

Kosovo National Day

Celebrating 10 years of progress

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Most Japanese remember Kosovo for the struggle during the war, but as a growing number of Japanese visitors are discovering, Kosovo has essentially transformed. Few outside Kosovo know that

it has one of the highest rates of economic growth in Europe, as well as a strong service industry driven by vibrant youth, diverse media, high rate of broadband internet, cultural attractions and culinary delights. Our hot springs compare to those of Kusatsu, Gunma Prefecture, according to a Japanese diplomat who lived there.

Kosovo turns 10 today and epitomizes the values a country created in the 21st century should possess — human rights, free market economy, democratic values and rule of law — the very values that Japan has espoused and generously promoted. Despite Kosovo's transitional challenges, the newest addition to the international community of nations is the best indication of a more secure and democratic world order. The biggest remaining challenge is gaining United Nations membership, the absence of which shaves off several percentage points of potential gross domestic product growth.

I would like to express our gratitude to

Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which last May revised the travel advisory, rating Kosovo as a safe destination for Japanese to visit, paving the way for more tourism and investment that we are actively promoting.

Kosovo's booth at the Japan Association of Travel Agents Tourism EXPO in September attracted significant interest, and agencies are including Kosovo in package tours. We also presented business opportunities, films and culture at various fairs and spoke about Kosovo to school children and academics. With the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), we will exhibit Kosovar photos, food and national clothing in May.

In November, I took six Japanese media representatives, NHK among them, to Kosovo. We toured ancient and medieval historical sites, nature and observed traditional architecture. Kosovo's cuisine is a unique blend of traditional, Mediterranean, Ottoman, Central and Western European influences. With the support of Turkish Airlines, this year we will be able to once again take a group of media and travel agency representatives to explore Kosovo further.

In 2018, we will intensify our outreach to potential investors, showcasing Kosovo's progress as a business destination. Simplifying our tax system has boosted Kosovo to No. 40 in the World Bank's Doing Business Report; the country also ranks fourth for most improved business reforms. Using the euro as our official currency creates a business-friendly conservative monetary policy. Our sound banking system boasts the

region's lowest rate of non-performing loans.

All goods produced in Kosovo enjoy free access to the EU and have preferential treatment when exported to Japan and the U.S., as they are charged a fraction of operating costs compared to the EU average. The youthful population not only contributes to a vibrant nightlife, but also to entrepreneurship and innovation. For example, one Japanese investor is growing shiitake mushrooms.

Kosovo supports Japan's Osaka Kansai Expo 2025 bid and welcomes its increased responsibility of collective security provision in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan's renewed focus on helping to bring the Balkans into the European fold is good news. Supporting Kosovo's membership in international organizations is the most effective way toward closure and bolstering European security and unity.

Japan's culture is increasingly present in Kosovo. Japanese language, origami and *kusaki-zome* (plant-dyed fabric) were introduced to Kosovo last year. In January, the enthusiastic alumni of JICA programs established the Day of Japanese Culture.

Next February, we will hold a joint celebration of the 10th anniversary of diplomatic relations and in 2020 our embassy will mark 10 years since its official opening. As we celebrate these upcoming milestones, I hope we can all contribute to a row of *sakura* trees and a Japanese garden in Kosovo as a symbol of strong friendship between our two nations.