

The (Geo)Politics of Democracy in Albania

Klodiana Beshku

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The (Geo)Politics of Democracy in Albania

Klodiana Beshku¹

1. Introduction

Albania lies in the Western part of the Balkan Peninsula, along the Adriatic and Ionian seas, with a coastline spanning from Montenegro to Greece and divided from Italy by the Strait of Otranto. It is a European country, both geographically and culturally, strongly committed to becoming part of the European Union (EU). After a long stall in the process of European integration and the delay in the opening of accession negotiations, the country started the accession talks with the EU in July 2022. Albania completed the screening sessions for all six EU accession negotiation clusters in November 2023. In mid-October 2024, the first accession negotiation cluster – the Fundamentals – has officially been opened. Albania is part of a region where all the countries aspire to full EU membership. Scholars have previously highlighted that the more a country advances to the European Union, the more its democracy consolidates. It has become such an intrinsic relationship that “Europeanisation” and “democratisation” are often used interchangeably in the literature dedicated to the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, scholars have underlined the backsliding of democracy in these countries (Bieber & Kmezić 2017) as well as the rise of authoritarianism in the region (Bieber 2020). These dynamics have been linked to the failure of the EU’s conditionality mechanism (Dzankic, Keil & Kezia 2018) or the decoupling between formal compliance to the EU norms and the substantive democratic transformation of the region (Richter and Wunsch 2020).

Albania has followed a twofold path in consolidating its democracy. The EU’s report for 2024 acknowledged a degree of Albania’s alignment with EU standards, particularly in the functioning of the market economy and in the reforming of the public administration. Even so, the report has emphasised the need for further efforts to adopt measures for tackling corruption and organised crime (European Commission 2024). Regarding the progress in the rule of law, for the first time, high-level politicians have been indicted and convicted by an independent body called SPAK (Special Structure against Corruption and Organised Crime). This body is the result of the thorough reform of the Albanian judiciary system undertaken under EU pressure, the most far-reaching reform of a kind in the Western Balkans (Beshku & Mullis 2018).

Nevertheless, elements of democratic backsliding, such as weak parliamentary oversight (Vurmo 2022), self-censorship among journalists (Bino 2023), and corruption, remain an area of serious concern in the country (European Commission 2024). By contrast, Albania fully

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aligns (100 per cent) with the EU's CFSP in all the sensitive current issues (European Commission 2024). Between 2022 and 2023, during its term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, the country has actively engaged in resolutions condemning Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Albania represents a small country that navigates the shifting global context by means of its commitment to EU membership and its alliance with the US.

While there is ample scholarship that links European integration to the level of democratisation of a country, there is hitherto a gap in our knowledge on the links between geopolitics and democratisation; that is - on the impact of geopolitics on the democratic decline or failed democracy promotion. Considering that geopolitics is traditionally concerned with the study of the state, its borders, and its relations with other states (Heffernan 1998: 61), what we aim here is to identify the external geopolitical actors whose presence – visible or not – has influenced the Albanian government's decision-making in a way that it adversely affected the quality of the country's democracy.

In recent years, two countries have exerted a strong influence on the decisions of the Albanian government: Türkiye and Italy. Some of these decisions have negatively affected democracy by downplaying the existing structures of decision-making whilst moving the country away from alignment with European values. Türkiye has conditioned nearly every investment in Albania with measures limiting the Turkish opposition's activities abroad. More concretely, there have been attempts to close the Gülenist movement's activities in Tirana at the request of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who holds this movement responsible for the 2016 coup attempt in Türkiye. Furthermore, President Erdoğan has publicly supported Prime Minister Edi Rama with Turkish investments before and during Rama's electoral campaigns.

Regarding the relationship with Italy, an agreement between the Albanian Prime Minister Rama and the Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni was signed in November 2023. The agreement enabled the construction of a processing and detention camp for migrants headed to Italy in Albanian territory. Both leaders treated the agreement as a bilateral issue reflecting the friendship between them and the two countries. This report explores the relationship of Albania with Türkiye and Italy, the friendship among their leaders, and the formal and informal practices related to these relations. It uses the analytical lens of personalisation of foreign policy to unpack how these practices can be detrimental to the quality of the country's democracy.

2. Geopoliticising the State of Democracy

Although the country's position as "partly free" has been stable in the Freedom's House reports since 2020, the last of these reports highlights that "political parties are highly polarised and often organised around leading personalities" and that "corruption and bribery remain major problems, though the government is working to address corruption in the judiciary" (Freedom House 2024). Furthermore, according to the Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoDI), Albania exhibits mid-range performance across all categories of democracy, scoring in the top 25 per cent globally for Freedom of Religion and Access to Justice (IDEA 2024). The same study highlights that "between 2018 and 2023, the country experienced significant advances in Access to Justice but saw notable declines in Economic Equality" (IDEA 2024). In 2024, the Economist Democracy Index also revealed a slight drop compared to the previous year (European Western Balkans 2024), yet the country managed to remain in the category of "flawed democracy". In 2022, Albania's score rose by 4 points, and the country left the "hybrid regime" category (European Western Balkans 2024). All these figures show that it is difficult

to assess a proper decline in the level of democracy in Albania. This difficulty is probably due to the contrasting processes of governance problems on the one hand and, on the other hand, the success of the judiciary reform and the vetting process for prosecutors. The judiciary and the attendant reform have addressed important aspects related to the country's EU membership bid, such as the fight against corruption, clientelism, and state capture, resulting in the arrests of former ministers and PMs since 2022. Thus, Albania exhibits the traits of a transitional democracy.

Still, the personalisation of the country's foreign policy by its Prime Minister, Edi Rama, is indicative of at least a degree of democratic decline. To date, both academic and policy work has examined the political charisma of the Albanian leader and the presence of populist features in his way of doing politics (Budini 2008, 2012, 2016; Lela 2016; Koxha and Heinisch 2024). Even so, they lack the assessment of the link between the methods put in action by his politics and the democratic decline in the country. Recent studies do not unpack the linkages between geopolitics and the backsliding of democracy. These linkages become more evident if one uses the lenses of the personalisation of foreign policy to analyse the political behaviour of a leader with other leaders. In her study “‘Our Brother Erdoğan’ – From Official to Personal Relations of Political Leaders of Albania and Kosovo with the Turkish President”, Gentiola Madhi shows how the personal friendship between the two leaders creates grounds for a pragmatist and calculated political behaviour (Madhi 2021). Madhi notes how leaders of closely allied countries may slip into non-transparent, clientelist, and secretive practices. In the case of Albania's relationship with Türkiye and Italy, these practices are discernible in the personal friendship between the Albanian Prime Minister Rama with the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Giorgia Meloni, the President of the Council of Ministers of Italy.

The personalisation of foreign policy may be detrimental to the quality of democracy in a country. It prioritises certain countries and decisions over others, it favours choices driven by emotions rather than by national interest, and furthers private interests at the expense of the common good. Like populism, personalisation has significant effects on procedural aspects of foreign policymaking (Destraddi and Plagemann 2019). Decisions may become blurred and non-transparent, and the leader is no longer searching for political consensus within the party or the public. Forms of authoritarianism and personalisation of foreign policy often go hand in hand with “seizing and exercising power and control over foreign policy institutions” (Özdamar and Yanik 2024: 1836). Taken together, they may account for some aspects of national interest, but the means employed may become ambiguous or ultimately populist. The geopolitics of a country becomes merely (geo)politics when it goes away from the values and only cares about realpolitik. This transformation of geopolitics becomes detrimental not only to the quality of democracy in the domestic sphere but also to the security of a country, its neighbours, and the wider international sphere. Additionally, it might favour third countries over EU member states or non-orthodox practices over the EU's democratic values.

Finally, the personalisation of foreign policy inevitably leads to its politicisation. The leader who has already personalised or hyper-personalised the foreign policy of a country uses some of the arguments for mobilising domestic political support. This is despite the fact that, politicised issues like migration or the influence of multilateral organisations like the EU over domestic policymaking can only be resolved by resorting to foreign policy (Destradi, Plagemann, and Taş 2022). In the case of Albania, contentious foreign policy issues serve as a litmus test for the level of democratisation of the country. In what follows, this study illustrates how the personalisation of foreign policy detrimentally affects the state of democracy in a country by looking at the special channels of influence exerted by Türkiye and Italy on the Albanian leadership.

3. Identifying the Geopolitical Actors

Charismatic leaders play a pivotal role in the personalisation of foreign policy. Therefore, the focus of this study is on countries whose foreign policies embody strong identification with the countries' leaders. These leaders represent the highest positions in their respective countries – presidents or prime ministers – and have a personal and publicly recognised friendship with the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama. This friendship has enabled Prime Minister Rama to transport foreign policy issues into the sphere of domestic politics by means of his engagement, and without public consent. In the context of Albania's geopolitics, these dynamics are best seen in the relationship with Türkiye and Italy. In the case of Türkiye, we can identify extreme foreign policy exceptionalism by means of conditioning investments in Albania in exchange for open support in electoral campaigns for the Albanian Prime Minister. In the case of Italy, the Treaty on Migrants is a result of a personal agreement between the two leaders. In both cases, strong bilateral historical, political, and economic ties have favoured the personalisation of foreign policy and informal practices that accompanied it. This process was assisted by considerable popular support for each of the leaders.

Albania and Türkiye share a common past under the Ottoman Empire from the fourteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, a period when a large part of Albanians converted to Islam. After the Ottoman Empire left the Balkans, the state of Albania – established in 1912 – and Türkiye signed a Treaty of Friendship in December 1923. The two countries had diplomatic relations even during the communist regime in Albania despite Albania being one of the most isolated countries in Europe. In December 1955, Türkiye voted for Albania to become a full member of the United Nations. A decade later, Albania sided with Türkiye against the recognition of Cyprus in an important vote in the UN (Xhaferi 2017). In the tumultuous 1990s, Türkiye became the main supporter of Albania in economic and foreign policy terms.

The twenty-first century opened with two major events for the Albanians, defining the country's recent relations with Türkiye. First, the parliament of Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008, and second, Albania became a NATO member in 2009. In both cases, Türkiye was supportive. It immediately recognised the Republic of Kosovo as an independent state, and lobbied for Albania to become a NATO member ahead of its accession. The strategic partnership between the two countries materialised in 2013. The immediate recognition of Kosovo's independence influenced the rise of Türkiye as a key power in the Balkans (Abazi 2008).

Furthermore, Albania was central to the new Turkish engagement policy in the Balkans, which was in line with the revival of Turkish interests in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire. Türkiye is Albania's most important economic partner and security provider due to the strong cooperation between the two under the NATO umbrella and the need for containment of the Russian influence in the region. Türkiye has invested in Albania's banking, health, and construction sectors. It also exerts soft power and public diplomacy through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre, focusing on art, culture and education (Lami 2017: 30). Moreover, the continuous transmission of Turkish soap operas in the Albanian televisions extensively contributes to the popularisation of Turkish culture and contemporary lifestyles (Abazi 2020: 174).

In 2022, around 600 Turkish companies were operating in Albania, employing around 15,000 Albanian citizens (Euronews 2022). Turkish investments have doubled in the last decade (Euronews 2024), especially after the entry into force of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the Republic of Türkiye and the Republic of Albania in May 2008. The FTA eliminated customs duties on imports by both sides. The website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of

Türkiye (2024) notes that “Türkiye-Albania relations derive their strength from shared history and strong social and cultural bonds.” In line with this established relationship, the signature of the Joint Political Declaration for Establishing High-Level Cooperation Council by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Edi Rama on 6 January 2021 further reinforced bilateral relations (Prime Minister’s Office 2021). Six agreements accompanied the partnership (Euronews Albania 2024). One of these agreements included a military cooperation framework agreement, signed during the official visit of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama to Ankara in February 2024 for the first meeting in the framework of the Türkiye-Albania High-Level Cooperation Council. Türkiye is the major investor in Albania, followed by Italy and France (Bank of Albania 2024).

Italy and Albania’s cultural ties are also strong, largely due to the Italian support for Albanian independence in 1912. In the early twentieth century, Italy had a strong geopolitical interest in Albania. At the time, Italy considered Albania to be a counterweight to the expansion of Yugoslavia in the Adriatic and a bridge to exercising its proper influence in the Balkans (Luku 2015: 30). By contrast, during the First and the Second World Wars, Italy represented an enemy in Albania, having invaded the country and imposed its culture and language on it. During the isolationist drift of the communist regime in Albania (1945-1990), the Italian memory of colonialism in Albania gradually disappeared (Chiodi, Devole 2006: 5). In the 1990s, Italy became the ‘land of hope’ for many Albanians. Since Italy corresponded to Albania’s aspirational ‘Westernness’ (Mai 2003:3), a mass exodus of immigrants from Albania landed on the Italian coastline in the early 1990s, reaching its peak in March 1991. Italy not only welcomed the waves of immigrants coming on boats and ships from Albania but also established a humanitarian mission called Operazione Pellicano as a general response to the mass immigration, which lasted more than two years (1991-1993). Another Italian mission – Operazione Alba, a military-humanitarian mission, was deployed in Albania after the bankruptcy of pyramid financial schemes in 1997 and the political and economic crisis that followed. These operations founded the basis for the Albanian’ gratitude’ to Italy, a fact that Rama duly cited in favour of the Pact on Migration signed with Meloni in November 2023.

In the post-communist period, Italy became the main influential foreign power in Albania, as well as an important foreign investor. Since 2013, Italy has been one of the strategic allies in the National Strategy of Albania (Beshku 2016). A Declaration on Strategic Partnership was signed by both countries in 2010. It was followed by seven specific agreements of considerable importance for the relations between the two countries. Italy’s particular attention to Albania is influenced by border security concerns and the presence of about half a million Albanians in Italy. Thus, Italy is the main supporter of Albania in the EU and has “a special responsibility towards Albania’s European integration path” (Frontini and Denti 2017: 573).

Italy has been among the major bilateral donors in Albania over the last twenty years, as well as the country’s first commercial partner and one of the most important investors. As such, it constitutes an important ally in political and economic terms. In 2022, Italy was Albania’s main commercial partner and the destination of the major share of Albanian exports. In 2021, Italian and mixed capital enterprises arrived at 2,675, expanding from the banking sector to communication, footwear, and textiles. The National Bank of Albania recognises Italy’s substantive foreign direct investment in Albania in the last decade. The strong points of the Italian position in Albania are constituted not only by the economic cooperation between the two countries, but also by the geopolitical approach Italy applies to Albania by co-habituating with the country in different regional organisations like the Central European Initiative (CEI), the Adriatic Ionian Initiative (AII), the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Berlin Process (Kajana 2024). Italy’s geopolitical interest in Albania, with which it also cooperates in a number of regional

organisations affiliated with the EU, makes Italy the first advocate for Albania in its European integration path.

4. Systematising the Channels of Influence

The cultural, political, and economic ties between Albania, Türkiye, and Italy are very strong and provide an easy justification for any treaty or agreement between these countries. Türkiye and Italy both represent cases of transformation “from rulers to supporters” (Xhaferi, 2017) of Albania. There are also cases showing privileged partnerships and alliances due to the special friendships of the Prime Minister of Albania, Rama, with the President of Türkiye Erdoğan and the Prime Minister of Italy, Meloni. A range of formal arrangements, accompanied by informal practices, that have favoured Turkish and Italian political and economic influence has ensued from these friendships.

The Turkish-Albanian relationship expands beyond mere bilateral relations because the personal relations between the two countries’ leaders go beyond the official political ties between their countries (Madhi, 2021). Regarding informal ties, the case of the hospital in Fier – Albania’s third major city – constitutes a remarkable example. The construction of this hospital began shortly after Prime Minister Rama’s visit to Türkiye in January 2021. The hospital was completed in less than three months, a well-equipped 150-bed facility of over 70 million euros. It was inaugurated on 21 April 2021, just four days before the Albanian parliamentary elections, clearly supporting Rama’s re-election (Tzifakis 2021). In January 2022, the Turkish President, Erdoğan, addressed the Albanian parliament and reaffirmed that Albania’s commitment to the fight against the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization – FETÖ, as it is known to the Turkish authorities, broadly known as the Gülenist organization – remained a precondition of Turkish support and brotherhood. In the same address, Erdoğan highlighted Türkiye’s massive investments in Albania (Beshku 2023: 6). At that time, the Turkish President was on an official visit to inaugurate the 522 apartments built with Turkish funds in the city of Laç for the Albanian families who had lost their homes during the 2019 earthquake. In September 2022, a Turkish journalist named Ahmed Emre Olur – an opponent of the Turkish government – was deported to Türkiye by the Albanian government without following the international rules for deportation (Politiko 2022). Furthermore, a school and a kindergarten linked to the FETÖ organization had been closed just one week after the start of the lessons (Beshku 2023: 6). Albanian authorities have repeatedly denied the link between this closure and the Gülenist movement. However, these events, together with a previous closure in 2020 of two madrasas and the Memorial International School in Tirana, also linked to this movement, raised controversy.

Accepting various forms of aid from Türkiye to address the challenges that emerged from the earthquake, the pandemic, and low foreign investments have become common for Albania. As a result, Albania’s dependence on Türkiye has steadily grown, raising concern in public opinion about the close personal relationship between Prime Minister Rama and President Erdogan. Madhi (2022) remarked that frequent and untransparent meetings between the two leaders brought with them the risk that, over time, the boundary between interstate and commercial relations between the two countries would further blur, leading to the personalisation of power and interests. Something similar took place recently with the delayed inauguration of the Namazgah Mosque in Tirana. During his last visit to Albania in October 2024, President Erdoğan inaugurated the Namazgah Mosque, also known as the Grand Mosque of Tirana and the largest mosque in the Balkans, nearly five years after the completion of its work. The mosque, funded by Türkiye – specifically by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and the Türkiye Diyanet Foundation — as a symbol of the shared history and common culture of

both countries (Ataman 2024) was ready to be inaugurated in 2019. The inauguration was delayed due to tensions between Ankara and the Muslim community of Albania, perceived by the Turkish government to have ties to the Gülenist movement. Investigative journalists interpreted the delayed opening as a sign of an undeclared 'war' between alleged supporters of Gülen and supporters of Türkiye's President (Karaj & Buyuk: 2024). Inauguration occurred once when the senior leaders of the Albanian Muslim community were exempted from the inauguration ceremony and the future management of the mosque.

Italy used to represent a typical case of formal relations in terms of foreign policy between the two countries until Meloni came onto the political scene. An unprecedented informal linkage between Rama and Meloni was forged in the summer of 2023 at the height of a touristic "boom" of Italians in Albania. The two leaders met in Valona and spent four days with their respective families in the Albanian Prime Minister's official residence in the coastal village of Dhërmi (Logroscino 2023). An exclusive Treaty on Migration accorded between the two countries during these meetings was only made public several months thereafter through the reporting of Italian media (Sinoruka & Siviero 2023). Prime Minister Rama was subsequently criticised for signing an agreement without prior consultation with the parliament of Albania and without informing the Albanian public and media or the European Commission about it (Hasa 2023; Gozzi 2023). The agreement concluded between Rama and Meloni allowed Italy to run migrant reception and detention centres within Albanian territory and waters to accommodate thousands of migrants and refugees rescued at sea on Italian shores. Prime Minister Rama defended this move as an act of "returning a favour" to Italy – an act that touches upon the concept of honour in the Albanian culture. Discussing the origins of the agreement, Rama confirmed that he gets along very well with Meloni and that the pact was due to the friendship the Albanians owe to Italy for its unlimited past support (Carlucci 2023). Rama openly declared in the European Parliament in September 2024 that, "[t]his is an exclusive agreement with Italy because we love everyone, but with Italy, we have unconditional love," (Jones 2024). The "exclusivity" of this pact shows a high degree of personalisation of Albania's foreign policy by Prime Minister Rama. To date, the Italian Court of Rome has been cancelling the detention of the immigrants in Albania, deeming it to be against a recent European Court of Justice sentence, which ruled that a country outside the EU cannot be declared safe unless its entire territory is deemed free of danger.

The blurred lines between formal and informal practices in Albania's relations with Türkiye and Italy that we were able to observe in the above cases could become still more hazy in the future. Even before the deal with Meloni, Rama had neglected to engage the public regarding the Open Balkan initiative,² seeking only post factum to manufacture consent for it by conducting a nationwide opinion poll (Beshku 2023: 10). Such personalisation of decisions might lead to further non-transparent concessions through personal deals and linkages. One such case is the recent news concerning possible investments in two Albanian islands – Sazan and Zvërnec – by Jared Kushner, the son-in-law of the United States President Donald Trump (Lipton, Swan and Haberman 2024). Although as yet unofficial, the plans have caused serious concern among the Albanian public.

In sum, the domination of the public sphere by a strong leader who consolidates his power domestically through formal and informal external linkages is bound to contribute to democratic erosion (Bieber 2018: 141). This subsequently leads to the loss of faith in democratic institutions and patterns of fair and transparent decision-making processes.

² The Open Balkan initiative is a political and economic zone, including Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia established in 2019. It was established in response to the slowdown in the EU enlargement process since 2014. Deemed disputable in other Western Balkan states, and in view of the revived enlargement agenda the initiative has withered away (Mirković 2024).

5. The Outcomes of Externalities on Transitional Contexts

It is easy to spot formal Turkish and Italian conduits of influence in Albania. These countries have been Albania's economic and security partners since the beginning of the 1990s. They have been Albania's major political and economic supporters during its transition from a centralised to a free market economy. It is also easy to follow the informal channels of influence by Turkish President Erdoğan and Italian Prime Minister Meloni to the Prime Minister of Albania, Rama, as their close personal friendship does not constitute a secret. Based on the countries' formal partnerships and their leaders' strong personal friendship, investments, and exclusive agreements were concluded by all parties in the last decade. These took place, especially in important political moments when the leaders needed each other's public support. Rama needed massive investments before the elections (2013, 2017, and 2022) by Erdoğan; Meloni needed Rama to maintain her party's electoral promise from October 2022 to deal with the migrant crisis in Italy; Rama needed Meloni to sign the Social Insurance Deal with Italy whereby the first Albanian immigrants in Italy got their pensions recognised in both countries (which was ratified by the Italian Parliament after the Pact on Migration with Albania, in February 2024); finally, Erdoğan needed Rama to contain the Gülenist movement in Albania and the Western Balkans after the coup d'état of 15 July 2016 against him.

In all the above cases, one can discern not only Rama's interest in converting external support into electoral victories, but also a national interest in attracting foreign direct investments from Türkiye and Italy. In this case, arguably, informal personal linkages were able to shape foreign and public policies positively. However, while personal and national interests may coincide, informal influences can make a leader's behaviour and, as a consequence, the country's foreign policy unpredictable. Democracy is about having clear rules, procedures, and regulations to avoid unpredictability. In countries where democratic culture is not so strong, strong leaders can exercise considerable sway over the public. Such is the case with Albania's controversial Prime Minister Rama, who has managed to impose himself as a brave leader capable of implementing unpopular policies. Drawing on his vocation as an artist, Rama's unconventional style and innovative approach to politics managed to win him either major supporters or major haters in the general public, with little grey zone in between. As a result, Albanian politics remains shaped by strongmen and exhibits high levels of polarisation (Bieber 2018: 77) to the steady detriment of democratic standards. Phenomena such as exclusion of party members, suppression of challenges to party leader, silencing of opposing voices within parties, control of political rivals, contested internal party elections, and personal struggles and conflicts within parties are some of the characteristics of the clientelistic and leader-centred party system in Albania (Bino 2017: 52-53).

From another perspective, a high degree of personalisation of public policies in general, and foreign policy in particular, may shorten their implementation time and make policies more effective. For as long as the leader's will coincides with the national agenda, the national interest appears as the priority in the overall agenda of the leader. However, such practices might favour form over content and the effectiveness of policymaking over values. In the case of Albania, this might be detrimental to the country's EU membership bid. An unsuccessful Rama-Meloni agreement on migration could influence the country's performance in the context of EU integration (Tondo 2024). It could also affect the popularity of Rama in the next elections, because leaders who personalise foreign policymaking might be held more directly accountable for their courses of action by their voters (Destradi et al. 2022).

Since a strong personalisation changes the 'accountability environment' of foreign policy (Narang and Staniland, 2018), Prime Minister Rama's popular support might be affected by this phenomenon. Even so, he might not receive a blow in the next elections in Albania in April 2025 because the implementation of controversial projects contracted through informal

channels could distract the public's attention from urgent domestic issues. That is, the personalisation of foreign policy may also be used to shift accountability and the domestic public's attention.

6. Key Highlights

This report explored Albania's relations with Türkiye and Italy through the lenses of the personalisation of foreign policy and the formal and informal practices related to these relations. Türkiye and Italy have been strong political, economic, and cultural allies of Albania after the fall of the communist regime. The two countries have exerted a strong influence on the decisions of the Albanian government, especially since 2020. Both formal and informal channels of influence of these countries exist in Albania. The close friendship of the respective leaders marks relationships between Albania, Italy, and Türkiye. These friendships, in turn, caused Albania's government to make controversial decisions, hampering democracy by downplaying the official structures of decision-making. In some cases, decisions made through such friendships have made the country move away from the country from alignment with European values.

Albania's relationship with Türkiye and Italy has expanded beyond mere bilateral relations due to close personal relations between Albania's Prime Minister Rama and the leaders of the two countries. These relations go beyond the official political ties, leading to substantive informality. In the case of Türkiye, due to the close friendship between the two leaders, there is an extreme foreign policy exceptionalism. This exceptionalism is put into action by demands and conditions every time Türkiye invests in Albania. Turkish President Erdoğan has conditioned nearly every investment in Albania with measures limiting the Turkish opposition's activities abroad. Moreover, the Turkish President openly supported Prime Minister Rama before the elections in 2021 by building the Fier Hospital and inaugurating it before the elections.

In the case of Italy, following the short vacation of the Italian leader in south Albania at the premises of the Albanian Prime Minister, the two leaders signed the Treaty on Migration. This Agreement instigated the construction of a Procession and a Detention Camp on Albanian territory. It was an exclusive bilateral agreement made possible only because of the friendship between the two leaders. The Agreement was made public in Albania through Italian media, and it was ratified in the Parliament only two months later, without a public debate preceding it.

The Prime Minister Rama's imposing personality and charisma have led to the personalisation of Albanian foreign policy. While a strong personalisation of public policies seems efficient in terms of implementation, the national interest may be realised only if it fits the personal agenda of the leader. At the same time, the personalisation of foreign policy favours form over content and efficiency over values. Such personalisation of foreign policy has substantial informality as its by-product, alongside an adverse effect on public deliberation and accountability at home. Not only does it prioritise certain countries and decisions over others, but it favours choices driven by individual relationships or the pursuit of power rather than by national interest or the common good. Albania's relations with Türkiye and Italy showed that, even where national interest is preserved, a highly personalised foreign policy can only preserve it through unilateral and ambiguous means void of broader social consensus.

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