



A local "spot" shows how a *Çifteli*, an Albanian musical instrument, is crafted.

Forty-two children in one room may sound like a sure-fire recipe for chaos, but not on Friday mornings at a primary school tucked away in Çabër/Çabra in the mountains of northern Kosovo. The five-to-seven-year-olds wait expectantly in their chairs, all eyes fixed on Përparim Shala as he sets up a VCR player, a projector and a video cassette.

It does not take long before shrieks of delight run through the room as a familiar figure appears on the screen. "It's Gonzo the

Great!" says a wide-eyed little girl. *Rruga Sesam*, the Albanian-language version of Sesame Street, unfolds at a quick pace, transporting everybody into the world inhabited by Bert and Ernie and Big Bird and Cookie Monster and Elmo.

"We knew that the animation and the antics of the lovable Muppets would be a big hit, but we were not prepared for this level of enthusiasm," says Mr. Shala. "Sometimes the kids don't want to leave; they insist on watching another episode."

# Sesame Street goes off-the-beaten-path in Kosovo

BY MEVLYDE SALIHU AND SILVIAN SURUGIU



The multi-ethnic and multilingual public broadcaster, Radio-Television Kosovo (RTK) has been broadcasting the show in Albanian and Serbian on Saturdays since late 2004, but there are some places that lie outside its broadcasting zone.

To make up for this, once a week Mr. Shala, Democratization Programme Assistant, drives 20 minutes to Çabër/Čabra from the OSCE Mission's office in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica to screen one half-hour episode for the village children.

Çabër/Čabra (population: 1,500) is a Kosovo-Albanian village in Zubin Potok, a municipality where Kosovo-Serbs form the majority. Pre-school teacher Valdete Hajra hopes that, through the influence of *Rruga Sesam*, her pupils will become much more open to ethnic, religious and cultural diversity than their parents.

"Three generations have grown up learning their ABCs and 1-2-3s by watching Sesame Street since its launch in the U.S. in the late 1960s," says Ms. Hajra.

"Most of the people my age in Kosovo followed the series on German television in the 1980s. These kids are

fortunate to be able to watch it in their own language. They can go beyond the colourful images and catchy tunes and absorb the lessons from the featured themes."

"I learned that it's important to brush my teeth in the morning and before bedtime, and that I should not be afraid to go to the dentist," says seven-year-old Armend when asked what he remembers most from this week's show.

"I'm pretty sure that once they're more familiar with the characters, they will be able to get even more out of it," says first-grade teacher Selvie Bajrami.

Roma kids from Gjakovë/Đakovica are tickled pink at learning from Grover.

Pre-school education being an unknown concept in Kosovo, some parents confess to having been perplexed when the screenings were first announced.

"I asked myself, 'Is school a place for learning or for entertainment?'" says the father of five-year-old Blerim. "But after the teacher explained what the show was all about, I was happy at the thought that my son would not only be learning to read and count but would also be helped to see the world differently."

He adds almost as an afterthought: "Besides, I feel better knowing that he is safe in school and keeping out of trouble."

He had in mind a tragic event in July 2005, when three children from Çabër/Čabra drowned in the Ibar river. Although it was obviously an accident, it had brought back painful memories of March 2004, when another incident involving children triggered an outbreak of inter-ethnic violence throughout Kosovo, leading to the death of some 20 people, injuring hundreds and rendering thousands homeless.

"We are firmly convinced that our special efforts to introduce *Rruga Sesam* to these parts will help bring about some positive changes to village life," says Përparim Shala. "These kids deserve all the opportunities we can offer."

Just like Kosovo's north-western tip, the southern municipality of Dragash/Dragaš (population: 35,000) is out of RTK's broadcasting reach, further isolating 37 mountain villages in the regions of Gora and Opoja.

This time, the Dragash/Dragaš Community Centre that was established by the OSCE in January 2003 was assigned the task of taking *Ulica Sezam* — Sesame Street in Serbian — to several villages under a "mobile cinema" scheme.

Fun and games at the Kosovo launch



Elvir Ilijazi, project co-ordinator, says that the children of Orushë/Orçuša village in Gora were initially reluctant to come and watch the show. “They are not used to strangers and feel uneasy when they encounter unfamiliar situations,” he says.

“However, the second screening attracted greater numbers and the children actually asked questions and were more lively. Now we can talk about the show’s content together and they can hardly wait until *Ulica Sezam* visits again.”

Brod, another isolated village in Gora, is also on Mr. Ilijazi’s route. “There, the children are more active and spontaneous. This is possibly the first children’s programme they have seen in their young lives,” he says.

The language spoken by the people of Goran, called “Našinski” (“our language”) is a mixture of Macedonian, Turkish, Bosnian and Serbian. “Gorani children have to be guided to fully appreciate parts of the show because of language nuances, but this doesn’t pose too much of a problem,” Mr. Ilijazi says.

Still another weekly stop for him is the popular Community Centre of Bresane in the Opoje region, which attracts droves of mostly Kosovo-Albanian children.

Angela Tenbruck, who co-ordinates the Sesame Street project from the Prishtinë/Priština headquarters of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, says that efforts to reach both the northern and the southern ends of Kosovo are continuing.

“We want to be true to Sesame Street’s tried-and-true model that offers the same fun and laughter and learning to children across and within cultures and countries,” she says.

“Whether they are in the big cities or in the tiniest villages, the children of Kosovo deserve to enjoy the same high-quality educational television programming that is widely available elsewhere in the world.”

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## Kosovo gets a taste of “Muppet diplomacy”



Gary Knell introduces enthusiastic Elmo to some new-found friends.

When *Rruga Sesam* and *Ulica Sezam* made their debut on RTK in December 2004, Kosovo joined a community of 125 countries and regions that subscribe to Sesame Street’s philosophy that all children should be given a chance to achieve their highest potential.

The project is a joint initiative of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, the UNICEF office in Kosovo, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and the Sesame Street Workshop, the New York-based non-profit organization that is behind the show’s locally co-produced adaptations around the world.

With RTK as the main broadcaster, the show is also beamed to audiences in Kosovo-Serb areas by DTB (Children’s Television Station) in the Gjilan/Gnjilane region, TV Most in Zvečan/Zveçan and TV Hertz in Štrpce/Shtërpçë.

The project’s educational package consists of:

- 52 half-hour episodes from Sesame Street’s international

library. These were carefully selected for dubbing into separate Albanian and Serbian versions.

- 26 action-filled two-to-three-minute “spots” co-produced with a Kosovo team. These feature children from different ethnic groups, demystifying for young viewers the day-to-day lives of other communities and exposing them to a language other than their own.

- 15,000 activity kits for children and 1,500 kits for children and parents in Albanian, Serbian and Bosnian. These were produced by UNICEF to introduce Sesame Street as part of early-childhood education. A new series is planned.

Both the local spots and the activity kits follow an educational curriculum that was designed around the findings of comprehensive research by educators representing various communities.

The curriculum’s overarching goal is to help children in Kosovo to be more aware of their rich cultural heritage and the multi-ethnic society in which they live, to develop healthy social and emotional attitudes and skills, and to help build a foundation for respect and understanding among social and ethnic groups.

“Today’s young children are growing up in a complex world, a world that knows no technological boundaries and where cultures, religions and ethnicities intersect in ways previously undreamt of,” says Gary Knell, President of the Sesame Street Workshop, who flew to Kosovo for the launch of the project.

“As children recognize and enjoy authentic representations within their own cultural context, the hope is that they can begin to learn more about children they rarely encounter in their daily lives. By humanizing ‘the other side’, we aim to open up the minds of children and their parents.

“We may not be getting world leaders to sit at the same table, but using a few friendly furry faces, we hope that our “Muppet diplomacy” is having an impact on the thinking of today’s children, who are tomorrow’s leaders.”