

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP OF MARGINALIZED MINORITIES IN KOSOVO AND THE BALKANS – CHALLENGES AND ADVANTAGES

Lendrit Qeli

Republic of Kosovo, lendritqeli0@gmail.com

Abstract: The political leadership of minorities in Kosovo and the Balkans is one of the key aspects of building democracy and social integration. Despite significant developments in the region, minorities such as Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians continue to face various challenges during the process of political integration. These challenges include barriers to institutional representation, lack of access to political and social opportunities, and restrictions on their active participation in decision-making processes. In the face of these difficulties, it is important to understand that the integration of minorities and the increase of their political inclusion is a process that requires time, resources, and continuous commitment from all levels of society and institutions. Meanwhile, some other communities such as the Turks, Bosnians, Serbs, and Gorani have achieved a higher degree of political integration, due to a variety of factors, including shared political and cultural history, deeper relations with state structures, and their experience in post-war administration. These groups have managed to secure more significant representation in state institutions and have developed political leaders who hold important positions in decision-making, contributing to policies that help preserve their rights and interests. This paper analyzes the main challenges and opportunities for the advancement of political leadership of minorities in Kosovo and the Balkan region. In conclusion, this paper will examine how opportunities for the political leadership of minorities can be advanced in a way that supports diversity and social integration in the Balkans, contributing to strengthening stability and harmony among different ethnic and cultural groups.

Keywords: Political Leadership, Minorities, Kosovo, Balkans, Integration, Representation, Decision-Making, Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians

1. INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence in 2008, Kosovo has clearly opted for the development and implementation of multiculturalism. The concept of multiculturalism includes cultures, races, ethnicities or minority groups, which have specific characteristics within a culture or policy. In Kosovo, this concept is included in the highest legal and political act in the Constitution of Kosovo and that ethnic groups/non-minority communities are protected as a separate category. However, in practice the implementation of the legislation still remains a challenge that is often mentioned in international reports. In this review, we will explore the factors that help increase the political involvement of minorities, as well as the difficulties that hinder the development of sustainable and effective leadership. (Mislimi, E., (2023, p.4) The bulk of this essay focuses on the social, cultural and legal aspects of the political inclusion of groups such as Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians. It also analyses the possibilities that exist for improving their representation in state structures, as well as ensuring that they have an active role in the decision-making processes that shape everyday life in Kosovo and the region. The Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in the Balkans are still being analyzed through the structure of dissection and cumulation in Kosovo. Their access to employment and housing, to social assistance is fraught with obstacles and children are discriminated against even at school. (Kamberi, F., 2021, p.2) According to regional data, unemployment has reached 95 to 100%. This is forcing many Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians from the Balkans to leave their homeland for Western Europe, in the hope of a better life there. Many Western European countries have declared Kosovo a “safe country of origin”, allowing them to return asylum seekers. Thus, many Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians from the Balkans are forced into a permanent migration cycle due to the failure of Kosovo’s reintegration policy and European return practices. The lack of prospects for the future in Kosovo has led to the majority of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians from the Balkans returning illegally to Western Europe. As for the political perception of the prospects of representatives of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians, numerous aggravating circumstances also hinder the clear political development, prosperity and career of the small number of active cadres from these minority groups. (Sallova, D. (2019).

2. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

After the Kosovo War and the declaration of independence in 2008, Kosovo entered an important phase of building democratic institutions and integrating ethnic groups that make up its post-war society. The Constitution of Kosovo, adopted in 2008, created a legal framework that guarantees special rights for minorities, including mandatory representation of various ethnic groups in the Kosovo Assembly and other state institutions. This was done to ensure that all communities, regardless of their size, have equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes

and contribute to the development of the state. One of the most important measures has been the allocation of reserved seats in the Kosovo Assembly for communities such as Turks, Bosniaks, Serbs, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians. This has created opportunities to guarantee the representation of groups that have faced historical discrimination and who encounter significant barriers in their integration into Kosovar society. This mechanism has been seen as a necessary step to provide each group with a voice in decision-making processes and contribute to building a more equal and inclusive society. (De Schutter, H. (2023)) However, despite the guarantees provided by the Kosovo Constitution, the reality of political representation for minorities is more complex. Sallova, D. (2019) Despite the reserved seats and the legislation passed, the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian minorities continue to face structural barriers and political discrimination that undermine their opportunities to actively participate in political and social life. These groups, facing the reality of social exclusion and economic challenges, often lack equal opportunities to advance to important political positions and influence policies that affect them.

Furthermore, the obstacles these groups face include a lack of equal access to educational and professional opportunities, as well as being perceived as marginalized groups, which often leaves them outside powerful political and decision-making groups. Structural discrimination and deep-rooted, widespread social prejudices are other barriers that make integration and political advancement more difficult for these communities. Another important issue is that, even though the reserved seats in the Assembly offer an opportunity for representation, they are often limited in the real impact they can have on public policies. Representatives from these groups may face pressure from larger political groups to follow their directives and interests, thus reducing the opportunity to fully represent the interests of their communities. This may be another factor that hinders them from advancing their political leadership to higher and more influential levels of government. This overview of the political situation of minorities in Kosovo demonstrates that, despite efforts to guarantee rights and equal opportunities for all citizens, many unresolved challenges still remain. It is important to understand that legal and constitutional interventions, while necessary, are not enough to guarantee the full integration of marginalized groups into decision-making processes and enable the development of sustainable political leadership for these groups. This requires ongoing engagement not only from state authorities but also from civil society, international organizations, and the minority communities themselves to improve opportunities and eliminate discrimination and barriers that continue to exist. (Sweet, A. (2020).

3. THE SOCIAL VULNERABILITY OF ROMA, ASHKALI AND EGYPTIANS

In this way, we are also faced with the main dilemma that the leaders of Kosovo must resolve: How to promote a multiethnic society in Kosovo, in which Roma, Ashkali and Balkan Egyptians will be treated equally by the state and society and at the same time enjoy the same rights, duties and opportunities. Furthermore, it is necessary for the political elite of Kosovo to strengthen the framework conditions and public policies that promote the social inclusion of disadvantaged population groups. It is necessary to condemn the exclusion and rejection suffered by these population groups and to create concrete social measures aimed at improving their education and housing conditions. Finally, integrated support measures such as tutoring programs or scholarships for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and integrating them into the school system should be introduced. The focus is now on access to higher education and the labor market. The “My First Job” programme offers young adults from discriminated groups the opportunity to demonstrate their skills through paid internships and to benefit from training in this area. Specific initiatives promote the active participation of young Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian women from the Balkans in the civil, political and economic life of the country. Furthermore, in order to improve the housing conditions of these minorities and combat segregation, a pilot project for the reorganisation of residential areas is currently being implemented. Another central element of the project is awareness-raising work aimed at combating discrimination and racism. In addition to training provided to employers in the public and private sectors on diversity, information sessions and exchange meetings teach members of the Roma community how to better deal with discrimination. It is also essential to organize activities to bring Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians closer together, as well as with other citizens of various ethnic backgrounds, in schools, community centers and cultural institutions. Hajrullahu, A. B., (2019)

4. POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN KOSOVO

One of the questions that can give some dimension on the politicians of minorities in Kosovo is the following: How is the leadership of representatives of these minorities? The political leadership focuses particularly on political institutions that have great effects on social systems. Contemporary studies on political leadership observe the theoretical and practical inclination that certain political factors play on the economy and on social life such as politicians, political parties, national governments, supranational organizations, regional and sub-national organizations as well as the impact of these political factors on development. (Delatte, A.L. (2021)) At the local

level, the theory questions the relevance of the leadership of mayors with urban planning policies, housing etc. What limitations and disadvantages do political representatives of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians face? In the simplest observation the leadership of politicians of small minorities is as follows: *Limited Representation* – Despite guaranteed seats for minorities, their influence in decision-making remains limited. This phenomenon is closely linked to the formation of governments, which are often based on minority votes but fail to support the political programs that these communities advocate for. Even when these programs are supported, the backing is minimal and does not reflect the full interests of specific groups. *Insufficient Political Integration* – Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities continue to face inadequate integration within major political parties. This reduces their influence on the political scene. Although political pluralism exists, the impact of minorities is diminished due to the large number of political entities representing these communities. For example, the Egyptians have two parties, the Ashkalis have three, and the Roma have five, which dilutes their political strength and impact on decision-making. *Lack of Institutional Support* – Financial and legal support for minorities is often insufficient. The government formulates policies through strategies, but they are not always effective, and there is often inadequate funding allocated for their implementation. Municipalities also often treat this issue as a "hot potato," as they lack the necessary capacity to implement the policies, while the central level faces the same budgetary constraints. *Limited Participation in Public Administration* – Employment of minorities in public administration is a significant challenge. Communities such as Turks, Bosniaks, Serbs, and Gorans are overrepresented in the state administration, while Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities are underrepresented. This often links the weak political influence of these groups to the lack of opportunities to exert pressure on governance and advance their political leadership. *Lack of Access to Quality Education* – Education remains a major issue for these groups, directly affecting their political and social inclusion. Despite efforts by community-based education centers to provide additional support, the situation remains dire. Although these centers have improved capacities and contributed to reducing school dropout rates, state financial support is minimal. The state has allocated only 200,000 euros for all educational centers in Kosovo, while needs reach 1.8 million euros. Furthermore, educational programs for Roma are not respected, as textbooks do not include lessons on ethnic multiculturalism. Also, as is the case for other communities, no appropriate staff has been provided for teaching in their native languages, including the printing of textbooks in these languages. (Rucht, D. (2020)

5. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ROMA, ASHKALI, AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES

The Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities in Kosovo face numerous challenges that contribute to their marginalization compared to other groups like the Turks, Bosniaks, Serbs, and Gorans, which are more integrated into state and political structures. These challenges are linked to various factors, including: *Low socio-economic status* – This status limits these groups access to educational and employment opportunities, leaving them behind in many aspects of social and economic life. This limitation makes it harder for individuals to engage in political life and seek institutional support. *Stigmatization and social exclusion* – These communities face prejudice and discrimination, which not only hinders their ability to participate in decision-making but also renders them invisible and unclear to the majority of the population. This stigmatization reduces their confidence in opportunities for representation and integration. *Lack of strong political and organizational representation* – Besides the limited efforts to represent their interests, the absence of a strong organizational and political structure leaves them powerless to influence the changes they seek and to realize their rights. In many cases, they are disorganized and lack the necessary support to address their concerns at the institutional level. Rrahimi, D. (2020).

6. OPPORTUNITIES AND POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS

Political Strengthening of Minority Political Parties – Creating political programs tailored to the needs of the communities, with a maximum of two active rival parties defending their interests, could contribute to increasing the political influence of minorities and offer opportunities for fair and effective representation. *Affirmative Policies* – The number of seats for minorities in institutions should be increased, and special mechanisms for support should be established. This could include opportunities for the election and promotion of individuals from these groups to key positions, ensuring more equal participation. *Collaboration with International Organizations* – The engagement of the European Union (EU) and other international organizations is necessary to protect the rights of minorities and to provide technical and financial support that can assist in building capacities and strengthening the voices of these communities. *Development of Political Education Programs* – Training and programs dedicated to minority youth who wish to engage in politics can provide opportunities for developing new leaders who can become agents of change. *Development of Anti-Discrimination Campaigns* – Initiatives to raise public awareness about the rights and importance of integrating these communities can help combat prejudice and create a more inclusive and tolerant environment.

7. REPRESENTATION AND EFFECTS OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities in Kosovo have faced significant challenges regarding high-level representation in ministerial positions. The lack of representation of these groups at the top levels of government has limited opportunities for institutional support and the advancement of policies that address their needs. However, in the previous legislature, the Egyptian community had a minister in the position of Minister of Local Government, who contributed to the allocation of over 25 million euros for projects that improve living conditions for this group. Some of these projects include assistance for infrastructure development, distribution of scholarships for students, and improvements in drinking water supply conditions. This has had a noticeable impact, helping the Egyptian community become more involved in Kosovo's social and political life. This comparison between the period without representation and the period with a minister highlights the importance of including marginalized groups in decision-making processes and the support that ministerial positions can provide in advancing policies for social and economic development.

8. COMPARISON OF REGIONAL COUNTRIES WITH KOSOVO (SERBIA, NORTH MACEDONIA, MONTENEGRO, ALBANIA)

Kosovo, as a newly established state, stands out in the Balkans for its progressive approach toward the representation and inclusion of minority communities, particularly the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian populations. Unlike many other countries in the region, Kosovo's Constitution guarantees reserved seats for these communities in the Kosovo Parliament and ensures their representation in various state mechanisms and decision-making bodies. This constitutional recognition offers a certain level of political inclusion and empowerment that is not present in the other countries of the Balkans. However, despite these constitutional provisions, the representation of these communities still falls short of the desired level, and significant challenges remain in terms of their full participation and influence in the political and social spheres. In contrast, neighboring countries such as Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia do not initially recognize the Roma and Egyptian communities as constitutional categories. Instead, they are acknowledged under specific laws as vulnerable minority groups with certain protections. Peters, G. (2020) These legal frameworks, while providing some safeguards, do not offer the same level of institutional support or political recognition as Kosovo's constitutional guarantees. Furthermore, none of these countries have implemented comprehensive methods for the inclusion and integration of these minority groups, such as affirmative action policies or mechanisms for positive discrimination. This lack of robust policies has hindered the ability of these communities to advance in key areas like education, employment, and political participation. The situation in these countries is further exacerbated by a fragile political will to address the needs and challenges of these communities. While international organizations and local NGOs play an essential role in advocating for minority rights and supporting integration efforts, their efforts are often limited due to the lack of strong government policies. The states in the region seem to lack the political commitment to make substantial changes or implement measures that would facilitate the full inclusion of Roma and Egyptian communities into the social, economic, and political fabric of their societies. Moreover, the political representation of Roma and Egyptian communities in these countries is minimal or non-existent. Unlike Kosovo, where there are dedicated political spaces for these groups, such as reserved parliamentary seats and positions in government, the representation in Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia is either extremely limited or not structured in a way that ensures political empowerment. In most cases, these communities either align themselves with larger political parties, which may not prioritize their needs, or their representation is achieved through other, less direct means. The absence of ethnic political parties specifically dedicated to Roma or Egyptian interests, as seen in Kosovo, further contributes to the marginalization of these communities in the political arena. (Poggi, G. (2020))

9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVANCING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP OF MARGINALIZED MINORITY COMMUNITIES

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Based on the above, in conclusion, we highlight the following recommendations in order to improve the status of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in the domain of everyday life, political, social, economic, and educational domains. To this end, the following recommendations are proposed: a). *Affirmative Action and Positive Measures:* Implementation of affirmative action policies and positive measures to advance minorities into political positions and institutions. b). *Political Education and Training:* Investment in education and the development of leadership skills for youth from marginalized communities. c). *Creation of Ethnic Political Parties:* Encouragement of the formation of political parties representing marginalized communities, as seen in the case of Kosovo. e). *Empowerment of Civil Society:* Support for local and international organizations that promote the rights and integration of minorities. d). *Improvement of Social and Healthcare*

Services: Ensuring equal access to services for marginalized communities.e). International Support and Regional Cooperation: Increased international support and cooperation between states in the region to integrate minorities.f).Awareness and Education on Diversity: Creation of campaigns promoting tolerance and social diversity. g).Development of Minority Linkage Structures: Establishment of structures within the community to address the needs and concerns of minorities.

REFERENCES

- Delatte, A.L. (2021), Qu'est-ce qu'un.e leader politique ? <https://dauphine.psl.eu/eclairages/article/quest-ce-quune-leader-politique>
- De Schutter, H. (2023). Two grounds of multiculturalism. *Ethnicities*, 0(0).DOI: 10.1177/14687968221149590
- Doli, D., Korenica, F. (2013). The Consociational System of Democracy in Kosovo: Questioning Ethnic Minorities' Special Status in Kosovo's Constitutional Regime. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 601–613
- Freedom House. (2020). *Kosovo: Political Rights and Civil Liberties*. Freedom House.
- Hajrullahu, A. B., (2019). Soft competitive authoritarianism and negative stability in Kosovo: statebuilding from UNMIK to EULEX and beyond. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. VOL. 20, NO. 1, 103-122. Routledge. DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2019.1709686
- International Crisis Group. (2019). *Kosovo's Minority Rights: Challenges and Prospects for Political Inclusion*. International Crisis Group.
- Koliki, R. (2012). *The Political Landscape of Kosovo: Representation and Integration of Minorities*. University of Pristina Press.
- Köhn, W. (2016). *Ethnic Minorities and Political Power in Central and Eastern Europe: A Comparative Approach*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mislimi, E., (2023,p.4) Multiethnicity and Identity in Kosovo through European Integration The Construction of Group-Differentiated Rights in Kosovo University: Linnaeus University Term: Spring 2023Subject: International Affairs, Master's Thesis, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1762054/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Peters, G. (2020). Approaches in comparative politics. In Caramani. D. (ed.) *Comparative Politics*. Fifth Edition. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Poggi, G. (2020). The nation-state. In Caramani. D. (ed.) *Comparative Politics*. Fifth Edition. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Rahimi, D. (2020). The position of minorities in the new state. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 6(1), 139-151.
- Rucht, D. (2020). Social movements. In Caramani. D. (ed.) *Comparative Politics*. Fifth Edition. UK: Oxford University Press.53
- Sajed, M. (2013). *Minorities and Political Representation in Post-Conflict Societies: The Case of Kosovo*. Routledge.
- Sallova, D. (2019). Multiethnic Principles of Administration and Politics of the International Community in Kosovo. *Perspectives of Law and Public Administration*, 8(2), 272-277.
- Sweet, A. (2020). Constitutions, rights, and judicial power. In Caramani. D. (ed.) *Comparative Politics*. Fifth Edition. UK: Oxford University Press
- The World Bank. (2015). *Kosovo: Economic and Social Inclusion of Minorities*. The World Bank.
- The World Bank report addresses the economic and social inclusion of minorities in Kosovo, including political areas.