

Recognising The KLA

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Skopje appears to have accepted that it must recognise the political role of the KLA.

The southern Balkans took a modest but important step towards normality this week with an official quasi-state visit of Kosovo's acting prime-minister Hashim Thaci to Macedonia.

The visit included a stop in Tetovo, for a unique trilateral meeting with Albanian Prime Minister Pandeli Majko, as well as leading Albanian politicians from Macedonia. The following day, Ibrahim Rugova, the Kosovo Albanian "President" also arrived in the Macedonian capital. But the notable visit was Thaci's.

Thaci, the political leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), was received June 16 by Macedonian Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski with all the formality of a head of state. Georgievski, who heads the Macedonian nationalist VMRO-DMNPE, the largest party in the governing coalition, underlined his support for Thaci and the provisional Kosovo governing administration appointed by the KLA.

"It is in Macedonia's interests for the administration of Hashim Thaci to be established in Kosovo," Georgievski said. "This will favour political stability, as well as the economic prosperity of Kosovo."

The two leaders pledged to work together in resolving mutual problems, including establishing liaison offices in Pristina and Skopje, resolving minor unresolved border disputes, and organising a follow-up visit by the Macedonian premier to Kosovo.

Such open support for the KLA leader is notable at a time when NATO countries are expressing concern about demilitarising and otherwise "restraining" the Albanian militants within Kosovo. Reports in the international press in recent days have focused on the delicate task of securing control over Pristina, Prizren, the border with Albania and other strategic points from the KLA.

Yet according to an Albanian source close to the meetings, Thaci's sudden visit was co-ordinated with support from the US, though the Skopje embassy denies this.

Given the importance impoverished Macedonia places on financial and political support from the West, Macedonian political analysts consider it unlikely that Georgievski would engage in such public diplomacy with Thaci without Washington's consent.

The relaxed manner of the meetings and moderate statements suggest an effort to draw Thaci and the KLA away from armed struggle towards formal and democratic politics.

Also notable from the visit was the great restraint shown by the Macedonian press--even the nationalist newspapers. "Premier Honours Hashim Thaci," Macedonia Denes, the Skopje daily, noted grudgingly, taking care in an editorial standfirst to put dismissive quotation marks around references to "Prime Minister" Thaci and his proposed "embassy" in Skopje. Other nationalist papers did not see fit even to mention the meeting on the front page.

In the usual Balkan context, high-level meetings between national leaders of rival ethnic groups would

unleash a storm of rumour about "secret" accords to divide up another long-suffering plot of Balkan turf. Speculation about such a deal between Albanian and Macedonian parties was touted by one newspaper during Macedonia's parliamentary elections last autumn.

The KLA has long been derided in Macedonia as violent separatists, hell-bent on securing independence for Kosovo and ultimately union with Tirana in a Greater Albania. That would inevitably mean the division of Macedonia, with the Albanian-majority west of the country, including Tetovo, joining the new state.

Only two months ago, the Macedonian Interior Minister Pavle Trianov raised alarms over the discovery of what he claimed was a KLA base and weapons cache in Macedonia. Other senior Macedonian members of the Skopje government subsequently denied the report. But the perception of the KLA--and indeed all Albanians--as drug- and arms-running terrorists was confirmed within the Albanophobic Macedonian press, many of the Macedonian political parties and much of the Macedonian population at large.

Less than a year ago, Giorgievski, a founder of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation - Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VRMO-DPMNE), would have been the first to attack dialogue with a Kosovo Albanian hard-liner. VRMO-DPMNE has long been considered an extremist nationalist group. Its goal was seen as a "Macedonia for Macedonians"--excluding Albanians from real political power.

Yet the prospect of a peaceful settlement within Kosovo has had an immediate impact, serving to soothe regional tensions almost as quickly as the NATO bombing sent them spiraling.

Macedonia's gravest concern has been the 360,000 Kosovo Albanians who flooded the country, of whom around 260,000 remain. This raised anxiety among Macedonians, including the ruling VMRO-DPMNE, of a permanent demographic shift, while frustrating many Albanians in Macedonia, who felt the country should have been more welcoming.

Early in the bombing, tensions over the refugee issue threatened a major political crisis in Macedonia, with the risk that Albanian leader Arben Xhaferi would pull his Democratic Party of Albanians (PDP) out of the coalition government. With the country serving as a major base for Western troops, Macedonians also feared a spill-over of the war, by direct attack or other instigation by Belgrade. While Albanians generally supported NATO, Macedonians broadly opposed the bombing against Yugoslavia.

With Kosovo Albanians demonstrating their urgent wish to return, and the risks of attack from Belgrade removed, this left Skopje with one final main concern over Kosovo, that the KLA will continue its violent struggle to achieve Greater Albanian--including portions of Macedonia.

A conclave of top Albanian officials from three countries in Tetovo, not long ago scene of violence over the unofficial Albanian-language university there, would also have sent Macedonian commentators into a fit of nationalist apoplexy.

The Thaci-Giorgievski meeting dominated a session of parliament the next day which became so chaotic that the members could not even agree an agenda. Social Democratic deputy and former Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski accused the government of undermining Macedonia's national interest by recognising an independent Kosovo and called for massive demonstrations.

Yet Thaci himself set a decisively moderate and positive tone. "We must leave hate to the past, and start thinking about the prosperity of the Balkans," he said after what an Albanian source close to the session with Giorgievski described as a very open and cordial discussion. He also stressed the need for open borders, economic development, and intensive political contacts between Kosovo and Macedonia.

The subsequent meeting in Tetovo of top Albanians from the three territories also seemed calculated to demonstrate that political communications across borders to discuss issues of mutual concern could be stabilising rather than threatening.

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