

Obituary for The Independent

ARBEN XHAFERI

Arben Xhaferi was one of the most influential leaders of an ex-Yugoslav ethnic group in the period of the wars during the disintegration of Yugoslavia. An ethnic Albanian, he was born in the north-west Macedonian town of Tetovo to a family with some Turkish links. He excelled at school, and rarely for an Albanian, won a place at Belgrade University. He was one of the '1968' generation there, and adopted a radical anti-revisionist Marxism stemming from his studies of his favourite philosopher, Hegel. Among the other radical students he worked with at the time was, ironically, young and glamorous sociologist Mira Markovic, the future wife of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic.

A tall good looking young man, he found his first vocation in journalism, and worked in the Kosova capital of Prishtina in print and broadcasting before being purged from his job in the Milosevic martial law imposition in 1990. He then returned to Tetovo and soon became immersed in the struggles of the 25% ethnic Albanian minority in Former Yugoslav Macedonia to find a new, post-Yugoslavist political leadership. He soon began to work with radical Tetovo lawyer, and his alter ego ever since, Menduh Thaci. In early 1993 they engineered the overthrow of the old leadership of the Albanian party in Tetovo, and soon the city became the beacon – or a nightmare – depending on viewpoint, of Albanian radicalism and nationalism that it has remained ever since. Xhaferi was elected a member of

the Skopje parliament in 1994, and began to emerge as a major influence not only on the increasingly fractious and confrontational politics of the Albanians under the government of Titoist survivor Kiro Gligorov, but also in Kosova where he had family links and many networks from his years of work there.

He foresaw the inevitability of military conflict in Kosova long before many contemporaries, and he and Thaci carefully built informal cross-border arms procurement and smuggling networks in the 1995-1997 period to support the nascent Kosova Liberation Army that were to prove to be of decisive importance in the subsequent Kosova war. He was not, however, a natural Balkan warrior, and saw with sadness the bloodbath in the northern republics after 1992 and worked to avert it in his region if diplomacy offered opportunities. He also saw the importance of building foreign contacts and an intelligence network for the Albanians, to counteract the strength of the Serbian lobby in Britain and France, and devoted much time and energy to this in the pre-conflict period.

As the war developed the first signs of the Parkinson's Disease that were to plague the rest of his political and personal life began to appear, worsened by severe overwork. His gentle charm, excellent English and scholarly habits meant that his advice was often sought by foreign diplomats, and as time went on, he increasingly became a presidential figure in Tetovo, the day to day running of the party being left to Menduh Thaci. Unlike many Balkan leaders, he enjoyed the company of intelligent women, and treated them as equals, and disliked the Islamic social conservatism that is beginning to return to the region. He liked a cigar and the small pleasures of life and was not an ascetic. He welcomed the changes of policy towards the Balkans under the Blair government in Britain and began to attend conferences at Wilton Park and elsewhere, where his learned, sometimes visionary

disquisitions on Hegelian themes often disarmed instinctive critics. There was, nevertheless, a firm Albanian nationalism embedded in his outlook, and he looked forward to the development of a culturally united 'ethnic Albania' that would reunite a people divided by externally imposed borders for all the twentieth century.

The entry of NATO into Kosova in the summer of 1999 was perhaps the culminating point of his political life, because soon afterwards new challenges for the Albanians in the region arose that brought forward new leaders and ended the exclusive hegemony of the Thaci-Xhaferi axis in Albanian Macedonia. The disappointing performance of the United Nations Kosova administration played into the hands of the new radicals, principally Ali Ahmeti, and in 2001 Ahmeti and his allies opened up a military campaign against Skopje. The ensuing short war was a success for the Albanians, and although Xhaferi was indispensable involved in negotiating the August 2001 Ohrid Accords that ended the fighting, his party lost its primacy in the leadership of the Macedonian Albanians to Ali Ahmeti.

Despite his increasing physical incapacity, and this setback, Xhaferi remained a key figure in the deliberations of the often fissiparous Albanian leadership, as the many tributes to him made after his death have shown, often from those of widely differing political standpoints. In 2007 he formally stepped down from the leadership of the Democratic Party of Albanians, and became the honorary President of the party. He felt the compromises involved in the Ohrid deals were required to protect the territorial integrity of Macedonia, and if they had not been made the only regional beneficiary of a split Macedonia would have been Greece. Not all Macedonian Albanians shared this view, but it has meant that the Albanian minority in western Macedonia have secured many human rights improvements compared to the time of the Gligorov period after 1991.

*Arben Xhaferi, politician, born Tetovo, Yugoslavia, 25th January 1948, died in Skopje,
Former Yugoslav Macedonia, 15th August, 2012*

James Pettifer