

Comment: A Poisoned Chalice

Author: IWPR

Leading Kosovo journalist warns the next UNMIK chief that he may rue the day he ever took up the post.

When Kofi Annan offered you the post of Special Representative in Kosovo, the job description might just as well have read, "Doomed to failure". You'll have God-like status in Kosovo, but no real power: no army, central bank, prosecutor, no constitution and no friends. You will wake up feeling you must take us towards democracy and final status and go to sleep feeling you accomplished nothing.

Once you start understanding one problem, you'll find the list of others you still face has lengthened.

When you leave, Dr Ibrahim Rugova will give you a stone [his standard parting gift to honoured visitors]. You will also get a cartoon from our editorial office and kind words from the EU ("We highly appreciate your contribution to..."). There will be a great deal of gossip from the people you worked with, and much speculation about your successor.

You will try to increase the importance of your mission. You will catch yourself repeating, "Europe cannot forget Kosovo" – knowing, as you say this, that it has.

When you arrive, you will face a fundamental dilemma: you are being sent to be a king, president, prime minister, minister of finance and dispenser of justice, but once you arrive you'll realise that you are none of these.

You will come with a plan, which will seem excellent, but the realities of Kosovo mean that you will struggle to implement it.

There will be a murder somewhere and we will all have to deal with that for one week; one of the power plants will break down and you will suddenly see yourself turned into an expert on boilers; and then Belgrade will set out an initiative demanding one Kosovo Serb police officer for every member of the minority.

You will say the only important thing is to implement standards, though after a while you will not believe your own words.

Your big plans will not be understood by anybody. When you meet local political leaders, you will understand from their eyes that the whole conversation was more or less in vain. You will talk about standards and cooperation. They will talk about standards and cooperation. One of them, laughingly, will ask you for independence. At the end of the talks, you will leave with the feeling that you learned nothing from each other.

You will catch yourself thinking, "Is this worth the trouble?" You will think of your family, friends, and the easier responsibilities you once had. You will see more and more poverty, read about locals leaving Kosovo and experience more criticism. You will rue the day Annan flattered you by telling you that you were the most serious candidate for the job.

But two factors will make you accept the position.

The first is ego: after years someone has rewarded you with a mission that means you will be known everywhere. At European foreign ministers' meetings you will have your place to report on Kosovo. In the evenings, in some European capital, a Kosovar waiter will personally offer you a drink, as a sign of respect.

The second reason has to do with advancement. With this UN position, you join the list of real European heavyweights.

Once you accept your job as Kosovo's chief administrator, ask for a definition of your mandate. The fact that you are omnipotent with a UN mandate does not add up to much.

The UN will not be able to explain your job description to you. Annan will say it is to respect Security Council resolution 1244. The bureaucrats will give you a list of things you should not do. Western capitals will talk about standards. And some diplomats will warn you that you do not have much time, as the Kosovars' impatience is growing.

Meanwhile, two things will happen: the debate on UNMIK reform and Kosovar elections.

With the first you will be in the unusual position of being the head of an organisation that's changing, or pretending to change.

Then elections will be held, which for months will paralyse your efforts to hold talks with the Kosovar leadership on standards and cooperation. After the elections, popular pressure for things to move faster towards final status will increase.

Ask, however strange it seems, what the system of accountability is. You have grown up in such a system, whose rules are quite simple: parliament answers to the electorate, government to parliament. There's no such system in Kosovo. Everything here will be done in your name. Every official making any decision will do so on your behalf.

And finally - watch your back. Not six months will pass before some incident happens that requires your urgent attention. But you will not be the mediator, because the moment you became the chief administrator, you became a party in the conflict.

Veton Surroi is chief editor of the Kosovo daily Koha Ditore.

Location: Kosovo

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/comment-poisoned-chalice>