

ALBANIAN-GREEK RELATIONS AND TIRANA'S QUEST FOR THE EU MEMBERSHIP

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Although Greece and Albania share extensive historical, economic, social, and security ties due to their NATO membership, their bilateral relations from time to time have been problematic, raising concerns for the broader Western Balkans. Several unresolved issues between Athens and Tirana that have their roots in the past prevent the normalization of their relations and, as a result, create obstacles for Albania's EU accession process. The respect of the Greek minority rights in Albania, the delimitation of maritime zones, Greece's Law of War with Albania, the Cham issue, that Tirana unilaterally raise the refusal of Athens to recognize the independence of Kosovo and the arrest of the elected member of the Greek National Minority Mayor of Himare are some of the issues between the two countries. It is the aim of this article to study recent normative and empirical discourse to argue that the normalization of the relations between Albania and Greece is crucial for the EU's enlargement with the countries of Western Balkans and for the stability of the region in general. Within this context, this article analyzes the historical background of the bilateral relations between Greece and Albania, evaluates the current economic, social, and political situation, and presents some policy proposals before reaching a conclusion.

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Historical Background

Albanian-Greek relations began in 1912 when Albania established its independence from the Ottoman Empire. The first issue that emerged in the bilateral relations between Athens and Tirana was the faith of the thousands of Greeks who were living within the territory of the newly established state. This implied that the Greek population that was living in Albania had to acquire a national minority status. Athens, from the very beginning of its bilateral relations with Tirana, raised the issue of the protection of its national minority, claiming that Albania was following an expatriation policy against it. It was only in 1922 that Albania recognized the Greek national minority living within its own territory, given that such an act was one of its accession criteria to the League of Nations.¹

The peak of the deterioration of Greek-Albania relations was reached during the Second World War, when Italy launched its attack against Greece from Albania territory, and as a result, "Greece declared Albania as an enemy state, a status which remains until today."² Just after the end of the war, Albania also claims that Greek paramilitary forces expelled 30.000 Muslim Albanians from Epirus. The Greek state denies the existence of this issue. The Cold War froze relations between the two countries until 1971, when they re-established official diplomatic relations.

1) Glevin Dervishi, "Greek-Albanian Relations, the Past, the Present and the Future," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.10, No. 3, May 2019, p. 25

2) Dervishi (2019).

The end of the Cold War signified the beginning of a new era in Greek-Albanian relations. More than 600.000 Albanians became economic refugees to Greece. In that way, on the one hand, Greece became an extremely valuable exit for Albania's extreme isolation during the Cold War but also prevented the collapse of Albania state from a social uprising due to extreme poverty and economic collapse. On the other hand, Greece's acceptance of all these Albanian refugees' flows enabled intense interactions on a societal level, bringing the people of both countries closer to each other.³ Within this context, in March 1996, Albania and Greece signed the Treaty of Friendship, Co-Operation, and Good Neighborliness, which, in a way, brought an end to the status of the "condition of war" between them.

At the same time, Athens supported Albania's accession to NATO and in the European Union. The EU summit held in Thessaloniki in 2003 concluded that all Western Balkan countries would become members of the union. Also, in 2009, Albania became a member of NATO and at the same year, signed with Greece an agreement on the delimitation of continental shelf. Despite the fact that the Albanian Parliament ratified this agreement, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Albania rejected it the following year.⁴ In 2022, both countries agreed to refer the issue to the International Court of Justice. As far as the Cham issue is concerned, the Greek Foreign Minister of the time, Nikos Dendias stated after his meeting with his Albanian counterpart in 2022 that this is a non-existent issue and that "Greece is ready to discuss only issues that it considers existing."⁵

The Case of Fredi Beleri and the Deterioration of Albanian-Greek Relations

Without any doubt, the case of the imprisonment of the elected Mayor of the City of Himare, Fredi Beleri, on charges of election corruption and vote buying two days before the municipal elections of 14 May 2023, is the most serious crisis in Greek-Albania relations over the last decade. Greece accuses Albania of not adhering to the Rule of Law, a basic criterion for EU accession within the context of the Copenhagen Criteria, and thus is planning to veto Albania's European road if Tirana will not change its position. The situation became more complicated when Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama made a visit in Athens on 12 May 2024, exactly a year after Beleri's arrest, and spoke to Albanians living in Greece. The rights of the National

3) Evelyn Karakatsani, "Greece External Relations Briefing: Relations Between Greece and Albania," *China-CEE Institute*, Vol. 66, No. 4, October, 2023

4) Kasem Cenaj, "Albania-Greece Agreement on Setting Maritime Boundaries, According to International Law, *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Rome-Italy, Vol. 4, November, 2015

5) Hellenic Republic MFA (2024) "Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias," statement following his meeting with his Albanian Counterpart, Olcha Xhacka (Tirana, 23/05/2022). Available at <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/minister-of-foreign-affairs-nikos-dendias-statement-folowing-his-meeting-with-his-albanian-counterpart-olta-xhacka-tirana-23052022.html>

Greek Minority that live in Albania, as stated above, are a major concern of Greece and have determined the quality of the bilateral relations with neighboring Albania since its establishment as an independent state.

The Positive Aspect of Albanian-Greek Relations

Despite of this serious deterioration in their bilateral relations because of Fredi Beleri issue, there are still positive elements in their interaction that one should not neglect. It is worth mentioning that “Greece is Albania’s main economic partner since the end of the Cold War... and that Greek exports to Albania have increased by 60 percent during the last five years.”⁶ This implies a great potential for closer economic cooperation with mutual benefits. It is also worth to mention that according to a study conducted by the Open Society Foundation of Albania (OSFA) and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), 85 percent of the Albanians believe that Greece has assisted Albania and 60 percent of Albanians have a positive attitude towards the Greeks. At the same time 90 percent of the Greeks believe that Greece has assisted Albania and 47,5 percent of the Greek participants have a positive view towards Albanians in general.⁷ Within this context, both governments have to be careful in their conduct of relations.

Albania’s Quest for the EU Membership

In 2009, Albania submitted its application for EU membership, and in 2014, it was awarded a candidate status. As mentioned before, Greece is a champion of the enlargement of the EU with the Western Balkans countries provided that they fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria. The “Beleri Issue” in Athens's view, constitutes a violation by Albania of the rights of the Greek National Minority and the rule of law. As a consequence, Greece puts the resolution of “Beleri’s Issue” as a precondition to give its consensus for initiating the negotiations process for Albania’s accession in the EU.

In October 2023 while attending the meeting between the EU and Western Balkan Leaders, the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis stated that: “the resolution of the issue is a necessary condition for Greece to take the next step and agree to start Albania’s negotiation process with the EU.”⁸ Most recently, in a highly symbolic movement, the governmental party “New Democracy” has included in its ballot the imprisoned Fredi Beleri as a candidate member of the European Parliament elections. Fredi Beleri was elected with a great number of votes. In other words, Athens

6) Karakatsani (October, 2023).

7) Ioannis Armakolas, Giorgos Siakas, Alketa Bezani, Klodjan Seferaj, (2021), “Relations between Albania and Greece,” published by OSFA and ELIAMEP, available at <https://www.eliamep.gr/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/Public-Opinion-Greece-and-Albania-Relation-ENG.pdf>

8) Quoted in Karakatsani(October, 2023).

believes that the “Fredri Beleri” issue is, without doubt, a European issue and that the advance of the accession negotiations between Tirana and Brussels sets its resolution, in accordance with the respect of human rights and the rule of law, as a prerequisite.

Geopolitical Imperatives

At the same time moreover, Greece and Albania, as NATO members, have to bear in mind that they have to contribute to the wider policies of the Alliance. Consequently, they have to be more co-operative within the context of the emergence of a multipolar structure of the international system and the competition at all levels that this development implies for NATO in general and the U.S. as its leading state in particular. States like Russia and China are already trying to expand their regional influence. As a result, the EU prospect for Western Balkans seems to be as imperative as ever before. “Notwithstanding current obstacles, the shifting global order and the influence of external actors in the region make the WB6 inclusion within the EU of vital importance for the European security and stability at large.”⁹ This fact however should not send the wrong message to candidate countries that there are “shortcuts” to accession. This implies that Albania has to make sure that it complies with the Copenhagen Criteria as soon as possible. Simultaneously, Albania’s entrance to NATO should not create conditions of “reverse institutionalism” similar to these emerged following the entrance of Greece and Türkiye in the 1950s.¹⁰ That means, as soon as Tirana became member of the Alliance and felt secured towards Russian re-activation in Western Balkans, it will be able to raise issues against other countries of the region Greece included.

Policy Proposals and Conclusions

As was argued above, gradually, due to Albania’s economic development, its bilateral trade with Greece is increasing for the benefit of both countries and their people. There are already relations of economic interdependence between them. On the one hand, thousands of Albanian citizens are employed in Greece in a period that Greece really needs more workforce. On the other hand, the income that this fact implies for Albania through the remittances that its nationals are sending to its Banks is also very important. As was also stated above, the increased social interaction over the last 35 years between Albanians and Greeks have brought them closer to each other creating conditions of mutual understanding and co-operation. At the same time thousands of

9) Eleonora Poli, “Embracing the Western Balkan Countries’ EU Accession at Present,” Foundation for European Progressive Studies, *Policy Brief*, August 2023, p. 1

10) See, Crebs, R. (1999). “Perverse Institutionalism: NATO and the Greco-Turkish Conflict,” *International Organisation*, Vol. 53, No. 2, Spring, pp. 343-377

Albanians have acquired Greek citizenship and have been totally incorporated within Greek political, economic and social life.

It is more than obvious that the interests of both countries demands their constructive co-operation for the resolution of their issues. The deterioration of their relations will have negative results for both of them, especially their people. Their participation in NATO should constitute an extra motive for co-operation and constructive engagement, not competition between them. At the same time, EU membership prospect for Albania provides another unique opportunity for Albania to come closer with Greece, not necessarily because this is the only way to get the final approval for membership, but because their common borders and shared history demands it. The EU demands full compliance with the Copenhagen Political Criteria from Albania and any other candidate country. For such a prospect to be efficient, however, given the new geopolitical urgency in the region, the EU should accelerate the accession process of Albania and the other Western European Countries, without suggesting an alternative. Finally, if Greece and Albania perceive that some issues cannot be resolved in a bilateral level they can resort to the International Court of Justice. The normalization of their relations is first of all for their own interests and undoubtedly for the interest of the wider region of the Western Balkans.