

# Oral History Kosovo

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## INTERVIEW WITH JELENA BJELICA

Belgrade | Date: January 28, 2018

Duration: 10 minutes

Present:

1. Jelena Bjelica (Speaker)
2. Valerie Hopkins (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.*

**Valerie Hopkins:** When did you first realize that Kosovo would declare independence?

**Jelena Bjelica:** To be honest, I can't actually remember the exact date or month for that matter [what matters]. But I'm sure it was some months, several months before it actually happened. I do remember giving an interview for Al Jazeera [in] late 2007, early 2008, when I did say something like, “Yeah, I mean, it's kind of obvious that Kosovo will declare independence, rather sooner than later.” But when it was exactly, I don't know [what] to tell you, but it was definitely two, three, four months before.

**Valerie Hopkins:** Where were you for independence day?

**Jelena Bjelica:** I was in my apartment in Pristina. I did work in... back then I actually moved to Pristina in late 2005, and we opened a newspaper which was called *Građanski Glasnik*, the Civic Herald in English, Shkelzen Maliqi, Petrit Selimi and myself, and I was editor-in-chief, so I actually lived back then in Prishtina. And I was obviously as an editor-in-chief and journalist myself attending all of these conferences, being on different talk shows around, and obviously around that time, 2006, 2007, there was a lot of talks about the political settlement for Kosovo, and not only among Kosovo Albanians or Kosovo Serbs, but also in the international community circles. So, it was some kind of, how to tell you, like a daily, it was a daily routine, it was a part of the job, and a journalist and editor-in-chief obviously wants to be on top of the ball.

So, on the 17th of February I was in Pristina in my apartment, and the funny thing was that my best friend from Belgrade came, and I'd been actually inviting her for like, two years, to come to Pristina, and then she kind of totally randomly picked that weekend, it was some weekend, I think the 17th of February was a weekend. And without actually knowing it's going to happen on that very weekend. So we had a great... it was a big party, and a lot of people came, a lot of different friends who actually were not based in Pristina at that time, they all came, it was a big party on the street and my friend from Belgrade had a great time, she was like, “Oh my God! I didn't realize Kosovo is so cool!” And I was like, “Yeah, but it's not everyday like this, you know.” And then we had this standing joke with my friends, with my Kosovo Albanian friends on the streets. So I was coming and saying, “This is my friend from Belgrade,” and then they were saying, “Hey, hi, bye-bye Serbia,” and my friend replied to them, “See you in [the] EU,” so there was this rhyming, a standing joke, or rhyme.

It was... we even put... I used to live in [on the] opposite [side] of [the] Grand Hotel, [on] Zahir Pajaziti square, and... because everyone was putting some flags, and we were like, OK we can't put a Serbian

flag there, it would be really weird. So we were like, OK let's put an EU flag! So we had an EU flag... on my window. But it was a great atmosphere, it was really... you know... I've been in Kosovo since 2002... actually 2000, I've been reporting from Kosovo, and I moved to Kosovo, I based myself in Pristina since 2005, and in this period 2000-2005 I was actually traveling, and I would spend two months, two weeks in Kosovo, two weeks in Belgrade, and then two weeks in Kosovo. So in 2008, there was a relief in a way, like... a big burden fell off, and the people were just, they were really, genuinely happy, and it also made me happy.

At some point it was actually really difficult, especially in these years and months before the declaration of independence, people were kind of stuck, mentally stuck somewhere, and all of a sudden after the declaration of independence, it opened them, a burden fell. I was very happy to be there, very lucky to be there, to see it. And... yeah, it was a lot of booze on the streets, everyone was getting wine, and grape raki, we would just go to Martin's, that's the little street where Martin's is, there was live music, and people were singing. I remember... wherever you travel in the Balkans, because all of these songs are the same, and then I felt very sorry that time I didn't know Albanian, and I couldn't sing their songs, but you could just hum it along and so on, it was lovely.

**Valerie Hopkins:** Where were you at 3:50 when independence was declared? Wait, actually, I wanted to ask: these people who were celebrating, because I don't know, were they, how much advance notice did they have, did they find out the night before, did they find out that day? Do you remember?

**Jelena Bjelica:** I don't remember exactly, but I think it was maybe the night before. There were these stories, and they were putting up this press theme, last minute, like last 24 hours, that it's going to handle all of these media requests. But I also don't think it was very sudden because there were a lot of foreign journalists around, there was some notice I would say, like 48 [hours] or something, 48 to 24 hours, there was notice because a lot of people flew in on... they were there on the 17th. While I was doing... I was filing the story then, because I also... although I owned my own newspaper, I was a correspondent in this 2000-2005 period for Serbian newspapers, and they didn't have, I think, a correspondent so, although I did have my newspaper, I filed the story because... what else do you do. I think I was not exactly on the street or anything like that, but I was in my apartment and... following the press conferences on TV, making phone calls and the usual things journalists do, I can't remember whether I went to the Grand Hotel, in the Grand Hotel there was a press conference, it was just like handier to stay at home and... because it was like directly broadcasted press conference and then the internet and computers and so on, everything was at home.

I actually did... and I remember it was terribly cold, it was like -5 or something, terrible cold. But then I remember we did go out, maybe in the afternoon, 6, 7 and then Anna showed up out of nowhere from New York, so I had like three people in my house staying, and mind you, I had the smallest apartment ever, 40 square meters or something, all these people. It was kind of chaotic but genuinely chaotic, a good vibe and just like a party everywhere, it was fun. But I did know the night before, I'm pretty sure I did know because, I remember I went to pick up a friend from Belgrade that evening when she arrived, and I was like yeah, "There's gonna be the declaration of independence tomorrow, I hope you're OK, because if not, you better go."



