



Weekly Briefing

Albania political briefing:
Government reshuffling in a new political season
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Introduction

At the onset of the political season, the Albanian Prime Minister conducted a comprehensive review and projection meeting. During his address to party members, ministers, and collaborators, he reflected on the progress made by Albania in the past few years. While refraining from calling out names, he commended specific individuals' work while condemning others' actions. The government took credit for the successes, while the failures were attributed to particular outcasts or individuals. The most significant announcement was the government's decision to implement sweeping changes, with five ministers stepping down and seven new ones appointed. These changes were far-reaching, impacting nearly 40% of the government.

Background: A tumultuous history of ministers in the past decade

It is not uncommon for governments to undergo reshuffling of ministers, deputies, directors, and so on. However, over the past decade in Albania, there have been several changes in government, with some ministers serving for such a short period that the public hardly gets to know them. It is ten years since the Socialist Party (PS) has been in power, and the executive branch of government is entirely under this party's supervision. There have been plenty of changes in a decade; the only element that accompanied all these changes was Prime Minister (PM) Rama's exclusivity to make these changes on his own. Edi Rama made the first change in the government after only 300 days of governance. In August 2014, in a press conference, he announced the resignation of the Minister for Relations with the Parliament and his replacement with another socialist Member of the Parliament (MP).

In 2015, Erion Veliaj's candidacy for the head of Tirana Municipality left the Ministry of Social Welfare vacant. Edi Rama entrusted this post to another close confidant in May of the same year. Also, in 2015, the head of the Ministry of Justice was changed.

While in the first two years, the changes came from resignations, in 2016, Edi Rama started the first dismissals. In February of this year, the Minister of Finance was dismissed from office by a specific decision of Rama, appointing Arben Ahmetaj to this position. Still, in 2016,

a new appointee was nominated to the Ministry of Economy, Tourism, Trade, and Entrepreneurship.

In September 2016, the Minister of Transport resigned. In that year, the Socialist Party was in a coalition with the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), which denominated the Freedom Party. The same party then proposed another substitute from its ranks.

In March 2017, Rama dismissed the Minister of the Interior, Saimir Tahiri, and the Minister of Social Welfare. In January 2017, Rama signed the dismissal of the Minister of Justice without any public justification. Immediately after the news publication, the dismissed minister spoke about his clashes with the PM and made severe accusations about several other ministers, blaming them for rampant corruption. This was just the prologue of the enormous rift between the PS, headed by Rama, and the LSI, run by Ilir Meta (the former President). In 2017, Rama did not need a coalition to win, so Ilir Meta and his party (LSI) were left without any negotiating power, thus without ministries. Rama won in 2017, and from that day on, he could govern the country as he wished, with whomever he wanted.

The most sensational changes in the government were marked in 2018. Through the national assembly of the PS, Rama announced the profound reformation of the government cabinet, also replacing ministers who had been in office for five years. The unique feature of these changes was the introduction into the government of persons without contribution to politics. In 2018, the student protest gave a solid impetus for removing the Ministry of Education, giving this post to an unknown figure in Albanian politics who came from Kosovo.

Another unknown figure in the political scene coming from Kosovo, Rama, brought him to the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Other changes in 2018 are on the heads of The Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Infrastructure, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Defense and Entrepreneurship. In this same year, Rama replaced also the Deputy Prime Minister.

In 2020, although they were appointed with fanfare, the ministers from Kosovo did not stand out and did not even complete their mandate as the heads of the respective ministries; both stayed in position for less than two years.

In 2021, Rama reformed the government, adding four state ministries for Relations with Parliament, Enterprise Protection, Youth and Children, and Standards and Services. The Minister for Reconstruction, Arben Ahmetaj, took the post of Deputy Prime Minister. There

were changes at the head of Finance and Economy, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Agriculture.

In 2022, Rama dealt a blow to one of his closest collaborators, Arben Ahmetaj, who was targeted by the opposition's accusations of high corruption. In July 2022, Ahmetaj was dismissed from the post of Deputy Prime Minister.

What stands out in three government mandates is that only some ministers have completed a full mandate. The ministry most infamous for the higher turnout is the Ministry of the Interior. Since 2013, this ministry has undergone six changes. Almost all the departures were due to scandals involving the leaders of this ministry. The last change was made in August 2023.¹

Government reshuffling in September 2023

On September 4th, at the National Assembly of the Socialist Party, PM Edi Rama presented the changes in the government cabinet. Without giving any specific explanation, Rama made public the changes in the government at the end of a speech of almost 90 minutes. His remarks were dedicated in part to the tourist boom of this season and the need to respond with a new approach. The second part concerned strengthening the role of the justice authorities, with the commitment to give them unconditional support. Despite the anti-corruption strikes, which have affected some former members of the government cabinets and a significant number of officials or former officials of all levels in central and local government.² While five ministers leave, seven new ones are appointed. The changes concern the Foreign Affairs, Economy and Finance, Agriculture, Education, Health, and Minister of State for Entrepreneurship; furthermore, they established a new ministry, the State for Local Government, and dissolved another, the Ministry of State for Standards and Services.

One ministry dissolved, and another was created: Rama established the Ministry of Local Government, which he entrusted to the Deputy Mayor of Tirana. The local elections of May 14th, 2023, have highlighted the need to build a new department - the PM argued - a ministerial body to strengthen the cooperation between the central and local governments. Since

¹ Klan News (2023, September 3). Qeveria "Rama", më shumë ndryshime në histori. <https://tvklan.al/qeveria-rama-me-shume-ndryshime-ne-histori/>

² Mero, A. (2023, September 4). Ndryshime në qeverinë Rama, ikën ministrja e Jashtme Xhaçka. <https://www.zeriamerikes.com/a/7253910.html>

the last local elections dealt with “great challenges,” the need for coordination between the central and local governments is evident, thus establishing a new ministry.³ While the Ministry of State for Standards and Services was already a minister without a portfolio (with no specific responsibilities or a predetermined staff), it was not needed anymore. This ministry was headed by Milva Ikonomi, former Minister of Agriculture. In 2021, when it was created, it was “invented” as a political favor, yet its uselessness was proven. Besides being a former minister, Ikonomi has also held the Deputy Minister of Health position. During this tenure, she signed contracts of public-private partnership (PPP). These contracts are currently under investigation by authorities for corruptive practices (namely, the sterilization of surgical equipment and the national program of medical check-ups).

Ministry of Finance and Economy: Delina Ibrahimaj was dismissed as Minister of Finance and Economy, but she has a new, lower-ranking position, as she was appointed Minister of State for Entrepreneurship. The Ministry of Finance and Economy will be headed by Ervin Mete, who was earlier the Deputy Minister of Finance and is currently head of the Financial Supervision Authority. He has an American and British educational background, has no political background, and is mainly thrown into the principal label of technician.

Ministry of Health: Albana Koçiu has been proposed for the position of Minister of Health. She is the Director of the Department of Public Administration (DAP), a position she has held since 2013. According to her official CV, she has 18 years of experience in central and local administration leadership positions,⁴ yet no previous experience in healthcare or similar fields. It is worthwhile noting that she was the deputy Mayor of Tirana when Edi Rama was the Mayor.

Ministry of Education: Evis Kushi was dismissed from office to be replaced by Ogerta Manastirliu (former minister of health). Colloquially, one of her most notorious scandals is the plagiarism accusations. Indeed, for a minister of education to plagiarize academic work should be the end of her career, yet nothing happened. This was made public in 2020 and did not influence any aspect of her job. On the contrary, more competencies were given to the ministry.

³ Shqiptarja (2023, September 3). Asambleja e PS/ Rama ndryshon gati gjysmën e kabinetit qeveritar! Emrat e ministrave të rinj! <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/rama-propozon-ndryshimet-nw-kabinetin-qeveritar-emrat-e-rinj-nw-6-ministri>

⁴ Dritare (2023, September 4). Kush është Albana Koçiu, ministrja e re e Shëndetësisë! <https://dritare.net/ngjarjet-e-dites/kush-eshte-albana-kociu-ministrja-e-re-e-shendetesise-i748828>

Ministry of Agriculture: Frida Krifca was dismissed from the ministry a few months after the European Union announced the suspension of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development IPARD funds based on corruption suspicions. The case is currently under investigation by the Prosecutor's Office. She will be replaced by Anila Denaj, previously part of the government cabinet as Minister of Economy and Finance. In July this year, the European Commission temporarily suspended its funding to support agriculture and rural development in Albania. According to the EU delegation in Tirana, the suspension was based on information from the European Anti-Fraud Office.⁵

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA): the dismissal of Olta Xhaçka coincides with Albania's United Nations Security Council (UN) presidency. However, problems with the former foreign affairs minister had been brewing for years. Xhaçka held powerful positions since 2013, including the Ministry of Defense. She was a close collaborator of Edi Rama and a loyalist to him in every sense, always at the center of power.

With early contributions to the opposition and a strong personal connection that passes through her husband (Artan Gaçi), a former schoolmate of PM Rama, Xhaçka has been one of the ministers with the most solid positions in the government for six consecutive years. A completely different wind blew for her a few days before the dismissal. On September 1st, she appeared in front of the cameras and talked about the job that awaited her and her ministry in Albania's second-year presidency in the Security Council. There were new commitments ahead, innovative projects, and relationships to strengthen with Western partners.

But recently, the heavy shadow of several scandals in which her name has been implicated tarnished her image of an educated woman in the West, specifically in the United States, an image on which she climbed the steps of her career in the party and then the government.⁶ There are many speculations and legitimate reasons for which she was dismissed. The most prominent of all remains the Greek element. Chances are that the PM has released her from duty after the serious scandals at a time when Albanian diplomacy has to account for the Greek diplomatic counterattack for Fredi Beleri (who belongs to the Greek minority, won the local elections to be the mayor of Himara but is in jail for vote fraud since months). From that day on, Greece has launched a lobbying campaign in European offices and American politics to increase the

⁵ Sinokura, F. (2023, September 5). Albania PM's Surprise Ministerial Changes Are Cosmetic, Analysts Claim. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/09/05/albania-pms-surprise-ministerial-changes-are-cosmetic-analysts-claim/>

⁶ Lapsi (2023, September 12). SPAK, oligarkët, amerikanët apo grekët/ Kush e largoi Olta Xhaçkën nga qeveria?. <https://lapsi.al/2023/09/12/xhacka-2/>

pressure on the Albanian government. The Albanian government needed the best experience in diplomacy to cope with the Greek pressure, and Xhaka was required to be up to the task. Second is the issue of her husband, who owns properties in the same area of Himara. According to some reports from Greece (unsupported by any facts or evidence), there were problems with the landowners and her husband. By dismissing Xhaka, Rama removes a potential antagonistic option for future relations with Greece.

Another path that many analysts in Albania have expressed might be a reason for her dismissal: the scandal about giving the army's properties to what they call "oligarchs." Xhaka has been in the offices of Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK) several times, and she was interrogated regarding leasing a naval base when she headed the Ministry of Defense. In July 2020, the government hired the base for the construction of a tourist project that was to be realized by the union of companies "Concord Investment" and "Kastrati Group" represented by the company "Marina Bay Saranda." However, a former Deputy Commander of the Naval Forces report claimed that the President's approval was not obtained for removing the property from the Expansion Plan. Being the President and the commander of the armed forces, his approval was needed, and this caused SPAK to start the procedures and seize the property.

Another path is her husband's announcement as a "strategic investor." The history of the 5-star hotel in south Albania, owned by her husband, has caused much trouble for not only her but also the Socialist Party and the Prime Minister. The opposition accuses Xhaka of being in a conflict of interest as a minister since her husband was declared a strategic investor by a particular government decision. Xhaka defended herself by saying that she did not participate in the government meeting where the decision was made and that her husband had been in business for years, yet this claim is not credible for the public. The opposition has asked the Constitutional Court to remove Xhaka's mandate, but their efforts were rejected by the Socialist Party, forcing the Constitutional Court to decide against the Socialists. To date, the opposition's request has remained hostage to the procrastination of the procedures in the parliament, as Rama has shielded her.⁷ Furthermore, troubles appear to have just started because after she was dismissed, a former political advisor of hers, when she headed the

⁷ Lapsi (2023, September 12). SPAK, oligarkët, amerikanët apo grekët/ Kush e largoi Olta Xhakkën nga qeveria?. <https://lapsi.al/2023/09/12/xhacka-2/>

Ministry of Defense, was arrested in Dubai (one year prior, four of his business partners were arrested in Tirana).⁸

The new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Igli Hasani, is not specifically a diplomat, but he has much experience in security issues. Previously, he was the Co-Coordinator of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Economic and Environmental Activities. Before joining the OSCE, he was the Ambassador of Albania to various International Organizations in Vienna. He has held different high management roles in the Ministry of Defense, including Secretary General, Director General for Defense Policy Director of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Foreign Relations, and Director of Euro-Atlantic Integrations.⁹ Perhaps the new minister's profile indicates Albania's foreign policy projections, given the times of uncertainty and conflicts.

The discourse of technocrats, bureaucrats, and political appointees

There have been numerous discussions about the reasons behind the recent government reshuffle in public discourse. Some believe that these changes were made to achieve specific objectives. PM Rama had warned his ministers of the impending changes two months prior, which caused them to work with adrenaline, fear, and anxiety. Additionally, he aims to alleviate the stagnation of his own position as prime minister by balancing the routine nature of his job with other dramatic changes, which, according to an Albanian academic, are minor.¹⁰

For others, these changes came because of the accusations against this government. Concerning the ones that left (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Agriculture and Health), analysts think that Rama had no choice but to remove them from political and public attention. Regarding the new names, they are not related to any specific contribution but are a reward for their loyalty to the PM. In several other perspectives, most of the ministers who were removed from office had already been accused publicly, which means that the recent changes in the government have been made in response to the ongoing investigations by authorities into government scandals. These modifications reflect Rama's urgent need to take action, as dozens

⁸ Vatnikaj, E. (2023, September 16). Arrestohet në Dubai ish-këshilltari i Olta Xhaçkës.

<https://www.oranews.tv/politike/arrestohet-ne-dubai-ish-keshilltari-i-olta-xhaces-i1109136>

⁹ MFA official website, Curriculum Vitae of the Minister. <https://www.punetejashtme.gov.al/en/ministri/>

¹⁰ BalkanWeb (2023, September 7). Ndryshimet në qeveri/ “Rama mori të gjitha masat”, akademiku Fuga: Krasiti degët e qeverisë që mund të preken nga SPAK. <https://www.balkanweb.com/ndryshimet-ne-qeveri-rama-mori-te-gjitha-masat-akademiku-fuga-krasiti-deget-e-qeverise-qe-mund-te-preken-nga-spak/>

of scandals have tarnished his image. The ruling party hopes to create the impression that things are changing and that the abuse era is ending. However, government officials' abuses are typically not limited to specific individuals but are systemic.¹¹ Ever since assuming power in 2013, Rama has not hesitated to take action against his subordinates whenever his rule has been threatened by corruption scandals or growing public dissatisfaction. His political team has been almost entirely replaced by technical officials, who seemingly have no ties to the Socialist Party. However, some view these changes as superficial, without bringing fundamental innovation to the existing system.

What does it take to be a minister in Albania? Politics has become so business-oriented that in the end, those who support the government use the same logic as hiring in corporations: what it takes “the 3C-s of hiring,” which are Character, Competence, and Chemistry.¹² Character is the most important forged in experience; competence is when someone gets the job done, and chemistry, of course, is the one the team or the team leader likes the candidate who fits the organization's purpose. The socialists agree publicly on this path; they know that to be a minister, the 3c is important to Rama.¹³

The question remains: how can the new ministers be there without any prior analysis or a program for the future of the ministries they will head? - Setting up a government cabinet should mean setting up a team that represents the fittest candidates according to the needs of the sector they will manage. Thus, being a technician is a good thing. However, what about accountability? Usually, to be held accountable, a minister should have a political background because citizens, in theory, vote for that person. Any popular vote has yet to select any of the ministers in the above list. The only element they have in common is the third “C,” namely chemistry with the Prime Minister.

The recent decision to replace the ministers who stepped down has sparked debates among political analysts and the public. According to many, the reasons behind this move are connected to potential corruption charges that some ministers face. This would severely damage the ruling party's reputation and the Prime Minister's if proven accurate. The frequent

¹¹ Gjoka, B. (2023, September 6). Ndryshimet në kabinetin e Ramës u diktuan nga ‘skandalet e qeverisjes’. <https://www.reporter.al/2023/09/06/ndryshimet-ne-kabinetin-e-rames-u-diktuan-nga-skandalet-e-qeverisjes/>

¹² Graves, S. (2023, September 26). The Three C's of Hiring: Character, Competence, Chemistry. <https://www.stephenrgraves.com/blog/the-three-c-s-of-hiring-character-competence-chemistry>

¹³ Top Chanel (2023, September 10). Rama shkund qeverinë, emrat e rinj, kush janë deputetët që duhet t'i tremben SPAK? <https://top-channel.tv/video/rama-shkund-qeverine-emrat-e-rinj-kush-jane-deputetet-qe-duhet-ti-tremben-spak-top-story/>

government changes have already negatively impacted the country's stability and the smooth functioning of the ministries. The new ministers must be up to the task to avoid further disruptions and ensure the efficient operation of the ministries they represent.

Conclusion

It is concerning that there has been no analysis of governance and decision-making nor independent consultation with the leading bodies and the interested parties on the new ministers. This lack of involvement of other actors suggests that overcoming the concentration of power will be challenging. The incoming ministers must provide assurances regarding their political or professional expertise; this has yet to happen. This government reshuffle seems substantial, but mostly it is superficial. Ultimately, all know too well that their ministerial position is safe as long as the PM decides so.

The experience, with several corruption scandals at the ministerial and deputy ministerial levels, demonstrates that to lead these government bodies, there is much need for “flexibility.” The flexible ones are the ones that usually are the most corrupt. For many in Albania, these leading positions are given to the most “flexible” because they are the easiest to manage; perhaps that is why they are so quickly hired and so easily fired. Previous corruption scandals caused apprehension; there are no hopes that this reshuffle will be an occasion to break away from those detrimental patterns because they are challenging to overcome. By prioritizing transparency and accountability, Albanian citizens need a government that is genuinely responsive to the requirements and interests of the people. The name of the minister does not matter; the results do.