Albania external relations briefing:
Albanian foreign policy in 2019 - controversies and challenges
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This is predicted to be a very complicated year in the Albanian diplomatic agenda. Many challenges are on the sight and the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs is supposed to pursue the national interests in a fast pace and undisputed professionalism, considering that the responsibilities ahead are of historic relevance and the political expectations are high. The preeminent areas where the workload will be of intense gravitas are the opening of accession talks with the EU, preparation for the OSCE Chairmanship in 2020, the Chairmanship of the Adriatic Charter, continuations of talks with Greece, monitoring of Serbia-Kosovo potential ‘territorial exchange’ and the acute need of a multidimensional (bilateral and multilateral) intensification of the Albanian diplomatic presence in the region and beyond.

Legacy and controversy

In late December 2018, in the governmental reshuffle of his cabinet, Rama did not spare the Foreign Affairs Minister Ditmir Bushati either. He dismissed the Minister by praising his achievements and dedication, adding that the name change in the Ministry is just a push ahead in trying to enhance of Albania’s efforts to EU membership.

Former Minister Bushati is viewed by many Albanian scholars, politicians and ex-ambassadors to have left no footprint, no doctrine, and no major foreign policy accomplishment; furthermore, he has been heavily criticized for not being transparent in his negotiations with Greece and for spreading a wave of nepotism and political clientelism in the Ministry he led for five years.

However, the new name proposed by Edi Rama, to be the new Minister for Europe Foreign Affairs (MEFA) put the media and the public opinion in a state of absolute consternation.

Genti Cakaj, a 28 years old- Kosovo born Albanian, dual nationality holder, former adviser to the Prime Minister and Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs was the fulcrum of a 3 weeks long, political confrontation between the President Ilir Meta and Prime Minister Edi Rama. The two, former allies and current adversaries, started a media and procedural clash for the same nomination of Cakaj as Minister.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, the Prime Minister nominates the Ministers of his cabinets and the President of the Republic, has a seven-day timeframe to decree the new nominee. In this case, the President did not accept the candidacy of Cakaj to be
the MEFA and declined Rama’s request on the bases of: “[…] not fulfilling the constitutional criteria to be a Minister, not having the necessary credibility and not offering sufficient guarantees to exert his duties objectively and with the required competences.”

The major concern for the President, besides the overall reluctance expressed in the decree, was the fact that the new candidate, while serving in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as vice-Minister, did not acquire the necessary security clearance certificate from the National Directory for Security of Classified Information (DSIK). The other (not explicitly declared) reason for not appointing Cakaj’s candidacy, on which almost all the Albanian analysts agreed, was the fact that the Minister-to-be had expressed in the past his accepting views on a potential ‘territorial exchange’ between Serbia and Kosovo.

Finally, Rama took a Tsipras-like approach, by putting his name on the Minister for Europe Foreign Affairs so holding two positions at the same time. On January 23rd, in the shortest speech of his career, Rama delegated all duties and responsibilities of the MEFA to Cakaj, by achieving at the end the same outcome he aimed since the very begging. As of that day, Cakaj is de facto the person responsible of leading the Albanian foreign policy. The implications of this controversial choice will be the bases for the future events and outcomes.

- **Challenges of Albanian foreign policy 2019**

  **Opening of accession talks with the European Union – the spring of hopes**

  By all aspects, the priority of the Albanian foreign policy in this year will be the opening of accession talks with the EU. In 2014 Albania acquired the candidate status to the EU and since the very beginning there were five key priorities on which the EU required progress and swift implementation: public administration reform, judiciary system reform, fighting corruption, fighting organized crime and protection of human/property rights.

  In 2019, there is a new MEFA and there is a new Head of the EU Delegation to Albania, Luigi Soreca, who substituted RomanaVlahutin; the negotiations will have to follow the line of their predecessors dictated by the political agreements between the EU and Albania, however, it is impossible to know how the personal attitude of the two new key figures will affect the ongoing of the process.

  It is true that the EU leaders meeting gave the ‘green light’ in 2018 to open accession talks and this decision is expected to pave the way of final approval in 2019, however, everything will depend on the new composition of the European Parliament (EP) after the spring elections all around member states.
Spring will be a probationary period for Albania, as it is expected that the European Commission will submit an annual report to the country, to be further examined by the member states of the EU Council. A latest projection on EU elections released by Robert Schuman Foundation anticipates that the departure of the British members will lead to a very intense political reshuffle in the EP and a rise in populist and nationalist extremes, even imagining that the later might win a majority. The report suggests that if these forces will match the national level results, they might win the majority of the seats; however, the report continues, even if this will be the case, these forces are divided in several groups, and rarely form cohesive positions on given topics.

The screening process for Albania (and Macedonia) has started already and it will have its result by spring, and the decision will be proclaimed by end of May.

**Preparation for the OSCE chairmanship in 2020**

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) traces its origin to the détente phase in the early 1970s and was created initially as a conference to serve as a multilateral forum for dialogue and negotiations between East and West with an official agreement signed in 1975 also called ‘Helsinki Process’. The events of the end of the Cold War, the new international challenges and the Budapest Summit of 1994 led to its acquiring permanent institutional and operational capabilities.

The OSCE has a comprehensive approach to security that encompasses politico-military, economic and environmental, and human aspects. It therefore addresses a wide range of security-related concerns, including arms control, confidence- and security-building measures, human rights, national minorities, and democratization, policing strategies, counter-terrorism and economic and environmental activities. As of 2019 there are 57 participating States (stretching from the US to almost all European countries, Russia, Central Asia to Mongolia) enjoying equal status, and decisions are taken by consensus on a politically, but not legally binding basis.

The OSCE Chairmanship is held for one calendar year by the OSCE participating State designated as such by a decision of the Ministerial Council. The function of the Chairperson-in-Office (CiO) is exercised by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of that State.

Albania will take the Chairmanship in 2020, however, a huge preliminary and procedural work is needed before, meaning 2019 will pave the way to this Chairmanship and intense focus is required in order to fulfill the necessary duties and responsibilities.

Besides, when the Chairmanship was announced, the delegation of the Russian Federation and Serbia, released two “Interpretative statements under paragraph IV.1 (A) 6, of
the rules of procedures of the OSCE”; the fulcrum of both declarations was Kosovo and was specifically required: “[…] we expect that Albania will, as every Chairmanship, set aside its national agenda during 2020 and perform its duties in a responsible, transparent and unbiased way.”

For the first time Albania is taking the lead of the OSCE which is a very important and at the same time very complicated organization. The geopolitical aims of the OSCE, the controversial complexity of its members, the combination of multiple constituent structures, make OSCE leadership a real challenge and Albania’s confrontation for the first time with this challenge demands accountability, capacity and highly diplomatic professionalism.

**Chairmanship of the Adriatic Charter**

The US-led/initiated Adriatic Charter was signed in 2003 in Tirana with the presence of the (then) US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, and the Prime Ministers of Albania, Croatia and Macedonia. The aim was for the initiative to be an important forum and instrument for regional cooperation and strengthening and canalizing the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the Western Balkans. In 2008, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro became members as well.

As of 2019, there are the Adriatic Five (A5) are having an active role in promoting and implementing the NATO Open Door Policy. This platform is important to the member countries as well as the United States; in fact, during his visit in Podgorica Summit of 2017, Vice-President Mike Pence stated: “The Adriatic Charter has played a leading role in bringing the Western Balkans into unity with Europe and alliance with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Adriatic Charter itself is a testament to the United States’ commitment to the Western Balkans, and to Europe as a whole.”

It is true that the Charter has a more security oriented agenda; however, it has three forums at the level of Foreign Ministers, Defense Ministers, and Chiefs of Defense. This element added to the foreign policy agenda, requires efforts and accountability from the Albanian MEFA as well.

**Continuations of talks with Greece**

In the case of negotiations with Greece resuming, another adverse challenge will be on the agenda of the MEFA. The talks with the Southern neighbor are complex and need highly skilled expertise on a multitude of fields.

It appears that the negotiations have stalled for the time-being (or at least it is not of public knowledge otherwise) since Ministers, Kotzias and Bushati, who were the promoters of the
deal, are not in office any longer. On the Greek side, Tzipras is handling himself the foreign policy agenda; while in Albania, Edi Rama delegated all responsibilities to Gent Cakaj.

If in 2019 the process reassumes as a whole, the entire burden of negotiations will fall on the newly elected/delegated Minister.

In this case the controversies within Albania will be even higher for two specific reasons: first, the legacy of the past talks is surrounded by lack of inclusiveness and transparency and second, because the new de facto Minister is already surrounded by skepticism and has been the focus of institutional dispute between the President and the Prime Minister.

**Monitoring of Serbia-Kosovo potential ‘territorial exchange’**

Albania has a great role and responsibility for Kosovo, especially in the phase of trying to normalize relations with Serbia. Last summer there was ‘political seismic wave’ arriving from Pristina when the public opinion was made aware of a possible arrangement between Thaçi and Vučić, where there was presented the idea of territorial exchange as a solution. Since that day on, in Albania there is a precipitation of analysis, ideas, debates, articles, policy papers, etc. on the issue. There is no single Albanian media outlet that did not dedicate space to the story; sometimes (for certain platforms) the matter is analyzed on daily bases.

In 2019, however, there is a new Minister, who views the situation differently from his predecessor and in contrast with the Albanian Government official discourse.

Germany is the main opponent of the possible territorial exchange and has warned both Belgrade and Pristina in refrain from further proceeding; however, Florian Bieber, a Balkan savvy Austrian scholar, believes that there might be signs indicating the negotiations are continuing below the radar.

In many wonder how will the new Minister handle the issue and for most of the early projections it appears that support for Cakaj is coming only from Edi Rama and some on his entourage; for as far as scholars and foreign policy analysts are concerned, the majority of them argue that the insufficient political formation and lack of experience of the MEFA will interfere (for worse) in the process.
**Final reflections**

There is an acute need of a multidimensional (bilateral and multilateral) intensification of the Albanian diplomatic presence in the region and beyond.

One of the most prominent Albanian scholars of IR, Lisen Bashkurti, estimates that for all the above mentioned challenges there is a need of at least 1400 experts, including here specialist of all fields to negotiate 35 different chapters of EU accession talks.

The fundamental question remains: is the new *de facto* Minister up to the job? If the Minister aims to be successful in his performance, political animosity and clientelism should be set aside in order for meritocracy to prevail.

In such demanding reality as described above, there has never been a better time when the expertise of a multitude of ex-diplomats, former Ambassadors, foreign affairs specialist and international relations scholars is needed in order for Albania to perform with dignity in the world stage and safeguard its national interest. Many of these exceptional Albanian experts have been sidelined, without considering their immense contribution to the nation and the Albanian diplomacy.