

Macedonia: Premier Drops Hawkish Line

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Prime Minister Georgievski surprises locals and Westerners alike by adopting a conciliatory approach toward the Albanians.

In a sudden political somersault, Macedonia's fiercely nationalistic prime minister Ljupco Georgievski has sought to mend fences with the country's Albanian minority he hitherto tried to suppress.

To the surprise of foreign diplomats and political colleagues alike, he withdrew the Lions - a paramilitary police force - from checkpoints set up to hamper the movement of Albanians in western Macedonia, where the majority of the community lives.

Last month, Georgievski, leader of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party, vowed he would never agree to such a move.

The change of heart followed some hard talking by representatives of the international community on whom Macedonia is still heavily dependent for its well being. Georgievski may also have concluded, in the opinion of some observers, that a hard line stance might not go down too well with voters in the national elections due this year.

A similar transformation was displayed by the hawkish interior minister, Ljube Boskovski, who until now vociferously backed the prime minister's tough line. It was Boskovski who had ordered the Lions into action. Now he said they would be replaced by regular police units in order to restore "confidence and trust" between the country's divided communities.

The new mood of conciliation became evident shortly after the resignation last month of the country's moderate vice-president, Dosta Dimovska. As the only moderate in the government, her departure looked like isolating Georgievski and Boskovski in a hard line bunker.

Georgievski also withdrew his opposition to an amnesty law for Albanians who took part in last year's conflict. Until now he argued that the pardon pledge issued last year by President Boris Trajkovsk should be good enough without legislation to back it up.

But the pledge proved too full of holes to satisfy either the Albanians or the international community. Leaders of the four major parties have now agreed to push through an amnesty law soon and the justice ministry is preparing a draft.

Diplomats say the prime minister lately appears "genuinely friendly and cooperative". They believe he wants to secure backing from the international community before elections are held. When that will be has not been decided.

Opposition parties and the international community want the ballot held at the end of May or early in June. The parliamentary majority led by Georgievski's party claims they cannot be organised in such a short time.

Analysts are intrigued to see Georgievski struggling to demonstrate his reformist image. To this end,

diplomatic sources say, he is even prepared to remove his closest ally Boskovski from the interior ministry.

Last week, the Macedonian authorities officially asked NATO to extend the peacekeeping mandate of Task Force Fox for a further three to six months. Georgievski personally handed the letter to NATO secretary-general George Robertson during his visit to Skopje.

Normally, protocol dictates that the president should handle such a matter. The fact that Georgievski stepped in ahead of him was viewed as another sign of the prime minister's eagerness to display his newfound spirit of cooperation.

Behind all this, tensions still simmer. They flared again on Sunday when one Macedonian man was killed and another seriously injured by a bomb explosion in the Albanian stronghold village of Aracinovo, near Skopje.

Until recently, the press were running with claims that Albanians were plotting a spring offensive in a bid to renew the conflict. Many of these reports had been generated by Georgievski and Boskovski to thwart any Macedonian efforts at reconciliation. The two politicians' conversion to the peace process seems to have put a stop to these stories.

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