

Tirana and Belgrade Build Bridges

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Uneasy Balkan neighbours set aside differences over Kosovo in effort to improve relations.

The resumption of air links between Serbia and Albania has signalled a growing rapprochement between two countries, which had been at odds since the days of the Ottoman Empire.

For the first time in 21 years, a Yugoslav airline, JAT, jet flew into Tirana on December 15 to start up a three-flights-a-week schedule. The ATR72 aircraft carried an official delegation, which held talks on economic links and broached the prospect of new highways across the Balkans.

JAT began flights to Albania in 1938 but halted the service in 1981 when relations between Belgrade and Tirana were in a deep freeze. Albania broke ties with the late president Josip Broz Tito after the end of World War Two and animosity was renewed in 1999 when NATO bombarded Yugoslavia to halt the repression of Kosovo Albanians.

The then-Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic accused Albania of supporting rebel forces in Kosovo and reduced diplomatic ties to charge d'affaires level.

After Milosevic's ouster two years ago, the new pro-western leadership sought to improve relations with Yugoslavia's neighbors, including Albania. The two countries officially re-established diplomatic ties in January 2001.

Recently, relations have grown even warmer as both countries strive for their long-term goal of joining the European Union. Albanian deputy prime minister and foreign minister Ilir Meta visited Belgrade in November and Serbian deputy Prime Minister Nebojsa Covic travelled to Tirana aboard the JAT flight on Sunday. Both leaders were accompanied by groups of businessmen.

During Meta's visit, the two countries were reported ready to sign 14 bilateral agreements, starting with the JAT flights. Meta and Goran Svilanovic, Yugoslav foreign minister, agreed to abolish visas for official visits and to promote economic links. Meta told reporters the agreements would boost cooperation "not only through trade and the economy, but also through intellectual exchanges".

Svilanovic said the November talks also focused on ways of joining the EU. The two officials announced that an agreement on free trade would be signed in the next few months.

In Tirana, Covic met top Albanian officials, including the Prime Minister Fatos Nano who urged Belgrade to join in raising funds for a highway connecting Albania's port of Durrës, Pristina, Nis and Belgrade. "Our aim is to reach western European standards in all countries of the western Balkans, including Kosovo. They should achieve parameters of a democratic multi-cultural life," Nano told Covic.

During these meetings both sides played down the disputed issue of Kosovo's future, referring to the matter only in general terms. Nano said that "necessary conditions" were being created for the return of Kosovo Serbs and that this would contribute towards building a civil society.

The new Yugoslav ambassador, Cafo Kapetanović, who is of Albanian origin from Ulcinj in Montenegro, also

said, "There is no reason why Kosovo should interfere in our relations".

Albanian leaders in Kosovo, however, might take a different view. They were recently angered by the inclusion of Kosovo in the new constitution linking Serbia and Montenegro and would like to see Tirana playing more significant role in their bid for independence.

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