Kingdom of Serbia had already disintegrated into smaller principalities due to internal conflicts under the reign of Stefan Uroš V (1355–1371), the son of Tsar Dušan. Consequently, in the historical era the Battle of 1389 took place, the Great Kingdom of Serbia had already disintegrated, and many Serbian princes, including Lazar, became vassals of the Ottoman Empire (Judah 2008: 20). In 1389, Prince Lazar refused to be further subject to Ottoman rule, which involved paying taxes and delivering soldiers to the Sultan (Detrez 1999: 19). As a result, Sultan Murat I led his Turkish forces to the western Balkans, where the battle fought out in Kosovo resulted in the death of both Sultan Murat I and Prince Lazar (Judah 2008). Geopolitically speaking, the battle itself was inconsequential for the course of history: by 1459, Serbia was integrally annexed into the Ottoman Empire. Yet, from an ideological stance, the legend developed into the matrix of Serbia's ethno-

nationalist crusade at the end of Ottoman reign. The Serbian campaign was similar to that of the other ethno-national communities. In the first place, it was geopolitically driven, and thus revolved around the territorial expansion of its national borders. Ideologically, Serbia's political ambition was presented as a historical responsibility to "restore" its medieval Serbian lands while simultaneously "bringing back" Christian authority to the Balkans (Janssen 2015). In the first respect, the notion ingrained in the Serbian psyche was that the Ottoman conquest had impinged on Serbia's natural development into a Western European type of nation state (Payton 2006). Accordingly, the death of the historical figure, Prince Lazar, was exalted to mythic status, representing the beginning of a dark era under Ottoman occupation. Prince Lazar was modeled in the image of Jesus Christ (Detrez 1999; Payton 2006; Judah 2008; Petrović & Stefanović 2010); at the same time, his death held the promise of Serbia's eventual rebirth.

For the most part, the Albanian assertion over Kosovo at the end of the nineteenth century rested on the geopolitical aspiration of nation-state congruency. In the ethno-nationalist spirit of the time, this view, defined as *irredentism* in Detrez (1996; 1999), posited that regions traditionally inhabited by an ethno-demographic majority group deserved political unification. However, the design of the greater Albanian state coincided with ethnically mixed territories claimed by the South Slavs on various other historical grounds. These regions included the Albanian-dominant lands of present-day Kosovo, the Preševo valley in South Serbia, Northwest Macedonia, and parts of Montenegro. Comparable to the other nationalist rivals, the Albanians sought validation for their envisaged ethnic country by reverting to the ancient past. According to their historical account, the Albanians are indigenous inhabitants of the Balkans, who share ancestry with the Illyrian tribes that populated the region before the Roman civilization. As such, the Albanian claim of autochthony in Kosovo preceded the South Slavs' arrival in the sixth century (Judah 2008). The second part of the Albanian narration goes back to the Middle Ages. Similar to the medieval Battle of Kosovo (1389) and its epic hero Prince Lazar, which conveyed the constituent elements of the Serbian national identity, the Albanian protagonist Skanderbeg related the medieval making of a unified Albanian nation. The legend of Skanderbeg,² who was born into an Albanian noble family as Gjergj Kastrioti (1405–1468) in the present-day city of Lezhë in Albania, rhetorically fortified the Albanians' resolve for national unity at the end of the nineteenth century. Rediscovered

2 In Albanian, he is known as *Skenderbeg* rather than Skanderbeg. The common alternative form *Skenderbeu* is used in the nominative case in Albanian, whereas Skanderbeg is vocative.

by the Albanian nationalist historian Naim Frashëri in 1898, the disputed Albanian version of the Skanderbeg biography can be summarized as follows: Skanderbeg was sent in early infancy to the Sultan's court. His father Gjon Kastrioti, who was an Albanian nobleman, and chieftain of the territories stretching from present-day Prizren (Kosovo) to Central Albania, was also a vassal of the Sultan. According to the common customs of the time, his son Gjergj Kastrioti was sent as hostage to the high courts of the Sultan. Converted to Islam, Skanderbeg rose in military rank, and became a high military commander of the Turkish Army. In 1443, Skanderbeg deserted the Ottoman Army during the Battle of Niš (in present-day southwest Serbia) along with other Albanian soldiers, and turned against the Ottomans. According to the Albanian narration, he created the League of Lezhë, unifying the Albanian noblemen in combat against the Ottoman expansion to Western Europe. Subsequently, in the present-day Albanian city of Krujë, Gjergj Kastrioti raised for the first time what would become the Albanian flag with the two-headed eagle, ruling the north of Albania until his death in 1468. For the Albanians of the late nineteenth century, the League of Lezhë (1444), which united the Albanians against a common invader, was paralleled to their unification in the League of Prizren (1878). As noted in Kostovicova (2005), the League was established by Albanian intellectuals in 1878 as a "political-military motor" (p. 31) first in defense of the Albanian-dominant lands against the invading South Slavs. Secondly, it turned against the Young Turks in the pursuit of Albanian national autonomy. While in medieval chronicles, and in Western interpretations of the historical figure, Skanderbeg was declared a Christian crusader who helped halt further expansion of the Ottoman Turks to the West (Judah 2008; Dyrstad 2012), in the Albanian legend the religious motives are left out. In particular, the religious dimension of the historical account did not lend itself to the Albanians' national identification as a religiously mixed nation at the end of the nineteenth century. Rather, the national symbolism of Albanian unity conveyed by Skanderbeg limited itself to the continuation of national unity among the Albanians in the face of their failed geopolitical unification at the Congress of London in 1912, and subsequent South Slavic domination.

Correspondingly, the legacy of Skanderbeg was perpetuated throughout the twentieth century, epitomizing the Albanians' continuous pursuit of national unification. The importance of Skanderbeg in Albanians' nationalist ideology is brought together in his statue, as shown in Figure 2 below. The statue was raised in the central boulevard of Pristina after the interethnic war (1998–1999), and is similar to the statues erected in Tirana (Albania), and Tetovo (Macedonia, Judah, 2008). Along with the Coat of Arms (the two-headed

eagle), which influenced the national flag of the country Albania in 1912, the perceived autochthonous borders of the imagined *Greater Albania* are drawn in the statue, revealing how even in contemporary times, the idea of ethno-national distinctiveness is sustained among the ethnic groups despite the postwar transition of Kosovo to an inclusive society.

To many outsiders, the rivaling foundational chronicles of the Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo may be viewed as crude echoes of the past, irrelevant to an explanation of the longstanding animosities between the communities in more recent historical times. While it is true that the crux of the interethnic disagreement does not go back to the competing narrations, rhetorically, they have acted as the driving force in perpetuating interethnic divides (Demaj 2023). In the early twentieth century, these chronicles served the nation-state dogma ubiquitously in each of the different nationalist pursuits that coincided with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Intercepted by the period under socialism (1945–1991), in which a new civic understanding of identity emerged, unifying the Albanians and Serbs on the grounds of a common supranational socialist cause, ethnic nationalism violently reappeared in the 1980s, resulting more forcefully in the interethnic break-up between the communities.

When in 1989 the autonomous mechanisms of Kosovo were removed and Kosovo was placed under the administration of Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, intergroup relations severed, resulting in a spatially divided society along ethnic, linguistic, and ideological lines (Malcolm 1999; Detrez 2019). Throughout the 1990s, the Albanians and the Serbs were taught different historical versions of the past. While the ethnic Serbs occupied the public space, the Albanian resistance centered on mass grassroots defiance in alternative underground dimensions of the same public environment. The resistance movement brought the Albanian population together in the joint cause of boycotting the Serbian government (Janssen 2015). More particularly, they created a previously unprecedented parallel society with its own educational system, health care, government and institutions. Through the continuation of self-managing structures throughout the 1990s, the Albanians managed to ignore the presence of Serbian rule. The parallel government was led by Dr. Ibrahim Rugova and his party, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). The ideology of Rugova was inherently pacifist and the strategy included attracting international intervention to Kosovo by passive resistance. From 1997 onwards a different Albanian faction came to the surface and presented itself as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The central figure in this military organization was Adem Jashari, whose image became central in Kosovo's

postwar memory politics. Jashari was assassinated by Serbian forces, not in battle, but in his village home, along with 28 other members of his family, most of whom were women and children. The violence that ensued between the KLA and the Serbian government eventually alarmed the international community (Judah 2008), who intervened in 1999 through a bombing campaign over Belgrade, effectively ending Serbian rule in Kosovo. The period between 2000 and 2008 was characterized by UNMIK administration and the presence of international supervisory bodies. This period marked intensive efforts of the international community to set up a provisional government and engage in stabilizing interethnic relations in Kosovo. Yet, while Kosovo's laws and regulations were based on a democratic and Western-based civic model of multi-ethnic inclusivity, in reality the society remained divided along ethnic and ideological lines.

The Albanian language in Kosovo: diglossia

Different from the South Slavs, whose distinct ethno-national identities accorded with their divergent ethno-religious histories (see Greenberg 2001, Jovic 2006), the Albanians remained a culturally unified community throughout twentieth century South Slavic hegemony based on their joint language and notwithstanding their discrepancies. The Albanian language, which stands alone on the Indo-European tree as an isolated linguistic branch, consists of two major dialect groups: Gheg and Tosk (Albanian: Gegë(ri)sh and Toskë(ri)sh). The natural isogloss separating the north-based Gheg speech communities from the south-based Tosk dialect speakers is the river Shkumbin that runs through central Albania (see map in Figure 1). In the late nineteenth century, the Gheg-based variant spoken in the (present-day) north of Albania, Kosovo, South Serbia and West-Macedonia underwent a gradual process of standardization. The standardization processes were influenced by prominent nationalist writers, lyricists, and historians who elevated the literary usage of Gheg. A prominent example was the nationalist Albanian poet Gjergj Fishta (1871–1940). On the other hand, the prominent historian Naim Frashëri (1846–1900), who chronicled the highly influential Albanian nationalist account of Skanderbeg in his *Istoria e Iskenderbegut* (1978) wrote in Toskërisht, the variety promoted to the dialect base for the standard Albanian language. It should be underscored that with it, he emblematically brought the figure of Skanderbeg to the center of Albanian national history in the same period in time that the League of Prizren (1878) was created, which mobilized the Albanians around the joint ethno-nationalist cause. As noted previously, in the first place, the League of Prizren (1878) was established as

an Albanian political and military force to defend the Albanian-inhabited lands within the Ottoman Empire from South Slavic invasion. After Istanbul (1881) disbanded its military devices, the League transformed itself into a cultural union of Albanian intellectuals tasked with the preservation of the Albanian culture and language (Kostovicova 2005).



Figure 1. The geographical spread of the Ghëg and Tosk dialects (source: Wikimedia)

The state boundaries drawn in the Congress of London (1912) encouraged the standardization of Tosk in Albania, while the Ghëg dialect experienced substantial functional and symbolic status loss. Against the anti-Albanian undertaking of the early twentieth century, the Albanians of former Yugoslavia were denied official access to their own mother tongue, restricting the development of the Ghëg dialect, which was exclusively spoken by the Albanians in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). As a result, the nationalizing transition of Albania to an independent state in 1912 had as its linguistic consequence the gradual codification of a Tosk-based standard language minimally influenced by the Ghëg variety. After 1945, the standard

language imposed on a widespread scale by the communist leadership of Enver Hoxha in Albania was based on the Tosk variety spoken in the south of the country, where many prominent communist leaders were from (Detrez 1999). In 1972, the standard language spoken in Albania was adopted in Kosovo as the official language of the Albanians, co-official to Serbo-Croatian in the territory.

In addition to the complex interethnic Albanian-Serbian realities, the sociolinguistic situation of Kosovo should be understood in relation to the diglossic order that constrained the spoken and written use of Albanian. The phenomenon of diglossia in its current definition was first coined by Ferguson (1959) who used the concept to describe the situation in which two genetically related dialects, i.e., these are Gheg and Tosk in Albanian speech communities, are spoken in the same territory, but with strictly divided social functions or domains. As further specified in Landry & Allard (1994), diglossic sceneries are characterized by strict “compartmentalization” and “stability.” This means that the High variety (or H variety) is usually reserved for formal situations and written speech –in the case of Albanian, this is the Tosk-based standard language – whereas the Low variety (or L variety) –the Gheg dialect, occurs in colloquial speech and informal contexts. In contrast to Gheg, the Tosk-based H variety is status-related and stronger politically, and therefore codified, institutionalized, and attributed for widespread use in media, schools and literature. Alongside their different functional distributions, other characteristics typifying diglossia (Ferguson 1959: 450–453) appertain to the Tosk-Gheg discrepancies in Kosovo. Firstly, there are considerable internal differences in terms of grammatical, lexical, and phonetic segments enabling any Albanian to detect whether a speaker is Gheg or Tosk. Secondly, the language acquisition process of the Gheg L variety in Kosovo occurs naturally, as opposed to the standard Tosk language, which is learned in later stages at school, and through Albanian novels and television. Finally, the Albanian literary tradition since the Second World War (WWII: 1940–1945) has exclusively promoted the Tosk-based standard, leading to a strained sociolinguistic milieu in which the Gheg vernacular and its speakers have been rendered marginalized and undervalued. Arguably, the perceived “non-conflictual” order relating to any diglossic context (Ferguson 1959, Allard 1994) existed between the varieties throughout the twentieth century in the Albanians’ joint undertaking to preserve a sense of national unity despite their geopolitical partition (Byron 1975).

In recent years, however, a tentative shift can be observed in which the traditional functional differences of Gheg and Tosk are rapidly fading.

This arguably has to do with the postwar advance of a Kosovo Albanian consciousness that co-exists alongside the traditional ethnic Albanian identity. As this paper will show, Gheg-based lexical items and grammatical constructs are increasingly adopted in Kosovo Albanian media, steadily elevating the status and prestige of Gheg in Kosovo (and even in Albania). An example illustrating the promotion of Gheg is the consistent use of the infinitive form *me* in for example, “*me shku*,” which translates to English as “to go.” The infinitive does not exist in the Tosk-based standard, where “to go” would be translated into the verb phrase, “*për të shkuar*” (Byron 1945). While the magnitude of these shifts has yet to be examined structurally through linguistic study, the change is perceptible in sociolinguistic respects, as shown in this paper.

Methodology

To examine the postwar renegotiation of Albanian identity, this study employs a twofold methodology inspired by Muth’s (2015) research on Nagorno-Karabakh. Initially, the cultural landscape of Pristina is analyzed as a site of collective memory and commemoration, drawing in part upon Baker’s (2012) work as well. It is acknowledged that a collective sense of identity and belonging can be closely tied to the symbolic representation of memory within the built environment. This study adopts a city-centric approach, focusing on the capital city of Pristina, which allows us to investigate the relationship between the commemorative landscape and the identity of the place within the context of everyday social life. Specifically, our examination concentrates on the central trajectory of Pristina, namely Mother Theresa Boulevard and its central squares. This boulevard symbolically represents state power, as evidenced by the presence of key government buildings and the parliament situated there. Figure 2 illustrates M. Theresa Boulevard and highlights the various commemorative objects located along this path.

Furthermore, in addition to analyzing the material environment as a site of commemoration, language is also considered within the framework of Kosovo’s postwar identity-building politics. Previous studies by Demaj (2022a, 2022b) and Demaj & Vandenbroucke (2016) advocate for incorporating LL as a critical aspect of investigating the symbolic practices involved in identity formation in Kosovo. While in these studies the emphasis is on the intergroup struggle between the Albanians and the Serbs, in this study we focus on the Albanians and their language. In particular, we demonstrate how the growing prominence of the local Gheg variety reflects a new reality characterized by

the emergence of a Kosovar-based Albanian identity that is intimately linked to Kosovo's new geopolitical borders.

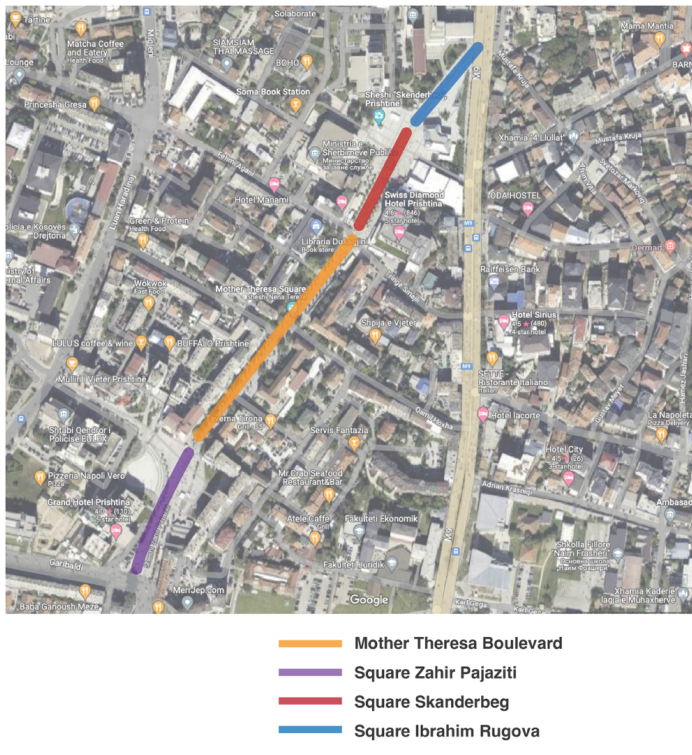


Figure 2. Mother Theresa Boulevard (source: Google Maps)

Post-war memory politics in Kosovo

Discrepancies between policy and practice

The image of an ethnically diverse and civic society promulgated by the international community and fashioned in Kosovo's Constitution (2008) and embodied in its laws and regulations does not correspond with the realities one is confronted with on the ground (Demaj & Vandenbroucke 2016). Rather, referencing Kostovicova (2005: 182), prewar ethnic segregation continues "in an equally crude form, only the two communities exchanged places." Indeed, by 2007, the Albanian identity of Kosovo was a *fait accompli*. According to Ingimundarson (2007), the overall atmosphere of uncertainty that pervaded the Albanian psyche over Kosovo's future geopolitical status

during the phase of UNMIK supervision propelled the Albanians to take “total symbolic control” over Kosovo’s identity-building practices (Krasniqi 2013b: 41; Ingimundarson 2007; Albertini 2012). Discordant with Kosovo’s status quo under UNMIK administration, the Albanians strove for ethno-national legitimization and political recognition as an entity independent from Serbia, by engaging in a homogenizing narrative that disagreed with the desired multi-ethnic and inclusive character of Kosovo (Ermolin 2015). Their aspirational ideology as seen in practice *ipso facto* contradicted the internationals’ rhetoric of interethnic reconciliation by “forgetting the past” (Krasniqi 2014: 155). Following Di Lellio & Schwandner-Sievers (2006), the central theme around which Kosovo’s identity revolved after the conflict has been termed by extension of their work into the memory politics today as the “postwar liberation narrative,” (see also Krasniqi G., 2013; Krasniqi V., 2014; Ermolin, 2015). Comparable to Muth (2013; 2014; 2015), who in his studies on the postwar linguistic, symbolic and cultural landscapes of Nagorno-Karabakh found that the region’s identity is in part constructed around a “singular victimization complex” of Armenian suffering during the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict as seen in war memorials, the cultural landscape of the city is constructed on the Albanian experiences of the interethnic war (Ingimundarson 2007, Ermolin 2015, Demaj 2023).

Similarly opposing the multi-ethnic vision of the international community are the various nationalist Serbian symbols saturating the cultural spheres of some urbanized Serbian enclaves (Demaj & Vandenboucke 2022). In conflict with the Albanian narration, the Serbs’ symbolic landscapes are constructed on the reproduction of Serbia’s longstanding claims to Kosovo as the medieval cradle of their civilization (Payton 2006, Detrez 2019). An example is shown in Figure 3 below, which is a statue set at the central square of the Serbian-exclusive municipality of Gračanica/Graçanica. Located just five kilometres from Pristina’s city center, it is inhabited by a Serbian-majority population of around 10,000 people, many of whom withdrew from Pristina, and secluded themselves in this area. When this picture was taken in 2018, the Serbian flag accompanied the statue, whereas Kosovo’s new national flag was absent. In agreement with Chandra (2006), who contends that in reality, the society’s organizing structures are rooted in ethnicity-based nationalism, the different ethnic backgrounds and attitudes of Kosovo’s residents heavily influence one’s sense of belonging. The postwar situation of ethnic segregation as crystallized in the era of the 1990s impinges on the development of a multi-ethnic society in which all citizens are equally represented.



Figure 3. Statue of Prince Lazar in Gračanica/Gračanicë (source: Uranela Demaj)

Renegotiating Albanian national identity through the politics of memory and place on Mother Theresa Boulevard

Against our understanding of the existing discontinuities between policy and practice, our further analysis concentrates on Mother Theresa Boulevard as a site of commemoration and identity configuration. By following this spatial trajectory, we locate our research area in a socially vibrant setting of the city center frequented by many passers-by and featuring shops, cafés, and the organization of daily events and street activities. An understanding of this locality as an area in which the daily goings-on of the local inhabitants occur is important for our investigation of the commemorative landscape. More particularly, we follow Baker (2012) when stating that the material environment helps shape the inhabitants' collective sense of self as their identities are shaped in relationship to the symbolic manifestations of place. Accordingly, our central aim is to demonstrate the significance of locality

and space in shaping collective memory and renegotiating the Albanians' sense of identity after Kosovo's independence in 2008. In this regard, three interrelated observations can be made about the role of the commemorative landscape.

The first concerns the role of the material environment in depicting Kosovo's independence as an extension of the Albanians' historical struggle for national sovereignty and political self-determination. The spatial configuration of two pivotal figures in Albanian national history most pointedly asserts this contention. A clear sense of historical continuity is established through the arrangement of the monument of Dr. Ibrahim Rugova (Figure 4), who headed the Albanian resistance movement in the 1990s (see section 3), in the direct vicinity of the medieval Albanian hero Skanderbeg (Figure 5), who fought the Ottoman invasion in the Middle Ages. In fact, the monuments are centrally positioned at two adjoining squares with their busts facing one another.



Figure 4. Statue of Ibrahim Rugova (source: Wikimedia)



Figure 5. Statue of Skanderbeg

The parallel drawn between the figures is straightforward: In two different phases of the Albanian account, these personalities have been central in converging the Albanians around the common national cause. In the Middle Ages, the unifying role of Skanderbeg was in bringing the Albanian clans together to fight off the Ottomans' further expansion to the west. Similarly opposing the Albanians' perceived foreign occupation, Dr. Ibrahim Rugova led the Albanian resistance movement of the 1990s, which resulted in the Albanians' mass boycott of the Serbian regime. The historical reverberation of the medieval Skanderbeg narration into the Albanian perception of the events of the 1990s would have likely not been as explicit were it not for the spatial composition of the monuments. Indeed, the specific placement of the objects contributes to a thematic structure whereby the recent past unfolds in continuity with the Albanians' perceived longstanding national struggle for self-determination. Out of this narrative reproduction emerges a sense of collective identity that is exclusively Albanian with the ethnic Serbs as the offending other imbedded in the victim-perpetrator duality. Arguably, it also

perpetuates ethno-nationalist ideas of identity by cementing these notions onto the built environment.

Our second observation concerns the role of the commemorative space in perpetuating the longstanding national ideology of Albanian unity. Not only in a historical sense is Kosovo's independence represented as the continuation of the historical quest of the Albanians for national sovereignty. From a geopolitical perspective as well, the territory is visually depicted as part of a larger ethno-political scheme. Indeed, if we zoom in on the monument of Skanderbeg, a map is displayed with the geopolitical borders of the Greater Albanian state. In the Albanian narration, the ultimate aspiration is the geopolitical unification of all Albanian territories in a greater Albanian state. As the map shows, this includes Albania, Kosovo, and parts of South Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. Arguably, then, the perpetuation of this ideology through the built environment represents Kosovo's socio-political transition in a manner consistent with this vision. In the Albanian viewpoint, Kosovo's independence is rhetorically viewed as a victory and an advance in the restoration of the Albanians' perceived rightful lands. In other words, Kosovo's independence is not represented as a disruption of Albanian cohesion. Contrarily so, the commemorative space perpetuates the Albanian sense of national identity, which traverses political boundaries but not ethnic delineations. This is not only reinforced through the spatial arrangement of Rugova and Skanderbeg as key figures of Albanian national history. Rather, the symbolic configuration of the statue of Mother Theresa is also embedded in this ethno-nationalist ideology (Figure 6). The vast majority of Albanian-speaking onlookers would recognize Mother Theresa by her monastic name: In the Albanian inscription the word *Nënë* translates to the English equivalent Mother. What the inscription of her Albanian birthname *Gonxhe Bojaxhu* refers to is the less commonly known Albanian ethnicity of Mother Theresa. Her typically Albanian name, *Gonxhe*, means *rosebud* in the language whereas the last name *Bojaxhiu* entails an occupational etymology. There is no English or Serbian equivalent provided for the word *mother*. Indeed, from a linguistic perspective, the texts visible on the monuments' placards thus far crystallize our understanding of the commemorative environment as a space of ethnic Albanian identity. The text on the Skanderbeg statue reads *Hero i Kombit* which translates to *Hero of the Nation* in English. The term *komb* in Albanian contains a distinctively ethno-cultural meaning different from notions of nationality related to geopolitical belonging or citizenship.



Figure 6. Statue of Mother Theresa (source: Uranela Demaj)

Finally, while the ideology of ethnic Albanian continuity is perpetuated against the background of the Albanian struggle for self-determination, the material space reveals a third more particularistic identity born out of the unique experience of the Kosovo Albanians under the Serbian regime of the 1990s. Indeed, on the Zahir Pajaziti square situated at the other end of the boulevard the interaction of three commemorative installations chronicle the decade of ethnic Albanian defiance in Kosovo in the 1990s. Chronologically

speaking, the dialogue between the commemorative devices immortalizes three main events: the protests of 1990 in which the ethnic Albanians demanded secession rights, the creation of the ethnic Albanian parallel society in 1991, and the emergence of the KLA in 1997, which culminated in the subsequent war of 1998–1999. The first event is commemorated through the sculpture of Faik Rexhepi (Figure 7) titled *Këmbëkryq*.



Figure 7. Faik Rexhepi installation (left, source: Uranela Demaj) with a picture of the actual event (right, source: Koha Ditore)

Among the protesters who demanded in 1990 that Kosovo be turned into an independent state was Rexhepi. While the other participants were being violently chased by the Serbian police, Rexhepi was captured sitting cross-legged and weighing his head on his hand in what is now considered an iconic symbol of the Albanians' countermovement against the Serbian state apparatus.³ Secondly, a larger-than-life poster of late president Dr. Ibrahim Rugova symbolically denotes the Albanians' parallel structures, which came into existence in 1991 and subsisted throughout the 1990s as an underground mechanism of peaceful disobedience (Figure 8). Alongside these commemorative symbols of the recent past, the statue of the fallen KLA soldier Zahir Pajaziti (Figure 9) completes the historical narration of the 1990s as his death at the hands of Serbian military forces conveys the emergence of the KLA as the Albanians took to an alternative route, of

³ A photograph of the actual protest in May 1990 can be accessed [here](#). A video of the event can also be viewed [here](#).

violence, to their previous boycotting of the Serbian institutions. Arguably, out of the Milošević era, a differing presentation of Albanian identity emerges from the ethno-nationalist account of Albanian unity. Bound to Kosovo and its distinctive interethnic past, the memory of the 1990s perpetuates a unique formulation of group identity on account of Kosovo Albanian solidarity. Accordingly, alongside the Albanian perception of ethno-national unity, the material environment has left room for the emergence of an identification of its own, which binds Kosovo in particular to the domestic Albanians residing in the territory and their experiences with Serbian rule.



Figure 8. Poster of Ibrahim Rugova (source: Wikimedia)



Figure 9. Statue of Zahir Pajaziti (source: Uranela Demaj)

Bac, u kry! The Gheg variety of Albanian as a linguistic symbol of state independence

Language choices in Pristina's LL: English and the symbolic reconfiguration of the city

The postwar political shift of Kosovo reversed ethnic hierarchies in both the socio-political and cultural sense. As the Serbian authorities left the territory, the ethnic Albanians who have always constituted Kosovo's demographic majority asserted their political dominance. While after the Declaration of Independence (2008) Kosovo was officially proclaimed a multi-ethnic country with shared Albanian and Serbian co-officialdom, in reality, the reversed power relations challenged the notion of inclusiveness (Demaj & Vandenbroucke 2016, Demaj & Vandenbroucke 2022, Demaj 2022). Rather,

the power reversal crystallized the division of society along ethno-spatial lines with ethnic segregation as the main impediment to the democratic development of Kosovo (Kostovicova 2005, OSCE 2008, Friedman 2014, Fridman 2015, Demaj & Vandenbroucke 2016, Demaj 2022). The hegemony of the Albanians and their language is particularly obvious in the LL of the capital of Pristina. As Demaj & Vandenbroucke (2016) note, Serbian is virtually absent on signage if not for its presence on official texts. Instead, Albanian serves as the main language of public discourse. It addresses the majority Albanian residents of the capital; Albanian also holds symbolic power since the language was banned for official use throughout the 1990s following the introduction of the Serbian-only language regime of Milošević in 1989 (see Demaj 2022, Greenberg 2004). The power shift after the war resulted in a shift in language hierarchies and attitudes vis-à-vis Serbian. Today, the language associates strongly among the Albanian community with Kosovo's pre-war South Slavic culture and Serbian oppression.

The informative value of Serbian as a second language has been replaced by English in the capital (Demaj & Vandenbroucke 2016). Undoubtedly, the profuse visibility of English in the LL is partially due to its international and governmental importance in Kosovo. Since the arrival of the international community, English occupies an official *lingua franca* position in the country. This means that all official signage requires a translation in English. Moreover, the language prevails in official documents in case of possible misinterpretations in the local languages. Yet while from this perspective, the language is for identification and not for communication (see also Bryel-Olmedo and Juan-Garau 2010), the employment of English in the LL of Pristina goes beyond the informative functions of the language. Arguably, it plays a symbolic role in attempts to rebrand Kosovo's image from a Yugoslavian socialist territory to a western capitalist state (Demaj & Vandenbroucke 2016). A similar explanation for the use of English can be found in other geographic settings that have undergone socio-political and economic transformations. Examples are the cases of Kiev, Ukraine (Pavlenko 2009), Skopje in North Macedonia (Dimova 2005), and the post-apartheid city of Bloemfontein in South Africa (Du Plessis 2009). Comparable to these countries, English symbolically demarcates a break with the past and a view towards the future. Namely, it is not only associated with a capitalist-oriented culture in the global economy (Kelly-Holmes 2000). Perhaps more than in other sites, English is a linguistic symbol of postwar liberation: it embodies the language spoken by Kosovo's liberators, the international community and the United States. As such, it also indexes Kosovo's orientation to the west and its aspirations for future EU accession. The code preference for English in Figure 10 demonstrates the role

and use of English alongside Albanian and vis-à-vis Serbian. It is clear from this placard that English is preferred over Serbian, and diminishes the titular position of the latter.



Figure 10. Billboard, *Bac, U kry!* (source: Wikimedia)

Bac, u kry! The Gheg variety of Albanian as a linguistic symbol of postwar state independence

In this section, we argue that the Gheg variety of Albanian has become a symbol of liberation and a celebration of local identity and culture in Kosovo. In particular, its increased visibility after the Declaration of Independence (2008) is the result of a strengthened connection between the ethnic Albanians and Kosovo, redirecting the focus of Albanian identity from a pan-Albanian national identity to one rooted in the experiences of the people of Kosovo.

One important example of the local significance of the Gheg variety is the slogan “Bac, u kry!” which employs the Gheg construction of the present continuous tense, and means “Uncle, it is done.” Since it was first displayed during the events of the Declaration of Independence (2008, Figure 11), the slogan has undergone creative changes that express the dynamic nature

of the Albanians' processes of identification with Kosovo. Since 2008, it has continued to play a prominent role in promoting Kosovo's identity: alternatively, it satirizes numerous societal phenomena and issues pertaining to Kosovo's socio-economic and cultural conditions.



Figure 11. Campaign for Kosovo's ten-year anniversary: Bac, Çikat na e zbardhën ftyren (source: Wikipedia)

In the first respect, the celebrations of the ten-year anniversary of Kosovo's independence incorporated the multimodal use of the slogan “Bac, çikat na e zbardhën ftyrën.” This campaign included the image of the three Kosovo Albanian artists who have achieved global success in a range of fields; the world-famous stars and music artists Rita Ora and Dua Lipa, and the twice world champion judoka Majlinda Kelmendi. Again, the Gheg text plays a prominent role in indexing the Kosovo-based Albanian identity of the women. The honorific address “Bac” is maintained, and combined with “çikat” which means “girls” in the Gheg variety. To compare, if standard Albanian were used, the slogan would have adopted “vajzat” or the less formal alternative “gocat” whereas “çikat” is distinctively Gheg. Likewise, the idiomatic phrase “na e zbardhën ftyren” (literal translation: they are brightening our face) means “they are making us proud” and is a Gheg saying not common in the Tosk-based standard. It is clear that the saying signifies the linguistic identity of the local Albanians of Kosovo, and therefore impacts the linguistic processes of identification with the country. In marking its centennial, the

Gheg text likely validates the cultural autonomy of Kosovo, and seeks to symbolically connect with Kosovo-born individuals who have fared well in the west. In continuation of this observation, the Gheg variety is also symbolic in demarcating boundaries of differentiation, not just with Albania but also with the cultural identities of the other communities present in the country. Besides the imagery itself, which invokes local Albanian-centric identifications with the experiences of war and liberation, the text #Kosova10 uses the Albanian suffix -a added to the stem Kosov-, which clearly underlines the Albanians' call to adopt the Albanian place name internationally instead of Kosovo (with the -o suffix), which derives from Serbian.



Figure 12. Satirized versions of *Bac, U kry* (source: Wikipedia)

Since the image of Jashari was iconized in the official campaign of 2008, the depiction has been rechanneled to the public through, in particular, social media, in order to address certain socio-economic and political issues particular to the post-independence era. In other words, the Jashari image has come to not just celebrate Kosovo's transition to independence, but especially also to criticize the state leaders' inability to overcome certain challenges after the war. To illustrate, the leading text in 2018, also adopting the Gheg variety, was "Bac, Ja Shkela" which means "Uncle, I am out of here." The image alluded to the mass exodus of the ethnic Albanians from Kosovo during that year as a result of the poor socio-economic conditions of the country. The rhetoric implied is straightforward, namely, the Jashari family did not sacrifice their lives for Kosovo only for the Albanians to leave it decades after the war. The image has also been extended – still in the Gheg variety – in less serious contexts. For instance, the three-week diplomatic stay of Prime Minister

Albin Kurti was satirized upon his return on social media through the text, “Bac, u kthy,” which means “Uncle, he is back.” The text rhymes with the original saying, and alludes to the long duration of Kurti’s visit overseas.

The deliberate use of the Gheg variety of Albanian is of great significance as it reflects the cultural and linguistic identity of the Kosovo Albanians. It is viewed as a linguistic symbol of resistance to foreign domination and Serbian oppression, and represents a previously suppressed celebration of their unique identity and heritage. Before the war, Gheg had been suppressed not only in response to Serbian oppression but also in relation to the standard Albanian language, as a means of maintaining Albanian unity in the face of South Slavic hegemony. Following the Declaration of Independence, the symbolic visibility of Gheg is prominently displayed on advertisements, local shops, and in the names of restaurants, cafes, and businesses throughout the capital.

Conclusion

This study has examined the postwar renegotiation of Albanian identity as manifested through the material environment and language choices in Pristina, the capital city of Kosovo. By approaching the built environment through the twofold perspective of memory and language, we attempted to shed light on the multilayered reconstruction of Kosovo’s Albanian identity after the war. As we have highlighted in our examination, Kosovo’s identity as an independent country does not separate itself from the ethno-nationalist ideology of the Greater Albanian state. Rather, the manner in which the commemorative landscape is spatially organized in the central boulevard symbolically links the period of oppression under Serbian rule in Kosovo with the wider account of struggle for national coalescence and political unification with the Greater Albanian state. At the same time, we have showed that expressions of a local Kosovo-based awareness are emerging, particularly in the area of language use. The increased prominence of the Gheg variety of Albanian depicts a tentative shift in attitude towards the local Albanian culture and language. If it is true that prior to the interethnic conflict, the Kosovo Albanians compromised their local linguistic identity in order to embrace a broader Albanian context, then the aftermath of the war has undeniably fostered an increase of self-awareness and self-actualization regarding the local Gheg dialect in Kosovo. Notably, as the slogan “Bac, u kry” exemplified, the emergence of the prominence of the Gheg dialect as a linguistic emblem of state sovereignty has come to signify a commemoration of local identity and culture. Further research can delve into the evolving dynamics of the Gheg dialect in the postwar context and contribute to an

understanding of the complexities surrounding language and identity politics in postwar Kosovo.

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