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Dayton Peace Accords Series

DR. VJOSA OSMANI-SADRIU

*Interviewed by: Tom Selinger
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Dr. Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu has served as President of Kosovo since 2021.

INTERVIEW

Q: My name is Tom Selinger from ADST, the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. It's May 24th, 2025. We're in Dayton, Ohio, and I have the great pleasure to be interviewing Dr. Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu, President of Kosovo.

OSMANI-SADRIU: A great pleasure, a great pleasure. Thank you for the opportunity.

Q: So we're here in Dayton, Ohio, reflecting on the achievements and legacy of the 1995 Dayton peace negotiations. And the Kosovo issue was famously not included in those negotiations. Would you like to reflect on that decision from the perspective of the people of Kosovo?

OSMANI-SADRIU: Well, Kosovo is not an issue any longer. Right now, Kosovo is a country, an independent, sovereign, thriving democracy, and we're very blessed that throughout this period, we've had the strong support of the United States. But you're right; back in the early '90s, when the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was going on, the Dayton Agreement was about Bosnia-Herzegovina. It was about that country, and the parties involved did not include Kosovo because we did not participate at that time in that war.

Although during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of course, the entire region was suffering because the Milošević regime had instilled upon Kosovo an apartheid-like regime where for ten years before the war in our country, all of our basic human rights were being violated from the right to live to the right to go to school, to the right to play sports or go to university and the right to work.

So although in our country ninety-two percent are of an Albanian nationality, everyone that belonged to this nationality was kicked out of their jobs, was kicked out of their schools, and all of this was legislated through decisions by Milošević, which, the only other case was Apartheid South Africa where this was actually through the written

decisions, not just political will. So we were living under oppression while the war in Bosnia was going on, and we all knew, given what had happened at that time in Croatia, Slovenia initially, and then in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that we were next, that Milošević would come to Kosovo to kill us. And, of course, it was a very difficult childhood for us because there was a lot of tension at all times. There were tanks rolling down the streets everywhere we would go, police officers who would not allow us to go to school.

So it was practically war at that time all over Yugoslavia. But most of the wars, until '95, happened in Bosnia Herzegovina, and when Dayton happened, it was a sigh of relief for the region that finally peace would come. But, yes, the situation is still very, very complex in Bosnia-Herzegovina. And I would say in the wider region, but at least this region has had peace. And that's to a large extent, thanks to the United States of America and the leadership role that the U.S. had taken back in the 90s in our region.

Q: Do you think the Dayton process established some precedence or laid the groundwork for international involvement in the Kosovo crisis just a few years later when it really took off in 1998?

OSMANI-SADRIU: I wouldn't say Dayton in itself, but I would say what happened in Bosnia, generally speaking, the international community intervened in Bosnia just way too late. After the Srebrenica genocide happened after thousands and thousands were killed after so many children were killed, and after so many women were raped as a tool of war by the Milošević forces. By the time the international community intervened, there was so much loss of life, so much suffering, so much destruction. And when the war in Kosovo started, I think the lessons that the international community had learned from Bosnia and Herzegovina— that it's not just about intervening, but it's also about doing it at the right time before it becomes too late, came to play. So they intervened a few months after most of the massacres had happened, and it was so much earlier compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina. But one thing to keep in mind is that the massacres and the killings of Milošević forces in Kosovo were at a higher intensity in Kosovo. So, if the international community were not to intervene in March 1999, they didn't need more than a year to wipe out all of Kosovo with the intensity of killings that they were carrying out.

So in just a matter of months, they killed 13,000 civilians in Kosovo, raped about 20,000 women, and we have the highest number of children killed per capita of any of the wars in former Yugoslavia. But I do think that in terms of, if I can call it the conscience of the international community, Bosnia played a great role in raising the conscience of the international community that Milošević is not a peacemaker. He cannot be trusted. He was a crazy, genocidal mind, an autocrat that wanted to destroy everything that was not like him. So it was better to stop him sooner rather than later. So, we often say that Bosnia suffered so much and that the only good thing that came out of it is that the world intervened sooner in Kosovo.

Q: Can you reflect on the international support for Kosovo's eventual independence in 2008, particularly the U.S. support? And I understand you played a key role in defending that Declaration of Independence before the international court.

OSMANI-SADRIU: Yes.

Q: Do you see echoes of Dayton there in terms of the international response?

OSMANI-SADRIU: Well, so many of the diplomats that were involved in Dayton were also involved in making, in supporting Kosovo's independence. But I would say in the case of Kosovo's independence, it was a flawless American victory. Of course, for us, it is a victory for humanity to begin with. It shows the power of human dignity before everything else and how the principles of freedom, independence, democracy, and sovereignty brought together all Western powers in defense of these values. So Kosovo today is, I still believe, the biggest success story in recent history of American foreign and defense policy after the Second World War.

So there was enormous support from the United States in helping us come to independence, but also post-independence, which is why it's a great example. So, the U.S. was with us in helping us get our freedom through the peacekeeping process, and then the state-building process, and then after that the democracy-building process, so all of this circle. We were never left alone, which is why it is such a success story worldwide, and even today, it remains, I would say also in terms of NATO, NATO's longest, but also the biggest success story in terms of its missions.

So the U.S. was there from the most complex political issues to the little things that one cannot think of. I often say we had to build a country from scratch. And you talk about your founding fathers. In Kosovo, those who drafted the Constitution and worked on the Declaration of Independence were still around. But every single word there in the Declaration of Independence, every single article in our Constitution was written with a U.S. expert, a U.S. politician, a U.S. lawyer by our side helping us out, and always thinking forward. In that sense, it has been an indispensable support, which is why Kosovo today is the most pro-American nation on earth. And we wear that as a badge of honor because there were so many, and not just in terms of institutional building, but so many men and women in uniform from the U.S. Army that have been helping keep peace and preserve peace in our region, a region that had never known peace in the history of its existence until the U.S. came to our rescue and made sure that peace is possible.

Q: With soldiers in uniforms and diplomats in suits.

OSMANI-SADRIU: Absolutely, a great combination, but it's an amazing success story, one that I do hope that the U.S. is proud of as much as we are.

Q: Thank you, yes. How would you evaluate the implementation of the Dayton Peace Accords and, more generally, international involvement in the region over the past three decades?

OSMANI-SADRIU: Having dealt with these complex problems for more than two decades, I've come to a conclusion, which is a very simple one. Perhaps to quote Martti

Ahtisaari, President of Finland, who negotiated Kosovo's final settlement. He said, "Peace is a question of will." When there is will, when there is political will from the leadership of nations involved, peace is always possible, and implementation of peace agreements is always possible.

The reason why the European Union was created and the reason why Germany and France, about twenty years after World War II, got together was because Germany had the will to deal with its past. They went through a denazification process. They made sure that those who committed the crimes faced consequences and faced justice, and they are still paying reparations for what they did, but they never hide it. Even today's generations accept what has happened, and they say, "Never again."

In our region, the problem with implementing the Dayton Peace Agreement or other agreements that were reached throughout the region is that Serbia today is led by a guy who served as Milošević's minister for propaganda. So, just imagine someone who served as minister of propaganda during the genocidal war, not after, but during the genocidal war of Milošević in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and elsewhere. So, when you have a leader like that who thinks about how to drag us all to the past, the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreements and other agreements reached with Kosovo, and so on, it becomes quite a complex and difficult task.

That doesn't mean that our willingness is going to waver. Quite the opposite, we're also committed, the rest of us, in the region to maintain peace, and we work hand in hand with our friends and partners from Bosnia and Herzegovina to support them every step of the way. We have a history of excellent relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. We want them to finally thrive despite the challenges that they face in implementing the Dayton Peace Agreement. And we also try to learn from their experience so that we do not repeat those mistakes because it's very crucial that we cooperate with one another, we support one another, and regional cooperation is the only way forward to make sure that our kids never go through what we had to go through.

Q: What are any other challenges you want to mention that you see on the road ahead?

OSMANI-SADRIU: Perhaps rather than challenges to talk about the potential. Now, of course, our region does face challenges, but it's also an enormous potential for growth, economic development, and investment. The young people are thriving. Kosovo has the highest GDP growth in the region for the past four years. The youngest population in Europe that are excelling worldwide in so many areas, from music and football to science and politics. So we're very, very proud of them. And I think it's about time that the world sees the Western Balkans as a potential rather than as a burden.

So hopefully, they will see that face of us in Kosovo. Kosovo is a country of youth. That's the true face of Kosovo today, not a country of war, a country of youth that is thriving.

Q: Thank you so much.

OSMANI-SADRIU: Thank you.

End of interview