



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Albania external relations briefing:**

**A message from Washington throws Albanian politics into chaos**

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# **A message from Washington throws Albanian politics into chaos**

## **Summary**

Over the years, many instances have demonstrated at what extent the United States (US) are involved in Albanian political scene, yet, very few have caused so much heated debate internally. Former Prime Minister of Albania Sali Berisha and his immediate family are not allowed to enter the US territory.

Usually when the US issues visa refusal or *persona non grata* declarations, those are not accompanied by specific explanations on the reason behind the decision, but not for the former Albanian leader.

Confusion, joy, bitterness, fervent discussions, accompanied this American decision. The mixed, deep emotions demonstrate how much polarization Berisha, in his late '70s, still causes to Albania.

## **Introduction**

On May 19<sup>th</sup> 2021, the US Department of State releases a “*Public Designation of Albanian Sali Berisha Due to Involvement in Significant Corruption*”. From that day on, the entire political scene of Albania is in turmoil, and every news cycle has analyzed the declaration with all intended causes and merits. This very loud public accusation from the US has been dubbed mostly as a political act, rather than a legal one. However, for many in the country, now it's the turn of Albanian institutions to start a proper investigation of the former leader.

## **The US designation**

A tweet from the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, would summarize an American decision which started as a personal statement, but was visibly a declaration of departmental importance. “Today, I am announcing the public designation of Sali Berisha, a former President of Albania, former Prime Minister of Albania, and former Member of Parliament of Albania, due to his involvement in significant corruption.” - the declaration noted.

Details on why this decision came to light were explained stating that in his official capacity as Prime Minister of Albania in particular, Berisha was involved in corrupt acts, such as misappropriation of public funds and interfering with public processes. This would include using his power for his own benefit and to enrich his political allies and his family members at

the expense of the Albanian public's confidence in their government institutions and public officials.

Furthermore, the statement continues: "His own rhetoric demonstrates he is willing to protect himself, his family members, and his political allies at the expense of independent investigations, anticorruption efforts, and accountability measures." The members of his immediate family were also mentioned as being part of the same restrictions.

The statement concluded that this designation reaffirms the US commitment to supporting political reforms key to Albania's democratic institutions. "The United States continues to stand with the people of Albania. The Department will continue to use authorities like this to promote accountability for corrupt actors in this region and globally."<sup>1</sup>

With this declaration, in just a few lines, the US have penalized the very symbol of Albanian transition.

### **Who is Sali Berisha?**

Sali Berisha, twice President and twice Prime Minister, is the longest-serving ruler in Albania after Enver Hoxha. The man that shaped Albania transition as well as the most fervent, anti-communist, although a former member of the Party himself. The most pivotal figure and founder of the Democratic Party (PD), the first right-wing party in the country. His brand was hate, division and revenge!

Berisha's agenda has contaminated the Albanian politics and the public sphere since he first appeared in the public domain. He immediately become the symbol of the culture of hatred in Albania since he took power in 1992, and in order to gain and retain power, has not hesitated to impose even the most extreme solutions. He was the person that created the very practice of extreme position against the political opponent.

The man who has ruled Albania with an iron fist and imposed his will on all the institutions and structures of the whole country. Because of his policies, narrative and practices, entire generations of Albanians will endure economic and social repercussions.

He was in charge when the most drastic collapse of Albanian economy occurred due to the pyramid schemes, he didn't stop them - on the contrary - he endorsed them. Immediately after the collapse of the pyramid schemes, he made possible opening of weapons depots, and its consequences are felt even today.

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<sup>1</sup> Blinken, Antony J. (2021, May 19). Secretary Of State - Press Statement. Public Designation of Albanian Sali Berisha Due to Involvement in Significant Corruption. Retrieved from: <https://www.state.gov/public-designation-of-albanian-sali-berisha-due-to-involvement-in-significant-corruption/>

He was the Albanian Prime Minister who pushed the narrative of North vs. South and sent the army to crush and kill southerners in 1997, by calling them the “Red Rebels” and sons of communists.

The man that brought Albania in the brink of a civil war, with calashes that cost more than more than 3000 lives. The man under whose leadership in 2008, an ammunition warehouse explosion killed 26 people, and man who was the Prime Minister when under his watch, snipers killed 4 protesters on January 21<sup>st</sup> 2011, in the main boulevard of Tirana.

The founding father of the right-wing party is now on the trial of the public opinion, worldwide.

### **The US and Sali Berisha – it’s complicated!**

Some Albanian political analysts argue that there is no institutional memory from Washington if we are about to see the history of Berisha and US.

He was the first Albanian leader to pay a visit in the White House, on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1992, President Bush welcomed him with great honors. On September 12<sup>th</sup> 1995, again in Washington meeting President Clinton. On July 10<sup>th</sup> 2007, President Bush (Jr.) visits Albania where Berisha stated “the greatest and most distinct guest in Albanian history.”

In 2009, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) welcomed Albania as a member, and Berisha stated that without the American help that would not have happened.

In January 2011, when four opposition demonstrators were killed on the boulevard they heard the American ambassador in Tirana consider Sali Berisha as a “statesman”.

Some argue that this is the beginning of a top-bottom approach for accountability in Albania. Maybe this is the first “big fish” to be tangled in the net of the Justice Reform.<sup>2</sup> Others argue that Sali Berisha, after this US declaration is the face of the failure of the Albanian pre-democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Foreign dignitaries have a special spot in the country’s political scene, especially western diplomats, some argue that the role of arbiter for Albania’s internal debate is monopolized only by Washington envoys.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Balla, S. (2021, May 20). Miracle of Freedom? Apo i dënuari i parë i saj? *Panorama*. Retrieved from: <http://www.panorama.com.al/miracle-of-freedom-apo-i-denuari-i-pare-i-saj/>

<sup>3</sup> Vangjeli, L. (2021, May 24). Berisha Non Grata, në shtyllën e turpit ka gozhdë për të gjithë. *BalkanWeb*. Retrieved from: <https://www.balkanweb.com/berisha-non-grata-ne-shtyllen-e-turpit-ka-gozhde-per-te-gjithe/>

<sup>4</sup> Bushati, A. (2021, May 20). Berisha non grata, më keq vonë se kurrë. *Shekulli*. Retrieved from: <http://shekulli.com.al/berisha-non-grata-me-keq-vone-se-kurre/>

## **Ramifications for the Albanian political scene**

The US State Department has made efforts to separate the individual Berisha from the Democratic Party, a necessary division, also to give it a chance to be reformed, to give up Berisha's path. All the blinding rhetoric and cruel harshness of Berisha towards every issue that could bring detente and understanding in the governance of the country has been exactly the ignition of fierce internal debate.

The party he create is in a crossroad, they cannot dispose of him, because his clout is still very strong in the party structures. On the other hand, they cannot make an enemy of the US, since they pride of the “close ties with Washington.”

For the first time, a former Balkan president and prime minister, is on the State Department's blacklist, and apparently strong reasons have forced the top US institution to make such a decision.

It has long been expected that Berisha would be on the Black List and a "non grata" person, as undesirable in the US. He himself has known this and sharpened his aggressive rhetoric, to defend himself, his family and his political allies at the expense of independent investigations, anti-corruption efforts and accountability measures.<sup>5</sup>

Many today who support the opposition are confused. Sali Berisha has been the closest man to the Americans and also, often, the most hostile to them. That of the Democratic Party itself with its father not merely spiritual, of the party, who whenever he needed, put them all in line within the walls of his political house.

This political termination of Berisha, is called by some in the right wing PD as the American selective justice. Their argument is that in order to have faith in the new justice institutions, there should have been also someone from the left-wing party, so that there are no political speculations on the matter.

Berisha answered and the next day, and he called an emergency press conference. He is suing directly Secretary Blinken for defamation in neutral court of law, in France. His successor in the leadership of the PD, Basha, commented as well, by keeping all options open he stated that he expressed regret for the US decision to declare former Prime Minister Sali Berisha ‘non grata’ while demanding full transparency on every fact and document related to this decision. He emphasized that Berisha is the Albanian leader who has given the most valuable contribution

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<sup>5</sup> Islami, B. (2021, May 19). SHBA e bëri të vetën, Rama mbajti kryepremtimin që kishim menduar gabimisht se e harroi, shqiptarët presin sot që SPAK të nisë hetimet kryesisht. *Gazeta Dita*. Retrieved from: <http://www.gazetadita.al/shba-e-beri-te-veten-rama-mbajti-kryepremtimin-qe-kishim-menduar-gabimisht-se-e-harroi-shqiptaret-presin-sot-qe-spak-te-nise-hetimet-kryesisht/>

to the development of the country and the strengthening of democracy, and led Albania's friendship and strategic alliance with the US to the highest levels.<sup>6</sup>

With this declaration from Washington, the Albanian right endured another defeat after losing the elections.

### **Conclusion**

Dubbed as the “beginning of the end” for the Albanian transition, the optimistic voices are reading between the lines as much as they can from this American message. The man that no prosecutor or judge dared even mention, is now being vilified on the world stage. Albanians know very well what Berisha is capable of. Some label him a true curse for the country and its development.

A former hero of Washington turned into villain, is not something new. The main question is who benefits in Albania from this move, and all logical answers point to current PM, Edi Rama.

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<sup>6</sup> Euronews Albania (2021, May 19). Berisha “non grata” në SHBA, reagon Basha: Transparencë e plotë mbi çdo fakt që lidhet me këtë vendim. Retrieved from: <https://euronews.al/al/vendi/politike/2021/05/19/basha-reagon-pas-vendimit-per-shpalljen-non-grata-te-sali-berishes-nuk-ndryshon-asgje-ne-marredhenien-tone-me-shba/>