Making civil society meaningful in independent Kosovo

Contributed by Henry H. Perritt, Jr. Thursday, 27 March 2008

I am just back in Chicago after a week in independent Kosovo. While I was there, I talked to Prime Minister Thaçi, President Sejdiu, other senior political leaders and more than a dozen young professionals, most of whom are old friends. All are proud of independence.

All give high marks to the Thaçi government and to the Kosovar people for giving Kosovo a dignified independence day and an inspiring start to statehood. All recognize that much remains to be done to make independent Kosovo a success. The economy must improve and create jobs; the electricity crisis must be dealt with. Deterioration of the educational system must be arrested and improvements begun. Belgrade's effort to sabotage independence must be controlled. Russia's thuggish new imperialism must be thwarted. In an uncertain legal environment, with UNMIK further overstaying its welcome, and challenges being made to the implementation of the responsibilities of the International Civilian Presence and EULEX, the government of Kosovo must take the initiative, forcefully and aggressively. It must act like the government of an independent state, and not the ward of an international political trusteeship, doing nothing without explicit international permission.

In meeting these challenges, the Thaçi government, like past Kosovo governments, faces a peculiar capacity gap. Independent Kosovo has experienced political leaders like Thaçi, who by now understand the collective and personal interests that define politics in Kosovo. They understand how to work with—and against—the international community. They understand how to craft a message that resonates with the general population. Kosovo also has a cadre of civil servants who know how to carry out government programs, although political-faction loyalty, indifferent work ethnic, lack of results orientation, rudeness to the public and uneven technical skills continue to plague their ranks. The greatest gap is in the middle—individuals who can bridge the space between policy and politics. For the most part, they comprise Civil Society; they are Kosovo's intellectuals, and they avoid politics.

This column is directed to them—to you—who can fill the gap. You have advanced degrees from the U.S., Germany and the U.K. Your analytical and language skills are impressive. Yet you hold back from the rough and tumble of the political arena.

Kosovo is flooded by think tank reports on virtually every aspect of public policy. Some are generated by foreign government and inter-governmental agencies such as USAID, EAR or their contractors. Some are generated by international NGOs such as the International Crisis Group or the European Security Initiative. An increasing number are generated by local consulting groups such as MDA, KIPRED, ReInvest and the Institute for Advanced Studies.

The problem is that almost no one takes the intellectual capital generated by these think tanks and translates it into coherent and viable political programs in the energy, economic, education, or justice sectors. The political leaders do not fully trust the intellectuals, and the intellectuals disdain partisan politics. No one sits at the right hand of Thaçi, or Sejdiu, or Kuqi, or Krasniqi, or Haradinaj who can say, "if you embrace this part of the USAID report on privatization of the electricity company, it will gain support from this part of your constituency and anger this other part. As a result, the policy proposals are publicized briefly, given lip service, and then forgotten about, while the political parties put all their energies into jockeying for favor with the internationals, more foreign donor support and competition over the spoils. No substantive program emerges to which anyone with political heft is genuinely committed.

Too many young people—almost all of them with real education and talent—stay away from politics. "I don't want to be associated with the current political leadership or any of the political parties," they say. "Kosovo's future depends on the current political elite giving way to a new generation." Yet none of them can name a single person who will lead this new generation of politicians. Maybe their inability to name names is because they are the new generation of political leaders; theirs are the names; yet they shrink from the responsibility.

Formulating policy that works in a democratic society is not an antiseptic process. If you have good ideas, you have to get your hands dirty to see them implemented. You have to risk association with a political party or a political leader who may lose the next election. Think tanks are worthless if they are disconnected from politics. Civil society is meaningless unless its participants also compete in the political arena.

If you have good ideas about how to improve Kosovo's economy, get involved in trying to get them implemented. If you know how to fix the electricity problem, put your goals to the test. If you like Thaçi, get involved with the PDK. If you want Ramush Haradinaj to organize an effective opposition, volunteer to help him organize a new configuration of political parties. If you do not like either of them, find others who think like you and then organize a new political movement; run for the assembly and speak out. Democracy operates in the backrooms, on the streets, and on election day more than in civil society seminars and donors conferences. Your international masters will try to hold you back, but you have to do it for your country.

Kosovo's policy problems are, of course, difficult—some say intracticable. But no one who cares about Kosovo's future can have a clean conscience if he or she sits on the sidelines, criticizing Thaçi, Sejdiu, Krasniqi or Kuqi, and is not brave enough to join them—or their opponents--in seeking solutions. If, ten years from now, Kosovo is viewed as a failed state, the guilt will be born, not by the political leaders who tried, but by the well-educated younger generation who failed to participate.

Mr. Perritt is Professor of Law at the Chicago-Kent College of Law. He is author of two upcoming books on the Kosovo Liberation Army and

the Kosovo final status negotiating process, respectively.