

Tirana and Belgrade Restore Ties

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Tirana smooths over nationalist opposition to its decision to re-establish diplomatic ties with Belgrade.

Tirana seems to have diffused nationalist protests in Kosovo and Albania over its restoration of diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia.

Kosovo leaders had seen the renewal of ties as a betrayal. Their grievances were then exploited by the Albanian opposition.

The nationalist protests, however, eased following talks between Albania's Deputy Foreign Minister Pellumb Xhufi and Kosovo Albanian leaders in Pristina.

Tirana appears to have persuaded Kosovar leaders that far from abandoning Kosovo, it was attempting to establish a sound basis for the province's campaign for independence.

Diplomatic ties between the two countries were re-established on January 17, five days after an approach from Belgrade, an Albanian foreign ministry statement said.

Links were severed in March 1999 by the Yugoslav government over Albania's support of the NATO bombing campaign.

In restoring diplomatic relations, the Albanian government implicitly accepts United Nations Resolution 1244, which recognises Kosovo as a province of Serbia - hence the hostile reception to the news from Kosovo Albanian politicians intent on pushing for independence for the province.

Xhufi's visit to Pristina appears to have smoothed ruffled feathers. A few days later, Ramush Haradinaj, leader of the Alliance for Kosovo's Future, said on Voice of America radio that he supported Tirana's decision and believed the move would prove to be positive for Kosovo Albanians.

Tirana's representatives in Belgrade will provide Kosovo Albanians with a voice in the Yugoslav capital to both remind the new authorities there of the numerous problems yet to be resolved in the province and provide valuable insights into what the Yugoslav authorities intend to do with it.

A pressing issue is the fate of Kosovo Albanian prisoners currently held in Serbian jails. The Kosovars are demanding their release, but no political party from Pristina dares to talk to Belgrade on this or any other matter ahead of the general elections expected later this year.

An Albanian foreign ministry statement on January 21 confirming the re-establishment of diplomatic relations said, "The Albanian government has made clear that the release of Kosovar political prisoners and the [fate] of the missing from the conflict in Kosova are issues of special importance, which the new Belgrade authorities should treat as a priority and in a democratic way."

Eager to exploit the Albanian government's discomfiture immediately after the restoration of diplomatic

relations, the country's opposition politicians joined Kosovo Albanians in denouncing the move as "too hasty".

The main opposition party, former President Sali Berisha's Democrats, said the government should have attached preconditions to any agreement with Belgrade.

Berisha repeated the old accusation that the ruling Socialists were "linked" to Belgrade and did not enjoy the support of Kosovo Albanians.

The hostility aroused by the decision exposed a lack of coordination within the Albanian government. Conflicting reports and comments called into question whether ties had in fact been re-established or were simply under discussion.

On January 22, the head of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee, Sabri Godo, said in a television interview he would need to seek clarification from the foreign minister.

"I am not clear if relations were re-established or only the talks to re-establish them were started," Godo told Television Arberia. "The latter would be the right course of action at the moment."

This appeared to contradict both the foreign ministry statement from the day before and comments from United Nations Balkans envoy Carl Bildt that Tirana re-established relations the previous week.

Albanian Foreign Ministry spokesman Sokol Gjoka attempted to shed more light on matters saying, "there's no confusion". Tirana had responded positively to an approach from Belgrade on January 17, he said, "but of course there are procedures to follow."

Albanian Foreign Minister Paskal Milo said he had consulted with Western governments, especially the United States, before coming to agreement with the Yugoslav authorities.

The situation was further confused by conflicting reports that Socialist leader Fatos Nano had met Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica during his recent trip to Athens.

In 1997, Nano seriously undermined his own credibility at home and among Kosovo Albanians when he met former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic in Crete.

Clearly worried that a meeting with Kostunica could also prove damaging, Nano's spokesman immediately denied the reports. The following day, however, Greek media reported Nano had met Yugoslav Federal Foreign Minister Goran Svilanovic in an Athens hotel.

Finally, on his return to Tirana, Nano said he had met Kostunica and Svilanovic in the Greek capital and had discussed the fate of Kosovo Albanian prisoners, the "disappeared" and the "democratic and peaceful development of the Balkans".

Nano's actions are not expected win him support in Albania or Kosovo, but could bolster his standing in the West. He met US Ambassador Joseph Limprecht on his return to Tirana, an indication Washington approved of decision to meet Kostunica.

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