

Albanian 'Peace Deal' Controversy

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The Macedonian government may have squandered its last chance for peace

Once again, it appears that the Macedonian government has managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

With its denunciation of a ceasefire pact worked out on its behalf between the leaders of the National Liberation Army, NLA, and leaders of the leading Albanian parties in Macedonia, the government may have squandered its last chance for peace.

President Boris Trajkovski, Prime Minister Ljupco Georgievski, and the

Macedonian language media all dismissed the agreement, apparently without having seen it, and called on the leaders of the Albanian parties in the national unity government - the Party of Democratic Prosperity, PDP, and the Democratic Party of Albanians, DPA - to renounce it.

The state news agency ran a headline asking if the deal was "a new anti-Macedonian conspiracy" aimed at the "protection of the terrorists and their ideological and political cause for Greater Albania".

The hysterical reaction of the Macedonians was matched by that of the EU, NATO, and the US embassy in Skopje, which described the deal as a "totally unacceptable...effort to bring this group (NLA) into the state structures. There should be no accommodations made for violence or violent groups".

The pact was reportedly brokered, or at least encouraged by US ambassador Robert Frowick, a retired state department veteran leading the OSCE mission in Macedonia. Frowick brought Macedonian and Albanian parties together to build a national unity government earlier this month, and was eager to win a peace agreement before fighting between the army and police and the NLA got out of hand.

Frowick left Macedonia last Thursday, having faced a barrage of criticism from Macedonians, the international community, his own government, and even the OSCE, which claimed that he had been "acting on his own".

But what was actually in the agreement between the NLA and the Albanian parties in Macedonia? According to Albanian language media in Kosovo, the NLA reconfirmed their recognition of the territorial integrity of Macedonia, and specifically repudiated the carve-up of the country into federal units.

The more troubling aspects of the pact, as described by Macedonian officials, included an NLA veto over policies related to Albanian rights, and integration of demobilised NLA fighters into police and army forces in Albanian-majority areas.

While the last two conditions may be unacceptable to the

government and the international community, the agreement was at least a starting point for realistic talks

to end the violence.

Earlier this month, when the national unity government in Skopje was being formed, senior NLA officials approached moderate Albanian figures in Kosovo, asking for advice.

"They told me that they felt they were in pretty good shape militarily, but that they were politically isolated," said a Kosovar who met some of the NLA leaders, and who asked not to be named. "They genuinely weren't sure what to do next."

The Kosovars they talked to advised the NLA to start acting like statesmen, to declare a ceasefire, come up with some reasonable demands for the government to meet, give a reasonable deadline for the demands to be met, and, in the meantime, either start their own party or prepare to get involved in Macedonian politics.

"These guys are wacky," said the Kosovar who met them. "Most of the leaders have never really done anything but plot and fight and make trouble all their lives. They don't know much of anything else, and they need to be persuaded that there are better ways than fighting to solve problems for Albanians in Macedonia.

"These guys fought in Kosovo and didn't really get anything out of it. Thaci and the Kosovo Liberation Army, UCK, got some power and gas stations and nice cars, and some respect, but the Macedonian guys couldn't even go home.

"They want something for themselves - power, money, respect, and are willing to wreck the country to get it. They need to be engaged in such a way that they can see a future for themselves in Macedonia without war and chaos. Kosovars and the Macedonian Albanian parties were working on them to get them on board."

Moderate Kosovars met Ambassador Frowick and persuaded him that

someone, preferably someone from the United States, needed to talk to the NLA leaders.

Frowick encouraged the leaders of the DPA and the PDP, Arben Xhaferi and Imer Imeri respectively, to go to Kosovo to try to make a deal with the NLA that could bring an end to the fighting before the situation in Macedonia spun out of control.

It is unclear how the news of the deal, reportedly brokered in Prizren last Wednesday, leaked out. Wire reports claimed the Macedonian state news agency broke the story.

Despite protests from Xhaferi and Imeri that the Macedonian parties were well aware of their meetings with the NLA, the prime minister, Ljupco Georgievski, accused the two of calling on their people to "wage war on Macedonia".

While the international community has denounced the deal, some

Western officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, believe the

government has missed an important opportunity.

"The reaction from the Macedonians, the EU and the Americans has been unbelievably stupid," said one official. "Do they imagine they can just wish these guys [the NLA] away? Frowick was the only one down here who actually had a clue what was going on. Now he's gone, and it is back to amateur hour."

Despite all the sound and fury surrounding the deal, the question remains, what else was there to do to avert further violence? It is easy for Lord Robertson and Javier Solana to preach against negotiations with terrorists, but other than emboldening the Macedonian army and police to shell villages more heavily, their tough talk has yielded no visible results.

The reality in Macedonia is that while few people really want a war, and while the national unity government may be genuinely committed to improving the civil rights situation for its Albanian citizens, the NLA remains in a position to scuttle any progress towards peace and multi-ethnic stability.

Last week, there were reports that as many as a dozen Albanian civilians may have been killed in artillery attacks on the

villages of Slupcane and Vaksince near Kumanovo. Every Albanian civilian casualty guarantees more recruits for the NLA and hardens Albanians' conviction that the Macedonian government is not serious about improving their lot.

Every dead Macedonian policeman or soldier deepens the Macedonian belief that all Albanians are intent on dividing the country.

In an atmosphere of intense fear and distrust on the part of Albanians, and almost hysterical paranoia on the part of Macedonians, the national unity government could better serve the country by working with the international community to try to broker a ceasefire with the NLA.

It might be humiliating to finally acknowledge that yes, the government did talk with "terrorists", but it is important to note that in Kosovo and in southern Serbia the West encouraged talks with "terrorists".

Lord Robertson may tell the Macedonians not to negotiate, but

his own country, Britain, with much greater resources and especially military resources, ultimately had to bring the political wing of the Irish Republican Army into the government to end the violence in Northern Ireland.

If the guerrillas decide to open up new fronts in Gostivar and Debar, as they have threatened, the army and police might find themselves stretched thin and unable to prevent "free territories" being established.

In the event of the fighting escalating this summer, the Macedonian government may look back at the last few days as a last chance for peace. President Trajkovski, Prime Minister Georgievski, and their European allies should remember Winston Churchill's admonition, "Jaw jaw is better than war war".

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