



Independence day

Csaba Sógor gives **Matt Williams** some first-hand impressions of the day Kosovo declared independence

Watching Kosovo's declaration of independence was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, says Csaba Sógor. Travelling through Bulgaria and then Serbia, the Romanian MEP arrived at the Kosovan border at about three o'clock on Sunday afternoon and was greeted by the sight of Serbian soldiers with machine guns stationed on the hills. K-For soldiers on the Kosovo side manned a tank with its gun trained directly upon them. But despite the military presence, Sógor says the atmosphere was very calm.

"There were a few protesters, including both young and old people in military uniform with K-For flags, and once these people had been told to leave, the place was empty. There were, however, a lot of flags hanging from the houses, both Serbian and Albanian, but also US flags, German flags and the UK flag."

Sógor also saw something unusual that could explain how local people cope in a region so strongly divided. "When I crossed over into Kosovo, there was just one car in front of me, but it did not have a number plate on it. The man in the car stopped once we were both just over the border. Smiling at me, he took a registration plate from the boot and began to affix it onto his car. It was then we realised that he must be a Serb from Kosovo. If he was to have a Kosovo registration plate when he goes home to Serbia, they would destroy his car."

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Sógor says that despite the cold weather in Pristina, people were out drinking beer and champagne and eating huge cakes on the street. "I wanted to get a sense of the national feeling there, so I called a waiter over and he told me that Kosovo had been waiting for this moment for 600 years."

For the declaration itself, Sógor decided to go to the Grand Hotel, which was at the centre of controversy when it was taken over by Kosovo Albanians and where there was once a sign outside which read 'Dogs and Albanians Not Allowed'. "It was a very good atmosphere inside the hotel. Everybody was watching the television and there were a lot of people dancing about in national dress. We managed to get very close to the leaders of Kosovo, the president and prime minister, and of course Thaçi got the biggest round of applause! They had some bodyguards, but there was really no security at all, it was like a celebration of the football world cup final."

Sógor is optimistic about the future of Kosovo and says that lessons can be learnt from Slovenia, the country currently holding the presidency of the EU.

"When Slovenia declared independence, Serbia did not recognise Slovenia as a country. The most important thing now however is for the EU to ensure stability not just in Kosovo and Serbia, but in the whole western Balkan region. The EU must also ensure the individual and collective rights for the Serbian minority in Kosovo. It is essential to ensure not only political stability for Kosovo, but economic stability, and the freedom of movement for the people of Kosovo. Autonomy is a very good solution." ★