

Coming Home. Albania in the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean

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At the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference, held in Lisbon on 5-6 November 2007, it was decided to accept requests from Mauritania and Albania to become full members of the Barcelona Process (BP). 2008 was therefore witness to Albania's progressive and complete integration and participation as a Member State of the BP, as well as its participation in transforming the BP into the Union for the Mediterranean. The country's candidature and participation undoubtedly had a regional effect, encouraging others to present themselves and opening a process of reflection on the development of the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean (BP: UfM). This led to an extension towards the Mediterranean States of the Western Balkans, reflected in the decision taken by the Heads of State and Government in the Euro-Mediterranean Summit in Paris (13 July 2008) to accept Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Monaco as members. Aside from the regional effects or implications, Albania's integration into the Euro-Mediterranean process raises questions not only of what and how but also why and what for; what does it mean and what are the potential effects for Albania and the Mediterranean? Spain has played a decisive role in this participation and development, a priority on its agenda in the initial stages of fostering Spanish-Albanian relations, to which we will focus particular attention.

Albania's Candidature, Early Days and First Experiences in the BP: UfM

Albania's initial involvement in the Euro-Mediterranean family took place at the Extraordinary Summit of Heads

of State and Government held in November, 2005 in Barcelona. The occasion marked the tenth anniversary of the Euro-Mediterranean Conference, also held in Barcelona and which gave birth to the Barcelona Process. Having presented a request to this effect, Albania was invited as a guest. Given the extraordinary nature of the Summit, Albania's presence did not imply a decision on the part of either Albania or the Member States of the BP to formalise any kind of structural relationship. It did, however, certainly constitute a show of interest and initiated the process that would eventually lead to Albania's integration. The process began, as was necessarily the case, with developments in the heart of Albania, and in particularly Albanian diplomacy. In fact, Albania's reflection and definition of its candidature to the BP and the development of the Mediterranean dimension of its external projection slotted into the wider framework of defining priorities regarding its international insertion. Following the fall of the communist regime, defining these priorities represented the necessary external corollary of the internal transition towards democracy and a market economy, and was characterised by the definition of Euro-Atlantic integration as one of the nation's fundamental objectives, reflected in both external and internal policies. This was the embodiment of Albania's arrival and a guarantee that there would be no return from the transition/foundation in process. Debate surrounding the situation arose between two camps: those who considered the development of the Mediterranean dimension as an unnecessary distraction from focusing energy on the fundamental Euro-Atlantic objective, or even as a deviation that replaces this objective; and those who considered it as a complement and a forerunner to this. The outcome was settled by Besnik Mustafaj,

¹ The author assigns himself ownership of the content of this article.

the Foreign Affairs Minister at the time, who took a clearly favourable position towards candidature to the Barcelona Process and the development of the Mediterranean dimension. If presence at the Barcelona Summit in November 2005 constituted an approach pending fruition, then absence from the Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Helsinki in November 2006 rang alarm bells of a possible loss of momentum. Minister Mustafaj responded by sending a letter in December of the same year to his Finnish counterpart, in his capacity as President of the Council of the EU, requesting Albania's entry to the BP.

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Thus at the beginning of 2007, Albania's candidature found itself on the agenda of the different committees of the EU and the BP, which determines the latter's institutional life and the decisions it takes. The ball began to roll, paving the way to a possible decision in the following Euro-Mediterranean Conference to either accept Albania's candidature or reject it, or keep it on the agenda in order to study it further. Talks held on different levels with Albania led Spain to strongly support the candidature from within the committees. The Commission's non-paper (17 September 2007) proposed the participation of Albania and Mauritania as regional members of the BP. This would allow them to maintain, respectively, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) or the European Development Fund (EDF) for their bilateral relations and at the same time participate in all the institutional mechanisms of the BP and in its regional programmes. Spain's support together with the non-paper set the scene in the autumn for a favourable decision. Consequently, Albanian diplomacy was set in motion, driven by Prime Minister (PM) Sali Berisha, whose efforts, together with those of Spain, the EU's Portuguese presidency and other favourable actors, gave Albania's admission the 'fumata bianca' at the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on 5-6 November in Lisbon. The new Foreign Affairs Minister, Lulzim Basha, who

had attended the conference, returned triumphant to Tirana. Together with traditional diplomacy, it should be noted that public diplomacy made a significant contribution through the international seminar, *Albania and the Barcelona Process: Challenges and Opportunities*. The seminar was organised by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), the Spanish Embassy in Tirana and Albania's Foreign Affairs Minister, and was funded by the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (AECID). It took place on 21 October, just before the preparatory Euromed Committee for the Ministerial Conference, and brought together experts and actors from the BP. Speeches from PM Berisha, the President of the Parliament, Topalli, and Minister Basha, before ambassadors of the Member States of the BP in Tirana and the media, served to demonstrate Albania's utmost interest and commitment before the acceptance of its candidature in Lisbon.

Having attained status as a Member State of the BP, 2008 was a year in which Albania would learn about and begin participating in the BP's different institutions and forums. Numerous landmark events marked Albania's arrival: the appointment of Ambassador Ferit Hoxha, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as Euromed Coordinator, and his participation, along with that of Albania's Permanent Representation to the EU, in the institutional life of the Process; the election of former Foreign Affairs Minister, Mustafaj, as member of the Advisory Council of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation; the creation of an inter-ministerial coordination group to facilitate the participation of the relevant ministers and authorities; the participation of PM Berisha in the Euro-Mediterranean Summit in Paris and of the different members of the government in the Euro-Mediterranean ministerial conferences; the appointment of the Speaker of the Albanian Parliament, Jozefina Topalli, and members of parliament Illy Bufi and Ilir Rusmajli as Albanian members of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliament, and their participation in the conference held in Amman in October; and the celebration on 17-19 September in Tirana of the 2nd international seminar, *Albania and the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean: Challenges and Opportunities*, run by the same organisers as the first. Many international experts from all areas of the Euro-Mediterranean process participated in the seminar, which aimed to provide information and training for the relevant actors of the Albanian State and society, in order to facilitate their participation and allow

them to take advantage of the opportunities and mechanisms that this process offers. PM Berisha's inaugural speech for the occasion made Albania the first Member State of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) to publicly support Barcelona's candidature to host the seat of the organisation's permanent Secretariat. Spanish diplomacy subsequently led an intensive campaign to this end, which came to fruition with a decision in favour of Barcelona at the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference in Marseille in November.

Albania's External Transformation and the Development of the Mediterranean Dimension of its Foreign Policy

Strewn with almost a million bunkers, Albania under Enver Hoxha was a bunkerized society, isolated physically, socially and historically. Time had a different rhythm. Recovering lost time was not a question of returning to times passed and once abandoned, but of beginning right from the start in the rhythm of our times. The political, social and financial system had to be constructed from its foundations. The process experienced by Albania since the fall of the communist regime has been more like that of founding a country than a transition, conditioned by a legacy of isolation, inertia and tradition. This legacy has hindered Albania's external foundation and transformation, which necessarily accompanies and to a large extent allows the possibility of internal change. Inertia and tradition are faced with the immediate environment of an Albania surrounded by powerful regional forces, by a major foreign ally seen as guarantor of their sovereignty and international insertion; yesterday the USSR, then China and today the United States. Albania feels particular devotion to the latter, assuming the role of the most faithful of the faithful, as demonstrated by the collective delirium in response to President Bush's visit on 10 May 2007. This calling finds support in the well-established Albanian Diaspora in the USA, organized around the National Albanian American Council, a powerful lobby whose capability of influencing US interest in Albania was demonstrated by the US involvement in Kosovo, considered by Albanians from both sides as saviour and guarantor of the collective identity. In April 2008 Albania was invited to join NATO at the Bucharest Summit, an act which was made effective in the Strasbourg-Kiehl Summit.

The signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement on 12 June 2006 was a major step towards joining the European Union, constituting the culmination of the ratification process and forerunner to Albania's upcoming request for candidate status. With respect to Albania's foundation these events have formed the country's backbone and main national strategic objectives, organising general consensus and channelling the country's efforts. The external and internal dimensions are an option for a united future to overcome a traumatic and isolated past; a collective project on the long road to Europe and a denied Europeaness.

To some extent, this situation is similar to that experienced by Spain. European integration for Spain was an external dimension of its own internal transition, which preceded and came above its external foundation and transition. In turn, this external dimension was part of the essence of not only what we wanted to be in the world, but what we wanted to be to ourselves.

This is why the issue of developing the Mediterranean dimension of Albania's foreign policy challenges the country's maturity; its choice of external policy at the same time implies a choice for its internal one. The choice is to look outward and influence what is happening outside, and not only manage how those outside influence what is happening inside; to opt to cross the Rubicon and change the paradigm, or, to be more precise, construct a new one.

The debate is infused with double-meaning and double-transcendence. Does this development and choosing to join the Barcelona Process constitute an alternative or a replacement to Euro-Atlantic integration? Does it mean Albania will be considered or will consider itself as part of the South or simply that efforts towards the fundamental aim of Euro-Atlantic integration will be diffused and distorted? Foreign Affairs Minister Mustafaj and PM Berisha have decided to develop the Mediterranean dimension by joining the BP, considering this to be complementary and enriching for the fundamental Euro-Atlantic option, and believing it possible that the two can develop simultaneously and not one after the other.

On the one hand, it implies the assumption that Mediterraneanness is a defining component of the collective Albanian identity, which should come through in its external projection and international insertion, and the assumption and affirmation of Albania as a country on a level with both Europe and

the Mediterranean. It also implies Albania's will to relate with and contribute to the construction of international order in the Mediterranean.

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On the other hand, Albania's foreign policy can and must go beyond its Euro-Atlantic integration. This means assuming the EU's external policies and projections, thereby offering the opportunity and need to participate, with its own heritage of relations and knowledge, in defining the EU's global interests and international priorities. And within these international priorities what area could be more immediate, be of greater interest and have greater capacity to contribute for Albania than the Mediterranean area? To accept, in short, that Albania's interest is not to integrate and participate in any kind of European Union, but in one which makes the Mediterranean the object of its interest and its priority, and to contribute effectively to the definition of EU policy towards the Mediterranean and to the construction of international order there. Integration does not just mean complying with standards set by others, but also, once all necessary requirements have been fulfilled, participating in their definition. Thus Albania becomes both policymaker and the object of those policies.

Here there is a strategic option for Albania's foreign policy, another Rubicon to cross. Until now, its founding process has been characterised by international players dictating the standards to be reached –economic recommendations from the International Monetary Fund, OSCE electoral observations, NATO's Membership Action Plan, the European Commission's Progress Report, etc.– and Albania manages its policies and actions to align itself with these. Recently, however, along with political and socio-economical elements, the emergence of identity and culture has become the structuring axis of the international system. While with respect to the former, Albania may find itself walking the path that separates it from the established paradigm, in terms

of identity and culture it may be a country that represents the paradigm: a model of interreligious coexistence in a secular state; a demonstration, among other things, of the compatibility of Islam with democracy and the separation of religion and politics. Albania may become an international example, a model to follow. Its opportunity and strategic option, therefore, is to use this situation as an international asset, to help construct an international order in the Mediterranean and beyond, for which the Alliance of Civilizations constitutes a particularly suitable forum.

Finally, Albania's participation in the Euro-Mediterranean, far from being an alternative or substitute to joining the EU, may constitute a useful fore-runner to this. A way to prepare for its future EU participation through its participation in the Euro-Mediterranean institutional mechanisms. An opportunity for Albania to acquire credibility, recognition and familiarity through dealing on a daily basis with its future European partners. Furthermore, for a country who, aside from in Turkey, only has embassies in Tel Aviv and Cairo, this presents a unique opportunity to develop relations with the Southern States of the Mediterranean.

Reality and Potential of Albania's Contribution to the Euro-Mediterranean Construction

The Euro-Mediterranean construction is undergoing a period of transformation, a qualitative leap in its evolution from process to union. This implies reflection not only on its essence and content, but also its borders, or, moreover, the crossing of these borders. Few countries better embody this 'crossing' than Albania, with its unique characteristics; the reflection of Mediterraneanness and of the possibilities that this offers. Albania is secular, Islamic and Christian, Sunni and Bektashi, Catholic and Orthodox, the only state that has been constitutionally atheist in its recent history, European, Balkan, Mediterranean, for five centuries part of the Ottoman Empire and able to preserve its language and a collective identity which looks towards Europe. The administrative borders of the European Commission itself were the first to be extended –the Western Balkans are territory of the DG Enlargement, while the DG Relex oversees the BP– in order to make membership of the BP and prospects of joining the EU, which was

dealt with by unconnected departments, simultaneous and compatible.

The Euro-Mediterranean candidature and integration of Albania, as has already been mentioned, provoked reflection regarding the participation of the Western Balkans in the Euro-Mediterranean construction and the integration of the Mediterranean states in the UfM at the Paris Summit. This in turn forms part of the necessary normalisation of the region's international insertion in its peace consolidation. This implies not only being the focus of attention for this and for conflict resolution, the affirmation of Albania's perspective of European integration as an essential element in those prospects and the definition of fundamental projects for a shared future both internally and externally; but also, and at the same time, being part of a Mediterranean in whose construction it wants to, can and does participate.

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Euro-Mediterranean integration of Albania and the Mediterranean Balkan States has also helped the EU to substantially transform the nature of the BP or the UfM. This is no longer fundamentally just a forum for EU relations with southern Mediterranean members that are unable to join, or with the Arab States and Israel, but signifies the appearance, together with Turkey, of a third group that can act as a connector between both. A facilitator of consensus between third-party members and global Euro-Mediterranean consensus. This presents Albania with the challenge and opportunity of exploiting and developing its full potential as connector, through active diplomacy and with initiatives that bring returns and improve relations, both with the southern members and with the EU, and help improve its international position and credibility and build assets for

its diplomacy. The challenge and opportunity are for the Mediterranean to know Albania better, and for Albania to know the Mediterranean better; for Albania to know itself better in the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean to know itself in Albania and to know its interreligious coexistence and future dreams. Thus, the future is a blank slate waiting to be written on.

Spain and the Implementation of Albania's Mediterranean Role

So, in light of what has been said, it would have been difficult without the pen and Spain's decided commitment to write the pages of Albania's Euro-Mediterranean integration. Commitment in the form of political dialogue, support and drive, diplomatic action, information and technical training and assistance. These were elements of a process that started with a visit from the Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, in Tirana on 5-6 February 2006 –the first by a Spanish minister. The occasion marked the beginning of a foundational stage in the development of a deeper level of Spanish-Albanian relations, through the announcement of the opening of the Spanish Embassy in Tirana, which took place in July 2006, while the Spanish Cooperation, having defined Albania as a country of special attention, opened an AECID Antenna in Tirana. This decisive move of relations on all levels, both on a bilateral plane and a multilateral one, makes Albania's development of the Mediterranean dimension of its external projection and its integration into the BP the prime objective and preferred area of the relations. So although Spain can and does make a special contribution to realizing Albania's Euro-Atlantic prospects, thanks to its own experience of integration and its political support, it does this to a process that is already underway. Its contribution, however, to the definition and development of the new Mediterranean priority of Albania is done on uncharted territory, to set a process in motion that must be the founding stage for Albania's contemporary international relations. This process is associated with the founding stage of contemporary relations with Spain, linking both and making this, literally and symbolically, an especially close and irreplaceable area of our global relations. So in one way or another, Albania is born in the Mediterranean at the hands of Spain; and Spain is born in Albania

–and Albania in Spain– at the hands of the Mediterranean. And let us not forget that this also constitutes the stage for carrying out other shared priorities on the global agenda, such as the Alliance of Civilizations or the “One UN” process for United Nations reform –for which Albania is one of eight pilot countries.

Spain, therefore, is not only acting in its own interests and with its own vision of driving and developing the Euro-Mediterranean process, but also performs an act of coherence with its own history and with that of its Albanian relations.

With its own history, because although Spain’s triple European, American and Mediterranean aims have been in place since the transition period, it is only after European integration, both the country’s external and internal objective, that Spain began to construct the architecture of its global relations with Latin America, through the Ibero-American summits and EU-Latin American relations, and an international order for the Mediterranean, which paved the way, during the Spanish Presidency of the EU in 1995, to the birth of the Barcelona Process. So, it is not so strange that, having been invited to join NATO and aiming the process towards European integration, we share our own experience and accompany Albania in achieving this and its Mediterranean calling.

In terms of our relations with Albania, although contemporary relations are in the process of being formed, there was a time in the 15th century, when

the Albanians were of vital importance for us, and us for the Albanians. A mythical and landmark moment in Albania’s history was when national hero Gjerj Kastriot “Skanderbeg” put up the last resistance against the Ottoman dominion in the Balkans and, in search of aid from Christian powers, found Alfonso the Magnanimous, king of Aragon and Naples, with whom he signed the Gaeta Treaty in 1451. From this point onwards Alfonso’s troops, with Ramon d’Ortafà as Viceroy of Albania, fought alongside Skanderbeg. ‘We’ in the Mediterranean at that time essentially meant the Crown of Aragon, and for that ‘We’ the commitment with Albania constituted a fundamental element in oriental politics, and for Magnanimous it was the last attempt, in the perspectives of the time, for the Mare Nostrum to continue to be ours. So it is not so unusual that, as laid down in the Gaeta Treaty, the descendents of Magnanimous, after being definitively beaten in 1479, gave refuge to twenty thousand Albanians in Calabria and Sicily, whose descendents are known today as Arbëreshë and speak 15th century Albanian. The history is not without its parallels with that of the Sephardis, who, expelled by the same Ferdinand the Catholic that gave shelter to the Arbëreshë in Sicily, would end up in Albania as part of the Ottoman Empire.

This is why Albania’s Mediterranean integration, with our support, constitutes both a step forward and a step back. We are coming home. Albania is coming home and Spain with it.