

Youth and Democracy: The Promotion of Youth Participation by the International Community in Kosovo

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Abstract

Kosovo is a good example of the successes and failures of international efforts to promote democratization. From 1999 to 2008, the territory was an UN-protectorate and democracy promotion was largely in the hands of the international community. Even today, five years after the self-declaration of independence and the acquisition of full sovereignty in September 2012, the influence of the international community is still tremendous. Hopes for the democratic development of the country are largely invested in the young generation. This paper, based on interviews with local and international experts, and a survey of students in Pristina, examines whether the criticisms of the international community also apply to the promotion of political participation by the young generation. It also considers the co-ordination of activities between international organisations and local organisations.

Keywords

Kosovo; democratisation; young people; youth policy; nongovernmental organizations; action programmes/action plans; multilateral foreign aid; national identity

The Kosovo Experiment and the Role of the Youth

Democratization processes are a prerequisite for the effective functioning and long-term stability of any modern state and economy. Such processes

* A slightly different version of this contribution originally appeared in German with the title *Jugend und Demokratie: Die Förderung der Partizipation Jugendlicher durch die internationale Gemeinschaft im Kosovo*, in: *Südoeuropäische Hefte* 2/2012, pp. 45–57. It can be read online at: http://suedosteuroepaeischehefte.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/sh_1_2_feltes.pdf.

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must take on board younger generations, as they are the future of any country. This article focuses on the activities undertaken by the international community in Kosovo to promote youth activities. By using empirical data from interviews in Kosovo,¹ my study shows that the implementation of youth projects was not successful and that not enough attention has been paid to the concrete concerns of young people. Efforts must be made to improve civil-society youth organizations via networks and alliances, while the role of young people in the political system in general must be strengthened.

In recent years, numerous studies have dealt with the Kosovo conflict and its consequences, the future of the country and the international presence there.² These have frequently paid more attention to administrative and territorial questions and the activities of international actors than to the people themselves and the changes that they have lived through in recent decades. While the media has tended to concentrate on political processes and political actors, research and analysis focusing on the people

¹ The article is based on the analysis of documents and materials gathered by the author during a preparatory visit to Kosovo in March 2011 and a two-month research trip undertaken from June 2011. As well as a non-representative standardized survey of students in Kosovo in Pristina, local and international experts were interviewed on the topic of youth participation in Kosovo. These include representatives of the international community (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe/OSCE, United Nations Children's Fund/UNICEF, United Nations Development Programme/UNDP, United Nations Population Fund/UNFPA), experts from international foundations and organizations (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Terre des Hommes, Mercy Corps, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit/GIZ – German Society for International Cooperation), representatives of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport (including the director of the Department of Youth/DoY and a GIZ/CIM Integrated Expert), researchers from national and international research institutes (Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development/KIPRED, Kosovo Public Policy Center/KPPC, University College ISPE), representatives of the Kosovo Youth Action Council (KYAC), the Kosovo Youth Network (KYN), the Local Youth Action Councils (LYACS), the *Vetëvendosje!* (Albanian for self-determination) movement, academics and journalists.

² Cf., e.g., Michael Daxner, Fifteen Years of Peace-building Activities in the Western Balkans: Lessons Learned and Current Challenges, in: *Connections. The Quarterly Journal* 3/2010, pp. 63–74; Institut für Europäische Politik/IEP, *Operationalisierung von Security Sector Reform (SSR) auf dem Westlichen Balkan – intelligente/kreative Ansätze für eine langfristig positive Gestaltung dieser Region* [Security Sector Reform (SSR) in the Western Balkans: Intelligent/Creative Approaches for a Positive Sustainable Development in the Region], Berlin, 9 January 2007, available at: <http://balkanforum.org/IEP-BND/iepo001.PDF>; Jens Narten, *External Democracy Promotion in Post-Conflict Zones: Evidence from Case Studies: Kosovo*, Hamburg, March 2009, available at: http://aix1.uottawa.ca/~czurcher/czurcher/Transitions_files/Final%20Report%20Kosovo.pdf; Christoph Zürcher, Building Democracy While Building Peace, in: *Journal of Democracy* 1/2011, pp. 81–95.

and their participation in the democratization process³ has generally been ignored – to the extent that it exists at all.⁴ Although a quite successfully functioning “underground democracy” had been established in Kosovo under the repressive rule of Slobodan Milošević, the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and other international organizations opted to create entirely new socio-political and administrative structures after the war of 1998–99.⁵

After more than ten years, the activities of the international community in Kosovo are coming under increasing criticism. According to Vedran Džihčić and Helmut Kramer, the international community has remained far from fulfilling its ambitious objectives, and this has been extremely costly. They criticize the extremely unrealistic and ahistorical approach of the international community, as well as a naïve belief in unproblematic democracy building.⁶ Many authors stress the key role played by the youth⁷ of Kosovo – both now and in the future. Fifty per cent of Kosovo’s population is under 24,⁸ and youth unemployment is over 70 per cent.⁹ While many see the rising number of young people as providing a motor for the

³ The rest of this paper will focus on “democratization” activities undertaken by the international community. This concerns efforts, by means of diverse programmes and projects, to strengthen civil society organizations and to enable young people to play a greater role in politics and society than hitherto.

⁴ Cf. Orli Fridman, *Perspectives on Conflict. Structured and Unstructured Daily Encounters in Kosovo*, available at: http://www.transconflict.com/10/wpcontent/uploads/2010/12/StructuredUnstructuredDailyEncountersKosovo_Fridman.pdf, p. 2.

⁵ Cf. Narten, cited above (Note 3), p. 2.

⁶ Cf. Vedran Džihčić/Helmut Kramer, *Der Kosovo nach der Unabhängigkeit. Hehre Ziele, enttäuschte Hoffnungen und die Rolle der internationalen Gemeinschaft* [Kosovo after Independence. Noble Aims, Dashed Hopes and the Role of the International Community], Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Berlin 2008, p. 15. Iain King and Whit Mason have also criticized the international presence in Kosovo. They described its work as a failure (the subtitle of their book is “How the World Failed Kosovo”), listing all the mistakes made in detail. Cf. Iain King/Whit Mason, *Peace at any Price. How the World Failed Kosovo*, London/New York 2006, esp. pp. 240–256. Focusing on the role of the EU and OSCE is Marianne Ducasse-Rogier, Kosovo: what the EU should not be expected to do, in: *Security and Human Rights* 1/2011, pp. 29–35.

⁷ Using the United Nations’ definition, which defines a country’s “youth” as those members of the population between the ages of 15 and 24.

⁸ Cf. The World Bank/Statistical Office of Kosovo (eds), *Consumption Poverty in the Republic of Kosovo in 2009*, Pristina, May 2011, p. 9, available at: http://esk.rks-gov.net/eng/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_details&gid=934&Itemid=-8.

⁹ Cf. European Commission, *Kosovo 2010 Progress Report*, Brussels 9 November 2010, SEC(2010)1329, p. 24, at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2010/package/ks_rapport_2010_en.pdf.

development of Kosovo, others warn of a “demographic disaster” if more attention is not paid to the concerns of the youth. The World Bank’s 2007 World Development Report¹⁰ also focussed attention on the problem of youth participation, and called for young people to be provided with greater opportunities to take part in the life of society. If this does not occur, according to the World Bank, the resulting frustration could lead to a turning away from society and an increasing propensity for violence. The economic and social costs of violence are such that it should be considered one of the most significant barriers to development.¹¹ A process of this kind could lead to the destabilization of the country in the medium to long term.

While many theoretical works deal with democratization in post-war regions, or what are known as “countries in transition”, there are few empirical studies that have focused on how a post-war society can achieve not only a lasting peace, but one that is also accompanied by democracy. The bulk of the literature on what is generally known as “peacebuilding” is focussed on the transition from (civil) war to peace, and the question of how this peace can be secured. Studies of this kind generally do not consider whether this peace is accompanied by democratic structures.¹² While many analyses stress the failings of the UNMIK interim administration in the early post-war years,¹³ most of the later studies are concerned with the unresolved status question, minority issues, or the decentralization process.¹⁴ Very few deal with the implementation of democratization processes or the opportunities for citizen participation via organized political structures (forums, associations, councils) apart from elections. This is the

¹⁰ Cf. World Bank, *World Development Report 2007. Development and the Next Generation*, Washington, D.C., 2006.

¹¹ Cf. Peter Imbusch, *Jugendgewalt in Entwicklungsländern – Hintergründe und Erklärungsmuster* [Youth Violence in Developing Countries – Background and Patterns of Explanation], in: Peter Imbusch (ed.), *Jugendliche als Täter und Opfer von Gewalt* [Adolescents as Perpetrators and Victims of Violence], Wiesbaden 2010, pp. 11–94, here: p. 20.

¹² Cf. Christoph Zuercher/Nora Roehner/Sarah Riese, External Democracy Promotion in Post-Conflict Zones. A Comparative-Analytical Framework, in: *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 1/2009, pp. 1–26, here: p. 1.

¹³ Cf., e.g., Anne-Marie Gardner, Beyond standards before status: democratic governance and non-state actors, in: *Review of International Studies* 3/2008, pp. 531–552; King/Mason, cited above (Note 7); Jens Narten, In Need of Self-Reflection: Peacebuilding in Post-War Kosovo from a Systems-Analytical Perspective, in: *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* Winter/Spring 2007, pp. 121–132.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., Alexander B. Downes, More Borders, Less Conflict? Partition as a Solution to Ethnic Civil Wars, in: *SAIS Review* 1/2006, pp. 49–61; Avnita Lakhani, Finding a Peaceful Path for Kosovo – A Track Two Approach, in: *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* Summer/Fall 2006, pp. 27–41; Oisín Tansey, Democratization without a State. Democratic Regime-building in Kosovo, in: *Democratization* 1/2007, pp. 129–150.

jumping-off point for the current contribution, which considers whether the general criticism of the international community applies equally to its efforts to promote the participation of young people. It also examines whether and how the activities of international organizations and institutions are co-ordinated and what role is played in this by (co-operation with) local organizations.

The Current Situation in Kosovo

Kosovo “seems to be [...] caught in an impasse, which goes beyond the mere status issue”.¹⁵ This has to do with the contradiction between the need for an effective state and state institutions to generate trust, on the one hand, and the extent of activities carried out by the international community and international organizations, on the other, whose financial power makes them dominant, but which have largely failed to achieve aims such as the promotion of sustainable reforms in all areas of public administration.¹⁶ Alongside many other ongoing challenges, such as corruption, organized crime and misgovernment, the most urgent task in Kosovo, as in many developing countries outside Europe, is to provide young people with an adequate primary and secondary education. In low- and middle-income countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the educational needs of a majority of young people are already met in this area. The challenges that these countries need to meet include the development of tertiary education and facilitating the participation and integration of young people in society. An integration process of this kind is presently underway in Kosovo. Following the establishment of the Kosovo Ministry for Culture, Youth and Sport (MCYS), the ministry’s Department of Youth (DoY), advised by the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ), drew up a national youth strategy. This resulted, in 2009, in the adoption by the parliament of both the Law on Youth Empowerment and Participation (hereafter “Youth Law”) and the Kosovo Youth Strategy and Action Plan 2010-2012 (KYSAP). These strategy documents aim to provide the youth of Kosovo, for the first time, with formal opportunities for participation and advancement at both national and local levels. The overall goal of the Youth Law and the Action Plan is to bring

¹⁵ Ducasse-Rogier, cited above (Note 7), p. 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35: “[...] overestimating its capacity to promote reforms in [post-conflict situations] is risky.”

young Kosovan citizens closer to European standards for youth participation. To this end, the Action Plan states “that Kosovo youth are also youth of Europe; therefore, they need to aspire to have equal rights as elsewhere in Europe [...]”.¹⁷

These efforts seem to have had a certain degree of success: The survey of students found that 83 per cent felt that young people now had better opportunities for political and social engagement than was the case before the war. In contrast to education, economic matters and energy policy, however, youth policy is not among the government’s priorities. This is evident in the ministry’s extremely below average budget, and the small size of the DoY. At the time the research was carried out, the staff was limited to eight specialists, three ancillary staff members and one GIZ/CIM integrated expert.

The Development of Youth NGOs and the Kosovo Youth Network

Numerous studies have shown that engagement in civil society in the post-socialist countries of Eastern and South-eastern Europe is at far lower levels than in many other countries.¹⁸ Socialist Yugoslavia was typical in possessing very few independent civil-society organizations, a consequence, in part, of the fact that the concept of civil society did not play an appreciable role in that country until the late 1980s. Until then, “social engagement” was largely restricted to the structures of the so-called “social-political organizations” (Socialist Alliance of Working People, League of Socialist Youth, etc.). The first organizations that sought to bring about liberal-democratic change were only formed shortly before the break-up of the Yugoslav state. Kosovo’s first NGOs were only founded post-1989, when the Kosovo-Albanian parallel system was established.¹⁹

¹⁷ Republic of Kosovo, *Kosovo Youth Strategy and Action Plan 2012–2012*, Pristina, September 2009, available at: <http://www.erisee.org/downloads/2013/2/Kosovo%20Youth%20Strategy%20and%20Action%20Plan%202010-2012%20ENG.pdf>, p. 9.

¹⁸ Cf., e.g., Marc Morjé Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*, Cambridge 2003; Richard Rose, How People View Democracy: A Diverging Europe, in: *Journal of Democracy* 1/2001, pp. 93–106.

¹⁹ In 1989, the autonomy of the Province of Kosovo was removed by the Serbian parliament, and most Kosovo Albanians were no longer allowed to work in the public sector. They were excluded from schools and universities, public administration, the police, the judiciary, and the health service. In response, Kosovars organized an underground parallel system of their own. For instance, schooling in the Albanian language was provided in private houses. People with health problems sought help among Kosovo-Albanian friends or acquaintances. Conflicts were dealt with internally without recourse to the police or

After the war, Kosovo experienced a real boom in the establishment of NGOs. This could in part be ascribed to the numerous offers of financial assistance made by a range of international organizations. Thus, first the UNDP and later the GIZ attempted to establish a kind of youth network in Kosovo. Efforts were begun to identify youth organizations and provide them with technical and financial support. Following a youth congress held in 2001 with the participation of more than 100 youth organizations, the Kosovo Youth Network (KYN) was founded. The KYN was designed to increase public awareness of the concerns of young people while facilitating their effective participation in the democratization process. This network was a key partner to the MCYS/DoY and the international steering group in drafting the first version of the Youth Law²⁰ and the Youth Action Plan from 2003 to 2005. One problem with this arrangement was that most of the youth organizations that participated had only been established with the help of international donors and continued to survive entirely on the basis of their financial support. In fact, a number of NGOs were founded merely to bid for international project assistance, collect the large sums of money on offer, and then wind up.²¹ Because many NGOs saw themselves as competitors, there was little long-term co-operation between them. Although the KYN had 150 member organizations in 2003, it did not prove sustainable, and was officially dissolved in 2009. Nonetheless, the network continues to be run in an unofficial capacity by a number of committed young people, and a new president was elected in 2010. Since its official dissolution, however, the KYN no longer plays a role on the political stage. One reason for this is said to be the increasingly critical stance taken by the network towards the government.

According to the DoY, in 2011 there were some 90 youth NGOs in Kosovo with a total membership of 450. Accordingly, the average youth NGO has five members, most of whom have a university degree or the highest level of school leaving certificate. From this, it can be concluded that most NGOs do not have broad support. At present, there are around 4,200 registered

judiciary; cf. Carolin Leutloff/Elmar Pichl, The state of education in Kosovo after the cease fire in June 1999, in: Centre for Study of Balkan Society and Culture (ed.), *How to construct a civil society? Education and Media in Southeastern Europe: Country-reports*, Graz 1999, pp. 183-194. This resulted in the creation of a highly integrated system of mutual help and assistance, leading in turn to strong mutual interdependencies. Centuries-old clan structures played an important role in this.

²⁰ This first (2005) version of the law was, however, not adopted, as it failed to secure a majority in parliament.

²¹ At the time, many youth NGOs are said to have had access to greater funds than local authorities.

NGOs in Kosovo. This reflects a typical feature of the work of the international community in the post-war period: Thousands of national and international NGOs swarmed to Kosovo, where hundreds of millions of euros in aid money was available to support activities in a wide range of areas.²² However, this boom in NGO foundation now appears to be at an end, particularly as international funds are now flowing increasingly into state institutions rather than civil society.

The Law on Youth Empowerment and Participation

The Law on Youth Empowerment and Participation, which was adopted in September 2009, was the first piece of legislation to deal with the political participation of young people in Kosovo. The aim of the law is to promote and consolidate the participation of young people in the (political) decision-making process, without discrimination, in the context of the development of a democratic society and, through this, to raise their quality of life and position in society. The law called for the establishment of a Kosovo Youth Action Council (KYAC) to represent Kosovan youth organizations at the national level. Following difficulties in co-ordinating the various youth councils, it was ultimately only created in May 2011. The political role of the KYAC is governed by Article 6 para. 1 of the Youth Law, according to which the government, “in compliance” with the KYAC, is responsible “for the development, adoption and implementation of documents relevant to the youth sector”²³ and is required to consult with the council in

²² On this topic, Thomas Seibert, a member of the organization *medico international*, wrote the following: “The massive influx of money is destroying what remains of the institutions of the Albanian ‘parallel society’ that had resisted the Belgrade dictatorship for so many years and had still been active during the war. They have been replaced by financially potent and technically perfect foreign NGOs – 300 bureaus in the field of health alone. To help them co-ordinate their work, Kosovo is not only divided into ‘security zones’ allotted to the various occupying powers, but also into ‘areas of responsibility’ (AOR), each of which is under the overall management of a given NGO. According to a plan drawn up by the UNHCR, these organizations should co-ordinate the distribution of food and relief supplies, either alone, or together with ‘private volunteer organizations’ (PVOs). Working in such organizations has become the sole source of income of many Kosovars – and not a few of the PVOs are aligned to the UČK.” Thomas Seibert, Hilfsorganisationen im Geflecht staatlicher Interessen [Aid Organizations in the Network of State Interests], in: *Wissenschaft & Frieden* 3/2001, at: <http://www.wissenschaft-und-frieden.de/seite.php?artikelID=0118>. (author’s translation).

²³ Republic of Kosovo, *Law No. 03/L-145 on Empowerment and Participation of Youth*, Article 6, para. 1, at: http://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Kosovo_2009_Youth_Law.pdf.

connection with all matters that affect the youth of Kosovo. What this consultation entails, however, is kept very vague. Nowhere is there an indication of how the co-operation should take place in practice and how much influence the KYAC is supposed to have. There is also the question of representativeness: On the question of who the KYAC is supposed to report to, Article 9 merely states that this is to be the subject of sub-legal acts to be passed at some future date.

The Youth Law also states that independent Local Youth Action Councils (LYACs) should be formed in every municipality in Kosovo. These should be structured along the same lines as the KYAC and should consist of a representative selection of members of independent youth organizations and politically unaligned young people. Shortly after the passing of the Youth Law, the Kosovo Youth Strategy and Action Plan 2010–2012 (KYSAP) was also adopted. It had a budget of just under 3.5 million euros. Of this, 220,000 euros per year are set aside exclusively for “participation”, almost half of which is to go to support the youth councils (central and local).²⁴ According to the DoY, 28 per cent of the budget is funded by the international community. The 45-page Action Plan aims primarily at implementing the provisions of the Youth Law (above all the creation of youth councils) and highlighting in an exemplary fashion the significance of having a national youth policy. What is alarming, however, is that very few young people in Kosovo even know of the existence of these plans. The survey of students found that only 25 per cent²⁵ had ever heard of the Action Plan and only 23 per cent knew of the Youth Law itself. Indeed, even some representatives of the international community who were interviewed appeared not to know the KYSAP by name. According to current representatives of the KYN, their ignorance can be attributed to the fact that the youth organizations in Kosovo do not really identify with the KYSAP. In their eyes, the KYSAP is a strategy controlled by the donors, which is more concerned with meeting the demands of the international organizations than the needs of Kosovo youth themselves.

²⁴ Additional funds are dedicated to the creation of youth centres (135,000 euros in total), the establishment of youth officers in municipalities (45,000 euros), and the creation of a national exchange platform for youth NGOs (51,000 euros). Source: author’s interview with a representative of the DoY.

²⁵ In this regard, the results match those of a representative study undertaken by the UN Volunteers Kosovo, the UNDP Kosovo and the Kosovo Public Policy Center (KPPC) in 2010, in which 26 per cent of young people asked stated that they had heard of the Kosovo Youth Action Plan (KYAP); see UNV/UNDP/KPPC, *Support to Implementation of the Kosovo Youth Action Plan Project (SIKYAP)*. *Youth Volunteerism in Kosovo. An Opportunity to Learn*, Pristina, March 2010, p. 17.

The Kosovo Youth Action Plan is an exemplary and well-structured document that theoretically meets all relevant European standards. Originally, the Action Plan was intended to be a kind of founding document for subsequent executive strategy documents. As things stand, however, it rather resembles a collection of activities being undertaken, in the form of projects, by a highly diverse group of actors, often with a lack of co-operation and consultation. Given its shortage of both human and financial resources, the DoY cannot itself take responsibility for the implementation of the plan. In recent years, as a result of the Youth Law and the Youth Action Plan, conditions have been created in Kosovo that should in theory provide almost optimal opportunities for youth participation. The Youth Law and the establishment of country-wide youth councils, in particular, are looked on as positive models throughout the region. However, although these opportunities for participation exist on paper, they are not successfully involving the local youth. So far, therefore, the largest problem is implementing the ideal opportunities that exist in law. To date, no truly independent youth organizations can be said to exist in Kosovo that are controlled by neither political parties nor the international community. Given, in particular, the history of external directedness (by Belgrade) going back decades and the strength of Kosovo's networks (clans, political and economic networks), it will take more time for young people to become aware of their role and responsibility in the democratic future of the country.

The Promotion of Youth Participation by the International Community

The fact that it has not proved possible, more than ten years after the end of the Kosovo war, and despite enormous financial support, to establish an independent, democratic state under the rule of law means that the international community's engagement in Kosovo is highly controversial. In the survey upon which this contribution is based, nearly half of those questioned (47 per cent) indicated that the hope they had placed in the international community had not been fulfilled. Only 26 per cent stated that the international community had succeeded in establishing the conditions for a democratic Kosovo. Most interviewees noted that the failure of donors to harmonize their aid efforts was a major problem with the work of the international community. According to representatives of the OSCE in the province, Kosovo is home to too many parallel structures. Too much money flows into projects whose sustainability cannot be guaranteed, owing to a

lack of consultation and co-ordination. To ensure that this problem can be dealt with in the future, a sub-group of the sector working group “Education and Employment” of the DoY is to address the area of youth policy at the lowest level. At the same time, the Ministry for EU Integration, which was established in 2009, has been given responsibility for harmonizing assistance by means of an “Aid Management Platform”. However, international co-operation with this ministry has itself been described as difficult and complicated.²⁶ The ministry’s perceived lack of willingness to co-operate is said to rest on a disapproval of any co-ordination of assistance, as this would reduce the number of projects and the scale of financial assistance. A further factor that comes into play here is the fact that the international community provides significantly less support for activities designed to promote democratization and participation than in the areas of education and employment. In view of Kosovo’s efforts to forge closer links with the EU, however, European organizations and donors, in particular, are supportive of the establishment of a strong civil society. It can thus be assumed that projects supported by the EU Liaison Office or the GIZ are more concerned with a democratic, participatory civil society than projects supported by organizations such as USAID, which stress entrepreneurship and economic development. This prioritization is reflected in the answers provided by the student respondents: Forty per cent stated that the international community has done enough to support the schooling and vocational training of young people since the end of the war, while only 23 per cent indicated that a sufficient effort has been made to provide young people with opportunities for political and social participation.

The legislation that has been passed in Kosovo has been described as a significant model for the whole of the Balkans.²⁷ Despite considerable successes on the part of the international community in the area of formal lawmaking, the practical implementation as well as the results in terms of genuine participation remain well behind expectations. This can be partly explained by noting that there was, until recently, no national framework law for the promotion of youth participation. In addition, co-ordination within the international community is inadequate. Contrary to all stated intentions and promises of improved co-operation, the various national and international institutions involved can be described as less interlocking than “interblocking”.

²⁶ Source: the author’s interviews with representatives of various organizations.

²⁷ Cf. Juliana Olldashi-Berisha, *The Right to Education. The Case of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo*, Pristina 2008, p. 99.

Nepotism and the Clan System

The EU and the international community in general made many mistakes and generally overestimated their “capacity to promote reforms”.²⁸ One major mistake was to underestimate Kosovo’s clan system and the system of patronage that it entails. Particularly when it comes to contacts within the ministry and political parties, it is easy to overlook that one is frequently dealing with personal networks around key political figures – most of which are based on former UÇK structures. To this day, former UÇK elites remain the primary contacts and co-operation partners of the international community. Speaking in group discussions, students also noted the key role played by the clan system in Kosovo and the power structures based upon it.

With the delegitimization of Yugoslavian institutions, which occurred, at the latest, with Slobodan Milošević’s assumption of power, as well as the suspension in 1989 of Kosovo’s autonomous status, which had previously been protected by the constitution, there was a gradual renaissance among the Kosovar population of informal, archaic traditions, whose roots can be found in centuries of Kosovo-Albanian culture. During this time, the power of extended families and their leaders was gradually consolidated. In this way, a system of rule based on the clans and the key principle of age-based patriarchal authority grew to dominance in Kosovo. The clan-based legal and social order codified in the traditional *Kanun*²⁹ can “be understood as ‘social cement’, since Kosovo still lacks a consolidated national foundation”.³⁰ In this regard, Saskia Drude has written: “The Kosovars are far more integrated; they define themselves in terms of their family, their traditions, and their people.”³¹ The interviews I carried out confirm these insights. It was explained to me that, to this day, what supports a Kosovo-Albanian is not faith in the state, but solidarity in the extended family. State structures have been experienced over the centuries only as oppressive

²⁸ Ducasse-Rogier, cited above (Note 7), p. 35.

²⁹ Albania’s traditional body of law, the *Kanun*, governs not only punishments and conflict resolution processes following criminal acts, but also (above all) problems of civil and family law. Cf. Islam Qerimi, *Die Institutionen der Rache und Blutrache bei den Albanern* [Albanian Institutions of Vengeance and Blood Vengeance], 2009, p. 1, available at: http://www.polizei-newsletter.de/documents/2009_Qerimi_Kanun.pdf.

³⁰ Institut für Europäische Politik/IEP, cited above (Note 3), p. 47 (author’s translation).

³¹ Saskia Drude, *Hundert Wochen Kosovo. Alltag in einem unfertigen Land* [A Hundred Weeks of Kosovo. Everyday Life in an Unfinished Country], Aachen 2008, p. 12 (author’s translation).

systems of rule imposed from without. Relying on such structures – let alone identifying with them – could be the cause of one's downfall. This is strengthened by Kosovo's high level of illiteracy, which continues to be an issue. In times of need, therefore, the people fall back on tried-and-trusted structures and established dependencies. The newly created bodies and institutions are therefore trusted less, especially since they are clearly corrupt, which is likely to have lasting negative consequences. As a result of the short-term nature of their projects, the international organizations in Kosovo are usually unable to take account of social structures and historical ties. The programmes and projects of the international community are often set up too quickly, and fail to reach the local population in a way that allows them to take up the services on offer. It has been argued that Kosovar patriarchal society requires longer to adapt to democratic change – something the international community has not taken into consideration. Since young Kosovars have not been part of the decision-making processes of the last decade, the argument continues, they are now being swamped by the sudden change. Ultimately, therefore, a sustainable democratization process must begin in families. According to one student respondent, the international community might be able to influence the government and the world of politics, but not society.

The effects of the clan and patronage system are also evident in the area of youth organizations. Such organizations are often skillfully infiltrated by political parties, for instance, by being invited to participate in hearings, where they can be presented as the “voice of youth” in a way that supports that party's political goals. While many young people are able to achieve high office (up to ministerial positions) by these (party-political) means, they often do so at the cost of their independence. The political tendencies of many youth organizations can be recognized in the distribution of donor money and other support to certain organizations by the DoY. At present, for instance, a clear preference can be detected for youth organizations with links to the current director of the DoY. Some people have expressed the hope that new parliamentarians and ministers – such as Memli Krasniqi, the 33-year-old minister for culture, youth, and sport, who has been in office since February 2011 – some of whom were educated abroad in Europe or America, could see the winds of change blow through the traditional clientelistic system. The influence and oversight of an “elite network” is clearly the major problem for young people, as those I spoke to themselves recognized. They feel that the key positions in politics and society are occupied by certain networks that are uninterested in the concerns of young people. Under the influence of the international community, the

world of politics, according to the interviewees, is also concerned more with minority issues and gender justice than with youth issues. Most of the students I approached for my survey were of the view that, in terms of their career prospects, “being well connected” – i.e. having the right relationships and knowing the right people – was almost as important as having a good education.

Conclusions

The international community generally has more interest in stability than in democracy, and this is evident both financially and in terms of the content of the projects they fund.³² In the case of Kosovo, it is becoming clear that democratization processes are often a prerequisite for the functioning of the economy and the achievement of stability, yet the international community has been late in recognizing this. Many of those I interviewed thus noted that while the Youth Law and the Youth Action Plan owe their existence to the international community, the implementation of many projects remains superficial, and not enough attention has been paid to the concrete concerns of young people. All too often, blueprints are simply taken over from the headquarters of international organizations in Brussels or New York, while an insufficient effort is made to take account of local specifics. Especially in view of the history of Kosovo and its civil society, this has to be seen as a major mistake on the part of the international community. In this regard, efforts must be made to improve the organization and vigour of civil-society youth organizations via networks and alliances and to strengthen the role of young people in the political system in general by, for instance, directly supporting independent youth organizations in Kosovo and bypassing political networks where possible.

More than ten years since Kosovo became a protectorate of the international community, the latter’s democratization efforts, which one may characterize as an attempt to install “off-the-shelf democracy”, still lack the foundation they need in the form of an active civil society. Even if some steps have been taken in the right direction in recent years, by means of the Youth Law and the Youth Action Councils, this “soft sector” has so far been neglected. It will take several more years for the youth of Kosovo to fully

³² See the comparative case studies of countries in transition by Zürcher, cited above, (Note 3), pp. 93–94, and Jens Narten, *Assessing Kosovo’s Postwar Democratization. Between External Imposition and Local Self-Government*, in: *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 1/2009, pp. 127–162, available at: <http://www.tfd.org.tw/docs/dj0501/127-162-Jens%20Narten.pdf>.

adapt to the new situation and to develop new ways of thinking. Democracy takes time – particularly in Kosovo, where there is widespread resentment of centuries of external directedness and memories of the recent civil war will long remain very present in the minds of all Kosovars. The increasing withdrawal of international donors will change the basic conditions in Kosovo. This could also have positive effects if it leads to tighter control of the resources that continue to be provided and to proper evaluation of the effectiveness and sustainability of assistance efforts. Overall, the international community has already created a foundation for structures of democratic participation for the youth of Kosovo. Yet the existence of such structures by themselves is no adequate indicator of a self-supporting and sustainable democratization process. The major input, however, needs to come from the youth of Kosovo itself. International actors can only lend support for this process.

Alongside the creation of opportunities for participation (which is now concluded), the more intensive and challenging task for the future consists in giving life to these structures, strengthening the youth of Kosovo, and supporting young people in fulfilling their role in a new democratic system despite the legacy of decades of external directedness and a traditional system of patronage that is deeply rooted in their consciousness. The international community needs to be more attentive to Kosovar society than it has hitherto been if it is to understand it and support it properly. In this, the youth of Kosovo are certainly ready and motivated to participate in shaping their country, as became clear from my discussions. In general, moreover, they see the future in a positive light: Two-thirds of young people surveyed were of the opinion that Kosovo will be a better place in which to live in the future. The preconditions for positive development thus appear to be in place. The question is only whether they will be taken advantage of by all participants.