

INTERVIEW WITH PETRIT SELIMI

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Duration: 50 minutes

Present:

1. Petrit Selimi (Speaker)
2. Aurela Kadriu (Interviewer)
3. Donjetë Berisha (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.

Part One

Aurela Kadriu: First, can you introduce yourself?

Petrit Selimi: I am Petrit Selimi.

Aurela Kadriu: Something about your early childhood memories, the times you grew up in, your family, friends, school?

Petrit Selimi: I was born in Pristina in 1979. I mean, the last decade of the '70s, before the demonstrations of 1981, but I don't remember the political events much, my parents tried to protect me from politics in my first four-five years. There were sighs, there were concerns, there were meetings between my parents or relatives in the kitchen, where, when I think about it now, it was obvious that things were not going well.

In the beginning, my childhood was relatively similar to that of other children who grew up in Pristina. Our maternal aunt lived in Ulcinj, so during the summer we went to Ulcinj, we took the twelve-hour road every summer. We went to Greece once, every year, the first years of the '80s. We had, I went to Faik Konica school which at that time was called Aca Marović. I went to kindergarten in the center of Pristina, behind the city stadium.

My mother was a conservator of old books, my father was a secretary in the Constitutional Court. My father's family are from the region of Bujanovc, from Nasalcë, a village, but they came to Pristina very early in the '50s, my father finished his high school here in Pristina. My mother's family is from the region of Prizren. My grandparents from both sides have a big presence in our family, we were a big family on both sides.

My apartment was in the center of Pristina, at Goleshi street, which is now named Rexhep Luci street. The coffee shop Strip Depo was created in my apartment. I lived there for most of my childhood. Since

we lived in the center, we constantly had guests, whoever had problems in QKUK¹ or to issue any document from all around Kosovo, they stopped there first...we lived on the ground floor, so I spent my childhood with guests. Our cousins came to play with our toys, to sleep over, my mother baked good pies and my father played *zhol*² with his friends time after time, so our house was constantly full of people.

And I grew up in a family with many first, second and third cousins, to us you were considered a close family even if you were the fourth or fifth circle. So, these were the first years of my childhood. A life that wasn't rich, it was a middle-class life, with a kindergarten in Pristina as well as elementary school in Pristina. My mother insisted that we learn languages since we were children, so I knew English and Serbian before elementary school...in the elementary school I already spoke both languages fluently. I also learned Italian because for a period my mother, Violeta, studied the pathology of book, which is a chemical science of the improvement or cure of old paper or old books, in Rome. So, she tried to teach us Italian as well. I know some of it, if I stop in Italy for longer, I will learn it better.

Aurela Kadriu: Okay. Petit, can you tell us a little about the school time. I mean, were you part of the parallel system³ at that time?

Petrit Selimi: Yes, in fact, when you think about it now, maybe everything began exactly in '91, when the autonomy was suspended. And let me say it again, since we lived in the center, in *Goleshi* street, every demonstration passed through our street. I mean, people went up with banners, flags, photographs, and came down escaping from the police, teargas and bullets.

And from my balcony, terrace, window, I witnessed the history of the fall of former Yugoslavia, and the beginning of violence. As children, we were very used to teargas, because I am telling you, in the center of Pristina and on the ground floor... we would take yoghurt glasses, cut their bottom and replace it with a wet sterile gauze, and we would stay with gas masks in our apartment. Very early we learned the tricks with onions and every other way to overcome the effect of teargas.

It is interesting, dreams and expectations of the early '90s compared to what really happened. '92, Europe '92, half of the restaurants and coffee shops in Kosovo were named *Evropa '92* [Europe '92], because people expected unification with Europe, and that we would all become Europe. Toto Cutugno had the song in Eurovision "*Insieme, Unite, Unite Europe*"⁴ exactly in '92. And here there was a strong desire, after the fall of communism, to be part of a bigger family, but of course, absolutely the opposite of that was happening.

Violence caused the abolition of autonomy, schools were closed. It was September 1, '91, at school, back then it was called *Aca Marović*, where the police simply said, "You have five minutes to leave," and we as children disperse I was twelve years old. And after that, I went to a private school in Pejton,

¹ QKUK, *Qendra Klinike Universitare e Kosovës*; Kosovo University Clinic Center.

² *Zhol*, particular board game played with cards.

³ By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation making Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The reaction of Albanians was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes.

⁴ *Insieme: 1992* [Together: 1992], winning song of the 1990 Eurovision contest in Zagreb.

in the parallel system, in a pretty cold basement. It wasn't education, it was everything but education, we played, we were noisy, as if putting now...kudos to the people who gave their houses, because when you think about it now, opening your house every day to thirty-forty twelve-year olds, for months in a row wasn't that easy for those who helped.

Then we moved to Emin Duraku school at Kodra e Trimave which was a challenge in itself because we had to walk through neighborhoods where the girls were often harassed, we had to go with our parents, there were more problematic children, they were poorer people, so maybe there was a silent social conflict, besides the ethnic one and the escape from the police.

Then I enrolled at Xhevdet Doda gymnasium. Yes, I was in the last year, in the eighth grade when an Englishman, David Willkom, came to Kosovo, and I was invited by a mother of my friend, a friend of my mother and she said, "An Englishman is looking to meet children who speak English," and we met him, I guess at the apartment of Pasionare or Lyra Xharra, I don't remember which one of these sisters was there, around ten-fifteen people, and talked with the Englishman about our concerns, hopes and experiences.

That was the time when existence in Kosovo was entering a dark area, our parents were fired. From a relatively middle-class life, we all became poor. Our mothers started baking bread at home, make chocolate at home, all of them worse than their original versions. And we had a good time for those two-three hours that we talked. When, two months later, somebody called at home and said, "They will come here with a children's festival..."

Aurela Kadriu: Sorry, that meeting... I am sorry to interrupt...

Petrit Selimi: Yes!

Aurela Kadriu:... were there only Albanian children, I mean, Kosovars, or were there Serbs as well?

Petrit Selimi: Yes, there were only Albanian children. No, I don't...

Aurela Kadriu: Maybe before talking about that period, I would like you to tell me a little about the coexistence, your coexistence with Serbian children. Did you have Serbian friends before the separation?

Petrit Selimi: Look, to be honest, it is not that we had many friends. First, I wasn't a child who went out much, I locked myself in the National Library at my mother's office, I took comics and books and went under the table and read for hours in a row. So, I wasn't the child who would go out to play soccer with other children.

There were Albanian classes as well as Serbian ones in the elementary school, but it is not that there was much contact between them. Living in the center, of course there were more Serbs in the center than anywhere else in Pristina. Half of the inhabitants in the center were Serbs I guess. In my building, in the back then Goleshi street, now Rexhep Luci street, half of the inhabitants were Serbs. So, we had sporadic contacts, but I didn't have Serbian friends.

Because things were already defined in '91, it's not that there was a big love between Albanians and Serbs after 1981, and relations got worse every year. So, I wouldn't say that I had an Ivan or Milan friend, because I didn't. Simply, I didn't get to have [Serbian] friends in the elementary school. But of course, we coexisted, if not talked and together... because we were there, in the same city.

But in '91, our parents were really angry with Serbs, they all were very angry because [Serbs] remained employed, not only employed, but they even took the jobs of our parents. And then from '90, I mean...I remember Bob Dole, [US] Senator Dole with Congressman Lantos came to Kosovo for a visit at the Grand Hotel and Albanians went there to meet them, thousands of Albanians in front of Grand's doors. And Serbs, the stupid police that they were, started chasing and beating Albanians in front of the American delegation.

And I remember that my father was beaten with a baton because he was hurt when he came home, and that was the period when somehow politics occupied our childhood. In fact, our childhood was over, if we had whatever kind of childhood until that time, and if maybe our concern was, "Will I be able to buy a Commodore 64 computer," and, "Can we go to Greece for vacations," from that period there were no more such concerns, because we were all unemployed, we had no money and everything was about politics. And maybe the only concern after that was not going out of the apartment when there were demonstrations, so that we wouldn't be hit by bullets or by people escaping, running.

And all the people born in that period, part of that generation, more or less had their film cut in '90 and their film continued in '99. And it is a lost decade of childhood for those who were children, of maturity for those who were adults. In '91, my father was a secretary in the Constitutional Court of the Republic... of the Province of Kosovo, but there was a Constitution, there was a Constitutional Court. In '99 he didn't speak English so he was an unemployed lawyer because the world changed and he should've known the internet and everything that happened during the '90s, which we missed.

Aurela Kadriu: How was the discourse of the lectures in the parallel system, at that time, and in the family, how did they talk to you, what kind of advice did your parents give you? What kind of discourse... at the time when your national identity was denied?

Petrit Selimi: Elementary school, let me tell you again, there was little studying because there was no concentration. We fought with each other first of all. The fact that politics changed doesn't mean that girls don't fight with boys and boys don't fight with boys. When you are in a school, that can be managed and structured because you have a teacher who stops you, but when you are closed in a basement for twelve hours, you have no escape and there is no one to manage such a situation. And there, if boys fought with boys in the yard of the elementary school, the teacher would come and stop them, but who can stop children to fight with each other in a basement?

So, I don't remember anything from the lectures of that period because I guess it was a half-fun kind of situation, and there was nothing chaotic in the first years of the parallel school. But of course, everything changed in the sense that if in the '90s you had the photograph of Josip Broz Tito in the first page of the book and there were talks about brotherhood and unity and poems were about Boro

and Ramiz,⁵ and when we went to a trip in the eighth class we went to Landovicë, the memorial of Boro and Ramiz and everything was dedicated to the Yugoslav discourse.

And in the building where the Ministry of Economic Development is nowadays, there was a Tito's slogan, "From words to deeds!" And the other slogan was, "Take care of brotherhood-unity, as much as you care about your own eyes!" And these were the operating mottos of the educational system. Then, everything changed all of a sudden, I guess it was difficult for teachers as well to find themselves with the new changes, but it was generally known that, "Serbia is the enemy, they changed our lives, they fired our parents."

They started killing people, you would hear names such as Ylfete Humolli,⁶ students who died. We saw, I remember, exactly where I grew up, after protests, there were trucks who would clean the roads in order for people not to see the blood in the morning. And these were the impressions... for a lot of people it was an existential matter, to survive, I mean to eat, to survive *as in food* [English], so it was a total demolition of norms and values that make someone a human being.

But on the other side, an internal empowerment and increase of solidarity. That was the time when the first political parties were established and on the walls of our schools we would write *Kosova Republikë* [Kosovo Republic] and LDK,⁷ the first graffiti of '91. And I mean, there were no foreign media, people started listening to radio *Free Europe* and *Zagreb* as the only channels of information, because of course the newspapers and the radio television were closed.

On the other side, the world put economic sanctions on Serbia right away in '92, because of its activity in Bosnia, and economic existence was totally degraded in the sense that you didn't have what to buy, you had to wait in line to buy bread, or milk, you had to go early at five or six in the morning in front of Voçari and Gërmia.

And *Shfercer*,⁸ people who were more dynamic started going to Turkey to buy stuff and sell it. There... so there was total destruction in Kosovo, caused by the Serbian occupation, but also a mega demolition in the whole Yugoslavia, the war in the television, murders, Bosnia, massacres, these were the news of the early '90s. The war in Croatia, we followed it with full attention, as well as the one in Bosnia because they were afraid that it would happen to us as well, and it also turned out that way, and they were terrified.

⁵ Boro and Ramiz were two partisans, the Serb Boro Vukmirović and the Albanian Ramiz Sadiku, who were executed together during the Second World War. They became the symbol of the Brotherhood and Unity of the Serbian and Albanian people.

⁶ Ylfete Humolli, a student killed by Yugoslav forces on February 1, 1990.

⁷ *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo. First political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

⁸ Austrian German: *Schwärzer*; *Schwarz*, literally black color, to paint something in black. When international sanctions against Belgrade began during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, aggravated in Kosovo by Milošević's firing of all Albanians from their jobs, a new black economy emerged. The term is used to describe people who did illegal exchange of Dinars to Deutschmarks and smuggled goods illegally, and it is equivalent to "black marketeers."

And when I think about it now, I am a father now, the insecurity of my parents must have been terrifying, not knowing what would happen to their children. Many people went abroad at that time, many people went to the diaspora, children of my paternal uncle, cousins, children of my maternal aunt, and all of a sudden, the circles of our families started weakening because of people who started fleeing Kosovo.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember anything from the cultural life of that time, Kurrizi, Qafa?

Petrit Selimi: It wasn't a cultural life, it was the opposite of a cultural life. But yes, I remember when I first went out to drink vodka-Schweppes at Kurrizi. Kurrizi, there were some coffee shops there at the time. And I remember the first year that we went to the Catholic Church for Christmas, so that we would go out after that. Imagine, there were no mobile phones, of course there were no landline telephones either because they often didn't work, rotary phones. And I imagine how terrified our parents were when we went out at that time, they couldn't know where we were or what we were doing, but on the other side, how to keep us at home?

Aurela Kadriu: How would you organize the meetings since there were no communication means at that time?

Petrit Selimi: Uff... with landline telephones, we would manage somehow. And we would go out in the evenings. To music parties that were organized by the first rappers and rockers, BB Poqi, Ilir Bajri, some of the beginners. Then later Memli [Krasniqi] with "*Ritmi i Rrugës*" [Street Rhythm], but in fact, Kurrizi was the destination point. Then Qafa on the second floor.

But in the elementary school in the eighth grade there was Elida. At Elida you went to eat sweets, and try to escape without paying. I did it once, but I forgot my backpack inside and I had to go back somehow. We didn't have money, we all had small money, when you had enough money to buy a hamburger and a Coca-cola, that was the main day of the week. And, still, you know, it was total destruction in the beginning and then somehow people started trying to create something in that context, plant some cultural seeds, create some cultural oasis in a total desert of financial, economic poverty and political repression, and a relatively hopeless situation.

Aurela Kadriu: Then what happened to you after eighth grade, after elementary school?

Petrit Selimi: In eighth grade it was when... I didn't go to my *semimatura*⁹ for example, because David whom I told you about earlier, who was in Pristina, he talked to some children and he called on the phone and told my parents, "Can your son come to Austria to a conference in '92, about children's rights?" And that was exactly in the period, in June, when it was the end of eighth grade, we couldn't wait for the *semimatura* to dance with girls and to first have potential contacts with the opposite gender. And I wasn't there, imagine, I had to go to this conference together with Pasionare I guess, and Lyra.

⁹ *Semimaturë* was the old set of examinations given to students after the fourth year of elementary school.

And going there was much of a challenge because Pristina had no airplanes, neither did Belgrade because it was under sanctions, so we travelled with an old car, a Mercedes of uncle Elez who lives in Germany today, we went with it to Subotica, from Subotica some Hungarians took us and sent us to Austria, to a village, Nürsteg, a lot of children from all around the world and it was somehow a miracle.

When I left, everybody was very proud of Petrit going to a conference, ten deutschmarks from an uncle, twenty from an aunt, I had a total of forty deutschmarks which was a lot for a child. And we spent a week at that children's conference, I guess. Then we went to Vienna where I found out that this conference is part of a greater conference for human rights.¹⁰

The Dalai Lama and leaders of various countries were there. We represented the situation of children's rights in the world at that big international conference. During the time that we were there, we met some other people, Kristin Eskeland from Norway and Werner from Austria. They were leaders of various big NGOs and we were there, a Croatian, Daniella, a Serb from Belgrade, Ivan and I. "Why don't we try to organize a similar conference or event and dedicate it only to the children of our region?"

Aurela Kadriu: Did you represent the political situation in Kosovo there?

Petrit Selimi: Of course, yes...

Aurela Kadriu: How did you transmit it?

Petrit Selimi: We were all so aware politically. And we were little terrorists in the sense of the big noise we made about Kosovo and the situation of children's rights. And we had a very authentic and original story, because our schools were closed, our parents were fired. Whoever you told about the situation...

On the other hand, there were Bosniaks, they were experiencing massacres, crime, genocide. So, the situation in general was such that on one hand, a big part of Europe was entering the period of the fall of the wall of Berlin, the fall of the Soviet Union and the beginning of democracy, except the Balkan island where Serbia started a massive campaign in many countries in conflict, apartheid, and in some places also genocide. So, it was a touching story for everyone (sneezes). Sorry! {addresses the interviewer}, I have a cold, so...

Aurela Kadriu: Feel free to continue where you left it, how you met with...

Petrit Selimi: And we met the leaders of NGOs in Austria, we decided, "Let's do something only for former Yugoslavia," they liked the idea. I was only fourteen at the time, and then I returned to the first year of secondary school here at *Xhevdet Doda* and we met some children, youth whom we knew, who were our friends, and created the first cell of a youth activism.

Then I went to Austria and Norway two or three times, to make the plan of how to organize the meetings, this youth organization. And It was interesting because back then you could not travel at all,

¹⁰ On June 25, 1993, representatives of 171 States adopted by consensus the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights.

and when you travelled, you would to seek asylum. So, I would go to Austria and Norway and return, and that seemed very interesting to people.

There were no NGOs in Pristina, there were no opportunities to go abroad and creating something from scratch in Kosovo was an innovation, because everything was in deficit here. So, the first group of friends who were at Xhevdet Doda, we met and decided, some of them were my classmates and some others from other classes, we decided to create a kind of organization. The idea was not very clear, where we would do cultural projects, art, journalism, I mean, a kind of movement that would compensate the total absence of free activities in our life.

It was welcomed by international friends and they decided to support our idea. And we started to hold conferences each year, maybe even twice a year in Austria, exactly in the village of Nürsteg where there were various participants from the republics of former Yugoslavia. You know, from seven children, we were always, children and adults, our circle expanded, from being five-six people, we became ten-fifteen, twenty-twenty-five. We decided to open a youth center in Pristina, a kind of office. We decided to open a kind of office which would deal with activities and exhibitions.

The Norwegians came here, Kristina, and we agreed to use my apartment as a meeting place. Before that we used to meet in our houses, in various houses, we would meet in various houses. My apartment was in the city center and maybe that is why it was easier to start working there. A kind of *youth center* [English] was created, a youth center, we held meetings, had exhibitions, events.

We then organized music evenings in those buildings which were there, various coffee shops. So, a kind of... we started with the publication of an insert, a youth newspaper within the then magazine *Koha Javore* [Weekly Time]. While in Austria, the subject of the name came up, "How will this network of organizations in former Yugoslavia call itself?" And there had been an interview of Leonard Cohen, the famous Canadian singer who died last year. "Are you an optimist or a pessimist?" And he said, "I am a post-pessimist." And it was an accurate name for the period we were living in, because calling ourselves *Lulediellat e Ballkanit* [Balkan Sunflowers] at the time when there was total terror, was a little naive. But how to express our desire to get out of the trap of pessimism and defeatism and fight it, do something about it, without having a super optimistic name? Then someone proposed the name *Post-pesimistët* [Post-pessimists], and that remained the name of the organization and it was used for seven-eight years as the platform of political, cultural and artistic activism of a great generation of Pristina youth.

Aurela Kadriu: What did you do at *Postpesimistët*, what kind of events did you cover, I mean we are talking about the supplement, the newspaper...

Petrit Selimi: I was one of the journalists of the supplement *Postpesimistët*, I guess Garentina Kraja was the editor-in-chief. Then we started publishing another seasonal magazine with comics, culture, an alternative magazine which was called *Hapi Alternativ* [Alternative Step]. Back then the Soros foundation was already opened and we took a grant from them. This was a magazine that aimed to more or less compensate the total absence of information about culture in the '90s, it was a more alternative artistic expression, and we published it as a second magazine.

We organized a lot of music parties, that was the time when electronic and grunge music came to the market, so we helped Kosovar bands to produce, to organize music events. There were some alternative theatre shows, Jeta Xharra was in charge for the theatre. Within Post-pessimists there was always a branch, a pretty distinctive branch of theatre and shows, the National Theatre was closed, but we organized [plays] in alternative spaces where the whole life took place... I remember there was no official facility, you could do whatever you wanted, I mean, the exhibitions of the greatest Kosovar artists, Muslim Mulliqi¹¹ and so on, were held in coffee shops, concerts were held in coffee shops, poetry evenings were held in coffee shops. Everything, that was a platform where you could express every kind of artistic activity.

Aurela Kadriu: Were there political patterns in *Postpessimistët*? Did you report the beatings, violence, murders that happened?

Petrit Selimi: Always! When visitors came from abroad, we would always go to KMLDNJ.¹² There was *baci*¹³ Adem¹⁴ as the leader and we would also go to the headquarters of the *Qendra e Shkrimtarëve* [Center of Authors] which was part of the LDK. We often met professor Fehmi Agani.¹⁵ We organized workshops about journalism, the generation of journalists, Ylber Hysa, Dukagjin Gorani, then other human rights activists, they all held workshops for us and they were all pretty much focused on our reality, which was very politically charged and the interviews that we did abroad as well as the publications that we sent abroad were always focused on the story of the tragic reality of Kosovo, because you couldn't avoid that.

So, somehow, we tried to create some values, some resistance actions that, "We haven't died totally," that, "We are producing something," but on the other side, abroad we tried to tell the story about the tragedy that happened in our country. So, domestically there was an enlightening activity, if I can use the word without sounding pretentious, and abroad there was an information activity, that is, telling others about what was happening in Kosovo.

Aurela Kadriu: How was working under that pressure? I have read articles where you report about the murders of your friends, or the murders of youth at that time, and somehow in the big picture, it sounds like an illegal activity for that time, somehow *underground* [English]. How was working under that pressure, having the office in the city center and wandering around the city at that time?

¹¹ Muslim Mulliqi (1934-1998) was an impressionist and expressionist painter of Kosovo. Born into a family of artists in town, Mulliqi attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade under Zoran Petrović, where he also continued with the postgraduate studies.

¹² The full name of this organization is Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedom. KMLDNJ is the Albanian acronym.

¹³ *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful term for an older person.

¹⁴ Adem Demaçi (1936-) is an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

¹⁵ Fehmi Agani (1932-1999) was a philosopher, sociologist and politician, one of the founders of the Democratic League of Kosovo. He was assassinated by Serbian troops as he attempted to flee Pristina disguised as a woman to avoid detection.

Petrit Selimi: When I think about it now, I would be terrified if my child was doing something that was somehow half-illegal, to write... but let me tell you something else, I guess Milošević didn't care much about the peaceful resistance and what the newspapers were saying. Because there were opposition newspapers in Belgrade as well, also *Bujku*¹⁶ was being published at that time, a daily newspaper which existed in Kosovo, and it also had very politically charged articles.

There were other magazines, like *Zëri* [The Voice] and *Koha Javore*. They didn't allow us to have televisions, we could only watch the television of Albania, there they had a one hour of Kosovo program with our famous anchors. But, in fact Serbia started shaking and being afraid and reacting in a harsh way when the mode of the activity of Kosovars changed and became more aggressive, not aggressive but more active and oppositional.

There were some legends at that time, for example people would say, "In Drenica there are some villages where the police cannot enter." And I remember these conversations of the '90s, '94-'95. Of course, I didn't know at that time, but they were talking about Prekaz and all that region where at that time, a resistance, of which we in Pristina didn't know about, had started, but people slowly realized that there was no chance of getting out of the vicious circle of occupation by only staying and watching.

And that was the time when some students protests already started taking place here in '97. But this was only another episode because in '96 I went to Norway. The Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide and the former-prime minister Tavas Holterberg saw me at an international conference, I guess they liked me, I don't exactly know the *background* [English] and they went to my parents and told them, "We want to make it possible for this boy to go and live in Norway. So, I didn't attend my *matura*¹⁷ party in Pristina either, I missed both of them.

I went to Norway, I continued in an English-speaking boarding school. I lived in the family of the former foreign minister of Norway, Kai Eide, at his house, his family. And then I came to Kosovo every summer, of course, I spent a lot of time here. But in '97, when the protests started, and in '98, when the conflict as well as direct attacks already started, then the attack in Prekaz and the murder of Jasharaj,¹⁸ there was no turning back, it was obvious that it would turn out for the worse or something would happen.

Part Two

Aurela Kadriu: What was the stand of the Kosovar parallel state structures towards your activity in Post-pessimists at that time...

¹⁶ *The Farmer*, daily newspaper which replaced *Rilindja* after Serbian authority banned it, in August 1990.

¹⁷ *Maturë* or *Maturë e Madhe*, a set of examinations given to students after the eighth year of elementary school (High school graduation).

¹⁸ The massacre of the entire family of the Jashari in Prekaz, Drenica, on March 1998 marks the beginning of the Kosovo war.

Petrit Selimi: You know what...

Aurela Kadriu: ...did they have any stand, were there statements coming from there, did they support you, did they oppose you?

Petrit Selimi: ...we were pretty small compared to the big story that happened at that time. Those few people engaged in these activities, especially in the early '90s, helped each other. I mean, our contact with the existing structures of that time was always good, correct. Was there anything in the shape of financing? No. When I think about it now, we had ridiculous budgets from Norway, maybe one-two thousand deutschmarks for a six-months budget at that time, I don't exactly remember how much the budget was, but it was enough for these, we managed to publish the newspaper, to organize various events...

Yes, but in '95, '96, '97 we began to recover some new principles of activism. *Koha Javore* became *Koha Ditore* [Daily Time]. And many journalists and youth from Post-pessimists who were in Pristina became journalists of *Koha Ditore*. I mean, maybe eighty percent of the whole *Koha* were founders of... the first journalists were those from workshops... who came from the core group of Post-pessimists and who later became editors, those who now are... Fis Abrashi is the director of AP [Associated Press] for Central Europe, Beni Qena the director of AP in Jerusalem. Various famous journalists all around Kosovo and the world who were... the core of them were part of the first group of Post-pessimists.

Aurela Kadriu: What was the year in which Post-pessimists was officially concluded?

Petrit Selimi: There was no official year of its conclusion. There were generations after the war who conducted activities as well, they had an office, a youth center. But after the war, in 2000-2001 an explosion of donors happened here, I mean a lot of NGOs opened, there was a lot of money, hundreds, thousands of euros spent for various activities...all those who used to be part of Post-pessimists got employed, no matter how young they were, they spoke English, they had, sometimes also the experience of survival, as the French saying goes, "They rested because..." there was no need for *Post-pessimists* anymore.

If there used to be the part of resistance and cultural development in a cultural desert, there was no need for resistance anymore because Kosovo was liberated, and the big competition of funds and NGOs was among those who were way bigger and more interesting, and that somehow imploded the organization.

So, there was no definitive date that, "It is closed and there is no more *Post-pessimists*," but people grew up, the second and third generation of Post-pessimists also didn't... they continued their lives, they went abroad to study, many of them. So, it was a kind of natural death, if I may call it like that, of the entire movement. But, it wasn't a death because that spirit and that activism, and that progressive feeling of change is still here with the people who are working all around Kosovo.

Aurela Kadriu: Was the movement name the same in Croatia and Serbia...

Petrit Selimi: Yes. Yes, yes.

Aurela Kadriu: And, did you have contacts with people from...

Petrit Selimi: We had...in the meantime, after the war?

Aurela Kadriu: No, I mean at that time, did you have any coordinated activity?

Petrit Selimi: Yes, we would meet in Austria. It wasn't a coordination, but they were like, when we went to Austria, we heard about what those in Zagreb and Belgrade were doing. But I can freely say that our organization was the most active and sophisticated. We had office and activities, we wrote good proposals. We had pretty much, for that time, a multilayered complicated and complex activity. So, we were the most active one, but there were branches or centers of Post-pessimists all around former Yugoslavia, but some of them were more successful than the others.

Aurela Kadriu: When you went to Norway, your family continued staying in Kosovo, right?

Petrit Selimi: Yes, yes.

Aurela Kadriu: How was that period for you? You were in Norway, in Kosovo there was misery, your family was here?

Petrit Selimi: In the first year, I cried all the time. I remember when my paternal aunt greeted me, she used to bake a very good pie, in Anamorava¹⁹ they call it called *samcë*, it is a pie with garlic and yoghurt. And, I cried for *samcë* in Norway, "I want to eat *samcë*," for my paternal aunt, mother and father. Now, not having a lot of money, we would only talk on the phone once or twice a week, with a landline telephone.

And I couldn't get used to, because Norway is pretty cold, people don't hug each other and they don't physically touch each other, they don't even shake hands with each other. But this only happens until you get used to them, until you get into their families, otherwise they are very warm. But *externally* [English] they are not like us in the Mediterranean part, the southeastern part of Balkan, where there is much more emotion in human relations.

So, the first year was pretty difficult, I was alone, my parents were in Kosovo. I had a scholarship that covered my expenses, but of course, not a luxurious life. I was at a school where there were a lot of rich children, children of ambassadors, children of Norwegian billionaires. I only managed to integrate in the second year, to integrate pretty well in the sense that I would go to sleepovers, I had friends. I made friends, some of the best friends that I still have in my life are from the period of secondary school in Norway.

Aurela Kadriu: What did you study then, Petrit, did you continue?

Petrit Selimi: Yes, in '98 I finished secondary school in Norway and enrolled in the University of Oslo. First in Theology, Biblical Sciences, because I was interested in religion, not that I was religious, the

¹⁹ *Anamorava* is a valley in Kosovo, in the southern part of the District of Gjilan surrounding the Binačka Morava river.

opposite. But then I changed it, I studied Social Anthropology for one semester, and then I studied Urbanism in the other.

So, I studied Urbanism and Anthropology or, “The Effect of Changes of the Physical Sceneries of Cities on Social Structures,” I guess this was my graduation thesis. I finished the faculty right after the war and I came here to work within a project that was named Internet Project Kosovo which later was called IPKO. I was part of the first team that established IPKO, we worked in the former building of Boro and Ramiz, in the sports center, in 2000-2001-2002.

Aurela Kadriu: Before returning to Kosovo, how were the vacations when you came here, Kosovo was still under tension...

Petrit Selimi: First, it was weird that I came here, because when people went abroad at that time they were asylum seekers and they couldn't no longer return. I mean, few were those who would go and return here on vacation, and I was lucky enough to be able to go and return during the summer because 99 percent of people never returned in the summer. And I couldn't wait to return, of course, because I had friends and family here, and no matter the tension, you felt home in your family with your friends and your social life.

I had fun during summers, even though the situation was far from fun. So, there was always a conflict between the quiet and beautiful life in Norway and the terrible life here. And of course, then the opposite, warm family and social life here, and a colder life in Norway. But later these were somehow balanced, and a balance was created between abroad and home.

Aurela Kadriu: What did you do after your studies?

Petrit Selimi: For some time I was...I worked for IPKO then I worked for the OSCE as an officer...

Aurela Kadriu: Here in Kosovo?

Petrit Selimi: Yes, in Kosovo, as a media officer. Then I was the editor of the newspaper *Java* [The Week] of Migjen Kelmendi. In fact, first I worked at *Zëri Ditor* [Daily Voice] for Blerim Shala, as a journalist, then as an editor of the centerfold, I mean, the entertainment pages, and...basically what I did before, but they were just repackaged in the post-war life. Then together with some journalist friends, with the financial help of friends from IPKO, we founded the newspaper *Express*. So, I was the first executive director of the newspaper *Express* when it was a newspaper and an online portal.

In the meantime, in 2006-2007, maybe I had a minimal talent for public relations and I used it to work as a consultant, I worked for some foreign brands. In 2009, in 2010 I entered politics and in 2011 I was appointed Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo, a position which I held for two mandates. Last year, in 2016, I became an acting Minister of Foreign Affairs because the former Minister Hashim Thaçi became President, so I remained as a Minister for five-six months.

Until recently, last summer, after an offer that I was given from Washington, I decided to lead an investment fund that is called Millennium Challenge Corporation, which aims to begin this summer, in 2017, with investments in issues such as the environment, reusable energy, the rule of law.

But I am still in contact with many of Post-pessimists here and abroad. I am even writing one chapter of a book about Post-pessimists which is being published in Norway and I can say that the experience of that time is what made many of us who we are today, whatever we are today, good or bad.

Aurela Kadriu: Thank you very much!

Petrit Selimi: Thank you very much!