



Weekly Briefing

**Albania external relations briefing:
Albania and Kosovo: the Leaders, the People, the
Narrative**

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Summary

Article 8 of the Constitution Albania notes, “*The Republic of Albania protects the national rights of the Albanian people living outside its borders*” – this is specifically designed for Kosovo. For the Albanian state authorities defending/protecting Kosovo is a constitutional obligation. For the Albanian people, Kosovo citizens are brothers and sisters with one language, one history, same roots, all Albanians. The clashes in the north of Kosovo have been the main theme for Albanian politicians, media, civil society, and citizens for weeks in a row, but most of all, the attitude of Edi Rama towards Albin Kurti is the center of all narrative.

Introduction

Violent clashes took place in the north of Kosovo at the end of May 2023, and the chain reaction they created has been the topic of all discussions in Albania since the day they started. As the situation is evolving by the day, so is the attitude of Prime Minister (PM) Edi Rama. The head of the Albanian government was quick to adopt a critical stance regarding Kosovar institutions’ acts, specifically PM Albin Kurti. Wanting to play a major regional role in this type of “big brother” approach towards Kurti, Rama is juggling with the Western powers on the one hand and the Albanian public opinion on the other.

Unfolding of events and the governmental (Rama’s) stance

Since the tension of the situation in the northern part of Kosovo, Rama's disagreement has hit a new high with Albin Kurti. Rama has repeatedly asked Kosovo to listen to the demands of the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) regarding the situation in the north. He has also requested the establishment of the Association of Municipalities with a Serbian majority in Kosovo, describing it as an international obligation of Kosovo. These developments are seen as a low point in Kosovo-Albania interstate relations.¹

The first public stance of Rama on the matter was made in a press conference on the future of Kosovo on June 8th. He announced that he had submitted a draft statute of the

¹ Rama's attitude towards Kosovo - dissatisfaction in Tirana and Pristina. <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/rama-kurti-qendrimi-ndaj-kosoves-/32459501.html>

Association for Municipalities in Kosovo, with a majority of Serbian residents, to the French President and the German Chancellor. According to Rama, the draft was prepared by experts, and he expects that it will be valid to take the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue to another level.² This provoked vivid reactions in Kosovo.³ The fact that the government of Albania sent an idea to other authorities (Berlin and Paris) before sending its draft proposal to the government of Kosovo was widely considered a huge disappointment. Many have argued that this volatile situation is bigger than the leaders. Rama and Kurti have the responsibility to shoulder these events in close communication with each other.⁴

Canceling the joint government meeting: Seeing that Kurti would not listen to any of the discourse and suggestions coming from Tirana, Rama made another move forward that somehow irritated the public opinion further. In a last-minute twist, the Albanian Prime Minister announced that he had decided to cancel an annual intergovernmental meeting between Kosovo and Albania. Rama justified this act by claiming that due to the tense circumstances, he had proposed a smaller meeting but was not accepted by the counterpart. He also stated that the meeting could not be held "under the circumstances of Kosovo's difficult relations with the entire Euro-Atlantic community," referring to international criticism. This was the last in a series of back and fourth public declarations between the two sides. For many experts in Albania, the cancellation of a joint meeting between the two governments has further damaged already frayed relations between Albin Kurti and Edi Rama. This is the latest in a series of open disputes between the two, which has turned into a personal fight.⁵

Former Prime Minister Sali Berisha, through a reaction, described the unilateral decision of Rama to cancel the joint meeting of the two governments as an act of betrayal towards Kosovo. He points out that Rama, enraged by the rejection of his draft by Kosovo, decided to cancel the meeting of the two governments, which only serve Serbia and Vucic.⁶ Besides the opposition, many circles in Albania were critical of this decision; for them, Edi Rama, who was trying to act as a mediator, instead should have taken a firm stand in unison with the Kurti government. They go even further, as to imply that this decision will be a part

² Rama hands Macron and Scholz a draft statute of the Association. <https://www.koha.net/en/arboretum/380858/Rama-hands-Macron-and-Scholz-a-draft-of-the-association/>

³ Association: Reactions from Kosovo after Edi Rama's proposal. <https://www.dw.com/sq/asociacioni-reagimet-nga-kosova-pas-propozimit-t%C3%AB-edi-ram%C3%ABs/a-65866204>

⁴ Kosovo, the 'traitor Rama' and Kurti. <https://gazetadita.al/kosova-tradh3tari-rama-dhe-kurti-nje-analize-e-raportit-mes-dy-te-majteve/>

⁵ Fraternal Discord: Rama's Cancellation of Meeting With Kurti Strains Kosovo-Albania Ties. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/15/fraternal-discord-ramas-cancellation-of-meeting-with-kurti-strains-kosovo-albania-ties/>

⁶ The cancellation of the meeting of the two governments, Berisha: Rama was ordered by Vucic. <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/anulimi-i-mbledhjes-se-dy-qeverive-berisha-rama-u-urdherua-nga-vucic/>

of the history of shame that he chose to be an ally to Serbia instead of Kosovo. With the cancellation of the meeting planned in Gjakova and with the entire political course Rama has been following lately, it is openly seen that his attitude is not in support of Kosovo, and he is serving a different agenda.⁷

Three Kosovo policemen arrested: The annulment of the meeting in the public domain was immediately substituted with another event. On May 14th, the Kosovo Police made public that three of its members from the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) were arrested by the Serbian authorities near the border with Serbia. This arrest was executed by the special forces of the Serbian gendarmerie in Leposavic and brought the reaction of the citizens in Albania, who came out in protest on the main boulevard in Tirana. The protesters say that the situation in the north of Kosovo has affected them, and they have called for Albania to support Kosovo.⁸

The allies' discontent: Yet, some circles in Albania criticize Kurti as much as Rama does. To them, this is delirious irresponsibility, and the argument is made regarding what is labeled as reckless decisions. There is a lack of a sense of national gratitude as well as state obligations to consult in advance with "liberators/USA," as well as on the "vital necessity" that Kosovo has for strengthening cooperation with the US, argues a former Albanian general.⁹ Indeed, the US plays a crucial role in this endeavor. The American envoy for the Balkans, Gabriel Escobar, has been particularly harsh on the matter. He has said from the beginning that the US has conveyed direct criticism to Albin Kurti, but Escobar has been especially sharp. He stated publicly that Washington does not support an individual who has no instinct for cooperation. This declaration came a few days after Kosovo was excluded from the large NATO military maneuver in Europe, "Defender Europe 23". Some argue that there is too much at stake for one person to take over in this way. Kurti is convinced that he is doing the right thing. Before him, there were dozens and maybe hundreds of leaders convinced that they were doing the right thing while they were gambling on the fate of their people! Because what Kurti is doing is an adventurous game of gambling with the nerves, the will, and the attitude of the Western powers toward the status of Kosovo and its future, argues another Albanian analyst.¹⁰

⁷ Edi Rama, the prime minister of shame. <https://sot.com.al/opinion-editorial/edi-rama-kryeministri-i-turpit-i594879>

⁸ Kidnapping of 3 KSF members, Kurti convenes the Security Council tomorrow. <https://politiko.al/english/kosova/rrembimi-i-3-ane-tareve-te-fsk-se-kurti-mbledh-neser-keshillin-e-sigurise-i485197>

⁹ The future of Kosovo threatened by the delusional power in Pristina. <http://www.panorama.com.al/ardhmeria-e-kosoves-e-kerccenuar-nga-delirantet-e-pushtetit-ne-prishtine/>

¹⁰ The bitter diplomat Escobar and the "individual" Kurti. <https://www.voxnews.al/analiza/diplomati-i-hidhur-escobar-dhe-individi-kurti-i41647>

“Freezing” the Open Balkans: on June 19th, Edi Rama once again called on Belgrade to immediately release the three officers; otherwise, bilateral relations between Albania and Serbia will take steps back. But also adds that Kosovo will be the biggest loser if de-escalation does not happen.¹¹ However, he was not heard in Belgrade, so on June 23rd, he stated in a press conference that there would be no meeting about the Open Balkans or other relations until Belgrade unconditionally released the three police officers. He is “freezing” not only the Open Balkans but also any kind of dialogue with Belgrade unless they do not release Kosovar policemen. The Prime Minister described the detention of Kosovar policemen in prison as a “state aberration” on the part of Serbia.¹² This case has caused numerous reactions not only in Kosovo and Serbia but also in the European Union and the USA, which have constantly demanded their release. They were also mentioned during the visit of the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, in Tirana. Indeed, it was also speculated in Albania that Orbán was negotiating with Vucic for their release. Finally, on June 26th, they were freed and let go back to their homes.

Albanians’ orientation: In seeing the comments of the average Albanian citizen, they are taking a stance and side with Kosovo. Regardless of who is in power, Albanians have always been inclined towards supporting Kosovars at any time in history. Even though Albanians typically show their solidarity through several symbolic actions, power struggles and statehood disputes boil below the surface. The political tensions and competing goals between Albania and Kosovo are now boiling over, and the outcome will primarily benefit Serbia's regional agenda.¹³ Pristina has an accumulation of grievances against Tirana, but mostly with Edi Rama. Paradoxically, having displayed staunch resistance to Belgrade’s dominance for several decades, Pristina now has to demonstrate its resistance to Tirana’s “big brother” syndrome.¹⁴ For some, this is raising Rama’s reputation as a regional problem solver, but at what cost? Only time will tell.

¹¹ Albanian PM warns of “icy” relations with Serbia over Kosovo policemen detention. <https://euronews.al/en/albanian-pm-warns-of-icy-relations-with-serbia-over-kosovo-policemen-detention/>

¹² Rama "freezes" the Open Balkans until the release of 3 policemen. <https://lapsi.al/2023/06/23/rama-asnje-marredhenie-me-serbine-asnje-takim-per-ballkanin-e-hapur/>

¹³ Janusz Bugajski for The Geopost: Intra-Albanian conflicts are intensifying. <https://thegeopost.com/en/analysis/janusz-bugajski-for-the-geopost-intra-albanian-conflicts-are-intensifying/>

¹⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion

Politics on the matter is divided, the people are united, and the narrative is changing by the day. With this volatile situation, fear and concerns for destabilization of the region are the priority on every agenda. This will be a situation that will be decided by politics, the high-level/great power one, and Albanians know that. Locally and regionally, some leaders want that name engraved in the annals of history, and they are trying to do so. The point is, which chapter of history will they lead – the dark or the glorious one?