



# Weekly Briefing

**Greece external relations briefing:  
Relations between Greece and Albania  
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# **Relations between Greece and Albania**

## **Summary**

*The briefing presents the relations between Greece and Albania. The two neighbours' relations can be characterised as generally good. Social and economic bonds are strong but existing issues put obstacles to further develop the relations. Greece was always sensitive towards Albania respecting the rights of the national Greek minority living in Albania. The recent pre-trial detention of the ethnic Greek mayor-elect Fredi Beleri, has sparked the reaction of Athens. Athens hard stance towards Tirana is indicative of its importance to Greece. Greece was always an advocate of the Western Balkans accession to the EU. However, Athens seems determined to hinder the accession process of Albania if the later does not respect and guarantee the rule of law, one of the main Copenhagen criteria for the accession to the EU.*

## **Introduction**

Greece and Albania are neighbouring countries and share extensive historical, social and economic ties. Both countries share the same values and belong to the same Euro-Atlantic geopolitical sphere. They are NATO members, Greece is also a member of the EU, while Albania is under the EU's accession process. At the end of the Cold War the interaction between the two countries increased significantly bringing new opportunities for cooperation in many fields. However new and old challenges and disagreements between the two nations were brought to surface. Thus, despite the close ties political and diplomatic relations are challenged. In addition, old stereotypes between the two nations still linger among the societies which may hinder the further development of the relations.

The pre-trial detention of Fredi Beleri undermines the existing good relations. The protection of the ethnic-Greek minority living in Albania is a key aspect of the Greek-Albanian relations. Thus, the arrest of Beleri brings to surface an existing problem, highly important for Greece. Athens asks Tirana to respect the rule of law and safeguard the rights of the ethnic Greek minority living in Albania. The Greek government addressed the issue in both the EU and NATO level and has linked the Albanian's EU prospect to the implementation of the EU standards. Nevertheless, the deterioration of the relations between the two countries needs to be avoided, especially during the geopolitical instability of the current period. Western Balkans

at the present moment need now more than ever before. Under such circumstances Greece and Albania need to work together to solve existing issues and curve a way of friendship and cooperation exhibiting a paradigm of good neighbouring relations in the region. It is evident that both nations have the will to establish strong and stable relations. Where there is a will, there is way.

### **Background on the relations between Greece and Albania**

Greece and Albania not only share borders but a long history. Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of nation states, in this case Albania in 1913 - Greece was already recognized as an independent state in 1830 – the two nations started to establish close bilateral relations. Both states view each other as a strategic partner, however, as it was the case with other Balkan countries, territorial disputes and ethnic minorities settled in the opposite side of the border hindered the relations between the two countries. Besides, the borders are not always strictly corresponded to ethnic lines, creating disputes among the nations of the region. Greek-Albanian case stands out as the relations between the two countries can be described as good and hostile at the same time throughout their modern history.

The WWII heavily marked the Greek-Albanian relations. Following Italy's attack to Greece, through the Albanian territory, Greece declared Albanian as enemy state, a status which remains until today. In addition, the dramatic events of the WWII increased the already existing minority issues. Moreover, the division between East and West created by the Cold War brought the two countries in the opposite front, meaning that the relations between them were almost frozen until 1971 when diplomatic relations were established (1). It should be mentioned that despite the non-existent diplomatic relations during this period economic cooperation did occur, indicating the close ties between the Greek and Albanian people. Following the end of the Cold War, Albania was re-exposed to the West. During this time a great number of Albanians migrated to Greece which on the one hand helped to establish an intense communication between the two societies and break Albanian's extreme isolation during the Cold War but on the other raised problems related to the integration of Albanians in the Greek society, their economic and social status.

Nationalistic sentiments and existing issues between the two nations disturb the relations. The Albanian side focuses their external relations with Greece to issues such as the non-recognition of the independence of the Republic of Kosovo by Greece, the improvement of the

status of Albanian population in Greece, the Greek minority expansion in Albania (the case of Himare), the Cham issue and the dispute on the maritime border between the two countries (2).

The Greek side considers that the maritime border issue between Greece and Albania can be solved. Specifically for the Greek government the issue can be solved with an agreement between the two countries to refer to the International Court of Justice, as PM Mitsotakis proposed in 2022 before attending the EU-Western Balkans summit. It should be mentioned that Albania side has agreed as well to refer the issue to the Hague. Concerning the Kosovo issue, as the Greek PM stated, Greece mediates between Belgrade and Pristhina in order to find a common solution (3). As far as the Cham issue is concerned, Greece considers this a non-existent issue, as the then Greek MFA Nikos Dendias stated after his meeting with Albania's Minister for Europe & Foreign Affairs Olta Xhacka in 2022 "Greece is ready to discuss only issues that it considers to exist," clarifying that for the Greek side "there is no such issue" (4).

Greece gives special attention to the treatment of the national Greek minority in Albania and the protection of human rights among the Greek population living in Albania. As the 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy report stated, "Greek minority rights, in particular, property rights of the Greek minority remain a subject of disagreement in the bilateral relations between the two countries" (5). Nevertheless, the 2023 report of the European Commission stressed more the issue between the two countries and specifically the recent case of the pre-trial detention of the ethnic Greek mayor-elect - Fredi Beleri - who was arrested on the eve of the local elections on charges of vote-buying (18). This is the main problem that currently disturbs the Greek-Albanian relations.

Despite existing issues, it is worth noting, that the two countries view each other as partners. Greece dynamically supports Albanians accession to NATO and the EU. Albania joined NATO in 2009 and the then President of Albania Sali Berisha had stated "Our partner, Greece, during the last 30 years was very helpful for Albania. Supported Albania's road to NATO and Europe, and made serious investment in the country" highlighting the supporting role of Greece (6). Concerning Albanian's accession to the EU as the former MFA Nikos Dendias has stated in May 2022 "Greece fully supports opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. It is absolutely predisposed to offer its technical assistance" and added "We think that the European perspective of the Western Balkans is a one-way path" (7).

According to a study held by the Open Society Foundation of Albania and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) in 2021, Albanians and Greeks largely do not see each other as a threat. Specifically, only 3% of the Albanian responders

defined Greece as a potential threat and none of the Greek responders declared that Albania is a potential threat to Greece. Moreover, among the Albanian participants 61% had a positive opinion for Greece, while only 4% a negative. On the contrary 15.5% of Greeks had a positive opinion about Albania and 40,5% a negative, indicating the negative stereotypes for Albania prevailing in the Greek society. Concerning the accession to the EU 51% of the Greek responders support the accession of Albania (8).

As far as the bilateral relations between the two countries are concerned, almost one out of two Albanians believe that the last decade (2010-2019) the relations are better in comparison to the previous one (2000-2009). One out of two Greeks also consider the bilateral relations improved compared to the previous decade and one out of three consider the relations as stable. In addition, concerning the problems affecting the relations between the two countries, the Albanians indicated the delimitation of the maritime zones (30%), the Cham issue not being recognized by Greece (17%), the question of the law of war with Albania (10%), claims of properties with regards to Chams (9%), the Albanian immigrants in Greece (6%) and the violation of rights of Albanian immigrants in Greece (4%). In the same question the answers of the Greek responders are more scattered indicating that the Greek public opinion does not share any prominent concern on issues that hinder the bilateral relations. For example the answer with the highest percentage was "other problem" with 17%, which follows the Albanian expansionism - "Greater Albania" with 12.5%. It is also worth mentioning that according to the study, 85% of the Albanians believe that Greece has assisted Albania in the last twenty years and 90% of the Greeks believe the same. The majority of Albanians (60%) have a positive attitude towards the Greeks in general and 30% neither positive nor negative, with 47.5% of the Greek participants answering that they have a positive view towards Albanians in general and 42% neither positive nor negative. Interesting enough, despite the proximity of the two nations and the strong social links both the Greeks and the Albanians, by 73.5% and 58% respectively believe that the two nations have fought wars against each other in the past, which is not accurate since the two nations have never fought each other (8).

Evidently Greeks and Albanians have a relatively good perception about each other and do not portray the other side as a possible threat of their respective countries. In addition, the two nations have close economic ties and their economies are highly interconnected. Greece is Albanian's main economic partner since the end of the Cold War. Greece is the third country from which Albania imports. Moreover, for Greece Albania is considered a target country, given its geographical position and its economic progress in sectors such as construction, tourism, and food & beverage. Albania ranks in the 18<sup>th</sup> place for the Greek exports, with 1.55%

on total exports and exportable products such as steel, electricity, petroleum products, paper, fruits and vegetables etc. It is worth noting that Greek exports to Albania have increased by 60% during the last five years. In June 2023, Enterprise Greece in collaboration with the Economic and Commercial Affairs Office of the Greek Embassy in Tirana organised a webinar on doing business between Greece and Albania. During the event the Greek Ambassador in Albania, Konstantina Kamitsi, stated: “Greece is one of the biggest foreign investors in Albania and bilateral trade is flourishing. The fact that we share the same values, as the majority of Albanians speak the Greek language in addition to the proximity of the two countries, create a favourable business environment to facilitate further cooperation and development”, indicating the will to increase economic cooperation (9).

Further cooperation between the two countries has been established in other sectors as well such as education and culture. The cornerstone is the “Agreement on Cooperation in the field of education, science and culture”, which was signed in 1998. Moreover, the two countries cooperate in the level of university education. The Greek language is taught at the Department of Greek Language of the University of Tirana and at the Department of Greek language, literature and culture of the University of Gjirokastrë. Furthermore, Greek language schools operate in Albania, either as public or as private ones such as the school “Arsakeion” in Tirana (1).

### **The case of Fredi Beleri**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of May, just two days before the 14<sup>th</sup> of May elections in Albania, the Albanian authorities arrested Fredi Beleri, a member of the Greek minority in Albania, who was standing for election as mayor of the Himare city, along with his associates, on charges of actively participating in election corruption and vote-buying. He was arrested on the basis of wiretaps revealing a third person would provide him with the names of those who would vote for him if he paid them the amount of 45 euros. Beleri argues that there is no evidence and only allegation. The Appeals Court, after hearing both sides arguments, decided to keep Fredi Beleri in prison (10). It should be mentioned that although in custody Fredi Beleri was elected Mayor of Himare in the elections of the 14<sup>th</sup> of May. Nevertheless, due to his arrest has not yet sworn. Inevitably this event has put the relations between the two countries on the ice.

Following the arrest, the Greek side accused Albania on not adhering to the Rule of Law and not respecting the rights of the Greek minority in Albania and called for his immediate release. In addition, since the arrest the Greek government has made numerous contacts with

the Albanian side in order to resolve the issue. It was reported that behind the scenes the Albanian PM, after the second round of Greek elections in June, had assured the Greek side that “the case of Beleri will be settled”. However, since Beleri is still in prison, it is believed that this was a strategy to buy time in order for three months of pre-trial detention expire and automatically disqualifying Beleri from the mayoral office. According to the Albanian municipal code a mayor is obliged to have a residential address within the boundaries of his municipality, which is not the case as Beleri is held in a prison in Vlore (12). Since his arrest Beleri has proceeded with requests to be released but the Special Court of Appeal in Tirana has rejected them. Patrick Henry, the president of European Lawyer Without Borders, noted that the Albanian courts violated articles 5 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (11).

The disappointment of Athens with Tirana was reflected in the decision of the PM not to invite the Albanian PM to an informal dinner of Western Balkans leaders in Athens held on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August. Instead Mitsotakis invited the president of Albania Bajram Begaj. Begaj declined the invitation due to “an agenda defined later”. Following the dinner Beleri made a statement mentioning that in politics friends need to talk to each other and try to put themselves in the shoes of the others especially when “things seems to go wrong” and stated that “my dear friend and respected colleague in Athens is invited to the Berlin Process Summit held in Tirana in October” (17). With this diplomatic statement Rama attempted to deescalate Athen’s reaction.

The hard stance towards the issue was also showed by the participation of the Athens Mayor Kostas Bakoyannis and the Thessaloniki Mayor Konstantinos Zervos, in consultation with the Greek PM’s office and the Greek MFA, to a demonstration organised by the Greek minority organisation “Omonoia” on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August in Himare in favor of Beleri. Bakoyannis had stated that “Democracy can not be imprisoned”. Margaritis Schinas, the Vice President of the European Commission, who also participated in the demonstration via a pre-recorded video message declared that “this issue cannot and must not become a barrier, a wall, to the country’s and the Albanian people’s European aspirations.” (12) The Albanian PM, Edi Rama, reacted to the protest by stating through his social media that “There is no other case, to the best of my knowledge, where the elected officials of a democratic state organise a protest in another democratic state against the authorities.”. Rama also accused Greece of intervening in matters of Albanian justice, as well as undermining Albanian accession process to the EU (13).

## **EU's enlargement process in the Western Balkans**

Indeed Greece, has addressed the issue to both the NATO and the EU. As the Greek MFA Giorgos Gerapetritis has noted in his speech during a conference organised by ELIAMEP “Greece cannot accept candidate countries that do not meet the membership criteria and mainly the essential principles of the European community such as democracy and the rule of law” and added “Albania must show that it respects the rights of the Greek national minority and the rule of law” (14). During the meeting of the Greek and Albanian PM on the sidelines of the NATO Summit held in August in Vilnius, Mitsotakis raised the case of the arrest and pointed out that the issue needs to be resolved urgently, as it relates to Albanian’s respect to the rule of law (15). Moreover, PM Mitsotakis has directly linked the accession of Albania in the EU with the case of Beleri. In October PM Mitsotakis attended the meeting of EU and Western Balkan leaders on the framework of the Berlin Process Summit held in Tirana. During the meeting the PM repeated Greece’s position that Albanian’s aspirations to join the EU are undermined by the case of Beleri, as the Greek PM clearly stated “the resolution of the issue is a necessary condition for Greece to take the next step and agree to start Albania’s negotiation process with the EU”. Mitsotakis also added “Beleri has the right to be sworn in, even if he is in custody as mayor of Himare”. Furthermore, the Greek PM expresses his optimism that the problem will be resolved without affecting the relations between the two countries and stressed that Greece will continue to firmly support the Western Balkans accession prospects. He acknowledged that the path is difficult as the countries need to first adjust to the European acquis, indicating that Greece has the will to support Albanian’s accession by the condition it resolves the case and respects the rule of law (16).

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November the European Commission adopted its 2023 Enlargement Package, providing assessment of the progress of the Western Balkans and guidance on the reform priorities ahead. As already mentioned, in the report for Albania, the Commission mentions that although Greek-Albanian relations remained good, the pre-trial detention of an ethnic Greek mayor-elect has been a source of bilateral tensions and “raises serious concerns” (18). Most recently, Athens increased the pressure on Tirana by its decision not to agree to a joint letter of the 27 EU member-states to Albania on the opening of the negotiations of the first package of accession chapters. Greece has requested in all possible levels that Beleri will be given the opportunity to be sworn as a mayor of Himare and evidently will reconsider its hard stance only if Tirana proceeds to steps that indicate that there is a room for discussion between the two parts (19).



## Conclusion

The societies in Greece and Albania are highly interconnected. Economic cooperation between the two countries is also consistent and has further increased throughout the last years. The close ties between the two countries are apparent and both nations are looking towards a deepening of the bilateral relations. However, the recent case of Fredi Beleri arrest by the Albanian authorities has put a thorn in the relations, since it brings on surface an existing problem, namely the respect of the rights of the ethnic Greek minorities in Albania and the rule of law. Greece's hard stance towards Albania is a mean to address this significant issue. The EU prospect of Albania and the other Western Balkan countries is highly important for the benefit of the people and the stability and security of the region. Greece supports and will support the accession of Albania to the EU with the precondition that it respects the rule of law and safeguard the rights of the ethnic Greek minority living in Albania. It is mandatory for Albania to adhere to the Copenhagen criteria in order to be integrated to the EU. Greece and Albania need to work together and through dialogue solve the existing issue and continue the present good relations and cooperation.

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