

Nov 04, 2016 by [Behar Xharra](#)

Three Years into Kosovo's Independence ^[1]

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Three Years into Kosovo's Independence: Further recognitions will be crucial for the country's development

"Dawn rolling over, the clouds bring the rain, it's time to start over, time to join hands." These were the first lines of Kosovo's last year's campaign reaching out to the world. The lyrics give an idea of the country's continuing challenges. On February 17, Kosovo celebrates the third anniversary of its independence. Despite all rightful arguments against or for the secession from Serbia, Kosovo is consolidating its statehood gradually. Political, social and economic difficulties are still enormous. International ties are thin, but growing.

Impact of internal turbulences on foreign perception

The previous months have been intense for Kosovo. In September 2010, President Fatmir Sejdiu resigned after the Constitutional Court ruled that he had breached the constitution by staying as a party leader while being in office. In October 2010, the coalition partner LDK (Democratic League of Kosovo) withdrew from the government with PDK (Democratic Party of Kosovo). In November 2010, the Parliament passed a vote of no-confidence. Shortly after, Kosovo held its first parliamentary elections since declaring its independence. The election results confirmed a simple majority for PDK, which is about to form a new government with various smaller parties. The events had been a serious test for the young democracy.

Organ trafficking, organized crime, corruption: Kosovo struggles quite a lot with its image in the news these days. Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi has been recently linked to war crimes in a report by the Council of Europe. The EU Rule of Law Mission to Kosovo, EULEX, announced opening preliminary investigations if evidence is provided. Allegations have already harmed the legitimacy of the government in the past. A Swiss newspaper titled polemical, Kosovo's "founding myth" of a just war is at stake. Though individual politicians are put in the spotlight, the perception of a whole country is once more shattered abroad.

Positive achievements are automatically undermined: As the European Union Progress Report 2010 highlights, the Parliament of Kosovo has made progress on institution-building. Kosovo has achieved significant steps forward regarding decentralization. The government has launched judicial reforms. The turnout of Kosovo-Serbian voters increased in the last elections, which is a sign of improved integration. Kosovo even made it on the New York Times travel list for 2011, placed before Okinawa, Budapest and Miami.

Kosovo internationally off radar

Kosovo remains in an international limbo. So far, only 75 out of 192 states acknowledged the new state. Though the International Court of Justice ruled that Kosovo's declaration of independence was not illegal under international law, about two thirds of the international community is reluctant to formal contacts. Most lately, Oman, Guinea Bissau and Qatar established diplomatic relations. The EU is divided: Greece, Romania, Spain, Cyprus and Slovakia rejected a joint EU decision on Kosovo's status. Africa, South America, the Middle East and Asia simply do not have Kosovo on their radar.

Legally, there no fixed number at which a territory officially becomes a state. For a UN membership the Security Council has to agree. An admission to the global organization is, however, difficult at the moment. Russia or China would most likely use their veto power. Russia's UN envoy Vitaly Churkin has already made clear that Moscow will not allow the cancelation of the UN Resolution 1244, which confirms Serbia's territorial integrity. Parallel, Russia supports the independence of Georgia's breakout regions Abkhazia and Ossetia.

Consequences for Kosovo's citizens

Further recognitions are crucial for Kosovo's development. Aside from the high political sensitivity of the matter, the consequences for Kosovar citizens are real. In a report by Soros Foundation, Kosovo was listed as one of the most isolated countries in the world. Kosovo is behind Afghanistan on the issue of visa liberalization. Afghani passport holders can cross twenty-two borders without restrictions. Kosovars can only travel to five countries visa-free: Turkey, Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia and Haiti. "Male, unmarried, under 30, good luck," can be often heard among the lines in front of the consulates in Pristina. Education and job opportunities outside Kosovo are a reverie. Options are limited for young Kosovars facing an unemployment rate of 45 percent, which is one of the highest in Europe.

Local entrepreneurs stay in front of closed doors. Domestic commerce documents are simply not recognized overseas due to the lack of diplomatic relations. Insurances for Kosovo are still among the most expensive ones the world. The same time, NATO is downsizing its mission because of a stable environment. Although Kosovo imports goods and services worth around 200 million USD from neighboring countries such as Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina, it is impossible for Kosovo to reciprocate exports. The reason is not a shortage of capacities, but non-recognition. The Economic Initiative for Kosova (EIKS) announced that trade of "Made in Kosova" products has slightly increased. The renewal of the EU preferential trade agreement meanwhile failed. Goods from Kosovo brought into the market of the European Union will need to pay extra tariffs.

And the list goes on: Kosovo cannot receive its own web IP address posing a threat to online purchases, internet banking and national cyber security. An international postal or telephone code is denied. Mobile phone calls are channeled costly through Slovenia or Monaco. A lift of air traffic limitations is expected to be addressed in the next talks between Belgrade and Pristina. Kosovo athletes cannot even join international sports associations. Taiwan is a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), yet it is recognized only by 23 states. The world Judo junior champion, a Kosovar, will most probably need to emigrate to Albania or Azerbaijan in order to compete for a London Olympics 2012 medal.

Realities of a new Balkan

The Balkans are changing. The region is, by far, no longer what it used to be in former Yugoslavian times. Whereas the role of the predominantly Serbian populated North of Kosovo might give some leverage in negotiations, Belgrade is aware that the independence of Kosovo is irreversible.

The new Kosovo government would benefit from strengthening the dialogue with its diaspora. Statistically, eight countries sent recognition letters in 2010 – the year before, it had been eleven. In comparison, more UN members recognize the Palestinian state. Countries indifferent to Kosovo's independence have not been approached persistently enough. Kosovo set-up 20 embassies, but not a single one of them is in Africa, South America or South-East Asia. A strategy which still bears potential is the "Big Brothers-Big Sisters" principle: Ankara and Riyadh could be reactivated as catalysts to lobby for Kosovo in the Middle East, Lima and San José for Latin America, Japan and South Korea for South East Asia.

"The sun slowly rising, shining on earth. The sky's open minded, today." The last paragraph of Kosovo's nation branding ad sounds euphemistic. It will need improved efforts from inside and outside Kosovo to bring the country on an international map. Further recognitions will be decisive for the speed of progress in Kosovo, particularly for economic growth and enhanced life conditions of its people. The international community should embrace the transforming Balkans. Friendly diplomatic relations to all sides would contribute to a stable peace in the region.

The views expressed in this commentary are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect those of USC CPD or any other institution. For the last year, both have been lead researchers in the Kosovo Public Diplomacy research project of Friedrich-Ebert Foundation in Pristina.

Their study will be published in the CPD Perspectives series in April 2011.
