



KOSOVO

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Irish solution to Kosovan problem

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Kosovo is more or less at peace after years of one of the most brutal ethnic wars in history. But the peace in the new state of Kosovo is a fragile thing, and over it hangs a dark cloud of despair.

In the heart of the Balkans, Kosovo is an economic wasteland, home to as ruthless a Mafia as ever existed, whose international trafficking in drugs, weaponry, prostitution and hitmen makes it one of the most lawless places on Earth.

The predictable failure in the months and years ahead to fulfil the naïve idea that independence would automatically bring prosperity is bound to leave Kosovans, 95 per cent of whom are Albanian, 5 per cent Serbian, deeply disillusioned.

About 60 per cent are unemployed, and the workforce is largely unskilled and poorly educated.

A less attractive home for investment would be hard to imagine anywhere in Europe. The government is starting to try to make a good education available to more Kosovans, but it will take at least two generations for anything remotely resembling the Irish economic miracle to happen.

About the only export industry is the sale to Macedonia of scrap metal, compressed from armaments left after the war.

Power supplies are uncertain, infrastructure is worse than that to be found in most Third World countries, there is no coastline, no raw materials to speak of, so why should anyone in their right minds invest there?

The hard truth is they shouldn't, and they don't.

Serbians are, bit by bit, slipping away from many parts of Kosovo if they can, but those who remain owe their true allegiance to the Serbian government in Belgrade.

At worst, Kosovo is a powder keg ready to explode, though this is unlikely right now.

At best, social unrest is predicted for next winter, when deprivation caused by high prices and the absence of jobs will hit hard.

There is also the risk of a return to ethnic and political violence. In order that the peace should hold, the Kosovan government turns a blind eye to such transgressions



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as Serbian insistence on running their own railway train from the north to the centre of the country.

The military commanders of the multinational task force in KFOR, in which Ireland has the lead role at present, are constantly pressing for more urgent action from the international community, particularly the EU and the UN, in the face of a deeply difficult mission.

They have a robust mandate -- if they are under fire, they have the right to shoot to kill.

But in the absence of an adequate and suitably trained police force, they accept with a certain fatalism that there are times when it is wiser to turn a blind eye and to allow people to let off steam, provided life is not threatened.

This calls for maturity and restraint on the part of officers and young soldiers; but it is a role in which the 300 Irish troops on the ground are acknowledged to excel.

The German Deputy Commander of the KFOR mission, Major General Gerhard Stelz, was generous with his praise for the military professionalism as well as the more subtle skills of the Irish men and women.

"I would not say this to you if I did not mean it," he told Defence Minister Willie O'Dea, in Pristina last week.

O'Dea is ultimately responsible for Irish forces in nearly 20 countries posted around the world, with the main groups in Kosovo, Bosnia and Chad.

He is keenly aware of the delicate balance that his forces have to strike in keeping the peace and maintaining the rule of law.

They have to possess an extraordinary range of skills, as soldiers, as diplomats, as ambassadors, and above all, as decent and fair human beings.

O'Dea, the first Irish minister to visit the region since Independence on February 17, deeply empathises with the mission statement to the troops to 'walk and talk' with the Kosovans.

"The Irish troops are superb at this type of preventive soldiering. They are men and women of the highest calibre, and their popularity with Kosovans, whether Albanian or Serbs, is one of the most encouraging features of the present situation," he said.

With the minister was the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, Lt General Dermot Earley.

Earley believes that there is a deep will on all sides to preserve the fragile peace, and that there are no better soldiers on Earth than the Irish to carry out such a delicate operation.



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But there is a conviction that people must become better off and the economy must develop -- and that can't be done without outside help -- for the deep ethnic hatreds to slowly fade away.

Ireland, even before the economic boom, had some bedrock industries like tourism and agriculture.

Tourism, not surprisingly, is unknown in Kosovo.

On Wednesday evening, I dined alone in the empty restaurant of the Grand Hotel in Pristina.

The head waiter gave me unremitting attention, constantly praising the food, and insisting on calling me "prime minister".

I told him several times that I was a mere journalist, but he didn't seem to want to know.

"Prime minister, I can highly recommend the steak," he declared.

It was, indeed, a fine steak of Irish proportions. I enjoyed a good three-course meal for only €14.50.

When I told him to keep the change from €20, his eyes filled with gratitude. "Ah, thank you, prime minister," he said.