

June 2017

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Poor Albanians who hosted displaced Kosovars

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The experience of hosting displaced Kosovars is one that at least one Albanian village would prefer not to repeat.

One day in 2001 I dropped in on a former neighbour in Albania in her tiny two-roomed house. Their family photo album included pictures of the Kosovar¹ family they had taken in following their expulsion from Kosova at the end of March 1999. Each family of four had squeezed into one tiny room, and they shared the one sink with a tap in a tiny scullery and the primitive outside toilet. It was hard to imagine how they had lived that way for two months.

Kosovars who came in 1999 who had kin from whom they had been separated during the communist era in Albania stayed with them, but most were given shelter by people they did not know, such as my neighbour. Hospitality, especially when shown to strangers, is the most important tenet of Albania's unwritten customary law and its highest virtue. It is an articulation of what is thought to be decent and proper, by which a family's reputation is measured and, no less importantly, by which they measure themselves.

On arrival and for a day or two afterwards guests will be looked after by their hosts, though the women among them will lend a hand with chores. Then some agreement will be reached about how the guests will contribute to the household. In the past, when passing strangers were taken into a private house because there was no inn in the vicinity, they would pay as if it were an inn. Likewise, strangers might well be expected to pay for their keep, it being deemed fair to contribute to costs if they were able. Kosovars were, on the whole, better off than their Albanian hosts, especially those who received remittances from family members elsewhere. However, the family taken in by my neighbour had, with their expulsion from Kosova, lost their source of income, so she fed them.

Even in normal times my neighbour's family lived from hand to mouth. The

husband had a badly paying job and their small piece of land only produced hay for their cow, and beans and other vegetables for their own needs but no more. Moreover, the Kosovars arrived at the end of winter, when stores from last year's harvest were running low.

When people in the village were asked to take in refugees, they were, according to my neighbour, given to understand that they would receive some financial assistance. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, had undertaken to pay the very modest sum of US\$10 per person per week to families who took in refugees as a contribution to their costs. It was a factor the villagers had taken into account in assessing if they could afford to do it. But no money arrived.

For each week that went by, the financial position of my neighbour's family became more and more stretched. Sooner or later they would reach the point where not only could they no longer feed their guests but they could no longer feed their own families either. It would be evident too to the guests, if only because there was less food on their plates. It must have embarrassed them that they were causing hardship. Then one day, after two months, without any warning they informed my neighbour that they were leaving. They had arranged to move to the house of another family. So they left and, she said, they did not even say "Thank you". That had hurt her most. When I asked if she had received any of the money supposed to have been available, she whispered "No" – and that had hurt too.

None of the money that was paid out as part of the UNHCR scheme reached those for whom it was intended anywhere until June, when most of the refugees had already returned to Kosova. There were also villages that missed out altogether. This undoubtedly caused greater hardship than the international aid community appreciated.

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What may have seemed unimportant as seen by UNHCR was a major loss for the individuals concerned. More than a decade later an Albanian newspaper reported that a pensioner in a village just outside the town of Kukës where money had been paid out while surrounding villages had got nothing had taken it upon himself to sue the

United Nations. It was a hopeless case but the villagers were making a serious point.

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1. The Albanian spelling of Kosova/Kosovar is used here as it was the one used by all the people mentioned and is now the official Albanian spelling for the state of Kosova and its people.