

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	4
1.1 Albania’s domestic reforms and citizens’ perception.....	5
<i>Graph 1: Expectation of the time needed for Albania to achieve EU membership. ...</i>	7
<i>Graph 2: Perception of the negative influence of corruption and organized crime on Albania’s EU integration.</i>	8
<i>Graph 3: Perception regarding the effect of the establishment of SPAK effect on the fight against corruption /organized crime.....</i>	9
1.2 Union’s internal struggle to enlarge	9
1.3 Partners or rivals? Albania’s relations with third countries	11
<i>Graph 4: Perception of the friendliest country to Albania.</i>	11
<i>Graph 5: Perception of Turkey’s influence.</i>	12
<i>Graph 6: Perception of NATO influence on Albania’s security.</i>	13
<i>Graph 7: Perception of EU influence on Albania’s security.</i>	14
<i>Graph 8: Perception of China’s influence.</i>	15
<i>Graph 9: Perception of Arab countries’ influence.</i>	16
1.4 Conclusions and recommendations	17
2 To the European Union:	17
2. To the Albanian Government:	17
3. To the Albanian Parliament:	18
4. References.....	19

CITIZENS' PERCEPTION ON ALBANIA'S EU INTEGRATION PROCESS: WILL THE BELIEF THAT THE SUN RISES FROM THE WEST PREVAIL?

Gentiola Madhi

“Here it comes this blessed day, born from the west...”

— Why, Naim Frashëri

1. INTRODUCTION

Albania masters a clear strategic vocation and cross-party commitment to join the European Union. The accession perspective granted by the Thessaloniki Summit back in 2003 is considered the major catalyst for the advancement of the reform agenda and democratization of the country. Although the pace of accession has been marred by several hiccups over the years, public support for the process remains (roughly) above 90%.

Despite the general support at the domestic level, the EU enlargement process involving Albania and the Western Balkans is currently stalling. As the Union stumbles through several internal crises and its leaders become prone to regurgitating old promises, the EU's intentions of pushing the accession process forward have become more ambiguous. Enlargement has turned into a contentious policy within EU member states, which has led to a contradictory relationship relation between the EU on the one hand and the membership-seeking countries on the other. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 seems to have set the enlargement policy adrift, posing questions of the Union's credibility and hindering efforts for further democratization in the region.

As membership seems 'out of reach' for almost all the Balkan countries, Albania finds itself divided between domestic reform struggles and a certain 'waiting fatigue'. It has been five years since the country embarked upon a deep and comprehensive judicial reform –

strongly backed by the EU and USA – which was expected to mark the turning point for the opening of the accession talks. However, the theoretical green light to the opening has not materialized into practice and there is little chance that it will occur within the year. Instead, a domestic polarized political climate has succeeded in the politicization of the undertaking of policy reforms. This has contributed to rising scepticism among the population about the effectiveness of these reforms, while also affecting public trust in state institutions.

No less important is the politicization of enlargement by certain member states, like France and the Netherlands, which has partially contributed to the general disappointment and domestic fatigue. On the one hand, are the member states that see enlargement as important for the Union's geostrategic interests, while on the other are those who desire a normative-based accession perspective. As questioning the progress of Albania on its EU-reform agenda has become an issue of discussion in some European capitals, the Union's ambiguity is playing out in favour of third countries with a strong interest in edging onto the regional scene.

In the light of the present uncertainties and repeated accession setbacks, this policy brief seeks to analyse the extent to which public perception reflects and contrasts the official positioning of Albania in foreign and security policy. The analysis relies on the findings of the 2020 edition of the Albanian Security Barometer as well as primary and secondary sources such as official documents, official statements, reports issued by the EU, and media coverage.

The paper is organized into three main sections. It starts with an overview of Albania's obligation to address the key priorities at the domestic level vis-à-vis citizens' perception of the related performance. Then, the focus shifts to the implications of the EU's internal developments which hinder the accession process of the candidate countries. Finally, the third section compares and contrasts the citizens' perceptions of the influence of external actors like Turkey, China, and the Arab countries and the latter's potential derailing of Albania's EU accession path. The paper concludes that the mixed signals arriving from the EU are neither beneficial nor constructive for Albania's democratization process and the continent's stability and security. Therefore, all actors need to engage in the creation of a new political momentum that can push forward the process.

1.1 ALBANIA'S DOMESTIC REFORMS AND CITIZENS' PERCEPTION

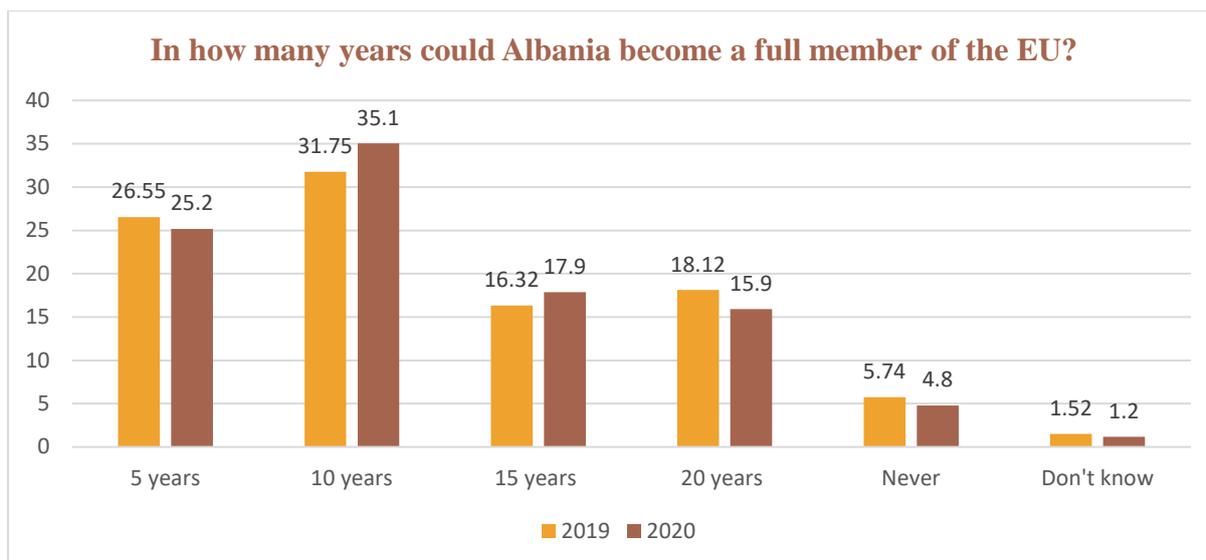
Albania was granted candidate country status in 2014 and its accession path has been littered with obstacles. The long-awaited green light for the opening of the accession talks

was awarded in March 2020, after several discouraging signals sent by France. Paris' triple veto in June 2018, June 2019, and October 2019 were based on its insistence that the Union needs to reform itself before opening its doors to new members. However, France was not the only sceptical country, it was also backed by the Netherlands and Denmark. These countries were not fully satisfied with Albania's reform efforts. In autumn 2019, the EU adopted a list of 15 pre-conditions that needed to be satisfied by its authorities before the holding of the first and second intergovernmental conferences. The conditions were related primarily to the five key priorities, and some of them delineated specific actions to be put in practice by the Albanian government so it could move to the next stage. What the list did not make any clear reference to, was the timeframe. Only part of these reform tasks was easily measurable and achievable within a limited time.

In spring 2020, the European Commission assessed the performance of Albania with regards to the fulfilment of the 15-preconditions, which then led to the awarding of the green light for the accession talks in March of the same year. Afterward, the Commission also presented the draft negotiating framework with Albania to the EU member states, but this step is still to be completed. Even though all countries voted in favour of Albania's progress in June 2021, the draft negotiating framework is still to be approved. This situation in part goes against the general EU discourse revolving around the prospect of Albania becoming a member state based on its merits and the quality of implemented reforms, which in turn determines the speed of the accession process. Currently, Albania's destiny remains tied to North Macedonia's and therefore is conditioned by Bulgaria's veto against the latter over a bilateral dispute of language and origin.

Notwithstanding the difficult journey faced so far and the 'waiting fatigue' of the political elite, the public support for the country's accession perspective continues to be solid. A poll conducted before the COVID-19 outbreak showed that 97% of Albanians are in favour of EU integration.¹ As the European perspective per se remains undisputable, what has changed over the past pandemic year is the citizens' perception regarding the time when Albanian will join the Union. Certainly, the various postponements have had a political cost and affected the general perception at the national level.

¹ Orlando Crowcroft and Dena Ristani, "Albania is no closer to joining the EU. Its leaders might prefer it that way", *Euronews*, April 23, 2021. Accessible at: <https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/23/albania-is-no-closer-to-joining-the-eu-its-leaders-might-prefer-it-that-way>



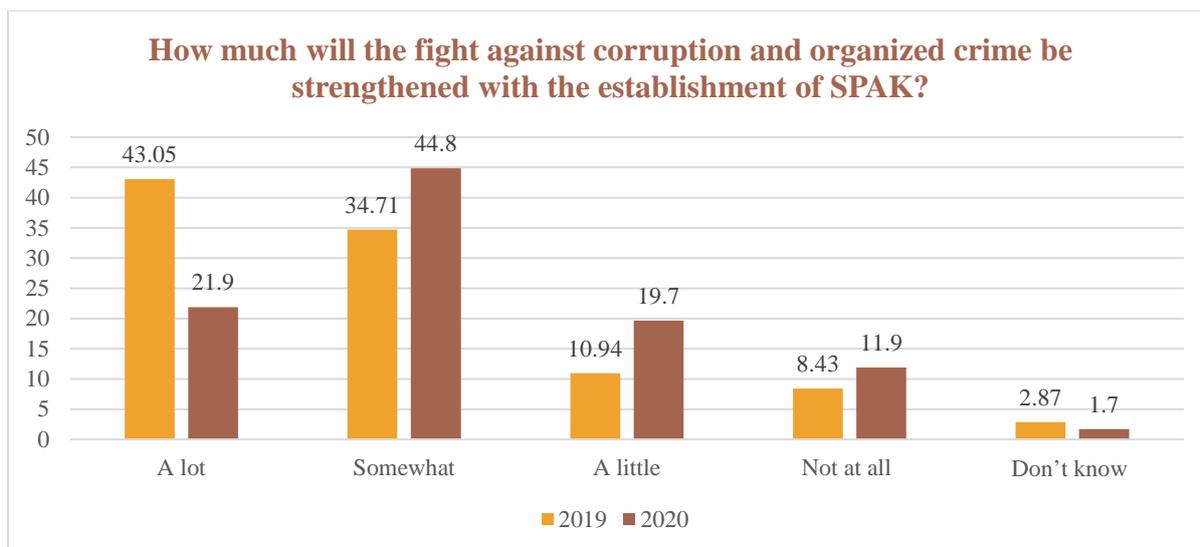
Graph 1: Expectation of the time needed for Albania to achieve EU membership.

As the Albanian Security Barometer shows (see graph 1), over the last year there has been a slight increase of those who think that Albania is not going to be a full member by 2025, but by 2030 instead. The shifting of the timeframe from 5 years towards a 10- or 15-years perspective appears even more realistic when considering both the internal challenges that Albania must overcome to become a fully-fledged democracy and at the same time the multiple internal challenges that the EU is dealing with. However, the extended waiting time may exert a negative effect on the younger generations, who may become hopeless about EU membership and opt to leave the country for better life and work perspectives.

When focusing on Albania’s internal challenges, the main obstacles refer to the so-called five priorities, namely completing the judiciary reform, fighting against corruption and organized crime, de-politicizing public administration, and last but not the least, ensuring protection and promotion of human rights. The country’s comprehensive justice reform is expected to mark a turning point in the achievement of sustainable results in the other above-listed priority areas. During the last five years, the justice reform implementation has continued consistently, and new judicial institutions have been established.² It is expected that the new institutions will engage to establish a solid track record in investigating and prosecuting those involved in criminal activities.

The last country report published by the European Commission in 2020 states that Albania has some level of preparation in the fight against corruption and organized crime, marking

² European Commission, “Albania 2020 Report,” *Commission Staff Working Document*, SWD(2020) 353 final, Brussels, October 6, 2020. Accessible at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/albania_report_2020.pdf



Graph 3: Perception regarding the effect of the establishment of SPAK effect on the fight against corruption/organized crime.

The decrease of citizens’ trust in the new judicial institutions should serve as a warning call to the political elite, who need to distance themselves from unconstructive public discourses and/or behaviours. The mitigation of corruption and organized crime threats is possible only through the strengthening of state institutions, and their aligning with the principles of transparency and public accountability.

1.2 UNION’S INTERNAL STRUGGLE TO ENLARGE

Notwithstanding the assessments on Albania's fulfilment of these pre-conditions or in general its delivery on the EU reform agenda, the present stand-by mode of the accession process is not only a problem of satisfactory results. As the College of Commissioners in the office is heading towards the end of its second year of a five-year mandate, the accession process has not managed to advance. The pledged leading of a ‘geopolitical Commission’⁴ by President Ursula von der Leyen, to reinforce the role of the Union as a relevant international actor, has not materialised. Instead, the EU support of the candidate countries remains stuck at the declaratory level, without any concrete pressure on sceptical member states, who seem even more divided when dealing with enlargement policy, it has opted for temporary instrumentalization for short-term domestic political interests.

⁴ European Union, Speech in the European Parliament Plenary Session, Ursula von der Leyen, President-elect of the European Commission, Strasbourg, November 27, 2019. Accessible at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/president-elect-speech-original_1.pdf

Firstly, there is a lack of political capital at the EU level to push forward the accession process. Secondly, the democratic backsliding in some EU member states, like Hungary or Poland, has caused resistance to include enlargement policy in the Council's negotiation table. With enlargement not ranking high on the EU priority list, the general tendency now is to deal with one policy issue at a time. In the meantime, the adoption of certain instruments, like the new accession methodology of February 2020, are meant as transitory reinvigorating moves to keep the EU accession perspective alive. But, neither the new accession methodology nor the issuing of the green light for the opening of the accession talks in spring 2020 managed to change the course of events for Albania (and North Macedonia).

Thirdly, the general situation today is not conducive to the EU's readiness to welcome new members. The outbreak of COVID-19 last year profoundly reorientated the political priorities of the Union. Exploring the available alternatives to prevent the diffusion of the virus and at the same time enhancing the productive machinery became the two leading themes of the Commission's work. This corresponded with the entry into force of the new Multiannual Financial Framework, 2021-2027. Then there are the challenges posed by migration for the EU member states. Considering the financial difficulties caused by the pandemic and the withdrawal of the US and its NATO partners from Afghanistan, a new wave of migrants is expected to reach the Union's coasts in the coming months.

Fourthly, political situations in certain member states appear to not be in favourable shape. On the one hand, stand Poland and Hungary with their respective illiberal turn, and/or Bulgaria with its internal political instability. On the other hand, two major countries like Germany and France – the traditional 'engines of change' within the EU- are respectively going through an important electoral process, which may have a considerable effect on the Union's policy-shaping in the future. In particular, the presidential elections in France in April 2022 are considered a cornerstone for the enlargement process, and there is little expectation that there will be any breakthrough before then.

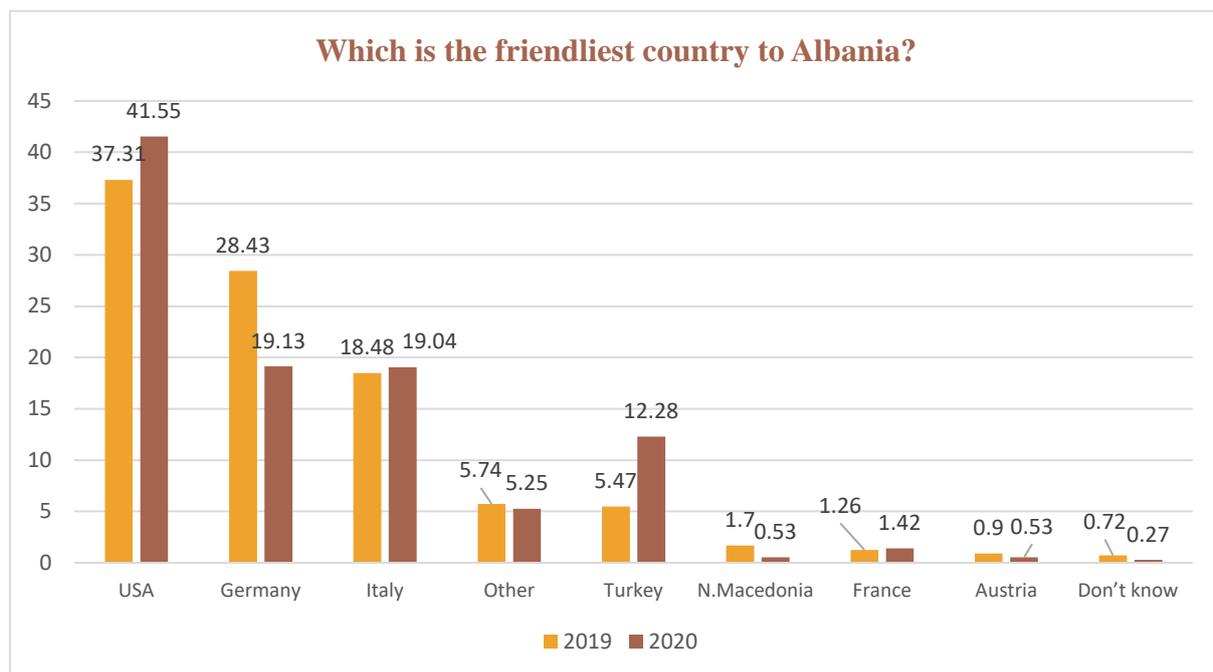
As the member states have turned into the 'real gatekeepers' of accession, their domestic developments are gaining even more importance when analysing the enlargement perspective in the short time span. While France and the Netherlands were the first countries to make use of their political power to halt the opening of the accession talks with Albania since 2020 it has been Bulgaria's turn to block the process. The instrumentalization of the veto power has created a fragmentation of the official positions between two EU institutions, with the Commission trying to push forward the accession process and the Council doing the opposite. Moreover, the presence of contrasting positions from the EU and its member states have created a cacophony of voices

emphasising the lack of realistic goals at the EU level when dealing with the Balkans, and particularly with Albania and North Macedonia.

The EU's internal veto politics undermines its ambition to become a global player and spreads disappointment among the Balkan countries, hindering reform efforts. In front of a missing carrot or delivery of promises, the political will to bring about reforms decreases. Instead, it allows for a 'geopolitical turn' as the Union risks creating a vacuum in its own backyard and opening the doors for Russia and China.

1.3 PARTNERS OR RIVALS? ALBANIA'S RELATIONS WITH THIRD COUNTRIES

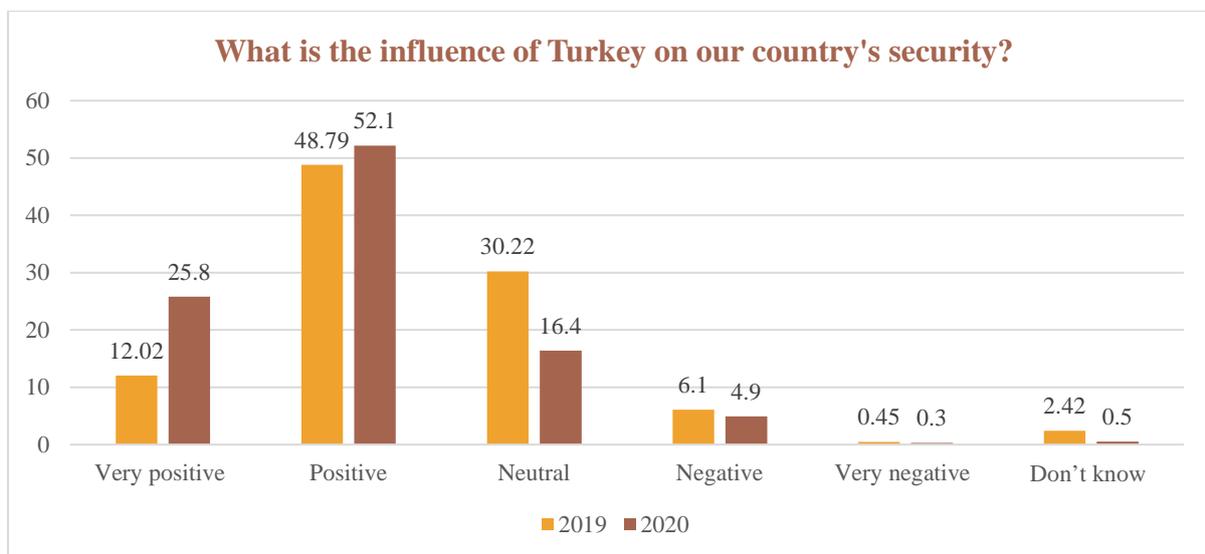
In light of an unclear accession perspective, the Western Balkan countries are slowly opening up to new investment opportunities from third countries. In the case of Albania, Turkey constitutes an interesting example for deeper analysis. If we analyse the findings of the Security Barometer, Turkey is perceived by Albanians as the fourth friendliest country to Albania, after USA, Germany, and Italy.



Graph 4: Perception of the friendliest country to Albania.

As shown in graph 4, the citizens' perception has more than doubled in one year in favour of Turkey, at the expense of the support of Germany. On the contrary to the general view of the Western partners vis-à-vis Turkey as a third country, Albanians support for Turkey is linked primarily to three sets of reasons. Firstly, the portrayed 'special friendship' between the Albanian Prime Minister and the Turkish President has had a positive impact.

Their frequent tete-à-tete meetings are widely mediatized in Albania and “both leaders have spent significant efforts and energy conserving the emotional aspect of this relation”⁵. Secondly, Turkey actively provided support to Albania after the earthquake of November 2019 and was the first country that the Albanian government reached out to during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Albania’s Prime Minister declared at that time that his government had put a list of requests to tackle the effects of coronavirus on Turkey’s table,⁶ and a year later it was again a Turkish company that managed to provide Albania with more than 1 million doses of Sinovac vaccines to handle the situation. Thirdly, Turkey has increased its presence in Albania’s business sector in the past 8 years. Its undertakings are investments in strategic segments, such as the co-participation in the establishment of Albania’s flag carrier AirAlbania, or the construction of Vlora Airport (later cancelled). Finally, in the public discourse, Turkey is often mentioned as a NATO partner of Albania, although in practice the current dynamics within the NATO framework are not the same as a decade or so ago.

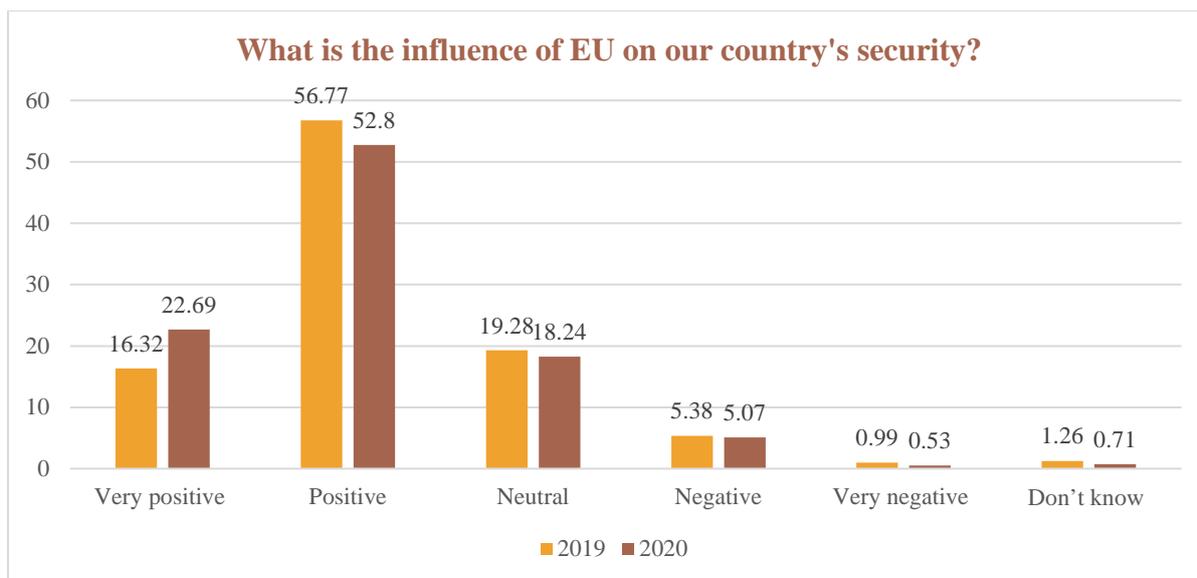


Graph 5: Perception of Turkey’s influence.

In terms of security provision, Turkey has provided considerable technical and financial assistance to the Albanian military forces. NATO is perceived in very positive terms by

⁵ Gentiola Madhi, "Our brother Erdogan" – From official to personal relations of political leaders of Albania and Kosovo with the Turkish President", *Western Balkans at the Crossroads*, Prague Security Studies Institutes, February 2021. Accessible at: https://6e7a0e8d-d938-46ff-832d-a1d2166bc3a6.filesusr.com/ugd/2fb84c_e0f33c388d464582a006d771df96c3d3.pdf

⁶ Balkanweb.com, “Ne rast se do te permbyset bota... Rama: Kam folur me Erdoganin, kemi ndihmen e garantuar”, March 19, 2020. Accessible at: <https://www.balkanweb.com/ne-rast-se-do-te-permbyset-bota-rama-kam-folur-me-erdoganin-kemi-ndihmen-e-garantuar/>



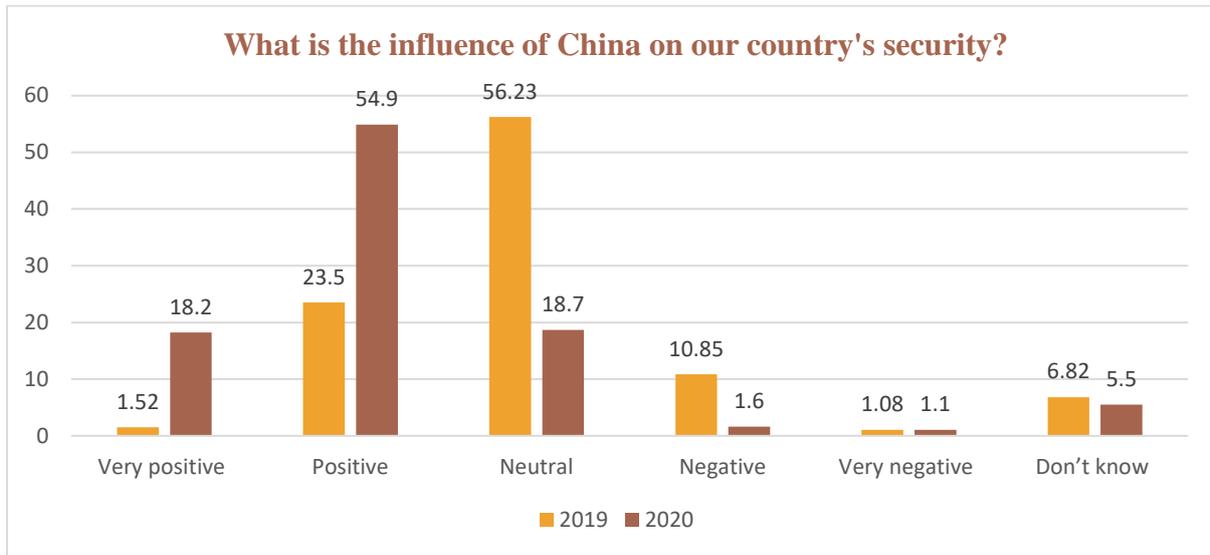
Graph 7: Perception of EU influence on Albania's security.

Nevertheless, the line of argument here is that Albania and the Western Balkans in general are Turkey's door to the EU and it does not seek an alternative integration model to that of the EU. Instead, Turkey's role and influence need to be analysed more in the frame of its capacity to affect the domestic processes in the Balkans, which favour its temporary interests.

Unlike its strong connections with Turkey, Albania's diplomatic relations with China follow quite a different path. In the past three decades, they can be characterized as formal and with limited visits at the highest level. The 'business as usual' approach has prevailed at the bilateral level, and both countries follow a diametrical positioning on many foreign policy issues, including the issue of Kosovo's independence. As long as China has no intention to recognize Kosovo as an independent country, no breakthrough can be expected. However, Albania presents an opportunity for China's agenda in Europe, and by following a low profile, the Chinese political pragmatism and long-term economic interests have resulted in a certain level of investment penetration in the country.⁷ Generally, the Chinese companies are reputed in Albania as reliant business partners, and all political parties show a positive inclination vis-a-vis China. The influence of China in Albania's security is assessed in positive terms by the respondents, beyond expectations. When we compare the barometer's data over the last two years, it emerges that there has been an 18-time increase in the percentage of Albanians considering China's influence as

⁷ Anika Abazi, "Albania. New geopolitics and shifting linkages", in Florian Bieber & Nikolaos Tzifakis (ed.), *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*, Routledge, London, 2019.

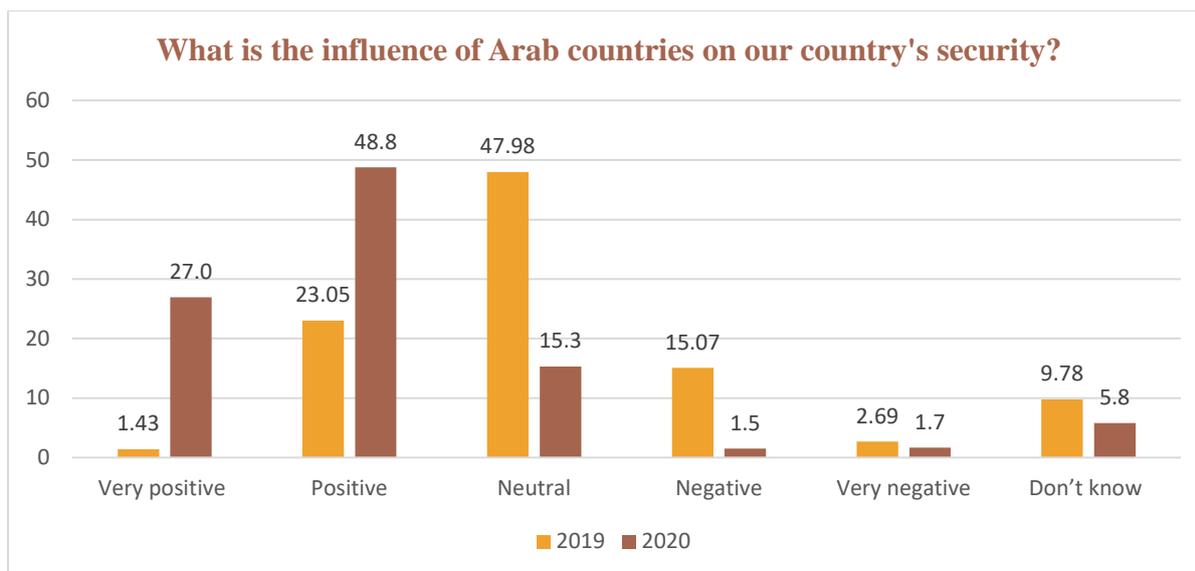
very positive, with those who see it in positive terms more than twice as high. (as shown in graph 8).



Graph 8: Perception of China's influence.

Overall, 73.1% of the respondents positively value the influence of China, a figure almost equal to the one on the EU's influence. This misalignment between the citizens' perception with the country's general foreign policy objectives should inspire greater reflection for the political elites who should consider the preparation of adequate informative content for domestic media outlets.

Finally, there has been a notable political opening between Albania and the Gulf countries (such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar) over the past years, to attract more foreign direct investments. The number of exchange visits at a high level has increased and these third countries have assured the Albanian leader of their faithfulness in times of uncertainty, as was the case after the earthquake and with the provision of 10,000 doses of the Russian vaccine early this year. Although bilateral relations now can be defined as business-oriented, it is interesting to note that the positive perception of Albanians has increased considerably. As graph 9 illustrates, in the last year 27% of the respondents assess in very positive terms the influence of the Arab countries on Albania's security, and the other 48.8% in positive terms.



Graph 9: Perception of Arab countries' influence.

Overall, the positive assessments are equal to 75.8%, which is higher than the figure of those assessing positively the EU's influence. This constitutes another interesting case that demands further investigation into the reasons for such strong credibility of the Arab countries in the eyes of Albanians. Such positive perceptions cannot be explained based only on the Arab investments in the country i.e., the recent signature of the concessionary agreement between the Albanian government with that of UAE on the construction for the touristic port of Durrës, or the establishment of a direct air route between Tirana and Dubai. Moreover, different dynamics need to be taken into consideration when referring to this group of countries. For instance, Saudi Arabia is generally perceived as a promoter of Wahhabism, this development should raise perplexities in front of the risk and extent of penetration of this ideology in Albania. Meanwhile, UAE is attempting to become an alternative financial provider to the Albanian authorities, and in the long run the 'debt diplomacy' may become a bitter reality for the country. Therefore, what emerges from the citizens' perceptions vis-à-vis the Arab countries or China's influence in the country's security is a general lack of in-depth/tailored knowledge among the wider public on the country's interests and the negative effects that some countries can exert on Albania's good governance and its European integration process.

1.4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Keeping the accession perspective in limbo is neither good for Albania nor the European Union. Therefore, there is a need to establish a new political momentum that can push the reform agenda forward at the domestic level, as well as enhance the perception that Albania's contribution to the EU is beneficial to the entire continent both in terms of stability and security. To this purpose, a list of targeted recommendations have been drawn for the main actors of the process:

2 TO THE EUROPEAN UNION:

- Define a clear vision with regards to the enlargement policy for the next five and ten years.
- Provide measurable incentives/actions that contribute to restoring credibility in the accession process.
- Monitor regularly the situation of rule of law in the candidate countries, by using the same instruments as for the member states.
- Engage with and involve non-state actors in policy processes that go beyond the consultations on the country's annual progress.

2. TO THE ALBANIAN GOVERNMENT:

- Engage in a permanent dialogue within the institutional framework with the political and non-political actors on issues of foreign policy.
- Reach out for a bipartisan agreement in the parliament on the adoption of the EU reforms and related legislation.
- Enhance the public participation of technical staff in public debates on judicial reform and other reforms in general.
- Increase transparency and accountability of state institutions dealing with foreign and security issues.

- Invest in informative campaigns on the benefits of EU integration and the foreign policy priorities of Albania.
- Support non-political initiatives (through financial contributions and technical infrastructure) for specific age groups, especially youth not attending tertiary education.
- Incentivize educative programs in national media outlets on foreign policy and security issues.

3. TO THE ALBANIAN PARLIAMENT:

- Demand for constant accountability of the government on the reform agenda.
- Reach out of bi-partisan agreements over the country's strategic priorities.
- Increase the quality of reporting and information over the work of the parliamentary groups and plenary sessions.
- Invest in open access digital infrastructure.
- Strengthen the presence in the public and academic sphere.
- Establish research units for tailored policy analysis and cooperation with non-state actors.

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