

# *The Birmingham Post*

Birmingham, UK, Monday, December 8, 2003, page 10

## **A corner of Europe still waiting for peace**

*The eyes of the world remain focused on Iraq and the rest of the Middle East. But **Dr Gëzim Alpion** argues there is still much unfinished business to complete on our own doorstep in Europe*

A word of advice if you fly to Kosova this winter. Make sure you are properly insured because you have no guarantee your plane will land at Prishtina airport.

It is not as sinister as it sounds. You will certainly land there - eventually. But not before your plane has taken you first on an unscheduled tour to another landing strip somewhere in Greece or Bulgaria or even further afield to Italy or Switzerland.

In my case, the Austrian Airlines plane took me first to Thessalonica in Greece and from there back to Vienna International where my odyssey to Kosova had started some seven hours earlier.

The reason for the *ad hock* change of plans had nothing to do with any terrorist threat. The culprit in this case was the weather.

'Ending up somewhere in Europe is normal for us who fly regularly to Prishtina,' a United Nations official told me at Thessalonica where we were

stranded for quite a while. ‘Landing at Prishtina is still done visually. The pilots, of course, can’t take chances.’

I asked whether it cost too much for the UN to modernise the airport. ‘Well, no,’ he replied. ‘The main problem with the airport is its location. It’s been built in a most unsuitable valley.’

‘Anyway, as you’ll see, the airport now is in a much better shape than when we first took control of it.’

And he was right. The following day the weather in Kosova was much more welcoming, and I was in for quite a pleasant surprise when the plane touched the tarmac. A brand new airport. Everything inside was clean and shining!

For a moment, though, I had the feeling that I had landed in the wrong place. I certainly expected the UN military presence at the airport and everywhere in Kosova – a large number of passengers on my plane were in military uniform. What took me by surprise was the impression I got at the airport that I had landed in an English-speaking country and not in the heart of the Balkans. All the signs at the airport were in English; not a single word in Albanian or Serbo-Croat.

‘Do you understand what the signs read?’ I asked a Kosovan immigrant returning home from the Czech Republic. He shrugged his shoulders, smiling helplessly.

Those who built the airport were obviously concerned first and foremost for the comfort of thousands of Westerners and non-Westerners employed by the UN and other international organisations and charities throughout Kosova. And they were right.

Who would like to get lost at Prishtina airport, or any airport for that matter!

Foreigners can put their time in Kosova to a much better use than loitering around a tiny giant like the airport of Prishtina. Time is always precious; never more so for those who have gone to Kosova purely to help out its people.

Albanian and Serbo-Croat are not used in the airport signs because the UN obviously wants a speedy integration of Kosova into the European Union. This, I thought, also explains why the euro is Kosova's official currency.

The Kosovans are expected to tolerate an insignificant Orwellian linguistic transformation (some would call it humiliation) if they are serious about their wish to join the family of European nations. You do not join the most exclusive club in the world without making some small sacrifices.

If Kosovans expect foreigners working there to learn Albanian or Serbo-Croat, they must be joking. If they had linguistic hobbies, the numerous foreign do-gooders of Kosova would have very well chosen to pursue comfortable academic careers in their own countries. They are in Kosova mainly for the noble purpose of making this traditionally troubled patch of land and the Balkans a better place to live in.

I was picked up at the airport by Sami Islami, a Kosovan journalist now living in London. On our way to Prishtina, Sami gave me a very grim picture of the daily life in Kosova. 'There is real poverty here,' he told me, shaking his head in despair. 'Which is a shame. Kosova is such a rich place.'

I only had to look from the window of the car to see that Sami was right. I have visited several countries in the Balkans, but I had never seen such a vast field as the Plane of Kosova.

I asked a representative of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosova (UNMIK) why the economy was in such a poor state.

‘Mainly because the Kosovans abroad are not investing in Kosova’, was the reply. Perhaps there is some truth in the claim. But I could hardly see how the ‘rich’ Kosovans in the west were the main culprits for the poverty of the people in Kosova.

It is four years since the Nato-led alliance succeeded in evicting the ethnic cleansing Serb army from Kosova. In all this time, however, the European Union and the UN have been unable to come up with a clear plan for the future of the province.

Who would like to invest in a place whose international status is nowhere in sight? Would any western businessman be foolish enough to throw away his money in a place like Kosova whose future is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty?

Kosova is often described as one of the few UN success stories. Undoubtedly, the UN has done a very good job in Kosova. Thanks to its military presence, the Albanians in Kosova no longer live in fear that Serb military thugs would massacre them simply for being Albanians.

But the Albanians and the Serbs of Kosova do not just want to remain alive. They have every right to govern their common country. So far, the people of Kosova are virtually powerless. They have no say whatsoever in deciding about their future.

The UNMIK officials are quick to blame the Kosova leaders for their pathological naivete – they are seen as a bunch of old-fashioned people who have failed to show real leadership. I could see for myself that the present

leaders of Kosova have still a lot to learn when it comes to democratic skills. As for the Kosovan media, it is hardly the independent vibrant force that Kosova needs at this unique historic moment.

But then one could argue that the amateur behaviour of the Kosovan politicians is also a result of the limits imposed on them by the UN, which rules Kosova more like a colony than a democracy. The local politicians are not seen as partners by the unelected modern viceroys of the UN, who often are some over empowered bureaucrats thrown into the limelight of international politics hardly for any successful political careers in their own countries.

The people of Kosova are tired of promises and frustration. They are Europeans, who, as a result of their own faults as well as of the West's sins, have been artificially estranged from the rest of Europe for over six centuries.

It is about time they rejoin the family of European nations. Offering them a chance to decide on their future through democratic means is not a favour we are doing them.

In giving them a voice and listening to them, the UNMIK and the EU are in fact meeting a sacred obligation towards them and the rest of the nations across the world that aspire for democracy.

There will be no peaceful coexistence for the Kosovan Albanians and Serbs if *vox populi* is ignored.

Europe needs to sort out the issue of Kosova and sort it out for good, if it does not want a repeat of history. Only difficult democratic decisions will bring lasting peace to Kosova.

- *Dr Gëzim Alpion is a research fellow and lecturer at the University of Birmingham. He was a visiting professor at the University of Prishtina from October 27-31 where he lectured on American Literary and Media Studies.*