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# The relationship between hope and societal stability in Kosovo

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## ABSTRACT

Dashed hope leads to potentially destabilising anger. I highlight examples of the link between dashed hope and anger/unrest in Kosovo, before focusing on the post-independence period. The hopes raised following the 2008 declaration of independence were subsequently dashed leading to despondency and anger. Anger was manifested, however, in a primarily constructive way resulting in increased support for Vetëvendosje. The international community's approach towards Kosovo, however, restricts Vetëvendosje's capacity to realise people's hopes. If Vetëvendosje is unable to realise people's hopes, this will likely precipitate "hopeless anger" and support for illiberal/violent movements with ominous implications for stability in Kosovo and the region.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

While hope has long been a focus of enquiry in philosophy and medical studies, it is widely noted as being an under researched topic within Politics and International Relations (Eagleton 2015, xi; Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2019, 644; Schlosser 2013, 169). In this article, I suggest that the relationship between hope and societal stability is one of the many issues where hope's political importance is potent but underappreciated.

Various described as "central to human agency" (Milona 2020, 111), "a magnificently dynamic force for social reform" (Elliot 2020, 134), and "part of the methodology for changing the social landscape" (DeNora 2021, xi), hope can be a powerful political force; instilling hope in people inspires action, cultivates resilience, and has often been successfully harnessed to impel the realisation of seemingly unachievable goals. Yet, raising hopes is also dangerous; a failure to achieve hoped-for goals can lead to "disappointment and disillusion" (Bennett 2015, 26–27) which may ultimately manifest as "hopeless anger" (Stockdale 2017, 368). Dashed hope can, therefore, imperil societal order as it can unleash "powerful winds of disappointment" which may ultimately "become destructive and undermine the political body itself" (Sleat 2013, 141). In this article, I demonstrate that

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Kosovo's recent history, and current predicament, highlights this potential for dashed hope to impel societal instability.

Despite the voluminous academic literature on Kosovo's recent history, insufficient attention has been paid to the impact of dashed hope. By highlighting examples from Kosovo's recent history – the societal unrest in 1981; the rise of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) after 1995; and the riots in March 2004 – I suggest there is evidence of a link between dashed hope and civil unrest in Kosovo which deserves greater attention and appreciation.<sup>1</sup>

Having identified this link, I turn to the period after the declaration of independence in 2008. While conditions for the vast majority of people in Kosovo have undeniably improved, I argue that the gap between the hopes people held following the 2008 declaration and their current reality has proved to be a more potent source of political mobilisation than the relative improvement in their welfare. Though this gap has led to a rise in despondency and anger it has not as yet sparked societal instability; rather it has manifested in increased support for the political party Vetëvendosje (Maliqi 2020, 24; Visoka 2017, 148).

Vetëvendosje been criticised for employing controversial direct-action tactics, its uncompromisingly confrontational stance towards Serbia, and for ostensibly having a mono-ethnic outlook. It is, however, committed to liberal democracy, international integration and shuns violence; it is, as such, significantly less of a threat to stability than the other more violent/authoritarian movements in Kosovo – such as sectarian nationalists or Islamic extremists – also seeking to capitalise on the prevailing societal anger (Maliqi and Ilazi 2021, 6). It is not the case, therefore, that the lack of violence or instability in Kosovo since 2008 means the populace are content; rather Vetëvendosje has served as a conduit for the anger people feel at the failure of their hopes to manifest thereby forestalling widespread societal instability. Yet, I argue that regardless of how effective Vetëvendosje may be in government, it faces many internal and external challenges – which are beyond its capacity to influence – and likely to significantly impede its efficacy. Should Vetëvendosje ultimately prove unable to overcome these challenges, and thus dash the hopes of its supporters, this could well precipitate a societal shift towards the more extreme political movements which threaten peace in Kosovo and the wider region.

## Hope as risk

For millennia, the proliferation of hope has been employed by political actors as a strategy to garner support and/or cultivate resilience (Bennett 2015, 26–27; Elliot 2020, 134; Moellendorf 2006, 414). Instilling hope in a group – and, concomitantly, convincing these people that their hopes can only be realised if they support a particular movement/party/leader – has often served as a powerful catalyst for political mobilisation even in circumstances when the chances of the hoped-for outcome being realised are slim (Bennett 2015, 10; DeNora 2021, 9; Girot 2004, 62–64; Snyder 2021, 29). Hope can thus act as a force which impels people to undertake actions that are onerous and not guaranteed to succeed, but potentially rewarding; without hope, these actions would not be undertaken (Bennett 2015, 10; Bovens 1999, 671; Sacks 1997, 267; Snyder 2021, 89). The various pro-democracy movements which mobilised across Eastern Europe in the 1980s are a clear example.<sup>2</sup>

Hope does not, however, manifest as a political force only as a catalyst for change/revolution; it is also a vital means by which societal stability is maintained. All governments seek to convince people that their hopes can be realised if they support their leadership (Bennett 2015, 25). Therefore, leaders must promote hope by advancing what Richard Rorty describes as “plausible political scenarios” related to the realisation of people’s hopes (1989, 86; see also, DeNora 2021, 3; Bennett 2015, 27; Snyder 2021, 90). So long as people believe that their most cherished hopes can be realised by supporting a particular government – and, more broadly, a political system – they will accede to the extant rules and regulations even if they are not avid supporters of the specific party/group in power (Sleat 2013, 141). In such circumstances, the government need not routinely employ coercive measures to maintain order; people satisfied that their core hopes can be realised within a particular polity do not rebel against the prevailing system and hope is thus a vital means by which social order is maintained (Scruton 2010, 4). Conversely when people believe that their hopes cannot be realised, they may seek to change the existing system (Dienstag 2006, 25; Eagleton 2015, 2; Gurr 2015; Scruton 2010, 4). Thus, maintaining social order requires ensuring that the populace continues to believe that their hopes can be realised without fundamental change; political leaders thus must, as Matt Sleat notes, perpetuate a convincing “narrative of hope” (2013, 138). They thus seek to pacify populations by ensuring they believe the “rhetorical promise” they advance (Bennett 2015, 54).<sup>3</sup>

Hope is not static and what one generation hopes for may be significantly less ambitious than the hopes held by succeeding generations. The nature of the hopes that people hold – and thus the changeability of these hopes – is of course a function not only of their own desires but also the signals they receive (DeNora 2021, 13; McGeer 2004, 108; Sleat 2013). During periods of economic recession and war, for example, the dominant narrative will invariably encourage people to hope for minimalist goals relating to survival – food, shelter, employment – and this will influence the scale of people’s hopes (DeNora 2021, 13; McGeer 2004, 110–111; Snyder 2021, 89). But conversely, the scale of people’s hopes will increase when they are encouraged to believe that they can achieve much more expansive goals, such as job satisfaction, intellectual stimulation, advanced human rights and/or political power (Bovens 1999, 620; Snyder 2021, 74).

### *Western decline and the rise of anger*

Raising hope leads to an immediate increase in positivity about the future; while this can certainly be beneficial for societal stability in the short term, it is also dangerous because if these raised hopes are not realised “despair will rise” (Leshem and Halperin 2020, 184; see also, DeNora 2021, 65; Snyder 2021, 202; Martin 2008). Widely regarded as the opposite of hope, despair essentially denotes a conviction that a hoped-for goal cannot be achieved, or that the previous strategy employed to achieve these hoped-for goals is futile. Despair ultimately leads to significant changes in behaviour and “propels people to actions or solutions that previously would have been unthinkable” (Butler 2002, 72). Despair itself manifests as despondency or anger (Bovens 1999, 672; Moellendorf 2006, 423). The former is characterised by a cynical/apathetic outlook, and/or an inclination to give up on a particular aspiration. Anger, despite the word’s negative connotations, can be positive in so far as it may compel people to maintain a conviction that their hoped-for goals

can be realised, but via a different strategy. As such anger may serve as a catalyst for renewed agency and fresh thinking (Huber 2021; Stockdale 2017). However, an alternative manifestation of anger as the result of despair is inherently more dangerous; “hopeless anger” in response to dashed hopes can manifest in impulsive decision-making, irrational/misdirected rage and violence (Macdonald and Waggoner 2018, 132; Stockdale 2017, 368). As such, the consequences of the hopeless anger are, “politically dangerous sentiments such as disaffection or estrangement” (Huber 2021, 721).

A profound recalibration of people’s hopes occurred across Eastern Europe – and indeed the wider world – in the wake of the collapse of communism and the ascent of the West. This was fuelled by a wide variety of Western political leaders – especially in the US – who encouraged a dramatic increase in the scale of people’s hopes through their promises that a new era of respect for human rights, inter-state peace and economic prosperity had dawned (Barnett 1997; Brooks and Wohlforth 2002, 283; Hehir 2023; Nye 1990). This future failed to materialise; today, human rights violations are on the increase, economic decline and uneven growth are widespread, democracy and freedom are in retreat, and rival powers to the West – most notably Russia and China – have become more powerful and aggressive (Acharya 2014; Boyle 2016; Ikenberry 2018). Because the raised hopes have not been realised, societal instability caused by “disaffection or estrangement” is evident across the world.<sup>4</sup> This trend is particularly pervasive across Eastern Europe where the hopes for peace, prosperity and progress which bloomed in 1989 have been dashed, prompting widespread societal anger, and increasing support for “ethnopolitism”, defined as “populist, nationalist, autocratic and chauvinistic political manifestations” (Hronešová 2020, 38).<sup>5</sup> The societal disaffection impelling the “new authoritarianism” in Eastern Europe – and particularly in the Balkans – is related to the fact that after the Cold War people were encouraged to expand the scope of their hopes (Bieber 2020, 2).<sup>6</sup> The fact that these hopes were not realised – that raised hopes were dashed – has accentuated societal disaffection, and ultimately led to disappointment and in some cases anger (Enyedi 2020; Hronešová 2020; Marcus 2021). This, therefore, coheres with those studies on the impact of dashed hope noted earlier which found that people’s willingness to accept their material condition is greatly affected by the gap between this reality and the hopes they were encouraged to believe *would* materialise (Gurr 2015; Musschenga 2019).

Many have examined the rise of anger – and its political manifestations – in Eastern Europe though few have explicitly framed these analyses within the context of hope’s political potency (Bieber 2020; Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac 2021; Krastev and Holmes 2019; Prelec 2020). It is not possible in one article to assess the impact of dashed hope across Eastern Europe, and thus the focus below is specifically on Kosovo with the aim being to highlight the extent to which dashed hope has played, and today plays, a significant – though not exclusive – role in fomenting societal anger and instability.

### Dashed hope and societal instability in Kosovo

Kosovo’s tumultuous history has been well documented, and it is not the aim here to recount, or fundamentally reappraise these events. Rather, the intention is to argue that one of the key catalysts for the various instances of societal instability which have erupted in Kosovo has generally been overlooked. Existing analyses of instances of

societal instability have focused predominately on the suppression of nationalistic sentiments, ideological and emotional impulses, economic malaise, state oppression, and the denial of human rights (Daskalovski 2003; Dragovic-Soso 2003; Guzina 2003). Undoubtedly all played a key role in fomenting societal anger in Kosovo, but I suggest that another, as yet underappreciated, factor – dashed hope – served as an additional, at times concomitant but not exclusive, catalyst. It is not possible here to undertake an exhaustive analysis of the role of dashed hope throughout Kosovo’s history; rather, I seek below to suggest that there is evidence that dashed hope has played a role in three events widely recognised as key moments in the modern history of Kosovo.<sup>7</sup>

### *Examples of dashed hope*

From 1945 to 1966 Aleksandar Rankovic oversaw domestic security within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and demonstrated a particular zeal for oppressing the Albanian community in Kosovo due to his belief that they sought to violently unite Kosovo with Albania (Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000, 34–35; Judah 2000, 34–36). Following Rankovic’s dismissal in 1966, the oppression eased; in 1970 the University of Pristina was established and “an Albanian national renaissance began in Kosovo” (Judah 2000, 38). The new 1974 SFRY constitution increased Kosovo’s status by recognising it as an autonomous province thereby granting it a seat at the Federal Presidency. In 1978, Fadil Hoxha became the vice-president of the SFRY Federal Presidency making him the highest-ranking Kosovo Albanian ever in the SFRY.

During this period, “the Kosovo Albanians had never achieved so much in such a short time” (Mertus 1999, 17) and the 1970s are regarded as the “golden years in Kosovo” (Skendaj 2010, 39). Yet, in 1981 widespread rioting erupted across Kosovo. The disturbances began at the University of Pristina when students protested at poor food and facilities, but quickly spread and took on an overtly political character; protestors demanded independence for Kosovo, leading to weeks of violent demonstrations which were eventually quelled by a violent clampdown (Malcolm 1998, 334–335).

There are indications that there was a link between the mass uprising in 1981 and the increase in the nature of the hopes held by the Kosovo Albanians. The reforms initiated in the 1970s and the promises made by the SFRY government naturally led to the rapid development of new – more expansive – hopes amongst the Kosovo Albanians. Whereas previously people’s hopes related to basic survival and freedom from oppression, by the early 1980s these had been replaced by new hopes relating to greater cultural and political autonomy. However, Kosovo remained part of SFRY and, more emotively for the Albanian community, still officially a province of Serbia; the Kosovo Albanians thus still felt like “second-class citizens” (Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000, 36). In the preceding decade, the Kosovo Albanians hopes had been raised, but not realised; as Judah notes “[The 1970s] were years of rising expectations” but by the early 1980s the lack of sufficient change jarred with these very expectations (2000, 38). Reflecting on the catalyst for the disturbances, Julie Mertus notes that the SFRY authorities had created the conditions for the 1981 unrest by “opening the door for hope” amongst the Kosovo Albanians (1999, 18).

The dramatic increase in support for the KLA in the late 1990s can also arguably be attributed to a significant – though not exclusive – extent to a sense of dashed hope.

Following the revocation of Kosovo's autonomous status in 1989, the vast majority of Kosovo Albanians supported the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and its leader Ibrahim Rugova, who pursued a strategy of peaceful resistance in the belief that this would win them international support (Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000, 92). International actors encouraged the LDK not to follow the violent path taken by other groups seeking independence from the SFRY and the international message given to Rugova was "nearly unanimous praise for his movement" (Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000, 57). The LDK thus believed that "they would be rewarded for their good behaviour by Western countries" (Judah 2000, 38). They in turn convinced their supporters that Kosovo was high on the international agenda, international support was strong and all their problems "would soon be solved" (Judah 2000, 124; see also, Malcolm 1998, 334–335).

The 1995 Dayton Accords dashed these hopes (Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000, 36). The Accords explicitly recognised the territorial integrity of the SFRY successor states thereby stipulating that Kosovo remain part of Serbia, itself a constituent republic within the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The concessions granted to the Bosnian Serbs who's leaders *had* engaged in violence further angered the Kosovo Albanians (Surroi 1996). The Dayton Accords were thus a "dramatic and humiliating" (Judah 2000, 124) rejection of Rugova's hope that passive resistance would lead to liberation and had the effect of "undercutting Kosovar Albanian hopes" (Perritt 2010, 2). This unwelcome revelation greatly contributed to the subsequent upsurge in support for the insurrection waged by the KLA; as Chris Hedges noted, Dayton, "... shattered all hopes for peaceful change in Kosovo" (1999; see also, Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000, 36; Judah 2000, 9).

The rise in support for the KLA led to a dramatic increase in the scale of the violence in Kosovo; by 1998 a civil war raged, and the international community became directly involved in the situation after years of comparative neglect (Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000, 18). A peace deal presented to President Milosevic and representatives from the Kosovo Albanian community in March 1999 was signed only by the latter, and in response NATO launched a military operation – without UN Security Council authorisation – against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on the 24th March with the expressed purpose of protecting the Albanian community in Kosovo. On the 9th June Milosevic capitulated and agreed to remove all his security forces from Kosovo in return for a cessation of NATO's campaign. The following day, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1244 which mandated the deployment of Kosovo Force (KFOR) – a NATO-led peacekeeping force – and the establishment of the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) which was charged with governing Kosovo.

The deployment of KFOR and UNMIK was greeted with jubilation by the Kosovo Albanians who believed they would protect them from further attacks and start a process which would swiftly lead to independence, peace and prosperity. They were encouraged to hope by the promises made by a wide range of powerful Western leaders after the intervention. Indicatively, at the end of July 1999, during a visit to Kosovo UK Prime Minister Tony Blair assured the people, "we can see the chance for hope and confidence and prosperity for the future" and promised a future of, "peace, security and friendship ... a future with the family of nations in Europe with the security that comes and the prosperity that comes with being part of Europe" (BBC News 1999).<sup>8</sup> The plethora of ambitious

promises made about the bright future ahead led to a general sense of “euphoria” within Kosovo (Lawyers Committee for Human Rights 1999). Indicatively, US journalist Greg Campbell, who was in Kosovo when the international missions arrived, noted that for the first time in many years “the Kosovars in Pristina bore with them something distinctly resembling hope” (2000, 239).

However, Resolution 1244 constituted a compromise between the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council; both Russia and China were opposed to independence for Kosovo and as a result Resolution 1244 recognised “the commitment of all Member States to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia” and spoke only of seeking “substantial autonomy and meaningful self-administration for Kosovo ... within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia”. UNMIK thus quickly found itself in an invidious position; while UNMIK was officially “an interim administration ... pending a final settlement” it was not clear what this final settlement would be or how it would be determined (Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000, 9). UNMIK officials thus struggled to administer a province in which over 90% of the population – believing they had just won a war of liberation – expected independence, whilst adhering to “a near impossible mandate” which in effect supported the position of the defeated party (Chesterman 2001, 4; see also, Perritt 2010, 63–64; Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000, 100).

This quickly became a major source of resentment amongst the Kosovo Albanians and was further exacerbated by UNMIK’s lack of meaningful consultation with the locals and formally unaccountable powers (Greicevci 2022, 48; Musliu 2021, 25; Visoka 2017, 17). Thus, the Kosovo Albanians soon perceived UNMIK as “the greatest barriers to both final status resolution and evolution of power to local institutions” (Perritt 2010, 72; see also, Blumi 2003; Skendaj 2010, 39).

On the 17th March 2004 riots erupted across Kosovo. In addition to attacking Kosovo’s minority communities – Serbs in particular – the Albanian rioters targeted UNMIK and KFOR. The rioting was sparked by what later proved to be false reports that three Albanian children had drowned whilst fleeing from a Serbian mob (Human Rights Watch 2004, 19). This was, however, clearly a pretext; the gap between the hopes held by the Albanians in the immediate aftermath of the NATO intervention and the reality of their situation five years later, had generated a wide groundswell of fury which was primed to explode (Visoka 2017, 17). Indicatively, prior to the riots, Faton Klinaku, leader of the “War Associations”, three interconnected organisations representing KLA war veterans, described UNMIK as “neo-colonialists” and accused it of, “... carrying out the same policies applied by Serbia” while a subsequent headline in the Kosovo Albanian newspaper *Epoka e Re* warned ominously, “UNMIK beware, KLA will burn you down” (Human Rights Watch 2004, 18). By March 2004, to the dismay of the Albanian community, Kosovo formally remained a province of Serbia, unemployment stood at some 60%, corruption was rampant, and both the education and healthcare system were dysfunctional. Maintaining societal stability amidst this yawning gap between what people had hoped for and what they received proved impossible.

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Further focused analysis on each event discussed above is of course necessary to identify more precisely how, and to what exact extent, dashed hope manifested as a political force



in these instances, and more generally throughout Kosovo's history. Nonetheless, the evidence above at least highlights that dashed hope played a significant role which, due to the fact that it has largely been overlooked, suggests we should consider the impact of dashed hope when appraising societal stability in Kosovo today; this is the focus of the following section.

### Hope in Kosovo after 2008

On the 17th February 2008 Kosovo declared independence precipitating jubilant celebrations amongst the Albanian community; as one woman noted, "We hope everything will be fine ... There is a sense of optimism and hope in the air" (Bytyci 2008). The Kosovo Albanians thus celebrated the new era that had supposedly begun; their country was ostensibly poised to become a recognised member of the international community and join international organisations – such as the EU and NATO – that would provide Kosovo with greater security and the political and economic support required to ensure prosperity (Perritt 2010, 214–215).

### *The lack of progress*

However, the hoped-for future failed to materialise; though few can reasonably deny that the welfare of Kosovo's citizens has improved since internationally supervised statebuilding began in 1999, Kosovo remains beset by a range of debilitating issues internally and stasis, if not regression, internationally; many within Kosovo have come to describe it as "the unwanted corner of Europe" (Lata 2019).

After the jubilation of February 2008 there was a sharp degeneration in public satisfaction which became endemic by 2015/2016; surveys conducted by UNDP show that in October 2008, satisfaction with the Executive Government was 55.71%, the Prime Minister 63.12%, the Parliament 49.03% (UNDP 2011, 13). By April 2015 these had all plummeted to 17.80%, 18.3% and 17.3% respectively (UNDP 2022, 10). Similar trends are evident with respects to "Political Direction", "Economic Direction", "Perceptions of Corruption" and "Attitudes Towards Voting" (UNDP 2022, 9–14). The "2016 Balkan Barometer" also found that Kosovo was second only to Bosnia regionally with respects to the number of people describing themselves as "completely dissatisfied" in answer to the question "How satisfied are you with the way things are going in your society?" (Regional Cooperation Council 2016, 38). The report also noted "The largest discrepancy between the assessment of the current state of affairs and expectations for the future is present among the population of Kosovo" thereby highlighting a profound disjuncture between people's hopes and their actual reality (Regional Cooperation Council 2016, 32).

Since 2008 unemployment has fluctuated but remains extremely high; the European Commission's 2022 report noted that 20% of Kosovo's labour force are unemployed – youth unemployment stands at 38.9% – and Kosovo's economy, though improving slightly, is heavily reliant on remittances (European Commission 2021, 99 and 120). Due to the persistently high unemployment, migration soared; between 2008 and 2018 a fifth of the entire population tried to leave Kosovo; 2015 was the single worst year, with an exodus of 122,520 people (Begisholli 2019). There was a "continuously negative" migration balance of over 210,000 people between 2015 and 2019 which is estimated to

have caused an annual loss in GDP of €519 million (Westminster Foundation for Democracy 2021, 7–8). The high unemployment fuels the migration but so too does, “the high prevalence of corruption” which has afflicted Kosovo since independence to the extent that became widely regarded as an example of state capture (Coelho 2018; World Bank 2017, 56). In 2022, the European Commission described corruption levels as still being “systemic” (2021, 5).

Following independence, EU membership was regarded as an imminent panacea; the widespread hope that Kosovo would soon join the organisation was not unfounded given the promises made by Western leaders to Kosovo and the promise of membership made by the EU to all the SFRY successor states at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. Yet, Kosovo’s progress towards EU membership has been negligible; illustratively, the European Commission’s 2022 report on Kosovo’s progress found that “limited progress” has made towards EU accession (European Commission 2021, 6–7). Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia have all been designated as candidate countries by the EU; Kosovo has not.

Kosovo has joined several important international organisations including the World Bank, the IMF and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and international sports organisations such as the International Olympic Committee and FIFA. But Kosovo cannot join the UN as Russia and China refuse to recognise it, and its attempts to join UNESCO in 2015 and INTERPOL in 2018 failed due to a lack of support. Serbia, with Russia’s support has waged a “de-recognition” campaign against Kosovo and convinced several states to rescind their recognition of Kosovo (Stojanovic and Bami 2021).

One of the most disappointing issues for Kosovo citizens has been the denial of visa-free travel in the Schengen zone; Belarus is the only other country west of Russia facing similar restrictions. Since 2010 various Prime Ministers in Kosovo have declared that they received assurances from the EU that visa liberalisation was imminent, only for these hopes to be subsequently dashed; the process has been described by a Kosovar journalist as a “truly disappointing ... emotional roller-coaster” (Lata 2019). The European Commission finally confirmed that Kosovo fulfilled all the criteria for visa liberalisation in 2018 – a decision endorsed by the EU Parliament – yet in its 2021 report it noted with regret that this had yet to be granted due to reluctance amongst certain EU member states (European Commission 2021, 3). This prompted widespread societal anger – Kosovo’s Prime Minister described it as “a great injustice” (Taylor 2021) – and many within Kosovo concluded that visa liberalisation was not about fulfilling criteria; Kosovo’s people were just not welcome (Maliqi and Ilazi 2021, 6).<sup>9</sup> In December 2022, the EU finally announced that Kosovo’s citizens would be granted visa liberalisation on the 1st January 2024 – a decision endorsed by the European Council in March 2023 – and while this was clearly a welcome development, the “destructive consequences” of the widespread anger prompted by the denial of visas for so long remain (Cermak 2022; see also, Kadriu and Musliu 2023).

An additional source of anger for the Kosovo Albanians is the fact that Serbia has increasingly become the recipient of what they perceive as unfair support from the EU. Since the Serbia Progressive Party came to power in 2012 Serbia’s government has become more authoritarian, yet Serbia is today ahead of Kosovo in the queue to join the EU. Evidently fearing an isolated Serbia will turn towards Russia, the EU has allegedly turned a blind eye to the steady erosion of press freedom and democratic rights in Serbia

(Bieber 2020, 107; Freedom House 2021; Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia 2021; Hronešová 2020, 40). By contrast, the Kosovo Albanians feel they have been pressurised by the EU, and other erstwhile allies, into implementing a series of painful constitutional changes – that benefit neighbouring states – ostensibly in return for visa liberalisation and progress towards EU membership without notable reward.<sup>10</sup> A recent report noted that a growing number of citizens in Kosovo see the EU as “unreliable, untrustworthy, biased against or even anti-Kosovo” (Maliqi and Ilazi 2021, 2). Similarly, a report by the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies noted, “The largely positive attitudes of Kosovo institutions, as well as citizens, towards the EU has been undermined in recent years as the Union fails to deliver on its commitments” (2022b, 3).

### Not yet hopeless anger?

Kosovo is a significantly better place to live today than it was in the 1990s; it is safer, more prosperous, more democratic, and there have been significant improvements in the country’s infrastructure. However, in the minds of the Kosovo Albanians these gains are judged not against the situation in 1999, but the future they were promised, which has not materialised.

As noted earlier, dashed hope leads to despair which manifests either in despondency or anger. The huge levels of migration from Kosovo clearly evidence the former; many people have evidently decided that remaining in Kosovo is, in essence, hopeless.<sup>11</sup> Anger is also evident; some Kosovo Albanians have engaged in violence against minorities, though such incidents remain comparatively rare.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, some have joined Islamic extremist organisations and engaged in violence at home and abroad, but not in significant numbers (Kursani 2017). Therefore, the widespread anger amongst the Kosovo Albanians at the failure of their hopes to be realised has so far not manifested in violent instability. The lack of significant violent instability, however, should not be taken to mean that anger is not widespread in Kosovo. Though the absence of instability is somewhat surprising – given the history of dashed hope leading to anger and societal instability in Kosovo highlighted earlier – in Kosovo, the anger felt has been largely – though not exclusively – channelled into increased support for Vetëvendosje.

### The rise of Vetëvendosje

Initially founded as a direct-action protest movement in 2005, Vetëvendosje was established by locals unhappy at the unaccountable power wielded by the internationals – especially UNIMK whom they portrayed as “occupiers” – and what they portrayed as a corrupt local elite that had come to power in Kosovo after 1999 through bribery and intimidation. In 2010 Vetëvendosje chose to contest elections, though it still claimed to be a “movement” rather than a conventional political party (Zani, 2015, 314). In 2010 it won 13.16% of the vote and in 2014 it increased this slightly to 13.59%. In 2017, however, it won 27.49% of the vote thus becoming the single largest party. This sudden increase in support coheres with the public opinion surveys noted earlier which highlight a precipitous decline in public satisfaction around this time. Following the 2019 elections Vetëvendosje was again returned as the largest party and entered government for the first time with the LDK; this coalition was short-lived and new elections were held in 2021

when Vetëvendosje won 50.28% of the vote, the highest share won by any party in Kosovo since independence (Stojanovic and Bami 2021).

Vetëvendosje has been criticised for its many controversial – and illegal – direct-action protests, its ostensibly narrow focus on the interests of the Albanian community, its disrespect for other political parties in Kosovo, its aim to unite Kosovo with Albania, and its hostile stance towards the Serbian government (Visoka 2011, 113; Nosan 2012; Yabanci 2016, 26; Visoka 2017, 135; Smajllaj 2020). However, in contrast to the divisive, nationalist autocrats that have emerged elsewhere in the Balkans (Bieber 2020; Enyedi 2020; Hronešová 2020), Vetëvendosje is committed to parliamentary democracy and has never incited or supported violence against any minority community in Kosovo.<sup>13</sup> While it is more to the left than other parties in Kosovo, it adheres to a traditional social-democrat orientation and is a member of the international “Progressive Alliance” group which includes the UK Labour Party and the US Democratic Party. Additionally, though the party seeks to extricate Kosovo from foreign interference, it is not isolationist and actively works to join both the EU and NATO.

### *Factors beyond Vetëvendosje's control*

Vetëvendosje has managed to convince people in Kosovo that, though their hopes have been dashed, they should still hope to achieve peace and prosperity within a pluralist democracy; the means by which they can achieve these hopes, rather than the hopes themselves, are what Vetëvendosje have challenged (Visoka 2017, 133; Maliqi and Ilazi 2021, 6). The alternatives to Vetëvendosje – increased support for political movements espousing sectarianism and/or violence, such as the KLA War Veterans or Islamic extremists – would clearly be significantly more destabilising (Maliqi and Ilazi 2021, 11).

The fact that Vetëvendosje has thus far served as a means by which the anger felt by the Kosovo Albanians has been channelled into peaceful – albeit at times unconventional, disruptive and provocative<sup>14</sup> – political mobilisation, does not guarantee that this will remain the case. Regardless of how genuinely committed Vetëvendosje is to its agenda, and how competent it may be in government, it is prey to a range of forces beyond its control that will significantly impede the achievement of the hopes and “high expectations” of its supporters (Paçarizi 2022).

The West's approach towards Kosovo is in-keeping with a general disposition to the Balkans which has come to be described as “stabilitocracy”; the aim being the consolidation of regimes in the region that maintain order and don't challenge the status quo (Bieber 2018; Pavlovic 2017). In Kosovo's case, this has meant that the expansive goals initially set for Kosovo have been significantly diminished and the prevailing approach adopted by both the EU and the US has increasingly become to contain Kosovo in a state of limbo whilst incorporating Serbia into the West's sphere of influence (Maliqi 2020, 9; Bieber 2020, 107). Thus, the current context in which Vetëvendosje governs is one in which Kosovo's importance to the West has diminished.

Even if Vetëvendosje adopts a singularly compliant attitude towards the EU and dutifully implements all the conditions presented to it by Brussels, Kosovo faces a unique array of barriers to accession over which it has essentially no influence. Meeting the accession criteria is not sufficient as Kosovo is not recognised by Cyprus, Greece, Romania,

Slovakia and Spain, each of whom can veto Kosovo's accession. Their refusal to recognise Kosovo stems from the fact that they are opposed to unilateral separatism largely because of their own domestic situation; as such, so long as Serbia refuses to recognise Kosovo, the five EU non-recognisers will view it as an exemplar of a principle – unilateral separatism – they fundamentally reject (Ker-Lindsay and Armakolas 2020). As such, Kosovo can only join the EU if Serbia recognises it and thus Serbia effectively wields a veto over Kosovo's EU membership; as a report from within Kosovo noted, "membership in the EU and NATO has been presented to Kosovo as dependent on an agreement with Serbia" (Maliqi and Ilazi 2021, 5; see also, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies 2022a, 8). The chances of Serbia recognising Kosovo, however, are remote given the present government's overtly nationalistic orientation (Kosovar Centre for Security Studies 2022a, 10). Vetëvendosje has, of course, no leverage over Belgrade's stance towards Kosovo and this is a barrier to its accession over which it has no control.

Additionally, the EU's appetite for enlargement in general has diminished significantly (Maliqi 2020). In 2003 the EU promised membership to all the states in the Balkans; since then only Croatia has joined. As the EU tries to cope with a range of crises – most notably Brexit, the authoritarian tendencies of some member states, and persistent economic instability – focus has shifted from expansion to consolidation. Key states, such as France and the Netherlands, have in fact demonstrated a particular reluctance towards enlargement in the Balkans (Maliqi and Ilazi 2021, 6). Kosovo is – like all aspiring EU members in the Balkans – prey to these forces over which it has no control, and as such, the prospects of imminent EU membership – which 92% of Kosovo's citizens desire (Centre for Insights in Survey Research 2020) – serving as a panacea are unrealistic (Kosovar Centre for Security Studies 2021b, 5). Illustratively, Montenegro was officially granted candidate status in 2010 but has still not joined the EU; given how much further advanced Montenegro is than Kosovo – it is not even yet recognised as a candidate country – the chances of Kosovo joining the EU in the next 15 years are remote even if the status issue is resolved; given this, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies warned Kosovo's citizens "need a reality check" (2022b, 18).

Furthermore, Kosovo's fate is heavily dependent on continued US support. The US was the main driver behind the military intervention in 1999, and the key advocate supporting Kosovo's independence in 2008. As has been widely noted, since 2008 the US' power has gone into decline leading to a fundamental rethinking of the US' overseas commitments (Acharya 2014; Boyle 2016; Ikenberry 2018). The election of President Donald Trump in 2016 was a consequence of this new more inward-looking disposition and in recent years many erstwhile allies of the US – such as the Kurds in Syria – have found to their cost that US support can be rescinded; this was most spectacularly illustrated when the US withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021. As US power continues to wane and it re-evaluates its overseas commitments, its support for Kosovo has arguably become less fulsome as attention has shifted to other more pressing concerns. Kosovo is host to the large US military base Camp Bondsteel and as such has some strategic importance, but in 2020 a number of officials in the Trump administration warned that the US was considering pulling its troops out of Kosovo (Bami 2020). The election of Joe Biden was welcomed by most Kosovo Albanians, given his previous support for their cause, but in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the need to strengthen NATO cohesion, and China's increasingly threatening behaviour, Kosovo's importance to the US has decreased

while the perceived need to facilitate Serbia's integration into the West has increased (Mujanovic 2023). The political calculations made in Washington regarding Kosovo are, of course, essentially beyond the capacity of the Kosovars themselves, or Vetëvendosje, to influence.

Vetëvendosje's promise to address corruption, criminality and unemployment in Kosovo is contingent upon Kosovo improving its international status and the continuing support of its key allies. Given the challenging international context outlined above, Vetëvendosje's ability to redress these ills will be limited if Kosovo remains isolated as a partially recognised state. With limited prospects for growth through legitimate/legal economic channels, many will naturally turn to corruption and crime (Paçarizi 2022). Likewise, tackling unemployment will require massive external investment and this will continue to be difficult if Kosovo remains in the international periphery. A rise in corruption and criminality will also dissuade foreign investment in Kosovo thereby perpetuating unemployment leading to further societal anger.

Ultimately, regardless of how effective Vetëvendosje may be, it faces a range of external challenges over which it has limited influence, and which are likely to significantly impede its efficacy in government. The containment-orientated approach adopted by the international community towards Kosovo significantly impedes Vetëvendosje's ability to improve the lives of Kosovo's people. If Vetëvendosje ultimately fails to realise the hopes of its supporters, then Kosovo's own history, and the research on dashed hope, suggests that this will likely precipitate "hopeless anger" that could ultimately precipitate a sudden shift towards more extreme political movements with destabilising implications for peace in Kosovo and the region.

Any groups that provoke instability in Kosovo will naturally face censure from Kosovo's allies whose support has been essential to date; while this is a significant disincentive to engage in such action, Kosovo's recent history suggest that fomenting instability is not necessarily a self-defeating/irrational strategy. In particular, the lack of movement on Kosovo's independence which impelled the 2004 riots, ultimately proved to be means by which the achievement of independence was expediated. Prior to the riots the approach taken by the international community – like today – was to maintain order in Kosovo while avoiding the status issue; indicatively, Human Rights Watch noted that before the riots UNMIK and KFOR seemed to be "happy to continue with "business as usual" in Kosovo" and were "operating under the assumption that forestalling the progress promised would be sustainable" (2004, 3). A UN report commissioned after the violence likewise noted, "In the absence of a strategy with any sense of direction" the plan had been "to 'keep the lid on'" but noted that this ultimately proved unsustainable as the Kosovo Albanians' "unfulfilled aspirations and ambitions" eventually boiled over (Eide 2004, 111; see also, International Commission on the Balkans 2005, 10).

The 2004 riots were widely condemned by all Kosovo's international allies and damaged the reputation of the Kosovo Albanians, but they also "galvanised the international community" and precipitated a significant change in international policy; attention immediately turned to addressing Kosovo's status which culminated in the 2008 declaration of independence (Perritt 2010, 80; see also, Visoka 2017, 43). As such, though few admitted it openly, the 2004 riots had succeeded in furthering the Albanians' quest for independence (Perritt 2010, 80). The lesson, which obviously has potentially

serious implications for Kosovo today, is that violence may well appear to the disaffected to be a rational strategy given it has previously worked.

It is also important to note that the 2004 riots took the international community “by surprise”; as such, the fact that there is negligible violence/unrest in Kosovo today cannot be taken as evidence that instability will not suddenly erupt (Human Rights Watch 2004, 15). Indeed, the causes cited by Human Rights Watch for the eruption of violence in 2004 – “Deep dissatisfaction within Kosovo society about the lack of progress in resolving the final status of the province, continuing economic stagnation, and deepening concerns about Belgrade’s attempts to consolidate political control in some parts of Kosovo [and] the fate of the 3,430 persons missing since the end of 1999 war” – are issues that continue to cause anger amongst the Albanian community in Kosovo today (Human Rights Watch 2004, 15).

## Conclusion

Today, societal anger can be observed worldwide, and this has led to domestic instability and increased support for populists. The fact that people’s hopes were raised so dramatically following the end of the Cold War only to be subsequently dashed has been highlighted as one of causes of the widespread disaffection and anger, though few have explicitly engaged with hope as a frame for explaining this trend (Krastev and Holmes 2019; Marcus 2021; Pappas 2019). In this article, I noted that studies on hope show that while hope can be a powerful force for positive political change, raising peoples hopes and then failing to realise them, has often generated an angry backlash. “Dashed hope” is, therefore, a catalyst for societal instability. Though this is acknowledged by those who have examined the potency of dashed hope as a force for political change, it remains generally underappreciated within the academic literature on the factors which threaten peace and stability.

In keeping with global trends, in Eastern Europe economic stagnation/decline has led to rising societal disaffection and increased support for both nationalistic populists with authoritarian tendencies and violent groups determined to foment instability (Bieber 2020, 2; Enyedi 2020; Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac 2021; Krastev and Holmes 2019; Maliqi 2020, 1; Prelec 2020). In this article, I focused on Kosovo as an example of this link between dashed hope, anger, and societal instability, and argued that an analysis of those instances of societal instability widely cited as key moments in Kosovo’s recent history suggest a strong link between the failure of hopes held to materialise and societal instability. Dashed hope was certainly not the exclusive catalyst for instability, however, and further research into the extent to which dashed hope influenced events is required.

Yet, having established that dashed hope played a role in fomenting societal instability, I noted that though raised hopes in Kosovo have been dashed since the 2008 declaration of independence, this has not led to serious societal instability in Kosovo. I argued that this is largely because the anger felt by the people of Kosovo has thus far been channelled into support for Vetëvendosje. While the party has been criticised by many for both its tactics and outlook, it does not espouse an authoritarian or sectarian agenda, seeks to work within, rather than overturn, the existing democratic system, and is committed to continuing Kosovo’s attempts to further integrate with the West through joining NATO and the EU. Thus, while Vetëvendosje’s tactics have at times been unconventional and its nationalistic stance has alienated some within Kosovo, its ascent to power has not precipitated any significant political or societal instability.

Yet, while Vetëvendosje has to date served as a means by which anger in Kosovo has been channelled in peaceful/constructive ways within the prevailing democratic system – thereby forestalling societal instability – I argued that there are many challenges facing Vetëvendosje which they have negligible capacity to overcome. If Vetëvendosje proves unable to overcome these challenges its supporters will likely look to alternative means by which to express their anger. These alternatives are bleak; should Vetëvendosje prove unable to realise the hopes of its supporters this will likely lead to despondency, manifesting in renewed mass migration, or worse, destructive anger potentially manifesting in violence. Ominously, a recent report from within Kosovo noted that “public disillusionment”, a “growing discontent among the general public” and “a deep sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future” had created “an enabling environment for latent illiberal currents” (Maliqi and Ilazi 2021, 6). As such, though dashed hope has not yet led to societal instability in Kosovo, it cannot be ruled out in the future.

Looking beyond Kosovo, further research is required to better understand hope’s political currency across Eastern Europe; two potentially important areas of enquiry stand out. First, while disenchantment as the result of dashed hope is widespread in the region, its political and societal manifestations have varied. The turn towards authoritarianism and nationalism in Serbia and Hungary has been, for example, significantly more acute than in Estonia and the Czech Republic. The factors which have contributed to this variation require further analysis and could include the strength of civil society, culturally specific perceptions of the likelihood of progress, and/or the degree to which the state has acceded to international integration. Thus, more could be done to examine why certain states have been able to resist the “powerful winds of disappointment” which accompany dashed hope (Sleat 2013, 141). Second, Kosovo is not unique regionally in having endured corruption, unemployment, and slow progress towards EU accession; it *is* unique, however, in terms of the fact that it was the recipient of unprecedented levels of international interference in the form of the military intervention in 1999, and the official and unofficial power wielded by external actors – most notably the US and the EU – ever since. The relationship between this level of international engagement in Kosovo and the scale of the hopes held by the people there would, one assumes, mean that the role of hope and dashed hope as factors in domestic politics would be significantly more pronounced in Kosovo than in Moldova for example where the general lack of international engagement will likely have ensured that hopes were never raised significantly. Thus, the extent to which external signals influence the scale of a society’s hopes requires further study and particularly whether it is irresponsible for external actors to fundamentally alter the dynamics of a political culture by raising hopes, especially if these hopes may not be realised.

## Notes

1. This is not to suggest that dashed hope was the *only* catalyst for these events; rather the point is that dashed hope was *a* key catalyst which remains underappreciated.
2. Reflecting on the role of hope during the 1980s, Vaclav Havel noted, “Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out” (1993, 68).
3. This basic premise relates to the ontological security approach which holds that an individual’s perception of their own security is a function of their belief in the stability of their identity. This does not mean that individuals necessarily seek to maintain the status quo but



rather that they seek an environment that is conducive to their own “capacity for personal continuity” (Mitzen 2006, 344; see also, Steele 2008; Croft 2012). For analyses of how this manifests at the state level see, Ejduš 2020; Subotić 2016.

4. As arguably most vividly emphasised by the attempted coups in the United States in 2021 and Brazil in 2023.
5. Additionally, there has been increasing influence exercised by non-western authoritarian states in the Balkans – such as Russia and United Arab Emirates – who have capitalised on societal anger towards the EU; see Prelec 2020
6. This is not of course the only reason why authoritarianism and populism is on the rise in Eastern Europe, See Krastev and Holmes 2019; Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac 2021.
7. These three events have been chosen because they are widely recognised in the literature on as pivotal instances of instability which each impelled a new phase in Kosovo’s recent history; see for example, Campbell 2000; International Commission on the Balkans. 2005; Independent International Commission on Kosovo. 2000; Judah 2000; Mertus 1999; Perritt 2010; Skendaj 2010; Visoka 2017.
8. Similarly, in November 1999 NATO Secretary General Javier Solana declared that the “comprehensive rebuilding” then underway in Kosovo would lead to “a viable political and economic order” (1999, 119). Bernard Kouchner, the newly appointed head of UNMIK, affirmed these ambitious goals for Kosovo and the wider region, promising that successful statebuilding in Kosovo would eventually ensure that “the Balkans should be synonymous with freedom, open society, and brotherhood” (Cohen 2000, 43–44).
9. The Kosovar Centre for Security Studies found “39% of the Kosovars view the lack of visa liberalization as prejudice of some EU member States towards Kosovo and 25% see the policy as a discrimination from the EU” (Kosovar Centre for Security Studies 2022a, 3).
10. Kosovo has been pressurised by Western states into making significant concessions to accommodate Serbia; these include the creation of the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities in 2013, and the establishment of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutors Office in 2015. Both were deeply unpopular with the public in Kosovo and implemented by the government of Kosovo only because of threats issued by powerful Western states (Alija 2021; Biserko 2021; Hehir 2019; Maliqi and Ilazi 2021).
11. Indicatively, explaining his decision to leave, one young Kosovar noted, “people have given up hope that things will change” (Ott 2015).
12. In December 2022 and January 2023 clashes occurred in the north of Kosovo between Serbs protesting changes to licence plate regulations and the Kosovo police. In the course of the disturbances there were also several incidents of assault perpetrated by Kosovo Albanian civilians against Serbs, including the shooting and wounding of two young Serbs near the town of Shterpce.
13. Vetëvendosje has, however, been criticised for its “exclusionary practices” and having never “empathised with other non-dominant minorities” which has “profoundly undermined prospects for peacebuilding in Kosovo” (Visoka 2017, 135).
14. Vetëvendosje has targeted vehicles used by UNMIK and EULEX and set off tear gas in Kosovo’s parliament (Visoka 2017, 131–133).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributor

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