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What Kind of Burden is the Burden of History? How Young Adults in Serbia and Kosovo Use History to Understand and Experience Nationalism

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What Kind of Burden is the Burden of History? How Young Adults in Serbia and Kosovo Use History to Understand and Experience Nationalism

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ABSTRACT The role of history in popular understandings and experiences of nationalism remains a puzzle of nationalism scholarship. Existing approaches are polarized between constructivist and elite-driven explanations that neglect nuanced instrumentalizations of history. This study investigates uses of history vis-à-vis nationalism by Serbian and Kosovo Albanian students. The author argues that historical themes are evoked in two distinct ways: *lived history* and *abstract history*. The former embraces official nationalist narrative, ignores the ethnic out-group, and deduces historical lessons for individuals. The latter rejects official nationalist narrative, makes clear connections with the out-group (favorable and unfavorable), and deduces historical lessons for collectivities.

Introduction

This study explores two distinct uses of history for understanding and experiencing nationalism. Guided by the research question ‘How does this population evoke history to describe, explain or express nationalism?’ I engage in 30 in-depth interviews with young adults from Serbia and Kosovo. I argue that this theoretically salient population instrumentalizes history in two distinct ways—lived history and abstract history—that correspond to differing understandings of nationalism. This study is an intervention in the unproductively polarized theoretical debate between constructivists and elite-driven theorists.

Literature Review

How people ‘from below’ understand and experience nationalism is a central puzzle of contemporary nationalism scholarship (Calhoun, 1997; Fenton, 2010; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Hobsbawm, 1990). Yet investigations of the uses of history in understandings

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of nationalism are sharply polarized, leading either to dehistoricized micro-level explanations of nationalism or emphases on the importance of history that obscure the precise ways that individuals instrumentalize history for different ends (nationalist or not). On the one hand, *constructivist*, microanalytic, and interactionist approaches emphasize the creative, interpretive nature of individual understandings of nationalism but disregard the varying conditions under which elite-inspired historical narrative is instrumentalized. On the other hand, *elite-driven*, macroanalytic explanations emphasize the dominance of official, elite-inspired historical narrative in determining nationalist outlooks and perceptions, but neglect the variety and creativity involved in applications of history at the individual level. While both are useful, these approaches neglect nuance in the use of history for a variety of (often inconsistent) purposes; they oversimplify the relation between historical narrative and individual understandings of nationalism; and they leave the relational in-group/out-group dynamic at an impractical, abstract level. This study is a step toward overcoming this unproductive polarization.

Notoriously, '[modern] nationalisms have been particularly obsessed with history' (Calhoun, 1993, p. 225), but studies have failed to capture individual ways of instrumentalizing history toward understanding and experiencing nationalism. An influential collection on ethnic dynamics (Chandra, 2012) relegates history and perceptions of it to technical definitions (pp. 10, 90, 95), secondary or marginal factors vis-à-vis nationhood (pp. 56, 93, 125, 392, 402), and imprecise admissions that 'history may be constructed' vis-à-vis ethnic identity (pp. 137, 150). Focusing on Eastern Europe in particular, Petersen (2001) incorporates interview-based evidence from Lithuanian subjects as 'oral histories' admired for their objectivity and 'richness' (p. 4); but how these uses of history relate to subjects' attitudes toward nationalism is deliberately unaddressed (pp. 281–282). Even when instrumentalization of history vis-à-vis nationalism at the individual level is tackled directly (Barton & McCully 2005; Levstik & Barton, 1998; VanSledright 2008), the investigation is restricted to readers and producers of textbooks in advanced affluent societies. Overall, micro-analytic uses of history in relation to nationalism remain mysterious.

Purporting to correct this failure, *constructivists* seek data from so-called ordinary people, who are treated as creative and proactive producers of nationalism. The resulting constructions barely resemble the ideological apparatus 'from the top', if at all. The argument that nationalism and ethnicity are ultimately sustained and reproduced through everyday experience (Brubaker, 1996; Brubaker, Feischmidt, Fox, & Grancea, 2006; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008) opened new methodological horizons. Rather than analyzing formal elite activities or ideologies as indicators of nationalism, one can examine the stories of lived experience—everyday or otherwise—of ordinary people, including their 'folk sociological' understandings of nationalism. Furthermore, instead of generalizing an abstract typology such as 'state-building nationalisms' across numerous cases (Hechter, 2000), one can investigate what the clash of rival nationalisms means on the proverbial ground in a particular case. Brubaker et al.'s (2006) study of Transylvania demonstrated the fruitfulness of studying experiences and understandings of nationalism with in-depth interviews at a single site with two competing nationalisms.

Partly as an overreaction to the exaggerations of elite-driven macroanalytic studies, this approach relegates the role of historical narrativizing in understandings and experiences of nationalism to one of *many* everyday practices. Opposed to focus on heavily historicized elite-driven narratives that allegedly indoctrinate people, constructivists overwhelmingly

study non-historical narratives and routinized activities that do not involve thinking about history:

The broad brush strokes favoured by macro-analytical approaches to the study of nationalism blur (and sometimes obscure) the finer grains of the nation that are embedded in the routine practices of everyday life. (Brubaker et al., 2006, p. 20)

Constructivists also insist on the relationality of nationalism: the insight that the construction of nationalist categories and ‘groupist’ thinking requires a conceptualization of an ethnic out-group. They reject approaches that presume static, coherent entities—such as ‘Serbs’ or ‘Kosovars’. Cooper and Brubaker (2000) reject the reification of concepts such as ‘nation’ and ‘nation-ness’, and examine nationalism as a highly contingent, reactive phenomenon that requires a perceived in-group/out-group relation. Following this, I approach Serbian and Kosovar nationalisms as interwoven—not as isolated entities. However, this focus remains incomplete because the uses of history for nationalist construction of the in-group/out-group relation (or lack thereof) remain largely obscure.

Elite-driven explanations (Breuilly, 1993; Gagnon, 2006; Gellner, 1983; Hechter, 1995, 2000; Smith, 1987, 1998) adopt more traditional, macroanalytic approaches. They bring history to the fore and emphasize the overwhelming capacity of elite ideological narrative to determine beliefs and understandings ‘at the bottom’. A forceful critique of Brubaker and related approaches came from Smith (2008): he accused Fox and Miller-Idriss’ ‘everyday nationhood’ approach (2008) of being ahistorical, of presupposing existing nation-states while ignoring their origins, of downplaying the decisive power of elites to propagate and mold nationalism among the broader public, and—perhaps most devastatingly—of succumbing to a ‘blocking presentism’ that neglects historical context (Smith, 2008, p. 566). Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) were largely unprepared to concede any of the objections, insisting that the two subfields are decidedly ‘guided by different concerns’:

Our primary focus is not on Smith’s moment of ethnogenesis [. . .]; rather, we concentrate on the ways in which ethnonational idioms—once in circulation—are enacted and invoked by ordinary people in the routine contexts of their everyday lives. (p. 574)

The suggestion that Smith’s focus is exclusively on such a ‘moment’ is not earned. In fact, there is a mutual failure of both approaches to explain the precise uses of historical ‘idioms’ once they have begun ‘circulating’. Furthermore, elite-driven theorists do not fully allow that elite-centered, macroanalytic studies and small sample, interview-based ones can be complementary. Their critique is more profound: that the misidentification of the origin of understandings of nationalism (inevitably wedded to historical awareness) leads the constructivists astray. Both schools of thought, therefore, are inclined to exclude the other as generally misguided.

Few attempts have been made to bridge the chasm between such two approaches. Some have explored the subconscious nature of understandings of nationalism, thus circumventing the constructivists’ emphasis on a creative, interpretive producer at the micro-level. Bergholz (2013) emphasizes how knowledge of histories of ethnic violence can cause micro-level nationalism to abruptly appear in ‘un-self-conscious and quasi-automatic

way[s]’ (p. 694). This so-called ‘sudden nationhood’ is largely an ‘automatic emotional response [instead of] a rational, instrumental decision’ (p. 695). But scholars who emphasize the role of irrationality and nonrationality in experiences of nationalism (Kedourie, 1960, Lustick, 1999) underestimate the respondents’ power (and willingness) to deliberately use history for different purposes, both nationalist and anti-nationalist. ‘Nationalism is irrational’, the argument goes, ‘based on unquestioned, virtually subconscious beliefs embedded in a culture’ (Binder, 1999, p. 277), freeing investigators to dismiss entirely any folk sociological knowledge as mere ‘hegemonic beliefs’ in a Gramscian sense (Binder, 1999). This attitude hardly does justice to ‘ordinary’ people’s ability to use history in a colorful assortment of ways, including by personalizing historical themes for recognizably nationalist purposes. Greenfeld (2005) specially goes too far in claiming that nationalism is in concert with mental illness because of its predominantly nonconscious and unreflective sources.

In a related effort, Billig’s ‘banal nationalism’ research (1995) purposely focuses on everyday representations of nationalist solidarity, which—due to their repetition and subliminal effects—contribute to identity formation. It also, however, acknowledges formal, elite effects in determining historical memory through routinized symbols associated with statues, flags, hymns, and the like. But it neglects the incorporation (or lack thereof) of elite historical ‘truths’ into individual historical memory and experience that need not be ‘banal’. For the most part, the historical practices related to nationalism that the subjects raised in this study were anything but mundane or routine—they mostly evoked war and other extraordinary conditions. It is perfectly normal, especially in post-conflict areas, that only a modest subset of interpretations of historical events involve the act of saluting a flag, repeating a nation’s name at ceremonies, etc.

Finally, the two approaches share a weakness in their inadequate exploration of how historical themes associated with nationalism regulate declarations of inclusion and exclusion on the subjects’ part. Even constructivists, who insist on the centrality of in-group/out-group relationality, often take for granted that historical themes tend to produce nationally exclusionary views. This complexity cannot be captured adequately with the popular ‘civic’ vs. ‘ethnic’ nationalism dichotomy (Plamenatz, 1973; Roshwald, 2001), which has rightly been criticized (Brown, 1999; Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010) as analytically fragile and vulnerable to easy politicization. The temptation here is to separate good, liberal, benign nationalism from chauvinistic, discriminatory, destructive nationalism—‘us’ from ‘them’. What has been called a ‘credentialist’ approach to national identity (Medrano, 2005) suggests that attributes of nationalism are used by respondents to exclude others from the respondents’ perceived group belonging. Some studies even integrate this assumption into the research design itself, as when Kunovich (2009) excludes the possibility of cross-ethnic inclusivity by defining ‘national identity’ as ‘*a socially constructed sameness resulting from nationalism*’ (p. 574; emphasis in original). Having done so, Kunovich becomes inattentive to ambivalent uses that nationalism and its historical attributes can and are routinely put to. Against such approaches, I assume that exclusivity and inclusivity may emerge interchangeably, that they will overlap in some instances and diverge in others, and—above all—that they may vary according to the particular way history is used by subjects. Moving beyond the sluggish observation that individual uses of history are nuanced, I specify two distinct, particular instrumentalizations that have been disregarded.

Methods

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 matriculated university students ($n = 30$) between the ages of 18 and 23 (inclusive): half from the University of Priština and half from the University of Belgrade. Subjects were selected from enrollment lists primarily with random sampling and partially through qualified chain-referral sampling. The entire Belgrade subsample was interviewed in Serbian once in June and July 2012, with follow-up interviews in August 2012 and January 2013. The Priština subsample had a weaker response rate: 4 of the 15 students were unwilling or unable to participate in the study due to language barriers—the rest were interviewed in English in July and August 2012, with follow-up interviews in December 2012 and January 2013. Out of the remaining six, four respondents were recommended by other interviewees and two by a university staff member. They were interviewed in January 2013 in English. All respondents, including the six snowball-sampled interviewees, were asked to refrain from speaking to anyone about the substance of the interviews.

The study was motivated not by probabilistic but by theoretical sampling (Small, 2009): it contributes to an analytic framework for studying *these* groups at *these* settings. Young adults in post-conflict areas are ideal subjects for the topic at hand for three reasons. First, university students are *relatively* impressionable and young enough to be meaningfully influenced by elite-inspired historical and nationalist narrative. Not only are they in the process of being exposed to university-level textbooks and related educational indoctrination, but they are primary targets of elite narrative dispersion through families, popular media, and political parties. Second, this sample consists of people whose age predisposes them to free thought, independent judgment, and open-ended questioning. Compared to peer groups, this age-cohort has greater possibilities for rejection of elite indoctrination, as well as lower costs of avoiding rigid, fully formed dogmatic views of history and politics. Third, young educated adults are a crucial constituency as possible future leaders and influences on societal processes related to nationalism. The justification for study of uses of history for understandings of nationalism is greatest precisely if it focuses on people who are more likely to determine future outcomes. There is no evidence to suggest that the sample is especially unrepresentative of students in Serbia and Kosovo of their age, but generalizations beyond this largely urban, above-mean socioeconomic bracket are unwarranted and unintended.

The fact that the students are educated is a partial limitation of the sample. However, several peculiarities of the two societies mitigate the limitation. First, decades of state socialism, war, and economic turmoil have stratified Serbia and Kosovo in such a way that academic degrees are remarkably poor predictors of wealth, employment, and even social status (Arandarenko, 2007; Pichl & Leutloff, 1999). The gap between youth poverty and educated youth poverty is especially miniscule in Kosovo, where ‘extreme poverty’ has ranged from 13% to 15%, while ‘general poverty’ has dwindled around 50% since the 1999 conflict. ‘In these circumstances’, one economist notes, ‘you cannot even think about the existence of [a] middle class’ (Ibrahimi, Marleku, & Gashi, 2007, p. 2). Furthermore, the ratio of students from rural backgrounds (i.e. from outside Belgrade and Priština) is roughly proportional to the ratio of the 18–23 cohort at the national level.¹ Finally, the two schools are accessible public universities, and thus unattractive to affluent students who prefer private schools.

To extract maximum insight from the subjects’ own experiences, I encourage spontaneous evocations of themes related to nationalism while restraining the investigator’s

own preconceptions. For instance, instead of a direct examination along the lines of ‘What did the 1999 war mean to you?’—which might be asked with the knowledge that historical issues are bound to emerge—this approach opts for a more indirect, open-ended questioning in which the investigator follows the subject’s lead, awaiting mentions of life experiences, personal narratives, and other illustrations of nationalism. Folk sociology from respondents can thus interact with ‘ordinary’, everyday explanations drawing on biographical information of the subjects’ own choosing. This allows for a nuanced and even contradictory set of understandings of history, all related to nationalism in distinct ways.

This research is innovative in four regards. First, although Serbia and Kosovo have been popular sites for studies of nationalism (for a review, see Popov, 2000, pp. 327–351), the two are rarely analyzed together comparatively or as an interactive whole. Indeed, typical research proceeds by investigating Serbian and Albanian nationalisms separately (Kostovicova, 2005; Lellio & Schwandner-Sievers, 2006; Perica, 2002). Second, the focus on young adults is unique among recent studies of the area. Qualitative work on Serbia–Kosovo prioritized children (Zdravkovic-Zonta, 2009), migrants (Fischer, 2005; Mai & Schwandner-Sievers, 2003), Roma and other minorities (Clark, 2007), and female constituencies (Munn, 2006), while young adults (educated ones particularly) have been subsumed under broader categories, if not ignored altogether. My study treats this group as a relevant category in its own right. Third, in compliance with Small’s (2009) critique of random sampling strategies aimed at generalizations, I draw limited theoretical conclusions from this modest sample without overstating its representativeness. Finally, my extraction of interview-based data in the post-independence period in Serbia/Kosovo is an original one. Much of the work on nationalism in the region has been restricted to the period of conflict, after which academic interest led to archival and other non-ethnographic work (Visoka and Gjevori, 2013) or has waned altogether.

Findings

All subjects—without exception—spontaneously referred to ‘history’ and related terms such as ‘the past’, ‘our past’, ‘what has happened over time’, ‘all that has happened to us over centuries’, ‘our path over the centuries’, or ‘times gone by/passed times’ without my insinuating the topic in a question. The word ‘history’ and its derivatives (excluding synonyms) appeared a remarkable 816 times during the aggregated 72 hours of conversation, at an average of one mention every 6 minutes. Historical narratives are developed in two sharply delineated subthemes of *lived history* and *abstract history*. The two are in turn associated with different approaches to nationalism. Lived history tends to reject ‘official’ nationalist narrative and popular belief, to ignore the ethnic out-group, and to produce lessons of history at the individual, personal level. Abstract history tends to embrace ‘official’ nationalist narrative, to make clear connections (both inclusionary and exclusionary) between in-group and out-group, and to produce lessons of history for collectivities.

Lived History

‘History has hit me, I mean me *personally* [points to his chest], so many times that I basically can’t ignore it’, Belgrader GH avowed. Such invocations of history are characterized as relating to the recent past: events directly experienced and remembered by subjects, understood as concrete, unmediated, and deeply private. Various formulations of the

idea that ‘history’ intervened in (or, more ominously in GH’s case, ‘hit’) one’s personal life, pervades narratives of family crises, broken relationships, forced relocations, economic losses, and even love affairs. Historical events are strictly recent in this subtheme, and are illustrated with biographical details that assign them unique personal meanings and experiences, as if to make history ‘one’s own’. The protagonists in these narratives are neither nations nor states nor peoples, but relatives, friends, and individuals with names and biographical color. Far from grand historical narratives, these evocations are highly contextualized and subjective, often thought to be misunderstood and unexpected by those who lack direct experience with the historical events in question.

Contempt for official narratives. Twenty-seven respondents cited specific years (seven went further to cite months, while two were specific enough to cite dates) in describing their lived experiences of history. The remaining three recalled selected events as well, but referred to them as ‘in that famous moment’, ‘when the clock struck for Serbia’, ‘at the beginning [. . .] of the transition’, ‘when the occupation ended’ (the 2003 assassination of Serbia’s prime minister, the 1999 Kosovo war, the 2000 Serbian popular uprising, and the 1999 Serbian withdrawal from Kosovo, respectively). All but seven of the respondents retold stories of the 1998–1999 war and every single one referred to an episode shorter than several weeks. Nine of these history-as-lived stories from 1998–1999 refer to experiences lasting just a few hours and take the form of ‘when X happened, I was doing Y’. With just a few exceptions (SM took the view that ‘historical events I lived through have nothing to do with me, I try not to think about them’, while IF felt ‘Really, I refuse to let these big [historical] happenings ruin my life’), respondents took great care to explain the predominantly negative effects of events understood as ‘historical’, often believing that others—the interviewer included—cannot know what it was like to live through them. More than half of such cases make explicit the contrast between personal experience and the incorrect or simplified elite-level narrative: the ‘official history’, ‘official story’, ‘popular story’, ‘leaders’ fairy tale’, or ‘what everyone was brainwashed to believe’.

‘Everyone knows about the ethnic cleansing in ninety-nine’, VV says, ‘but they don’t know anything if they were not in Kosovo’. He proceeds to describe three days of regular humiliation he and his family experienced in Priština at the hands of Serbian policemen. He vividly recalls an encounter with a Serbian paramilitary who handpicked him from several children to reassure him ‘that everything will be good’ while smoking a cigarette and sporting a large rifle:

VV (K):² It was constant [pause] disrupting for *every* phase of my life [. . .] and this phrases about Serbian aggression and war for liberation and genocide is just empty words for me. I really lived it on my skin. Politicians talk about this history, yes, but this is just words. If I live it *myself*, how can you talk about it like that? This is just words. If you did not feel it yourself, you have no idea about this history.

Notice the dismissal of more abstract labels for the historical event in question, and the insistence on ‘I’, ‘my life’, and ‘my skin’ as a contrast to them. Notice furthermore that, just as the soldier selected VV in particular, history is seen as having selected him personally. The division is not between Serbs and Albanians, but between those who ‘lived’ history and those who did not.

MV from Belgrade describes a similar discrepancy between those who ‘know history’ and those ‘who think they know [history]’. The latter, he insists, ‘are the ones who call themselves nationalists’. After touring a bombed apartment complex near his residence in Belgrade, MV saw a ‘parallel universe on [Serbian television]’. What he saw with his own eyes had nothing to do with portrayals in the news, he recalls: ‘I cannot imagine how someone who didn’t see in person the demolished building, the rubble’, and who ‘actually could [not] smell the corpses on that day’ can talk about this event. Similarly, VC, who feels especially revolted by ‘violence of any kind’, believes that people who ‘manipulate with the historical memories of others because they read about them in some stupid book’ should not be permitted to speak ‘unless they’ve witnessed it themselves’.

No ethnic relationality. Lived history is evoked without attempts to draw comparisons or contrasts with the ethnic out-group. The differences between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians proved to be sharpest precisely in the subtheme of lived history. Evocations are typically so specific that any consideration of symmetry or asymmetry in the relation between the two ethnic categories did not come readily to mind. Seven specific historical events ‘as lived’ are referred to by ten or more Serbian respondents; twelve similar events are referred to by at least eight Albanian respondents. Not a single event that most Serbs highlight is also highlighted by a majority of their Albanian counterparts.

The only two events to be named explicitly by *any* two subjects of differing nationalities are Kosovo’s 2008 declaration of independence (a ‘day’ that ‘we have waited for centuries’ and a ‘crime against Serbia’) and the 1999 NATO conflict (a war of ‘American liberation’ and ‘a bombing of children, civilians, innocent people, hospitals’). The nationalist assumptions behind such evaluations are certainly hard to miss, even as descriptions of these events are personalized. But none of the evocations make comparisons to the ethnic out-group or attempt to describe—sympathetically or otherwise—the out-group’s position.

Indeed, the only commonality between the Belgrade and Priština groups on discussions of lived history is that both overwhelmingly tend to cite historical events or periods in which their own nationalities are victimized. Altogether, Serbs mentioned the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (nine independent mentions), the expulsion of Serbs from Kosovo after the war (eight), and a 2006 stoning of a Serbian convoy in Kosovo (four). Kosovo Albanians mentioned the Serbian campaigns in Kosovo preceding the bombing in 1998 (a solid 12 mentions), the accidental NATO bombing of Albanian civilians (7), the harsh conditions of Kosovo refugees fleeing the war (7), and the extradition of Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) leaders to the Hague (3). When the last of these happened, FG recalls hearing the news in front of his father, a KLA supporter who broke out in tears for the sole time in FG’s memory:

FG (K): It is hard for me to explain to someone who is not from Kosovo. I don’t think anyone can understand this feeling, this unique feeling. I talk this story to people outside Kosovo, but there is no use.

Here, history is once again divided between those who experience it in Kosovo and those who do not. But this recollection, there is no direct reference to the ethnic out-group nor is the event related to Serbian action as one might have expected. Indeed, extraditions to the Hague are an ideal opportunity for such a connection; elite nationalist discourse, for its part, routinely compares Serbian and Albanian extraditions or draws attention to the

Hague Tribunal's bias toward one or another side. But FG personalizes the event to a great extent: it is the family member who is the center of the story, and the act of crying is arguably the *truly* historical event. '[P]eople outside Kosovo' and 'someone who is not from Kosovo' are never specified to be Serbs, which would—if anything—strengthen the point about the failure to understand.

Similar stories of lived history sought to make reified historical events personal without reference to the Serb–Albanian conflict, even when it might appear impossible to avoid the reference. 'Do you know what happened on February seventeen?' asked HG. The date, in 2008, was Kosovo's declaration of independence—but this was not the response HG was looking for. Rather, it was 'the biggest party I've ever been to in Priština'. Smilingly, HG proceeded to describe a tour of the city streets she had walked on that day. Instead of references to slogans or political intricacies of that moment (Kosovo was the main headline of the world's press at the time), HG associates the day with extravagant intakes of alcohol with her boyfriend and his brother.

Describing another occasion easily relatable to the ethnic out-group, MM from Serbia personalizes the historical moment without any relational reference to Albanians:

MM (S): I will never forget that day, March 24th [1999, the beginning of air strikes], when we got up early in the morning to put tape on all the windows [to prevent them from shattering from nearby detonations]. I remember I couldn't find the scissors to cut the tape, and then I thought to myself, you know, what a stupidity! What if we all die, who needs scissors? It was only then that it really reached my head. For months before, everyone knew there was going to be bombs, but this was the first time I actually realized it was happening, and I couldn't believe it and started crying because I couldn't find the scissors [smiles].

MM added that the date was 'carved into my brain', and that she remembers it as often as her birthday: 'every year, at the same time'. Priština respondents exhibited disdain for people who 'trivialize' (LD) historical events and 'make it seem like a heroic historic victory for our nation, but they were not even there' (KI). 'It's one thing to sit somewhere far away and watch CNN how, you know, today fifty villages burned, or fifty civilians killed', LD exclaims, 'but [. . .] I know people who were killed by Serbs. I had to read in the news about people I know personally'. He adds that 'history will never remember [their] names', nor do 'people reading historical books' ever know 'the pain of people on the ground'. Not unlike a natural disaster, history uncaringly ruins personal plans:

BZ (K): My uncle called to say that his house [in the country] was burned, and we have to go to Albania immediately. Thousands of people on every border crossing and, uh, we are refugees now. I remember telling my best friend, you know, yesterday I was playing football, I only cared about that, and now I'm a refugee. That's the shock of history. It's like a flood.

This passive formulation of 'his house was burned' is similar to seven other evocations of loss of property or death clearly caused by none other than Serbs: not a single one of these named the ethnic out-group behind the tragedy.

Historical lessons are personal. A notable pattern of discussing history vis-à-vis nationalism was the understanding of history as lesson. Both lived and abstract historicizing on

the part of interviewees was sometimes described as a learning experience (or a missed opportunity for one). History as ‘lessons’, a ‘harsh lesson’, an ‘important teacher’, or something ‘Serbs [should be] students of’ or a source of ‘messages for what to do and what to avoid’ was an idea common to nine in the Kosovo subsample and seven in the Serbia subsample. However, evocations of lived history exclusively inspired personal, biographical lessons—far removed from collectivities.

Once again, *specific* events were didactic. Of the 16 who explicitly regarded history as lesson, 7 referred to the NATO bombing of Serbia as a lesson of some sort, 4 saw the failure of nonviolent Kosovo leader Ibrahim Rugova as a learning experience, another 4 reported being taught something by the 2008 pogrom in Kosovo, and 1 felt educated by Serbia’s defeat by the Ottomans in Kosovo in 1389. Conspicuously, none of the lessons—by Albanians or by Serbs—were drawn from outside of the immediate national context. No one reported learning, for instance, from Serbia’s wars in Croatia and Bosnia, or from Kosovo’s tensions with the UN. Outcomes of learned lessons included ‘I stopped trusting Serbian politicians’, ‘[I] began reading history’, ‘I decided to learn to talk in public’, ‘I took off [Rugova’s badge] from my backpack’, and ‘I finally stopped worrying about stupid things’—all restricted to the personal level.

Paraphrasing a song she enjoys, UC joked that ‘I personally fought history, and history won [chuckles]’ when her plan to travel to Switzerland to live with relatives was foiled by her father’s orders to her at the outbreak of violence: ‘when the war broke out [1998], he told me I have to stay at home and take care of [my sisters]’. As inter-state relations complicated the status of Albanian refugees, UC began working at a shop to save up for her eventual trip. She hoped that the conflict would end soon enough for her planned trip to Switzerland not to have to be canceled; after several postponements at the Priština Bus Station, ‘history killed that idea of mine. Now I have learned not to plan too much or hope too much’. VV mentions in passing how the year 1998, when fighting resumed after a failed truce, was a pivotal year ‘for me’ because ‘it quickly smartened me up’ and led to the sinister conclusion that ‘there will be no peace’. This revelation, he adds, ‘unfortunately’ came late to him, as ‘most people [realized] this much earlier’. Similarly, KR marvels at the fact that while ‘everyone’ began to panic and be more suspicious, ‘I learned that life is short, and that worrying is a waste of time.’ Even on the rare occasion when lessons from lived history were generalized beyond the individual, the generalization was qualified with such terms as ‘at least in my case’, ‘because of my situation’, and ‘most people did not react this way, but I did’.

Abstract History

In sharp contrast to the previous subtheme are discussions of nationalism via abstract history. In these comments, respondents discuss history as a public story of ‘nations’, ‘nation-states’, ‘states’, ‘peoples’, etc., with a much sharper ‘us’–‘them’ dichotomy between Serbs and Albanians. History in these cases is described at a highly impersonal, almost mythological level—references to specific dates, events, or individuals become scarce and secondary. The protagonists of these stories are ‘Serbs’ and ‘Albanians’, and they unfold over ‘centuries’ if not ‘millennia’. Far from being experienced first-hand and individually, history is a collective force affecting one’s entire in-group. It is no longer one’s own, but ‘ours’. Strikingly, whenever history is prefaced with the word

'our' by any of the respondents, not a single biographical detail is associated with it. Additionally, the connection between nationalism and history is entirely decontextualized; thus as many as 12 Serbs and 11 Albanians describe causal relationships between nationalism and abstract history without reference to time, place, or political setting. The division between those who 'lived it' and those who did not is replaced with ethnic division.

Reverence for official narrative. While evocations of lived history were often contrasted with 'the official story' and related phrases, abstract history is commonly supplemented with appeals to 'formal history', 'well-known truth', what 'everyone knows', 'obvious facts', and sources such as textbooks, reports, and documentaries. The phrase 'it has been proven/shown' precedes five separate subjects' invocations of abstract history. Indicatively, the term 'official' (as with 'official history') is always derided when compared to lived history, but always endorsed when evoked with abstract history. Only three respondents from Serbia (MP, KR, and KB) and one from Kosovo (VV, who went as far as to say 'I don't care and I don't know about the ancient past, it's just boring when everybody talks about it') refrained from abstract historical sagas reminiscent of elite narratives. As many as 24 respondents described the history of their nation, in various paraphrases, with roughly the same characteristics: it is a history of perpetual victimhood, misunderstanding and cruelty from international forces, delayed state-attainment, relative powerlessness, and elite betrayal.

Appealing to common knowledge of one sort or another, the vast majority of respondents cited abstract historical theses as objective and undisputable. Ten Serbs and 13 Albanians mentioned 'great defeat[s]', 'major step[s] back', 'national catastrophes', or 'national failure[s]' in the distant past. Of these 23, barely 5 referred to specific historical events or centuries, as if naming them would be superfluous. When asked to provide examples or disclose 'what specifically you have in mind', subjects were reluctant. 'Well, I mean just in general. Our whole history', LK clarified. 'I mean since the very start', KI explained, 'Kosovo has been pushed down over and over and over again'. 'You know as well as I do' was SM's response, while UC opted for 'I don't know, I'm not a historian, I'm studying math, but that's my general knowledge of our history.' Even the few exceptions that specified the abstract history did so only somewhat. When asked to elaborate, VC for example noted that 'Well, there was the defeat by the Turks, Austro-Hungary ... Hitler. On and on.' BD, for his part, pointed out that his tale of Kosovo's 'millennia' of 'oppression and terror' were 'mean[t] as a mythology, so it's not about specific events. But the national mythology is sometimes more important than the real history'.

CO, a history major who spoke for well over ten minutes about Serbia's 'tragic past' and 'constant chain of losses':

- Q: How long do you think this has been happening?
 CO (S): You see *that's* your problem, it's not a question of ... you know, you ask me how long. But the point is that this is a process over thousands of years. If you analyze the history literature, there is no question. It has gathered a momentum that you cannot just cut off. Some things never change.

Abstract historical narrative was also substantiated with views of specific national leaders, novelists and other public figures. Of the sum total of 13 mentions of in-group nationalist names like Rugova or Milošević, 12 were endorsements of their views in the context of an

abstract historical thesis. Subjects were sometimes reluctant to concretize the relevance of such theses:

- LK (S): You know who's my voice as far as political views go? [filmmaker Emir] Kusturica. He was saying, look, nationalism is just stupid—but we need patriotism. You need something to keep people together when times are tough.
- Q: Can you give me an example from life?
- LK: Well ... maybe not from my personal experience. I am much younger than Kusturica's generation [smile]. [...] But the fact is that we needed *something* to keep us together through this crazy history. We needed something to help survive as a nation. Now, patriotism would have been better, but it was nationalism actually.

Here we have an appeal to a prominent nationalist public figure, intended to explain nationalism's role 'when times are tough'. Given 'this crazy history' (taken for granted), LK finds it perfectly understandable that nationalism should have been functional and effective. Similarly, when asked 'how do you know this?', GW defended the view that Kosovo nationalism 'has always been naïve' by saying 'I don't have any personal knowledge about this, but you can't ignore all the smart people who proved this.'

Ethnic relationality, exclusive and inclusive. Whereas one is hard-pressed to find a common reference point for both the Serbs and the Kosovo Albanians in their descriptions of lived history, the similarities in the narratives of abstract history are arresting. Roughly half of the sample—some 13 respondents from both nationalities—engaged in comparisons of abstract histories of Serbia and Albania in particular. As subjects were unaware that the sample includes Serbs and Albanians, it is notable that the issue would come up as often as it did. 'Throughout history, Kosovo has been like a trouble child of Serbia', OK explains—conceding that his own nation 'was not always the ideal parent'. FG declares that 'Kosovo and Serbia are two nations glued together artificially, but we can't escape this fact', while GW (a biology student) recognizes a 'parasitic situation between the two nations. [...] Since we can't move to Mars', he believes 'we' have to make 'this relationship *symbiotic* instead of parasitic'. SR took the lead in relational generalization when she said '[a]ll things considered, these two peoples have been neighbors for so long that, looking from outside, [...] we are basically very similar nations, we have the same destiny'.

Differences were largely superficial because if one were to substitute 'Serb' for 'Albanian', or 'Ottoman oppression' with 'Serbian oppression', the histories being described are often identical:

- IO (S): I think nationalism comes out of historical problems. Nations which are surrounded by enemies develop nationalism and spread it out as much as possible to protect themselves. In our history, in our history, I mean, we have been *surrounded* by enemies for hundreds of years. [...] When you are in the middle of a stampede of bigger nations, the small ones in the middle always suffer most.
- HG (K): This part of the world is the crossroads of empires. And we are a small nation, we are a small people, so it's hard to find good leaders. They only come once in a thousand years. Nationalism is, for me, the only weapon we had against all the big boys is to be united and ready to fight for each other. If there is divisions, then the empires benefit always. Divide and rule. So we have no friends throughout our history, and we are always the weaker ones.

Based on the statements alone, it is practically impossible to determine that IO is speaking about Serbian history while HG is speaking about Kosovo Albanian history. For all intents and purposes, the descriptions are interchangeable: they both involve centuries of oppression and victimhood, a sense of being surrounded, a leadership deficit, a shortage of reliable ‘friends’, a delayed nationalist awakening, and an understanding of nationalism as a means to survival and self-defense.

Four respondents who engaged in abstract historicizing (two from each subsample) made comparisons between Serbia and Kosovo on the one side, and the history of ‘Europe’, ‘the West’, ‘the rest of the world’ or ‘the Balkans’ on the other. SR pushed furthest in this direction, fusing the standard narrative of a feud between Serbia and Kosovo with a deeper logic that binds the two warring nations together—a logic imposed on them by history:

SR (S): Of course it’s complicated and [messed]-up. Of course it’s complicated. We’re talking about so much killing, so much force that, of course, it’s going to be complicated. That’s what the international community does not understand, I think. NATO, America, you know . . . Sweden [laughs and turns her head, as if looking for someone else in the empty room to share the laughter], what do they know about war? So, in this strange way I think it’s interesting that Albanians and Serbs understand each other very well. We both understand how complicated the situation is because we experienced it on our own skin.

Q: Can you tell me a little more?

SR: So, here you have two stories of two nations, and if you tell each story without any compromise, it is simply impossible to have anything but war. You cannot have both strong versions of the story and reach a solution—it’s impossible. If you begin at the start with the strong version of the nation’s story, peace automatically is out of the question. *Automatically*. What I was telling you, you know, is that both sides know this. Both Serbs and Albanians understand this. [. . .] So, because they both understand this, that’s why they both know that you can either have war or you have to compromise. You cannot have everything.

The ‘two stories of two nations’, vague and conceptual as they are, are ultimately seen as converging. There is symmetry between the paired nations, and an explanation for the lack of peace between them: it lies not so much in their dissimilarity, but in their shared ‘knowledge’ and ‘understand[ing]’. Whereas lived history narratives (including SR’s own) are often thought to be unique and incomprehensible to those who have not gone through them, the overall history of the entity ‘Serbs’ is here thought to be shared and understood by none other than the ‘Albanians’ with whom ‘so much killing’ has been exchanged. So strong is the common understanding that SR is annoyed by the ignorance of outsiders, as well as by the obvious mistake of insisting on a ‘strong version’ of the nation’s abstract history. Without a hint of personal anecdote, SR speaks with a tone of objectivity (the common knowledge is ‘definit[e]’, and compatibility of Serbian and Albanian nationalism is repeatedly described as ‘impossible’) and reserves her annoyance for the clueless ‘international community’ rather than the two nationalisms in question (all they need to do is ‘compromise’ and a ‘solution’ is possible). While virtually everything else is being described in an abstract historical and political vacuum (the ‘complicat[i]ons’ and ‘mess-up[s]’ are unspecified, as is the role of the international community), the relation between ‘Serbs’ and ‘Albanians’ is taken for granted. Bound together by ‘war’, the ‘two nations’ and their ‘two stories’ are seemingly inseparable.

Historical lessons for nations and peoples. The history-as-lesson subtheme is characterized by a belief in one nation or its 'nationalists' learning from rival ones, or at least failing to do so at the appropriate time. Similar understandings of victimhood were heard across the ethnic divide, regardless of how dissimilar the events and supposed lessons were. 'Our greatest tragedy', IO laments, 'is that we make the same mistakes over and over again and history of course hits us over the head for it'. Thus 'we' the Serbs failed, he continues, to realize that Kosovo Albanians were 'stronger than we thought', which should have been 'obvious even before the [NATO intervention]'. Kosovo Albanians are said to have failed, according to FK, in 'waiting so long for Rugova to try all his tricks before turning to the KLA'. The cost, he believes, was a decade's worth of unnecessary struggle for independence that 'we could have gotten much earlier'. In a similar vein, VC wonders 'how quickly we [Serbia] could have been in the EU already if we just learned the harsh lesson of 1999'. When asked to specify the lesson, VC shook her head, sighed and explained that 'You simply *cannot* go against the whole world. We should have compromised.'

On a more constructive note, 'the great teacher called history', as BD calls it, 'has given us the strength to finally stand up as a nation'. After suffering so many years of oppression, he explains, the Kosovo Albanians were uniquely qualified to fight on all fronts—military, economic, cultural—against Serbian control of the province. LD found that war 'strengthened our national resistance' and 'put a curtain on the idea that we can't get rid of the Serbs'. He recalls being 'excited more than ever before in my life' when an otherwise-pessimistic cousin involved in military actions dashed into LD's home to announce that NATO is intervening 'to save us'. What seemed impossible minutes before, LD confesses, suddenly 'became possible', teaching him 'to never give up hope'. A likewise well-learned lesson on the Serbian side was spotted by KB:

KB (S): [The war in] 1999 taught me personally, and, you know, most normal people in Serbia a huge lesson. It was tragic that it came to that, but that was the way it was. We learned that violence cannot solve anything. The more the bombing went on, the worse it got, and not just for us. It was a disaster for Albanians, for Serbs in Kosovo, for the Americans who ended up killing more people than they saved. But everyone on all sides thought that violence was the only option. Then it turns out, who would have thought, that it's not the answer.

KB goes on to single out a category of Serbian people who 'did not learn anything' from 1999, and who 'shot themselves in the foot' because of it; she calls them, simply, 'nationalists'. Notice the direct inversion of IO's formulation cited above: instead of people who learn from history, nationalists are said to be those who *fail* to do so.

Other evocations of history as lesson were more ambiguous when it came to whether the learning was successful or not. FG, an anthropology student, remarks:

FG (K): We used to think that nationalism was biological. [. . .] Nationalism was just what this biological group produced as an ideology, just like certain biological groups have specific language or religion, so they have specific nationalism. But now, I think history is instead of biology. Now, what makes us Kosovars is our history. And when people say 'we are Illyrians' 'we are Slavs' they really mean history. They mean, this and that is what we have learned in our historical path.

Notice here that history serves as no less than the very rationale for nationalism. Categories such as 'Slavs' and 'Illyrians' are referred to as expressions of collective ('we',

'us') historical learning. A similar sentiment could be heard from AC, who describes the Serbs as 'an adaptable people' who are quick to adjust to 'whatever history gives us, including the sanctions and the wars and the isolation'. She believes this process of adaptation is reflected 'in our mentality, and in the way we never give up' when faced with difficulty 'from Kosovo'. In a more extreme formulation, IO attributes to Serbia the 'lesson we will never forget', taught to 'us' as early as 1389 in Kosovo. Namely, 'Serbs have to make allies if we are to be in Kosovo' instead of 'going it alone and getting beaten over and over again and again'.

Interestingly, all the descriptions of historical lessons are formulated so as to be directed at the national group of the respondent. Both Serbs and Kosovo Albanians describe only lessons being taught to their own 'nations' by others, with no mentions whatsoever of history as an occasion for 'us' to teach something to others. Furthermore, when a specific 'teacher' or lesson-giver is specified, it is either an abstraction ('history' itself is the 'teacher' for BD) or a collectivity such as Serbs/Serbia and Kosovo Albanians/Kosovo. It is never individuals who exhibit varying degrees of successful learning, as with lived history. 'We [Serbs and Kosovo Albanians] are competing', as KB put it, 'in correcting our mistakes from history'.

Discussion

Four main findings serve to overcome the polarization between constructivists and elite-driven theorists.

First, uses of history cannot be thought of as merely one of many everyday practices and processes involved in construction of nationalism. History's spontaneous emergence in conversations about nationalism, the variety of instrumentalization choices, and the emotional intensity it provokes, demand greater attention than most constructivists give. The proper question cannot be whether history matters, but how it is used, under what conditions, and to what ends. Far from passive recipients of nationalism that elite-driven theorists lead us to expect, the subjects were active, thoughtful producers with creativity far exceeding what is conferred by elite nationalism. Most importantly, the data demonstrate that even seemingly straightforward historical events are subject to counterintuitive interpretation, personalization, and imaginative reframing. Elite narrative is clearly inescapable—but it is used for a variety of purposes. When one would least expect (traumatic lived history narratives), apparent enemies can be ignored, and seeming catastrophes can become personal epiphanies (as with didactic abstract historical narratives). No analysis of elite discourse could possibly explain history's varied impacts on these individuals' understanding of nationalism, nor could ahistorical practices and rituals account for such strategic instrumentalization of history. Indeed, the mere finding that a decisive majority of respondents spontaneously evoked (or 'enacted', if one prefers) similarities across categorical boundaries of nationality *as well as* narratives of 'perpetual victimhood' indicates considerable elasticity in uses of history.

Second, the role of elite-inspired narrative seems to depend on the *kind* of instrumentalization of history in question. Much of elite-driven theory implies that personal experiences are often 'tainted' by official nationalist doctrine, but the subjects' lived history narratives prove the opposite: personalized historical narratives strictly avoid appeals to elite sources and authorities. If anything, such sources are contrasted with the 'personal truth' in order to be dismissed as misleading. Subjects rejected as futile any attempt to

convey historicized narratives successfully to those who did not directly live them. In contrast, abstract historical statements were often bolstered with specific appeals to elite authority and sources. Almost all mentions of elite representatives were made as endorsements of historical ‘truths’ justifying nationalist statements. Some subjects even exhibited difficulty in relating abstract historical narrative with their own lives—history became a justification for national *collectivities*, their behavior, and their supposedly homogeneous beliefs.

Third, when history is used for explaining nationalism or expressing it, relationality is anything but automatic. It is just as misleading to assert that a given understanding of nationalism is intended to draw lines between nationalities as it is to claim that it mainly serves to complicate them. The findings suggest that inclusiveness and exclusiveness, ‘same-ness’ and ‘difference’ can coexist in curious ways not only among like-minded, self-proclaimed ‘nationalists’ of the same ethnicity, but even within a single individual. Furthermore, it is simply not the case that relational observations about the two ethnic groups are such that they imply asymmetry, sympathetic or otherwise. Lived history narratives consistently avoided any relational statements about the out-group, whether empathetic or disparaging. Indeed, personalized historical interpretations often constructed out-groups as people who had not shared the experience or for whom any attempt at description would be useless. But these never assumed a national dimension; the excluded were within the respondent’s ethnic group. All the subjects who evoked personal (indeed, disturbing) experiences obviously caused by members of the ethnic out-group neglected to label them relationally. This suggests that elite-level discourse, even in such an irreconcilable ideological setting as the one between Serbian and Kosovo Albanian nationalism, cannot be assumed to produce exclusionary attitudes, as elite-driven theorists expect. When history was used abstractly, relational statements permeated. The data included instances of self-proclaimed nationalists evoking abstract history to affirm likeness across the ethnic divide, and the identification of similarities between their own nation and its supposed ‘enemies’ that shine a favorable light on both. When using history abstractly, subjects were quick to associate Serbs and Kosovo Albanians, whether to urge anti-nationalist reconciliation or to illustrate resemblance and mutual dependency. Neither constructivists nor elite-driven theorists could have predicted that abstract history—not lived history—would be used to produce statements that undermine ‘official’ nationalist conclusions about the necessity of conflict.

Fourth, the didactic dimension of history also varies with the kind of use. When engaged in lived history narratives, subjects barely express any nationalistic understandings along the lines of ‘lessons learned’ at any collective level. These ‘lessons’ are, like lived history generally, deeply personal and even apolitical. Respondents are commonly eager to qualify what they ‘learned’ from history as applying exclusively to them; none of them instrumentalize such history to condemn the ethnic out-group, glorify one’s own, or to draw nationalistic conclusions. Abstract historicizing, however, is regularly used for these purposes, but not exclusively. The data also show that abstract history is thought to teach a variety of different lessons—some learned, others belatedly, and some not at all. On occasion, history is in effect an arena in which the two ethnic communities supposedly teach each other lessons. In other instances, history is a grand impersonal force distributing warnings to both nations. Most interestingly, purported elite narrative does not correspond effortlessly with the uses of abstract history that subjects opt for, nor is it clear that one view of nationalism via abstract historical thinking excludes another one

that is in tension with it (the in-group can be, as a collectivity, thought to be historically naïve, but also flexible to changing historical circumstances).

Future Research Avenues

Although neither constructivists nor elite-driven theorists seem prepared to admit it, interview-based studies can be quite fruitful in integrating the role of history in nationalism directly. Macroanalytic nationalism scholarship cannot monopolize investigation of history's impact on 'ordinary people'. Serbia and Kosovo are ideal sites in this regard, as the two relevant categories of peoples have undergone dramatic state-formation changes in recent history. But micro-analytic studies have refrained from exploring through interviews what this 'historical association' means for individuals. History does not disappear as a legitimate topic in small sample, interview-based studies merely because of the limited temporal scope of the data collection. Indeed, a potential advantage of this approach over traditional studies of the relationship of history to nationalism (particularly archival social science) is that 'history' is multifaceted, multifunctional, and instrumentalized for contrary purposes. We saw that history is 'made', appropriated as 'our own' and 'my own', and often relegated to irrelevance in favor of other issues—all of which is done with little or no connection to the purely historiographical content of particular events.

Fenton's distinction between three uses of terms such as history—*scholarly*, *political*, and *popular*—can be a useful aid for moving forward (Fenton, 2010, p. 25). In this context, one might say that most studies of nationalism are concerned merely with scholarly and political history—elite-driven theorists expressly so. At best, constructivists who take an interest in popular history are restricted to comparing it with its scholarly and political counterparts. Even Brubaker et al. (2006) are mostly interested in distinguishing between vernacular, popular understandings of historical events and those historical events as reflected in political party ideologies or scholarly materials. These comparisons shed light on how scholarly and political histories transform into popular misconceptions. This in turn identifies the mechanisms—textbooks, family narratives, popular culture, etc.—that shape popular history. But popular history is rarely treated as anything but monolithic in such approaches.

This study, in contrast, began with the premise that the subjects are inconsistent producers of history with at least two distinct strategies for instrumentalizing it. The extent to which the history they are generating has a relation to either scholarly or political history in Fenton's sense depends on the kind of use. For instance, Serbian and Kosovo Albanian abstract history has proven remarkably similar despite the fact that the two are drawn from diametrically opposed 'official' narratives. Serbian and Kosovo society, from schools to media outlets to political parties, propagate nationalistic historical accounts that bear little relation to the kinds of understandings that subjects offered here. History is interpreted and experienced in varying degrees of personal-ness, abstractness, politicization, and relevance to the subjects' understanding of in-group/out-group dynamics. Further exploration of these degrees and the conditions under which they vary can be rewarding.

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Notes

1. Belgrade accounts for almost a third of Serbia, while Priština accounts for close to one half of Kosovo excluding the Serb-populated north. Moreover, young people are disproportionately concentrated in the urban capitals.
2. (K) indicates the respondent is from Kosovo and (S) indicates (s)he is from Serbia.

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