

Albania: Paving the Way to Kosovo

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Officials seek to allay western fears over upgrade of Kosovo highway

The Albanian government has begun to collect a new tax to fund the reconstruction of its road link with Kosovo, amid international fears the project hinted at "Greater Albania" ambitions.

The authorities in Tirana are so sensitive to charges of expansionism that they have sought to stress the economic benefits of upgrading the 180-kilometre Durrës-Kukës road.

Former prime minister Pandeli Majko lobbied hard for the project during his term in office, saying it was aimed at extending trade and tourism opportunities.

"It serves to better link our port capacity with well-known pan-European corridors. This road will make a dynamic change to Albania's markets and will give new life to business, encouraging investment and tourism."

The improvements are aimed at cutting the journey time on the road from eight to around two to three hours. It is hoped goods can be moved from Kosovo onto Central European trade corridors.

As well as opening up new markets, an improved road should encourage Kosovo Albanians to holiday along Albania's coast.

A further benefit could follow in the form of investment in the poor north-eastern area of Albania, currently seen as a wild place where, according to a local saying, "the rifle accompanies the child from birth."

It is hoped that ease of access will lead to wider improvements in the country's infrastructure - which will in turn stem the current migration from the area.

Majko steered the new tax through earlier this year after winning all-party backing and the support of businesses, and collection started in July.

It will cost big companies a few thousand US dollars a year while smaller businesses will be expected to pay up to 500 dollars. This will result in an estimated annual revenue of 20-25 million dollars.

New prime minister Fatos Nano has made it clear that the project remains a government priority, and a fundraising drive is continuing.

It is estimated that it could cost up to 400 million dollars to fully upgrade the highway - a colossal sum for the small, poor Balkans nation, which has a population of around three million people.

A section of the road was actually repaired by NATO during the 1999 Kosovo conflict, but the money dried

up not long after the end of the war.

While the project has not been included in international aid budgets for the next three years, new channels of funding may come about if Stabilisation and Association Agreement negotiations with the European Union begin soon.

Some neighbouring countries - Greece in particular - are keen to protect their own tourist industries and may oppose the project.

They are blamed for putting it about in Europe that completion of the project would orient Albania towards the east, and not the western direction it claims to be heading in.

However, there was jubilation when the World Bank offered a small amount for the feasibility study for the upgrade and later said it was looking at investing some 20 million dollars in the project. Other international financial institutions, such as the European Investment Bank, have also expressed an interest.

Small-scale work may start soon, and it is hoped that the project will get underway next year.

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