

The Beards of Kondovo

By Xhavit Shala

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Macedonia,¹ Ilinka Mitreva, protested strongly against a depiction of Macedonia placed on the official web page of the EU Commission to EU Enlargement Commissioner, Oli Rehn, on July 27, 2005.² The Minister considered it unacceptable that the EU comment made no mention of the “Macedonian nation or language” and described Macedonia as “a respectable territory” and “an area that combines the Bulgarian, Serb, Albanian and Greek cultures and Orthodox Christianity and Islam ”³.

In view of this strong reaction to a descriptive statement, one can’t but notice the calm with which the Macedonian authorities have followed the “Kondovo” development. Their position on this matter is at odds with the engagement of the highest levels to resolve as soon as possible the issue of the so called “bishop’s crises” with Serbia⁴.

The Macedonian authorities have not undertaken any real action to resolve the crises aside from the media speculation with the matter and allegations about the alleged involvement of Muslim radicals with beards in the matter. With the exception of an official and almost routine meeting of the National Security Council and a warning that resembles the memorable Chinese ones, the Macedonian authorities show no intention to

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²The article was first published in daily “Korrieri”, August 13, 2005 and was then carried by several Albanian internet sites

³ Skopje, Macedonia, July 27, - the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ilinka Mitreva has submitted a note of protest to the EC Ambassador to Skopje, Donato Kiarini, and the EU Commissioner on Enlargement, Oli Rehn, against the comments printed in the official internet site of the European Commission. According to the statement Mitreva considered the information published on Macedonia in the section «EU Relations with the Western Balkans » unacceptable and demanded that it be immediately removed. She emphasized that the information did not represent the true image of Macedonia and is insulting to its citizens. The information described Macedonia as "a respectable territory " and "a country that combines the Bulgarian, Serbian, Albanian, and Greek cultures and orthodox Christianity and Islam". The Macedonian media that were first informed of this information noted that there was no mentioning anywhere of the term « Macedonian nation " or "Macedonian language ". (Macedonian Government Web site, Vreme, A1 TV, Makfax – 27.07.05).

⁴ On October 8, 2005 the Macedonian President, Branko Cervenkovski, officially admitted that relations between Belgrade and Skopje are frozen as a result of the conviction of a Serb bishop in Macedonia. The Serb Media have persistently demanded from President Cervenkovski to release from prison the Serb bishop, Jovan Vranishovski, who was sentenced to 18 months of prison by the Court of Manastiri on June 23, 2005. Mr. Vranishovski was sentenced on the basis of article 319 of the Criminal Code on charges of inciting religious and racial hatred. Many Macedonian analysts have concluded that this is not only a breakdown on religious matters but marks deterioration in the relations between the two countries (Lajme. Net - 09.08.2005).

deal with Commander Krasniqi who appearing quite at ease continues to play football in the soccer field of the village school.⁵

The Macedonian calm at handling the Kondovo issue can be explained only if one assumes that the Macedonian law enforcement structures are closely monitoring it with the aim of using it in the interest of their goals that go against the advancement of the rights of Albanians there.

The Macedonian politicians are taking advantage of the development and using it as their secret card in both the domestic and foreign policy. The Macedonian parties in power are using the story to shift attention away from the economic problems Macedonia is facing and the accusation of corruption coming from the opposition and the international community. At the same time, it is also trying to persuade the losing side in the referendum, which makes up the most nationalistic segment of the parties electorate, and the opposition that it has no other way but to implement the Ohrid Agreement because failure to do so could lead to a destabilization in Macedonia.

The governing majority is using the story to tell to the EU that it has been able to only partially fulfill the accession obligations on the alleged grounds that the Albanian factor is not cooperating. Incidents such as the one in Kondovo and the media speculations with the so called radical Islamic groups that are following this story are being used by the Macedonian officials to face off pressure from the international community that is calling for a full implementation of the Ohrid Agreement. At a time when the Kosovo status discussions are starting, the Macedonian instrumentalisation of the Kondovo incident has a negative influence on the status talks.

The Albanian political parties in Macedonia all share the blame for the Kondovo crises. They were not able to become the most trusted representatives of the Albanian interests in Macedonia allowing room for a return to the military options of resolving problems,⁶ which the international community does not want to even hear them mentioned at this moment.

It was these parties who did not put their foot down for a general amnesty of all UÇK (KLA) former fighters the absence of which forced the latter to organize, rebel and take weapons against the Macedonian state.

Furthermore, following narrow party political interests, the Albanian parties in Macedonia are trying to play with and draw benefits from the Kondovo incident. They have not hesitated to even tarnish the image of their former comrades in arms as Islamic fighters. The leader of the Albanian political party in the Macedonian government did not

⁵ “Kondovo, the bell that warns of the return of an anti-Albanian climate», a report from Kondovo, by journalist Albert Gjoka, published in the daily «Express», August 10, 2005.

⁶ Commander Krasniqi, in an interview given to the daily «Express» on August 10, 2005, says: «we took up weapons to let every one know that without a full withdrawal of these anti Albanian elements, without the release from prison of our commanders and co-fighters and of the war invalids, and without a full implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, there shall be no handing over of weapons».

reject the reports printed in the Albanian and Macedonian press that he had met with the Albanian Prime Minister because of concerns over the involvement of radical islamists in the Kondovo situation. Failure to do so gives legitimacy to the accusation made in several media, and anti-Albanian ones in particular, regarding the so called radical Islamic nature⁷ of the Kondovo revolt.⁸

“Ali Ahmeti asked only that we give a chance to the agreement and the resolution of the problems through political means,” the rebel of Kondovo Krasniqi declared to a daily. “We informed him of our demands and since they are absolutely based on the Ohrid Agreement we gave him a chance. As soon as we went quiet and Ali Ahmeti promised a peaceful resolution, sworn anti-Albanian Macedonian elements started raising their heads. The BDI leader all but disappeared while we took up our weapons again, swearing that we would not give them up that easily again.”⁹

In spite of all of this, commander Krasniqi and his followers should know that in the year 2005 taking up weapons is not the way to resolving the issue in a country that is a NATO candidate and wants to enter the EU. The choosing of such a path not only penalizes them but it also incriminates them.

Ali Ahmeti, who is recognized by the internationals as a pleasant interlocutor, will soon lose this status if he proves unable to meet all the demands of his former comrades in arms, in keeping with the Ohrid Agreement and Macedonian legislation. Ahmeti and others should work together to dispel the fog of the so called radical Islamic penetration in Kondovo.¹⁰ The Albanians of Kondovo and the rest of Macedonia have been practicing their Muslim faith for centuries. Their religion is a tolerant one. Despite the attempt of the oil dollars (gulf money) to radicalize it and the high doses of islamophobia present in the west today, it would be wrong to ask Albanians to pick one faith over the other when they have cohabited in peace for centuries with both religions.

Political parties in Albania, aside from lacking information on what is actually happening in Kondovo, have also tried to draw benefits from this issue. The meetings held a few

⁷ Skopje, Macedonia – The leaders of the main Albanian opposition Democratic Party in Macedonia, Arbër Xhaferri, in an interview given to Kosovo daily “Koha Ditore” on August 13, 2005, rules out any risk from a growth of extremism among Muslims in Macedonia. Any effort « to label» the Albanian issue in the Balkans with a « Muslim robe » aims at harming the interests of the Albanian people in the region, Xhaferri said. His comments came as a reaction to information released by the media that authorities in Tirana and Skopje were exchanging information regarding the possible presence of radical Islamic elements in Kondovo (Dnevnik, Utrinski Vesnik, Veçer – 13.08.05; MIA – 12.08.05).

⁸ «Gazeta Shqiptare» of August 10 went to press with the large headlines on the front page titled : « Tirana-Skopje, the alarm about Islamic extremists goes off » and the subtitle « Secret talks in Korca between Ahmeti and Nano on the threats in Kondovo».

⁹ Interview given by Commander Krasniqi to daily Express of August 10, 2005.

¹⁰ "There are no Islamic extremists here in Kondovo, only Albanians. Ali Ahmeti is committing a grave mistake by making Tirana also believe these things. He is a weak player who is playing in the hands of Cervenkovski and who has mixed Albanian with Islamists, Commander Krasniqi says in an interview printed in daily «Gazeta Shqiptare», of August 10, 2005.

days ago by the Prime Minister of Albania with the leaders of Albanian political parties in Macedonia and the coincidental presence in these meetings of a person who has been successful in mediating the release of hostages taken by Islamic terrorist organizations, seems to have reinforced the allegations made by the media that there is a radical Islamist problem in Kondovo.¹¹ This image was further reinforced by the fact that there was no official statement made on the topics discussed during these meetings, while persons with certain interests told the press that the interlocutors discussed with concern on the penetration of radical Islamists in Kondovo¹². The Macedonian media spread this report swiftly.

The meetings, and the reports coming out of them in particular, rather than focusing on the concerns about the situation in Macedonia, want to indirectly convey to the international community the message and the threat that possible political changes in Albania may allegedly lead to an incitement of nationalism and radical Islamists that is dangerous for Europe. These were messages that were also voiced during the electoral campaign in Albania.

While politicians in Macedonia and Albania are racing to draw short term political benefits from the Kondovo story, the real winners from this history will be the radical Islamists who with the indirect help also of Macedonian Secret Services (taking advantage of the loss of faith of those rebelling in their political leaders) are trying to present themselves as the spiritual supporter of the Kondovo revolt.

Commander Krasniqi seems to have caught wind of this strategy when he says: “At the moment when we were manifesting a strong discipline to international monitoring, someone caused a conflict and physical settling of accounts between Muslim theologians. Our information says that such services are being carried for the benefit of PM Cervenkovski by the former Chairman of the Muslim Community Arif Emini, the PM’s advisor, Zejnullah Fazliu, Zenun Berisha, his mufti, and Xhemal Memeti, the accountant of the Community.”¹³ These are the names of the individuals that have been identified by other sources as well as persons who are trying, with the help of petrol dollars, to install the Wahabi ideology in the Muslim Community of Macedonia.

Albanians everywhere are the real loser of the Kondovo conflict. Such developments followed by media manipulation will help make Albanians a target of negative attention

¹¹ In the meeting held in Korca on August 6, 2005 between Prime Minister Nano and Mr. Ali Ahmeti was attended also by Ilir Kulla, Chairman of the State Committee on Cults. According to media reports, it was Mr. Kulla who mediated a meeting between Ali Ahmeti and Fatos Nano. According to reports from the Italian newspaper «La Repubblica», reprinted by the daily «Gazeta Shqiptare» on November 6, 2004, Ilir Kulla was the one who with the help of Salah El Din Kufaro, the son of the Syria’s Grand Mufti negotiated the release of two Italian hostages, Simona Parit dhe Simona Torreti who were kidnapped in Baghdad on September 7, 2004. The two Italian citizens were released on September 28, 2004.

¹² The article printed in «Gazeta Shqiptare», August 10, 2005, says: «Wahabi extremist groups may have become part of the armed Albanian protesters in Kondovo, a village on the outskirts of Skopje, who has come since several days now under the control of armed Albanian rebels, headed by Commander Agim Krasniqi».

¹³ Interview given to daily Express, August 10, 2005.

in European public opinion. The last Eurobarometer which ranked Albanians just one rank above the bottom in European citizens' preference, a ranking lower than that of those who perpetrated the massacres in Srebrenica, is clear proof of that.

In cooperation with their political representatives, the people involved in the developments in Kondovo must find a legal path to achieving their rights in Macedonia. Politicians in Macedonia must understand that only the full implementation of Ohrid Agreement can ensure the survival of the Macedonian state and establish as a steady foundation for its stability.

Tirana, August 13, 2005