

My Year in Kosovo

Twelve months spent discovering and experiencing the complexity of Kosovo's society

By Jérôme Mellon
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Exactly one year ago, through the window of a plane, I was overlooking a vast land of green forests and rolling mountains, passing by at great speed a few thousand feet below. Some three hours after leaving London, accompanied by my girlfriend Monica, I landed in Kosovo for my first visit in this part of the world, and for my first experience in a developing, war-torn country.

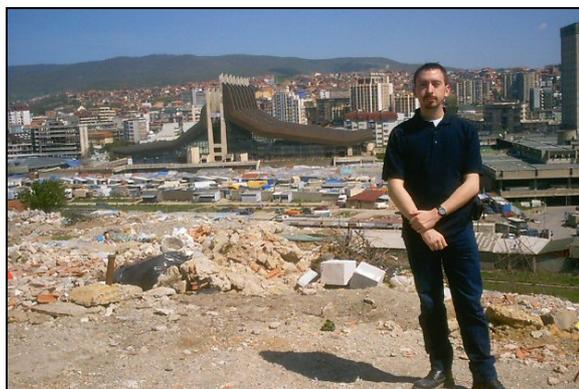
I knew very little about Kosovo or the Balkans before being selected for a six-month internship with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Kosovo. Therefore, in the four months prior to my departure from Canada, I embarked on an intensive preparatory programme, mainly through my sponsoring organisation, the United Nations Association in Canada. But I knew that nothing I read about Kosovo could fully prepare me for the experience waiting for me in this foreign land.

At the heart of the Balkans, Kosovo was part of the Roman Empire, then Byzantium, and part of the Ottoman Empire in the early 15th Century. Kosovo became part of Serbia before the First World War, and Yugoslavia just after. Under German and Albanian influence during the Second World War, its place in Yugoslavia was reaffirmed after the conflict. Kosovo became a province in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy from 1974 to 1990 within the SFRY and Serbia.

The Yugoslav Republic began to break up during the early 1990's with Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia breaking away from the state. An upsurge in violence in Kosovo in 1998 drew the attention of the international community, leading to an eleven-week conflict in the spring of 1999. On 10 June 1999, the province was placed under United Nations administration, with the European Union and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe providing key parts of the interim government, and with KFOR, the NATO-led peace implementation force, providing military security.

Three days after my arrival in the capital Pristina, I went to my first day of work at the UNDP office. Everything was new and I barely had the time to adapt to my new surroundings before being sucked into my work as a Security

Sector Programme Analyst. My job consisted of overseeing the implementation of UNDP projects aimed at developing a transparent, efficient and accountable security sector in Kosovo. My previous experience as a lawyer somehow contributed to my day-to-day work but I could also count on a strong and genuine interest in security matters, which would prove to be a valuable asset.



Jérôme Mellon in Pristina, the capital city where approximately one quarter of Kosovo's population live

As days turned into weeks, and as I became more comfortable with my work and my new life environment, I started to learn more about the complex and unique Kosovo mosaic. The prominent issue characterising Kosovo is the relationship between the Albanian and Serbian communities. Serbs, who are predominantly Orthodox Christians, constitute a minority, as do Turks, Roma (gypsies) and Muslim Slavs, while Muslim Albanians represent 88 percent of Kosovo's population, estimated in 1998 at 2.2 million people. Of the more than 200,000 Serbs who have fled the violence in Kosovo since 1999, less than 1,000 have returned. The 100,000 Serbs who remained behind live either in the Serb-dominated North or in enclaves spread throughout the province and heavily guarded by NATO troops.

Guarded enclaves and special security precautions are still required today, as interethnic violence often reappears without warning. In mid-March 2004, three days of large-scale anti-Serb violence dealt a near-fatal blow to international efforts aimed at preserving a semblance of multi-ethnic society in Kosovo. As 50,000 Albanians rioted across the province, 19 people were killed, more than 900 were injured,

seven Serb villages were razed, 800 houses were burnt, 4,100 Serbs and other non-Albanians were displaced, and 29 Orthodox churches and monasteries were destroyed.



The violence of March 2004 has left scars that have not finished healing, more than a year later

The friction between Albanians and Serbs also emerges with unmistakable intensity in the political arena. About a month after I arrived in Kosovo, the province held elections on 23 October 2004 to choose its second parliament since becoming a UN protectorate. The official results confirmed that President Ibrahim Rugova's pro-independence party won about 45% of the votes – not enough for a parliamentary majority. The total turnout in the poll was put at about 51%, compared with 64% in 2001. The vote was marred by a mass boycott by the Serb minority – less than 1% of eligible Serbs cast a vote – highlighting the deep divisions still plaguing the troubled territory. This boycott was widely seen as a Belgrade-inspired protest.

Approximately four months later, after the establishment of a coalition government that seemed promising, Kosovo Albanian Prime Minister and former rebel commander Ramush Haradinaj was charged with war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and immediately resigned from his post on 8 March 2005. Although Haradinaj made clear that he would not defy the tribunal, peacekeepers were taking no chances. Germany flew in extra soldiers to bolster its KFOR peacekeeping contingent, and Britain deployed 500 additional troops after an urgent request from NATO. Fortunately, no major incident happened and the population of Kosovo respected Haradinaj's request to remain calm and refrain from any violence.

It was the first time that I personally felt an immediate and very credible threat to my security. After all, the indictment of Haradinaj happened exactly one year after the violent anti-

Serb riots, and March had always been a particularly violence-prone period of the year in Kosovo. In addition, and contrary to the March 2004 events where Serbs were the actual target, if violence was to erupt following Haradinaj's arrest in March 2005, the members of the international community would have been the target of such violence. It was not going to be the last time that I would feel insecure but I quickly understood that such feeling was part of the experience of living in Kosovo. In fact, I somehow became accustomed to the frequent explosions, shootings and attacks which occurred throughout the province and in Pristina, such as the assassination attempt on the President on 15 March and the triple bombing in downtown Pristina on 7 July.

Beyond the often violent tension between Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Albanians lies the strong desire for the majority of Kosovans to gain full political independence at the end of the United Nations interim administration mandate. While Kosovo is still officially a province of Serbian and Montenegro, Belgrade has no authority over the administration of the province, and Kosovo Albanians wish never to return under Serbian control. However, Belgrade is putting a lot of effort in trying to regain jurisdiction over Kosovo, which is considered one of the jewels of Christian heritage, having served as the "Vatican" of Serbian Christian Orthodoxy from the 12th century onward. Between 1999 and 2004, approximately 150 churches, monasteries, seminaries, and bishop residences were attacked by ethnic Albanian mobs, and Serbian authorities have repeatedly pledged to do everything in their power not to lose Kosovo, which is still seen as a significant landmark of the Christian Orthodox heritage.

Some argue that the Serbian Government is fully aware that it will never regain effective control over the province. Nevertheless, facing a nationalist backlash at home, most Belgrade politicians would prefer delaying Kosovo's access to independence rather than accepting it. To resolve this political quagmire, the United Nations recently appointed Norwegian Ambassador Kai Eide to assess the progress made by Kosovo in achieving a set of eight standards identified as prerequisites before any decision can be made on the final status of the province. Launched in December 2003, these standards relate to Functioning Democratic Institutions, Rule of Law, Freedom of Movement, Sustainable Returns and the Rights of Communities and their members, Economy, Property Rights, Dialogue, and the Kosovo Protection Corps.



The hot issue of decentralisation in the province might prove decisive in the negotiations on Kosovo's final status

The decisive factor might rest with the ability of Serbs and Albanians to reach a deal over the thorny issue of what is called decentralisation – a process aimed at granting Serbs the right to administer their own communities in specifically defined parts of Kosovo. If this is accomplished as planned, Eide may then report to the UN Security Council that enough progress has been made in order to start final status negotiations by October. A further six months are envisaged for talks, which are highly likely to result in a recommendation to recognise Kosovo as independent by the end of 2006, subject to the continued presence of some Western troops and additional political safeguards for the Serbs. The West's hopes of disengagement by end-2006 look increasingly unrealistic and it is still unclear whether the international community will accept the prospect of remaining in the Balkans for yet another year. Until this is clarified, neither the Serbs nor the Albanians will be in any hurry to conclude a deal.

At the end of my six-month internship, I was offered a new UNDP contract to keep working in the development of the security sector in Kosovo. With a project aimed at further developing the administrative division of the Kosovo Police Service and with another initiative designed to support the establishment and initial development of the Office for Public Safety within the Office of the Prime Minister, I was learning everyday and strengthening my management skills. While I focused on security-related initiatives, I also learned a lot about other areas in which UNDP was involved, such as poverty reduction and economic development. Official statistics put the unemployment rate at 60 percent among ethnic Albanians and apparently, numbers are much higher in the ghettoized Serbian communities. In the past, economic activity in Kosovo had been centered on industry, predominantly electric power, mining and metallurgy, construction materials, agro-processing, and agriculture, which

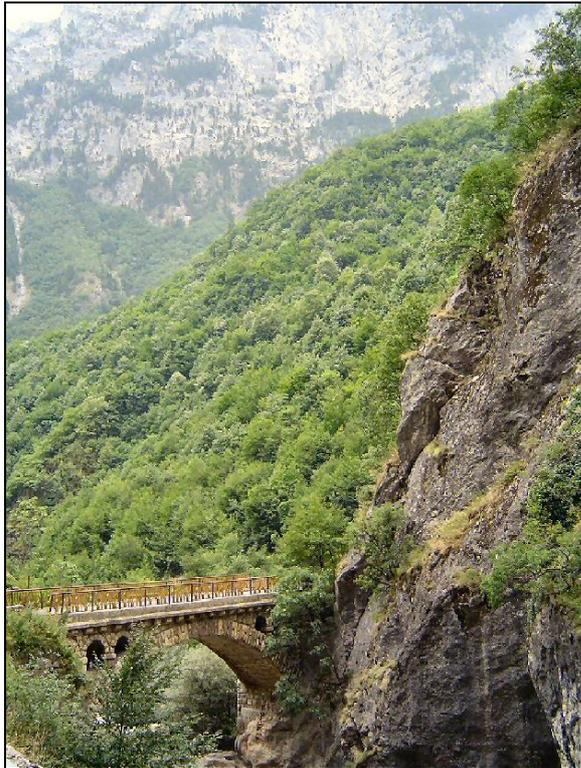
accounted for about a third of the Gross Domestic Product in 1995.

However, since the end of the conflict in 1999, the economy has been in rubble. The undefined economic system, the lack of a friendly environment for investors and negative domestic savings are the main obstacles to increase domestic and foreign investments in the context of promoting the domestic production, and improving the country's negative market balance. In addition, the lack of foreign investment prevents Kosovo from fully exploiting its natural resources. A recent study by the Kosovo Directorate for Mines and Minerals and the World Bank estimated the value of Kosovo's mineral resources at 13.5 billion euros, and while the mining industry could generate up to 35,000 jobs, a substantial investment of 1.8 billion euros would be required to sufficiently develop the mining sector in Kosovo. The unresolved political status of Kosovo is a major impediment to foreign loans and investments and one can only hope that the resolution of Kosovo's status, expected to take place in 2006, will allow for an increase in foreign investments and for the granting of development loans which could tremendously boost domestic economy.



A view of downtown Pristina, the heart of Kosovo's political and economic activity

Now that a year has passed since I first arrived in Kosovo, I look back and realise how much I have learned and how stimulating this experience has been so far. In addition to being involved in the reform and development of the security sector, I have had the opportunity to travel in the region, visiting Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Austria and soon Turkey. I have met a lot of very interesting local and international individuals, have participated in high-profile meetings, and have been involved in politically-sensitive projects, such as the Kosovo Capacity Assessment Project and the Internal Security Sector Review.



A breathe of fresh air and a green scenery in Kosovo's Rugova Valley

However, life has not always been easy in Kosovo and if it hadn't been for the presence of my girlfriend, I might have not remained in Kosovo for so long, or I might have not succeeded in finding a healthy balance between life and work that so many internationals around me seriously lack. One of the bleakest aspects of living in Kosovo is the pervasive presence of pollution. Seven kilometres northwest of Pristina, the 70-meter high, concrete chimney of Kosova A, one of two power stations of the Kosovo Energetic Corporation, spits out thick smoke which leaves a dark red layer of particles on the nearby houses' rooftops. There is plenty of evidence to support the coal-fired plant's appalling impact on the citizens' health. A report by Kosovo's Ministry of Environment in May 2003 said Kosova A emitted around 2.5 tons of dust per hour, which exceeds the European standard by some 74 times. The same report concluded that in the Obiliq area, where the power plants are sited, air pollution is responsible for 63 percent of baby fatalities and 48 percent of stillborn babies while lung cancer

and respiratory diseases are cutting a swathe through villages next to Kosovo's ageing electricity stations.

The daily life in Kosovo is also made difficult for an international like me by the lack of a strong arts and entertainment scene. Winter days can be very depressing in the absence of such activities, and the day-to-day life is made even more uncomfortable by the two to three, one-hour power outages and the shutdown of running water from 22:30 to 6:00. In addition to badly-insulated houses, omnipresent garbage piles, packs of stray dogs, and heavy car pollution, one has to deal with social, cultural and language differences which are not always easy to overcome.

I will still be living and working in Kosovo for five more months and despite the discomfort and difficulties, I truly look forward to continuing this fascinating and unique learning experience. I am proud of the work I do, and I am happy to contribute to the improvement of the security sector in Kosovo. This year in Kosovo has gone by fast, and the months ahead will probably pass by quickly too, but the memories, the feelings, the experience and the skills which I have acquired here will remain with me forever.

Learn more about Kosovo

- United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
<http://tinyurl.com/74skb>
- International Crisis Group: Kosovo
<http://tinyurl.com/8u7cd>
- UNDP Kosovo: Kosovo Police Service Institutional Capacity Building Project
<http://tinyurl.com/45e2w>
- UNDP Kosovo: Support Project to the Security and Rule of Law in Kosovo
<http://tinyurl.com/cxbfx>
- UNDP Kosovo: Kosovo Capacity Assessment Project
<http://tinyurl.com/bqyo8>
- Aerial Photo of Pristina
<http://tinyurl.com/dzdga>
- Economic Initiative for Kosovo
<http://tinyurl.com/9j3hm>