

## **Kosovo Travel Breakthrough**

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Kosovars celebrate as United Nations travel documents replace hated Yugoslav passports

Twice a week, people queue up in front of the Yugoslav liaison office in Pristina to apply for a Yugoslav passport. They do so reluctantly.

"I am ashamed to wait here in front of my enemy's door but I have no choice," said one man. "I need the passport to go to Turkey and buy goods to sell. I have five children: I am unemployed and I need to feed them."

By the end of June this year, Kosovars should no longer face the dilemma as the UN hope to have distributed new ID cards and travel documents across the region.

At an official ceremony a month ago, Kosovo's chief administrator Hans Haekkerup presented the first Kosovan 'passport' to Time Kalechani, a pensioner from the West Kosovan city of Pec (Peja). "I'm very happy," she told the gathering. "Now Kosovo is free, I hope to God we are given all our rights back."

Around a million ethnic Albanians expect to have the new UNMIK travel papers by the end of June. The documents will replace passports and identification cards confiscated or destroyed by the Serbian authorities during the 1998-1999 conflict.

The papers will enable their holders to travel freely outside of the region for the first time in a year and a half, and are of great symbolic importance for many Kosovars.

"Let them call it what they want," said a man on a Radio Kosovo phone-in. "travel document, passport, whatever.... For me, it's important that it's not a Yugoslav passport. "

The ID cards - which UNMIK started issuing in December - and travel documents are part of a huge administrative operation launched by the UN to rebuild the provinces's public records.

According to Pajazit Nushi, President of Human Rights Law in Pristina, Serb troops and officials systematically destroyed documents such as birth certificates, health and school records, or sent them back to Serbia, believing this would deter the fleeing population from returning.

That wasn't to be the case. But it's certainly true that when the refugees came home the absence of identity documents became a big problem, as their freedom of movement was severely restricted.

Kosova's first chief administrator Bernard Kouchner promised ID cards and passports for Kosovars back in August 1999.

But the process of registering the population and producing the papers was beset with practical and technical problems.

Registration forms were not filled in correctly; the Indian company chosen to input data stumbled over Albanian names and there were hitches over the design of the new documents.

Diplomatically, though, things ran smoother. Kouchner succeeded in getting the following countries, Sweden, Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Greece, Finland, France, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, United Kingdom, Italy and USA, to recognize the travel documents.

However, one rather large stumbling block remains. Kosovars still require visas to travel to the aforementioned countries. And these visas have to be obtained from embassies in neighbouring Macedonia.

Unfortunately Skopje does not recognize the UNMIK papers, effectively rendering them useless for travel outside of Yugoslavia.

The situation is expected to change, however. At the end of January, Macedonian deputy president Antonio Miloshevski said that his country would shortly recognize the documents.

Some Kosovars have nonetheless expressed anger over the visa restrictions. In response, UNMIK spokesman Susan Manuel pointed out that for the past ten years Kosovars with Yugoslav passports were unable to travel to most EU countries.

For the time being, those with travel obligations will end up queuing outside the hated Yugoslav liaison office for a passport.

For some Kosovars this is unacceptable. "I would rather wait for another ten years for an UNMIK travel document," a passer-by told a TV crew filming outside the passport office in Pristina.

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