Kosovo: An Identity between Local and Global

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Abstract

This paper presents a cross-disciplinary point of view about the study of culture and memory in the contemporary world, considering as case study the process of nation building in Kosovo, the newest nation in Europe. To do so, this paper critically blends suggestions from contemporary globalization studies and the semiotic model of the semiosphere. The processes of nation building acting in Kosovo represent an attractive object of analysis, especially after the independence declared by the Albanian majority. An independence that must be considered not only the consequence of the exacerbation of social relations between ethnic Serbs and Albanians, but has much more to do with the broader geopolitical frame in which it took place. This paper will then focus on tracking the glocal relations, which emerge through different areas of the society (economy, politics, media) in order to show how memory can become a tool to manipulate cultures and a weapon for great powers to achieve specific strategic targets. The final aim is to provide analysis increasingly concerned with the global relationship between the micro-realities of everyday life and the macro-dynamics of the contemporary world, to shed some light on the role of nations in the globalization era.

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1. Introduction: Identities in a Globalized World

In 1992, Hobsbawm concluded his major work *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* stating that the end of the twentieth century would see the decline of nationalism in conditioning public policies – with new ‘supranational’ structures taking centre stage – and would lead to the birth of new entities unclassifiable as ‘nations’ in the classical sense.

Nowadays, this prevision is less disputed than before in nationalism and globalization studies, even if the end of real communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe gave the impression that nations still have a crucial role in the contemporary world and international diplomacy: many new nation-states rose worldwide, and the bloody consequences of the Yugoslavian collapse were taken as examples of the shape ethnic conflicts could assume in their quest to establish homogeneous territories. But, at the same time, all evidence shows that in Western Europe the ties between state and nation were decreasing, influenced by immigration, globalization and the growing prominence of supranational entities like the EU.

Only at the beginning of the twenty-first century the developments in cultural studies and post-colonial research helped to understand the transformation the world was experiencing, giving for instance deeper answers about the reasons and the progress of the war in Yugoslavia, such as Appadurai (1996), Allcock (1999) and Gagnon (1999). These works helped to de-construct the myth of ethnic war, showing the political objectives served by the conflict, the scarce mobilization of the people in ethnic terms, and the role of emotions and identities in contemporary politics.

Thus it is possible to agree with Hobsbawm: if nations have not disappeared, they have indeed changed their nature, to adapt to a world in which human groups are more and more connected by new technologies and interrelated by global fluxes of people and goods. From this perspective, it is possible to note how, in an increasing number of countries, the principle of the nation-state – as a mediation between a social group and its territorial and political organization – cannot be considered anymore the only source of political
legitimization. Yet despite this dynamic, nations have not lost their entire significance. Not by chance, in Europe and elsewhere, do most of the claims by minorities and peripheral groups still lean on national or ethnic arguments; and these groups in most cases tend to invent or ‘construct’ new national histories and symbols to justify their requests.

This strategy of self-determination can serve not only in disciplining the relations outside the border of the group – that is to say confronting other groups; it permits also to define the group itself, because the concept of nation works as a system of governance, hiding a power mechanism: as shown by Foucault (1969) by the notion of biopolitics, the construction of ‘social order’, in contemporary societies, is strictly connected to the exercise of power and the manipulation of the identities of its members, through processes of control, discipline and repression. Nations are a typical example of this kind of processes, aimed at creating docile social identities coherent with the rules of the system as a whole.

What is new, in the globalized world, is that the exercise of power is no more confined to national borders; in other words, self-determination could hardly be reached without foreign support and sometimes active international involvement. This means that the birth of new nations does not only depend on internal relations between the majority and the minority (or the minorities) of a country’s population, but above all on the role these local struggles can perform in the relations between great powers; a state of things that makes new ‘nations’ more malleable and manipulable by those who detain larger capitals in the international arena.

This change in the nature of nations imposes new tasks for researchers. This paper contributes to the debate by presenting a semiotic perspective on one of the most resounding events of 2008, the independence of Kosovo from Serbia, in order to show that nation-

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2 As a matter of fact, the only way to impose it, in many contemporary states, would be to use political violence or the deprivation of human and political rights from a substantial part of the population.

3 In fact, the events of the Arab Spring in northern Africa, Yemen and Syria suggest further research paths and underline the significance these movements give to ethnic and national attachments, which appear to be minor details with respect to the reason and the meaning of the protest; but it is still early to infer reliable conclusions.

4 The notion of capital proposed here follows the concept outlined by Bourdieu (1984), drawing on the classical notion of capital not just in economic terms but also on cultural, social and symbolic levels.
building processes, in this tiny country, became nothing but a pretext for great powers to achieve specific strategic and diplomatic targets.

Semiotics studies cultures, and cultural formations as identity and nations, from a topological and narrative perspective, paying attention to dynamic interactions between global flows (political, economic, media) and local responses in a wider frame of power relations. With reference to the present case study, this paper will show that the new ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983) in Kosovo is held together by the construction of a symbolic level interwoven by narratives. A symbolic level whose role, in Kosovo’s official discourse, is to present the ‘West’ – which represents those countries favourable to its independence – as the ‘best place to live in’, and Kosovo as a part of it.

In this paper it is obviously impossible to describe in depth this controversial and complex set of events; but it can be a good example of the heuristic potential of a dialogue between semiotic theories and globalization studies, sketching the framework for further research.

The current situation of Kosovo is widely known, and well described by many authors.\(^5\) After the war in the 1990s, fought between the Serbian army and paramilitaries and ethnic Albanian forces led by the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK – Ushtria Çlimitare Kosovës), the country has been administrated by United Nations through a Special Envoy since 1999. Years passed, Milošević fell and KLA officials became ministers and presidents of Kosovo under international rule. Negotiations ended up with no agreements between Serbian and Albanian officials, and Kosovo unilaterally declared independence on 17 February 2008.\(^6\)

At first sight, this event could be explained focusing on local political and ethnic factors, seeing in it nothing but a new application of the usual and constitutively Western concept of nation-state: an ethnic minority, the Albanian one, broke free from a long-lasting dominance by a mightier neighbour. But much more seems to lie below the surface: taking into account the general environment in which Kosovo independence took place, it must be

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\(^5\) In an incomplete list of books dealing with the events in Kosovo in last twenty years, it is possible to cite Allcock (1999), Gagnon (1999), the recent Dérens and Geslin (2010) and the historical Malcolm (2002), not to mention the classical BBC book about the collapse of Yugoslavia, Silber and Little (1995).

\(^6\) This event was very resounding in international media, receiving full coverage in almost every Western country.
conceived as the centre of a wider frame of global relations, and not just a little region stretched in the middle of the Balkans.

A glimpse to Priština, the capital city, during Independence Day, can portray the whole complexity of the situation: while the Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi was proudly exhibiting the newest Kosovo flag, blue with a yellow map of the new state and six white stars, people in the streets were celebrating in front of TV cameras exhibiting the Albanian flag, with its two-headed eagle on a red background, but also Western flags, of USA and EU (Figure 1–2).

These contrasts raise many questions. To begin with the simplest one: how many national flags are there? To find a meaningful answer, it is necessary to conceive of Kosovo as the place where two main discursive forms are clashing. The first one concerns the historical struggle for defending national and Albanian identity during the long age of Serbian sovereignty over this province: a discourse which pivots on a narrative of a century-long conflict between the Serbian and Albanian ethnic groups, overstuffed by examples, memories, practices confirming their impossibility to live together in the same state.

The second discourse is much wider than the former. It portrays the often conniving international interests and the profitable power relations established in Kosovo following NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, and United Nations’ administration of the province: amongst the
consequence of international intervention, it is possible to recall the creation of a bridge-head state closer to the Middle East, and the control of European energy and raw material supplies, in open contrast to Russia (a Serbian ally) and its enduring aims towards the Balkans.

Thus the events in Kosovo can be better explained as a reflex of the current tendency of forced homogenization, which is part of the dominating narrative of globalization. It lever with three cornerstones: de-nationalization of economy, limitations of the territories, and political uniformity following the Western model.

The only way to understand what kind of identity is going to be forged in Kosovo is then to track and identify these global–local relations that emerge through the different scapes that shape culture and society, to use Appadurai’s (1996) terminology. The relations between these discourses define the consequences on the people, at the same time actor and target of the new identities and lifestyles.

1.1 Semiosphere as a Glocal Device

Analysing identities in the contemporary world requires a methodology both accurate in observing the ‘unceasing murmuring’ of everyday life and adaptable when confronted with dynamics of much greater extent. This paper will apply a semiotic model of cultural and political analysis, the semiosphere – as introduced by the Russian semiotician Lotman (1984) – in its connections with other disciplinary approaches.

Semiotics takes relations and oppositions as primary data around which the researcher defines his/her theory: before all, then, studying identity and cultures through a semiotic approach means to ground globalization processes into a complex set of differences and interdependences. A position, which is not far from those suggested by distinguished members of globalization studies, speaking of connectivity with Tomlinson (1999) and Robertson (1992), of disjuncture with Appadurai (1996), of articulation with Clifford (2001).

7 The importance of this goal can be displayed in the urgency with which Western delegates demanded the construction of a new pipeline in the Balkans (AMBO – Albanian-Macedonian-Bulgarian Oil Pipeline). Not by chance, the US Trade and Development Agency’s paper, published May 2000, assessed that the pipeline was a US strategic interest.
In this essay, Lotman’s cultural semiotics will be presented as a fruitful theoretical and methodological framework to create a dialogue between semiotics and globalization studies. In fact, these approaches focused both on relational and topological construction of identities and on the diachronic variation and the complexity of cultural systems.

Lotman proposed the model of semiosphere in the homonym essay dated 1984: in analogy with Vernadskij’s notion of biosphere, Lotman called semiosphere that ‘semiotic continuum full of different types of formations situated at various levels of organization’ (Lotman, 1984: 5). This perspective defines culture as a dynamic and hierarchical organism, shaped by a complex set of languages sedimented over time, and a more specific set of texts produced in known and unknown languages.⁸

Talking of semiosphere implies then to focus on the global/local relations both between different languages and between languages and texts, located at different levels in the semiotic continuum. That is why Lotman proposes the museum as a good image for describing these dynamic activities:

‘Imagine a museum hall, where exhibits from different periods are on display, along with inscription in known and unknown languages, and instructions for decoding them; there are also the explanations composed by the museum staff, plans for tours and rules for the behaviours of the visitors. Imagine also in this hall tour leaders and visitors and imagine all this as a single mechanism (which in a certain sense it is). This is an image of the semiosphere. Then we have to remember that all elements of the semiosphere are in dynamic, not static, correlations whose terms are constantly changing. We notice this especially at traditional moments which have come down to us from the past’ (Lotman 1990: 126–7).

This example highlights the whole complex functioning of culture: language in a semiosphere only works through connections with other languages and texts, and none of them has an independent existence.

⁸ The term ‘language’ is used not in reference to verbal language, but to any system of communication that can be interpreted by mankind. Thus, from a semiotic point of view, a book, a picture, a public speech or a political demonstration, all acquire the same analytical status as texts, which can be meaningfully interpreted only by those who know the languages in which they are developed.
Nation-making processes such as Kosovo’s provide some basic illustrations of this dynamic, as recalled picking up on the contemporaneous presence, during Independence Day, of the new flag of Kosovo and of the flag of Albania, which is a different nation-state.

The concept of semiosphere aims exactly at explaining these functional conjunctures and disjunctures between discourses or, in Appadurai’s terms, between scapes (economical, cultural, media) that give shape to the world in an inter-subjective arena.⁹

Lotman acknowledges a constitutive ambivalence in the notion of semiosphere, using it both in a global and a local sense; semiosphere is a model for the whole of a culture, but can also describe a portion of it: it can represent huge cultural systems, like a national culture, or just some of its sections, like economic or political discourse, or ‘flowing’ phenomena like fashion and social trends, protests, and, to the extreme, the refusal of rules, laws and common beliefs. All of these examples can be interpreted and analysed as semiospheres: systems of meaning in constant transformation, interaction and interdefinition.

As suggested by recent semiotic researches,¹⁰ semiosphere must be conceived as an in-and-out glocal device, in which each entity is at one level a globality and, at another level, a locality. In our case, if the Kosovo nation-state can on one level be a globality when considering a text as the new flag or the new Constitution, it is a locality in relation with wider economic and symbolic international flows.

This insight is typical of a semiotic approach: the identity of each element is determined by its position and its relations with other elements inside and outside a given semiosphere. To change position, to move from one semiosphere to another, from one analytical level to another, implies an identity change and, consequently, an alteration of the morphology of the semiosphere involved in the process. In this scenario, it is easier to understand how texts and ritual practices, linguistic codes and ideologies can represent points of stability within a semiosphere, structuring the developments and the transformation of society and culture.

⁹ Like Appadurai, Lotman conceives cultural forms as fractals, underlying the primacy of relations over single elements.

1.2 Limits and Boundaries: Between Homogenization and Heterogenization

Identity is conceived by semiotics as the result of relations within and outside a given semiosphere – a personal one, to the limit. The tension between these two orders is all-pervading in the realm of politics and nationality; the Kosovar identity is then determined by the relations between nationalities inside Kosovo (Albanians, Serbs) and by relations between these single nationalities and other nation-states and symbols outside Kosovo (Albania, Serbia and so on).

Indeed, changing position and moving from Kosovo to Albania or to Serbia, Albanian identity would not be perceived in the same way. Due to this duplex nature of identity, it is crucial to analyse the relation between internal and external spaces in each semiosphere: for example, between identity and alterity.11 This is where the Lotmanian notion of boundary plays its role; it both separates and unites:

‘no semiosphere is immersed in an amorphous “wild” space, but is in contact with other semiospheres which have their own organization; there is a constant exchange, a search for a common language, and creolized semiotic systems come into being’ (Lotman, 1990: 137).

Kosovo represents exactly this kind of creolized space, the outcome of a dynamic not so different from the indigenization of cricket in India reported by Appadurai (1996: 119–49).

Any semiosphere is characterized by two complementary and distinct features, strictly connected with a central issue for contemporary globalization studies, that is the tension between homogenization and heterogenization: on the one hand, it shows a ‘structural heterogeneity’ (Lotman, 1984: 64) which imposes a continuous reformulation of its internal structures; on the other hand, semiosphere is grounded in ‘meta-structural self descriptions’, that create hubs structuring the connections between its nodes, through specific modelling systems and parameter-texts.

In Lotman’s words:

11 In this paper the philosophical term ‘alterity’ is used instead of the more usual ‘otherness’ because it better highlights the complementary relation with the identity of the self.
‘the structural heterogeneity of semiotic space creates reserves of dynamic processes and represents one of the mechanisms of the creation of new information inside the sphere. In peripheral areas, where structures are less organised and more flexible, the dynamic processes meet with less opposition and, consequently, develop more quickly. The creation of meta-structural self-descriptions appears to be a factor which dramatically increases the rigidity of the structure and slows down its development. Meanwhile, sections which were not subjected to description, is registered in categories which are clearly inadequate develop quicker. This allows for the future displacement of the function of the structural nucleus to the periphery of the previous stage, and the transformation of the former centre to the periphery. This process can clearly be traced in the geographical transference between the centre and the “outskirts” of civilised worlds’ (Lotman 1990: 142).

Giulianotti and Robertson (2007: 168) use the term glocalization exactly to describe this kind of process, which ‘registers the societal co-presence of sameness and difference, and the intensified interpenetration of the local and the global, the universal and particular, and homogeneity and heterogeneity’. And it is also the same process tackled by Rosenau (1990) with his concept of ‘fragmentation’, which captures in a single word the pervasive interaction between fragmenting and integrative dynamics, unfolding at every level of community.

These remarks suggest crucial methodological consequences. If globalization is ‘fragmentative’, in which way are nexus and nodes structured into the liquidity of relations that characterized contemporaneous social life? Lotman’s answer to this issue is the concept of textualization. From his point of view, texts are modelling systems, meaning-generating devices which impose models of behaviour and define an identity of the semiosphere. Texts are then points of stability to be investigated through their intertextual relations that separate them from the rest.

The idea of textualization can be associated with two opposite dynamics first introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1972), namely territorialization and de-territorialization. The concept of territorialization describes a main attitude in modern states’ behaviour, primarily in international relations: the need to extend the domination on states’ and areas’ periphery not only by political or social control (as described by Foucault, 1969, 1975) but also control-

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12 This question represents the fulcrum of recent publications by Baumann (2000, 2003), dedicated to the study of contemporary world as ‘liquid’ as a consequence of the passing of traditional social and cultural categories.
ling the discursive formations which grow on its borders. If the state is a capitalistic machine established on a determined territory, territorialization is that principle upon which this machine spreads its linguistic and cultural codes beyond its periphery, to the space lying outside. The main goal in this process is the absorption of these extra-cultural spaces inside the machine’s languages by reproducing linguistic dominance. In short, it is a way to force weaker and peripheral parts of the semiosphere to adopt foreign symbols.

Thus, according to my perspective, textualization dynamics aim at re-territorializing the cultural sphere of meaning. Priština’s avenues are an example of this dynamic, since they were invaded, after NATO bombing, by murals and statues of Bill Clinton and other Western officials: it was a way to introduce Kosovo into a new cultural-symbolic order, which could – from the United Nations’ point of view – guarantee a peaceful cohabitation between Serbs and Albanians.

The strong presence of Western symbols in Kosovo aims exactly at redefining this layer of nexuses that shape memory, erasing old national symbols and celebration (such as the Flags’ Day and St. Vitus’ Day). In this dialogue with the Western cultural semiosphere, Kosovo fills the position which Lotman (1984) describes as ‘listening’, receiving passively foreign texts into its sphere, having no mediation power (as a protectorate). Kosovo’s flag and national anthem are examples of textualization processes that trigger the emergence of specific semantic connections (having as mediators concepts like multiculturalism, Westernness), while at the same time they hide specific relations of power inside and outside Kosovo’s semiosphere.

The independence of Kosovo has then a peculiar feature: it did not pivot on a distinction from ‘the West’, as it was for example in Serbia in the last decade, to forge its identity. On the contrary, in this province the primary goal was to describe Kosovo as a part of the West, EU and USA, even when it meant to put aside local traditions and to become completely dependent on Western support, both economically and politically.

2. Kosovo: A Country Looking for Identity

In this reconstruction of a Western-like Kosovar identity, the geographical element played its role. As Todorova (1997) has shown, in Western societies the whole concept of Balkan
acts as an opposite to the concept of Europe; the author convincingly argues that this lexical misuse guaranteed a way – an ideology, under some aspects – to distinguish two conflicting axiologies, variously lexicalized as civilization and savagery, modernity and tradition, peaceful nature and belligerence. This is not the place to recall all her arguments, but it is worth noting that also in the 1990s they represent quite well the habit of many Western observers and diplomats towards Kosovo events.\(^\text{13}\) opposing the Balkans to Europe has been the pivot to conduct a de-politicization of the entire conflict, and a way to represent the war just as the result of centuries of hatred and violence between Serb and Albanian ethnic groups.

Both in the ‘West’ and in the Balkans, the primary partner in this strategy has been the media: repeated images and broadcasting (see Dérens and Geslin, 2010: 187) portrayed the war in Kosovo, as they did with those in Bosnia and Croatia, as an ancient – sometimes medieval – ethnic struggle, neglecting to show how the conflict was mostly a consequence of decisions taken by high government officials and pursued by paramilitaries and soldiers instead and not common people.

The emphasis accorded to ethnic divisions by most journalistic accounts of the conflict can be easily spotted in the main reason that NATO put forward to bomb Federal Yugoslavia: the ongoing mentioning of the census statistics (collected in 1991) and of Serbian responsibilities (‘the population of the province is 90% ethnic Albanian and only 10% Serbs; Serbs are maintaining power committing crimes against mankind’).\(^\text{14}\)

Ignoring the political objectives served by violence adopting a narrative that de-politicized the conflict, it was possible to justify international inaction towards Milošević and the Serbian Army until 1999, and a record time decision taken autonomously by NATO without a UN resolution.

\(^{13}\) Silber and Little (1995) repeatedly and extensively deal with similar behaviour by Western journalists and officials towards the war in Bosnia and Croatia.

\(^{14}\) Western media neglected also to make this clear opposition between two groups more messy, e.g. by mentioning the existence of other ethnic groups in the territory, such as Roma, who faced mass intimidation especially from Albanians. But these minorities came into consideration of Western journalists only in a very late phase of Kosovo’s wars, after 2003 (Dérens and Géslin, 2010: 190).
On 17 February 2008, while people were celebrating in the streets, in the Parliament Building the Prime Minister Thaçi was delivering his official speech, trying to avoid any reference to ethnic issues; as an example, he never used the term ‘Albanian’, always substituting it with ‘Kosovar’: ‘as my parents and grandparents taught me what being a Kosovar means, I ask you to speak to your children and grandchildren and explain to them the meaning of this day’. A smart figure of speech, indeed: by using this formula, the Prime Minister does not explain what Kosovar identity is, but says that it exists and should be handed down to posterity.

As a matter of fact, the task of defining a Kosovar identity went along with the steps towards independence. Few months before this statement, Thaçi said – as reported by NY Times on 9 December 2007 (Bifulksy, 2007) – that ‘Kosovo identity does not exist, but the taboo is beginning to crack’. The taboo he was talking about was the possibility of Kosovo to gain independence by self-determination of the Albanian majority without – which is the trickery – pretending a reunion with fellow Albanians from Albania.

As Thaçi said on Independence Day, ‘as of today, Kosovo will be a democratic, multi-ethnic state moving rapidly toward EU and Euro-Atlantic integration’. To gain the right, and the support necessary for declaring independence, the ‘official’ identity of Kosovo could be in no way ‘Albanian’: it would exist only when every single nationality living on this territory would accept the contemporaneous presence, in Kosovo, of each other: Albanians, Serbs, Romas, Bosnjaks and so on.

What a strange feeling to hear sentences like these from Hashim Thaçi, who despite his behaviour as the ‘voice of reasons in KLA’, and a smart politician in obtaining international support, is reported to have been a fierce opponent of Serbs and a proud defender of the natural right of the Albanian ethnic group to rule over the province (Dérens and Geslin, 2010: 130).

15 The complete speech by Hashim Thaçi can be found on the official website of Kosovo’s Assembly (Thaçi, 2008).

16 This is actually the typical discursive strategy of nationalist leaders: the nation being an abstract object which aims at describing a mutant and fragmented reality, it requires to be textualized in reality and presented as a part of the world the nation wants to represent. The more it is recognized as a part of citizens’ personal identity, the mightier the nation becomes as a system of governance. Thus saying that everybody knows what being a Kosovar means, without explaining it, is just a way to include any possible interpretation of these national affiliation owned by the audience.
What happened in the meanwhile? Kosovo’s recent history hides a clue: especially after the independence, official documents began to show a particular declination of what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) called *invention of tradition*, allowed by the authoritative mediation of the UN. A manipulation, which is a matter of power relations much bigger than Kosovo’s, and shows the glocal device that shapes societies in a globalized world. Identity being a temporary assumption of some characteristic, as an effect of the contact with one or more others, it is necessary to take into account the importance and the role that supra-national organizations and institutions, which substituted themselves in Kosovo, played in shaping this province’s culture.

The primary solution to guarantee a better cohabitation between Serbs and Albanians was ‘reloading’ history from 1999, that is to say, after the beginning of international administration. From this perspective, the creation of the new official Kosovo identity Thaçi was talking about depended mainly on the deletion of the historical dimension, and the ‘Kosovo reconstruction’ – outlined in the last years – was not only devoted to the restoration of public buildings and private homes destroyed by the Serbian Army, but also to neutralize ethnic tensions forging a brand new identity.¹⁷

The big Newborn sculpture put in the centre of Priština to greet independence represents exactly this process through the ‘English engravings’ that represent a new neutral start through international mediation (Figures 3–4, below). Not by chance does independent Kosovo have three official languages: Albanian, Serbian and English.¹⁸

It is now possible to see how the Lotmanian framework presented earlier is a perfect tool to understand the complex construction behind this kind of identity: being the Kosovo semiosphere in the position of ‘listening’ – due to its weak borders and mild cohesion – it is more susceptible to acquire discourses, texts and representations broadcast from the outside and necessarily bond to alien points of view.

¹⁷ A new identity, which did not require coherence with Albanian or Serbian traditions and memories, but only had to be in line with Western values and axiologies.

¹⁸ However, the sculpture says ‘Newborn’, in English, and not ‘Porsalindur’, which would have the same meaning in Albanian language.
That is to say that the entire epic of the military victory of KLA against the Serbian army, which is the main source of Kosovo government’s legitimization, could no longer be the leading narration in defining the identity of this ‘nation’, because it stirred up the resentments of the Albanian part against the remnants of the former rulers.\textsuperscript{19} It was necessary to create a completely different background, in which the presence of Serbian and other minorities would be perfectly coherent – and at most defended – by law and official institutions. Thus, the new Kosovo invented tradition demonstrates that, in fact, the war just moved Kosovo’s institution from Serbian sovereignty to the international one.

A good example to show the effects of this dynamic is the new Constitution, which has been written by Western delegates and only later ratified by Kosovar Parliament without amendments: nothing but an equilibristic translation at a local level of global ‘trends’ (the division of power along ethnic lines) and ‘magic words’ like the concept of \textit{multiculturalism} recalled by Thaçi on independence day.

The first step in this identity-building process, as said, was to erase every symbol and ‘evidence’ of what happened before 1999, like the war and Milošević’s period, to allow the dust to settle.\textsuperscript{20} Nonetheless, it is a matter of simple observation to remark that ‘starting

\textsuperscript{19} As a matter of fact, the first years of United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK)’s sovereignty on the province saw much retaliation against Serbs remaining in Kosovo, as a demonstration of the lingering spirit of revenge (Dérens and Geslin, 2010: 195).

\textsuperscript{20} In my recent research of the current social situation in Kosovo, one emerging dynamic amongst ethnic Albanians was the tendency to begin the narration of their existence with Serbian occupation, regardless of their age; a recurrent habit
history up again’ implied also the deletion of the almost peaceful Yugoslav period, when Serbs and Albanians lived together without remarkable inter-ethnic struggles. By imposing a new ‘neutral’ beginning of history – and textualizing it in the living reality – Western and Kosovar officials intended to create a new memory which deprived traditional symbols and celebrations of their meaning, causing a reaction in those peoples who were used to defining themselves primarily as Albanian or Serbs.

This deletion of history is evident in the museums currently existing in Kosovo: the History Museum, as an example, shows a wide collection of pre-historic terracotta but little dated after the birth of Christ. The national library, which is a notable example of modernism built in 1982 on a project by the Croatian architect Mutnjaković, was deprived of more than half of its books during the war, and is still setting up. Any other notable building has been built after 1999; a state of things that demonstrates quite well the situation in which an entire people, having a sedimented identity, is forced to recognize itself in symbols provided by foreign powers.

As a consequence, during international administration, the same NATO’s KFOR (Kosovo Force), well aware of the situation on in the field, behaved for nine years as a boundary, rather than a bridge, between the two conflicting groups. After all, citizens’ personal biographies were in most cases interwoven with stories about the killing of parents and relatives, about their deportation as prisoners or their escape as refugees, which neglected any past example of loyal and mutually fruitful cohabitation.

Thus a contradiction lies at the very basis of the official Kosovo narrative defined by the West: while official documents declare good inter-ethnic relations as the first goal of the new state, everyday life is still shaped around the differentiation between communities that led to the war. As a consequence, the failure of negotiations made evident to the West that the only practicable way out of the quagmire was to support a unilateral declaration of independence by the majority group, the Albanian one, entrusting the Special Representative and international peacekeeping forces to protect minorities’ rights.

which demonstrates how deeply an event like a war can manipulate personal identities, particularly when it is supported by the political establishment (see on this argument Bakić–Hayden, 2005).
But the need for a ‘social stability’ necessary to economic and political reshaping of Kosovo soon showed that international presence in Kosovo could not restrict itself to separate and protect the conflicting ethnic groups, but to find a common place for each of them; that is the reason why, to unburden their conscience about the ineffective international administration, after the declaration of independence the same countries that endorsed the UNMIK mission and its attitude, demanded Kosovo to be a *multicultural state*, nevertheless underlining the pre-existing *differences* between the two main nationalities. A multiculturalism that, in its realization, is not so different from the one used for Bosnia in 1995: a registered and aseptic model of organization and distribution of power between ‘nations’, completely untied to the history and the traditions of the region. ²¹

But the heart of the matter is that this tiny province, with ‘the tendency to produce more history than it can consume’, to quote Winston Churchill’s famous sentence about the Balkans, could no more represent the common place to reunite these Serb and Albanian ethnic groups, as long as Bosnjaks, Roma, and other communities live on its territory.

The only available environment would be ‘the West’ itself, which meant including Kosovo inside the Western world: a task that was mainly pursued in the discursive sphere by the production of new narratives whose target was, to use once more Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, the *territorialization* of Kosovar semiosphere.

### 2.1 Symbols of Dominance

The dominance exerted by foreign powers in Kosovo is nevertheless evident by itself. During international administration Priština’s main access street got a new name as Bill Clinton Boulevard, with huge murals and a bronze oversized statue of the former American President standing on the street and welcoming cars arriving to town (Figures 5–6). ²²

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²¹ Not by chance, the primary effect of the Dayton constitution of Bosnia-Herzegovina was to introduce in public management those ethnic distinctions that have been the ‘raw material’ for nationalistic unrest in the nineties: so, even if the causes of the war were not, indeed its consequences are ethnic, accepted and justified by international mediation.

²² This is one of the two biggest streets in Kosovo’s capital, the smaller one being named after Mother Teresa.
It is not by chance that Bill Clinton has become one of Kosovo’s national heroes: he drove and defended the right of NATO in bombing sensible targets on the European territory. But it is not a single case: in Priština it is possible to find streets dedicated to General Wesley Clark, or to the American diplomat William Walker, as well as huge manifests glorifying Tony Blair as ‘a leader, a friend, a hero’ (Figure 7, below).

Many scholars have pointed out that war is much more than moving armies and soldiers. Present-day wars are semiotic and strategic events, able to create new narrations and new definitions, even to modify the cultural system in which they take place. Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2003), in their major work on net-wars, note correctly that the next war will be won by the side that reports it better. They are obviously not talking about impossible complete media coverage of the events: they are just saying that even signs could become weapons, if well used. It is then possible to think to these events – war, resistance and NATO bombing – as points of connection between discourses produced at different levels of the semiosphere.

23 Just as Ennio Remondino, Italian state television reporter from Belgrade during NATO bombings in 1999, said once reporting the attacks: ‘these bombs are signs, it’s a murdering in words’.
The concept of translation is central to understand this kind of dynamic: it states that each element belonging to a cultural system (e.g. the image of Tony Blair) or, as semiotics defines it, a semiotic object, can be translated into a different culture (and became part of it) if it can fit and be coherent in the languages and the semiotic configurations acting in it: calling Tony Blair a ‘hero’ (as long with UÇK members) then means that former UK prime minister represents the concept of ‘heroism’ accordingly with official definition of it in Kosovo. In this way, a semiotic object can serve as a pivot of new translation processes, which permit to ‘acquire’, ‘adapt’ and ‘locate’ elements coming from the outside without destabilizing the system (Figure 8, below).

Thus, as a consequence of war and international administration, Kosovo semiosphere began to fatten with ‘alien’ elements, inserting them into its own national grand narrative: Bill Clinton, USA or European flags, foreign ideologies.
The political level thus played a central role in endorsing global discourses, as suggested in reference to the use of the term *multiculturalism* and the request of *security* by Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi; as a consequence, the behaviour of the Kosovar government, forced to follow the line provided by Western officials, boosted ethnic revivals in both parts: unrecognised by the Serbs and more and more distant from Albanian people’s feelings.

After all, national symbols are there to set a difference from those who recognize them and those who do not: ‘us’ and the ‘others’. This is the reason why the new ‘Kosovo official discourse’ had to delete the ‘other’, as this ‘other’ was the source (and the responsible) of past conflicts.

Thus the most ironic part of the story is that the domination by the West forced ethnic Albanian leaders, who lead Kosovo government and seem to be the winning part in this still cold conflict, to abandon Albanian traditional symbols as well as Serbian ones, like the two-headed eagle preserved in Rugova’s flag of Dardania. Or to deny the status of state celebration to several Albanian traditional public holidays, such as the 28 November, the Flags’ Day, usually celebrated as the anniversary of the first declaration of independence in Kosovo’s story, that of the League of Prizren in 1912 (a short-lived independence from the Ottoman Empire). Flags’ Day followed the same destiny of St. Vitus’ Day, 28 June,
which symbolizes for Serbian people the day of the battle in 1389 in Kosovo Polje.\textsuperscript{24} The only logic was the \textit{deletion} of everything, which was not shared by those nationalities that, year by year, peacekeeping forces themselves contributed to separate.

It is then easier to understand the meaning of the words pronounced by Thaçi: Kosovar ‘official’ identity does not yet exist because it has been deprived by any historical, religious and political grounding, becoming nothing but an \textit{umbrella term} (to use the famous definition by Umberto Eco, 1986), docile and malleable by the discourses coming from the systems of exercise of power and from outside the semiosphere.\textsuperscript{25}

![FIGURE 9: THE FLAG OF KOSOVO](image)

The flag is another good example, reproducing quasi-stereotypical mania in state-building actions of the European Union: stars and blue (Figure 9). In the centre, the yellow silhouette of the new state, surmounted by six white stars representing the official ethnic groups

\textsuperscript{24} As other Serbian festivities it has been cut from official celebrations but is still celebrated on the field of Gazimestan, every year.

\textsuperscript{25} Concerning the name of the people, the situation seems to be moving towards the same direction as Bosnia: Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat, eventually Bosnjak. Thus the same national name could become a new source of division.
living in Kosovo: Albanians, Serbs, Roma26, Bosnjaks and Gorans (an islamized Slavic group).27

This state of things does not change taking into account other official symbols of independent Kosovo, beginning with the name of the country. It is the international (English) form for the genitive plural of the word kos, which is blackbird in Serbian language. Kosova and Kosovës, in Albanian language, are a loan from the Serbian linguistic root.

While flag and name define the aseptic background of the new state, the currency and the national anthem serve as pivots of a different narrative. It is possible to call it a ‘redemption narrative’, which defines the only place in which the new ‘Kosovar identity’ in fieri could be significant: the European one, as far as possible from those chaotic and warlike Balkans.

Since 1999 the Euro is the official currency of the province, placing Kosovo in a wider economic discourse whose centre is located in Western countries; a situation, which strengthens the almost complete dependence on Western energy supply and investments, which do not improve the real economy. As a matter of fact, the principal source of income are remittances from migrants living in Western countries (mainly USA and Germany), while the country’s economic weakness has produced a thriving black economy which cannot be controlled by the state.28

The last example is the national anthem of Kosovo, which is particularly interesting: it is a lyric-less hymn titled Europa, because it has not been possible to find enough common words for every nationality living in Kosovo, not to mention the presence of at least three languages, two national (Serbian and Albanian) and an ‘imported’ one (English).

26 The Roma group is often divided into ‘Ashkali’ and ‘Egyptian’ groups. The latter represents an interesting process of invention of tradition: members of this group are actually Roma, which chose to refuse this affiliation (and the ‘demonization’ they frequently suffer), turning down, with their ethnic name, their marginal existence. This invention bases on narratives about a pretended deportation of Egyptians accomplished, 2000 years ago, by Alexander the Great during his Egyptian campaign. It has nothing to do, therefore, with the national group usually called ‘Egyptians’, citizens of Egyptian Republic.

27 It stands to reason that the only common symbol between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, the two-headed eagle, has obviously not been chosen as a symbol of the new Kosovo State: What colour would the eagle be? Should it be black as in the Albanian flag or white as in the Serbian one?

28 In addition, since the independence, internal entrepreneurship has been guaranteed only in reconstruction and building trade, because bigger projects have been contracted to foreign companies, like those concerning the installation of new pipelines to bring oil and gas to Europe.
Then, this national anthem does not define an *identity*, nor does it tell a story of an event important for Kosovo inhabitants. It defines the *cultural frame* in which the future Kosovar identity will officially develop itself: the Western one.

### 2.2 The Ground Effect

This situation on the official level is, as seen, not reflected in everyday life: the different groups which compose Kosovo population, and particularly Serbs and Albanians, went on defining themselves by means of traditional ethnic affiliation, strictly codified by the difference in language, religion, and way of life. This process is evident in the analysis of two founding myths of contemporary Kosovo, those about Country’s Fathers: former president–philosopher Ibrahim Rugova, leader of non-violent resistance against Serbian repression in the 90s; and former UÇK commander Adem Jashari, killed by the Serbian army on 1998.

After 17 February, in Priština’s streets everyone can see plenty of shirts portraying Jashari and the sentence ‘bac, u kry!’, which translates to ‘uncle, it’s done!’ in English. In the centre of the town, a huge portrait of Jashari in military suit stands out on the walls of the modernist mall, just in front of an evocative portrait of Rugova (Figures 10–11).

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29. The image of Jashari shows an interesting dynamic: his face has undergone a process of iconization, becoming a veritable logo to be used on shirts and banners.
Two stories – one of peace, one of war – that may seem contradictory (as they were in reality), but perfectly respond to the need of symbols of belonging by the Albanian people. Since Albanian identity is the unique shared value between them, the only narrative that could celebrate both of them as examples of heroism and pride would be Albanian nationalism; but Albanian nationalism is not coherent with the golden rules imposed by Western officials onto the Kosovo government.

However, some of the new Kosovo symbols have soon been 'ethnicized' by the Albanian dominating group: Figure 12 (below), portraying a wedding caravan, shows quite well how the new flag of Kosovo has been completely acquired by Albanians, while it is considered as a foreign symbol by Serbs.
The reason for this ‘ethnicization’ of the flag lies in the ineffective construction of the new official identity, because Kosovo’s ‘partial’ independence complicated the usual dynamic of nation-building processes: international mediation having deprived the new state of many of its perquisites, it lacked an essential piece, what Gellner (1983) called a ‘high culture’ – or a pretended one. Having substituted the ‘local’ potential high culture with Western culture, in Kosovo there are no historical narratives able to unify every one of its citizen coherently with the shape the state has assumed.

Speaking of the Serbian ten per cent of the population, almost 20,000 of them live in the northern side of Kosovska Mitrovica, divided from the south by the river Ibar. Amongst them, the construction of new narratives about the loss of Kosovo frequently merged with the Orthodox Church’s call for defending its historical monuments, depicting the war for Kosovo as a crusade against the invading Muslims.

This is a different example of translation: even if the religious element is not so important in the typical Kosovo Albanian identity, it is central for the Serbian one, and each difference will now serve to define a boundary from the others. As the Albanian part, Kosovar Serbs consider their national identity as their identity, but unlike the formers they actually have an external homeland (Serbia) which considers them as its citizens, and pays them a
monthly pension. This is the reason why the common currency in Northern Kosovo is still the Serbian dinar, road signs are written in Serbian Cyrillic, and the administration is *de facto* independent from central government.

A look to the central square of Northern Mitrovica (Figure 13) confirms this state-of-things:

**FIGURE 13:**
POSTERS IN NORTHERN MITROVICA

In the background there is a big poster promoting NATO initiatives in Kosovo saying *spremni da vas saslušamo*, with a female soldier and many kids. In the rest of the country – and, speaking about Mitrovica, just across the bridge – the same poster is written in Albanian language (*të gatshëm t’ju dëgjojmë!*), with the same meaning: ‘we are willing to listen to you’ (Figure 14).
This ‘double-faced’ behaviour had its ‘ground effects’, conditioning a common and growing resentment against international forces: the Serbs see in them the defenders of Albanian ‘theft’ of Kosovo, while the second ones consider them a burden that obstructs the construction of a modern country with a single national identity, still protecting the ‘loser’ Serbian part.30

The rest of the Serbian group lives in small communities near Priština and Peć/Peja and in the surroundings of the monasteries of Dečani and Gračanica; to note it incidentally, these monasteries– and World Heritage Sites – are still encircled by international military because they have been threatened by extremist Muslim groups.

Most Serbs still living in Kosovo are elders who lived their entire lives in this province, or farmers confiding in subsistence economy and in the monthly payment granted by Serbia to citizens still living in Kosovo. They look to Belgrade as their capital, even today when Serbian President Tadić seems to have chosen the admission in European Union instead of resisting to the bitter end about Serbian rights over Kosovo.

30 Many town walls, both in Albanian and in Serbian areas, show similar slogans: ‘Eulex - made in Serbia’ and ‘Kosovo je Srbija’, respectively.
As reported in many newspapers, Americans are now planning to leave Kosovo, dismantling Camp Bondsteel, which was built to become the centre of USA operations in Middle East. As a consequence of the fall of northern Africa dictators like Ben Ali and Mubarak and the end of Gheddafi regime in Libya, the European South–Eastern chessboard changed, and Kosovo is no longer strategic for NATO and USA as it was three years ago. But, if Americans, and then Europeans, leave, what will remain of their intervention and dominance over the province?

However, to recognize the contradictions lying in the official construction of the Kosovar nation does not help to understand ‘which memory’ remains in Kosovo after the independence. The self-representation of Albanians in Kosovo, which has never been strictly connected with religion and is deeply neglected by public power due to foreign influence, can rely only on traditional symbols – as verbal language – and communitarian practices like funerals. The example of funerals is not accidental. It has been chosen because cemeteries represent the only places of ‘concrete memory’ recognized by the people in their everyday life.
In general, a cemetery is a place of celebration of the continuity of a human group, where traditional values (honor, glory and military victory) link themselves with the memory of those who died or have been killed: places that in Kosovo are still dominated by ethnic Albanian national symbols, as shown in the following images (Figures 15–16, above).

The two-headed eagle, on one side, and the tombstones portraying soldiers in army, on the other, celebrate the victims of Serbian repression and the heroes of the independence war but at the same time reassert their national identity, which is indissolubly part of their heroism; in this way, a connection is still maintained between the new identity of the Kosovar state and their Albanian heritage. The comparison of these images of Albanian cemeteries with the following one, taken in the Orthodox part of a Christian cemetery in Peja/Peć in July 2010 (Figure 17), is stunning: tombstones were destroyed and graves violated with animal bones.

**FIGURE 17:**
A VIOLATED SERBIAN GRAVEYARD IN PEĆ/PEJA (WESTERN KOSOVO)

An effective demonstration of the practices of exclusion directed towards the Serbian population of Kosovo, despite the fact that they enjoy the status of a constitutive people of the Republic of Kosovo.
Conclusions

This paper aimed at analyzing the consequences of the independence of Kosovo with attention to the ongoing identity-building processes in this society. It firstly introduced Lotman’s cultural semiotics, discussing its connections with other disciplinary approaches and defining the bearing concept of semiosphere as a model to analyze cultural dynamics.

Drawing on this theoretical introduction, this paper showed identity-building processes in contemporary Kosovo as outcomes of dynamic interactions between global flows (political, economic, mediatic) and local responses in a wider frame of power relations; but this interaction is largely ineffective, as confirmed by the great distance between official representation of Kosovo and the real life of its citizens.

The recent Kosovo independence tells us that the concept of national self-determination – once considered a ‘sacred tenet’ in international relations – is becoming meaningless in the globalized world: no self-determination occurs only on a local dimension and consequently plays a role in a wider frame of global relations. In the case of Kosovo, fostering the declaration of independence became just an option – among others – for great powers to acquire a stronger position in international confrontation.

But in Kosovo international involvement did not only bring peacekeeping forces and foreign investments, but determined also a change in the cultural system – the semiosphere – in which citizens live their life, introducing new words, new practices and new ways-of-life untied from traditional ones. The concept of multiculturalism represents one of the cornerstones of this cultural colonization. Presented as a strategy to defend or maintain different national cultures in the same state, it rather seems to be a way to create and to define new and docile local identities, as part of a plan of control Western border areas and Western energy and raw material supplies.

Finally, it is necessary to add that the independence of Kosovo set a risky precedent for future unilateral self-determination by minorities all around the world. As a matter of fact, the declaration was not consistent with the legislation in effect in international relations, i.e. as for the role of the United Nations in resolving and mediating crisis. However, the International Court, called to judge about it, stated on 22 July 2010 that the declaration of inde-
dependence was ‘not illegal’, thus confirming the lawfulness of the existence of Kosovo. But still five members of EU, and almost half of UN, are not going to recognize Kosovo as a state.\(^{31}\)

With many reasons: despite reassurances coming from NATO countries, the independence has already opened the way for similar secessions; the neighbour Republika Srpska in Bosnia is for example still threatening to leave the State of Bosnia-Herzegovina and join the Republic of Serbia. And many possible ‘Kosovos’ are waiting, often located inside the same Western borders: Scotland, Cataluña, Sardinia, and so on.

Kosovo is then to be defined as a cultural system in imbalance; but this is the only characteristic it shares with nineteenth century nation-states. This instability may end, depending on the evolutions of discursive apparatus put in stalk, in many different ways; and it is impossible to foresee, for the time being, if the ending of the coexistence between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo will be, as many observers point out, a new division between northern provinces – which will reunite with Serbia as a decision of their Serbian majority – and the bigger part remaining as an independent state.

However, the events in Kosovo demonstrate once more the crisis in which nations, to be conceived as homogeneous imagined communities, have been thrown in the last 15 years by global economic fluxes, beginning with the Yugoslav wars of 1991–9. Nevertheless, both ethnic Serb and Albanian groups, whose relations are still strained, indicate a future access to the EU as the primary goal to obtain a better future for them and their families.

The EU which is currently experiencing one of the harder periods of its history, due to economic crisis, members’ growing debt, lack of executive power; but at the same time it appears the only viable way to resolve the lingering tensions between former Yugoslav people and nations – a crucial task, whose accomplishment will show the reliability of a future Union enlarged to include the Balkan countries, as a common home for any European citizen.

\(^{31}\) The exact figures of the international recognition of Kosovo are: 81 out of 193 (42 per cent) UN member states, 22 out of 27 (81 per cent) EU member states, 24 out of 28 (86 per cent) NATO member states, and 23 out of 57 (40 per cent) member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have recognized the Republic.
3. Bibliography


