

Petrit Selimi: “The sight of our athletes marching in Rio de Janeiro will be the pinnacle of state-building for Kosovo”

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*A government reshuffle is imminent in Kosovo after the troubled election of Hashim Thaci as President on 4 March. In an interview with EUROPP editor Tena Prelec, acting Minister of Foreign Affairs, **Petrit Selimi**, discusses the issues of recognition and state-building, recent problems with the opposition using tear gas in Kosovo’s parliament, high-level corruption, and Kosovo’s participation in the upcoming Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro.*



Over the past year, few countries have been added to the list of those who recognise Kosovo as an independent state. But Kosovo’s government has recently been highly active on other fronts, such as culture and sport. Do you think that informal recognition is becoming more important than the formal process?

I think we are generally diversifying our portfolio of interaction with the world. We are shifting from the immediate need for Kosovo to be bilaterally recognised by as many countries as possible to ensuring that Kosovo has a rightful place in all possible platforms of nation-building and nation presentation, which obviously go well beyond bilateral processes of recognition.

You have been personally very active in the field of sport promotion, pushing for the recognition of Kosovo by the Olympic Committee. Why do you think sport is so important in this context?

Because I think that the sight of Majlinda Kelmendi, a world judo champion who scored the highest number of points in all categories, marching in Rio de Janeiro with a Kosovo flag for the first time ever is a pinnacle of state building and is as important as other forms of recognition. The Olympics were an important step, and UEFA and FIFA will be important too, because we have to think about things that matter to people. Membership to some of the more technical organisations were important for economic processes, for diplomatic reasons, but platforms of popular culture are sometimes of quintessential importance for the sense of nation-building.

As well as uniting people, sport can also generate divisions, which has been repeatedly shown in the Balkans. How will you make sure that such incidents are avoided? Are there any projects you are working on with Serbian communities to ensure that sporting events end up being a factor of unity, and not of division?



Petrit Selimi (left) during a recent [talk](#) he gave at the LSE, alongside Dr James Ker-Lindsay. Credits: [LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe](#)

I think that internally it will be a very good opportunity because there are many young people in the Balkans who are very good at sports. I was very happy when I saw that a Kosovar female tennis player from the Serbian community joined Kosovo’s Davis Cup team, until she was subject to criticism in the Serbian press which claimed she would be betraying her nation by joining Kosovo’s team. Unfortunately, in this case the athlete had to resign and will not be

competing for Kosovo. But I still think that sport in Kosovo can be a great generator of communal cooperation and reconciliation. I can imagine that the Kosovo Olympic team may also include Serbian and Turkish athletes and thus be a focal point for bridging ethnic divisions.

When it comes to sporting competitions between states, we have to be very careful and ensure that all the matches take place in a civilised atmosphere. Luckily in handball and basketball we have had some successful experiences of hosting Serbian teams and travelling to Serbia while managing to keep the situation calm. Of course some sports are simply more heated than others, so I think that a football match between Serbia and Kosovo would still be better done in an empty stadium, at least for the first occasion.

Kosovo's political opposition has engaged in unorthodox protests recently, such as throwing tear gas and eggs in the parliament, and clearly there is a level of discontent that exists among the wider population. How would you assess these concerns, and how do you plan to win back the trust of these citizens?

I think there are two elements at play here: there is a 'European' issue, which is still very visible in the Balkans. Citizens are tempted by a protest vote. You can see it happening throughout the world, from far-right movements in Europe to the political phenomena of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the United States: many people are tired of politics as usual. Kosovo is no different from some of these countries, where young people feel like they do not find representation in the current political mainstream.

But then there is another factor in Kosovo, related to some specific problems inherent to the country. I wouldn't say that discontent in Kosovo is comparatively higher than in the rest of the Balkans: you had recent discontent in Slovenia and in Athens, to name two examples. What is different in Kosovo is the involvement of members of the parliament in these incidents. That is a specific feature of Kosovar politics and we have to ensure that it does not compromise the international relations of Kosovo. On the other hand, we need to be more communicative and we need to address the existing challenges more effectively.

These challenges are, first, being part of the EU and ensuring the rule of law. Second, having a coherent and holistic approach internally towards all communities. And finally, there are the international challenges, part of which is related to the obstacles that Serbia still puts in place for us in the international arena. We signed an agreement in 2013, and the spirit of it is still being violated by our northern neighbours, who are trying to block Kosovo wherever they can. In essence, the agreement foresaw that there wouldn't be recognition yet, but that the countries pledge not to obstruct each other's progress. This is not happening.

Many Kosovars have migrated out of the country recently, but many were also compelled to come back and are now finding it very difficult to stand on their own feet. How is your government going to help the returnees?

The bulk of the roughly 60,000 migrants who left Kosovo in 2015 did so in the first three months of the year. Out of this group, about 20,000 came back. Because of the Schengen rules, which we signed up to, we need to put into place a particular set of tools. We have recently launched micro-incentives in the agricultural field for returnees. It is clear that those who spent their last savings to fund their trip to the EU are worse off now than before they left.

But I also think that our society is very resilient. Informal social support is an important feature in Kosovo, and family support connected to the diaspora (and also internally) is very strong. This is informal and is not state-sponsored. I think that because of these factors people are very entrepreneurial and are able to get by, although of course not everybody does. Aside from the agricultural grants, they also get a small fund to restart their lives once they return. Kosovo is, unfortunately, not a rich country, and I think that these people will stand as an example for others not to try it again.

You have previously mentioned that there are a few 'bad apples' in Kosovo as well as elsewhere in the Balkans who are engaged in corruption. In the face of the resilience of the problem, including instances

involving high-profile personalities such as the highway deal or the American University of Kosovo (AUK) case, are you still of the same opinion?

I think there has been a record low of scandals involving the Kosovo government in the last four months, during this government. I don't recount articles written by journalists in a substantive manner. There are bad apples, and there are some cases of corruption, but I think there has been a drop in high-level corruption over the past few months and I think there is empirical evidence to back that up.

The AUK case goes back to 2008. The highway has never had any legal consideration by EULEX or any other court, and I think it was money well spent. This road will connect the markets in the region. It will have another branch – which was recently discussed in the Paris summit – that will connect Nis and Pristina. Serbs and Macedonians will be connected to Albanians and Montenegrins via Kosovo, by virtue of this highway.

So do you think that there was also a problem in the legal system regarding the length of the judicial processes, if cases from eight years ago were settled only now?

Of course, if you go to the European Court of Human Rights at the Council of Europe and you look into it, you will see that the single biggest problem in the entirety of South Eastern Europe is the length of the judicial cases. Kosovo is not immune to it. It is not good, but Kosovo is not a unique black hole in this issue in the Balkans.

What I can say is that in comparison to our neighbours, Kosovo has the lowest level of corruption, and I think this can also be proven. If you take per capita, you take the budget, you take the size of the economy, the size of the oligarchs and then you do a proper study you can see that. A lot of people suffer from intellectual laziness on this point – they say 'ah Kosovo is corrupt' – but actually when they go to all our neighbours and assess the wider region, among the newest EU members, they will see far more significant cases which involve far larger sums.

Our budget is small. And a lot of money goes to our salaries and pensions, so the resources that any 'bad apples' can misuse are comparatively much smaller than elsewhere in the Balkans. I am not trying to give a rose-tinted view of this issue, I think that whoever steals must go to jail, and whoever takes public money must go to jail. But I also refuse to accept any narrative that tries to corner Kosovo as some sort of exceptional case in the Balkans, when actually that is the opposite of the truth.

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Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. The podcast of Petrit Selimi's recent lecture at the LSE, organised by LSEE – Research on South Eastern Europe, can be accessed [here](#).

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About the interviewee

Petrit Selimi

Petrit Selimi is currently the acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo. He has served as Deputy Minister at Ministry of Foreign Affairs for two mandates, and is currently an interim minister following the recent election of former Foreign Minister Hashim Thaci as President of the Republic.

