

Prodigal Analyst

A researcher returns to rural Kosovo

I must confess that, originally, it was the importance—not the charms—of rural Kosovo that lured me beyond Pristina, Kosovo’s melancholy capital. After all, Kosovo’s population is mainly rural and, ultimately, the region’s wealth is its vineyards, orchards, and mines. Not only can’t one understand Kosovo without knowing its villages, one can’t appreciate it either—as most of the quickly jaded “internationals” on the various missions in Kosovo don’t.

At the time, in 2003-04, I was working for European Stability Initiative (ESI), a small, hands-on think tank exploring emigration’s impact on the rural economy. In stocking feet and heavy sweaters, we spent untold hours in thickly carpeted living rooms drinking tea and questioning Kosovar families about the vagaries of eking out a living from the land of their ancestors.

There was hardly a family without a loved one in Germany or Switzerland working on assembly lines or construction sites and regularly remitting back to Kosovo. During the 1970s and 80s, tens of thousands of Kosovar Albanians left their homes to work in the factories of Western Europe. Many of the *gastarbeiter* ended up staying. In the 1990s hundreds of thousands joined them, on the run from the escalating violence of Serb rule. As tragic as the flight was, it was the diaspora’s financial support that lifted the villages out of abject poverty (to say nothing of financing a parallel state and guerrilla army).

Today most villagers live in stout brick houses with indoor plumbing and ceramic-tiled roofs. Often in the backyard one can spy the derelict old houses: one-story shacks built from homemade, now half-dissolved mud bricks. If in use at all, they function as a storage shed or cow stall. The villages of Kosovo have come a long way since fathers and sons herded goats and chipped granite from the Dinaric Alps.

Yet our conclusions were gloomy: Although three decades of emigration and remittances had modernized lifestyles, it hadn’t created a foundation for economic self-sustainability. Were monies from abroad to dry up, these villagers would have little more to fall back upon than their grandparents had.

It was happenstance, not plan, that brought me back to rural Kosovo this year. The offer arose to participate in a migration study that included the same



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rural regions where, a neat five years earlier, I had conducted the first study. The new mission was to evaluate the villages' transformation since the 1998-99 war, as well as the changes brought about by last year's declaration of independence. As much as anything, I was looking forward to reconnecting with some of the men and women, genuine salt-of-the-earth types, whom I had met there before—and in a way befriended.

Of the villages we explored in 2003-04, Livoc I Eperm, nestled along the border of southern Serbia's Presevo Valley, was one I remembered particularly fondly, not

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least for the warm reception we always received there. A relatively large village of about 2000 people, it is comparatively well-off, in large part because it is so near the town of Gjilan. Unlike most Kosovo villages, it has a new schoolhouse and a small health clinic built by international donors. Also a rarity in Kosovo, Livoc remains a multiethnic village, with a smattering of Serbs who live peaceably alongside the Albanians.

Returning to the village this year, even from a distance it was clear to see that Livoc's sanguine plans had not materialized. Looming, half-built, multi-story houses—a sure sign of diaspora connections—stared out over the barren winter fields: barely a brick or a window frame had been added to most of them since the last time I was there.

"The diaspora was over confident in those days after the war," sighs Ramadan Kurteshi, a school teacher and village elder. Kurteshi admits that he was fortunate: His three brothers, two in Switzerland and one in Austria, built a modest new home for him, so that at age 53 he could move out of his parents' place with his wife and three children. Now that he has left his father's home, his brothers are no longer required to send him money. This is the law of the Kosovar countryside.

As Ramadan is talking, his five-year old scrambles up to the computer and begins playing with Facebook. "What's new?" he repeats my question. "Just look," he motions over his shoulder to the computer. "The whole village is online." In a factual tone he says: "We use it mostly for school work and literature." Behind his back, the pajama-clad child deftly switches to MSN Messenger and minutes later to a video game. Of course, says Kurteshi, like all Kosovar Albanians, he enthusiastically backed the declaration of independence in February 2008. But in the village, he admits, it has made little difference.

Driving away from the house, a silvery dome and a thin, pointy minaret immediately catch my eye. This is something new. Upon closer inspection it is a compact, freshly white-washed mosque. Across Kosovo, Islamic charities have invested heavily in religious facilities. The villagers however tell us differently: the mosque was bankrolled by local businessmen and, of course, the diaspora. Our driver, an easy-going graduate student from Pristina, just rolls his eyes at this.

But from the point of development, it doesn't really matter: Either locals are pooling remittances to build a mosque rather than roads—or they're not, and Saudi Arabia is. Either way, it's dead capital, just like the big houses: it neither creates jobs nor primes the village for an economic take-off.

At the other end of the village is the Isufi family's hill-top dairy farm. After the war, the three Isufi brothers in Geneva invested in state-of-the-art Swiss dairy equipment for the farm and six head of first-rate dairy cows. Zekri, an affable thirty-something Kosovar, ran the business. He had big plans to expand the herd to twenty or thirty cows. Maybe, once it took off, his brothers might even come back and work the farm with him. This is was the plan.

Zekri embraced me like a long lost cousin. It meant a lot to him, he said, that we'd come back, that we cared about him and his farm. The reality, though, was that the business had failed. The Isufis couldn't sell their milk at a price competitive with that of state-subsidized dairy farmers in Macedonia and Slovenia. Zekri sold the cattle. Now he simply watches over the family property and waits, although he isn't sure for what. I didn't have the heart to ask if the grand promises attached to independence had let him down.

Elsewhere, the situation wasn't much better. The village's biggest business, a junkyard, was reeling from the economic crisis: metal prices had nose-dived and its gruff though thoroughly hospitable proprietor was doing everything to keep three men on the payroll. At a carpentry shop in another village orders were way down and one of the best customers, a local man in Belgium, has just lost his job and couldn't pay the outstanding bill.

The ESI study concluded that villages like Livoc were textbook cases of "modernization without development." This remains the case. Although the villagers have modern sensibilities and satellite TV, their villages aren't capable of producing much more than they did forty years ago. These villages are dependent on remittances. The image that sticks in my mind is that of a stranded teenage boy surfing the Internet while the rain outside turns the dirt road into an impassable, muddy trough.

One thing though that has changed is family size. The Kosovar Albanians had the biggest families in Europe; the high birth rate kept Kosovo's villages full despite the decades of emigration (in stark contrast to the depopulated rural regions of Serbia, Greece, and Croatia.) Now harder times have altered the way the villagers think about family and most today limit their offspring to two or three (rather than five or six) children.

The Kosovar villagers also have to deal with another fundamental difference from the 1990s: It is now almost impossible to go abroad. The West no longer needs the cheap labor and Kosovars aren't accepted as political refugees any longer. The rural population is pretty much stuck in independent Kosovo. During the grim days of the Milosevic regime, the outflow of angry young men functioned as a political safety valve. But this avenue is not open to the Kosovar Albanian government today. Kosovo was a ticking demographic time-bomb, we warned five years ago. This hasn't changed.