

NEWS



Kosovo's University of Pristina Attempts to Climb Out of the Ruins

By *Theresa Agovino* | MAY 12, 2000

A U.N.-appointed administrator begins to rebuild the campus and fractured faculty

Michael Daxner exudes enthusiasm. He smiles often. His speech quickens and his voice rises when a topic excites him. His body is in motion even as he sits. The tall, lanky 53-year-old is always raising his arms, pointing his fingers, tilting his torso, shifting his weight.

His energy is all the more impressive given the burdens of his job. In March, the United Nations Mission in Kosovo

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appointed Mr. Daxner, an Austrian, as international administrator for the University of Pristina system, which has been crippled by ethnic strife, war, neglect, and its Communist past.

In 1990, when Serbs banished Albanian professors from the University of Pristina, the ousted academics set up an entity of their own, with students taught in garages, storefronts, and basements. Now, in the wake of NATO's campaign to stop the Serbs' brutal displacement of thousands of Albanians in what was then a Yugoslav province, the Albanians are in charge, and the Serbs are in exile.

Mr. Daxner works 13 hours a day, seven days a week to fashion a budget, reform the university's administration and legal structure, while overseeing academic changes as well. He is also chief fund raiser for the university, which needs everything -- from desks to dental tools, computers to chalkboards.

"The way I see it, we have a year," says Mr. Daxner, who has an 18-month contract. "Now Kosovo is still in the public eye, so we have to take advantage of that. In one year, the window of opportunity is closed. Kosovo will be forgotten."

Next March, on his one-year anniversary, Mr. Daxner hopes the university will boast a replenished library, a new, multipurpose scientific laboratory, a student cafeteria, and a rector's office with computerized recordkeeping. He expects his less visible accomplishments to include a new accounting system, a new set of bylaws to be created by faculty members and administrators, and new contracts for professors, setting out the hours they are expected to work.

In his efforts to renew the university, he has an uphill battle, facing faculty members who often don't show up for work, buildings battered by war, and many people who question his authority and are skeptical of his ability to achieve his goals. Still, he has some strong supporters. "My first impressions of Mr. Daxner are very good," says Mazllum Belegu, dean of the medical school. "He is a very energetic man, and he can be less subjective about our situation. As locals, we are too subjective. The international community will listen to him, we hope."

Mr. Daxner's energy burns in an atmosphere of disillusionment. Ethnic Albanians were joyful last June, when the Yugoslav military and police that had harassed them for a decade were forced to leave Kosovo, which became a United Nations protectorate. The euphoria quickly ended, however. These days, heat, electricity, and telephones function sporadically at best. The streets of Pristina are filled with garbage.

The biggest problem facing Mr. Daxner is that many of the 1,500 professors on the roster are putting in only cursory appearances, leaving the university's 22,000 students never knowing when they will have a class. The professors can't survive on their stipends, and many have found better-paying jobs working for international aid organizations.

Their absence, along with the lack of supplies, won't help in the effort to persuade foreign institutions to recognize the university and to accept the diplomas it gives out, one of Mr. Daxner's goals.

He would also like to bring Serb professors and students back into the university fold, as part of the U.N. mission to create a multiethnic society. No Serbs are studying at the main university now, although a few are attending classes in the divided city of Mitrovica.

The Serb academics, though, do not recognize the U.N. administration, including Mr. Daxner. And most Serb and Albanian academics alike say they can't imagine working together ever again, a fact that depresses even the ebullient Mr. Daxner. "Universities are supposed to be the foundation of a civil society," he says. "I listen to people. But I tell them, 'History is important for an identity, but history gives you no hints on how to build a new society.'"

Even aside from drawing Serbs back into the university, Mr. Daxner has set seemingly impossible objectives. Pristina has been in tumult for a decade, and donors, professors, and students are all fatigued from conflict and sporadic violence.

Moreover, Mr. Daxner explains, deans and professors exercised an unusual amount of power in the prewar parallel systems for Serbs and Albanians, because circumstances didn't allow for many formal meetings. That needs to be changed if the faculty is going to develop bylaws creating what he hopes would be a new, streamlined administration.

The parallel structure also largely cut off the ethnic Albanians from advances in education, an isolation that still plagues them now that they have the university's main buildings back. The medical school has never taught molecular biology, the Albanians say. And even though the Berlin Wall fell years ago, the economics department is still spending a lot of time teaching Marx. Professors and students complain that education at Pristina is more theoretical than practical, a reality that may flow from the recent experience of Albanian professors: When you're teaching in a garage, theory is easier than practice.

The problems with teaching are mirrored in problems with the physical facilities. Even before the war, the university lacked a campus, and most of its scattered buildings are archetypal Communist architecture -- drab structures in need of a new coat of paint. Along with the buildings in Pristina, the university has six other outposts. Last year, many of the university buildings were damaged and looted during the NATO bombings. The electrical-engineering department, for example, has been left without labs. The European Union estimates that it will cost almost \$9-million to repair all of the damage, but so far it has budgeted only half that amount. Some repairs have been started with E.U. funds that were set aside for the university in 1998 but never used because of the fighting.

Because the U.N. mission in Kosovo is short of money, the salaries paid to government employees are paltry. University professors, who are paid by the U.N., receive \$117 a month. But drivers, secretaries, translators, and guards who work for the U.N. or any of the hundreds of non-governmental agencies or government missions in Kosovo can make \$468 to \$1,170 a month. That reality has its effect on academics.

"I think he [Daxner] is overestimating what can be done here in a year," says Shpend Bakalli, deputy head of the Pristina office of World University Service-Austria, an organization supported by the Austrian government that aids universities. "The mood at the university is not so good."

But many professors are pleased with Mr. Daxner's appointment. Born in Austria, he was a professor of higher education who served as president of Carl Von Ossietzky University, in Oldenburg, Germany. He is active in the Association of European Universities and was a founding member of the U.N. Academic Task Force's Pristina Working Group, which was created by aid organizations and European governments to improve university education in Kosovo.

Some at the University of Pristina oppose Mr. Daxner's proposals, such as changing its name to the University of Kosovo System. Many professors object to that idea because they struggled to keep the university alive as a symbol of Albanian defiance of the Serbs. Although the Serbs also maintained a "University of Pristina," the Albanians view the name as theirs. The Albanian professors say they didn't make such sacrifices only to see the name changed. "The name is part of our tradition. To change it would be like a slap in the face," says Ilir Limani, dean of the faculty of electrical engineering.

"The name is politically loaded," responds Mr. Daxner. "Kosovo doesn't need an Albanian university. It doesn't need a Serbian university. It needs a European university."

The chief administrator also faces criticism over his proposal to institute mandatory retirement at age 65. Some deans say they won't have enough professors to replace the retirees. Others say it is unfair to those who taught for 10 years in the parallel system to retire them now that Albanians are finally in charge. "There is a moral problem here," says Rexhep Murati, dean of the law school. "Those [older professors] worked for 10 years with little salary. And now we are back in our buildings and we are supposed to say to them, 'Go away.' They could have gone abroad. They could have done other work, but they didn't. There is also no real pension system here. What are the professors to do?"

Mr. Daxner responds that some professors must retire, so that he can conserve the limited cash he has to pay salaries. About 5 percent of the university's 1,500 professors are over 65, he notes. With them gone, he can pay \$244 a month to professors, starting in October. He will expect professors to work three full days for the salary, still leaving them four days to find other work so they can support their family. "We are not so arrogant to think that people can live on that," he says.

Professors and deans are divided over whether the salary will be enough of an enticement. Shaban Buza, a mechanical-engineering professor, says he will teach for three days for \$244, but adds that he will continue working at the Reuters news

bureau as a translator the other four days a week. Currently, he is working at Reuters full time and goes to the university one day a week to give lectures. "The students are suffering, that is sure," he says. "They go to the office, and the professors aren't there." But nobody can survive on the current stipend, he says.

He realizes that if he works three days a week at the university and four at Reuters, he will have little time with his wife and three children. "In these days, something always gets left behind. But I think we have to work harder for better days for Kosovo," he says. "And one day, when Reuters doesn't need me, I will go back to my primary work full time."

Mr. Buza says there are advantages to teaching a mathematical subject. The Internet has made it easy to keep up with developments in the field even while the lack of industry in Kosovo impedes practical knowledge. The curriculum can be revised with relative ease once laboratories are functioning again, he says.

The law school has a special set of problems. Kosovo is technically still part of Yugoslavia, but many aspects of Yugoslav law violate international human-rights law, so the dean says it isn't clear which law the university is supposed to teach.

Various organizations, including the American Bar Association and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, are helping revise the law school's curriculum.

But it may be difficult to get professors to reform their teaching habits, says Mr. Murati, the dean. Most of them just lecture and don't interact with the students, he explains. "We know how to teach in a theoretical manner. But we know there needs to be more-concrete examples for the students, more discussions with the students, more writing exercises. We want to reform. We need help."

The law school's teaching methods may have something to do with its dropout rate. The first-year class often starts out with 600 students -- but only 40 will graduate.

One law student, Learta Gunga, says she rarely goes to class, because the lectures don't expand upon her reading at home. "The professors don't really talk to us. They don't ask us our opinions or what we think," she says. "I'm in school, but sometimes I'm not sure why. I think I'm afraid that if I quit now, I won't start again."

Lungar Cana, a medical student, is equally demoralized. He is taking at least a year off to work to support his family. Because of the war, he says, he has not practiced on a patient since 1998, and he is worried about his skills. "Will I be a good doctor? I don't know," he says.

He is not thinking only about himself. "All over this place," Mr. Cana says, "you've got professionals who should be working at their jobs, but they are working as drivers and translators. It's not good for society."

Mr. Daxner worries about such pessimism and wants international aid organizations and foreign governments to step up their aid. Mr. Bakalli, of World University Service-Austria, agrees: "Donor activity has not been satisfactory. There have been a hundred delegations here, but most of them do nothing. We are hoping that now that Daxner is here, that will change."

Mr. Daxner wants materials and money, to be sure, but he also wants foreign professors to come to Pristina to lecture, teach, and share their expertise. That will energize the university, he says. "People here were patient for such a long time, and now they are becoming impatient. The university needs to be strong, because a strong university can be a structure to contribute to peace."

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