

## **Kosovo – 2001 – Kosovo Assembly**

It was the early summer 2001 and the International Foundation for Election System (IFES) decided to enrol a training project in Kosovo in preparation of the assembly elections scheduled for November, and I was contacted to enquire if I was available to be a project manager. When the request came, I had already worked in Serbia and Bosnia and I'd been in Kosovo in 1999, right after the end of the NATO bombing for an assessment mission. For me, this request was like well, to the Balkans, I am Italian and it is important to understand how close the Balkans are to Italy. The Iron Curtain during the Cold War fell right to the Italian North eastern border. People from Yugoslavia used to go to the Italian border town of Trieste to buy blue jeans and other goods. And when the war broke out in the early 90s, it felt really close. It was really close, and not only geographically, but also emotionally. Somehow in the Balkans I always had the odd feeling of being abroad without actually being abroad.

In any case, I landed in Pristina. It was summer. I don't remember the exact day, but I do remember it was very odd and the city still had visible signs of the war. Sidewalks were in bad condition and walking around required the constant attention to avoid falling into holes or tripping on disconnected pavement. Electricity supply was limited to a few hours a day and the noise of the generator was a constant background sound throughout the day. At that moment, Kosovo was somehow an artificial environment. There was a massive civilian and military international presence. The UN Security Council had granted the mission Omic full administrative, legislative and judicial authority all over the region and security was guaranteed by several thousand NATO soldiers under. The label of K4, the amount of resources channelled into what is a very small piece of land, was unprecedented. At least it was unprecedented in my professional experience.

The election was about 3 months away when I arrived and my project had to set up training sessions throughout Kosovo, targeting potential chairperson and polling station staff. It was not the training. A technical training on elections had a wider scope. You need to put the disassembly election of November within the wider perspective of a democratic process, and specifically what disintegrated Kosovo. We decided that the training had to address a number of key questions, such as what is democracy, what the electoral process they could expect to elect, and what role they were expected to play in this process. And what were the legal grounds for the thousands of international people walking around their own country? Who is in charge and what happens in the polling station on Election Day? All to be covered in a session of approximately 6 hours. And of course, any single word written in the training curriculum had to be cleared by the OC. Legal department, where the overall responsibility of running the election. Doing this requires navigating a bit in foggy waters. First of all, not all electoral rules for the election were issued yet, and this required talking about the coming electoral process in terms that were general enough not to contradict anything that the expert on

election might come out without being either superficial or meaningless in the content we were transmitting. Then there was the big questions. That was always looming in the background and was the question about Kosovo's final status? It was obvious to whoever took the time to talk with Kosovo Albanians that they wanted independence and they wanted it. Sooner later than later.

There was a constitutional framework that, if I remember correctly, was signed in May 2001, but this constitutional framework gave no power to the Assembly to be elected, of establishing Kosovo finance. And we knew, we were very aware, the question on this issue were bound to come out during the training session and we didn't want the trainers to be entangled into a political item that was actually constantly discussed at the highest level. And so we devised the standard response to be given in the event of question on the road to independent independence of Kosovo. I think we took the words from something the UN Special Representative said when he signed the constitutional framework. It sounded something like the constitutional framework is a major step in stone on the road to a substantial autonomy and toward the future in which all the people can live. Peace, peaceful, safe and fulfilling life in Kosovo. It was not satisfactory, of course, but however it did help avoid that this training session moved into heated political discussion about independence.

The last point was the question on the participation of ethnic Serb to the election, and this was probably the most delicate aspect of the project. Anti-Terror hostility was tangible all over the region and it was rooted in years of discrimination and violence. And unfortunately it did erupted in several occasion in violent acts. One particularly was brought up by several representatives I had the opportunity to talk to. An attack in February 2001 on a bus taking Kosovo Serbs to Serbia, killing over 10 people. In addition, there were confusing messages sent by the Serb leaders to the community. Some of these leader campaigning directly against participation in the election. The bottom line is Serb highly distrusted the international community and further distrusted. Distrusted the electoral process that the community was trying to organize.

You need to be underlined that the living condition of certain communities would stay within Kosovo were bad. They were living in enclaves, sometimes as small as a few buildings within a neighbourhood. Freedom of movement was limited, as was access to basic services and security was guaranteed only by the presence of NATO forces. For example, the Bikani Monastery, a beautiful UNESCO heritage site, had to be constantly protected by international forces. To avoid the act of sabotage, sabotage and damages. A little different was the situation of the three provinces north of the Iber River, which is the river across the the famous city of Mitrovica, where the majority of population is served. Situation was different, but the distrust was the same. And in certain occasion, even greater so for us, for the team we were working together, the question would serve willing to participate in training sessions such as the one we were organizing. Well,

there was no way to know, but to go and ask them. So started a difficult process of engaging the leadership of all the major Serb enclaves to explain what we were doing, asking if they were willing to present someone of their choice to this session, and so on and so forth.

I conducted personally all these meetings and I spent days travelling around Kosovo to talk to people whose reaction was usually nailed from or diffident and sometimes outrage hostile. I remember one meeting, I think it was in Gratzanza, where I entered the room where the local leadership was waiting, me and my interpreter. And of course they were all males and one of them, even before saying hello, told me in English: "I remember Aviano (Aviano is a US military base in Italy, where a lot of the planes that bomb Serbia, Serbia took off). It was a cold shower. I remember myself answering. I remember Aviano very well as well then the memories of what actually was said and how the discussion progressed faded a bit. But I do remember it was a lengthy meeting and at the certain point that said that I thought they had all the right to decide not to participate in the election or in any related event. But what I was offering was simply to have more information on what was going to happen. Their participation in our project entailed no final commitment over the elections. Luckily, most of the meetings were less tense. People listened politely to my piece, but one thing was clear. Election was not a priority for them. Their main concerns were on access to health services, satisfied basic needs. Sure. I listen to tens of stories about women unable to reach decentral services during labour or children not getting proper education or the fear every time they left the protected enclave. Sometimes they even ask me if I could do something regarding a specific problem. And of course I couldn't. It was not a positive feeling. Not at all. I don't really know if it was my effort or all.

The reason I don't know about or simple curiosity, but most of the Serb communities I talked to decided to participate in the training session and we were ready to enrol the programme with international trainers starting arriving in Kosovo and we had to couple them up with Kosovo trainers to employ and run the session around the region. We had 26 trainers paired up in 13 teams with the Kosovar training servings serving as both facilitator and interpreters. It was paramount for the consistent training sessions throughout Kosovo. The training had to be the same no matter who the training team was or the audience. So we organized a training of trainers to present the curriculum, methodological approach, clarify doubts and especially compile a list of potential sensitive questions and how to answer them. To get Serb trainers from Mitrovica, we have to organize an army escort to bring them to Pristina for the TOT and once in Pristina, the trainer asked me to accompany them from their hotel to the venue of the tot every morning and to accompany back to the hotel in the afternoon. They didn't feel safe or walking by themselves around town. And somehow, the presence of an Italian young woman was considered a shield enough for the violence they were actually

fearing. We translated all the material in Albanian and Serb, prepared training kits for each team, and dispatched them around Kosovo to run training sessions in strict coordination with the OSCE offices in Pristina and in the different municipalities. This was not always an easy thing to do, but eventually we did.

In the middle of all this, there was 9/11. News broke out through phone calls or emails, and we entered a kind of serious situation at work. We're full of phone calls, meetings, e-mail, and problem solving of different kinds. And in the evening we are meeting with friends to watch the news in the few apartments that had TV with international channels or we just migrated into hotel lobbies to watch what's going on in the United States. States.

I cannot say that everything went smoothly. It never does, and I don't remember how many training sessions were conducted, but again. We reach over 1600 people all over Kosovo of all ethnic groups. I left Kosovo before the elections that were generally considered successful without any major violent incidents. The LTK party of Ibrahim Rugova, won by large margin and only about 46% of the Serb population showed up at the polling station. It was not my last visit to Kosovo and the Balkans are still part of my life, but this is another story.