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Media Observatory Report

The second issue of MORE features:

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#02. July 2023

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INTRO: Media Observatory Report (MORE)

The 2nd issue of MORE is published in a period of renewed bilateral tensions following the arrest and detention of the ethnic Greek Mayor elect of Himare, Freddy Beleris, last May. This new crisis, which remains unresolved and threatens to derail the improving bilateral relations, will be analysed in the 3rd issue of MORE.

The present issue is a testament to the volatility of bilateral relations. That is because the period covered (December 2022 – February 2023), the visits to Albania undertaken in that period by Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias, and the media work we monitored, all demonstrate the willingness of the two governments to turn a page in their bilateral relations. At the time, the two governments seemed to be on the same wavelength, with only the media, with their often stereotypical or prejudicial reporting, remaining as obstacles to rapid improvements in bilateral relations. A few months later, the political climate seems less favourable.

There will be more on how things turned sour in the next issue of MORE. For now, let us focus on the high-level visits to Albania and how the media on both sides failed to understand the political atmosphere between the two governments. As we will see in this issue, in contrast to the attitudes of the political leaderships, the Greek media tended to rely on stereotypes to discredit Albania's leadership, rather than attempting to understand the complex sociopolitical trends in the neighbouring nation. For their part, the Albanian media often published unsubstantiated analyses of the 'real intentions' of the other side, depicting Greece as a "blackmailer" with total control over Albania's EU perspectives and subsequent prosperity.

Our analysis aims once again to provide food for thought about how media in both countries, unable still to see the wood for the trees, recycle misconceptions and ultimately fail to reflect the new realities, both in bilateral relations and in the wider context of the Balkan region and the EU.

02.



SEE MORE

Inside the stories

The second issue of MORE is the fruit of media monitoring which took place between December 2022 and February 2023. We have selected three key stories to analyse from this period.

For each story, the Media Observatory Report provides:

- a. a short background;
- b. a short qualitative analysis of certain media stories (striking examples, news headlines, narratives);
- c. the description of the actual events which were reported on incorrectly;
- d. an assessment of the political significance of the media choices made, their impact on public perceptions, and primarily the opportunities the media missed to play a constructive role in creating a more healthy political discourse;
- e. key takeaways about the political impact of the media coverage.



This 2nd MORE focuses on:

1. **Mitsotakis' first visit to Albania:**
Unfortunate statements, apologies, and the bad weather
[Click and go to page 4](#)
2. **Dendias in Tirana once again:**
Turkey as a third factor in Greece - Albania relations
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1. THE ISSUE

Mitsotakis' first visit to Albania:

Unfortunate statements, apologies, and the bad weather



EU-Western Balkans Summit - 2022.
Family Photo: Tirana, Albania Dec 6, 2022
©European Union [Credit Link](#)

1.1. SHORT BACKGROUND

It was the first visit undertaken by a Greek prime minister to Tirana in 13 years, and took place within the framework of a [European Union – Western Balkans Summit](#), the first such event held in a candidate country. Coincidentally, the last visit by a Greek premier to the Albanian capital [was in 2009](#), the day before Albania submitted its application for EU membership. The presence of Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Tirana was intended to serve a [twofold purpose](#): encouraging Albania's European perspectives, and promoting a further improvement in bilateral relations.

However, the visit was “overshadowed” by an interview published in [Euractiv](#) on the same day in which the Albanian premier, Edi Rama, appeared to say that Greece had “cheated the EU” for many years both before and after it joined the Union. Rama [apologized](#) to his counterpart for his comment during their bilateral meeting. Bad weather prevented Kyriakos Mitsotakis from visiting villages where members of the Greek minority live.

These issues gave rise to SYRIZA, the main Greek opposition party, accusing the government of "dangerous communicative management" in Greek foreign policy.

1.2. GR MEDIA

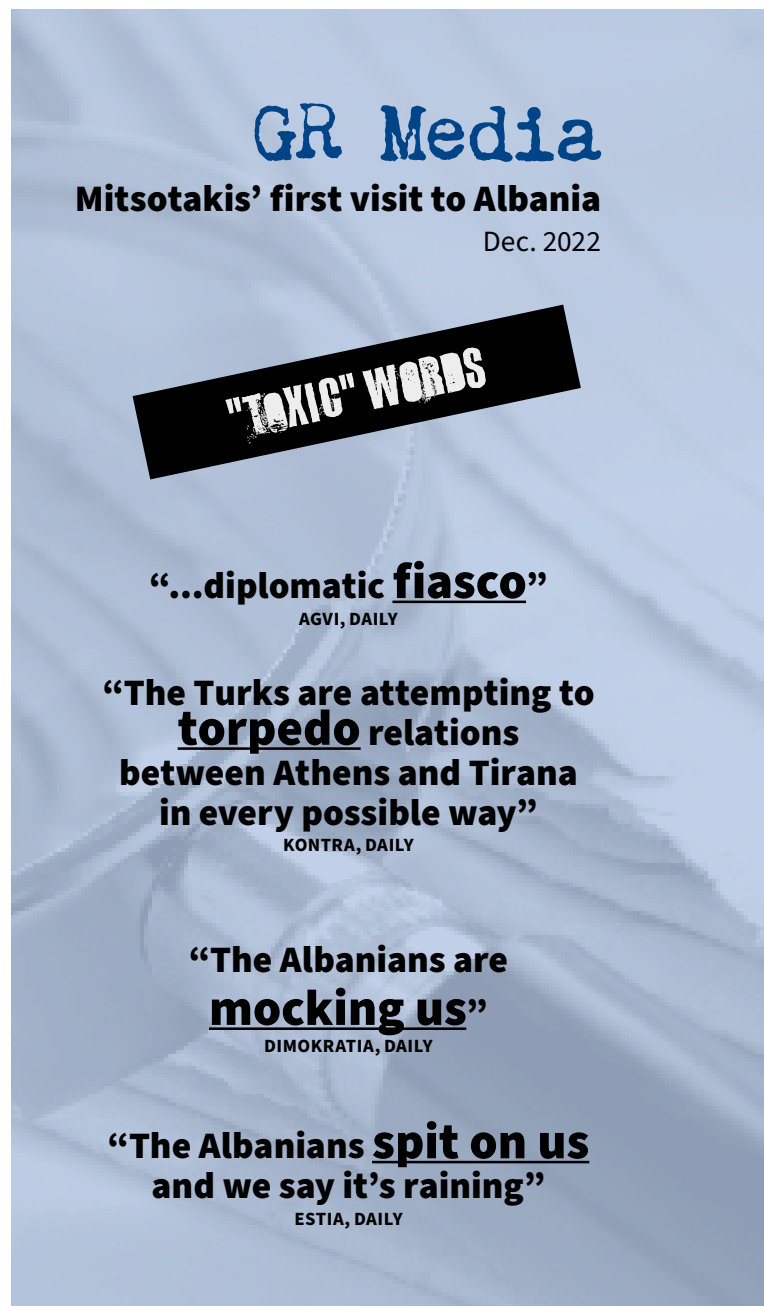
A “foggy” visit: The visit of the Greek PM to Tirana and his presence at the EU–Western Balkans Summit may have received good coverage in the media for three consecutive days, but the approach differed depending on the editorial line of the individual outlet.

For instance, pro-government papers emphasized the pending issue of the maritime borders along with Rama’s apology to Mitsotakis for his statements to Euractiv. Nationalistic media talked about the insult made by Rama and highlighted his close relationship with the Turkish president. Media affiliated with SYRIZA ([Avgi](#)) claimed the visit was a “**diplomatic fiasco**” and even questioned whether bad weather conditions really were the reason Mitsotakis postponed his visit to the villages of the ethnic Greek minority.

For example, **Ta Nea**’s front-page headline read: “**Rama’s apology** and the road to The Hague”. Other indicative headlines include: “The Albanians are **mocking us**” ([Dimokratia](#)), “**The Albanians spit on us and we say it’s raining**” ([Estia](#)), “Rama blocks Mitsotakis: **The Turks are attempting to torpedo** relations between Athens and Tirana in every possible way” ([Kontra](#)).

[Kathimerini](#) (center-right) revealed that: “Despite the political agreement (...), it would seem that the *compromis* [i.e. the legal document that will refer the issue to the ICJ] is still some way from being approved by Albania. Athens asked Washington and Berlin to mediate to Tirana in recent months, to progress the issue. However, the results have been less than spectacular, with no meetings taking place at a technical level.”

[Dimokratia](#) (right-wing) pointed out in its editorial that: “Mr. Rama is seeking to humiliate both

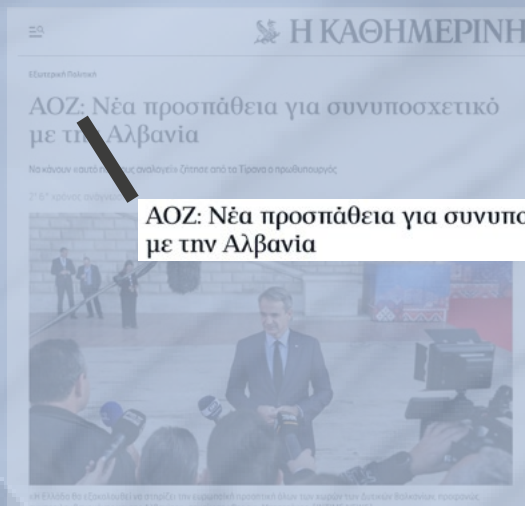


Prime Minister Mitsotakis and our country, and he commits this hubris because he is convinced that he will not suffer any consequences for what he said”, adding that “it is not possible to seriously consider Albania’s EU candidacy. This is a bad joke. Albania is a country that systematically violates human rights and brutally oppresses the Greek national minority.”

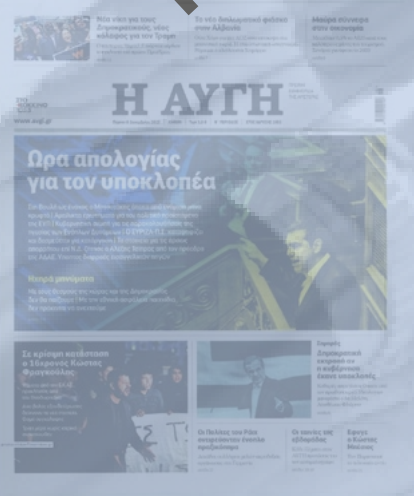
GR Media Headlines

Mitsotakis' first visit to Albania

Dec. 2022 2022



Το νέο διπλωματικό φιάσκο στην Αλβανία
Ούτε Χάγη για τον ΑΟΖ ούτε επίσκεψη στα μονοτακά χωριά. Η απικονομική «συγγνώμη» Ράμα και η πλάκωστη Χειμάρρα σελίδα 7



του Εύθ. Π. Πέτρον
Μας «πτύουν» οι Άλβανοί, και έμεις λέμε ότι βρέχει...

1.3. AL MEDIA

Optimism over the delimitation of the maritime zones: The presence of the Greek PM in Tirana received extensive media coverage, but the primary focus was on the maritime zones issue. The overall reporting was positive, allowing room for the 'optimism' [expressed by the Greek PM](#) that a solution would be found to the issue. However, there was no consensus on which side is responsible for moving the process forward.

[Shqiptarja.com](#) (pro-government) wrote: "The Greek PM in Tirana: Optimistic that, together with the Albanian government, we will find a solution to the sea issue." [Syri.net](#) (pro-opposition), while still speaking of 'optimism', focuses primarily on the responsibilities on the Albanian side.

AL Media

Mitsotakis' first visit to Albania

Dec. 2022



1.4. SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

a. Rama's interview with Euractiv

What was actually said: The interview in Euractiv was published on the day of the Summit. In the [English version](#) of his interview, Rama spoke about "the need to push ahead with reforms to ensure the authenticity of the enlargement process." He specifically said: "We should not forget that the integration process is an individual-based, merit-based process. We have to fulfil homework criteria standards, and it's not an exam to be cheated (...)." He added that it is crucial to have working institutions and not to "cheat a lot as some neighbouring countries did in the past. When asked to name names, Rama said, "Greece."

However, the [Greek version](#) read: "Albanian PM Edi Rama... gave an exclusive interview to Euractiv which contained innuendos against Athens. He more or less stated that Greece 'cheated' to join the EU." Specifically, the Greek version has translated the sticking point of his statements as: "And because it's for our own good," he said, "we need to have functioning institutions." "Not like some countries did in the past, like a neighbouring country, Greece for example, that cheated a lot. It took money from Europe, went through a period of opulence and then ended up very badly," the Albanian Prime Minister stressed.

Distortion of reality: So, it seems the controversy was provoked by the clearly misleading translation into Greek of the original text. The original verbatim text of Rama's full interview is not available on Euractiv's website. However, it seems clear that, somewhere between the two versions, the published text was given a particular twist that was certainly unfriendly towards Greece.



Photo P7GPMFD © iLixe48 - Envato Elements (adaptation)

That does not mean that Edi Rama's statements were not unfortunate, but the misleading translation led to a number of stories, op-eds and headlines in the Greek media focusing on the purported insult.

Greek media therefore stressed that Greece had good cause to be suspicious of Rama and especially of his role in the maritime borders issue; these analyses suggested, as a consequence, that Greece could block Tirana's EU accession.

Behind closed doors: Reading the [public statements](#) of the two PMs during their bilateral meeting, it seems that Mr. Rama's interview was discussed, but it appears that his apology ([he reportedly said](#): "It was never meant to be about contemporary Greece") was well received by the Greek delegation and did not overshadow the substance of the talks.

1.4. SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

b. The postponing of Mitsotakis' visit to Greek minority villages

What actually happened: Kyriakos Mitsotakis was originally scheduled to visit Himare, Livadhe and Dervican on December 8, after his visit to Tirana, but the visit was postponed due to bad weather. According to government sources, his office had been informed the morning before by Greek authorities that fog was predicted in Himare for the early hours of December 8. The opinion was that the helicopter that was to have taken on the visit would be unable to do so. The same sources said Mitsotakis was scheduled to attend a New Democracy party meeting that evening in Athens, and had chosen to travel by helicopter as a result.

Political controversy: It seems that both Rama's interview and the postponing of Mitsotakis' visit to villages of the Greek minority allowed SYRIZA to downplay the political significance of the Greek PM's visit to Albania, even before it had taken place. On December 6, the day before Mitsotakis visited Tirana **Avgi**, the SYRIZA newspaper, wrote about "Mitsotakis' pre-elections acrobatics with the minority", accusing him of trying to gain more votes from the right of the political spectrum ahead of the parliamentary elections.

Fiction vs reality: On December 7, **Estia** (right-wing) wrote: "Mr. Rama, you don't guarantee the PM's safety and yet dream about the EU?", while **Ta Nea** questioned whether there had been "a warning of a planned provocation by Albanian ultra-nationalists? A potential incident with Chams could be an explanation," it said. The Greek PM's subsequent visit to the Albanian South revealed such reporting to be pure speculation which served only to reinforce existing stereotypes about Albania.

The postponing of Mitsotakis' visit to Greek minority villages



Photo P7GPMFD © iLixe48 - Envato Elements (adaptation)

In the Albanian media, the historian Arben Llalla said on **Euronews Albania** that the Greek PM's visit to Himara had been postponed following the request by the Albanian PM, since Mitsotakis would be accompanied from the Kakavije border crossing by representatives of the far right who were unwelcome in Albania. Again, there was no evidence of any such plan by the Greek PM, and the reporting served only to reinforce existing stereotypes in the Albanian media.

Overall, despite rumours and misinformation to the contrary, it was bad weather conditions that prevented the Greek premier from visiting villages where ethnic Greeks live. After all, the rescheduled visit was undertaken by Mitsotakis and Rama just a few days later, on December 22.

1.5. POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Further "poisoning" relations: Most stories and op-eds in the Greek press chose to highlight the unfortunate statements made by the Albanian PM, rather than the friendly atmosphere the two officials maintained throughout the visit. For example, a commentary in **Ta Nea**, though stressing that Rama's statement has been wrongly interpreted, still noted that: "the very word "cheat" is insulting and reveals the

rudeness of the Albanian PM, especially as the host of the Western Balkans - EU Summit.”

Another op-ed in [Kathimerini](#) under the title: Seeking Albanian trust (using the Albanian word ‘besa’) said Greece should not trust the Albanian leadership, because “thirty years’ experience has taught us that problems with Albania (...) generally appear at the moment of implementation (of agreements). Our experience with certain politicians teaches us they forget their commitments. They seek pretexts to cancel them, or at best postpone them.”

Such opinions not only failed to highlight the positive outcome of the Greek PM’s visit to Tirana, they actually added to the stereotyping and mistrust of Albania, especially through the pejorative comments and language used in relation to its leader.

Unable to see the wood for the trees: With the exception of one story in [Kathimerini](#), which highlighted the importance of the Tirana Summit in providing a new boost for the enlargement process, both Albanian and Greek media once again focused obsessively on the delimiting of the two countries’ Exclusive Economic Zones. As a result, they failed to discuss the benefits Albania’s accession to the EU could bring, both to bilateral relations and the wider Balkan region.

It is also clear, especially following the start of Albania’s EU accession talks in July 2022, that the political leaderships in Athens and Tirana have been keen to get bilateral relations on a new track. This positive attitude has largely been absent from the media analyses on both sides.



1.6. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ↳ Once Tirana’s EU negotiations began, the political leaderships in both countries intensified their efforts to improve bilateral relations and to gradually settle bilateral issues. Mitsotakis’ visit to Tirana in early December, the first by a Greek PM to Albania in 13 years, was part of these efforts.
- ↳ Edi Rama made unfortunate statements, which were wrongly interpreted by the Greek media and opposition parties, and for which he apologized. The Greek political leadership stayed on script, stressing its strategic choice of supporting Albania’s EU accession process.
- ↳ However, oversimplified and derogatory analyses in the Greek press continue to fuel distrust of the Albanian side and ignore the progress made by Albanian society and politics.
- ↳ Media on both sides continue to focus with near obsession on the delimiting of the maritime zones. While the issue clearly has to be resolved—and before the conclusion of Albania’s EU accession talks, to prevent it being exploited politically by factors on both sides—the legal route agreed by both sides is the most appropriate way to do so.

2. THE ISSUE

Dendias in Tirana once again:

Turkey as a third factor in Greece - Albania relations



FM Dendias meets his Albanian counterpart Olta Xhaçka in Tirana. Dec 21, 2022. flickr.com, Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών, Creative Commons (CC BY-SA 2.0) License. [Credit link](#)

2.1. SHORT BACKGROUND

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias visited Tirana in mid-December as part of a mini-tour of the Western Balkans. It was the [third time](#) Dendias had visited Tirana and he met with both his counterpart, Olta Xhaçka, and PM Edi Rama. Public statements by both FMs reflected a very positive atmosphere and their press conference concluded without incident—unlike [their press conference of May 2022](#), which was overshadowed by a statement about the Chams made by Xhaçka.

According to the Greek media, the only fly in the ointment was Albania's [purchase](#) of three Turkish Bayraktar drones a day before Dendias' arrival in Tirana and two before the Greek PM's visit to the South of Albania (see below for more on this). Interviewed for Euractiv on the same day, Albania's former PM Sali Berisha reinforced the dominant belief in Greece that Ankara was behind the annulment of the 2009 maritime sea borders agreement between Athens and Tirana.

2.2. GR MEDIA

Discomfort over the Bayraktar drones: The visit received good coverage by the press. However, with the exception of some references to what the two FMs actually said, most stories highlighted Dendias' discontent with Rama having contracted to buy three Bayraktar drones from a Turkish company. Concluding his visit, [Dendias said](#) that Albania had made a key choice to join the EU, and that Greece enthusiastically supports that course. However, he continued, this means the country has to decide on "a series of parameters" that serve the basic EU narrative.

Avgi (left-wing) saw **indirect blackmail** in Dendias' statement: "Albania (needs to choose to be) either with the EU or with Turkey", while **Eleftheros Typos** (right-wing) wrote: "Dendias' pointed **insinuation** to Tirana about the Turkish drones." **Kathimerini** said that: Dendias "has sent a very discreet but **clear message** regarding Albania's European perspectives and the impact of the undermining role played in the Western Balkans by **third actors** with a revisionist agenda, **such as Turkey.**"

GR Media

Dendias in Tirana once again Dec. 2022

Απάντηση
Δένδια στον Ράμα
για την Τουρκία



Η ΑΥΓΗ



Ή με την Ε.Ε., ή με την Τουρκία η Αλβανία

Εμφάνιση επίθεση Δένδια στον Ράμα μέσα στα Τίρανα μία μέρα πριν από την επίσκεψη Μπιτοσάκι στα μπινοτικά χωριά της Αλβανίας

Αιχμές Δένδια προς Τίρανα για τα τουρκικά drones



Αιχμές Δένδια προς Τίρανα για τα τουρκικά drones

Απάντηση Δένδια στον Ράμα για Τουρκία, Bayraktar

Επίσκεψη στα Τίρανα

Απάντηση Δένδια στον Ράμα για Τουρκία, Bayraktar

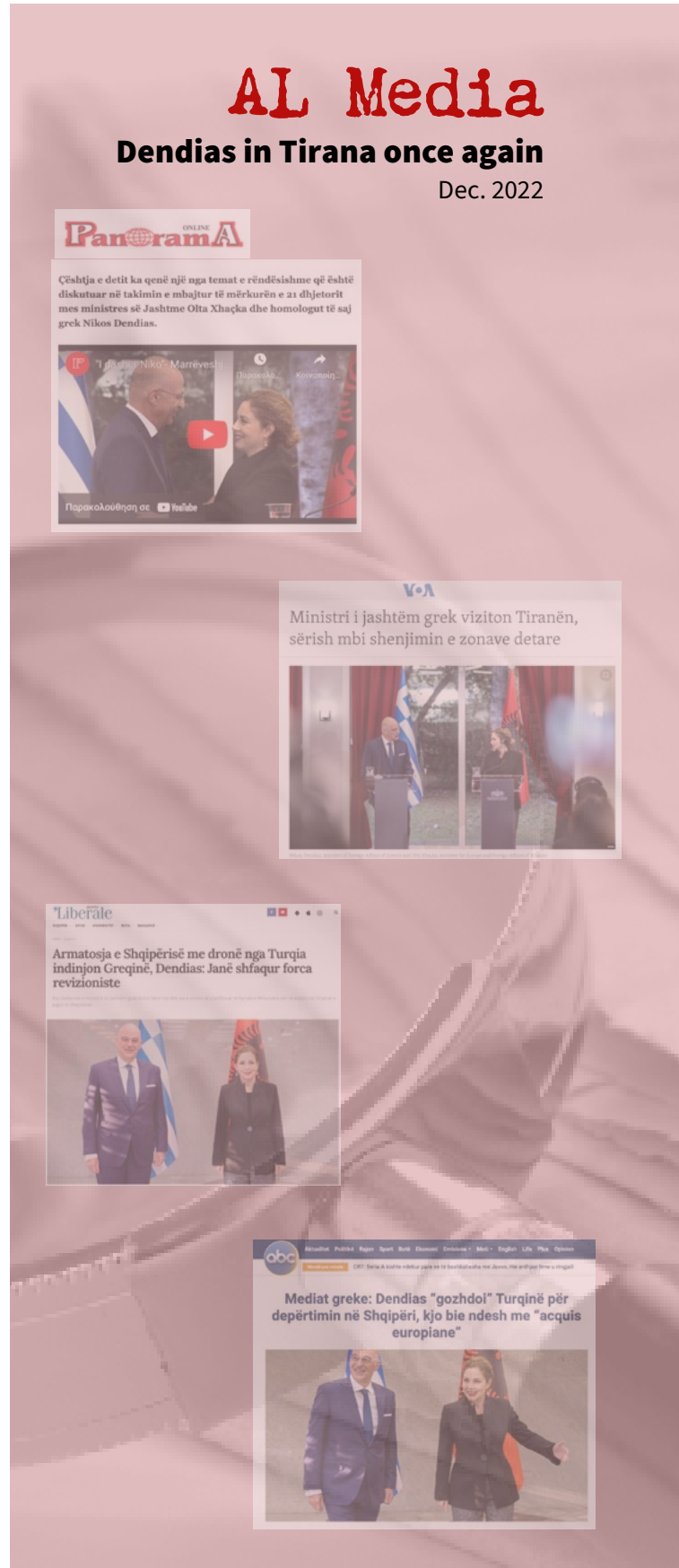
Επίσκεψη στα Τίρανα

Επρόκειτο η Αλβανία έχει κάνει την επιλογή να καταστεί μέλος της Ε.Ε., θα πρέπει να λάβει και τις ανάλογες αποφάσεις, είχε πει από τα Τίρανα ο υπουργός Εξωτερικών Νίκος Δένδιας, λίγο μετά τη δήλωση του πρωθυπουργού Ενβι Ράμα πως γιάζει υπερήφανος διότι η χώρα του είναι «στην ίδια πλευρά» με την Τουρκία. Ο κ. Ράμα, μετά την υπογραφή για προμήθεια τριών UAV τύπου Bayraktar, περιγράφει την Τουρκία ως «στρατηγικό εταίρο της χώρας του» λέγοντας ότι «το ευχαριστώ δεν είναι αρκετό» για τον «φίλο του κ. Ερντογάν». ΛεΑ. 4

2.3. AL MEDIA

Delimitation of EEZ remains priority: Media prioritized the delimitation of maritime zones. [Gazeta Panorama](#) (pro-opposition) noted Xhaçka addressing the Greek FM in a friendly manner. "Dear Niko" - The Foreign Minister talks about the discussions on the maritime agreement with Greece: We are looking for a compromise for the referral to the International Court of Justice", it wrote. [Voice of America](#) (neutral) gave space to the maritime zones issue, with a focus on Dendias emphasizing the importance of respect for International Laws as the basis for resolving bilateral disputes.

"Bayraktar" agreement 'bothers' Greece: Media also reported Dendias' discontent over Albania's purchase of the "Bayraktars". [Liberale.al](#) (pro-opposition) reports that "the arming of Albania with drones from Turkey infuriates Greece, Dendias: Revisionist forces have appeared". For its part, [ABC News](#) (pro-government) reported: "Greek media: Dendias 'nailed' Turkey for penetrating Albania, this contradicts the 'European acquis'."



2.4. SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

On Berisha's statement: Dendias' visit to Tirana coincided with a [statement made to EURACTIV](#) by former PM Sali Berisha, who reportedly said Turkey had "intervened" to cancel the 2009 Greece-Albania maritime deal. His statement was quoted by a number of stories in the Greek press. **Political** (right-wing) wrote: "Edi Rama's role and Berisha's 'bomb'", while **Estia** (right-wing) in an op-ed entitled "The new romantic nationalism" stressed that Berisha was speaking half-truths when he left out his own relations with Turkey; the newspaper concluded that Albania's EU path went through Athens, not Ankara.

What has been actually said: In his interview, Berisha referred to the bilateral agreement reached in 2009 for the delimitation of maritime zones. He said that Albania's then opposition Socialist Party, led by current PM Rama, appealed to the Constitutional Court before the agreement was ratified by both countries. Then he said this: "Greece signed it with six nautical miles of territorial waters for itself. Edi Rama was the one who brought the agreement to the Constitutional Court. Turkey was never interested in that agreement and made a strong intervention."

Open to interpretations: It is noteworthy that no video recording was provided for the interview and Euractiv did not provide a text in Albanian, either. Berisha's statement, as translated into English and [Greek](#) by Euractiv, seems open to different interpretations. Another point is that the interviewer did not ask Berisha what he meant by "made a strong intervention", especially since he reportedly said "Turkey was never interested."

On Berisha's statement



Photo P7GPMFD © iLixe48 - Envato Elements (adaptation)

It was not the first time that Euractiv's Greek-language reporting had effectively spoilt an official Greek visit to Tirana; the same thing happened with the misleading translation of Rama's interview on the day of Mitsotakis' visit. However, the Greek media never questioned the ambiguous statement and decided to re-publish it, simply to reinforce a common narrative in Greece that Ankara was behind the annulment of the 2009 maritime agreement (for more, see [MORE no. 1](#)). It was also not the first time Berisha had made this claim. In fact, he had also [blamed](#) a third party for the annulment of the 2009 agreement in 2016, though he did not name the party on that occasion. No media went to the trouble to search for or reference any previous statements, or to verify its truthfulness on either occasion.

2.5. POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Kicking the dog and meaning the master: The Greek media stories on the Greek FM's third visit to Tirana focused more on Dendias' indirect messages to Turkey regarding Ankara's role in the Balkans. It was the main point Dendias was seeking to make at the press conference with his counterpart, when he emphasized the presence of revisionist forces in the region. It was also his choice to express his discontent with Albania's purchase of the Turkish drones in a separate statement. He even subtly warned Tirana that it has to choose its allies and friends when he stressed that Albania has to decide on "a series of parameters" that serve the basic EU narrative.

Subsequently, the Greek media gave greater emphasis to relations between Albania and Turkey, linking their stories to Berisha's interview and thus reinforcing a commonly-held belief in Greece that a special relationship between Ankara and Tirana is targeted at Athens.

However, an op-ed by Mero Baze for [Tema](#) noted that with his interview, Berisha was essentially seeking to "exploit" this perception in Greece politically. According to Baze, Berisha believed his argument might encourage the ICJ to look at the annulment as the result of a Turkish intervention, thereby leaving his agreement with Greece intact. And secondly, Berisha was trying to present himself as Greece's man in Albania by identifying Rama with Erdogan. Baze concluded that, fortunately, Albanian-Greek relations are on the way to permanent consolidation.

The two Foreign Ministers stressed this in their joint statement, saying that were ready to compromise on the delimitation of maritime borders and talking about the "bridges between our two peoples", referring to the Greek minority in Albania and the Albanian community in Greece. With the exception of sporadic references in some media (**Avgi, Ta Nea**), the majority of headlines and stories missed the important messages both Ministers wanted to send out about the future of bilateral relations and Albania's European future.



2.6. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ↳ Albania and Turkey have longstanding relations and are NATO allies. Tirana has every right to pursue military agreements with any country that serves its own national interests. Of course, its European perspective will also be judged on its alignment with relevant EU decisions in foreign and defense affairs. In this respect, unlike other Western Balkan countries whose leaderships habitually cultivate anti-western sentiment, Albania remains fully aligned with its NATO / EU rights and obligations.
- ↳ Greece has made a strategic choice, also in accordance to its own national interest, to support Albania's European perspective. Consequently, in its public statements, Greece's political leadership needs to highlight the benefits of this perspective for its relations with Tirana and the Western Balkans. Good and honest relations with Albania do not require Tirana to choose between allies and partners. Greek officials should not undermine the progress made in bilateral relations by insinuating that Albania's relations with Turkey are aimed against Greece.
- ↳ Media in both countries need to be more cautious when reporting on statements by officials and take care not to unquestioningly reproduce narratives that undermine bilateral relations. Instead of focusing on pending issues alone, the media could highlight issues that are paving the way towards stronger bilateral relations; issues of this sort relating to the environment, energy, economy or tourism are typically raised by officials in both countries, but rarely feature in media stories.

3. THE ISSUE

Mitsotakis' historic visit to the Greek minority in Albania:

The minority as a “bridge of friendship”



PM Rama and his Greek counterpart Mitsotakis meet in Dervican, Albania, Dec. 22, 2022. Photo copyright: AP. Source: [Lapsi.al](https://www.lapsi.al).

3.1. SHORT BACKGROUND

Just a few days after his visit to Tirana, Kyriakos Mitsotakis [visited Himare, Livadhja and Dervican](#), where many ethnic Greeks live, on December 22. The visit was originally scheduled to take place on December 7, but had to be postponed due to bad weather. It was the first visit by a Greek premier to Albania's ethnic Greek minority areas since his late father, Konstantinos Mitsotakis, traveled there as PM 31 years ago. In Himare, Mitsotakis was accompanied by Olympic gold medallist Pyrrros Dimas, a native of the town, while in Dervican he was joined by Edi Rama. Both PMs [declared](#) the Greek minority to be “an irreplaceable bridge in the inextricable connection between our two countries.” Rama announced that he would renovate the square in Dervican and rename it after Mitsotakis' father, a gesture that was highlighted in the [media](#).

The purpose of the Greek PM's visit was twofold: to speak with representatives of the Greek minority, to listen to their problems and declare Greece's support, as well as to send the message that Albania's European perspective will only be possible as long as Tirana respects the rights of Albania's ethnic Greek minority.

3.2. GR MEDIA

Greek flags and Orthodox Hellenism: The visit received good coverage for almost eight days in the press. Most stories described the visit as historic and of symbolic importance and included photographs of Mitsotakis meeting members of the Greek minority who are holding Greek flags and chanting “Hellas, Hellas!”

In their headlines, **Kathimerini** (center right) and **Ta Nea** (center) chose to highlight the premier’s reference to the Greek minority as a “bridge of friendship”, and Mitsotakis’ statement that the Greeks of Albania “sustained the flame of Hellenism and Orthodoxy”. A few, mostly right-wing papers (**Eleftheros Typos** and **Dimokratia**) chose to use the term ‘Northern Epirus’, a term often considered offensive in Albania, in their stories and headlines.

But typical nationalist sentiments of the sort more dominant in Greek media in the past, were still repeated. For example, an op-ed published in the left-wing pro-SYRIZA **Efsyn** newspaper spoke of “repressive policies” against the Greek minority in Albania as a “national catastrophe [for the ethnic Greek community] that has been ongoing since the early 1990s.” The op-ed repeated many standard nationalist, anti-Albanian and irredentist tropes. Such fiercely anti-Albanian media content can still be found in the Greek press, but is far less popular than in the past.

GR Media

Mitsotakis’ historic visit to the Greek minority in Albania



3.3. AL MEDIA

A positive tone, but some irritation: The visit of the Greek PM received good coverage with an overall positive tone. Stories emphasized his two distinct messages: respect for the rights of the Greek minority and support for Albania's EU accession. It did not, however, go unnoticed by some Albanian media that ethnic Greeks turned up to listen to the Greek PM carrying Greek flags, while others chanted nationalist slogans.

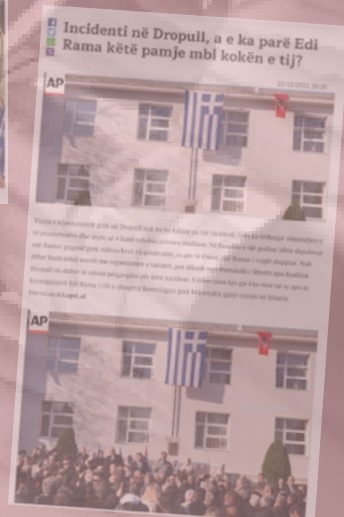
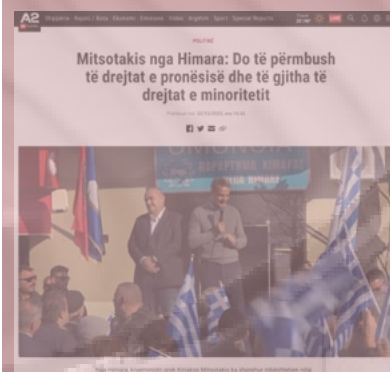
[Shqiptarja.com](#) (pro-gov) chose to run with the headline: *"Mitsotakis visits the Greek minority in Albania: Albania must respect your rights! Rama: National minority is a connecting bridge in relations between our two countries."* [Ora News](#) (pro-opposition) also reported positively on the visit in Himara; its headline: *"Greek flags in Himara for PM Mitsotakis"*. [A2CNN](#) (neutral) highlighted the Greek PM's statement on minority rights in: *"Mitsotakis from Himare: We will see property rights and all minority rights implemented"* and reported that the Greek PM has been given an enthusiastic welcome by the inhabitants of Himare with traditional music and clothing from Northern Epirus and Greek flags.

In Himara and Dervican, although both flags were flying on the public buildings, the Greek flag was far bigger. Probably because no official complaint was made, only a few media close to the Opposition reported it. Like [Lapsi.al](#), they limited their reporting to a 'protocol' incident and did not elaborate on the content of the chants.

Having said that, it is more than certain that the Greek media would have condemned any incident in which members of the Muslim minority in Greece waved Turkish flags during the visit of a Turkish official visit to their villages, or chanted slogans with similar content, as disrespect of Greek sovereignty.

AL Media

Mitsotakis' historic visit to the Greek minority in Albania



3.4. SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Association of Greek municipalities

What was actually said: In an article in [Gazeta Dita](#) (pro-gov) in early December, former diplomat Shaban Murati claimed that the Greek PM's visit to the Greek minority was intended to inaugurate and formalize the creation of the "Association of Greek Municipalities" in Albania.

What was meant: The former diplomat took a controversial notion used in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue out of context. Such a reference would understandably generate suspicion among readers about Mitsotakis' visit and the aims of the Greek government.

Distortion of reality: There is no public statement or official document detailing any intention on the part of any Greek government to create an Association of Greek municipalities in Albania. Moreover, according to diplomatic sources in Athens, Greek officials have never in recent years requested in private the formation of such an Association from Albania, nor do they have any intention of doing so in the future. Once again, unsubstantiated claims in influential media seem to have worked to undermine the conciliatory efforts of the two governments.



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3.5. POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

A new “chapter”: The Greek PM made two visits of a high symbolic nature to Albania within the space of two weeks, but only one story ([Ta Nea](#)) pointed out the two governments’ will to turn a new page in their relations. No big news came out of this visit, but that Rama was present for most of it cannot be overlooked. Stories in the Greek press did, however, miss the opportunity to highlight the importance of the PMs’ joint appearance and the visit itself, which reflected above all Greece’s strong will to support Albania’s European course.

The Greek press usually talks about the problems of the Greek minority—in fact, it tends to call it “forgotten”, implying that the Greek state does not do enough—when reporting on bilateral relations. Rarely if ever do Greek media report move beyond its narrow focus on the complaints and grievances of the Greek minority to report the progress achieved in Albania and to reflect on the future of bilateral relations when the country is well on course to join the EU. This has been yet another missed opportunity.

But many challenges remain: In an op-ed published in [Gazeta Panorama](#) (opposition), former Albanian FM Ditmir Bushati stressed that, despite what Mitsotakis said during his visit to Himare, the city “is not a municipality of the Greek minority” and that the Greek PM’s declarations about the Greek minority do not reflect reality. He reminded readers that Albania has developed a legal framework to ensure respect for and the protection of the rights of national minorities, and that Greece has historically denied the existence of an Albanian minority in Greece. However, reading Mitsotakis’ [statements](#), it seems that he did not in fact call Himare a municipality of the Greek minority. In addition, he said that, within the framework of a European Albania and “in the spirit of cooperation and friendship with the Albanian government, all issues could be resolved”.

On the other hand, it is a fair assessment that no Greek government would ever have allowed a similar visit by an Albanian PM to border areas in Greece, as Bushati says.



3.6. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ↳ The Greek PM made two symbolically important visits to Albania in the space of two weeks. The main message was that Greece and Albania show a genuine will to move forward and begin writing a new page in the history of their relations. Athens sees Tirana as a gateway to Greece consolidating a more active role in the Balkans as well as seeking to counterbalance Turkey's relations with Albania.
- ↳ To achieve both goals, Athens has made a strong commitment to Albania's EU accession. It helps that its neighbour is a NATO member and fully aligned with the West, while both the Greek minority in Albania and the Albanian community in Greece enhance strong bilateral ties and common interests still further. The joint appearance of the Albanian and Greek PMs in the villages of the Greek minority sends this precise message.
- ↳ However, once again, the media in both countries missed the opportunity to highlight this reality and to provide a balanced account of the real problems facing both the Greek minority and the Albanian community in Greece. It also failed to make a forward-looking assessment about the future of relations in the context of European integration.
- ↳ It is high time both countries finally overcame the problems inherited from the past which stand in the way of the further consolidation of bilateral relations and the final reconciliation of their two peoples. Media could play a constructive role in such efforts by giving more space to new generations of academics and to moderate voices who could explain the current realities in bilateral relations, the reasons why certain issues continue to exist, and what fair solutions could be adopted.

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About this publication

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