



Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia external relations briefing:
The Zelensky of the Balkans, Arbin Kurti, Incites Secessionism and
Ethno-Nationalism During Unofficial Visit to Macedonia**
Gjorgjioska Marija Adela


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

The Zelensky of the Balkans, Arbin Kurti, Incites Secessionism and Ethno-Nationalism During Unofficial Visit to Macedonia

Summary

On Friday 11th of August, Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti undertook a visit to two Macedonian municipalities, Skopje and Tetovo. He was received by the mayors of these municipalities, both from the ethno-nationalist Albanian opposition bloc. During his address in Tetovo, before a substantial gathering of his supporters, a flag symbolizing "Greater Albania" was prominently displayed, while the official Macedonian flag was conspicuously absent from the scene. In Skopje's municipality of Chair, Kurti presided over the renaming of a road, now bearing the name of an ethno-Albanian nationalist, Adem Demaçi. This road had previously been known as the "2nd Macedonian Assault Brigade," a name honoring the anti-fascist legacy of the nation from the Second World War. The country's President Pendarovski and Skopje's Mayor Arsovska both criticized Kurti's "nationalist rhetoric" and characterized his visit as an act that "fueled ethnic animosity." Levica emerged as the sole political party to promptly denounce Kurti's visit.

Kosovo's PM, Albin Kurti, conducted an unofficial visit to Macedonia on Friday, August 11th, during which he met with the mayors of the Skopje municipalities, Cair's Visar Ganiju, and Tetovo's Bilal Kasami. In the Macedonian capital, Kurti participated in the commemoration of a street formerly named "Second Macedonian Strike Brigade," which has now been renamed "Adem Demaci" street. In Tetovo, Kurti delivered an address before a significant gathering of his supporters. During this event, a flag depicting a map of Greater Albania was prominently displayed alongside the flags of Kosovo and Albania. Addressing the assembled crowd, Prime Minister Kurti conveyed, "The North Atlantic Alliance, NATO, the European Union, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom serve as invaluable platforms that provide us with protection and security, particularly in the current context where Russian imperialism has rekindled conflict on our European continent."¹ During the event, Kurti directed a message to

¹ Kurti appeals to North Macedonia: Close to Albanians and Bulgarians and far from Serbia, published on 12.08.2023, available at

<https://kosovapress.com/en/%E2%80%8Bkurti-thirrje-maqedonise-se-veriut-afer-shqiptareve-e-bullgareve-dhe-larg-serbise/> accessed on 14.09.2023

Macedonia, stating, "The closer North Macedonia aligns itself with Kosovo, Albania, and Bulgaria, and distances itself from Serbia— which remains connected to figures like Milosevic and Putin— the more imminent its path to joining the European Union. Our Balkan region, in turn, will grow more European and inherently secure. In this endeavor, we stand ready to assist and provide support to North Macedonia."² Kurti concluded his remarks by noting the interconnectedness of the regions, stating, "What unfolds in Kosovo resonates in Tetovo just as your concerns echo within our borders. The bond is reciprocal; events on either side are mutually felt, highlighting our shared concerns and aspirations."³ According to media accounts, while the Macedonian national anthem was omitted, the Kosovo anthem was audible during the event. Meanwhile, a video snippet of the mayor of Tetovo's address surfaced on social media platforms. In the video, he purportedly referred to Kurti as the "special prime minister of Tetovo" and "the prime minister of all Albanians."⁴

The media noted that the protocols at these events were unconstitutional and scandalous. In a parallel response, Stevo Pendarovski, the president of Macedonia, called for the organizers of these gatherings to face penalties. In his official statement regarding the visit, he asserted, "The organizers of public gatherings in Cair and Tetovo must be held accountable for their violation of legal regulations regarding the usage of the state flag, anthem, as well as community flags and symbols. Their complete disregard for state symbols is unmistakable."⁵ Pendarovski urged the relevant authorities to expedite the required procedures. He also tackled the issue of showcasing symbols that propagate the notion of a "large-state chauvinist idea" during the gatherings. "By showcasing provocative nationalist iconography that endorses chauvinistic notions of a larger state, they are fanning the flames of ethnic animosity and intolerance. This unequivocally goes against the fundamental principles and values outlined in the Framework

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Pendarovski: The organizers of Cair and Tetovo gatherings to be punished; Kurti: N. Macedonia is an ally, the gatherings were not directed against anyone, published on 14.08.2023, available at

<https://kossev.info/pendarovski-the-organizers-of-cair-and-tetovo-gatherings-to-be-punished-kurti-n-macedonia-is-an-ally-the-gatherings-were-not-directed-against-anyone/> accessed on 14.09.2023

⁵ President Pendarovski with a sharp reaction to the flag of "Greater Albania" in Tetovo during the visit to Kurti, published on 13.08.2023, available at <https://telma.com.mk/2023/08/13/pretsedatelot-pendarovski-so-ostra-reakcija-za-znameto-na-golema-albanija-vo-tetovo-pri-posetata-na-kurti/> accessed on 14.09.2023

Agreement, as well as the concept of Macedonia as a diverse, multi-ethnic nation," Pendarovski stated.⁶

Skopje Mayor Danela Arsovska strongly condemned the nationalist rhetoric of Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti. Moreover, Arsovska submitted an initiative to the Council of the City of Skopje to restore the name of the street "Second Macedonian Brigade", which was changed by the previous composition of the council to "Adem Demachi", and for which the Government gave its consent to the change, the City announced.⁷ Moreover, she added: "I urge all councils within the City of Skopje's Council to cast their votes in favor of the proposed resolution. This step will rectify the injustice suffered by 230 heroes hailing from diverse ethnic backgrounds, all of whom were valiant members of the Second Macedonian Brigade. These heroes made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of Macedonia. It is my plea that this initiative remains free from political manipulation or exploitation, particularly in terms of stoking ethnic conflicts. This is especially crucial considering that a significant portion of these heroes, beyond the Macedonian community, encompassed Albanians, Roma, and Vlachs."⁸

The political party Levica also condemned Kurti's visit describing it as "a separatist agenda of chauvinist ideas from the last century" and "a flagrant humiliation of the integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Macedonia". In its statement, Levica reminded that Adem Demachi was a Kosovar politician who has faced accusations of advocating secessionism during the era of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. They concluded that: "The entirety of Albin Kurti's visit and the subsequent occurrences paint a picture devoid of respect for the nation's emblematic symbols. Instead, they seem to embody actions that detract from the honor of the Macedonian state and propagate sentiments aligned with "Greater Albania," an agenda that can be perceived as anti-state."⁹ Left publicly called for a serious investigation

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Arsovska suggests to Kurti in Pristina to name the street Todor Aleksandrov, published on 14.08.2023, available at

<https://netpress.com.mk/arsovska-mu-predlaga-na-kurti-vo-prishtina-da-imenuva-ulica-todor-aleksandrov/>, accessed on 15.09.2023

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Albin Kurti's visit is a separatist agenda of chauvinist ideas from the last century, published on 13.08.2023, available at

regarding the organization of the visit, which had a separatist character, as well as the declaration of Albin Kurti as persona non grata. Similarly, the political party VMRO-DPMNE, criticized the government under the leadership of the Social Democratic Union (SDSM) for allowing Kurti's visit to unfold as it did. They accused the government of compromising Macedonian interests and failing to protect the country's sovereignty.¹⁰

In contrast to these reactions, the office of Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski also released a statement addressing the visit, but failed to strongly condemn it: "The Office of the President of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia wishes to clarify that the visit by Prime Minister Albin Kurti of Kosovo is, first and foremost, a private visit. For further information regarding the invitation, protocol, and organization of the aforementioned event, kindly direct your inquiries to the event organizer," the statement from the Government declared.¹¹ "In any case, the Prime Minister's Office deems the display of flags that are not of a national nature to be contrary to protocols and laws governing the organization of events in the presence of foreign dignitaries. Moreover, the type of iconography observed at the event in the presence of a high representative from a foreign country is inappropriate and unacceptable in a United Nations member state and a NATO member country. In this regard, we would like to inform you additionally that the Prime Minister's Office has been in contact with the Ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo to the Republic of North Macedonia during the day, concerning the aforementioned iconography used during the private visit of the Kosovo Prime Minister to the country," the statement clarifies.

A CNN article published shortly after Kurti's visit to Macedonia, described him as "Zelensky of the Balkans".¹² The article was openly supportive of Kurti's divisive politics,

<https://levica.mk/pres-centar/soopshtenija-reakcii/posetata-na-albin-kurti-e-separacionisticka-agenda-na-sovinisticki-idei-od-minatit-vek/> accessed on 14.09.2023

¹⁰ Controversy and debate surrounding Albin Kurti's visit to North Macedonia, published on 14.08.2023, available at

<https://euronews.al/en/controversy-and-debate-surrounding-albin-kurtis-visit-to-north-macedonia/> accessed on 15.09.2023

¹¹ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/32545407.html>

¹² The West's 'see no evil' approach to Serbia's Vucic risks destabilizing the Balkans, published on 14.08.2023, available at

which have stirred up tensions in the north of Kosovo for several months now. His visit to Macedonia suggests that the consequences of similar actions may have repercussions beyond Kosovo and into the territory of Macedonia.

In August 2023, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti's unofficial visit to Macedonia sparked a notable wave of reactions, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of ethno-nationalism and secessionism prevailing in the Balkans. This visit, characterized by symbolic gestures and statements, unveiled a sequence of interwoven political narratives that echo both historical tensions and contemporary aspirations. Kurti's presence in Macedonian municipalities, Skopje and Tetovo, carried ramifications that surpassed mere diplomatic engagement. The selection of these locales, associated with ethno-nationalist Albanian leadership, established a platform that many interpreted as a purposeful display of unity among communities with shared ethnic backgrounds across national borders. The renaming of a street within the Chair municipality to honor Adem Demaci, a controversial figure linked to Kosovar secessionist ideals, underscored Kurti's association with narratives of separatism. The responses to Kurti's visit vividly highlighted the deep divisions present within Macedonia's political landscape. President Pendarovski's plea for accountability and the criticism voiced by opposition parties such as Levica and VMRO-DPMNE accentuated concerns regarding the potential for the visit to incite ethnic discord and erode the sanctity of national symbols. CNN's portrayal of Kurti as the "Zelensky of the Balkans," drawing parallels with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, further underscores the broader ramifications of his actions. The potential repercussions of his visit surpassing Kosovo's borders and potentially impacting Macedonia's stability amplifies the significance of his visit. The implications of his actions exceed mere symbolic gestures, illuminating the intricate equilibrium between preserving a multi-ethnic harmony and upholding the sovereignty of the Macedonian state.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/14/europe/serbia-vucic-kosovo-balkans-west-intl-cmd/index.html> accessed on 14.09.2023