

VISIT TO KOSOVO – 11-19 OCTOBER 2014 – CONCLUSIONS

A group of 15 former MEPs, drawn from Germany, France, UK, Netherlands and Finland, visited Kosovo to meet political leaders, top civil servants, senior officials of the various international organisations, and civil society representatives. We also crossed the dividing line in Mitrovica and visited the frontier with Serbia. On the first and last days, we saw the historical sites and learned about Kosovo's history.

Overview: Kosovo's status as an independent state is still not recognised by five EU member states or by Serbia. However, two other problems have a far greater impact on the daily lives of its people:

- (a) widespread corruption in government and in the poorly functioning legal system;
- (b) unemployment of around 40%, with young people especially affected.

Those two problems are closely linked, since the rule of law and relative freedom from corruption are crucial to investment.

EU role: International organisations (UN, NATO and EU) abound, fulfilling peacekeeping, advisory and even some executive roles. While some are reducing their scope and numbers, the EU plays a central role and aspirations towards the EU – visa free travel and then membership – are what hold this nation together. It illustrated how UK's role in Europe would become meaningless without EU membership.

The Head of the EU Representation, a highly competent Slovene former Foreign Minister, has huge influence in Kosovo. But the EU has limited means of curbing the corruption and making the legal system function so as to generate confidence in the rule of law. It quickly became clear that the government's annual work programme is almost entirely written by the European Commission (and largely in its Kosovo office), in the form of the Commission's annual 'progress report'.

The snags are that, while new laws are passed as required, implementation fails at several stages. Detailed subordinate legislation – required at state or local level – is often missing, enforcement is weak because of corruption and lack of capacity, and it is left to the EU to point to the next layer of failings in the following annual 'progress report'. Progress is made but all too slowly.

US role: The role of NATO - and especially of US and UK - in 1999, in intervening to protect the majority of Kosovo's population from Serbian aggression, is hugely appreciated. There are not many capital cities which have roads named after Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, but you can find them in Pristina! The US, especially through its ambassadors, has played an influential role alongside the EU but, since 2011, it has increasingly left matters more to the EU.

The US ambassador who left in 2011 persuaded the Kosovo government to build a motorway to the Albanian border (leading towards Tirana). In so doing, he took the transport minister to the US to meet political leaders and be entertained well. That ambassador then retired and joined the Board of the giant US road building company contracted to build Kosovo's motorway. Some say that even the US is tainted by corruption! We used the motorway and observed very low traffic volumes. Now a motorway to Skopje is being built – again at a cost disproportionate to Kosovo's needs or resources.

Ethnicity and demography: About 90% of Kosovo's current population (estimated at 1.8 million) regard themselves as Albanian and speak the Albanian language, while only 5% are Serbs. Of the former Yugoslavia, only Slovenia and Kosovo had a language not of the Serbo-Croat linguistic family. As well as Serbs, minorities include Roma, Turkish and other groups. In the 120 seat Parliament, 10 seats are reserved for Serbs and another 10 split between the other ethnicities.

Family size tends to be large – 4 or 5 children being typical. This means an ideal demographic pyramid as compared with the UK and its aging population but the lack of jobs means a large and growing social problem. That, in turn, leads to emigration. As a result, despite a high birth rate, Kosovo's population has slightly declined in the past decade since the last bout of conflict.

Migration: The main destinations are Germany and German speaking Switzerland. Amazingly, there are about 400,000 Kosovans living in Switzerland. Swiss successes in Football's World Cup were attributed to literally half its team being Kosovans! France and Portugal were also mentioned as having some smaller Kosovan communities, with only a few in the UK. As well as well-established legal migrants, there is a flourishing entry route used by traffickers via Serbia and Hungary.

The crucial factor about this diaspora is that the émigrés maintain close links with the homeland to which many plan to return. Many, perhaps even most, Kosovan families are kept afloat by remittances from relatives living elsewhere in Europe. New apartment blocks in Pristina owe their construction to such émigrés acquiring a local base. Even more striking are the vast number of imposing but incomplete houses seen in villages. Land and labour are cheap, so the émigrés put down a proud marker of their intention to return but do not go to the expense of actually plastering walls, installing windows and finishing the properties!

History: From the 4th century, Slav people gradually moved into Kosovo and by the early Middle Ages were dominant. Around the 13th century, it was a Serbian stronghold, with an Albanian minority. However, under the Ottoman Empire, from 1455 to 1912, Albanians returned and gradually became the majority population.

In 1878, a meeting in Prizren (Kosovo) committed leaders of Albanian speaking (Ottoman) provinces to greater unity, initially accepting that it would be within the Ottoman Empire. It led to increasing assertion of Albanian identity and finally to victory over the Turks in 1912. However, international agreement assigned Kosovo to Serbia and then it became part of Yugoslavia. Following the war in 1999, Kosovo became effectively independent and that was recognised by most countries in 2008.

Today, the group of buildings where the Prizren League declaration was made remain and are used as a museum to commemorate the event. School parties visit, so keeping the memory alive. Greater Albania remains the dream of many Kosovans but most recognise that it would provoke further conflict and do not seek early fulfilment of the dream.

Fundamentalism: Almost all (Albanian-speaking) Kosovans are Muslims. However, it has a long history – especially as part of Yugoslavia – of secular government. Despite affirming adherence to that religion, about half the population rarely attend a mosque and many of those who do so are not strict in their observance. The main branch of Islam practised is Sufi and some say it is more tolerant. However, things may be changing.

A few days before we arrived, 30 arrests were made, including the Imam of a major mosque in central Pristina, for having urged young men to fight for IS in Syria. Those arrests came as a shock to most Kosovans. However, EU officials told us they had noticed increasing numbers of women wearing headscarves and some even full hijab. Around Pristina, they are a small minority but the trend is clear. We may wonder how far Western intervention in Iraq and elsewhere has produced this assertiveness.

Another factor may be proselytisation from the Middle East, perhaps Saudi or Gulf States. It was commonly alleged that women were being paid significant sums to wear the headscarf. If so, it is possible that such money is also being used to further more extremist objectives.

Current political situation: Elections on 8 June have produced a constitutional deadlock. Two parties ruled in coalition (PDK and AKR), with token ethnic minority participation. However, the AKR (an ALDE member until recently) failed to achieve the 5% threshold for parliamentary representation. So, although PDK increased its seats to 37 and topped the poll, thus claiming to have won the election, it could not form a majority government.

A coalition was speedily assembled by three opposition parties (LDK - 30 seats, AAK – 11 seats and Civic Initiative – 6 seats) with support from a fourth (VV - 16 seats), together holding 63 seats. But the PDK clung to office, claiming the right to determine the next Speaker, since the constitution allows the ‘winning party’ to ‘nominate’ to that role. The oldest member (PDK) upheld that interpretation and will not allow a vote until other parties agree to accept a PDK nominee. They do not trust a PDK Speaker to be independent and will not agree, so Parliament is not meeting.

The question has gone to the Constitutional Court, which gave a ruling leaving the Parliament no further forward. The PDK has the right to ‘nominate’ but what happens if Parliament votes against their nominee? On that, the Supreme Court was silent and the (non-partisan) President has no appetite for a further reference – which is a matter for her discretion. We pressed PDK and other political leaders for a solution – at least a compromise – but left with none in sight.

If no agreement can be reached, fresh elections may be held. But there are fears that the well-conducted June elections will not be repeated and problems from ballot-rigging to violence may ensue.

Political spectrum: PDK used to declare itself as left of centre but adopted ‘centre-right’ as its political self-description about 3-4 years ago. The LDK joined the EPP in 2012 and all the main parties seem to regard themselves as centre-right, with the possible exception of Vetevendosje (VV), which has sought some advice from German SPD Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

VV party stands apart, with distinctive good and bad features. Its title and aim is self determination, meaning the opportunity for Kosovo to become part of Albania. It is hard line in its attitude to Serbia and considers that country has been allowed to escape its responsibilities for compensating those who suffered loss in the 1999 war. However, it has many able young graduates who have been educated abroad and it seems to be the party most determined to root out corruption. In their role in the new coalition, its leaders told us they would not expect ‘self-determination’ in the short-term and were more concerned with corruption and effective governance.

Two parties have been ALDE members or observers. The AKR was the junior partner in government and fell from 7.29% vote share to 4.67% in June’s elections, thus losing all its 8 MPs. The Independent Liberal Party, presumably in the separate minority ethnic category, fell from 2.05% vote share and 8 MPs to 0.05% and no MPs. So, ALDE lacks a member party in the Kosovan Parliament.

Economy and environment: Kosovo was the poorest province of the former Yugoslavia. However, it has substantial reserves of lead, zinc, silver, nickel, cobalt, copper, iron and bauxite, as well as around 14 billion tonnes of lignite – fifth largest reserves in the world. It generates 97% of its electricity from such coal and wishes to do so in the long-term future.

The original plan to replace the most ancient and polluting of its two coal-fired power stations with one more than three times the capacity (to enable exports through power lines) has been scaled back, first to just less than double and now to little more than like for like replacement and, even that, built in two equal phases.

Several years have passed in this process. A recent fire has halved output from the oldest station, leaving doubts about energy supply this winter, when Albania no longer has spare capacity. The West European construction companies who expressed interest have given up and left the bidding to four companies – from Turkey or other points east of Kosovo. That sad story of public procurement is typical of the planning of capital projects.

To add to Kosovo's other major problems, it has high levels of pollution, including lead, in its rivers and elsewhere. Poor construction standards, failures of rubbish collection, and general lack of rules or enforcement all contribute to the pollution. Meeting EU environmental standards will be a huge challenge for many years.

Relations with Serbia: The only strong motivation for Serbia to work cooperatively with Kosovo is Serbia's ambition to join the EU. It has led to slow but steady progress over the last 10 years, since the last major incident of inter-ethnic violence. On that occasion, Kosovan media reported the deaths of three young boys allegedly chased into a river, where they drowned, by Serbian men with dogs. It led to mobs burning symbols of Serbia, such as an ancient monastery, and the flight of many ethnic Serbs.

Gradually, registers of births and of land ownership are being transferred back to Kosovo, having been taken to Serbia in or before 1999. Some small payments of compensation have been paid by Serbia to Kosovans whose property was taken or destroyed. A joint border/crossing post was established a few months ago, to replace a controversial Kosovan 'frontier' post which had been subject to arson attacks. After our visit to the new joint post, we were told that it was the first occasion when the officials had actually met such a party jointly. On similar occasions, they had always stood a few meters apart!

Such small steps of progress have advanced a considerable distance but tensions remain – and so do grievances on both sides. While we were there, Putin visited Belgrade and seemed to be wooing the Serbs (potentially away from their EU affiliations). However, Russia has just decided to reduce gas supplies to Serbia, reportedly because Putin was 'unhappy' with the outcome of his visit to Belgrade.

Latest news: In the past few days, the Kosovan daily newspaper Koha ditore has been publishing reports accusing several senior EULEX officials of having taken bribe to protect some Kosovo politicians and associated individuals from prosecution for corruption or even murder. It now appears that the EU has been investigating such allegations for several months but has not yet reached any conclusion.

When Koha ditore started publishing the reports, EULEX suspended British prosecutor Maria Barnieh on suspicion of leaking secret information to media and threatened to criminally prosecute the daily's journalists. Barnieh has announced that she is ready to publicise a series of documents that would expose corruption within EULEX in a WikiLeaks-type revelation unless she is returned to work.

These events will seriously damage the EU's key institution which has its own investigators, prosecutors and judges specifically to counter corruption in the equivalent Kosovo institutions.

Future: There are two main sources of hope. The first is Kosovo's young people. A high proportion of them attend university. We met two groups of students for Q & A sessions. They aspire to end corruption and build a better country. However, they are impatient with the EU – the long period of waiting even for visa-free access and thereafter membership. The second is the opposition coalition formed to take over government. Their nominee for PM and the participation of VV offer real hope of better governance – but they have an uphill task in difficult economic conditions.

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