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IS ALBANIA'S MODERATING VOICE IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE TAKEN FOR GRANTED?

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Albania is not the first country that European citizens think about in the context of future EU enlargements. Rarely featuring in media and public debates in comparison to its neighbours, Albania is the potential future member that the EU public seems to be least interested in. However, in some respects, Albania is one of the most promising cases. Interethnic divisions, questions of identity and bilateral disputes with neighbouring countries are the most common stumbling blocks in Western Balkan accession processes. Not so for Albania. Not only is Albania free of all such complex troubles, it also boasts overwhelming public backing for EU membership. Regionally, its role as an ever-increasing voice of moderation in the Western Balkans is also beginning to draw positive attention. Promising as these factors may appear, however, the troubling nature of Albania's domestic politics since the June 2009 elections, risks becoming a major obstacle to initiating serious progress for a possible future EU accession.

Poisoned Politics

The June 2009 Parliamentary elections in Albania proved a tough race between the two most important parties, Sali Berisha's Democratic Party and Edi Rama's Socialist Party. Half of the politically divided Albanian society voted for the left while the other half cast their ballots for the right. In the aftermath of the elections - elections that according to

OSCE mission made "tangible progress" compared to former ones - the right-wing parties established a ruling majority coalition with the Socialist Movement for Integration lead by Ilir Meta. Edi Rama's Socialist Party decided to boycott the new Parliament citing lack of transparency in the elections in various constituencies - where, according to the Socialist Party, deliberate manipulations had occurred. This marked the beginning of a long and still ongoing deadlock in Albanian politics. Prime Minister Berisha turned down the Socialists' demand to open up the ballot boxes, arguing that it was not in accordance with the country's Constitution. An extreme radicalization of the discourse followed, and along with an increase in the use of hate speech, the country now appears to be locked in an endless and poisonous political public discourse. The Socialist Party says it accepts election results and insists that their demands are related to the improvement of standards for future elections. Any efforts to mediate among the two parties have failed so far. In February 2010, the opposition entered the Parliament for the first time but a compromise is still out of reach. On April 30th, after a massive protest in Tirana, 22 opposition members and more than 180 supporters began a hunger strike, intensifying the political tensions. The strike was ended on 19 May 2010, after the involvement of the European Parliament and the EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele. A meeting in the European Parliament in Strasbourg between representatives of the Albanian government, the Albanian opposition and EU Enlargement Commissioner stressed the importance of find-

ing a compromise as soon as possible. Also the Spanish Foreign Minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, encouraged Prime Minister Sali Berisha and opposition leader Edi Rama to find a solution to the domestic crisis. Finally, and largely due to the EU's recent attention on Albania, the hunger strike was called off and talks to resolve the ongoing political stalemate were launched. Since then, the opposition regularly attends parliament sessions.

The Albanian election syndrome - meaning that Albania has yet to pass to normal rotations of power - reflects two things: firstly, it highlights inconsistencies in the election process, and, secondly, it illustrates the weak culture of defeat acceptance among the political class. The consequence of the serious lack of trust among the political players where conflict prevails over dialogue is the diversion of attention away from reforms, which intermittently advance and stand still. Uncontested elections remain the Gordian knot and restoring trust in the election process constitutes the greatest challenge for the country's democratic development. However, focusing most of the energies on the elections has overshadowed other equally important aspects of the reform process. While the population is open and amenable to reform, the political elite are increasingly losing momentum in its implementation.

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Democracy and Institutions in Albania: Still a long way to go

Very often, the reform debate in Albania, rather than being a debate on the Albanian reality ends up being a debate on the external reports concerning this reality. Albanians demonstrate more trust in international institutions than Albanian ones; legitimacy often lies with the international community and not in the domestic process itself. In recent years, there has been a slow but steady process of political stabilisation and economic progress in Albania. Since 1997 when the country was swept by chaos and anarchy brought on by the fall of large pyramidal schemes, Albania made important progress in the consolidation of state institutions. However, political parties and state institutions are still dominated by strong individuals, a common feature of Western Balkan countries. The current government has tried to assert control over independent institutions, hampering their normal functioning and leading to tense relations between the two. Party leaders' personalities predominate over political programmes; ideological differences among parties are less important than historic affiliations. This weakens the internal democracy of the main political parties as well as the impact of public opinion on their policies.

Other reform challenges in Albania include the functioning of the public administration and the fight against corruption. Although an advanced piece of legislation dealing with public administration has been drafted, it is still neither professional nor functional. European Union progress reports have repeatedly criticized the politically-inclined and clientelist public

administration. The OSCE-OHDIR report on the latest parliamentary elections underlined the pressure exercised upon the administration during the electoral campaign. The establishment and functioning of effective public administration, therefore, remains a long-term challenge for the country.

Corruption remains a serious problem in Albania. The justice system, far from being independent, has failed to investigate and rule on important corruption cases. According to the Balkan Gallup Monitor, when asked about examples of corruption that they had been confronted with, 52% of respondents in Albania acknowledge that they had to offer a bribe or a present in order to solve a problem.¹ The latest Index of Transparency International ranks Albania 10 places lower than a year ago. It is, however, a promising sign that anti-corruption rhetoric is getting stronger and is becoming one of the central topics in public discourse.

Albania's path towards the EU

Up until the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, when Western Balkan countries were promised an EU membership perspective, the EU had given the impression that it was just a matter of time before the Western Balkans countries would become EU members; this activated strong support for EU accession in Balkan countries. After the last enlargement round, however, the EU has become more cautious and less encouraging about Balkan accessions in the near future.

Albania is clearly aiming for EU membership and counts on an overwhelming consensus among political elites and the public regarding this goal. In recent years, Albania made important progress in the path towards accession: As a result of the improving relationship between Albania and the European Union, talks on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) were opened in 2002. In 2006, the SAA was signed and entered into force in April 2009. The conditions set by the EU before Albania can achieve EU membership include the completion of institutional reforms, tackling organised crime and corruption as well as strengthening government and administration at local and central levels. Albania formally applied for EU membership in April 2009 and now aims to receive candidacy status. The completed European Union Questionnaire - a formal step in reaching candidate status - was delivered by Prime Minister Berisha to the European Commission in April 2010. The Commission is now evaluating the country's readiness to become an EU candidate and might require additional clarifications.

In 2008, the EU opened a structured dialogue on visa liberalization with Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania, developing detailed roadmaps with clear benchmarks. In December 2009, visa requirements for Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia were abolished as these three countries had fulfilled the requirements. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania hope to get the green light

1. Balkan Gallup Monitor, Insights and Perceptions, Summary of Findings, 2009.

from the EU member states to be included to the so-called Schengen White List.

The process of visa liberalization has become one of the main topics of public debate in Albania, and the pressure of public opinion upon the government has significantly increased since citizens of Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro were granted visa-free travel. According to the Balkan Gallup Monitor, when asked who they blamed for their country's delayed participation in visa liberalisation, a majority of respondents said it was their national government's fault.² Afterwards, the Albanian Government took some serious steps in implementing the Visa Road Map, including the distribution in a short period of more than half a million biometric passports. However, if Albanian citizens have to wait much longer, those who think that Albanians and Bosnians are prejudiced on religious motives and that new barriers are being set up in the region, will gain ground. After a surge in asylum seekers from Macedonia and Serbia to Belgium following the visa liberalization - possibly due to dubious tourist agents giving false information - policy makers in Albania now fear that these incidents might have negative consequences for the visa liberalization for their own country. The public information campaign planned by the Albanian Interior Ministry aims to familiarize citizens with visa-free travel outlining that it will allow for short stays in the EU, but that it will not entitle to work or take up residence in the EU.

According to official statements, EU members remain committed to granting visa-free travel to Albania and Bosnia. On 27 May 2010, the European Commission proposed that visa free travel should be granted to Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina as progress had been made, underlining that some requirements still had to be fulfilled and that the Commission would continue to monitor these outstanding issues. In the end, it will be up to the member states to take the final decision in autumn. The EU should require the Albanian government to fully meet the standards, without using the problems with other countries as an excuse to further delay. Albania, being left in the last wagon along with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, which has yet to be offered a roadmap for visa liberalization, has caused a fracture that should not be overlooked, just as it has conjured up the fear of new walls being erected in the Balkans. The delay of visa liberalization for Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina and the lack of a perspective for Kosovo could easily turn into a problem for regional stability.

European integration, first of all, means visa liberalization for Albanians. It is expected that once the visa regime is lifted, the attitude towards the country's European integration could be questioned more. According to the Albanian Institute for International Studies, the support for EU integration - currently at 88% - is expected to drop to under 50% once visa liberalization is reached.³ A more critical attitude towards EU

integration is a sign of a society's more inquisitive approach towards the process, but, at the same time, a drop in general public support might reduce the European integration effect as a driving force behind reforms in Albania.

Albania in the Region: A stable anchor in the Western Balkans

Fifteen years after the Dayton Agreement that established the post-war order for the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, ethnic and territorial conflicts in the Western Balkans seem far from resolved. The debate on Kosovo's independence is ongoing and Bosnia and Herzegovina seems to be moving further away from a functional federal political system. Despite the often complicated domestic situation of the last fifteen years, Albania has consistently pursued a responsible line in its foreign policy. Since its difficult post-communist transition, it has followed a restrained regional policy that has been valued by the EU and the US. It did not experience the ethnic conflicts that characterised the Balkans in the 90s, although it has paid the price of being geographically close to the crisis. Albania's moderating voice on the issue of eth-

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nic minorities for instance - a permanent source of friction among neighbouring countries - has contributed to Balkan stability throughout the crises years.

While Albania was a major security consumer in 1997, when the Alba Mission led by Italy contributed to the reestablishment of public order, today, Albania has been transformed into a security provider, sending peacekeeping missions to Bosnia, Afghanistan and Chad. Albania became a NATO member in April 2009. The overwhelming support for NATO membership among Albanians is related to several factors. First, membership in the alliance is seen as a step closer to joining the EU and as an anteroom for EU integration, as no former communist country has become EU member without first passing through the Atlantic Alliance. Second, support for NATO is related to Albanian pro-Americanism. The United States was the main advocate for Albania's NATO membership, which was announced by President Bush during his visit to Tirana in June 2007. Third, NATO is popular in Albania because of its military intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and KFOR's role after the conflict. Finally, NATO is seen as a barrier to Russia in its efforts to penetrate the region. Many believe that Albania's and Croatia's quick NATO entry had the objective of keeping Russia out of the Balkans and the Adriatic. From NATO's perspective, "Albania's accession serves to anchor the Alliance more firmly in South Eastern Europe and transforms the Adriatic into a virtual NATO lake. With the accession of Albania and Croatia (except Montenegro,

2. Balkan Gallup Monitor, Insights and Perceptions, Summary of Findings, 2009.

3. Albania and European Union, In search of local ownership, Albanian Institute for

International Studies, Tirana, 2009.

also actively pursuing accession), NATO members line the entire Mediterranean coastline from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Levant.”⁴

You can choose your friends but you can't choose your neighbours: Sending out friendship requests

Since the conflicts of the 90s, the Albanian elite have been very cautious not to evoke nationalist feelings in neighbouring countries. Albania has no bilateral problems or serious disputes with any of its neighbours. The declaration of Kosovo's independence in February 2008 and Albania's NATO admission have created a new geo-political reality in the region. After entering NATO, Albania has undertaken moves to boost its position in the Western Balkans and will soon have embassies in all Balkan countries. The decision to open

Albania's moderating voice on the issue of ethnic minorities - a permanent source of friction among neighbouring countries - has contributed to Balkan stability throughout the crises years

an embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the only country of the region where an embassy was still missing - is proof of Albania's desire to play an increasingly important role in the Balkans. Offering itself as a line of communication between the region's Albanian and non-Albanian communities, Albania loosened border controls and opened several new border crossings, which also provided a much needed trade boost.

Ever since granting EU membership perspectives to the countries in the Western Balkans the EU has promoted regional integration, stressing that reinforced relations among the countries will improve well-being, peace and security. But while the Balkan countries' EU path runs through regional integration, the biggest incentive for it still comes from the EU rather than from the region itself. Today, regional cooperation in the Balkans is more complicated than in the early 2000s after the launching of the Stability Pact. Improvements are of course undeniable, however, there is a tendency to focus on individual relations with Brussels rather than on holding high the spirit of togetherness. Kosovo's independence has made cooperation an even bigger challenge, as Serbia excludes Kosovo from participating in regional initiatives. Albania has shown a constructive stance on regional integration by its unilateral decision to abolish visa requirements for Serbia as in April 2010, which means that today no Western Balkan country needs visas to travel to Albania.

After the independence of Kosovo and its recognition - or non-recognition - by its Balkan neighbours, inter-Balkan relations have gone through bilateral crises, cooling-off or warming-up with old and new problems emerging. Kosovo's declaration of independence has necessitated a refor-

mulation of the inter-state relations between Albania and Kosovo, which following the end of the Kosovo-conflict had already entered a new stage. Political, economic and cultural ties have been intensified and “a dynamic Albanian sphere is now emerging.”⁵ The Durres-Pristine Highway - often called the *Road of the Nation* - will significantly shorten the distance and increase the so-far negligible exchange of goods between the two countries. Prime Minister Berisha has offered Pristine the use of the Shengjin Port, which will give land-locked Kosovo access to the Adriatic and be an important step for its economic viability. The idea of national unification, *Ethnic* or *Greater Albania*, are not of any relevance, and not part of any major political party's programme in Tirana. Albanians see the future of their country not through border changes but through their integration into Europe. Borders should be made irrelevant, not changed. Instead of a *Greater Albania*,

their favourite formula is a *Greater Europe*. Since the war, it has become clear that Albania does play a role as a regional point of reference for Albanians living in neighbouring countries.⁶ However, it would be a mistake to overvalue this influence.

Despite holding completely opposing views on Kosovo,

relations between Serbia and Albania have been improving. Albania holds that the Kosovo issue should not be an obstacle to the development of relations between Albania and Serbia. An important signal in that sense has been the Albanian government's announcement in December 2009 of a 400,000€ grant to the Serb community of Gracanica.⁷ The most significant step in the improvement of relations between the two countries was the Foreign Minister Ilir Meta's official visit to Belgrade in March 2010, the first high-level visit after Kosovo's proclamation of independence. Years of frozen relations between the two countries seem to be melting, even while both sides underline their unalterable positions with regard to Kosovo. During his visit to Serbia, the foreign minister also visited the Presevo Valley, being the first Albanian official in history to visit the villages inhabited by the Albanian minority. Belgrade is more reserved concerning the normalization of relations; whereas Albania has an ambassador to Belgrade, Serbia has a *charge d'affaires* in Tirana. Still, economic relations between the two countries have advanced at a rapid pace.

Albania's approach towards its neighbours Macedonia, Montenegro and Greece is also moderate and cautious. Albania does not want to be involved in the dispute between Macedonia and Greece, who claims that the name 'Macedonia' implies an unspoken territorial claim on the Greek northern region also called Macedonia. Although Tirana has not yet recognized Macedonia under its Constitutional name nobody in Albania uses the FYROM acronym, and the name Macedonia is used in all bilateral agreements.

Montenegro is Albania's neighbour with which it has best re-

4. Robert Craig Nation, NATO in the Western Balkans: A Force for Stability, Faenza Conference Paper, p 5.

5. Tim Judah, Yugoslavia Is Dead. Long Live the Yugosphere, LSE, 2009, p. 31.

6. Miranda Vickers, Is There an Albanian question?, Chaillot Paper, No. 107, 2008.

7. Balkan Insight, Albania moves to strengthen its role in the region, 26 January 2010.

lations. The two countries have established close cooperation in harmonizing their EU integration agendas and in exchanging information and expertise. Neither the ethnic Albanian minority in Montenegro nor the small ethnic Montenegrin minority in Albania have caused tension between the two countries. The good relations are best seen in the joint border crossing at Muriqan-Sukobine, the first of the kind in the region.

Greece's non-recognition of Kosovo also failed to cause major problems between Albania and Greece. Athens has maintained a more careful stance than some other EU members which have not recognized Kosovo, like Spain and Romania. Athens recognizes Kosovo passports, has an office in Pristina and has recurrent contacts with Pristina authorities. While Spain is not overly concerned about the delicate balance in the Balkans, Greece is more sensitive to stability in its own neighbourhood. Regardless of some recurring tensions (in January 2010, the Constitutional Court of Albania annulled the Agreement on the Sea Border between the two countries), relations between Albania and Greece are good.

Finding ownership and redefining Albania's foreign policy

Important as last years developments may be - such as the entering into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and Albania's EU membership application - they have not resulted in serious efforts by Albania to prepare itself for a future in the EU. The serious deterioration in political dialogue in the post-election months and the delay in the adoption of key reforms are detrimental to advancement towards the EU. Further, the continuation of the hostile political climate will have negative effects on the public's trust in national institutions. The Albanian government should grasp the opportunity of the high popular backing for EU integration to launch key structural reforms and not take such wide public support for granted. The political and media discourse in Albania deal with EU integration as if it were a preparation for the opening of an exhibition for the EU rather than a process of reforms leading to the well-being and functioning democracy for the Albanians themselves. The strengthening of Albania's local ownership of the process of EU integration remains an important challenge for the future.

In recent years, Albanian foreign policy has been focused on Euro-Atlantic integration and Kosovo. Now, having entered NATO and dealing with its EU integration process, Albania needs to redefine its foreign policy and to diversify this focus. Since 2005, when Albania was the first Balkan country to join the Barcelona Process, Albania has taken steps to develop a Mediterranean policy. Being Balkan *and* Mediterranean, Albania should become more active in Mediterranean politics with concrete input in the newly created frameworks.

Albania's key foreign policy goal remains full EU membership, but enthusiasm for further EU enlargements is waning amongst many of the EU members. Even though it is a difficult moment for enlargement, the EU should not lose the

overwhelming majority of supporters in Albania. The region still bears historical burdens from past conflicts and Albania's ability to have a moderating influence on existing tensions in the Balkans should not be underestimated nor taken for granted. Albania is not involved in any of the current 17 disputes in the region and has important advantages compared to other countries in the region: its population is ethnically homogeneous, it was not part of the Balkan wars in the 1990s, nor does it face identity related dilemmas. This has allowed Albania to have a moderating influence in the region. Albania faces many domestic problems all of which can - provided that Albania shows real commitment to reforms - be solved in the long run. However, Albania needs more European attention. International media and think-tanks give tiny space to developments in Albania. This terms' Spanish rotating Presidency has so far failed to give serious attention

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to Albania. During his visit to Western Balkan countries in April 2010, Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos did not visit Albania and praised Serbia's regional policy of good neighbourly relations in Belgrade, not mentioning Albania's or other countries' efforts. Spain's pro-Serbian stance in the Balkans should be substituted by a more balanced approach towards the region, recognizing each country's individual progress in itself, rather than evaluating developments merely in relation to Serbia.

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