Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective

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Chapter 4

Albania Moving from Security Receiver to Security Provider

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4   Albania Moving from Security Receiver to Security Provider

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Introduction

Albania is a typical case of a state that is both small and weak, and faces specific insecurities after the fall of communism. Government discourse and strategic documents clearly state Albania's intention to transform the country from a security receiver into a security provider. These convey the country's willingness and commitment to establish partnerships with international collective security institutions, and to be a factor of peace and stability (Hide and Kamberi 2010, 13). Here, rather than the normative tenet of promoting security, Albania's goal is largely instrumental: It seeks to further its own national interests and overcome domestic vulnerabilities and geopolitical insecurities (Gjevori and Visoka 2016). In its effort to move from a security receiver to a security provider, Albania has relied on the support of and alliances with the United States and the European Union. The country has also worked continuously towards joining Euro-Atlantic structures. However, despite adhering faithfully to the demands of the Euro-Atlantic community, it has achieved only limited independence of action. Albania is increasingly becoming a geostrategic partner of the US and EU for security and peace in the region, which in turn does not coincide with improving its internal political cohesion and stability. At best, Albania has been described as a country 'which provides stability externally but domestically oscillates between democracy and autocratic tendencies' (Primatarova and Deimel 2012, 7).[1]

This chapter looks at developments in the security, defence, and foreign policy sectors in Albania, with a focus on recent internal and external threats, the reforms undertaken, and the challenges the country faces in its efforts to become a security provider. To analyse whether and how Albania consumes and provides security, the chapter considers the country's defence spending and other material contributions, its 'passive' or 'active' role in the respective policies, the attitudes of the elites and citizens, and the geopolitical context (see: Longhurst 2002, 51). Of relevance here are not only the modernisation aspect of the reforms, but also the attributes and qualities of the security to be provided. The theoretical understanding is shaped by the Copenhagen School approach, in which the security agenda is widened and deepened – not only broadening the range of potential threats, but also moving analysis down to the level of the individual or up to the regional and

international levels (Krause and Williams 1996, 229–230). Correspondingly, the chapter studies the security complex and context, including a broader range of domestic actors and international governmental organisations (e.g., NATO and the EU) (Kazharski and Tabosa 2018) – as these may frame both the discourses and practices of securitisation (Léonard 2010).

An Overview of Security Developments in Albania

As part of the Balkans, Albania has experienced similar post-communist security concerns to those of its neighbours, yet the country possesses some distinct particularities. Throughout the 1990s, the entire region was exposed to instability and violent conflicts, causing many human victims, displacement of civilians, trauma, and immense economic losses (for example, Slovenia's ten-day war 1991, Croatia 1991–5; Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992–5; Albania 1997; Kosovo 1997–9; Macedonia 2001). These early crises in the entire region were mainly the result of the weakness of the state and its failure to balance state politics with citizens' security and rights (Jano 2009). In the spring of 1997, the Albanian state failed along with the collapse of the pyramid schemes, and the whole country fell into total anarchy.[2] The violent clashes between state forces and the popular masses resulted in the deaths of some 2,000 people (Jarvis 1999). During its early post-communist period, Albania operated in 'survival mode'. It was subject to tensions caused by domestic instability, surrounded by inter-ethnic conflict in its near neighbours, and a very distant approach from the EU despite Albania's wish to join the Euro-Atlantic community.[3]

It is only after 2000 that the developments in the security, defence, and foreign policy sectors started to be largely shaped, if not determined, by the Euro-Atlantic integration processes.[4] Since then, the country has been a step closer to meeting the Western standards and conditions in the fields of security, defence, and foreign policy. Albania's long process of reforming the security/defence/foreign policy areas has provided concrete results and benefits (NATO membership in 2009, EU visa liberalisation in 2010). Albania now possesses a (relatively) comprehensive institutional and legal framework, which has allowed it to contribute actively and constructively to regional security and peace missions abroad. Yet it has failed to substantially transform its domestic normative behaviour and the internal civil-power relations. The country remains vulnerable in its ability to maintain the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force in a democratic and accountable manner. In the medium term, Albania's future challenges will be dominated mostly by concerns about human security rather than issues of military or state security. From the perspective of Albania's security, the country is facing few significant conventional risks but several domestic (human) insecurities, thus being less exposed to external threats than to internal ones. Over the last decades, Albania has successfully sought to become not only a receiver but also a net contributor to security in the region and beyond. However, domestically, the country remains politically polarised and democratically quasi-dysfunctional, despite certain measures of stability.
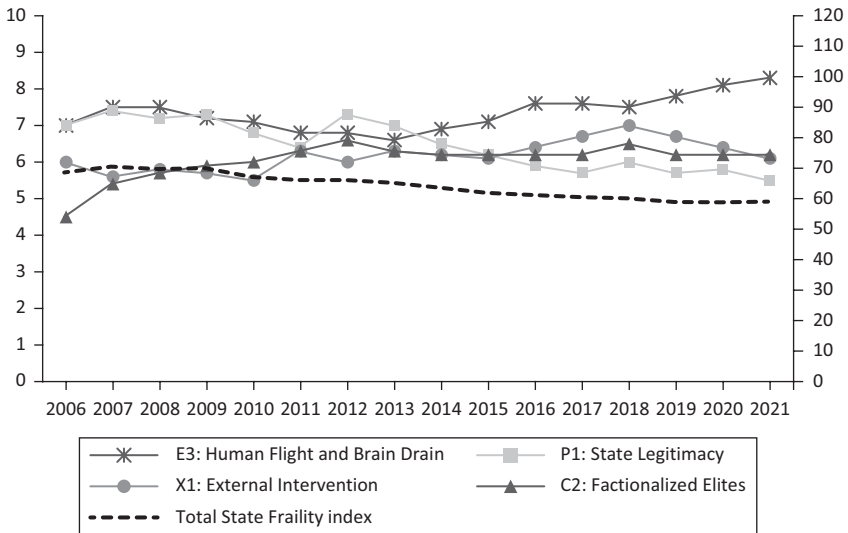
Figure 4.1 Albania's fragility. Source: Fragile States Index 2021. https://fragilestatesindex. org/analytics/. The Fragile States Index (formerly Failed States Index) comprises 12 conflict risk indicators of state vulnerability across economic (E), political (P), social (S), and cross-cutting categories (cohesion: C and external intervention: X1) to measure trends in a state's capacities and pressures which contribute to its levels of fragility or resilience. The index can be used to compare a country's current performance with that of the past. The lower the score, the better a country is handling its vulnerability.

According to the Fragile States Index (Figure 4.1), Albania has improved its position towards becoming a more stable state. It is currently ranked the 59th least vulnerable to conflict or collapse, with a long-term trend of improving 9.6 points since 2006. If its fragility is calculated according to individual measures (the average throughout the years 2006–21), the country is much worse in terms of human migration and brain drain, state legitimacy, external intervention, and factionalised elites.

The Internal-External Security Nexus and the Tensions with Democratic Governance

In-out Security Threats

The major threats to security in Albania derive from the criminal activities of individuals or groups, with the line between internal and external threats becoming blurred. The security narrative of Albanian elites and that of the official documents shows a securitisation trend built on mutual dependency and linkages between the internal and external aspects of security.[5] Such an approach is very much in line with the EU official agenda, which is transversal across all the latest

security strategies (see for example EU Security Union Strategy, COM 2020, 3; The European Agenda on Security COM 2015, 2).

The overall security framework, including strategies and institutional capacities, has improved over the years. Yet public safety is not guaranteed, with domestic criminal threats fluctuating greatly over time. There is still a considerable risk of violent and serious crime in the country. Crime-related statistics indicate a continuous overall increase in criminal cases, especially since 2013.[6] The criminality rate, the number of crimes per 100,000 inhabitants, is increasing by 1.87 points a year. The most notable crimes in recent years have been drug-related, followed by intentional homicide and theft. Homicide has dropped from 41% (2014) to 28% (2019) of the total criminal cases, whereas drug-related crimes have increased from 19% (2014) to 32% of the total cases. The numbers for theft have fallen, accounting for just 15% of the total domestic crimes (22% in 2014). Yet, this does not corroborate with citizens' feelings of insecurity, as many of them (42%) perceive theft to be the greatest threat to their personal security (see: Dyrmishi 2021).

Illicit trafficking of all forms, mostly of human beings and narcotics, has re-emerged as a major concern, with multiple forms of coercion and exploitation taking place in and outside of the country. There is also drug-related crime, as the country has increasingly become a source of illegal production and consumption, especially cannabis production. Moreover, the country has also been a point of transition on the Balkan route of narcotrafficking.[7] The form of drug-related criminal offenses is characterised by fluctuations over the years among different categories of drugs. Law enforcement agencies' engagement in drug seizing has improved, especially in the last few years, confiscating large amounts of drugs, mostly cannabis. For example, in 2014 more than 100 tonnes of marijuana were seized during a large-scale police operation in the village of Lazarat, while in 2017, Albanian authorities seized the third-largest amount of cannabis herb ever found in Europe, or 19% of the European total (UNODC 2020, 65). About 100 new cases of human trafficking are being referred each year, with the highest number (125 persons) occurring in 2014. Almost half of the victims were children, and eight out of ten were women. Only a few of the trafficking victims are third-country nationals. Domestic criminal involvement in drug and human trafficking operates within a network of organised crime. Albania has been used by local gangs and criminal groups as a transit route for the trafficking and smuggling of illegal immigrants and drugs from countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. According to official data, the majority (80%) of the convictions for criminal activities linked to organised criminal groups were for narcotics and human trafficking (State Police 2019, 12).

In addition to illegal trafficking and organised crime, the issue of terrorism has been added to the security agenda (see: Decision of the Council of Ministers, 2013), relating to the threat of violent extremism and radicalisation. While concerns about (religious) radicalisation date back to the 1990s, with minor and isolated events (see: Vurmo 2015, 32), the issue of violent extremism became an issue only later. There has been considerable public interest in news related to the issue of extremism, especially during 2014–15. According to Google trending data, the

Table 4.1 Selected data on the crime situation in Albania

Total	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Criminal cases	6796	7088	6268	7349	6929	7857	8590	8947	7883	13617	15640	17304	12398	13827	11531
Criminality rate	129	142	129	148	133	141	118	125	175	134	156	144	146	143	177
Victims of human trafficking	74	69	-	108	94	97	84	92	95	125	109	95	105	95	-
Drug seizures (kg)	39601	7554	24948	18539	16065	11048	9850	24739	20742	157539	11487	283732	86343	25219	82655

Source: (criminal cases and criminality rates) Ministry of Justice, https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/statistika/; (victims of human trafficking) Ministry of Interior, https://mb
.gov.al/raporte-kombetare-e-nderkombetare/; (drug seizures) United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, https://dataunodc.un.org/.
Notes: Criminality rate is calculated as the number of crimes per 100,000 inhabitants.

number of citizens searching the internet about ISIS (e.g., individuals searching for the term 'ISIS') reached a peak in November 2015. During the war in Syria and Iraq, the proclamation of the Caliphate and the creation of ISIS attracted some foreign fighters from Albania. It is estimated that about 114 (according to official data) to 150 Albanian citizens joined the conflict, mainly in 2013; some of them set up an ethnic Albanian (sub)unit within IS, and 48 others returned soon after (Hide 2015, 18; Shtuni 2015). There has been a growing fear that the returned foreign fighters have been sufficiently trained and indoctrinated to recruit and radicalise others to engage in terrorist attacks upon returning home (Byman and Shapiro 2014). The latter events and international mobilisation not only made the government aware of the domestic threat, but also spurred the state to change its previous approach and measures from those directed against a 'far outside' terrorism threat to countering internal home-grown violent extremism and radicalisation (e.g., the approval of a new national strategy and action plan, the set-up of anti-terror directorates and the national coordinator against violent extremism; see: Decision of the Council of Ministers 2015). Although the returnees proved much less of a terrorist threat than originally predicted, the risk they pose is hardly eliminated and is still very real in terms of the radicalisation of certain parts of society. This is primarily because several Albanian extremists involved had a criminal past (Hide 2015, 6), and also due to their socio-economic isolation and the lack of institutional proximity (Vurmo 2015). Yet, the percentage of citizens perceiving terrorism (7.8%) and violent extremism (2.2%) as major threats to the country is very low and declining (Dyrmishi 2021, 43).

Reducing Externalisation of Security Threats beyond Borders

The major security concerns (illegal trafficking, organised crime, and terrorism) that the country faces require common actions and external cooperation with third countries and international organisations to combat them effectively. Moreover, the Albanian law enforcement institutions have been ineffective, inefficient, and unaccountable, with little formal training and considerable political obedience. The resources available (in terms of equipment and working conditions) and capabilities (number of staff and their professional training) of the Albanian police have been inadequate to address internal crime, let alone more organised crime. Thus, the reforming of the security sector has been led by several international agencies and actors (the EU, US, and United Nations Development Programme).

The European police assistance missions started in the early 1990s with the Multinational Advisory Police Element (MAPE, May 1997–May 2001), followed by the PHARE EC-funded project of Police Assistance (ECPA, October 2001–August 2002) and, from December 2002 onwards, the Police Assistance Mission of the European Commission to Albania (PAMECA) (Schmidt 2004). The EU's main objective in Albania has been to enhance the capacities of law enforcement institutions on a basic level (Trauner 2009, 72). The EU has attempted to shape the public security institutions through a combination of not only advice (e.g., 'suggesting' reforms) but also imposition (Ioannides and

Collantes-Celador 2011, 417). The strategy of policy transfer (objectives, legislative and organisational approach) in the area of freedom, security, and justice was based not only on EU membership conditionality, but also on EC visa facilitation and readmission agreements. The latter has given the EU strong leverage to pressure for reforms and establish efficient return policies given the fact that visa liberalisation with the EU was ranked highly on the country's political agenda (Trauner 2009, 76–77). Moreover, the first-ever Frontex-facilitated joint operation in border cooperation on the territory of a third country was launched in Albania in 2019.

The aim of the reforms introduced through EU police assistance has been to reduce the externalisation of the Albanian internal threats to the EU, rather than dealing with the security concerns of Albanians. The country is perceived as 'exporting' a security problem to the EU, thus being pressured to minimise the current potential risks of migration, trafficking, and organised crime. The EU-led security sector reforms expect third countries to be the 'providers of security', whereas the EU acts more as a 'security consumer' out of its own security interests, without sufficiently taking the concerns of the third country or citizens into consideration (Barbé and Kienzle 2007). Critics argue that the EU's top-down security-first approach has created externally directed police forces that are more concerned with securing their neighbours than securing their own citizens (Ryan 2009, 327–328). As such, the concept of security established in the relevant domestic strategies, the reforms undertaken, and the transformation process in the security sector, are all based on the threats primarily addressed by international institutions (mainly the EU), and only to a lesser extent on those perceived by the Albanian state or acute domestic needs and emergencies (see: Defence Directive 2021, 1; Hide and Kamberi 2010, 11).

The Missing Link of Democratic Governance in the Security Sector

The security-first agenda, its top-down approach, and the intention of pleasing the partners (e.g., the EU) rather than providing security have had the unintended consequences of causing the good governance and democratic principles in the security sector and more broadly to deteriorate.

There has been a mutual need – from the EU side, to closely cooperate to secure its own border and, from the Albanian political elite, to deliver – which resonates in the content of the security reforms. The focus has been only on building and consolidating the law enforcement institutions in terms of internal capacities and infrastructure, with no crossing over into the issues of democratic oversight, accountability, and transparency. The latest programming (PAMECA V 2017–21) focuses exclusively on improving the capacities of the law enforcement institutions and the coordinating mechanisms for tackling organised crime, terrorism, and border management (see: PAMECA). Some previous projects (PAMECA IV, UNDP) tried to address the component of human rights and community policing by applying the principle of human security, yet achieved little in the way of results to improve the performance or accountability of Albanian

police (Ryan 2006). Guiding security reform in terms of capacity building has come at the expense of relegating good governance and democratic principles to second place (Ioannides and Collantes-Celador 2011).

Prioritising security over the normative rights of its citizens is the Albanian path-dependent approach, associated with the state's weakness in guaranteeing citizens' security. Providing internationally required responses to terrorism, organised crime, and corruption prevails over instituting good governance principles that protect the normative rights of its citizens. The state's collective conventional threats are depicted as more likely to occur and their consequences riskier than any violation of human and societal rights. This has often been the case, with citizens' freedoms receding in the face of state or collective security concerns. There have been several instances of government using legal means against citizens. For example, the tragic explosion at an ammunition disposal factory in 2008 killing 26 people and injuring hundreds; the national guard killing 4 protesters and wounding others in the opposition-led riots in January 2011; the police using force and making arrests during the demolition of the National Theatre; the police shooting dead a 25-year-old man in December 2020 for not obeying the overnight curfew imposed to halt the coronavirus pandemic. The danger of the use of state force and restrictions on individual and group freedoms in the name of security is a serious setback to democratisation and could be instrumentally used for the preservation of political power, especially in new democracies (Cohen 2005, 47).

Defence Modernisation and Foreign Policy Directions

Military Reforms and Gaps

In the first decade of transition, the military inherited from the communist regime was indoctrinated, demoralised, impoverished, and politicised. The Albanian army has been loyal, with no tendencies to seize control over domestic politics, but prompt to be misused in harsh times of political struggle for power or government crises (Abazi 2004, 30). This was the case in the 1997 crisis, when the country was on the brink of a civil war. It was only after the crisis with the adoption of the Constitution (1998) that the country achieved an important democratic standard through separating the military from state police and national intelligence services. Since then, despite the legacies of the past and the recent constraints, Albania's defence reform has experienced significant progress and culminated with NATO accession in 2009 (Gjevori 2015).

Since becoming a NATO member, Albania has spent on average approximately $178 million annually on military expenditures, roughly 1.34% of its GDP.[8] The country intends to gradually raise its defence budget to 2% of GDP with the final aim of upgrading the capabilities of the Albanian armed forces. This objective, to be achieved by 2024, is put forward in the new revised defence strategy, where 20% of the budget should be planned for the modernisation of operational capacities for missions: Equipment, techniques, and interacting systems of communication and information (Decision of the Council of Ministers 2019, 16).

The country's commitment to increasing defence expenditures and upgrading its capabilities has not been fulfilled yet. However, in the last years there has been a small gradual increase in the defence budget, whereas in the other countries from the region defence spending stagnated with budget cuts (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2021, 76). The armed forces personnel were reduced drastically after 2000, from 67,500 or 5.02% of the total labour force to only 9,000 personnel or 0.64% of the total labour force in 2018. Since 2010, Albania has had an all-volunteer professional army, and currently the strength of the active armed forces is mostly land forces. The country's spending, mainly on personnel expenditures,[9] restricts its ability to modernise the military in terms of improving infrastructure and equipment. The most noticeable initiative is the demilitarisation programme to get rid of old, unstable, and excess munitions. Some of the significant modern equipment procured includes naval patrol craft and helicopters, as well as an advanced airspace surveillance system (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2021, 84).

Since the 1990s Albania has participated in all security initiatives and proposals initiating in the West. It was the first Balkan country that participated in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, joining the Partnership for Peace Initiative once it was formed and gaining full NATO membership in 2009, together with Croatia. Albania contributed to several international peacekeeping missions in various frameworks, such as the NATO mission in Afghanistan, the mission Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean, the EU missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Mali, and the UN missions in Chad, Iraq, and Georgia. Albania has made meaningful efforts to support international peacekeeping endeavours (Hendrickson, Campbell and Mullikin 2006, 249), with a total of more than 6,918 troops (1996-2018), while there were about 330 Albanian troops in Afghanistan alone (see Ministry of Defence). This contribution is limited in scope as Albania does not possess an independent expeditionary capability. The country must further develop its 'niche' capabilities and its role to provide a substantial benefit to the Alliance. For example, Albania could make an important contribution to maritime security across the wider Mediterranean, if the country manages to upgrade and modernise its naval military, through purchases of modern naval equipment and improving its ability to project forces (Polak, Hendrickson and Garrett 2009).

With regards to democratic transparency and the accountability of the military, Albania has the necessary legal and institutional framework for civilian democratic control and oversight of the military. In addition to the parliament, the main body of control and oversight of the military, there are other public institutions (e.g., the Ombudsman and the Commissioner for the Protection Against Discrimination) serving as watchdogs for the protection of citizens' interests *vis-à-vis* the military. Yet there is a notable inconsistency between the legal provisions and their weak implementation. The control and oversight procedures remain only formal, or at best they do not provide robust outputs because either the expertise is lacking or the process is being politicised (Kamberi and Memaj 2020, 33). For example, at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, the Albanian government
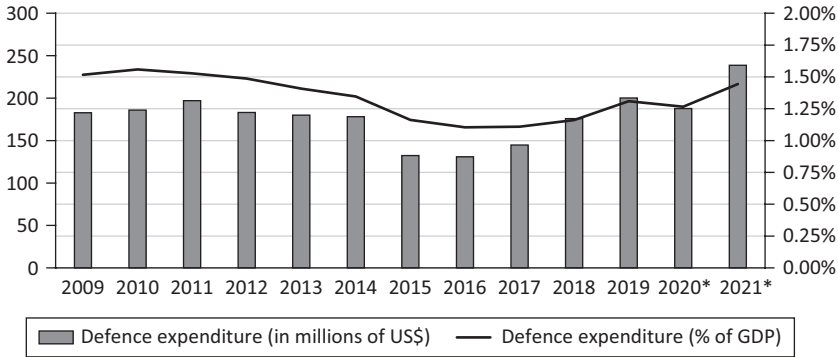
Figure 4.2 Defence expenditure. Source: Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2009–2016) and (2014–2021), see NATO 2017 and NATO 2021. Notes: * for 2020 and 2021 figur*es are estimates*.

deployed the military to enforce the curfew rule impeding certain rights in the cities, overriding the standard legal procedures of requiring a parliamentary decision to declare a state of emergency.

Albania overall has made major steps in modernising its defence sector, following NATO guidelines of having a small, highly mobile, and better trained military force. The public perception has been improved during the last years, perceiving the military as the most trusted, least corrupt, and least politically influenced public institution (Vrugtman and Bino 2020, Dyrmishi 2021).

Continuity and Change in Foreign Policy

Another way to gauge how a prospective ally may contribute to peace and security in an international context is to examine its recent foreign policy directions.

The aftermath of the post-communist regional context had been characterised by inter-state conflicts, ethnic grievances, and domestic weaknesses. Yet Albania did not intervene or meddle in the domestic affairs of its neighbours where its co-ethnics live (Gjevori 2018, 172). The post-communist elite discourse of Albanian nationalism and 'national unification' has been an ambiguous and unstable element of the Albanian parties' ideological repertoires, mainly used for internal and external political leverage at particular critical moments, which did not articulate or mobilise into a nationalistic-securitising policy option or move (Barbullushi 2016). Public opinion also shows a wide discrepancy between people's aspirations and the achievement of 'national unification'. The majority of Albanians express an abstract desire (63%) and willingness to vote in favour of national unification (75%), yet very few of them believe this is possible (23%) and only if the international community will endorse it (70%) (Demi and Çeka 2019). Still, Albania has formulated and implemented a regional policy of non-intervention.
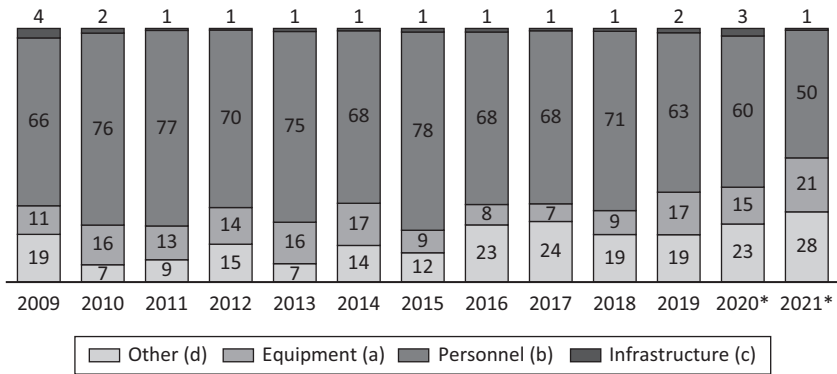
Figure 4.3 Defence expenditure by main category as percentage of the total. Source: Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2009–2016) and (2014–2021), see NATO 2017 and NATO 2021. Notes: (a) equipment expenditures include major equipment expenditures and R&D devoted to major equipment; (b) personnel expenditures include military and civilian expenditures and pensions; (c) infrastructure expenditures include NATO common infrastructure and national military construction; (d) other expenditures include operations and maintenance expenditures, other R&D expenditures, and expenditures not allocated among above-mentioned categories. * Figures for 2020 and 2021 are estimates.

Even today, Albania supports and encourages the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue under the auspices of the EU, without any interference or effect on its relations with both countries. The overly constructivist role of the government and its insufficient support for Albanians in the region is considered by some of the Albanian diplomatic elite to constitute a failure of the country's foreign policy to meet with the exigencies of national interests (Beshku 2016, 16–17).

Under the regional cooperation initiatives, bilateral relationships with the countries of the region have been intensified, yet with some contradictory rhetoric and communication taking place. In 2013, the new government articulated a more constructivist and ambitious approach towards a policy of 'zero problems with neighbouring countries', committing to collaborate with other countries of the region, especially Serbia and Greece, to address unresolved bilateral disputes. Public discourse and media reporting were also intensified, reflecting the country's interests, ties, and geopolitical strategy (Zguri 2016, 61). The media engaged more with Albanian-Greek relations, mostly displaying a negative connotation, albeit depending on specific issues (see: Lleshaj and Sulçebe 2014). To a lesser extent, there were also a few reports referring to Serbia, the majority of which had a neutral connotation (see: Krisafi 2017). Similar trends are reflected in citizens' perceptions, where the majority of Albanians perceive Albania's relations with Greece and Serbia as normal, without too much euphoria but still improving over the years (Armakolas et al. 2021; Çela 2015; Çela and Lleshaj 2014). Albania has

initiated bilateral cooperation with Kosovo since 2014, through regular meetings between the two governments. This practice was replicated in 2017 with the government of North Macedonia. The impact of the signed agreements and strategic projects of these bilateral meetings has been in general limited and slow in implementation. After 2017, the (same) government explicitly articulated its ambition to advance and protect the inalienable rights of all Albanians throughout the region, also committing to financially support projects initiated by municipalities, public institutions, or civil society in the region (Council of Ministers 2017, 23). In 2019, the Albanian Prime Minister, along with his counterparts from Serbia and North Macedonia, initiated the so-called Balkan 'Mini-Schengen' area (later officially called the Open Balkan initiative) intending to establish the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital (the four EU freedoms) between the countries of the region.[10] This initiative was embedded into the government programme (2021–5) (Council of Ministers 2021, 35) despite harsh opposition and its assessment as a tactical move to impress the EU after the failure to open EU accession negotiations (Bushati et al. 2020, 17). The very few 'internally driven' bilateral and regional initiatives are neither genuine nor value-added to the EU's (and member states') existing initiatives of regional cooperation (e.g., CEFTA or the Berlin Process). Indeed, they are more a political 'show off' of the domestic leaders than the true responsibility of assuming ownership over regional integration and beyond.

Albania's foreign policy today has smoothly shifted from a 'passive', excessively neutral role in the region, towards a more pro-active – at least rhetorically – regional cooperation and bilateral relation, especially with the states where Albanians live (Jano 2018, 6). All domestic initiatives are considered in line with the framework of European integration and the principle of a good neighbourhood. The main objective of Albanian foreign policy, since the fall of the communist regime, has been the country's European integration. For the countries aiming to join the European Union it is important to align with the political criteria on good neighbourhood relations and regional cooperation as well as comply with the EU foreign, security, and defence policy (Chapter 31). Albanian foreign policy for many years has been in line with EU foreign policy declarations and measures. It is among the few countries in the region that fully aligns with all EU declarations and the Council's decisions on common foreign and security policy.[11] This is a significant indicator of the country's geostrategic orientation and the degree of influence of external actors, mainly the EU. The country's desire to advance its integration into the European Union, in addition to NATO membership, has been the cornerstone of Albania's foreign policy discourse and practice, gathering strong public support for its domestic reforms and its constructive standing in the region.

In addition to the very pragmatic continuum of aligning with EU foreign policy, there have been moves towards challenging the status quo and building more positive prestige for the country in the region and beyond. In this spirit, for example, there was lobbying for several years and ultimately the election of Albania as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the first time (during

2022–3), which in the words of the Albanian Minister of Defence will serve 'to further increase the prestige of Albania as a serious actor in the international arena' (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2021). Additionally, Albania's chairmanship of the OSCE in 2020 was also portrayed as an historic opportunity for the country to show its multilateral diplomatic skills and leadership role on the international arena.[12] The goal of increasing Albania's foreign policy prestige is reflected in the new government programme (2021–5), which explicitly states the objective of continuing to consolidate the image and role of a regionally strong Albania that is considered a serious partner globally (Council of Ministers 2021, 37–38).

The Way Forward to Bridging the Gaps

The latest development in Albania's security, defence, and foreign policy is depicted in the interplay between three main frictions: Will versus capabilities, values versus interest, and local ownership versus internationally induced reforms.[13]

There is an unquestionable political will to be part of a collective security space, within the European and NATO context. This is backed by strong public support that membership in NATO and the EU will contribute very positively to Albania's security (Dyrmishi 2021).

The Albanian discourse and strategic documents rigorously follow NATO guidelines and the EU strategic security, defence, and foreign policy approach. It has adopted policies and built institutions conforming to EU requirements, but Albania still lacks resources and capacities to properly implement them in practice. The country is heavily dependent on the EU and other foreign aids. Work is needed to help bridge this gap, which currently persists between practice and rhetoric.

Secondly, the challenge also rests on ensuring a degree of symmetry between security and freedom, the central tenet of liberal democracy. The foreign policy and the security and defence reforms often oscillate between the choice of interests over values and norms when it comes to practice. Security and collective interest are the key message of the current strand of reforms. Especially with the rise of unconventional and unpredicted threats, the collective security interest has seriously clashed with individual rights and freedoms, threatening individual protection. There is a constant need to reconcile the collective and individual security agenda and governance, without one prevailing over the other. They are mutually important, not only for the security sector, but to the country's overall democratisation. The golden rule is to provide security in a way that is consistent with the principles of liberal democracy and thus ensure that human security and freedom priorities are in place.

Albania continues to be a policy taker, and also a security provider externally. Domestic elites and security institutions are more oriented towards global security threats, and their major concern is compliance with international requirements. There is a tendency among the Albanian political elite to seek external rather than

domestic legitimacy in the reforms undertaken. Most of the reforms in security, defence, and foreign policy are being induced by the EU and NATO, promoted by the domestic political elite and policy experts, and in the end supported by citizens. It is high time that Albania reviews this 'outside-in' approach to security and foreign policy compliance. The strategies, capacities, and processes should be organised around the country's specific needs and vision rather than simply being patchy copies from outside. For this turn on local ownership, the mobilising of politically autonomous agents of change and advocacy groups is necessary (Elbasani and Šabić 2018).[14] In the end, rather than a top-down or bottom-up choice, a more realistic approach will be a cross-loading approach: A mutual exchange of norms and needs. This is because the sustainable success of reforms is intertwined with the reception of EU-set norms and the domestic projection of needs.

The core challenge on security matters remains the question of security from what and for whom. The early transition in the field of national security in Albania ought to come to an end and the traditional, state-centred security approach needs to develop into a multidimensional and people-centred security goal. The current threats are more of an environmental, health, criminal, economic, and other non-military nature. Moreover, the entire security concept needs to be in some way liberalised as the state is no longer the only relevant subject and object of security, with the individual also emerging as such. The overall debate between human security and traditional national security discourse serves to broaden the security understanding to include a more community-based approach, incorporating political, social, and economic rights into the good governance, human rights, and participation aspects.

Conclusion

Albania has made progress in this second wave of reforms, modernising security-defence-foreign policy especially in terms of policy adoption and institutional building. It still needs to do more in terms of democratic consolidation and domestic governance. The country's membership in NATO and the opening of EU accession negotiations has been successful in transforming a former failed and small state into (at least formally) a Western-type security-providing country. In its role as a security provider, Albania is facing two main challenges.

Firstly, Albania could be characterised as both an external security provider and an internal security receiver. The country continues to suffer from many of its previous domestic security deficiencies, and still, it is a considerable contributing factor in the security and peace of the region and beyond. NATO membership and engagement with the EU offer a reliable setting for Albania to pursue an active and greater role in peace and security. Yet, the country has not lived up to its ambitions of gaining prominence and leverage in the regional and international arena, mostly because of its internal political instability and deadlocks. Whether Albania will be able to manage the polarised and volatile domestic political situation will reflect also on the external relations and its role in the region and beyond.

Secondly, Albania has prioritised external over internal threats; international demands over domestic needs; the regional over the domestic context; and thus, it ought to find a better balance. The major securitisation debates emerge from above, either from the US or the EU, and then diffuse into the national context. Following the international discourse and its requirements, the domestic political leaders frame the issues as domestic threats or obligations of the Euro-Atlantic integration process, thus managing to translate a broader securitisation discourse into a range of domestic administrative practices (e.g., regulations, strategies, agencies) which then find (quasi-)unquestionable public support. EU and NATO membership should provide the framework within which Albania constructs its security, defence, and foreign policy. Yet, the prioritisation should come from the Albanian context and with the full involvement of other domestic actors.

To achieve the very goal of collective security and make the shift from security receiver to security provider, Albania needs first and foremost to accelerate its pace of reforms with a focus on the domestic and democratic governance of the security-defence-foreign policy sectors. The point here is not to abandon all merits of the previous reforms but to refine and critically approach the current challenges. The new shift in prioritising and practising security in Albania should be informed and transformed following the local turn (Ejdus and Juncos 2018) and the normative turn (Richter 2012), respectively. These substantial shifts will increase both the country's domestic legitimacy and its international credibility as a security contributor both within and outside its borders.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1 To describe the semi-authoritarian regime in Albania, where undemocratic practices persist in part because of external support and legitimacy – particularly from the EU – the concept of 'stabilocracy' (Primatarova and Deimel 2012) or the very similar term 'stabilitocracy' has been used by Bieber and other scholars, to describe the type of regimes that emphasises geopolitical considerations over liberal democracy. Although the term was first used to describe the PD's leadership, the importance of a strong-man and party patronage still persist even with the latter socialist government (Bieber 2018, 179–181). On other more recent accounts of illiberal practices and strategies in Albania, see also: Kera and Hysa 2020.

2 In early 1996, the legitimacy of the Albanian government was contested and pyramid schemes flourished with a value estimated at half of the country's GDP. By early 1997, the pyramid schemes collapsed, and the opposition parties led the popular protests,

combining their political agenda with the public demand for the return of their lost savings. The conflict between the state order forces and popular masses were violent. Thus, the state lost control over the country, the army and police had mostly deserted, and the armouries had been looted by rioters and government supporters, leaving the county in full chaos and civil disorder (for more see: Jarvis 1999).

3 On the argument of the EU 'distancing' or 'terra incognita' approach in the entire region in the 1990s, see Smith (2000) who argues that the EU is willing to contribute only in post-crisis reconstruction, but not to engage in the acute phase of crisis management.

4 For a detailed analysis of the developments and challenges in the Albanian security sector during the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, see Caparini 2004, 259–262.

5 A review of the categorisation of threat in the Albanian strategic document seems to have been broadening the concept of security from internal/external (National Security Strategy 2000) to internal/transnational/global (National Security Strategy 2004), conventional-non-conventional ranked according to the likelihood and severity of the consequences (National Security Strategy 2014), the latest form (conventional/non-conventional) is also followed in the National Military Strategy 2015, as well as in the Strategic Defence Review 2019, with the difference of explicitly listing the seven non-conventional threats (terrorism, immigration, mass propagation of weapons of mass destruction, cyber threat, threat to communication lines and power supplies (critical national infrastructure), hybrid warfare, natural disasters, and epidemics).

6 For data on criminal cases, the criminality rate and crime categories, we refer to the official statistical reports from the Ministry of Justice, https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/statistika/. The increased number of criminal cases after 2013 is also due to the toughening of the criminal punishment for thefts of electricity and violation of road traffic rules, being no longer an administrative but a (minor) criminal offense. This trend reflects also on the exponential increase of the number of persons arrested; however the number of persons convicted guilty remains disproportionally very low.

7 For a recent detailed report and data on drug trafficking in Albania and the Balkan region see: Kemp, Amerhauser and Scaturro 2021, 22–43.

8 Own calculations of averages for 2009–2021, based on the data from Figure 4.2 Defence expenditure.

9 In the last ten years, about 70% of the total military budget has been allocated to personnel, with an expected tendency to be reduced in the upcoming years. See Figure 4.3 Defence expenditure by main category as percentage of the total.

10 The initiative was officially announced in July 2021, during the Skopje meeting of the three leaders from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. It was accompanied by the signing of three initial agreements: Responding together to natural and other disasters, allowing citizens to work in one another's countries, and helping goods move without delays. See: Government of the Republic of North Macedonia 2021.

11 See Živković (2019), based on the yearly comparative assessment of the Balkan states' alignment with the EU's foreign policy declarations and measures, compiled by the International and Security Affairs Centre (ISAC). See detailed reports at ISAC – Policy Analyses and Policy Studies section https://www.isac-fund.org/en/library/policy-analyses-and-policy-studies.

12 Albania's chairmanship of the OSCE gained some credit for ending the leadership vacuum at the OSCE, forging consensus in the appointments of the Secretary General and the heads of the three autonomous institutions, the timely extension of the mandate and budget increase of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, and the facilitation of the dialogue in the Belarusian crisis – all despite the constraints posed by the coronavirus pandemic (Liechtenstein 2020).

13 See also Collantes-Celador and Juncos (2012) on a similar argument about the EU's security strategy in the region, exemplifying three main contradictions between the EU's short-term, own security-first, interventionist approach, and the long-term nature

of the challenges, the socio-economic development needs, and the necessity to advance local ownership of reforms in the countries of the Balkan region.

14 For a broader application of the notion of security ownership at the regional level, that is the regional ownership of maintaining security cooperation and building common security capabilities and responses within the European security governance system, see: Jelka, Hrabálek, and Đorđević 2021.

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