



Weekly Briefing

**Albania external relations briefing:
Foreign affairs in Albania for 2023 – a review**

Marsela Musabelliu

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping



1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.



+36 1 5858 690



office@china-cee.eu



china-cee.eu

Foreign affairs in Albania for 2023 – a review

Introduction

During 2023, Albania's foreign policy was marked by significant controversies regarding regional and continental initiatives. While officials working on the nation's foreign policy remain optimistic that they have made the best efforts possible and that Albania has received the attention it deserves, adversaries propel debates on the direction of external affairs, with discussions centering on Albania's leadership style and behavior. 2023 was an important year concerning the need of the Albanian political establishment for outside help. International actors, especially the most powerful Western ones, are always a topic of discussion in the internal political and public discourse. In an election year, their support was needed more than ever. This was also the year when Albania held a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council, which means that in terms of visibility on the international stage, it had to pay its dues. And, of course, European Union integration is Albania's Alpha and the Omega of every political action.

The people, the policies, and the inclination

In theory, foreign policy decisions should be based on a country's national interests. However, in practice, this is only sometimes the case. More often than not, the ruling party decides what, when, and how to proceed regarding relations with other countries. In the case of Albania, this has been the norm for the past decade since the Socialist Party (PS) came to power. The decision-making process in terms of external relations has been centralized and guided by Prime Minister (PM) Edi Rama. This approach is expected because the same strategy is applied to internal affairs. The concentration of power in the hands of the PM makes it easier for foreign emissaries to deal with one influential leader without any complications. This centralized approach has helped Albania maintain a stable political façade for the world - which its powerful allies appreciate - but it has advantages and disadvantages. While it may make it easier for foreign emissaries to deal with one influential leader, what is happening within the country is never an issue for discussion. This approach is best for foreign counterparts to prevent problems from spilling outside Albania. There is a Foreign Affairs Ministry that handles all the necessary tasks and obligations, and there is a minister who attends less critical events; however, the PM is always the lead figure in crucially visible meetings.

In September 2023, Rama dismissed Olta Xhaçka as minister, a woman who has held influential 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. A former schoolmate of PM Rama, she has been one of the ministers with the most solid positions in the government for six consecutive years. There are several possible reasons for the dismissal of Xhaçka, and one of the most prominent reasons is the Greek element involved in the scandals that took place in 2023. Greece has launched a lobbying campaign to increase pressure on the Albanian government, and Xhaçka was required to handle the situation, which apparently she did not manage well. Another possible reason is the scandal involving the army's properties, as she was interrogated regarding leasing a naval base. Additionally, a particular government decision declared her husband a strategic investor, causing accusations of conflict of interest. The opposition requested the Constitutional Court to remove Xhaçka's mandate, but the socialists rejected their efforts. As of the end of 2023, no indictment on her has been brought up. Albania's new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Igli Hasani, may not be a traditional diplomat, but it is argued that he brings experience in security matters to the role. He has also held high-level positions within the Ministry of Defense, with responsibilities including NATO and foreign relations, Euro-Atlantic integrations, and defense policy. Given the current climate of uncertainty and conflict, Hasani's appointment may offer insight into Albania's future foreign policy plans.

Nevertheless, regardless of who the minister is, the center stage is always for the PM and his “charm offensive” on the international stage.

European integration (or lack thereof)

European Union (EU) integration was high on the agenda, and this year has been an active time of meetings, discussions, and negotiations with several European leaders. In 2023, Albania hosted the Berlin Process Summit, becoming the first non-EU country to do so. The event saw the participation of officials from twenty-five countries, including six prime ministers of the Western Balkans, and VIP political figures such as the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz, among others. The event was marked with a red carpet, and the capital's main streets were closed to traffic. During the summit, Rama stressed the importance of preparing for the future and called for a common approach to confront the challenges ahead. He expressed concern about the division between EU and non-EU countries. He highlighted the collaboration between the leaders of the six Western Balkan countries in transforming the region into one that reflects the freedoms of the EU. Yet,

Albanians were disappointed (again) with the summit since there was no mention of a potential date for their accession to the EU. As a result, the overall process remains stagnant, and it is still being determined whether access to the common market and free movement of goods, services, transport, energy, and the digital single market will suffice for Albania's entry into the EU. Although Albania and other Western Balkan countries have yet to set a timeline for potential EU membership, integration within the Western Balkans is welcomed. Still, more is needed to narrow the developmental gap between them and the EU countries. The region needs a clear EU accession perspective because their economies have been experiencing slower growth than most EU countries, primarily due to the absence of concrete economic benefits associated with EU membership. The EU's effort to increase regional economic integration is positive. It is the highlight of every declaration that comes from their representatives, but tangible measures are required to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU economically.

Many Albanians are disappointed with their country's lack of progress toward full EU membership and express frustration with the government's carefree attitude. 2023 did not do much to alleviate their growing impatience and disillusionment, as it showed increased antagonism towards political leaders and unfulfilled promises. Despite the high-profile nature of meetings, events, declarations, and more, this year, he failed to address the concerns of the average citizens, who are becoming increasingly resentful and skeptical.

Beyond tangible results, which were not present, it was a significant year for Edi Rama vis-à-vis the EU leaders; he showcased his ability to engage with the international community at the highest level by introducing Albania's history and his vision for the future. Albania's PM has used every occasion to showcase his increasing role and leadership style, and apparently, the EU leaders are leaning in his favor. While the symbolic importance of any communication is appreciated, it is crucial to note that progress must be made beyond mere symbolism. Albania consistently shows the highest levels of support for the EU among all Western Balkans countries, making it a safe and welcoming destination for EU leaders looking to strengthen their relationship with the country. However, if 2023 taught Albanians something, much work must be done to achieve Albania's full integration into the EU.

Albania and Greece relations at a standstill

2023 brought the relations with Greece back again on the high political agenda; it all escalated during and after the local elections. In May, Fredi Beleri, who was running for the mayor of Himara as an opposition candidate, was arrested on charges of "active corruption in elections carried out in collaboration with others." He was serving as the head of OMONIA

(the Democratic Union of the Greek Minority). The accusation against Beleri was that he had offered money to citizens in exchange for their votes. Testimonies from residents confirmed that they had been promised approximately 100 euros for each vote in favor of Beleri. The arrest caused reactions from both Albanian and Greek politicians. The Greek Foreign Minister communicated on the situation directly with Rama. Beleri is a person who holds both Greek and Albanian citizenship, is quite controversial, and has a reputation in political circles. He has been accused of violence and hate speech towards Albanian national symbols in the past. Beleri had also had run-ins with law enforcement in the country and was previously sentenced to three years in prison for publicly burning the Albanian flag. Beleri has previously been accused of terrorism in connection with a massacre that occurred in 1994 and was later acquitted by the court. Thus, a man convicted of criminal offenses was running for office under the approval of “Together We Win,” headed by Sali Berisha. In the end, Beleri won by only 19 votes, so Himara has a new mayor-elect in jail.

Controversies between Tirana and Athens went on for months, with public declarations and closed-door meetings. By the end of 2023, Greece issued a stern warning, threatening to impede Albania's progress towards EU membership unless Beleri is allowed to assume office. The situation has strained relations between Albania and Greece, with the latter persistently asserting its intent to obstruct Albania's European integration despite pressure from other EU members. In mid-December, Greece formally presented a reservation to the Committee of Permanent Representatives of EU member states. It is established that Athens considers Albania's EU membership contingent on Tirana's stance on the Beleri issue. This is not the first instance of Greece leveraging its position to impede Albania's negotiations, prompting reactions from EU institutions. Edi Rama has expressed skepticism about Greece hindering Albania's EU journey, yet officials in Athens remain unyielding. In response to Greece's stance, Germany disagreed, deeming Athens' position unacceptable. Berlin insists that the Beleri issue should not interrupt Albania's path to EU integration, emphasizing that membership is determined solely by fulfilling conditions. The issue was brought into public opinion repeatedly throughout the year when diplomatic and non-state actors had plenty of heated discussions.

The list of open issues between Greece and Albania is long and challenging. There is much need to maintain a delicate balance to keep Albania's European perspective open while resolving bilateral issues without being perceived as an obstacle to Tirana's EU path. Albanians know there cannot be reciprocity in the relations with Greece. Because of the need for approval for the EU path, the hundreds of thousands of Albanian emigrants living and working in Greece, and many other issues related to the power imbalance between Athens and

Tirana. This relationship is not one of equals, and the power dynamic between the two nations is being highlighted again in 2023 due to one person.

Another element that is different from the trend regarding the approach with Greece is the attitude of PM Edi Rama. Since the list of unresolved issues between Greece and Albania is extensive and complex, Rama has somehow, in the past, maintained a delicate balance with Greece, sometimes bordering submission, but not in this case. He is taking a stance, making his voice heard, and claiming that it is up to the Albanian judiciary system to have the last say. Even when the highly delicate issue of sea borders was on the table, Rama was not this harsh - apparently, the “Beleri case” goes on a different level. This move is seen as a double win for Rama's political capital. Firstly, he demonstrates to his opposition (Berisha and Meta) that their man (Beleri) will not take office. Secondly, he plays the role of a patriot by taking a stance for Albania. Rama is leveraging the Beleri/Greece card as the next big issue of Albania's lack of EU integration, portraying Albania – or better, his government - as doing all it could, but Greece is hindering the process. Whatever the case, this new obstacle to EU integration can become a significant issue, compounding previous problems.

Albania at the United Nations

Albania was elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for 2022-2023. During these two years, Albania's presence at this table held a unique opportunity to represent the perspective of a small country eager to play an active role in addressing global challenges. Albania’s presence in the UNSC was made globally visible on September 2023, when PM Rama chaired a council meeting. It was the delicate situation in Ukraine for which the Security Council had to convene for a high-level open debate. The meeting was supposed to be a signature event of Albania’s September Council presidency. The expectations for a high-pressure meeting were mentioned several times since it would be Zelenskyy's first in-person address to the UNSC. Rama stated that helping Ukraine defend itself gives assurances to those seeking peace and cooperation while warning those seeking conflict. He argued that assisting Ukraine to protect itself by stopping Russia sends the best and fairest message to anyone considering embarking on a similar adventure in the future.

The high-level debate, chaired by Albania, focused on the implications of the Ukraine conflict. While engaging in a heated exchange, Rama's confrontational approach gained international attention, particularly in his interactions with Vasily Nebenzya, Russia’s Permanent Representative to the UN. The disagreement escalated, with Nebenzya accusing Rama of providing political assessments. Rama, in turn, warned against further provocations

and criticized Russia's attempt to block Zelenskyy's speech. Rama underscored the apparent hypocrisy in Russia's claims of rule violations within the UN building, characterizing them as an impressive display of double standards. The exchange between Rama and Nebenzya during the discussions on Ukraine epitomized the tense atmosphere surrounding the ongoing conflict.

Rama's bold stance aligned with the broader (Western) theme of supporting Ukraine and challenging Russia's actions. The resulting confrontation highlighted the complex dynamics within the UNSC and the divergent perspectives on the conflict. Rama's active and assertive role positioned Albania prominently in the global diplomatic arena, drawing admiration and criticism alike. This stint at the UNSC highlighted derivative power, where smaller nations leverage relationships with major powers to pursue specific interests. While Albania's approach aligned with Western countries, critics questioned the practical benefits for a small nation in being so loud and longing for center stage in the larger geopolitical landscape.

Regional discords and bold actions

2023 was the year when Albania left the Open Balkans initiative. It was the year when Rama and everything Western Balkan-related was somehow out of the limelight. In 2018, Rama first proposed a broad program for the Balkans to foster political ties and promote the region's free flow of people, products, and services. It was perceived as a "One-man plan" by many in the Albanian political arena. He was a vocal advocate of the Open Balkans initiative on the international stage, emphasizing the importance of cooperation and regional integration. He believed that while Europe faces its challenges, the Western Balkans should not be held back by past conflicts.

In 2023, Albania was no longer a part of the Open Balkan project. The justification from the government was that this initiative was parallel to the Berlin Process and thus was unnecessary. Although Rama's proxies contended that the outcomes were remarkable, it had to end. The process of integration in the Balkans has become a crucial aspect. Yet, the government must ensure that political ambitions align with national interests to guarantee the success of the EU integration process. Rama saw it as an endeavor that could have served special interests, particularly in making him a mediator in the Serbia-Kosovo crisis. The project faced intense debates and strained relations with Kosovo since its inception, with varying opinions from Albanian politicians, diplomats, analysts, and other experts on its purpose and accomplishments.

With yet another regional initiative failing without even starting to institutionalize, the debate in 2023 was centered on whether the various endeavors being undertaken by leaders

are genuinely aimed at improving the lives of citizens or simply a means for gaining international recognition. Despite facing challenges in cooperation and coordination, it is becoming increasingly clear that intensified dialogue and problem-solving approaches will be necessary for the respective countries' leadership. Against this backdrop, the Albanian PM has taken it upon himself to emerge as a regional negotiator, wanting to mediate old and new disputes, but it did not happen. There was a lack of diplomatic communication between the parties in the Western Balkans, and the word “regional” was substituted with “European.”

An Italo-Albanian “charming” political year

In November 2023, Italian PM Giorgia Meloni and Edi Rama signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" or "Protocol on the Management of Migration." Announced as a groundbreaking migration policy, up to 36,000 asylum applications per year will be processed from Italy to Albania. The protocol involves migrants rescued at sea by Italian authorities being disembarked in Albania, where two centers will be built and exclusively managed by Italian civil servants. The deal, aiming to reduce migrant arrivals in Italy, is the first of its kind between an EU member state and a non-EU country.

Throughout the year, there have been several meetings between the two leaders and a public display of mutual admiration. The public in Italy and Albania alike was unaware of this deal, and the controversies started from the day it was made public. The Italian issue with migration is a long-standing one; using a third (non-EU) country to host asylum seekers, mainly from African nations, has been thrown into EU public debates but has yet to be executed as an actual deal as the one of Meloni and Rama. Despite historical and geographical ties between the two countries, the agreement has faced criticism. Concerns arose regarding the legality of detention; it sparked debates and criticism and raised concerns about the lawfulness of detention and the need for more clarity on processing, returns, and extraterritorial procedures. Rama's decision to sign the protocol without parliamentary approval has drawn criticism from both domestic and international communities. Critics argue that the deportation of migrants to developing countries like Albania is an inadequate solution to the broader issue of migration for Italy and the EU at large. Another concern is Albania's capacity to handle the project responsibly, lack of rule of law, and economic challenges. For the Italian side, this is justified as aligning with the EU's "external dimension" approach to strengthening migration policies by partnering with non-EU countries. However, the European Commission still needs to issue an assessment. Meloni's initiative is seen as a model for EU cooperation with non-EU countries, but questions about legality and practicality have been raised.

Rather than a deal between two nations, this is a pact between two individuals who share a deep connection. Critics in Italy argue that their country's international obligations mean they will still bear responsibility for the outcome of successful and unsuccessful asylum claimants, which could render the deal a political stunt with limited practical benefits. Conversely, in Albania, most public and analysts see this as a practical issue, not a problem per se. Albanians, who have been a migratory people for centuries, are well aware of the struggles that migrants face, and most of them sympathize with any migrant. However, considering the reality, as one of the poorest countries in Europe, citizens know they will somehow have to pay for their Prime Minister's decision.

In mid-December, Albania's Constitutional Court temporarily halted the agreement's ratification. In response to appeals from opposition lawmakers, the court has scheduled a public hearing in January 2024 to decide whether the deal violates the Constitution. Last but not least, there is somehow a paradox in principle for this situation. Rama, who identifies as a socialist, has aligned with Meloni, a far-right figure often viewed as extremist. This development underscores the growing ambiguity of Europe's left vs. right political spectrum. Political alignment has become less about ideology and more about personal interests. Interestingly, politicians tend to emphasize their ideology and political affiliations during election campaigns, yet governing priorities often supersede these labels when they come to power.

Conclusion

A well-crafted and well-executed foreign policy should benefit the nation and its citizens. Still, while juggling pomposity and controversies, the Albanian government evolved a sense of self-importance and self-centrism to new limits. This happened to the extent that the so-called “natural and strategic” allies allowed, and the extent of this support hinted at the fundamental importance that Rama and his government had in foreign affairs. The centralized decision-making process might provide some wins in façade but offers limited internal discourse on foreign affairs. This year unveiled that old problems are complex to dismiss, and new, unexpected issues could become even more significant obstacles. Albania's 2023, concerning the rest of the world, navigated dependency, vulnerability, and decisions influenced by power preservation in Tirana rather than by assessments of the international environment.