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## Ilegalja: terrorists or freedom fighters? An Albanian tale from Yugoslav times

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### What was *Ilegalja*? How are its members linked to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)?

*Ilegalja* (or, indeterminate, *Ilegale*), in Albanian refers to the early Albanian militant groups who organized themselves against the Yugoslav regime under Tito. To them the legal regime was illegitimate, because it oppressed Albanian ethno-national self-determination and, consequently, working towards a militant uprising – albeit illegal – was seen as a legitimate undertaking. *Ilegalja* is thus a proud term in Albanian, evoking the great risks which these people took and sacrifices made for the greater national cause. Such risks included an entire family being declassified as 'enemies of the people'; prison; torture and death. The KLA is depicted as the culmination of these earlier efforts at militant self-organisation, and many of *Ilegalja*'s later generations of activists, whether previously operating in Kosovo or abroad, came to serve as top commanders or were otherwise involved.

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### What is their heritage in Kosovar and Albanian culture today?

There is a heritage of public morality, obvious to those able to understand the messages conveyed via specific cultural tropes that underpin the symbolism of national commemorations, political speeches and even of many private remembrance rituals. These tropes (for example, the *amanet*) conjure up ideals of cross-generational obligation, ethno-national unity and self-sacrifice for the greater cause. All major parties have vied for popular support in these terms. I further claim that there is a more implicit socio-political legacy resulting from decades of experiencing state persecution and fears of infiltration, and this is evident in low degrees of interpersonal trust and routine evocations of mutual suspicion. Cultural tropes of unity (as well as of treachery) appear so emphasised exactly because social reality was so unreliable and fractured. Lastly there is a clear political legacy in terms of the new political elites, who, beyond the political parties, include the powerful Association of Former Political Prisoners and the Association of War Veterans.

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### What is their political legacy? Which parties relate to *Ilegalja* and the KLA?

The leading Democratic Party (PDK) is a direct successor of the People's Movement of Kosovo, LPK, a merger of several *Ilegalja* groups in the early 1990s that opposed Ibrahim Rugova's and his Democratic League's, LDK's, non-violent approach to resistance. The LPK is credited with the founding of the KLA. The LDK's claims are much more ambiguous (it temporarily included ex-*Ilegalja* members in the early 1990s), but it generally also subscribes to the hero and martyr cults of commemorating and celebrating national liberation. The Alliance for the Future of Kosovo, AAK, represents a regional, Western Kosovar, wing of the former militant organisations. Most interestingly, the most

powerful opposition, the Movement for Self-Determination, presents itself as the true heir of the KLA and its predecessors' liberation fight, but deny this moral heritage to the others (for reasons of their alleged political compromises and corruption). Last year, among others, they absorbed the Socialist Party, also headed by an important former *Ilegalja* activist. Most recently, with the leading PDK under Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi coming under increasing, critical scrutiny, some of its most prominent former *Ilegalja* members have left in order to form a new party.

### *Ilegalja* contributed to a nationalisation of education in Kosovo. Can you take us through this process?

Many of the former activists have a rural background and were the first in their families to have the opportunity to study. Typically they became teachers, poets or ethnographers. They saw it as imperative to raise and disseminate ethno-national

awareness or, what I call, the 'militant spirit', among the wider population. Their history is entangled with higher education becoming available in the Albanian language since the late 1960s. As with other national liberation movements, they used music and poetry to generate emotional commitment amongst themselves and their students. I find it particularly fascinating to unpack the subtexts of the historical narratives used in their educational practice. For example, Skanderbeg's struggle against the Turks served as a metaphor for the Albanian struggle for liberation from the Serbs in Yugoslavia at the time and was understood as such by the intended audiences.

### **Albanian politicians of an *Ilegalja* background claim to represent democracy and human rights today – how does this tally with their history?**

In my opinion the rhetoric of democracy and human rights, in the ways in which we like to understand it, really gained currency from the late 1980s onwards when these terms became a means to garner international attention and support for the plight of the Albanians in Kosovo. However, there exist earlier references, particularly to the concept of democracy. Much of it was influenced by neighbouring Albanian dictator, Enver Hoxha's, Leninist understanding of it (particularly in the 1970s, when Albanian TV transmissions could be received in Kosovo). The human rights discourse of the 1990s, even during the period known for civic resistance, was nationalistic. What I find fascinating is how nationalism – perceived from an international, liberal perspective as the cause of all evil in the Balkans – at grassroots level has been seen as a promise of salvation. The individual activists' histories suggest that their families' and their nation's grievances were experienced as the same. Nationalism meant hope to end injustice, division, oppression and human rights violations, even if at the expense of individual fulfilment for the generation in charge, and whether expressed through a human rights discourse, or not. How can human rights agendas that are so deeply embedded in nationalism convert into the same rights for all?

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### **“I currently ride my bike, but of course, after I come to power, I will be using the government vehicles.” This is Visar Arifaj, the self-proclaimed Legendary Chairman of Kosovo's satirical Strong Party. How did political culture change since the time of *Ilegalja*?**

Arifaj and the Strong Party are a most recent phenomenon which suggests that, finally, it has become possible to use irony in political matters in Kosovo and that this might be due to generational change. The Strong Party was only registered in 2013 and Arifaj is just 26 years old. His title plays on the concept of the Legendary Commander of the KLA, Adem Jashari, who, according to the founding mythology of the new nation, through his and his extended family's militant resistance and heroic sacrifice under Serb shell fire at their private compound in March 1998, prompted the people's uprising and NATO intervention. To the old guard, of course, such political satire is sacrilegious. Some locals cannot understand it at all. But these new developments also demonstrate that there exist subversive, post-heroic strands in Kosovar urban society that hold the potential to challenge *Ilegalja*'s legacy.

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