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Kosovo's love affair with the Clintons

By Guy Delauney

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Kosovan Albanians swear they will never forget the role of the "Klintonos" in the Nato bombing campaign which brought an end to conflict in 1999

A smattering of Albanian comes in handy when deciphering certain Pristina street signs. Otherwise it may not immediately be apparent that "Bulevardi Xhorxh Bush"

refers to the former US president who insisted that Kosovo should become independent.

But only consonant pedants would demand a translation of the name of the busy thoroughfare which runs perpendicular to George Bush Boulevard. "Bulevardi Bill Klinton" is a tribute to the man Kosovan Albanians hold in the highest possible esteem.

Pristina has not just named a street in his honour. It also erected a larger-than-life-size statue of a beaming Bill Clinton, his arm outstretched in welcome. The man himself unveiled this monument when he visited Pristina to a rapturous reception in 2009.

This adoration also extends to Mr Clinton's family. Just a few yards from the statue, a women's clothes shop called Hillary adds a fashion element to the affair.

"We rate the Clinton family so highly," says Elda Morina, a member of the family which owns both Hillary and a second outlet, Hillary 2.

"They made the whole world know our problems. For the first time everyone knew who are Kosovans. Bill Clinton is the person who revealed our suffering - and from that point we all had big sympathy for the Clinton family."

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Ethnic Albanians give Mr Clinton credit for the Nato bombing campaign which brought an end to the Kosovo conflict in 1999. This allowed those who had fled to return to their homes, although the Morina family were among those who stayed in Pristina throughout.

"I suffered a lot of post-traumatic stress," says Elda. "I was a teenager; it was a vulnerable time of my life."

Opening the boutique was part of the process of getting back to normal - with Elda's father suggesting it should be named in honour of Hillary Clinton. The shop stocks a range of outfits similar in style to those favoured by the former secretary of state.

"It's a classic style," says Elda, picking a trouser-suit from a rack of monochrome outfits. "Hillary Clinton is a woman with a big vision - it's not her clothes which define her."



Homages paid to the Clintons in Pristina range from a statue of a smiling Bill Clinton...



... to clothing boutiques honouring Mrs Clinton - who herself paid a visit in 2010



"It's a classic style," says Elda Morina of her Hillary range

The Hillary range has attracted a loyal clientele - "women in business and politics," says Elda - customers perhaps aiming to pick up on a little of the Clinton charisma.

Gratitude towards the Clinton family and respect for the United States is deep-rooted.

"This admiration has been there for many decades," says Kosovo's Deputy Foreign Minister Petrit Selimi.

"The Clintons embodied that link simply because at the moment of the grave injustices when hundreds of thousands of people were fleeing the Milosevic regime and ethnic cleansing was being conducted by the state apparatus, Bill Clinton was like a saint. It was a miracle that the world intervened for a speck of land like Kosovo that had no oil, no diamonds, no resources."

Not just altruism?

But while Kosovo may feel it has a special relationship with the United States - and the Clinton family in particular - others suggest that this is, in fact, a very one-sided romance.

"The 1999 bombing was not, as the Kosovans appear to think, just an intervention intended to stop the violent repression of the Kosovan Albanians," says Andrea Capussela, a former

international official in Pristina and the author of a recent book, *State-Building in Kosovo*.



More adulation of the Clintons - but some question whether the affection is warranted

"Western governments and especially Washington saw Kosovo as an occasion to establish the principle that where they could claim there was a genuine humanitarian crisis was occurring, they could take military action irrespective of Security Council authorisation."

The Clintons' subsequent involvement with Kosovo has been limited to brief visits.

But some of the US officials most closely associated with the 1999 bombing have sought to deepen their relationship - on a business basis.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and special envoy James Pardew were both involved with bids for the state-owned telecoms company. The former's investment fund, Albright Capital Management, later withdrew to "pursue other opportunities".

Mr Pardew had been lobbying on behalf of a consortium led by the investment firms Twelve Hornbeams and Avicenna Capital; he stopped after his involvement became public.

Nato's former supreme allied commander, Wesley Clark, now chairs the Canadian energy company, Envidity. In August, Kosovo's government proposed a deal to allow Envidity coal exploration rights across a third of the country.

Critics of this arrangement said it would allow Envidity near-exclusive rights to exploit Kosovo's considerable coal reserves. The deal has yet to receive parliamentary approval, after opposition MPs asked for more information about the scheme.

'Unhealthy relationship'

"It is a relationship that can be abused," says Andrea Capussela. "Because corruption is so endemic in Kosovo, having a strong connection based on what the Clinton administration did for Kosovo could lay the basis for an unhealthy business relationship."

And the enduring influence of the United States in Kosovo may not always be to the latter's advantage. The former US ambassador to Pristina, Christopher Dell, lobbied for the contract to build a "Patriotic Highway" to Albania to go to a consortium led by the American firm Bechtel.

Mr Capussela calls the project "colossal and unnecessary", costing 25% of Kosovo's GDP. The year after leaving his diplomatic post in Kosovo, Mr Dell started a new job - with Bechtel.

"The US has enormous influence in Kosovo, but they lack the incentive to use it to favour long-term development. The tragedy is that the interests of Europe are in favour of the development of Kosovo, but it remains very difficult for Europe to advance this interest," says Mr Capussela.

Back on Bill Clinton Boulevard, such ideas seem almost like heresy. In the Hillary boutique, pictures of its namesake's 2012 visit hang proudly above the cash register - and Elda Morina is excited about next month's presidential vote.

"Whoever wins, it's OK," she says, "but we have the idea that she is the one. If she wins, it's better for us. Kosovans admire the Clintons, that's why."

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