

Date November 5, 2018

**RESOLUTION APPROVING THE GREATER DES MOINES SISTER CITIES COMMISSION  
RECOMMENDATION OF ESTABLISHING A SISTER CITY RELATIONSHIP WITH PRISTINA,  
KOSOVO**

WHEREAS, the Greater Des Moines Sister Cities Commission initiates, promotes, and facilitates community and economic development activities, including municipal, business, cultural, educational, professional, technical, scientific, environmental, youth, and other endeavors between our citizens and those of our sister cities; and

WHEREAS, the Commission initiates dialogues between peoples not only for cultural understanding, but also with those with similar interests in areas of industry and governments; and

WHEREAS, the Commission promotes and facilitates establishing Sister City relationships with cities chosen for their special relationships with our community, developed with certain areas of the world; and

WHEREAS, the Commission has already established successful Sister City relationships with Kofu, Japan; Saint-Etienne, France; Shijiazhuang, China; and Stavropol, Russia; and

WHEREAS, the Commission now enthusiastically recommends the designation and establishment of a Sister City relationship between Des Moines and Pristina, the capital city of the country of Kosovo and the Council finds that Pristina bears a close resemblance to the City of Des Moines in demographics, economics and geography and has cultural ties to citizens of Des Moines.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, by the City Council of the City of Des Moines, Iowa, that the recommendation for designation of Pristina, Kosovo as a Sister City is hereby approved and the Greater Des Moines Sister Cities commission is hereby charged with establishing a Sister City relationship with Pristina, Kosovo, and the Mayor is authorized to formalize that relationship by signing a Sister City agreement, subject to the approval of terms by the City Manager and Legal Department, on behalf of the City of Des Moines.

Moved by \_\_\_\_\_ to adopt.

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Lawrence R. McDowell  
Deputy City Attorney

COUNCIL ACTION	YEAS	NAYS	PASS	ABSENT
COWNIE				
BOESEN				
COLEMAN				
GATTO				
GRAY				
MANDELBAUM				
WESTERGAARD				
TOTAL				

MOTION CARRIED

APPROVED

\_\_\_\_\_  
Mayor

**CERTIFICATE**

I, DIANE RAUH, City Clerk of said City hereby certify that at a meeting of the City Council of said City of Des Moines, held on the above date, among other proceedings the above was adopted.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my seal the day and year first above written.

\_\_\_\_\_  
City Clerk



**GREATER DES MOINES SISTER CITIES COMMISSION**

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Des Moines, Iowa 50309-1891  
Phone: (515) 283-4141  
FAX: (515) 237-1300

October 30, 2018

The Honorable Mayor  
and  
Members of the City Council  
City of Des Moines

Re: Des Moines-Pristina, Kosovo Sister City Resolution

Dear Mayor and City Council Members:

On your City Council agenda for November 5, 2018, there is an item that is a Council resolution which would authorize the formalization of a Des Moines-Pristina, Kosovo Sister City relationship. On behalf of the Greater Des Moines Sister Cities Commission, I urge you to support the passage of the resolution.

Des Moines presently has four (4) long-standing sister city relationships. Those are with Kofu, Japan; Shijiazhuang, China; Saint-Etienne, France; and Stavropol, Russia. Each are very interesting and diverse relationships. If you have read the recent series of Des Moines Register articles, you may be aware that the State of Iowa and one of the newest if not the newest democracy in the world, Kosovo, have had a growing connection even prior to Kosovo's independence 10 years ago. That relationship has blossomed into a formalized Sister State relationship with Kosovo and the State of Iowa. The relationship entails interaction in multiple dimensions including economic and community development to education, agriculture, youth and professional development, social, cultural, and government best practices, as examples.

In reality, Iowa's relationship to Kosovo is not just government-to-government. It is people-to-people, and community-to community. In this regard, the cities of Fort Dodge, Sioux City, Norwalk, and Johnston have already established active sister city relationships with respective Kosovo cities. Other Iowa cities will follow. Pristina is the capital city of Kosovo, and Kosovo has chosen our own capital city of Des Moines to be the location of its U.S. Consulate.

The Greater Des Moines Sister Cities Commission has been exploring this Des Moines-Pristina relationship for some time. Our greater community and its institutions are already actively engaging with their Pristina counterparts. As examples, the Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) has a strong presence in Kosovo. The University of Iowa, which has a satellite campus in Des Moines, is actively engaged in internships with the University of Pristina. Stone Castle wine, produced in vineyards near Pristina, can be found on the shelves of Hy-Vee. Drake University and representatives of the Greater Des Moines Partnership, together with representatives of the Greater Des Moines Sister Cities Commission, were part of a 55-member Iowa delegation to Pristina and Kosovo last May.

Pristina and Des Moines, besides being interestingly different, have their commonalities. Pristina's population is approximately 204,725, similar to Des Moines. Both are capital cities. Pristina, as with the rest of Kosovo, has a young population who have assumed leadership roles in governance and entrepreneurial activities. Des Moines similarly has been recognized by numerous national publications as one of the best places in our nation for young adults to live and prosper. The young professional groups with whom the Commission is visiting and working with, are excited about the possible

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interaction and collaboration with similar young professionals in Pristina. While being an urban base, Pristina is the center of an agricultural region. Shared opportunities present themselves not only in the areas of citizen diplomacy and democratic nation building, but in mutually beneficial community and economic development, which areas to be promoted are set out in the resolution.

I could go on, but I wanted to keep this memo short and to the point. At Monday's Council meeting, representatives of the Commission and members of the community will be present to answer any questions you may have about the proposed relationship. If you have questions prior to the meeting, please feel free to contact me. Again, on behalf of the Greater Des Moines Sister Cities Commission, I urge your support of the Pristina Sister City resolution. Thank you.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Roger A. Nowadzky". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'R'.

Roger Nowadzky

Chairperson

Greater Des Moines Sister Cities Commission

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## IOWA HELPS BUILD A NATION FROM THE ASHES OF WAR

*Courtney Crowder, ccrowder@dmreg.com*

VUSHTRRI, Kosovo — Sipping macchiatos in the shadow of a Byzantine-era castle, Xhafer Tahiri recalls memories from 20 years ago as quickly and precisely as the names of his children.

March 24, 1999, was the day NATO forces' bombs lit up the Kosovo horizon, bringing Tahiri hope that the injustices he and his fellow Albanians suffered at the hands of the Serbians might be over.

April 15, 1999. The night that fighting between Serbian and NATO forces arrived on his doorstep, forcing the 15-year-old and his eight siblings to leave their home with only what they could carry.

June 15, 1999. The morning his family returned to their village of Vushtrri to discover a patch of scorched earth and a few bent and broken walls where their home once stood.



**Mayor Xhafer Tahiri in the town square of Vushtrri, Kosovo on Sept. 17. Tahiri remembers falling asleep to the sound of explosions in May 1999.**  
*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*

Then there's Aug. 13, 2018, when, as mayor of his hometown, Tahiri walked the Iowa State Fair's Grand Concourse, threw out the first pitch at an Iowa Cubs game and watched the flag of Kosovo — Europe's youngest democracy — rise outside the City Hall of Norwalk, Vushtrri's sister city.

Talk of pork chops on sticks and Big Boars might seem wholly out of place in this traditionally Muslim country half a world away from Iowa, but Tahiri is far from alone in his reverence for the Hawkeye State.

For years, Iowans in and out of military fatigues have quietly worked to lift this tiny country out of chaos and poverty spawned by years of bloody conflict and a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

They are, in many regards, literally helping grow a new nation — and putting Iowa on the front lines of foreign diplomacy in the process.

In more than 20 trips annually, members of the Iowa National Guard along with civilian partners instill American interests in the Balkans — a strategic foothold in the shadow of Russia that has for much of the modern era been the political powder keg that lit the world on fire.

For Iowa, the relationship — which marks the first time a U.S. state has formed both a security *and* civil partnership with an entire country — is not simply a feel-good venture, said Lt. Col. Michael Wunn, former director of the Iowa-Kosovo partnership.

From establishing the first foreign consulate in Iowa to cultivating new revenue opportunities to training a burgeoning military, Kosovo has opened almost as many doors for Iowans as Iowa has for Kosovars.

"It's good for America to have a friend in the Balkans for the same reason it's good for America to be in Korea," said Mark Baskin, a former civil servant with the area's U.N. peacekeeping mission. "If the state of Iowa is carrying forward the interests of the United States in this region, it's playing a very significant role — even if it's not the center of attention in the news."

In the 10 years since Kosovo declared independence, it endures as an example of American intervention that worked. Yet, the nation is at a tipping point.

Key members of the U.N. Security Council, including Russia and China, have refused to recognize Kosovo's independence, and the country hasn't met requirements to join the European Union or NATO.

Kosovo's inability to stabilize Serbian relations has led to shaky security and an unemployment rate of more than 30 percent.

But with roughly half of the population under age 25, a growing group of young Kosovars is pushing to fight corruption, fix the justice system and stem Islamic extremism.

"People here are resilient because they've lived through very difficult times," said Baskin, who now teaches at Rochester Institute of Technology's Kosovo campus.

"I have friends here who have seen seven or eight members of their family killed during the war, and yet they're OK. They're moving forward."

As the young country continues to fight for change and embrace optimism, Kosovo's future is one that Iowa is helping shape.



**Newborn Monument in Pristina, Kosovo on Sept. 18. The monument was placed in February 2008 after the Republic of Kosovo formally declared its independence from Serbia. The "B" & "O" have been replaced this year with "10" to mark the tenth anniversary of Kosovo independence.**  
*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*

## In a nightmare, dreaming of freedom

By May 2, 1999, Tahiri's 11-person family was living in a "2-square meter" nylon tent just inside the Kosovo Liberation Army's lines.

Every day, they split their meager rations. Every night, Tahiri fell asleep to the sound of explosions over his rumbling tummy.

"If I close my eyes, I'm back there immediately," he said. "And the worst part was the fact that we never knew if we are going to make it through alive."

On that particularly gray spring day in his hometown, more than 100 villagers trying to evade Serbian forces were instead massacred in a field just outside city limits. Videos of the aftermath show their belongings strewn across the pasture, each hastily dropped as the villagers tried to outrun Serbian bullets.

Villagers were buried where they fell, which today is a grazing area for cows.

This graveyard — where the headstones have been replaced with a uniform black granite — is emblematic of the dichotomous way the war is both remembered and forgotten.

All across the country, markers and memorials sit in the center of towns, on roadsides or in fields, but life in this modernizing country evolves around them.



**Mayor Xhafer Tahiri shows a memorial family gravesite outside Vushtrri, Kosovo, on Sept. 17, where over 100 villagers were killed May 2, 1999, as they tried to flee Serbian forces. Many were buried where they fell.**  
*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*



**A memorial gravesite sits outside Vushtrri, Kosovo, on Sept. 17.**  
*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*

Although people embrace two religions — most Serbians are Orthodox Christians and most Albanian Kosovars are Muslim — the Kosovo War was a conflict over ethnicity.

Before it achieved independence, Kosovo was a Serbian province. Under the reign of strongman Slobodan Milosevic, the minority Serb group lorded power over the majority Albanians.

As disdain between the two groups intensified, Milosevic fired Albanian-speaking men from state jobs, shut down Albanian media and declared teachers would instruct in Serbian exclusively.

By the mid-'90s, which tongue you spoke determined whether you were a second-class citizen, said Jehona Gjurgjeala, an educator and activist who was 15 when the conflict ignited.

"You go into this mode of self-preservation where you know what you can and you can't do," she said. "And you kind of kept yourself safe by actually limiting your movement and limiting your behaviors so that you didn't provoke bad reactions."

On RIT's campus in Kosovo, students who were babies during the war understand the conflict through their elders.

"(My parents) tried not to let the war get in our ears because we were still very, very small and they didn't want us to have trauma," said Gelonida Bajraktari, 20, a public policy and international relations major. "But I still remember as young children that they wouldn't let us play on the streets. ... They would always keep us inside, but never telling us why."

Gjurgjeala and Tahiri, like many in the generation who were teenagers during the conflict, returned to Kosovo to help form the country their friends died to create.

Gjurgjeala went to school in London and worked as an executive at Expedia before deciding that in the one life she had to live, she "wanted to leave something behind."

Tahiri studied in Italy, went to law school and joined the team drafting Kosovo's declaration of independence, which used the U.S. Constitution as a framework.

Even a decade later, Tahiri's tears come quickly as he talks about being in parliament's hall when the document was signed.

"That night, I went back home and kissed my father and my mother and said, 'Congratulations,'" Tahiri remembered. "They raised a family of nine children in a system where they didn't know which one of us will survive because we didn't have freedom. Yet it didn't stop them."



**Thousands of refugees, backed up for miles, make their way into Kosovo near the border crossing at Morini, Albania, on June 16, 1999, despite warnings of minefields and little food in their Kosovo homeland.**

*(Photo: AP Photo/David Guttenfelder)*



**An ethnic Albanian woman consoles her two twin sons at the Morini, Albania, border after crossing on foot from Kosovo on May 25, 1999. Kosovar refugees continued to cross into neighboring Albania as NATO tried to relocate the over-crowded camps further south from the volatile border area.**

*(Photo: AP Photo/David Guttenfelder)*



**Iowa and Florida signs for the streets in Marigona Residence in Pristina, Kosovo, on Sept. 18.**

*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*

## Signs of Iowa influence abroad

On Feb. 5, 2005, Lt. Col. Wunn flew into Pristina en route to join other Iowans already in Kosovo on a peacekeeping mission. From thousands of feet up, what few roofs that survived the war barely peaked out over a blanket of white snow.

"You could see places that had been bombed," he said. "You could see places where people had been displaced. There was still a need to clean up and to repair and re-establish."

More than a decade later, the trappings of normal European life abound in Pristina. Coffee shops bustle with students and suited business people, and rebuilt town squares feature ornate public art.

But unlike Paris or Bucharest, a Disney-esque love for America is woven into the city's fabric — a nod to the help the U.S. provided in fighting the Serbs.

Bill Klinton (sic) Boulevard, the main drag through town, is in a perpetual traffic jam. Hillary, a store at the corner of Klinton Boulevard and Robert Doll (sic) Street, sells reproductions of the former first lady's most famous ensembles.

Elsewhere, roads named for George W. Bush and Woodrow Wilson (who championed self-determination for nations) wind around construction on glitzy new apartments and office buildings.

The thumbprint of Iowa is evident, too. The state flag hangs alongside those of Kosovo and Albania outside the country's Ministry of Defense. The prime minister lives on Iova (sic) Street. And an Iowa State University banner hangs in a coveted spot behind the hottest bar in Pristina's poshest neighborhood.

All this Hawkeye fanfare was far from Maj. Gen. Tim Orr's mind when he pushed for the Iowa National Guard to join with the Kosovo Security Force as part of the federal State Partnership Program.

Founded in 1993, the program connects Guard units with less-developed countries to share best practices.

When the Kosovo partnership came up in 2011, Iowa was one of the only states that didn't have a formal agreement through the program. Competing against 17 other units, Iowa won out because of the Guard's previous deployment to the area and Iowa's connection to agriculture, which leaders thought could benefit the country's rural regions.

"It was clear to us, too, that there would be opportunities to engage with Kosovo outside of those military activities," Wunn said.



The view looking along Bill Klinton (sic) Boulevard in Pristina, Kosovo, on Sept. 18. Former President Bill Clinton called for NATO military involvement in Kosovo in 1999 and many streets and roads bear United States' presidents' names.

*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*



Bill Klinton (sic) Boulevard in Pristina, Kosovo, on Sept. 18.

*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*



U.S. Flags and an Iowa State Cyclones banner hang in Sports Bar President at Marigona Residence in Pristina, Kosovo, on Sept. 18.

*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*

The Guard reached out to Iowa Sister States to begin the process of creating a civilian connection, but, at the time, the organization couldn't take on more agreements.

Founded by former Gov. Bob Ray, Iowa Sister States takes its partnerships "quite seriously."

"Unlike perhaps other states that sign them and kind of file them away, we actively engage with our sister states," said Kim Heidemann, the group's executive director. "So... we felt we really had to take a good look at the benefits of the relationship."

### **Each visit brings 'something concrete'**

Meanwhile, Kosovo's then-president Atifete Jahjaga was on a mission to rebrand her country.

Jahjaga saw expanding the established military partnership into other governmental arenas as crucial to that campaign. So she directed her top ministers to visit Iowa and engage with the state's leadership.

Two years later, in 2013, then-Gov. Terry Branstad made the agreement official when he went to Kosovo to sign an accord connecting the countries.

"I'm very proud (of this relationship) because from every single visit, something concrete comes out that opens the door to the partnership and the work between both of our states," Jahjaga said.

For Kosovo, the partnership "distills down the U.S. into a manageable organization," Wunn said.

"Rather than New York or Washington, D.C., where they're just a small fish in a big ocean, they can come to Iowa," he said. Here they "have more of that personal connection and access to policymakers, access to business leaders, access to the experts."

While economic relationships bloomed from the partnership — including a Kosovo vineyard that now sells wine in Iowa — knowledge is what Kosovars desperately want as they prepare to join the greater community of nations.

Responding to that call, Iowa Sister States worked to bring professionals and specialists to the table.

To help with foreign policy, University of Iowa law students worked with diplomats in the Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To stitch together an updated educational system, community college students are planning workshops with Kosovar teachers.

And to get youth interested in agriculture, which is widely seen in Kosovo as un-hip, Future Farmers of America exchanged delegations with the country.

In addition to allowing for citizen-to-citizen diplomacy — a key part of all of Iowa Sister States' relationships — these partnerships offset costs.



**Former Kosovo president Atifete Jahjaga speaks with the Register on Sept. 18 in Pristina, Kosovo. She said that each visit includes something that "opens the door to the partnership and the work between both of our states."**

*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*



**Former Kosovo president Atifete Jahjaga greets Lt. Col. Michael Wunn, former director of the Iowa-Kosovo partnership, on Sept. 18 in Pristina, Kosovo**

*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*

Iowa Sister States is allotted \$19,000 of state money a year to maintain and grow the Kosovo partnership. The Iowa National Guard doesn't use any state money, but spends an estimated \$300,000 of federal funding annually to conduct about 15 exchanges per year.

"When you look at how much a bomber cost or how much a day of deployment in Afghanistan cost, that's nothing," Baskin said, "\$300,000? I mean, that's paper clips."

## Seeing the unimaginable in Iowa

On Dec. 22, just beyond where we sipped macchiatos, Tahiri was sworn in as Vushtrri's mayor.

In the shadow of the centuries-old castle, Tahiri faced a new beginning. Now, he had the chance to rewrite his hometown's story of struggle into one of advancement.

Soon he'd find out he had a few partners on that journey — his sister city, Norwalk, and the state of Iowa.

When I arrived in Kosovo, I wanted to find out what Iowa was getting out of this relationship.

Achievements and accolades aside, the real answer doesn't play well in pamphlets or bar charts.

The real answer is legacy. Here, in this small county with big political and strategic importance, a handful of Iowans are molding what our state's heritage will be across the world.

"The question you have to ask yourself is, is charitable donation, is helping a neighbor in need, is that worth it?" Lt. Col. James Grimaldi responded when challenged what Iowa *really* gets from all this.

"You do it because it's right," he continued. "The people of Kosovo are eager. They love Americans and they want to move forward and they could use our help."

The international community will inevitably fade away as Kosovo continues to develop, but Iowa has made a long-term commitment. And that unique dedication will cause real change, Gjurgjeala, the educator and activist, said.

Iowa, she said, "has managed to build something that is literally a massive community ... every point of entry multiplies straight away because there's so many stakeholders on both sides."

For Heidemann and the other Iowans at the August flag-raising ceremony outside Norwalk's City Hall, another successful sister city relationship offers a wonderful return on investment and a good example for local-level connections.



**Vushtrri Castle in Vushtrri, Kosovo, on Sept. 17 with Mayor Xhafer Tahiri attending a high school technology presentation. The castle dates to the Byzantine era and is located in the center of Vushtrri.**

*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*



**Emergency Management Planning & Interagency Cooperation Advisor Lt. Col. James Grimaldi is shown on Sept. 18 in Pristina, Kosovo.**

*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*

But watching the Kosovo flag sway in the same breeze as the Stars and Stripes was so emotional for Tahiri, he wasn't sure he'd make it through his speech.

For the boy who escaped war with only what he could carry and helped his family rebuild their lives from a scorched patch of grass, this was another freedom that seemed like a fantasy.

And for the man who watched his country declare independence and who became his hometown's mayor, it was the moment he realized his future just might be filled with days he once deemed unimaginable.



**The flag of the Republic of Kosovo flies in front of Norwalk City Hall on Oct. 18. Norwalk became the sister city for Vustrri, Kosovo, in 2018.**

*(Photo: Rodney White/The Register)*