



ALBANIA AND GREECE: UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLAINING

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Albania-Greece relations in the context of Albania's EU integration process: gap between reality and perception

*Alba Cela*¹

Abstract:

Most of Albanian citizens asked in a national poll in 2013 about whether Greece would like to see Albania in the European Union answered no², an answer that might sound expected in the context of the difficult relationships but that actually sounds perplexing when compared to the past track record of relevant developments. This belief that Greece is out there to become an obstacle to Albania's integration path is unfortunately present in segments of the population. Yet it sharply contrast to the real performance of the Greek state and representatives when it comes to Albania's integration. Whereas it remains true that Greek politicians from time to time mention integration when complaining about the handling of some issues in Albania, Greece has not done any significant step to halter integration so far. Greece has never vetoed any significant milestone in Albania's European path compared to let's say other countries such as the Netherlands did when it came to granting Albania candidate status. On the contrary Greece, just like Italy and Austria, is one of the engaged supporters of Albania's European path. This paper tries to analyze

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1. *Alba Cela, Deputy Director of the Albanian Institute for International Studies*
 2. "Albanian Greek relations from the eyes of the Albanian public – perceptions 2013", A. Cela; S. Lleshaj <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/10896.pdf>

this gap between perception and reality and offer a rationale for efforts to improve communication related to this particular issue.

Introduction

European integration is a complex and rich process that has the potential not only to transform countries internally but also to significantly improve the relations between neighbors sharing a tough history fraught with misunderstandings and even enmity. The European Union's appeal stands first and foremost in its being a project of and for peace. When it comes to the process of European integration of the Balkan countries, the Union has been clear and determined to outline the condition that countries need to have normalized relations before membership. The solution of bilateral issues for example is one of the key components that has harnessed attention and effort during these years.³ The solution of bilateral disputes is an unnegotiable condition that stems not only from the values of good neighborhood which are at the core of the EU, but also from the EU's previous bitter experience with cases such as Cyprus.

Unfortunately countries have become veto-powers and obstacles when it comes to the progress of European integration and have continued their conflictual rhetoric even after becoming members such as the cases of Croatia and Slovenia show. The most obvious example is that of Greece vetoing any further steps of the European integration of the Former Republic of Macedonia based on the name issue.

The fear that something similar can happen to Albania is quite present in Albanians discourse, shadowing the real relationship that has existed

3. "Joint Declaration Adopted by Western Balkans Foreign Ministers in Vienna – Countries Will Not Obstruct Neighbours' Progress in EU Integrations", <http://balkanfund.org/2015/08/joint-declaration-adopted-by-western-balkans-governments-representatives-in-vienna-countries-will-not-obstruct-neighbours-progress-in-eu-integrations/> Accessed on August 29, 2017.

these years between the two countries when it comes to EU integration.

The risk is alarming. The European integration process is not only a national aspiration with no political alternative in Albania. It is the process by which all important reforms are vested with legitimacy, assistance and are monitored. The EU conditionality pushes forward the transformation of the country. All delays and obstacles in this process are simultaneously delays in the overall progress achieved in the transformation of the country.

However the record has shown that Greece has had a different attitude towards Albania, at least until recently. It has supported the reforms and shown considerable backing for Albania's integration milestones in the past such as status issue or even visa liberalization.

As Albania approaches a hopeful time for the possibility of opening negotiations, with a positive appraisal from European actors⁴ upon the solution of its recent political crisis and the regular held elections, the issue of guaranteeing the support of its neighbors becomes a primary importance item. In the first address to the Albanian Assembly, Prime Minister Rama said that the only country with which Albania had '*issues*' was Greece and that he was determined to seek a collaborative relation while upholding Albania's rights.

These declarations come at a time when the press is pushing hard once again the possibility of Athens blocking the integration path upon unresolved issues, including a recent one concerning properties in Himara. This context brings forward once again the persisting contrast between the fiery rhetoric of both countries when it comes to their relationship and the European integration framework and the previous experience of sustaining constructive assistance in the process of accession.

4. <http://top-channel.tv/lajme/artikull.php?id=363977#k1>

Brief history

Despite many political problems, confrontations and unfortunate events, Greece has been a crucial partner in Albania's transition. One need to remember the impact of hundreds of thousands of Albanian citizens who found an economic viability and then build a life in the southern neighbor, providing precious remittances to their parents; the important economic investments and assistance provided by the southern neighbor and most pertinently its continuous political and international support when it comes to both NATO and European integration processes.

More specifically during the decision making times in the Union regarding Albania, Greece has consistently fallen in the supporting camp.

Of course the complexity of relations between Albania and Greece has been often reflected in the EU integration developments. For instance right wing MPs in the European Parliament regularly debate and challenge the progress reports and relevant positive resolutions on Albania on grounds that they don't reflect the problems of the Greek minority here or even worse raising issue about 'Greater Albania' aspirations.⁵ However these claims are usually not getting in the way of real developments since they are clarified and dismissed by EU actors.

Furthermore recently there have been some promising attempts to address the outstanding issues in a more formal and constructive manner, the most recent one being the Bushati-Kotsias package which has been highly praised by Commissioner Hahn. However even in this case the debate has brought up sensitive claims on the Greek side that the Commissioner wrongfully addressed the Cham issue, which remains unrecognized by Greece.⁶

5. <http://top-channel.tv/lajme/english/artikull.php?id=13663&ref=ml#.WcN149VL-M8>

6. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/eu-commissioner-caught-in-between->

Political context and electoral rounds greatly influence the serenity of the relations and therefore the integration narrative as well. In the last elections round in Albania, the perception was that the political establishment was siding with the rhetoric of the PDIU, the political party in Albania most at odds with Greece since they represent the Cham community in the country. This was coupled with a decreasing frequency of high level meetings and generally tepid bilateral relations.

More recently integration is coming up repeatedly in the complaints from the Greek side, as a potential negotiating chip further exacerbating existing perception and fears that Greece could indeed bloc Albania's future in the EU.

Perceptions

There is a widely held perception among Albanians than when push comes to shove, Greece will block Albania's entry to the European Union. This perception is comfortably nested within some other myths often perpetuated by the media or irresponsible politicians. Quite a significant number of Albanians also mention Greece to be a threat to the security of Albania,⁷ despite the fact that both countries have signed a Treaty of Friendship and most importantly that they are NATO members.

In general the perceptions of Albanian regarding Greece and relations with Greece reveal a very mixed picture. The results of a public poll in 2013 show that "45 percent of the citizens believe that these relations are normal. 22 percent believe they are in a bad shape and a small group of 5 percent say that they are in a very bad shape. Similarly 27 percent believe the relations are in a good or even very good divided respectively

albania-greece-hot-topic-09-29-2016

7. "Albanian Greek relations from the eyes of the Albanian public – perceptions 2013", A. Cela; S. Lleshaj <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/10896.pdf>, pg 31.

between 21 and 6 percent. Albanians seem to believe that governments of Albania and Greece enjoy a better relationship with each other than do the respective people of each state. While 52 percent of Albanians believe relations between Greek and Albanian government are normal only 42 percent say the same about the relations between Greeks and Albanians themselves.”⁸

When it comes specifically to the perspective of Albania’s integration within the European Union, the Albanian public opinion is fragmented and generally skeptical about Greek support. Hence when asked if their fellow citizens in Greece would support the European integration of Albania, Albanian themselves seem divided in almost there equal parts between those who believe in the Greek support, those who are afraid of a negative relation and those who don’t know. With a very small advantage of 37 percent Albanians are hopeful that Greek citizens would support Albanian E integration *while 34 percent believe that Greek citizens do not support this aspiration of Albania*. 30 percent is the group that does not have a clear opinion on this matter. Even grimmer seems to be the perception of whether the Greek government has been to help to Albania in its effort of European integration. In this case a majority of citizens, *46 percent, believe that this has not been in the case* while 35 percent believe that the Greek government has helped. 18 percent do not know the answer.⁹

The difference in the perceptions about the role of citizens and government is particularly odd. Whereas skepticism and even dislike among the Greek population regarding Albania might be existing and might increase after specific incidents, the Greek government has had to surpass that in sustaining Albania’s effort to join the EU.

For a comparative perspective, an opinion poll undertaken in Greece

8. “Albanian Greek relations from the eyes of the Albanian public – perceptions 2013”, pg 19, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/10896.pdf>.

9. “Albanian Greek relations from the eyes of the Albanian public – perceptions 2013”, pg 36-37.

has revealed that “About half of the Greek public opinion views current relations with Albania as neither good nor bad, while one third consider them as good.” When it comes specifically to questions about integration, “six out of ten (58%) [believe] that the Greek government has assisted Albania in its EU accession process. 32% of respondents believe that Greeks do not want Albania to become a member of the EU, while 56% disagree with that statement.”¹⁰ It is interesting to note in the last result that the majority of Greeks seem to be of a positive attitude towards Albania’s European perspective.

Media role

Of course these perceptions are flamed by occasional media coverage of declarations of Greek politicians as well. For example in the case of the debacle about some properties of Greek minority citizens in the city Himara frequently generate strong statements. This is not the only time. European standards that have to be respected are brought up when it comes to complaints about Greek minority, properties of the Orthodox Church, Greek soldiers’ cemeteries on Albanian territory, etc.

There is no doubt that the long list of unresolved issues and long held misunderstandings puts this relationship in a far from perfect position. However the media articles also do not provide the right contextualization and use titles that sound more sensational than the coverage would warrant.

A previous study of the Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS), has shown that the percentage of articles and coverage with negative and quasi negative connotation in Albanian press when it

10. All results of the poll undertaken in Greece in 2013 are available at “the Greek Public Opinion towards Albania and the Albanians Social attitudes and perceptions”, Ioannis Armaklosas, ELIAMEP <http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/The-Greek-public-opinion-towards-Albania-Final-report-Dec-2013.pdf>. Cited numbers are in page 8.

comes to Greece and Greek-Albanian relations is double that of positive articles. The study also points to few positive stories while exposing some stories such as the infamous ‘Kareli case’ which poisoned relations in the public opinion for a long time.¹¹

One example is the case of the declarations at the end of last year, of former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece, Nikos Kotzias about Greece not being generous with the vote pro opening of negotiations for Albania.¹² The most used title in this case was ‘Greece will block the European integration of Albania’, suggesting absolute certainty and not possibility. In fact the full statement regards the necessity of Albania fulfilling the 5 conditions posed, monitored and evaluated by the institutions of the European Union and therefore it’s factually correct. Naturally the connotation given in the statement by highlighting the respect for minorities is not encouraging but the statement does not convey at all a certainty that a decision to block has been taken.

On the other side, many Greek politicians have not hesitated to come forward with strong support declarations in the time when the decision to grant Albania the official EU candidate status was being deliberated. Just before the meeting of the EU Council of Ministers, where the decision about granting Albania the EU candidate status was eventually postponed, the Greek ambassador to Tirana, Leonidas Rokanas, emphasized Greece’s firm support for Albanian’s EU integration. This statement was followed recently by another one that was made this time by the Greek Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs,

11. “Greece and the Albanian-Greek relations in the Albanian printed media 2014”, pages 10-11, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/11319.pdf>

12. Media coverage examples with titles saying **Greece will block the European integration of Albania**:

- <http://www.gazetatema.net/2016/12/06/greqla-bllokon-integrimin-e-shqiperise-ne-be-kotzias-sdo-bejme-gabimet-e-se-shkuares/>
- <http://www.javanews.al/der-standard-greqla-do-te-bllokoje-integrimin-e-shqiperise-ne-be/>
- <http://www.tiranaobserver.al/krisja-e-marredhenieve-greqla-gati-te-bllokoje-integrimin-e-shqiperise/>

Evangelos Venizelos, who reaffirmed Greece support and stated that “Albania should get the candidate status in June”.¹³

Not taking things for granted

Through the timeline of Albania’s integration process, Greece has not been an obstacle or a delaying factor, on the contrary, it has been a de facto supporter. The gap that exists between the specific perceptions about its stance on Albania’s integration and the performance so far is a direct result of heated political declarations, faulty media coverage and lack of communication between other important social actors.

That said there are of course no guarantees that things will not go south. The rhetoric in the last months, mirrored by a media frenzy has been mostly negative. Integration is coming up again and again as a keyword for addressing how relations can become worse, instead of improving. The last declarations of President Pavlopoulos, that Albania does not seem to have a European perspective since it is infringing upon minority rights are an alarm bell since he is not considered an extreme voice.¹⁴

The risk that Greece can use its voice and decision making power to impede Albania’s goals or even veto its milestones is a real possibility. Indeed the most recent political class in Greece has been less patient and more aggressive with its rhetoric. Whereas in the past, Albanian politicians could count on matured and familiar political actors such as those from PASOK or New democracy, the relative new players are definitely more challenging. In this context the need for better communication becomes even more pertinent.

13. Tirana Times, (2013). Albanian-Greek relations: Beyond the status quo. Tirana Times. (2014). Greece to support Albania’s EU integration process. www.tiranatimes.com

14. “Greek president uses harsh voice, conditions integration”, Ora News 8 September 2017 <http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/presidenti-grek-ashperson-tonet-ndaj-shqiperise-kushtezon-integrimin/>

Communication challenges should be seen and targeted by a strategic approach that goes beyond the occasional friendly meetings, lunches and so on. The latter often do more to confuse the public than to reassure it that dialogue is on the way to resolve outstanding issues. The contrast between the way these symbolic milestones are presented (with outmost enthusiasm) and the subsequent or even parallel messages that come from the neighbors.

Improving communication both at the political and public level requires a long term investment also on key actors such as media which has been missing entirely. While there are several attempts of organizing regional exchanges with reporters and editors, or even bilateral from Albania and Serbia, the experience has not been replicated in the case of Albania and Greece.

Conclusions

It is not just symbolic that the most public commitment taken by the Union to this region regarding its European future has been during the famous Thessaloniki Summit, albeit many years ago. The Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed with Albania in June 2006 and entered into force in April 2009. Albania became an official candidate country in 2014 and the next step is the opening of negotiations. The road has been long and will continue to be arduous. Albania largely benefits from having the support of Greece in this process and should be committed to preserving and deepening this support.

On the other side, the European future of Albania is also a desirable goal for Greece. A northern neighbor which is safe and stable, integrated in the Union and further developed represents a positive outcome for Greece, its politicians, investors and citizens.

The mutual support becomes even more necessary in a context where the internal developments in the EU itself have seen the enthusiasm and

commitment to the enlargement policy weaken substantially and there is now a clear split between skeptical countries and countries that have been pushers of integration. Albania recently secured the public support from Italy to open negotiations¹⁵ and should it get the same support from Greece it would send an unmistakably positive signal to European institutions to go forward with this step.

Both sides can and should do more to improve the official and public discourse when it comes to their collaboration in the context of European integration, this also includes an effort to refrain from emotional short term responses to occurring events in order to safeguard long term achievements on both sides. The primary responsibility rests with the political class which needs only to keep in mind the long term mutual benefits of the process and use that framework when dealing with specific issues.

Media in Albania and Greece should be provided with information and opportunities to further explore the positive aspects of partnership in this regard rather than focus on sensational events that create misperceptions. One illustrative example is the Cross Border Program between Albania and Greece financed by IPA funds, which best portrays the potential of European integration to assist the border regions and strengthen bilateral bonds. Successful project examples and their socio-economic or environmental impact need to have more highlight and presence alongside the inescapable political coverage.¹⁶ Similarly there is a recent project that assist the Parliament of Albania to fine tune its role in the process of European integration, assisted specifically by the

15. Tirana Times: “Gentiloni promises support for opening of the EU talks” <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=134135> (Prime Minister Rama official visit to Italy) 13 October 2017

16. Recommendations also form the research study on Albanian media also pinpoint the fact that more articles of economic and social nature are needed to change perceptions on both sides. “Greece and the Albanian-Greek relations in the Albanian printed media 2014”, pages 10-11, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/11319.pdf>

counterparts in Italy and Greece.¹⁷

Finally civil society on both sides has taken important steps to improve the communication and have genuine discussions even on difficult matters. CSOs should keep up the work done in the aspect of bilateral relations and therefore needs financial and technical assistance to continue increasing dialogue, awareness and collaboration between different social groups.

European integration should be the key positive realm of improving, developing and sophisticating bilateral relations between Albania and Greece. Unless the level of maturity in political and other forms of communication increases significantly we all risk to lose out on this enormous potential.

17. <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/albania/ipa/2015/20160126-eu-integration-facility.pdf>

Understanding Albanian-Greek relations: Deconstructing paradoxes and myths ¹

*Albert Rakipi*²

Two main issues have dominated Albanian-Greek relations during the last over-one hundred years, also coinciding with the modern history of the Albanian state: the issue of territorial/border disputes and the issue of ethnic minorities - both typical for two neighboring nations and states.

Territorial, border and minority issues have historically been, and continue to be, the main source of tension in bilateral relations. They have fed a cyclical relation of crises with frequent ups and downs, interrupted by periods of cooperation only to return to a state of tension but never leading to conflict, in the classical sense of the word.

At first glance, territorial/border and ethnic disputes seem to be a mediocre story between two neighboring nations, the states of which were established in context of the vacuum created from the withdrawal or fall of empires, as was the case of the Ottoman Empire's withdrawal from the Balkans.

In the following paper, I will discuss how and why territorial/border disputes and minority issues going back as far as the beginning of the

1. This paper is part of the study "Understanding Albanian Greek relations: Deconstructing paradoxes and myths"

2. *Albert Rakipi, PhD in International Relations*

twentieth century still serve as the main source of tension and instability. Another element to be discussed which makes the case of Albania and Greece unique, as much as paradoxical, is simultaneously being at war and in peace for territory/borders and minorities for which neither Greece nor Albania is currently contesting.

Revisiting history

Three main historical periods have defined the nature and problematic of Albanian-Greek relations during the last century. *First, it was the period of national movements in the Balkans*, and the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire in the turn of the nineteenth century, and until the start of the twentieth century. These national movements led to the establishment of Balkan states, the territories and borders of which did not necessarily comply with ethnic lines. Albania's case, in particular, was the most critical and significant. The creation and recognition by European powers of an Albanian state led to the fraction of Albanian territories among its neighbors, including Greece. Thus, the political map of the Balkans was finally complete, but the territories which, according to this map, were recognized as states and the borders that separated them would become the main source of future conflicts and tensions. The two Balkan Wars and World War I questioned, in the worst case, the future of an Albanian state and, in the best case, Albanian territories not only in the country's north, but also in its south, due to Greek claims.

Secondly, it was World War II, at the start of which Albania and Greece, accidentally in fact, were in opposing fronts due to third countries' commitments. Italy attacked Greece in October 1940 using Albanian territory, which it had invaded since April, 1939. Two of the most important issues of Albanian-Greek relations are tied to this period, issues that are intertwined and still present on the negotiations' table even after seventy years: *the law on the state of war*, which is

paradoxically still in power, and the Cham issue. Through a royal decree on November 10, 1940, Albania was declared an enemy state, along Italy. As paradoxical as this law may seem, it remains in power to this day. In addition, although the trajectory of the Cham issue began in 1913³, with the end of the Balkan Wars and the placement of the Cham population under Greek jurisdiction, due to the dramatic developments of World War II the Cham issue is relevant to this day and part of the negotiations' historical problems.

Similarly, Albanian intervention in the Greek Civil War during and immediately after the end of World War II not only created tension in bilateral relations, but also threatened Albania's territorial integrity and influenced relations for a long period to come.

Thirdly, the Cold War, with its East-West divide, placed the old Balkan neighbors in opposing blocks again. Albanian-Greek relations were highly influenced by the Cold War climate during the long period it lasted and, at least until 1970, the only relation between the two countries was a state of conflict and almost frozen relations.

Although Greece was one of the few Western states with which the Albanian communist regime managed to establish, other than diplomatic relations, a very modest economic cooperation, the two countries remained overall isolated from each other for decades. Communication between the two populations, which are the oldest neighbors in the Balkans, was interrupted immediately after World War II. State relations remained tense especially until the beginning of the seventies. In addition to the ideological divide that belonged to opposing blocks, the permanent political tensions between the countries were mainly fed by a historically conflicting heritage and historically founded disputes, stemming from the process of state creation and independence and, more specifically, directly related with the establishment of an independent

3. For a detailed understanding of the Cham issue, see Eleftheria K. Manta, *Muslim Albanians in Greece, the Cham Epirus (1923-2000)*, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 2008.

Albanian state at the beginning of the twentieth century.

With the end of the Cold War and fall of the communist regime in Albania, another factor influenced, and continues to do so, Albanian-Greek relations: Albanian emigrants or, the emigration of Albanians to Greece.⁴ The massive migration of Albanians to Greece served to establish a lively and intense communication between the two societies. This massive presence of Albanians in Greece revolutionized political, economic and social relations between two people who were separated for a long time due to the Cold War and Albania's extreme self-isolation during the communist regime.

The migration of more than one sixth of the Albanian population to Greece simultaneously created other problems related to the integration of Albanian emigrants, their economic and social status and their human rights.

The nature of the international system and the nature of regimes which governed both states during this century have been two important factors to influence the unique dynamic of Albanian-Greek relations, but in any case, it has not yet been possible for both states to conclusively reach final agreements on the contested issues.

Last but not least, *the populist approaches* used by both administrations have mined the opportunity to solve the disputes mainly created during the first half of the twentieth century.

4. At least Five hundred thousand Albanians migrated and relocated in Greece after 1991. The big migration wave right after borders reopened had Greece as its destination. Although there is a lack of exact statistics, like in Italy's case, where the number of registered Albanian migrants was 540,000, it is estimated that at least 700,000 Albanians have moved to Greece during the last 25 years.

The big paradox: two states at war living in peace

Paradoxes and myths in Albanian-Greek relations, like in the history of other nations, are tied generally to the past, and exclusively to times of war, but in the case of Albania and Greece the degree of influence paradoxes and myths have in contemporary bilateral relations is unique.

In 1996, Albania and Greece signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation - the most wholesome diplomatic tool possible to formalizing a state of peace and full cooperation between the two countries. But in the most paradoxical way possible, the State of War Law between the two states persists, approved by the Greek parliament in 1940.

Albania and Greece have been united by their common NATO membership since 2009. However, despite their membership to an alliance where member states have agreed to engage in a common defense in case of an attack by a third party⁵, Greece withholds its 1940 royal decree.

Here lies the paradox of all paradoxes: in 1949, Greece supersedes the respective law that makes Italy an enemy state, but leaves the same War Law with Albania in power, thus officially continuing to regard Albania an enemy state although it was Italy that attacked Greece using Albanian territory, also invaded by Italians.

After almost two centuries, the “Northern Epirus” narrative, which in geographical terms consists of half of modern day Albania, has actually ended up being a myth, just like the Big Idea (Megali Idea) itself. On the other hand, the Cham issue, which constitutes the biggest problem in Albanian-Greek relations for 70 percent of Albanians⁶, continues to

5. Article 5 of the NATO Treaty

6. See *Greece and Albania*, Albanian Institute for International Studies, Tirana, 2013

feed the political narrative of political parties' institutions, the media and specific groups in Albania without anyone daring, as it usually happens in the case of myths, to crack the myth and see what lies inside it.

But paradoxes and myths are not just tied to history: Greece is Albania's main economic partner and during the last 25 years, since the fall of communism, at least 700 thousand Albanians have migrated and are currently living and working in Albania. Also from a strategic point of view, the majority of Albanians believe that Greece is an important country for Albania and that the government should pay great attention to bilateral relations between the countries.⁷

Paradoxically enough, the majority of Albanians who believe the country is under a foreign threat also think this threat comes from Greece, and that Greece represents the biggest threat to Albania's national security.⁸

Albania and Greece, although are NATO members, differ in addition in their various foreign policy orientations in the Balkans. Greek traditional alliances have been historically regarded with doubt and distrust in Albania. This particularly happened with the alteration of the Balkan political map, after the creation and recognition of a new state, the state of Kosovo. Greece is one of the two Balkan states, and one of the five European states, which has not recognized Kosovo as an independent state. The degree to which not recognizing Kosovo has affected bilateral Albanian-Greek relations is debatable but, at the end of the day, it is a factor which, if not affecting the real sphere of relations, definitely affects the virtual sphere of relations, which remains a prisoner of myth and paradoxes.

7. *Twenty years later: People on state and democracy*, AIIS 2011.

8. See *European Perspective for Albania*, Albanian Institute for International Studies, Tirana, 2016. Also see *Twenty Years After: People on State and Democracy*, AIIS, Tirana, 2014.

Territorial/border disputes and the issue of continuity

When student Eleftherios Venizelos gathered his friend around a map and imagined Greek borders, he sought half of today's modern day Albania and a big part of modern day Turkey⁹, while Albania did not yet exist as an independent state. But only a few decades later, in 1919, excellent former law student Venizelos, now holding the Prime Minister's mandate in Greece, presented on behalf of the Greek delegation at the Paris Peace Conference all the arguments why Greece should have Southern Albania, or "Northern Epirus," as he liked to call it.¹⁰

Although the Paris Peace Conference did not recognize Greek claims in "Northern Epirus," the Council of Foreign Ministers of the four big powers - the USA, Great Britain, the USSR and France - was anyway introduced to the Greek request and arguments concerning its claims in South Albania in 1946.

During the Cold War, territorial claims were a factor of tension between the two countries and an unspoken public barrier in establishing diplomatic relations for at least a few decades since the end of World War II. The reasons why the two countries did not escalate towards conflict can be explained with the Cold War and the rivalry between big powers, as well as Balkan rivalries, which have been historically present when it came to accepting an independent Albanian state and its territories.

With the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1971, a positive step was made in eliminating one of the biggest sources of tension between the two countries, the "Greek territorial claims, per the Northern Epirus platform. A gradual withdrawal from the Greek side is noticed

9. Margaret Macmillan Paris, 1919, *Six Months that Changed the World*, Random House, p. 348

10. Ibid, 351

since then, but also an effort from official Tirana not to identify Greek official policy with the so-called Northern Epirus thesis, supported “by reactionary Greek circles, including the Greek Church, which through chauvinist points of view seek to hamper the approximation of Greece with Albania.”¹¹

It can be said without hesitation that, with the end of the Cold War and fall of the communist regime, the territorial claims according to the Northern Epirus ideological platform were finally archived. Further developments such as the mutual signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and Albania’s NATO¹² membership finally ultimately concluded every territorial claim created and carried throughout history.

Despite this new reality, peripheral segments within Greece, and especially those belonging to the Greek Diaspora, continue to feed the born and dead Northern Epirus thesis and keep the populist-fed discourse of the virtual sphere alive.

Parallel to territorial disputes, issues of defining borders between the two states - the same international borders recognized by the Big Powers - have been a source of tension.

In 2010, Albania’s Constitutional Court devalued the continental shelf agreement. After several years of negotiations and the eventual acceptance of a maritime border agreement - the only border left undetermined - it seemed like Albania and Greece were on the track of closing the open chapter of border disputes. However, Albania’s Constitutional Court devalued this agreement because it “stepped on constitutional principles and did not respect international right principles in determining maritime borders.”¹³

The failure to approve a maritime border agreement, for which

11. Enver Hoxha, *Dy Popuj Miq*, Tirana, 1985, Publishing House 8 Nentori, pg 415.

12. Albanian got invited to become a NATO member at the Bucharest Summit of 2008 and, a year later, in 2009 it became a full member of the Alliance

13. See Constitutional Court ruling, 15 April 2010

negotiations had begun immediately after World War II ended, prove another constant characteristic of Albanian-Greek relations: border issues and disputes surrounding it continue to be an essential source of political tension, no matter the democratic changes, common membership in the North-Atlantic Alliance and the consistent Greek support towards Albania's EU integration. The issues of defining the borders between Albania and Greece appeared immediately after European powers recognized the Albanian state. Initially, more than an issue of defining the countries' borders, it was related with the territorial claims towards Southern Albania or Northern Epirus. Although the Conference of Ambassadors of the European powers did not recognize Greek claims that wanted to include Albanian territories, these claims persisted to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.¹⁴ In 1921, the Ambassadors Conference, which immediately followed the Peace Conference, recognized the borders of 1913. From this period on, border disputes can be regarded separately from territorial disputes. For several decades during the Cold War, the issue of defining borders was one of the obstacles to establishing diplomatic relations.¹⁵ Actually even after the establishment of diplomatic relations, occasional tensions arising were tied to undefined borders and to the Greek hesitation to define its land border.

However, it is important to state that more than the minority issues per se, the way the governments of both countries accommodated and behaved towards the Greek minority was a source of tension. Primarily, the presence of the Greek minority and dispute concerning its numbers has served to feed territorial claims and, later, border claims, but - gradually - the policies followed by Tirana and Athens towards the Greek minority were a source of tension on their own. During the Cold War, including the period diplomatic relations were established, the issue of the Greek minority in Albania was a constant source of tension which persisted even after the fall of communism.

14. See *The Albanian Problem in the Paris Peace Conference*, AIIS, Tirana, 2018

15. See Enver Hoxha, *Dy Popuj, Dy Miq*

The populist account: don't open the box

One of the most disputed issues in Albanian-Greek relations, in fact also related to other historical disputes, is the Cham issue.

After the Balkan Wars, the Cham population was placed under Greek jurisdiction while with the Firenze Protocol of 1913 the territories in North-West Greece, inhabited by Cham population, remained outside Albanian borders. Nonetheless, the beginning of 1923 marks the origin of the Cham issue, when Greece and Turkey started negotiations on population exchange. Greece announced it did not intend to include the Cham population in the population exchange convention with Turkey. Although the exchange programs were to only include the region's Muslims, without touching the Cham population, at least 500,000 Chams were involved in these programs.¹⁶ The Albanian government did not regard the expulsion of the Cham population in the exchange programs as a privilege.

Either way, the biggest part of the Cham population remained expelled from the Greek-Turkish 1923 Treaty of Lausanne's population exchange and was thus supposed to enjoy the same status as Greek citizens.

However, regardless of official policies announced by the Greek government, the Cham population did not enjoy equal rights with Greek citizens during the period between two wars. The social and economic heritage gained during the Ottoman Empire's rule started eroding under local and central policies backed by the government and, in an increasingly hostile political and social environment, the first clashes between the Cham and Greek populations began. The situation

16. The UN Commission, unable to determine the Muslim origins of the Chams, decided to compromise by applying the Chams free will to go to Turkey. According to Greek authorities, out of the 10,000 that wanted to leave, only 5,000 were accepted by Turkey. See Eleftheria K. Manta, *Albanian Muslims in Greece, the Chams of Epirus (1923-2000)*, The Institute of Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki, 2008

for the Cham population got even harder under the Ioannis Metaxas dictatorship of 1936. In addition to the arbitrary use of violence, the Metaxas government prohibited both the use of the Albanian language in both the public and private spheres of life and the publication of Albanian language books and newspapers.

Yet, it was the developments of War World II that were really decisive for the Cham population's future. Italy, at first, and Germany, after Italy capitulated, announced the national union of Albanians, including, among others, the Cham population living in Greece. It seems the Chams sought the return of the economic and social status, and their future in general, in cooperating with the Italians first and the Germans later. During Fascist occupation, the communities were involved in a cycle of violence that took bigger dimensions once Germany withdrew from Greece in 1944. The Greek resistance forces, in particular, under the command of General Zervas, undertook hostile operations towards the Cham population, causing many victims.¹⁷

Collective violence and massacres persisted with the massive movement of the Cham population to Albania.¹⁸ In 1940, in the Chameria region, precisely at the South of the Albanian-Greek border, 25,000 Chams were gathered.¹⁹ A decade later, during the Greek population census of 1951, only 127 Albanian-speaking Muslims

17. The most violent massacre of Muslim Albanians was made by Greek soldiers who did not belong in military formations, on June 27, 1944, in the Paramithia area, where the forces of the Republican Greek League (EDES) of General Zervas entered the city and killed about 600 Muslim Albanians, men, women, and children - many of whom were raped and tortured before death. According to eyewitnesses, the following day, another EDES battalion entered Parga, where 52 other Albanians were killed. On September 23, 1944, Spatar was robbed and 157 people were killed. Young women and girls were raped and those men who remained alive were gath27/06/18hered and sent to the Aegean islands.

18. For an objective account of the Cham issue, see Miranda Vickers, James Pettifer, *The Cham Issue: the Next Stage*, Naimi publishing house, 2014

19. Within the controversial Cham issue, the numbers are also disputed.

were registered in the entire country.²⁰

The Cham issue, which both countries interpret differently, was the first clash and dispute between Albania and Greece.

The most essential question is how the historical trajectory of the Chams, which, in the words of Stathis N. Kalyvas “couldn’t be more emblematic of the dark continent - the European 20th century,” has influenced and continues to influence Albanian-Greek relations.

The Cham issue has been source of tension between the two countries since the Greek-Turkish population exchange of 1926.

Other than the demarches undertaken directly towards official Athens, the Albanian government expressed its worries concerning the population’s situation at the League of Nations. During this time, Athens was also closely following the deepening of Albanian-Italian relations, also in the context of the Cham population within its territory, worrying Albanians might have the support of a power like Italy in their claims and potential shares of their brothers in Greece.²¹

Until the start of World War II, Albania was engaged with the Cham issue in one way or another. Developments during the war were dramatic for the Cham population in Greece. At first Italy, and then Germany, announced the creation of Greater Albania, which included Northern territories on the border with Kosovo as well as those in the South, also with the Chameri region, in addition to Albania according to the 1913 borders.

With Albania’s liberation and the establishment of the communist regime in Albania, the Hoxha communist government was attentive to the Cham issue at first.

20. Stathis N.Kalyvas at Eleftheria K. Manta *Muslim Albanians in Greece, The Cham Epirus (1923- 2000)*, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 2008

21. Miranda Vickers

Hoxha presented the Cham issue at the Paris Peace Conference of 1946. The Communist government asked for the repatriation of Chams in Greece and the restitution of their assets.²² This was the period when relations between the two countries worsened due to official Greek requests on territorial claims at Northern Epirus.²³ Meanwhile, the ideological positioning and division among the big powers - the USSR on the one hand and the USA and Great Britain on the other - also influenced relations. Along the interstate disputes of the Balkans, clashes between global superpowers had their impact on a considerable scale.

Similarly, the Albanian communist regime, although not directly and openly, supported the efforts of the Cham population placed in Albania to internationalize their case. Two Cham congresses were organized in Albania in 1945 and 1947 and a series of efforts were undertaken by European powers and the United Nations.

During the Greek Civil War, the Cham issue starts to resurface: the Greek communists saw Chams placed in Albania as a good way to strengthen the Democratic Party. Greek communist leaders asked Tirana, the Albanian communist leadership, help in recruiting them in the army.²⁴

This was the last time the Albanian government engaged with the Cham issue, and that was entirely in an ideological context, as it aimed to help the Greek communists in the civil war.

Finally, the communist regime put a lid on the Cham issue in 1953, when it gave the Cham population Albanian citizenship through a special decree.

22. See Beqir Meta, *Greek-Albanian Tension, 1939-1949, The Cham Tragedy*, 111-167, Academy of Science of Albania, Tirana, 2006.

23. *Ibid*, Meta.

24. Out of approximately 2000 Chams that Greek leaders aimed to recruit among Cham communists based in Greece, they only managed to recruit 150.

During the entire Cold War and until the fall of the communist regime the Cham issue was not part of the frequently tense and troubled relations. The Cold War and division in two opposing blocks are not enough to explain why the Cham issue was no longer a concern of the government. Regardless of Albania's isolation, a closed border with Greece, the lack of diplomatic relations for three decades and despite the fact both countries belonged to opposing military and ideological blocs, Albania and Greece had tense relations, but it was never due to the Cham issue. The Hoxha government had also given up the requests presented at the Paris Peace Conference of 1946 and, until the end of the Cold War and the fall of the communist regime, kept quite regarding the Cham issue. The Cham issue was not even part of the negotiations during the re-establishment of diplomatic relations at the beginning of the 1970s.²⁵

The complete silence regarding the Cham issue becomes even less understandable if we compare it to the communist government's attention towards the Greek minority in Albania. The regime consecutively tried to point out the Greek minority in Albania, "a smart, hard-working and patriotic people,"²⁶ "enjoyed the same rights as every citizen of the republic." The government took care and propagandized how the minority had its own newspaper; a lively militant tribune to the Greek minority's working masses. The Populist Republic's Constitution ensures them the same rights as all other citizens of the republic.²⁷

The only comparison between the Cham issue and that of the Greek minority in Albania is that of 1945, when Enver Hoxha himself tried to stress a big difference between Greek reactionaries,

Greek chauvinists and his regime. "We don't act on the minority,"

25. One possible explanation is the fact that the Cold War and the East-West ideological clash served, among other things, as a backbone to maintain national issues and nationalist ideas all over the world, including the Balkans, frozen.

26. See Enver Hoxha, *Dy Popuj, Dy Miq 8 Nentori*, Tirana, 1985

27. Ibid

Hoxha writes, “like the bands of Zervas and Plastiras do with the Cham population, which they’ve massacred and violently killed. Our stand towards the Greek minority is one of the most progressive. The Greek minority in Albania enjoys all rights, it has its schools, its teachers, its press and its representatives in power and the military.”²⁸

The finalization of the Cold War and the fall of the communist regime in Albania marked the return of the Cham issue. Since 1991, the Cham community created its own political organization and, later on, its own political party, which achieved parliamentary representation. The organization initially made its claims public - claims that were not so different from those presented to the UN, foreign missions to Tirana and the Greek government only half a century ago. Like in the post-World War II memorandums, the organization sought the repatriation of the Chams to their lands, the restitution of their properties and wealth, compensation of income and respect towards their human rights. The Cameria Organization, the second political organization founded after 1991, when the first opposition party was also established in Albania, hoped to have the non-communist government’s support in solving the Cham issue and believed the Cham issue should re-enter the Albanian-Greek relations agenda. The Cham population in Albania and their political organization put its hopes in the Democratic Party - Albania’s first non-communist government. During the communist regime, the Cham population was regarded with disbelief and no rights for assembly were granted to them, while the idea that the regime had betrayed the Cham issue was quite popular. This not only explained the Chams’ big hopes after the fall of communism, but also a sort of mistrust towards the Socialist Party (and its allies), which, at least during the first decade, was seen as the Communist Party’s heir, responsible for the long silence towards the Cham issue. Starting from 1991 and onwards, the Cham issue would be a permanent part of Albanian-Greek relations. From 1992, the requests of the Albanian side were related to the financial compensation of confiscated properties and the repatriation of expelled

28. Ibid

Chams in their land. It seemed that the Greek government accepted the return of the Cham issue in the countries' bilateral relations agenda.²⁹ Despite this acceptance, further stands of the Greek government have ranged from completely refusing to recognize a Cham issue to refusing to discuss compensation for the confiscated properties, arguing the Cham population cooperated with the occupants and court orders had declared its people war criminals,³⁰ although they had principally agreed to the request since 1992. The stand of Albanian governments, similarly, since the return of the Cham issue in 1991, has marked a dynamic of ups and downs. The 1994-1995 crisis of Albanian-Greek relations radicalized the Albanian government's stand towards the Cham issue. On the other hand, the 1997 crisis, which had the country close to anarchy, left the Cham issue aside.

The reason behind this radical stand is related to the weak, almost failed, state of the government due to the crisis, but also to the fact the socialists came into power, for which the popular conception remains that they "support the national Albanian issue a little or not at all," and have reflected weak policies in relations with Greece and a level of dependence towards Athens.³¹ Meanwhile, the Cham issue becomes increasingly part of the internal conflict between Albanian political

29. During a visit to Albania in 1991, Foreign Minister Karolos Papoulias said the demands for property restitution and financial compensation, "should be resolved by a bilateral commission." See Miranda Vicker. Likewise, at the first meeting of the two prime ministers Simitis-Berisha in 1992, concerning the two requests presented by the Albanian side: financial compensation for confiscated property and return of their land to the Chams, Greek authorities expressed a willingness concerning financial compensation. "For the properties that were seized from Chams who were not denounced as conspirators of the Axis' invading forces but who had fled from fear, abandoning their property." See Eleftheria K.Manda, *Muslim Albanians in Greece, The Cham Epirus (1923-2000)*, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki, 2008.

30. *Ibid*, pg. 232

31. In November 1997, Prime Minister Fatos Nano met Milosevic in Cretes, giving Prishtina a mediating role in solving the Kosovo problem, while ignoring the Cham issue which was no longer part of the bilateral agenda.

parties.³² The drift towards a totalitarian narrative becomes apparent at the end of the 1990s and a myth begins surrounding the Cham issue. It is no longer spoken of the specific requests that make up the Cham issue - requests that were clearly articulated after the end of World War II, the Cold War and the fall of communism. Although it is being increasingly discussed, the political parties and other (not necessarily political) groups' narrative speaks more of a myth rather than of the elements that make the Cham issue and the ways to solve it. The Cham issue narrative, at least since the 1997 crisis, is similar to the narrative of myths. The creation of the Party for Justice and Unity, its dissolution and creation of the Party for Justice, Integration and Unity (PDIU) was not a small influence towards the totalitarian rhetoric of the Cham issue and creation of its myth, as it almost privatized the Cham issue and its myth.

The PDIU declares itself "Party of the national causes, of the Cham issue, the inclusion of patriotism in the country's governance,"³³ claiming exclusiveness of the national issue. The Cham issue is nothing more but "part of the unresolved national issue."³⁴

Liberation from paradoxes and myths

Albanian-Greek relations, after the end of the Cold War, the fall of communism and Albania's re-exposure to the West, develop in two different spheres: one is the sphere of peace, in which actual relations develop in the fields of economy, trade, investments, parallel to exchanges in the social aspect - the communications of the two societies

32. Ordinary debates when an Albanian minister visits Greece or when a Greek minister visits Tirana are summed up in the questions "Did he mention the Cham issue?" "Why was the Cham issue left out of the talks?" "Who is betraying it and why?"

33. See PDIU's mission, Official website

34. See Sh. Idrizi Speech, 27-year-anniversary of the Chameria Organization founding, January 2018

in the fields of art and culture; while the other sphere is the “sphere of war,” which is in fact virtual: it operates the political discourse, the political elites, the media and different interest groups. Within this sphere the discourse is almost totalitarian and centers on mainly contested issues stemming from history, such as the Cham issue, the so-called “North Epirus issue” and the minorities’ issue. The first is the real sphere, the second is fictive.

Although it seems these two spheres develop and function parallel and simultaneously, there is a degree of influence and interdependence between them. The almost cyclical crises in the Greek-Albanian relations after the end of the Cold War have been defined by the interdependence of these two spheres. The first is a real world that is related to economic interests, communication and societal cooperation, while the second was built and functions on myths and paradoxes, creating in fact one big paradox which, in the best case scenario, maintains the status quo in these relations without allowing their development and strengthening and, in the worst case scenario, produces cyclical crises which have damaged, or have the potential to damage the future of these relations.

It is not possible to explain Albanian-Greek relations in the post-Cold War context without understanding and explaining the paradoxes and myths created by history. Undoubtedly, the strengthening of these relations is not possible without liberation from these myths and paradoxes.

Migration: Bridge or pitfall in Albania – Greece relations?

*Andi Balla*¹

In many ways, Greece has left more of a mark on post-communist Albania than any other country. The two countries' peoples have for centuries been similar in culture, temperament and outlook for the world, but the past three decades have increased contacts and led to increased similarities and synergies between the Albanian and Greek people.

The largest element in these interactions in the past three decades is, of course, the massive migration of Albanians to Greece, which started in the early 1990s as Albania rose from decades of communist isolation. It continues to this day with the trend of circular migration – Albanians returning from Greece or returnees who go back to. Thus the two countries are linked – through geography – yes – but primarily through the human ties that permeate all interactions – be they political or economic.

Yet, increased familiarity can also result in contempt. There is little doubt that many Albanians have a love-hate relationship with Greece. Annual surveys by the Albanian Institute for International Studies repeatedly show that Albanians view Greece as the greatest threat to Albania – in most years, even more than Serbia, with which the Albanians, as a people, had an armed conflict with as late as 1999. The findings are puzzling at first, but explainable and relate to two fears Albanians have, precisely due to extensive contact with Greece.

1. *Andi Balla, Media expert*

The first fear relates to what the Albanian people view as Greece's territorial ambitions toward Albania, with the latest case being the dispute over the maritime border. Greece is seen in Albania as a more powerful neighbour that holds the right tools in its arsenal: a long-time EU membership and relative wealth. The economic crisis might have weakened Greece – and that threat perception has gone down with it – but with Greece coming out of its economic crisis and its foreign policy growing more ambitious with time, the perception of threat among Albanians will likely respond accordingly.

Nowhere is that perception stronger than the second fear Albanians have of Greece – the fear of how Greece treats Albanian migrants and visitors. The treatments of Albanians who work, study and visit Greece has changed a lot over the past three decades, steadily improving as Albanians in Greece and Albanians in general improved their financial well-being and integration in Greece and the international community of nations. However, concerns flare up now and then, poisoning relations and feeding populist stances on both sides of the border. It is not unusual for Albanian migrants and visitors to be the first to feel the negative events in bilateral political relations, turning the bridge that people-to-people relations form into a potential pitfall.

The very nature of migratory movements in recent years, being cyclical and secondary at times – meaning a return to Albania and back to Greece or migration of Albanian migrants to third country like Germany or Canada – make it hard to predict the number of Albanian migrants that currently live in Greece. The Albanian government believes that approximately 500,000 people born in Albania are living in Greece, with their children, the number would go higher. The 2001 Census in Greece indicated the presence of 433,249 Albanian immigrants. The crisis in Greece could have led to as many 180,000 Albanians leaving the country, albeit perhaps not permanently. Regardless of the actual hard numbers, a very large population of Albanians currently live in Greece, making it a strong element of bilateral relations.

Looking at the longer term, most of that population will eventually be completely integrated into Greek society; holding on to a weaker and weaker connection to Albania, however, that connection will be stronger than the rest of the Diaspora due to geographic proximity. In addition, in about ten years, Albania will likely join the European Union, barring any further major crisis in the bloc. This process is already taking too long for the aspirations of many Albanians, but once membership becomes reality the narrative of relation and people-to-people relations will change too. One major change will relate to the removal of the hard border and integration of infrastructure. The movement of people and migration on both sides will become easier, and we are likely going to see more Greeks migrate to Albania, whether to profit from business opportunities or from the lower cost of living and similar climate and culture – as is likely to be case for retirees.

As the two governments look at bilateral relations, these people-to-people ties should be seen as a priority. Migrants are and should be viewed as a bridge between the two countries, not as a pitfall.

Economic impact of migration

One of the most important aspects of Albanian migration to Greece is the economic impact it has on both countries. Greece is just emerging from the worst economic crisis in recent history. Its economy and well-being shrunk considerably during that time and Albanian migrants were among the most affected groups.

An interesting trend that happened during the depths of the Greek crisis was that Greek media expressed concern that Albanian workers were leaving the country in droves for better pastures – either returning to Albania or going into secondary migration to Northern Europe or North America.

Since early 1990s, the Greek narrative had been simple. It detailed how

the Greek people were there to help the poor Albanian migrants pouring over the border -- giving them food, shelter and work. They were -- as they saw it, humanitarian. And Albanians should just be grateful to have been allowed to stay and work.

The Albanian narrative is different, however. It looked at the harsh sacrifices and hard work migrants had to go through – often under intense discrimination from the Greeks – to make ends meet.

But beyond the narratives and human stories that go with them, there are hard numbers. The economic impact of Albanian migration to Greece has been high both for the originating and host countries. Greek sources put the remittances sent home by Albanian migrants in the billions – with some 2.2 billion euros during the eight years preceding the Greek crisis alone, from 2003 – 2011, according to data presented to parliament in 2012 by the Bank of Greece.

With the severe financial crisis in neighbouring Greece, tens of thousands of immigrants working there lost their jobs, severely affecting remittances which remain a vital source of income for their families. Albanian migrants started a flow of returns to Albania, some permanently and others temporarily until the Greek situation improved, according to reporting by *Tirana Times*.

Most of the impact on Albania has traditionally come through remittances, money migrants send home to help their families. Around 46 percent of migrants sending remittances to Albania are reported to living in neighbouring Greece, compared to 41 percent in Italy, according to a central bank survey.

Albania was up until 2010 one of the top per capita recipients of remittances in Europe, according to the World Bank. As a result, remittances have carried a large weight as a percentage of the GDP. Things have rapidly declined since, and that is very much related to the economic crisis in Greece – at a lesser extent in Italy and elsewhere.

A large wave of migrants returning home, lower trade exchanges, investment and remittances were some of the most obvious impacts the economic crisis in neighbouring Greece, the top investor and second most important trading partner, initially had in Albania, according to a late 2012 study conducted by the Albanian Centre for Competitiveness and International Trade (ACIT).

The study, which dubbed the Greek crisis “a social bomb for Albania” found that around 180,000 Albanian migrants, or 18 to 22 percent of the total Albanian migrants in Greece, returned home from 2008 to 2012. The sharp cut in remittances is one of the most obvious impacts for thousands of poor households. Fuelled by a recovery in Italy and Greece, Albania’s main trading partners where an estimated 1 million Albanian migrants live and work, remittances slightly recovered for the third year in a row in 2016 when they climbed to 616 million euros, but remained about a third below their peak level of 952 million euros in 2007 just before the onset of the global financial crisis, according to the country’s central bank.

But the positive contribution has been important for Greece too, according to data by the National Bank of Greece (NBG). According a report by the bank, “Immigration has played a very important role in supporting both domestic demand and the productive potential of the Greek economy.” NBG reported that the one million immigrants from South-eastern Europe have boosted the flexibility of Greece’s relatively rigid labour markets, raising potential output growth and supported consumption following their integration and assimilation into the economy.”

That impact is also felt in the money made and saved. In the last 15 years, the number of Albanians in Greece has constantly increased. Even more important, to a very large extent these Albanian migrants are becoming upwardly mobile as they work in better paying jobs including construction, industry and services, and increasingly steer clear of agriculture and seasonal jobs. At the same time, many of these Albanians

have been reunited with their families and plan to stay for longer periods in Greece. All these factors are influencing their saving habits.

No one doubts that Albanians have a high propensity to save. In 1999, it was estimated that each Albanian migrant in Greece saved at least 2,340 dollars annually. In 2004, the average annual savings rose to 5,390 euros per household and that resulted in migrants depositing large sums in Greek banks. By way of indication, in 1992, or only two years after the initiation of the first massive wave of emigration, Albanian migrants in Greece had already deposited an estimated 80 million dollars in Greek banks. By the end of 2007, it was calculated that Albanian migrants in Greece had deposited about 2 billion euros in Greek banks, according to reporting by *Tirana Times*.

Albanian migrants prefer to deposit their savings in Greece, or other host countries, because of economic instability, underdevelopment of the home banking sector, lack of investment opportunities in Albania, bad memories from the collapse of pyramid schemes in 1997 and other reasons. These 2 billion euros saved in Greek banks are equal to 30 percent of the Albanian GDP. Nevertheless, the Albanian state and Albanian banks do very little to convince Albanian immigrants to save in Albanians banks or to invest even more in the Albanian economy, instead of simply financing the everyday consumption of their families and relatives.

Things getting better for migrants

As neighbouring Greece escapes its worst-ever recession that has seen its economy contract by a quarter since late 2008, the Albanian migrant community there has been severely affected, with about as many as 180,000 migrants leaving Greece and permanently settling in Albania and other EU member countries.

Prospects for Albanian migrants in Greece have become more optimistic

in the past three years as the neighbouring country gradually escaped recession and is set to register positive growth rates of 2.1 to 2.5 percent in 2017 and 2018 on improving consumer and investor sentiment and a boost in its key tourism industry.

But it's important to look directly at the human stories behind the numbers, as done by a documentary produced by German public broadcaster DW recently.

In it, Ardian Rakipi of the Federation of Albanian Associations in Greece says between 180,000 to 200,000 Albanians have left Greece in the past eight years because of the crisis there. "The two factors mostly affecting Albanians is being unable to support their children's education and their own financial situation. Currently, there is tough pressure in the labour market as there are no jobs available," he says.

Aviol Marra, a 25-year-old waiter from Albania who has been living in Greece for the past 12 years, says things are getting slightly better. "It's six years now that the economic crisis has been affecting Albanians. Many people have returned to Albania, many families have remained jobless," says Aviol. "Albanians are people who like working and do their best. The Greeks appreciate this and we are among the first they will hire," he adds.

Things are not as smooth for some other Albanian migrants. Ardian Dako, a 30-year-old Albanian migrant, used to work as plumber, but only works as a waiter during summer now. "People are sleeping outside, they can't afford eating, paying the rent or electricity," he says.

Finding a job is getting more difficult for Albanian young men and women and many of them target going to EU countries. "It is difficult for young and elderly people," says Eva Cani, a 19-year-old Albanian who wants to study medicine. "My father went to England for a short time and he has turned back so that we all leave together. Young people now see their future mostly abroad to England, the U.S., or Europe," she adds.

The second generation of Albanian migrants born in Greece manage to find a job based on their educational attainment. Some 60 percent of Albanian young people are educated. However, with Greece's youth unemployment at about 44 percent, the EU's highest, chances are minimal and even Greek young men and women have taken to migration. "One thing we should bear in mind is that when there is economic pressure and we insist on 'economic crisis' foreigners are the first to be affected and that means Albanians who account for three-quarters of migrants here, as the Greek residents themselves are looking for a job and there is extraordinary competition," says Ardian Rakipi of the Federation of Albanian Associations in Greece.

Migrants, visitors and the hard border

The Albanian media and public have always been highly sensitive to how Albanians are treated in Greece. Leaving behind some of the more extreme and violent experiences of the 1990s and early 2000s, today physical mistreatment is mostly episodic on migrants, while visitors face few problems as thousands of Albanian cross the border each day problem-free.

That border remains as hard as ever though – taking time and effort for migrants and visitors navigating through it.

Problems remain, especially on issues tied politics and bilateral relations, things like old people born in Greece and expelled as children as part of the Cham deportation campaign after the end of WWII as well children of Albanian migrants born in Greece and whose passports refer to Greek birthplaces in Albania rather than in Greece – an excuse of sort used by Greek authorities to deny entry to entire groups of Albanian citizens who have a right to visit all Schengen Area countries, including Greece, visa-free for 90 days. Albanian authorities have worked to solve this problem, especially in the case of the children, while the Cham issue remains a hot

potato in bilateral relations – one the Greeks don't want to talk about, while Albanians are increasingly bringing up.

However, beyond systemic issues, treatment of migrants and visitors goes up and down depending on political relations between the two countries.

Let's look at an example from August 2013, as reported by the Albanian section of the Voice of America: An elderly Albanian couple who lived in the United States decided to go see their grandchildren in Greece as part of their brief visit to the region, they were prepared to sit for a long a time in the scorching heat of the Kakavija Border point between Albania and Greece, experiencing what Albanians who travel to Greece for any reason have known well since the early 1990s.

Long waits and grumpy border guards are the norm on the border, but this time it was something else. As they reached passport check, they were told to go back to Albania, as they did not have the needed funds to visit Greece. Several accounts of that day say the Greek guards demanded Albanians show they had 1,500 euros in cash on them, which many people simply don't carry for security reason in an age of debit and credit cards. But the true reason for the border closure was also given in hints and curses: Greek anger over a property dispute between an Albanian local government and the Orthodox Church in the town of Permet.

“When I tried to explain, the Greek guard motioned as if he was going to tear up my passport,” the woman, Nexhije Lipaj, told a reporter of the Voice of America who was on the scene and described what happened in a report.

The Lipajs were not alone in their experience that day. Hundreds of Albanians, anyone traveling to Greece on Albanian passport without Greek residency permits – tourists and business visitors – were told they would not be allowed into Greece. The news caused anger in public

opinion in Albania, which had worked hard to earn an agreement with the European Union, of which Greece is a member, to gain visa-free movement for its citizens. Since 2010, Albanians have gone visa-free to watch football matches in Norway and to the beach in Spain, but more importantly, they have been free to travel to see loved ones in Greece and Italy – two neighbouring countries hosting the largest percentage of Albanian migrants abroad.

The incident had marked the first time a European state arbitrarily closed its borders to Albanian tourists. It prompted the Albanian border officials to resort to reciprocity for the first time. Greek citizens were simply sent back under the same pretext: Not enough cash to enter Albania. The situation was quickly solved through diplomatic channels on both sides, but the incident clearly marked a turning point for Albanian policy and public opinion. It indicated the country would no longer put up with being treated as anything but an equal partner.

It also highlighted how migrants rights were held hostage to relations between the two countries have soured over many issues, from the unsolved maritime border to Athens fighting for the rights of the Orthodox Church and ethnic Greeks property rights -- all to the irritation of the Albanian government who does not want the neighbour to meddle in its internal affairs.

Government needs to do more

Albania's government needs to do more to help Albanians who reside in Greece. Beyond words of praise for their help through remittances, successive Albanian governments have done little to support Albanian immigrants abroad – largely failing to offer essential citizenship rights like voting and children's birth registration for those living abroad.

Albanian citizens abroad are essentially disenfranchised. They can only vote if they return to Albania on ballot day, which is impossible for many,

with some noting this suits Albanian politicians who don't want to deal with a major voting bloc perhaps used to more accountable politicians in the countries in which they live.

Beyond voting, Albanian bureaucracy had left many Albanian children born abroad virtually stateless for years, because their parents couldn't come back to Albania to register them. Thousands of Albanian children born in Greece to Albanian parents went unregistered until 2009, when an NGO, TLAS, signed a memorandum of understanding with the government to help get these children on civil registers.

“There have been technical issues that made it impossible or difficult to register these children,” said then Deputy Interior Minister Iva Zajmi at the signing ceremony, adding Albanian diplomatic and consular missions abroad will now help secure identification documents and registration for these children, which have a constitutional right to Albanian citizenship.

The Albanian government must also do more to help Albanian families who returned from Greece during the crisis. More than 133,000 people returned to Albania during that time, marking the highest pace of return since the country started losing a third of its population to migration in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The data comes from a study of the International Organization for Migration and the Albanian Institute of Statistics, INSTAT, which urged authorities in Albania to create better capacities to reintegrate the returned migrants into Albanian society. Men, who were more likely to emigrate in the first place, outnumbered women at nearly three to one among those who had returned to Albania. Researchers found that 95 percent of those who returned did so voluntarily, and the lion's share came back from the neighbouring countries – 71 percent from Greece and 24 percent from Italy. Both Greece and Italy were particularly hard-hit in the recent economic crisis, and the main reason the migrants cited for returning to Albania was economic difficulties like unemployment and lower wages in their host countries.

Those returning are not typically high-skilled workers Albania lost to the massive brain drain of previous decades, however. The study found that most of the returnees were not university graduates and were long-term migrants, with an average of seven years lived in Greece and four in Italy. Most of these migrants were very poor before leaving Albania, and came back significantly better-off than they were before, both in terms of savings and in skills, the authors of the study noted. In addition to their own savings, through the years they had also helped their families back home, remitting on average 200-250 euros per month, although that number rapidly declined in recent years due to the economic crisis.

In post-migration Albania they mostly found self-employment in agriculture or started small businesses. But, in a worrying sign, the study showed that the average returnees have yet to make significant investments in Albania, either because they lack the sufficient funds to do so, or because they don't believe their investment would be safe. The researchers also found that about half of the surveyed returnees said they plan to settle in Albania permanently, while a third see the move as temporary and might migrate again should the conditions change.

Migration can be circular, however. Data released by INSTAT in early 2015, showed about 15 percent of people like him had re-migrated, indicating mobility of Albanian workers is now an entrenched feature -- and emigration is likely to continue to be part of the Albanian story for decades to come.

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Why are the Albanian-Greek relations moving backwards?

Bashkim Zeneli¹

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Bilateral relations between Albania and Greece have always had, and still continue to have, a great importance. Not only for the sake of good neighborly relations between the two countries, and the friendship between our people, but also for the future of our Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Albania has always viewed Greece, a member of the European Union and NATO, as a gateway to NATO, and now to the EU. Truly, the Greek support in our Euro-Atlantic processes has always been convincing. And the support coming from Greece after the 90s has been reassuring. Without doubts, in Greece we have always found an ally, a friend, a neighbor who has always been there to support us in our difficult transition path, not only in the European integration process, but also in our economic and social development. In all these years, Greece has stood on our side, encouraging and supporting our democratic transition processes, but also being one of the important partners in our trade and economic relations.

In particular, after the Thessaloniki Summit, held in June 2013, Albania has been a foreign policy priority for the government of

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Greece, not only under the political aspect, but also through its support with comprehensive development programs. Our relations have been meaningfully of a strategic, comprehensive and sustainable partnership. These relations have been characterized by a European and forward looking spirit.

We should not forget or regard as irrelevant, as it has commonly happened in recent times, the extraordinary sense of humanism that Greek people showed in the beginning of the 1990s when they opened the doors to Albanian emigrants seeking a better life in Greece. Today, well-integrated in the Greek society as equal and well-respected citizens, they are building a better life for themselves and their families. Without any doubts, the Albanian community in Greece is a precious capital in the relations between our two countries. This is a fact that we need to attribute a much greater importance, and not treat it just as evidence and reminder only during electoral campaigns, through the incursions of political forces towards our compatriots in Greece.

On the other side, the presence of a Greek ethnic minority in Albania has been, and still is, a very important political, moral, and human element in the relationships between our countries. In Albania, a special attention has always been paid to fulfilling the minority rights and standards of this noble minority community, in full accordance with the European and international standards. Albanians love and respect the Greek minority, and they cohabitate perfectly with each other. I am confident that certain property or regulatory plans, would never compromise this relationship, neither harm the Greek minority in Albania.

Nevertheless, it's important to look more carefully at the problems that the Greek minority is facing, and understand their demands, and their legal rights. No one, ever, should think in a way ...” we gave this or that...to the Greek minority”. Absolutely not! The Greek minority, like any other minority, should enjoy their rights

not as a “gift” or “reward”, but as legally deserved rights. And I can say that some good work is being done in this direction. The most recently created problems, should not be over-exaggerated, or even worse, seen as political attitudes towards the Greek minority. This would harm our bilateral relations. Between Albanians and the Greek minority there are no divisions, in every aspect, in their rights and obligations. The sustainable commitment of the Albanian government to fulfill the European standards of the Greek minority in the country, should be at the center of the attention of the politicians and state institutions. It would never be “too much” what we are doing for the Greek minority in Albania, but we also should increase our efforts to demand better fulfillment of the standards for our compatriots living and working in Greece.

People of our respective countries live in friendship and good understanding, in harmony, and they love and respect each other. They closely collaborate in all sectors, turning into important factors not only in economic and social exchanges, but also crucial for the stability and peaceful development of our region. Ours is, unfortunately, a troubled region still affected by ethnic hate and dangerous nationalism.

Looking back at our historical relations, it is noticeable that the path for their reconciliation has not been easy. Instead, our relations have faced challenging and delicate moments, well-known to all of us. But only through dialogue, often a difficult one, and a collaborative and forward looking spirit, leaving the dividing past behind, the necessary dialogue has been achieved.

The sporadic hate feelings, or some incidents, some of them even dangerous, often intentionally and grotesquely amplified by the media, fortunately have not been able to dictate or ruin our bilateral relations. The good understanding and the friendship between the people of our countries goes back in time, in history, traditions, and culture. Fortunately, we’ve not fallen into the trap of provocations,

or emotional daily events. Our relations have moved into the right direction, when courageous answers have been given to negative speculations, very often created from certain groups that have tried to misuse or misinterpret old enmities for their political gains, both in Albania and Greece.

When the spirit of positive political dialogue has been kept alive, to defend the good relations between our two countries, also a courageous response has been given to groups negatively predisposed to harm the bilateral cooperation, and stimulate the sense of hate between our nations. Any behavior in opposition to the general consensus and the European values of good neighborly relations and cooperation, has been harshly criticized. When politicians have done well their job, this has helped in strengthening the relations between our nations. On the opposite, good relations have been harmed, when politicians have been led by nationalistic and xenophobic tones, based on “ethnic hate” and false protagonism. When both sides have genuinely looked forward in strengthening good neighborly relations, cooperation in all areas has benefited. Such a cooperative spirit has given to our relations a strong human dimension, which I’m afraid, today is missing!

With a strong political will and through healthy dialogue, both in Tirana and Athens, we have been able to jointly give solutions to old traditional enmities or new Balkan problems. Real dialogue, through respect, tolerance, and compromise has been in the interest not only of our two counties, but also for peace and stability in the region... This is not an empty slogan, considering current developments. Nothing has been easily achieved, but everything has been possible only with a comprehensive understanding, and trust in each other. Problems need to be called for what they are, without using “folkloristic” backgrounds, acting in the name of our common European future. Of course, it takes courage to solve issues, and courage does not lay in rhapsodies; courage lays in

future thinking.

Building and consolidating sustainable bilateral relations based on a stable system of European values, would serve to foster deeper and sustainable regional relations in the Western Balkans, supporting also its Euro-Atlantic integration. Our objective has always been to strengthen our ties with the West, and the Euro-Atlantic alliances. The West, for us, begins with our immediate neighbors, Greece and Italy, members of the EU and NATO, both our friends and partners.

We should be clear and not “distracted” in our strategic relations, both politically and diplomatically. The “cheque” diplomacy, or the “cultural” and “religious” ones should not replace our strategic, long-term relations. Strategic relations should be based on solid principles, and should not change because of “theoretical fabrications” of clientistic politicians for their power games.

I believe, modesty aside, I can speak confidently about the relations between Albania and Greece. And, I really look at these relations, with great objectivity. In this context, I can say, not without disappointment, that our bilateral relations have been worsening in the last 7-8 years. I also tend to disagree with the alleged perception that the worsening of these relations should be attributed to the current socialist government, despite the fact that the latter has been also “confused” in this direction.

Today, it is obvious that our bilateral relations are frozen. Unfortunately, relations have sled backwards, with the main actors falling pray of this “frozen situation”, despite voices claiming otherwise. I’m afraid, we are facing this situation with frivolity and lack of responsibility. The political class should take full responsibility for the current situation, for the bilateral failures in the efforts to solve the current problems. Numerous diplomatic meetings have not managed to bring any solutions. In addition, we have succumbed to unacceptable political and diplomatic language.

The situation has escalated at the point that ministers in Greece point out that ... they are much stronger than us (as if we, both NATO members, are preparing to face each other). Our side responds... asking the neighbors “to put down their tales....”

Why are talking like this to each other? What is to take pride in such declarations? Why are we getting stuck in this situation, suffering a significant lack of trust between each other, focused on “revealing each other’s tricks”? A natural question arises “why is the politics, intentionally or unintentionally, freezing relations between two friendly nations”? There is constantly only talk, instead of finding the solutions to “untie the string knot”. What is the perspective of our relations in our capitals, Tirana and Athens? Are our relations captured by nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric?

I think, unfortunately, instead of liberating ourselves from the traditional reservations, and doubts and distrusts of the past, we’re mainly holding on to them, and using them politically. We forget that the adaption of such extreme positions, despite promising and euphoric declarations on both sides, is sending the wrong messages to the public, irritating people and their relations. *(In the last 4-5 months there have been some moves in the positive direction, and we wish to improve the “frozen relations” of the last 7-8 years. And without any real responsibility, there have been numerous declarations on “our good relations”).*

The policy of European values has been long replaced, perhaps unintentionally, by the petty accusations, and an awkward willingness to react against each other. The current issues that we are facing, which I would not consider so problematic to hinder our relations, are restricting us to see beyond them. These long term “cramps” are harming our relations. Particularly, our relations have worsened (I use this term without any hesitation) after the decision of the Albanian Constitutional Court on the annulment of the Maritime Border Agreement.

According to the Albanian Constitutional Court, the agreement does not exist. According to the Greek side, the agreement is valid. Without getting into the details of this well-known debate, the real question is: what has been done until today to resolve this issue, from the moment that the PD government signed the agreement, to the SP government that aimed to solve this problem?

During the last 8 years, we have heard petty political declarations of ministers in TV shows, we have witnessed a professionally unacceptable “spinning” of the issue for the public opinion, a shameful incompetency. There have been conflicting declarations over time. We have heard talk of new projects, courts, and arbitration possibilities, new working groups and experts, negotiating team, foreign experts...

It has been said that we are taking the best experiences from Turkey, Italy and Cyprus. The Slovenian model has been mentioned as a potential solution... In what terms have we sat down with the Greek side to discuss this issues? What is the space for improvement, correction, calculations, and recalculations? Shouldn't the Albanian public know what is happening with this agreement, which is turning ten-years-old ‘without an agreement’? Obviously, yes! It is a political, legal, moral and national duty for the political class to explain these questions to the public. For the sake of transparency, the Albanian public should know the position of the Greek side on this issue. What is the opinion of the Greek Government? What is acceptable and unacceptable for them? Is there any room for compromise? Who should answer on these questions? What are the perspectives of solving this issue?

This is a matter of national security, and everyone should be informed. Communication with the public should be done institutionally and with great responsibility. It is a duty of the government to keep its own citizens informed. The Albanian parliament has kept silent on such issues of important national security. In the developed

Western countries, parliaments also play crucial roles on these issues of national security, keeping everyone accountable for their actions or inactions.

(It seems that we are moving towards a solution on this issue, but there is no transparency. What is more dangerous is that we're still seeing in this "agreement" treason and traitors. Treason 8 years ago, still treason today. Is this a bad political game? Yes! A political game is being played to show to the people that we have "big gains" with the new agreement. We need a fair, honest, a legal agreement. There is a need to explain to the public opinion what has changed in this new agreement that is being negotiated from the previous one).

Especially in the last few years, the issues of the "state of war", the Cham question, and the cemeteries of the Greek soldiers fallen in Albania during the war against the Italian fascists, have been frequently at the center of discussions. I will not address separately each of these issues, since other authors will elaborate on those issues in more details. However, these issues were not born yesterday, they have existed for quite some time. Each of those has been previously discussed, there is history and analysis behind them. But today, I think, these issues are being referred for mainly internal political consumption. Addressing these issues on these political nervous tones, has increased aggressively in declarations from both sides.

Today, more than ever, there are continuous discussion on the "state of war" between the two countries, where certain political segments are falling prey of disinformation on this issue. In the worst case, they are intentionally using this issue to harm relations between the two countries. Infamous organizations, individuals, and different groups, who are skeptical or opposed to good relations between Albania and Greece, keep digging in the far past, stuck behind in history. Certainly, creating problems between our two countries.

We should not forget that since 1996 there is in existence a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, good neighborly relations, and security between Albanian and Greece...!

People in both countries live in harmony, and have mostly put the difficult past behind them. I think, while not viewing the absurd issue of the “state of war” as an obstacle to fall prey in our bilateral relation, we need to insist that the Greek parliament abolish this law. Despite the fact that with the Greek Government Decision of 1987, “the issue of the State of War with Albania is a closed case, politically and legally”. On this issue the parties should really have a dialogue, not just talk. If this law is just a relic of the past, its place is in the museum. (*The Greek government is saying that will soon abolish this law, and this would be really a very important step for our relations*).

Similarly, in recent times, stronger than ever, there are discussion about the Cham issue and a potential solution. Our government officials have constantly requested the solution of this issue to their Greek counterparts. Their answer has always been that “there is no Cham issue”. What are our requests in regard to this issue? For sure, we are NOT asking for any border changes. The Albanian requests in regard to this issue should be treated in line with the standards of human rights, with a new spirit of cooperation, in a good-understanding of what is acceptable for each side. This requires real trust on each other. Above all, it requires that we look forward, without falling prey of prejudice and pressure. But at the same time, not accepting that this issue “cannot be discussed”.

The issue of the cemetery of Greek soldiers fallen in Albania, is another issue that I think merits a solution. Passing the ball from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Defense will not help solve the situation. There has been a very long unjustifiable bureaucratic process on this issue, long overdue. Too many commissions have been established and abolished. Naturally, this

is a very sensitive issue for the Greek people. Without any doubts, soldiers fallen in the war must be honored and respected. They are respected not only by the Greek people, whose sons died in the war, but also by the Albanian people, well-known for their anti-fascist values and contributions during the wars.

Numbers and locations of the Greek soldiers' cemeteries, is a matter that should be bilaterally discussed with the spirit of cooperation and full responsibility. Everything can be solved when there is good will and no prejudice. More than 12 years ago it was agreed in principle between the two countries to release a joint government statement concerning this issue. But, it was agreed to postpone it after the parliamentary elections of 2005 in Albania. It would be in our honor as a country, under the political aspect, but also for the moral and human aspects to have this issue finally resolved. *(I had written these line on October 3, 2017. The Albanian government decision on this issue of few weeks ago needs to be positively recognized).*

The above mentioned issues and others, have a negative impact in the relations between our countries. As I mentioned above, issues are not new (with the exception of the Maritime Border Agreement), but the way these are being handled with dangerous political tones and with lack of a constructive dialogue, will not help solve these issues. These problems can only be resolved with a European spirit and its progressive philosophy. *(Let's wish for the best interest of our countries and our people, that finally, in the last few months we seeing signs of some good reciprocal understanding).*

We should be worried that there been no new agreement signed in the last couple of years, with the exception of any rare protocols, considering that several years we would sign up to 10 agreements a year. Agreements are a sign of good cooperation. Agreements in the fields of education, culture, healthcare, or other cross-border cooperation have been forgotten. There are no new economic

agreements in a long time, despite the fact that the economic exchanges between our two countries have increased (this is a very important element),

The number of official exchange visits is also decreasing. Even when they take place, their follow-up declarations leave a bitter taste. In the last 5 years, there have been no official visits at the level of the prime ministers. This tells a lot, and above all, it has never happened before.

In the past few years, relations have gone in the wrong foot, using the concept that “we raised all our issues, the ball is on the other field”. In politics and diplomacy, there should be hard work every day, even with small little steps, but consolidated.

We are neighbors and friends, and we need to have good relations in every field. We need to acknowledge with more realism the fact that the neighboring Greece is a member of NATO and EU, not to repeat it as a simple fact, but to consider it as a constant support in our EU integration. Of course, trust in each other is key in this process.

In addition, we should seriously take into consideration, the importance of almost 800 thousand Albanians that live and work in Greece, not only with electoral campaign slogans and politicians' visits. On the other hand, we should treat the Greek minority in Albania in adherence of all European standards and rights. Our people, on both sides, want to live in peace, friendship, and good cooperation. This needs to be ensured and guaranteed by our governments. It can only be achieved by avoiding unnecessary clashes, hatred, hostility, which are unfortunately amplified intentionally.

Any respective “good words” or evaluations for each other have been missing for a long time. Greek politicians exclaim that we are

seeking a “greater Albania”. This is really absurd! On our side, “the Trojan horse” appears now and then on every issue to be solved. This is another absurdity! There are those “giving credit” to officials for finally “teaching the Greeks a good lesson”. These people are nothing but megalomaniacs, xenophobic and provocateurs, who are convinced to “winning credits” for encouraging hostility and divisions between Albania and Greece.

People do not accept such a language, such negative messages. More than anyone else, the Albanian community living in Greece does not accept such a behavior. For decades they have worked honestly for a full coexistence, friendship, and cooperation with the Greeks. Rightly so, many of them consider Greece as their second homeland. Their children are being raised and educated there, proud to be amongst the most distinguished at every level of schooling. I know personally, many Albanian families whose kids have been awarded for their excellent results with scholarships from the Greek government to study in other countries, such Germany, Austria, the UK and France.

Inter-marriages among Greeks and Albanians are becoming commonplace. This is a beautiful thing. This is a fact of life! Many of them have become Greek citizens, too. What’s wrong with this... to call them “traitors”? Why is it considered a “good thing” only when you become a German, British, American, or French among others?

When relations between our two countries are frozen, the human dimension is what suffers most. It is easy to fall prey of nationalistic behavior, but that cannot lead the way forward in our future. “Frozen relations” is not just reflected in people’s lives, but it also hurts them. Nothing should be overlooked in the bilateral relations, but above all, wrong expectations and long delays could be really harmful. In such a situation, positive developments have no present and no future.

Several years ago, the bilateral relations were considered as excellent, on the basis of a strong strategic partnership. Our two countries have greatly cooperated in every field. Several agreements and cooperation protocols have been signed and ratified. Hundreds of Albanians with severe illnesses have been treated for free in Greek hospitals. Hundreds of Albanian students have been awarded scholarships in Greek universities. Since the end of 2002, the Greek government has allowed Albanian citizen who live in Greece to cross the borders even without proper documentations, enabling their free movement, and being able to visit their homeland outside any Schengen area regulations...

The Greek prime ministers, Mr. Simits and Mr. Karamanlis, in their official meetings with their Albanian counterparts have evaluated relations between our two countries as a model for cooperation in the region and beyond.

I believe that there should be “more walk” and “less talk”. This is the message to be passed every day. Good bilateral relations need much work, but they can be built up and strengthened. But, it takes just a moment to harm good relations, and freeze them. This can happen when the attitudes are characterized by a weak European spirit. (As an example, Germany wouldn't have been able to achieve anything, hadn't it been led by a strong European spirit after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in the 329 days that followed until the German re-unification. A great example of leadership that focused on the European future).

Obviously, the political will to overcome this “frozen situation” between our two countries, needs to be reciprocal. We face common challenges, and need to resolve them together.

Relations between Albanian and Greece take a higher importance nowadays, not simply for the bilateral cooperation. These relations should be put in the regional and European context. You cannot

stand for European values on one hand, and fail to have good neighborly relations, on the other hand.

Certainly, the European Union is going through difficult times, wrapped into its own problems and challenges. In many EU countries, the trust toward the EU has decreased, being placed by Euro-skepticism. The Great Britain exited the EU. Nationalistic parties are on the rise in Europe. In their last elections, countries like France, the Netherlands, and even Austria, were threatened by nationalistic parties' anti EU- rhetoric. In other EU countries, mainly in the former communist East Europe, populism and illiberal democracy are on the rise.

Terrorism is threatening Europe more than ever. The refugee crisis has given birth to new problems both for the EU member states and the EU institutions in Brussels. In this context, a new racist and xenophobic behavior is being evidenced everywhere in Europe. Eastern European countries in the EU, inclined to go against the EU policies, opting to build walls in the doors of Europe, are even asking for EU financial funds to finalize those projects. Other countries claim that they only accept catholic refugees, or not accepting any Muslims (a real shame for the European human and cultural values for which these countries fought for in the beginning of the 1990s).

Turkey, a NATO member and EU aspirant, due to its own internal developments, has been worsening its relations with the EU, and some of its most prominent member states, some of which with great contributions for the Turkish emigrants in Europe. The Turkish foreign minister declared, recently, that "Europe is inclined towards fascism, going back to its situation of before WWII". Such a declaration is really concerning. President Erdogan openly declared "We don't need Europe"!!! or that "the students who study in the West, return as voluntary Western spies." (The Economist, September 30 – October 6, 2017, pg. 27). Driven by a nationalistic agenda, threatening towards Europe, the Turkish

foreign policy seems unacceptable. Turkish relations with Russia have been strengthening, while those with the United States have seen worsening.

To complicate further the current security situation in Europe, you add US-Russia, Europe-Russia, and Europe-US relations, with new problems and confrontational attitudes. Other security challenges, such as ISIS' aggression, the endless bloodshed in Syria, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, or the nuclear threat by North Korea.

Well, unfortunately, we are not living in a peaceful world of freedom!

On the other side, recent developments in our region are not peaceful and democratic in their core, despite sustainable efforts of the Western countries to promote peace and stability in the Balkans. In spite of the goals of Euro-Atlantic integration, and some positive progress made in that direction, the Western Balkans is still suffering from a narrow-minded concept of European values and standards. Nationalism is on the rise, with dangerous inclinations towards nationalistic governments. Ethnic disputes and hatred are dangerously shaping regional relations.

The Western Balkans, in its EU integration path, today more than ever, is in great need of reconciliation. The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, has been strongly repeating this message since the first meeting of the Berlin Process. Countries in the region, in specific moments, unfortunately too frequent, tend to hold on ethnic, xenophobic, and religious problems. (The well-known German magazine 'Der Spiegel', few weeks before the Trieste Summit in July 2017, had dedicated a long piece of five-full pages to the developments in the Western Balkans. The analysis was titled "Step-children of the continent", focusing on the rise of the nationalistic rhetoric of the past).

Countries in the Western Balkans, including Albania and Kosovo, in more than few occasions, have threatened Europe with alternative options, which are completely absurd. “Der Spiegel” made it evident, that in Tirana and Prishtina, EU disappointed Albanians could undertake a change of the national borders in Europe. (N. 26, 26.02.2017, pg. 93)

With everything mentioned above, Europe is not living in its best days. Problems are challenging. However, the EU should not, under any circumstances, forget the Western Balkans. On the other side, the EU integration is the only game in town for our region. There is no other alternative! Without the EU, there can be no peace, freedom, stability, and development in the Western Balkans. By doing our own homework in strengthening the rule of law, in our integration path, we also give our own contribution in strengthening the EU. *(The most recent published EU Commission strategy on a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans, is a very positive signal, and a significant turn in the EU’s vision for the region. However, the recent visits of the EU leaders in the region, expected with high optimism, turned to be a routine tour).*

Any doubts for a sustainable peace in the region, or any rhetoric for alternative options outside of the EU, would be dangerous for the future of the Western Balkans. The European political language in the region shouldn’t be replaced by unclear jargons, euro-skepticism, disappointments, or speeches of national superiority.

It is dangerous that every time that the “European appeal” decreases, the “nationalistic rhetoric” increases. Such a nationalistic “readiness” is dangerous for the future. On the other side, it speaks about the seriousness and honest commitment to the Euro-Atlantic integration. I will use FYROM as an example. They signed the EU Association Agreement more than 16 years ago, an EU candidate for the last 11 years. On the other side, 9 years ago, FYROM

received a conditional invitation to become a NATO member, but it has remained stuck of the nationalistic policies and ethnic clashes to resolve the name issue with Greece. (*Fortunately, in the recent months, the new government led by Zaev is moving seriously in the positive direction in the European path*).

In Bosnia and Hercegovina, the nationalistic narrative and the ethnic divisions, but also demands for a political separation of the country have been increasing. Other countries in the Western Balkans have their similar problems with rise of nationalism and ethnic disputes. In a certain way, there has been also some backsliding also in the democratic developments in the region.

I mentioned the examples above, to reiterate that Albania too, should look at the European integration, also in the framework of good neighborly relations, and regional reconciliation. I don't find excessive to remind ourselves of the legendary quote of the German Chancellor, Vily Brandt, a Nobel Prize winner, when he referred to good neighborly relations "not next to each other, but with each other". This can be really demanding, but also at the same time a big test for us. It requires clear and courageous actions! We need to talk to each other, not against each other.

Clearly, we will not be able to progress with good faith and confidence towards the European Union, if we're not able to move ahead in improving relations with our European neighbor, Greece. Fortunately, the Western Balkan countries aspiring to become EU members are bordering in the north with Croatia, and in the south with Greece, both EU and NATO members. We need to take good advantage of this very fact.

Getting back into the bilateral relations with Greece, it is very important to work, on both sides, based on the conviction that we can only move forward if we work together. Far more things unite us, than those that divide us. Politicians owe this to their people.

They want to live in peace and friendship. We cannot close our eyes, but instead understand better, that we are witnessing very tragic events not far away from our region. People and nations, not far away from us, are living in hostility and war, a hostility that seems to never stop. These nations have taken no steps, with or without foreign mediation, to reconcile, to come closer to each other, and leave the past behind. And these are people with important cultures, traditions, and history.

In our bilateral relations with Greece, we should not allow (in reality we should be worried) the creation of any curtains. The ability to move over this situation, to believe in partnerships, should not be absent at any situation. We need to know each other better, and move beyond all obstacles, to be real strategic partners, trusting in each other and in our common future. The full responsibility for the future requires all of us to give up the nationalistic rhetoric. On October 3, 2017, at the occasion of the 27th anniversary of the German reunification, the German President Steinmeier declared that “the big love for our country should not lead to nationalism. Homeland means responsibility for the future”.

I have personally publicly supported Prime Minister Rama’s efforts for the normalization of the bilateral relations with Serbia. We could not afford anymore to continue to be “frozen” in our relations with Serbia, in the context of our common European future. But, I cannot agree that, voluntarily or not, our relations with Greece have moved backwards. We should not leave our old friends aside, to make new ones.

For a thousands of reasons, from any point of view, our bilateral relations with Greece are more important. But unfortunately, on both sides, we have remained hostage of the shadows of the past, allowing those to dictate our future relations with each other.

I share a great respect for the Greek President, Pavlopoulos, with whom I have had an excellent cooperation on issues related to

Albanian immigrants, during the years of my service in Greece, when he was Minister of Interior. He has always been very supportive, and I have always expressed my gratitude to him for his commitment. But, I was really caught out of a surprise when he told the French President Macron, that “in Albania, human rights are violated, especially property rights”. (After this declaration, there have been some other hasty declarations from other politicians).

In the last 28 years of transition, there have been many unresolved, or “badly resolved” property issues in Albania. But, I am 100 percent convinced that there no bad government intention, or anything specific against to the Greek minority’s property rights. On the other side, I agree, that if the property of an Albanian has to be torn down, we need to “think twice” when we deal with the property of a member of a minority. In certain political circles and some Greek media, it was presented as the Albania government undertook a “blitzkrieg” against the Greek minority. This was also supported by political and media segments in Albania. Minority issues are always more sensitive than others. I believe that the new minority law that will be passed in the Albanian parliament will be a good step in the right direction for the full respect of their rights.

I mentioned the example above, to show that when we carry along problems from the past, we have a “readiness” to add “new quarrels” to those. Is there a political will to overcome this situation? When I talk about “will”, I don’t mean just a “desire”. “Will” means, above and foremost, clarity, responsibility, and European standards. Dragging necessary solutions over time, creates room for new quarrels, problems, and disputes. Conflict breeds conflict. The spectacle of diplomatic meetings is only producing more euphoria, at least judging from the joint press conferences, or declarations from Greek restaurants that we are very close to good solutions. How long will this last? Shouldn’t we instead, without much noise or publicity, take the first necessary steps of dialogue towards the real solutions?

Our citizens have the right to know what is happening, what are the new developments, what is the reciprocal compromise, what are the obstacles? Solutions cannot come from “brave” declarations from a distance. Lack of transparency talks about lack of professionalism, but also lack of political clarity. Where there is only rhetoric, there is no progress.

In my numerous articles or television talks in the past recent years, focusing in the relations between our countries, I have always highlighted that, unfortunately, there is lack of mutual trust. For some time now, we look at each other with doubts and serious reservations. This is indeed unacceptable. It points out to a move in the backward direction.

In this situation, it is unforgivable that the diplomatic relations between our countries are not “waking up” to see that we are stuck in a “frozen situation”. No side is undertaking the necessary steps to improve the situation. Once, it took only a declaration of the British Prime Minister, Thatcher, before the German re-unification that “two Germany-s are better than one”, for the German deputy Chancellor and minister of foreign affairs, Genscher, to immediately fly to London to meet with her. He talked with Thatcher. Again, when the French foreign minister, Frances Duma, said that “a unified Germany would be a danger”, minister Genscher flew again immediately to Paris to meet with President Mitterrand. He took similar trips to Moscow, Warsaw, and Washington, together with Chancellor Kohl. The reason was simple, to clarify every declaration, any prejudice, any reservations. And with great transparency and accountability, everything would be reported back to the Bundestag.

The numerous declarations from a distance, not only fail to solve any issues, but they actually are reminders of our problems. Perhaps, we are stepping back being shy in front of the obscurantist, populist, and nationalist voices, on both sides. Will our politicians

allow these nationalist voices to define our mutual behavior? The joint political responsibilities should go beyond the good will to normalize relations between our two countries, but they also should address our European future, being crucial for peace, stability, and security in the region.

Our political leaders should learn to “swallow words” declared in Tirana and Athens, which have “heated” the situation. This requires courage and responsibility. Our countries have common interests, for this we need to work together to find the necessary understanding, without any confusion, prejudice, or reservations. To look forward in our bilateral relations does not mean that problems should not be discussed.

I believe we need a new “guide” for our common European future. We need a guide of European standards, not Balkan ones. We need a clear guide, an advanced one! And the basis of this guide should be trust. Trust, and efforts to re-establish trust. Without re-establishing trust, we cannot move forward. We could certainly put a façade, and after formal meetings, we could declare that things are being resolved, that a good climate is being established. However, it would be only temporary, and not sustainable.

To reestablished trust, courage and clarity are crucial. To be led by courage, means to feel and take responsibilities. It is a responsibility towards the good friendship and understanding of our people, who have lived together for centuries. Responsibility should be bare of momentary declarations, under nationalist or populist tones.

To take on responsibility and to sit down to resolve problems, means to actually work in favor of hundreds of thousands of Albanians living in Greece, whom have high expectations for better relations between our countries.

To take on responsibility means to show more attention to the everyday problems of the Greek minority in Albania, not only

related to property issues, but also to more broader cultural, educational, and social issues.

Claiming responsibility means showing added, daily, attention to the minority for each of its issues, not just property, but also cultural, educational, social. Trust is won through actions, not just words. There is no trust when words are rounded up, when promises are overlooked, when momentary and domestic interests take over. Only open, European, and honest behavior, should be a real standard of re-establishing trust. Trust is measured through attitudes.

We cannot move ahead in our European integration while looking back. History has taught us that Europe was made of brave men to serve their people in peace and liberty, in friendship and understanding, taking responsibility for the future, and leaving the past behind. And they were capable of leaving an ugly past behind them.

Our problems (for what they are, without adding unnecessary additional value to those) cannot be solved in one day with a magic stick. But, I don't think we have seriously sat down together to resolve those issues. For this reason, we should not waste any more time.

Skilled and capable experts, on both sides, should sit down, without nationalistic loads and populist guidance. These experts should be skilled, experienced, and visionary diplomats, with high integrity, and not spoiled and servile, which unfortunately are in large numbers. *(Let's talk seriously, despite the fact that bilateral meetings have been held in Crete and Korca, the "heated" declarations in Athens and Tirana have continued).*

It has been more than 13 years since the start of the discussions about inspection commissions to review the history textbooks. The objective is to strip them off untruthful and faulty interpretations of

the past. Is this initiative so difficult to be undertaken? An important step that would serve to the historical truth of our past.

The European future should be “seen in the eyes” every day, in every step, in every relationship. We need to be clear about our alliances, and our strategic allies. Of course, Greece should be a strategic ally for us, in the region and beyond. A strategic ally, is among other things, someone that loves Europe, and contributes positively towards its future. European values should lead our way to the future. Today, any friendship or cooperation, in every field, should not be seen outside these European values. (Will we ever be able to say out loud, eventually, that “we love Greece”, and our relations are strategic? Will be clear on our positions, today, five years after repeated declarations that “we are working to sign a strategic partnership agreement?”)

Foreign policy, especially diplomacy, are based on seriousness, honesty and credibility. That is what makes a real interlocutor, a credible partner. “Punch lines” are not political, neither can guarantee a better future.

What has been built up in our bilateral relations, should not be allowed to get spoiled by certain segments, associations, speculative, populist, and delusional individuals, on both sides. Our governments should take their full responsibilities, and should not be influenced from nationalistic voices who operate for their petty domestic interests.

Governments should take their full responsibilities when genuine interests of people, and their friendship are negatively affected and threatened. The ability to overcome incidents, prejudices, tensions, is the ability to have a clear picture of the future and to know how to achieve future objectives.

I personally think that Prime Minister Rama should look at the bilateral relations between Albania and Greece with a timely high

responsibility. Any populist declarations will not suffice. He should not listen to those biased advisors “whispering in his ears” “it was great what you did to the Greeks”. We should learn our lessons from what is happening in Europe, and not “clap” those leaders that are challenging the EU. Our “friends” and “brothers” should be in line with the European integration. Very clearly! In their words and actions! Out loud!

For us, good relations with Greece, as a NATO and EU member, as a neighbor and beyond have a significant importance and deserve to be clearly prioritized. We should not lose sight of the fact that relations between Albania and Greece should be strategic ones.

We need to commonly undertake initiatives to return to the best days of our relations.

Albanians and Greeks are good neighbors, good friends and should coexist as such. Politicians and governments should serve this end. This is what the people want and they will always hold their governments responsible and accountable, both in Tirana and Athens.

Bilateral Governmental Communication: A Tool for Stronger Albanian-Greek Relations

*Bledar Feta*¹

Addressing bilateral communication is an essential aspect in the process of strengthening state relations between countries where mistrust is high. In the case of Albania and Greece while grappling with the unfinished business and uncharted waters, maintaining communication channels open is vital. The two countries, albeit inextricably linked like very few others in Europe, as they're intertwined by multiple historical, economic, cultural, and societal ties reserve a mutual suspicion on deep-seated and open issues, colliding their bilateral relations. While consolidating the recent changes is challenging for Athens and Tirana, conflicting views have perplexed bilateral relations and the atmosphere has been at times distinctly frosty with no high-level contacts. Clearly, the intensification of bilateral contacts during the last four years and the establishment of joint mechanisms to discuss the open issues seem to be a step into the right direction. At the same time, the flipside of this positive development is the complexity of these controversies and the tough political rhetoric, which cast doubt on whether the two parts will successfully confront their problems in the near future. To move forward – all in one package, Tirana and Athens need to acknowledge the costs of further escalation, show strategic clarity and political will, and above all need to maintain communication channels open as a necessary tool for the dismantlement of barriers responsible for the paralysis in their relations.

1. *Bledar Feta, International Relations Analyst*

Introduction

Since the foundation of the Albanian state in 1913, the relationship with Greece has been complex and unstable. During most of the Cold War, relations between the two countries were tense. After the end of the communist regime and its replacement by a democratically-elected government, the situation did not change drastically while several zigzags have been observed in their relations. During the presidency of Sali Berisha (1992-1997), bilateral relations were almost frozen with breaks in diplomatic contacts and violent border incidents.² Relations improved during the Socialist-led government (1997-2005), but began to deteriorate again following the re-election of Berisha's Democratic Party in 2005. Although during this period relations did not reach the low level of Berisha's first presidency, the contacts at political level were limited. Communication was held mainly in the fringes of international summits and since 2010, Athens had downgraded bilateral communication and consultations with Tirana to the level of the Foreign Ministry Secretary General.³ This view was mainly attributed to Albania's reluctance to ratify the Agreement for the Delimitation of the Greek-Albanian Continental Shelf and Maritime Zones signed in 2009 and nullified in 2010 by the Constitutional Court of Albania. After the agreement was revoked, Albania and Greece experienced another "frozen" phase in their diplomatic relations.⁴

2. Miranda Vickers: "*The Greek Minority in Albania – Current Tensions*", Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, page 2, January 2010.

Available at: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/111787/2010_01_20Balkan%20Series%200110%20WEB.pdf (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

3. Alexandros Mallias: "*Greece and Albania: the framework and terms for a New Deal*", speech delivered during an international conference organized in Tirana, 2012. Available at: <http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Greece-and-Albania1.pdf> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

4. Dorina Ndoj: "*The Albanian-Greek relations following the Sea Border Issue*", European Journal of Social Sciences, Education and Research, Vol.4, No. 1, May-

However, despite all the difficulties ice has started to melt. Since 2013, high-level contacts between Tirana and Athens have been strengthened and intensified, signaling a new era of improved bilateral communication. This frequency of bilateral exchanges and the engagement in discussions concerning certain issues demonstrate the importance that both sides attach to their relations, as well as their common determination to move forward. The stronger bilateral communication has already delivered some results. The difficult long-standing issue regarding toponyms has been resolved in a mutually acceptable way and both parts have re-engaged in a dialogue on other key issues, by reinstating several joint committees of experts. However, the negotiations aimed at resolving some of these problems are slow and with yet uncertain outcomes. In addition, this period saw the resurface of tensions between Athens and Tirana due to many incidents which have provoked strong nationalist overtones giving the impression that countries' relations are stuck into patriotic and populist gear. Some examples of recent tensions can be mentioned here: the disagreement over the territorial reform in Albania and the demolition of ethnic Greek families' homes in Himara considered by Greece as a threat to minority's rights; the demarche delivered by Albania to Greek authorities over energy exploration in the Ionian Sea; the nationalist discourse on the both sides of the border and the racist extremism of Golden Dawn in Greece directed against all foreigners, including the Albanian immigrants.

The disputes and problematic aspects in relations between Greece and Albania remain in place and capable of creating tensions if brought back to the forefront at any given moment. Four issues, whether raised by Athens or by Tirana, have turned bilateral ties sour between the two neighbors: the unresolved maritime dispute, the cemeteries of Greek soldiers in Albania, the technical state of

war still in place and Cham's claims on their confiscated property. In addition, the Greek side focuses especially on the fate of the ethnic Greek minority in southern Albania expressing concerns about the discrimination of their rights, while the Albanian part complains about the bureaucratic hurdles that Albanian immigrants often face in Greece.⁵ Not only do the two governments have opposing views on all these topics but also both societies have completely different readings with a great deal of mistrust between each other. "The general perception in Albania is that Greece has never fully accepted the creation of the modern Albanian state; whereas the general perception in Greece is that Albanians have a hidden agenda aimed at diminishing Greece's clout in the region".⁶ The reservoir of public discontent has not dried out; therefore the status of Greek minority in Albania and the status of Albanian immigrants in Greece are likely to keep the Tirana-Athens channel busy in the coming years.

Albania's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy

Soon after the Socialist Party came to power in 2013, Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama underlined the need for a governing team that will bring a new model of behavior and a more collaborative spirit in the foreign policy area. In that context, he articulated the Zero Problems with the Neighbors as one of the main leading principles

5. See "The Greek Public Opinion towards Albania and the Albanians – Social Attitudes and Perceptions", South East Europe Program ELIAMEP, page 11, December 2013. Available at: <http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/The-Greek-public-opinion-towards-Albania-Final-report-Dec-2013.pdf> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

6. Speech of Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Ditmir Bushati at a Roundtable Discussion organized by the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) in Athens. Available at: <http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Report.docx.pdf> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

of the Socialist government's foreign policy.⁷ The name given to this policy suggested that it would eradicate all the problems that Tirana has with its neighbors by following a more "cooperative track" portraying Albania as a friendly country that prioritizes cooperation with its neighbors. In line with this principle, the government has announced the creation of a strategic quadrangular with Greece, Italy, Turkey and Austria, in an effort to cultivate better relations with them.⁸ In order to maintain equilibrium, the Albanian Prime Minister tested his new approach during his visit in Athens, Rome and Ankara immediately after his victory in the June 2013 elections, affirming the importance of relations with all Albania's strategic allies.

So far Albanian-Greek relations have always been described as a strategic partnership.⁹ Tirana is very much interested in cultivating and maintaining good relations with its southern neighbor; however, the relations between the two countries were widely shaped by the different approaches toward the foreign policy, which the different political parties have pursued in both countries. The principle of zero problems towards Greece, although initially considered out of time and place, it has been in some way successfully implemented in the past four years. Tirana's relations with Athens now follow a more cooperative track with many high-level contacts which have led to the establishment of joint expert meetings where some open

7. "Rama: Greqia partner strategjik. Politika jone e jashtme "zero probleme me fqinjët", Gazeta Shekulli, September 2013. Available at: <http://gazeta-shqip.com/lajme/2013/09/24/rama-greqia-partner-strategjik-parimi-politikes-sone-te-jashtme-zero-probleme-fqinjjet/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

8. "Trekendeshi i diplomacise rajonale behet katerkendesh", Reporter.al, September 2017. Available at: <https://www.reporter.al/trekendeshi-i-diplomacise-rajonale-behet-katerkendesh/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

9. See "Bushati: Albania is interested in strategic relations with Greece", European Western Balkans, 22 September 2017. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/09/22/bushati-albania-interested-strategic-relations-greece/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

issues are discussed in details. According to the Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ditmir Bushati, through this “policy of small steps” Tirana and Athens “have set the train in motion again and are working together to achieve concrete results”. “We will continue with our motto, zero problems with the neighbors and we will intensify our efforts to address all problems we have with Greece”. This was the declaration made by the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama during the presentation of his new government program in the Albanian Assembly in September 2017.¹⁰ Albania’s Head of Government added that “we want mutual friendship, mutual respect and strategic cooperation with Greece”, but underlined that “despite the internal problems, Albania will never close its eyes and will never be quiet when it comes to defending the truth and our rights”.

Athens’s initial expectations for a change in Tirana’s stance with Edi Rama as a Prime Minister were very high.¹¹ Greece’s satisfaction with Rama’s victory can be explained by the lenient position adopted by his Socialist Party in the past, compared to the intransigent stance of Sali Berisha’s 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. The soft approach towards Athens on issues with national interest has angered ordinary Albanians with local media demanding from Albanian politicians to react to what they see as Greece’s interference in Albania’s internal affairs. Therefore, Rama’s recent nationalist/patriotic rhetoric can be viewed in light of his desire to

10. “*Kuvend – Mesazhi i Rames per Greqine: Nuk mbyllim syte, as gojen per te drejtat tona*”, Ora News TV, 11 September 2017. Available at: <http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/rama-ka-nje-mesazh-per-greqine/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

11. “*Ελλάδα και Αλβανία: ο δύσβατος δρόμος των ψευδαισθήσεων και ο αξιότιμος κ. Ράμα*”, mignatiou.com, February 2017. Available at: <http://mignatiou.com/2017/02/ellada-ke-alvania-o-disvatos-dromos-ton-psevdesthiseon-ke-o-axiotimos-k-rama/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

enhance the Socialists' image as a force that is "no less patriotic" than the Democratic Party as well as his attempt to improve his image as a visionary pioneer both domestically and with regards to foreign policy. Therefore, the Albanian government has to preserve a difficult equilibrium by addressing sensitive national issues and preserving at the same time good relations with Athens. The current statements of Albanian Prime minister and his persistence in raising the Cham issue in an official way have satisfied a considerable part of the Albanian public but at the same time have angered Greece, eliminating Athens's hope for radical modification on Albania's official position in relation to some of the open issues. Some analysts believe that by putting bilateral relations into a nationalist and patriotic gear Rama maintains existing problems and adds new ones, far from following a zero problem policy with Greece. On the contrary, for some others his persistence in raising any issue officially is in the right direction for the resolution of all open issues, approaching the final reconciliation in Greek-Albanian relations.

Tensions persist despite the diplomatic intensity of high-level contacts

The diplomatic intensity of high level-contacts between Tirana and Athens has not put an end to new tensions and low-range bilateral disputes which still are coming to the surface. Not very long, after the election of Edi Rama, tensions rose again in July 2014 when Albanian parliament adopted the law on country's new administrative and territorial division. Government's plans to slash the number of municipalities were fiercely contested by the Unity for Human Rights Party (PBDNJ), which represents Albania's Greek minority. Party's leader Vangjel Dule considered the new administrative division as illegal, declaring that "it is threatening minority rights".¹² He mainly objected to the non-denomination of

12. See "*Miratohet me 88 vota reforma territoriale*", Voice of America News,

southern municipality of Himara as an ethnic minority area.

Worried about the situation, the leader of PBDNJ traveled to Athens where he had a meeting with the then Greek Foreign Minister, Evangelos Venizelos.¹³ In a telephone conversation with his Albanian counterpart, Ditmir Bushati, Venizelos pointed out the sensitive nature of the territorial reform and the need to push forward the pending issues between the two countries, without adding others.¹⁴ The Albanian Foreign Minister replied that the territorial reform is Albania's domestic issue and has long been discussed in the parliament and by a special parliamentary committee.¹⁵ Regarding the Himara issue, which was presented as a concern by Athens, Bushati said that "Himara is one of the functional units of the country and it will be treated as all other units". Meanwhile, Venizelos reacted by saying that "the solution must be done through European practices. Albania is now an EU candidate and it has more obligations". The conversation between the two counterparts came several days after the letter of Venizelos to Bushati, where he stressed the importance of the reform and the fact that the Greek minority in Albania must not be affected by it.

The strong reaction of the PBDNJ became a headache for the governing coalition since the bill required a qualified majority to pass through the parliament. Thus, the government decided to

31 July 2014. Available at: <https://www.zeriamerikes.com/a/reforma-territoriale-parlament/1969029.html> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

13. "Dule meets Greek Foreign Minister", Top-Channel, 24 July 2014. Available at: <http://top-channel.tv/english/artikull.php?id=12372> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

14. "Municipal cull anger Albanian opposition", BalkanInsight, 25 July 2014. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-to-pass-first-administrative-reform-in-decades> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

15. "Will the territorial reform make the Greek minority leave the governing coalition?", Independent Balkan News Agency, 25 July 2014. Available at: <http://www.balkaneu.com/territorial-reform-greek-minority-leave-governing-coalition/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

include the recommendations of the Party for Justice, Integration and Unity, PDIU, which represents the Cham Community in Albania and has a strong rivalry with PBDNJ. Finally, the Parliament passed the territorial reform but Greeks were deeply concerned. PBDNJ continued to be part of the ruling coalition until March 2015 when the Albanian government included PDIU in his coalition and angered Greece.¹⁶ Party's leader, Shpëtim Idrizi, was elected as deputy speaker of parliament. Protesting over the move, Dule resigned as deputy speaker and PBDNJ left the ruling coalition. The existence and political performance of PDIU and the support it was getting from Edi Rama, who was using his power to promote the Cham issue, was seen with increasing concerns from Athens.¹⁷ Automatically, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the appointment of a Cham representative as a Deputy Speaker of the Albanian Assembly. Greece is dissatisfied with what it sees as a growing anti-Greek sentiment in Albanian society and public discourse, expressed by the rising influence of nationalist and anti-Greek parties such as PDIU.¹⁸ PDIU is not part of Rama's second cabinet, leaving him more room to deal with the Cham issue in a way that will not irritate Athens.

Tensions continued in 2015 when Tirana and Athens engaged in a dispute over exploration rights and borders. On May 4, 2015, Albanian authorities delivered an official demarche to the Greek ambassador,

16. See “*PDIU brakstis PD-në, hyn në qeveri, koalicion me PS-në*”, Ora News TV, 30 March 2015. Available at: <http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/zgjedhjet-rama-konsultime-me-deputetet-takon-edhe-kreun-e-pdiu/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

17. Sokol Kondi: “*Tirana, the centre of world diplomacy*”, Albanian Platform for Policy Advocacy, July 2015. Available at: <http://appa.al/en/report-july-2015-ministry-of-foreign-affairs/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

18. Ioannis Armakolas and Giorgos Triantafyllou: “*EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans–Greece*”, European Policy Center, Issue Paper No.79, page 136, July 2015. Available at: http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_5832_eu_balkans_-_issue_paper.pdf (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

asking Athens to revise its plans for energy exploration in the Ionian Sea on the grounds that it would intrude Albanian territorial waters.¹⁹ In addition, Tirana asked Greece to present maps of planned land exploration in Epirus, a region in northwestern Greece along the borders.²⁰ The Albanian complaint caused the intense reaction of Athens with Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias cancelling a scheduled meeting with the Albanian Ambassador in Athens as well as his participation in the Inter-Balkan Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Tirana on May 22, 2015. Diplomatic resources in Athens interpreted Tirana's move as a clear bid to question existing borders in the context of the decades-old nationalist idea of creating a "Greater Albania", as Greek "Vima" daily noted.²¹ The Albanian part considers the decision of Greek authorities to conduct hydrocarbon exploitation in the Ionian Sea "as a unilateral move" with the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sending a new verbal note on the issue on October 26, 2015, supporting that "at least one of the exploration blocks is located into the Exclusive Economic Zones of Albania".²² Tirana underlines that since there is no agreement on the delimitation of the continental shelf between Greece, Albania and Italy, no act of research or exploitation should be undertaken without the consent of all parties.²³ It seems that the debate over the sea border and maritime zones unfolded another important issue between the two

19. Nikolas Katsimpras: "Is Edi Rama joining Erdogan and Putin in the 180-degree-turn-club?", Hellenic American Leadership Council, 2 June 2015. Available at: <http://hellenicleaders.com/blog/edi-rama-joining-erdogan-putin-180-degree-turn-club/#.Wdn28I-OPDd> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

20. Ibid

21. Aggelos Athanasopoulos: "Τα Τίρανα αμφισβητούν περιοχές για έρευνα στο Ιόνιο". To Vima, 17 May 2015. Available at: <http://www.tovima.gr/politics/article/?aid=704871> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

22. Aggelos Athanasopoulos: "Η Αλβανία τραβάει το σκοινί στο Ιόνιο κατά το παράδειγμα της Τουρκίας", To Vima, 15 October 2015.

Available at: <http://www.tovima.gr/politics/article/?aid=753978> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

23. Ibid

countries - i.e. potential oil exploitations in the waters of the Ionian Sea -, an issue which will keep Tirana-Athens channels busy for a long time putting barriers on the road to a complete reconciliation.

Tensions resurfaced again in 2016 and 2017. This time, at the heart of the tensions was the decision of local authorities in the Albanian town of Himara to demolish the homes of 19 ethnic Greek families.²⁴ Reacting to the demolitions, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintained that Albania's EU aspirations may be compromised if Tirana fails to protect the minority rights.²⁵ The safeguarding of the Greek minority rights in Albania constitutes a significant foreign policy objective of Greece with Greek officials having repeatedly conditioned the improvement of bilateral relations and Albania's accession into the EU on the respect of these minority rights. "Reform in the justice sector and protection of human and minority rights were two of the five key priorities that Albania must implement fully and in a sustainable way, as a condition for examining the start of EU-Albania accession negotiations" Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Kotzias said, underlining that "the illegal demolition of Greek minority property is a blatant violation of human, minority and property rights".²⁶ The Albanian side has denied any violation of

24. "Athens in diplomatic spat with Tirana over demolition of ethnic Greeks' homes", ekathimerini.com, November 2016

Available at: <http://www.ekathimerini.com/213304/article/ekathimerini/news/athens-in-diplomatic-spat-with-tirana-over-demolition-of-ethnic-greeks-homes> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

25. "Athens reacts to demolition of ethnic Greeks' homes in Himara", ekathimerini.com, August 2017. Available at: <http://www.ekathimerini.com/221273/article/ekathimerini/news/athens-reacts-to-demolition-of-ethnic-greeks-homes-in-himara> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

26. Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias reply to questions tabled by MPs on the demolition of Greek minority-owned residences and businesses in Himara, southern Albania (July 2017).

Available at: <http://www.mfa.gr/epikairota/diloseis-omilies/anakoinose-upourgeiou-exoterikon-skhetika-me-katedaphiseis-stis-drumades-kheimarras-akineton-pou-aneoun-se-mele-tes-ellenikes-ethnikes-meionotetas.html> (last

minority rights declaring that the plans of the Albanian government include thousands demolitions along the country, in an attempt to reconstruct the chaotic urbanization that took place after the 1990s.²⁷

Into what might already be coined as a complex situation, the statement of Prime Minister Edi Rama that “Athens owes a lot to Albanian speaking population who had lived there throughout times: such as the rescue of the Acropolis by the intervention of the Archbishop Gjergj Dushmani”, was considered by Athens as a nationalist rhetoric, and added fuel to the fire frustrating Greek officials’ initial hopes for potential improvement in the bilateral relations. This statement of Rama, which came after the demarche of the Greek ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the demolition of houses in Himara, raised the reaction of Greek media considering them provocative and out of time. For Greece, Albanian Prime Minister has increasingly given signs of provocation over the past couple of years, especially vis-à-vis the presence of Albanian minorities in the Greater Balkans. Erion Veliaj’s policy, a political fetus of Edi Rama, to renovate Tirana’s main Skënderbejë Square by putting stones all over regions of the Balkans, including even stones from Greece’s northwest Thesprotia region is seen as an “action that cultivates and conceals irredentism”. “These stones, on which their regions of origin are inscribed, constitute a work that symbolizes the “unity of Albanian territories” and is clearly a “state action that cultivates and conceals irredentism” the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs said. The ministry went on to label the initiative as “yet another provocation from the Albanian government, which is openly undermining good

accessed on 30 September 2017).

27. Sqarim i Ministrisë së Kulturës lidhur me Deklaratën e Ministrisë së Punëve të Jashtme të Greqisë për prishjen e objektit në fshatin Dhërmi (27 July 2017).

Available at: <http://www.kultura.gov.al/al/newsroom/deklarata-per-shtyp/sqarim-i-ministrise-se-kultures-lidhur-me-deklaraten-e-ministrise-se-puneve-te-jashtme-te-greqise-per-prishjen-e-objektit-ne-fshatin-dhermi&page=1> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

neighborly relations”.²⁸ The current government in Tirana, like all mainstream political parties, is opposed to any political unification of Albanian-inhabited territories through border changes; they would prefer it caused by their integration into the EU.²⁹ Once the planned extension of European Union membership into the Western Balkans become a reality, borders will lose their meaning in the classic sense, and the hope is that the free movement of persons, ideas and goods in a European context will ensure a peaceful and a prosperous future for the entire region.

In a climate of mutual mistrust, doubt and strong statements both countries have managed with some success to maintain balanced bilateral relations without jeopardizing the already established process of high-level consultations. However, building up relations of mutual trust remains an urgent task since tensions and ethnically related incidents will occur, particularly in Himara, eroding the basis for friendly rapports and closer cooperation. Yet, the fact that it is in neither side’s interest to allow bilateral relations between Athens and Tirana to deteriorate again and therefore this should in principle exercise a powerful moderating effect. Neither side has the luxury to let relations sour.

28. Ανακοίνωση Υπουργείου Εξωτερικών αναφορικά με αλυτρωτικού χαρακτήρα έργο ανάπλασης κεντρικής πλατείας Τιράνων (26 June 2017). Available at: <http://www.mfa.gr/epikairotiita/diloseis-omilies/anakoinose-upourgeiou-exoterikon-anaphorika-me-alutrotikou-kharaktera-ergo-anaplates-kentrikes-plateias-tiranon.html> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

29. “Ράμα: Η “Μεγάλη” Αλβανία είναι η Ευρωπαϊκή Αλβανία”, SKAI TV, 23 November 2016.

Available at: <http://www.skai.gr/news/politics/article/331640/rama-ston-skai-i-megali-alvania-einai-i-europaiki-alvania/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

High profile visits between Athens and Tirana – New Democracy-PASOK Government

In 2009, the then Prime Minister of Greece Costas Karamanlis visited Albania, the first and the only such visit by a Greek PM since 1992. The signing of the agreement on the delineation of maritime borders by the two foreign ministers of that time, Lulzim Basha and Dora Bakoyanni, was the main outcome of his visit showing sentiments of improvement in Greek-Albanian relations. However, the balance of the bilateral relations changed significantly after the decision of the Albanian Constitutional Court to nullify the agreement. From 2010 to 2013 Albania and Greece experienced another “frozen” phase in their diplomatic relations. The three-year period of Siberian winter in the relations among Tirana and Athens came to an end after the 2013 parliamentary elections when the socialists came to power in Albania and when in Greece the previous Samaras–Venizelos government was preparing to take over the Presidency of the European Council. Within this four-year period, there has been a number of important high level visits of Greek officials to Albania and Albanian officials to Greece, which has reconfirmed the political commitment of both sides to achieve progress and simultaneously have boosted the bilateral dialogue on important open issues.

The official visit of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece Evangelos Venizelos on October 14, 2013 in Albania ended the previous stagnation of high-level official visits, putting the first stone for further bilateral communication. Venizelos visit to Tirana took place in the framework of the European Council Presidency that Athens took over in January 2014, and few days before the visit of the then Greek President Karolos Papoulias. Venizelos was received by the then President of the Albanian Republic, Bujar Nishani, and had meetings with Prime Minister Edi Rama, Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati, and the Speaker of Parliament Ilir Meta at

that time. The core issues that dominated these meetings were the call of the Albanian part to Greece to abolish the World War II-era law that technically has left the two countries at war and the request of the Greek part for full respect of the sea border agreement by the Albanian authorities.³⁰ Previously, on September 24, 2013, the two countries' foreign ministers had a meeting on the margins of the 68th United Nation General Assembly in New York where they discussed mostly about Albania's European perspective and the political and economic dimension of their relations.³¹ According to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs³² the talks between the two Ministers took place within the political framework which was shaped during the unofficial visit of Prime Minister Edi Rama to Athens on August 5, 2013, and the meetings he had with the then Prime Minister Antonis Samaras and Foreign Minister Venizelos.³³

The request for the end of the "State of War" was also repeated by the Albanian President Bujar Nishani during the meeting he had with the Greek President, Karolos Papoulias who arrived in Tirana

30. Joint statement of Deputy Prime Minister Venizelos and Albanian Foreign Minister Bushati following their meeting in Tirana (15 October 2013). Available at: <http://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/joint-statements-of-deputy-prime-minister-venizelos-and-albanian-foreign-minister-bushati-following-their-meeting-in-tirana.html> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

31. Fani Kotzamani "*The Albanian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Priorities*", Southeastern Europe Intelligent Unit, Security and Defense Analysis Institute, Issue 1, Page 24, September 2013. Available at: http://www.i-sda.eu/main/documents/SEEMR_SEPTEMBER%202013.pdf (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

32. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos meets with Albanian Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati (24 September 2013). Available at: <http://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/news-announcements/deputy-prime-minister-and-foreign-minister-venizelos-meets-with-albanian-foreign-minister-ditmir-bushati.html> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

33. "*Samaras welcome Albanian PM*", To Vima, 5 August 2013. Available at: <http://www.tovima.gr/en/article/?aid=525097> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

on November 4, 2013, few weeks after Venizelos. Calling Papoulias “a great friend of Albanians” for his personal contributions, Nishani requested that the Greek President help out so that the “Greek parliament cancels the law of a state of war that is still in effect between the two countries and is keeping Albanian nationals’ property in Greece under provisional seizure, as well as to help recall all relevant laws which also go against the Article 15 of the bilateral friendship agreement”.³⁴ Like Foreign Minister Venizelos, President Papoulias focused on the implementation of the sea border agreement showing Athens’s determination to close this chapter with Albania by putting this issue at the top of Greece’s bilateral agenda. Both visits came after the elections in Albania and aimed at boosting bilateral cooperation since the election of Edi Rama as Albania’s premier had raised hopes for an improvement in formerly stagnant bilateral ties. These meetings did not bring concrete results regarding the resolution of open issues because of different readings but both parts agreed on the intensification of bilateral communication which saw a boom the following years.

In 2014, Athens and Tirana did not abandon this policy of bilateral engagement. On January 14-15, 2014, immediately after Athens assumed the Presidency of the European Union, the Albanian Defense Minister Mimi Kodheli embarked in a two day official visit to Athens, invited by the then Greek Minister of Defense Dimitris Avramopoulos. Kodheli and her counterpart shared the view that their meeting gave a new dimension to the bilateral cooperation in the field of security and defense by opening a new chapter.³⁵ In the statement to the media, Minister Avramopoulos affirmed Greece’s

34. Press release of the President of the Republic of Albania, Bujar Nishani (04 November 2013). Available at: <http://president.al/?p=12719> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

35. Defense Minister Kodheli official visit to Athens (14-15 January 2014). Available at: <http://www.mod.gov.al/eng/index.php/events-and-analysis/131-defence-minister-kodheli-official-visit-to-greece-14-15-january-2014> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

support in restructuring Albania's armed forces, while Minister Kodheli stressed the importance of reinforcing the cooperation in the field by underlining the fact that 35 Albanian students have attended supreme military academy in Greece and that two Greek officers have already completed the supreme defense and security academy in Albania.³⁶

The following month was characterized by a high volume of contacts between Athens and Tirana. On February 6, 2014 Albanian Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati travelled to Greece where he had bilateral meetings with President Karolos Papoulias, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Evangelos Venizelos and the Prime Minister Antonis Samaras. In the meeting with Prime Minister Samaras, Minister Bushati commented on the "strategic importance" of relations between Greece and Albania expressing Tirana's readiness to talk about concrete solutions to issues not addressed yet.³⁷ On his part, Prime Minister Samaras, referring to the priorities of the Greek 2014 EU Presidency, reassured Minister Bushati on Greece's commitment to accelerate the European integration of the Western Balkan countries. He also expressed the willingness of the Greek part to move towards a more problem-solving oriented relationship with Albania, in an effort to detach from the problems of the past. Four days after the visit of Minister Bushati, the then Albanian Minister of Health Ilir Beqaj continued the string of Albanian officials' visits to Greece. Beqaj arrived in Athens on February 10, 2014, where he

36. Statement by Defense Minister Dimitris Avramopoulos and Albania's Defense Minister Mimi Kodheli after their meeting at the Ministry of National Defense (14 January 2014). Available at: <https://www.avramopoulos.gr/en/content/statements-defence-minister-dimitris-avramopoulos-and-albanias-defence-minister-mimi-kodheli-after-their-meeting> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

37. Minister Bushati meets with Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras (06 February 2014).

Available at: <http://www.punetejashtme.gov.al/en/press-office/news/minister-bushati-meets-with-greek-prime-minister-mr-antonis-samaras?page=52> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

had a meeting with the former Minister of Health of the Hellenic Republic Spyridon Adonis Georgiadis. Both parts expressed their absolute readiness for strengthening bilateral cooperation in the field of health. In addition, Greek Minister Georgiadis repeated Greek government's willingness to assist Albania in speeding up the steps for obtaining EU candidate status in the framework of the Greek EU Presidency.³⁸

Greece's strong interest in supporting Albania's EU accession process was also expressed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Evangelos Venizelos during his second visit to Albania. Minister Venizelos returned to Albania on February 24, 2014, for a second time in a period of six months, as part of his Western Balkans tour in the framework of the 2014 Greek EU Presidency. In his capacity as a Chairman of the EU Council of Minister, Venizelos underlined that it is a "main priority" of the Greek presidency that candidate country status be granted to Albania by the end of the six months of the Greek presidency.³⁹ The dimension of bilateral relations was one other aspect discussed during the meetings of Venizelos with Prime Minister Edi Rama and Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati where all parts confirmed their desire for rapprochement of the bilateral agenda. Both sides were of the opinion that "the busy agenda of high-level political meetings in the past five months served as a sound political and practical basis to put into motion a new structured process through the activation of joint expert committees which will help in the resolution of all pending issues".⁴⁰

38. New agreement between Albania and Greece in the field of health (10 February 2014). Available at: <http://www.shendetesia.gov.al/al/newsroom/lajme/marveshje-e-re-shqiperi-greqi-ne-fushen-e-shendetesise&page=1> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

39. Joint statement of Deputy Prime Minister Venizelos and Albania Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati following their meeting in Tirana (21 February 2014). Available at: <http://gr2014.eu/sites/default/files/22-02-14%20Venizelos-Bushati%20joint%20statements.pdf> (last accesses on 30 September 2017).

40. Minister Bushati meets with Deputy Prime Minister of Foreign Affairs of

Within the same month one other Albanian minister visited Greece. On February 21, 2014, the then Minister of Justice Nasip Naço held a visit to Athens, invited by his counterpart Haralampos Athanasiou. The focus of this visit was the strengthening of cooperation in the field of justice. Few days later, on March 7, 2014, it was the Albanian Minister of Education Lindita Nikolla who visited Greece to meet with her counterpart Kostantinos Arvanitopoulos. The purpose of her visit was the increase and the consolidation of cooperation in the field of education and research. Minister Nikolla was very satisfied with the level of cooperation and underlined the establishment of a joint expert committee with the mission to review the texts of school books.⁴¹ The reactivation of the “mixed textbook review committee” was part of the bilateral agenda also during the visit of the Greek Minister of Education Andreas Loverdos who visited Tirana eight months later on October 19, 2014. During his meeting with Nikolla, the Greek Minister discussed the possibility of a bilateral cooperation in writing books for the education of the Greek minority children.⁴²

Within this framework of regular political consultations which took place during all year, the Secretary General of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Anastasis Mitsialis travelled to Tirana to meet with his Albanian counterpart, Ambassador Qirjako Qirko on December

Greece (21 February 2014). Available at: <http://www.punetejashtme.gov.al/en/press-office/news/minister-bushati-meets-with-deputy-prime-minister-and-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-greece&page=7> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

41. Education and science: a new chapter of cooperation with Greece (07 March 2014). Available at: <http://www.arsimi.gov.al/al/newsroom/lajme/arsimi-dhe-shkenca-nje-kapitull-i-ri-bashkepunimi-me-greqine&page=1> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

42. Albania Minister of Education meets with the Greek Minister of Education and Social Affairs Andreas Loverdos (19 November 2014).

Available at: <http://www.arsimi.gov.al/al/newsroom/lajme/ministrjanikolla-takim-me-ministrin-e-edukimit-dhe-ceshtjeve-sociale-te-greqise-loverdos&page=21> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

18, 2014. The high profile representatives of both countries' diplomacy assessed positively the "existing level of bilateral relations, the tendency to seek and find solutions of mutual interest and the spirit of understanding in a cooperation that has produced visible results". In addition, Qirkos and Mitsialis expressed their support for the advancement of the work done by joint committees on the level of experts, an initiative launched during 2014 which according to them "needs to be deepening towards tangible results in specific areas of cooperation".⁴³

During 2013 and 2014 Athens and Tirana managed to establish one of the most important communication instruments that express the dynamic of their relationship. The instrument of frequent official visits of Albanian officials in Greece's capital and vice versa demonstrates their continuous commitment to the final resolution of deep-seated issues although the resurface of a number of tensions during the same period. The formation of the new government in Greece in January 2015 did not halt this positive trend in the area of bilateral communication with many important top-level contacts taking place.

High profile visits between Athens and Tirana – SYRIZA-led government

In 2015, Greece entered in one of the country's most difficult moments when the failure of Greek MPs to elect head of state led the country in snap elections. At the January 25, 2015 parliamentary elections the radical-left and anti-austerity SYRIZA of Alexis

43. Foreign Ministry Secretary General, Ambassador Mitsialis in political consultations with his Albanian counterpart, Q. Qirko (19 December 2014). Available at: <http://www.punetegashtme.gov.al/al/zyra-e-shtypit/lajme/sekretari-i-pergjithshem-i-ministrise-se-puneve-te-jashtme-z-qirjako-qirko-pret-homologun-e-tij-grek-amb-anastassis-mitsialis&page=34> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

Tsipras won, attracting the 36.34% of the Greek vote. During the next period, the SYRIZA-led government did not take major initiatives in the foreign policy area due to the demands of internal politics and pressing macroeconomic and social problems. From January 2015 to July 2015 no bilateral official exchange took place between Tirana and Athens. However, this small stagnation to the official visits is not attributed to Athens change of policy towards Albania but to the timing and the difficult political and economic situation in Greece. Athens new government continued this policy of communication with Albanian institutions adopted by their predecessors and the next visit of Greek official to Tirana came seven months after SYRIZA took power in January 2015.

This time the Albanian officials received the new Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Kotzias who visited Tirana for two days (14-16 July 2015) as part of his Western Balkan tour. The visit of Minister Kotzias was considered as a step forward in the relations between the two countries since the two parts talked about finding mechanisms that would lead to the legal dismantling of the war law, a continuous demand of the Albanian side.⁴⁴ Regarding the delimitation of the continental shelf and the exclusive economic zones the sides had different readings on how to resolve it but agreed to create a special commission “to conduct a technical assessment and determine the modalities which will lead to the delivery of a sustainable solution”. According to the joint statement delivered by the both parts “in case there will be no agreement, it will be required to address the issue within the norms of international law and the European spirit”.⁴⁵ During this visit, Minister Kotzias signed three agreements with the

44. Minister Bushati meets with Greek Foreign Minister Bushati (15 July 2015). Available at: <http://www.punetegashtme.gov.al/en/press-office/news/minister-bushati-meets-with-greek-foreign-minister-nikolaos-kotzias?page=28> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

45. “No quick fix to Albanian-Greek maritime dispute”, *BalkanInsight*, 16 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/no-deal-on-albania-greece-maritime-shelf-border-dispute> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

Albanian part on specific areas of bilateral cooperation.

The visit of Minister Kotzias was followed by an intensive period of diplomatic activity with high volume of bilateral visits between the two countries' Ministers of Foreign Affairs. On March 21, 2016 was the Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ditmir Bushati who conducted a visit to Athens, where he met with President Prokopis Pavlopoulos, Speaker of Parliament Nikos Voutsis and his counterpart, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Kotzias. The meeting between the two foreign ministers focused on the continuation of the already started process of addressing the open issues.⁴⁶ In that context, the two sides expressed their commitment for the creation of a mechanism that will resolve all open issues "one at a time" and "will conclude on a package agreement".⁴⁷ During his stay in Athens, Minister Bushati participated in a roundtable discussion organized by the Southeast Europe Program of ELIAMEP, where he delivered a speech on the importance of Albanian-Greek relations in the current challenging European context. Minister Bushati dedicated a significant part of his speech to the open issues that are at the heart of Greek-Albanian relations, dividing them into three categories. According to him, the first category includes issue inherited from the past such as "the state of war", "the sequestered properties of Albanians during and after the second world war", and "the human rights issue of the Cham population and their descendants". In the second category, he included issues

46. Minister Bushati visits Greece (21 March 2016).

Available at: <http://www.punetegashtme.gov.al/en/press-office/news/minister-bushati-visits-greece?page=19> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

47. Joint Statements of Foreign Minister Kotzias and the Foreign Minister of Albania, Ditmir Bushati, following their meeting (21 March 2016), Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Available at: <http://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/joint-statements-of-foreign-minister-kotzias-and-the-foreign-minister-of-albania-ditmir-bushati-following-their-meeting-foreign-ministry-21-march-2016.html> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

of daily importance such as “the work of joint bilateral committees” and “consular affairs”. In the third and the last category, Minister Bushati included issues which have a defining importance for the future, such as “the delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zones and continental shelf”, “trade relations” and “energy security”.⁴⁸

The Foreign Minister of Greece, Nikos Kotzias, returned to Tirana on June 6, 2016 for a second time within a year. In a period of tensions the two countries managed to agree on the creation of a road map in order to resolve all outstanding issues dividing them.⁴⁹ During the joint statement the Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs highlighted that “the established mechanism for addressing all bilateral issues, will be accompanied by a roadmap and a calendar, to achieve tangible results”⁵⁰ On March 2, 2017, in the course of this close and periodic dialogue, the Albanian Foreign Minister carried out another working visit to Athens, which was primarily focused on the establishment of joint working groups of experts to discuss each open issue separately.⁵¹ The exchange of official visits is not

48. Roundtable discussion with the Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Ditmir Bushati on “The Role Albanian-Greek Relations in a Challenging European Context”, ELIAMEP, 22 March 2016. Available at: <http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Report.docx.pdf> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

49. Despite tensions, Greece and Albania agree to road map (6 June 2016). Available at: <http://www.ekathimerini.com/209361/article/ekathimerini/news/despite-tensions-greece-albania-agree-to-road-map> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

50. Joint statement of Foreign Minister Kotzias and the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Albania, Ditmir Bushati, following their meeting in Tirana (6 June 2016).

Available at: <http://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/joint-statements-of-foreign-minister-kotzias-and-the-foreign-minister-of-the-republic-of-albania-ditmir-bushati-following-their-meeting-in-tirana-june-2016.html> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

51. “Kotzias, Bushati discuss bilateral issues and cooperation on energy”, Athens Macedonian News Agency, 3 March 2017. Available at: <http://www.hri.org/news/greek/apen/2017/17-03-03.apen.html> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

the only instrument of Athens and Tirana to communicate with each other. Both countries' high-ranking officials have also been met in different multilateral occasions such as the 2016 NATO Ministerial Meeting and the Quadrilateral Meeting of Greece, Albania, Bulgaria and FYROM on cross border cooperation held in Thessaloniki on April 22, 2016. One other meeting between Kotzias and Bushati was held on September 21, 2017, in New York. The working lunch between the two ministers was conducted in a very good climate and an extensive discussion was held on all bilateral issues, regional and international developments.⁵² On November 11, 2017, the two Ministers and their working teams engaged in a marathon meeting in the island of Crete in Greece. Although nothing concrete was announced, this meeting showed that bilateral communication between the two countries is in the right path and able to open new perspectives for the improvement of bilateral relations.

No visits at Prime Ministers Level

Although the last four years have been full of visits between the two countries at different levels, including presidents, assembly speakers and ministers, no visits of prime ministers have been in place. Therefore, the visit of the Greek Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis in 2009 remains the first and the only visit of a Greek Prime Minister to Albania. The lack of bilateral exchanges at the prime minister level has raised questions by many analysts in Albania who are wondering if the last year's intensification of bilateral communication has fully exploited its potentials, making speculation on the effectiveness of the whole process. The refusal of the Greek Prime Minister Alexis

52. Spiros Sideris: "Nikos Kotzias met with homologues Bushati and Dimitrov in New York", *The Greek Observer*, 21 September 2017.

Available at: <http://thegreekobserver.com/politics/article/20366/kotzias-met-homologues-bushati-dimitrov-new-york/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

Tsipras to accept the invitation of the Albanian part for an official visit to Tirana and his decision to reconsider his visit to the Albanian capital for participating in the SEECP Summit on May 22, 2015 is attributed to Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama stance and his rhetoric which is considered by Athens as a new nationalistic wave in the country. In a phone conversation with his Albanian counterpart Alexis Tsipras underlined that "recent actions and the increasing nationalist rhetoric on the Albanian side undermined a climate of confidence that is necessary for the progress of bilateral relations".⁵³

In addition, Edi Rama's cooperation with the Cham party was seen with increasing concerns from Athens, which fears a rise of anti-Greek sentiment in Albania. In that context, the visit of Albanian Speaker of Parliament Ilir Meta to Athens on October 13, 2016 where he had a meeting with Prime Minister Tsipras was interpreted by Albanian analysts as an effort of Greece to promote Meta as a counterbalance against Edi Rama to make sure that Tirana maintains a pro Greek line.⁵⁴ After a period of conflicting rhetoric and statements the two Prime Ministers had their first meeting on May 25, 2017. This meeting took place on the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Brussels. The two prime ministers underlined the nature and strategic importance of the Albanian-Greek relations with Prime Minister Edi Rama emphasizing on the need to progress towards finding solutions to existing disagreements, while respecting the best European and international law practices.⁵⁵ Prime Minister Tsipras

53. Phone conversation of Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras with the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama (22 November 2017). Available at: <https://primeminister.gr/2016/11/22/15441> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

54. "Controversy in Tirana as Meta's visit to Athens disturbs majority allies", South East Europe from Tirana, 13 October 2016. Available at: <http://www.tiranaecho.com/latest-news/controversy-in-tirana-as-metas-visit-to-athens-disturbs-majority-allies/> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

55. Prime Minister Edi Rama meets with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras (25 May 2017).

Available at: <http://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/news/prime-minister->

voiced Greece's strong support on the state-consolidation reforms in Albania and the importance he attaches to respect of the rights of the Greek national minority.⁵⁶ Both parties agreed that “only by finding stable solutions with a direct impact on the well-being of both nations will strengthen trust between the two countries and will remove them from the conflicting rhetoric and the deadlock of the past”.

The success story

This frequency of high level contacts between Athens and Tirana is indicative of both parts intention to keep communication channels open. Even though this intensive communication which achieved its peak during the last four years there have been no commitments yet regarding a potential change in the position in a number of issues on which parties have not yet been able to agree. This is not to say that the all above mentioned top-level meetings and contacts between the two countries officials constitute a failed mission; on the contrary, the institutional communication between Athens and Tirana is bearing significant fruits.

The biggest success of this interaction is the agreement reached on May 12, 2014, which resolved the problem of toponyms. This breakthrough demonstrated just what can be achieved with political will, reflecting the continued strength and effectiveness of bilateral communication, if used in a consistent manner. The technical character of this problem did not downgraded its importance, as well as the necessity for its quick resolution having in mind the

edi-rama-meets-with-greek-prime-minister-alexis-tsipras (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

56. “*A meeting of Alexis Tsipras and Edi Rama in Brussels*”, Naftemporiki, 25 May 2017.

Available at: <http://www.naftemporiki.gr/story/1239491/sunantisi-al-tsipra-enti-rama-stis-brukselles> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

negative effects it had in the everyday life of many Albanians living in Greece. The Greek border authorities were refusing the entry of Albanians to Greece – especially to children with legal residence permits born in Greece – because of the Albanian spelling of Greek cities in their passports⁵⁷. After months of negotiations, the Foreign Minister of Greece Evangelos Venizelos and the Foreign Minister of Albania Ditmir Bushati announced in Brussels, during the EU-Albania Association Conference, that Tirana and Athens had reached an agreement on the use of geographical names of Greece in the Albanian documents.⁵⁸ The two countries agreed to refer to the standards set out by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) with Albania taking the responsibility of issuing new passport for Albanians born in Greece including an English spelling of their birthplace. During the transition period, until the preparation of new documents, free movement of citizens was allowed on both sides of the border.⁵⁹

The settlement of the issue of toponyms marked the beginning of both countries efforts to overcome current challenges.⁶⁰ These

57. Sashenka Lleshaj and Dritan Sulcebe: “*Greece and the Albanian-Greek relations in the Albanian printed media 2014*”, Albanian Institute for International Studies, page 40, 2014. Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/11319.pdf> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

58. Joint statement of Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos and the Foreign Minister of Albania, Ditmir Bushati, on the Margins of the EU Foreign Affairs Council (12 May 2014).

Available at: <http://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/joint-statements-of-deputy-prime-minister-and-foreign-minister-venizelos-and-the-foreign-minister-of-albania-ditmir-bushati-on-the-margins-of-the-eu-foreign-affairs-council-12-may-2014.html> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

59. Resolution of the issue of toponyms (15 May 2014).

Available at: <http://www.punetejashtme.gov.al/en/press-office/news/resolution-of-the-issue-of-toponyms?page=44> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

60. Ditmir Bushati: “*Does Albania have a foreign policy?*”, Independent Balkan News Agency, 1 November 2017.

Available at: <http://www.balkan.eu.com/op-ed-albania-foreign-policy/#sthash>.

issues have dominated the bilateral agenda in all meetings and many fruits have been seen in the direction of their resolution with the establishment of a joint mechanism that has allowed both parts to map their open issues and address them “face to face” without “taboos and complex”. One of the main topics of the official talks between Athens and Tirana is the one concerning the cemeteries of Greek soldiers fallen in Albania. The two countries decided to re-activate the joint commission of experts to determine this issue. Bilateral commission met in Athens in October 2016 to discuss technical details about the proper exhumation and burial of Greek soldiers fallen during the Greek-Italian War.⁶¹

Albania and Greece have reengaged in dialogue also on other key issues, by reinstating the long-dormant joint committees of experts regarding the revision of school textbooks, the transboundary freshwater management and protection, and road transport.⁶² On January 29, 2016, the joint committee for road transport met in Tirana for further enhancing the Albanian-Greek cooperation in the transport field. The two sides signed a protocol which addresses a series of concerns raised by passengers and transport operators in both countries.⁶³ The third meeting of the joint committee on school textbooks took place on February 22, 2017 at the premises of the Greek Ministry of Education. In the agenda of this meeting was the examination of the way that history, literature, geography, culture

FefUpfha.dpuf (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

61. “*Varrezat e ushtareve Grek ne Shqiperi, takohet komisioni i perbashket Shqiptaro-Grek*”, Star Plus TV, 25 October 2016. Available at: <http://www.starplus-tv.com/politike-star-plus-tv-shkoder/item/17995-varrezat-e-ushtareve-greke-ne-shqiperi-takohet-komisioni-i-perbashket-shqiptaro-grek> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

62. Interview of Greek Ambassador to Tirana at Albanian Daily News, 30 March 2015. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/intervista-e-ambasadorit-grek-z-l-rokanas-per-daily-news-tirana> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

63. See the Protocol of the Joint Committee for Road Transport between Greece and Albania here: https://www.lawspot.gr/sites/default/files/annex_files/other/parartima-0544.m.6861.as189.pdf (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

and economy are presented at school text books in both countries, in an effort to keep them in line with the spirit of UNESCO and the Council of Europe.⁶⁴ This meeting was characterized as highly constructive, with both sides agreeing on all issues of the predetermined agenda.

Tirana and Athens are also trying to negotiate solutions for other thorny issues through the finalization of a mechanism that will result in a package agreement. The two sides have agreed to focus on their discussion on a package that categorizes the open issues on different baskets and with the principle that nothing has been agreed as long as there is no agreement to all issues.⁶⁵ Albania and Greece plans additionally to renew and amend the friendship treaty between them which has a deadline that expires by the end of this year. The new friendship pact that Tirana and Athens have declared that they want to sign will reflect the current developments⁶⁶, and will include safeguards which will constitute the basis of a new legal framework that will lead to the resolution of all problems between the two countries.⁶⁷ Owing to the deep distrust between the parties, the local analysts do not share optimistic projections about the outcome of these negotiations.

64. Τρίτη συνάντηση επιτροπής εμπειρογνομόνων Ελλάδας-Αλβανίας, Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, 22 February 2017. Available at: <http://www.minedu.gov.gr/news/27046-22-02-17-triti-synantisi-2> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

65. Interview of the Albanian Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati at Top Story, Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 September 2017. Available at: <http://www.puneteshastme.gov.al/al/zyra-e-shtypit/intervista-shkrime/interviste-e-ministrit-ditmir-bushati-me-gazetarin-sokol-balla-ne-emisionin-top-story> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

66. Ibid

67. “Κοτζιάς-Μπουσάτι: ΑΟΖ, υφαλοκρηπίδα και νέο Σύμφωνο Ελλάδος-Αλβανίας”, CNN Greece, 21 March 2016. Available at: <http://www.cnn.gr/news/politiki/story/26041/kotziyas-mpoysati-aoz-yfalokripida-kai-neo-symfono-filias-elladas-alvanias> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

Key open issues at the heart of the Albanian-Greek relations

There are several pending issues between Greece and Albania. The recent bilateral communication revealed that there are four hot points in Tirana-Athens talks. Two of them are the demands of Greek authorities and the other two the demand of Albania. The Greek side focuses especially on the regulation of the Exclusive Economic zones of the two countries, and on the construction of Greek soldiers' cemeteries in Albania. From its part, Tirana complains about the failure of Greek parliament to formally annul the "law of war" with Albania, and the issue of the properties of Albanian Chams who fled Greece in the 1940s.

- **Maritime border with Greece:** The 2009 Agreement for the Delimitation of the Greek-Albanian Continental Shelf and Maritime Zones has become a highly sensitive issue in the bilateral agenda. The agreement became the apple of discord between the then government of Sali Berisha and the Socialist opposition, creating a stir of controversy in the local media, which accused the Democratic government of selling national interests to its southern neighbor. The initiative of the Socialist Party to send the agreement to the Constitutional Court led to its annulment (April 2010) – a decision that displeased Athens. Greece was demanding the enforcement of the agreement, while Albania was aiming at its renegotiation.⁶⁸ Since then and until September 2013 the contacts at the political level were limited, encouraging speculation that there was a cold war between the two countries. After 2013, both parts came back to the negotiation

68. Dorina Ndoj: "The political discourse on the Albanian-Greek Sea Agreement Dispute", International Journal of Academic Research and Reflection, Vol. 3, No. 7, page 3, 2015. Available at: <http://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/THE-POLITICAL-DISOURSE-ON-THE-ALBANIAN-GREEK-%E2%80%98SEA-AGREEMENT%E2%80%99-DISPUTE.pdf> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

table to hammer out a new solution on the maritime border dispute. Although they have not changed their official position on the issue, Tirana and Athens have agreed that “their respective teams should conduct a technical assessment and determine modalities which could lead to the delivery of a sustainable and acceptable solution”.⁶⁹ No agreement on the issue after the technical consultations could result in addressing the dispute to an international tribunal, which for the moment is not profitable for none of the states.

• **Cemeteries of Greek Soldiers in Albania:** Another contentious issue between Athens and Tirana is the Greek demand to build cemeteries in southern and eastern Albania to commemorate Greek soldiers who died fighting Italian forces. On February 9, 2009, Greece and Albania signed an agreement to locate, exhume, identify and bury the Greek soldiers, which foresees the creation of two military cemeteries, one in Kleisoura and one in Voulariates in Albania.⁷⁰ However, since then no serious action for the implementation of the agreement has taken place, while the joint Albanian-Greek committee set-up under its provisions has stuck for a long period of time. The exact number of Greek soldiers fallen in the Albanian soil, the number of cemeteries and their locations, plus the identification way of Greek martyrs have been some of the controversies on the issue. The current political consultation between Athens and Greece has revealed that Tirana recognizes its obligations resulting from the agreement but according to the Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ditmir Bushati, the Albanian part needs some guarantees on how this agreement would be implemented in practice.⁷¹ In that context,

69. Minister Bushati meets with Greek Foreign Minister Nikolaos Kotzias. Albanian Embassy in Greece, Available at: <http://www.ambasadat.gov.al/greece/en/minister-bushati-meets-greek-foreign-minister-nikolaos-kotzias> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

70. “PM Karamanlis meets Archbishop Anastasios of Albania”, Council of Hellenes Abroad, 28 April 2009. Available at: <http://en.sae.gr/?id=16456> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

71. Interview of Albanian Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati at Top Story, Albanian

according to Minister Bushati both parts are working on drafting an implementation protocol for the enforcement of the agreement in practice. In addition, they have agreed on the reactivation of the committee on military cemeteries which is working on the issue.

- **The Cham Issue:** Disagreements over the Cham issue have contributed to the poor state of bilateral relations between Tirana and Athens. For Albania, the Cham issue is a component part of its diplomatic agenda with Greece. The Albanian diplomacy has long pushed for the issue to be included in a package of measures that two countries need to resolve. However, the Greek authorities appear extremely reluctant to engage in any dialogue on the Cham issue. Various Greek administrations, both socialist and conservative, have publicly declared the Cham question a non-issue.⁷² Therefore, it is still unclear whether the topic will be included for discussion in the suggested diplomatic package which refers to a bilateral set of open issues between the two neighboring countries. The inclusion of the Cham issue to the bilateral agenda came to the surface in 2016 when it triggered controversies not only between Athens and Tirana but also between Athens and the EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn because of his statement that the two countries are communicating on the matter as a bilateral issue, causing Athens to immediately rebuke his comments as impartial and with a clear bias towards Albania.⁷³ “Greece is not discussing the issue of Cham Albanians

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 September 2017. Available at: <http://www.punetegashtme.gov.al/al/zyra-e-shtypit/intervista-shkrime/interviste-e-ministrit-ditmir-bushati-me-gazetarin-sokol-balla-ne-emisionin-top-story> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

72. “*Greece/Albania: Neither side can let relations sour*”, Oxford Analytica, 11 October 2010.

Available at: <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB163342/GREECE-ALBANIA-Neither-side-can-let-relations-sour> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

73. Fatjona Mejdini: “*Greece accuses Hahn of backing Albania over Chams*”, BalkanInsight, 29 September 2016. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/eu-commissioner-caught-in-between-albania-greece-hot->

in its bilateral talks with Tirana”, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a press release, responding to claims the issue is up for discussion.⁷⁴ “Greece has proposed to Albania a discussion on a series of issues which remain open for both sides, but the Cham issue is not one of them”, the Ministry’s supported. The foreign ministry statement continued by mentioning that “the Albanian side wanted it and asked for it [to be included], but the Greek side did not accept it”.

• **State of War with Albania:** One of the constant demands of the Albanian side during the high level meetings is the abolition of the World War Two-era law that has left Greece technically in a state of war with Albania. Albanian analysts supports that Greek refusal to nullify the law in question in the parliament is linked to the Cham population and their property demands. Albanian officials maintain that the law prevents Albanians from claiming property they owned in Greece prior to WW2, while its scrapping will allow the vindication of property rights in accordance with international law. “Greece should scrap a law dating back to 1940 so that the Albanian Cham minority who were expelled by Athens during World War II can claim back confiscated property”, Bushati said at a joint statement with Venizelos in 2013.⁷⁵ According to Bushati “the abrogation of the Royal Degree of November 1940 which established the state of war with Albania will unleash positive political energy and help transform the strategic importance of bilateral relations into a true, relevant strategic partnership”.⁷⁶ Greek officials, however, have

topic-09-29-2016 (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

74. “*Greek Foreign Ministry denies discussing Chams with Albania*”, Kathimerini, 5 October 2016. Available at: <http://www.ekathimerini.com/212588/article/ekathimerini/news/greek-foreign-ministry-denies-discussing-chams-with-albania> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

75. “*Albania asks Greece to end state of war*”, BalkanInsight, 14 October 2013. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-calls-on-greece-to-end-state-of-war> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

76. Speech of Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs at a roundtable discussion

constantly turned down Tirana's claims that the war law is still in power, supporting that the state of war cannot be said to exist because it was abolished through a decision by the Greek government in 1987.⁷⁷ Although their different positions, the two parts have agreed to work together and according to Minister Bushati "the two parts are closer than ever before to find solution on this issue".

The Greek minority in Albania: a barometer of bilateral relations

The safeguard of the Greek minority rights constitutes a significant foreign policy objective of Greece. Greek foreign policy's top priority is the treatment of all the members of the Greek minority throughout the country, and not just in the areas recognized by the Albanian state as "minority zones". The Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Kotzias has declared that "Albania should not continue with the reform of Enver Hoxha, who recognized as minority only people living in two areas, who if they move to Tirana or any other town, would lose that status". According to him, "this has now received attention from the EU and the USA".⁷⁸ Greece also wants the whole minority issue to be tackled from a European Union rather than a Greek perspective. For this reason the Greek government is raising the minority issue not only on a bilateral level but also within the framework of the EU and the Council of Europe

organized by ELIAMEP, March 2016. Available at: <http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Report.docx.pdf> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

77. "Κοτζιάς: Διαφορετική η προσέγγιση Ελλάδας-Αλβανίας στο θέμα των Τσάμιδων", CNN Greece, 6 June 2016. Available at: <http://www.cnn.gr/news/politiki/story/34864/kotzias-diaforetiki-i-proseggisi-elladas-alvanias-sto-thema-ton-tsamidon> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

78. "Greek Foreign Minister: "We shouldn't have supported Albania's EU accession without conditions", Top Channel TV, 29 September 2017. Available at: <http://img.top-channel.tv/lajme/english/artikull.php?id=21043&ref=fp#.Wd9pH4-OPDd> (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

supporting that several problems in relation to Greece and Albania, including the protection of the rights of the Greek minority, should not be seen as bilateral, but rather as following within the scope of the European *acquis* and Copenhagen conditions.⁷⁹

The respect for minority rights throughout Albania is consistently among the criteria set by the European Commission in its annual progress reports on Albania's EU accession course. Greece claims that Albania is repressing Greek rights, while Albania claims that these rights are respected in accordance with international norms. Although both countries have wider strategic interests in promoting cooperation and European integration, frictions over minority right cannot be precluded as uncontrolled local problems evolve especially in the predominantly ethnic Greek town of Himara, which plays a hugely disproportionate role for its size in Greek-Albanian relations, and distrust remains in place. It falls to Tirana to deal with the minority issue in a very measured way, recognizing the importance of not angering Albanians by seeming too lenient in national issues, while not upsetting Athens given Greece's veto power to block Albania's entry to the EU. On its part, the Greek diplomacy should maintain also a delicate balance of keeping Albania's European perspective opened, while trying to resolve bilateral issues, without being perceived as standing in Tirana's way towards the EU.⁸⁰ However, it is not without significance to mention that local cross-ethnic relations remain strong despite the occasional tensions. Albanian citizens of Albanian and Greek ethnic background often claim that pressure from Tirana and Athens creates artificial divisions in their localities.

79. Ioannis Armakolas and Giorogos Triantafyllou: "EU members states and enlargement towards the Balkans-Greece", European Policy Center, Issue Paper No. 79, July 2015. Available at: http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_5832_eu_balkans_-_issue_paper.pdf (last accessed on 30 September 2017).

80. Ibid

Conclusion

On the whole, Greece and Albania have enhanced significantly their bilateral communication, which is an important step for the improvement of their relations. Yet, frequent meetings on the level of ministers, secretaries-general, and existing committees alone are no salve for the resolution of open issues. Despite the fact of top-level contacts, the picture of relations emerged from the last four years is still quite worrying, casting doubt on whether the two countries are in a position to make the next step for the full reconciliation onto their relations. One of the factors that burdens Albania and Greece in their quest to upgrade their relations is the existence of controversial issues, namely the Greek minority, which seems to keep alive the sense of doubt and mistrust between them. These issues have been swept up in the ethno-nationalist rhetoric that runs tension high leaving little space for rational argumentation. Only a determined and consistent approach, with a great manifestation of political will would renew momentum in Greek-Albanian relations, while the strategic clarity will create conditions for developing trust-based relations, which will not be affected by the media cacophony and nationalist rhetoric. It is in Albania's and Greece's hands to use the instrument of bilateral communication to establish a constructive dialogue that will lead to the resolution of all issues, strengthening in this way their relations. On the contrary, there is still a growing concern that the longer the open issues remains at limbo, the more the danger increases of these issues being hijacked by extremists and potentially backfiring with serious consequences for moderate political forces and bilateral relations.

Unsolved political issues between Greece and Albania threaten the stability and liberal democracy in Balkans

Dr. Dorian Koçi¹

Historical background

Throughout the ancient history of the Balkans, Albanian and Greek populations in the region have shared territories, historical destiny and mutual traditions for a long-time. This reality has increasingly strengthened their relations, already expressed in the creation of similar cultural and political paradigms until the late Middle Ages and on the eve of the French Revolution. However, this proximity which seemed to create grounds for a very close and non-conflicting cooperation between the two populations at the first glance, highlighted also the first contradictions for territories and hegemony in the region after the emergence of national states and the embrace of nationalism as a centrist state-building ideology in their political and public life.

Taking into consideration that the Greek national state was established nearly 80 years previously than the Albanian national state, the pressure and the nationalist tension often ascending in the relations between the two countries was greater and well-organized from the Greek side. This period transpired to be likewise pivotal for the consolidation of the negative perceptions and stereotypes in the Greek cultural and public life about Albanians, which made possible the organization of anti-Albanian discourses and these paradigms engaged for a long time by Greek nationalism.

1. *Dr. Dorian Koçi, Director of National Museum of Albania*

Nevertheless, the Albanian population who was still in pursuit of creating its national identity was not inactive to the messages that nationalism as a stream was conveying in the mid-XIX century. At this period, mainly in the Greek-Ottoman conflict of 1897, we find ideologists and national activists conveying an anti-Greek nationalist message, but due to political alliances in the region that the Albanian elite was in quest of, and due to the existence of a great Albanian linguistic minority well integrated in the Greek political life in the newly established Greek state, the latest empowering bridges of cooperation between the parties related, the Albanian side was more inclined to a closer and free of prejudices co-operation between Albanians and Greeks.

However, this climate of confidence that was designed to be built between the two sides for the final purpose of building a common Greek-Albanian state, was severely damaged by the nationalist claims of both sides of unequal origin and intent.

The Greek political elite supported its political action on the nationalist platform of Megali Idea (1844), which meant the restoration of the Byzantine Empire. In this form, it was universally accepted that Megali Idea was imperialistic and that absolutely or exactly involved the subjugation of other populations to Hellenism. The Greek nationalism was of Messianic type, attributing to itself the role of salvation of all the Balkan Orthodox which equaled them to Greeks from the Ottoman rule. It is true that within the Ottoman provinces of Yannina were a considerable number of Hellenic population but the claims of official Greek policy to count as Greeks even Albanian Orthodox population created a big gap in the relations between two elites.

Meanwhile, the Albanian political elite has a different political platform to Megali Idea; Albanian nationalism was not of Messianic type, but mainly requiring by its representatives such as Pashko Vasa, Sami Frashëri... to protect Albania not to be torn apart by foreigners, to keep their language and their nationality, to compete against the intrigues of their enemies and to prevent the spread of the Greek and

Slavic languages and thoughts, which are shaking the foundations and uprooting Albania and Albanians.

However, this apparent defensive sense of Albanian nationalism was amplified by a sense of preserving the Ottoman Empire integrity or rather, preserving property rights in the event of its disintegration, as Albanians and mainly their aristocratic class were great landowners in some other European vilayets of the Ottoman Empire such as Thessaloniki and Thessaly, where there was no significant Albanian population to be incorporated in the future Albanian national state, which was understandably powerfully opposed by the Greek nationalism and the national state which had accurate intentions towards these territories.

This clear inconsistency between platforms and ideas, aims and goals made it possible for many of the Greek-Albanian approaches initiated by both major cultural and political figures from both countries to fail in accomplishment of the expectations from both sides. In contrast, there have been bitter confrontations in direct armed conflicts and indirect diplomatic confrontations which led to clearly prevailing in the Albanian political thought of the ideas expressed by Sami Frasheri in his book “Albania - what it was, what it is and what it will be” declaring that the Greeks are the worst enemies of Albania... In order to achieve their goals, the Greeks utilized against Albanians the school, the church, the Orthodox faith, the religious and provincial divisions, the armed war, murders etc..

The Balkan Wars (1912-1913), delineation of Albania's borders, the Corfu Protocol (1914), the Peace Conference in Paris (1920), the Italy-Greek War, the deportation of the Cham population (1944-1945), the Peace Conference in Paris (1946) and the earthly claims about the so-called Northern Epirus, the involvement of the Albanian communist state in the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) and the August 1949 provocations organized by the Greek government over the territory of the Albanian state, are episodes of a long series of misunderstandings and hate between the two states and populations; by this means not

only attesting the contradictory nature of the Greek-Albanian relations observed in contrast to the positive aspect of how they started, but at the similarly were high-tension sources in South-Eastern Europe, which also marked a great irritation to the countries' interested in the region.

This was another reason why even in the framework of the Detention and the reduction of tensions across Europe, the Albanian-Greek diplomatic relations reinstatement news on May 6th, 1971 after the break-up and proclamation of the 1941 war law was well received in the diplomat's circles in Europe and beyond the Atlantic in the USA.

Challenge of the present

The Albanian side was forced to make concessions regarding the reinstatement of this diplomatic relations with Greece regarding the Cham issue, the Albanian citizens' property and the Albania's borders recognition. The Greek side was obviously contented not withdrawing from its previous positions and at the same time, finding out that its 30-year-pressure had brought results.

We are mentioning these three immutable objectives from the Greek side, because they continued to be problematic topics between the two countries, though during the '70s and '80s some positive steps were taken by the Greek government to reduce the tension that these unresolved issues carried over Greek-Albanian relations such as Greek State Council SE 2327/76 decision, Greece's highest administrative court, according to which "Albania ceases to be considered an enemy state since its establishment of a regular diplomatic relationship or a decision of the Greek government of Andrea Papandreou of 1987 to formally abolish the state of war.

However, this abolition was never voted in any form in the Greek Parliament, or was decreed by any president of the Hellenic Republic. Thus, Greece and Albania, as two countries that have been in the process

of establishing regular diplomatic relations for almost 27 years, entered the new post-Cold War Era with a formidable state of war between them and with a bunch of problems that required solutions within the new wind of changes in international relations. All this great burden of problems have played and continue to play an important role in shaping peace and the fate of liberal democracy in south of Balkans. Greece and Albania's political life and public discourse have been involved in high level of expressing nationalism and several times important decisions in the relationship between two countries have been taken under the influence of conflict and this nationalistic climate. Thus, Greece has threaten informally Albania with the use of veto before important decisions taken for it from European Union and Albania has been obliged to enter in discussions over the disputable topics by avoiding the public opinion. The agreement signed by both sides in 2009 about the delimitations of waters was a proof of no ethical agreement. This agreement as it is already known initiated a nationalistic reaction in Albania and creation of "Alliance Red and Black", which created a wave of nationalism in the public discourse. This wave of nationalism attempted to be spread among Albanians in region and in 100 years of Albanian Independence even moderated Albanian leaders adapted a nationalistic rhetoric. Thus, the destroying of balance in Ionian Sea and Corfu Channel in favor of Greece and in disfavor of Albania caused a number of problems retaken from the past for both countries.

However, in this nationalist discourse that had begun to be articulated in the public life of the two countries, they tried to be careful not to pass on the tones of extreme nationalism or irredentism and above all to be able to distinguish well Albania's obligations to minorities as a country that claims to become a member with full rights in the EU and not to create the wrong impression with regard to foreign policy with Albania's neighboring and domestic minorities. Wishing that Albania benefited from a rapid integration into the European family, official politics tried to draft its policy at least in accordance with Copenhagen criteria where if it couldn't meet the economic criteria at least to be

able to meet the political criteria. In the political criteria it is known that respect for human and minority rights are two of the five necessary criterions.

Therefore, Albania feels compelled, but legally it has a duty to fulfill all minority rights in education, investment and preservation of its cultural heritage. On the other hand, Greece should be more open in its foreign policy towards Albania and show a “common sense” regarding the problems that the two neighboring states have. These problems relate to the weak and backward support provided by Greece to NATO’s action in Kosovo (1999), the registration of population on ethnic and religious criteria (2001) and (2011), the continued improvement of the status of Albanian emigrant population in Greece, minority expansion in Albania (Himara case), Cham problem and controversial water dispute between Greece and Albania. Although there is a reform of the Greek political class, especially after the Thessaloniki Summit (2003), where Greece sought full Balkan integration in the EU or recent calls of official Greek foreign policy for the Western Balkans’ EU accession in 2025, the tension raised on the above issues hinders the creation of a good and friendly climate between the two countries.

One such thing, for e.g., is the lack of recognition of the independence of the Republic of Kosovo, a reality that no matter how Greece tries to avoid it, it will turn into a boomerang in the continuity of friendly contacts between the two countries. But not only between the two countries, as it is already known that the Albanians except being organized in the state of the Republic of Kosovo, they are a state-forming majority also in Macedonia and a very important ethnic minority in Montenegro. Having such important number of Albanians in region and in some neighbor countries, it is already an axiomatic thought for the International Diplomacy, including the Greek one that the stability of Balkans depends on the welfare of these communities. Greece needs to have an agreement for the official name of Macedonia, not only with Macedonian elites but also with Albanian elites of Macedonia.

Agreeing in recognizing Kosovo as an independent state, Greece can soothe the ethnic tensions in its northern borders.

The Cham problem as one of the human dramas that has not yet been resolved is a problem that should not be overlooked as a “nationalist passion” of Albanians, but the technical side of this problem should be treated as a European issue of ownership denial and as a consequence as a fundamental human rights² and the moral side requires the punishment of the crime that has occurred against the Cham population in such a way that it will not be repeated again. Another important issue is the legality of Cham population properties in Greece. According to European statistics, the northern region of Greece called Epir, is one of the poorest regions in Europe. The inhabitants that live there cannot develop their properties and foreign companies cannot invest because of the legal status of the land properties. Discovering of great reserves of gas in the region will complicate more the problem, if both sides will not achieve an agreement about the legal status of land properties.

This entire situation in the official relations between the two states has come because the Albanian state has not been able to build an accurate strategy regarding problematic issues with Greece. The different political tensions in Albania, the ongoing changes of administration and the amateur behavior expressed in dealing with these relations have made it possible for the political rapprochement between all the Greek and Albanian governments to be admirable, but the friendship between the two nations to be frozen.

Certainly, the performance in Greek-Albanian relations will have a better future than what is left behind. In this context, it is no longer possible to talk about the return to the tense era of 1994-1995, but it feels, and it is necessary that two neighboring NATO allies now and soon allies also in the EU should reform their policies to make possible for the populations to embrace a Euro-Atlantic discourse in addressing their problems and relationships.

2. Koçi.D, “*Hesapet dhe kasapët*”. Shqip, 19.05.2009, pg: 9

A good legal basis for achieving this goal is the signing of a new Treaty of Friendship and both parties should call for joint commissions to resolve all their problems based on this new Treaty. Joint commissions should immediately after that begin work, firstly to abolish the meaningless war law and the return of properties to Albanian citizens, that are under seizure but also Albania should perform the preservation of property titles to the Greek minority in Albania; the rewriting of the texts of the history of Greece and Albania; highlighting the contribution of Albanians to the Greek Revolution and their participation as mercenaries in Ottoman troops; the destruction and burning of South Albania by Greek forces in the Balkan Wars; the abolition of the discourse against the Albanian population where the Orthodox Church continues to be considered as Greek; the explanation to the young generations that Albania in 1940 was a conquered country and therefore could not attack Greece; open discussion and without prejudice to the Cham issue; protection and sponsorship of the language and cultural heritage of the Arvanites in Greece and the opening of ethnic schools for Albanian emigrants based on all European conventions and the protection and support of the rights of the Greek minority in Albania, its cultural heritage, the re-evaluation of linguistic minorities such as in Narta and Himara.

Looking at the issues that are reflected in the Greek-Albanian relations is a long way to go for a sincere and less problematic approach in the future. Fortunately, the road to European integration and tomorrow's coexistence in Europe creates many premises that according to Copenhagen criteria and other EU treaties, all the problems between the two countries will be reduced by creating a better co-operation not only in the government level which for the sake of truth has not been missing but an approach between the two peoples under the example of Franco-German friendship. In fact, more than an economic and political integration of the whole Balkans in EU the creation of a Franco-German co-operation model among its peoples remains the biggest challenge.

Public opinion and Albanian-Greek relations

*Jordan Jorgji*¹

Abstract

In an anarchical international system, the relations between states are based on material power, which is mainly composed of military and economic capacities of nations. In addition, the systemic and sub-systemic balance of power determines to a great extent the international behaviour of states. This logic applies particularly in neighbouring countries, which are essentially characterized by security problems. Such an example is the relation between Albania and Greece, as two countries of the Balkan Region.

Beside the above-mentioned features, the relations between nations are also based on non-material factors, such as human capacity – that are Albanian immigrants in Greece and Greek minority in southern part of Albania – cultural and educational cooperation, public opinion, and so forth. The role of public opinion on foreign policy – and as a result on interstate relations – has been increased recently, alongside with the democratization process of the Balkan states since the end of the Cold War period. With the aim of exploring Albanian public opinion regarding Greece, a pilot survey was conducted with young people of Korça Region. The collected information provides a descriptive overview on opinions toward Greece, as well as its relations with Albania.

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Suggestions drawn from this primary survey may serve as a guide for other more comprehensive researches. In addition, Albanian elites may undertake further efforts regarding public opinion, with the aim of improving the bilateral relations with Greece.

Key words: complex network of mutual misunderstanding, foreign policy, neoclassical realism, public opinion.

Introduction: complexity of Albanian-Greek relations

The political Albanian Greek relations are generally based on a complexity of dynamic factors. The latter look to be like a piece of land that was once considered ‘virgin’, but afterwards were added different ground layers, dark and open colour, as a result of climate change and other influencing elements. In an analogous way, the relations between the two states were built on a complex network of mutual misunderstanding, which was created and further multiplied in the name of extreme nationalism. The nature of the latter – as a phenomenon in Balkan – was often irredentist and also disrespectful to ‘others’, that means other neighbouring countries².

The negative collective memory of Greek elites toward Albanians on one side, and the cultivation of fear and siege psychology against Greeks by Albanian politics on the other side, enhance the old bilateral problems that have been existed for a long time – as well as the new ones. These problems cover a wide range of topics, starting from the territorial issues till the end of the Second World War; the massive expulsion of Cham population; the Albanian provocations during the Greek civil war; the perpetual ‘state of war’ by the Greek part; the provocations of Albanian communist regime during the Cold War period, especially through the presence of Soviet naval

2. Stefanaq Pollo, Arben Puto, *The history of Albania: from its origins to the present day* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 113-114.

base in south Albania; the Albanian nationalism after the 1990-s; the problems between Albanian immigrants in Greece and the Greek state, as well as those between Greek minority in Albania and the Albanian state³. In many instances, the existence of these problems has continuously prevented the governments of both countries to develop a satisfactory bilateral communication, and furthermore to motivate a sustainable Albanian Greek partnership. But what makes it even more difficult, is to solve a part of these issues related to the cultivation and spread of negative images in the direction of each-other, both in Greek and Albanian people⁴.

Often, public opinion exerts considerable influence on formulation and implementation of foreign policy, within the context of relations

3. Βασίλειος Κόντης (επιμ.), Ελληνισμός της Βορείου Ηπείρου και οι Ελληνοαλβανικές σχέσεις: έγγραφα από το ιστορικό αρχείο του Υπουργείου Εξωτερικών, τόμος 3, 1922-1929, Αθήνα: Βιβλιοπωλείον Εστία και Κοινωφελές Ίδρυμα 'Αλέξανδρος Ωνάσης', 1997, 13-35, 91-92, 349-356, 365. Βισκόντι Πράσκα, Εγώ εισέβαλα στην Ελλάδα (Αθήνα: Γκοβόστη, 1999), 77. Gazmend Kapllani, Nicola Mai, "'Greece Belongs to Greeks!'" The Case of the Greek Flag in the Hands of an Albanian Student," *The New Albanian Migration*, eds. Russel King, Nicola Mai, Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 153-172. James Pettifer, "Rising Tensions in Albania's Ethnic Relations," *The Politics of National Minority Participation in Post-Communist Europe. State-building, Democracy, and Ethnic Mobilization*, ed. Jonathan P. Stein (Armonk, New York: M.E.Sharpe, 2000), 178-188. Κωνσταντίνος Σβολόπουλος, Η Ελληνική πολιτική στα Βαλκάνια, Αθήνα: Ελληνική Ευρωεκδοτική, 1987, 66-71. Miranda Vickers, James Pettifer, *Albania. From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity* (London: Hurst & Company, 1999), 197. Paskal Milo, *Të vërtetat e fshehura: Incidenti i kanalit të Korfuzit* (Tiranë: Toena, 2010), 63-65, 87-95. Richard Clogg, Σύγχρονη Ιστορία της Νεότερης Ελλάδας (Αθήνα: Καρδαμίτσα, 1993), 236. Zihni Haskaj, *Mendimi politik e shoqëror i Rilindjes Kombëtare Shqiptare*, vëllimi I (Tiranë: Universiteti i Tiranës, Instituti i Historisë dhe i Gjuhësive, 1971), 323.

4. According to Quincy Wright, the sympathy or the hatred shared within the public opinion plays an important role on the directions of foreign policy. As Wright quoted characteristically "*If only love of peace and hatred of war could be universalized...war would disappear*". Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, Vol. 2 (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1942), 1079.

that states develop with other neighbouring and non-neighbouring countries⁵. In addition, public opinion's influence becomes even greater, when legitimacy of political power by the masses has democratic nature⁶. However, this doesn't mean that other influencing factors are eclipsed⁷. Certainly, the fundamental role of systemic signals; of regional balances; as well as of calculation and comparison of states total power, can never be called into question. Only an irrational and enthusiastic leader could attempt to do so⁸. What is to be noted is that the role of these fundamental factors in foreign policy and inter-state relations has recently been enriched by the real power that public opinion has gained, especially today in the era of rapid flow of global information⁹.

The international relations theory has also been adapted to the above-mentioned contemporary changes. Neoclassical realism attaches particular importance to the role that various factors – including public opinion – do have within the process of systemic signals elaboration and that of foreign policy formulation¹⁰. Therefore, this theoretical model fits more with foreign policy analysis, rather than global theories, such as Neorealism, Liberalism and Marxism.

5. Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* Vol. 29, No. 2 (Fall, 2004): 170-173. Douglas C. Foyle, *Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 9.

6. Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, Revised Edition (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 291-292.

7. *Ibid.*, 291.

8. Foyle, 13.

9. Holsti, 300-302, 316.

10. Schweller, 164. Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, Introduction: Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy", *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, eds. Steven E. Lobell, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3-4. Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* vol. 51, no. 1 (October, 1998): 144-172.

I. Survey characteristics: data collection and interpretation

The present analysis is strongly based on taking into account the above-mentioned aspects. Examination of historical dynamics that relate with inter-state relations is not intended to be developed, neither the description of nature that existing unresolved bilateral issues do have. The main purpose of this article is to describe the knowledge and preferences of Albanian public opinion related to the Greek state and people, as well as to Albanian-Greek relations. This is archived through a pilot survey that was recently conducted with young people of Korça region, in the south-east part of the Republic of Albania.

The survey took place during the first half of 2017, and was based on a probable sampling. The latter consists of 100 students, who study in various bachelor and master programs of “Fan.S.Noli” University. Respondents age is from 18 to 35 years old.

Furthermore, it is important to stress that the tendency of survey results may also indicate the general preferences of Albanian public opinion, due to the chief characteristics of the survey itself. Because of their young age, respondents turn into participatory subjects, regarding the flow of opinions within their family environment – where an interaction of ideas occurs between them and parents or other relatives – as well as in university facilities, where young people come in contact with their peers from different geographical regions. In this context, the conclusions drawn from this pilot sample may be used in order to undertake other more comprehensive studies in the future, as well as to enrich the scientific contributions.

Within the survey, a questionnaire filled by respondents was composed of 33 questions, which relate to different fields. In this way, the questions are grouped into four main categories:

First category refers to the general knowledge that Albanian people may have in regard to Greece, Greek culture and chief elements of the Greek way of life. This is achieved by studying personal contact of Albanians with Greece, through touristic and employment visits, culinary, culture, literature, geography, daily politics and speaking the Greek language.

Second category is made up of specific questions, where the knowledge is more limit and professional. The main fields here are art, history, diplomatic relations, politics, mythology and religion.

Third category consists of opinions on ‘hot political topics’ of the past, which still hinder the progress of Albanian-Greek relations.

Fourth and final category is associated with opinions that respondents express on the current course of bilateral relations, as well as on the future perspective of these relations.

1. First category: general knowledge

The data show that 70% of respondents had been in Greece at least one time in their life, while 41% of them have regularly visited the aforesaid country. Only 30% of people never paid a visit to the neighbouring Greece. The latter does not consist an unimportant figure, due to geographical proximity of Korça region with Greece. Nevertheless, economic and social problems of Albanian society do not motivate enough young people of visiting the neighbouring countries.

Concerning food – a very important element of ordinary life – many respondents, 43% of them, are able to distinguish ‘feta’ as the traditional greek cheese. However, almost half of people had not the chance to face in their daily life – and to preserve in their memories – this important aspect of culinary, despite the increase

of cultural interaction between Albanians and Greeks in the last two decades. ‘Feta’ cheese is popular in albanian food market, and is also recommended to be cooked each time when Albanians return from Greece during the holidays.

78% of respondents are informed that Greece is a parliamentary republic, but only 32% answered correctly about Nikos Kazantzakis, as author of “Captain Michalis” novel. Furthermore, 33% of people are able to distinguish “Apology of Socrates” as Plato’s work, although the two-mentioned works are already included in Albanian pre-university programs.

The majority of people (54%) believe that Alexis Tsipras has the state of President of Hellenic Republic, while in truth his post is that of Prime minister. Only 17% responded correctly, identifying as President Mr. Prokopis Pavlopoulos. However, the focus of the greater part of media to Mr. Tsipras over the last few years reflects the familiarization of Albanians with Greek politics. In addition, 84% of people know that nearest urban cities of Greece with Korça region are those of Kozani and Thessaloniki. The broad identification of ‘Korça-Kozani-Thessaliniki’ triangle coincides with the specific detail that many respondents have frequently visited Greece.

64% of people are familiar with greek words, while 15% of them are able to write these words correctly, using greek alphabetical characters. It should be noted that the latter differ completely from the Latin characters that albanian alphabet applies. Additionally, 72% can identify mathematical symbols that relate with greek letters, whereas 81% know more than three islands of Greece. Concerning entertainment, about a quarter of people – 23% – is able to distinguish ‘Rebetiko’ as traditional greek music and dance, whereas the majority has never heard of it.

Geographic proximity between the two countries, as well as mass migration of Albanians to Greece after the end of the Cold War, have

both contributed to strengthening the contacts among Albanians and Greeks. These contacts had been frozen for about half a century. Particularly, Albanian emigrants play an important role, concerning the diffusion of many greek cultural aspects into albanian society.

Despite the obstacles that often exist in bilateral inter-state relations – mainly, because of the complexity of mutual misunderstanding – a large part of Albanians possesses the basic knowledge about Greece and its culture. The most important bridge of contacts between Albanian people and Greece relates to the frequent visits that the first have paid to the mentioned country. Notwithstanding, the difficult financial situation of many Albanians does not motivate the touristic trips toward the Balkan countries, feeding in this way the physical and intellectual isolation of our society regarding the neighbours. Beyond the need to improve welfare, the encouragement of mobility programs between Albanian students and workers and their fellows from other Balkan countries would help to reinforce the mutual contacts among Albanians and neighbours. This will further contribute to improve the collective image toward ‘others’, a phenomenon that characterize Albania and other Balkan societies, including also bilateral relations with Greece. Moreover, the educational programs of the Republic of Albania may give a greater emphasis to prominent Greeks and their important works in philosophy, literature, art, geography, and so forth. This would expend the cosmopolitan way of thinking of Albanians – especially of young people – helping in demythicizing step by step the mutual hatred of inter-ethnic relations with Greeks, as well as with other people of the Balkan Region.

2. Second category: specific knowledge

Despite the particular difficulty of this category of questions where knowledge is more limited, it was noticed that Albanians

have become partially familiar with Greece. Specifically, 28% of respondents are able to distinguish Giorgos Seferis as a poet and diplomat; 15% recognize Maria Callas as a world-renowned soprano, and also 15% know that Ioannis Kapodistrias was the first head of the greek state, after its independence. In addition, 33% have information concerning the ancient city of Knossos in Crete, but only 5% of respondents know that diplomatic relations between Albania and Greece were settled in 1971¹¹. Nevertheless, the major part of people – 48% – have knowledge of Pericles, as a politician and orator in classical Athens, along with 37%, who have heard about Penelope. The latter is known in Homer's *Odyssey* for her fidelity to her traveller husband, Odysseus, while he was absent. As for antiquity, 24% answered correctly about the 'Battle of Salamis', as a naval battle fought between Greeks and Persians.

Regarding geopolitics, 77% of respondents know that Greece is a member state of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), although 33% is exactly informed about Greece population, which is around 11 million inhabitants. According to 11% of people, greek military junta of 1967-1974 was a dictatorial regime, while 12% believe that another non-democratic regime – along with junta – was the government of Ioannis Metaxas, the latter serving as Prime minister of Greece from 1936 until 1941. Furthermore, many respondents – 47% of them – identify greek state and society with orthodox religion only, whereas 28% responded precisely on the existence of at least three religious communities in Greece, which are the Orthodox, the Muslim and also the Catholics.

Concerning the question of who was the General Consul of Greece to Korça in 1936-1938, only 2% managed to answer exactly that

11. Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, *Greece and the Cold War. Frontline state, 1952-1967* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 105. Michael Schmidt-Neke, "A Burden of Legacies – The transformation of Albania's political system," *Legacy and Change. Albanian transformation from multidisciplinary perspectives*, ed. Robert Pichler (Münster, Germany: Lit Verlag, 2014), 25.

this status was held by Giorgos Seferis, who became later a Noble laureate in literature. Interestingly, 3% of respondents - that is 1% more than the previous – believe that the grade of Consul in that period was held by Theodoros Oikonomou. In fact, it is true that the latter served as Consul of Greece in Korça, although not during the mentioned period when he wasn't even born at that time, but in 2009-2011. Then, Mr. Oikonomou left the position upon the request of greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after the nationalist statements he had made about Albania¹². It was precisely the turmoil caused by his public statements, the main factor that lead Albanian people to commit to remember this person. Hence, channelling of nationalism to public opinion played a greater role than the very fact we all ought to be proud, regarding the diplomatic service of a renowned personality like Seferis to the greek authority in Korça.

Improvement of inter-ethnic relations does not relate exclusively with personal experiences – visits, migration, relationships – but is also the result of the image constructed by socialization and politization process in society. In this case, media owns a considerable influencing power. In spite of difficulty of questions, more than a quarter of respondents manifested their knowledge on history, culture and politics. Enlightening albanian public opinion in regards to Greece – as well as to other neighbouring countries – consists an important element that encourage gradual limitation of distance between Albanians and ‘others’. This process will become faster and more efficient if enlightening is mutual and not biased. But, when it comes to enlightening, it is important to mention the necessity of information objectivity and of emotional control, during the process of informing public opinion. Many times, emotions are artificially irritated by elements which are able to gain a certain profit, exploiting the complex network of misunderstanding. When media – as a main tool that influence the strengthening of the mention

12. “Provokimet e konsullit grek,” *Top Channel*, February 8, 2011, Accessed September 20, 2017, <http://top-channel.tv/lajme/artikull.php?id=203539>.

network – operates in full dependence on market or on different actor preferences, then news becomes deliberately more subjective and also spreads faster in the direction of public opinion.

Many times, Albanian media has led to the further strengthening of myths, including the nationalist myth that it's always Serbs and Greeks fault dealing with Albania. Consequently, the image of hostility toward neighbours within the collective memory of Albanians became stronger, hindering the possibility of coherent relations with neighbouring countries. Of course, similar problems prevail also on the other side of borders, in terms of the negative image that prevails in Greek public opinion toward Albanians. Nonetheless, there is still the chance that this reality may change. If media in Albania will broadcast more greek films, songs and events, this would 'soften' to some extent the distance that exist between Albanians and the Greek people. The same applies additionally to media in Greece, concerning the necessity to cultivate a more pro-Albanian image.

Until now, media has chosen to transmit to the respective masses – Albanians and Greeks – almost only the negative side of news toward 'others'. Concretely, albanian media proclaim loudly the nationalist statements of an inappreciable number of Greek politicians, whereas media in Greece does not make enough efforts to demythicize the representations of Albanians as criminals, an image that has been unfairly created after 1990. Several years ago, a big television channel in Albania hosted some weekly music evenings of different Balkan and European countries. One of them was dedicated to greek music, where surprisingly familiar greek songs were broadcasted from the television screen, masterly performed by Albanian singers. Similarly, on the other side of borders, an impressing film series was presented to the greek public opinion in the early 2000s. It was the first move that described the difficult contacts that existed at that time between greek society and Albanian immigrants. Named

“Η αγάπη ήρθε από μακριά” (Love came from afar), the movie portrayed the ‘forbidden love’ that arose among an Albanian young man and a Greek married woman. Afterwards, no other attempts were made by media, aiming at limiting the distance between Greeks and Albanians.

If media becomes more cautious in using its influence over public opinion, and display fairly negative and positive aspects of each phenomenon, then informing process of the masses – and consequently the public awareness – will be more objective and contemporary.

3. Third category: opinions on ‘hot topics’

In this category, there are intentionally presented questions which trigger respondent sensitivity concerning the myth of ‘fatherland’, and also their ability to control emotions in case of moderate and rational judgment. At this point, provocative terms were introduced – familiar to albanian nationalism and historiography – as ‘Northern Epirus’, ‘Cham’ and ‘Arvanites’.

Regarding the question of what does ‘Northern Epirus’ mean, 33% of respondents mentioned that the term relates to a geographical region in south Albania inhabited by Albanian descents. Almost same rate – 28% – believe that the regions is composed by Greeks. According to 18% of people, ‘Northern Epirus’ had been used long-ago within the historical context of the past, but which today doesn’t relate to any specific geographical region. In addition, 11% consider that the use of the mentioned term constitutes irredentism and is extremely dangerous. Looking at the other side of the coin, the respondents were asked to determine what does ‘Chameria’ mean. The answers had a different direction compare to the previous question. Hence, the main majority of respondents – 76% – believe that the term

‘Chameria’ is connected with a certain region in north-west Greece, inhabited by Albanian descents. Only 5% consider that population in this region are Greek citizens and descents. The moderate answer that this sort of term had been used within the historical context of the past but which today does not relate to any concrete geographical region was provided by only 1% of respondents, as opposed to 18% in the previous question. Nevertheless, 9% believe that ‘Chameria’ consists an irredentist term and is extremely dangerous to be applied, similarly with the analogous answer of the above question.

In connection with Arvanites, most of the respondents – 49% – believe that this term is associated with Albanian descents who had always lived in Greece but are suppressed by greek state through the denial of their native language. In addition, 23% of people consider that Arvanites are Greeks, whose familiar or community communication is related to the medieval version of albanian language, while 28% do not have any knowledge concerning this term.

To these three political questions, it is concluded that young people – as a core of albanian public opinion – are indoctrinated by nationalism to a considerable extent, and are still far away from the communitarian emancipation, the latter rooted in the European Union culture. Although the respondents are attending university facilities and have the chance to access broad literature – in order to expend their ability to think rationally – they are still remaining subjects of a very ethnocentric spread of information. This is evidenced by the selective rationality that is applied by respondents, as far as they have to judge other – not Albanian – nationalism, but not in the case of albanian nationalism or irredentism. Ethnocentrism of education and the large commercialization of Albanian media have caused, among other things, the excessive degree of Albanians politicization. Similarly, to communist Albania of the Cold War period, people continue to be politicized in a troublesome way. Troublesome because the politization is extreme but not real. It

can be comparable to a deceptive outward appearance – briefly facade – which makes the citizen superficially informed, and as a consequence underestimate the essential matters of society, that is economic problems. Therefore, the major part of Albanians today is closer to a kind of ‘tyranny of the majority’ in Alexis de Tocqueville terms, than the rule of law, where the latter characterize the modern nations.

Difficulty and retardation of political emancipation is still ‘imprisoning’ Albanians within the network of mutual misunderstanding, which began to be built in the period of national movements. Thusly, greek nationalism is seen by Albanians as the main problem that threatens national security, whereas domestic – albanian – nationalism is perceived as natural, legitimate, fair and harmless. Specifically, commercialization of nationalism is illustrated in daily life by printing the map of ‘Greater Albania’ in different ordinary objects as t-shirts and paintings¹³. On the other hand, displaying any irredentist greek flag – for example ‘Northern Epirus’ map – would constitute a massive warning to Albania’s elites. A similar situation prevails in the greek society, which has been usually translated by Albanians as ‘albanofobia’¹⁴. Thus, domestic nationalism is often perceived and evaluated within the rational frames, while the nationalism of neighbours through the lens of the 19th century. On these terms, demythicizing of hatred, and further building a common European perspective among Albanians and Greeks, is mainly based on the need of modernization – or ‘Europeanization’ – of the collective point of view toward ‘others’, mostly with regard to inter-ethnic

13. Andrej Nikolaidis, “Balkan nationalism has been reawoken by the attack of the drone,” *The Guardian*, October 15, 2004, Accessed September 21, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/15/balkan-nationalism-drone-football-serbia-albania>.

14. “Vrasja e Karelit, Berisha: Mbizotëron albanofobia në shtetin fqinj,” *Shqiptarja.com*, March 31, 2014, Accessed September 21, 2017, <http://shqiptarja.com/politike/2732/vrasja-e-karelit-berisha-mbizoteron-albanofobia-ne-shtetin-fqinj-207652.html>.

relations. This process, which previously happened between Germans and French serving as the core of European Union start, is a necessity to be also applied in the Balkan region, widely known as the 'powder keg'. Consequently, inter-state relations in economy and infrastructure should accompanied with efforts to change mentalities, in accordance with Globalization priorities.

4. Fourth category: present and future of bilateral relations

As to the last category of questions, the respondents focused on estimating the progress and the future perspective of Albanian-Greek relations, according to their beliefs. Regarding the extent of support that Greece provides to the European perspective of Albania, the respondents answered as follows: 31% believe that Greece is helping Albania 'neither too much, nor too little', 17% 'enough', 17% 'very little', 15% 'not at all', 12% 'little', and only 1% answered 'too much'. Judging from the given answers, it comes to light that 75% of people describe negatively the greek support to European integration of Albania, opposite to 18% who evaluate it in a positive way.

When people were asked to determine the relations between Greeks and Albanian immigrants in Greece, 58% stated that the relations rate was median, while the rest of respondents described them as follows: 26% 'good', 10% 'bad', 4% 'very good', and 2% 'very bad'. Similarly, the respondents were asked to evaluate the relations between Albanians and the Greek minority in Albania. From this angle, people chose the following options: 41% 'good', 28% 'median', 13% 'very good', 11% 'correct', 2% 'very bad', and 1% 'bad'. Hence, 65% of respondents believe that relations between Albanian descents and Greek minority are strong, while people who do not think in this way constitutes only 31% of the sample. On the contrary, as little as 12% consider that relations of Albanian

immigrants with greek state and society are vigorous, whereas 88% describe these relations as problematic. What is peculiar at these two questions has to do with the ethnocentric angle of respondents. So, people believe that the behaviour of Albanian state and society toward minorities is in accordance with the principles of democracy, but the opposite occurs when respondents are asked to estimate the treatment of immigrants by the greek state and society.

Further, people were asked to rate their sympathy toward Greece, choosing from the minimum grade of 1 to the maximum grade of 10. The average score was 6.49, while most preferred grades were 5, 8 and 7. However, it was found that 54% of respondents have positive perceptions toward Greece, rating this country with grades 7 to 10, while 46% opted to choose negative grades from 1 to 6. This positive assessment is also accompanied by people's optimism on the necessity for further improvement of relations with Greece. Thus, 87% of respondents say that bilateral relations should be developed even more, compared to 7% who rejects this preposition. In a similar way, 81% believe that establishing a friendship association between Albania and Greece on education and culture areas, would strongly motivate the further improvement of bilateral relations. Against such an association were only 6% of people, who believe that this idea does not bring any benefit.

The recurrent crisis in Albanian-Greek relations, as well as mutual misunderstanding in inter-ethnic contacts, had a significant damage on the chances for cooperation between Albania and Greece over the last two decades. Instead, the collapse of 'Iron Curtain', which divided Balkans during the Cold War, brought closer the two countries as partners within the Euro-Atlantic family. Realistically thinking, there is not – and should not exist – any fundamental division between Greece, as a member-country of NATO and European Union, and Albania, as NATO's member and EU candidate-country. The presence of a large number of Albanians in Greece who have

been already integrated into the greek society makes them a major human investment in improving bilateral relations. Simultaneously, the Greek minority in Albania can serve as a bridge of understanding concerning Albanian-Greek relations, in case that the prejudices existing between minority and albanian state will be reduced. This human capital – Albanian immigrants in Greece and Greek minority in Albania – had not being properly valued and in addition, it has been ‘taken hostage’ by the inherited mentality of the past in both countries. Consequently, the provocative statements often made by Albanian politicians on the one side, and imposing verbal conditions on the european path of Albania by the greek political elites on the other side, have led to increasing albanian public opinion pessimism in regard with the greek support. In this way, many Albanians estimate as problematic the relations of their country with Greece.

However, ‘hope dies last’. The improvement of Albanian-Greek relations is greatly desired by the majority of Albanians. Cultural and educational affiliation should become a significant investment power which must be pursued, aiming at the real and long-term improvement of bilateral relations. The respective embassies and consulates may create nearby spaces where mutual information, as well as the cultural and educational cooperation, should be promoted to the benefit of both countries. Such spaces may be libraries and cheap language courses, where information on albanian and greek language, culture and other particular aspects may be provided to the people. In addition, encouragement of touristic trips and mobility programs would make Greece and Albania more tangible by both citizens.

Conclusions and suggestions

According to the survey results, Albanians believe that the relations with Greece are not in the proper level, and that further efforts must be made to improve them. The cultivation of ethnocentrism by political

and non-political elites has led to the prevalence of nationalism on albanian public opinion, instead of rationalism. Consequently, Albanians perceptions toward Greece – and also other balkan countries – have remained static and strongly connected with the unresolved political issues of the past. Nevertheless, considering that Albania's foreign policy priority remains its accession in European Union, as well as the adequate role that this country plays within NATO, it is a necessity that the greek policy of Albania to match up with the contemporary elements of Globalization. Of course, this must take place in context of defending national interest, where the latter itself should not remain 'hostage' of the conflictual past.

Bearing in mind that usually there is an important interaction between public opinion and foreign policy in countries which are characterized by – or intend to implement – liberal democracy, then it is necessary to explore the image, perceptions and preferences of public opinion toward other countries. Hence, political and other elites should influence public opinion in such a way that the latter may not be incoherent with actual challenges, mainly in terms of national, regional and international peace and stability. So, if the conflictual past and divisions that were imposed by the Cold War propelled the hostility between Albania and Greece, today there are totally different situations and priorities within the area of Globalization. The human and financial capital that describes actually the relations between Albanians and Greeks, leads to the conclusion that the political relations and their interaction with the collective image of both people toward each-other, must be modernized, or using the correct word 'Europeanized'. Herewith, politics, art and media may play a remarkable role in improving the image of Albanians concerning Greece and bilateral relations. This can be achieved through several processes, as follows:

a) showing more movies, songs and documentaries, which are

associated with Greece and with relations that exist today between Greeks and Albanians;

- b) dedicating a greater emphasis to Greek writers and philosophers on behalf of albanian Ministry of Education, including them within the educational programs of pre-university level studies;
- c) a greater cooperation between Greek and Albanian authorities, in supporting reciprocal visits of students and young people;
- d) a greater support by Albanian and Greek authorities – in cooperation with European Union – in expanding student and labour mobility programs between Albania and Greece;
- e) the reduction of those technical aspects, which artificially hinder the bilateral relations, such as altering the timetable of international routes – albanian busses toward Greece – or improving efficiency of customs controls;
- f) greater democratic measures of albanian government toward Greek minority in Albania, as well as improving cooperation with the greek authorities in order to protect better the Albanian immigrants in Greece;
- g) more frequent sportive, cultural and artistic exchange visits between the two countries.

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Greek-Albanian Relations in Greek and Albanian Historiography of the 2000s

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... I am glad to report that our project proposal was finally accepted by the General Assembly of ... I presented the project on the first day and was badly attacked by the ... [a national] delegate... The Academy of [capital city of a Balkan state] does not accept the term “pre-modern” or any term different to the term “post-Byzantine,” although it is not willing to participate in the project. We had a discussion and I convinced the other delegates that the latter term is just an expression of a Balkan anachronistic nationalism, not a scholarly argument. The vote for the new projects was on the last day and ... [the very national delegate] used that period to oppose me and to find people on his/her side. I kept answering indirect questions and made a lot of clarifications. Finally, at the time of vote, the ad hoc Committee presented the project in a positive way, and even [the very national delegate] voted us, but surprisingly the ... delegate [of a western European state] voted against. So, the project was triumphally accepted and I was congratulated a lot by many colleagues from all over the world. The ... delegate [of a Balkan state] refused to support me in the last day, because the ... Academy [of the very Balkan state] is ...

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This anonymised report, whose extract is quoted above carefully edited with square brackets, could well have been an extract from the lobbying meetings at the side of negotiations ahead of the Treaty of Lausanne, had it not been for the terms “project,” “pre-modern” and “post-Byzantine” pointing to contemporary times. In reality, the text above was reported on the basis of a recent meeting of an international scientific event for the purpose of evaluating a number of research project proposals. As is implied, the outline negotiations involve a number of Balkan states, including Greece and Albania. This event is not the least isolated; to quote only one type of such events, many times international scientific events have fallen prey to Greek boycott on account of how the neighbouring state of FYR Macedonia is reported. Without entering into the essence of the name issue, the self-exclusion from events aimed at bringing together scientists who are potentially to drive the change of hostile public perception towards the Other is much telling. It is therefore understood that in some ways the past continues to haunt the Balkan present and its scientific circles, especially those employed at state institutions. In this context, the aim of this paper is to outline the evolution of the Greek and Albanian historiography in matters pertaining to Greek-Albanian relations in the course of the 2000s and how these are conditioned more by ideological proclivities than by the intensity and quality of contact of Albanian and Greek historians with each other or by the generation of historians.

Questions pertaining to the ideological orientation of Greek and Albanian historiography even after the 2000s remain highly controversial for a number of reasons. The scientific politics and ideologemes brought forward by both sides are more often than not based, originate or are attributed to early twentieth century inertial remnants (Tsitselikis & Christopoulos 2007, 9). In the course of the past century several generations of Albanians (including Albanian historians) were nationally nurtured with the image of the Greek as an enemy (Giakoumis and Kalemaj 2015 & 2017; Kalemaj and

Giakoumis 2015) while the same generations of Greeks were raised with the morale of the irredentist political notion of “Northern Epirus,” popularized in nationalist songs, like “ I have a little sister, truly a doll; her name is Northern Epiros and I love her...” (Tsitselikis & Christopoulos 2007, 17). Hence, dealing with the multifaceted aspects of Greek-Albanian relations has inevitably borne the ideological charge and arsenal that such perceptions of the ethnic Other has inherited.

In the past, matters related to the ideological orientation of Greek and Albanian historiography were deceptively upheld as self-evident truths in the service of political agendas which were set out in advance of research on historical material. Blatsiotis has demonstrated how the principal ideologeme of Greek policy that Albanians constitute no nation, but rather a volatile ethnic group has transformed in various periods of time (2003, 46-50), also imparting scholarly works of quite some merit (e.g. Malkidis 2007, 1-80). Conversely, Greek irredentist claims over Northern Epiros, entangled, as they were, in the period they were raised, acquired a quasi-inherent trait of the Greeks as the ethnic Other and was consequently projected by the Albanian popular and scientific historiography into the ancient past to uphold the national myth of permanent victimization (e.g. Ministria 1959, 6).

In pre-war Balkan scholarship, but also thereafter, historical problems and phenomena were separated from their wider, international context and were studied from the narrow sight of national ideology in an attempt to construct their alleged ‘national’ character. For example, the long 19th century’s passage from the *empire* as a political entity to the nation-state was viewed in a linear fashion, thereby failing to distinguish processes of hybridization in the process of constructing national identities, whereby empires imagined they could transform to nation-states (Ottomanism) and nation-states envisaged their future as empires (the Greek ‘Great Idea’ and the Serbian ‘Nacertaniye;’ Stamatopoulos 2018, Introduction). I have elsewhere demonstrated

how the instrumentalization of the Albanian language question in the process of constructing a national identity led to historical exaggerations and distortions with regards to the stance of the Orthodox Patriarchate towards Albanian language and its use in liturgical services (Giakoumis 2011). It is therefore evident that such ethno-centric constructs are profoundly both methodologically problematic and research-distorting.

Such biases in Greek and Albanian historiography could, in theory, provide partial answer to the question why education does not always lead to prejudices reduction in Albania, contrary to the conclusions of intergroup communication theory scholars. An increasing body of literature presents evidence that more education leads to less intergroup prejudices. However, as Peshkopia et al. has presented (2017), this conclusion, drawn on the basis of evidence from western countries applying multicultural education, does not apply to most Balkan countries which, alike Albania, set primary goal of their educational systems to instil a sense of national identity and belonging, in view that enduring notions of national identity are believed to form in the course of primary socialization years as also indicated by the US paradigm (cf. Giakoumis & Kalemaj 2017). In his survey, Peshkopia has found that, contrary to the expectation that more education leads to less intergroup biases, in the case of Albania, more education leads on the one hand to prejudice reduction towards homosexuals, but on the other hand to prejudice increase towards Greeks, i.e. a group targeted as the hostile Other by ethno-nationalist narratives (Peshkopia et al. 2017). While Peshkopia's research has not been conducted in Greece to draw useful conclusions, Papakosta's work (2009; 2013) certainly indicates similar prompts from the side of Greek historiography.

Not surprisingly, the subjects of historical research from both academic and non-academic milieus were dominated by subjects related to dominant national(ist) narratives, occasionally alternated with topics of political and diplomatic history. One also notes the

parallel development of a non-academic literature on the same matters (e.g. Dalianis 2000 & 2008; Isufi 2002; Karkasinas 2014; Litsios 2008; Mandi & Jovani 2013), not bound by rigorous scientific methods and interpretative apparatus. Such literature more often than not promotes nationalist agendas. Especially after the turn of the 21st century, public history initiatives play an increasingly important role, on occasion leaving noteworthy traces (e.g. Tzimas 2010). The availability of archives has significantly facilitated research, although the declassification time of archives after 25 years, in the case of Albania, and 30 years in regard to Greece is only nominal as in reality fewer documents have been declassified and prepared for historical research to the official declassification time (cf. Skoulidas 2015). It should be noted, however, that the number of documentary evidence published or utilized from Albanian archives (Boçi 2008, 2009, 2010 & 2012; Dervishi 2009; Dushku 2012; Gurakuqi 2011; Meta 2009, 2010, 2012a, 2012b & 2013; Naska 1999; Puto 2011; Tritos 2003) is greater than the number of published Greek sources of the like (Baltsiotis 2009; Karakitsios 2010; Kollaros 2015; Koltsida 2008; Kondis 2004; Kouzas 2013; Manta 2004 & 2005; Margaritis 2005).

For the historical period from before Albania's independence until World War II dominant topics in the Albanian and Greek post-2000 historiography relate to matters of territory, minority rights, the establishment of the Autocephalous Church of Albania and the so-called "Cham" issue. The delimitation of the new state's borders was studied from a variety of perspectives. Most scholars include matters related to territory in wider studies pertaining to Greek-Albanian relations (e.g. Gurakuqi 2011; Dushku 2012; Meta 2013) and the subsequent claims of an unsolved "North-Epirotan" issue (Barkas 2016; Skoulidas 2015 & 2012; Baltsiotis & Skoulidas 2013; Triadafilopoulos 2010; Malkidis 2007; Baltsiotis 2003). Another preferred subject for the Greek historiography relates to the ethnic Greek minority in Albania and its rights, a topic that has been touched in political (e.g. Baltsiotis 2009; Barkas 2016; Anastasopoulou 2013;

Dalianis 2000 & 2008; Karakitsios 2010; Tsitselikis & Christopoulos 2003), geographical (Kallivretakis 1995), linguistic (e.g. Barkas 2016), cultural (e.g. Karkasinas 2014; Litsios 2008; Mandi&Jovani 2013; Pappa 2009) and educational (Barkas 2016; Giakoumis&Kalemaj 2017; Ismyrliadou 2013; Karakitsios 2010; Koltsida 2008; Kouzas 2013) perspectives. The matter of the Orthodox Church of Albania and its Autocephaly was dealt with in a lesser number of monographs [Glavinis 1996; Katopodis 2001; Giannakou 2009; Simaku 2011; Bido 2016]. Last but not least, a significant number of works have been devoted to Chameria and its inhabitants. This is a primarily legal matter related to the properties of the exiled Cham Muslims who were forced to flee out of Greece towards Albania after World War II, after the collaboration of certain individuals of this community with the Nazi occupation forces in Greece, but it also bears political ramifications. Such works were written from an Albanian (Naska 1999; Isufi 2002; Dervishi 2009; Meta 2009, 2010, 2012a; Puto 2011; Elsie & Bejtullah 2013), and a Greek (Tritos 2003; Manta 2004; Margaritis 2005; Ktistakis 2006; Papatheodorou 2007; Baltsiotis 2009) perspective on the matter.

Although one would have expected that, after many years of Greek-Albanian exchanges at all levels, Albania's integration to NATO and the EU, where Greece is already a member and Albania's supporter, a certain postnationalistic (Bennett 2001) or internationalistic trend would emerge, in fact, nationalist discourses and related stereotypes demonstrate an outstanding endurance. This is partly owed to the fact that very few scholars speak the language of the ethnic other. Michael Tritos' brief treatise on the Chams (2003), for instance, cites no Albanian bibliography, while the Albanian perspectives considered by Malkidis (2007) are solely in English, thereby imparting the author's ability to pass more informed judgements on the matters he raises. This is not an exclusivity of Greek historiography. Writing about minorities and the construction of national identity in Albania a year after his election as a member of the Albanian Academy of

Science (2012), Beqir Meta (2013) did not consider any newer Greek bibliography to Lazarou's 1986 book on the Vlachs of the Balkans and their language. His books on Chams (Meta 2010) and the Greek-Albanian tension from the outbreak of the World War II (1939) to the end of the Greek Civil War (1949) (Meta 2012a) includes no Greek scholarship after 1997, while even the Albanian works considered were published no later than 2000 and 2001 respectively. One could attribute this to personal hastiness, as his book on Greek-Albanian relations in 1949-1990 (Meta 2012b) has no bibliographical updates after 1997, had it not been for scholars of a younger generation who conducted part of their studies in Greece using a rather outdated bibliography, as is the case of Sonila Boçi's work on minorities in Albania from 1939-1949 (Boçi 2012), whose last consulted work in Greek bibliography was Manta's monograph (2004). It is surprising that Ktistakis' authoritarian, purely legal work on the properties of Chams and Albanians in Greece and the lift of the war status from a domestic and international legal standpoint (Febr. 2006) has been entirely neglected in Albanian bibliography, as far as I know.

The absence of an international perspective from the majority of historiographic works produced in Greece and Albania after the year 2000 is also an approach entangled in past, ethnocentric perceptions and narratives. Hence, while Ardit Bido's monograph (2016) is very well-informed in terms of Greek and Albanian bibliography, the author's monoscopic perspective of the relations of the Ecumenical Patriarchate with the Orthodox Church of Albania falls short of understanding how developments analysed and discussed in his work were conditioned by wider political power reconfigurations that shaped the frame in which the Ecumenical Patriarchate could move, such as developments with the Romanian and Bulgarian Churches, etc. (cf. Giakoumis 2011). Sonila Boçi's (2012) well-researched and overall balanced monograph on minorities in Albania between 1939 and 1949 reproduces uncritically an older thesis of Albanian historiography, stereotypically repeated by the older generation of

Albanian historians (e.g. Meta 2013, 51-8), that the Greek-speaking population in Southern Albania were metics settled during the second half of the 18th century to work the lands of the rich land owners (formerly called feudal lords) of Gjirokastra and Saranda, a thesis that has long been reviewed (cf. Giakoumis 2003). The dominance of ethnocentric, monoscopic and rather localistic interpretative apparatus is apparently not a trait of some Albanian historiographical works (cf. Xhufi 2009; Karagjozi-Kore 2014), but also of Greek historiography (e.g. Koltsida 2008; Koltsidas 2008; Pappa 2009; Karakitsios 2010; Xynadas 2012; Ismyrliadou 2013; Karkasinas 2014). It is interesting to note that such proclivities are very evident to select historiography produced by members of the Greek minority in Albania (Barkas 2016).

The studies of scholars substantially trained internationally offer insights of wider interest. The historiographical value of the work of Ilir Kalemaj (2014) is good evidence of how substantial exposure to international scholarly environments can provide original insights of interest beyond the narrow focus of a study. While Kalemaj's study did not focus exclusively on Greek-Albanian relations, his study of real versus imaginary territoriality of Albania also touches on Greek-Albanian relations. Kalemaj developed a two-by-two matrix, one of whose axis related to domestic political pressures regarding Albania's actual and should-be borders, while the other to international pressures vis-à-vis Albania's borders. His findings that high international pressure lowered claims of imagined territories and that low international pressure resulted in augmented domestic political claims over imagined borders can be applied in wider contexts. The works of Ridvan Peshkopia and his colleagues (Peshkopia & Voss 2016) can be classified in the same category of studies by internationally trained scholars dealing with matters related to the history of Greek-Albanian relations and how these affect current attitudes towards the other. Peshkopia & Voss' work on the role of ethnic divisions in the attitude of ethnic majorities or minorities toward the death penalty

(2016) draws conclusions of universal interest in such matters. Though about an entirely different period and setting, I think that Margaritis' stunning comparative study of both Jews and Chams as "undesired fellow-patriots" (2005) can also be classified to the interpretative apparatus of viewing multiple perspectives of a single matter for safer conclusions.

From Greek historiography, important and rather well-balanced contributions can be quoted from scholars whose studies and public interventions aim at smoothing the divisive forces of nationalism in the Balkans. Such type of historiography highlights matters related to minorities, holds theses often deemed as cosmopolitan, in juxtaposition to other 'nationally-minded' scholars. Leonidas Kallivretakis, for instance, has conducted the earliest historical geography and demography account of Albania's post-socialist period (1995), in which he looks at matters with the cold blood of a disengaged scientist. The political, pragmatic and, on occasion, self-interested, adaptations of ethnic identifications in post-socialist Albania have been studied by Lambros Baltsiotis (2003) through the prism of societies in transition. Baltsiotis (2003) traces a number of political arguments and ideologemes raised by both Greece and Albania in a historical fashion. In so doing, he outlines the processes by which calls for a joint 'Greek-Albanian nation' transformed to the construction of the political notion of Northern Epirus (Baltsiotis 2003, 45-53); the instrumentalization of language to uphold political claims over a single geographical region (Epirus) by the two states (*op. cit.* 54-61); issues of the historical delineation of the Greek minority (*op. cit.* 61-84); matters related to the complex identifications of Albanian and Vlach Orthodox Christians (*op. cit.* 84-110). Tsitselikis and Christopoulos' (2003) work on the historical "uncertainties" of the Greek minority in Albania viewed as "national truths" is also to be included in the same analytical categories. I would also single out the works of Elias Skoulidas (2001, 2012, 2015), whose balanced approach towards contested issues causing much political

controversies owes much to his competent knowledge of Albanian, a rather rare quality of Greek scholars writing on matters of both Greek and Albanian interest. It should be noted, however, that the lists of neither the works nor the authors discussed above are exhaustive, though they are representative.

In the course of 2000s a number of very interesting researches cast light on how the ethnic 'Other' is represented in primary and secondary school History education and textbooks in the Balkans and how this might have affected modern attitudes towards the ethnic 'Other.' The representation of the 'Other' was approached from a Balkan perspective in the course of the late 1990s in a background of rising tensions that eventually led to the bloody Kosovo conflict. The publication of a collective 1998 volume titled *The Image of the Other* (Collective 1998) in Sofia was only a start, in which the image of Albanians in Balkan textbooks was discussed, yet, no Albanian or other scholar presented the image of the 'Other' in Albanian history textbooks. In 1998 an international conference on the same matter gathered scholars from the Balkans (including Albania) and west Europe on this very topic (Xochelis & Toloudi 2001), whose proceedings comprised a first decisive step in the 2000s towards the study of the role of History textbooks in national identity constructions. The conclusion that negative constructions of the 'Other' need to be replaced in the frame of a united Europe led to a number of initiatives aiming at producing alternative History education materials in several Balkan languages (e.g. Murgescu & Berktay 2009; Kolev & Koulouri 2009).

In this context, it is hardly surprising that similar studies were conducted in the frame of Greek-Albanian relations. Although interest in this matter dates back in 1990s (e.g. Kofos 1993), new research was conducted and presented in the 1998 conference in Thessaloniki, which was later published in 2001. The volume dealt both with the image of the Albanians in Greek textbooks and the

image of Greeks in Albanian textbooks (Xochelis et al. 2001). The image of the Albanians in Greek textbooks was later researched with a different sample of textbooks by Konstantina Papakosta (2009 & 2013), whose findings corroborate the conclusions of Xochelis et al. (2001). In both samples of textbooks, the image of the ethnic ‘Other’ in Greek-Albanian relations is portrayed negatively.

In 2014 the author of this paper initiated a longitudinal project researching the image of the ‘Other’ in Albanian History school textbooks from before the establishment of the Albanian state to the country’s post-communist period (1886 to date). Research of the image of the ‘Greek’ in Albanian History school textbooks has currently advanced to the end of the communist regime (1990) and its outcomes have been published (Giakoumis & Kalemaj 2015 and 2018; Kalemaj & Giakoumis 2015). As has been demonstrated, the transformation of the image of the Greek in Albanian history school textbooks reflects the principal phases of bilateral relations, echoing histories of conflict, neighbourhood and partnership, whereas the image of the Greek is more negative upon the nation-building (1912-1921) and the complete self-isolation of Albania from the rest of the world after the Sino-Albanian split (1972-1978) than in other times; for, Albania’s nation-building project, similarly to the ones of other Balkan countries, was highly dependent on the demonization of the ethnic ‘Other’ (Giakoumis & Kalemaj 2015), while Albania’s seclusion from the rest of the world could be sustained only upon the systematic terrorization of the population on the pretences of foreign existentialist threat (Giakoumis & Kalemaj 2018). The portrayal of a negative image of the Greek is primarily owed to national curricular choices persistently focusing on territoriality and military operations with reference to the Greeks (Kalemaj & Giakoumis 2015). Such findings have been used to explain the failure of intergroup communication theory to explain why more education in the case of Albania does not lead to biases reduction in the case of Greeks, contrary to what it does in the case of homosexuals (Peshkopia et al.

2017; Peshkopia et al. July 16, 2017).

In a paper dealing with the evolution of historiography vis-à-vis Greek-Albanian relations in the 21st century it would have been an omission not to mention some excellent works centering on Greek-Albanian relations before the establishment of either nation-state. Among these studies, one should single out the outstanding multi-year work of Vasilis Panagiotopoulos and his team (2007), which culminated with the publication in 2007 of the (almost) complete preserved archives of Ali Pasha of Tepelena, the Pasha of Ioannina (c. 1750-1822), a controversial but dominant personality of the late Ottoman Empire. His figure is of interest so much for late Ottoman history as it is for the emerging history of the Albanian people, as Albanian historiography has interpreted him and other late Ottoman pashas in Epirus and Albania as an early agent of national awakening. The close vicinity of Ali Pasha's pashalik to the Ionian islands, by then under European control (Venetian, French, Russian, English), and his ambition to rise to some sort of a local hegemon paved the way to Balkan and international scholarships writing a variety of information about his life and deeds, viewing him positively, negatively or variably. Although such accounts were based on some sporadic letters of his, a complete publication of original sources which could test what has been written about him was thus necessary. The publication of the almost 1500 documents of his (preserved) archive, systematically annotated and organized to provide all possible assistance to readers (indexes, glossary, extensive introduction) was missing. Their publication (2007) helps understand the operations of a primitive hegemonic system of power with its difficult-to-understand bureaucracy. Panagiotopoulos' introduction, in particular, is a monument of balanced historiographical discourse, which sets the tone of such works.

Having outlined the major developments in Greek and Albanian historiography on Greek-Albanian relations, in spite of few new and

innovative approach, one is stunned at the persistence of ethnocentrism and past stereotypes. In spite of the almost free movement, very few Greek or Albanian historians learn the language of the other even when they dare to write about bilateral relations, at the expense of the effective utilization of other's bibliography. In addition, with the exception of few international initiatives, such as the ones undertaken in the frame of the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbooks research's project titled "History Textbooks and Teaching in Albanian Language Areas," Greek and Albanian historians are rarely involved in joint bilateral or multilateral historical projects, thereby obstructing ample time for contact and exchanges. Last but not least, even though it has never been easier to travel and acquire international perspectives on matters of interest to Greek-Albanian relations, there still is bare international dimension that would provide fresh insights to matters raised in older Greek and Albanian historiography. In some ways Greek and Albanian historiographies seem to remain entangled in their own past. The few innovative and balanced works mentioned above seem to be written either by mostly politically left-wing oriented scholars, such as Lambros Baltiotis, in Greek historiography; and by scholars with substantial international education and training with regards to the Albanian historiography. It is interesting to notice that my findings regarding the Greek historiography corroborate the findings of a Greek report that the biggest factor[s] determining "attitudes towards Albanians is (primarily) ideological self-identification" (Armakolas 2013, Chapter 5).

Writing to the author of this paper to complain for not being invited to a conference, a colleague exclaims: "Good luck to the conference on ...; I just read the programme at ... It seems that big strings were pulled and we [i.e. the colleague] were not invited. I assume that the ... participants [from a third Balkan country], fierce exponents of ... nationalism [of this third Balkan country], are more serious scientists. Where are all these distinguished scientists from ... who have dealt with ... and ...?" Considering that the point is not related to the

name of the colleague, the title of the conference or the origin of the third Balkan state and its historians participating in the conference, I omitted them for obvious reasons. In fact, although the conference was launched with an open call for proposals which was missed by the good colleague, the reason of non-invitation was owed solely on budgetary grounds. Yet, levelling a conspiracy theory appears to be almost inherent to the Balkan peninsula, where the value of human life has rarely outweighed the violent thrust of nationalism.

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The Greek foreign policy towards Kosovo and the region and the implications for the Albanian-Greek relations

*Ledion Krisafti*¹

Introduction

Kosovo's February 2008 declaration of independence was confronted with different reactions by different countries of the Balkans and the Southeastern Europe in general. These reactions depended on different factors. Geopolitical calculations, historical and religious ties between Serbia and the other countries or Kosovo and the other countries, determined the acceptance or not of Kosovo's independence.

The Greek reaction towards Kosovo's independence has been a mix of geopolitical calculations and historical and religious ties with Serbia. But, the Greek initial reaction, in the day after the declaration of independence, was neutral. It emphasized the need for the involved parties "to refrain from actions that might spark dangerous tensions", and "the stability and security of the region".² While Greece at first recognized that "yesterday's decisions in Pristina undoubtedly shaped a new reality in the particularly sensitive region of the Western Balkans", it left the issue of recognition for a future time, when it has examined all of the developments in depth; all of the dimensions

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2. Statements of FM Ms. Bakoyannis following the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council https://web.archive.org/web/20120503235708/http://www.mfa.gr/www.mfa.gr/Articles/en-US/190208_alp_1300.htm

and consequences these developments have for regional security and Greece's interests."³

Ten years after Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in February of 2008, Greece is one of the five EU member countries, which haven't yet recognized Kosovo's independence. Contrary to the other four countries, Spain, Romania, Slovakia and Cyprus, which have internal problems with large minorities, concentrated in a certain part of the territory of that state, Greece has no such problem. There is no large minority concentrated in a part of Greece that may seek autonomy or independence. Having this in mind, Greece's not recognition of Kosovo's independence and its politics towards Kosovo and what this means about the Albanian-Greek relations, needs an explication.

In January 2017, during a visit in Serbia, the Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras affirmed the Greek support for Serbia in the Kosovo issue. Tsipras said that Greece desired to help Serbia in solving this issue, but the maintenance of stability was the crucial issue.⁴ He didn't say explicitly that Greece will never recognize Kosovo; Greece has never said this, but with the emphasizes on the "solution of the Kosovo issue" may be understood that Greece will recognize Kosovo only after a mutual agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. This was emphasized by the former Greek President Karolos Papoulias during a three-day visit in Belgrade in 2009. Papoulias said that only a mutual agreed solution to the Kosovo issue is acceptable for Greece and this solution should be inside the international law.⁵

As late as October 2017 the new Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos

3. Ibid.

4. Tanjug, *Cipras Nikoliću: Grčka podržava Srbiju kada je u pitanju Kosovo i Metohija*, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/cipras-nikolicu-grcka-podrzava-srbiju-kada-je-u-pitanju-kosovo-i-metohija/5thmh1f>

5. Srbiji je mesto u Evropskoj uniji, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Srbija/71181/Srbiji+je+mesto+u+Evropskoj+uniji.html>

said that the Greek stance towards Kosovo has changed.⁶

Nevertheless, of all the five EU countries that haven't recognized Kosovo, Greece has been the most cooperative with Kosovo.⁷ There have been several meetings between high officials from Greece and Kosovo, especially with the foreign minister of Greece, but Kosovo in those meeting hasn't been represented as a state. Greece has recognized Kosovo's passports and has given a reluctant support for Kosovo's bid to become part of the international organizations. During the voting for Kosovo's UNESCO membership, Greece was one of the countries that abstained. But, since the beginning, Greece's position in regard to Kosovo's independence and its recognition has been unequivocal.

In 2014 Kosovo Foundation for Open Society conducted a survey with more than a thousand Greek citizens. Almost 70% of them said that Greece and Kosovo should have good relations, but without recognition.⁸

The two-fold foreign policy of Greece

Since the fall of communism in Albania, former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, Greece has positioned itself as the main promoter of the European perspective of the former communist countries of the region. The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 and the "Thessaloniki Agenda", adopted during Hellenic Presidency of EU in 2003, have been the main guidelines for the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. Fourteen years after the Thessaloniki Summit the

6. Pavlopulos za RTS: Grčka ne menja stav o Kosovu, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/2890965/pavlopulos-za-rtts-grcka-ne-menja-stav-o-kosovu.html>

7. EraldinFazliu, *Recognition denied: Greece*<http://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/recognition-denied-greece/>

8. *Të jesh Grek, të jesh Kosovar*, "Fondacioni i Kosovës për Shoqëri të Hapur, 2014

integration processes of the region have gone according to the plan laid out in Thessaloniki. All these years Greece has fully supported the EU perspective of the region.

But at the same time Greece has pursued a foreign policy in relation to the other Balkan countries based also on its national interests. The case of ‘‘Macedonia’s’’ name has been going on for more than two decades and Greece hasn’t taken a step back from its position. On the contrary, it expects that the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to make a step back and to obey to Greek proposition that the name Macedonia should be dropped off. For Greece the issue of FYROM’s name is not just about history and symbols, it is above all about ‘‘the conduct of a UN member state, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which contravenes the fundamental principles of international law and order; specifically, respect for good neighborly relations, sovereignty and territorial integrity.’’⁹ This is not to say that the Greek position is wrong, but this serves as a case to understand Greece’s foreign policy. The European integration of FYROM would have a stabilizing effect in the Western Balkan region, but for Greece its national interest in this case comes first, not the European integration of Macedonia.

Also in relation to Albania, Greece has pursued two different and parallel lines in its foreign policy. Greece has been a great promoter of Albania’s EU integration processes and the candidate status to Albania was given during the Hellenic Presidency in 2014. Greece also has accepted hundreds of thousands of Albanians emigrants since the beginning of the 90s and considers them as ‘‘a bridge’’ between the two countries, but also it has focused on issues of national interest for Greece as the rights of the Greek minority in Albania, cemeteries of Greek fallen soldiers during the war between Greece and Italy in 1940-1941 and the issue of the maritime border between Albania and Greece. Many times Greece has threatened to condition Albania’s EU integration processes based on the developments of the issues that are

9. <http://www.mfa.gr/en/fyrom-name-issue/>

of national interests to Greece.

The Greek stance towards Kosovo's issue should also be seen in this two-fold foreign policy with the other Balkan countries. Greece has recognized Kosovo's passports; mainly in order to benefit its tourism industry, and also Greece is part of the foreign armed forces still stationed in Kosovo. Greece also has opened a liaison office in Prishtina and Greek businesses are active in Kosovo. But Greece hasn't recognized Kosovo and the last visit of the Greek Prime Minister in Serbia confirmed the Greek stance of not recognizing Kosovo as an independent state. Greece has done all of the above about the passports and UNMIK because of its role as a promoter of peace and European integration in the peninsula, but the non-recognition of Kosovo as a state serves its national interests and the larger geopolitical interests of Greece in the region.

This situation is explained with a twofold view of the geopolitical calculations and interests of Greece. On the one hand, this non-recognition of Kosovo and the Greek stance towards Kosovo has its roots in the wars in former Yugoslavia in the beginning of the 90s and it goes beyond mere political and geopolitical considerations on the part of Greece. History, culture and religion play a similar important role as the national interests of Greece in regard to Kosovo and Serbia. Since the beginning of the 90s and during the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Greece has constantly been a close partner and supporter of Serbia's actions in the region. Greece evaded "United Nations sanctions and, according to the International Criminal Tribunal, contributed considerably towards Milosevic's war machine".¹⁰

For Greece and the Greek public with their Christian Orthodox sympathies about Serbia and Serbs in general, it is difficult to accept the independence of another Muslim-majority country in the Balkans. In

10. Helena Smith, *Greece faces shame of role in the Serb massacre*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jan/05/balkans.warcimes>

1999, 97% of Greeks were against the NATO intervention in Serbia.¹¹

On the other hand, the Greek policy towards Kosovo is not linked only with cultural, religious considerations, but also with the case of Cyprus. Since 1974, the island of Cyprus, inhabited by a majority of Greek-speaking population has been divided into a Greek zone and Turkish zone. If Greece recognized Kosovo's independence, it would give legitimacy to the Turkish zone in Northern Cyprus. It is hardly believable that Greece will recognize Kosovo's independence without a final solution of the Cyprus case.

These cases illustrate the complex foreign policy of Greece towards the Balkans. Historical, cultural and religious considerations and feelings play an important part, and the perspective of EU integration of the entire region would be beneficial to Greece, but also there are the Greek national interests and there is the case of Cyprus. All of these are equally important in the Greek foreign policy and they are never important on their own, without the others. In this light should be seen the influence that Kosovo's issue and Kosovo's independence has in the Albania-Greece relations. If one analyzed only one of the variables mentioned above – history\culture\religion, EU integration, national interests, Cyprus; the view would have been partial and misunderstood.

All the variables above should be taken into consideration when one considers the Greek foreign policy including that towards Albania and Kosovo. In international relations even small countries like Albania could use different variables when conducting their foreign policy, but in difference with other larger countries, the small countries can't use all of them at the same time to gain some profit, exactly because of larger countries in their region that have more variables and because of them more maneuverability. Greece has the luxury to use all of them in our region.

11. *Të jesh Grek, të jesh Kosovar*, "Fondacioni i Kosovës për Shoqëri të Hapur, 2014

Kosovo and Albania-Greece relations

In a recent survey by the Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS), Albanians think that Greece is the main “enemy” in the region. This stance is perfectly understandable because of the many issues still to be resolved in Albanian-Greek relations and also because Greece is the only country with which Albania confines that is much bigger geographically, economically and militarily. The other countries like Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo, with whom Albania confines, don’t pose a similar “threat” to Albania as Greece and there aren’t so many unresolved issues as with Greece.

In the beginning of the 90s Greece was the only stable country in the region. Yugoslavia was engulfed in successive interethnic wars, the fall of communism in Albania sent hundreds of thousands of refugees in Italy and Greece and later the 1997 collapse of the government exasperated further this situation, and Bulgaria and Romania had their problems in establishing the rule of law. Greece’s EU and NATO membership made it the natural starting-point for all the European processes of the region. Greece as the only light in a dark neighborhood, took all the responsibility of being the guidance for all the others and Greece took this responsibility because not only it supports the EU integration of the region, but also because being in the EU and having unresolved issues of different natures with almost all the countries it confines with, this responsibility gave Greece also the potential to condition the EU integration of these countries with the resolving of the problems with them. Greece has done and threatened to do this until now.

The issue of Kosovo hasn’t directly influenced the relations between Albania and Greece. Almost in every meeting with their Greek counterparts, the Albanian foreign ministers since 2008 have demanded from Greece to recognize the reality in the Balkans,

which is Kosovo's independence.¹²The Greeks, from their part, have repeated the same things without taking a definite position about Kosovo's independence. In their public declarations, the high officials of Albania and Greece haven't gone beyond these positions about Kosovo and it is unlikely that this situation will change in the near future. The issue of Kosovo has never been directly an issue in the relations between Albania and Greece.

This has happened because Kosovo's issue hasn't been a direct issue between Albania and other countries of the region, neither with Greece nor with Macedonia or Montenegro or even countries a little further like Bulgaria or Croatia. Albania's role in this issue has been to recommend to all these countries Kosovo's recognition as an independent country and to explain why this would benefit the entire region, but nothing more than this. Kosovo has its institutions, has its Prime Minister, its Foreign Minister, which have the responsibility and all the capacities to deal directly with the countries of the region, without the influence of Albania.

In order to find and understand the influence of Kosovo's independence and Kosovo's issue in general in the Albania-Greece relations, one should look at the geopolitical calculations that Albania and especially Greece do in relation to their Balkan policy.

On the one hand, the stability that the Kosovo independence has brought to the general security of the Balkans is something that Greece cherishes, because an unstable Kosovo directly influences in the Greek immediate neighbors Albania and Macedonia and an unstable Albania and Macedonia has direct consequences for Greece.

But on the other hand, Kosovo's independence has weakened Serbia's position in the Balkans, which is a close and historical ally of Greece. Also Kosovo's independence was unilateral, was a changing of the

12. Konferenca e përbashkëtpërshtypBushati-Kotzias,<http://shqiptarja.com/skedat/2724/konferenca-e-perbashket-per-shtyp-bushati-kotzias---304867.html>

borders without the consent of the two states, in this case of Serbia and Kosovo. In the 18 February 2008 statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece it was said that “Greece has always believed and continues to believe that the best solutions to differences and problems arise from mutually acceptable arrangements. From dialogue and negotiations. Not from unilateral actions and accomplished facts. This position, founded on respect for the principle of the peaceful resolution of differences, also determined our policy on the Kosovo issue.”¹³ This is a point that Greece has repeatedly emphasized and has pushed for direct talks between Serbia and Kosovo to reach a final agreement between them.

The Greek recognition of Kosovo’s independence and its right to secede unilaterally from Serbia should be seen also in the light of the Northern Epirus issue. This issue is not an official issue of the Greek foreign policy but it is a sensitive issue for the Greek public in general. If Greece recognizes Kosovo, why should it refrain from demanding more on the Northern Epirus Issue? Political organizations and even political parties like the Golden Dawn, the third major political force in the Hellenic Parliament, have been vocal in the last years about this issue. The Greek recognition of Kosovo’s independence would give legitimacy to their demands and this could have an impact on the relations between Albania and Greece.

Even in these times of great European integration, states, by their very nature, tend to vie with each other about influence and Greece is not an exception to this. Since the fall of communism in the Balkans, Greek economic influence in the countries of the region has been enormous. By conditioning the EU integration of several countries of the region with issues that are mainly in the national interest of Greece, it has tried to render its political influence in the region as important as the economic one. Also, in the last decade with the

13. Statements of FM Ms. Bakoyannis following the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council https://web.archive.org/web/20120503235708/http://www.mfa.gr/www.mfa.gr/Articles/en-US/190208_alp_1300.htm

growing economic power of Turkey and its attempt to translate this new economic power into political influence in the regions once part of the Ottoman Empire, there is also an indirect and silent rivalry between the two countries for economic and political influence in the region. Albania and the Kosovo issue also have their place in this indirect rivalry.

The problem of Kosovo in general is part of the “Albanian issue” which became an issue after the Great Powers in 1913 divided the Albanian nation into several states. Only in Albania, the Albanians were the largest nation. In the other countries, like Serbia, Macedonia, Greece and Montenegro, the Albanians become a minority inside those countries. Kosovo’s independence is the solution of one of the parts of the “Albanian issue” in the Balkans. But the fear of the other countries has always been that Kosovo’s independence will increase the demands for more rights for Albanians inside their respective countries and even more than that. This has happened already in Macedonia and Montenegro.

A supposed consequence of the Greek recognition of Kosovo’s independence would be the greater pressure by Albania about the Cham issue. This is unlikely to happen because the Balkan foreign policy of Albania in the last two decades hasn’t worked this way, and Albania has been a positive influence in the region, but Greece may perceive it this way. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia hasn’t expressed any irredentist views concerning the Greek Macedonia, but regardless of this, Greece accuses FYROM of irredentist aspirations. In international relations, in many cases what is perceived to be the intention of a state by another state is more important and has more impact than what really that state aims to do.

The rivalry between Greece and Turkey in the region is not only direct, but also through their allies and their potential influence in the region. Since 2003 and especially since the influence of Turkey’s former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu’s

neo-ottoman political ideology, Turkey's foreign policy in the Balkans has been concentrated more on the Muslim-majority countries or the Muslim-majority areas of the region: Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Sandžak in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In this case, the Greek recognition of Kosovo's independence would strengthen an ally of Turkey and would weaken an ally of Greece. Therefore, Greece's recognition of Kosovo's independence and establishing full interstate relations between them would strengthen the "Albanian factor" in the region, namely Albania and Kosovo, which in turn is more oriented towards Turkey and would weaken the "Serbian factor" which is oriented towards Greece and Russia. Albania and Turkey are the only countries of southeast Europe that Kosovo has excellent relations. Kosovo has signed 21 agreements with Turkey, more than with anyone else and Turkey and Albania had a diplomatic presence in Kosovo even before the independence.¹⁴ The Greek recognition of Kosovo's independence would give more legitimacy to the Turkish influence in Kosovo and in the Albanians in general in the Balkans.

But, this silent rivalry for influence and power in the region is not confined only to the geopolitical calculations of the Greek foreign policy. It stretches also to the feeling of sympathy and antipathy that Greeks have for certain major global powers and these feelings in a certain measure determine the influence that these major global powers have in the Balkans. They project their influence in the region in those countries where they feel that they are appreciated and make those countries a starting-point for their policy and influence in the region.

This strengthening of the "Albanian factor" in the Balkans, mentioned above, for Greece would be a further strengthening of the United States in the region, given the enormous political, economic and military

14. *Kosova në kontekst rajonal. Marrëdhëniet politike bilaterale*. Instituti Kosovar për Kërkime dhe Zhvillime të Politikave, Maj 2014

investment of the United States in Kosovo, and would weaken the influence of Russia in the region, which is directed mostly towards Serbia and less to Greece. There is a well-known and well-documented anti-Americanization in the Greek public in general. “The extent and intensity of anti-Americanism in Greece, as registered by Pew, Gallup and other public opinion surveys, is indisputable”.¹⁵ As, on the other hand, there is a well-known sympathy for Russia, mainly connected with the common Christian Orthodox faith, which is very important for the identity of the two nations.¹⁶ As was mentioned above, religion is a very important factor for the Greek foreign policy.

Greece, of course, is not a starting-point for Russia’s influence in the region (the Slavic countries, especially Serbia retain place of pride), but the enormous role that the US played in ending the war in Kosovo and the role that the US has played since in all the difficult steps for Kosovo’s international recognition and in the building up of its institutions, have made Kosovo in the Greek public, to be a US project in the Balkans. This is not so easily acceptable for the Greek public in general. “It’s about the US pursuing its own expansionist strategic interest”, cited New York Times in 1999 a young Greek girl participating in a rally against NATO’s bombardment of Serbia.¹⁷ And many shared her views. At that time 95% of Greeks opposed the bombing, 63.5% of those polled by the largest daily newspaper Ta Nea, had a favorable view of Slobodan Milosevic and 94.4% of them had a negative view of Bill Clinton.¹⁸ In this view, the anti-Americanization of the Greek public in general and the influence of the Greek public opinion in the country’s foreign policy in this case,

15. Ted Couloumbis, Athanasios Moulakis, *Are the Greeks Anti-American?*, Global Europe Program

16. Henry Stanek, *Is Russia’s Alliance with Greece a Threat to NATO?*, The National Interest

17. Alessandra Stanley, *CRISIS IN THE BALKANS: ATHENS; NATO bombing, Tears at Greek Loyalties, Reawakening Anti-Americanism*, New York Times, April 25, 1999

18. Ibid.

shouldn't be excluded.

In the end it can be said that Kosovo is not a direct issue in the Albania-Greece relations, it has never been. A Greek recognition of Kosovo's independence would be welcomed in Albania and it would change almost nothing in the direct bilateral relations between Albania and Greece. But Kosovo is part of the "Albanian issue" in the Balkans and Kosovo's independence and the Greek recognition of it plays a part in the general foreign policy of Greece in the region and in this way it affects the relations between Albania and Greece. The issue of Kosovo is inseparable from the Greek religious and historical ties with Serbia, but also with geopolitical rivalry with Turkey for influence in the region. If the issue of Kosovo would have connected only with the stability and security of the Balkans, Greece would have already recognized Kosovo, because Kosovo's independence has considerably minimized the potential for security problems and war in the Balkans.

Also, Kosovo's recognition by Greece would reopen the issue of Northern Epirus in the Greek public in general, even though it may not have any influence in the bilateral relations between the two countries.

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The economics of Albanian-Greece cooperation

*Selami Xhepa*¹

With the fall of communist system, Albania and Greece started to bring down walls and build bridges in terms of economic, political and social relationships. The questions we ask almost three decades later are: Is this really happening? Aren't we still largely divided and borders still very important in terms of cross border trade and investment? How is socio-cultural setting working to bring people on the both sides of the border closer together, or it is not working at all?

Dynamics of cooperation between our two countries over the last three decades had the ups and downs, moments of enthusiasm and euphoria, and moments of decline, pessimism and frustration. In the beginning of '90s, given that Greece was a developed economy and fully integrated in regional and global economy, a leading role by Greece with the Balkan region was evident. The crucial role played by Greece in sheltering very large flows of migrants shall not be forgotten. Almost 40% of migrant, or 600,000 people were settled in Greece. They still continue to work and live in this country, contributing mostly to development of Greek economy, but also to Albanian economy through remittances flowing back in the country helping families improve the standard of living and relieve them from poverty. Trade and investment was intensively flowing and first important investments were made. Greek banks were among the first to cross the border; privatization by Greek companies of some

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important industries, particularly of the mobile telecommunication, small and medium Greek firms started green field investment projects in manufacturing, mainly in the neighbor cities.

This privileged position of Greece in relation to Albania and other Balkan countries could have given Greece some advantages in the international division of labor and strengthen her competitiveness on international markets. But research ² shows that they missed that opportunity. Greece used economic cooperation as a means to advance foreign policy interests rather than taking advantage of that position to create a new perspective in the international division of labor. A hub and spoke trade and investment area with Greece in the center as a hub, based on revealed comparative advantages, could have produced a different economic reality for Greece and for the region. Although Greek government lunched some initiatives to support penetration of Greek companies in the region, for example through the Hellenic Plan for the Reconstruction of the Balkan (1999), this project seems a failure since no sustainable results were achieved. Perhaps some companies took advantage of such financial support, but this did not generated sustainable results since their presence in our markets remains very modest compared to other countries and with the potentials it does represent.

Economic integration is assumed to bring more specialization and product differentiation among countries – therefore making them more dissimilar. On the other hand, this process of specialization may take place on regional clusters, not following of national borders. What has happened in our case after close to three decades of cooperation? Do we have some success stories in building some sort of regional clusters in some industries? Unfortunately there is not so much to tell on that regard. Cross border cooperation remains very fragmented and limited to EU funded projects and it never

2. Vassilis Monastiriotis and Achilleas Tsamis, 2007, Greece's new Balkan Economic Relations: policy shifts but no structural change, *Hellenic Observatory*

materialized on a comprehensive strategy by Greek or Albanian authorities. Borders do not look the same as thirty years ago; but still we do not see intensive economic activity taking place. This is supported by empirical evidences as well.

Research shows that trade and investment potentials are largely unexplored. Gravity models to trade and investment flows indicates that actual flows are far below the potential flows and what models predict. The same findings are drawn through questionnaires and interviews with the business community. For example a research project of Dr Lefteris Topaloglou ³ from the University of Thessaly finds that level of cross border cooperation is at low levels with Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria and that market size, purchasing power, geographical conditions, distance, quality and productivity of local firms, product differentiation of local economies are among the variables which strongly impact the flow of cross border trade and investment.

Looking at trade and investment data, the trends have been on a clear declining path. Looking at trade relations, for example, ⁴ in 2004 Greece represented a market for 11.3% of total Albanian exports and 18.6% of Albanian imports. On 2017, this share has significantly been reduced to 4.3% of Albanian exports and 8% of Albanian imports. Declining trends have been consistent particularly since the start of the crisis strongly affecting Greece. The logic of a country in crisis is that crisis makes the affected country more attractive in terms of competitive products therefore Albanian imports from Greece should have been increasing. Instead they were reduced dramatically. From the investment perspective, although Greece remains a large investor for Albania, the dynamics have been in strong decline, particularly after the Greek crisis. Major investment

3. "Enterprises' Strategy across the Northern Greek Cross Border Zone: Trade, Investment and Obstacles", *Discussion Paper Series*, 14(3): 49-62

4. Trade data are taken from www.instat.gov.al and investment data from www.bankofalbania.org

projects took place in early start of the transition in Albania – in ‘90s- and then they stagnated. The behavior of FDI from Greece in the recent years also shows for a very low level of investment flows from Greece to Albania. For the period 2014-2017, for example, investment flows from Greece represented only 5.6% of total FDI in Albania. Furthermore, from 2016 and on, the trend has been in reverse – a reverse flow of investments from Albania to Greece. This may be attributed to reversing of flows from Greek banks back in mother banks or other Greek firms relocating back in Greece.

Rivalry has characterized Greek Albanian relationship in important European projects, particularly on infrastructure. The most distinguished example is the 8th Transport Corridor, or the linking of Albania with the gas routes to European markets, which never gained the Greek support and therefore remained undeveloped. With the exception of some improvement on the border connectivity, there is no joint project on a large scale of either in infrastructure or in manufacturing industries.

Greek crisis reversed many things. About 180,000 Albanian migrants have returned home over the past five years as Greece’s crisis intensified. Three Greek banks in Albania own close to 16 per cent of all assets in the Albanian banking sector. Recently there is a process of bank consolidation of the Greek banks, mostly purchased by other private banks of other nationality.

From an institutional and legal framework point of view, basic bilateral agreements in trade and investment cooperation have been in place since before ‘90s. Double taxation, protection and promotion of bilateral investments and free flow of trade in goods have been instituted both bilaterally and in the EU context.

However, the cooperation remains below potential levels. If a better policy approach towards trade and investment regime can be designed, economic relations can be further improved. By a better

policy approach, I mean, first of all a policy of good neighborhood, easing tensions and rethorics. There should be more in depth research exploring barriers to trade and investment, intensive contacts between business associations, institutional structures to support this agenda. Free trade and a secured investment area between our neighbor countries are essential for the prosperity of people on both sides of the border.

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