

INTERVIEW WITH MEHMET KRAJA

Pristina | Date: November 4, 2014

Duration: 130 minutes

Present:

1. Mehmet Kraja (Speaker)
2. Jeta Rexha (Interviewer)
3. Kaltrina Krasniqi (Interviewer/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.

Childhood

[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about his childhood and family.]

Mehmet Kraja: I was born...up until the age of 15 I spent my childhood in Kraja, one of the villages near lake Shkodra. My childhood was pretty much identical to the childhood of other people of my generation, a difficult childhood with many wishes and little means. The place where I grew up was a bit special, it was a border zone and very close to lake Shkodra. There was a kind of gap within. It's a very beautiful space, very pleasant but living there is very hard. This internal gap might have followed me my whole life because I always had this internal contradiction within myself with regards to what is ideal and what is...and the human impossibility to achieve it. It's something that becomes part of a person's character with time.

Nevertheless, I remember interesting things from that time, certain things are...they border with magical realism, I would say, because I'm a literary person and that's where my mind takes me. I mean, there are things that take on an almost fantastical dimension. People there lived in a world that was relatively...incredibly closed. We had Shkodra directly ahead, which we never visited and we looked down on it from our heights, a city our people dreamt of, but didn't have the right to experience. And then, with time it takes on...that border, which divided our area from Albania at some point started to take on mythic dimensions, and sometimes took on the phantasmagoric strange dimension of a vision.

I know one thing, that in our extended family there was an old man, I remember him very well, Selim. He thought the sun rose from an opening in Maranaj. Maranaj are the mountains above Shkodra which end and extend into another opening after Romania, and that was the world, there was nothing else, that was the extent of the world. If the road to Shkodra was closed, he never left the village, he had never been anywhere in his life. In these people's minds, they had Shkodra and nothing more. They integrated with great difficulty, they started integrating very late in these places in which, in reality, history ordained them to inhabit. It's a place where the border moved and the border was simultaneously a curse and a legend...legends were told of it, it was a myth.

I remember the saboteurs who crossed the border there, they crossed on both sides...especially the ones who came from Albania, they hit the road at night when automatic weapons sounded, this was during my early childhood when relations with Albania were very strained and both sides sent saboteurs against each other. Sometimes it seems like these things happened one thousand years ago, but it actually wasn't, it wasn't one thousand years, it was less than...it could be 50 years, but no more than 50-60 years. I mean, these are real events that I remember from my childhood.

So, I mean it was this kind of childhood... moreover, that place lived in [a tragedy], very often in [a tragedy], it is torn apart by the tragedy created by big ideas. When big ideas are translated into small places they cause tragedies. Communism, fascism...so when they come to a small place they also cause great upheaval, they cause great troubles.

There was a teacher of a course, at a socialist gathering...he held the gatherings in the village, he spoke every once in a while and was afraid of making mistakes while speaking. And when...to calm the situation somehow and to curry favor for himself, he'd climb onto a chair and call loudly, "Long live communism!" or "Long live socialism!" I mean this would happen when he saw he might have made a mistake, to reinforce his position.

These are the kinds of situations I experienced until high school. Then I went to high school in Ulqin. To go to Ulqin, you would first have to, you had to go through the lake on a boat to get to Novi Pazar, then by train to Tivar and then by bus. It was a trip that took all day, except in the winter, when there was snow or when we went through the mountains and ended up in Ulqin, it took four and a half hours on foot and then you had to take a bus for a while and that's how we'd get to Ulqin.

I spent four years of my early youth in Ulqin. Those years were mostly the same as those of other young people, they're called years of dreams, those are years of dreaming. For the first time one is confronted with a strange sensibility, with an infinity such as the sea. The sea is a very strange metaphor, when you see it for the first time it leaves you dumbfounded and you have no words to explain it and you seem so small before it, I mean this is the feeling I had. Then, you start to learn the different stories of the places and those stories are...sometimes it seems like you see what you read in books - those knights, those battles, those medieval wars. It's as if, you close your eyes a bit and they appear all at once because the castle and Ulqin had only a few inhabitants, it was a town with few inhabitants.

This is the idealistic side, where I'm idealizing Ulqin, on the other hand there was a very serious problem in Ulqin. There was a political problem, Ulqin was an Albanian city but it communicated and learned in Serbian. We were from the villages and we went there to be educated in Albanian. The high school opened, the high school didn't have a single student from Ulqin who studied in Albanian, everyone studied in Serbian, or Serbo-Croatian as they called it then. It was a very difficult situation, by the end of four years of high school, there wasn't a single student who attended classes in Albanian. Then, they opened...they started to approach it differently...a slightly different climate was created. It was a very heavy political climate, this was around '67-'71. The air [of change] that started in Kosovo started to be felt there. That spirit of change started in Kosovo with the movements of '68, of '66.

I remember in '68, if I'm not mistaken, it was after the Pristina demonstrations that their echo was heard even though a small number of people organized it. But, I know that the mayor of the municipality was the high school principal, first he held a meeting in which he decisively said that the flag of the Albanians would be raised in institutions alongside the flag of Yugoslavia, of Montenegro etc. I mean, we interpreted it this way, because we were very young, that they were rushing to put up the flags before we were forced to do it violently or with a kind of...they took our argument away, they simply took it out of our hands and forced us out.

This was an attempt to create an identity and to truly introduce a different climate, to have Ulqin function a bit differently. And that entire Albanian part of Montenegro was under different kinds of pressure. It was really difficult during high school. The high school was supposed to function in Albanian, the language was taught in Albanian and most subjects were taught in Serbian, there was a lack of staff, pressure, always pressure, throughout high school. Different professors came, not only immigrants from Albania,

not others who were always unsuitable, so we always were under a pressure that didn't come directly from the authorities, it was legalized. But they came from movements that were more clandestine, close to the system and inside the state structures itself. This lasted until 1971. In '71 I came to Pristina, this Pristina you're seeing {nods in the direction of the window}. Even this here {points}, this former Pedagogical High School that's seen here, it was around then as well, this road was covered in mud. This neighborhood was under construction, I remember upper Aktash very well. I remember it had a very good theater. The Union Restaurant was there, a stinking creek used to flow between the National Theater and the Union.

Pristina took on an urban structure...people who remember, who are older than me and from Pristina know this very well. With the mayor of the municipality Nazmi Mustafa, the old man they called him, they called him that because that's what he was. That old man, created this urban structure, for better or for worse, these main roads, it could have been in '73 or '74...but it was around '71-'74 when I was a student, meaning it took on this form, this structure. That was the time of Kosovo's complete autonomy, it was also the period when institutions were built, as far as I know...Radio Prishtina, the Printing House...as far as I know those university buildings were also built then...All the institutional structures we have today, the state ones and the other ones and cultural and administrative institutions were mainly built in that time, namely the period of autonomy. And it continued like that...until today.

Youth

[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about his youth.]

Mehmet Kraja: I studied literature, I don't even know...I have an unpleasant story to tell, when I told the professor in some high school, the high school in Ulqin that I want to study literature, they paused a bit...because I was a good student, I had good grades even in natural sciences meaning physics, math... "Why, why literature?" "Well, because I feel like it." No one thought I'd do it, usually literature is studied by poor students, or mediocre students, or students who study social sciences...we had a kind of...a good student had to go into natural sciences and that was it, everyone knew this was the case! So, I enrolled in literature.

I started to work before I ended my studies. I was the editor-in-chief of *Bota e Re* and at the time I was accepted as a journalist of...*Bota e Re* was a student newspaper. I was the editor-in-chief of *Bota e Re* from '74-'76, for two years. Then, they fired me. The people who fired me are now important people in politics. I'd say that, they were even saying that they might put the whole editorial team in jail, we escaped jail, but as far as firing us was concerned, they fired us very quickly. It was a time of liberalization in Kosovo. We have to accept that. But, on the other hand, politically speaking, things were controlled very carefully and a vicious battle was fought between the different factions in power. Meaning on the one hand the state provided a lot of opportunities and pretended to be more liberal than it was, on the other hand through ideology, through party structures, through party organization, they tightened their ideological grip. We were free and in chains at the same time. It was a paradox, but that's what it was like.

Compared to others, to other socialist countries, Kosovo was also...Yugoslavia at that time was advancing as far as freedom is concerned. This was the image they portrayed. On the other hand, the state, the party, the security structures, they created the perfect intelligence service that worked its way into the deepest and most far-flung cells in society, it controlled everything. Of course the control wasn't as ideological as it used to be although there was always a problem here. There was a connection, they always thought there was a connection between nationalism and dogma. So, dogma and nationalism

were connected in their eyes because Albania was their model. A war was being fought here not to have the Albanian model, to not have Albanian ideology cross the border.

That period was a period... nevertheless it was a period of liberalism, I would say. And now us as students we had a certain spirit that wanted more than what they gave us and we created that new world, we occasionally created what were considered small scandals at the time. And at that time, the head of the youth rushed to scold us, he would come to meetings with an assistant...they've become important now, important people. When the camera turns off I'll tell you their names and you'll clearly see that they're really very important people, I won't mention their names. Of course a working group was also created in... the editorial desk of *Bota e Re* was at the student dining hall, and... they fired us all, and about methey said, "He's in *Rilindja*, let him stay quiet, let him stay in *Rilindja*." As far as the others were concerned, it was a problem as to what would happen to us.

The university rector was Professor Idriz Ajeti, who is with me now in the Academy. He protected us. He protected us...I don't think he ever read *Bota e Re* because he was busy with other things but he protected us, and he seriously protected us. At least that's what they told me that he looked out for us.

Language

Mehmet Kraja: Now there's something...about language that we have to clarify. Kosovo's relationship to literary Albanian is a bit more specific and very often...ideas about that time are being circulated that don't offer a clear reflection of that time and of those developments. If we say that culturally there was an attempt to create a nation, to create a nation in and of itself, I mean this is what they were saying even after '81. After '81 all the dirty laundry of the system was exposed. All the projects they did pertaining to Albanians came out into the open, they couldn't keep it a secret anymore because everything was in clear daylight.

Then if there was an attempt to create a different culture here, if this was the aim, to create an Albanian identity integrated into Yugoslavia...it's completely normal that the goal was also to do something to our language linguistically, to change something. It's logical that if something was done in the field of literature, and if something was done in the field of figurative art, was done in music, was done in politics, was done in social life, then naturally, there was an aim to do something to the language as well.

This development in language has its own history. There was a period of time near the end of the '50s, around the middle of the '50s when the Albanological Institute was opened, it was maintained for two years, it closed, Selman Riza was brought in, he was placed there with three-four scholars, to be made into Selman Riza..

Then another dark period begins - the Albanological Institute reopens, because these things are linked to institutions. The faculty is opened as well, I speak only about the Institute...later in '63, there's a movement that takes place, sometimes Kosovo must adopt the literary variant of Albanian, and sometimes the Gheg variant, and sometimes the literary variant adopted by Albania. All these movements take place until '78, these are movements that were dictated by the policies of the time. In '68 the linguistic council of Pristina conclusively solves this problem. It closes this issue because a political decision is made to have Albanians in Yugoslavia write like they do in Albania. Naturally with the necessary differences, because there still wasn't a specific grammar to follow, not even in Albania, with its linguistic differences that were allowed to continue.

To get one thing straight. Now comes the Albanian Orthographic Conference. In '72 the Albanian Orthographic Conference is held, in Fadil Hoxha's book, what's it called...you'll find the title {refers to the

interviewers} because I don't remember it at the moment. In Fadil Hoxha's book it specifically says, "the permission for Kosovars to attend the Orthographic Conference" was given by Petar Stambolić, the number one person in Serbia, not in Yugoslavia, in Serbia. What changed, why did it unfold like this? Why was there this movement in Yugoslavia, I mean to integrate, because it was our language that gave us, Albanians in Yugoslavia, the opportunity. We made up the third largest nation, numerically Albanians in Yugoslavia made up the third largest nation, after Croats, more than Macedonians, more than Slovenians, more than Bosnians who were numerically small, when you started separating them, therefore it was the third largest nation in Yugoslavia.

So, why was all of a sudden this allowed? This has to do with the liberalization of the '70s that I mentioned, but there were liberal ideas that broke through, in the party and in the state and everywhere else, but there was also a strategy. The strategy was Yugoslavia wanted to abandon the appearance of a special nation made up of Albanians from Yugoslavia. It sees that it's no longer possible to create a special nation. And, that's why Albanians in Yugoslavia were to be treated like a national minority.

On the one hand this had its disadvantages, because if you had a nation you'd have the advantage of being a constitutive part of the Yugoslavian state. Because nations had that right, only those five nations had the right to be constitutive elements, republic, six republics. Nationalities did not have the right to be constitutive elements, they were only annexes. Now, that was definitely abandoned, it was abandoned and Albanians were given the chance to communicate on the level of...I mean they were allowed to have the same written language to communicate without disruption, with a culture, should we call it, A culture, is a little inappropriate to call it that, regardless, that's how it is!

Now, how to put it, they say, this is a communist product. Because communists from both sides decided to make the language like this, because this language shouldn't have been like this, but Kosovo didn't have the capacity to make its own language. What would it make it with, how would it make it? One newspaper and a few books, with a writing tradition...don't forget in '44, '45, Kosovo turns out to have an exceptional amount of illiterates. Over ninety percent of the population was illiterate, and now for a period of let's say twenty-thirty years, what could it do? It would create literature, it would generate culture and make its own language. Impossible! Even if it made Gheg the official language, it would again take on the Shkodra variant - *shkodranishtën*. It was impossible for it to create its own because there was no writing tradition.

Why wasn't there a writing tradition is a different issue that needs to be reviewed and studied. But the problem is, there was no literature, there was no writing tradition and there wasn't a tradition of cultivating language. And, as a result, it was completely normal to take on...it wasn't a question of why did one take it on, because they were communists, and over there, there was communism...No, it had very little to do with that. It had to do with the need for the cultures to communicate between themselves. Because after all, language is a code, language is an agreement, literary language is an agreement.

The standard language is an agreement! We agree to write like this because we communicate better. That's it, nothing more. We communicate if we want to communicate with the neighborhood of Pristina, we write in the language of the neighborhood of Pristina. If I want to communicate from Pristina to Llap and also Drenica, we write with this language. If I want to communicate further afield, you have to write in the language with which the people of a bigger territory communicate in.

War

[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about his youth.]

Mehmet Kraja: Today, in the twentieth century, the need has arisen, the need for integration within national boundaries arose since the nineteenth century, and languages have been consolidated since the nineteenth century. We were late and arrived in the twentieth century, the second part of the twentieth century, we arrived with linguistic diversity, and there was a need to turn this into a language as was done in cultured nations, to communicate with a standard language. So, we enter into an agreement that language is an agreement, the standard is the agreement, we make a linguistic code, a code of communication, which allows us to understand each other easily and without problems. We understand each other across space, not only within neighborhoods, but in the entire space, and we achieved this.

This is what the Orthographic Conference achieved. There's nothing mystifying about it. I mean these things are very practical. Now comes the time of globalization. Naturally! Now one's national language isn't enough, you yourselves have witnessed that we've mostly remained there, with our language, there we are realities, but in fact we've fossilized. That's how you consider us, because you're a younger generation. That we're not as advanced because globalization has different requirements. We can no longer ghettoize ourselves inside the nation, that doesn't make sense! That's idiotic. That's madness. I mean ghettoizing within the national space. Nowadays ghettoizing one's self from a world perspective, from a contemporary perspective, from a global perspective is considered backward, it's considered anachronistic, it's considered crazy. Let alone ghettoizing within one nation. This doesn't make sense, that's why these are all caprices, meaning pointless caprices. I'm not saying that they found the best linguistic solution, either one could have been chosen. I don't know, I mean maybe Gheg could have also been included on the basis of...

But it happened, and it can't be undone because the majority of Albanians who say they write in Gheg or say they are Gheg, Gheg themselves, including my Shkodrans who are very close to me, who are always close to me and whose language I know, unfortunately they don't know how to write the language they themselves spoke and wrote a long time ago, because time had its way and today they've adapted to the standard language. Whether they want to or not, they talk like Shkodrans. And when they write, even when they pretend to write in the Gheg dialect, that's not what they're writing. They write it with mistakes.

I had a thought, that the twentieth century would end the problem of Kosovo. How? I had no idea how things would develop, not with this speed, at least not this speed because we need to be conscious of who we are. We have to be grateful to those who helped us achieve this, naturally also to our own people who sacrificed themselves. Not with this speed. I had an idea that the twentieth century would be the century when things in the world would be clarified. I always had this opinion. Strangely enough it matched up with what happened. The year 2000 really found us, not as a state, and not completely free, but with a clear perspective of how things would unfold.

And now we became free people! We became a free country. Is this enough? This is the dilemma, now the problem and the emergence of the problem, and does freedom solve all problems? Absolutely, not! Expectations were very high, freedom doesn't solve all problems. It's a necessity, it's a part of human life, it can't be separated from life, freedom is human life itself, without it one can't live. But it doesn't solve problems. It isn't an instrument for solving problems. Some problems resolve themselves, but not all of them.

Like those eternal existential problems that can't be solved, freedom can't solve them. Any formula, created so far, has not been able to solve them either. Regardless, some things have been resolved. For us, for my generation it's not that important, I'm not talking on a grand scale, the realization of an ideal, I'm not saying that. It has nothing to do with that. As far as I'm concerned, I'm very pragmatic in this

respect. I'm saying that we can live in a country where at least I have one thing, the satisfaction of knowing that the Serbian police won't knock on my door anymore and I'm not afraid that someone will enter. Because, I lived through those fears and those bad feelings. Of course, I respect those who suffered more than I did and I'll never forget their dues in that regard, but we lived through certain fears, certain moments that you'd find difficult to believe even if I told you. But we lived through very critical moments of life that really will never be repeated, and I know they won't be repeated in our children's lives either. For [us] as a generation, this is a satisfaction for us. Thus, this is a tangible freedom.

It is a great concern, I believe this is also true also for others of this generation, because we weren't able to do what were supposed to do. So, we achieved something, we did what was natural, because freedom is a natural part of human life. We did what was utilitarian, we did what was existential. But, we didn't do what something higher than that, something that would be a bit more developed than this. Thus, we didn't create the state the way we should have, we didn't build institutions the way we should have. We didn't make it...so we didn't push the process in the direction we should have and we had the opportunity to do so. But now who is...

And another thing, something I feel guilty about when facing the new generation, who can accuse us, who can say to us, "Yeah, you brought to us, you created a useless Kosovo." When I face them, I sometimes feel bad facing this generation. I feel bad sometimes, that we really didn't give them better prospects. But now it seems even this generation, [it] doesn't fall on our generation... the need fell upon our generation, the opportunity and the need to create this country, the way that it is, with all its backwardness. It seems like it will be the next generation's task to create Kosovo the way they want, the way people deserve to have their country be.

Activism

[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about his activism.]

Mehmet Kraja: Now everyone here thinks they lived through a historical time, an important time in history. They made history. They took part in history. I'm one of the founders of the Democratic League of Kosovo. I even wrote a book that explains the context in which the Democratic League was founded, what was at the root of the political movements of the '90s, before and during the 90's. First of all I don't think I did anything heroic, we have to rid ourselves of this idea that we were heroic in any way. We even did something that doesn't suit intellectuals – we became involved in politics at a time when political classes created other countries, and those of the former Yugoslavia, political classes created them.

Slovenians, the political class did it, they separated Slovenia from Yugoslavia. There wasn't any need to create an intellectual platform or an intellectual movement. It was a movement of compromise that aimed to keep Yugoslavia together. It was created in Zagreb, and then tried to spread it throughout Yugoslavia, it was done in Kosovo too. Meaning, an intellectual movement tried to keep Yugoslavia together, but it was an intellectual movement to constitute specific states within the former Yugoslavia. There was no need, in the majority of the countries this wasn't needed because there were the political classes themselves, it was the political establishments themselves that marked off their share of what belonged to them in Yugoslavia. Their situation was simpler, and they separated. It was politics itself that preempted these movements, the politicians themselves, the political class preempted these movements, but in Kosovo this wasn't the case.

Politics [in Kosovo] was amputated, it was voiceless, it was crippled, it was...I won't call it treacherous, because people were told that they were traitors, they weren't. They were nothing. Meaning they lost it,

we didn't have the opportunity any more...it couldn't be trusted, since the years...from '81 onwards, there was an extraordinary distance between the political class and on the other side, the ordinary people. And this brought us approaching the 90's, when they couldn't find a common language with their own people. Perhaps they also would want to take control of the situation and to lead the people in the direction of the Slovenians or the Croatians. But, they also didn't have the power, or even the opportunity and they were under an extraordinary amount of pressure...or maybe their minds weren't there at all. They could have also not even had that idea at all, because they were shaped in that way. Therefore, they didn't do that which the political class in other countries did.

In Belgrade they rallied around Milošević, the political class rallied around Milošević, and the intellectuals as well because that's where they saw their national interests. In Slovenia they rallied around Kučan, around others, in Macedonia they rallied around Gligorov. Thus everyone rallied around...in Montenegro around Bulatović, Đukanović, so everyone created political elites and went forward with them. The intellectuals too joined them to create a bigger voice to work towards independence, the independence of the states, the creation of national states.

We were nowhere, because it was clear Yugoslavia was ripping apart at the seams, this was very apparent. You didn't need to be very smart to see that Yugoslavia was gone, and now the problem was, what would come after. We didn't have a political class to take control of the situation. It didn't have the strength, it didn't have ideas, and it couldn't take control. Maybe there also weren't the right circumstances, I can't judge entirely clearly, at least not right now. Maybe, we need a temporal distance, a more thorough investigation and to see in the documents whether there was a real chance. Maybe there wasn't in fact a real chance.

So, what did we do? We entered a game that isn't becoming for the intelligentsia. How could it be the job of writers to create political movements? It's not their field, it doesn't belong to them. We can create cultural movements, we can do different things for artistic movements, but political movements...This seems a little like ... they could say, "But that's what they did in the Czech Republic. The Czechs did it, the writers did it, Havel did it." To be a dissident in the Czech Republic was different from being a dissident in Kosovo. We didn't have that problem, over there, there was ideological dissent, and in Kosovo the situation wasn't the same. They were different situations, but despite that things happened here...you could even say that we preempted them. We were ahead of the Czech Republic, but that's not important.

What's important is the fact that we entered a game, we found ourselves facing a situation in which Kosovo was realistically stuck at a crossroads, it did not have a single idea as to which way to go. Everyone started staking their claims. Everyone started making, creating states with national ideas, we ended up nowhere, with nothing. Pluralism arrived, it started...pluralism was declared. There wasn't an internal movement that could come up with something else, apart from the Communist League. The Communist League degenerated, the people...it didn't work anymore. People saw that but they didn't have where to go, and we created the Democratic League. It was a sanctuary for people.

Now take into account that around seven hundred thousands and something people became members. A futile euphoria! These things aren't done with euphoria but that's what happened. Meaning people came in, asked for asylum, because they didn't have where to go, they didn't have where the hell to go. They were abandoned, they were left orphans, simply put. They didn't have where to turn. Not because we knew so much and we had a clear political program, we didn't have as clear a political program as we now proclaim we did. The program of the Democratic League was a program camouflaged with hermetic phrases that couldn't be deciphered at all because we had to register there...the Democratic League was

registered in the Federal Secretariat of Jurisprudence, it was registered there and that's how they accepted it.

Of course, in the background, I can't say that there wasn't a dose of cunning within us, as we always had in this regard. We had this mischief within us because we were looking to see how we could achieve our national interests. But, did we have ideas as how to achieve them? We didn't have ideas, because things were far off and very complicated. They were very far off and very complicated. Then the '90s came. Forget the fact that domestic power was improvised here, and what do I know, it becomes so...one thousand strange things happened.

At that time I wasn't here, I was in Albania I had to flee to Albania, but it was also a situation in which the international community didn't want to know that you existed. Regardless, because how can I say, today we say, there was infiltration an infiltration naturally happened because there was an interest in what was happening in Yugoslavia overall. But there wasn't even an idea of Kosovo's independence, no living person would endorse it. We have to say this openly, not even your best political friend in Europe would endorse it, wouldn't endorse the independence of Kosovo.

It vegetated politically until the moment when this happened and the game was played...power was improvised and things like this were done. They became, the game of power and usurper was played. There was also...everyone knows this by now. But, there's something people should be aware of, that during the 90's big internal mistakes were made. Many things degenerated because the rules of the game were broken, the system was broken. The institutions fell, even when we had institutions they didn't function very well, let alone when we didn't have them at all. Meaning it functioned on the basis, the country, the people, society functioned on the basis of a collective life with unwritten and unenforced rules. Sometimes this seems OK, sometimes it seems like it can work, but a state can't be built on the basis of goodwill. And Kosovo, in the '90s, lived on the basis of goodwill. Things function on the basis of goodwill up until a certain point and in that way many things were left half-finished. In the Kosovo of the '90s, many things were left half-finished.

While this was happening it degenerated completely. I think that up to a certain point an important decisive turning point in Kosovo was '95, the Dayton Agreement. That was the final turning point, the turning point when the disappointment was extraordinary. I'll refresh your memory a bit, to also remind the people that lived through that time. Dayton was held in the winter, it was cold. Here it was...I also wasn't here, I was in Albania. But, Kosovo was knocked down, it was completely dethroned and disappointed, traumatized, powerless, forgotten, left to the mercy of no one, ignored by the international community, that Badinter Committee and the others...ignored to the point of insult. So ignored that now they have the gall to have Badinter come here and lecture, but I say openly that one of, one of the factors that caused an increase in the repression here, was Badinter because he told Milošević, "This is yours, keep it because Kosovo is yours...there are no ideas for its separation, nor any rights to claim it."

The international community was cruel during the '90s, from '95 onwards it was cruel, vicious in its position to not let Kosovo break away from Yugoslavia, from Serbia. This continued until 1999. The rest you already know.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Why did you go to Tirana?

Mehmet Kraja: That was the situation at the time...I went, the first time I went voluntarily. I went with our idea that to do important things (smiles). We were circulating illegally in Albania and then I went back. After a few months I decided to return, I went around the end of November and decided to come back at

the end of January, I decided to come back in February. When I came back, they came and warned me that they wanted to put me in jail. At the time they had these...what do I know, these lawyers and other people communicated, they had some connections, they still had some connections, and they warned me. Simply put, someone from the Democratic League came, I won't say their name, and said, "You must disappear from here immediately because you're in danger of being arrested."

I had a flu, I mean it was February, I don't remember the date exactly and the only way to do was to go to Preshevo and then cross the border because we didn't have valid documents. I had gone there before, as far as entering goes, I entered, but I had no way to get out. I had an identification card, and an identification card that was still valid, it was valid. With Riza Halimi and the people in Preshevo, the people that we have there today, they organized our passage to Macedonia, and from Macedonia I then had an Albanian passport and I ran away to Albania and then I stayed there until '99, seven years.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How did you feel in Albania?

Mehmet Kraja: I integrated well in Albania, but of course as a writer I can tell you one thing, that I had to restart my career as a writer because in '86 they published the novel that I published here in '84. What I wrote in '82, which was published in '84, was republished in Albania in '86 if I'm not mistaken, and many copies were published. And I wasn't an unknown name, I was a writer who had things published there as well. But as a writer it didn't...whatever kind of illusions Kosovo writers had that they'd work there, they didn't work (smiles). So I had to start from the beginning, to publish *Dritat e Mesnatës* (Midnight Lights) and what not, to integrate into the cultural and literary environment of Albania and I think I achieved that for the period of time that I was there and still am...

With regards to other sides of it, I lived...I integrated well. Meaning I didn't have problems, I survived without problems. I'm not a part of "Kosovar history" {makes quotation marks} in that regard, because Kosovar histories and those of Albania are messy, but my story is simple, I mean with regards to Albania (smiles).

Professional Life

[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about his Professional Life.]

Mehmet Kraja: This is it, with regards to my biography, meaning until the time when I started working as a journalist in *Rilindja*. Then I became dedicated to *Rilindja*. It was always an idea I had, naturally I started writing. I published my first book in '78.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: You surely started writing earlier.

Mehmet Kraja: Yes, of course as a high school student, yes. I'll tell you a detail about high school, I started...Writing is a different story which needs a little...it's like something special, but this is from the aspect of life I have to say that now taking into account that literature doesn't...we all knew that literature here doesn't allow you to support yourself, to survive, therefore one had to have a profession. Journalism was always closer to me, and most writers primarily worked at newspapers or did journalistic work, or work around newspapers, sometimes in publishing houses, so this was the work that writers primarily did.

And I became involved in journalistic work at *Rilindja*. I worked there until *Rilindja* was closed, until the day it closed I worked at *Rilindja*.. I have over twenty years of experience in journalism, I worked in journalism for about 33 years until I left it. So, it was a profession we practiced, which I practiced in two

different time periods. I worked as a journalist during the socialist period, I practiced the profession at the time ... the period of disorder I would call it, it wasn't socialism, or communism, or freedom or nothing – the years of the '90s was a time without time, I don't know what it was. I can't define it, I don't know myself what it was, and I arrived at that period after the war, I continued working in journalism. So I have around 30 years of experience working as a journalist, sometimes as an active reporter, then for a time as a columnist, then as an editor, then...meaning most of the usual work that's done in journalism.

This is it with regards to the profession I practiced, always leaving aside work, my individual commitment to the personal motivation I had - literature.

With regards to literature, I started writing as a high school student, I started publishing. I wrote as a beginner, meaning I had no idea how literature was created (smiles). I had a notebook I wrote in. When I was in high school I published the first story of my young life. I sent my first story to the editorial staff at *Jeta e Re*, I barely managed to type it on a typewriter. It was quite a long story, and I sent it to *Jeta e Re*. The editor-in-chief was Esad Mekuli.

When I got a job after a while, sometime in the spring, and then the holidays came and for the holidays I went to the village of Kraja. There, in the village, we didn't have anything. When it arrives...meaning communication was difficult and sometimes impossible. One of them came, it was Ibrahim Berijashi who published, he'd published and knew here {points towards the window} pupils and students from Kosovo and he'd met...no, Esad [Mekuli] sent him a telegraph, "Tell me who this Mehmet Kraja is. Is it a pseudonym, who is it, because I want to publish his story?" He tells him, he sends him a telegraph or writes him a letter, I don't know, and tells him. Meaning, that's when my history of publication begins and then my introduction to Esad, when I got my first job when I came to Pristina in '71. And he places me in the student dorms and right after that the first thing that I did was, I went, I met with Esad Mekuli. He welcomed me in an extraordinary way, I don't believe that today there's an editor among the ones whom we know who would welcome someone like that. Esad was incredible in that regard. He welcomed me in an extraordinary way and then my cooperation with *Jeta e Re* began, pretty much for several years, without an interruption.

Naturally, along with my work as a journalist, I had to set aside and sacrifice enough time for literary work. Here we don't have...no one in Kosovo lived off of literary work. We can't get by living off it. Meaning, I don't think there was anyone who could live off literature. We couldn't live off the work we did in the field of literature. It was always our secondary work, a second job and then we committed to it.

I published year after year, by now there are around 25 books. There are mainly, eleven or twelve novels, among them stories, drama, I also wrote journalistic books — three-four journalistic books. And of course I wrote articles, hundreds of articles, with thousands of journalistic texts in newspapers.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: A small digression, this story. ... what's it about?

Mehmet Kraja: It's about our surroundings there, about developments...meaning it was a slightly ethnographic story, according to an old story about who knows where. An old thing I don't remember now. But, it was a story about the surroundings, about the place and the time there, I mean something like that. It wasn't anything great of course, I was young at the time, I don't think I knew how to write anything, but as it turned out it left an impression on him and they published one by one in a few...I published a few stories that I then collected into a specific book.

Now there's one thing here, that we need to take into account, that the formation we had as writers, was difficult for us. All the writers here in Kosovo had a difficult time shaping themselves. We found ourselves

in very confusing situations. This confusion you'll see for yourselves, but as I said before, not nationalism, not...

In Yugoslavia we were free in the sense of introducing modes of writing, of literary methods because in '57 Tito and Krleža proclaimed the pluralism of methods and one didn't go to jail anymore for literature. You didn't go to jail anymore in Yugoslavia for literature. There were ways of maintaining control, there were ways of inspecting, which were done through instruments, because I mean we were always somewhere, and in that way we were checked up.. But there wasn't a problem in this sense, we weren't trying to be, maybe because here and there we didn't have...there wasn't a need for us to be ideological dissidents. How to become an ideological dissident when you can write like Ionesco or Beckett, Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* was put on in Paris in '67, or '68, in '69 it came to Pristina. I mean in '69 it was put on stage in Pristina ... you didn't have a chance to become an ideological dissident in those circumstances. And this, has to be removed from that ... that we had ideological dissidence in Kosovo or Yugoslavia - no! Because, Tito took the argument for it away, when he proclaimed the pluralism of literary modes and methods or of all methods. Of course, they favored those who wrote...meaning those who applied the socialist methods, of realism or what not, or Marxist methods. They were the favorites of the authorities, but we all had our freedom.

But there was something else, national dissidence began to develop and that's what the authorities fought. That's why an entire literature of metaphors was created and developed in Kosovo, with metaphoric language, stories with hidden meanings in them. A literature was developed which said one thing, but you were meant to understand something else. A whole literature was created to disguise national dissidence. I conditionally say to disguise it and to...because in metaphors you can't be caught at all. Regardless there were the metaphor police, if I can call them that, who reviewed them and handed out warnings to writers even about metaphors. That tower, those castles, this...*"E di një fjalë prej guri"* (I know a word of stone), wrote Azem Shkreli. This stone, what is this stone, why is this stone used so much? Why are towers so present in the poetry of Kosovo's writers?

So an entire literature was created, an entire literature was created in the language of metaphor. It was used to hide dissidence. And in prose, I used to be a poet, I'm a prose writer, even in prose we dealt with historical themes, with themes...my first two-three novels deal with distant subjects which always aimed at... "I remember very well, my apartment is in Bregu i Diellit (Sunny Hill), it was during the police curfew of '82, it was during the police curfew after the demonstrations. It lasted a long time. The police curfews got longer, they got repeated several times, sometimes on the anniversary of the demonstrations it seemed like a police force was created anew. I think it was in '82, no in '81, when I wrote the novel *Udhëzime për kapërcimin e detit* (Instructions on crossing the sea) and it was about the Middle Ages. I was writing it, and I know that from the window [of the room] where I wrote at night, I looked at the police who had taken over an intersection and stood there and inspected. Of course the police, with their special forces equipment, protected, stopped circulation, there was no movement at that time, there wasn't supposed to be any. Anyone who left their apartment could have been killed. And the entire time I watched the police and how they stood at the intersection, while I wrote *Udhëzime për kapërcimin e detit*... which was about the Middle Ages."

So, before my eyes I had the police and here I had a topic about the Middle Ages. So, we learned to talk in allusions and to talk with metaphors. This was a...a literature was created which spoke indirectly with metaphors in order to disguise national dissidence. But we all had a problem now, this is the thing I said earlier that our literary formation took place with many problems. Our dissidence, on the one hand we had the socialist realist literature we continually absorbed from Albania, Albanian literature had the

national Renaissance, the literature of the Renaissance, it also had the socialist realist literature that came from Albania. From Kosovo there was, for example in prose, there were a number of stories, three unimportant novels, or maybe they were important, it doesn't matter, but, a short literary tradition, it didn't have a canon. It was a body of literature that could be read in a week, or two, and that was that. And then what was one to do?

This was the literature you had to shape yourself with. And what did we do then? We were under constant pressure, from the literature from Albania which was limited, but that had within it national romanticism and of course socialist dogma – the two things it had within it. Because Enver Hoxha accomplished a symbiosis of national romanticism and communist ideology, he did this, he grafted them well, and he packaged them beautifully in order to give it to us. Internally Albanians didn't buy it, inside Albania it was very difficult to swallow this beautiful package. We, here across the border ate it up easily. I mean we were under the constant pressure of socialist realism and this ideology of Albanian national romanticism and we were under the pressure of the impossibility that it offered. We saw that literature, that method of socialist realism that we didn't like, and on the other side, in Yugoslavia, we had exceptional opportunities to communicate with let's say European literature, world literature.

I said I had the [book] sets, while in Albania at that time one didn't and couldn't read Dostoevsky, nor Kafka, nor Proust, nor Joyce, nor...so an entire literature. We on this side were supplied with exactly this kind of literature, on the other hand...because Yugoslavia had now declared it was open to different literary artistic currents and to Western influences. And it was even, it was even fashionable to be as similar as possible. Sometimes there were a lot of epigones in this regard. There was epigonism and plain plagiarism with regards to the West. There was much epigonism.

Now Kosovo's literature found itself under pressure from two sides. It wasn't very clear in that regard, as to how to orient oneself. A number of writers became social-realists like the writers in Albania. Someone became a modernist, as if it was...the models were, what do I know, the models within Beckett, I mentioned another...So, on the one hand ultra modern, and on the other an almost primitive socialist-realism. Between these two oppositions, we were in a very bad spot and we had a problem, which we didn't notice, but later became obvious. Who did we leave the reader to? What happened to the reader?

In fact we liked being modern, a few plays like Beckett's were written. Novels were also written which were like, what do I know, one of Joyce's or someone else's...they were made according to Western models, or anti-novels. An anti-novel like Nathalie Sarraute's...what do I know. But, one thing was a problem, that the reader was quite taken with the socialist-realist literature of Albania because the constellation of knowledge and the level of knowledge but also the spiritual condition of the Kosovo reader of that time, corresponded and communicated easier with the literature of socialist realism which had "socialist realism" {makes quotation marks} and national romanticism which came from Albania, rather than with Ionesco or Beckett or anti-novels.

There was a disconnect of this kind, a stinking creek ran next to the Theater of Pristina, and Beckett was being performed inside the Theater. This was the discrepancy we lived in. Now, if you look at it from this distance, it seems like a parody but we lived through this. On the other hand, Pristina tried to create a cultural life, it tried to create a cultural life. That cultural life of Pristina naturally was an imitation, it imitated other cultural circles in Yugoslavia, that's beyond discussion, that's what it was like.

An elite was also created not really based on models like Belgrade or Zagreb, because Belgrade was far, Zagreb was far, but like Sarajevo, Skopje. Meaning certain models were created, to have an elite of its own. But that elite often had huge deficiencies and few people. When you went to the theater you saw the

same people, when you went to an exhibition you saw the same people, and numerically there weren't many people. There were a few...meaning you went to the theater you saw the same people, you went to an exhibition and saw the same people. You went to the orchestra's concert you saw those people, meaning the number of emancipated people in the artistic literary sense was very limited.

On the other hand, there was an effort to create our own art, to give it life, space and to create our own art. It was a bit deluded, there were also intentions, there of course were also political intentions. Of course, because let's say it openly at that time the aim was, the aim was for Albanians in Yugoslavia to create their own identity separately from the identity of Albanians in Albania. So the idea was to create the Albanians of Kosovo, to have a Yugoslav nation. And it might have been created if a mistake hadn't been made. Serbia made a big mistake, because after '81 it insisted that Albanians in Kosovo become Serbs. To make Albanians become Serbs, they wouldn't do it, they wouldn't become Serbs. Albanians had started becoming Yugoslavs. Or they started to or there were elements that could be transformed into Yugoslavs, or at least there were some who started a little, to integrate a little. If not a Yugoslav nation in the simple sense of the word, there were those who started to integrate. And a cultural strata was created, a literature was created and a certain number was reached...and music and ... meaning all the arts were created, and a theater.

But, to be accurate, in the majority of cases this was Yugoslavian literature, Yugoslavian music, Yugoslavian figurative art with these kinds of predispositions that worked in Yugoslavia. Did we rebel? Were we what they wanted us to be? No, of course not, because we had our national dissidence. This started gradually, so national dissidence started in Kosovo when freedom began, self-awareness and freedom. Meaning a minimal self-awareness and a minimal freedom, they were used to create national dissidence, which one by one produced the developments that brought us to where we are today. That's how I see things.

I'll go chronologically. The '70s somehow corresponded with my age. I was young, meaning I was of university age and as I told you at the time they fired us from *Bota e Re*. So we had patience, courage and enthusiasm ahead of us. Naturally there was national euphoria. I remember in '78 when I was a journalist, I followed all of the gatherings that were held on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the League of Prizren. The 100th anniversary of the League of Prizren was celebrated, it was celebrated in Albania, but it was also celebrated here, it was celebrated simultaneously, and here it was celebrated very well because the state itself treated it as important. Because that was the idea that out of these Albanians we will create their own state. I tell you that even in the language there were problems like this, meaning there were these kinds of initiatives.

During the '70s, I mean I experienced them like the rest of the youth and with a kind of enthusiasm. With an idea of sorts that something could be done here, that we would make of ourselves what we could, the way we were, but we would make ourselves somehow. And yes, we had a kind of self-confidence if I can call it that. The '80s were the most disillusioning years for us. Those that had the illusions that it would happen, that they could integrate in Yugoslavia, they were beaten down. There was nothing left anymore, because even marriages broke down, there were marriages there were people married to Serbian women or vice versa but most were...the marriages broke apart.

To speak bluntly on this point, the conflict went to a point where it beggared belief that the conflict went that deep. It was thought that opinions were quite evened out, but in '81 a catastrophe was brought to the surface, the relations between the nations and people's illusions. There were no more illusions about anything. On the other hand, Albanians in Yugoslavia no longer had the trust of anyone in Yugoslavia. And

it wasn't only Serbs anymore, but today of course they talk differently. It was also the Croatians, the Serbs and Slovenians and Bosnians and Macedonians that returned their hatred towards Albanians...of course Serbs led the way in that regard, but they all made up the choir. Serbs were the choir, but they were all members at the base of that choir, without exception.

It was hatred towards Albanians that brought all of Yugoslavia to its feet, without exception. Now Montenegrins say it was different...no...all of them without exception had one stance. So, people's illusions were destroyed. Especially those of Albanians who thought they could integrate in Yugoslavia. On the other hand, connections to Albania were severed - the cultural connections to Albania. An artery was severed which had, which was life-giving for Albanians in Kosovo and Albanians in Yugoslavia because here began respectively the dethroning and the destruction of institutions or more specifically their Slavization, in an extraordinary, fast, and light-speed way, and with no other alternative, statebuilding, Slavic domination, the control over it, and on the other hand the separation from Albania, the severing of that life-giving artery.

They were the most difficult years, I see them as the years that were the most...until the 90's, they were years of such chaos that we don't even know what to call them. The 80's were very difficult years. In this regard I mean we were...we ended up completely paralyzed in a corner, politicians would say this, "A mouse hole, look for it three hundred times, you still won't find it." I mean there was a huge amount of pressure, under the pressure of hate, under political pressure, under the pressure of imprisonment, under ideological pressure, there was a complete lack of future prospects. In one regard this did us good, it destroyed our illusions, there were no more illusions that one could do something in this place and this state.

You had to search for another prospect, for the sake of these people you had to look for another prospect. You had to orient them...there was no where else to turn. You would orient towards your identity and national integrity, you had no other alternative. Communism wasn't important, ideology had not one bit of importance. Now they give it importance because it was communism, it was communism, communism since...taking into account historical periods from the liberalization of the '70 onwards, communism represented nothing. The national cause was the primary issue and this national cause started to gradually recruit people. There were two points of view, recruiting people and bringing them close to Albania, which was refused, the ties were broken. The people, when Enver Hoxha, when the Party Congress was held right after '81, people went to Gjakova, half of Pristina invaded Gjakova to follow it, because they could catch the Albanian [State] Television there. It wasn't that they were longing for Enver Hoxha, they wanted to know what was happening, what stance would Albania take at the Party Congress, what position does Albania have towards Kosovo, that's where the problem lay.

The '80s were like this, they were very heavy and very difficult, but simultaneously very mobilizing because things became clear, things became defined very clearly. On the one hand, there was...but there was something else I have to say and in the middle [of all of this]... everything Albanian became good, that was the funny side of that situation, not only funny but of course also damaging, because a kind of unsustainable unification took place because values weren't differentiated. Homogenization surpassed the normal level expected of a normal place with normal people. All people, all Albanians can't be good.

That's the problem of homogenization, everyone became Albanian. On the one hand, there were the authorities with their famous discrimination and their instruments that of course one couldn't meddle with...Serbs could have been behind them, but the main tasks were done by Albanians themselves inside those institutions. Albanians themselves discriminated, they undertook actions that were bizarre, that

were low. Of course there were things that were...things were clear, but on the other hand they weren't clear, on the other hand in the homogenization of Albanians. In that moment it could have also been necessary, because a common front was being created, all of us...everything Albanian was good. Everyone was good at that time, which of course isn't realistic but that's how it was. Thus a huge homogenization of the population took place.

And now, these people, one could see that this homogenization and this harsh contradiction between the state and a big part of the population and between the carriers of power in Kosovo and the people as well, created huge divisions, and great dramas even within families. There were families that discriminated amongst themselves, there were problems with family members, a son against a father, there were cases like this. They banished, in a way, people who were close to the state, they started publicly hating them. Thus, a common front was created, unification and national homogenization on one side, and on the other side those who were on the other side were purged very clearly. And the situation became harsh, very harsh, and it was clear that this situation couldn't last that long.

It lasted until the end of the '80s. The end of the '80s and that which we know now began.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: You also wrote during the 80's. What did you write about?

Mehmet Kraja: During the '80s I wrote the novel that I mentioned, I watched the police and wrote a novel about the medieval ages. I naturally continued writing, I wrote plays, I wrote the play *Hana prej letre (Paper Moon)*, which despite being awarded at the *Katerina Josipi* competition wasn't performed here, because it mentioned something about a demonstration...it created that sort of allusion. So as I said, I always talked, we spoke with metaphors and there was one like this. Meaning, it was primarily literature in its function, but of course we also had journalism at the same time. At that time I can't say that we did journalism...but near the end of the '80s, then it started to come alive, the situation became invigorating and they started expressing that publicly. Dissatisfaction, we didn't express any in particular, but always a greater national endurance and dissatisfaction with other things. That was the beginning of it, meaning the beginning of political movements at the end of the years...because the '90s had a previous order, and that is what I just described. In the '80s there was a very harsh period of repression and it meant the dissolution of the system, at the end of the '80s, not the beginning of the '90s, but the end of the '80s. At the end of the '80s the dissolution really began.

Dreams

[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about his dreams.]

Mehmet Kraja: I never think that life is a competition, it isn't...life is a normal process. I see life normally, I don't put conditions on it. Meaning, I've never placed goals before myself. I did what I knew to do and I did what I could, and I did what I know how to do best, I'm a writer. In essence I'm a writer and these observations of mine, I know that they sometimes don't stand up to scientific critique, one might say. They don't withstand scientific critique, but I don't care that they don't stand up to scientific critique, because I'm a writer. As a writer, despite the fact that I live an orderly life, despite the fact that I do orderly work or try to do orderly work, to act as a loyal citizen like an upstanding citizen, regardless, I'm a writer. And I can't put those kinds of limitations on my thoughts, or impose the need to surpass for example, myself. I have my ambitions, I don't hide that at all, but I try to have realistic ambitions and I try to treat myself as if I was another.

Meaning, when I say, “Yes, this is who I am,” I don’t feel bad that I am who I am. Maybe it was my fate to be the person I am. I don’t have any pretensions in this regard. I’m not bothered about whether this way is right, or isn’t right. I continue the way that I am, I don’t have any regrets.