

CONTACT

Bledar Feta
 Research Associate
 South East Europe Program, ELIAMEP
 Email: bledifeta@yahoo.gr
 Website: <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/topics/southeast-europe-programme/>

Territorial and Border Issues: One of the Main Sources of Tension in the Greek-Albanian Relations

Bledar Feta, BA International Relations, University of Piraeus, MA Political Science, University of Athens
 International Relations Specialist

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Greek-Albanian relations as a sign of systemic inefficiency and goal divergence, reflect the way the two nations have "mirrored" each other ever since their liberation from the Ottoman rule to this day and their strategic aims concerning the territorial status of Southern Albania/Northern Epirus, which had been a disputed area ever since it acquired a temporary status of autonomy with the 1914 Corfu Protocol.

The Period of National Movements in the Balkans

National movements led to the establishment of Balkan states, the borders of which did not necessarily comply with ethnic lines. The Greek-Albanian borders were drawn in 1913 including the "Northern Epirus" area which Greece wished to incorporate. Greece's stance caused stereotypes on the Albanian side, which regarded Greece as a hindrance to the emergence of the modern Albanian state. The two Balkan Wars and World War I questioned, in the worst case, the future of an Albanian state and its territories

The World War II

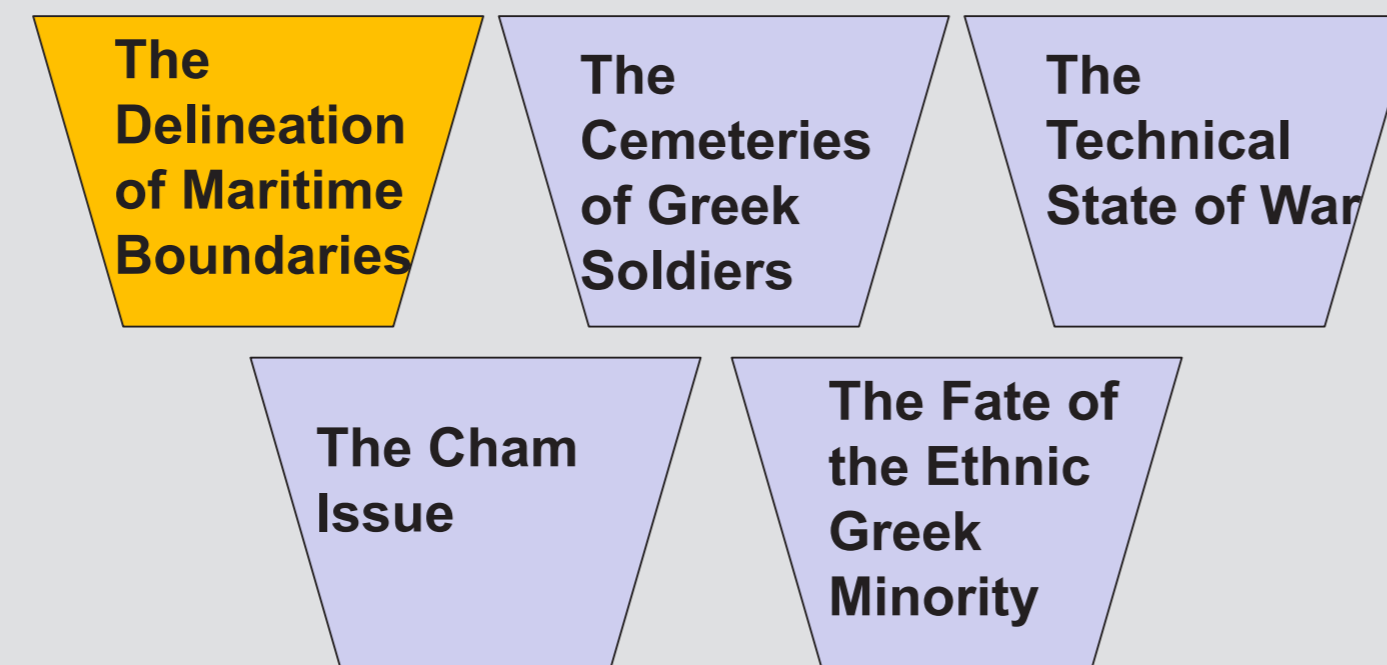
Two of the most important issues of Albanian-Greek relations are tied to this period, issues still present on the negotiations' table even after seventy years: the law on the state of war and the Cham issue. A number of Balkan countries have Albanian populations in their territories, which has encouraged speculations about a "Greater Albania" project for their political unification. That would alter the existing borders, and it is the question that seems to provoke the most fear for Balkan peace and stability. Thus, any reference to the Cham issue from the Albanian side has been seen with a great suspicion from Greece.

The Cold War

During the Cold War, Greek-Albanian relations were tense, mainly because of the Greek minority. Albanian viewed Greece with deep distrust, seeing any move by Athens and the leadership of Greek minority in Albania as a part of a plan to hellenise southern Albania as "northern Epirus".

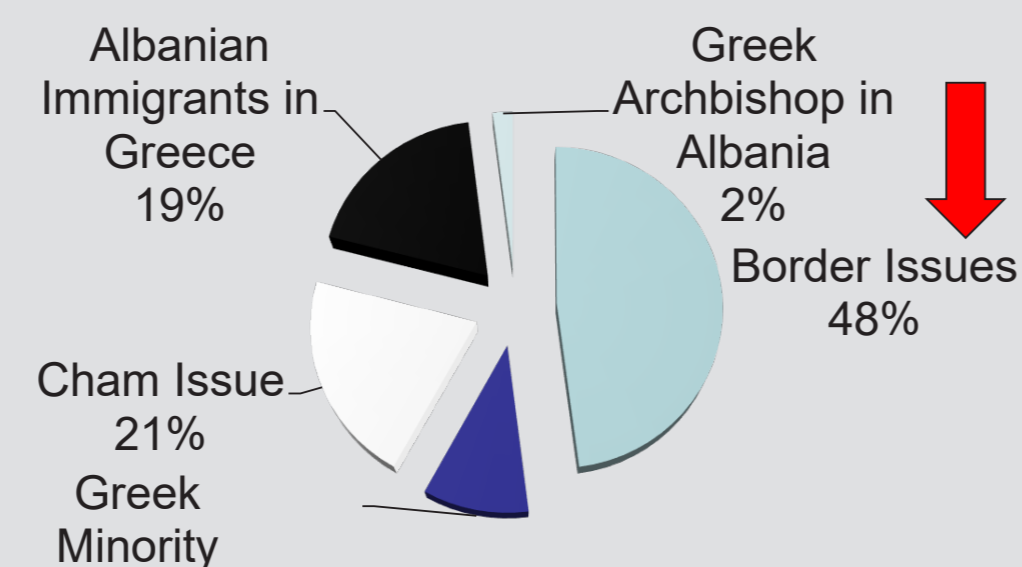
BASKETS OF OPEN ISSUES

The disputes and problematic aspects in relations between Greece and Albania remain in place and capable of creating tensions if brought back to the forefront at any given moment. A number of issues, whether raised by Athens or by Tirana, have turned bilateral ties sour between the two neighbors:



Tirana and Athens are trying to negotiate solutions for these thorny issues through the finalization of a mechanism that will result in a package agreement. The two sides have agreed to focus on their discussion on a package that categorizes the open issues on different baskets and with the principle that nothing has been agreed as long as there is no agreement to all issues.

ISSUES INFLUENCING GREEK ALBANIAN RELATIONS



Asked to identify and rank according to their importance the issues that heavily affects the relation between the two countries **Albanian citizens** pick three main problems to be addressed: the borders issue, the Cham issue and the treatment of Albanian migrants in Greece.

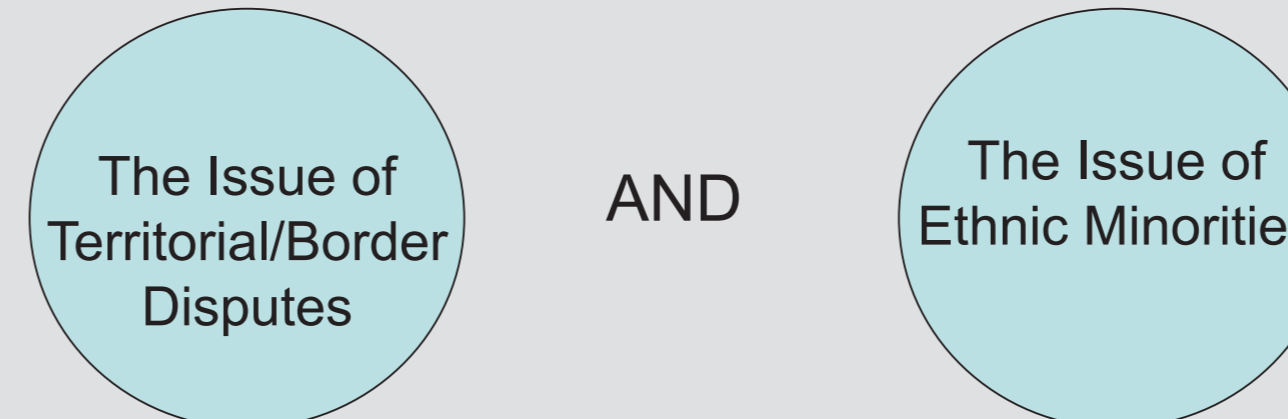
Albanian Greek Relations from the Eyes of the Albanian Public 2013.
 Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS)

The general perception in Albania is that Greece has never fully accepted the creation of the Modern Albanian State with its existing borders with many Albanians still believing that Greek people consider south Albania a Greek territory.



GREEK - ALBANIAN RELATIONS

Two main issues have dominated Albanian-Greek Relations during the last over-one hundred years:



Territorial and border issues have historically been, and continue to be, the main source of tension in bilateral relations. They have fed a cyclical relation of crises with frequent ups and downs, interrupted by periods of cooperation only to return to a state of tension but never leading to conflict, in the classical sense of the word.

TERRITORIAL DISPUTES PAST ISSUES WITH IMPLICATIONS IN THE PRESENT

- Officially, Albania and Greece do not have territorial disputes. However, the legacy of the past has created a complex situation with many groups inside both countries claiming the Epirus region. Greeks claim southern Albania inhabited by the Greek minority as part of the north Epirus province, while Albanians claim formerly Cham inhabited areas in northern Greece known as Çamëria.

BORDER ISSUES PRESENT PENDING ISSUE

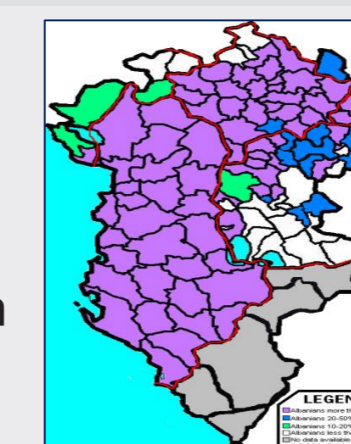
- The definition of maritime borders in the Ionian Sea has become a highly sensitive issue in the bilateral agenda. The debate over the sea border unfolded other important issue between the two countries - i.e. the continental shelf and the delineation of exclusive economic zones for potential oil exploitations in the waters of the Ionian Sea -, issues which will keep Tirana-Athens channels busy for a long time.

GREEK - ALBANIAN PERCEPTIONS

The relations between the two states were built on a complex network of mutual misunderstanding, which was created and further multiplied in the name of extreme nationalism. As a result both societies have completely different readings on territorial/border issues with a great deal of mistrust between each other. The two countries and societies, albeit inextricably linked like very few others in Europe, remain locked in mutual suspicion and false perceptions



Figure 2. Albanian Population in the Balkans
 Source: Wikipedia



THE MARITIME BORDER – PENDING ISSUE

A Albania and Greece have tried to set a permanent maritime border in the Ionian Sea . The first talks began in 2008

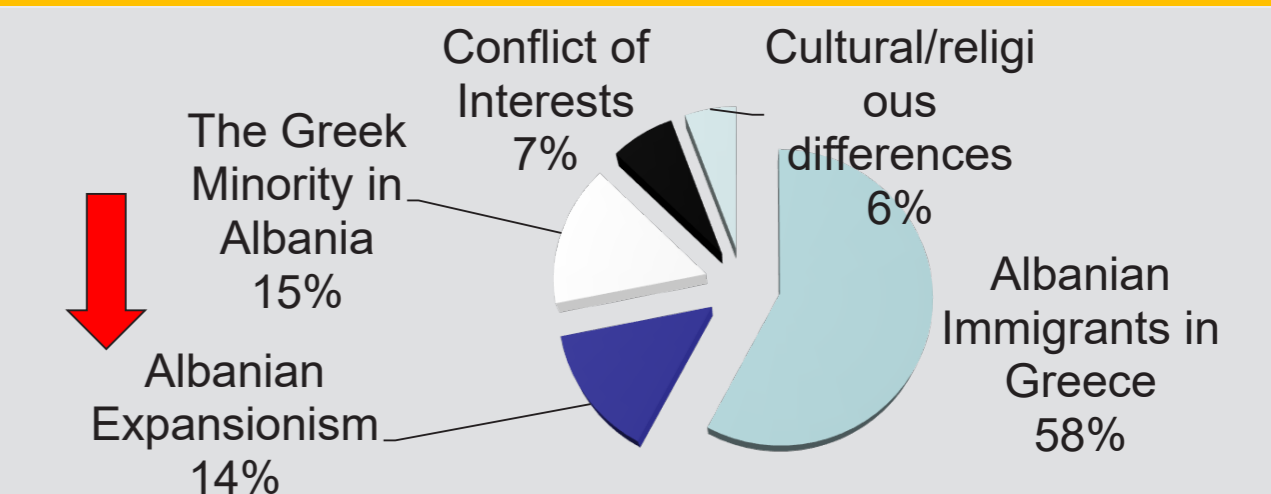
B The agreement for the demarcation of the Albanian-Greek maritime borders and the delimitation of continental shelf and economic exclusive zones was signed in 2009.

C A year later the Albanian Constitutional Court nullified the agreement due to constitutions' "procedural and substantive violations". The found the deal unfavorable for Albania and argued the Greece was unfairly granted maritime territory.

D After 2013, both parts came back to the negotiation table to hammer out a new solution on the maritime border dispute. Although they have not changed their official position on the issue, they have agreed that "their respective teams should conduct a technical assessment and determine modalities which could lead to the delivery of a sustainable and acceptable solution".

No agreement on the issue after the technical consultations could result in addressing the dispute to an international tribunal, which for the moment is not profitable for none of the states.

MAIN PROBLEMS IN GREEK ALBANIAN RELATIONS



The general perception in Greece is that Albanians - as a people - have a hidden agenda aimed at diminishing Greece's clout in the region through the creation of "Greater Albania", which includes part of the northern Greece.



Almost 1 in 7 **Greek citizens** consider Albanian expansionism and nationalism (as expressed in the vision of Greater Albania and claims on Greek territory) as the most important bilateral problem. It is in that context that the Greek public opinion view Albania's claim in relation to Cham Albanians' properties in Greek Epirus.

The Greek Public Opinion towards Albania 2013
 South East Europe Program, ELIAMEP