

The pilot 'ambassador' of Kosovo

Although Kosovo is an independent state, it still suffers from a lack of recognition. Over 60% of UN Member States (including Mauritius) have not officially recognised it. So, in February 2009, James Berisha, a US-trained Kosovan pilot, single-handedly started a campaign, 'Flying for Kosovo', to drum up support for his country. I met him at Le Labourdonnais last week hours before he was due to fly to the Seychelles.

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After the bitter civil war which raged in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s came to an end, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence on 17 February 2008 from Serbian domination. Over 90% of the inhabitants of Kosovo are Albanians with a minority of Serbs (over 100,000) on a territory which is 'five times the size of Mauritius' but with a small population of only 2 million people. So far, "out of 193 UN Member States, only 75 have recognised Kosovo", according to James Berisha, the unofficial pilot ambassador of Kosovo. He acknowledges that the recognition rate among countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America is pretty low and disappointing. Besides the United States, Canada, Australia, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand and others, only 22 countries within the EU, 12 from the African continent and 7-8 in Latin American

have recognised the newly-independent state. "The whole planet is today a global village", Berisha says. "We need to be able to live in peace with other nations and have civilised relations (economic, cultural...) with them which are mutually beneficial to our peoples." I asked him if these relations with other nations would include Serbia. He says that "Kosovo has trade relations with Serbia as well as other Republics in the former Yugoslavia such as Slovenia from which we import household items, washers and dryers for refrigerators, PVC doors and windows."

The mission he has set himself is to raise awareness in the whole world about the "existence of Kosovo as an independent nation". Without any official mandate, he founded 'Flying for Kosovo' in February 2009 and started flying to a number of countries request-

ing their governments to recognise Kosovo. As his work gathered momentum, the authorities in Kosovo have started supporting him in his unusual mission by giving him an official letter to submit to the countries he visits.

On his current tour of the African continent, he started his stopovers from the north and travelled all the way to the south, then to Mauritius. He says that out of the 42 African countries which have yet to recognise Kosovo, he only has Eastern African states to visit. He was given 42 official letters by the authorities in Kosovo addressed to each of the Heads of States of African countries he flew to. In a month, he will be done with Africa and will have covered the whole continent.

In Mauritius, he met an official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was rather disappointed with this visit because he was told that Mauritius has to abide by the rules of the African Union, one of which is not to accept the separation of nations. The FA official told him about intractable cases such as Kashmir and Diego Garcia/Chagos Archipelago. James Berisha was unaware of the Chagos Archipelago saga and of Diego Garcia. Shaking his head, he tells me that he is aware of realpolitik and geopolitics. Then he evokes the issue of Russia and its role in the Kosovo-Serbs dispute. "Russia is so unfair and is driving us crazy", he unhesitatingly says. "Initially

Russia said that if Georgia were to split into two states, it would not recognise the new states. But it did. Why not Kosovo?" laments James Berisha who further adds that many countries feel threatened and do not want to compromise their good relations with the powerful of this world. Out of the 34 countries in Central and South America, only a handful of them have recognised Kosovo. They include Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Peru, Belize, Colombia, etc but not Venezuela and Nicaragua, which are "friends of Putin", Berisha says. But neither have any of the bigger countries such as Brazil, Chile, Argentina... They either do not want to be seen to be condoning partitions - these may represent an internal threat for them - and/or feel closer to the Serbs. With regard to Brazil, Berisha feels that as Kosovo now has a woman President and so has Brazil, maybe the two women might come to an agreement to overcome the current stalemate. It remains to be seen whether gender or realpolitik will have the upper hand.

James Berisha perceives a change in the Chinese posture. "China is changing and is becoming more neutral", he says. "The European Union is going so far East with Russia trying to control one half and the US the other half." I asked him about the role of Bernard Kouchner... "He was OK. But I was not happy with what the French did in the region or division under their control - the North where there are a majority of Serbs. They simply kept apart Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. Kouchner helped French companies. Do you know that the main telephone company in Kosovo is based in Monaco? This is why if you call me, you will need to dial the international direct dialling (IDD) code for Monaco, ie 00 377, before you dial my number! We do not have our own country code because we are not recognised by the United Nations."

In a country where the unemployment rate is as high as 40%, it is not surprising why James Berisha wants to see more foreign direct investment (FDI). This is likely to increase with more official recognition of Kosovo which declared independence unilaterally in the wake of 78 days of NATO bombing (between March to June 1999) which effectively put an end to ethnic cleansing by Serbian ultra-nationalist forces led by the hardliner Slobodan Milosevic. The country is still being re-built and Berisha foresees a phenomenal growth over the next 4-5 years. "There is already a boom in real estate", he says. Under the banner of his 'Flying for Kosovo' initiative, James Berisha has visited 84 countries in the last two years, patiently seeking formal recognition of his country.

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