H.E. AGRON BAJRAMI

AMBASSADOR OF KOSOVO TO THE KINGDOM OF BELGIUM, THE GRAND DUCHY OF LUXEMBOURG AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

"Our strategic orientation is Euro-Atlantic integration. We have no doubts about this"

Let us start with some (long overdue) good news. Following agreement between the European Parliament and the Council on a proposal by the Commission, passport holders from Kosovo will be allowed to travel to the EU without a visa (for maximum 90 days in any 180-day period) starting on January 1, 2024.

We are happy that by the end of this year, the visa regime will be lifted for citizens of Kosovo, and I hope this will only improve our relations with EU. We are glad that this agreement is concluded because it was long overdue, as you well say. It was a unanimous decision of the Council, and this is a very good sign because it means that all 27 Member States of the EU supported visa free regime for Kosovo.

The importance of this process is manifold because Kosovo citizens will finally be able to move freely, to enjoy, to see and to communicate with Europe. This is particularly important for our young people. It gives our society the full taste of freedom that we have lacked so far. At the same time, it is proof that in a relationship with the European Union (EU), when you commit yourself and achieve the standards that are requested and required, there are benefits to be derived.

Of course, we fulfilled the conditions for visa liberalisation five years ago. The European Commission itself has said several times in official reports that Kosovo has complied with all the rules, regulations and fulfilling conditions. Unfortunately, the Member States were not able to come to this decision for a long time. Until now. This is a sign to us that it is well worth to engage.

It is important because we have a long list of things we want to achieve, and with this objective completed and out of the way, it leaves more room for other political processes to be attended to, most notably EU candidacy.

Towards the end of last year, during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, we submitted our candidacy for EU membership. This is a natural step for us, a step that underlines our strategic orientation, that is to stay, that we belong to Europe and we belong to the EU. It also underlines the fact that we are ready for this step. All the relevant reports, including European Parliament and EU Commission reports, are identifying steady progress in all relevant fields, those relevant to the EU and to our society: rule of law, democracy, human rights, economy, etc. Progress is therefore visible, recorded and shown in these reports. And this makes us a very credible candidate for EU membership.

We think that in the current geopolitical context, Kosovo's EU candidacy would help not only us but the region as a whole. We hope that our application will be dealt with as soon as possible, that EU Presidency will provide us with the questionnaire, and then the process will move forward.

For our citizens, and for citizens of the EU, it is important to see that the Kosovo of today is not the Kosovo of 15-20 years ago. Our improvement is solid and sustainable. We have been politically stable for over two years and we are ready to keep this course. The only crisis is the one in our relations with Serbia. In every other field, we are comfortably moving, progressing forward in a positive direction.

What is your vision on the normalisation process with Serbia?

This year we reached two major agreements: the February Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia and the Implementation Annex to the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia, agreed in Ohrid on March 18.

We consider these to be very important agreements, which are very difficult to accept, but we accepted them nevertheless, so the process moves forward. When we did accept them, we also wanted to sign them, which unfortunately did not happen, as there was no willingness to sign them by the other side. Nevertheless, they are now considered to be legally binding, at least according to the EU and the US, and the intention of EU is for the commitments from the agreements to be incorporated into the European perspective and integration processes of both Kosovo and Serbia.

And we are comfortable with that. We are committed to fulfilling and implementing these agreements in their entirety. But we insist and place special emphasis that they have to be respected in their entirety, not selectively. It seems however, that this view is not shared by Serbia. Belgrade has been denying parts of the agreement since the first day we achieved it. As a consequence, more than three months since we agreed in Ohrid, we are yet to have an agreed calendar about when each of the points of the agreement will be implemented.

I hope that by the time this interview is published we are going to have a clearer picture, but politics is not a movie, it does not end in two hours. Of course, it was always to be expected that we will have ups and downs in this difficult process. The premise of the whole process is complicated. It could have been much better and easier for everyone involved if in 2008 Serbia would have had the courage and strength to accept and recognise Kosovo's independence, which is the consequence of a history and is unlike other histories being talked about.

Kosovo's independence is the natural and just conclusion of a situation in which we were for years under Serbian repression. During the 1998-99 war the State of Serbia committed genocide against the Albanian population of Kosovo. Thousands of civilians were killed, entire villages were burned and many cities were destroyed. A million Kosovars – more than half of the population – were made refugees in countries of Europe and beyond. Most of the rest, hundreds of thousands, were internally displaced. The repression of Serbia against Kosovo Albanians was cause for NATO intervention in the spring of 1999, after which Kosovo was removed from the authority of then Yugoslavia. Independence was therefore a natural conclusion of that process. If our independence had been recognised by Belgrade, today both Kosovo and Serbia would probably have been at the final stages of EU membership.

Unfortunately, that was not the case, and now we have this normalisation dialogue, which is at the stage where we need to conclude the process that started in 2011. But normalisation cannot come if there is no clear agreement about what the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia is.

For everyone involved, it is clear that unless there is mutual recognition, the relationship cannot be considered to be normal.

And this – mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia – is what will have to come at the end of this process. There is no way around it: the conclusion of dialogue, full normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, is possible only if there is mutual recognition.

Yet, we are not sure Belgrade wants to conclude this dialogue and achieve the lasting solution. We have continuously seen signs that Serbia does not intend to accept all the parts of the recent agreement. They only fully accept one point in which the government of Kosovo commits to ensure an appropriate level of self-management for the ethnic Serbian community in Kosovo. But they refuse to accept they have agreed to the other points, such as the point in which they agree not to block Kosovo's membership in any international organisation. Serbia already breached the agreement by voting against Kosovo's membership to the Council of Europe. And the EU is mistakenly keeping silent about it.

Kosovo also has a clear vision for NATO and hopes to participate in its Partnership for Peace programme.

Our strategic orientation is Euro-Atlantic integration. We have no doubts about this. There is no political party in Kosovo opposed to this vision. The absolute majority of Kosovo citizens want to be citizens of a country which is a member of both the EU and NATO.

I think that in technical aspects, regarding NATO and its Partnership for Peace programme, we fulfil all criteria, meaning that our armed forces are trained by NATO, in fact created by NATO. Again, there are four countries in the NATO Alliance which do not recognise Kosovo yet. But by working and engaging constructively with everybody we can overcome this issue.

In the current context of threats to security, not only because of Russia's aggression to Ukraine, the EU, NATO and the West have realised that we need to have a very compact system of defence and security: physical defence; economic security and the protection of our system of values and other freedoms. In this regard, Kosovo, as part of the Western Balkans, inevitably has to be included in this family of Euro-Atlantic organisations.

The non-recognisers are slowly starting to realise that keeping Kosovo out of NATO Partnership for Peace project, for example, is not helping anybody. While including Kosovo will help everybody. For a start, it would make our region more stable and secure.

There is no alternative to our Euro-Atlantic path. But this does not mean we are against somebody else. It only means it is our path. In that path, we have constantly said that we want to support and stand on the side of the just and the humane. In the current context, there is no neutrality when it comes to Russia's aggression on Ukraine. We stand with Ukraine, regardless of the fact that Ukraine does not recognise us. That is of no importance in this context, since it is a matter of principle.

We are recognised by more than 100 countries; and we have relations with countries which have not recognised us, and with some of them we have very good relationship. So recognition has just become a formality. As a small country, we need to find ways of cooperation with everybody who wants to cooperate in goodwill, and on equal footing.

Also, we want to deepen our relationship with wider world. Yes, we belong in Europe and EU, but we also belong to the whole world. During the war in Kosovo, when our people were suffering, nations from all over the globe were helping us, from Asia and Latin America, to Africa, Middle East and Oceania. With many of these nations we have very good relations. With others, we intend to build very good relations.

Looking ahead to the EU accession process, which reforms will be needed domestically to align with EU standards and the acquis communaitaire?

We prioritise, constantly, the rule of law. You can achieve a certain standard, but if it is not maintained, they can drop rather fast too. Democracy is not a given. Every day work is needed to maintain it.

This is not just a matter of fulfilling standards to join the EU, but providing our own people with good perspectives of living in a country which is democratic and in which everyone has equal opportunities for success and progress.

Among the priorities ahead are critical reforms in rule of law, and here I will highlight the Criminal Procedure Code, Law on Commercial Court, Financing of Political Entities, National Strategy and Action Plan against Domestic Violence, and adoption of the Migration Strategy.

We need to reform the economy, as well, and to be able to do that we approved the Economic Reform Programme 2023-2025. In the field of economic development, I should highlight the Consumer Protection Programme 2021-2025, general law on inspections, amending the law on the protection of competition, etc.

In that regard, our main priorities are rule of law, the fight against corruption and public administration reforms. We also want to improve education, to give the younger generation better opportunities to compete in the modern world.

And we can do all of this, as we have already shown. Just look at what was achieved during the past year. As the EU Commission Report on Kosovo shows, in most of areas – like fight against corruption, public administration reform, economic and monetary policy, functioning of market economy, education and culture, social policy and employment, transport policy, trans-European networks, food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary issues – we have evident progress.

Kosovo has performing quite well in business rankings as of late. What measures has the government of Kosovo taken to create an enabling environment for investors and businesses?

Kosovo has certain assets which I think are worth highlighting. Our population is quite young, more than half is under 30. Our population is multi-lingual and used to working in multi-cultural and multi-religious environments. The government has tried and improved the conditions of doing business for foreign investors and for local entrepreneurs.

In past two years, Kosovo has achieved political stability and has been demonstrating a stable macroeconomic environment since. Our economic growth reached a double digit of 10.7 percent in 2021.

Our ambitious industrial policy, sustainable investment, and strategic investor status we offer, has achieved an increase in exports by 84 percent reaching the value of EUR 2.7 billion. It is continuing this year as well with an increase of the export value by 62 percent, and 88 percent increase in export amount. The impact was also felt in Foreign Direct Investment, which increased by 22 percent.

With our ambitious legislative agenda, we expect to see it grow further through reforms in investment policy. As a result of our Economic Revival fiscal policy and the decisive steps taken in the formalization of the economy, 10,000 jobs have been formalized, while 35,000 new ones have been created.

At the same time, we have shown to be quite resilient, as we have managed very well the pandemic and consequences of Russian aggression on Ukraine. This resilience shows that Kosovo presents a good opportunity for European businesses, especially those that have been thinking about near-shoring, moving from far away places to a country which is close enough geographically, politically stable and on the path of integration to the EU. And many other reasons among which a good legislative framework; adaptive workforce; competitive labour costs, etc.

On the other hand, we also work to see how to attract our own diaspora, which is quite substantial, successful and well integrated across Europe. In Belgium, it is around 50-60,000. In Germany, it is almost half a million. In Switzerland, over 300,000. We wish to bring them back and provide them the conditions to invest back home, to allow them to serve as a greater link between Kosovo and the rest of Europe.

In Belgium, for example, the opinion about Kosovo 20 years ago was quite different from what it is today. Back then, opinions were influenced by the fact that we were a post-war country of the former Yugoslavia. Lots of crises, instability, conflict and inter-ethnic hatred. That was dominating the news headlines. Today, while we still have problems with Serbia, everyone who is moving to or visiting Kosovo is aware that Kosovo is much more than a place where some troubles are occurring from time to time. It is, in fact, a very vibrant country.

What are the main sectors with the highest potential?

I would highlight the IT sector and wood processing. There are capacities in agriculture which have to be explored. There are also good perspectives in green energy, but because of the past war, and the years of neglect, our energy generation capacity has been rather limited. Now we are in the process of renewing it.

Mentioning IT sector, let me just briefly explain that Kosovo's great asset is its young people. More than 60 percent of Kosovo's population is younger than 30. Our youth is multilingual, very innovative, and oriented towards modern economic trends, with IT sector being the most fast growing one in Kosovo.

Let me mention here that Kosovo, as investment destination, is also attractive. Foreign Direct Investments in the Republic of Kosovo have increased over the years. Foreign companies from around the globe have opened their business and invested in the country in many fields.

To name a few, PowerPack Kosovo LLC – a Belgian investment – is a leading manufacturer and supplier of refuse sacks, PMC bags and organic waste bags. SOWI Kosovo L.L.C – a joint Kosovo, German and Israel venture – invested more than EUR 170 million on a 105 MW wind farm. Hirano Mushroom LLC – a Kosovo-Japanese investment in the field of shiitake mushrooms – is exporting 99 percent of their products to the EU market.

Also, Marriot International Inc. – a US chain of hotels – has built two hotels – "Four Points by Sheraton" and "Courtyard Marriot" – in Pristina. In the banking sector there is presence from Türkiye (TEB, Ziraat, Turkiye Is Bankasi, BKT), Austria (Raiffesen Bank, ProCredit Bank), Italy (Credins), and so on.

Of course, Kosovo has much more potential for investments, especially now that the Energy Strategy has entered into force and the interest of investors in this field is on its peak.

We do not normally think of Kosovo as a tourist destination, but it certainly is an up-and-coming destination.

Kosovo is very close to Brussels, less than a three-hour flight away. Pristina is a very lively capital city of 200,000 inhabitants, which has a good social and cultural atmosphere especially for the younger people: inexpensive, with a good food scene and a vibrant nightlife.

From Pristina, you can be within one hour in a place that transports you five centuries back. There are rural areas with untouched nature and old villages. We have a mountain range on the border between Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia, which provides great hiking and trekking opportunities, as well as a ski resort – Brezovica. Mountain and nature-based tourism therefore have the most potential for future. And while we are landlocked, the sea is just a couple of hours away in Albania.

The past has left a lot of marks in Kosovo, and I do not mean only the ugly ones related to the war. I am referring to monuments of social life of centuries ago. If you visit Prizren, an old city with a well preserved Ottoman centre, you could have the feeling of walking into 17th century Istanbul. This city hosts a lot of cultural events, among which one of the best documentary film festivals in the world, Dokufest, which this year will take place between 4 and 22 August. So, there is something for every taste.

We have very good air connections with Western Europe, our airport is one of the leaders in the region by number of flights and number of passengers. Kosovars themselves like to travel a lot themselves.

And I would link back to the first question on visa liberalisation, and why it is so significant for us. This will break the chains of isolation which are usually the underlying reason for conflict, hatred and miscommunication. In this regard, we are in quite a positive place as a country and as a society, 25 years after the war.

Mentioning the war, before we conclude, allow me to underline that Kosovo is a great success story. Just think about it – this small Balkans country was born out of the great suffering of its people. After decades of repression and systematic violence, culminating with destructive war and genocide in 1999, Kosovo and its people were able to build a country that is a model of democracy in the region. It is a remarkable progress, which we are committed to build upon further.

Agron Bajrami was born on December 5, 1967. Married to Adelina, and father of son Sharr (20) and daughter Lisë (18). Before coming to Brussels as Ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo, Agron Bajrami had a remarkable carrier in journalism – in the years 1994-2021 he was a journalist, Editor and Editor-in-Chief (2004-2021) with Koha Ditore, the most notable daily newspaper in Kosovo. In his Twitter account @AgronBajrami describes himself as fan of history, books, movies, graphic novels & rock music.