

## **Kosovo Assembly Murals Enrage Serbs**

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New building's décor angers both Serbs and guardians of good taste.

As you walk into the renovated wing of the Kosovo parliament in Pristina, a circle of marble tiles in the lobby is meant to conjure up associations with NATO's insignia – an artistic thank-you to the alliance for the bombing that drove Serbian troops from Kosovo in 1999.

With its grandiose mahogany staircases, the main hall resembles the interior of a luxury liner about to embark on a smooth ocean crossing. But the opening of the 2.5 million euro premises has been anything but smooth.

The controversies that followed the inauguration ceremony on December 18 have turned the building into an obstacle, rather than an aid, to the assembly's work.

The money for the renovation work came from Kosovo taxpayers while the electronic voting system was a gift of the European Agency for Reconstruction.

The parliament has been at work since December 2001, when the Albanians who make up 90 per cent of Kosovo's population, regained their own assembly after more than a decade under the direct rule of Slobodan Milosevic's regime in Belgrade.

But in a sign of the trouble that was to come, Harri Holkeri, head of United Nations Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, refused to attend the opening ceremony. According to Holkeri, this was because the murals on the walls were of a "mono-ethnic" character.

Two tall murals, each more than 5 metres high, on either side of the entry hall represent Skenderbeg, the medieval Albanian hero who defeated an invading Ottoman army. A third painting represents the Prizren League, a 19th-century gathering of Albanian leaders that paved the way for the creation of an independent Albania in 1912.

"The murals in the assembly are mono-ethnic in nature, while the assembly is a multi-ethnic institution and the murals should reflect the multi-ethnic nature of the assembly as well as of Kosovo," said Mechthild Henneke, UNMIK's press officer.

Despite this criticism, Nexhat Daci, speaker of the assembly, has refused to remove the murals, saying that would only humiliate the Albanians.

He suggested that local Serbian representatives in the Povratak coalition should instead install paintings reflecting their own history on the remaining blank spaces.

However, as there is no room for more paintings of the same size in the entrance hall, they would – effectively – have to be hung in the interior of the assembly café.

The Serb members of parliament are unimpressed and have boycotted every session in this new building.

Oliver Ivanovic, the Serbian member of the assembly's presidency, told IWPR on February 23 that Serb deputies would only return to the parliament if the Albanians removed one of the three large murals, "so that we could put up one painting with Serbian motifs of the same size".

Ramush Tahiri, advisor to the speaker of parliament, said he had received a faxed proposal along those lines from the Povratak coalition but had refused to consider it on account of the nature of the communication.

"The fax is directed to the 'Institutions of Kosovo and Metohija'," he declared. "We cannot review or discuss this proposal in parliament since this is an unacceptable name."

The terms "Kosovo and Metohija", which is sometimes abbreviated to "Kosmet", are exclusively Serbian and a cause of great irritation to the Albanians who call the land Kosova.

Nevertheless, Tahiri admits that Albanian deputies - including himself - are not happy with the murals. "These paintings are badly made copies and we want a committee formed to decide on replacements," he said. "But no one wants to be seen as the person who removed the great Skenderbeg [from the walls], at least not before any new elections."

A need to take a patriotic stance in public and to glorify the nation's heroes has been a distinguishing feature of Kosovo Albanian cultural and public life since the Serbian withdrawal.

In some places, statues have been erected in honour of countries that took part in the bombing of Serbia in 1999. A prominent example is the miniature but eye-catching American Statue of Liberty placed on top of the roof of the Pristina's Victory Hotel.

Zake Prelvukaj, a well-known painter teaching in the University of Pristina, is one of many intellectuals who believes the attempt to render patriotism into art in the new assembly has not benefited Kosovo.

"Why did they not let Kosovar painters decorate the parliament instead of allowing Italians to deliver these embarrassing paintings?" she asked. "We are training artists who are virtually starving from lack of work."

Prelvukaj criticised the decision to leave the assembly's design and furnishings to the Italian interior design company Mabetex, which had been subcontracted to renovate the parliament.

The artist said the motifs chosen by the company had done more harm than good. "Albanians must be clever in this phase of state-building," she said, "which means choosing authentic symbols for Kosovo that do not stir up such animosity.

"This has actually hindered the development of a Kosovo state and has definitely harmed the image of the Albanians."

Bexhet Pacolli, the head of Mabetex group, defended his organisation, "The paintings and murals were not a part of our contract at all. But when we noticed there were three big walls in the entry hall we asked

painters from the League of Painters in Kosovo to come up with three paintings. They told me that it will take at least 9 months to finish them. None of these painters was prepared to come and work in sub-zero temperature this winter and slave away like my workers did.

“Additionally, the paintings might not be of a high artistic value but I assure you that we have made an effort to be politically sensitive in our choice. For example, we removed the guns and knives from the original painting of the Prizren League because we wanted to create an image of diplomacy rather than war and bloodthirsty images.

“I am sure that more can be done and images could be improved but we have done what we could to our capacity. The issue is that it would take five minutes to remove these murals and put something else. Why don't they do this? Nobody has asked me to do this. That is because they would have to actually work harder to produce these paintings and artists would rather prefer they gather and criticise as they sit in cafes of Kosovo.”

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