

IDENTITY IN THE PREŠEVO VALLEY
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S
EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

Located in the south of Serbia, the Preševo valley is home to the country's small ethnic-Albanian minority. The generation that grew up in the valley after the ethnic conflicts, which marked the region two decades ago, is growing into adulthood. This thesis investigates how young ethnic-Albanians from the Preševo valley experience their identity. A qualitative research, based on semi-structured interviews, explores how they relate to their Albanian ethnic identity and the Serbian and Kosovar national identities. Although they have Serbian citizenship, they feel hardly attached to the Serbian national identity. Rather, they feel connected with Kosovo, with whose population they share the Albanian ethnic identity. However, they do not feel fully included in the Kosovar national identity either. As such, some experience a feeling of abandonment.

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1. Introduction

The Preševo valley in southern Serbia is home to the country's small ethnic-Albanian population. Since the Kosovar war of 1998-'99 and the subsequent insurgencies in the Preševo valley, co-habitation of Serbians and ethnic Albanians is exceptional. Although the inhabitants of the valley manage it, political games create an everyday challenge for the ethnic-Albanian minority. Two decades after the conflict, they are still demanding rights to freely express and experience their culture.

Those who were children during the armed conflicts, have now grown into adulthood. They cannot be held responsible for what has happened, yet, they have to live with the consequences. This thesis researches how this generation experiences its identity, how they relate to the Serbian national identity, of which they carry a passport, and how they relate to the Albanian ethnic identity, which they share with the majority of people living in Kosovo. In order to find answers, ten semi structured interviews were carried out with young ethnic Albanians from the Preševo valley. The analysis is based on their testimonies.

The thesis consists of three parts, in the first one, the background of the valley and its people will be explained. In the subsequent part, the definitions, theories and methods used to build the analysis are set forth. The analysis itself consists of two main sections, the first one about the integration of young ethnic-Albanians in the Serbian society. Here, explanations are formulated for the respondents' low interest in the Serbian national identity. In the second section, Kosovo's restricted capabilities to act as a kin-state will be analysed. In the conclusion, the respondents' relation with respectively the Serbian national identity, the Albanian ethnic identity and the Kosovar national identity are presented.

2. The valley and its people

In the following section, the Preševo valley's geography and demographics will be discussed. Although the geography of the valley does not directly influence the identity of its inhabitants, the political significance of the region's location can eventually have implications on the identity debate. Demographic trends evidently have a direct impact on the identity question. Yet, the proportional share of different groups in the region has remained fairly stable.

2.1. Location and Geography

The Preševo valley is located in the South of Serbia, bordering Kosovo in the West and North Macedonia in the South. The valley consists of three municipalities, namely Bujanovac, Preševo and Medvedja.



Figure 1 Map of the Preševo valley

The valley is an important gateway in the mountainous Balkans. Today this is most visible on the motorway E75 which connects Norway with Greece and Belgrade with Thessaloniki and

runs through the valley. It is one of the busiest highways of South-Eastern Europe. The road is part of corridor X, one of the ten trans-European corridors that the European Union has developed to improve connectivity, accessibility, free movement and cross-border exchanges throughout Europe (Van Baar, 2017). Two other infrastructure projects which are currently in the making signify the geopolitical importance of the valley. Both can be traced within the Chinese ‘One belt, One road’ initiative, an important project for the positioning in world politics for countries like Serbia. The first project is the construction of a high-speed rail connection between the Greek port of Piraeus to Central Europe. A first section of this project is already under construction between Budapest and Belgrade, the more Southern section would run through the Preševo Valley. A second project is the creation of a channel connecting the Morava river, which flows from the South of Serbia into the Danube, with the Vardar river which goes from North Macedonia to Greece to end in the Aegean Sea.

Thus, the economic and geopolitical importance of the valley should not be underestimated. Without a doubt, it is a decisive element in any political decision concerning the region. This thesis will however focus on a more social level: the people living in the valley.

2.2. Demography and Outmigration

The Preševo valley is home to Serbia’s small Albanian minority, which constitutes less than one percent of the country’s total population. Yet, in the Preševo valley, Albanians form a majority, one could call this ‘Reversed demographics’, where a group is an ethnic minority on the national level but constitutes an ethnic majority on the local level (Rácz, 2017). According to a 2002 census, ethnic Albanians constitute a majority in Preševo (89,09%) and Bujanovac (54,69%) and a considerable minority in Medveđa (26,17%) (International Crisis Group, 2007). A more recent census, held in 2011, was boycotted by the Albanian population of the

valley and is therefore not useful. However, in 2015, a population assessment in search for the actual 2011 numbers was conducted on behalf of the OSCE team in Serbia¹. According to this estimation, ethnic Albanians remained the large majority of inhabitants in Preševo with 91%. As well in Bujanovac, proportions remained fairly equal with an Albanian majority of 53,4%. Only in Medveđa, the number of Albanians decreased significantly, here, they are estimated to be a minority of 7.1%. Because of this, Medveđa is not used as a research subject in this thesis.

The share of Serbian inhabitants remained relatively stable with a minority of 7,7% in Preševo (opposed to 8,5% in 2002) and in Bujanovac a larger minority of 33,9% (opposed to 34,1% in 2002). In Medveđa, as the share of Albanians has decreased significantly, the share of Serbian inhabitants increased to 86,4% (opposed to 66,6% in 2002).

Although relative numbers remained fairly stable in Preševo and Bujanovac, absolute numbers have decreased saliently all over the region. Whereas in 2002 a total population of 88.966 was counted in the valley, the estimation of the 2011 only found 75.336 inhabitants remaining. There are no significant differences in the scope of this decrease between different ethnicities or municipalities.

The decrease in inhabitants has most likely to do with a high degree of outmigration to Western Europe. The most popular destination for people from the valley is Switzerland, where ethnic Albanians that came as guest-workers from Yugoslavia form one of the most important immigrant groups (Dahinden, 2005). As almost everyone in the Preševo valley has at least one family member living in Switzerland, remittances are a major source of income.

¹ I received a copied version of “*Expert Team report on methodology to estimate South Serbian population missed from the 2011 Population and Housing Census,*” by an informant of mine in Preševo; The assessment was conducted by the OSCE Mission to Serbia upon the request of the Serbian MPA.

Yet, this is not unique to ethnic Albanians nor to the valley. Outmigration to economically more vibrant regions affects all countries and ethnicities in the region. Therefore, one cannot detect significant differences between ethnicities in the outmigration from the valley.

Besides economic migration however, there is another type of outmigration among youth. As opportunities for higher education are rare in the region, young people move to surrounding cities to study. What makes the Preševo valley peculiar, is the high number of students who go abroad to enjoy education in their own language. Many ethnic-Albanian students do not return to their place of birth after their graduation and remain in Albania, North Macedonia or Kosovo.

In sum, young ethnic-Albanians who grew up in Bujanovac lived together with a relatively big Serbian minority. Their peers who grew up in the neighboring municipality of Preševo had less chances to meet Serbians since the town is almost solely inhabited by ethnic-Albanians. This share in proportions stayed stable over time while the absolute numbers have decreased in both municipalities. Outmigration to neighboring countries is an important cause of this and is sometimes motivated by the lack of study and work opportunities for ethnic-Albanians in Serbia.

An important question that has not been addressed yet, is why this ethnic-Albanian minority exists in Serbia. This is the focus of the following section in which the region's history will be discussed.

3. The valley's history and present

3.1. History

The region corresponding to the current Southern Serbia has been inhabited by an Albanian speaking population for centuries. A story often referred to by the ethnic Albanians is about '*Molla e Kuqe*' or 'red apple'. Allegedly, the northern border of the territory once inhabited by Albanians reached till a village called red apple close to Niš². Nowadays, the Preševo valley is the only place in Southern Serbia where Albanians still live. Understanding the more recent history of the region is key to understand the predicament of the Albanians living in the area and the strong attachment they have with their ethnic identity. The following section explores briefly the Ottoman and Yugoslav history, after which the recent conflict of 2000-2001 will be explained.

3.1.1. Ottoman times and Yugoslavia

During the period of the Ottoman empire, the Preševo valley was part of the 'Kosovo Vilayet'. Besides modern-day Kosovo, this Ottoman 'province' encompassed what is now Western North Macedonia, the Sandžak region and the Preševo valley. Already in the 'Kosovo Vilayet', ethnic Albanians formed the majority of the population. However, when in 1913, in the Treaty of London, the borders of modern-day Albania were drawn, the inhabitants of the former Ottoman province were left outside the new country. Instead, the former Vilayet became in 1918 incorporated in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes which later became the kingdom of Yugoslavia. Thirty years later, at the beginning of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in 1944, the territory was divided among the federal republics of Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia and the autonomous province of Kosovo and

² A village called '*Црвена Јабука*' or red apple still exists nowadays close to Niš, which might be the same as the one from the story.

Metohija (Judah, 2001). Remarkably, the three municipalities, Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa, that always had been close to Kosovo and which shared the same socio-economic characteristics with the region were left outside of the province and became part of the Yugoslav Republic of Serbia.

3.1.2. 1992-2001

In 1992, an unofficial referendum was held in the Preševo valley in which most of the ethnic Albanians voted for the independence of the region from Serbia and the unification with Kosovo (Zylfiu et al., 2017). This plebiscite however, did not attract the desired response of the Yugoslav authorities and had thus no further implications.

During the subsequent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990's, the Preševo valley remained free of violence. Only in the aftermath of the war in Kosovo, a group of ethnic Albanians in the valley formed the 'Liberation Army of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa (UÇPMB), they launched an insurgency against the Serbian police that was patrolling in a Ground Safety Zone (GSZ), a five kilometers wide demilitarized zone around Kosovo, in which heavy weapons were prohibited (Pettifer, 2012). The formation of this liberation army resulted from the increasing harassment of the Albanian minority by the Serbian authorities. *"After the loss of Kosovo there seems to have been a widespread feeling that the best solution to the remaining "shiptar" [Albanians] problem was to either drive them out, or intimidate them into leaving"* observed Bob Churcher, director of the International Crisis Group in Pristina at the time (Churcher, 2002). For about two years, between the summer of 1999 and the spring of 2001, the region was regularly startled by fighting. The insurgencies eventually came to an end with the ceasefire agreement signed in the village of Koncul. The ceasefire was the direct result of a proposal of the then Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia Nebojša Čović known as the 'Čović plan'. *"Briefly, the plan made provision for the creation of a "multi-ethnic" police*

force, and for more, and more effective representation for Albanians in local government. There were also promises of more aid from both the US and the EU, and of more employment of Albanians” (Churcher, 2002). The ceasefire proved to be effective and ever since, the region has remained peaceful.

3.2. Current situation

Although fighting is over, the conflict in the Preševo valley is not settled. On the fields of minority rights and cultural freedom, ethnic-Albanians are still dissatisfied. In the following part, the opportunities for political representation are briefly explored after which the struggle for education is elaborated on. The latter is the field which concerns youth the most, in school, identities are formed and certain visions on the world are offered. The final part of this section is a dissertation of the negotiations about a possible border change which would have severe consequences for young people’s futures.

3.2.1. Political representation

Albanians from the valley almost exclusively vote on an ethnic basis for Albanian minority parties. These parties are mostly active on the local level. The Party for Democratic Action (PDD) delivers both the majors of Bujanovac and Preševo

In Serbia, there is a threshold of five percent to be elected into the national parliament. However, this threshold does not exist for minority parties so they do have a chance to gain a seat without obtaining five percent of the national vote. Since the Albanian minority is smaller than one percent in the overall Serbian population, the absence of a threshold is necessary for them. Currently, the Albanian minority Party for Democratic Action (PDD) has

with Riza Halimi from Preševo, one seat in the Serbian national parliament. As the other local parties in the valley, the PDD is politically oriented to Kosovo and calls for a high degree of decentralisation and territorial autonomy (Bochsler, 2008).

In the light of decentralization, the local parties achieved the creation of the ‘National Council of Albanian National Minority’ in 2010. The council is active in the fields of Education, Culture and Language and engages itself to defend and enlarge the rights of Albanians in these spheres. However, by the establishment of the National Council, education was seen as the main priority (Lazic, 2010). As explained below however, the National council did not yet accomplish major improvements.

3.2.2. Education

A long-lasting issue in the region has been the content of textbooks in primary school. As the valley lays in Serbia, it is the Serbian curriculum which has to be taught in schools. However, Albanian language textbooks containing this curriculum hardly exist. The result is that teachers have to translate Serbian textbooks by themselves and dictate those to their pupils. For the first four grades, some textbooks are provided by the Republic of Albania, but only those dealing with non-contentious topics. Courses dealing with history, geography, arts and music, are also in these grades taught without textbooks (Zaba, 2016). In the late summer of 2015, a truck transporting over 100,000 Albanian language textbooks provided by the Kosovar ministry of education was blocked at the Serbian border where it stayed for half a year. By the spring of 2016, the Serbian authorities decided that the books should return to Kosovo, which led to protests in Preševo by ethnic Albanians, claiming their right to be educated in their own language.

A similar situation exists in the field of higher education, where opportunities to study in the Albanian language are scarce in Serbia. In Medveđa, the university of Niš opened branches of

its faculties of economy and law, where some programs are taught in Albanian. Further, the University of Novi Sad offers some scholarships for students from the region, however no programs in Albanian. Far more students decide to leave Serbia to enjoy Albanian education in the neighboring states of North Macedonia and Kosovo or even go to Albania. In the latter, the University of Tirana yearly reserves a certain amount of study places to students from the Preševo valley, similar quotas do exist in Kosovar and North Macedonian universities.

Because Serbia does not recognize Kosovo as a country, it neither does recognize diplomas obtained in the country. As such, when young persons from the Preševo valley study in Kosovo, going afterwards back to their home region to work is difficult.

Instead of trying to solve these problems by striving for minority rights, some people rather opt for the adjustment of borders, this is the focus of the following section.

3.3. Border correction

Preševo and Bujanovac are both surrounded by hills, one who travels over the tortuous roads to the West, reaches the Kosovar border after a few kilometres. The first control posts are operated by the Serbian police, officially, they only conduct routine checks as they would do anywhere else in Serbia, *de facto*, they conduct border controls by which they reaffirm the existence of a border they actually deny. Less than two decades ago, these hills were part of a Ground Safety Zone (GSZ) in which heavy weapons were prohibited in order to secure peace in Kosovo. Ironically, the GSZ became itself a conflict zone. The Serbian police who is now controlling the border, fought with the UÇPMB, of which the former members now regularly cross the border. Only one container further, beneath the same shelter, the Kosovar border police is in charge. Although they literally work under the same roof, the Kosovar and Serbian officers have little communication with one another. It is the result of a political game in which tensions around the border are stirred up every once in a while. Only a year ago, a Serbian minister crossed the border irregularly after which he was arrested by the Kosovar

police with a lot of bravado. Although tensions are stronger in Kosovo's northern border, where a control post was set on fire in 2011, trust is low and today's calmness might still change overnight, if politics decide so. An issue which gives people reason to keep worrying is the so-called land-swap.

In the late summer of 2018, an old idea to solve the problems between Serbia and Kosovo was once again brought to the table during the negotiations between both countries' leaders in Brussels. The plan is to redraw the borders so that the Northern part of Kosovo, predominantly inhabited by Serbs, would fall into the territory of Serbia while (a part of) the Preševo valley would be given to Kosovo.

The so called 'land-swap' is very controversial and its actual implementation seems unlikely. From a realist perspective, one could argue that a land swap would be the actual partition of Serbia, a method used to settle ethnic conflict. As defined by Jaroslav Tir, "*partition is an internally motivated division of a country's homeland territory that results in the creation of at least one new independent secessionist state and that leaves behind the now territorially smaller rump state*" (Tir, 2005). Partition is seen as a last solution in ethnic conflicts. The idea is that the security dilemma which follows from domestic ethnic conflict, can only be solved when ethnicities are effectively divided from each other (Jenne, 2009). "*[O]nce communities are mobilized for violence, the reality of mutual security threats prevents both demobilization and de-escalation of hypernationalist discourse. Thus, lasting peace requires removal of the security dilemma. The most effective and in many cases the only way to do this is to separate the ethnic groups*" (Kaufmann, 1996). The current status of Kosovo can arguably be seen as a *de facto* partition. However, Kaufmann argues that partition without ethnic separation increases conflict. In the Kosovar case, relatively large minorities remained in both the rump and secessionist states. The exchange of territories could therefore be a big step in the normalization of relations between the two countries. The idea is furthermore not

new. Already during the bombing on Serbia in 1999, Mearsheimer and Van Evera argued that partition would be the best solution to settle the conflict in Kosovo and that the Northern parts of Kosovo should remain in Serbia (Mearsheimer & Van Evera, 1999). The same idea was also brought up in more recent studies as possible scenario for Kosovo's future (Economides, Ker-Lindsay, & Papadimitriou, 2010). However, partition in the case of Kosovo would not lead to mono-ethnic states. The Serbs living in enclaves scattered around Kosovo surrounding their cultural heritage would end up being a tiny minority in the country (Perritt Jr, 2005). Similarly, it is very unlikely that the full territory of the Preševo valley would be given to Kosovo, given the geopolitical importance the valley has (*see section on Location and Geography*). Consequently, if the partition would once become actual reality, a tiny Albanian minority would likely be left behind in Serbia.

But, even if partition continues to be an unimplemented but considered scenario for the future of the region, it presumably has a strong influence on the everyday lives of people in the valley. It reaffirms the existing ethnic boundaries and impede interethnic relations.

So far, the current situation. Before coming back to the Preševo valley, the following section intends to position the topic in the broader literature on identity in South-Eastern Europe

4. Ethnic identities in South-Eastern Europe

After defining the different categories that will be used in the analysis, this section explores the literature on young peoples' identities in South-Eastern Europe. The chapter ends with the formulation the research questions.

4.1. Defining identity

When one talks about identity in Southeast Europe, it is important to clarify which categories will be used. Divisions in the region are based on religion and language (Judah, 2008). The Slavic speaking people are distinguished from each other based on their religion or the religion of their ancestors. Even though they not all of them practice their religion, Serbs are typically Orthodox while Croats, who speak the same language, are said to be Catholic. In Bosnia, the same language is spoken but next to Serbs and Croats there live Muslims referred to as Bosniaks. In North Macedonia, an Orthodox church exist as well, but North Macedonians can be distinguished from Serbs by their different language. The same goes for the regions inhabited by Albanians where all above-mentioned religions are practiced but a language distinct from the Slavic languages is spoken. Since the categories 'Albanian', 'Bosniak', 'Croat', 'Macedonian' and 'Serb' do not coincide with the homonymous countries, borders cannot be taken as demarcation lines to categorize the inhabitants of the region. As Brankovic and colleagues note, "*National identity in the region is still primarily defined in terms of ethnonational belonging that defies the borders of the respective countries. This causes people to feel more attachment to their "mother" states (where their ethnic group is a majority) than to the country they live in.*" (Branković, Turjačanin, & Maloku, 2017).

4.1.1. National identity and Ethnic identity

Because of this complexity and for the sake of clarity, I will in this thesis distinguish between two possible kinds of identity. *First*, I will use the category ‘**national identity**’ in the sense of shared civic identity or citizenship. I will thus take “*nation as a substitute for that territorial juridical unit, the state*”(Connor, 1978). For example, the Belgian ‘national identity’ would refer to the bond between the citizens of Belgium, based on their shared citizenship regardless of the language they speak. *Second*, I will use the category of ‘**ethnic identity**’ to refer to the identity based on narratives of shared language, tradition and history or, “*a group characterized by common descent*”(Connor, 1978). Common descent might be just in the minds of the people, in this sense it equates with Anderson’s imagined community (Anderson, 2006). In the Belgian example, ‘ethnic identity’ can then refer to the presumed bond between Dutch speaking Flemings and the presumed bond between the French speaking Walloons.

Another example is Germany, where there is a difference between on the one hand ‘*Staatsangehörigkeit*’, literally state-membership, which defines a German citizen with rights and obligations, this can be seen as national identity. On the other hand, there is ‘*Volkszugehörigkeit*’ which can be translated as membership to a people, this does not necessarily overlap with the state membership and can thus be seen as ethnic identity.

‘National identity’ and ‘Ethnic identity’ are categories that *can* but not necessarily *do* bind people to each other. This means that they do not create internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups but they can create a sense of groupness (Brubaker, 2004).

“Shifting attention from groups to groupness and treating groupness as variable and contingent rather than fixed and given, allows us to take account of—and, potentially, to account for—phases of extraordinary cohesion and moments of intensely felt collective solidarity, without implicitly treating high levels of groupness as constant, enduring or definitionally present.”

At certain moments, national and/or ethnic identities can thus come to the forefront and serve high levels of groupness. The evident examples of this are sports and holidays, as Fox noticed in the Romanian town of Cluj, being Hungarian or Romanian was outspoken during the Hungarian national holiday even though most local students were indifferent to it. It became much more significant however during a football match between the Romanian and Hungarian national teams (Fox, 2006). Sport, *“has become an important arena for national self-assertion and involvement”*(Löfgren, 1993). The influence of it might however go deeper than the few occasions in which two neighbouring countries play against each other, as Edensor argues:

“Sport is increasingly situated in the mediatised matrix of national life, is institutionalised in schools, widely represented in a host of cultural forms and is an everyday practice for millions of national subjects. These everyday and spectacular contexts provide one of the most popular ways in which national identity is grounded.”(Edensor, 2002)

An example of this is Novak Đoković, the Serbian tennis player who has become a symbol for his country, as well as for the Serbs residing in the neighbouring states (Bowers, 2015). As such, he made his entrance in the everyday lives of Serbs, appearing daily in the media and being displayed on cars and shop-windows, his popularity reaches way further than the moments when he plays a tennis match.

Sports can thus play a significant role in the fostering of national identities and even transcend ethnic differences. Many national football teams of Western European countries reflect the ethnic mix in their societies while uniting under the same flag. Yet, not all players have the same ethnicity, they might thus meanwhile be a symbol for people who share their ethnic identity in other countries.

However, the difference between national and ethnic identities only exists in the minds of the people for whom the difference creates an actual tension. For one who is never confronted with inconsistencies between both, it might be hard to distinguish. It thus requires the eyes of an ethnic minority-group member to give interpretation to these categories on a practical

level. On that point, they become categories of practice (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). As such, these categories can be operationalized by ethno-political entrepreneurs to stir up people's feelings of groupness and make a divide between 'us' and 'them'.

Taking this into account, in this thesis, I will use national and ethnic identity as categories of analysis. This means that I do not treat them as tangible categories that necessarily exist in people's everyday life. I rather use them as tools to structure otherwise more intangible nuances in the analysis of my data.

4.2. Youth identity in South East Europe

The lasting salience of ethnicity and the complexity of it in former Yugoslavia, is due to ethnic minorities that remained living in the successor states and political entrepreneurs who organize their mobilization along these ethnic lines (Brubaker, 2004). Indeed, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political-party landscape is still strictly divided along ethnic lines. Therefore, politics are not about welfare, infrastructure or health, but about ethnicity (Majstorovic & Turjacanin, 2013). In North Macedonia, tensions between the Albanian minority and Macedonian majority led to fistfights in the country's parliament in 2017 (Ceka, 2018). In Serbia, the Kosovar question keeps dominating the national news and politics, just as it does in Kosovo itself (Jovanovic, 2018).

Over the last twenty years, a new generation has grown into adulthood. They are the children of those who witnessed the wars, or fought in it. They grew up in deeply divided societies, with narratives of the past, raised with scars. More than anywhere else in Europe, they were brought up conscious about which group they belong to and which group they do not. In Bosnia and Herzegovina for example, it still happens that there are 'two schools under one

roof, one for each ethnic group. The children learn the curriculum of their ethnic group, often in direct contrast to the one of the other (Tolomelli, 2015).

It is in this light that scholars have been wondering how young persons' identities are being developed in these new states. Majstorović and Turjacinin showed how young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are very receptive to the discourse of ethno-political entrepreneurs. In Republika Srpska, the youth sees themselves as Serbs and for them, 'Bosnian' and 'Bosniak' are synonyms and they equate both terms with the term 'Muslim'. Bosniaks from their side, found it odd that people would call themselves Serb or Croat when they were born in Bosnia and Herzegovina and insisted that they all should use the term Bosnian (Majstorovic & Turjacinin, 2013). Similar results were found in Kosovo by Maloku et al., who describe how young ethnic Albanians equate a Kosovar identity with an Albanian one and therefore exclude ethnic Serbs from it, the latter identifying more strongly with Serbia (Maloku, Derks, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2016). These results support the findings of Branković et al. who found that *"For majority groups, ethnic identification is often projected to national identity, while minority groups distance themselves from it or seek alternative identities"* (Branković et al., 2017). However, in North Macedonia, Ali Pajaziti and colleagues found that the young Albanians they interviewed had a stronger national affiliation with the country than their ethnic Macedonian contemporaries. Moreover, young Macedonians from Skopje showed a low ethnic and religious identification, whereas the ethnic Albanians in Skopje and Tetovo showed a higher sense of ethnic and religious belonging (Pajaziti, Blaževska-Stoilkovska, Fritzhand, Rustemi, & Qose, 2017). These findings suggest that exceptions are possible and that the young generations might be establishing stronger national identities and weaker ethnic ones.

4.3. Youth identity in the Preševo valley

A region in which young people's identity have been studied less so far is the Preševo valley. As explained in the introduction, the valley is home to the ethnic Albanian minority in Serbia. Located next to Kosovo and North Macedonia, the Preševo valley forms a very interesting domain for the study of young people's identity. Such research is all the more relevant in the light of the possible border change scenario by offering a voice to the people who would be affected. In this thesis, my aim is to find out how young ethnic Albanians in the Preševo valley experience their identity. The following research questions will be guiding the analysis:

- ❖ How do young ethnic Albanians in the Preševo valley relate to the Albanian ethnic identity?
- ❖ How do young ethnic Albanians in the Preševo valley relate to the Serbian national identity?
- ❖ How do young ethnic Albanians in the Preševo valley relate to the Kosovar national identity?

5. Methods

5.1. Semi-structured interviews

The possible land swap between Kosovo and Serbia is a top down idea, discussed among the leaders of both states during negotiations in Brussels which are initiated by the European Union. The possible implications however, would first and foremost be felt by the inhabitants of the affected regions. What Eric Hobsbawm said about the importance of social implications of nations is also true for land swaps: “[T]hey are [...] constructed essentially from above, but [...] cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people,” (Hobsbawm, 2012). In their “methodological agenda for the empirically grounded investigation of the nation in everyday life”, Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) see interviews as an appropriate way to investigate everyday nationhood. They propose a “‘wait-and-listen’ approach to see how and when nationhood comes up in the discursive and interactional contexts of everyday life” (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008).

For this research, I conducted semi-structured interviews. This means that I developed an interview guide with topics that I wanted to cover. However, during the interviews I would add questions or leave some out, depending on the answers given by the respondents (Bryman, 2016). In the end, I always provided respondents the opportunity to add additional thoughts or to ask topic related questions to me. After my fieldwork, I transcribed all relevant sections of the audio-recorded interviews.

5.2. Respondents

In total, I interviewed ten people, all but one being in their twenties. As such, they were young enough not to have consciously experienced the violent events that marked the region’s recent past, yet, they are old enough to think about their identity and that of their region.

Finding these people was anyhow not evident. During a short visit to the valley in the beginning of the year, I had learned that it would be very difficult to randomly find English speaking interlocutors on the streets. Due to my lack of proficiency in the Albanian language, I found myself obliged to look for participants on social media.

Via someone who had worked at the refugee camp in Preševo, I received the contacts of ten young and English-speaking inhabitants of the valley who all had volunteered in the camp. However, the profile of a volunteer in a refugee camp does not coincide with that of an average young inhabitant of the Preševo valley. Moreover, most of these persons knew each other to a certain extent after having worked together. I therefore decided to only meet with four of the proposed persons. Via them, I got in touch with two other interlocutors who did not know any of the other respondents, nor each other.

A second starting point in my search for participants was a young woman who I knew from previous fieldwork in Kosovo, she proposed three other persons to me, who did not know each other or any of the other participants. In the end, I spoke with four respondents from Bujanovac and six from Preševo, four women and six men.

As knowledge of English was a requirement, it was impossible to obtain a representative sample of the valley's youth. Yet, given the relatively small scope of a master's thesis, I do not believe that the partial homogeneity of my sample is necessarily a disadvantage. The voices presented in this thesis are those of some young, highly-educated individuals who are or have been engaged in several civic society initiatives. Their views on the society are likely among the more progressive ones to be found in the valley and are as such not a reflection of their generation. However, this does not disqualify their voices, even less when bearing in mind in mind that the future leaders of the region might have a similar background. Thus, it is important to bear in mind that this thesis is only an image of the Preševo valley. One that

captures a very limited timeframe and a very limited group of its inhabitants. Yet, it is an image that remains worth seeing.

5.3. Position of the interviewer

For about twenty days, I was based in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, from where I commuted by bus and hitchhiking to the Preševo valley. For proper ethnographic research, it might have been beneficial to stay in the valley for the entire period of the fieldwork. Moreover, this gave me the opportunity to meet and talk with young people that had left the Preševo valley to study or work in Kosovo.

Preševo and Bujanovac are not popular touristic destinations and finding accommodation can therefore be hard. On the first night of one of my little journeys, I slept in an empty hotel next to the motorway leading to Kosovo, some kilometres outside Bujanovac's already small town-centre. After having shared my unease about this situation with one of my respondents, I was invited to stay with her family during my next sojourn in Bujanovac. In Preševo, I received a similar offer and could sleep in a small village nearby. Moreover, I was guided around by locals in both Preševo and Ternovac, a village next to Bujanovac. Like this, beyond my interviewees, I met many other inhabitants of the valley, encounters that broadened my understanding of the everyday life. These experiences served as a good compensation for the missed ethnographic chances.

But, no matter how good and long conversations are, as a foreigner, I was constantly aware of my position as an outsider. Without having a sufficient understanding of Albanian or Serbian, I cannot in any way claim to have fully understood the grievances and desires people harboured.

Yet, being a foreigner also has its benefits. One is to be mostly perceived as neutral, a very grateful position to be in as a researcher. Furthermore, there is no difficulty in playing the role of the ignorant, which makes people tell their stories detailed and from the very beginning.

A last point worth mentioning here is that by some, I was perceived as a journalist and not as a student. When people believe they are talking to a journalist, they continuously consider how their sentences will look like on paper. People do always play a certain role when they engage with others. If they had perceived me as a student they would simply play another role. However, over the last year, inhabitants of the valley have seen many foreign journalists in their villages, due to the rumours about the land swap and the presence of a refugee shelter in Preševo. Many have seen people they know appearing with a quote and sometimes a photo in international online media. Now that it might be their time, they were eager to present themselves the best they could. The possible bias this gives is illustrated well with a quote from a politically active male respondent from Preševo: *“When other people read that one was with journalists and he talked about how we need to change Serbia and not to change borders, he is afraid to be on the wrong side of history between Albanians and Serbians, in history they would stay like traitors”*

6. Analysis

The analysis is divided in two parts. In the first part, I analyse the position of young ethnic Albanians in Serbia, with a focus on language proficiency as a means to create and strengthen interethnic ties on the one hand, and a focus on the tension between conservative ethnic values and the aspirations of young people on the other hand. In the second part, I analyse the position of Kosovo as a kin-state. Here, a focus lays on passports which can serve as an instrument to strengthen national identity but meanwhile are key in peoples' freedom of movement. Another and last focus here lies on how Kosovo acts as a receiving country for ethnic Albanians from the Preševo valley.

Throughout the whole analysis, I use the Hungarians as a point of comparison. Although the histories are hard to compare, the current situations people are in, are often similar. In the first part, about the integration of young ethnic-Albanians in Serbia, I will use the case of young ethnic Hungarians in the Vojvodina as a reflection. In the second part, about Kosovo as a kin-state, I look for similarities and differences with the way in which Hungary plays its role as kin-state.

6.1. The integration of young ethnic-Albanians in Serbia

Krisztina Rácz made a study about the identity formation of young ethnic Hungarians in the Vojvodina, Serbia's most northern province. The situation she describes is in many ways comparable with the situation of young ethnic Albanians in Serbia's south. Rácz notes that

'Reversed demographics' is a situation in which an ethnic minority on a national level is a majority on a local level. In such situations, a minority has the experience of majority and sees its own language and culture as the dominant one and as the norm. Because of this, interactions with members of other ethnic communities are seen as a threat to their social dominance, and ethnicity becomes an important focal point through which spatial, temporal, and social relations are understood (Rácz, 2017).

This situation, observed in the Vojvodina, is very similar to what happens in the Preševo valley. Given their local majority status, ethnic Albanians do not have an incentive to

‘integrate’ or ‘assimilate’ to the Serbian society. This is reflected in the way respondents would introduce themselves, none of them would simply say to be from Serbia without stressing their Albanian descent. *“With papers, I am from Serbia but my bloodline is Albanian [...] I am not from Albania, neither from Kosovo, I am from Serbia. I was born here, I was raised here, but I keep my language, my culture”* explained a male respondent from Preševo. Similarly, a female respondent from Preševo declared the following: *“It is easier to say you are an Albanian who lives in Serbia, rather than saying you are from Serbia. Because, you cannot link yourself with the Serbs. It is not that I feel ashamed to say that I am a Serbian, but it is because I don’t feel like a Serb, I feel like an Albanian.”*

As ethnic Hungarians in the Vojvodina, ethnic Albanians in the Preševo valley thus strongly hold on to their ethnic identity, meanwhile they seem to care little about their national identity. In what follows, I will give two possible explanations for this. First, I will argue that language is a key element in the creation and strengthening of interethnic ties. The young ethnic-Albanians’ low proficiency in Serbian can be ascribed both to a low level of education and a low level of interethnic contact. Both might come forth out of a remaining grudge. Second, I will argue that on certain levels, the Albanian ethnic identity is still conservative, this creates a tension for young people who value their community but have liberal aspirations and are open to their Serbian peers.

6.1.1. Language

“If language knowledge, which is the primary means of communication, is lacking, interaction is scarce. This in turn negatively influences attitudes towards ethnic Others. This way, young people who belong to an ethnic minority are enclosed and defined by adults in the institutions of the majority as well as in their own ethnic worlds” (Rácz, 2017)

Language proficiency and level of education usually go hand-in-hand, many of my respondents therefore had a good understanding of the Serbian language, especially the ones coming from Bujanovac where a significant Serbian minority lives. Yet, they recognized that

they were an exception rather than the rule: in general, the young generation's knowledge of Serbian is significantly smaller than that of their parents' generation who grew up in Yugoslavia. As Rácz notes, this has its repercussions on the interactions young people from different identities have with each other. Both in Preševo and in Bujanovac, bars are segregated on an ethnic basis. On the central promenade in Bujanovac, respondents could easily point out which bars were attended by Serbs and which by Albanians. While Serbian bars might be visited by Albanians from time to time, the opposite never happened, according to my respondents. Since the big majority of bars were referred to as 'Albanian', interethnic contact rarely takes place in any of the bars. Accordingly, few respondents had Serbian friends. "[W]ith the Serbians here, it is not that we are in contact for real" explained a female respondent from Preševo. Accordingly, for most other respondents contact with Serbians in the valley was restricted to greetings. "There is no possibility to hang out, the only possibility was like NGO's that organized like 'multiculti' stuff. We would hang out, talk and stuff, but we would never keep up" explained a male respondent from Bujanovac. Indeed, the one occasion when interaction between young people from different ethnicities in the Preševo valley goes deeper is during organized reconciliation programs of NGO's. Yet, although a high number of NGO's operates in the region, only a selected part of the valley's young generation participates in such activities.

That the language barrier hinders more interaction between both ethnicities and thereby impedes the possibilities of interethnic friendship is evident. Some respondents blamed what they see as the low level of Serbian-language instruction. "It is more a formality our Serbian classes. Can you imagine I had an 'A' for Serbian? They were just like...you should learn this and then you will pass the class. I think that is the reason why my generation does not speak Serbian" explained a female respondent from Preševo. Yet, it would be too superficial to only blame the education, as Rácz observed in the Vojvodina:

“In general, teachers, curriculum-makers, textbook authors, i.e. members of the adult society, are seen as responsible for the lack of knowledge of Serbian. On the other hand, Serbian-speaking peers are rarely considered as individuals with whose help the state language could be informally mastered. The assumed malfunctioning of education system is seen almost solely as an institution through which Hungarian youth from Kishegyes would gain competency in Serbian”(Rácz, 2017).

Indeed, presumably more young people would be proficient in the Serbian language if interaction with their Serbian peers would be less scarce: in other words, it is a vicious circle. However, there might have been another aspect as well. Albanian children in the Preševo valley start learning Serbian in school around the age of ten. As a female respondent from Bujanovac explained: *“We learned Serbian in school, but we did not learn anything because the teachers were either Serbians who did not speak any Albanian or Albanian teachers who spoke to us in Albanian. It was the period of UÇPMB, when we had homework in Serbian my dad would get angry about that. So, I never really spoke Serbian that good.”*

Apart from the low quality of the education, there is also the lack of motivation to learn. Given the recent conflict, openness and curiosity towards the Serbian language and culture is not evident within the Albanian society. The same respondent recalled a moment in primary school when she was listening with friends to a song of the Montenegrin artists Dado and Sako Polumenta. Her teacher asked them why they were listening to Serbian music, and if they knew any Serbian listening to Albanian music.

With time passing by, people in the Preševo valley have grown less resentful toward each other. However, as some respondents have indicated, there remains a certain stigma on interacting with Serbians. I see this as a second possible explanation for the ethnic Albanians’ minor interest in their Serbian national identity.

6.1.2. Tension between collective values and individual goals

As indicated in the section on the border correction, the street running from the valley to Kosovo is not an easy one. In the summer, queuing time can be high since many diaspora members use the border crossing to enter the country. Yet, this does not keep respondents from regularly crossing the border. Indeed, when asked to which city one would go to hang out with friends, almost all respondents answered Gjilan, the first city in Kosovo behind the hills. This is a remarkable finding given that the closest and most accessible city is Vranje in Serbia, located north of the valley. Most gave rational reasons to prefer Gjilan over Vranje, such as family and friends, having studied there or the lower prices in Kosovo. Yet, some would also give more emotional reasons for why they did not go to Vranje. *“Yeah, but there [in Vranje], everybody is Serbian, [...] I know a little bit of Serbian, but most of the youngsters in Preševo they don’t know how to speak it. Also, we have had some problems with Serbians so we are afraid or they are afraid [...] when you go alone, maybe something would happen”* explains a male respondent from Preševo. *“I have never been with my friends from Preševo in Niš or Vranje. We never find ourselves as being hosted well, they are not going to do something but the prejudices make that it is uncomfortable going with friends”* adds another one.

Both testimonies suggest that there is still an element of fear. Prejudices are persistent and make people reluctant to visit places where Serbians are the majority. This reality is a sad reflection of the small degree to which Albanians integrated in Serbia’s society, which one could construe as the degree of reconciliation. This is also an important difference with the Hungarians in the Vojvodina. While the latter can enjoy the delights of cities as Subotica and

Novi Sad, Albanians in the south seem to be stuck in their valley. The only ways out are Kosovo and the Albanian-inhabited parts of North Macedonia.

On the one hand, the Serbian authorities can be held accountable for this situation, as they have never prioritized the integration of the valley, nor did they construct an inclusive national identity. On the other hand, Albanians in the valley are very attached to their ethnic identity.

The Albanian ethnic identity is mainly built up around the common language. As Judah puts it: *“Albanian is the one thing all Albanians have in common. In this sense, what makes an Albanian an Albanian stands in direct contradiction to what makes a Serb a Serb. [...] History molded the Serbian nation differently. Being Serb today derives from being Orthodox”* (Judah, 2008). Indeed, whereas Serbia’s ethnic identity is built around Serbian Orthodox church, the Albanian ethnic identity is not linked to any religion in particular and is built around the Albanian language. Although it stands as a unique language in the wider Slavic-speaking region, profound differences exist in dialects between people from different regions, and communication does not always go smoothly.

Other elements of the Albanian ethnic identity are less tangible and seem to exist more in the endorsement of traditions and symbols. The flag with the double-headed eagle is the symbol in which Albanians all over the region take the most pride, because they see it as the symbol many fought for. As a respondent from Preševo expressed it: *“When there were tough times for the Albanian people, when we did not have our own lands, we dreamed about the flag, because that was our only hope. That brought us hope and togetherness and still it does in Preševo”*. Due to regulations issued by the Serbian government, the Albanian flag can rarely be witnessed in the Preševo valley. Yet, on every cemetery, they are erected next to a couple of graves. There lay men who gave their lives for the flag, either in Kosovo while fighting for

the UÇK, or in the valley itself while fighting for the UÇPMB. On the emblems of both liberation armies, the double-headed eagle is central. But beyond language and symbols, Albanians share descent traditions and customs.

One such custom lays with the choice of a life partner. Almost none of my respondents could imagine marrying with someone from another ethnicity. As a female respondent from Preševo explained: *“I would not marry someone who would not have the same traditions and religion as me. Especially in Preševo, people are not familiar with this”*. Moreover, several respondents explained the practices among young diaspora men in Switzerland. During the summer, they come to the valley to find a partner and take her to Switzerland. *“It is a cultural problem that Albanians only want to marry other Albanians”* explains a male respondent from Preševo. Interethnic marriages are thus very uncommon in the Preševo valley. According to respondents, the few Albanians who have a relationship with a Serbian person have a stigma on them and are sometimes even seen as ‘traitors’ of the Albanian people.

The word ‘traitor’ came back in several interviews, however, always as a word used by others. For example, a male respondent from Preševo talked about how young people from the valley would love to visit Vranje more often but, that they would be seen as traitors by the Albanian community. Another male respondent from Bujanovac explained that he could not introduce himself as a Serbian because *“I would be seen as a traitor if I would not say I am Albanian”*. As all my respondents were well-educated, proficient in English and oriented towards the West, none of them would fully identify with the rather conservative symbols and practices related to the Albanian ethnic community. When discussing these, they would talk in more general wordings, about other people, thereby distancing themselves a bit. Some would for example acknowledge the ethnic segregation in relationships to constitute a problem. Yet, they would not deny the existence of certain practices and traditions, and rather, they would express respect for them. As such, their everyday lives are a trade-off between

their Albanian ethnic identity and their personal, more liberal aspirations in life. A male respondent from Preševo illustrates this well: *“I have been connected with a Serbian girl, I don’t have anything against, you know. But for example, older people won’t agree with that because it is a short time since the war”*. Meanwhile, he is in favor of connecting the valley to Kosovo: *“We are Albanians, we belong to Kosovo, we are not Serbians”*. While most respondents were generally open to Serbia, willing to learn the language if they had the chance and meet peers in reconciliation programs of NGO’s, many still saw Kosovo as the country to which they were most strongly connected. In the following part of the analysis, I investigate how Kosovo acts as a kin-state.

6.2. Kosovo as a kin-state

During the interviews, Kosovo was often mentioned as a point of reference, a ‘motherland’. Kosovo however, is a somewhat atypical kin-state for two reasons. Firstly, per its constitution, Kosovo is a multi-ethnic state, not an ethno-national one. Secondly, within Kosovo’s different ethnic communities, many people still consider another state as their kin-state. Kosovar citizenship, or national identity, is supposed to bind the different ethnicities in the country. In what follows, I will analyze how inclusive this Kosovar national identity is for people who live outside of Kosovo. First, by elaborating on the issue of citizenship, second by analyzing how people are welcomed when they move to Kosovo. For both cases, I use Hungary as a point of comparison, since this country is often seen as a model kin-state.

6.2.1. Passports

In her book ‘Between state and nation’, Myra Waterbury claims the following:

“[C]ontemporary state policies concerning populations across the border in Eastern Europe are increasingly framed by the language of rights and citizenship and the institutionalization of cultural political and economic ties rather than active policies to change borders or reclaim populations” (Waterbury, 2010)

I will argue, that while this is true for Hungary, the same cannot be said about Kosovo.

The language of rights and citizenship is what I call national identity in this thesis. It is materialized by the granting of passports to co-ethnics living outside the state borders. I agree with Szabolcs Pogonyi that a passport can be an important means to construct national identity (2018). In his study, he showed that among others, Hungarians from the Vojvodina

“saw citizenship as a valuable symbolic asset which can be instrumentalized as blurring intra-ethnic boundaries and erase symbolic stigmas of otherness that transborder Hungarians experience in their encounters with Hungarians from Hungary” (Pogonyi, 2018).

What should be stressed here is that granting citizenship is only an effective tool to construct national identity when the ethnic identity of the receivers coincides with this national one. Just like many Hungarians in the Vojvodina, most Albanians in the Preševo valley have Serbian citizenship. Yet, this does not seem to attach them strongly to the Serbian national identity because in both cases, this Serbian national identity does not coincide with their respective ethnic identities.

When from the other side, ethnic Albanians from the Preševo valley would be granted an Albanian or Kosovar passport, one could expect that it would strengthen their Albanian national identity because in this case, it would coincide with their Albanian ethnic identity. A female respondent from Preševo explained the following: *“I am Albanian and I feel I have parts there [in Albania]. For example, I would like to have the Albanian passport, just to have. I wanted even to apply to have it, we have the right because of the ethnicity³”*. With an Albanian passport as the materialization of national identity, the acquisition of one would serve as a confirmation of her Albanian ethnic identity.

In the aforementioned examples, the acquisition of citizenship, be it Hungarian or Albanian, would for the recipient be added to their Serbian citizenship, as they would gain dual citizenship. The national identity that comes with these passports would come on top of their

³ In reality, Albania does not grant citizenship on the basis of ethnicity, this was proposed by prime minister Sali Berisha in 2012 but the law did never change. Albanians outside Albania can get citizenship only in specific cases for contribution in sports, culture and through a presidential decree. More info on this can be found in the country report on Albania of the EUDO citizenship observatory written by Gëzim Krasniqi: <http://eudo-citizenship.eu/docs/CountryReports/Albania.pdf>

original citizenship. In the scenario of a land exchange between Serbia and Kosovo however, affected citizens would most likely not be able to hold on to their current passports. In Northern Kosovo, little would change since most ethnic Serbs possess a Serbian passport (Krasniqi, 2012). In the Preševo valley on the contrary, dual citizenship is rare and most ethnic Albanians only have Serbian passports. Except for the contribution to their national identity and the ‘blurring of intra-ethnic stigmas’ as described above, acquiring a Kosovar passport is not as profitable as getting a Hungarian one. In this case, a passport does not only represent a certain national identity, it also affects freedom of movement. Kosovo is the only country left in the region without a visa-free regime to the Schengen zone, despite the European Commission’s support for Visa liberalization. With a Kosovar passport, people in the Preševo valley would have access to only a limited amount of countries, but the Kosovar national identity would endorse their Albanian ethnic identity. The Serbian passport on the other hand, gives them access to more places, in particular to the Schengen zone, but as presented above they have difficulties to relate with the Serbian national identity.

If presented as a trade-off, respondents had contradicting preferences. *“I like the Serbian passport and that would be the only thing I would mostly miss, but I would not sacrifice my passport [to become part of Kosovo]. In the near future, Kosovo will go through this process and people in Kosovo deserve to travel abroad. So, I would not sacrifice my passport for this”* tells a female respondent from Preševo, a male one agrees: *“It is good to have a Serbian passport because you can go everywhere, you know. With Kosovar passport you are nothing. I want Kosovo but not the passport.”* For these respondents, the benefits of a Serbian passport override their willingness to be a part of Kosovo. Although the national identity attached to the Serbian passport does not coincide with their ethnic identity, these respondents prefer the benefits of the passport. The national identity connected to a Kosovar passport would overlap

with their Albanian ethnic identity, but for them, this does not trump the limited usefulness the passport has. Another male respondent from Preševo, on the contrary, would give up his Serbian passport for a Kosovar one: *“A passport gives you the right to travel abroad, Kosovo does not have that. But, for me the main thing is to have freedom and to have rights, and then just don’t travel. Because whenever you come back, you [are] still going to come back where you live. I would rather live in a place where you have the rights and you speak your own language.”* Presented as a trade-off, not everyone would prefer the added value of a national identity over the loss of freedom of movement. The question remains: why does this have to be a trade-off? How come that Kosovo, perceived by many as their kin-state, did not follow the Hungarian example and distribute passports to tie the people of the Preševo valley to the Kosovar national identity? Waterbury points out that:

“For the kin state, its relationship to an external minority population can have a significant impact on the construction of national identity, the dynamics of political contestation, and foreign and domestic policy-making” (Waterbury, 2010)

The difference between Kosovo and Hungary lies, I believe, in the role the trans-border population plays in domestic and foreign politics. For the Hungarian state, the ethnic-Hungarians abroad are used as a tool in domestic politics. *“Actions taken by Hungary were often justified by the ties of ethnic kinship but were driven primarily by domestic political strategy”*(Waterbury, 2010). In Kosovo, the ethnic-Albanians of the Preševo valley are domestically of little significance, they rather play a role in foreign politics, especially in the negotiations with Serbia as presented in the background chapter. Instead of distributing passports, thereby making the inhabitants of the Preševo valley part of the Kosovar national identity, the strategy applied by the Kosovar state is what Waterbury in the opening-quote to this chapter calls: ‘active policies to change borders or reclaim populations’. However, the chance that a border correction will happen is small. Meanwhile, Kosovo, encouraged by the international community, does its best to treat the Serbian minority well, institutionally. By

granting extensive minority rights, the Kosovar state can only hope that Serbia will do the same to the Albanian minority in the Preševo valley. As Krasniqi notices:

“Kosovo’s capacities in designing and implementing diaspora or kin-state policies are limited both legally and practically. Kosovo’s constitutional definition as a state of its citizens (as opposed to an ethno-national state) formally restricts Kosovo from adopting paternalist policies towards the Albanian minorities in the neighboring states, especially those residing in Preševo Valley” (Krasniqi, 2012)

With limited capacities, the Kosovar state cannot carry out kin-state policies the same way Hungary does. But although inhabitants of the Preševo valley cannot share in Kosovo’s national identity through the acquisition of passports, they still share the Albanian ethnic identity with the majority of people in Kosovo. The following section of the research therefore investigates how co-ethnics are welcomed in Kosovo.

6.2.2. Kosovo as a receiving state

If inhabitants of the Preševo valley cannot share in the national identity of Kosovo, the country which they perceive as their kin-state, how then, are they welcomed in Kosovo? After all, even though they do not share the Kosovar national identity, they do share the Albanian ethnic identity with the majority of Kosovo’s population. *“In Kosovo, [...] I feel like home, we go there two or three times every month”* explained a male respondent from Preševo, indicating that they are welcomed very well. *“I have studied there and also lived there, so yes, I do feel connected, maybe not 100% but 95% yes”* confirmed a female respondent from Bujanovac. A female respondent originating from Preševo but currently living and working in Pristina, where the interview took place, explains how she was welcomed: *“In the beginning I did not know how the society, how they would accept me, because I have not even studied in here, I studied in [North] Macedonia. But when I came here, I felt actually very good. Prior to coming, I had some questions.”* Yet, the experience of moving to Pristina to study or work was not equally smooth for all respondents. *“People over here consider us as brothers, they*

consider us as their own nation but sometimes we feel like kind of left behind because we cannot participate in all the programs, we cannot apply in the same scholarships as the people from Kosovo. We cannot work in any state job” explains a male from Preševo who studies in Pristina. An older male respondent from Preševo firmly confirmed this. *“We don’t have the right to work here [Kosovo] in institutions. We are foreigners in Kosovo”* he said. *“To work here, we need to have a citizenship of Kosovo, which Kosovo did not give to us for twenty years.”* Next to these more institutional problems people are confronted with, there were also testimonies of people experiencing frictions with the Kosovar people, as people from the valley can be recognized by their accent: *“As a kind of joke, sometimes they say that I am a Serb yes. Sometimes they question the passport, because we have the Serbian passport, and then they always say like, okay, you are living in here [Kosovo] and you are using the benefits of there, they make jokes of that. Probably they feel it, but it is not that I have had any discussion or anything”* explains a female respondent from Preševo, living in Pristina. A male from Bujanovac who had studied in Kosovo but returned to the valley had a similar experience: *“In Kosovo, I was seen as a foreigner, they called me a Serb even though I speak Albanian”* It is however important to notice that these difficulties were only brought up by some of my interlocutors and the positive experiences outnumbered by everyone the negative ones.

The move from the Preševo valley towards Kosovo can be seen as ‘ethnic return migration’ as *“[M]igrants are traveling to –not from– their putative homelands”* (Fox, 2007). Rogers Brubaker notes that this

“typically involve[s] some special openness on the part of the receiving country, derived from its understanding of itself as being a ‘homeland’ or mother country for coethnics abroad and as having some kind of special responsibility toward them” (Brubaker, 1998).

While this might be true for some cases, such as the return migration of ethnic-Germans to Germany. In other cases, economic circumstances in the ‘homeland’ might cause difficulties for kin-minorities to move there. As Fox noticed eloquently:

“Hungary was not the benevolent mother country greeting its long-lost ethnic brothers with open national arms. Almost immediately, the symbolic myth of national inclusion was confronted with the harsh reality of economic exclusion”

On this aspect, following the testimonies of some respondents, I would argue that the Kosovar situation shows similarities with the Hungarian one. For example, when respondents were called Serbs while visiting Kosovo. In Hungary, ethnic Hungarians from Romania recalled the same experience, they were often called Romanian while they speak and feel Hungarian. Fox rightly argues that

“In theory, this ‘Romanian’ label could function as an unmarked category referring to the migrants’ country of origin. In practice, however, the label was heard by the Transylvanian Hungarian migrants as a symbolic denial of their Hungarianness” (Fox, 2007).

Even though the ‘Serbian’ label might be meant jokingly, for some it might also be a ‘symbolic denial of their Albanianness’. However, as showed in the previous section, the Hungarian state somehow compensated for not greeting its ethnic brothers with ‘open national arms’ by offering them citizenship even if they do not reside in Hungary. As being a multi ethnic state of all its citizens, Kosovo cannot make it to grant citizenship based on the Albanian ethnicity to people in the Preševo valley. Young people in the Preševo valley do therefore feel themselves stuck between different countries, as a female respondent from the Preševo valley described:

“Sometimes we just feel left out. When you introduce yourself in Belgrade, they connect us immediately to Albanians, they won’t consider you like theirs. And if you go to Kosovo, again they will consider you a bit like an outsider, not from there. And in Albania they consider you from Kosovo.” Indeed, young people in the Preševo valley grow up without a real national

identity, it creates a feeling of abandonment, especially in places where they share an ethnic identity with people. This feeling on the other hand, might also bring them closer together. Indeed, several respondents indicated similar things as this male respondent from Preševo: *“People from Preševo, when we are here [Pristina], we are more together with people from Bujanovac, of course, because they are our people”*. The reference to ‘our people’, suggests that instead of a strong national identity, the young inhabitants of the valley develop a kind of regional identity. One respondent claimed to be a *“local patriot”* and another one told: *“My hometown [Preševo] is very important to me. Whenever I talk about my place, I mention that it is a very special place, with special people and I am very proud that I am coming from there. It is a small place but it is very important that it is a small place with very big people coming from there”*. The emergence of regional identities in an area severely marked by ethnic conflict, is an interesting development and path for further research.

7. Conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to investigate how young ethnic Albanians from the Preševo valley experience their identity. The analysis is based on ten semi-structured interviews conducted with respondents between 20 and 30. As the language of the interviews had to be English, only a specific group of the valley's young people was eligible. Consequently, all respondents were highly educated and had participated in civil society initiatives. The sample was thus far from representative, yet this does not make the opinions shared by the respondents less valuable. The thesis is a picture of the Preševo valley, captured in a certain time frame with only some of its inhabitants portrayed, yet, it remains an image worth to be seen.

Three research questions were investigated to understand how young ethnic Albanians experience their identity:

- ❖ How do young ethnic Albanians in the Preševo valley relate to the Albanian ethnic identity?
- ❖ How do young ethnic Albanians in the Preševo valley relate to the Serbian national identity?
- ❖ How do young ethnic Albanians in the Preševo valley relate to the Kosovar national identity?

Ethnic identity was understood in this thesis as the identity based on narratives of shared language, tradition and history and the presumed common descent of the members. National identity was understood as the shared civic identity, based on membership to a state. This identity is materialized by passports and national symbols such as flags and anthems.

Young ethnic Albanians' relation with the Serbian national identity

Although all respondents had Serbian citizenship, none of them felt strongly affiliated with the national identity that comes with it. Two possible explanations for this were offered in the thesis.

First, the low proficiency of young ethnic-Albanians in the Serbian language, impedes them from having close relationships with their Serbian peers and from consuming the Serbian culture. Respondents referred to the low level of Serbian language education as the main reason for this. However, as languages are mainly acquired through practice, one could argue that more interaction with Serbian peers could also be a starting point in the improvement of language skills. Contact with Serbians is however not evident, this is the second explanation for the respondents' low affiliation with the Serbian national identity. Within the ethnic-Albanian community, prejudices and stigma's about Serbians are persistent due to the turbulent history of both ethnicities. As such, young people experience a tension with their Albanian ethnic identity when they want to interact with Serbian peers.

Young ethnic Albanians' relation with the Albanian ethnic identity

Most respondents expressed their proud of being Albanian. The events of the 1990s and early 2000s have left the ethnic Albanians in the region with a strong awareness of their ethnicity. Although most respondents did not experience the events consciously, the ethnic symbols related to the identity still found resonance among the respondents. Yet, for some, the conservative nature of certain customs attached to the Albanian ethnic identity created tensions with their liberal aspirations in live; for example in their search for a life partner or when they wanted to engage with Serbians.

Young ethnic Albanians' relation with the Kosovar national identity

As the respondents' affiliation with the Serbian national identity was low, among some of them, the desire to unite with Kosovo existed. Acquiring the Kosovar passport would affirm their shared ethnic identity with the majority of Kosovars, thereby giving them a national identity with which they could relate. However, the Kosovar passport would restrict their

freedom of movement, as visa liberalization to the Schengen zone is still not accomplished in Kosovo. Given the dilemma, some respondents would prefer holding on to their Serbian passports and thus to their freedom of movement, rather than choosing a national identity which coincides with their ethnic one. Double nationality, which would not restrict their freedom of movement but offer a national identity, is not an option. Kosovo as a multi-ethnic state cannot grant citizenships on an ethnic basis to people in the Preševo valley. Kosovo's abilities to act as a kin-state are therefore restricted and some respondents signalled a feeling of abandonment, meanwhile, there is reason to believe that they compensate this by developing a strong regional identity.

In sum, young ethnic-Albanians in the Preševo valley are raised with an Albanian ethnic identity. This one does not coincide with the Serbian national identity, the country of which they are citizens. As integration in Serbia does not go smoothly, many choose to study in Kosovo, their putative homeland. Yet, in Kosovo they are from time to time perceived as foreigners and as such, they cannot work in Kosovar institutions. Yet, their Kosovar diploma is not recognized by Serbia which makes going back not attractive.

There are two possible ways to get out of this situation. One of them is the proposed border correction, after which everyone's ethnic identity would coincide with their national identity. It is however important to remember that truly mono-ethnic states are a political mirage, as ethnic minorities seem to remain a reality in all countries. The other way out is the creation of an inclusive Serbian national identity which could encompass the valley's emerging regional one.

8. References

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