

## Rama-Vucic: A Historic Visit?

Written by Joseph Coelho

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JOSEPH COELHO, DEC 12 2014

On 10 November 2014, the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, embarked on a two-day diplomatic visit to Serbia to meet his Serbian counterpart, Aleksandar Vucic. European policymakers and media around the world portrayed the visit as a historical moment because it was the first time in over six decades a head of government from either country hosted the other. According to most media accounts, the last time was in 1946 when the Albanian communist dictator, Enver Hoxha, visited Belgrade to meet with then Yugoslavia's leadership. Under pressure from the European Union, particularly Germany, the recent Albanian visit to Serbia was framed as a significant step forward for both countries to achieve their mutual goal of European integration. By deepening cooperation on several policy fronts, both countries could also contribute to regional stability and work towards consolidating peace in the Western Balkans.

Such expectations, however, were diminished by a football brawl on 14 October 2014 between the two national teams during a European Championship qualifying match in Belgrade. The match was cancelled after forty-one minutes of play when an unmanned drone carrying a flag signifying "Greater Albania" flew over the field, sparking a brawl between the players and Serbian fans who eventually invaded the field. Without any concrete evidence, Serbia quickly accused Rama's brother, Olsi Rama, of flying the drone over the field from his VIP suite in Partizan stadium. The Albanian delegation that attended the game strongly denied the accusation, suggesting that the Serbs staged the whole incident. Following the match, both Rama and Vucic took to social media to exchange insults. Leaders on neither side condemned the violent incident. Instead, Serbs blamed Albanians for instigating the violence while Albanians lauded the flying drone as a victory of sorts. In the end, both football associations were punished and fined for their conduct by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) and the highly anticipated meeting between Rama and Vucic was postponed from October 22 to November 10.

It did not take long for the Western media to pick up the story and perpetuate the myth that what was at play was not necessarily two football associations competing in Europe's most competitive tournament, but a rivalry of long-standing narratives that have historically plagued Albania-Serbia relations. In other words, history had once again reared its ugly head between these two countries. The violent nature of the football match was just a continuing expression of virulent nationalism that is part of a wider historical narrative of Greater Albania versus Greater Serbia. Given this, attempts at reconciliation and achieving a common future under the umbrella of the European Union are essentially uncertain, or worst, futile. The International Institute of Middle-East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES), based in Ljubljana, articulated this view in a recent analysis, arguing that the "football match... provides a good example that no matter how much the spirit of the future is present, the spirit of the past is still strong enough to thwart the plans for the future. Abandonment of the football match between Serbia and Albania illustrates all the complexities of relations in the Western Balkans."

A closer inspection of Albanian-Serbian relations, however, reveals that while differences between the two countries are real and divisive, particularly over issues such as Kosovo and minority rights, the notion that long-standing historical tensions between the two countries are responsible for today's problems is somewhat misleading. Relations between Albania and Serbia since the Second World War were at times non-existent and consisted mainly of ideological confrontations between Communist elites, disputes over Kosovo, and low-level interaction and economic pragmatism, not ancient ethnic hatreds.

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### Rama's Trip

The inauspicious circumstances described above set the stage for Rama's visit to Belgrade. But much to the dismay of European officials, relations between both leaders appeared to sink even further by the end of Rama's first day. During a joint press conference, Rama spoke about Kosovo and the need for Serbia to face reality on Kosovo's independence. "Independent Kosovo," he argued,

recognized so far by 108 different countries across the globe and supported by the International Court of Justice, is an indisputable and irrevocable regional and European reality... Let's be honest till the end – Kosovo's independence has made the Balkans a more stable region.

The news conference quickly devolved into a sharp exchange of words as Vucic, surprised by Rama's remarks on Kosovo, accused his counterpart of veering off the agreed program and denounced the Albanian premier's speech as a "provocation", noting that he could not allow Serbia to be "humiliated" by such statements. The press conference ended without a handshake and both leaders were accused of violating diplomatic protocol by the other's national press. It also did not take long before the Serbian president, Tomislav Nikolic, cancelled his meeting with Rama and quickly published a statement on national TV, denouncing Rama as an irresponsible politician and accusing Albania of being a continuing source of instability in the region.

On the second day of his trip, Rama visited the Albanian population of the Presevo Valley in southern Serbia. As expected, Rama was greeted as a hero in a festive atmosphere of Albanian music and flags. Billboards and banners stating "Welcome, Prime Minister" with the portrait of Edi Rama on them were put up around the city ahead of the visit. Rama met with local officials and insisted that his country did "not dream about Greater Albania, but about great Europe." He assured a large crowd that his country would make the issue of minority rights in the Presevo Valley an integral part of Serbia's path towards the EU. He also stated that he would never allow Albanians in Serbia to be assimilated.

The visit ended with both premiers signing agreements on document-free travel between Serbia and Albania, combating cross border crime and customs, and a memorandum of understanding on youth cooperation. In addition, both agreed that they would continue to cooperate in other policy areas, especially in terms of economic cooperation – Rama also invited Vucic to visit Tirana. The EU reaction to the meeting was particularly cautious due to the fact that Europe, in particular, German Chancellor Angel Merkel, had recently invested considerable time and political will in the region. For Merkel, the Rama-Vucic meeting represented a renewed effort by Berlin (and the EU) to improve bilateral relations between the two countries. In earlier August, Merkel hosted a summit of the heads of states and governments of the Western Balkans with the intention of showing Europe's return and strong commitment to promoting cooperation and development in the region. The debacle that emerged from the meeting poured cold water on those efforts.

Overall coverage of the historic event characterized the trip as either a diplomatic failure or producing very little in terms of improving bilateral relations. However, what is interesting about the analysis of the visit is the degree to which journalists and commentators were not surprised about the tense outcome. For them, the violence and the war of words that were exchanged in the aftermath of the football match and Rama's visit to Serbia were inevitable outcomes determined largely by a legacy of violent Balkan history.

### Too Much Bad History or Lack Thereof?

Anyone who studies or writes about the Balkans is familiar with Winston Churchill's famous quote on the Balkans that the region produces more history than it can consume. This view continues to pervade the writings of journalists and commentators who cover the Balkans today – some would say ad nauseam. Recently, the Serbian journalist, Momir Turudic, wrote in the *Vreme* weekly that we all should "[j]ust be careful not to pronounce the summit a historical one because we've had enough history in the Serb-Albanian relations." Adelina Marini, who writes for *euinside*, an online media service based in Bulgaria, agreed later with Turudic that the "visit was pronounced a historical one but it ended with the same *enough* history piled up for centuries in the Serb-Albanian relations." It should be noted that the

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Rama-Vucic meeting, whether historical or not, was scheduled among several historical ceremonies, including the centennial anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Such powerful historical symbolism was not coincidental.

Nonetheless, while Albania-Serb relations could stand to improve today, it is certainly not the case that this relationship has always been a bad one. In fact, one can argue that the lack of a relationship, or the perceived need for one, is really responsible for the recent fallout. The little interaction between Albania and Serbia (as part of Yugoslavia) after World War II is partly due to Albania's gradual descent into international isolation. After Yugoslavia's break with the Soviet Union in 1948, the communist leadership in Albania decided to align itself with the Kremlin, favoring the harsh Stalinist brand of communism over the more do-it-yourself version of communist revolution embraced by Yugoslavia. The subsequent split between Yugoslavia and Albania in 1948 put to an end any speculations regarding Kosovo's future with Albania, or at the very least, any realistic or serious discussion of a "Greater Albania". By the 1950s, relations between Tirana and Moscow also deteriorated as a result of Nikita Khrushchev's condemnation of many aspects of Stalinist rule practiced by Albania's communist leadership. The rapprochement of Soviet-Yugoslav relations in 1955 angered Tirana, who added the Soviet Union to a long list of countries it distrusted.

Albania's isolation from the communist world – including China by the late 1970s – meant that Albania's interaction with Serbia was limited and at times non-existent during this period. While Tirana condemned the ill treatment of Albanians living throughout Yugoslavia (particularly in Kosovo), the bitterness in Yugoslav-Albania relations was not based so much on ethnic enmity, but ideological disagreements and fear of political change. The policies of de-Stalinization and the later introduction of Gorbachev's perestroika reforms throughout the Soviet Union in the 1980s posed a direct threat to Albanian communist leaders who were resistant to any change or revisionism that weakened their strong grip on power. Even with the increasing demonstrations by Kosovar Albanians in 1989 and 1990 against the repressive policies of then Serbian President, Slobodan Milosevic, Tirana tended to tread carefully to avoid direct confrontation with Serbia over its policy toward Kosovo. The organized and peaceful Albanian opposition in Kosovo was not only demanding full autonomy and republic status within the Yugoslav system, but also political pluralism and free-market reforms. The communist leadership in Tirana was terrified that such demands and anti-communist ferment would also spread inside Albania, thereby undermining its power.

The breakup of Yugoslavia after 1991 and the rise of ethnic-based warfare in the region widened the gap between Albania and Serbia. In particular, the issue of Kosovo throughout the 1990s increasingly became a decisive wedge in bilateral relations, exacerbating mutual distrust and antagonism. Diplomatic relations were thus discontinued during the 1999 NATO air campaign, but were gradually restored in early 2001. Since then, Serb-Albanian relations have waxed and waned overtime and can be characterized mainly as being based on pragmatism. High-level delegations from both countries have held a series of important meetings aimed at intensifying cooperation in a number of policy areas. These included agreements on taxation of goods, cooperation in tourism, and fighting organized crime and international terrorism. Perhaps the most important signs of cooperation have been in the areas of trade and energy. A recent article by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) revealed that in spite of shaky diplomatic relations, the volume of trade between both countries has steadily increased since 2000, reaching \$170 million in total trade exports in 2013 compared to \$30 million in 2007. In particular, Albania is increasingly reliant on Serbia as its largest supplier of electricity, suggesting that Albanian political leaders are more than willing to accept Serbian electricity regardless of the concept of "Greater Serbia". Beyond bilateral diplomacy, both countries continue to participate in the work of various regional bodies and organizations, such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the South Eastern Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP), the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), the Southeast Europe Cooperation Initiative (SECI), etc. Participation in these organizations has helped both countries pave the way to faster EU membership – both Albania and Serbia are currently candidate countries for EU accession.

### **Political Reality Defies the Myths**

Yet, despite gradual improvements in bilateral relations, there continues to be a relatively low-level of interaction between both countries. According to Bojan Elek, a researcher at the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy,

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since 2000... there have been only 11 bilateral agreements signed between [Albania and Serbia]. At the same time, Serbia and Bulgaria, another neighbor, signed 33 agreements. This suggests that there is room for deepening the cooperation.

This may also suggest that perhaps Tirana and Belgrade have no real genuine need or incentive to cooperate and become better neighbors. Today, the countries no longer share a mutual border. Both premiers and their respective alliances recently won convincing elections, which gave them a lot of political capital and flexibility to pursue more pressing foreign policy objectives. For example, Serbia has been trying to balance its commitments with the EU while at the same time maintaining its historical friendship with an increasingly authoritarian and bellicose Russia. Moreover, Belgrade is more preoccupied with the Yugosphere – that is, repairing social and economic bonds with the states of the former Yugoslavia – than with a country it barely interacted with throughout much of the Cold War. And while the EU has renewed its efforts on promoting stronger bilateral relations between Tirana and Belgrade, the pressure has been at best tepid, especially in terms of avoiding sensitive issues like Kosovo. In fact, the EU has already signaled to Serbia that it does not have to recognize Kosovo's sovereignty as a requisite condition for EU membership. Belgrade must simply “normalize” its relationship with its former province and not prevent Kosovo's integration into the international community. As a result, leaders in both countries can pay lip service to Brussels while at the same time invoking nationalist rhetoric as a powerful political tool back home.

The recent explosion of vitriol emanating from both sides is therefore a bit surprising, but not entirely unexpected. Political elites from both countries have done an effective job of cultivating the perception that each nation has greater ambitions of expanding beyond their sovereign borders. For the nationalist elements within Serbian society, the threat of a Greater Albania – that is, the unification of southern areas of Serbia, Kosovo, northwestern regions of Macedonia, the southwestern part of Montenegro, and some northern parts of Greece with Albania – is real a nightmare scenario. For Albanians, the Greater Serbian project has already happened militarily during the 1990s and continued on through Belgrade's patronage in the highly autonomous Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the maintenance of parallel political structures in northern Kosovo.

However, recent political dynamics in both countries contradict the Greater Albania versus Greater Serbia narrative that is being perpetuated in the media coverage of this so-called historic visit. Writing in *Transconflict*, Florian Bieber, an expert on the region, observed that in both countries “there are no significant political players who want to create some Great nation-state”. In Albania, for example, the nationalistic Red and Black Alliance vowed to shake up the country's political scene in the 2013 parliamentary election. The new political party or movement is known for its virulent form of Albanian nationalism and an irredentist agenda. Yet, the party barely received over 10,000 votes and was unable to win even one seat in Albania's parliament. To add to this point, the former Albanian Prime Minister, Sali Berisha, attempted to capture the patriotic vote by employing fierce nationalistic language that fed into the narrative of a “Greater Albania” during the campaign for the same election. The majority of Albanian voters, however, favored the pro-European message embraced by Edi Rama and his Socialist Party. Similarly in Serbia, the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party won only 2 percent of the overall vote in the recent 2014 parliamentary election.

In sum, the recent history and political realities described above should raise doubts about the view that current tensions in Albania-Serbia relations are based on long-standing projects of greater nation-state expansion. Such narratives are myths. At the same time, it is too easy to also contend that these myths are simply devised by political elites to galvanize the masses for their own personal interests. For some, whether based on a perceived sense of insecurity or a natural right of innocence and righteousness, these myths appear to be real and are palpable. As is the case with human relations around the world, perception often triumphs over reality.

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