

## Kosovo Finds Little to Celebrate After 10 Years of Independence

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/15/world/europe/kosovo-independence-anniversary.html>)

PRISTINA, Kosovo — I first arrived in Kosovo nearly 20 years ago. In 1999, NATO intervened on the side of ethnic Albanian rebels against the forces of Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia. I came to cover the war.

As NATO bombs fell, Serbian forces opened a campaign of ethnic cleansing that drove almost a million Kosovar Albanians, predominantly Muslims, from their homes. Serbia, mostly Orthodox Christian, soon capitulated and withdrew its forces. Afterward, Kosovo spent nine years under United Nations control, an internationally supervised limbo.

Ten years ago on Feb. 17, the mountainous, landlocked region of less than two million people declared independence from Serbia. Yet far from ending Kosovo's troubles, independence seems to have brought a new set of problems.

I have visited Kosovo frequently since arriving for the first time in late 1998 for a two-week trip. I returned in February 1999 and based myself in Pristina, the capital, until 2005. In the years since, I usually visit Kosovo at least once a year, often more.

Having covered the conflict, I can't help but view the people and the landscape through the wartime prism even now. Driving through the countryside, I remember the position of checkpoints, the lines of refugees, the displaced people searching for safety, the columns of thick black smoke that curled up from burning villages.

Much has changed for the land and its people. Returning this winter, I was struck by how the relentless optimism of Kosovars had yielded to disillusionment. The people seemed weighed down by resignation, as well as widespread disgust at perceived government corruption.

"I swear to God, if it wasn't for all those who have laid down their lives for this, I would say let's go back to the way it was before," one man told me. "We had a better life then; we had more opportunities."

What he says is a veritable heresy in Kosovo, and he did not want his name used for fear of seeming unpatriotic. Fear is still a fact of life for many.

Just days before my arrival, a moderate Serb politician, Oliver Ivanovic, was shot and killed in the streets of Mitrovica.

Mitrovica remains a largely frozen and divided city. Fear infuses the Serbian part. One resident described the police as being like flowers, for decoration.

I had photographed Mr. Ivanovic many times. He once led a feared paramilitary group that guarded bridges over the Ibar River, which divides the Albanian and Serb areas.

In 2003, I was at a meeting at which the United States diplomat Richard C. Holbrooke told Mr. Ivanovic that if he held on to his hard-line agenda, “You will wake up one day and look in the mirror and realize that the tide of history has passed you by.”

Mr. Ivanovic later transformed himself into a more pragmatic politician. Before his death, he had accused the local mafia of controlling the city. Many residents believe the mafia work on behalf of the Serbian capital, Belgrade, and speculate that Mitrovica may yet be formally partitioned.

In the rest of Kosovo, Albanian and Serb communities cooperate more. But psychic scars are everywhere, even if the landscape has been transformed by gleaming highways, giant gas stations and shopping malls.

The road from the border with Albania, which runs through the city of Gjakova and onto Prizren, is itself like a scar, a poignant reminder of wartime massacres.

It runs alongside the mountainous border and was used as a crossing point by the Kosovo Liberation Army rebels during the war. The villages bisected by the road suffered greatly.

The same road runs to Gjakova, now rebuilt after much of the town was burned down, including its Ottoman-era bazaar. It then passes through Xerxe and Krushe, broken villages where most of the men were executed.

According to a 2017 report by the International Committee for Missing Persons, 4,500 people went missing during the war — more than 1,600 of whom remain missing.

In Gjakova, I visited two women, Nusrete Kumnova and Ferdonije Qerkezi. During the war, Ms. Kumnova’s only son was taken and disappeared. Ms. Qerkezi lost her husband and four sons.

The remains of two of Ms. Qerkezi’s sons have since been found and buried. Her husband and the other two sons are still missing.

For these women, time does not move on. Ms. Qerkezi has turned her home into a museum dedicated to their memory.

Upstairs, their rooms are as they left them. Toys, soccer balls and pieces of clothing are carefully wrapped in plastic.

In another room, display cases hold the bullet-ridden clothes of the two sons whose bodies she recovered, a terrible reminder of how their lives ended.

She dismisses questions of how she feels about Kosovo’s independence anniversary with a simple, “Pah, don’t ask!”

While there is great disappointment with the political and economic situation, there are nonetheless shoots of optimism. Artistically and culturally, Kosovo is booming.

Kosovo-born artists like Rita Ora, Dua Lipa and Era Istrefi are regulars on the international music charts. Pristina's clubs, bars and live music venues — where there are few ethnic boundaries — thrive.

Petrit Halilaj, a young artist, was awarded a special jury prize at the Venice Biennale last year.

Through a strange twist of fate, I photographed him when he was an 11-year-old refugee lined up at a food distribution point in Kukes, Albania. His wartime experiences still infuse much of his work.

On my last day in Kosovo, news broke that Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj had been refused a visa to visit Britain. The reaction seemed to be widespread embarrassment, as he had also recently been refused a visa for the United States.

Since its independence declaration, Kosovo has been recognized by just 111 of the United Nation's 193 member states. Crucially, Russia, China, Serbia and five European Union countries do not recognize it.

So Kosovo remains the only country in Europe without visa liberalization, meaning that it is almost impossible for its people to travel. It also has the youngest population in Europe, according to the World Bank — 70 percent of its people are under 35.

“For as long as we are stuck in this ghetto, we will have problems,” Arben Berisha, the chairman of the Arsenal supporters club in Kosovo, told me. “We need our young people to go abroad to study and then bring their expertise back.”

Driving toward Macedonia to catch my flight home, I took one of the new highways linking Kosovo to Albania, and I couldn't help wondering: If the prime minister himself can't travel, what does it mean for the rest of the Kosovars?

Crippled by low wages, unemployment, a stagnant economy and an inability to travel, where were all of these bright, shiny highways leading them?