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Signaling change in Albanian politics: Edi Rama's visit to South Serbia's Preševo Valley

by Dr. Ioannis Armakolas, "Stavros Costopoulos" Research Fellow, ELIAMEP, Greece
and Bledar Feta, Junior Researcher, Western Balkans team, ELIAMEP, Greece

A new strategy for the Socialists

After almost two years of a high-stakes political battle, the opposition Socialists under Edi Rama made a 180-degree turn, adopting a new political strategy. Realizing the two-year political deadlock's negative effect upon his image, the Socialist leader abandoned the previous strategy of employing street politics, hunger strikes and parliamentary boycotts. Rama's new strategy seeks to construct for the Socialists the image of a responsible opposition with a constant presence in parliament, detached from the violent protests and in regular communication with the citizenry. The opposition leader has also embraced social networks like twitter and facebook to communicate his political agenda and to criticize the government's failures. His new political line aims to both attract the younger generation and to build a new and more patriotic image for the Socialist Party. Rama ceased the inflammatory rhetoric of the previous years and is eagerly awaiting the fruits of his new tactics.

The Socialist leader tested his new approach on the occasion of his visit to Albanian-inhabited territories, including Kosovo and the Preševo Valley in South Serbia, for promoting his new book *Kurban* ('sacrifice'). For Edi Rama, the visit to Preševo Valley in January 2012 was his first ever. He met with the nationalist mayor of Preševo, Ragmi Mustafa, and the moderates, Shaip Kamberi, mayor of Bujanovac, and Skënder Destani, leader of the Democratic Union of the Valley. Rama called on Serbia to accept Kosovo as an independent state, adding that European perspective is in Belgrade's hands. Referring to the difficulties faced by Albanians in the Preševo Valley, Rama stated that he will propose to the Albanian Parliament the establishment of a special fund for financing the construction of two schools and a hospital in the Preševo Valley. Additionally, he asked Serbia to respect the Albanians' fundamental rights and called for the creation in Preševo of a university similar to that of Tetovo, where lessons will be taught in Albanian, Serbian and English. Rama avoided any mention of Preševo's status in order to prevent any accusations that he may be harboring territorial aspirations towards neighboring countries.

Ethnic composition in the Preševo Valley

Preševo			Bujanovac				Medveđa				
<i>Year</i>	<i>Serbs</i>	<i>Albanians</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Serbs</i>	<i>Albanians</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Serbs</i>	<i>Albanians</i>	<i>Total</i>
<u>1981</u>	4.204	28.961	33.948	<u>1981</u>	15.914	25.848	46.689	<u>1981</u>	n/a	n/a	n/a
<u>1991</u>	3.206	34.992	38.943	<u>1991</u>	14.660	29.588	49.238	<u>1991</u>	7.205	2.832	10.367
<u>2002</u>	2.984	31.098	34.904	<u>2002</u>	14.782	23.681	43.302	<u>2002</u>	6.535	1.816	8.459
<u>2011</u>	n/a	n/a	3.066*	<u>2011</u>	n/a	n/a	18.542*	<u>2011</u>	n/a	n/a	7.292

*Albanians boycotted the 2011 Population Census. Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

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A delicate balance in Preševo

Preševo Valley is a geopolitically important area in South Serbia, immediately east of Kosovo. It is inhabited by Serbs and Albanians; the former form a majority in the municipality of Medveđa and the latter in the municipalities of Preševo and Bujanovac.

There was a brief Albanian insurgency in Preševo Valley more than ten years ago - a spillover effect of the conflict in Kosovo. Since then delicate balances have been maintained: on the one hand between the Serbian state and local Albanians and on the other among the more moderate and the more radical factions of local Albanian politics. Moderate Albanians participate – not without reservations - in the elections and try to promote their agenda vis-à-vis Belgrade through formal political channels. Nationalist Albanian parties, typically offspring of the insurgent Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa and Bujanovac (UCPMB), boycott Serbian elections and pursue a separatist agenda that calls for the unification of all Albanian territories.

The Albanian politicians from the Valley connect the future of their region with developments in Kosovo. They insist on the principle of reciprocity, demanding the same rights Kosovo Serbs enjoy in Kosovo. Thus, Albanian demands for political and territorial autonomy will likely become more assertive and vigorous if Serbia

Political Parties in the Preševo Valley

Party	Leader
Party for Democratic Action Partia për Veprim Demokratik – PVD	Riza Halimi
Democratic Party of Albanians Partia Demokratike e Shqiptarëve – PDSH	Ragmi Mustafa
Democratic Albanian Union Unioni Demokratik i Shqiptarëve – UDSH	Rahmi Zylfiu
Albanian National Movement Lëvizja Kombëtare Shqipëtare – LKSH	Orhan Rexhepi
Movement for Democratic Progress Lëvizja e Progresit Demokratik – LPD	Jonuz Musliu
Democratic Union of the Valley Bashkimi Demokratik i Luginës – BDL	Skënder Destani
National Democratic Party Partia Demokratike Shqipëtare – PDK	Nexhmedin Saqipi
Democratic Party Partia Demokratike – PD	Nagip Arifi

manages to extract extensive concessions from Priština in North Kosovo, i.e. the northern sector of Mitrovica city and the municipalities of Zvečan, Zubin Potok and Leposavic. Preševo Valley Albanians will likely demand autonomy or unification with Kosovo if the Serbs north of the river Ibar gain anything equivalent.

Albania's political fluidity and the rise of nationalist challengers

Rama's visit to the Preševo Valley is far from disconnected from politics back home. His effort to gain electoral advantage is considered the driving force behind his new approach that caters to Albanians living outside Albania. The Socialist leader aims to improve his image as a visionary pioneer both domestically and with regards to foreign policy. Furthermore, he attempts to shed the Socialists' image of a force that is 'less patriotic' than the Democratic Party. It is not uncommon among ordinary Albanians to view the

Socialists as 'soft' on national and foreign policy issues, often pointing to the close bonds with Greece that the party had at times enjoyed. This perception was frequently and skillfully exploited by Sali Berisha to increase the popularity of his Democratic Party and for portraying it as the sole protector of Albanians living outside Albania. Thus, the Socialist leader's visit to Preševo Valley can be seen as a gesture aiming to reverse this problematic image of his party.

The move comes at a period of rising uncertainty in the party landscape of Albania. The political dynamics seem to be shifting at the expense of the two main parties of the post-socialist era. New political forces have emerged that are challenging mainstream politics by addressing sensitive national issues. The 'Red and Black Alliance' is a movement-like party with a political platform that seeks to unite all Albanians. The new party appears to have an organizational structure and network of supporters outside the territory of Albania and

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especially in the diaspora. The Red and Black Alliance is a vocal challenger of the 1913 territorial status quo that created independent Albania but left many ethnic Albanians outside the borders of the new state. In addition to the Red and Black Alliance, President Topi's party, which is expected to be formed soon, is also likely to attract patriotically-inclined voters.

These developments have shaken both the Democratic and Socialist parties. As the party landscape in Albania becomes more complex, these main parties are focusing on rebuilding their patriotic image, not least through a new focus on the Preševo Valley Albanians. It is hardly surprising that on the very day that Edi Rama visited southern Serbia, the Albanian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Edmond Haxhinasto, had a meeting in Tirana with two key Albanian officials from the Preševo Valley: Riza Halimi, the most prominent of the moderate politicians and the sole ethnic Albanian deputy in the Serbian parliament, and Galip Beqiri, the President of the Albanian National Council of the Preševo Valley.

The Democratic and Socialist parties believe that in the forthcoming Albanian parliamentary elections, which will be held in 2013, there will be hemorrhage of votes to smaller parties. The fluidity of the party system and the growing influence of nationalist forces worry the two main Albanian parties. While no-one can yet be sure of the extent of the electoral leakage to smaller parties, one thing is certain: the electoral balance between the majority and the opposition is so delicate that even a small number of votes may cost a party the next government. It is, thus, to be expected that the main parties will make yet more efforts to upgrade their patriotic profile and to curtail the political dynamism of their nationalist challengers.

Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

Vas. Sofias, 10676 Athens, Greece | Tel. +30 210 7257 110 | Fax +30 210 7257 114 | E-mail eliamep@eliamep.gr

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