



Weekly Briefing

**Albania external relations briefing:
Albania's foreign policy in 2021 and the paths forward**
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Albania's foreign policy in 2021 and the paths forward

The internal political streams in Albania will highly influence behavior and discourse in foreign policy during 2021 - mostly because of the general elections to be held in late April. As it often happens, when in need of national support in the electoral campaigns, all major political parties evoke the international actors at one point or the other. Having an endorsement or even some kind of sympathy from a powerful foreign nation is portrayed as pillar of legitimacy from any internal political force, and in 2021 there appears to be no difference. The distinction however in the months to come, will be the ability to secure vaccines, as in Albania all are well aware of the fact that the vaccination process will be as swift as Albania's strategic partners will have the benevolence to assist.

The major struggle in 2021 will mostly be on realizing which foreign country or international institution will help Albania in receiving the Covid-19 vaccine, and as seen since early January this is not a an easy task. Developed countries are competing amongst each-other on which will have the most of the doses first, and with regards to developing countries the only option left is to wait.

The one-man-show

The New Year, found Albania with a new Minister of Foreign Affairs. The former Minister of Defense, Olta Xhaka, took the position with a cabinet reshuffling of ministerial posts declared at the very end of December 2020 by Prime Minister (PM) Edi Rama. However, for Albanians it is a well-known fact that the only protagonist in terms of external relations is Rama himself. In December of 2020 the PM would state in a press conference: "*Albania may be a small country but we wanted to do great things.*" Albania's PM since day one in power has been at the center of every decision and inclination in relation to other countries. In his words, Albania's brilliance at the helm of the OSCE is a great lesson for how much Albania can achieve, and a lesson of what is about to come with Albania's presence in the Security Council of the United Nations in 2022. Rama is rushing to attract foreign friends so that he can cement his win in the upcoming elections and in doing so he is making himself the pivotal figure of every endeavor outside of Albanian borders. The sense of protagonism is obvious and but the question remains, do the interests of the leader and the interests of the country intersect? – Many political analysts argue that all foreign policy endeavors initiated by the PM are mainly self-serving and intrinsically linked to his grasp of power internally. Furthermore, his meetings with

foreign leaders are mostly publicized as personal achievements of Rama rather than the performance of Albania internationally.

Turkey and Albania in a strategic partnership

Rama started 2021 with a state visit to Turkey on the 6th of January and was received with the highest honors in Ankara. He was accompanied by most of the Ministers of his cabinet and a strategic partnership agreement signed by Rama and Erdogan; it is considered as the latest step of deep understanding between the two leaders. The Turkish President, pledged a 60 million Euros donation, the construction of a hospital in Fier, the creation of Turkish university in Tirana, the restoration of a mosque in Shkodra and several other deals and lastly, and importantly the creation of a High Council of Bilateral Cooperation was declared. It is argued amongst International Relations experts that this was mostly a trip in order to gain favors (be this political or otherwise) from Erdogan prior to the elections rather than aimed at achieving deeper cooperation with Turkey, which is present already and extensively in Albania. Whatever the outcome will be, it is obvious that Rama made Turkey a priority in his and Albania's foreign agenda for 2021.

Greece and the integration path

While Rama's trip to Turkey was a state visit in itself, two days later in Greece he held informal meeting in a more homely environment. At a luncheon in Mitsotakis' private home, which was also attended by Foreign Affairs Minister Nikos Dendias, the two leaders reviewed Greek-Albanian relations, discussed developments in the Balkans, the European accession prospects for Albania, and of course the pandemic. Yet, the Greek media noticed that Rama is playing a double game, since it was from Turkey that Rama expressed his discontent to the European Union in not supporting the Western Balkans on the vaccine track. Still, in 2021, this quite bizarre gambling with Greece and Turkey will most likely continue.

Frictions with Russia

It appears that tensions run high and in the front of foreign affairs with starting the year, especially with declaring of a Russian diplomat *Persona Non Grata*, after his noncompliance with anti-Covid regulations in Albania. While an official declaration of the Russian Embassy in Tirana stated that this action will not be left without a response, the state of affairs with Russia is at an all-time-low. Another stance also revealed friction between the two, the declarations of Rama in which the PM labeled an offering from the Russian side of some Covid-19 vaccines, as a ridiculous provocation.

China and Albania, a history repeating

As it happened in the first days of identifications of the first Covid-19 cases in Albania, the authorities did not turn to China for help – the same is happening in this stage of the pandemic. As of end of January 2021 the Albanian government did not even ask for help in Beijing, making it clear that they will stay in deal only with Pfizer or the next option AstraZeneca. It is distressing to see this from the perspective of the citizens this kind of lack of flexibility, all they want is a vaccine, and it doesn't matter where it is from.

This behavior with China from Rama's side is noticeable to all, it remains only to see what will happen in the next (virtual) "17+1" High Level Summit, what signals will Albania be sending and what will be the shape of receptiveness from the Chinese side.

The European Union (EU): it is all about the vaccine

While in every other year the main topic with regards to the EU would be Albania's accession to the union, this time around the only point of reference remains the vaccination process. Rama publicly expressed his discontent for the EU in several declarations. Albania is in a very unfavorable position when it comes to obtaining vaccines, and the usual "helping hand" is nowhere to be seen. To that regard, Rama stated that - *as a person i felt indignant and as a European i felt ashamed* - the EU has opened a divide gap in Europe which is absurd and morally unacceptable decision-making, but also politically incomprehensible, he added. Rama going against the EU is almost a first, being the path to Albania's integration the priority on the foreign policy agenda for 2021. As some politicians in France and Germany reminded the PM of the conditions that Albania has to fulfill and not deal with animosity, it is our argument that in the months to come these type of tones and accusations will circle the podiums of all.

The United States

The only unchangeable variable in Albania's relations to foreign nations will be the United States (US). It has been, it is, and is going to be an ever-present actor in the scene. As the US Ambassador is involved in the electoral campaign, Justice Reform, Electoral Reform and hold talks with all main political forces in the country, it is only expected that the final "blessing" for the next elections will have to come from Washington.

What if...

In the (unlikely) event of a new political ruling force after April 2021, some scenarios might slightly change, however, as the first months of every government in Albania are more

about pledges rather than actual deeds, with summer ahead what will remain is autumn, and most likely in those months all will remain on the level of good will and commitments.

[Instead of conclusions] Will Albania embrace multilateralism 2021?

Rama's new appointee in managing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when accepting the job, stated that multilateral approach, based on principles on conflict prevention and peacebuilding, is on top of Albania's main priorities as a candidate for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council for 2022-2023. But, is Albania indeed embracing multilateralism? - Small countries usually do not have the luxury of having few allies, in times of crises this element becomes more important than ever. Having the ability to secure favors and good partnerships from a diversified number of countries becomes imperative, but not in Albania apparently – case in point the outreach (or better the lack thereof) of Albania's diplomatic endeavors in securing many sources of vaccine. As dogmatism is prevailing, and a well-defined "Cold War Mentality" is shadowing any political move outside of Albania's borders, this time around the cost are much higher than before, because lives are at stake. For 2021 it is our argument that this trend will continue all year long, independently of which party wins the elections. If Rama wins again, he will continue on this path because it is a continuity of what he has claimed and acted upon; and if the right-wing wins, they will not have enough clout or cemented power to do differently. Whatever the outcome will be, Albanians are now hostage of an obstinate political management that sees foreign relations as mean to an end. At a time when pragmatism is needed the most, it is nowhere to be found.