

An Interview with Tracey Ann Jacobson, U.S. Ambassador to Kosovo

Tracey Ann Jacobson has been the U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Kosovo since 2012. She previously served as the U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan (2003-2006) and Tajikistan (2006-2009), and had other international assignments in Nassau, Bahamas; Moscow, Russia; and Seoul, South Korea. Jacobson has also held several positions within the U.S. government, such as Deputy Director of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in Virginia and Deputy Executive Secretary at the National Security Council at the White House.

The Politic: Why did you join the Foreign Service?

There are two answers to that question. One of them is that I was naturally drawn to public service. My father was in the military. Both my grandmother and grandfather served in the British military in WWII, so we have a family tradition of public service. But the real reason is because of a party. I was working on my master's degree in international relations. I was working as a financial analyst, and I figured I would probably do that after graduation. My friends had a row house in Georgetown, and they were going to throw a party on the Saturday that they all took the Foreign Service Exam. And I said, "Ok, I'll just come to the party." My friend Angela said, "You can't just come to the party. You have to take the Foreign Service Test with me." So I signed up, and I showed up at this hotel at 7:30 on Saturday morning. I looked around for her, and she was nowhere to be seen. I went ahead and took the test; amazingly I was the only one from our little group that passed. It was a great party. I said, "I'll join for five years and then I'll go back and do some job at home," but 25 years later I am still doing it because I cannot imagine anything else that would be as much fun as this.

The Politic: Can you talk about your previous position at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI)?

I was a Deputy Director there, and I was also the Dean for the School of Professional and Area Studies. FSI trains people from 47 different U.S. government agencies in everything from 70 different foreign languages to professional skills such as political tradecraft, consular, management, public diplomacy, area studies, leadership and management, and information technology. It is divided up into four schools. On any given day on that campus there will be 2,000 students — maybe half of them in language and half of them doing other things. Starting with orientation for Foreign Service and Civil Service people and all throughout their careers we offer opportunities to continue to go back to the Foreign Service

Institute to learn new languages, to develop professional skills, and to take leadership training.

The Politic: Moving on to Kosovo, why is its independence from Serbia so important, and what has the U.S. been doing to ensure that it remains independent?

Kosovo is really a unique case. You know about the war in 1999 and the atrocities that were committed, and then Kosovo was under a long period of international management by the United Nations. In 2008 the country declared independence. The International Court of Justice ruled that declaration was in accordance with international law. We and many others recognized Kosovo right away, and over time they are getting more and more recognitions. They are closing in on 100 recognitions now, the most recent one being this week from Tanzania.

From 2008 until 2012 the country was under supervised independence. We had an International Civilian Office here that was helping the government get set up and implement the Ahtisaari plan. Last year the government and parliament completed a whole series of legislative and constitutional amendments to really enshrine the Ahtisaari Package in the constitution and in law. It preserves the rights of ethnic minorities; it preserves the cultural heritage of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Once all that was done we celebrated the end of supervised independence in September of 2012.

We continue to support Kosovo's independence. In the European Union there are five countries that do not yet recognize Kosovo's independence; in NATO there are four countries that don't yet recognize it. Over time more and more countries are recognizing it. And particularly now that Kosovo has reached an agreement on normalization of relations with Serbia, I'm hopeful that we will have that normalization and that will lead to more recognitions. We do a lot of course to support Kosovo's independence. We are helping the government build its capacity across the board in civil society and economy. We also contribute troops to KFOR, which is the NATO mission that continues to exist here with about 4,500 troops. We contribute to the European Union Rule of Law mission, which provides executive functions and mentoring in the rule of law areas such as policy, judges, and prosecutors.

The Politic: The Serbian Parliament recently voted to recognize the autonomy of Pristina (the capital) over Kosovo, but the Serbian President also said that he would never recognize the independence of Kosovo...

That is not quite accurate. The agreement that Serbia and Kosovo have reached is on the normalization of relations. It's been agreed that police and justice systems will be unitary throughout the country and operate under Kosovo law. The Ahtisaari plan that I mentioned

before had already given substantial room for decentralization of the authority to the local level. That can happen in the South of the country, and now it can happen in the North as well. This means that there will be new municipalities created in the North, and they will have local self-governance — not autonomy — as it exists in other municipalities in the country. The municipalities will have responsibilities for things like healthcare, urban planning, education. All of these things can be done in conjunction with Serbia, if Serbia wants to fund health and education, it can as long as it does so in a transparent way. So what has been decided is that the municipalities that have a majority of ethnic Serbs are going to form a union or an association, which they are allowed to do.

We expect all of that to happen over the course of the rest of this year. It is not recognition of Kosovo's independence. We did not ask for that in terms of this most recent dialogue. I believe the European Union has said to Serbia that it can start negotiations to join the European Union without recognizing Kosovo, but it is pretty clear that they're not going to be able to actually join the European Union without recognizing Kosovo. This is because the Europeans don't want another Cyprus situation within the European Union.

The Politic: What are the next steps for this agreement between Serbia and Kosovo?

The two leaders agreed on the broad implementation plan already. There are working groups continuing to hammer out the precise step-by-step details. They should finish doing that this week. There are certain concrete, on-the-ground steps that need to be taken before the end of June, when the European Union will have its meeting to decide whether Serbia will get a start date for negotiation sessions and whether Kosovo will get a mandate to negotiate a stability and association agreement. So stay tuned!

The Politic: What do you think of Kosovo's chances of joining the European Union?

They are clearly advancing on a European path. We're hoping that in June, Kosovo will get a mandate to start negotiating for a stabilization and association agreement, which is a big step. It allows contractual relations between the European Union and Kosovo. So that will be the next step. Kosovo is also working very hard to fulfill all of the benchmarks necessary for visa-free travel within the European Union. It is a step-by-step process. I have no doubts that they will join the European Union at some point in the future, but there are other steps that have to be gone through first.

The Politic: President Nikolic recently claimed that Serbia would never recognize the independence of Kosovo. Do you think his mind can be changed?

Kosovo is an independent country. The United States recognizes Kosovo as an independent country, as do 97 other countries in the world, even if Serbia does not. In terms of Serbia recognizing Kosovo, this is a conversation for the future. President Nikolic has

been clear, but we are very pleased with the progress that we have seen in terms of this agreement on normalization. For now that is a great achievement. In terms of who is going to recognize Kosovo when — I think that is a conversation for the future. Not for now.

The Politic: There have been some reports of ethnic tensions and clashes within Kosovo. Do you have any hope for more tolerance and integration, and is there anything the US is doing to facilitate that?

I think we do a lot in terms of ethnic integration. All the communities here are constantly making progress. It was just in 1999 that there was a terrible war with mass murders and ethnic cleansing. The fact that we have come as far as we have — to have a parliament (which has ten Serbian members), to have a Serbian Deputy Prime Minister, to have a country where in a lot of places Serbs and Albanians live peacefully side-by-side. There are ethnic clashes; there are tensions that crop up. It is important for the government and the international community to speak out about that and to investigate fully any crimes that might be committed. We run a lot of programs through our Public Affairs Office and also through USAID to both boost minority rights and integrate minority communities into the country as a whole. Of course we are working very hard on issues of equal human rights for everybody, regardless of ethnicity or gender, as a constant part of our program here.

The Politic: In 2012 *The Telegraph* reported that, though Kosovo spent £967 million in EU funds to deal with corruption and organized crime, little progress was being made in the crackdown. Organized and petty crime is still a major issue in Kosovo. Do you see progress being made?

Newborn Obelisk inaugurated for Kosovo's Independence

I do. There is still a long ways to go in terms of fighting organized crime and corruption. I cannot speak to what the Europeans have put into the system. I would say that number probably refers to the European Union Rule of Law mission, which is not just European. The United States provides 33 people to support that Rule of Law mission, including police, prosecutors, and judges. In terms of our own contribution apart from that, as the United States government, we have eight police advisors here. One is embedded in the police academy. We have two prosecutors here, who help the Prosecutors Council and even the Parliament to come up with better and stronger laws against organized crime. So we are trying to strengthen the legislative base to fight organized crime and corruption, while at the same time strengthening the capacity of the police to investigate and the capacity of prosecutors to prosecute these complex crimes. A lot of the crimes are transnational economic crimes. We are seeing some progress in this area, such as several arrests and indictments recently for corruption, including some senior officials. One was a judge and

another was the previous chairman of the Anti-Corruption Council. So we are increasingly seeing that no one is above the law.

The Politic: Is there one experience, person, or event in Kosovo that has greatly influenced one or more of your policies? How so?

There's no such thing as "my policies." I am the Ambassador; I am the President's representative to the people and government of Kosovo, and I'm the leader of the interagency team that works here. We have State, Defense, Justice, Treasury, and USAID at the moment. Our policies are a combination of the best thinking that we in the field can provide together with the headquarters in Washington. We go through an annual exercise where we decide what the overarching strategic policies are going to be, and then we coordinate on a daily basis on the local ones. It's not so much personalized to me. This mission has 100 Americans in it and over 300 local staff. So I hope that all of our policies here are the product of our robust engagement with the government and people of Kosovo, and through understanding their needs. We move forward together in close consultation with our European partners.

The two biggest events since I have been here have been the end of supervised independence in September of 2012 and the agreement on normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia on April 19 of 2013. Those are two tremendous milestones, and I think it is a privilege that I was here to see them at that particular time.

The Politic: You have also served as the Ambassador to Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Have there been any unexpected similarities or differences? What is it like to be an ambassador to such a young country like Kosovo, which was established in 2008, in comparison to your experiences working in more established countries?

It is funny that you call them "more established," because they are also quite young. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan achieved their independence with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992. I have not served anywhere in the last 15 years that was a country that existed when I joined the Foreign Service 25 years ago. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are also relatively new countries. The similarities are in the fact that they are transitioning from communist economies to private-sector-led open markets. We hope to help them transition from what was authoritarian rule to democratic rule. Kosovo is much farther along than those countries are. Another similarity between the countries is the extreme hospitality of the people. People in all three of the missions have been friendly, have been interested to know Americans, and have been supportive. I have been happy to serve in all three of those missions.