



Weekly Briefing

Albania political briefing:

5G in Albania: more about politics than technology

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Introduction

5G, the fifth generation of cellular network technology has been one of the most controversial issues in the international stage during the past years. With the two largest economies in the world competing for dominance in the field, the shockwaves of this race have been felt globally. China's edge in 5G is disorienting for all the nations that used to dominate new technology and the economic growth that accompanies it. The Chinese champion corporation on the 5G communication, Huawei, has spent more than \$2 billion over 10 years to ensure it is in the best position to be the architect of global 5G technology. The company has already signed contracts to provide 5G equipment with 40 international carriers and shipped over 70,000 5G base stations, or short-range transceivers. While from the United States declarations of cybersecurity risks related to Chinese-based producers have been systematic, Huawei has argued that its products posed "no greater cybersecurity risk" than those of any other vendor, and that there is no evidence of the espionage claims. In many markets such as the UK, Huawei proactively welcomes and allows full examination of its hardware and software products by local security experts.

As of November 2019, Availability of 5G networks in alphabetical order is: Australia, Argentina, China, Finland, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Monaco, Pakistan, Romania, Russia, San Marino, South Africa, South Korea, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay, Vietnam.

5G in Albania (?)

Vodafone Albania is part of Vodafone Group Plc – one of the world's largest telecommunications companies. It is a leader in the market, not only as an operator in the electronic communication industry, but also as a remarkable contributor in the economic and social development of the country. The company started offering GSM services for the first time in Albania in August 2001, and since then Vodafone has marked a successful performance in the market, reaching today to 1,8 million customers (in a country with a 2,9 million population).

In November 2019, Vodafone Albania marked a milestone for the electronic communications market, being the first operator to bring the 5G experience to Albania. In a very special show, Vodafone Albania demonstrated live what it will be like to drive a car in the future. Numerous well-known participants at the event, in the fields of politics, business and

media, were the first to witness and experience the driving and communication of an electric car and driver, remotely, through the 5G network provided by Vodafone Albania. Attending the event, Prime Minister Edi Rama was the first to test the experience and praised the company for its achievements. Meanwhile, Vodafone Albania CEO Achilleas Kanaris expressed the extraordinary importance of this event declaring that Vodafone Albania is committed to the journey and this is the start of a pilot project, tried out in very few other countries, putting Albania at the forefront of this journey not only to implementing 5G, but also to radically change the fixed infrastructure services, starting with the acquisition of ABCom.

5G technology enables high speed internet and response times up to 10 times faster than 4G, which means that the use of 5G technology will open doors to the use of a variety of technologies, including remote controlled robotics, cars autonomous, agricultural development, remote surgical operations, etc. The 4th industrial revolution is driven by the telecommunications sector and the close next step to futuristic reality is the 5G.

The politics of it all

Vodafone's display of future endeavors in Albania was supposed to be just another news in the promotion headlines, however, as soon as political figures of Albania started commenting on the potential threats of 5G technology, the only name associated to the news was China.

First reactions came from exponents of the right and soon after, the left joined the group. The former Minister of Defense, Fatmir Mediu, via a public statement argued that Albania should be very careful on the reliability of its partners especially those closely linked to security. While recalling the comments of US Secretary of State Pompeo in North Macedonia in stopping the Chinese intervention in 5G technology he added that for Albania, being a NATO member and a strategic partner to the US, the issue needs urgent addressing by the government.

Petrit Vasili, currently in the opposition party LSI and former Vice-Minister of Health, stated that silence of the government in face of the security concerns cannot be tolerated especially since Albania's most reliable partner, the United States, already warned the authorities on potential cybersecurity risks. He continues by questioning: until when will this anti-Western and anti-EuroAtlantic policy of the Albanian government will go on?

Former Minister of Justice, Ylli Manjani, went even further with hyperbolas by headlining— it is all about security. His question to the public was: “*Does the Albanian government have the guts and the luxury to play Chinese games?*” As his other colleague, he presented the argument of Albania being a NATO member and a close ally to the United States.

Vodafone Albania's introduction of 5G technology, happened just few days prior to the Annual Meeting of Representatives of The Defense and Security Committees from The

Parliaments of South East Europe (SEE). During this meeting Chairman of the Parliamentary Group of the Socialist Party, Taulant Balla, indirectly addressing the issue, stated that in Albania it is needed to listen to the American partners when it comes to 5G networks. He added that not all companies that build these networks can be trusted, regarding personal data and information, for this reason the Albanian government should strengthen its legislation to disable these companies and increase the security of our information systems.

On November 3rd, it just took a post from the US Embassy in Albania to further highlight this situation; the warning was clear and loud by citing a Leigh Harman article, it stated: “Is Huawei trustworthy? Huawei is hoping to produce and sell its 5G network equipment around the world. However, there are clear reasons for countries and consumers to act cautiously.” While on November 6th, however, Remarks by Chargé d’Affaires, a.i. Moses-Ones at the U.S. Policy in the Western Balkans Conference were more direct:

“On geostrategic location, you know the 5G revolution is coming: the connectivity of Albania’s 4G networks will soon upgraded; the connectivity of its geostrategic position on the map is important because there are nations like China that desire to seize the digital lifeline of the Western Balkans to siphon information from, and choke the networks of, U.S. Allies. Albania is already doing the right thing by exercising vigilance by protecting its networks. Again, some things in Albania are simply not for sale.”

The above were stated in the presence of Prime Minister Edi Rama, the same person who was targeted by the opposition as the supporter of 5G, consequently the Chinese Huawei.

Vodafone Albania and Huawei

In the development of 5G technology the Chinese Huawei Technologies has a dominant role. Meanwhile British Vodafone, which has partnered with Huawei for 5G technology, also operates in Albania - so the connection was withdrawn automatically: Vodafone Albania will use Huawei devices and technology to operate in the country.

The US, via Mike Pompeo, has urged its allies not to use Huawei technology because of concerns that the company could serve as a conduit for Chinese espionage. Not only small nations of the Balkans but also Western European countries are under pressure from the US to take a stand against Huawei. The concern is that Huawei's 5G market dominance would give China an advantage in future operations.

In Albania, for some days it was taken for granted that Vodafone would operate with Huawei for the implementation of the 5G, until on November 7th, when Huawei reacted over the debates over the 5G network potential involvement. The declaration stated: *"For the last three decades, Huawei has served three billion people worldwide without any major incident*

and there is no evidence that we can be trusted to provide secure telecommunications products. No other vendor can claim this level of success in internet security, which is why Huawei is trusted by leading European companies, among Huawei's 60 5G contracts, 31 of them are from Europe. Huawei is well aware of the importance of internet security, and we share concerns about this security in Albania.”

Huawei specifically pointed out that the company has not done any piloting or testing of 5G in Albania so far, and also has no contract or commitment to develop 5G in Albania.

Exaggerated suspicions and farfetched alarmism

Vodafone's event in Albania was just a pilot test for 5G, and yet, even this potential link to a Chinese company operating in technology was politicized immediately. Albanian politicians raced to pledge their allegiance to the West, even before Western diplomats or governments would individually do so.

When small nations are faced with the potency of big powers it is normal for them to abide or at least to follow to one or the other, however, this happens gradually. In Albania, even though the country needs more than ever diversified options of development, politicians are far from being tolerant or open-minded. It could be argued that the same politicians that started pointing fingers at Huawei (and China) are publicly discredited and politically vilified (Fatmir Mediu, Petrit Vasili, Ylli Manjani) - their credibility is minimal and what they claim does not have a public impact, nevertheless, these are just the symptoms of a bigger issue – political interest (of a single politician or an entire political party) are placed ahead of national interests. The technological revolution of our century is not about politics, it is about progress and welfare. A better technological infrastructure benefits the entire society and the country's economy, but as for everything else in Albania, the debate was politicized and polarized again.

Instead of conclusions

Many times, in human history, small nations become proxy-pioneers for controversies of a bigger scale. The global technology competition is not Albania's game to play, it is way out of its reach, especially Albanian politicians. In technology, as in every branch of the economy, Albania will have to follow global flows and be pragmatic not dogmatic, on the partners to choose.