

Kadri Veseli: “Kosovo needs an army – we are worried about increasing Russian influence, the rise of extremism and Serbian provocations”

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In an interview with *EUROPP*'s editors, **Kadri Veseli**, the Speaker of the Kosovo Parliament and Chairman of the country's largest political party, PDK, states that the people of Kosovo are sick and tired of politicians, with global pop stars and sportswomen being better ambassadors for the country than most members of parliament. He reflects on the difficulties posed by a disadvantageous visa regime, reacts to Aleksandar Vucic's election as President of Serbia, and outlines why he believes it is important to set up a Kosovo army.



What are the main challenges affecting Kosovar people today, and what is the government (and your party in particular) doing to tackle them?

For the last few weeks, I travelled throughout Kosovo on a listening tour. More than anything, I heard that the citizens of Kosovo are sick and tired of politicians and politics as usual. Just like in the rest of Eastern Europe, there is a palpable feeling of discontent with the ways economic and political transitions have developed. People of all income levels and ethnicities share their dissatisfaction with politicians. There are several lessons that I think are important to discuss not only for the Kosovar public, but for the wider audience in the Western Balkans. There are three themes that I discovered are most urgent for our citizens.

Firstly, regardless of recent flare-ups of ethnic tensions and nationalist discourse across the entire former Yugoslavia, people just don't care for nativistic sabre-rattling. People want jobs, jobs and jobs. Kosovo has managed to record the best average economic growth in the entire Western Balkans in last 10 years, but that growth was still not enough. Far from it. Nepotism, corruption and political interference are seen as the main obstacles to more equitable job-creation. We need faster progress to fight unemployment.

Kosovo is at a disadvantageous position when competing with the region as our businessmen, entrepreneurs and

traders cannot travel visa-free into the rest of Europe. While a Bosnian, Serbian or a Montenegrin entrepreneur can find both markets as well as financing for projects easier, Kosovars are still unable to travel freely and to compete fairly in the European markets. This hurts our export potential on a macroeconomic level while hurting our citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit on a very personal level. Politicians in Kosovo must deliver in the coming days and weeks to enable visa-free travel for Kosovar citizens.

Furthermore, we have been slow at adapting our education sector to the available jobs. There are actually job openings in Kosovo in the agricultural sector, Information Technology and other technical professions, however our universities are still focused on providing studies in Economics and Law. I've visited the Rahovec region, where grapes have been grown since the times of the Roman Empire, and was surprised that our own land is often worked by workers from neighbouring countries – an incredible development considering the unemployment level in Kosovo. Mismatch between the labour market and education is an issue that the government must address right away for our youth.

The second lesson I learned from my listening tour across Kosovo is that our people are rather well educated on what should be our national development priorities – more so than the politicians of Kosovo. Our people are keen for the institutions to increase support for agricultural production. They are eager for our country to produce more and import less. They are also embracing the wider societal transformation. We are no longer a closed, conservative society, fearful and oppressed. We are far more open to new ideas and lifestyles. Every third Kosovar lives abroad and this great diaspora of ours doesn't only bring remittances and investments to Kosovo – they also bring new influences and cross-cultural exchanges. Global pop stars such as Rita Ora and Dua Lipa are the new icons of our youngsters and our Gold Olympian Ms. Majlinda Kelmendi has been a better ambassador for our country than many ministers or members of parliament.

Hence, we must now tap into this incredible wealth of experience and knowledge. The party I belong to, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), has doubled the investments in agriculture and has quadrupled investments in infrastructure in the last 9 years. Still, we need a new beginning that will be firmly rooted in a healthy societal debate. If we only listen carefully enough, we will identify better solutions, best practices and exciting ideas for the new chapter of our country's young history.

The proposal to create a Kosovo army has created much controversy. You have recently stated that its establishment is 'a matter of days' – can you explain why you think this is necessary? Are you not worried that it might escalate tensions?

As I said, the people care more about the jobs than politics, but various incidents and threats still worry the public. When Kosovo President Hashim Thaci announced plans to transform the Kosovo Security Force into a small, multiethnic military force, there was immediate consensual support across Kosovo for these plans. Regardless of party affiliation, Kosovars want to feel secure and believe that such a force is long overdue. They want to know their children will be secure, regardless of the developments on the global stage. We are worried about increasing Russian influence, the rise of extremism on the margins of society, as well as Serbian provocations such as the propaganda train named "Kosovo is Serbia" that the government of Belgrade sought to send across our borders illegally.

There is agreement among Kosovo's leadership and our allies in NATO, including the United States of America, on the right and the need of Kosovo to have an armed force. The best way for us to reach the establishment of an army will be through an inclusive process, based on constitutional changes. Still, no one person may have veto power over the security of our children and the Serbian political leadership in Kosovo must find the will to resist Belgrade's intransigence on this issue. The Serbian government opposed our membership of international organisations. They have used blatant hate-speech to block our membership of UN agencies. Lessons were learned and the army of Kosovo will never be conditioned or blocked by Belgrade.

As for escalation, anything Kosovo does to reinforce its position internationally is considered to be "escalation" by

Belgrade. If we apply to UNESCO they start a racist campaign against Kosovo. If we establish an army, they start propaganda warfare, similar to the one Russians waged against the Ukrainian government. So, as I said earlier, no one has a veto over the safety of our children. We endured one genocidal war less than two decades ago, we shall never go through that again.

Aleksandar Vucic has emerged victorious from the Serbian presidential election on 2 April: what is your reaction, and what does this mean for Kosovo-Serbia relations?

Kosovo must continue dialogue with our neighbours, continue to implement European reforms and most importantly, continue a credible fight against corruption. The big words politicians use on TV must be translated into small projects in our communities that will benefit all, regardless of their ethnicity.

I'm convinced these lessons ring true for our neighbours as well. This is why the Berlin Process, big inclusive regional summits and conferences must refocus on the needs of the people in our region. Dinners in shiny ballrooms for politicians must be substituted with dirty shovels in the ground supporting job creation, deep reforms in education and the expansion of the agricultural sector if we are to prevent the increasing whispers of troubles in the Balkans.

Reading the Serbian media – which is entirely controlled by the government – with their war-mongering discourse and still derogatory language towards Kosovo Albanians, I feel that the situation doesn't bode well. Now that Vucic's election campaign is over, I hope that the actions coming from Belgrade will be more constructive than the words we continue to see. Serbia and Kosovo have potential to move forward, not by blocking each other but by embracing European standards of good neighbourly relations.

You were a leader of the Kosovar students' movement and then the head of the Kosovo Intelligence Service: how have these two experiences informed and impacted on your political career?

I have spent over two decades in political activism and serving my country, but I only recently became an elected politician. I recall the days of being a student activist in the early 1990s when we had to fear for every trip we took in Kosovo. Serbian police were omnipresent and violence was unspeakable especially in the rural countryside where there were fewer media but many civilians. I would have never imagined in my youth that NATO would intervene on behalf of Kosovo and that we would take an equal place in the family of nations. I am so proud of how far we have come.

This being said, our concerns before were about life and death. Poverty was great. Now the concerns are far more sophisticated and it took some time before Kosovo's politicians understood that now we must deliver on education reforms, healthcare, complex international obligations and duties – and above all, job creation. The feeling of national unity is easy to forge when you have an external enemy, but when the war is over and independence is proclaimed, it becomes harder to expect people to feel proud of their new civic, non-ethnic identity if they are unemployed or unhappy with the education of their children. Time has come for a change of paradigm in Kosovo and I am quite ready to push for such a new beginning. History was unkind to us with a century of Serbian occupation but we obtained a unique chance when NATO intervened and we became a state. Now, we must double-down on our efforts to make Kosovo a story of continued progress.

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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. Featured image via javanews.al.

About the interviewee

Kadri Veseli

Kadri Veseli is the Speaker of the Kosovo Parliament and chairman of the country's largest political party, PDK. He has previously served as head of the intelligence service.



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