

Viewpoint

Leadership lessons for institutional development in Albania and Kosovo: handout versus giving a hand

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Abstract

Purpose – This essay draws on my experience in the democratic development of Albania and Kosovo. These leadership insights are shared in the contemporary context of the changes in the past ten years to the international development landscape in the Western Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe. My professional reflections on leading efforts to establish democratic institutions form the basis of these case studies on Albania and Kosovo. Drawing on these reflections (Schon, 1982) can generate a deeper understanding of the leadership practices that facilitated a successful transition, as well as make explicit the implicit practices in leadership that resulted in less than successful efforts.

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis of the democratic development challenges in Albania and Kosovo are based on my experience in managing multi-million dollar nation building programs in both countries.

Findings – The democratic development of Kosovo and Albania illustrate the challenges that most leaders in governments and civil society face working in transitional societies. It should come as no surprise that their respective roles and goals will come into conflict as local leaders fight to hold onto power, while many Western good governance programs promote sharing of power. This conflict is complicated by the question of to whom the NGOs and international organizations are accountable – their donor or the community they are working in?

Originality/value – The analysis is based on personal experience in developing and implementing nation-building programs in Albania and Kosovo.

Keywords International, Democracy, NGOs, Conflict management, Nation building, Leadership and management

Paper type Viewpoint

This essay draws on my experience in Albania and Kosovo. These leadership insights are shared in the contemporary context of the changes in the past ten years to the international development landscape in the Western Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe. My professional reflections on leading efforts to establish democratic institutions form the basis of these case studies on Albania and Kosovo. Drawing on these reflections (Schon, 1982) can generate a deeper understanding of the leadership practices that facilitated a successful transition, as well as make explicit the implicit practices in leadership that resulted in less than successful efforts.

We have seen heightened importance of the role of the public sector and national leaders in the region as a result of three dynamics. The first is the USA disengaging from the region since about 2000. Second are the divisions within the European Union, which impact engagement with new members. Third is the global rise of illiberalism, typified most prominently by developments in Beijing and Moscow.

In this landscape of rapid change – disengagement by the West coupled with accelerated interventions from the East – several leaders in Central and Eastern Europe have moved away from democratic and free market norms. Rather, some of them are turning to Russia and China to preserve their power and reinforce their hold on their countries' resources.



In addition to their unsavory business dealings from Albania to Poland, China and Russia have also effectively promoted their brand of governance through effective social media disinformation campaigns. China, Russia and a number of leaders in the region have taken the fight between open and closed societies into cyber space, and so far, they are winning.

2019 marked the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The anniversary provides an opportunity to shed light on the West's democratic efforts in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. These countries were hailed as successful transitions from authoritarianism to democracy in great part due to European and US development efforts. Today, we are witnessing democratic backsliding in much of the region, which begs the question of what went wrong. The focus of learning can draw on the design, implementation, management, and impact, negative and positive, of the democratic development projects, and how, if at all, these projects differ today (see for example, [Jean, 2018](#)). This becomes critical as both the USA and Europe are slowly redirecting their development aid programs to counter not only Russia and China's influence in the region but the steady rise of populist leaders.

In relation to the Central and Eastern countries, Albania and Kosovo came late into the democratic fold. Many thought that both of these countries and the international aid organizations would benefit from their earlier democratic development experiences in the region. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Instead, in the early years, both the newly postcommunist elected leaders and many of us who were managing multi-million-dollar programs that promoted democracy often learned by doing as illustrated in my work in Albania and later in Kosovo.

Albania and Kosovo

I started in international development in 1991 in Albania. Since then, I have lived and worked in more than 25 countries where I was responsible for developing and implementing multi-million-dollar projects related to good governance and civil society development. Irrespective of the size of the project or its location, two major leadership challenges that I constantly faced in international development projects were as follows: one, managing the often-clashing expectations of the in-country staff, local government, donors, the public, and the organization's headquarters, and, two, the ability to work collaboratively across a range of teams and organizations, including donors, host governments, NGOs, multilateral institutions, and increasingly, the private sector. Below, I provide two case examples in leadership lessons, one from the early 1990s and the second from the early 2000s, which are relevant today.

In 1991, I led an effort to establish George Soros's Open Society Foundation (OSF) in postcommunist Albania. The challenges and even attacks I faced 30 years ago by the then-authoritarian President of Albania Sali Berisha are similar to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's recent assault on the OSFs in Hungary. Orban received a grant from the OSF in the 1990s to attend Oxford University to study civil society, yet he accused Soros and the OSF of working against the interests of Hungary and forced the OSF-funded Central European University, to relocate from Budapest to Vienna. Berisha and members of his government in 1992 were also beneficiaries of travel, equipment and training grants from the Foundation. However, this did not stop them from launching personal attacks against me in an effort to control the Foundation's work.

The second example is the United Nations' efforts in state building in Kosovo. Following the end of the Serb-Kosovo conflict in 1999, the international community tasked the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) with administering Kosovo until the region's final status was resolved (which occurred in 2008 when Kosovo declared independence). Kosovo's unique governing structure and unclear final status after the conflict raised the issue less about state building and more about good governance and the

role of the UN and Kosovo's elected leaders. During this time, I was responsible for managing a multi-million-dollar United States Agency for International Development (USAID) advocacy project to find how best to hold elected officials accountable. We were faced with the challenge of figuring out how to hold elected Kosovar officials accountable when they had power in theory, yet those who held the power in practice (UNMIK) were not legally accountable to the public.

The case of Albania: promoting democratic principles is not sufficient

Background

In 1992, Albania elected its first pro-Western government after decades of isolation and severe repression during communist rule. The Democratic Party (DP) of Albania's overwhelming victory gave it absolute control of the parliament and the government. Although the communist system collapsed, the new leadership and the public still had a distance to go in understanding the roles played by civil society and the government, particularly how each sector was intended to check one another. The West quickly embraced the DP and its leader Sali Berisha. This endorsement was important as it provided the perception among the public that the West, and in particular the USA, would intervene if Berisha fell out of line.

In their approach to leadership, within a few months in power, Berisha and the DP quickly and effectively took steps to stymie both their local and international critics. The few international NGO leaders who were critical of the government were accused of being communists or spies, while locals were forced from their jobs, maligned on the state-run media or, worse, brought to trial on trumped-up charges. All the while the USA and Western Europe looked the other way. The majority of international organizations gave the newly elected government the benefit of the doubt, viewing its actions in the context of a learning curve for the country's first democratic government. At the same time, the international community viewed the leadership of the new government as an integral regional player in keeping the Yugoslav conflict from spreading (see for example, [Hill, 2015](#)). Meanwhile, my mission as the head of the Open Society Foundations in Albania (the largest private donor in the country at that time) was to support educational reforms, independent media, the rule of law, human rights, transparency and to combat corruption (see for example [Soros, 1991](#); [Lubonja and Hodgson, 2014](#); [Abrahams, 2016](#)).

In November 1991, I was only a few years out of graduate school with some mid-level management experience. As the anti-communist movement spread to Albania, I joined a group of Albanian Americans to help the newly formed DP of Albania. In the summer of 1991, DP leaders led by Sali Berisha visited Washington DC and New York where they met with Congressional leaders and the Albanian diaspora. One of their frequent requests was the need for training on how international organizations worked, such as the World Bank, IMF, UN and the US government. I mentioned this to a former college professor of mine who suggested I reach out to the OSF. I drafted a three-page concept paper for a one-week training in Tirana for DP leaders on issues related to international organizations, the US government, and public administration and mailed it to OSF offices. To my surprise, the OSF awarded me a small travel grant.

Upon my return to NY, I sent a report on the training to the OSF and noted that Albania is in dire need of any and all assistance. A few weeks later, George Soros invited me to his Manhattan office on the corner of 57th and 7th Ave. He was looking for someone who had knowledge of Albania and could speak the language to travel to Tirana to set up his foundation, which by this time were assisting countries in the Eastern Bloc with their transitions to democracy. Albania was the last of the communist dominoes to fall. I had no prior experience with foundations, grants, open societies, or civil society, and I had no prior international experience.

My task, if I was to accept the job, was to register the Foundation, identify the needs of media and the “civil society sector,” and recruit board members for the Foundation. I was given a few thousand dollars in cash, a corporate American Express card, a laptop, and a few hundred copies of a black and white OSF brochure. The brochure listed the various programs that the OSF supported, which included providing support to media outlets, NGOs, women’s groups, minority interest groups, educational institutions, and providing travel grants for students and professionals to attend conferences and schools in the West (see for example, [Soros, 1991](#)).

Upon my arrival in Tirana, in order to promote the Foundation’s open and transparent philosophy, I gave an interview to the state-run television evening news program (the only TV station in the country). Having memorized the Foundation’s brochure, I went down the list of the types of activities the Foundation supports. Of all the types of projects I listed, the interviewer honed in on the travel grant. She asked if she too was eligible for the grant. I naively replied that everyone is eligible, but preference will be given to students, women and minorities.

Early morning the next day, I received a call from the front desk of my hotel (there were only two hotels in Tirana at that time) informing me that I had some guests. I went downstairs to find a few hundred people with suitcases in hand waiting for me in the lobby. I tried to explain that the Foundation was in the process of establishing its presence, and we were not prepared to award grants at this time, but the crowd felt it had been duped. Apparently, there were endless rumors circulating on opportunities to go to the West, including one that newly arrived ships from Italy had come to take Albanians to Western Europe, which sent thousands racing to Albania’s biggest port.

In the months leading up to the March 1992 elections, the leadership approach of the Foundation was to seek partners by establishing a board composed of university professors, museum directors, doctors and respected translators. We began to support the independent media, which included the DP-owned newspaper with newsprint (all TV and radio were state-owned), and began to distribute photocopiers, fax machines, and computers to universities and libraries. Following the DP’s victory, we equipped government offices and institutions with computers, office equipment and more.

Despite the support, our relationship with the government quickly soured once we turned our efforts to reforming Albania’s educational institutions, supporting the newly founded independent media outlets and human rights organizations, and proposing judicial reforms that went against the government’s policies. The government wanted the books, the computers and the travel grants, but not the reforms. The reforms were often seen as a threat to the possible replacement of government loyalists with nonparty aligned individuals. The government implemented a doctrine of “you’re either with us or against us,” and viewed any support that did not benefit the government or its cronies as an attack on “democracy” (see for example, [CSCE Hearings, 1996](#)).

By 1992, the OSFs throughout the region were transitioning from their support of “activism” to helping establish and boost government institutions. Their idea was that more could be achieved by working with the government directly than in parallel to (or against) the government’s efforts. Unlike many of the other Eastern European countries that had a history of pro-democracy dissidents and activism, Albania went from Stalinism to a fledgling democracy in less than a year (see for example, [Abrahams, 2016](#); [Lubonja and Hodgson, 2014](#)). As I quickly learned, the communist system collapsed, but the communist mindset, fear, distrust and paranoia, especially among the political leaders, did not. I would spend the next two years struggling to lead the foundation’s contradictory mission – provide much-needed support to the newly formed governing institutions while maintaining our independence and continuing to support the independent and often critical voices outside of government.

I decided to take the “open society” concept to its extreme by inviting more than 50 of Albania’s leading intellectuals from academia, government and media for a round table discussion to identify and prioritize the needs of their country. The national TV station was invited to cover the discussion. I asked attendees to propose projects for the Foundation to support that would benefit Albania’s democratic development. I also announced that \$500,000 was set aside for the Albanian-driven projects. The majority of the projects we were implementing were OSF prepackaged programs. I was looking for a way to develop made in Albania programs. Unfortunately, representatives from the government did not attend the roundtable discussion for fear that they might be associated with government antagonists who were seated at the table.

After a two-hour televised discussion, the participants proposed funding for cultural programs. These included translation and publication of popular classic European and American literature into Albanian, national art exhibitions, theater projects and financial support for Albanian artists to study abroad. And for a short time, the plan looked like it was working. The selection of the book titles was coordinated with the Ministry of Education. The art exhibition, theater and study abroad programs were coordinated with the state-run Tirana University, which had been called Enver Hoxha University just a few years earlier. George Soros, along with the President of the country and Western dignitaries attended the national art exhibition. Government leaders asked for copies of the newly translated books.

I thought that I had found a path forward with the government but shortly after the successful art exhibition our media-training program came under fierce attack by the government. Journalists and editors from all the major newspapers in the country, including those critical of the government, had been invited to the program, which was run by journalists from the USA and Western Europe. The government used the training to accuse the Foundation of supporting “enemies of the state.”

Educational reform fared no better. The government saw the initiatives as an opportunity to oust former communists from their jobs and replace them with ruling party loyalists, irrespective of their abilities to perform the jobs.

By the second year after the Foundation’s establishment, the government made it clear that if it could not control the much-needed aid, the aid was not welcome. Western governments, and in particular the USA, looked the other way as the DP increased its campaign against the independent media, opposition parties and human rights defenders (see for example CSE Hearing, 1996; [Abrahams, 2016](#)). Most of these individuals found shelter at the Foundation’s office, which put the Foundation clearly in the government’s crosshairs and on the opposite end of OSF’s overall strategy to work closely with newly elected postcommunist rulers.

By 1994, the DP turned Albania, once again, into a one-party state. The government began to personally attack me, and they made it clear that they did not want the Foundation in the country as long as I remained at the helm. I decided the best course of action was to resign (for once Soros, Berisha and I were in agreement). Soon after my departure, the Foundation aligned its projects with the government’s interests, for example, construction of schools, while keeping a healthy distance from organizations and individuals that were perceived to be anti-government.

Although Albania has progressed economically from its early days, it is still plagued by a weak civil society, corruption, and a fragile legal system, and the majority of its youth are looking to leave the country. The Foundation is no longer the player that it once was. Its budget and role in the country has dwindled significantly from the so-called “state building” days, and more importantly, it is no longer the only major donor in the country. The DP, with Berisha still at its helm, remains the second-largest political party in the country. The former president and prime minister continues to accuse his adversaries of being spies for Serbia and Greece, and has recently increased his attacks against Soros. Most recently, Secretary of State

Blinken publicly designated Sali Berisha and his family persona non grata for their involvement in corruption (see [US Department of State Press Statement, 2021](#)).

Electronic media, including television and radio stations and access to the Internet, have flourished in the past decade, but media outlets continue to align themselves with the government in power. This has less to do with ideology and more to do with financial benefits afforded by the government to the owners of media outlets through government advertisement and contracts and to avoid Prime Minister Edi Rama's war on critical voices. Rama does not hide his disdain for media outlets that dare to criticize his policy. He called Voice of America the voice of "the garbage bin" for their reporting on Rama's political cronies' ties to underworld figures. To crackdown on online media outlets, Rama proposed to create a regulatory body, which was blocked due to Western European pressure (see [Erebara, 2020](#)). Although Rama continues to threaten the independent media and has done little to stymie corruption within his government (see [Transparency International, 2021](#)), he remains Washington and Brussel's favorite son. Even though Albania remains a flawed democracy, there are important lessons and takeaways from my experience there in the early 1990s that could prove useful to international development professionals today.

Lessons learned

In leading operations and programs, I could have taken additional measures in the early days of my work in Albania. These steps may have provided both the internal and external support that would have allowed the Foundation to support democratic government reforms and assuage the government's concerns about critical voices. First, I should have formed the Foundation's Advisory Board after the 1992 elections and included internationals – individuals whose jobs were not dependent on the government and would not have given in as easily to government pressure, for example, Albanians working for international organizations such as the World Bank, UNDP or human rights groups, plus representatives of Albania's ruling and opposition parties. The majority of my board members became staunch DP supporters following the party's victory. Consequently, they were reluctant to support programs that the government did not like, which resulted in no support being given from the Foundation to independent and critical voices.

Second, I should have focused more on joint projects with US and European organizations, especially projects related to media, human rights and the rule of law. This would have taken the spotlight off the Foundation while showing the government and public that projects were backed by an array of Western organizations. I should have also sub-contracted reform-driven programs, such as educational reform, media development and anti-corruption activities, which the government viewed as a threat, to well-established and high-profile European and US-based organizations rather than to local organizations, which often caved under government pressure. The government frequently used the state-controlled media to attack organizations and individuals that were perceived as a threat. By having a team of international organizations employed or in partnership would have, at minimum, provided the local organizations legitimacy, and, more importantly, it might have helped shield them from government attacks.

One of the greatest challenges I faced was that most Western decision makers were unaware of Albania's rapidly declining human rights record. US and European leaders praised the DP for pulling Albania out of communism and rarely, if ever, mentioned the DP's backsliding on human rights. Congressional hearings in Washington DC praised Berisha and his efforts to turn the country around (see for example, CSCE Hearings, 1996).

Although I regularly raised Berisha's ongoing attacks against the media and the opposition at conferences and in meetings with European and US decision makers, my comments often fell on deaf ears. This was partly due to the lack of reporting on these issues by international media or human rights organizations. During the early days of DP

rule, not only the Foundation's work, but, more importantly, Albania would have benefited if both Brussels and Washington had taken positions against the DP's human rights violations.

Third, I should have emphasized training the local staff on grant and programmatic management, communication, drafting office and grant polices, measurement and evaluation, and greater guidance from New York HQ on the role of the Foundation. When I asked a senior officer in New York how many grants we should award and how we should select the issues, they responded by advising me to award as many grants as possible across as many issues as we could. They meant well by their advice, given that Albania just came out of 50 years of isolationism and was largely impoverished and underdeveloped. However, in 1992 almost every Albanian thought they were entitled to a grant from the West. The concept of NGOs and grants was brand new to Albania and to the Foundation's local staff. The scattershot strategy also kept us from defining a more strategic approach.

We were all in agreement in the Foundation's long-term mission and goals which was rooted in Popper's definition of open society: "an open society in which people are free to hold divergent opinions and the rule of law allows people with different views and interests to live together in peace" (Soros, 2010). Unfortunately, too often we differed on the "mini-steps" leading to the goal (Weiss, 1995). We could have benefited from, what was has now become standard for foundations and development programs, theory of change (TOC) exercise. TOC discussions would have helped us identify our overall strategy, define the Foundation's role in Albanian political and social context, identify measurement and evaluation indicators, and helped the field office and NY to develop a shared understanding of the Foundation's role in developing an open society in Albania.

Since we provided grants to both governments and NGOs, the Foundation's status as an NGO often confused both the staff and the public, and in a land of "either you are with us or against us," sent mixed messages to both sides. I found myself in a tug-of-war between the government and its critics. My own board often recommended not to fund critical media outlets and individuals that were publicly accused by the government as crypto-communists and provocateurs. On the other hand, early on when most of our funding went to the government, the Foundation was perceived as an extension of the government and at times an ad-hoc ministry. Let me be clear that not everything Berisha was doing was bad. For example, he pushed to have Albania join European institutions and NATO and tried to reform the economy. However, the same could not be said about his human rights record, which increasingly deteriorated. That said, Berisha remained very popular in Western capitals. They chalked his authoritative behavior up to postcommunist democratic growing pains (see for example, CSCE Hearings, 1996).

Building democratic institutions and a culture of democracy takes decades. Albania is still struggling to find its way. During my tenure in Albania, many of the critical voices saw the Foundation as an entity that was capable of shielding them from Berisha's autocratic state. On any given day, we had three to five journalists or political opposition members coming to the office looking for protection from the government. I sent many of these individuals to conferences and trainings across Europe, also when they felt physically at risk. I found myself in a game of cat and mouse with the government, one that I would lose in the end.

By the mid-1990s, Albania could be described in my judgment as a kleptocracy. Metaphorically, Albanian political leaders entered government with a Timex and came out with a Rolex. Public perception of civil society organizations was no better. NGOs were seen as "grant eaters" with self-serving leaders who solely survived from Western grants. Because of the international community's unwillingness to stand up to Berisha's autocratic rule, the public also lost trust in the perceived "democratic gatekeepers."

A significant lesson for me in retrospect is that in post-totalitarian states when newly elected governments are dependent on Western support, linking support to human rights

and the rule of law early on would go a long way to help the country stay on the democratic development track or, at a minimum, steer them on the right track. To date, Albanian politicians see their positions in government as an opportunity for personal advancement (US State Department, 2020) rather than as a civic responsibility to serve the people that elected them. The few remaining independent civil society organizations and media outlets left have not yet found a way to hold elected officials to account. Although there is ample evidence from video tapes about government contracts that allowed government officials to enrich themselves, to date, not one political leader has been imprisoned. I see a direct connection to Albania remaining one of the poorest countries in Europe. According to a 2018 Gallup poll, 60% of Albania's population would like to leave the country, a figure that ranks fourth globally behind the countries of Haiti (63%), Liberia (66%) and Sierra Leone (71%).

The case of Kosovo: a search for leadership

Background

In 1992, Yugoslavia politically divided, leading to war between the various republics. That same year, Kosovo's predominantly ethnic Albanian population declared Kosovo independent from Serbia. Belgrade responded by imposing martial law. From 1992 to 1997, ethnic Albanian leaders in Kosovo pursued a nonviolent approach to independence (see for example, Malcolm, 1998; Judah, 2000). They boycotted Serb institutions and created their own parallel governing structures, which included their own schools and hospitals, and self-imposed tax regime to keep the parallel system running.

Left out of the 1995 Dayton Accords peace agreement (see, for example, Packer, 2019) between the former Yugoslav republics and frustrated with no solution in site, the armed Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) became visibly active in 1997. The fighting between the KLA and Serb forces forced the USA and Europe in 1999 to actively push for a settlement. When Belgrade refused to negotiate, the USA led a NATO bombing campaign against Serbian military infrastructure to force them from Kosovo. After three months of bombing, Slobodan Milosevic, Serbia's president, regarded as a strongman dictator, withdrew his troops from Kosovo and agreed to a peace deal (see, for example, Judah, 2000).

Both European and the US governments slowly retreated from Kosovo, maintaining that all was well while leaving not only the status of Kosovo unresolved but also a unique system of governance that proved unaccountable to the people. The UNMIK became the ultimate authority and was responsible for overseeing what the UN called the four pillars of government:

- (1) police and the courts, which were led by the European Union (EU);
- (2) civil administration led by the UN;
- (3) democratization and institution building led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); and
- (4) reconstruction and economic development also led by the EU.

Below these pillars was the Kosovo Provisional Institute for Self-Government (PISG), comprised of elected Kosovo citizens (See for example Chesterman, 2001). PISG power and authority was, at best, no stronger than a high school student council. The governing structure was further complicated by Belgrade's ongoing influence over the Kosovo Serbs, the minority group primarily based in northern Kosovo.

Taken together, Kosovo's post-conflict governing system was like a Byzantine maze with doors in Prishtina, Belgrade and at the UN in New York. During this time, I was the

overseeing a four-year, multi-million-dollar USAID advocacy project tasked with training local NGOs to hold Kosovo's governing institutions accountable. The problem we faced was that both the authorities and civilians often lost their way in the shadows and turns of the UNMIK governing structure. No one could answer the simple question: Which governing authorities can the people of Kosovo – both Albanians and Serbs – hold accountable? According to UNMIK, the locally elected PISG is accountable to their electorate, even though it lacks formal power, while UNMIK held most of the real power but is accountable only to the [UN Security Council \(2001\)](#).

In order to provide direction to the possible solution of Kosovo's status, UNMIK developed a road map composed of eight standards, aptly named "Standards Before Status Policy". The Kosovars had to fulfill each standard before final status would be discussed. Those eight standards were functioning democratic institutions; rule of law; freedom of movement; returns and reintegration; economy; property rights; dialog with Belgrade and the Kosovo Protection Corps ([UN Press Release, 2004](#)).

With Belgrade and the Kosovo Serbs calling for the region to remain part of Serbia, the Albanian majority calling for independence and the international community led by the UN Security Council asking to delay a final decision, the road map turned out to be a maze. Technically, the road map faced a major hurdle from the start. In order for the PISG to meet the set standards, UNMIK had to relinquish more power to them. But UNMIK was hesitant about doing this, as it would place Kosovo further on the road to independence. And, as UNMIK had repeatedly warned, to appease Russia and China, there was no guarantee even if the standards were met that Kosovo's independence would follow ([UN Document, 2001](#); [UN Press Release, 2004](#)).

Consequently, parallel and competing governing institutions were created. PISG blamed UNMIK for governance problems, while UNMIK blamed PISG for its failure to meet the benchmarks. One point that united many locals and internationals was their frustration with the application of the rule of law, which was applied only when convenient for both UNMIK and PISG. Internationals were rarely, if ever, prosecuted for corruption or other crimes, and the same was true for the Kosovar leadership. The end result was a "stateless state" where emphasis was placed on an ongoing exercise in democracy rather than the establishment of responsible elected officials and rule of law.

In order to effectively implement the USAID-funded advocacy project, I decided to shift my attention away from UNMIK's labyrinthian governing system to focusing on and expanding on three crucial elements of Kosovo's civil society, which were strengthened during the nine years of parallel governance. These included the following: one, commitment to nonviolence; two, grassroots movement and three, an active youth.

In 1999, I looked at it as a unique leadership opportunity to build on the Kosovars' experience and energy that led to Kosovo breaking away from Serbian rule. However, like their predecessors before the war, these new NGOs faced a number of problems, including but not limited to the following:

- (1) They were largely a response to the donors' call for NGOs and were viewed as an income opportunity rather than personal initiatives to address Kosovo's postwar needs. Too often the donors identified the solution and tasked the locals to find the problem.
- (2) The two largest sectors of Kosovar society, women and youth (together comprising 70% of the population), remained underrepresented, not only in Kosovo's decision-making bodies but also in the NGO sector.
- (3) The majority of Kosovo's NGOs were concentrated in the capital, Prishtina, with little if any opportunity for NGO development in other areas where there was no forum for the communities to discuss and address their problems.

- (4) Kosovo NGOs lacked the basic management and fundraising skills needed for successful program development and implementation.
- (5) The communication networks in Kosovo were woefully inadequate. Most of the phone lines did not work, and the mobile phone network, which worked sporadically, was available only in Prishtina. The Internet was primarily available only to those international NGOs who were able to afford the high cost of wireless equipment.(6) Kosovo NGOs have had little if any opportunity to meet with their counterparts in the West and in Eastern Europe from whom they could learn valuable lessons.

The advocacy program I led took a three-prong approach. First, establish a community foundation outside of Prishtina, which would be responsible for awarding grants throughout Kosovo. Second, prioritize minorities, women, youth and NGOs located outside of the capital. Third, develop training programs that combined classroom training with mentoring. The training and mentoring were closely linked to the grant program, which was not limited to monetary awards, but included training and mentoring to the NGO throughout the life of the award. With more than 200 international NGOs working in Kosovo during this time, I developed a list of local and international civil society experts with a track record of working for NGOs who were willing to serve as mentors, at low cost, to the Kosovo NGOs in rural regions.

Between our in-class training programs, which covered issues such as management, time keeping, proposal development and fundraising, our grantees were assured guidance from the time they developed their proposal to when they began implementing their advocacy project. Also, we made the grant program flexible, allowing NGOs to propose advocacy projects either at the local or national levels. Moreover, to attract Serb NGOs, we not only met with Serb civil society leaders, but we also accepted the grant applications in the Serb language and offered to bring in mentors and trainers from Belgrade. In the first year of the program, the size of the grants was small compared to our investment in training. As NGOs became more confident and as their capacity to manage larger projects and funding grew, so too the size of the awards increased. Throughout the four years of the project, we continued to provide training and mentoring to the grantees.

The result of the training and grants was an array of successful advocacy projects. These included the following:

- (1) inspection of slaughterhouses;
- (2) drafting a regulation on utilization of school and public premises by community organizations;
- (3) drafting regulation on establishing professional institutions for treating drug addicts;
- (4) drafting regulations on the ethics and conduct standards of Municipal Assembly members;
- (5) drafting regulations on environmental protection in Peja municipality;
- (6) creation of local funds for micro-loans for women entrepreneurs;
- (7) creating local policy enabling larger numbers of Ashkali (one of the major ethnic groups) students to attend school; adoption of public participation regulation; and
- (8) the development of an NGO-initiated center for ongoing public discussions and legislative briefings, including publications and guides (see, for example, [Citizen's Guide to Governing Authorities in Kosovo, 2003](#)).

Lessons learned

Following the end of the Kosovo war, civil society and the ethnic Albanian community were vibrant, energetic, characterized by a proactive approach to developing their country. Kosovars in general initially saw the role of UNMIK as temporary and were willing to work with them and, if needed, around them. I decided to work around UNMIK by focusing on projects at the municipal and grassroots level. The rural regions of Kosovo were hardest hit by the war. We found that the communities sought a return to normalcy. For example, even though an entire village was destroyed, we were surprised how often local NGOs requested funding to advocate for public parks for their children and the elderly. Our grant program required the grantees to identify the type of trainings they needed, and their willingness to have a mentor proved beneficial not only to the NGO, but to their community as well. The end results were

- (1) Increased awareness among the broader NGO community on avenues for public participation.
- (2) NGOs were increasingly influential as a result of the development of effective advocacy networks.
- (3) Media outlets increasingly looked to NGOs for expertise on particular issues when reporting on a specific policy or issue.
- (4) The general public became more aware of opportunities for participation through NGOs due to high media coverage of NGO advocacy activities.
- (5) Greater awareness on the part of local government officials of the impact of constituent interest and participation in municipal affairs.
- (6) Kosovar NGOs were more informed on upcoming legislative and policy initiatives through legislative briefings.
- (7) Information exchange and dialog increased between Kosovar NGOs and the PISG.

Unfortunately, by 2005, fatigue and frustration with Kosovo's unresolved status coupled with the lack of accountability and transparency by both UNMIK and the PISG led to declines in civil society advocacy efforts. It was evident that the further development of civil society and the Kosovar governing institutions were closely linked to UNMIK.

One major question that the UNMIK mission raises is whether the international community could and should prepare a people for self-governance by assuming some or all sovereign powers on a temporary basis. From my experiences in Kosovo, I believe the answer to be yes, but it must do so in a more coherent and thoughtful way by including people with local knowledge including diaspora, expat experts and NGOs. The inclusion of local knowledge is invaluable in planning for the assumption of power, in anticipating the problems of governance, and in outlining a roadmap for relinquishing power and sovereignty. Also, it is very important that the status of a newly independent country be determined early on in the process. The uncertainty regarding the future of the governing structure erodes both the state building and the good governance elements and perceptions of accountability, law enforcement mechanisms, undermine longevity and predictability. And the case of Kosovo, was not uniformly applied, with a difference in its application to UNMIK and to the locals (see for example, [Chesterman, 2001](#)).

Lines of responsibility

Too often UNMIK appeared to be making up the rules as it went, thus keeping vague the lines of responsibility between UNMIK and the locals. Locals perceived this ambiguity as

intentionally intended to help the internationals who have more expertise and experience in keeping the locals in check. UNMIK officials should have clearly identified at the onset the responsibility of local government institutions versus UN governing bodies. During my time in Kosovo, with funding from USAID, we published a user-friendly citizen guide (in the form of a comic strip) to Kosovo governing institutions that detailed lines of responsibility between the local and international institutions. The majority of the guides were scooped-up by PISG and UNMIK representatives (see [EWMI, 2003](#)).

In an effort to promote a coherent front between the PISG and the international community, Kosovar leaders were paired with international advisors. With no clear codes of behavior for the international advisors, too often the Kosovar leaders found themselves as figureheads to the internationals who knew the tricks of the game to perpetuate their personal power. UNMIK should have developed clear codes of behavior for the international advisors and held them accountable for infringing them.

UNMIK needed to a better job keeping the public informed. This meant engaging civil society, local media and developing more transparent decision process related to the transfer of power to the U.N. supervised PISG, local administrative bodies comprised of elected officials, versus UNMIK-reserved power. UNMIK needed to develop a clear timetable and benchmarks for transfer of powers to Kosovo's elected representatives.

Rule of law and war crimes

UNMIK needed to address issues that were not negotiable, like the fate of missing persons and the return of Serbs to lands that they were expelled from during and after the war. This should not have been done piecemeal, as UNMIK did, but collectively, so that each group's concerns were addressed simultaneously in a way that was perceived as fair and just. Furthermore, the police and the judiciary needed to be strengthened by allowing the rule of law to take precedence over respective Western political concerns. This would have led to the arrest of such groups as the so-called "Serb Bridge Watchers" who patrolled the bridge across the River Ibar in the divided town of Mitrovica, as well as the Albanian militants who used the guise of "nationalism" to justify their criminal acts.

UNMIK needed to provide the temporary institutions such as PISG with clear responsibility, working with civil society watchdog organizations and the media to hold them legally accountable. With UNMIK running Kosovo, the PISG saw their elected positions as a personal opportunity rather than a public service responsibility. PISG members used their positions for economic gain and to angle their political party's control over public universities and state-owned companies such as the Kosovo Electric Company rather than attending to the needs of their citizens. Universities and the state-owned companies continue to be used by the parties to award jobs and educational opportunities to the sons and daughters of their supporters, while corruption remains rampant to the present day.

Conclusion: leadership lessons in transitional societies

The democratic development of Kosovo and Albania illustrate the challenges that most leaders in governments and civil society face working in transitional societies. It should come as no surprise their respective roles and goals will come into conflict as local leaders fight to hold onto power while many Western good governance programs promote sharing of power. This conflict is complicated by the question of to whom the NGOs and international organizations are accountable – their donor or the community they are working in? For example, with regards to programs that promote good governance, does the leader of the organization take on an activist role, as I did in Albania, or take more of a managerial role, supporting programs, which often have a clear start and end date, and the focus is on the success of the program? Both approaches were employed by various foundations and

organizations in Central and Eastern Europe, and the Western Balkans throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

I am a strong advocate of international development. I went into the field with a civic responsibility mindset (truth be told, the adventure of it all was also very enticing). This meant continuing my involvement with the countries and organizations long after funding for the projects dried up. It is easy to criticize the leaders of aid programs for their top-down approach to development, implementing cookie-cutter projects, and too often holding themselves accountable to their donor rather than the countries and people where they are serving. The fact of the matter is that it also comes down to the lack of political will by local leaders to implement reforms that promote the rule of law coupled with Western governments' failure to hold them accountable.

Yet, in less than 30 years, countries such as Poland and Hungary have gone from being cited as democratic transformation to the new faces for populism and nationalism. Unfortunately, Kosovo and Albania, and for that matter the entire region, are potentially moving in those directions. The challenges civil society organizations are currently facing are similar to the ones their counterparts faced 30 years ago. We can learn from our past mistakes by incorporating a mentoring program to assist next generation of NGOs in project development and implementation. Mentors should have a proven track record in developing and implementing development projects in a given country and region of the organization's interest. While mentoring can focus on general subjects, it can also aim to hone specific, practical skills required for the individual and organization's particular projects or programs. The majority of the mentoring will be done via email, telephone, or Zoom, and on-site. During my tenure as Chief of Party of USAID Policy and Advocacy Project in Georgia 2011, I established a successful mentoring program that helped think tanks and NGOs in one or more of the following areas: developing qualitative or quantitative research design; conducting reliable needs assessments and data collection for policy development and advocacy purposes; developing effective policy briefs and policy recommendations; monitoring advocacy outcomes and/or the implementation of existing policies; building and sustaining public support for an advocacy issue/campaign; mobilizing diverse resources for advocacy; and diversifying advocacy tactics. The mentors were recruited from organizations and individuals from Central and Eastern Europe with a proven track record in developing and implementing advocacy campaigns and policy reform in Central and Eastern Europe.

I also see universities as a key in developing the next generation of international development leaders. These new leaders face challenges that go well beyond those we faced 25 and more years ago – with contemporary crisis in climate change, disinformation and cyber security. Both government and nongovernmental leaders' decisions on these issues will have an impact that goes beyond the borders of their respective countries. Next generation leaders will need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills akin to playing a multi-dimensional three-tier chess game to address today's global development challenges. This means a cross-disciplinary approach to their education, which many universities have adopted, and my generation talking less about our successes and learning more from our leadership failures.

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About the author

Fron Nahzi has more than 25 years of experience in international development and has worked in over 20 countries across the globe. He has developed and managed multi-million dollar projects in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Caucasus, Oceania, Latin America and Southeast Asia. His project experience includes work with both local and national governments and the private sector to address such issues as security, disinformation, climate change, good governance, anti-corruption, conflict resolution, advocacy, rule of law, education and human rights. Fron is currently an Adjunct Instructor at American University's Department of Public Administration and Policy, and the Executive Vice President of Eos Tech Trust, a nonprofit that helps NGOs across the globe integrate technological solutions to advance their work. Nahzi holds an MA in Public Policy from the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy at University at Albany.

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