

Investigation: Kosovo's Over-Politicised University

Author: [Sebahate Shala](#)

From politicians doubling up as lecturers to student leaders preoccupied with “the national question”, the University of Prishtina is an institution crying out for reform.

It is Wednesday morning and Arsim Bajrami, lecturer at the Department of Political Sciences of the University of Prishtina, UP, is giving his lecture on models of democracy to his first-year students. At 12.15, he packs up his notes and returns to his office at the Rectorate Building, where he serves as vice-rector for academic affairs.

Two hours later he is off to the Kosovo assembly. As deputy-president of the second largest party in the region, the Democratic Party of Kosovo, PDK, Bajrami is also entrusted with leading the PDK caucus in parliament.

Professor Bajrami’s active political life is by no means unusual at UP, Kosovo’s main institution for higher education, which had almost 27,000 students on its rolls during the academic year 2003/04.

High-profile figures from across the political spectrum hold management and lecturing posts at UP. While not all are as active as Bajrami, four other members of parliament, from all three main parties, hold high executive or teaching posts.

Their involvement attests to the continuing influence that political parties may exert on Kosovo’s academic life and the interest they have in retaining a foothold on campus.

But by allowing deep political penetration, UP is tolerating a violation of Kosovo’s public service regulations, which forbid public servants, including university employees, from simultaneously holding political posts.

The current law on the civil service, UNMIK Regulation 2001/36, which covers all staff at the UP, lays down a basic principle of “political neutrality and impartiality” among employees, calling for “loyal service to the institutions of the government without fear or favour, and irrespective of political views and affiliations”.

Article 28.1 of the administrative directive, which specifies the above regulation, explains that while civil servants may belong to political parties, they may not be actively involved in political activity; precisely, they may not hold leadership or paid positions at any level.

The directive specifies, “A civil servant elected for a public post shall resign [political activity], effective from the date that he or she takes the oath or confirms acceptance of the elected post.”

The presence of politician-lecturers not only violates the Kosovo civil service code but the university’s own voluntary commitments. The UP is officially committed to the 1999 Bologna Declaration on Higher Education in Europe, which draws from the Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988 that says, “to meet the needs of the world around it”, a higher education institution must be “morally and intellectually independent of all political authority”.

Criticism of the UP’s practices has recently become more vocal on campus, with new student movements

demanding a university free from overt political influence.

As Glauk Konjufca, an activist in the new student initiative, Tjeterqysh, (which translates as “Something Different”), puts it, “As long as the university executive and teaching posts are filled by party activists, there is a permanent danger that key decisions on professorships, teaching assistants and students will be influenced by political considerations.”

AN INSTITUTION AT THE CENTRE OF THE “NATIONAL QUESTION”

Politics is not new to Kosovo’s university. Since its foundation in Tito’s Yugoslavia in 1969, the university has played a central role in the region’s political life.

Anton Berishaj, a UP sociology lecturer, describes its chronology as follows, “From its foundation until 1974, the UP was a national, romantic institution. From 1974 until 1981 it was an institution of enlightenment, while in the Eighties and early Nineties it became a fortress of nationalism. In the last decade of the last century, it turned into a fortress of resistance.”

The demand for a university-level institution in Kosovo was closely associated with the political movements of the late Sixties and with the drive by Kosovo’s ethnic Albanian majority for the status of an autonomous province of Serbia to be upgraded to that of constituent republic.

In 1981, seven years after Kosovo’s provincial government gained direct, separate representation to the main federal Yugoslav bodies, the university was again at the centre of political life.

After student protests erupted over conditions in their halls of residence, what began as a local campus disturbance escalated into bloody, province-wide demonstrations, demanding republic status for Kosovo. The trouble ended in several dozen deaths and the imposition of martial law.

In the 1990s, the UP became a symbol of Kosovo Albanian resistance to Slobodan Milosevic’s government in Serbia, which abolished the region’s autonomy in 1989 and attempted to re-Serbianise the territory.

As Albanians abandoned or were forced out of state-run education, police, health and government institutions, setting up their own parallel networks, the university suffered in tandem with the rest of society. After refusing to comply with a new Serbian curriculum, which largely eliminated the teaching of Albanian literature and history, most university lecturers were dismissed in 1991 and forced to organise alternative teaching in private homes. The Serbs thus remained in total control of the university buildings for several years.

After more than half a decade of this parallel education, a new wave of student protests erupted from the parallel Albanian UP in late 1997. These articulated frustration over the failure of the Serbian government to restore some campus facilities to Albanian students, as Milosevic and the main Kosovo political leader, Ibrahim Rugova, had agreed in 1996.

Nearly five years after the end of the NATO bombing campaign in 1999, which culminated in the expulsion of Serbian forces from Kosovo (and the consequent flight of Serb students from the official campus), the traditional close relationship between politics and the university continues, in spite of some attempts to eradicate the politicisation.

EDUCATION AMID POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

The status quo in Kosovo since the end of the war in 1999 has only confirmed the politicised atmosphere at the university. The executive body of the UP, known as the Rectorate, has been dominated ever since by the PDK, the largest party to have come out of the Albanian guerrilla movement, the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA.

Arsim Bajrami and Hajredin Kuci, two deputy leaders of the PDK, are the UP's vice-rector and head of the public relations office, respectively.

On the other hand, the ministry of education, science and technology is in the hands of the Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK, the PDK's main political rival and Kosovo's leading party since the 1990s. This has been the case ever since 2002, when control over education was transferred from the UN administration to local institutions.

With authority over the UP split between the Rectorate and the education ministry, the dynamics that have ensued have naturally tended to echo the wider party political struggles in Kosovo as a whole.

While the PDK has struggled to preserve its power over the university, the LDK has tried to insert its own authority into the academic world, reducing the power of its main rivals.

As Glauk Konjufca of Tjeterqysh told IWPR, "The university is an arena which different politically-influenced groups struggle to control."

A key battlefield between the education ministry and the Rectorate has been the drafting of the new statute of the university, which was to impose a higher level of professionalism in the curriculum, management and teaching.

Although the Law on Higher Education, passed in May 2003, demands that the new statute for the UP be completed within three months from the day the law came into force, the drafting process took well over a year, with deadlines being continually postponed due to disagreements between the Rectorate and the education ministry.

Enver Hasani, a lecturer in international law and international relations at the political sciences department, told IWPR, "The minister [of education] has been pushing for a new statute for the UP ever since the adoption of the new law on higher education, but the Rectorate has been stalling."

Hasani said the drafting process of the statute dragged on for over a year because it did not suit the interests of the Rectorate. "Without a strict law, the management of UP lacks any rules and can continue doing whatever it pleases," he said.

The main stumbling block appears to have been the procedure for electing a new executive management at the university. According to Rexhep Gjergji, an adviser to the education ministry, the ministry and the Rectorate had to seek professional advice from international experts in order to overcome their differences.

The latter became involved in re-drafting the new statute, the final version of which was approved by the UP senate on June 29, 2004, and was ratified by the Kosovo assembly ten days later.

AN INSTITUTION SUFFERING FROM LOW STANDARDS

With so much energy being spent on national and political questions, the UP has had limited opportunities to develop into an academic powerhouse, with graduation rates being disturbingly low and funding rather inadequate.

Critics feel that at least part of the problem is caused by politicians' battles for influence and control over the university. According to lecturer Hasani, it is not surprising that standards of education have suffered, when "academic and scientific advancements, the appointment of faculty deans and the admissions procedures are all mainly done in accordance with party loyalties".

In the academic year 2002/03, only about 11 per cent of UP's registered students even graduated, and nearly two-thirds of these were students of economics, law and humanities, at a time when Kosovo is desperately short of architects, engineers and doctors.

On the other hand, Georg Woeber, special adviser on higher education to the education minister, and principal international officer in the education ministry, insists standards at UP must be judged within Kosovo's recent historical context.

"It is difficult to compare the performance of the UP with other European or regional universities, because there are no other universities which started more or less from scratch less than five years ago. Bearing this in mind, the performance of the UP is acceptable," he said, although also admitting that there was room for improvement.

The other part of the UP's problem is not politics, but wretched under-funding. Its total budget of 10.2 million euro, allocated from the Kosovo budget in 2003, meant the university spent only 440 euro on each student on average.

This compares badly even with relatively poor regional institutions, such as the University of Skopje, which spends about 790 euro per student per year. The gulf with western institutions is far vaster, with the corresponding figure standing at 20,300 euro per student at the University of Amsterdam, for example.

As about half the UP's total budget is used to pay the salaries of university staff, few funds are left for research, capital investment, updating and reforming the curriculum, essential student services and upgrading the academic body.

REFORM BY A NEW STATUTE?

With new elections to the Rectorate coming up next semester in October, a concern of local critics is that party politics may continue to take precedence over professional teaching, leaving little improvement in the quality of education.

Some critics, such as lecturer Hasani, still retain hope for a more professional university, basing it mainly on the new statute of the UP and the implementation of the Law on Higher Education.

"The new law on higher education is one of the most modern in the region. Only strict adherence to this

law and to other international standards on education will guarantee the de-politicisation of the UP,” he said. “Otherwise, the UP will only shift from one to the other political wing.”

Education ministry officials claimed that the statute would be entirely compatible with the provisions of the 1999 Bologna Declaration, which sets out standards for higher education. Rexhep Gjergji of the education ministry was explicit about the link between the statute and de-politicisation. “Faculty employees cannot also hold other executive, state or party posts... The new statute of the UP will prohibit this,” he said.

However, the new statute has no provisions explicitly dealing with the issue of the political activities of UP’s managing or lecturing staff.

Indeed, Georg Woeber takes the view that the new statute should not concern itself with matters that are already provided for by the regulation on the civil service.

“This matter [the potential politicisation of the UP] is covered by the law on the civil service, and the new statute should not duplicate its provisions... The role of the statute is to provide rules for the daily operation of the university,” he told IWPR.

Whatever its merits on other areas concerning university business, on the issue of university politicisation the statute falls back – for the time being at least – on UNMIK regulation 2001/36, which has largely been ignored to date.

Hence, it is highly likely that politicians like Nexhat Daci and Sabri Hamiti of the LDK, Arsim Bajrami and Hajredin Kuci of the PDK, and Zylfie Hundozi of the Alliance for the Future of Kosova, AAK, will continue lecturing at UP while still retaining their party posts and their Kosovo assembly positions.

One reason why the UNMIK regulation 2001/36 has been so widely disregarded by the UP management and academic staff may be that key officials within the university do not feel university neutrality is a principle worth upholding. For example, Arsim Bajrami, vice-rector and lecturer at UP, says he has no qualms about violating the civil service code and sees no inconsistency between his role at UP and his political commitments at the Kosovo assembly and the PDK.

“I do not respect UNMIK regulations, but work to develop our own laws. I will therefore continue with all my engagements until Kosovo becomes a state,” Bajrami told IWPR.

“Without resolution of the status of Kosovo, it is illogical for professors to be locked up in university departments and only remain observers to political developments.”

For their part, students remain deeply divided over politician-lecturers, with some saying they are happy to have the politicians on campus as long as they are conscientious.

Arben Vrajolli, a third-year political sciences student, said, “Hajredin [Kuci] is of the same calibre as Arsim Bajrami, very able and always punctual. His political activities are his own business and as a student I don’t feel the effect of his political commitments.”

Ibadete, a second-year chemistry student, also commends her lecturer, Nexhat Daci, the speaker of the Kosovo assembly, “Daci does his best as a lecturer. He is responsible, and was only absent on few occasions, when he went on official trips abroad and had good reasons. I think a politician who is also a

lecturer cannot influence decisions at the university.”

On the other hand, Driton Halimi, a third-year law student, said, “Their duties at the university are of secondary importance for these lecturers... I don’t believe that students should be sacrificed because their professors are also [Kosovo assembly] delegates.”

AN OVER-POLITICISED STUDENTS’ UNION

The politicisation of the university is compounded by the role and profile of UP’s foremost student body, the Independent Union of Students of the University of Pristina, UPSUP.

With the university occupying such a central place in Kosovo’s political scene, it was almost inevitable that demands for student rights would be closely interwoven with wider nationalist politics.

The UPSUP called for student demonstrations in 1997, dissatisfied with the failure to implement the agreement on higher education reached between Kosovo’s parallel authorities and Belgrade. Although Ibrahim Rugova disapproved of the UPSUP’s call, its appeal was answered not only by the students but scores of ordinary citizens.

Nearly five years after Serb forces left Kosovo, the union is finding it hard to break out of its mode of resistance, its target now oscillating between Kosovo’s institutions, UNMIK, and the NATO-led security force, KFOR.

Propounding values not normally associated with European student organisations, the union, together with associations of war veterans and war invalids, has repeatedly concentrated on political themes, calling for the release of former KLA fighters arrested on suspicion of war crimes, for example.

Gani Morina, UPSUP’s leader until April 2004 and former KLA fighter, said he took part in protests against the arrest of Fatmir Limaj, an ex-KLA fighter and senior PDK official, by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, ICTY.

“We protested because it was disgraceful to see a KLA fighter being tried in The Hague alongside Milosevic,” said Morina.

The union was also a vocal critic of October 2003 talks between Pristina and Belgrade. Justifying the union’s intervention on that issue, Morina said, “We reacted not because we were opposed to talks but because we wanted the decision for talks with Belgrade to be taken by the Kosovo assembly, and not in violation of the will of the people.”

In March this year, the union was again at the forefront of national politics, as two days of violent anti-UNMIK riots erupted, forcing almost 4,000 Serbs from their homes.

At the start of the protest, on March 17, Morina addressed a crowd that had gathered outside UNMIK headquarters in Pristina, attacking the international bodies for their role in the territory. “We have come here to demand that UNMIK, KFOR and the international community adopt a fairer attitude towards Kosovo, because our freedom was not given to us but was won by ourselves,” the student firebrand said.

Morina denied that the UPSUP was actively involved in the protests, which later spiralled into violence. "Even if it had been honourable to organise these protests, the UPSUP cannot take the credit, because we simply did not organise them," he said.

He also insisted he got involved in the March protests as a citizen, not as a student leader, maintaining that the union existed primarily to defend student rights on campus, not articulate a wider political platform.

"The union was set up to advance studies and protect the rights of students," he said. "Our actions are often labelled as politically influenced, but only so that they [the education ministry and the Rectorate] can avoid accepting criticism for their own mistakes."

The critics are not convinced, however. Skender Fetahu, leader of the New Student Organisation, ORS, a recently-founded rival to the UPSUP, is scathing in his condemnation of the union for neglecting student issues.

"The UPSUP did not organise a single student event during the leadership of Gani Morina," he said. "All his time was taken up with political activities and with the rights of war heroes and invalids, which are issues of concern for parliament, not a student organisation."

With a new UPSUP leadership in place only since April, it remains to be seen whether the union's future activities will follow the pattern set during Morina's mandate.

But the momentum is in favour of shifting the focus onto purely student issues.

The year 2003 saw a proliferation of organisations and initiatives aimed at protecting student rights, ranging from Tjeterqysh to the ORS and a third organisation, the Student League, all of which are shifting the agenda of student activism towards academic concerns.

The new UP statute recognises all these organisations as legitimate student representatives with the same status as the UPSUP, allowing them to compete for leadership in a new student assembly.

"The new statute will allow us to hold elections and compete for the trust of students. It will be like political parties competing for government," said Fetahu of ORS.

UP NEEDS TO GET POLITICS OFF CAMPUS

With such a pronounced history of involvement in nationalist politics, a certain degree of political influence and activism at the UP is to be expected, given the fact that many within the university - and outside it - still feel it has a key role to play over "national" questions.

What this conviction must not overshadow, however, is the responsibility of the university to provide a high-quality education to Kosovo's students.

The role of UP as the main educator of Kosovo's future elite is becoming all the more vital, given the aspiration of Kosovo's Albanian majority for statehood.

But with such a low percentage of registered students graduating each year, UP has a long way to go to fulfil the ambitions set out in the Bologna Declaration.

If UP is to meet European standards, tough decisions will have to be made by its policy-making and executive bodies. It is important that these are decisions made free from political considerations, with the interest of the student and the labour market primarily in mind.

The new statute may help the university take key steps in this direction, as experts expect it to equip the UP with a progressive handbook for the daily operation of the university.

Georg Woeber, who was involved in redrafting the statute, said that having such a detailed set of regulations would substantially reduce political influence on decision-making.

But Woeber went on to admit, "To write a statute and implement it are different things." Nor does Kosovo's recent experience with the law on the civil service fill everyone with confidence that a new statute on its own can alter years of behaviour.

What the new statute is almost certain to alter, however, is representation of students. A stronger student body, with seven representatives in the university senate, will hopefully ensure student concerns are not marginalised by UP's decision-making and executive authorities, be they politically influenced or not.

Era Gjurgjeala is a researcher at the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, KIPRED, and Sebahate Shala is a journalist for the Kosovan daily Epoka e Re.

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