

Greece and Albania : The framework and terms for a NEW DEAL

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Albania's 100th anniversary as an independent state finds its relationship with Greece in a state of inertia, if not at a stalemate, remaining static and lacking political will and positive energy.

Contacts at the political level are limited, and usually conducted on the fringes of international summits. With the exception of the "frozen" twenty month period of July 1993 through March 1995, never has there been such lack of communication, high level visits, structured political dialogue and bilateral consultations at high political level.

Already since 2010, Athens was inclined to downgrade bilateral communication and consultations with Tirana to the level of the Foreign Ministry Secretary-General. Diplomatic consultations and contacts at that level are common between the European Union member states, with EU foreign ministers meeting regularly, almost on a weekly basis.

In our case , however, such consultations as the exclusive channel of communication may be interpreted as a lack of interest if not by negativity.

They do not lead to solutions, they do not offer a way out,they do not break the deadlock. Especially, when there are outstanding matters that demand political responsibility and decisiveness.

Above all, they demand political engagement..

The Greek side viewed this process as a reaction to Albania's backing away from ratifying the Agreement for the Delimitation of the Greek-Albanian Continental Shelf and Maritime Zones, disturbing statements by organized political factions associated with the so-called Cham Albanians, as well as in regards to issues related to the ethnic Greek minority.

On the other hand, Albania is not particularly concerned by the lack of a comprehensive plan with the full engagement of the Greek Government towards finding solutions on a political level.

Why? The answer is rather simple: the Albanian side – both the government of Prime Minister Sali Berisha and the opposition of Socialist Edi Rama - believes that Greece is weak and embarrassed at this time. According to Tirana's mainstream analysis, Greece also lacks the will, possibly even the capability, to engage in discussions and deal with certain issues.

The competent Albanian structures have concluded ,at least since the Spring of 2010, that in the midst of a deep economic crisis, Greece became weaker and vulnerable .Furthermore, Tirana felt that they had no particular interest to feel unhappy or dissatisfied.

Until very recently and perhaps still today, Greece dealt with Albania with contradictory feelings of fear and superiority. Albania, particularly the Tirana political and media establishment, used to look at Greece with fear, suspicion, and insecurity. In the last two - three years, however, Albania has added also superiority in its attitude towards Greece. The term prejudice equally applies to both sides.

Athens wonders whether Tirana really have an open agenda against Greece (Chams) while Tirana, to my regret, still worries whether Athens harbor a hidden agenda. At least, this is how Tirana formally analyses, mostly behind closed doors, the fact that Athens is still evasive about the legal consequences of the lift of the so-called "state of war" with Albania, done officially and formally by a Greek Cabinet decision in August, 28 1987.

The truth is that Greek - Albanian relations are not ruled by reason and accountability, but rather by the logic of public statements, misinterpretations and anachronisms. Perception prevails over reality. 1912, 1913, 1914, 1919, 1941, 1945 are more attractive years of political reference compared to 1991, 1996 and definitely 2009 and 2012.

The exact diagnosis of the state of the bilateral relationship at this point requires the skills of a psychiatrist, rather than those of a diplomat. My impression is that both Tirana and Athens feel comfortable with the current situation. In Athens, the political engagement starts and ends with statements by the Foreign Ministry.

Prolonging the present situation, however, is not in the best interest of Greece and Albania. It also erodes the possible albeit necessary political, parliamentary and indeed public support for an eventual accord and deal.

From Tirana, I hear ambiguous official and semi-official statements that by no means have any positive impact. They lead nowhere and render the conditions in search of a "Nea Deal" with Greece distant and increasingly difficult.

If we simply stay at the diagnosis and only passively observe the situation, I see no possibility of coming out of the trenches anytime in the visible future. Negative rhetoric is on the spot echoed across the borders.

It is also my firm belief that outstanding issues with Albania could be easier settled in the context of a holistic process, including the recognition of the Republic of Kosovo;

This process presupposes a high level political dialogue. The suggested agenda also includes the following:

- A high level political dialogue must commence between Athens and Prishtina, whose aim should be a mutually acceptable text in the form of an Agreement or Treaty, which will consequently be submitted to the Hellenic Parliament and the Kosovo's Assembly for ratification.

- It is preferable that Albania and certain Albanian groups and organizations put aside certain issues troublesome for Greece, which are put forth with unusual intensity and negatively feed Greek public opinion;
- I advocate the need for a change in stance by Albanian media and in the rhetoric of Albanian political leaders towards Greece;
- Issues concerning the ethnic Greek minority in Albania will also be addressed;
- There must be a settlement of the outstanding issue of the ratification of the Agreement for the Delimitation of the Continental Shelf and the Maritime Zones;
- There must also be a legislative arrangement by Greece of the 1987 Cabinet Decision about the lifting of the so-called "state of war". This issue could be settled with the amendment or the addition of an article in the Agreement for the Delimitation of the Continental Shelf, so that with its ratification by the Greek and Albanian Parliaments, any misperceptions regarding land and sea borders of the two allied countries would be eliminated. For ever.
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It would also be a good thing if Greece looked out for its own interests beyond the framework determined by Belgrade. Serbia is in a position to defend and promote its own interests regarding Albania and Kosovo and is already doing it behind the scenes in Brussels and in Tirana. Longstanding friendships are good, but safeguarding Greek interests with the Albanians is preferable.

Exactly the same principle and understanding should also prevail in the relations between Albania and Turkey as far as issues related to Greece are concerned. In this context, there is no need to be more explicit.

It is also certain that in the past few years, positions expressed by the Albanian media have negatively impacted Greek policies and public opinion and have played a hindering role in the policies of Greece towards Kosovo. They do not help the rapprochement between Prishtina and Greece, nor do they help the cause of the recognition of Kosovo.

It would be beneficial if, on the basis of Article 17 of the 1996 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation Greece and Albania recommenced bilateral consultations launched in September 2004. Last but not least, I advocate the need for a well prepared off the record retreat of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Greece and Albania to be joined at a later stage by the two Prime Ministers to lay down the ingredients for what I call the "New Deal" between Greece and Albania.

This deal should make clear how important Greece is for the Albanians, while in Greece it will make clear what an important role our Albanian neighbors can play.

I am aware that the proposed "New Deal" will not rally public unanimity and hundred per cent parliamentary support in Tirana and in Athens. Yet, it is up to the major political forces in the two countries to display leadership.

The proposed process requires careful steps. It requires action, creativity and drive; the complete opposite of the predominance of bureaucratic approach prevailing thus far. The situation requires active and behind the scenes diplomacy; it also requires personal relations

of trust. More than anything else, however, the situation demands that clear political line of action been undertaken. It requires leadership. It requires political will.