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Election Looms Following President's Exit

Early polls look likely following the resignation of the head of state, Fatmir Sejdiu, but the governing coalition is at loggerheads over when they should be held.

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Sale of PTK Enters Choppy Waters

Concerns about government-appointed advisers, corruption probes, strike threats and political problems are complicating plans to sell off Kosovo's most lucrative asset.

By Lawrence Marzouk

Questions are mounting about the privatisation of Kosovo, PTK, as plans to sell off the country's most lucrative public enterprise face a growing number of setbacks.

But supporters of the project argue that the sale must take place now, to secure the best value for the firm and ensure Kosovo does not sink into debt as it pays for its 700 million Euro highway.

Despite mandatory approval from parliament having been postponed, the government decided to press ahead with the sale of PTK in June, with the state planning to retain 25 per cent of the company's shares.

Some 30 firms expressed initial interest in the bidding documentation and this week five submitted

pre-qualification documentation. The firm is expected to fetch between 300 and 600 million Euro.

But the process has been fraught with difficulties. Concerns have been raised about one of the companies appointed to advise the government on the sale, Telco AG, who Prishtina Insight has discovered was fined by telecom regulators in Italy last year for their involvement in erotic phone lines, and who have recently had new advisors appointed to monitor their work.

Worries have also been expressed that corruption raids on PTK may damage its sale price.

The process has been further complicated by attempts by Serbia to derail the sale of what it sees as Belgrade-owned assets, protests by the unions and the political uncertainty which has followed the resignation of Kosovo's president, Fatmir Sejdiu, this week.

Advisor Overload

In October 2009, the Ministry of Economy and Finance, MEF, appointed Liechtenstein-based Telco AG, lawyers Wolf Theiss and consultants TPA Horwath, both of Austria, and US-based consultants PRTM to advise the government on whether to sell PTK and lead the process through to a potential sale. They are called "transaction advisors".

A 1.1 million Euro fee was agreed with the consortium and if PTK is successfully privatised the consortium, led by Telco and Vienna-based lawyers Wolf Theiss, will receive 0.39 per cent of the sale value, or 2.3million Euro, if PTK fetches 600 million Euro.

Telco AG's success in securing the deal, however, surprised some of the other bidders from more established firms, sources from one of the losing bidders told

Prishtina Insight.

Just a few months after their appointment, and allegedly under pressure from international actors in Kosovo, the government appointed a second tier of advisors for a further 500,000 Euros to supervise the work of Telco AG and its consortium.

The Liechtenstein-based telecommunications firm has, as a company, yet to establish itself as a major name in the telecoms consultancy market, although its staff include a number of consultants who have worked on major privatisation deals in the region.

Prishtina Insight has also discovered that the firm has been dogged by a series of unofficial and official complaints levelled against it in another field in which it operated.

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Banks Record Massive Profit Increase

Commercial banks in Kosovo continue to record large profits thanks to cost cutting and high interest rates for bank loans.

Economic experts criticise bank directors for applying the highest interest rates in the region while, as they say, the package of bank services...

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Albanians Vie for Religious Sites

"Often, during the winter, we have to pray directly on cold snow," says Sallahudin Brahimaj, 20, who worships at an improvised mosque in Prishtina's Dardania district.

The Dardania Mosque was formally a shop, sited on the ground...

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For a number of years, Telco AG rented out premium rate, Liechtenstein-based numbers across the world which, according to complaints from phone users on internet forums, and a case taken out by the Italian telecommunications regulatory authority, have not always been used in accordance with the law.

According to mobile phone users in different corners of the world, complaining on internet forums, they were contacted by text messages with news that they had won a prize and were given a number to call which was owned by Telco AG. Those who followed up the text with a call where then charged premium rates without their knowledge, it is alleged.

The Liechtenstein-based firm was also fined 100,000 Euros in 2009 for providing premium-rate numbers to an erotic phone service which did not advertise the cost of calls, according to the official findings of an investigation seen by Prishtina Insight.

Telco AG, according to its website, has stopped selling international premium rate numbers, although its sister company Telco AT continues to operate in that field, its website notes. In a briefing note sent to Prishtina Insight, Telco AG, said it was 'merely the owner of numbers' and not responsible for services provided by those renting the numbers.

However, when Prishtina Insight asked for an official comment on whether its operations in the area of international premium-rate numbers cast doubt on its suitability to lead such a prestigious project, the firm said: "We think this is an unserious (sic) and very malicious question, not based on facts. A team of highly qualified experts is advising the Government of Kosovo on this important transaction and your questions are drafted in a way that harms the privatisation process and damages the interest of the Republic of Kosovo."

The firm's relationship with Mobilkom Austria, one of the potential buyers of PTK, has also come under scrutiny in the Kosovo media. Telco AG admits it acted as advisors to Mobilkom Austria in a number of previous transactions in the region, including in Kosovo, but says it no longer works for the Austrian mobile giant.

The firm said in a statement: "We do not understand how [our] 'previous close relationship' with a telecom company should qualify as a conflict of interest for an advisor.

"Please let me draw your attention to the fact that most of [the] tender participants for PTK advisory tenders had direct or indirect commercial relationship with telecom companies interested in PTK, either as their commercial or investment banks, auditors, management consultants and similar."

An investigation by Prishtina Insight has also shown that Telco AG paid the US lobbying firm Rhoads Group USD75,000, 55,000

Euros, in the run-up to the tender decision, according to official lobbying reports filed in US' Senate Office of Public Records, to lobby in Kosovo and the US about issues related to the tender. No other firms in the process used US lobbyists.

Among the team assigned to lobby in Kosovo was Shawn Sullivan, who was brought in from another lobbying firm, Cassidy & Associates, where he was senior vice-president. He has recently moved to a new lobbying firm.

From 1995 to 2003, Sullivan served in various capacities at the US Departments of State and Defense. In 2001, he was appointed political advisor to the NATO Commander General in Kosovo and later as the NATO Secretary General's personal representative to Serbia.

Telco told Prishtina Insight the decision to employ lobbyists was a legitimate tactic, aimed at "neutralising" other US-based bids.

Despite securing the multimillion Euro deal with Kosovo's government, private concerns among diplomats, expressed to Prishtina Insight, began to surface early this year about whether the relatively unknown firm's work would inspire enough confidence to satisfy a suspicious public that its most lucrative asset, PTK, would be privatised properly.

The Ministry of Economy and Finance then issued another tender in May, this time to employ 'strategic advisors' to work alongside the 'transaction advisors'.

According to tender documents that Prishtina Insight has seen, the new strategic advisor will conduct an "ongoing analysis of the privatisation process, thereby providing assurance to the Kosovo public that the privatisation is carried out in accordance with the highest international standards of transparency and fairness".

While the transaction advisor remains in place, advising the government on the privatisation process, the strategic advisors will monitor the work of the transaction advisors and the government, in effect introducing a senior partner to the process half-way through privatisation.

The ministry argued that the appointment of 'strategic advisors' on top of the existing 'transaction advisors' in the middle of the privatisation process was normal international practice.

But sources close to the process described the decision as "highly unusual" and said it was motivated by concerns among international diplomats about Telco's relatively unknown status.

The same source added that the decision may have also been motivated by a desire to bring in consultants who would work more closely with the international community.

US Ambassador to Kosovo Christopher Dell did not confirm or deny that he had encouraged the government to employ a strategic advisor on top of the current trans-



PTK's Headquarters in Prishtina

action advisor in an interview with BIRN's Life in Kosovo show this week.

When asked, he said: "The government needed a strategic advisor to, as the name implies, give it strategic advice - Yes."

A spokesman for the Ministry of Economy and Finance told Prishtina Insight that the strategic advisor's appointment did not mean it "does not trust the current advisor Telco". They also maintained that the decision to bring in new consultants was made by the Kosovo government and was not influenced by other institutions.

In late August, a new consortium was appointed at a second attempt - after the first tender failed to attract enough bids - as strategic advisors, including US-based Hunton & Williams LLP, Castilla Strategic Advisors and David Ross Group, at a further cost to Kosovo of 555,000 Euros.

The appointment, a well-placed source told Prishtina Insight, has delayed the process by at least two months.

Telco AG told Prishtina Insight that work between the different advisors was progressing well: "We have completely different roles to the strategic advisors - we have our job and they have theirs and we do not expect to have any problems."

Cancelled Contracts and Recruitment Freeze

The privatisation process has also been hit by disputes between PTK and the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

These occurred after PTK signed a 20 million Euro deal with the Cyprus-branch of the international firm Amdocs in April to provide a new billing platform for mobile customers.

Following complaints from potential buyers of PTK, including Mobilkom Austria, who said it did not want to be lumbered with the contract, Ahmet Shala, Minister for Economy and Finance, ordered the cancellation of the deal and a freeze on all major capital investment and recruitment, according to a government letter seen by Prishtina Insight.

As the Amdocs contract had already been signed, PTK and the firm were forced to enter into an arbitration process in London to find a suitable compromise for the cancellation of the contract. The arbitration has yet to be concluded

and is expected to cost the company many millions of Euros.

PTK argues that it was essential to bring the firm in as its current billing system is 'falling apart' and limiting the number of new, contract-based customers it can take on. It also says that the new billing platform could be of use to future buyers who already use the popular Amdocs system.

Richard Quick, head of anticorruption at PTK, told Prishtina Insight: "The negotiations are going to be a long process and are likely to be completed after the privatisation."

"This means that whoever takes on PTK will be required to settle the dispute with Amdocs."

PTK Under Investigation

Some experts fear PTK's potential sales value may also have suffered as a consequence of raids by the EU rule of law mission, EULEX, on the firm on July 15.

The action which included a search of the home of PTK's executive director, related to investigations into multi-million Euro contracts between PTK and Kosovo-based Dardafon Mobile over telecommunication licences for a new mobile phone company, Z Mobile.

The offices of Dardafon LLC, Devolli, the parent company of Dardafon, and the Z mobile company, the brand name of the new network, and the private residences of representatives of those companies were searched.

Z mobile is a virtual network, meaning that it does not have its own telecommunication infrastructure and uses that of PTK.

PTK offices, in particular those of the chief executive officer, Shyqyri Haxha, and his private residence, were targeted in raids. No arrests have been made and EULEX said that investigations were ongoing.

All of those involved have denied any wrongdoing and said in statements following the raids that they are willing to cooperate with EULEX and the police.

Naim Rustemi, an independent deputy in Kosovo's parliament, said he had left the parliamentary session on PTK privatisation in June because of a perceived lack of transparency in the process.

Rustemi said the public enterprise ought not to be sold until the various legal problems had been resolved. "Each problem could decrease the price of the company,"

Rustemi noted, referring to the EULEX investigation. "No investor is going to come in with these problems."

Rustemi added the courts needed to clear up all suspicions before the government proceeded with the sale.

Questions over Timing and Process

Alban Hashani, of the Riinvest Institute, which specialises in economic issues, said the government had a duty to state its case concerning the benefits of PTK's privatisation.

"The government has failed to explain why they have to sell 75 per cent of PTK assets and not, say, 67 per cent," Hashani said.

But Liridon Mavriqi, political advisor to the economy minister, said the main reason why the government wished to privatise PTK now was because of growing competition within the field in Kosovo which saw PTK's annual revenue fall from 182 million Euros in 2007 to 145 million Euros last year.

Another key inducement to sell is in order to release funds for the new highway connecting Kosovo, Albania and Serbia, costed at 700 million Euros.

As a condition of an IMF loan of 109 million Euros, the government is obliged to sell PTK in any case.

Murilo Portugal, acting chair of the IMF, said in a statement: "An important objective of the Fund-supported programme is to shore up the government's bank balances to a prudent level."

"The timely privatisation of PTK, the post and telecom operator, will help replenish bank balances and ensure that deficit financing will not rely on short-term commercial borrowing."

Avni Zogiani, of the anti-corruption organisation COHU, which has been monitoring the privatisation process, told Prishtina Insight: "The government has to sell PTK now to give that money to the road project. This is being done under pressure."

Zogiani also complained that the sale was continuing, even though mandatory approval from parliament had not been given in June.

This week five firms submitted their pre-qualification documents to qualify for bidding - Croatia Telecom, Albanian Alb Telecom, Egypt's Orascom Telecom Holding, Telekom Austria and Sabafon from Yemen.

But the deal cannot go ahead without parliamentary approval, and following the resignation of Kosovo's president this week this may have to wait for elections.

If elections are held soon, as is looking increasingly likely, a new government may also decide to take a different tack on the project.

A source working on the deal told Prishtina Insight that companies will be very hesitant to bid during this period of political uncertainty and that the election of a new government could put the sale back to 2012.



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"With PTK's profits falling, this will lead to a decline in the sale value," the source added.

But Ambassador Dell said that he was confident a new government would be in place in time for the key decisions to be made about all privatisations, including PTK, which he said will be sold at the earliest in six months time.

Anti-PTK Protests on the Streets

The privatisation process also risks being derailed by unions, fearful that the sale will lead to job losses.

PTK workers called for the process to stop and this week marched in Prishtina against plans to privatise the firm.

The head of the PTK union, Milazim Alshiqi, said selling off the company was a mistake. "PTK is not a burden on the Kosovo government," he said. "During the last four years, PTK has donated some 3.5 million Euros for projects such as building houses for the homeless or scholarships."

The movement Vetevenodsje, 'self-determination' in Albanian, has also held protests and has pinned anti-privatisation posters across the city.

Visar Ymeri told the protestors this week: "Today, I will not invite the government to stop the privatisation of PTK, because it would be hopeless. Today, my call is addressed to the citizens of Kosovo, and especially PTK workers in this case. It is our responsibility to protect our property. We must be more determined and organised to protect the assets of Kosovo."

The Serbian Question

While Kosovo's government attempts to press ahead with the privatisation, the Serbian state-owned telecommunications firm Telekom Srbija AD has been consistently warning that PTK's buyer will face a legal challenge.

The Belgrade-based firm claims that its assets were "unlawfully seized" after the 1999 conflict and in a statement this week warned that buyers could face "legal actions in their home countries as well as before European judicial bodies".

This summer, Telekom Srbija took out an advert in the Financial Times with a similar warning.

While the potential success of this action has been questioned by legal experts, and the claims of unlawful seizure dismissed by the UN Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, sources close to PTK's privatisation warned that Telekom Srbija could force bidders in its own ongoing privatisation process to drop plans to buy PTK. The source added, however, that there was no indication that it would carry out this action.

But Croatia Telecom, one of the five potential bidders, said this week it was not concerned about the threats.

The continued presence of Serbian licensed mobile phone operators in Kosovo could also impact on the price of the sale.

At least 80,000 users outside of Kosovo's Serbia-controlled north use Belgrade-based networks, it is estimated, rather than the Pristina licensed firms, IPKO and PTK's Vala.

Election Looms Following President's Exit

Early polls look likely following the resignation of the head of state, Fatmir Sejdiu, but the governing coalition is at loggerheads over when they should be held.



By Petrit Collaku

Political parties in Kosovo have split down the middle over whether a general election should be held immediately following the resignation of President Fatmir Sejdiu.

Sejdiu stepped down as President on Monday following a Constitutional Court ruling that he could not simultaneously be head of state and head of a party, the Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK.

The dominant partner in the governing coalition, the Democratic Party of Kosovo, PDK, led by Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, wants a snap parliamentary poll held before the end of the year.

The party has the support of key members of the international community, who want to make sure that any government entering key negotiations with Serbia on ending the Kosovo-Serbia stand-off has a clear popular mandate.

But the government's junior coalition partner, led by Sejdiu himself, is calling for the election to be put off till next year, when the President's mandate is due to expire.

The opposition Alliance for the Future of Kosovo, AAK, is also steadfastly against an early election, mainly because its leader, Ramush Haradinaj is in detention in The Hague awaiting retrial for war crimes. Meanwhile, the opposition Democratic League of Dardania, LDD, and New Kosovo Alliance, AKR, were quick to call for a vote as soon as possible.

International Backing:

Since Sejdiu stepped down, several high-level meetings have taken place between the government and the so-called Quint, the US, Germany, Britain, Italy and France.

Senior diplomatic sources from the Quint countries told Prishtina Insight that an election was imminent. "I believe early elections will happen before the end of the year," one diplomat said.

US Ambassador Christopher Dell told Prishtina Insight: "Elections may be the best way forward for Kosovo - I wouldn't have said that one week ago, before the court's decision [on the President's resignation]."

The ambassador added that it was important that any government team entering negotiations with Serbia had a clear mandate from the electorate.

Constitutional tangle:

Kosovo's now acting president, Jakup Krasniqi, who is

also speaker of parliament, from the PDK, said he was in discussions with all political parties on finding a solution.

But in an interview with the BBC on Wednesday, Krasniqi suggested the current political environment in Kosovo dictated that new general elections should be held.

Kosovo's presidents are not directly elected but chosen by a two-thirds majority of parliament.

Krasniqi believes that it could pose a problem if a new president is elected now for a five-year term, while the parliament may have to wait until late next year for their elections.

Under the constitution, the speaker can assume the President's functions for no longer than six months.

If three votes in parliament fail to elect a new president with a two-thirds majority, a general election must be held within 45 days.

The president may also dissolve parliament following a successful no-confidence vote against the government.

It is not yet clear which mechanism is more likely to be used if deputies decide to force an early election.

Coalition at loggerheads:

One reason why the LDK has said it will not support an early election is because it is embroiled in its own internal leadership elections, which will see a new party head elected by the end of November.

On Thursday, the LDK's Sejdiu and the PDK's Thaci met to discuss the deadlock, saying after the meeting that the talks would continue.

Sejdiu told Prishtina Insight that his party had not yet offered a new presidential candidate.

"We need at least four to six months to prepare [for elections]," Sejdiu said. By then, the party's internal election would be settled, he added. "The LDK will [then] have time to be well restructured," he said.

He added that the party had not started internal discussions on likely next steps with regard to its current coalition arrangements. "There is a need for a thorough analysis of all that is happening to make a plan about what should happen next," Sejdiu said.

The LDK would be serious contenders in the next election and would aim to take the post of Prime Minister in a new coalition, he added, unlike the present and past coalitions, in which the party took the post of President.

Pristina-based political analyst Mufail Limani said Sejdiu's resignation had affected the proper workings of the state at a delicate time, jeopardising important political processes,

such as future talks with Serbia.

"It's quite a big mess inside the LDK and it is difficult to predict what the direction of the party's future will be," he added.

Ready or Not?

The possibility of quick elections has left many institutions and political parties 'flat footed', according to Ambassador Dell, especially the Central Election Commission, which will have to organise the poll.

While Dell questioned the readiness of the Commission to manage a snap poll, its spokesperson Fehmi Ajvazi, insisted they were prepared. "If the parties agree on elections, we cannot run away from the matter," Ajvazi told Prishtina Insight.

Nexhmedin Spahiu, political commentator and a former mayoral candidate for the AKR, said that while early elections looked likely, it would be better for Kosovo to assemble an interim government of technicians and wait until next April to vote.

"But it's up to the international protectors [of Kosovo] to set the date of elections rather than Kosovo's political parties," he suggested.

New Parties:

Among the new parties staking their claim for a slice of power if an early election takes place is the nationalist Vetevendosje movement.

Left wing economically, it has been the loudest opponent of international supervision of Kosovo's independence. Early this year it declared it would stand in the next election.

Albin Kurti, the leader, told Prishtina Insight that his party had already appointed staff to deal with election preparations. But he was disappointed that the date was being determined by the international community and by "selfish politicians", he added.

Another party that will also soon register for the election race hails from the civil-society sector.

Shpend Ahmeti, head of the think tank GAP, and Ilir Deda, from KIPRED, Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, announced the formation of their new party to Prishtina Insight on Thursday.

They said they would reveal their programme, membership and the party's name shortly. "The time has come to offer Kosovo society a chance to receive what it has long been expecting from the government, a better quality of life," Ahmeti told Prishtina Insight.

Deda said government was to blame for the broken state of Kosovo's society. "This is unacceptable and cannot be tolerated anymore," he said.

Editor's Word

Privatizimi



By Lawrence Marzouk

In an intriguing report published last week, Rita Augestad Knudsen, writing for the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, questioned why Kosovo had been launched into a frenzy of privatisation without anyone stepping back and asking whether it was the correct choice for the country.

It's a valid question. Privatisation is not always the best option for publicly owned firms or assets.

Just look at postal systems across the world. Many countries find it impossible to make postal firms profitable with universal coverage, but the idea that the company should just be offloaded to the private sector for services to be slashed is quite unpalatable.

In the case of Post Telecommunications of Kosovo, PTK, however, I believe that privatisation is the correct choice, especially given that the postal section will be handed back to the state.

In recent years, Kosovo's most lucrative asset, PTK, has been losing ground to its private sector rivals. This is painfully clear from the plunging profits.

Nepotism, corruption and just plain poor management have meant that PTK is not where it should be.

Privatisation is a quick, clinical way of reversing the downward profit trends and injecting much needed money into the country's coffers.

It is, however, a great shame that the process to date has been fraught with difficulties and that is being carried out with a metaphorical gun to the country's head.

No single institution or individual is to blame for the mess that has been the privatisation process, although the government is most culpable.

And it's not unexpected that selling off a relatively huge company in a country with no experience in that field has not been without obstacles.

But if you have read this week's Prishtina Insight piece on PTK, you will realise that so many different actors have been meddling in the process that the ship has been buffeted well off its course time and again.

The gun to the head is, of course, the pressure to sell the asset in order to find money which has, in essence, already been spent.

The IMF has made it quite clear that Kosovo must sell PTK if it wants to complete its first, 700million euro highway.

Of course, the government could decide to stop construction halfway through, or raise cash through borrowing at loan-shark rates instead.

Neither options are, however, more attractive, or should I say less unattractive, than selling off PTK, even for a cut-price deal.

So, PTK must be sold and to date the sale has been, let's say, a little problematic.

Not all is lost, however.

We have five potential bidders, some more reputable than others, and the chance to squeeze every last drop out of them for the benefit of Kosovo.

But the process must be clean, transparent and, most importantly, honest.

Qualities, I believe, that have been sadly lacking from similar sell-offs to date.

Kosovo Families Struggle after Swiss Welfare Suspension

A decision by the Swiss government to suspend a raft of welfare payments to Kosovars in the face of growing public concern about benefit fraud has left hundreds of families in dire financial straits.



By Dana Landau

Dr Shaban Hasi held the lofty position of director of the department of neurosurgery at Prishtina University's Clinical Centre from 2000, after he returned to his home country from Switzerland, until 2008.

But what his colleagues at the Prishtina hospital did not know was that he was also clocking up thousands of euros in disability benefits from the Swiss state at the same time.

At each review of his status, the Kosovar neurosurgeon, who had practiced in a Swiss hospital before being diagnosed as incapacitated, claimed he was still unable to return to work.

But following a tip-off from the Prishtina hospital to Swiss authorities, Hasi was arrested in 2008 and earlier this month given a 21-month suspended jail sentence and ordered to repay the 400,000 euro he had fraudulently claimed.

"We had no idea he was receiving a pension from Switzerland, as soon as we heard about it from the Swiss authorities he was let go," a senior University staff told Prishtina Insight.

This story was just one of many to form a benefit fraud media storm which sparked a heated debate in Switzerland over social welfare provided to Kosovars.

Representatives of the populist Swiss People's Party spoke of the "Balkanisation of the disability insurance", citing the above-aver-

age percentage of disability pension recipients among immigrants from Balkan countries.

The debate led to an agreement between Switzerland and Kosovo over the benefit payments not being renewed in April this year, resulting in non-payment of all new pensions to Kosovars who chose to spend their retirement years in their homeland, as well as an end to child benefits for children living in Kosovo, affecting thousands of Kosovars working in Switzerland.

Kosovars started emigrating to Switzerland from the late 1960s onwards, and many more followed as refugees during the 1990s.

It is estimated that approximately 170,000 Kosovars are living in Switzerland today. Over the years, their employers have made payments from their salaries into Switzerland's basic state pension and social security insurance.

The social security agreement between Switzerland and Yugoslavia entered into force in 1964, and ensured the rights of Yugoslav immigrants to receive their pensions and insurance payments even if they decided to retire in their native country.

But as concern mounted about abuse of the system by Kosovars, the Federal Social Insurance Office in Switzerland announced in 2008 that investigations into suspected misuse of disability pensions to recipients living abroad had begun.

However, investigators in Kosovo soon had to halt their operations after receiving death threats.

Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter in late 2009 declared the failed investigations and the atmosphere of threats and insecurity as the reason for discontinuing the agreement with Kosovo.

The Social Insurance Office further stated that it "assumes that Kosovo indeed exhibits a disproportionately high potential of insurance fraud", however, without mentioning any details about the investigations.

And while Swiss law requires the legal and administrative cooperation of local authorities for investigations within a contracting state, no Kosovar institution was informed of the presence of investigators.

Despite the initial link with fraud, when pressed for an explanation of the decision, Burkhalter

explained to the Swiss parliament that the primary reason for the decision not to renew the social security agreement was not the issue of fraud.

He argued, instead, that the reason was that "given Kosovo's institutional shortcomings, the proper implementation of a treaty is not currently possible", referring to a social security agreement between the two states.

The problems include a reliable, up-to-date and complete civil register, and a functional liaison agency to enable the treaty. The labour law, which would regulate social insurance, has yet to pass Kosovo's assembly.

In late 2009, the Swiss government took the decision not to renew the agreement with the government of Kosovo when it ended in April 2010.

Switzerland has social security agreements with 43 countries and all other former Yugoslav republics have either already completed social security agreements with Switzerland or are in the final stages of doing so.

The decision only affects pensions newly claimed from April this year onwards, and will not change the situation of the approximately 250 disability and old-age pensions and 330 additional pensions for children of recipients already issued in Kosovo.

Newly retired Kosovars will be left without pensions if they decide to leave Switzerland upon retirement. They may request a reimbursement of the pension payments made over the years, but this does not come close to the value of a full pension.

And the move also affects those claiming other types of benefits, such as children's allowances and disability payments.

Thousands of Kosovars in Switzerland are feeling the effects of this change in policy, it has been claimed.

Jusuf Jashari, 47, from Ferizaj and long-time resident of Geneva, said he was no longer receiving allowances for his four children who now live in Kosovo.

"I no longer receive any payments for my children in Kosovo and life is much more difficult for the children now," he said. "I have asked many times for the decision to be reversed, but I have been refused."



Kosovars celebrating in Switzerland, where there lives a large Albanian diaspora

Jashari himself is disabled and incapable to work and he used to receive 190 euros a month to support his four children.

Imri Blenishti, father of five, originally from Ferizaj, has been working and living in Switzerland since 1990.

He continued to work in Switzerland after his wife and children returned to Kosovo five years ago.

Until May this year, Blenishti received a monthly 900 euro child allowance, which was invested in his children's schooling and university fees.

But since April, the payments have stopped. Blenishti said he was very worried about his children's endangered schooling, adding: "I am not the only one going through this - many Albanians are experiencing the same problems."

Apart from the immediate effect on Kosovars in Switzerland whose children reside abroad, the change is also likely to influence the decision of new Kosovar pensioners about where to spend their retirement. Many will opt not to return to their homeland, meaning a loss of investment into Kosovo's economy, as well as additional social security and healthcare costs to Swiss institutions.

In May this year, members of the Kosovar diaspora together with Swiss trade unions petitioned with several thousand signatures against the discontinuation of the agreement.

The decision was criticised for discriminating against Kosovars who have worked in Switzerland, contributed to consolidating the Swiss welfare state through their

pension payments and thus should retain the right to choose where they would like to retire.

The petition also addressed the Kosovar authorities and called on them to urgently take up the issue with their Swiss counterparts.

The decision not to renew the agreement was announced in late 2009, however, it was not until September this year, more than 5 months after its expiry, that a working group from Kosovo visited the Federal Social Insurance Office in Switzerland.

The purpose of the visit was an information exchange at which the minimum technical requirements for a start of negotiations on an agreement were clarified. These include the effective implementation of social security legislation and a complete civil register.

On September 16, the Assembly of Kosovo gathered for an interpellation of Prime Minister Hashim Thaci after a request from deputy Emrush Xhemajli, supported by 32 deputies, on the topic of the non-renewal of a social security agreement between Switzerland and Kosovo.

Speaking at the plenary session of the Kosovo Assembly on September 16, Prime Minister Thaci was criticised for not reacting sooner, but he assured parliament that all steps would be taken to ensure that Kosovar citizens in Switzerland will not be deprived of a right that all other former Yugoslav citizens continue to enjoy.

Deputy Prime Minister Hajredin Kuci accepted that there was institutional neglect of this problem and has vowed to ensure the appropriate actions are taken.

News in brief

Kosovo Mayor's Home Searched in Fraud Probe

The home of Skenderaj mayor Sami Lushtaku and three other private houses have been searched as part of a fraud investigation by the Kosovo police and the EU rule-of-law mission in Kosovo, EULEX. Officers launched the searches on Tuesday in the Skenderaj municipality after Kosovo's Special Prosecutor had filed charges of abuse of official position, fraud in office and trading in influence, EULEX officials said.

Skenderaj municipality, the mayor and the Commission for the Donation of Social Apartments are being investigated for the donation of social houses to 43 beneficiaries last year.

Clinton to Visit Serbia, Kosovo

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Wednesday that she plans to travel to Serbia and Kosovo next month to push for talks between the two.

"I am very much looking forward to my visit to both Belgrade and Prishtina and the opportunity not only to speak with leaders, but also with citizens," Clinton said during a visit of High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs, Catherine Ashton.

The visit to Belgrade is expected on October 12.

Tadic to attend Patriarch's inauguration

Serbian President Boris Tadic will attend the inauguration of Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Irinej at the Pec Patriarchy on October 3, the church has announced.

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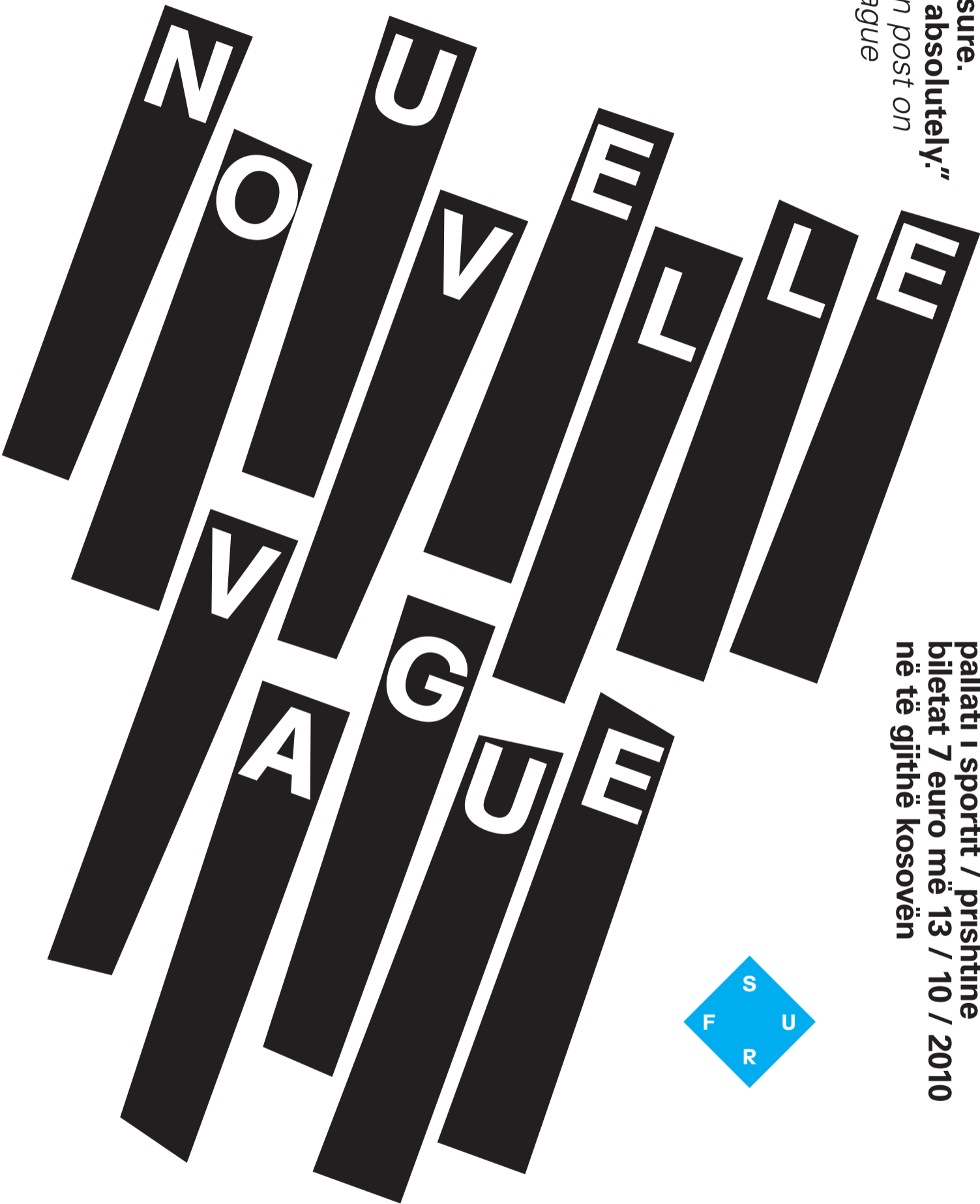
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Grape Subsidy Halts Kosovo Protests



By Lawrence Marzouk

Kosovo's government has agreed to subsidise grape production following a spate of increasingly violent protests led by farmers unable to sell their produce.

The government's offer of 1,000 euro per hectare for the year came after grape growers in Kosovo's vineyard region of Rahovec/Orahovac were left with thousands of tonnes of unsold fruit because of cuts in wine production.

"This is a subsidy for your hard work, but it is also to save grape vine cultivation in the Republic of Kosovo," Deputy Prime Minister Hajredin Kuci said late on Tuesday.

Rahovec, in the south east of the country, has about 2,240 hectares of vineyards which are expected to produce 20,000 tons of grapes this autumn.

In previous years, about a quarter of production was sold outside of Kosovo with the rest going mainly to producers of wine and raki, the local brandy.

But vineyards have accumulated the equivalent of 16 million unsold bottles of wine due to the economic crisis and an embargo on Kosovo products by Serbia.

It had been feared 6,000 tonnes of grapes could have been left to rot this year, leaving growers with a loss of 10 million euro.

Farmers led large protests demanding help from the vineyards and government, including one demonstration last Friday when 21 protestors were injured after a clash with police.

Betim Behluli, of the grape producers' association, said: "The aim of the association ... was for the protest to be calm and dignified, but the moment the special police unit appeared, the mass of protestors got agitated."

Sulejman Bala, the head of the state-run Institute of Vineyards and Wineries, from Rahovec, told Prishtina Insight that grape producers had slashed their wholesale prices from 0.25 euro per kilogramme to 0.15 euro.

"The grapes are currently being sold only to private consumers by the roadside," he added.

Deputy Prime Minister Hajredin Kuci held a meeting with grape growers on Tuesday evening which led to the subsidy agreement.

Half of the payments will be made by December 31, the government said, with the rest coming by the end of January.

Kuci said: "We have talked with private companies, but the government cannot impose their views, and must respect their independence."

"We have no desire to see citizens protesting in Kosovo, much less those who have worked, and work, diligently."

According to a press release issued by the government, representatives of the grape growers are satisfied with the subsidy proposal.



The government has agreed to subsidise grape growers who have struggled to sell their produce this year

Stonecastle, the country's largest producer of wine and the focus of much of the farmers' anger, decided not to buy any grapes this year from farmers in the area as its reserves are still full.

The company owns 600 hectares of vineyards from which it produces 3.5 to four million litres of wine each year.

"We'll produce the same amount this year, but we regret that we won't be able to buy any grapes from local farmers," Shani Mullabazi, the general manager at Stonecastle, told Prishtina Insight in an interview earlier this month.

"Our tankers are full and we have millions of litres of wine remaining in our basement," he added.

Mullabazi said the main problem for the wine industry in Kosovo was Serbia.

Belgrade is blocking Kosovo's participation in the Central European Free Trade Agreement, CEFTA, which links non-EU countries in Central and Southeast Europe.

Serbia refuses to accept Prishtina's participation in the agreement as a separate country, saying it may only be represented by the UN mission in Kosovo, UNMIK.

Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have also refused to allow any imports with the hallmark of the Republic of Kosovo, depriving the new country of a key export market.

Mullabazi said the main market for the company was Germany but, due to the financial crisis in Europe, sales of Kosovo wine had dropped there.

Banks Record Massive Profit Increase

Profits in the banking sector rocketed by 20 million euro in the first six months of 2010 through cost cutting



By Lavdim Hamidi

Commercial banks in Kosovo continue to record large profits thanks to cost cutting and high interest rates for bank loans.

Economic experts criticise bank directors for applying the highest interest rates in the region while, as they say, the package of bank services is poorer than in neighbouring countries.

Kosovo Central Bank, KCB, reports that until the first half of this year, commercial banks in the country have marked a profit of 19.4 million euros, up 56.8 per cent on the same period last year.

"The increase in profit is first and foremost a result of the cut in commercial bank expenditures, which have been cut by 6.5 per cent, in comparison with the same period last year, whereas the earnings marked an increase of 1.2 per cent," according to the central bank's monthly bulletin.

Haki Shatri, head of the Parliamentary Commission for Financial Supervision, said Kosovo's commercial banks secure such high profits because of the high interest rates they



Banks in Kosovo have recorded a huge increase in profits

charge, which, he says, are the highest in the region.

"Interest rates for loans in Kosovo are around 12 to 13 per cent and are the highest in the region," said Shatri.

The banks argue the high rates are applied because of the

high risk of default in Kosovo, but, according to Shatri, the opposite is true. The rate of bad loans is the lowest in the region.

This fact was confirmed by KCB officials. Besnik Kada, spokesperson of the Bank, told Prishtina Insight that according

to the latest figures 4.5 per cent of loans were classified as 'bad'.

According to the bank, the figure in Albania is 10.5 per cent, it is 8.6 per cent in Macedonia, 16.5 per cent in Serbia and 13.5 per cent in Montenegro.

Economic expert Berat Rukiqi

suggests that the high interest rates are a result of the high demand for loans in the country.

"The Central Bank for the moment only has the role of supervisor but with the new law, it is expected that the Central Bank will be granted additional functions," he said.

Shatri is calling on the state to investigate whether banks have colluded to keep interest rates high, an accusation that Rukiqi dismisses. A spokesman for TEB Bank dismissed accusations that banks were involved in any form of price fixing.

Eight commercial banks operate in the Kosovo market, most of which do so with foreign capital.

"We have banks from Italy, Turkey, Albania and Germany that are interested in the Kosovo market," Kada said, adding that there is room for new banks in the market, which, according to him, could have a positive impact on Kosovo's economy, offering new services and new employment opportunities.

Rukiqi also believes that two to three more powerful banks could enter the Kosovo market, which could also lead to a lowering of interest rates.

"The bank service package is the poorest in the region, therefore competition would have a positive effect," says Rukiqi.

Bulgarian Organic Food Wets Europe's Appetite



By Boryana Dzhambazova

Producers spy profitable opportunity in Western Europe's expanding appetite for foods grown without chemicals.

Bulgarian farmers Tania and Hristo Penov enjoy working their land near the sun-drenched coastal city of Burgas.

The couple, aged 54 and 57 respectively, aided by their 29-year-old son Stefan, have farmed organic produce in the town of Sredets for four years.

But the family has a reason to be especially pleased with the fruits of their labour last year, when they sold 50 tons of organic wheat to Germany.

In Bulgaria, which remains one of central Europe's poorest countries as it emerges from its communist past, the Penovs are part of a newly emerging trend.

They are taking advantage of what observers say is a niche position Bulgaria, and other Balkan countries, may have in catering for their Western European neighbours' growing appetite for organic foods.

Tania Penov told Prishtina Insight: "We sent a sample of our wheat to Germany so the company could test it. It said the quality was excellent and bought all the produce."

"Bulgaria has an excellent opportunity to further explore this niche market and should take advantage of it, as in Europe this is a hefty business worth millions of euros."



Bulgaria hopes to export more organic produce, such as this garlic

She said Bulgaria was ideal for growing the produce as much of its land has not been farmed for years, so no chemicals or fertilisers are present in the soil - an essential requirement for growing uncontaminated organic produce.

She stressed the Balkan country could further gain a key position in the Western European market by offering organic produce to those countries that can't grow it themselves.

"This year, some German companies have been very interested in buying eggplants, peppers and tomatoes from us," Penov said. "However, we have to expand in order to provide the necessary volume they require."

Kamen Krastanov, a member of the newly established local Association of Organic Traders, thinks Sofia should embrace the opportunity to further develop its organic market.

"We have lots of land that has not been cultivated for years and which would be perfect for growing organic produce," he said.

The Penovs are among 500 local organic producers who are now exporting most of their produce to Western Europe.

More than 90 per cent of Bulgaria's organic produce is exported abroad, according to data from the Ministry of Agriculture, a trend underlining the potential that Bulgaria has as a promising supplier of organic foods to the European market.

Veselina Ralcheva, the chairwoman of the Bioproducts Association, which unites local organic producers, said the country could occupy a niche position in the marketplace in Western Europe, where many fruits and vegetables are grown by intensive or traditional farming methods.

Ralcheva is herself an organic producer, mainly growing lavender and roses, with about 95 per cent of her lavender oil going abroad - mostly to France, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands and with some going to Thailand and the United States.

She said that many Western nations do not have a sufficient quantity of crop land in general, let alone land suitable for growing organic produce.

"The labour there is very expensive and this makes organic production even harder," she said.

"There's a demand for Bulgarian organic produce because we offer quality and low, competitive prices."

The country also seems to acknowledge the good outlook for the country's organic market.

In 2007, Bulgaria adopted a five-year national plan for the development of the organic sector including further development of the overseas market.

The government wants 8 per cent of the land in the country to be used for organic agriculture by 2013.

An increase in the number of organic producers and volume of organic products are also among its goals.

The number of local producers grew ten-fold from 2003 to 2008, according to Bioselena, a local non-governmental organisation working in the field of organic agriculture and environment.

It estimates that there are around 500 organic farms in the country, up from 311 in 2008 and just 181 two years earlier.

Most of their produce is sold abroad - fruit and vegetables traditionally go to Western Europe while the United States, Canada and Japan are a good market for organic herbs and rose oil.

Bioselena's statistics show that the number of companies that import and trade organic products to Bulgaria has also rapidly increased from 14 last year to more than 120 today.

According to Stoilko Apostolov, the director of Bioselena, it is easier to sell organic produce in Germany because the organic sector is very advanced.

He said many big German companies buy, process and sell their production all over Europe, while in Bulgaria the processing sector is still in its initial phase.

Although Ralcheva agrees that Bulgarian producers have a bright future in Europe, she says the demand for its produce abroad is greater than the local producers can supply.

"Bulgaria has an image of a country that offers eco-friendly vegetables and products and we have all the necessary conditions to supply organic produce to Western Europe," Ralcheva said.

"Foreign companies want bigger quantities than local producers, working by themselves, can supply," she said.

Organic farming, according to Ralcheva, could also create more jobs. "Growing organic herbs, which are very popular abroad, could provide a living for people in remote mountainous areas where no other type of agriculture is possible."

Belgrade, Skopje Seek Paypal Service



By Bojana Barlovac

Macedonia and Serbia are to officially ask PayPal, the global system for conducting financial transactions over the Internet, to offer its services to the two countries, Serbia's Minister of Telecommunications has announced.

Jasna Matic said on Monday: "In a conversation with a colleague from Macedonia, we have concluded that the Macedonian case is exactly the same as ours - that they have been negotiating with PayPal for several years, but no concrete progress for the company to enter the market has been made."

He said the two countries would make a formal request to the company to introduce its services.

With many consumer websites only offering payments through PayPal, Serbian and Macedonian nationals find they are restricted to sites where the purchase of goods and services online has to be carried out using credit and debit cards.

Irena Lacmanovic, a student from Belgrade, told Prishtina Insight she was no longer able to download music from one website after it changed its payment system to ensure the security of transactions.

"For the sake of our safety, the online radio ... which I've been paying to listen to for ages has recently shifted to PayPal payments only, leaving many of us without access to our favourite music."

She said there was no other way to access the content as Serbia is not served by PayPal.

Irena belongs to 13 per cent of Serbian nationals who purchase online, according to the latest survey



by the Serbian Institute for Statistics on the use of information and communication technology, ICT, in the country.

With 87 per cent of Serbian nationals declining to purchase online, Matic said such statistics show there was no particular confidence in the country in the safety of internet payments.

"Additionally, relatively complicated customs procedures for goods coming from abroad make the whole thing more difficult," the Minister added.

She expressed her hope that the customs difficulty becomes history once the EU Stabilisation and Association Agreement, SAA, is implemented, since tariffs on EU goods would gradually be abolished.

The SAA, by which countries hoping to join the EU work to harmonise their domestic legislation with EU laws and implement reforms, is part of the pre-accession process and was the next important step on Serbia's path towards joining the bloc.

Serbia was given the EU pre-accession green light on June 14 when the 27 EU foreign ministers decided to submit the country's SAA to the parliaments of EU member states for ratification.

The PayPal system was founded in the US in 1998 and has been owned by eBay since 2002. It has been available in Europe since 2004.

The service enables the online sale and purchase of products and services, money transfers and provides security of shipments.

Another Ottoman Era House Faces the Bulldozers

The ornate ceilings and engraved walls will soon make way for another drab block if the owners receive planning permission



By Belinda Vrapı

One of Prishtina's most beautiful Ottoman houses, once owned by the local chieftain, is to make way for a new block of flats.

The home, which has been inhabited by the same family for 26 years, holds rare decorated ceilings and wooden walls with exquisite engravings.

But the ageing family, who asked not to be named, is waiting for planning permission from Prishtina Municipality so the land can be sold on for redevelopment.

The white-washed house is wedged in between a series of communist housing blocks just off Qamil Hoxha Street in central Prishtina.

It is visible from the toilets in Te Komiteti and can be accessed through the entrance of the next-door block.

The two main rooms offer ornate wooden carved and painted walls with the Star of David, the Crescent Moon, as well as Hebrew and Persian writing, according to the owner.

Not much is known of the house's history other than that it used to belong to the local Bey, a term for a local leader in Ottoman times.

The owner of the house told Prishtina Insight: "Many have come to see the house and they all are astonished and comment on its unique architecture."

"However we need a new house to live in," she said, "We are now waiting for the municipality to give permission to builders so they get the land and build."

Despite the home's impressive architectural features, it is not a protected building.

And Sali Shoshi, head of Cultural Heritage without Borders in Kosovo, told Prishtina Insight that even protected buildings are facing demolition.

"44 per cent of the houses have been demolished since after the war and once again I say the trend of demolishing old houses has to end," he said..



The house is facing demolition



One of the ornate walls of the main living area

Prishtina through the Eyes of:

Pierre Bonifassi,

Intern at European Commission
Liaison Office



1. What surprised you most about Prishtina?

The patience of people stuck in unexpected traffic jams due to road works.

2. What's your favourite hangout?

Dit e Nat in the afternoon, Tingle in the evening, Pishat for dinner, later Gegë for jazz music or Crème de la Crème.

3. Do you do anything cultural?

I go to concerts, festivals and exhibitions. With the visits of Morcheeba, Snoop Dogg and Tony Blair, Prishtina was definitely the place to be this summer. Otherwise, I'd like to organise my own photo exhibition in Prishtina in autumn with pictures taken in the region and in Kosovo (www.tame-time.com).

4. What is the most annoying thing about Prishtina?

Bars closed at midnight.

5. If you were mayor of Prishtina for the day what would you change?

I would definitely build a large parking lot to relieve the pavements from cars. And if my mandate is renewed for a second day, I would dig a new river in Prishtina. But where?

6. How many macchiatos do you drink a day?

Well, I'm not a macchiato drinker; I've many addictions but not this one. I know that I'm certainly missing a part of Kosovo culture. But if you ask for fresh orange juices or Peja beers...

7. What's the tastiest Kosovar food?

Burek më djath with yogurt from corner burektore. The best breakfast on earth.

8. What landmark do you use to tell taxi drivers where you live?

Hotel Ambasador!

State-of-the-Art Schools to be Completed in November

Two new, state-of-the-art vocational schools are to open in November after a 13million euro building programme.

The facilities, located in Skenderaj and Malisheve, have been funded by the Norwegian government.

Last week, Ambassador Sverre Johan Kvale visited both to meet construction workers and confirmed the November opening.

"The schools look really promising and will probably become the two best in the Balkans" he said.

The Skenderaj school will focus on building and construction, while students in Malisheve will study commerce, adminis-

tration and trade.

"It is crucial for the country to provide vocational training. This will hopefully mark a new era for education here," Kvale added

The curriculum has also been developed with help from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research.

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training has reported that the curriculum is in line with the requirements of the EU.

Kvale added: "The 1700 annual students will not only be a valued resource in Kosovo, but the level of education provided

will improve the opportunity of gaining employment everywhere in the world."

Minister of Education Enver Hoxhaj said the schools would become the best in Kosovo 'in terms of content, functionality and design'.

The schools are the starting point of a new mission for education in Kosovo," he said.

"Vocational education and training is the very best way of connecting education with the economy."

The schools will be completed in early November and their opening will be marked with a small ceremony.

The official opening will be held in March next year.



The new school in Malisheve

Bosnia Parties 'Repeating Election Promises'

Bosnia's ruling political parties, heavily favoured to win re-election in October polls, have been making the same promises to voters as before they took office four years ago, according to a leading civic association.

Sabina Arslanagic

The Sarajevo-based civic association Why Not (Zasto Ne?), said on Tuesday it had found the parties were repeating more than two-thirds, or 67.3 per cent, of the promises they made in 2006, after comparing key election pledges made in recent weeks by the five ruling Bosniak, Croat and Serb parties with the last general polls.

"Specifically, we found that the ruling parties repeated, in their programmes for the forthcoming elections, 247 out of the total of 367 promises they made in 2006," the association president Darko Brkan told Prishtina Insight.

The repeated promises included achieving constitutional changes, bringing the country closer to the EU and NATO, building health clinics and highways, reducing public spending and creating new

jobs for young people.

"It is discouraging that the ruling parties are repeating as much as two-thirds of their earlier promises ... they should have done what they promised in 2006 instead of trying to win re-election on unfulfilled promises," Brkan said.

Brkan voiced hope that voters would not allow politicians to "trick them" and would instead base their voting decisions on "what they (ruling parties) achieved over the past four years".

The study looked at the governing parties, namely the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina (SZBiH), two ruling Croat parties the Croat Democratic Union (HDZ) and the Croat Democratic Union 1990 (HDZ 1990) and Serb Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD).

A poll conducted in early August by the Bosnian office of the US National Democratic Institute, NDI, on a sample of 2,000 Bosnian citizens, showed that the opposition Social

Democrats, SDP, would win 29 per cent of the vote for the parliament of Bosnia's Croat-Bosniak part, followed by SDA with 9 per cent and HDZ with 7 per cent.

In the country's other part, the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska, the ruling SNSD would win 38 per cent while two opposition parties, the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) and Party of Democratic Progress would, win 17 and 16 per cent respectively.

The SDP's candidates for the country's central parliament also enjoyed the support of 20 per cent of the survey's participants, followed by respective 13, 7, 6 and 5 per cent for those who supported SNSD, SDA, SDS and HDZ.

Monitoring of the first 10 days of the pre-election campaign, which kicked off on September 3, by Sarajevo University's Alumni think-tank, ACIPS, revealed that Bosniak, Croat and Serb parties were largely focusing only on their respective ethnic groups.

The monitoring found that Bosniak parties were more likely to focus on real issues and



Election posters in Bosnia

Bosniak "unity".

But Croat and Serb parties dedicated most of their campaign to the issue of the "protection of national issues" relating to their groups, notably the possibility of creating a third entity for Croat people and securing a greater autonomy for Republika Srpska in the face of growing calls of the international community for strengthening the country's central institutions.

Under the Dayton Peace Agreement which ended Bosnia's 1992-95 war, the country was split into two highly independent parts - the Serb-dominated Republika

Srpska and the Croat-Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) Federation.

The Croat-Bosniak Federation is further divided into 10 cantons, each with its own parliament and governing responsibility for local issues.

In the October elections - the sixth since the 1992-95 Bosnian war - 50 political parties and coalitions will compete for seats in the state parliament, two entity parliaments and the parliaments of 10 cantons.

The country's collective presidency and president of the Republika Srpska will also be elected.

Romanians Protest Over 'Unsustainable' Pensions Reforms

While thousands demonstrate against harsh cuts, government says failure to change the system will jeopardise vital IMF deal.

Protests by trade unions and opposition parties against IMF-mandated pension reforms are unlikely to derail Romanian government plans to alter the system, analysts say. The current retirement system is bleeding billions of euros each year as the population ages.

Thousands of people across the country joined the protests this week against the austerity plans, which include cuts to pensions and raising the retirement age.

"My salary has been cut by nearly 40 per cent to about 250 euros a month," says Ionut Albescu, a Bucharest laboratory assistant who has been working for 40 years. "Next year, when I retire, I'll have a pension of less than 200 euros, which is not enough even to cover living expenses."

Albescu was among the demonstrators who on Wednesday carried whistles, balloons and flags and called on officials to resign, chanting: "Shame on you."

In July, the centre-right government of Emil Boc decided to slash pensions by 15 per cent and then freeze them in 2011.

The measure was undertaken as part of a reforms package concluded with the IMF and the EU in exchange for 20 billion euros in aid, designed to help Romania emerge from its financial crisis.

Furthermore, last week, parlia-

ment adopted a pensions law that would gradually increase the retirement age to 65 for men by 2015 and for women by 2030.

The retirement age today is 63 for men and 59 for women. The new law would also eliminate the special pensions currently given to certain categories of public-service workers.

Left-wing and liberal opposition deputies left the chamber to protest against the rejection of several of their amendments, including increasing the average pension to 45 per cent of the average gross wage, or 220 euros per month. The average pension now is 175 euros.

Speaking in parliament, Prime Minister Boc defended the changes. "In practice, the age of retirement is now 56-and-a-half for men... and 55-and-a-half for women," he said. "We can't go on with this early retirement system."

Unions and opposition deputies say the plan places an unfair burden on workers.

They have tabled counter proposals, including taxes on certain bonuses and on the highest incomes to help fund the pension system.

The main opposition Social Democrat Party, PSD, has also announced it will challenge the law in Romania's Constitutional Court.

They claim that the government inflated the number of lawmakers in parliament that day in order to



Romanians protesting against reforms

get the legislation passed.

The vote for the new pensions law resulted in 170 in favour and 2 against, according to the Speaker. In Romania's parliament, most votes are conducted by deputies using electronic cards. The opposition claims some MPs from the government side voted using cards of colleagues who were not actually present in the room.

Many analysts say unions' and politicians' opposition to the new pension law is just a way for them to save face. "People recognise the problems in the retirement system but don't want to be directly affect-

ed," economic analyst Ilie Serbanescu said.

"On the other hand, union leaders and opposition politicians are just playing their normal roles, opposing any measure that condemns people to make huge sacrifices," he added.

"Furthermore, the pension law is part of a package of measures agreed with the IMF, so it had to be adopted by the end of this month or we risk losing the money," he continued.

The law will now be sent to President Traian Basescu to sign.

Romania's public pensions sys-

tem has suffered from a growing deficit since 2008. The figure is forecast to reach 3 billion euros by the end of the year, forcing the state to borrow more in order to pay out pensions.

Experts agree that a communist-era pay-as-you-go pension system is unsustainable over the long term.

Romania spends the equivalent of 12 per cent of its GDP each year on pensions and welfare payments. Together with the bill for public-sector wages, this accounts for about two-thirds of the government's annual expenditures.

Macedonia's Psychiatric

Time stands still for residents of mental health facilities where degrading treatment is the norm, promised reforms never materialise and getting out is nearly impossible.



By Yana Bührer
Tavanier

Walking the dim, linoleum-covered corridors at the Demir Hisar psychiatric hospital, your feet stick to a floor covered in urine, faeces and soup. Bedraggled, unwashed women silently return from lunch, some carrying chunks of dry bread and others holding half-eaten cans of soup which drip onto the floor as they shuffle by.

Many are barefoot, their filthy feet making a gummy sound with each step they take. The women are all carrying spoons, pressing them close to their chests. One by one, they disappear into their bedrooms where pools of urine lie under some of the beds. There are no nightstands, lockers, personal items, photos or clothing.

"Shit, shit, shit everywhere," murmurs one woman, her eyes fixed on the floor at the entrance to the toilets of the locked women's ward at Demir Hisar in southwest Macedonia. Three steps forward and there it is – human excrement spread everywhere and dry sinks with no taps to clean up the mess.

The conditions at Demir Hisar, a Macedonian psychiatric hospital for 370 people, are mirrored around the region. Degrading treatment, human rights abuses and appalling neglect are all too common at mental health facilities as promised reforms never materialise, leaving the vulnerable to languish for years on end in shocking conditions.

An investigation by Prishtina Insight has found that Macedonia is failing to meet international standards, not only because of insufficient funds but rather a

lack of political will to improve the situation.

Residents appear warehoused, not treated; living conditions are dehumanising; and institutions are understaffed. Meanwhile, the process of reintegrating patients into the community is so slow and fraught with bureaucratic barriers that it is almost non-existent.

Chronic underfunding:

In Demir Hisar there are rooms for music therapy, art therapy and reading therapy.

But only 30 of the patients visit these rooms. Most are locked inside the wards – their daily routine, shuffling from bedroom, to bathroom, to day room, to canteen. They look anaemic, their pale skin glowing in the dark and damp corridors.

Patients at Macedonia's other psychiatric facilities fare little better.

In wards four and five at Bardovci, on the edge of the capital, Skopje, 30 ghosts sit inside the blue-tiled day room, which is locked from the outside. Dressed in pyjamas, they sit on benches or on the floor, rocking back and forth. Some have been there for more than 20 years.

Directors of the hospitals blame lack of resources for the many problems at their facilities.

"We urgently need cleaners. We have just 11 cleaners for the whole hospital. But there is a government-imposed moratorium on new hires because of the financial crisis, so our hands are tied," said Demir Hisar's then-director Laze Kuzmanovski who says 95 per cent of the hospital's budget goes on salaries. "Hygiene is a big, big problem," he adds.

The management of Negorci and Bardovci, the two other main psychiatric hospitals in



Macedonian psychiatric homes have seen little progress in decades

Macedonia, also complain of lack of funds and staff.

Petar Kangov from Negorci, a hospital for 220 people, says he needs doctors and social workers. Pavlina Vaskova, deputy director at Bardovci, which has 450 beds, says doctors, psychiatrists, 30 nurses and about 20 cleaners are needed if the hospital is to run properly.

Human rights groups are also calling on Macedonia to spend more on its psychiatric patients.

"The price of 365 Macedonian denars [6 euro] per patient, per day, for hospital treatment, does not correspond to realistic costs and is far from the expenditure necessary to treat these patients," said Toni Menkinoski, a lawyer with the Macedonian Helsinki Committee, MHC.

"The current situation in Macedonian psychiatric institutions is characterised not only by a lack of funding but also by a reluctance to implement changes and to introduce new methods, both on the organisational and individual levels," he said.

In a recent report, the MHC notes that "the general hygiene requirements for the building are not fulfilled... The bed linen is in a very poor state. There is an alarming and urgent need for mattresses and bed sheets.

"The treatment at these institutions is still limited mainly to pharmacotherapy... The patients who are in the locked wards have no access to a phone... Their right to non-censored correspondence is not respected. The letters patients receive are often read by the staff."

New curtains, same problems:

It takes a journalists' visit to briefly improve life for patients at Demir Kapija, an institution for people with intellectual disabilities in southeast Macedonia.

"Yesterday morning I was called by friends who work in the institution who said new sheets were put on the beds, curtains were hung, everybody was dressed," said Oliver Nedev, who resigned as director at Demir Kapija in 2008 but until recently continued to work there as a doctor.

But the newly-hung curtains and the neatly made beds covered in stuffed toys don't hide the reality of Demir Kapija.

Twenty-eight-year-old Ilcho was

Girl Injured in Phone Mast Explosion



By Petrit Collaku

A three-year-old girl was injured on Tuesday night when a bomb went off on the roof of the building in which she lived in the Serb-majority north Mitrovica.

The detonation was aimed at a mast operated by IPKO, a Prishtina-licensed firm, and followed Kosovo's telecommunications regulator action against Serbian-licensed operators.

Serbia's mobile and landline telephone connections across most of Kosovo were interrupted on Monday on Tuesday after Kosovo's Telecommunication Regulatory

Authority, ART, dismantled 23 masts.

Kosovo police confirmed they had escorted ART engineers in a village in the Vushtrri municipality.

"Kosovo police continued today to offer assistance to ART... there was no security threat during the operation," Baki Kelani, a Kosovo police spokesperson, told Balkan Insight.

ART's action started early on Sunday with the support of Kosovo special police units.

Kosovo police officials said they were alerted to the presence of about 500 Kosovo Serbs near Dren village in Zubin Potok, north of Kosovo, who were attempting to obstruct the cutting of phone lines in the area.

"There were explosions and shots fired from the crowd, but not in the

direction of the police," Besim Hoti, the Kosovo police spokesperson for Mitrovica, told Balkan Insight, adding that the situation in the north was now calm.

Hoti said the Kosovo police received information on Saturday from a Kosovo Serb that a bomb could have been fixed to an antenna in Tvrdjan village, Leposavic municipality, that belonged to Kosovo's mobile operator, Vala.

"Kosovo police found some 200 grams of TNT mounted in the antenna and removed it successfully," Hoti said.

ART claimed in April that Serbian telecoms operators were working illegally in Kosovo.

The firms, using the phone prefixes of 063 and 064, function in Kosovo through Telekom Srbija, Telenores

and VIP companies that have antennas in Kosovo.

Telekom Srbija said in a statement on Sunday they would not abandon their users and workers in Kosovo, and were ready to do everything necessary to restore communication services.

Oliver Ivanovic, the State Secretary of Serbia's Ministry for Kosovo and Metohija, believes that representatives of "certain countries" in Pristina had supported the move, claiming it could only have been carried out with the support of Kosovo Albanians.

"It shows that the international community is not unanimous in the assessment of the situation and measures that are to be taken for this part of the Western Balkans," Ivanovic said.



Police investigating the crime scene

Neighbourhood

Homes Wallow in Neglect

taken from his abusive father who kept him chained in the yard of his home in Angelci, a small village. The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare placed him in Demir Kapija.

Eighteen months later, he lies curled up in his bed, his knees almost touching his chin. "This is what he does all day, because that's the position he was in when he was chained in the yard by his father," said one of the workers, adding that Ilcho doesn't undergo any special therapy.

Nedev blames inadequate and unqualified staff for the problems at Demir Kapija, which houses 280 people including children.

"Last year we had presidential and local elections. Demir Kapija is a small place, and 150 people were employed on temporary contracts in the institution - so that they and their families would support the party of the mayor," he said.

"These are unqualified people taken from the street, picked simply according to their political alliances," he added. "And they are supposed to provide special care to people with disabilities? They are harmful."

Nedev, who says he was fired as doctor when he shared his concerns with the local press, claims residents eat bread with tea twice a day and just once a day have lentils, peas or cabbage. He also claims that the heating fuel is being stolen and that it is bitterly cold in the winter inside the buildings.

Petre Nikolov, the director of Demir Kapija, dismissed the allegations as "pure speculation". He says he has no need for more staff and denies there are financial problems at the hospital.

However those monitoring Demir Kapija share Nedev's concerns.

"There is no individualised therapy. We've been saying for some time now that it needs to be developed. But in this institution there are ... way too many unqualified staff," said Slobodanka Zdravkowska, the head of the social welfare ministry's department for the protection of persons with disabilities.

Hear no evil, see no evil:

Conditions in the institutions should be closely monitored by the European Commission as Macedonia is an EU candidate country, and respect for human rights is one of the main criteria for accession to the union.

The EC spokesperson for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, Angela Filote, declined to comment to Prishtina Insight's questions on how the commission monitors psychiatric hospitals and social care homes in Macedonia, and on whether it looks at living conditions, standards of care and human rights abuses.

She also declined to comment on whether there are any recent EC documents on the subject, other than the annual progress reports, which say little about the matter.

Konstantin Jovanovski, a press officer at the EC delegation in Skopje, said monitoring the situation in psychiatric hospitals is not in the EC's mandate.

"Even though the institutions that you mention are not subject of direct monitoring by the EC in the country, their work is in the scope of the protection of human rights and freedoms," he said.

"Therefore, we do our best to encourage the country to fulfill the highest European standards in this, as well as in every other sphere, so that it can sooner join the EU family," he added.

Prisons or hospitals?

Long stays in psychiatric facilities are the norm in Macedonia. Many resemble social care homes, and a great number of the patients end up there for life.

In the past year, 770 patients out of a total of 1,125 at the three main psychiatric hospitals in the country had been hospitalised for more than 180 days.

In Bardovci, around 100 patients are there permanently - some have been hospitalised for longer than 20 years. About half of the people in Demir Hisar have been there for more than 10 years. "Some 150-200 could easily leave immediately if they had somewhere to go," said Kuzmanovski.

But they don't. Macedonia has no network of community-based services such as day-care centres or community housing that could help people with mental health problems leave the institutions.

There is also no government strategy for the deinstitutionalisation of the psychiatric hospitals.

The Ministry of Health did not respond to repeated requests from Prishtina Insight for comment on the government's plans for getting patients back into the community and on the poor conditions in the hospitals. A representative also failed to attend a pre-arranged interview.

Others, however, have plenty to say on the situation. "The living conditions in the psychiatric hospitals are catastrophic. The process of deinstitutionalisation should be speeded up," said Idzet Memeti, Macedonia's ombudsman. "We have to pull them out."

There are those trying to help but progress is slow and the government is being blamed for foot-dragging.

The Open Society Mental Health Initiative, OSMHI, a body focused on clos-

ing down institutions in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, signed an agreement with the Macedonian government in 2008 to help Demir Kapija residents move back into the community.

OSMHI agreed to fund the process, which included providing housing, establishing community living, providing training and covering living expenses. Under the plan, 64 people per year should leave the institution over a period of three years. But the process has been slow and since 2008 only about 40 people have left Demir Kapija.

"With the Macedonian government we have papers and lots of promises," said Judith Klein, the director of OSMHI. "The fact is that we have 40 people who left Demir Kapija who are now completely new people, living in the community like dignified human beings," she added.

"The problem is that there seem to be so many excuses to delay real progress on this project, and we are already so far behind.

"If there are elections we lose half a year. Then there are many bureaucratic hurdles that have to be jumped, and in all of this it is difficult to understand why those responsible do not recognise that now is the time that a committed donor is offering this partnership, making the transformation of one of their worst institutions absolutely doable and with a result that will not only be an enormous human rights victory but a major success for the government."

Snezhana Mihajlova, the head of a four-person department in the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, responsible for the coordination and implementation of the government's deinstitutionalisation strategy, insists the state is committed to getting patients out of Demir Kapija.

"Our priority for 2010 is to open six more apartments in Skopje, and then to take an additional 132 people out of Demir Kapija, leaving only the people with the most severe retardation and those that need medical support," she said.

"These would be around 150 people." She says those who continue to need psychiatric care could be moved to smaller facilities, "but that would need a lot of funding and is something to be considered for the future".

Klein says that in order to implement coherent and economically efficient social welfare reform, the institution must be closed completely and alternatives developed for all the residents.

"The most disabled people are the most vulnerable and need the most assistance, not the least assistance, and they can never be provided a decent quality of life in an

institutional setting. It is economically inefficient to keep part of the institution operating as well as operate the alternative system in the long term. Eventually there will need to be a complete shift to the community-based system.

"This is what had to happen in other countries, and investments in attempting to 'improve the conditions' for the most disabled people in the institutions were clearly poor investments. In the Macedonian context, we have the benefit of hindsight, but that does not seem to count for much here," said Klein.

Gordana Trajkovska, who has a child with an intellectual disability, is the director of Poraka Negotino, an NGO that provides community-based housing and other support to those who have come out of Demir Kapija through the OSMHI programme.

"We managed to take very few people out of the institution. We literally have to pull people out. The institution resists people leaving, because it receives funding on a per capita basis," she said.

Based in Negotino, a small town close to Demir Kapija, Poraka Negotino operates a day centre for people with intellectual disabilities and manages the houses for organised community living where former patients from Demir Kapija have relocated.

The houses are rented from local people, and there is full time support provided by assistants which is reduced over time according to individual needs.

"At first the people in the town were against us, but now we have 20 applications from homeowners who want to rent them out to us. People saw that there is nothing to be afraid of," said Trajkovska.

Verche is one of the residents of the community-based homes run by Poraka Negotino. Now 31, she had spent her entire life in Demir Kapija before being taken out a year ago.

"I remember her very well, this specific face," said Toni Menkinoski from the Macedonian Helsinki Committee. "I saw her a couple of years ago when I was in Demir Kapija. She was strolling the yard like a ghost, dressed in filthy grey rags, not wanting or not being able to communicate with anyone. Being here, even for this very short time, has done wonders for this girl. Before she had absolutely no human dignity."

Yana Buhner Tavanier is a free-lance Sofia based journalist and 2009 fellow in Birn's Balkan Fellowship for journalistic excellence program. Balkan Insight is BIRN's online publication. See more at humansnullandvoid.wordpress.com

Albania Faces US Cash Threat over Courts Bill

The US Embassy in Tirana has warned Albania's political parties they must pass a long-delayed bill to create an administrative court by the end of the month - or risk losing Millennium Challenge Funding.

The Embassy said in a statement on Tuesday: "In order to complete planned activities with US funding, the law must be passed by September 30.

"Failure to enact this legislation will result in the closure of Administrative Courts' activities

administered under the Threshold Programme by USAID."

The Administrative Courts bill is one of six components of the Millennium Challenge Corporation Threshold Programme II - Albania.

The draft law has been pending in parliament since early last year. Under the Millennium Challenge Agreement, USAID would work with Albania's government and judiciary to establish the Administrative Courts once the law was passed.

Albania's business community has long supported the creation of the court, which they see as a means to protect the rights and legal interests of all citizens.

To pass the new law, the Albanian government will need to secure a two-thirds majority incorporating opposition parties.

However, opposition leader Edi Rama has declined to give leeway to consensus reforms in parliament following the contested June 28 parliamentary elections, narrowly won by the right-wing gov-

ernment of Prime Minister Sali Berisha. The socialists want the government to instruct a parliamentary investigative commission to recount the parliamentary elections ballots, in return for them voting on bills requiring more than a simple majority.

However, the government has so far refused the opposition's request, claiming that they have exhausted all legal means.

The ruling majority is expected to send the bill for a vote in parliament on Thursday.



American Ambassador to Tirana

EU Continues 'KFOR' Fuel Smuggling Probe



By Petrit Collaku

Police in Kosovo have said they are continuing their investigation into the sale of contraband fuel to petrol stations.

Two wanted individuals, who are believed to be abroad, were still being sought on Monday after five people were arrested in connection with the major organised crime probe last week.

All five were remanded in custody at Pristina Municipal Court on Thursday for 30 days.

Soldiers from the NATO mission in Kosovo, KFOR, are suspected of selling fuel intended for military purposes from one of their bases to petrol stations.

KFOR said in a statement last week that some soldiers were suspected of having "been involved in the case of fuel smuggling, tax evasion, and misuse of economic authorisation".

"KFOR condemns all criminal acts and the involved nation has initiated all appropriate measures, including disciplinary and criminal investigations."

But, despite the acknowledgement, no troops have been arrested to date. However, according to media reports in Ukraine, prosecutors are preparing cases against suspects suggesting the soldiers will be tried in their homeland.

During 2008 and 2009, three million litres of fuel of contraband fuel is suspected of having been sold to three private petrol stations; AS Graniti in Stime owned by Agim and Sali Beqaj, Alb Petrol in Podujevo owned by Idriz Ejupi and Onazis in Prishtina owned by brothers Nazmi and Nexhmi Kastrati.

A spokeswoman for EULEX told Prishtina Insight that no KFOR soldiers were currently wanted in connection with the investigation, but added that enquiries were ongoing and did not rule out further action.

It has been reported that soldiers from the Ukrainian contingent, based in the southern Kosovo town of Strpce, are suspected of involvement in the alleged smuggling operation.

Kosovo Serb Dimitrije Davidovic, a suspect who EULEX had been searching for in north Mitrovica, was later discovered to be in a Belgrade prison where he has been held since May on drug trafficking charges.

KFOR soldiers are protected by diplomatic immunity which would have to be lifted if any were to face trial in Kosovo.

Albanians Vie for Religious

Once lauded as a symbol of religious tolerance, the opening of Prishtina's new cathedral has stirred simmering resentment among many Kosovar Muslims.



By Gjergj Erebara
in Prishtina,
Skopje and Tirana

"Often, during the winter, we have to pray directly on cold snow," says Sallahudin Brahimaj, 20, who worships at an improvised mosque in Prishtina's Dardania district.

The Dardania Mosque was formally a shop, sited on the ground floor of a Communist-era apartment block.

Muslims in Kosovo's capital city are not only angry about the poor facilities in their existing

Muslim country where just five per cent of the 2 million inhabitants are Christian, some claim this is outright discrimination. Ninety per cent of the population is ethnic-Albanian.

Ferid Agani is chairman of Justice Party of Kosovo, a popular political party of practicing Muslims in the country.

'Discrimination'

"The Muslim community had made a lawful request to have a piece of land in Prishtina to build a new grand mosque. The authorities refused that and we consider this an unacceptable discrimination against Muslims," Agani



A worshipper at a Prishtina mosque

mosques. They are increasingly voicing concerns about the resources pumped into building - and the location granted to - Prishtina's new Catholic cathedral.

Although most Muslims say they have no objection to Christianity or the building of churches, some feel that Catholics are benefiting from preferential treatment by the authorities seeking to emphasise links with the largely Christian EU.

In a predominately

claims.

Although Prishtina has many Ottoman-era and more modern mosques, those wanting to pray on Fridays and on holy days are often forced outside onto the pavement, leading

to calls for a
g r a n d

mosque to be built in the city.

This refusal to grant land in Prishtina to the Muslim community for a new grand mosque back in 2004 - after land was earmarked in the capital for the new cathedral in 2000 - is at the heart of the dispute.

Fatmir Sejdiu, the former Kosovar president, formally opened the Cathedral of Blessed Mother Teresa on September 5, exactly 13 years since the death of Mother Teresa, the ethnic-Albanian nun born in Skopje, Macedonia.

Just days after the official opening, the walls of the cathedral lauded by Sejdiu as a symbol of Albanian religious tolerance, were covered in graffiti and flyers.

"This year, we will pray Bajram [Eid] in the new cathedral," is just one example of the graffiti scrawled across a number of walls of the city.

Nehat Krasniqi, professor of Turkish language and history in the University of Prishtina, says: "I think that the government must be just in such matters. We saw the President [Rugova] marking the start of the construction of the cathedral and people were wondering here if he would mark as well the start of the construction of a new mosque.

"Every Albanian understands that the cathedral is important, that the headquarters of the church should be here in the capital city. "But this attitude had angered even people who are not practicing Muslims."

Ibrahim Rugova, the former president of Kosovo, is rumoured to have converted to Christianity just before his death in January 2006.

A question of envy?

Others, however, dismiss complaints about the cathedral as mere jealousy.

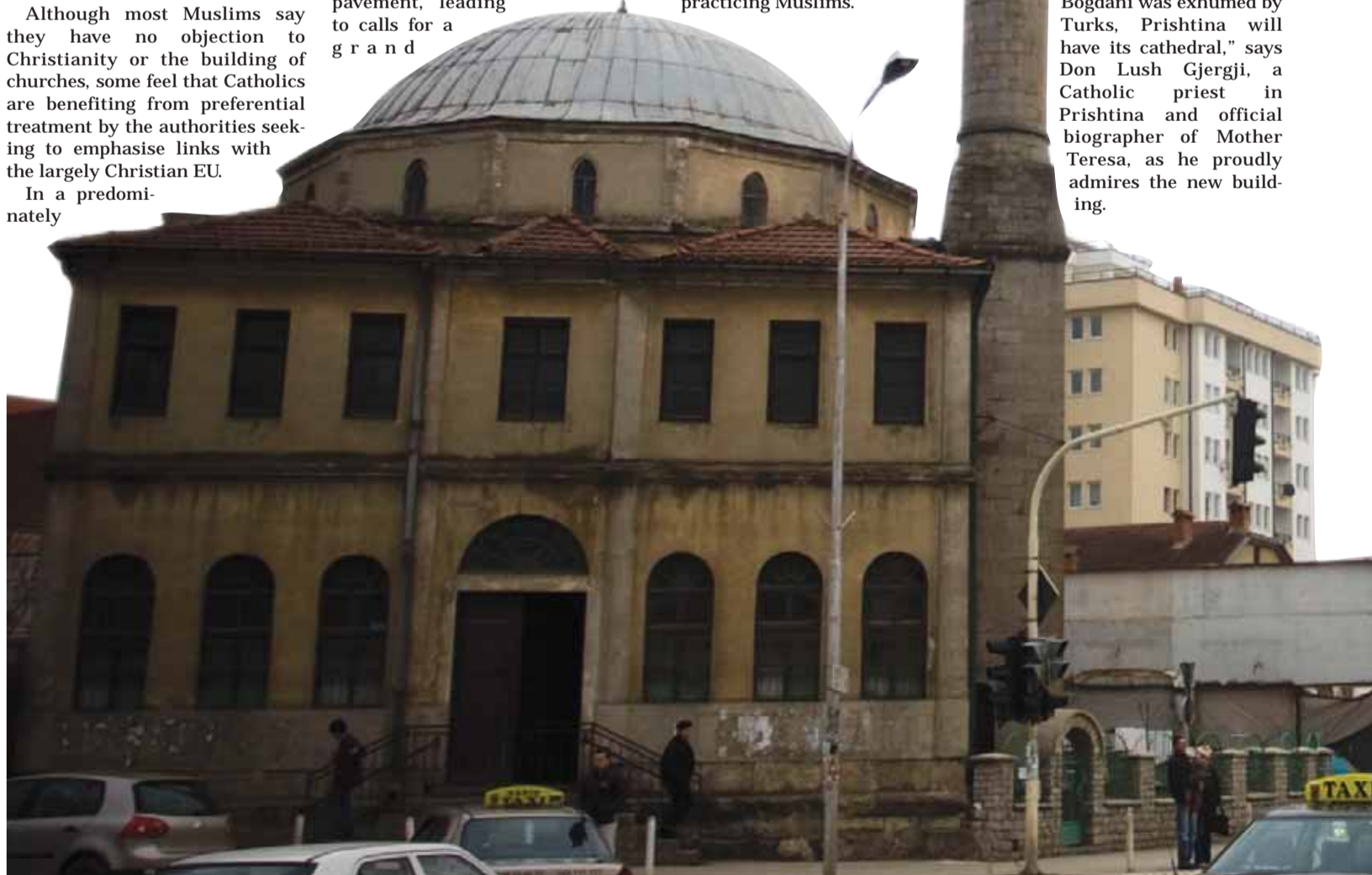
Jahja Drancolli, professor of History at the University of Prishtina, notes: "It is well known that the Muslim community needs new buildings. In the era of Milosevic, Islam was a way of resistance.

"Now we can see on Friday at noon that thousands of people pray directly in the streets. The Muslim community's request is, for me, more a question of envy: 'As they are building a church, we want a mosque as well'."

Drancolli says this has developed into "unnecessary religious rivalry".

For the small community of Catholics in Kosovo, estimated at 60,000, the building of Prishtina's new cathedral is evidence that Albanians are turning towards the West.

"Finally: 311 years after the body of Pjeter Bogdani was exhumed by Turks, Prishtina will have its cathedral," says Don Lush Gjergji, a Catholic priest in Prishtina and official biographer of Mother Teresa, as he proudly admires the new building.



Feature

Sites across Balkans



Pristina's new cathedral has been welcomed by many, but some Muslims feel angered that plans to build a grand mosque in the city have not received support

Bogdani, a Catholic Albanian Archbishop who fought the Ottomans in the Turkish-Austrian war of 1664-1669, briefly liberated the city in 1668, before his death to the plague. He was then exhumed by Ottoman soldiers and fed to dogs in Prishtina's square.

His death represented the last time Kosovo's Catholicism was based in Prishtina, as the church then moved to the city of Prizren.

But with the building of the new cathedral, the capital of Kosovo has been upgraded by the Roman Catholic church from parish to diocese status, says Father Gjergji, and the church headquarters moved back to Prishtina.

According to Father Gjergji, Pjeter Bogdani "was a predecessor of what we call now the European Union".

Critics of the decision to fund a new cathedral but not a new

grand mosque also note a political dimension.

"The new cathedral in Prishtina is just a political initiative," says Ramadan Ramadani, imam at the Isa Beg mosque in Skopje, in neighbouring Macedonia. "It has nothing to do with religion."

Shifting power balance

Disputes over ownership - spiritual or material - of religious sites and monuments are on the increase across Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania.

Drancolli, Professor of History at the University of Prishtina, explains: "Religious places have always been part of shifting power balance between religions as well ethnicities in these areas."

In Skopje, plans to regenerate the city centre include building an Orthodox church. However, Muslims claim that the church will be built on the site of a mosque.

"We have shown them photos of the mosque that was destroyed by an earthquake in 1920, but they said that before the

O t t o m a n

invasion there was a church, so they claim ownership," says Ramadani, who has organised protests against the government.

In city of Shkodra, northern Albania, a row erupted in 2004

"Often, during the winter, we have to pray directly on cold snow," says Sallahudin Brahimaj, 20, who worships at an improvised mosque in Prishtina's Dardania district.

when the Institute of Monuments, a government-run institution, announced that it would fund repairs to a ruined building in the city, a castle once called the Saint Stefan Church.

Local Muslims protested saying that for them, the ruined building was the Fatih Sultan Mosque.

Pellumb Xhufi, a historian in the capital Tirana, says the building had not been used as a mosque for two centuries and underlines that the Saint Stefan Cathedral also has great spiritual value for Catholics.

Both Catholic and Muslim clerics tried

to stage religious ceremonies in the place as part of their claims. The row came to an end when the Institute of Monuments cancelled its plans to repair the building.

"This is a very old story," says Nehat Krasniqi, professor of Ottoman studies at the University of Prishtina.

"In the 1920s, the Serbian Church pretended that the grand mosque of Prizren was built using stones stolen from a monastery five centuries ago and the government tried to destroy the mosque in order to take the stones. Albanians protested at that time and one government representative was killed.

"At the end, I think that religious objects are the property of the community where they are situated and it is up to the community to decide what to do with them.

In Kosovo we have well documented cases when an entire village was converted to Islam, including the priest, so the church was transformed into a Mosque. It is nonsense if some other village then claims ownership of the church."

Prishtina Insight requested a response from the Municipality of Prishtina, a spokesman declined to comment.

'Mass Grave' Search Launched in Serb Village



By Bojana Barlovac

War crimes investigators have begun searching a fresh site in a Serbian village believed to contain a mass grave holding the bodies of more than 250 Kosovo Albanians killed during the 1998-99 war.

Investigators from Serbia and the European Union rule of law mission, EULEX, began searching ground in the village of Rudnica in southwest Serbia on Thursday after an earlier probe at a different location nearby failed to make any discoveries, officials from Serbia's War Crimes Prosecutor's office told Prishtina Insight.

Serbian deputy war crimes prosecutor Bruno Vekaric told broadcaster RTS it was hoped the investigation would "put an end" to speculation over what happened in Rudnica during the Kosovo War.

"Each family must know what happened to its missing ones," he said.

It has not been determined who killed the people believed buried at the site in the Raska region, but bodies are believed to have been unearthed and then re-buried in order to hide evidence of war crimes committed during the rule of Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

Aerial imagery has suggested corpses could be buried in the area, but the exact location remains unknown.

Samples taken from the site will be sent to Belgrade for analysis to determine whether skeletal remains are present, Vekaric said.

Serbia announced on May 10 that, with the help of EULEX, it had uncovered a mass grave.

An investigation at the site ordered shortly after by the Serbian War Crimes Prosecutor's Office failed to yield results.

The excavations launched on Thursday at a different location were ordered following a detailed study of aerial footage of the area.

Meanwhile, investigations were also launched on Thursday at a site in Belacevac/Bellaqevc in Kosovo, believed to contain the bodies of 25 Serbs killed during the war.

"It is important to mention that Veljko Odalovic [President of the Serbian Assembly Board for Missing Persons] and investigative judge Milan Dilparic are present in Belacevac/Bellaqevc, where Serb victims are supposedly buried," Vekaric added.





Hiking to the old Macedonian Pass

Winter is approaching but there are still a few weeks left of crisp clear hiking air awaiting you in the mountains of Dragash



By Todd Wassel

Located in the southern end of Kosovo, Dragash is an oasis of untouched natural beauty and traditional villages sandwiched between the borders of Macedonia and Albania. Ignored by the Yugoslav government, the area never received development money for tourism despite its wealth of flora, fauna and cultural traditions.

Luckily, this also spared the region the communist era concrete hotels and restaurants that mar similar regions in Kosovo.

To help spur sustainable eco-tourism to the region and highlight an untouched wonder in the Balkans, I'm helping to write a hiking guide to the Dragash Region implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and funded by the Finland government.

There is no better way to experience this traditional area than by hiking the old pass to Tetovo, Macedonia.

Not only can you walk the old smuggling paths trodden by horses burdened with heavy oil barrels during the sanctions placed on Yugoslavia, but the view into Macedonia with its dramatic mountains and sheer cliffs is unforgettable.

The oil barrels from this period are still used to cover houses and storage areas.

This hike is harder and longer than the others I have written about but worth every second.

For those less ambitious the first part of the hike is easy, nestled in a gorgeous river valley and makes an easy 3 hour round trip hike.

Old Macedonian Pass

STARTING POINT:

Brod, from the cemetery

ENDING POINT:

Brod, the Cule hiking path

TIME- 7 hours (long hike);
2 1/2 hours (easy hike)

STARTING ELEVATION-

1,384 meters

HIGHEST ELEVATION-

2,265 meters

DIFFICULTY-

Hard or Easy (it's your choice!)

The Route

The path starts on the eastern edge of Brod. Enter the town from the Dragash road and turn left when the road ends.

Follow the river up past the mosque until you reach the edge of town with the cemetery above to the left.

Climb up the steep hill until you see the source of the river flowing out of the narrow gorge.

Follow the river and the gorge for about 1 hour until you reach a large bolder towering over the river.

From here climb up the hill to the right until you are above the bolder and you see a path that takes you to a flat area (perfect for camping) and a spring to fill water bottles further on. This where the easy hike ends and the longer hike continues.

Follow the path through the valley until it ends at a river. Cross the river and climb the mountain following a small goat path through up to the left of a sharp peak and then around it to the right and then up.

Your goal is the top of the mountain so feel free to get there any way that makes sense. Once you reach the top, after a long and steep climb, you will see the top on your right. This is where you will see the old wagon tracks and the remnants of a stone rest house. Keep going up to the right until you reach a drop off and magnificent views of towards Macedonia where Mt. Tito pokes its sharp head into the sky.

From here you start your return to Brod by keeping Macedonia on your left and the valley you hiked through on your right far, far below.

Make your way until you see the point of



A house in the picturesque village of Brod

Mt Cule (see earlier hiking article at www.toddswanderings.com) to your left and follow the contours of the path and mountain until you reach Cule.

Be careful not to go down the steep mountain as it drops suddenly and is dangerous. Keep on the goat paths and it will bring you around the backside of Cule and eventually down to the normal shepherd paths that lead back to Brod.

From Cule head down and cross a small river and you will see a clear path.

Just head towards Brod at this point and you can't go wrong. Remember part of the joy of hiking in Dragash is finding your own way, which is very easy as no trees obstruct your view.

How to Get There

Driving from Prishtina takes about two-and-a-half hours to reach Brod by car.

Drive to Prizren and follow the one way roads through the city taking a sharp left at the city centre and following signs for Kukes and Dragash where you will take a right hand turn to leave the city.

Continue on the road to Kukes for about 15 km until you come to an intersection with signs pointing left to Dragash.

Turn left and follow this road into the valley for about 30 km until you come to the town of Dragash itself.

Continue through Dragash centre following signs for Brod.

The road after Dragash winds its way through the mountains for another 20 minutes until you come to Brod, the last town along the road.

For more information on more hikes in Dragash and other great spots to visit in Kosovo go to www.toddswanderings.com.

Feature

New Books Help Reconcile Balkan History Quarrels

As Kosovo moves to remove 'inappropriate' text books for its Serbian students, Prishtina Insight looks at programmes across the Balkans to help erase nationalist history



By Bojana Barlovac

A Kosovo Ministry of Education commission last week moved to remove textbooks which included maps of the Balkans without Kosovo, Serbian songs with violent words and a 'Music and Art' book which only includes the Serbian national anthem.

The decision drew criticism from Kosovo Serbs, who argued the commission's decision was an assault on their identity.

Vesna Jovanovic, a professor of Serbian language and literature in the Middle Technical High school in Partesh, told the Deutsche Welle news organisations: "Simply, with this procedure the Ministry of Education from Prishtina hits our national identity, in language, culture, history, geography, and those are things to which every nation is sensitive."

Others believe the ruling forms part of the region's move to tackle the perceptions of the past with new history texts trying to broaden people's understanding of bitter controversies.

A major initiative on teaching modern history in the Balkans is aiming to bring a new way of thinking about painful historical issues.

Sixty historians from 11 countries in Southeast Europe have taken part in the project, which has resulted in the publication of four history workbooks for teachers.

The books tackle a range of controversial

topics from the Ottoman Empire to the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 and the Second World War.

However, the Yugoslav wars of the nineties have been omitted, owing to the lack of historic distance, authors said.

The Serbian edition of the four workbooks, entitled Teaching Modern Southeast European History - Alternative Educational Materials, published by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe and Dan Graf, was presented in Belgrade on September 20.

The four workbooks have already been published in Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, English, Greek, Macedonian and Turkish.

Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria are the only former Yugoslav or Balkan countries that have not introduced the books.

The authors say the books are designed to respond to difficult issues, on which teachers are expected to provide answers to students in class.

Historian Dubravka Stojanovic, editor of the Serbian edition, says comparative analysis of existing history textbooks of countries in Southeast Europe shows that all of them, from Slovenia to Cyprus, tend to present themselves in their history books as unique victims, particularly as victims of neighbouring countries.

"All the nations have seen history as the source and guardian of their national identity," she said. Through teaching materials, governments in the region had repeatedly changed facts in accordance to the needs of the moment, she added.

As countries reinforce their own identities by blackening the images of neighbouring nations, the important task of fostering

of good regional relations is endangered, she continued.

Stojanovic believes history needs to be presented as "a discussion", not as a single truth. "There is no one history," she maintained.

The new workbooks do not aim to offer a new, single truth about past controversies but a variety of viewpoints, gained through comments, documents, letters and pictures.

Together, they present a diverse picture about how the various nations have seen a common past through different eyes.

The fall of the main Ottoman fortress of Edirne, in Thrace, in the Balkan War of 1913, is one such event tackled in this way.

This historic battle has been differently interpreted by the two countries involved, with both Serbs and Bulgarians arguing that their armies broke through the Ottoman defences, making them the sole victors.

The new textbook offers three viewpoints, one from a Serbian Army Major, Milovan Gavrilovic, describing his own army's victory; a second from the French military attaché in Sofia, whose letter says the Bulgarian army seized Edirne; and a third from a Romanian newspaper article, lauding the heroic resistance of the Ottoman Turks.

Praising the new books, Serbia's Education Minister, Zarko Obradovic, said past events needed to be explained in their fullest extent. "Some truths may hurt some - but one should not flee from this because facts have to be faced," he said.

Obradovic said the Balkan countries have paid a high price for their unilateral approach to the interpretation of the past



One of the revised text books

and ought to discuss all events more openly. "We should not run away from any sensitive topic," Obradovic added.

The workbooks also cover the worst brutalities of the Second World War, including a chapter on the Holocaust that contains confessions and documents from the concentration camps that operated in the region.

The books present history as more than dates of wars, coronations, assassinations and political events, delving into the position of women, the state of culture, and the life of ordinary people in wartime.

In the volume covering the Ottoman Empire, there are segments on divorce in Bulgaria and Cyprus, then very rare, and on the phenomenon of people changing religion for the sake of love and marriage.

The workbooks do not deal with the 1990s, closing with events such as the May 1989 declaration in which Slovenians declared their ambition to live in a sovereign state and the violent Serbian-Croatian football match, which, in retrospect, heralded the bloody collapse of the Yugoslav federation.

However, later this year, regional historians are to meet in Thessaloniki, Greece, to discuss the events of the 1990s with a view to adding a new volume covering this period.

Although the books do not deal with the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s - whose origins remain contentious - they do contain more recent information about events from 2000 onwards.

Four points from Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence are presented on one page of the textbook while the Serbian parliament's reaction to the declaration is placed on the facing page. A suggested question about these issues is for students to cite three arguments in favour of Kosovo's stance and three in favour of Serbia's.

Students in Serbia will continue learning from the old history books until enough teachers have been trained in new teaching methods so that they can successfully use the books in class.

"Some 150 history teachers have been trained so far and another 120 are expected to be trained by the year's end, which would be 10 per cent of the total number of history teachers in the country [Serbia]," Stojanovic explained.

So far, evaluations of training sessions have shown that Serbian teachers like the books and find them challenging, she added.

Only in Serbia will the workbooks serve as required teaching material.

"It is not part of the regular programme in other countries but teachers [from other countries] have accepted it as additional teaching material," said Nenad Sebek, programme director of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, which stands behind the project.



Students across the Balkans are seeing their history text books reworked for the better

Metro – An Above Average Spot for Subs



By Fortuna

Sandwiches, the staple lunch of much of the developed world is not such a developed tradition in Kosovo's quickly developing capital city.

Cheese, prosciutto or tuna seem to be the limit of the known sandwich filling world.

In downtown Prishtina, next to the 'fancy-looking' Grand Hotel, you can find one of the city's best lunchrooms – Metro.

This well established café isn't, unfortunately, revolutionising the world of midday meals, but it's one of the best options in town for a quick lunch.

Do not let the rather sober and not particularly inviting exterior of the place stop you from stepping inside. If you are not up for buzzing, overcrowded Pejton, this is a very good alternative to seek refuge.

The small eatery offers a practical, not very inspiring interior but the large windows on both sides give the place a fresh and light look.

Metro's audience varies from internationals to those London Kosovars who pass the day away sipping espresso and enjoying the view of streets bustling with people.



Metro serves a standard menu of decently priced sandwiches, 2 Euro, and pasta salads 4 Euro, with the options of egg-salad, tuna, chicken and chicken curry.

As the salads are already prepared, on display close to the entrance to instantly make your mouth water, it does not take long for lunch to be served.

The chicken sandwich is good, but not extraordinarily different from those served in a dozen other places in Prishtina.

For the pasta salad, we opted for tuna, which was nicely plated and makes a colourful whole.

The delicious marinade disguised that the pasta was slightly overcooked. The salad, made up of the usual lettuce, carrots and beetroot, with olive oil as dressing, is very refreshing and forms a tasty combination with the tuna salad.

It is a not too overpowering lunch but



One of Metro's fine salads

definitely enough to assuage that feeling of midday hunger.

In case you are up for afters, make sure to order one of Metro's delicious desserts; it offers an array of muffins and absolutely outstanding apple pie.

If not, allow yourself to enjoy the relaxed atmosphere a bit longer and find yourself drifting off to downtown London.

All in all, Metro offers a friendly, unfussy environment where what you see is what you get. All it needs is a bit more variety.

Two stars

Metro

Garibaldi Nr 3/1

Prishtina, Kosova

+377 44 113-000

Where to pick up Prishtina Insight?

Prishtina Insight has teamed up with these five excellent venues to offer a limited number of complimentary copies of Kosovo's only English-language newspaper. Grab a copy of the publication and settle down with a drink or a meal to read it.

Filikaqa Sports Bar

Prishtina's best sports bar offers the perfect setting to watch a game on over a dozen HDTV screens, guzzle down a metre of beer and tuck in to some delicious food. There is enough space to accommodate large crowds and still maintain enough legroom and breathing space between rival supporters, or those wanting to watch different games, whether it is a Liverpool match, NFL game, or cycling race. Filikaqa's menu includes spicy chicken wings, beef nachos, cheese-stuffed pizza, fried chicken, burgers and fries. Every Friday, join Filikaqa for karaoke nights.



Filikaqa

Rr. Mujo Ulqinaku BL 4/1

Pejton, Prishtina

www.filikaqa.com

+381 38 244 288

Cavallero Mexican Restaurant

You can almost transport yourself to the Mexican coast, with soaring palm trees and an immaculate five star resort, while dining at Cavallero Mexican Cantina. Mouth-watering appetizers and savoury main dishes are nicely washed down with countless cocktail options and even imported Mexican beer. Gather you're friends and bring on the fiesta. Cavallero has a great terrace where you can enjoy the summer breeze. For more information, visit their facebook page, or contact them.



Cavallero,

Located next to the ex-UNMIK

building

Prishtina

+377 44 508 980

Facebook page

Cantina am-pm Restaurant

Cantina AM-PM, formerly known as Mexican Cantina, recently went through a transfer to new management, and although hardly noticeable from a distance, the new owners have transformed the venue into a more grown-up affair with good, cheap food. Cantina offers Mexican dishes at reasonable prices, starting from less than 5 euro. Although the majority of the food is Mexican-influenced, Cesar salad and pizza have been included too.



Mexican favourites served up at Cantina include tortilla, thicker pan-friend tortilla, nacho chips and burrito. Cantina's also offers a very pleasant area for al fresco dining.

Cantina AM-PM

Rr Qamil Hoxha

Prishtina

+377 49 710 710

Hotel AFA

Located in a quiet neighbourhood just outside the city centre, Hotel Afa can guarantee guests a peaceful night while being within walking distance of all the action. The venue has won a host of awards for its excellent service to customers and offers a good range of facilities, from an exclusive restaurant and VIP bar to pretty, tranquil garden. Rooms start at 45 euro for a single, and luxury rooms and apartments are available. The hotel's rooms are well appointed and comfortable.



15, Rr Ali Kelmendi,

Sunny Hill,

Prishtina

+381 38/225 226

www.hotelafa.com

Te Komiteti

Te Komiteti's large trees and a beautifully garden, which surround the small outdoor terrace, give you an impression of an exclusive place for ordinary people. And this is exactly what it is. From brunch to lunch-time snacks and special evening meals, this restaurant offers dishes comprising quality, varied ingredients, combined to perfection. Alongside one of Prishtina's best 'modern European' style menus, you'll also find a good selection of wine, and great sangria and cocktails.



Te Komiteti

Qamil Hoxha

Street

Prishtina

+381 38 24 96 63

Prishtina Insight

It could be you?

Prishtina Insight is looking for a small number of additional partners to offer complimentary copies of the newspaper. And for a small fee, you will also be included in our listings 'where to pick up Prishtina Insight'. Contact Prishtina Insight on +381 38 24 33 58 for more information.

Prishtina Insight

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On its publication date, every other Friday, delivered to your door or your inbox for as little as 10euro for six months. Visit www.prishtinain-sight.com for more details.

From news-stands in Prishtina, Prizren, Peja, Mitrovica, Gjakova, Gjilan and Ferizaj on Saturdays for just one euro.

From one of our partner organisations (see above). Grab a drink, meal or a bed for the night and enjoy a complimentary copy from Mondays after publication.

Prishtina Diary



Kosova Infest October 3-10, 2010, International Theatre Festival, 72, Tringe Smajle Street, Nr. A/4-1.

Started in 2004, the International Theatre Festival Kosova Infest is hosted annually in Prishtina the capital of Kosovo.

In the first five editions, KosovaInfest has drawn participation from 38 European countries with 42 performances.

2010 Programme:

- Sunday, October 3, 2010** Na Utehu from the Czech Republic,
- Monday, October 4, 2010**, Babok, Poland,
- Tuesday, October 5, 2010**, Seigradi, Italy

Wednesday, October 6, 2010, Vladimir Kosara, Montenegro and Macedonia,

Thursday, October 7, 2010, Memoire de la Nuit, Switzerland,

Friday, October 8, 2010, Beselam, pse me flijojne, Kosovo,

Saturday, October 9, 2010, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Albania

Saunday, October 10, 2010, Diary of a Mandman Germany

For more information visit www.kosovainfest.com.

Nouvelle Vague in Prishtina, October 22, in the backyard of the Youth Centre, Prishtina. Tickets on sale from October 13, 7 Euro each.

SURF Collective is a new Kosovar cultural initiative that aims to bring qualitative global cultural content to the Kosovo public. Contemporary art, comics, graffiti, architecture, and last but not least - oh so cool music. Following the successful Morcheeba concert this summer, SURF is now bringing another top musical act - Nouvelle Vague.



Nouvelle Vague is a French musical collective led by musicians Marc Collin and Olivier Libaux.

Their songs are innovative covers of punk rock, post-punk, and New Wave songs put to 60s bossa nova-style arrangements.

For more information, check out their facebook profile 'SURF Presents: Nouvelle Vague in Kosova'.

Prishtina Insight is offering two tickets each to the first two people to reply to info@prishtinainsight.com with the correct answer to this question: "What does Nouvelle Vague" mean in English?"



4 Tuned Cities:

Friday, October 1, 2010 @ Dit'e Nat'and Tetris, From October 1 until October 3, Dit' e Nat' bookshop and the Manipulative Space Tetris will be hosting film screenings and musical performances as part of 4 Tuned Cities Festival.

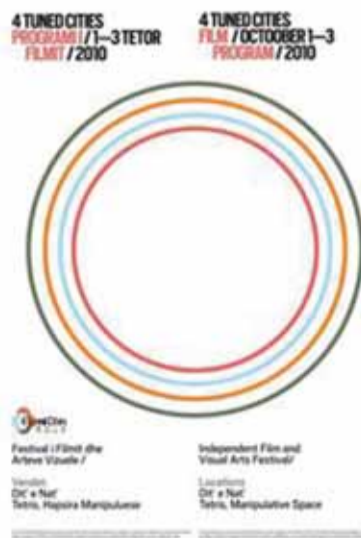
4 Tuned Cities is an independent film and visual arts festival that will be held in 4 different cities.


The film programme, separated into two feature length films and dramatic clusters of short fillms, will be screened for three days.

A mix of short fiction, documentary, animation and experimental films will be screened in groups of five to six, put together to build a dialogue surrounding respective themes. The six themes that will be screened are Shattered Walls, Alive and Kicking, Within/Without Borders, Going Underground, Asunder and Life on Real.

Cash & Marry, a documentary about marriage papers, and the feature film Scum, about two totally different lives intersecting in an unfortunate event, will be screened at Tetris.

For schedule synopsis' and more info visit: www.4tunedcities.com
No entrance fee.






Dossier K starts from September 29, at 6, 8, 10 pm

Dossier K is a sequel to the movie Alzheimer Case, which has won many awards and had been broadcast in more than 30 places.

This movie is based on the book of Jeff Garrett and the story takes place in one of Europe's most densely populated areas.

It is a story of passion, betrayal, revenge and blind ambition.

It deals with the Albanian mafia in Antwerp. Well-known police detectives have to deal with Albanian gangsters and internal problems of the police station.



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Filikaqa,
Friday, October 1, 2010 is, of course, Karaoke night at Prishtina's favourite sports' bar.

Hard Rockers Club

Saturday, October 2, 2010 Gverr and Madgog bands Metal live. Gverr will be selling their first album, Failed Philosophy



Ecosovo

Green buildings



By Elizabeth Gowing

The concrete mixers tumble their contents slowly, like someone turning in their sleep. And the buildings go up, everywhere – like an environmentalist's nightmare.

Kosovo's buildings are defiant. Often defiant of planning regulations, certainly defiant in the face of destruction and burning which is still a powerful memory for much of this land, many of its people. They are frequently defiant in the face of good sense, too – architects in Kosovo get paid by the square metre, so it is not in their interests to design sensible-sized houses. Unnecessary amounts of concrete are mixed, unnecessary sprawl takes over not only urban centres but also Kosovo's beautiful wilderness highlands and rolling farmland.

Can there be a green lining to this grey cloud hanging over the Kosovar landscape?

The answer might be yes, if the new construction means an opportunity to incorporate new technologies within buildings which are in themselves respectful of the environment, supportive of efforts to save energy and water.

For example, recent European Commission Liaison Office work on four Kosovar schools as well as the Gjilan Regional Hospital, has focused on energy efficiency measures such as thermal insulation. The energy consumption in the rehabilitated buildings is expected to drop by at least 40% as a result and they are expected to be more comfortable buildings – winter temperatures should go from 14°C to 20°C. In addition, the pollution caused by the heating, such as CO₂ emissions, will decrease considerably.

In the north of Prishtina another small green miracle is taking shape. It is inspired by the green school in the US attended by President Obama's children; this Green School in Kolovica is being built as part of American organisation CHF International's project for new school buildings and annexes that will ensure that the city's children take lessons in a maximum of two shifts, rather than the three or four that currently paralyse the education system.

In a USAID-funded project, CHF is working jointly with the municipality to produce Kosovo's first public building with ground source heat pumps. The school, designed by Kosovo architect Ilir Gjinolli, also has solar panels for hot water, wood fascias, maximisation of sunlight to reduce the need for lighting, a green roof which harvests rain which is filtered and then used in the school toilets, and a Building Management System detecting movement to control and rationalise lighting and heating. USAID is contributing 550 000 euros while Prishtina municipality is investing a million euros in the project, having made the decision to invest in this high-quality, long-term energy-saving school rather than a larger school for the short term.

'Yes, in the short term this is more expensive,' says CHF's Ian Schneider, 'but we'll be doing an evaluation to show the cost-saving over the medium- to long-term. And the cost of electricity is set to rise in Kosovo, given the country's low production and high consumption, so projects like this are going to become a necessity.'

The project has been designed to be easy to maintain, with local support available for the geothermal heating system ordered from the Rehau company. The technology, and in some cases even the raw materials are not produced in Kosovo. Valbona Dushi from CHF shows me the lamellated pine which makes up much of the building's structure. 'These are imported' she says. 'We used to have pine available in Kosovo, but there is so much logging that it's not possible to get the right quality of wood from Kosovo any more.'

It's a reminder that there is a need not only for green schools, but also green schooling in Kosovo. In January 400 children will file into their new Green School; these are the architects, the energy producers and the consumers of the future. Let's hope they learn not only in but from this inspiring setting.

Elizabeth Gowing is a founder member of The Ideas Partnership, a Kosovar NGO working on educational, cultural and environmental projects. Responses or suggestions for inclusion in future columns will find her at theideaspartnership@gmail.com

Restored Jewish Cemetery Falls into Disrepair

One year after the last vestige of Jewish Prishtina was officially reopened following restoration, the graveyard has returned to its unkempt state and grand plans to transform the site into a historic attraction have been dropped through lack of funding



By Dana Landau

Atop Prishtina's Tauk Bahqe in the Velania neighbourhood lies a little-known site of Kosovar cultural heritage. While it has been listed as one of the 19 protected monuments in the city, few people are aware of the unmarked Jewish cemetery hidden on this unassuming hill overlooking Kosovo's capital.

The cemetery dates from the 19th century, a time when the Jewish population in Kosovo and the region was plentiful and flourishing. Today, it is the only reminder of the once thriving Jewish life.

The younger gravestones display Hebrew engravings that are still legible, indicating the names and dates of the deceased according to the Jewish calendar, such as "3 Adar 5656" which is equivalent to 17 February 1896 in the Gregorian calendar.

Just a year ago, the Jewish cemetery in Velania was hardly recognisable as a cemetery, most graves unidentifiable and covered in grass and garbage.

A project was initiated by the Czech Embassy in Kosovo to restore the site, however, to this day it is unmarked and unguarded, and is used by local youngsters for football.

The project, aimed at rehabilitating the cemetery, was co-financed by the Czech Embassy and the Kosovo Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports and implemented by the Institute for the Protection of Monuments and the regional museum of Prishtina.

The initiative came after the



The Jewish cemetery one year after its reopening, looking unkempt

Czech Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs visited the site in the summer of 2008, witnessed the desolate state of the cemetery after decades of neglect, and decided that something had to be done.

The project was realised in summer of 2009 at a cost of 13,000 euro.

The restoration of the cemetery was celebrated with an opening on October 26, 2009, at which the Czech Ambassador, Janina Hrebickova, as well as then Minister of Culture, Valton Beqiri, spoke on the importance of preserving and protecting a site that bears testimony to a civilisation that lived in Kosovo for so long.

However, only a year after the restoration, the cemetery is again overgrown with grass, some of the stones are out of place and the site remains unmarked.

Seventeen stones were moved to two rows at the top of the hill where they were placed on cement blocks at ground level, which occasionally attracts curious looks from passers-by. It is this moving of stones that also drew criticism from the local Albanian-Jewish Solidarity Association.

Jan Plesinger, deputy head at the Czech Embassy, regrets that the project could not be prolonged due to lack of funds, and regrets that funding from other sources did not materialise.

"The Czech budget for development and technical assistance was cut significantly, leaving the embassy unable to support anything but the first two stages of what had initially been planned as a four-stage project," Plesinger explains.

Nevertheless, he also stresses that "ownership of the project is in the hands of Prishtina's Institute for Protection of Monuments," and it would be their job to maintain the site in good condition.

Despite the poor state of the site to this day, Plesinger considers the biggest – and unexpected – success

of the project the increased public awareness of Jewish history in Kosovo that the press coverage of the restoration led to.

The Albanian-Jewish Solidarity Association, founded in 2008 with the aim to further cultural exchange between the two peoples and revive Jewish culture in Kosovo, however, maintain that the work was done in an unprofessional manner.

Specifically, the fact that gravestones were moved 'amounts to desecration' of the site, according to its head Ruzhdi Shkodra.

The association designed a plan for restoring the neglected cemetery in Velania without moving any of the gravestones, consisting of a pathway through the cemetery and a memorial sign.

However, lack of funds put the plan on hold. In the meantime, the Institute for Protection of Monuments started work on the site.

Shkodra states that because no outside expertise on Jewish cemeteries was sought "great damage was done".

The association strongly condemned this, including in a letter to the Minister of Culture.

Haxhi Mehmetaj, director of the Institute for Protection of Monuments, on the other hand, maintains that the gravestones had been moved before, possibly by a landslide, leaving the archaeologists unable to identify the graves belonging to the respective stones.

He states that while his institute was appointed to restore twenty graves, during their excavations, the team of archaeologists found a total of ninety graves, more than had been expected there.

The stones that were moved were those unidentifiable to a specific grave.

They were therefore placed at the top of the hill in a row, which was perceived as more dignified.

Mehmetaj also plans to publish

Inside Prishtina



This is how the cemetery looked when it was reopened after a 13,000 euro restoration

monographs of all the inscriptions on the gravestones, based on work by experts who studied the Hebrew inscriptions. Yet this work remains unfinished for a year now.

Meanwhile, the Albanian-Jewish Solidarity Association has focused its activities on the cultural level through a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport, signed earlier this month, for the eventual establishment of a Jewish cultural centre in Prishtina.

The association counts a hundred members, both Albanians of Jewish heritage and others interested in promoting Jewish culture and ties between the two peoples.

Apart from promoting cultural and scientific exchange, such as arranging for collaboration between the University of Prishtina and Ben Gurion University in Israel, the association also aims to institutionalise the commemoration of the Holocaust in Kosovo.

For the past two years they have organ-

ised private memorials and conferences, which were met with great interest.

They aim to make the international Holocaust Remembrance Day an official remembrance day in Kosovo.

Kosovo has a long, yet little known Jewish history, culminating in the rescue of over 2,000 European Jews in Albania, many of whom found their way to the safe haven through Kosovo.

There is evidence of arrival of the Jews in Kosovo in the 15th century. During this time, the Ottoman lands became a refuge place to several waves of Jewish refugees from north and west. The biggest immigration wave came after 1492, when roughly 90,000 Jews arrived in the Balkans expelled from Spain and Portugal following the inquisition.

In the mid-19th century, there were Jewish merchants in Prizren, 600 Jews in Gjakova, and a Jewish community in Prishtina. By the end of the Ottoman period there were 305 Jews in Prishtina

and 3,000 Jews in the whole of Kosovo. Some of these have been buried at the cemetery in Velania.

Soon after the Serbian Montenegrin conquest in 1912 some Jews emigrated to Turkish territory, though it was the Second World War that brought an end to Jewish life in Kosovo.

During the Second World War, Albania became a remarkable safe haven for Jews, emerging from the war as the only country in Europe with a larger Jewish population than before. 2,000 European Jews found refuge in Albania, where they were hidden and protected by the local population. Many of these found their way to Albania via Kosovo, aided by officials, including the mayors of Prishtina who organised the safe passage of hundreds of Jews to Albania.

Whether or not Jewish life might be revived through the association's activities, and despite the efforts of the Czech embassy, the cemetery on Tauk Bahqë remains poorly protected and preserved.

Outside In Vetëvendosje! New blood, Tricky Blood Group



By Kreshnik Hoxha

Vetëvendosje's transformation into a political movement will undoubtedly bring new blood to Kosovo's bleeding political scene. But, is this particular blood group the one Kosovo really needs?

With a corroding LDK, a Hague-focused AAK and a self-obsessed PDK, Kosovo is craving for new faces and ideas that would take the country forwards from its vicious circle of stagnation.

For some this translates into Albin Kurti. With a history going back to student demonstrations of 1997 and his bitter criticism towards UNMIK, the Ahtisaari Plan and the government's susceptibility to international interference, Kurti has been a key player in the dynamics of Kosovo's politics and of course a catalyser of Hashim Thaci's ageing process.

His reactions to Ban Ki Moon's humiliating Six Point Plan certainly got him more fans, which will serve as a good capital in next year's elections now that Vetëvendosje has signalled its presence on the ballot papers.

At the end of the day, they are a different kettle of fish to the other offerings with nuances of semi-radicalism in their programme.

They have definitely got some things right, and one of them is their breathtaking ability to influence, appeal and raise awareness among the masses in Kosovo.

Can Thaci, Sejdiu and Haradinaj ever claim that they managed to gather thousands of people and shake the whole of Prishtina upside down as a sign of protest to a big political issue? No. And this is where Albin Kurti can teach them a trick or two.

But, Vetëvendosje has a fundamental problem at its core. It has an aversion of and disagrees with the Ahtisaari Plan, strongly supported by Kosovo's backers, which also paved the way for independence.

This might not be a problem for Kurti, because his movement is not as keen on international interference in Kosovo. However, he must realise that irritating the big players will just replicate the stagnation caused by the current government.

A keen Vetëvendosje activist recently told me that the Ahtisaari Plan should be immediately abolished and reiterated that Prishtina should open talks with Tirana for unification as the only tool for 'stability' in the Balkans.

In my book, this sort of 'stability' translates to threat and destabilisation in the region. Yes, Kosovo is undoubtedly sui-generis but its unification with Albania is definitely a precedent in the region and violates the core principles of the Ahtisaari Plan, upon which Kosovo's international recognition has been emerging, albeit slowly.

This fundamental problem would also imply that should Vetëvendosje become a big factor in forming a coalition after the elections, they will never enjoy the corridors of power, because their disagreement with the Ahtisaari Plan will always keep them in the opposition - as all other potential coalition partners are its backers.

And this is why Vetëvendosje must ensure their calculations are based on the algebra that treats Kosovo's statehood as multi-ethnic from an Ahtisaari perspective - a trick that they need to master before making the big move to politics.



Bar Review:

P1 – A New Club in Town

The newest club in Prishtina, P1 opened its doors the night of Bajram and has since then been offering music three club nights a week - Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

Located next to Gagi Caffè and opposite the government building, P1 is the newest

venue frequented by the youth of Prishtina.

It stands out from other clubs in town for its comfortable outdoor area open late into the morning.

The interior hosts two bars and the usual VIP area, as well as an outdoor bar with decorat-

ed walls.

Apart from the usual club nights of Hip Hop, P1 also promises to organise nights for special occasions, such as for the launch of new music albums and videos.

P1 is open every night until midnight until October 18

while it, as almost all venues in Prishtina, sorts out its licence.

The owner told Prishtina Insight that it already fulfills 95 per cent of the conditions to receive the regular permit.

NGO Focus: Working Towards a Future Without Fear In Strpce



By Inge Baanders

The NGO-scene in Strpce, one of Kosovo's southern municipalities, is not very developed and you can count on one hand those organisations that are active in this Serb-majority area.

But one of Strpce's most active civic initiatives is Future Without Fear, which has been developing projects ranging from running radio stations to creating a business centre.

Future Without Fear was established in December 2000, with the aim of helping people recovering from conflict and providing them with opportunities to move themselves and the municipality forward to a 'future without fear'.

In 2001, the NGO launched its first project, supported by the OSCE, House for Open Heart.

The project targeted Strpce's youth, offering English language and CV-writing courses, as well as teaching people to express themselves in a non-violent way through theatre- and music workshops.

In addition, Future Without Fear responded to the need for social development by opening a community centre, open to all people.

Nowadays, the community centre has grown to be a hub of social activity, while continuing to offer its space for educational opportunities such as English language courses and discussion groups.

Future Without Fear is led by a team of five young people, optimistic and eager to move forward.

The NGO has retained its focus on youth, who, according to the team, form the foundation of successful future development.

In cooperation with the municipality, Future Without Fear is



One of Future Without Fear's projects

developing a Youth Action Plan, identifying opportunities to improve youth initiatives and ways to respond to their needs and problems. It also tries to stimulate a sense of community responsibility by developing youth voluntary services.

Igor Savic, director of Future Without Fear, is positive about

his partnership with the municipality.

He said: "They listen to us and are open to new ideas."

One of the organisation's current activities is monitoring the functioning of the municipal assembly.

To create a stronger voice, Future Without Fear is part of

the Network Institution for Analysis and Development, cooperating with NGOs in other parts of Kosovo.

To reach a broader audience with its findings and create a sense of political inclusion, Future Without Fear has opened a local radio station in which it reports on the municipality's activities.

Every week, the radio station offers place for programmes in Romany as well.

The NGO also aims to increase economic opportunities in the municipality and is working on opening a business centre which provides support and advice to local small business enterprises.

For its current projects, Future Without Fear is mainly supported by the Kosovo Foundation for Open Society, AED and Forum Syd.

For more information contact ccstrpce@gmail.com

'Pioneering' Students Join New College



By Inge Baanders

A new college based in both north and south Mitrovica began its first full academic year this year with 120 students.

The innovative project from the NGO SPARK is, for the first time, offering international accredited diplomas to all communities in the divided city.

When asked about the difficulties experienced in establishing IBCM, Dr Paul Sudnik, director of IBCM, said: "Every start up has difficulties. I think it's a great achievement the way we have managed."

SPARK, an independent non-profit development organisation founded in the Netherlands in 1994, acknowledges the strength of young people to lead society forward.

It also recognises the need to build up the skills of local institutions, both economical and educational, "so they can inspire their own population".

In cooperation with the Lillebaelt Academy of Professional Higher Education, one of Denmark's largest business academies, SPARK opened the IBCM in February this year.

IBCM aims to empower young and ambitious people by offering them double degrees in the fields of business administration, public administration and agriculture and environmental management.

It employs ten teachers, the



Students and staff at IBCM Mitrovica on the first day of school this Monday

majority of whom hold Master's degrees from outside the region, including from Poland, Cyprus and the Netherlands.

IBCM offers a generous scholarship scheme and aims to attract students from throughout Kosovo and Serbia.

It has constructed two new buildings with a campus and modern computer facilities for its students, both in north and south Mitrovica.

In February 2010 IBCM started with a pilot cohort of twenty students, and on September 27 it officially opened for its first full academic year.

In addition to the first cohort, another 100 students have registered, with numbers divided equally between north and south of the river Ibar.

Dr Sudnik said the students were "very enthusiastic" and were pioneers of the project.

"They are for the first time confronted with a Western style of learning," he added.

Commenting on the number of students that have signed up to IBCM, Dr Sudnik said: "We have some remaining places but overall we are pleased with the response. We are an institution that started from nothing and naturally need to build trust. In a way, the students that have come forward to us are pioneers."

Apart from degrees, IBCM also offers part-time courses in business, public administration and agricultural business.

"At SPARK we empower young and ambitious people to lead their society into prosperity," said Yannick du Pont, director of SPARK. "The IBCM is an example of our mission."

For more information visit www.ibcmmitrovica.eu

Time to Upgrade Kosovo Politics

With an early election on the cards, Kosovars must stop voting for the myths of political leaders and instead vote for political programmes that guarantee development.

By Krenar Gashi in Prishtina

Following the resignation of President Fatmir Sejdiu last week, Kosovo looks to be heading towards an early election.

The fragile governing coalition between Sejdiu's Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK, and Prime Minister Hashim Thaci's Democratic Party of Kosovo, PDK, may soon not even have a majority in parliament.

Many of the LDK's ministers and MPs have publicly expressed their opposition to the coalition between old political foes, which was reached only when Kosovo was about to declare independence in early 2008.

Internal party elections set for December mean that some of them will not back Sejdiu as they are aiming to challenge him for the party leadership.

Although his resignation and dedication to the party may improve Sejdiu's position in the LDK, many believe he is not capable of reinvigorating a party that has been constantly losing voters since 2000.

The PDK currently leads the country, with Thaci as Prime Minister and another PDK MP as Speaker of Parliament and therefore also acting president. But this brittle Thaci government cannot go on for too long as on top of the political stalemate, his cabinet is being investigated for corruption by the EU rule of law mission, EULEX.

Amid the privatisation of key economic assets and with talks with Serbia just around the corner, Kosovo must go for an early election, despite possible criticism and hesitation from the international community.

European countries may not support this move as it would automatically mean postponement of the already announced talks between Kosovo and Serbia that the EU will facilitate. But keeping in mind the possible nature of these talks, the Kosovo authorities have neither the support nor the legitimacy to proceed in this process, particularly now, after the president's resignation.

And it's about time we dealt with our own problems first and started thinking and acting as a country - more than two years after we became one.

An election now would not only break the political deadlock but also represent a unique chance for a major transformation of the current political scene which is harshly criticised for being undemocratic and tribal.

For 10 years, Kosovars have been voting blindly, based on belief in their political leaders, all of whom have been promoting independence as the cornerstone of their political programmes.

The political parties have a centralised leadership, with a close group of people gathered around a mythical leader. Democracy is purely formal and political leaders are hardly ever challenged for their position.

The last internal elections in the LDK were held in 2006 when the party had to decide on the successor of its founder and spiritual leader Ibrahim Rugova.

Sejdiu won by a small margin over Nexhat Daci at a party congress that is remembered for the fistfights among people in suits and ties. Daci walked out and formed his own Democratic League of Dardania, LDD, damaging the LDK's electoral performance in 2007.

The PDK has had no internal elections since 2005. In 2009, it was quasi-legally accredited to run in the municipal elections

by the Central Election Committee, CEC, whose regulations explicitly say parties must have internal elections at least every 36 months.

According to the party statute, Thaci cannot run for leader as he was already chosen twice for the position. Nobody expects anything less than a statute change before the internal elections take place, if they take place at all.

Undemocratic political parties have damaged the parliamentary democracy and parliamentary life in Kosovo. As a consequence, European Commission Progress Reports have continually noted that it is the government that controls the parliament and not vice versa.

Parliamentary committees have become impotent; parliamentary questions ridiculous; and the institution of subpoena totally useless. In other words, parliament has become an institution which serves only to validate and justify the government's actions.

Debates have been silenced or in the best-case scenario ignored. Parliamentary democracy has become a formality as decisions have been made in the party headquarters by party leaders while MPs are there just to vote, be that in favour or against.

Early elections mostly suit the PDK, and that's why it's likely to happen. Being in the government, they will seek any reason for elections to be held before their mandate is over so they can blame the political stalemate for not fulfilling their promises.

Any quick election will help the PDK, some of whose senior officials have been targeted by prosecutors for corruption, with the aim of at least keeping the current position, with more than 30 MPs in parliament.

The opposition Alliance for the Future of Kosovo, AAK, of former prime minister Ramush Haradinaj will be less keen on a quick election now that its leader is being re-tried for war crimes in The Hague. This proves once again that the party is way too dependent on its leader whom most members and voters see as irreplaceable.

The other two opposition parties, the New Kosova Alliance, AKR, led by controversial businessman Behgjet Pacolli, and Daci's LDD, have already been pushing for elections.

The AKR managed to increase its ratings by recruiting a respected, young member of civil society to serve as vice president. The LDD, on the other hand, has lost some support as members returned to the LDK.

The LDK's electorate is unpredictable due to the already-announced internal elections. But if this party pushes for speedy parliamentary elections without holding party elections first, and it can do so as it's still part of the government, it will be more a gesture to reinforce Sejdiu's position within the party and will result in a worse result than during the last elections.

What will make the upcoming elections more interesting is the announcement of at least two new political forces. The Vetevendosje (Self-determination) radical movement of the former student leader and political prisoner Albin Kurti announced that they will run in the parliamentary elections, with predictions that elections would be held not before late spring 2011.

Vetevendosje aims to attract non-voters and a more nationalistic element of the population by saying they would not talk to Serbia to settle the problematic northern Kosovo issues but rather talk to Albania about possible unification.

The second political platform is likely to



The government building in Prishtina

be established by Shpend Ahmeti a western-educated policy analyst from civil society who has been quite critical of the government. Knowing Ahmeti, I believe he will manage to bring together other respectable professionals that have not been involved in politics so far. Establishing a horizontal leading platform based on internal debate and democracy and promoting a development-oriented political programme may result in them gaining the support of a good portion of the voters that abstained last time, most of whom are young.

With the current positions of political forces, new forces on the horizon and the crucial period Kosovo is entering, it's about time Kosovars started demanding concrete programmes from their politicians. No matter whether elections will be held in December, as it currently seems, or in early 2011, which would be the latest option, they will mark a crucial step in Kosovo's state-building process and a major switch in the way politics in the country is run.

In the last phase of state consolidation, the last thing Kosovo needs, is another empty change in government, applauded only by appointed puppets in parliament. What we need is political maturity which translates into party programmes and concrete policies.

Whoever runs for the new parliament should let us know loudly and clearly when they intend to talk to Serbia; how and when they will proceed with the privatisation of our key money-making public assets; and what they will do to get Kosovo further recognitions from other countries.

On top of this, parties should explain to the electorate what they will do with the 'bad' percentages: the 45 per cent unemployment and 15 per cent poverty that haven't changed for years.

Last, but by no means least, education starts at home. Without internal political party democracy, it's improbable that these members can develop the democratic skills necessary to promote, create or enforce democracy in the country.

Krenar Gashi, a former investigative reporter, is the research director of Kosovo's leading political think tank - KIPRED.

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*Are we in an institutional crisis?
Kosova, Kosovë*

Dear me, Kosova, what on earth makes you think that? This country's institutions are strong enough to weather even the fiercest hurricane.

My darling Kosova, the governor of the central bank was arrested a couple of months ago, and the architecture of national financial institutions did not so much as creek in the breeze.

The leader of the main opposition party was unceremoniously slammed in The Hague but people were too busy marvelling at the extra metres added to the state's moral high ground by the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion delivered the next day to notice any top soil blown off in the wind.

So when the president resigns, what of it? Mr Prime Minister, Mr Speaker of the Assembly and Acting President, and Mr former President himself have all, in quick and not at all choreographed succession, assured us:

"We are not in an institutional crisis."

Don't you believe what the leaders of your institutions tell you?

It is perfectly possible to run a country in a legitimate and democratic manner with a new president. Since the position of president is owed to the votes of two-thirds of the 120 deputies in the Assembly of Kosovo, these deputies can simply get together and elect a new president. What could be easier?

The current governing coalition was strong enough to withstand a stormy night of heavy drinking in Zanzibar last November, and there is absolutely nothing to suggest that former President Sejdiu was solely responsible for holding together this perfect marriage of the PDK and the LDK (after all, opposites attract, don't they?).

These two, together with the SLS, have 69 seats (am I up to date? A few swapped party mantles recently...), and with Mr Pacolli's nine seats plus a few independents, I'm sure the assembly can speedily agree on a new president, without having to go to a simple-majority third round.

And then, with all this support butressing the institution of the presidency, there would be no question of our new president serving a minute less than his or her mandated five-year term.

So there would be no need at all, Kosova, to call early elections when one main party has too many leaders and another has none, the Central Election Commission has no budget and needs several months to get up to speed, the Election Complaints and Appeals Commission has yet to prosecute anyone for electoral fraud from either 2007 or 2009's elections, and negotiations with Serbia are so pressing.

Which means, Kosova, that there is no institutional crisis at all.

Ashton: 'Kosovo-Serbia Talks Must Start Now'

The EU's top foreign affairs diplomat has told Prishtina Insight that a deal between Kosovo and Serbia is essential in removing obstacles to the countries' path towards membership of the union. The comments from the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Baroness Catherine Ashton, come after her first meetings with representatives from Prishtina and Belgrade on the issue of the much anticipated negotiations.



By Lawrence Marzouk

Lawrence Marzouk: Serbia's decision to change its resolution at the UNGA came at the 11th hour, how difficult were the negotiations between you and the Serbian President, Boris Tadic?

Catherine Ashton: I welcome the decision by President Tadic. It was not an easy decision but it was the right one. The resolution is a good common basis for looking to the future. The closure of the ICJ process in the UN General Assembly opens a new phase.

Question: Serbia's decision to change the resolution has been interpreted as a sign that Serbia has decided to choose its future in the EU over Kosovo. Do you agree with this interpretation? And will Serbia's EU integration be sped up as a result of its compromise over the resolution?

Answer: For Serbia and Kosovo the future lies within the European Union. We have received Serbia's application to join the EU and the next step is for the Council to take a

decision to forward the application to the Commission for an opinion. Consultations among Member States on this issue are ongoing and have intensified lately. I believe the Council will return to the issue in the near future. What matters is that people can experience real improvement in their lives. Getting closer to the EU has many advantages, economically and socially. What most people want is to live in a safe environment, have a permanent job and have hope for a better future for their children. And experiences from previous enlargements show that the EU can provide for this.

Question: How confident are you that talks will take place between Kosovo and Serbia this autumn?

Answer: Over the coming period we will engage in consultations with our partners and the two sides to seek their views and agree with them on how to proceed with the offered dialogue. EU integration is a long-term process and therefore it is important that the dialogue can start now. The sooner the better of course, but we will also need to make sure that it is well prepared. I am having first opportunities in New York to meet representatives of Serbia and Kosovo, as well as other international partners such as the United States, in order to listen to their views.

Question: What will your role be in future talks between Kosovo and Serbia?

Answer: From the EU side, I want to assure you of my personal intention to follow this very closely and my commitment to engage directly with President Tadic and Prime Minister Thaci. However, it is for Belgrade and Prishtina to decide on the most effective level of participation. The objective is to produce a genuine dialogue and therefore the level should be the right one to reach this aim. One can of course imagine different issues discussed at different levels.

Question: Do you believe that Kosovo's status should be among the issues discussed by the two sides or should the talks focus solely on technical issues? Should issues such as special status for the north of Kosovo or territorial exchange be ruled out from the start?

Answer: The aim of the dialogue is to promote cooperation, achieve progress on the path to Europe and improve the lives of the people. It is on this basis - on issues that are encompassed under the European agenda - that Belgrade and Prishtina should discuss. There are many areas where there is a need to promote cooperation and to develop a working relationship. Many areas where there is a need to apply and agree on com-

mon European standards. I expect this to be a step-by step process where the two sides will tackle specific issues in a manner in which they both agree to approach them.

Question: How important is it for you that Kosovo and Serbia reach a settlement?

Answer: This is a real opportunity. Above all, it is chance to remove obstacles on the path towards the EU. The dialogue has the support of Belgrade, Prishtina and the EU and could be a big boost for regional cooperation in the Balkans. It has the potential to generate genuine and functioning cooperation. Something that is essential for the region's European perspective. But as said before, the most important thing is that people can experience real improvement in their lives.

Question: Can Kosovo or Serbia become members of the EU without resolving this dispute?

Answer: The EU has offered to facilitate this dialogue. The aim here is for the parties to move towards the EU and remove obstacles on their predestined path to the EU. However, it's Prishtina and Belgrade's dialogue. Ultimately it is down to them to find the solutions that will bring them closer to the EU.

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