



Weekly Briefing

**Albania external relations briefing:
Zelensky's visit to Albania and security concerns in
the spotlight**

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

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Introduction

Albania has kicked off the first months of 2024 with a flurry of international activities, hosting a range of prominent events, including high-level summits, conferences, intergovernmental gatherings, and visits from foreign dignitaries. Key topics for discussion at these events have included European Union integration, Euro-Atlantic inclination, and pressing security concerns. Of particular note has been the heightened emphasis on security matters, as evidenced by the recent visit of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to Albania. The event was primarily driven by the geopolitical situation in Ukraine and the Western Balkans' political stance and practical approach towards the ongoing conflict.

The "Ukraine - Southeast Europe" Summit

A summit for Ukraine took place in Tirana on February 28th, with Albanian Prime Minister (PM) Edi Rama and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky co-organizing it. The summit was attended by the President of Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Moldova, the Prime Minister of Croatia, and the Chairwoman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The gathering was essentially a "Ukraine-Balkans" summit, with Moldova also represented. According to the results of the summit, a 12-point declaration was adopted and signed by all its participants, in which, in particular, it is stated that Russian military aggression against Ukraine remains the greatest threat to European security, is a flagrant violation of international law and a crime against the Ukrainian people. The declaration was also supposed to include points on the imposition of sanctions against Russia and malicious Russian influence in the region. Still, as Serbia's President, Aleksandar Vucic, said before the document's publication, they were removed at his request. What was agreed upon was the support for Ukraine's right to choose its security measures, in particular, a statement that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members and candidate countries highly appreciate the steps taken towards its future membership in NATO and support Ukraine's becoming a member of the Alliance as soon as security conditions allow. During the summit, the Ukrainian side expressed an interest in increasing military-technical cooperation with the Balkan countries, especially regarding ammunition production. The President of Ukraine expressed concerns about the supply of ammunition in his country and

how it affects the battlefield. He proposed co-production with all Balkan partners and suggested organizing a particular Ukraine-Balkans Defence Industry Forum in Kyiv or one of the Balkan capitals.

It is sometimes argued that until recently, Ukraine and the Balkan region were islands without any stable connection. The absence of such connection was caused, in particular, by the fact that for a long time, these “islands” looked at and perceived each other through the prism imposed on them by Moscow. Hence, there have been many myths and stereotypes in Ukraine about the Balkans and in the Balkans about Ukraine.ⁱ

Ukraine is trying to improve its defensive capabilities to beat back Russian forces at a time when the faltering of support from the United States (US) is being felt. Zelensky specifically expressed his strong interest in co-producing armaments with the Balkan nations. According to him, around 500 defense companies operate in Ukraine, but their collective strength is not enough to defeat Putin's forces. Zelensky proposed organizing a Ukrainian-Balkans defense forum in Kyiv or a Balkan capital to nurture arms cooperation, repeating similar initiatives conducted last year with British and US weapons companies. Albania, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Romania are NATO members. They have joined Western sanctions against Russia and sent arms and equipment to Ukraine.ⁱⁱ For Albania specifically, the rehabilitation of the Poliçan mechanic plant, a state-owned enterprise founded in 1962 for arms production, was discussed. In the idea of the Albanian PM, this site can absorb Western funding and know-how to serve Ukraine's needs. Yet, for many, it seems unfeasible because Ukraine's needs are imminent, and rehabilitating this mechanic plant on a full scale could take years.

It is worth noting that this amalgamation was more a result of mutual needs than a meeting of equal partners with similar values and ideas. The circumstances of the time dictated that these "islands" join forces in the present, but their alignment in the future is uncertain.

Zelensky in Tirana

This was President Zelensky's first visit to Tirana and the first Ukrainian leader ever to visit Albania. At the airport, he was received by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of State. Strict security measures accompanied his visit. The trip was meant to be within the framework of the "Ukraine—Southeast Europe" Summit, but it was also of political and presidential importance for Zelensky. Rama and Zelensky signed the Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between the two countries. According to this treaty, Ukraine and Albania will develop mutually beneficial cooperation in trade, economy, science and

technology, culture, education, security, health, media, tourism, and sports. Furthermore, Zelensky handed Edi Rama the Order of “Prince Yaroslav the Wise” for outstanding personal contribution and support to the Ukrainian cause.

For Zelensky, no one needs a Europe with different dignities, and the intentions of Vladimir Putin and the campaign he launched against Ukraine two years ago erode the safety of everyone else. With harsh tones against Moscow but very friendly to the countries seeking integration into the European Union, Zelensky addressed the regional leaders, assuring them that Kyiv unconditionally supported their Euro-Atlantic journey. With special thanks to Albania and Rama, he continued to outline a plan for restoring peace, introducing a Global Peace Summit, which is expected to be held in Switzerland, and inviting regional countries to participate. However, he did not deny that there have been problems with armaments in Ukraine due to the obstacles often encountered by various countries, especially the US. Therefore, to avoid being constantly dependent on the developed nations, he also proposed a formula for the joint production of armaments to the Balkan leaders, for which he started the talks of an initial agreement with Albania. He called the entire effort a determining path for the fate of the European community.

The Albanian PM highlighted the importance of increasing solidarity for Ukraine and called on Russia to stop the ongoing war. Despite being a small country with limited resources, Albania remains determined to support Ukraine's resistance to Russia. This, however, requires that everyone in the region contribute to the survival of the Ukrainian people and not to the victory of Russia's imperial appetite. According to Rama, the focus should be on stopping Putin's power-grabbing actions, as doing so would turn the world into a place ruled by power rather than rights. Rama believes that this war is about the dignity of all, and small nations like Ukraine should not become victims of Russia's appetite for power.

Referring further to the Balkans, Rama stated that after more than a quarter of a century, the wounds left by the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the last dictatorship of Europe (Albania) still need to be healed. He stressed the importance of unity and mobilization of connections and capacities to prevent Ukraine from losing and Russia from winning. He warned that such a result would be unaffordable and could threaten the existence of the EU.ⁱⁱⁱ

What was Zelensky trying to achieve? - The purpose of Zelensky's visit to Albania has been a topic of discussion among many. For some, the visit was necessary due to Albania's long-standing support for limiting Russia's influence in the Balkans. It is widely believed that Russia holds significant sway in the region. Given its history and current ties, no other country would be suitable for addressing this issue. Furthermore, there have been concerns that Putin might use the Balkans as a destabilizing region to counter NATO's

expansion to the east. This has raised the need for countries like Albania to take a strong stance against Russian aggression in the area. Albania has been ranked as one of the countries that have supported Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict and was crucial in gaining diplomatic support for Ukraine in the UN Security Council. In this regard, Albania's support for Ukraine is seen as a critical step towards achieving these goals. Zelensky's visit to Albania is expected to strengthen the existing ties between the two countries and send a message to Russia that their influence in the region is not welcome.^{iv}

Zelensky may be considering the Balkans as a contingency plan. However, it is well-known that the Balkan nations lack the resources and financial means to compete with the most powerful Western countries. Despite this, Zelensky finds himself in a position where he needs all the help he can get, regardless of its nature. He may be exploring all possible options to secure the aid he needs to address his nation's current challenges. As a politician, he is probably counting on the support of the Western Balkan countries not mainly to help them with their military capacity since they are minimal, but primarily the lobbying power they can play. Last but not least, Zelensky needs help drawing attention to the Ukrainian Front because many in the Western world lately focus on the Middle East. He needs to use his diplomatic network to maximize his points, draw more attention, and gain more support.

What was Rama trying to achieve? – Many voices close to the government proudly claim that Tirana has become the capital of summits because of the stature of the Prime Minister. Rama must demonstrate to his powerful allies, especially in the EU, that Albania's assistance to Ukraine reflects a commitment to Ukraine's well-being and Albania's aspirations for EU integration. In his speech with Zelensky present, Rama's perspective underscores the necessity of EU membership for stability and prosperity, contrasting it with the instability caused by external influences. Emphasizing the need for fundamental reforms and unity among aspiring EU members, the sentiment conveyed by Rama aligns with broader efforts to strengthen the region's position and counter destabilizing forces.^v

Rama showcased Albania's strategic alignment with the EU and its interests by framing support for Ukraine within the context of European integration and regional stability. Furthermore, in any speech of Rama, in all the settings, NATO was the prominent topic. In his words, Albania stands proudly within NATO despite its size. Alongside partners from Washington to Brussels, Albania vehemently condemns the aggression against Ukraine and remains steadfast in support.^{vi} What Rama truly gains is the positivity needed and the showcase of his political prowess for partners from Washington to Brussels.

After the summit concluded, Rama's benefits were significant in terms of increased visibility, prominence, and reputation. Having been mentioned on the world stage, Rama

gained valuable exposure and recognition from global audiences, significantly boosting his profile for some days.

Why Albania? - “*Albania is an aircraft carrier of the West,*” a former Albanian PM, Pandeli Majko, stated after the visit of Zelensky in Tirana. For him, the stance Albania has taken historically concerning NATO and the West made it the best place to hold this summit. Majko believes Albania's longstanding support of NATO and the West makes it an ideal location. Unlike other countries, which may be more precarious or publicly aligned with Russia, Albania's stance on this matter is unwavering.^{vii} Others argue that Albania is playing with fire a bit, being such a small country and taking on a more prominent role in publicly opposing Russia. However, for those in the government and its inner circles, the country's newfound geopolitical significance is a source of pride, not a cause for alarm. Some would go even further as to argue that Zelensky's visit showcased Albania's strategic decision-making abilities and highlighted its unique role on the global stage. It is evident that Albania has demonstrated unwavering support for Ukraine, consistently denouncing Russia's involvement in the ongoing conflict between the two nations. By selecting a country that has been outspoken in its opposition to Russia, the summit's organizers played it safe regarding the unwavering message of solidarity.

Ukraine as a cautionary tale for the Western Balkans

Rama and Zelensky have identical inclinations on many topics, and they were all showcased in Tirana. Zelensky warned the Western Balkans countries that Russia would do everything to destabilize the current situation, while Rama expressed his concerns about Russia's influence in the region. Although in different semantics, both warned that Putin's actions must not be allowed to succeed and stressed that Russia would do everything in its power to damage the Balkans. Both accepted the Russian threat as real and highlighted the need for the region's countries to be integrated into the EU as soon as possible to handle those influences better. For Rama, the aspiration to be a part of the EU has helped the countries in the area stay united. However, if this aspiration fades, the repercussions would be disastrous.

The two view Putin's cessation of actions and Ukraine's success as crucially linked to the stability of the Balkans and Europe's destiny. They emphasize that this is not just a threat to Ukraine's existence but to the entire future that they envision for themselves. For both, it is not mere rhetoric but a matter of grave concern because, in the Western Balkans, there is a real danger, arguing that the past should not be repeated where the foundations of the world order are called into question. Several times, concern was expressed about the conflict in Ukraine, and the need to avoid relativism was emphasized, as well as to recognize the

existence of an aggressor and a victim.^{viii} While solidarity is the keyword, the symbolism of Albania's unwavering support is also apparent. However, what was highlighted the most and repeated in the days and weeks to come was the potential threat and the dangerous times the Balkans lived in.

Ukraine has been used as an example several times in the past, and more during Zelensky's visit to Albania, to emphasize the importance of addressing security threats promptly. The focus has been on improving defense mechanisms to prevent similar situations in the region. The fact that Ukraine is in its second year of war has served as a cautionary tale for other nations as well. The message is clear - what happened in Ukraine could also occur in the Balkans. Therefore, measures are needed to ensure that security threats are dealt with promptly and clearly and with the cooperation of Western partners.

Security threats in the narrative, reminder of risks, and broader geopolitical concerns

The security threats for Albania have always been intrinsically connected to the broader region. During the summit for Ukraine, Rama reiterated the fact that the Western Balkans face several problems, and the area has seen too much bloodshed due to conflicts among them. Zelensky's visit was a crucial time to highlight these issues and make them a prominent topic in public discourse. Only time will tell whether these security threats are real or not. However, what is certain is that security threats were brought back into the public spotlight, and the public quickly took notice.

In the days following the summit, commentaries, articles, and news reports focused more on Albania's current threats. The discussions ranged from potential attacks to border disputes with neighbors to resurfacing old wounds. The situation was analyzed from every angle, and various experts weighed in. To echo the above, it was mentioned that Albania has been very vocal against Russia. For example, in 2022, at a summit in Brussels, Albania's PM said that Albania is 100% under Russia's radar. Moreover, at a UN Security Council meeting chaired by Albania in 2023, Rama clashed with Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, by defying Nebenzya's effort to disrupt Ukrainian PM Zelenskyi's speech. Although it is suggested that Russia has only a marginal interest and/or influence in Albania, it is visible that the relations between the two states are strained. Indeed, the general perception when discussing Russian influence in the Western Balkans is that Albania is not as vulnerable to Russian influence as the other states in the region. In this stance, the political declarations do not differ much from the public's inclination, and clearly, they are playing the same tune as the general perception; Albanians have a negative image of Russia. A survey

conducted in 2020 revealed that approximately 42% of the population perceives Russia's influence as very negative, 38% perceive it as negative, 10% are neutral, and 5.5% perceive it as positive.^{ix}

“A clear and real danger” was the term repeatedly used on the summit day and in the following weeks. This was mainly thrust into public opinion as a reminder that while the attention is currently on the Middle East, it should not be forgotten that danger is closer and more pertinent to Albania.

This shift is not an Albanian issue, and it was somehow expected. Even before the recent escalation in the Middle East, many in Ukraine had anticipated that the international community would gradually lose interest in their country's struggles. As global concern shifts from Ukraine to the Israel-Gaza war, experts warned of potentially severe consequences for Kyiv's ongoing battle. The war had already begun to recede from global headlines. Ukraine now had to make great efforts on various levels - through diplomatic initiatives, international forums, and civil society efforts - to sustain media interest. It was also predicted that as time went by, it would be harder to fight for attention, and without attention, there would be no weapons.^x For Zelensky, in Tirana, it was about attention, attention that would bring about weapons, and his visit was a reminder that Ukraine needed both.

Last but not least, this gathering of the Western Balkans and Ukraine was also a joint call for the EU not to forget them. After February 2022, it is crucial that the European Union takes steps to consolidate its position as a geostrategic leader, Balkans leaders argue. Although membership for the Western Balkan states remains uncertain, the ongoing war in Ukraine has significantly altered the landscape. With the candidacy of Ukraine and Moldova, the Union is now poised to expand further eastward. Ukraine's unique candidacy, which is twice the size of the Western Balkan countries combined, presents significant challenges for the EU.^{xi} While the representatives in Tirana acknowledge that full membership is not immediately feasible, the topic of discussion always revolves around it.

Conclusion

Zelensky's message went through, and Rama's gains in role-enhancing tactics worked. He was acclaimed in what he wanted to display himself as, namely, the most loyal pro-western leader in the Balkans. Another aim was also achieved: to "Communitize the Russian threat" by not making it Ukrainian but regional and continental. This meeting was more of a political product than a diplomacy meeting; while agreeing that security and peace are threatened, as never in decades, attention was focused on vigilance. Time and again, the fear that Ukraine would be the premise of a more significant confrontation between nations was displayed so that all interested parties would take note.

ⁱ New Geopolitics (2024, March 1). Some conclusions about Ukraine-Southeast Europe summit. <https://www.newgeopolitics.org/2024/03/01/some-conclusions-about-the-ukraine-south-east-europe-summit/>

ⁱⁱ Reuters (2024, February 28). Ukraine's Zelenskiy seeks Balkan arms, support at summit in Albania. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-zelenskiy-arrives-albania-foreign-minister-says-2024-02-28/>

ⁱⁱⁱ AlbaniaPost (2024, February 28). Zelensky in Tirana: Putin's failure is our security, we don't need a Europe with different dignities. <https://albanianpost.com/zelensky-ne-tirane-deshtimi-i-putinit-eshte-siguria-jone-nuk-na-duhet-nje-evrope-me-dinjitete-te-ndryshme/>

^{iv} Al Jazeera (2024, February 28). Zelensky needs Western Balkan states for lobbying. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/2/28/russia-ukraine-war-live-navalny-widow-address-eu-parliament>

^v Vision Plus (2024, March 2). Summit for Ukraine in Tirana, Zelensky thanks Albania for the support, what was discussed between the leaders present. <https://www.vizionplus.tv/live-samiti-per-ukrainen-ne-tirane-rama-dhe-zelensky-presin-lideret-e-ballkanit/>

^{vi} Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania (2024, February 28). Joint press conference of Prime Minister Edi Rama and President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky. <https://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/konference-e-perbashket-per-shtyp-e-kryeministrit-edi-rama-dhe-presidentit-te-ukraines-volodymyr-zelensky/>

^{vii} Top Chanel (2024, March 1). Why did Zelensky come to Tirana? Former Prime Minister Majko analyzes the summit for Ukraine: Albania, aircraft carrier of the West. <https://top-channel.tv/2024/03/01/pse-erdhi-zelensky-ne-tirane-ish-kryeministri-majko-analizon-samitin-per-ukrainen-shqiperia-aeroplanmbajtese-e-perendimit/>

^{viii} Shqiptarja (2024, February 28). Summit for Ukraine in Tirana. <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/samiti-i-ukraines-ne-tirane-rama-e-zelensky-ne-konferenc>

^{ix} Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Policy Brief (2024, January). Between Continuity and Change: Russian Influence and Security Challenges in the Western Balkans Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kosovo/20922-20240122.pdf>

^x IWPR, Institute for War & Peace Reporting (2023, November 1). Ukraine Frets Over Media's New Focus on Middle East. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/ukraine-frets-over-medias-new-focus-middle-east>

^{xi} Aspen Institute Italia (2023, December 15). Don't forget the Balkans. <https://aspensonline.it/dont-forget-the-balkans/>