

# Chapter 7: Populists Alone in the Government: The Case of Vetëvendosje in Kosovo

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## *1. Introduction*

Kosovo, Europe's newest democracy, continues to face the challenges of a protracted transition process. A recent wave of populism has undermined the consolidation of democracy. The most significant manifestation of populism in Kosovo's party system is the Self-determination Movement (LVV). The populism of the LVV is focused, among other things, on the consistent propagation of an expansive anti-establishment agenda. The party frames society as being polarized between the 'evil elites' and the 'good people,' which is expressed in the populist rhetoric of its chairman, Albin Kurti. By winning the majority of votes in Kosovo's multiparty system of proportional representation elections, the LVV succeeded in forming its own government. This rare event placed the party in a unique position to influence the country's political system, state functions, and democratic development, and has led to a dynamic evolution, one which has mobilized Kosovo's politics and attracted new populations. In this way, the country's democratic development has been positively impacted. In the long term, however, it can also have negative consequences by strengthening latent authoritarian tendencies and limiting political competition. This chapter first discusses the concept of populism in power and then applies its insights to the populism of the LVV and the context in which it emerged and developed. The analysis focuses on how the party came to power and how it behaves as a populist governing party. Given the relatively short time the LVV has been in power, the conclusions drawn here can only be considered preliminary.

## *2. Populists in government*

Populism is often considered to be an inherently oppositional phenomenon, because a populist party in public office is still a special and

relatively rare occurrence. In the case of Kosovo, a new, not yet fully consolidated democracy on the European periphery, it is likely to have a lasting impact on the country's development. The LVV came to power in a political flash in 2019, in a mere time span of about fifty days. The party formed a coalition government with the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), which was considered by the public to be the relatively more acceptable option among the more established parties. Nevertheless, the LVV branded the LDK as forming part of the corrupt political elites throughout its campaign. The reason for the public's more positive reception of the LDK could be the great sympathy which the citizens felt for their former leader, who had led the peaceful resistance towards independence in the 1990s. After the end of the coalition, the LVV was able to re-enter the government on its own in 2021, as it received the required majority for a sole government. In doing so, the LVV took advantage of an opportunity when a group of LDK members split off and joined the LVV's electoral lists. As a result, the LVV leadership felt it could contest and win the elections on its own and ultimately returned to power. Nevertheless, based on the pre-election polls, it remains questionable whether the LVV could have achieved this victory without the breakaway of LDK members, who probably would not have passed the 5% electoral threshold on their own (Gazeta Reporteri 2021).

Already, the LVV's first appearance in government has posed a dilemma for Kosovo's democracy. The problems were clear from the beginning of their coming to power. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, when the LVV placed first among the political parties and started negotiating coalition agreements, this immediately raised the question of how a populist party would manage to govern and how durable such a coalition would be, given the LVV's previous anti-establishment rhetoric. These concerns proved well-founded when the coalition collapsed after only fifty days. The LVV's second term in government, following the elections of February 2021, was more durable, given that it did not have to contend with a coalition partner that it regarded an establishment party. Nevertheless, the party seems to be plagued by political fatigue and has failed to meet the expectations of voters across the country. The first major public disappointment with populists in government occurred when the LVV lost the local elections in November 2021, less than nine months later. The question of why this was the case will be approached through the theoretical lenses of populism and populists in government.

As the concept of populism remains debated among scholars, the role of populism as a governing force, as well as of populist leaders and parties in

public office, is still subject to analytical ambiguity. Given that no universally accepted definition of populism currently exists, the study of populism, broadly speaking, can be approached in two different ways. One approach suggests that the failure of populists in government is not predetermined and instead depends on the present opportunity structures and other context-related factors (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). The re-election of populist figures, such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, among other leaders, provide evidence for this position. However, considering the LVV from this perspective would be problematic, since the coalition government it initially formed was too short-lived to leave a lasting impact or demonstrate any ability to govern. The LVV framed this period in such a way that the party appeared like a victim of collusion between the establishment parties, whose joint efforts led to the party's removal from power.

Another theoretical approach to populism in power, one which is more pessimistic, views populism as fundamentally incompatible with the requirements of government. This approach highlights the contradictory nature of populism, which ultimately dooms populists in power to fail (Mény and Sorel 2002: 18; Müller 2016). This pessimistic perspective appears to have more explanatory power for the Kosovo case. Heinisch (2003: 101) has made similar observations in the case of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, which thrived in opposition but failed once it was in power. Moreover, Canovan (1999: 12) claims that due to the inability of populists to keep their usually inflated promises once in power, they are destined to lose the electoral support. With regard to the durability of populist parties, Taggart (2004: 270) notes that they tend to come and go. In fact, the fate of the LVV in the government seems to come closest to these pessimistic assessments. The LVV was highly successful in mobilizing the public and polarizing society by engaging in populist mobilization strategies. Following the rapid collapse of the first LVV government, the subsequent LVV government also began to show signs of fatigue only a year into its term in office, thereby resulting in the disillusionment of many of its voters, as evidenced by the party's steep losses in subsequent local elections. This turn of events is even more remarkable if we consider the historically unprecedented electoral victory the party had achieved just one year prior. The experience of the LVV thus adds to our understanding of populists in power not only in established democracies, but in this case, in a developing democracy.

### 3. Defining populism

Among the most widely shared conceptualization of populism is the ideational theoretical approach that considers populism as 'a thin-centered ideology that structures society into two separated, homogenous and antagonistic groups, the 'corrupt elite' and the 'the pure people,' and politics as the expression of the *volonté générale* of the sovereign 'pure people' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6). The people are portrayed as victims of the elites (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015: 7). Relevant for this case study of Kosovo is also Roberts' definition (1995: 88), which was developed in the Latin American context. Roberts (1995) sees populism as upholding a personalistic and paternalistic, although not necessarily charismatic, kind of political leadership. In this way, populism is a heterogeneous, cross-class political coalition focused on subaltern sectors of society; a top-down process of political mobilization that either bypasses institutionalized forms of mediation or subordinates them to a more direct link between the leader and the masses; an amorphous or eclectic ideology characterized by a discourse that emphasizes lower social strata or is anti-elite and/or anti-establishment; an economic project that uses widespread redistributive or patronage methods to create a material base of popular support.

These contextual characteristics are also strong in Kosovo and the Western Balkans. Müller (2016: 19-20) provides a similar definition of populism in power. It highlights the aspects of emotion and sentiment as important factors in the populist's ability to claim superior morality as the intermediary of political imagination. Presenting politics as a platform of morally 'pure' people, who are struggling against the morally 'inferior' elites is a standard strategy of populist mobilization. This rhetoric is how populist parties promote the belief that they possess the absolute truth. When in government, this approach inevitably clashes with the daily demands and necessary compromises that come with decision-making, leading to 'narcissistic stress' and dissonance as they claim the moral high ground and fail to live up to expectations. As the populists are unable to fulfill their political promises, which were clearly inflated before they came to power, they inevitably face a backlash once in office.

#### 4. *The populism of Vetëvendosje!*

Soft elements of populism among political parties are a common occurrence in the electoral discourse in Kosovo. These tendencies have manifested themselves to some degree in the language of electoral campaigns, indicating that the country's democratic system lacks political maturity. They took the form of expressions of inter-party electoral communication during campaigns and often represented little more than an amateurish attempt to gain votes through vocal attacks on peer parties. Such occurrences should, however, be distinguished from a hard-populist anti-establishment discourse. Compared to the LVV's anti-establishment populism, the softer elements of populism displayed by other parties in the Kosovar party system in particular do not seem to have had any immediate consequences. Nonetheless, the soft populist rhetoric of the other parties has clearly contributed to the LVV's progress towards forming a government on its own. Although the LVV initially hesitated to label itself a political party, it fulfills the criteria to be qualified as a populist party. Its brand of populism has been present throughout its existence and been displayed in its political and electoral programs (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2019b<sup>1</sup>; Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2019c<sup>2</sup>). It is also evidenced in the party's political discourse, public posture, and its behavior as a member of the opposition and a leader in the government. The origin of the LVV dates back to the early 2000s, when it registered as Network of Action for Kosovo (KAN). It later transformed into the Self-determination Movement, before it became a political party. By presenting itself as being anti-establishment, it fulfills one of the fundamental criteria of populism. Its anti-establishment orientation has been the party's most consistent aspect since its early days as a movement.

The LVV was officially registered as a political party when it decided to participate in elections, although it had initially rejected voting as a means of bringing about real political change (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2019a). As will be discussed in later sections, however, its anti-establishment outlook has eroded over time, and the LVV has been increasingly taking on the

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- 1 Manifesto of the LVV has no date of when it has been published, but its statute specifies that it is one of the founding documents of the movement (Article 4, Statute of the LVV available at: <https://www.vetevendosje.org/statuti/>).
  - 2 This is short version of the program. The long version has never been created and published. Inside the program there is no date of publication. Here is the year when it has been made public during the electoral campaign in 2019, that includes 100 points meant to be the issues covered in the program.

characteristics of an established party in the government. Originally, the real reason for the formation of the LVV was to protect sovereignty and to achieve the unification of Kosovo with Albania. In doing so, the LVV mobilized against the role of the international community, which seemed to limit the goals of the country and the LVV. The party's stood against the role that the international community occupied and still occupies today (the LVV protest<sup>3</sup> actions). This is also reflected in the name of the party, *Vetëvendosje*, which means self-determination. In this way, the international community has inevitably become part of 'the establishment' and the target of the LVV's anti-establishment agitation. The LVV accused the international community of diminishing Kosovo's right to sovereignty and limiting the possibilities for the unification of Albania (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2019b; Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2019c). The latter goal served to reinforce the LVV's anti-establishment rhetoric and made it question Kosovo's statehood in its previous form. However, the LVV did not succeed in fully clarifying its ultimate national goal because of the presence of Albanians living in other neighboring countries. Since Kosovo's political system is ruled by constitution and remains a multiethnic state, it has no constitutional authority to advocate for merging with any other state (*Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo*, Art. 1.3 2018). This is a fundamental principle of the state that the LVV has not accepted, although it seems to have tolerated it during its time in power. This principle limits national sovereignty and prevents Kosovo from joining other states, in this case Albania.

In Kosovo, constitutional amendments require not only a two-thirds majority in parliament, but also a two-thirds majority among the minorities represented in parliament and thus the consent of the Serbian minority population, which is de facto an unattainable undertaking. Nonetheless, the comprehensive Kosovo status settlement proposal (UN Security Council 2007) submitted by Martti Ahtisaari in 2007 was also not accepted and rejected by the LVV, including by inciting mass protests. The Ahtisaari package proposal, which became part of the constitution, emphasized the role of the international community, limited Kosovo's sovereign right to unite with other states, and expanded the rights of minorities, particularly the Serbian minority of Kosovo. This was achieved in part through decentralization, which the LVV vehemently opposed (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2006). As a result, the LVV neither recognized nor respected the official

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3 At the webpage of the LVV (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2021a) most of the protests of anti-establishment character have been deleted.

state symbols, the flag and anthem, and it continued to uphold the flag and anthem of Albania. The LVV deputies take their oath of office in parliament and local assemblies with an Albanian flag placed in front of them, although procedurally they are not authorized to remove the Kosovar flag from the assembly itself (Gazeta Blic 2021).

The LVV strongly rejected the official dialog between Kosovo and Serbia on the unresolved issues between the two countries. Instead, the LVV proposed some kind of dialog with the Serbs in Kosovo, which in reality seems to be an unrealistic proposal, considering the circumstances and context. Rejecting the dialogue was very popular in the eyes of the public, but it was not viewed as a practical solution for the completion of the final status negotiations. *'Jo Negociata, Vetëvendosje'* (No Negotiations, Self-determination) is one of the mostly often heard slogan of the LVV. It is even attached to the traffic lights, targeting drivers waiting for the light to turn green.

The general anti-establishment goal of the LVV is the establishment of the Third Republic in Kosovo (Fakte Plus 2021). This is an allusion to the recent electoral victory along the lines of developments in post-revolutionary France. Accordingly, the First Republic is seen as the proclamation of the Republic in July 1990. The Second Republic began with the current state's independence on February 17, 2008, which, according to the LVV, as mentioned above, has not developed as expected. Thus, the LVV presents the establishment of the Third Republic as a means to overcome the current order (Fakte Plus 2021). The LVV's negative attitude toward the current state also extends to its institutions, as the party consistently behaves in an anti-constitutional manner, using all means, including illegal ones, to impose its political point of view. In this regard, the LVV has showed disrespect for the symbols of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and The European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), claiming that their role was to limit the country's sovereignty. They even threw eggs and tear gas canisters towards MPs from the established parties during a parliamentary session to prevent them from voting on the international agreement to resolve the border conflict with Montenegro (Zëri 2018).

The elements of the LVV's populist anti-establishment activities listed thus far were insufficient to bring the LVV into government. As an opposition party, it had won only a portion of the seats, but not a majority.

Table 7.1 Votes for the LVV from 2010 to the last elections

	Votes	Percentage	Seats
2010	88652	12.69	14
2014	99397	13.59	16
2017	200135	27.49	32
2019	221001	25.49	29
2021	438335	50.28	58

Source: Komisioni Qëndror i Zgjedhjeve

What boosted support for the LVV was the further expansion of the anti-establishment rhetoric. The LVV accused the ‘nefarious’ elites and the corruption of ‘the establishment,’ not only for engaging in political compromises and deal making, which would be necessary to achieve the kind of state that the LVV opposed, but also for causing the political, economic, and society ‘ills’ that the ‘good’ people were facing as a result. In doing so, the LVV pointed squarely at the political establishment, specifically the mainstream political parties which had governed Kosovo for some twenty years after the war. The LVV publicly accused these parties for engaging in corruption, nepotism, state capture, clientelism, favoritism, and patrimonialism, as well as for pursuing a route to privatization that, in their view, had produced no economic development but rather increased unemployment, poverty, and economic underdevelopment in general (World Bank n.d.). The data contained in international and national reports, e.g., from the EU, regularly show that corruption is widespread in Kosovo. In its reports on Kosovo, also the organization Transparency International has highlighted the problem of corruption in Kosovo (Transparency International 2022). Accusing the mainstream parties of state capture is a common talking point of the LVV. On many occasions, Kurti has appealed to television viewers not to compare him with ‘them,’ i.e., the other parties, while presenting himself as the savior of the state (Declaration of Kurti) who does not engage in state capture (RTV Dukagjini 2021).

In an attempt to demonize the other parties, the LVV has continuously vowed not to enter into coalitions with the establishment parties. No coalition with those who captured the state, as declared by Haxhiu (2016), one of the proponents of the LVV. This helped the LVV to present itself in the eyes of the public as morally ‘pure’, as the sole protector of ‘the people,’ destined to cure the ‘evils’ caused by the ‘others,’ i.e., the establish-



ment parties and elites. This form of othering and the overall expansion of the party's anti-establishment agenda during a time when discontent was high in Kosovar society contributed decisively to the LVV's unprecedented electoral victory in 2021. Its campaign touched on very sensitive and painful issues for individuals who had lost faith in politics due to the exploitation of the public good by politicians at the expense of the citizens.

Kurti sensed this development very well and used it very skillfully to gain power. Politicians who are affiliated with the ruling parties also engage in such behavior, but what the LVV has done is make a gross generalization about the entire political establishment, demonizing and discrediting political parties and politicians of all stripes, threatening them openly and aggressively, criminalizing them and their behavior, and accusing them of abusing the public. An evocative electoral promise to the masses was Kurti's slogan "*Hajnat ne burg*" ("thieves to the prison"), which became very popular and mobilized many. Such calls exemplify the populist rhetoric of this political party, since it is obviously not the government that imprisons people under an institutional separation of powers. Given the inadequate access to public information concerning the mandate of political institutions, such a populist promise resonated with citizens who perceived themselves as everyday victims and witnesses to corruption and state capture. This promise was further strengthened by the leader of the LVV, who, unlike the leaders of other parties, successfully managed to stay away from any corruption scandals involving money or other material benefits. The populist characteristic of dividing society into two camps, i.e., the 'corrupt' elites, who the LVV accused of acting at the expense of the 'pure' people, ultimately transformed the party into a populist political party situated on the fringe of the party system with a narrow anti-establishment agenda.

Thus, it was able to grow from a grouping of ideologically motivated students and activists into a mass populist party with a broader anti-establishment agenda that achieved an unprecedented electoral victory in the short history of democracy in Kosovo. While the anti-establishment discourse of the LVV helped bring the party into power and enabled it to govern without a coalition partner, it also raised expectations that the party would find difficult to fulfill. This development will be explored in detail in the following section.

## 5. *The LVV's rise to power*

The political, economic, and social environment in Kosovo is a fertile ground for the emergence of a 'populist savior' to enter politics and government. Concerning the prospects for the development of democracy and populism in Kosovo, the context is very similar to that identified by Roberts (1995: 88) in Latin America. The unconsolidated democratic system of Kosovo and the ongoing multiple system transformations have resulted in a type of democracy that is incapable of protecting the public and their interests. Instead, a system has been created which can be exploited by those in power. This unfortunate reality has contributed to a widespread negative view of politics and democracy in society, whereby those in power can easily exploit state resources and public goods to pursue their narrow interests at the expense of society (Freedom House n.d.). Such exploitative behavior has significantly damaged trust in politicians and the legitimacy of public institutions. These conditions were skillfully exploited by the LVV to increase electoral support for them while they formed the opposition, which then, as Müller put it, allowed them to colonize the state and its institutions (2016: 44). The 'proclamation' of the LVV to oppose privatization on ideological grounds proved correct, although even the non-privatized companies did not perform significantly better either. Kosovo's privatization process was conducted in such a manner that made it very profitable for some politicians and their clientele but proved costly for the economy (Briscoe and Price 2011; GLPS and BIRN 2018). Moreover, there are reports which indicate, in extreme cases of privatization, considerable areas of land were bought by politicians for relatively little money (Loxha and Elshani 2015; Gazeta Express 2020). These findings have provided leverage to the current LVV government, making it easier for LVV politicians to discredit the opposition parties whenever they criticize the current LVV-led government. The failures of privatization in Kosovo as the potential underpinning of the economy has been attributed to the work of the established elites and all major political parties.

Kosovo is fertile ground for the emergence of personalistic leadership. This was the case with the traditional establishment parties until recently, before they lost their strongholds, and it applies also to the current populist leader in power. The sociological perspective on leadership best explains the emergence and success of leaders in the case of Kosovo. Since Kosovo is still a developing society with relatively little complexity and a limited ability to organize interests, the majority of its citizenry forms a relatively

undifferentiated mass public, with only a few layers separating them from the leader. This fact has contributed to the organizational difficulty that parties have faced and has added to their legitimization problem while fostering a very personalistic political model. Parties and institutions are not able to mediate between the leaders and the masses. This is also the reason for the lack of integration among civil society organizations in Kosovo (Rumbullaku 2019). In fact, most NGOs remain donor-driven (EU Commission 2016) and have no integration capacities. Interest groups and labor unions in the public sector are very frail, and they remain almost nonexistent in private sector. The traditional institution of the family is still the predominant institution in Kosovo and therefore also has a considerable influence on politics and the economy, as it makes the largest contribution to the economy through remittances.

The populist discourse of the LVV developed as an interaction between the demand side, i.e., the people demanding change, and the supply side, i.e., the LVV's promises to enact change. The latter presented itself as a group of anti-politicians and outsiders fighting against the more established elites. In doing so, a strong relationship developed, and the LVV succeeded in winning over a significant portion of the public, even though Kurti's promises were not accompanied by an extensive electoral program (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2021b). What mattered most to the masses, was the trust which they had developed in the form of emotional and enthusiastic attachments to the leader of the LVV and the party on the one hand, and the disappointment and distrust which they felt toward the other parties on the other. The enticing promise of "*Hajnat ne burg*" ("thieves to prison", see Epoka e Re 2021), appealed to most people and drew large crowds to the LVV's rallies.

After the 2019 parliamentary elections, the party's populist character was also on display throughout the process of forming a coalition, when it had to deal with an establishment party. It took approximately three months for the LVV to negotiate an agreement with the LDK. Regardless of this fact, the coalition agreement, at least in terms of the governing coalition program and its policy orientation, was almost entirely devoid of substantive policy proposals and mostly concerned the ministerial positions (Krasniqi-Veseli and Sadiku 2020). As a result, the LVV's approach to forming a coalition government was complicated and protracted. Indeed, they did not negotiate the potential government program and policy direction as parties normally do. Instead, the LVV had to balance its radical campaign rhetoric with finding common ground with a potential coalition partner.

At the same time, the party struggled with its tendency to overpromise, its thin substantive agenda, and its relative reluctance to move from opposition into its government role, all of which contributed to a long government formation process. After nearly three months of trying to negotiate a coalition agreement, the two parties agreed on the division of the government in terms of ministerial posts assigned to one party or the other. The lack of trust between the two parties was on display for all to see.

It was the first time that a populist party led a governing coalition in Kosovo. Among the first interesting developments was the LVV's attitude toward the issue of state symbols, since they must be procedurally observed and respected. This was a clear sign that the party's new role in public office presented challenges that at least minimized the space for populist anti-establishment agitation. This would be different the second time the LVV formed a government, when the party ruled without a coalition partner and for a much longer time. As noted above, the LVV-LDK coalition lasted only a relatively short time. The government collapsed when then-Prime Minister Kurti fired the Minister of Interior, an LDK politician, largely over personal reasons. The LDK viewed this decision as a breach of their coalition agreement. It needs to be emphasized that this self-induced crisis unfolded during the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, without taking into account the political consequences.

The LDK, along with two other parties, had enough votes to form a new government, forcing the LVV back into the role of the opposition. It was feared that the LVV would not leave the government offices and instead claim to have the majority of votes among all parties, and that no government would be formed without it. The LVV announced protest rallies, but they did not follow through because of COVID-19, with the exception of a large rally at the beginning. Nonetheless, they indicated their populist positions toward public institutions and official procedures, when the new prime minister and ministers chose not to follow the protocol of transition of power—which would normally see them personally hand over their respective ministries to incoming prime minister and ministers.

The LVV remained in the opposition until after the early elections on February 14, 2021, as a result of the decision of the Constitutional Court (Constitutional Court 2021), which found that the government was not in compliance with constitutional provisions and brought down the government. The illegitimacy of the government that replaced the LVV-led government demonstrated in the eyes of the public the alleged victimization of the LVV by the establishment parties, which reinforced populist rhetoric

and further demonized the parties as they united to oust the LVV from its leadership role in the government. As it happened, this development proved to be very opportune for the LVV to increase populist momentum and thereby mass support.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2013) argument on geographic differentiation, which shows that the inclusive populist framework can be applied to cases outside of Latin America, does not apply to the case of Kosovo. This is because populist mobilization has further demonized the already discredited mainstream parties. Almost no one believed that the LVV would achieve such an unprecedented electoral victory. The proportional electoral system (Gazeta Zyrtare 2008) and the multiparty system that split the votes was considered to be a sufficient institutional and political obstacle. Yet, the LVV managed to beat all of the traditional establishment political parties—a historical feat. The LVV doubled the number of votes, gaining 50.28% of all the votes, which enabled it to form a government on its own.

As Kitschelt and McGann (1995: 201) note, the Manichean dichotomy of 'good' versus 'evil' is useful for parties seeking to move from periphery to the center of power. In the case of the LVV, this strategy proved highly successful. However, it can be argued that this can backfire once such a party is in power (Canovan 1999: 12; Heinisch 2003: 101), as the party lacks the experience and expertise to implement its agenda. As a result, the LVV has resorted to blaming the more established parties for the problems it encountered as a leader in the government. Another strategy of the LVV has been to distance itself from its previous campaign promises, such as lowering the cost of energy, by stating that the campaign was "a political goal" and not a "firm commitment" (Gazeta Metro 2021).

## 6. *The populist LVV in public office*

On March 22, 2021 (Radio Evropa e Lire 2021), the new government was elected, one which was solely comprised of LVV politicians. In its new role, however, the LVV transformed itself into the established elite. Müller (2016) points out that this is a conceptual contradiction of populism once populists come to power. As a leader in the government, one inevitably becomes 'the establishment elite,' even if one claims to work for 'the people' and against 'the elites.' The LVV's experience in the government has so far shown that they are gradually filling public institutions with party loyalists, contrary to what they had been saying in opposition' One of the first visible

signs of the LVV's transformation into an established elite was the fleet of cars which they have been using in office. The LVV once criticized the dark jeeps that the former government officials used. But now LVV officials seem to appreciate them and even use them for non-state but rather party activities, including an electoral campaign for party candidates in Albania and in local elections in Kosovo (Thaqi 2021). This behavior clearly shows a contradiction in the LVV's rhetoric and behavior, as the LVV once made such topics as part of its strategy to demonize the other parties.

Most interestingly, at the very beginning of its second term in government, one of the first actions taken by the LVV was to delete numerous documents from its website. These documents dealt with important issues that the party had taken up during its time in the opposition, specifically those issues that could now be seen as contradicting the government's current rhetoric (Rashiti 2021). This face-saving mechanism shows once again that the LVV has changed over time since adopting a leadership role in governance.

The slow beginning of the new LVV-led government has resulted in persistent demands on behalf of the public to initiate the promised changes and carry out reforms. Nonetheless, it took approximately two months for the government just to present its own governing program (Zyra e Kryeministrit 2021b). The LVV's governing program, however, did not differ significantly from the programs of previous governments, nor did it align with the exaggerated promises that the LVV had made while on the campaign trail. If implemented in its entirety, this current program will likely produce a similar performance to the past programs of previous governments. Normally, a governing program should be based on the parties' election manifestos and echo the electoral promises made during the campaign. It should indicate the parties' ideas and vision of how they plan to govern, or in populist terms, how they plan to cure the country's political, economic, and societal 'ills.' In case of the LVV, this did not take place. Complaints about the delay of the promised reforms were initially met with the argument that things take time and that the LVV had just gotten started. When the government was finishing its first year in office, the justifications changed, and the LVV was instead pointing the finger at the previous parties in power. These were accused as having been "irreparably damaged" the country for twenty years, and as such, the LVV's ability to move forward with the promised reforms had been hindered. The twenty years of bad governance has become a common catchphrase for the LVV-led government.

Needless to say, political observers were curious to see how the LVV-led government would adapt to the constraints of Kosovo's constitution, which it had consistently opposed as a member of the opposition, including when the party rejected Ahtisaari's comprehensive solution (Kallxo 2020). Yet, it appears that the LVV has since adapted itself to the constitutional requirements and usage of state symbols. The party's leader once ignored the Kosovo flag, even disparaging it publicly, describing the flag as a flag 'lara-lara' (Gazeta Reporteri 2019b). He also once declared that he would remove the flag from his office. However, he now seems to take a much more pragmatic and accepting approach (Gazeta Reporteri 2019a). Prime Minister Kurti continues to keep the flag of Albania in his party office instead of Kosovo flag, and at a meeting between LVV politicians and members of the diaspora in the summer of 2021, only the Albanian flag was present (Syri Kosova 2021).

Concerning the question of whether minorities—including the Serbian minority—should be granted the right to participate in governance, as Ahtisaari's proposal had called for, Prime Minister Kurti now seems to agree. Moreover, the Serbian minority ministers were not even excluded from the Serbian minority party, the Serb List, for directly challenging the government's actions in the northern part of Kosovo, where Serbian demonstrators blocked special police units, and one minister was among the organizers. Surprisingly, the LVV in the government seems to be more tolerant of the situation. The same applies to the issue of decentralization, which the LVV categorically rejected some time ago. The issue of initiating a dialogue with Serbia was categorically rejected by Prime Minister Kurti and the LVV, a move which they considered to be interfering with internal affairs, including with the rights of the Serbian minority and the unexercised sovereign rights in the northern part of Kosovo (Telegrafi 2012).

A widely known slogan of the LVV regarding the dialogue is "*Jo Negociata, Vetëvendosje*" ("No Negotiations, Self-Determination"). Since the formation of the LVV-led government, the issue of dialogue has been largely neglected in comparison to previous governments, although a deputy prime minister is responsible for initiating dialogue. The LVV and the prime minister need time to find a face-saving solution to justify their shifting positions toward Serbia. As mediators of the dialogue, the international community, the U.S., and the EU are exerting increasing pressure to reach an agreement on the unresolved issues. A series of formal meetings between the prime minister and the Serbian president, brokered by the EU's special envoy, reflected the tense situation in which Prime Minister Kurti currently



resides, as he is somehow trying to show steadfastness in order to save face with his supporters. However, it appears that international pressure is mounting, and he will either have to work faster toward finding a solution or find a way to leave the government if he chooses not to accept an internationally sponsored and supported solution.

It would seem that the LVV and the prime minister have forgotten one of their most important political goals, i.e., unification with Albania. As a political party whose main goal was once unification with Albania, the LVV has since downgraded this goal to the point of stating that the prime minister will vote for it if a referendum is organized in a democratic way. What a drastic change: Once a leader of a radical political idea, who, among other things, repeatedly questioned the foundations of the Kosovar state, he has arrived at the position of an ordinary citizen in stating that he would vote, like most ordinary citizens, if someone else organized the referendum (Qeriqi 2021).

The possibility that a populist party could capture the state poses a challenge to democracy in Kosovo. One of the main features of the previous governments was the capture of the state and institutional apparatus, which was carried out by populating the institutions, agencies, public companies, and governing boards with party militants and family relatives. The LVV and its leader once promised to remedy this situation (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje 2015). Yet, the LVV is continuing down the same path as the mainstream parties. As Müller (2016) predicted, the LVV has justified this on the grounds that the state, institutions, public enterprises, and boards of directors remain ‘trapped’ in the service of the old establishment. By hiring people based on their ideology, loyalty, and trust in the government, the LVV can advance reforms and avoid sabotaging the government’s work. To date, the tendency is that most of the boards of directors, executives of independent institutions, CEOs of public enterprises, university boards, etc., have been dismissed and largely replaced by supporters of the LVV.

It is interesting that the parties which once behaved in the same way are now blaming the LVV for appropriating the institutions and the state (Gazeta Scanner 2021). The same is happening with the politically appointed diplomats. Similar to before, the process of their reappointment was accompanied by favoritism, however, unlike before, the ministries have been flooded with inexperienced party members with low expectations in their performance. The prime minister’s somewhat paranoid attitude toward the people he works with, i.e., the party leadership, was decisive here. In an interview in which he was asked why he included party members in the



institutions, he replied that they were proven experts and were trusted (RTK 2021).

As far as the reforms introduced to fulfill the promises are concerned, the government has so far taken steps to implement the promised overhaul of the judicial system. A concept paper has been drafted so far. However, the EU has criticized this move, pointing out to the government that the mechanisms to reform the judiciary are not yet in place and that a full reform should only be considered once all other mechanisms have been exhausted (DG NEAR 2021: 4). Another major concern of the experts is that the state and the institutions that could use such a vetting process to capture the judiciary. On the other hand, a very popular measure is the state distribution policy, whereby subsidies for young mothers and children were created by government decree, which was also a promise of the LVV (Zyra e Kryeministrit 2021a).

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up, the case of the LVV, a populist party which has been in government for about a year at the time of this chapter's writing, seems to align with the pessimistic theoretical approaches to studying populists in power. The party had a slow start in governance and sought to justify this delay by highlighting the amount of time it took for them to come to power. Over time, the party found another justification for not meeting even the minimum expectations, namely, that things were so damaged by the previous ruling parties that the situation was unredeemable. Moreover, the LVV has begun to engage in the same problematic behavior of reclaiming the state and staffing public institutions with family members and party insiders, a development which the party has justified on ideological and loyalty grounds.

The experience of the LVV in the government has resulted in citizens' disappointment with the "very last hope," as the LVV was considered the last hope. This has signaled a crisis of legitimacy and trust in politics and Kosovar democracy, as evidenced, among other things, by the massive exodus of citizens. Unable to bring about the promised change, the government has instead put into perspective and normalized the performance of the former established political parties, which have been portrayed by the LVV as the culprits responsible for the 'ills' in society. This has given the impression that the blame for the shortcomings lies in the context and not

with the political actors, such as the former established political parties. That the public was disappointed with the LVV became evident in the local elections which were held just nine months after the party had won the parliamentary elections in a landslide. The LVV's defeat in the local elections has thus facilitated the gradual return of the establishment parties to government and signaled a loss of confidence in the populist party. By discrediting itself during its time in power, the LVV unintentionally is normalizing the behavior of former establishment parties and making itself appear as part of 'the establishment.'

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