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Albania's Greek Minority: Potential for Trouble

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Relations between Albania and Greece have deteriorated sharply following a violent border attack in April, the latest incident in three years of strained bilateral ties. Greece has stepped up accusations of Albanian "repression" of its ethnic-Greek minority, while Tirana fears Athens has designs on the Greek minority region in southern Albania. [Redacted]

Greek allegations that Tirana is systematically violating the rights of the ethnic-Greek minority with the aim of driving it out of Albania appear to lack foundation. CSCE officials report that rights accorded Albania's ethnic-Greek minority correspond to CSCE guidelines. [Redacted]

- Some complaints about Tirana's treatment of the Greek minority are legitimate.
- Albanian President Berisha has indicated, however, that he will focus on legislation to guarantee ethnic rights and improve his government's communication with the minority. [Redacted]

Albania's fear of Greek irredentism has been fueled mainly by Athens' failure to rein in extreme nationalists who seek to stir up the Greek minority. This has reinforced Albanian suspicions that the main ethnic-Greek political organization in Albania is manipulated by Greece. [Redacted]

A bilateral crisis over the minority issue that resulted in Greek reprisals could destabilize Tirana's pro-US government to the advantage of the former Communists and have regional repercussions.

Greece's Papandreou government [Redacted] views the issue of Albania's Greek minority as potentially the most explosive issue in Greek politics.

Rapprochement is unlikely without support from the West to overcome misinformation and deep-seated suspicions on both sides. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

Tensions Rising

Tension has been a regular feature in Albanian-Greek relations in recent years. Last summer, for example, Athens expelled 25,000-30,000 largely undocumented Albanian workers after Tirana expelled a Greek cleric for allegedly distributing irredentist literature. [redacted]

Relations between Albania and Greece recently have taken a marked turn for the worse following a border incident on 10 April in which two Albanian military officers were killed. The attack--which followed a brief thaw in relations since Greek Prime Minister Papandreou's return to power--sparked renewed Albanian allegations of Greek irredentism and Greek complaints about Albanian mistreatment of its ethnic-Greek minority.

- Albanian authorities claim the attackers escaped across the Greek border. A little-known terrorist organization, the Northern Epirus Liberation Front (MAVI), claimed responsibility for the attack, according to Greek press reports.

[redacted]

Albanian President Berisha publicly accused the Greek Government of abetting the perpetrators, but Athens has denied any involvement. Tirana's subsequent arrest of six ethnic-Greek leaders on charges of promoting Greek separatism and ties to the Greek intelligence service has further heightened tensions.

- [redacted]
- Berisha has assured [redacted] that the trials of the six Greeks--four of whom hold offices in Omonia, the largest ethnic-Greek political organization in Albania--will be public and the evidence will be made available for international examination. [redacted]

The Greek Government--which claims to have been surprised by Berisha's initial allegations of official Greek complicity--accused Tirana of persecuting the

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Greek minority. Athens twice cancelled planned bilateral meetings aimed at improving relations, blocked EU aid to Albania, and lodged protests with several international organizations, [redacted]

- Under increasing domestic criticism for being too soft, the Greek Government has also increased diplomatic pressure on Albania and publicly discussed sealing the border or stepping up expulsions of illegal Albanians. [redacted]

The police investigation of the border incident also prompted a further war of words following the questioning of some thirty ethnic-Greek witnesses in late May. Athens accused Tirana of initiating a new wave of arrests aimed at driving ethnic Greeks out of Albania.

[redacted]

- Berisha also told reporters he was prepared to visit Athens for talks with Prime Minister Papandreou if invited. [redacted]

Status of the Greek Minority

We have found no evidence that Tirana is pursuing a policy of systematic intimidation of its Greek minority or attempting to drive the ethnic Greeks out. Indeed, information available to us suggests that Athens' charges of human rights violations against Tirana are, in fact, more extreme than the complaints made by Albania's Greek minority. CSCE High Commissioner for Minorities Max Van der Stoel visited Albania twice last year and concluded that the ethnic-Greek minority's treatment conformed to CSCE guidelines. Van der Stoel personally investigated several specific Greek allegations and later told Athens that they were unsubstantiated. [redacted]

- Better economic opportunities in southern Albania are encouraging migration from north to south, but there is no indication of a government-backed program to relocate ethnic Albanians into ethnic-Greek areas.
- Tirana is relocating some families from impoverished northern Albania to unclaimed tracts of land on state-run farms, [redacted]. The land is mainly in central Albania, however, and the minority areas will be largely unaffected. [redacted]

[redacted] a lack of complaints about ethnic tensions on either a local or personal level. Most ethnic

Greeks travel to Greece to pursue economic opportunities rather than to escape discrimination.

- The current bickering between Tirana and Athens, however, is creating some fear among ethnic Greeks that the Albanian Government will begin to put pressure on them. [redacted]

Omonia: A Greek Fifth Column?

The downturn in relations with Greece has also heightened Tirana's suspicions about ties between the Omonia organization and Athens. Founded in 1991 with support and funds from several Greek organizations, Omonia also maintains ties to several radical Greek organizations which openly advocate the union of "Northern Epirus" with Greece. [redacted] Omonia leaders often travel to Greece and have been received officially in Athens. [redacted]

Although most Omonia leaders are moderate and willing to work within the Albanian system, some--including one of the six ethnic Greeks arrested in April--openly call for southern Albania's union with Greece. Several others of those arrested appear to have conducted irredentist activities, [redacted] [redacted] Omonia leaders are trying to downplay ties with Greece, however, and recently stressed at a press conference that they are independent from "outside" forces and loyal to the Albanian Government. [redacted]

Some ethnic-Greek complaints against Tirana are legitimate, however, particularly those that relate to education and underrepresentation of ethnic Greeks in the police and military. Ethnic Greeks have also complained about the government's refusal to return large tracts of land previously owned by the Orthodox Church. Some complaints--such as lack of control over education decisions and local police--stem from the centralization of administrative power that followed the ruling Democratic Party's loss in the July 1992 local elections. [redacted]

Level of Public Employment. Although there are no reliable statistics, based on the March 1992 voter registration, ethnic Greeks are Albania's largest minority and probably comprise some 3 to 5 percent of the population, or about 100,000-150,000 people. As many as half of the community currently works in Greece.¹

¹The size of Albania's Greek minority is a matter of contention between Tirana and Athens. Albanian authorities claim there are approximately 60,000-80,000 ethnic Greeks in Albania, while Athens says there are between 300,000 and 500,000. Greek estimates usually include all Orthodox believers, although [redacted] [redacted] ethnic Greeks make up only fifteen percent of the Albanian Orthodox population. [redacted]

- Although ethnic Greeks hold two cabinet posts and the governorships of Saranda and Gjirokaster, there is only a token ethnic Greek presence in the police and military, and virtually no Greeks are in positions of authority, [redacted]

- While Greek underrepresentation is partly due to the extensive purges of ex-Communists carried out in 1992, it probably also reflects a general distrust of ethnic Greeks by the security services. [redacted]

Access to Greek-Language Education. Ethnic Greeks currently are denied government-funded Greek-language education outside the "minority zones" in the south where the majority of ethnic Greeks reside. In addition, Greek language classes are offered for only a set percentage of the school day, depending on the grade.² A long-delayed education law currently being drafted is expected to abolish the minority zones and substitute a system that will permit funding of Greek-language classes wherever sufficient students are available. The legislation, however, is not likely to be ready for fall classes.

- Albanian authorities are planning to issue interim regulations with more flexible percentages and abolish the "minority zones" in time for the new school year. [redacted]
- There currently are some 73 primary schools offering Greek language education in Albania, [redacted] In addition, there are two Greek-language high schools and a university program to train Greek language instructors. [redacted]

Return of Church Property. Most Albanian Orthodox Church buildings have been returned to the Church and operate freely. Surrounding land, however, is subject to the land restitution law, which allows the return of only 5 hectares to a single individual or entity. Former landholders receive monetary compensation for land in excess of that amount. In addition, some previously Church-owned land is heavily populated.

- The restitution law also applies to properties belonging to the Catholic and Muslim religious communities.
- Enacting special legislation for Church properties would almost certainly lead to a political backlash against the Albanian Government by other former large landholders. [redacted]

²Under the current education law, all instruction is in Greek for the first four years of school. After grade four, both Greek and Albanian are used, but the ratio of Greek to Albanian declines in proportion from 60/40 in grade five to 38/62 by grade eight. [redacted]

Claims to "Northern Epirus"

The area of southern Albania--called Northern Epirus by the Greeks--has been a source of tension between the two countries for decades. Part of the Ottoman Empire from the 15th until the 20th centuries, Albania was recognized as an independent country by the London Conference of Ambassadors in 1912. The northern boundary was designated by the Conference in March 1913, giving Kosovo and Metihija to Serbia, but Greece laid claim to the southern part of the country. The southern boundary remained in dispute until it was delineated in 1925 by the Protocol of Florence, drafted by the West European powers. The Protocol was not ratified by the Greek parliament, however.

Albania's independence was placed in grave jeopardy during World War I, when it was occupied by Allied armies--mostly French and Italian. The secret Treaty of London, concluded in 1915 and published by the Russian Bolsheviks after the October 1917 revolution, provided for partition of Albania between Greece, Italy, Serbia, and Montenegro. At the 1919-1920 Paris Peace Conference, Greece again laid claim to southern Albania, while Serbia and Montenegro claimed the northern part, and Italy the port of Vlora. However, US President Wilson insisted that an independent Albania must be restored under the principle of self-determination.

Greece again occupied southern Albania in 1940 after defeating Italian forces which had invaded Greek territory through Albania, and called for uniting it with the "motherland." The Paris Peace Conference of 1946 rejected the Greek claim, however, and confirmed Albanian sovereignty. In 1971, Athens established diplomatic relations with Tirana, implying recognition of the existing border.

Sources of Distrust

Greek-Albanian tensions appear driven mainly by Tirana's fear that Greece harbors irredentist claims toward the Greek minority areas of southern Albania, and Athens' concern that the rights of its ethnic kin are being violated.

Athens' refusal over the past two years to conclude a formal bilateral agreement on the Greek-Albanian border--even though Greece has implicitly recognized it by signing the CSCE Accords and publicly affirming its commitment to the inviolability of borders in the region--has reinforced Tirana's suspicions of Greek designs on southern Albania.

- Albanian leaders believe that provocative claims by representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church of mistreatment of Albania's Greek minority are at least tacitly approved by Athens. A radio station run by a Greek Orthodox Church bishop broadcasts irredentist

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programs into Albania, and some Church officials claim they have provided ethnic Greeks with paramilitary training and returned them to Albania to "fight for Hellenism," according to French press reports. [REDACTED]

Athens believes it has a special responsibility to protect the rights of its ethnic kin abroad, and the issue is a strong rallying point in Greek domestic politics.

- Greek concern has been heightened further by the Papandreou government's alarm over Albania's growing ties to Turkey. Athens fears that Ankara sees Albania as a conduit for expanding Muslim influence in the region.
- Athens also has come under increased pressure from elements of the Greek Orthodox Church and nationalist fringe groups that are aggressively promoting the Greek minority issue. In recent months they appear to have become more active.
- The influx of an estimated 150,000-200,000 Albanian economic migrants--mostly illegal--into Greece has reinforced negative attitudes toward Albania. [REDACTED]

Potential for Instability

Unless Athens and Tirana manage to put relations back on an even keel, Albania's ethnic-Greek population could become the focal point of a serious--and destabilizing--crisis between the two countries.


- President Berisha has indicated he will make an effort to reassure the minority that Tirana is committed to ethnic rights by focusing on minority legislation and by increasing the number of high-level visits to the minority area. Such measures would be well-received by both ethnic Greeks and Albanians, who are increasingly concerned that tensions between Tirana and Athens will spark ethnic problems in Albania.
- Tirana's anxieties over perceived Greek irredentism, however, could tempt Albanian authorities to restrict ethnic-Greek political activities, which probably would prompt reprisals by Athens, including the expulsion of a large number of Albanian workers in Greece. [REDACTED]


Continued tension with Greece would have a negative domestic impact in Albania.

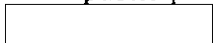
- As much as ten percent of the Albanian labor force currently is seeking work in Greece, and Albania's economy relies heavily on their earnings. The loss of these remittances and the repatriation of workers would sharply

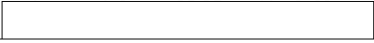


reduce family incomes and boost unemployment--already estimated to be eighteen percent.


- Continued Greek blocking of EU and other European aid would complicate Tirana's stabilization program. Albania defaulted on its commercial debt in 1990 and depends on international and bilateral aid--of which the EU accounts for over 50 percent--to finance critical imports.
- A significant downturn in Albania's struggling economy could result in a backlash against the ruling Democratic Party by Albanians weary from implementation of the Albanian Government's "shock therapy" program of economic reform. 

Athens wants to prevent current tensions from snowballing into a full-blown confrontation.  and is more likely to step up the economic and diplomatic pressure on Albania than to resort to military action. Greece sees itself in the long run as Albania's most important economic partner and recognizes that isolating Tirana would damage Athens' influence on behalf of the Greek minority.

- In May, Papandreou ruled out military action. Athens probably would contemplate refugee expulsions or military intervention, however, if it believed the Greek minority were threatened by an influx of Albanians fleeing violence in Kosovo.
- If tensions persist and ethnic Greeks in Albania were seen to be targets of forced "ethnic cleansing," Athens would come under intense public pressure to take more extreme action, including military action. 

Misinformation is likely to continue to feed distrust on both sides without sustained help from stronger democracies in the West. 



- In the long term, mutual hostility--despite efforts on both sides to patch up their differences--will undermine Greek ambitions to assume a political and economic leadership role in the region. At the same time, Greek intransigence in the Balkans will further distance the Greeks from their European and US partners. 

Northern Epirus and the Ethnic Greek Minority in Albania

