

## **An Optimist in Panic: an interview with Arben Xhaferi**

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Arben Xhaferi, president of the Democratic Party of Albanians, DPA, a partner in Macedonia's governing coalition, explains to IWPR why immediate constitutional changes are imperative for a peaceful resolution of the current crisis.

IWPR: How do you explain the outbreak of violence in Macedonia?

Arben Xhaferi: I explain this as ethnic competition: to whom does the state belong?

Macedonians want to create the state as their own ethnic property. Albanians

deny this, and thus we have conflict.

IWPR: After the elections in 1998, there seemed to be a new will to effect real change for Albanians. So, why are we seeing such conflict in Macedonia today?

AX: In 1998 we started to amend the constitution of Macedonia, which describes Macedonia as the state of Macedonians - where the official language is Macedonian, the official alphabet, Cyrillic, and the official religion, Orthodox. Albanians are very angry about this kind of possessiveness, but we haven't gone to the source of the crisis, the constitution itself.

IWPR: Isn't it more likely that changes could be achieved by politicians like yourself rather than NLA fighters?

AX: I'd been working to address the consequences but not the source of the conflict. I did not succeed in changing the constitution. There is no readiness to do this among the Macedonians. My vision was first to integrate Macedonia into the European Community and after that to introduce European standards. In this way I saw a real possibility to change the constitution.

IWPR: So, you were ready to wait?

AX: I was prepared to run a long race. But others wanted to sprint.

IWPR: Some Macedonian commentators have argued that the real initiators of the violence are criminals acting to protect their black-market trading interests. Would you agree?

AX: I don't believe this. Albanian idealists are behind this uprising and their leaders are not involved in criminal activities. Maybe, some soldiers have a criminal background, but they are not playing an important role in the decision-making process.

IWPR: And many of them are from Kosovo?

AX: During the Kosovo war there were more Albanians from Macedonia in the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) in Kosovo than there are Kosovars in Macedonia now. There may be a few Kosovars, but more than 90 per cent [of the members of the NLA] are Albanians from Macedonia.

IWPR: You have said that you have indirect contact with the leaders of the NLA.

AX: I must have contact with them to get them to put down their weapons and give dialogue a chance.

IWPR: Are you saying a decision was made not to fight back the Macedonian government offensive?

AX: Yes. They put down their arms because of pressure from politicians in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, and owing to pressure from NATO, the European Community and the United States. Javier Solana, by coming to Tetovo, also opened up hope of making changes in the state through negotiation.

IWPR: Did Solana make any promises to the Albanians?

AX: No. But he started to talk about the need for reforms in society, the need for dialogue to put down weapons. And everybody from the Albanian side agreed. Now the international community has handed over a clockwork orange. But we are not able to take it apart. We do not have the skills for that. We need experts from the EC, NATO and the OSCE.

IWPR: You have said that you do not plan to go to Luxembourg for the April 9 signing of the stability agreement with the European Union unless there is clear indication of progress in the dialogue.

AX: We had a conflict, a war in Macedonia. We created unbelievable pressure on the fighters in the hills to put down the weapons. But this came with the condition that negotiations would start.

Now there are no such indications. The president has called us in for coffee-table discussions. But he doesn't have any mandate to solve the questions. And discussion in the parliament will create more tensions than solutions.

IWPR: What kind of dialogue would you like to see?

AX: In 1991 the Macedonian majority wrote the constitution against the will of the Albanian minority. Since then, we have had permanent discussion and permanent conflict over the concept of the state.

But the concept of the state - the constitution of the state - is incompatible with multi-ethnic reality. So the question now is whether we change reality through ethnic cleansing or by changing the concept of the state?

IWPR: You have made seemingly conflicting statements over recent weeks, at times making you seem very close to the government and sometimes implying that you might even leave it. At times you have been very critical of the NLA and sometimes you suggest they have a "right" to continue should negotiations break down. Has your position wavered?

AX: No. This is a false interpretation. I never accepted fighting as an instrument to achieve political goals. I am for the political option. I am not a militarist.

But one thing that is very important to point out: the demands of the fighters are the same as ours.

IWPR: You have said that if there isn't movement on the key issues, you expect many young men will join the NLA?

AX: Yes. Many have friends on the hills. Others have cousins. And if the Macedonian authorities are cruel and rigid during their offensives, it might well cause other Albanians to join the NLA.

IWPR: Do you think the NLA should be directly represented in any talks?

AX: For me it would be easier. But I do not want to formally request this, as this would provoke a negative reaction in the international community. I will be very tough in negotiations.

IWPR: Macedonians demand that Albanians confirm the integrity and unity of the state. If you do not have the fighters in the talks, how can you provide such a statement?

AX: The Macedonians need the Albanians to make the same statement three times before breakfast and three times after. We are for the integrity of the state. I am tired of giving the same declaration.

IWPR: What are the essential changes negotiations need to deliver to ensure that fighting will not re-start?

AX: The first must be the constitution as the initiator of the crisis. The second is the proportion of Albanian representation in state institutions. The third is the census.

IWPR: You now seem to be suggesting that these things need to be tackled

within perhaps as short a period as one month. Is this right?

AX: We must be constructive. Albanian political parties are ready to fight against the radical demands of other Albanians for destruction, for federalisation and cantonisation. We are ready to continue without weapons and to keep the integrity and the unity of the state. On the other hand, Macedonian extremism is enshrined in the constitution. They institutionalised their extremism.

Every state and society has their radical elements but democratic forces must work openly against that.

IWPR: The preamble of the constitution refers to Macedonia as a state of "Macedonians and others". Would you consider the formula, rather than adding Albanians, to take out all mention of nationalities, so that Macedonia would be a civic state. You would get rid of the Macedonian claim to national primacy, but you would also set aside the demand from some Albanians that both major communities should be declared equal constituent nations.

AX: I am afraid that the multi-ethnic states cannot be pure civic states. In the end you must pose the question: who is civic? In which language is he talking? If the Macedonians want to create a civic society, but the civilian is Macedonian, speaking Macedonian language, we must again ask the question, who is he?

IWPR: But will you nevertheless be willing to consider a concession on this point, because as you know the argument for adding Albanians into the preamble makes Macedonians nervous? If there is to be a change, they would prefer it to be towards a document which is fully civic.

AX: Yes. If it is possible to resolve the question of language through other legislation then we will accept the definition of Macedonia as a civic society.

IWPR: In such a dynamic situation, is there potential for a realignment of Albanian politics? Could this change or even threaten the position of the democratic parties, even including yourself, as the NLA make radical demands?

AX: We will end up creating two groups stubbornly defending their positions along ethnic lines. Everybody will polarize around their own ethnic group. But we want to create a bridge. We want to keep the middle ground but our position is very fragile.

IWPR: How serious is the risk of war now?

AX: Very serious. I am very concerned about the future ethnic polarisation. War in Macedonia can be a regional war because the country is in the centre of the Balkans. We can't have a local war as in Bosnia or Kosovo. It would be a multilateral war because of the interests of the Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs and Albanians.

IWPR: Do you think that the EU and NATO representatives accept your view that changing the constitution is critical?

AX: They understand but they do not want to be involved in an internal affair in Macedonia. They want to test Macedonian maturity to solve domestic problems. They want to use this crisis as a test for us all, to see if we're ready to join the European Community.

IWPR: Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

AX: I am an optimist in a panic. I am waiting in panic to see what will be next. I hope that the Macedonians will be more reasonable and will understand that it is in the interests of the state to open dialogue.

IWPR: You just came from meeting President Boris Trajkovski. What is his view?

AX: He does not want to take responsibility for these deep changes. No one is ready to take this responsibility, to steer the Macedonian ship into calm waters.

IWPR: Not even one Macedonian politician?

AX: No.

IWPR: Some Macedonian opinion-formers seem to accept the idea of a change in the preamble to the constitution.

AX: They are not active enough. Who is active? The nationalists in the Academy of Sciences, who say not to touch the constitution. This is the reason I am talking about opportunism.

IWPR: What do you think of the recent arrest by the government of Albanians in Tetovo suspected as dangerous elements?

AX: The logic of militarisation, the logic of punishing problems, will lead to more complications. We suggest to democratise the crisis, to demilitarise society and to give amnesty to everyone who was involved in this crisis. Only the soft approach, only the political approach, only the liberalisation of the crisis and the society, can bring lasting peace in Macedonia.

Interview conducted by IWPR Trustee and Guardian foreign affairs columnist Martin Woollacott, Executive Director Anthony Borden and IWPR contributor Veton Latifi.

**Location:** Balkans  
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