

LACK OF BALANCE IN ALBANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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ABSTRACT

Albania has never been closer to the European Union. It is a candidate country for an EU membership. The European Union decided to open the access to negotiations with Albania in March 2020. Albania is working closely with the EU to undertake reforms required for its EU accession path. While its foreign policy is being oriented to EU, Albania maintains good relations with other actors. U.S. is another Albania's main ally. Albania shares many interests with U.S. and calibrates its foreign policy with Washington. But Albania is also under Turkey's radar. The EU is not against the pursuit of an Albanian foreign policy with several alternatives as long as Tirana maintains a balance between the allies and determines the priorities. This article aims to shed light on the balance Albania is supposed to maintain among its partners. Such platform will be efficient in its foreign policy only if it does not upset the balance with its allies. As a small state, it will benefit from allies if their strategies are aligned with Albanian interests. Therefore, Albania must develop a clear Western orientation in foreign policy – an orientation that often needs to be calibrated. The article concludes that small states can compensate for the limitations of their size and weak capacities, and exert influence on regional politics and beyond, only if they implement an efficient – and necessarily balanced – strategy.

Keywords: Balance, G-Zero, foreign policy, pivot, interests.

INTRODUCTION

As a popular joke has it, the difference between the optimists and the pessimists in the Balkans when it comes to European integration is that optimists believe that Turkey will become a member of the EU during the Albanian presidency, while pessimists expect that Albania will join during the Turkish presidency (Krastev, 2017). Jokes of this nature circulated in the corridors of the EU only a few years ago. European politicians did not believe that Albania would be one day part of the EU, and this was a way to express Europe's skepticism towards Albania. European skepticism about the Balkans is well-known - especially about Albania's integration into EU structures. However, such skepticism currently seems a history of the past. From a simple reading of European politics, Albania's commitment to the EU and the EU's investment in Albania, such comments are not realistic.

After many developments, the Balkans is now part of the European agenda. The countries of the Western Balkans have already put together clear platforms for their integration within the EU structures and there is generally a spirit of optimism. Through the enlargement policy, the EU aims to increase the level of democracy in Albania and other countries of the region despite the fact that after “. . . years of efforts, the EU's policies have not brought about the expected change” (The EU as a promoter). The prospect of EU membership in itself is an incentive to bring forward reforms

in Albania. As High Representative Josep Borrell has highlighted, the accession negotiations “can only happen if there is more progress on reforms and on their implementation.” And he has made clear that the EU too has to deliver: “we need to increase our efforts to bring the region closer to the European Union” (The EU and the Western Balkans).

Albania is actually a candidate country and – along with other Western Balkans countries – was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership during since 2003 at the Thessaloniki European Council. In 2009, Albania submitted its formal application for EU membership. In October 2012, Commission recommended that Albania be granted EU candidate status, subject to completion of key measures in the areas of judicial and public administration reform and revision of the parliamentary rules of procedures. In June 2014, Albania was awarded candidate status by the EU. In April 2018, the Commission issued an unconditional recommendation to open accession negotiations. And in July 2022, the Intergovernmental Conference on accession negotiations was held with Albania. The Commission started the screening process (European Commission). Under these auspices, it should be noted that the EU is no longer in a dilemma about the Albania’s integration into its structures.

With the changing balances in Europe, with the new approach of the EU towards the Balkans, with the repositioning of the West towards Russia and with the European/American fear of Russian, Chinese and Turkish penetration in the Balkans, Albania is closer to Europe - now not only geographically. Russia concentrates their efforts on perceived security threats and China is exerting economic power through loans and investments, along with expanding political and military influence (Powell, 2021, paragraph 1). All this happens at a time when European fears of Turkish expansionism in the Western Balkans are rising – a phenomenon troubling the West.

In the process of getting closer to EU, Albania has also developed good relations with Turkey. The close tie of Albania with Turkey raises doubts time and again. At a forum in Turkey, Albanian PM declared as follows: “It is also very important to say it clearly and loudly to all our European and American friends that in the Southeast Europe and in the Western Balkans in particular, Turkey is not a third power, Turkey is not ‘foreign’ in our part of Europe, because much of our history of state formation, as well as our integration in the Euro-Atlantic community is embedded with the path and this history of Turkey” (Rama, 2022).

Today Albania is pursuing the phase of the completing the chapters within the negotiations framework and its path to the EU has been shortened. Therefore, a small state like Albania must develop a clear Western orientation in foreign policy – an orientation that often needs to be calibrated.

Foreign policy with alternatives – often with tendencies towards imbalance

The EU is not against the pursuit of an Albanian foreign policy with several alternatives as long as Tirana maintains the balance between the allies and determines the priorities.

According to Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, “Albania has acquired a new status and role in international relations, a logical consequence of the growing partnership with all structures of regional and global security after the NATO membership in April 2009. Currently, Albania is in an important process with the European Union, after the entry into force on 1 April 2009 of the

Stabilization and Association Agreement, the liberalization of visa application for the candidate country status . . . Albania is a strategic country for security, peace and prosperity for the Balkans, the Mediterranean and Europe. Our foreign policy is determined to increase its role and contribution, as a factor with regional impact for increasing security and guaranteeing political stability and regional economic growth” (MEFA). Based on this synopsis of Albanian foreign policy, it can be noted that the country is trying to pivot. But one must ask whether Albania has the capacities to act so.

Bremmer (2012a) uses pivot state to describe a nation that “. . . is able to build profitable relationships with multiple other major powers without becoming overly reliant on any one of them. This ability to hedge allows a pivot state to avoid capture—in terms of security or economy—at the hands of a single country”. In the current format of international system – the so called by Bremmer G-Zero - in years to come, every nation will have to create its own options because there will be no government with the muscle to drive an international agenda. Some countries are better positioned than others to prosper in this decentralized global order. In this regard, G-Zero is an international environment where “no single nation (not even the U.S.) or alliance of governments (certainly not the G-7 or G-20) possesses the political and economic muscle to drive an international agenda. In this new decentralized global order, growth isn't enough. A country also must have resilience—the power to pivot” Bremmer (2012a). Bremmer gives us this angle about G-Zero:

Welcome to the G-Zero era, a world of every nation for itself. The United States will remain the sole superpower for the foreseeable future, but war-weary, under-employed, debt-plagued voters will reject an activist foreign policy. Europeans won't fill the vacuum; they're busy fighting over how best to save the eurozone. China and other emerging powers won't be much help. They face too many complex challenges at home to accept new risks and burdens abroad. This leadership void won't last forever, but the problem won't be solved this year or next.

An essential characteristic of this system is unilateralism, which basically means unilateral action without reference to conventions or without respecting multinational institutions. Let's take an example: in the geopolitical game of the Eastern Mediterranean, the dominant power is Turkey, which is acting unilaterally. On the other hand, Greece, in a defensive position, also tends to impose itself, as it makes alliances with other powers such as France and Italy.

Usually, the pivot can be exploited by the middle powers. Turkey is exactly one of the powers that can use the G-Zero world and get the best out of it. And its position is helpful in achieving this goal. Turkey's bid to join the European Union is going nowhere, but Ankara is actively expanding its international influence. NATO membership gives Turkey a voice in Europe and influence in Washington. It is an increasingly important emerging market, with per capita income nearly double that of China and four times that of India. Many in the Arab world look to Turkey as a dynamic, modern Muslim state. Add to this its position at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, and Turkey is the very model of a modern major pivot state.

It seems as if Albania is trying to follow a similar platform, but it doesn't have the power to pivot. However, at a more reduced level, it can only implement it effectively if it does not upset the

balance with its allies. It can benefit from allies as long as their strategies are aligned with Albanian interests. The definition of "central state" (a.k.a. pivot) applies to middle powers with strong economic, military and cultural capacities. Albania can aim for influence only in the region (and within the region only within the Albanian space) - in the best scenario. Currently, Albania - inserted "by force" on the Western tracks - tends to follow the "pivot state" strategy, but without having the capacity for such a thing.

Deciphering Turkish current foreign policy: Turkey is no longer oriented towards the West

As mentioned above, Turkey is following its unique platform in foreign policy. Turkey has a very complex relationship with the West. Despite becoming a candidate in 1999 and opening the negotiations with the EU opened in 2005, the EU made it clear that it was unable to accept Turkey into its fold. Turkey undertook drastic reforms to be part of the Union, but the EU showed reluctance that significantly influenced Turkey's change in foreign policy. The EU could only offer Turkey "privileged partnership".

From this point, the Turkish orientation would change – becoming a typical pivot state. The international system - reformed with the emergence of several poles, crushed by the financial crisis of 2008-9, unable to solve global crises by the West alone - enabled the emergence of imposing regional powers, one of which is Turkey. Turkey is clear on its path: West is a rival as much as a partner.

Currently, Turkish foreign policy tries to achieve regional and global interests. In the webpage of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is stressed that Turkey is “. . . also shaping conditions for sustainable peace and development in our neighborhood and beyond. In the pursuit of this primary goal, Turkey contributes to peace, prosperity, and stability around the world. Guided by our enduring objective to achieve ‘Peace at Home, Peace in the World’ as set out by the founder of our Republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, we implement an ‘Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign Policy’ that, in our President’s words, “reflects the enterprising spirit and humanitarian values of our nation’.”

Under this optics, Turkey has got big ambitions. While deciphering its foreign policy synopsis, it can be noted that Turkey:

- is compelled to pursue a foreign policy that is strong on the ground and at the table by implementing an insightful and agile diplomacy;
- uses several complementary political, economic, humanitarian, and cultural tools and conducts a diplomacy that thinks globally but also acts locally in every corner of the world;
- maintains close ties with the countries in the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, Southern Caucasus, South, and Central Asia;
- uses the opportunity to lay the foundations of a holistic and comprehensive policy towards Asia and the Pacific, home to the rising powers of the 21st century;
- supports regional ownership and solutions for regional problems;
- uses active diplomacy within multilateral fora;
- has a leading role in conflict resolution and mediation.

So, Turkey’s Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign Policy will continue to secure national interests in a volatile international environment.

PM Rama seems to reinforce such ambitions of Turkey, as he emphasized in the TRT forum held in December 2020, that “Turkey is a regional power and for our region, namely the Western Balkans, is a determining one. The truth is that the European international system, which has laid the basis for the 20th century international system, has failed to incorporate two very different actors of the continent, Turkey on one side and Russia on the other side”. Regarding the influence Ankara is trying to expand to Albanian and beyond, Albanian PM is playing Turkish game.

Referring to the Albanian Security Barometer carried out by the Center for Democracy and Governance, it results that Turkey "is one of the friendliest countries" of Albania, as "75% of citizens claim that Turkey has a positive or very positive impact on security of Albania" (Barometri, p. 18).

This is a confirmation of Turkey's “triumph” in its geopolitical strategy and exercise of public diplomacy. As part of this "Turkish grand strategy", public diplomacy has served as an essential tool for increasing Turkey's international stature through soft power. Specifically, Turkey has exploited two dimensions in this domain: the spread and transmission of Turkish identity and economic projects. These developments have also led to the increase of Turkey's credibility in the international arena, and its acquisition of the status of the regional leader. Another element of the growth of Turkish stature is today's international order, which is characterized by a withdrawal of traditional great powers and the appearance in the global arena of what are called emerging powers.

In the study of the Institute for Democracy and Governance Studies, a correlation is observed between Turkey's role as a developing power and its exercise of public diplomacy - on the one hand - and the increase in Albanians' perception of their security in relation to Turkey - on the other side.

Theoretically, this influence through soft power is the ability to attract and (inform, engage, influence), instead of imposing hard power. A country's soft power rests on its cultural resources, values and policies. In Albania, this Turkish diplomacy is active in many areas: on television screens through telenovelas; in numerous educational projects; in the endless religious programs (be it the construction of mosques or the restoration of cult objects); aid for health (hospital in the Fier region); aid for the earthquake; assistance for the army or the police, etc. In fact, Turkey has been influencing directly during this election campaign, as it has done in previous campaigns. For example, the hospital in Fier was promised to be built in a record time of two month and of course . . . before the 2021 parliamentary elections – directly favoring Socialist Party (Turkish hospital . . . , 2021).

This terrain is created by this way of exercising soft power, which is essentially related to the ability to inform, engage and influence a country. According to prominent author in this field, Joseph Nye, this is achieved through several characteristics. Among these can be mentioned: the formatting of preferences (the ability to define preferences tends to be associated with assets such as culture, values and political institutions); attractive power (soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to change people's perceptions); and the use of soft power resources: a) culture (in places where it is attractive to others); b) political values (when they coincide with the values of the other country) and c) foreign policy (when others consider it legitimate and with moral authority) (Gomichon, 2013).

Conclusion: an Albanian trajectory in foreign policy

The classification of Turkey in a rank with the EU and the USA is completely inappropriate (as PM Rama did in TRT Forum in December 2022). Albania does not have the luxury of using several compasses to get orientated in the G-Zero world, and Turkey has been excluded from the Brussels club. Albania can use some compasses only if it calibrates them according to a clear pro-Western strategy. An efficient strategy is to find a balance of interests between the powers that have influence in Albania - a balance that would serve the interests of our country. The classification made above does not reflect the realities in the Western Balkans.

The statement of the Albanian prime minister must have surprised many Europeans. It is a statement as challenging to the West as it is resounding for Albania's position. Albania, immersed in daily crises in its internal politics - based on the resources it possesses (geographical position, stabilizing effect in the region, relative influence on the Albanian geographical space, involvement in pro-Western alliances - among others) must know how to benefit from the powers that have interests matching its own.

The EU has been defined as the most useful path for Albanians – what they have wanted this for 30 years. It is a process that is gaining importance, as it is also supported by the US. Turkey may have a limited role in this equation. This equation is solved by two questions: What position would Albania have *without* the support from the EU/USA and *with* support from Turkey? And the opposite: what position would Albania have *with* the support from the EU/USA and *without* support from Turkey?

In international relations, size – normally associated with state capacity – matters a lot. Due to various weaknesses and needs, Albania must have clear foreign policy objectives in relation to powerful countries. And it must create balance between these allied states - in the relations it builds with them. The tendency to disrupt these balances goes only to the detriment of Albania.

This situation is an impetus for reflection and should constitute a debate for policy makers and researchers. As long as Albania does not have a clear state strategy or a track informing and guiding the decisions that must be made, it will not be able to be properly positioned even against an ally like Turkey.

Under these circumstances, reassessing Albanian national power in rapport with the allies is a necessity. This is achieved by understanding the dynamics in the regional arena and beyond. A clear strategy would help Albania in its orientation; on the contrary, foreign powers will utilize their power to achieve their objectives.

Diplomacy as a discipline clearly explains what path small states should follow: make the most of diplomacy to overcome their own weaknesses and using diplomacy mainly in democratic mediums. It is recommended that small states pursue multilateral diplomacy – in the case of Albania in a multilateral forum such as the European Union. Albania's position is strengthened by its participation in organizations - including NATO, UN, etc. A small country like Albania can benefit from this - as it has happened with the mandate in the Security Council (a non-permanent member of the Security Council for the period 2022-2023), the chairmanship of the OSCE during 2020, the initiative for establishing the European Political Community, welcoming the military

exercise “Defender Europe 2021” and other initiatives. In this context, the process of engagement in the EU is crucial, as it also affects other plans where multilateral diplomacy is carried out.

Small states can compensate for the limitations of their size and weak capacities, and exert influence on regional politics and beyond, only if they implement an efficient – and necessarily balanced – strategy.

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