
BELGRADE, BRUSSELS SLAM RAMA FOR SUGGESTING ALBANIA- KOSOVO UNIFIED LEADERSHIP PLAN

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Less than two weeks after the European Commissions articulated a roadmap for the Balkans further integration into the EU, Albanias Prime Minister Edi Rama sparked outrage in Serbia at the weekend when he publically broke with current EU policy by suggesting that his country and neighbouring Kosovo could in the future share a single president that would serve both governments.

Rama made the suggestion while addressing the Kosovar parliament on February 18 while visiting Pristina to mark 10 years since the disputed region opted to break away from the central government in Belgrade.

Albania and Kosovo share strong ethnic, linguistic, diplomatic, and religious ties – all of which Rama was quick to cite during his controversial speech before the Kosovar parliament. Tirana and Pristina already share diplomatic missions abroad as a viable justification for moving forward with an integrated government.

Rama, however, has gained a reputation for having made previous provocative statements about the unification of the two countries. He has repeatedly denied allegations that he is an Albanian irredentist, but has done little to successfully quash the widely-held belief that he is a staunch supporter of the establishment of Greater Albania – a nationalist concept that would unite the Balkans Albanian populations into one supranational state. The concept is one that is ominously similar to the ethnically and religiously pure Greater Serbia that former Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic so disastrously pursued in the 1990s.

Talk of unifying the two predominantly Muslim, ethnically Albanian, entities enjoys widespread support amongst local nationalists. As recently as two years ago, Rama repeatedly stated that the unification of Albania and Kosovo is inevitable, regardless of the EUs position on the issue.

Ramas statement should be seen as a warning to Brussels policy-makers as both Albania and Kosovo grow increasingly more frustrated with the slow integration process and could be part of a strategy by Tirana to strong-arm Brussels into fast-tracking Albanias EU accession process.

Pristina and Tirana both fear that further delays by Brussels and NATO could marginalise large sections of society and drive them away from wanting to be a part of the West.

Similar to just before the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, we have been watching a barely concealed race between the nationalist and European elements of society over the uncertain

future of southeast Europe, said Dr. Dušan Reljić, a leading expert on the Western Balkans and head of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs Brussels office.

For every year that Albania and the other Western Balkan accession candidates have to spend waiting in the queue and outside the gates of the European Union *□□□□ socio-economic decline continues, which deepens their political discord. This is what has fed the Albanian nationalists dream of abolishing the borders between ethnically Albanian areas and unifying them into a single state.

According to Reljić, the EU should not focus solely on the dogma of a broad enlargement policy, but instead, grant the countries provisional membership and provide assistance that would help tackle the crippling unemployment problems in Albania and Kosovo. Brussels should also develop generous migration programmes that would help locals better integrate into the workforce of other EU member states.

That might just be enough to prevent the region from descending back into crisis and chaos, said Reljić.

Ramas statements have infuriated Belgrade, with the Serbian government accusing him of stoking ethnic hatred and openly backing a clear and unequivocal plan for the creation of a so-called Greater Albania in the Balkans and on Serbian soil.

Belgrade officials were quick to issue an across-the-board condemnation of Rama, saying his suggestions were a deliberate attempt to further inflame tensions in Kosovo.

For us, Kosovo is a part of our state and every time someone presents this kind of ideas, of course, it cannot be welcomed or accepted, said the head of Serbias Government Office of Kosovo, Marko Djuric, who was backed by Serbian Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulins warning that Greater Albania must finally, after centuries, be stopped in its expansion.

The reaction from Brussels was also swift, but its tepid criticism of Rama stopped short of specifically naming or condemning Albanian irredentism.

European Commission spokesperson Catherine Ray told reporters that Brussels does not support statements which might be interpreted as political interference in neighbouring countries and are not helpful in building good neighbourly relations, adding that in light of last weeks roadmap that the Commission presented for the Western Balkans the EU expects Albanian and Serbia to build constructive and cooperative relations and to focus and intensify the work on their own respective reform programs to move forward on the EU integration path.

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