

Deliverable 4: Experience Abroad Reflection

Introduction

Spending six weeks in Kosovo with the Kosovo Youth Council (KYC) was not only a professional placement. It was also a return to a place that is part of me, yet one I had never really known as an adult or in a professional context. I left Kosovo when I was five years old, and since then I have grown up across Kenya, Thailand, and now Canada. This lifestyle meant that I carried diverse cultural frameworks into this experience, and I was curious to see how they would align or clash with life in Kosovo.

This reflection is less about the projects I did at KYC and more about what it meant to live in a culture that felt familiar and foreign at the same time. It is about the lessons I learned in everyday life such as walking the streets of Prishtina, navigating conversations in formal Albanian, experiencing the warmth of hospitality, and realizing how social rules and expectations are different from the ones I have carried with me abroad. Most of all, it is about how these experiences shaped me, not just as a student or a professional, but as a person who is still developing the sensitivity, patience, and humility to understand how people make meaning of their world.

Everyday Life: Coffee Culture, Food, Walkability and Socializing

Coffee and cigarettes. A true Balkan staple. It only feels right that I start with this. They are not just habits, but a way of life, almost a social currency. At the office, the day was practically measured in coffees: morning coffee to start, mid-morning coffee to keep going, after-lunch coffee to recover, late-afternoon coffee to survive, and sometimes an evening one just for good measure. Cigarette breaks filled the gaps in between, like commas in a never-ending sentence. What

surprised me most was that even the rare non-smokers in the office still tagged along for these, standing in the cloud of smoke just to be part of the conversation. At first, I thought it was odd. Why stand outside if you are not smoking? But soon I understood that it was not about the cigarette, it was about belonging. In Kosovo, these breaks are where relationships are built, gossip is exchanged, and half the real work gets done. If you skipped them, you risked missing out on the pulse of the office. This felt very different from Canada, where smoking is uncommon and often pushed to the margins of public life. Smokers are confined to designated zones outside office buildings, usually standing in isolation. Coffee is treated differently too, in Canada it is fuel, grabbed quickly in a paper cup and carried on the go. In Kosovo, coffee is never rushed. It is a ritual, taken sitting down, usually shared with others.

Food was another big adjustment. At home, Kosovar people usually eat traditional meals, including stuffed peppers and stuffed grape leaves, while eating out typically means fast food, bakeries, or Western staples like pizza and pasta. The food is tasty, but it can feel repetitive. In Canada, I am used to variety; you can have Vietnamese food for lunch and Ethiopian food for dinner. In Kosovo, new restaurants with international food often struggle. My colleagues told me about attempts to introduce new cuisines in Kosovo, such as Pakistani and Malaysian restaurants that had often failed due to lack of customer interest. That really struck me. This highlighted a cultural preference for familiarity over novelty, which I found both comforting and limiting. In Canada, food often means exploring and trying something new.

One other thing I noticed was how easy it is to move around in Prishtina. I walked to work most mornings. It took me about twenty minutes, and I loved passing by small cafés (which are busy at all times of the day, more on this in a bit) and busy streets along the way. Sometimes I took a taxi, but it was a shame to do so considering the beautiful weather. There is no Uber in Kosovo, you either call a taxi company or, if you are lucky, you find one available on the street. Buses were also a big part of my routine. They are frequent, inexpensive, and reliable and because

Kosovo is small, I could reach most municipalities in a maximum of two or three hours. This sense of closeness between places felt very different from the scale I had experienced in Nairobi, where on top of the distance it is considered unsafe to walk around the streets.

Social life, on the other hand, felt easier in Kosovo than in Canada. Here people go out during the week as much as the weekend, and plans are often spontaneous. It is possible to decide to meet someone for coffee in the afternoon and actually see them that same day. In Canada, it can feel like trying to book an appointment with a celebrity just to have a coffee with a friend. I sensed this spontaneity came from a more relaxed and community-oriented lifestyle. It reminded me that social well-being is not only about free time, but also about cultural attitudes toward flexibility and togetherness. While I do think a big reason for this is the culture, I must also recognise the season. Summer is sunny and warm, which naturally makes people more willing to be outside and social. I have yet to experience a Canadian summer, who knows, I might be surprised.

Hospitality and Integration

I was also struck by the warmth of Kosovar hospitality. In Kosovo it is normal to drop by someone's house without warning. Instead of being upset, the host will offer coffee, tea, cakes, or, if you go around lunch or dinner time, even a full meal. There is a ritual of insistence: hosts press guests to eat or eat more, while guests initially refuse a few times out of politeness before eventually accepting. A host that does not insist may seem stingy, while a guest who accepts too quickly may seem greedy; this performative back-and-forth dance is a way of showing care and respect both ways. In Canada, this kind of unannounced visit may be seen as rude and inconsiderate of someone's privacy and time. Hospitality exists, but it is more contained and not as ritualized.

My colleagues extended this same hospitality to me. One invited me to her hometown, Gjilan, where I stayed with her family, ate at her favorite restaurants, and visited the school she had attended all her life. Others took me on trips to the lake in the evenings after work, where we

played cards, ate snacks, and talked about the differences between life in Canada and life in Kosovo among other things. We would often spend the evenings together as well, visiting bars and sharing some laughs and a few rounds of drinks. These experiences gave me a sense of belonging and expanded my view of Kosovo, showing me a culture where community extends naturally from the workplace to personal life. I was not only a colleague; I was being welcomed into people's personal lives.

Gender Roles and Beauty Standards

One of the harder things for me to process was how present traditional gender roles still are. In many households, women are expected to cook, clean, and host, while men are not held to the same expectations. Younger people are challenging this, but the difference compared to Canada is obvious. Living in Canada, I have seen gender roles blurred and responsibilities shared more equally. In Kosovo, the division still feels strong; I rarely saw a father pushing a pram, I rarely saw a mother driving the family car unless she was alone.

Beauty standards also felt stricter. In Canada, people dress in many different ways. Some wear heavy makeup, others wear none. Some go to class in sweatpants (I am guilty of it myself), and no one cares. In Kosovo, there is more pressure to always look polished. One day at a nail salon, the woman doing my nails thought I was 14 years old (what?!). When I told her I was 22, she was shocked; "but you are not wearing any makeup," she stated. It was interesting that upon seeing someone without makeup her first instinct was that I must be too young, not that I simply chose not to wear makeup to my nail appointment. That moment showed me how much presentation matters here. Standing out, even with something so small, can be judged negatively. In Kosovo, fitting into the societal standard is more valued. In Canada, standing out is often praised as individuality and an expression of self.

The Double-Edged Sword of Relaxation

The work culture in Kosovo also surprised me. My boss laughed when I arrived early in my first week and said, "Why were you early? You are in the Balkans." Lunch breaks did not end at a fixed time. They ended when everyone felt ready to leave. Now, I have to acknowledge that this may not hold true for government jobs, or during busier times of the year. This felt surreal compared to Canada's strict schedules. But for me the benefits were clear; it created more room for connection and balance. Work was important, but it was not the only thing that defined people's lives. I was not stressed out at lunch, I was not rushing to swallow my food - I am quite a slow eater so I always dread being rushed during meals - and it really did feel like a break! I already discussed the coffee and cigarette culture, you will find all cafes are full regardless of what time of the day it is. There is a caveat to this unfortunately; sometimes tasks took longer than they should have and deadlines were flexible in a way that sometimes felt unproductive. I came to see this culture as a double-edged sword. On one side, it allows for more presence and stronger relationships. On the other hand, it can slow down progress. The challenge is learning to hold both truths at once.

How the experience changed me

I learned to treat cultural practices as variables rather than obstacles. Coffee breaks became part of my meeting strategy, punctuality expectations shaped event schedules, and hospitality rituals guided how I approached relationship building. The most transferable skill I gained was relational networking across differences. With limited professional vocabulary, I learned to connect through the shared human experiences that cross borders; grief for a loved one, a funny story from childhood, pride in a sibling, or plans for the weekend.

Saying goodbye was emotional, but it didn't feel final since I left with friendships that extend beyond the project and insights that will shape my leadership journey for years. Most importantly, I carry forward the reminder that leadership is not about being in front, instead it is about creating the conditions where others, especially those historically sidelined, can step forward too.

I leave more attentive to the signals that tell you how a place functions: who pours the coffee, how long a lunch actually lasts, what a polite refusal sounds like, where the margins of belonging are drawn. Global competence, for me, is now less about knowing facts and more about moving through differences with care, curiosity, and courage. If I can keep doing that, I can build projects that fit the place and relationships that last beyond the project itself.