



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Inter-Ethnic Relations in Albania: The Causality Between Inter-Ethnic and Inter-State Relations

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### Abstract:

Throughout the period of communism, human rights and freedoms of all ethnic groups, both majorities and minorities, had been grossly violated in Albania, while spiritual and ethnic sentiments were forcibly mitigated by the communist regime. Consequently, during the period of communism, the impression from abroad was that ethnically Albania was a rather homogeneous country. Nevertheless, certain neighbouring countries as well as different ethnic minorities living in Albania have constantly questioned such perception. After the fall of communism, the size of different minorities living in the country has emerged as the main inter-ethnic dispute in Albania. Although currently several ethnic groups are officially recognized as national minorities in Albania, the Greek minority is the largest one and the only minority large enough to have sufficient political, economic and social significance. The main aim of the paper is to analyse the state of inter-ethnic relations in Albania, with special focus on relations between ethnic Albanian majority and ethnic Greek minority. The paper also offers an analysis of main factors that contribute to inter-ethnic tensions in the country and explores possible scenarios in the future. The most relevant part of the paper analyses the causality between inter-ethnic and inter-state relations. The paper claims that as in other countries of the Western Balkans, interstate and inter-ethnic relations in essence represent components of the same equation. The paper concludes that the overall inter-ethnic relations between Albanians and Greeks in Albania are heavily affected by inter-state relations between Albania and Greece and vice versa.

**Keywords:** *Inter-ethnic relations; Albania; Albanians; Greeks; Inter-state relations; causality.*

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### **Introduction**

In the predominantly ethnically mixed region like the Western-Balkans, inter-ethnic relations in different countries represent one of the most important factors for the overall stability in the region. This is especially true for the Central Balkans that was the last part of Southeast Europe to be divided by state borders. The division that took place after the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century saw members of different ethnic, religious and linguistic communities becoming citizens of newly created nation states. Such outcome resulted only in one ethnic group occupying the entitled majority status (Wahlström, 2016: 37). In that matter Albania is not an exception, especially having in mind country's long period of isolation during the communist regime. After the collapse of communism Albania emerged as the most isolated and the poorest country in Europe. During communism, the extremely harsh regime in Albania repressed all forms of political dissent and religious affiliation, including any independent civic activity. Throughout this period, human rights and freedoms of all ethnic groups, both majorities and minorities, had been grossly violated in Albania. Furthermore, spiritual and ethnic sentiments were forcibly mitigated by the communist regime, which privileged social identity over primordial identities (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 8). As a result, during the communist period, Albania was generally viewed from abroad as an ethnically homogeneous state (Pettifer, 2001: 1).

Nevertheless, certain neighbouring countries as well as different ethnic minorities living in Albania have constantly questioned such perception. After the end of communism and the democratization of Albania, such claims have only intensified further. Currently, the main inter-ethnic dispute in Albania is about the actual size of different minorities living in the country and the scope of minority rights that they enjoy within the country. The main aim of the paper is to analyse the state of inter-ethnic relations in Albania, with special focus on relations between ethnic Albanian majority and ethnic Greek minority.

The paper also offers an analysis of main factors that contribute to inter-ethnic tensions in the country and explores possible scenarios in the future. The most relevant part of the paper analyses the causality between inter-ethnic and inter-state relations. The paper claims that as in other countries of the Western Balkans, interstate and inter-ethnic relations in essence represent components of the same equation.

The structure of the paper consists of four chapters altogether, including introduction and conclusion. After the introductory chapter, the second chapter the paper gives special attention to the current state of affairs of the inter-ethnic relations in Albania, with special focus on relations between ethnic Albanian majority and ethnic Greek minority. In the third chapter, the paper focuses on the causality between inter-ethnic and interstate relations, namely to the fact that in the countries of the Western Balkans, interstate and inter-ethnic relations in essence represent components of the same equation. The paper ends with a concluding chapter that summarizes the main findings of our analysis.

### **Current State of Affairs of Inter-ethnic Relations in Albania**

According to current legislation in Albania, Greeks, Montenegrins, Macedonians and Serbs are recognized as national minorities, while Roma people and Vlachs/Aromanians are only recognized as linguistic/cultural minorities. Both national and linguistic minorities are recognized under the multilateral treaty of the Council of

Europe - Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) that Albania has ratified in 1999 (Minority Rights Group International, 2007). Currently, in addition of being the largest ethnic minority in Albania, the ethnic Greek minority represents the only one large enough to have sufficient political, social and economic significance. The dispute about its actual size is especially sensitive since it is inseparably linked to the historical territorial claims on southern Albania by various Greek nationalist groups and state representatives.

Namely, such groups have continuously claimed that the part of southern Albania – known to the Greeks as Northern Epirus – has historically been part of Greece (Vickers, 2010: 2). The proximity of the Greek state which nurtures close economic and cultural links with the Greek minority has further amplified the political significance of that minority in Albania (Vickers, 2010: 1). In terms of political representation, the Greek minority is politically organised through the Democratic Union of the Greek Minority (OMONIA), and by the political party the Union of Human Rights Party (UHRP). In fact, the UHRP was established only in February 1992 once the enactment of legislation that banned parties based upon “ethnic principles” was introduced. After elections in March 1992, the party became the *de facto* electoral successor of OMONIA by winning two Assembly seats as compared to OMONIA’s five seats in 1991 (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 8).

Otherwise, Albania’s commitments towards the protection of minorities started after World War I, when in December 1920 the country was admitted to the League of Nations (Xhaxho, 2007: 12). As a result, since 1921, Albania’s ethnic Greek population has been registered as a minority living in recognised “minority zones” (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 9) “Minority zones” were defined as particular districts (Gjirokastrë, Sarandë and Delvinë for persons belonging to the Greek minority, and districts of Korçë (municipality of Liqenas) and Devolli (municipality of Vernik) for persons belonging to the Macedonian minority) categorised as such under the communist regime, inhabited by substantial numbers of persons belonging to national minorities (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2011: 11).

An inquiry established by the League of Nations in 1922 concluded that there were about 25,000 Greek speaking people in Albania. However, there is good reason to believe that the estimate was too low since the study was conducted only on limited parts of the southern border (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 8-9). After the Second World War, the new Albanian Communist regime narrowed the area of southern Albania described as a “minority zone” to just 99 villages in the districts of Gjirokastrë and Saranda. Such arrangements excluded the three villages of Himara, Drimades and Palasë that were in 1921 recognised as minority areas by the League of Nations (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 9).

It also excluded ethnic minorities living outside minority zones in other areas throughout the country. Mixed villages outside this designated zones, even those with a clear majority of a certain ethnic minority, were not considered minority areas and therefore were denied any language cultural or educational provisions (Albania: The Greek Minority, 1995: 6). In addition, as part of the communist population policy to prevent ethnic sources of political dissent, many Greeks were forcibly removed from the minority zones to other parts of the country. Moreover, during this period, the communist regime, has changed Greek toponyms to Albanian ones, while the use of the Greek language was limited only within the minority zones (Pettifier, 2001: 7).

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Based on the last census in Albania during the communist rule in 1989, there were 58,758 or 1.8 percent ethnic Greeks living in the country. However, these official figures were fiercely disputed by the Greek authorities as well as the Greek community living in the country. Leaders of the ethnic Greek community claimed that their numbers were around 260,000, while some estimates went as high as 400,000. According to the Greek Helsinki Committee, the figure is around 150,000, while the CIA World Fact Book 1994 estimates the Greek minority at 3 percent of the population, or about 100,000 people (Third Opinion on Albania. 2011: 6). It is worth mentioning that the first census after the fall of communism in 2001 contained no question related to ethnic or religious origin.

As a result, the chairman of the Democratic Union of the Greek Minority urged members of the Greek minority to boycott the census and accused the Albanian authorities of trying to intentionally reduce numbers of the Greek minority. (International Crisis Group, 2001: 12). After several recommendations by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), in 2011 the Albanian government finally decided to conduct a country-wide general census that would include a question pertaining to ethnic identity (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2004). However, in the last minute, the Albanian authorities made amendments that introduced fines for incorrect responses to the questionnaire. According to these changes, a response not corresponding with the data contained in the civil registry would be considered as incorrect (Third Opinion on Albania. 2011: 12).

Namely, according to article 20 of the Census law, anyone who would declare anything other than what was written in the civil registry might be risking a fine of up to 1,000 USD (Macedonia Internet News Agency, 2011). OMONIA and Greek opposition parties heavily criticised such amendments and again called to boycott the census (Krasniqi, 2012). According to official results, the number of ethnic minorities in Albania decreased considerably, with citizens of Greek ethnicity accounting for only 0.87 per cent of the population. The Greek minority and OMONIA reacted furiously, refused to accept the results of the census and claimed that the census figures have been falsified to the disadvantage of ethnic Greeks as well as other Orthodox minorities (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 10).

The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities also “considers that the results of the census should be viewed with the utmost caution and calls on the authorities not to rely exclusively on the data on nationality collected during the census in determining its policy on the protection of national minorities”. It also considered the 2011 census in Albania as unreliable, inaccurate, and incompatible with established standards for the protection of national minorities (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2011: 6).

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the overall population of Albania has also declined for roughly 8 per cent since 2001. As a result, the actual numbers today are extremely difficult to determine due to enormous migration of Albanians and other ethnic minorities since 1991. According to the Albanian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, in 1999 there were some 800,000 Albanian emigrants, with 500,000 of them living in Greece and additional 200,000 in Italy (King and Vullnetari, 2003: 25). On the other hand, certain sources state that since the end of the one-party state in 1991, up to two-thirds of the Greek minority population has moved to live in Greece (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 10). The Greek minority population has moved to Greece in a considerable

number mainly due to a privileged status they enjoy in the country. Members of the Greek minority are among others granted highly prized Greek visas including residence and working permits, and also enjoy privileges in terms of employment, schooling and medical assistance (Vickers, 2010: 10).

The main issue regarding the Greek minority in Albania currently has to do with the political, human, educational and cultural rights of the Greek community in Albania (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 10). After the adoption of legislation aiming at improving Greek minority rights, one could say that Albania has in principle addressed the major part of the cultural and educational needs of its minorities. The same is also true in terms of improvements related to political representation of the minorities. As a result, if not on a national level, Albania has at least at a local one ensured adequate minority representation. Since the Greek ethnic minority can freely participate in Albanian politics, it is unlikely that the group would experience any disadvantages due to deliberate group discrimination (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 9).

Nevertheless, there are some complaints by the Greek minority “about the government’s unwillingness to recognize ethnic Greek towns outside communist-era “minority zones,” to utilize Greek in official documents and on public signs in ethnic Greek areas, and to include a higher number of ethnic Greeks in public administration” (United States Department of State, 2013). Still, as it will be shown in the next section, it is our firm belief that future inter-ethnic relations between the Albanian majority and the Greek minority will greatly depend on overall inter-state relations between Albania and Greece. Improvement of such bilateral relations between the two countries will undoubtedly contribute to the relaxation of the overall relations between the two ethnicities. On the other hand, stable and good inter-ethnic relations between the two ethnic groups in Albania could undoubtedly serve as a solid foundation for continuous good neighbourly relations between Albania and Greece (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 11).

It is important to note that other minorities in Albania have also disputed official figures regarding their size in the country, most notably the ethnic Macedonian minority. Albania has given a minority status to ethnic Macedonians after the Second World War, when the Republic of Macedonia was established in socialist Yugoslavia. It should be mentioned that the ethnic Macedonian minority is primarily concentrated in the area of Prespa, a small town located around 30 km northeast from the Korca district. That area belongs to the south-eastern part of Albania, in the border line with Greece and the Republic of Macedonia (Xhaxho, 2007: 19).

Although the majority of the members of the ethnic Macedonian minority live in compact rural areas, some inhabitants of this ethnicity are also settled in bigger cities such as Korca, Pogradec, and Tirana. Nevertheless, as in the case of the Greek minority, Albania recognizes minority rights of the ethnic Macedonians only within the “minority zones” (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, 2008). According to the last census held in 1989 by the communist regime, the overall number of ethnic Macedonians in Albania amounted to 4,700. Nevertheless, the leaders of the Macedonian ethnic minority have similarly to the Greek minority also boycotted the census in 2001 (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 11).

In addition, due to last minute amendments to the electoral legislation, the leaders of the Macedonian minority have also called for the boycott of the census in 2011. While according to official results their make-up of the total population of the country is only 0.2 percent (5,512) (Population and Houses Census, 2011), both ethnic Macedonians as well as certain representatives of the Republic of Macedonia have often

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insisted on much higher numbers (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 11). As a result, in 2003 the Association of Macedonians in Albania conducted its own census of the number of Macedonians in Albania. Such informal census estimated the number of ethnic Macedonian population between 120,000 and 35,000 (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, 2008).

Nevertheless, it seems that such exaggerated figures are primarily intended for creating a certain parallel with enormous Albanian minority in Macedonia, rather than representing a factual reality. In addition to their size, main issues regarding the Macedonian ethnic minority in Albania are related to their political, educational and cultural rights. It should be mentioned that in terms of education, within the minority zone the instruction in the Macedonian language has been available since 1945, while the textbooks were issued by the state (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 11). Currently, the main request by the Macedonian ethnic minority is the extension of the right to instruction in their mother tongue to children of Macedonian ethnic affiliation beyond the minority zones, i.e. in other parts of Albania. Recent cooperation agreements in the field of education signed between Albania and the Republic of Macedonia certainly provide hopes that instruction in Macedonian language might also be introduced in secondary education (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 11).

As already mentioned, Vlachs/Aromanians and Roma people are also recognized as distinct minorities in Albania, however only with a status of linguistic/cultural minorities. Main claim of these two minorities is related to their request to be considered national rather than linguistic minorities (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, 2007). Nevertheless, one has the feeling that the position of Egyptians and Bosniaks is even more problematic, since they are not recognized either as a national minority or as a linguistic one.

These two ethnic groups have repeatedly asked to be recognised as persons belonging to a national minority, however such claims have so far not yielded any results. While such recognition would certainly enable members of these two ethnicities to benefit from the protection of the Framework Convention, their requests have not been examined by the Albanian authorities and their existence as distinct groups with specific identities has not yet been acknowledged (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 12). Still, it should be noted that generally Albania is characterised by a climate of respect and tolerance between the Albanian majority population and the national minorities living in the country. In terms of the respect for and protection of minorities, inter-ethnic relations are also generally good (Albania: Minority ethnic groups, 2014: 15).

The most pressing issue remains a nation-wide population census that would provide reliable data on percentages of every national minorities in line with the principles of free self-identification and internationally recognised data collection and protection standards (Third Opinion on Albania, 2011: 34). Although the census held in 2011 has for the first time since the fall of the communism contained questions on ethnic origin, it clearly failed to yield reliable data about the exact number of minorities in the country. On the one hand, the figures produced by the census were questioned by representatives of almost all minorities. On the other hand, the fact that some 14 percent of the population did not answer the question on ethnic origin is certainly quite troublesome.

Such ambiguity regarding numbers of the ethnic minorities provides room for different speculations by both representatives of governments of some neighbouring countries as well as minorities living in Albania. In turn, such reality while burdening

the inter-ethnic relations in the country, also needlessly strains Albania's relationship with its neighbours (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 12). As a result, despite the achieved progress and improved relations, mistrust still prevail both in relations with different minorities and the Albanian majority, as well as in bilateral relations between Albania and its neighbouring countries. The latter is mainly due to the fear of the Albanian state that ethnic minorities might be used by other neighbouring states for separatist or destabilizing aims.

### **The Causality between Inter-ethnic and Interstate relations**

The most relevant part of the paper analyses the causality between inter-ethnic and interstate relations. Namely, similarly to other countries in the Western Balkans, inter-ethnic and interstate relations in Albania are basically the components of the same equation. This means that the inter-ethnic relations between Albanians and Greeks in Albania are often influenced by inter-state relations between Albania and Greece and *vice versa*. Consequently, improvements or deteriorations of relations between Albania and Greece are an important factor that has a direct impact on inter-ethnic relations between the two major ethnicities in the country. At the same time, the opposite is also true; improvements or deteriorations of inter-ethnic relations between Albanians and Greeks in the country directly influence the bilateral relations between Albania and Greece.

For instance, inter-ethnic relations between the Greek minority and the Albanian majority for quite some time were shaped by Greece's territorial claims over southern part of Albania. During communism, policies of the Albanian authorities designed to hamper the preservation or growth of a distinct Greek ethnic identity in Albania, were significantly influenced by the official irredentist claims of Greece (Pettifier, 2001: 8). In fact, bilateral relations between the two countries have been for years haunted by the existence of a Greek ethnic minority in southern Albania and the issue of contested Cham's land ownership in parts of North-western Greece by Albanian governments (Maroukis and Gemi, 2011: 3). The Cham community comprises ethnic Albanians who were *en masse* expelled from northern Greece after the World War II and accused by Greek authorities of collaborating with the German forces.

Since then, the Cham issue in general and the question of their land ownership in particular have been a continuous source of tensions in relations between the two countries. On the other hand, the on-going claims by Greece about the discrimination of the Greek minority by the Albanian successive governments have further burdened the relations between the two countries. Such relations have also further deteriorated due to technical state of war that has existed between the two states since the World War Two.

Namely, after the attack by Italian occupation forces situated in Albania, in October 1940 Greece passed a law declaring a state of war between the two countries. Although the two countries signed a friendship agreement in the early 1990s, the law still needs to be abolished by the Greek parliament (Mejdini, 2016). As a result, school books in both countries were full of stereotypes and generally lacked any historical, cultural and geographical elements of national minorities' identity. Moreover, the respective treatment of national minorities has often been a source of discord in the bilateral relations between the two states.

Relations between Albania and Greece during early years after the fall of communism were reserved and occasionally even frosty. In this period, the Greek ethnic minority was often used as a pawn by the two fractious neighbours (Demjaha and Peci,

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2014: 10). The direct causality between inter-ethnic and interstate relations was first witnessed in 1993 in the district of Gjirokastra following the expulsion of an ethnic Greek Orthodox priest for allegedly taking part in anti-Albanian subversive activities. In response to widespread demonstrations in Greek inhabited villages, several local leaders were arrested and obvious human rights violations have occurred. Greek authorities responded immediately by stepping up deportation of illegal Albanian workers from Greece and by cancelling three official visits to Tirana (Pettifier, 2001: 12). Clearly, the increase in the level of repression by Albanian authorities that worsened inter-ethnic relations between Albanians and Greek minority in the country directly resulted in deterioration of the inter-state relations between the two countries.

Similarly, hostilities between the two countries reached its peak in 1995, when Albania arrested and imprisoned five OMONIA activists who were accused for threatening the integrity and sovereignty of Albania in collaboration with the Greek secret service (Demjaha and Peci, 2014: 10). By the same token, the normalization of the inter-state relations after the riots in 1997 and subsequent change of the government, has resulted in overall improvement of Albanian-Greek inter-ethnic relations in the country.

Another issue that increased inter-state tensions between Albania and Greece was related to maritime border agreement signed in April 2009 in Tirana by former Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha and his Greek counterpart Costas Karamanlis (Likmeta, 2015). The signing of the agreement that also determined the Exclusive Economic Zones of the two countries has triggered an unprecedented public objection by Albanian experts, academicians and opposition political parties. Overall, it has stirred great controversy in Albania, drawing claims that with such a deal Albania was giving away 225 square kilometres of territorial waters to Greece (Likmeta, 2012).

As a result, in January 2010 the agreement was annulled by Albania's Constitutional Court due to "procedural and substantial violations of the Constitution and the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea" (Ndoj, 2015: 138). Among others, the Court's decision required that the agreement contains clear delimitation, it does not violate the territory of Albania, it is just and equitable, and is in accordance with principles of the international law (Cenaj, 2015: 147). Such court ruling has obviously damaged relations between the two countries, and in turn has also deteriorated inter-ethnic relations between two major ethnicities in the Albania. When Socialists came to power in 2013, the government led by Prime-minister Edi Rama demanded a review of the agreement, however Athens has for some time insisted on the implementation of the agreement of 2009. Since then, experts from both countries have negotiated on a new agreement that would finally resolve the dispute. Nevertheless, such agreement has not been reached yet and the maritime border still remains a controversial issue between the two countries that now and then raises tensions between the two neighbours.

Such case was the one in 2015 when Tirana urged Athens to halt oil exploration in the Ionian Sea (Deliu, 2015). The most recent incident was again related to hydrocarbon exploitation in the Ionian Sea. Namely, recently Greece has signed a contract with a joint venture consisting of TOTAL, EDISON and Hellenic Petroleum to exploit hydrocarbon in Ionian Sea. Albania has claimed that certain exploitation zones in the Ionian Sea are located in its Exclusive Economic Zone, and that Greece needs to ask permission from Tirana in order to conduct such exploitation (Albania discovers 'grey zones' in the Ionian Sea, 2017).

Nevertheless, last November the foreign ministers of the two countries held a three-day meeting in Crete to discuss all open bilateral issues that were mentioned throughout



the paper. According to their statements, the talks were an important step forward and “they agreed on further steps which must be taken in order to achieve positive results on the basis of European values and rules and for the benefit of both countries and their peoples” (Kokkinidis, 2017). If the two countries manage to solve all open bilateral issues that would undoubtedly contribute to the overall improvement of their inter-state relations, and by causality to the improvement of inter-ethnic relations between Albanian majority and Greek minority in Albania.

### **Conclusion**

Similarly to other countries of the Western-Balkans, inter-ethnic relations in Albania represent one of the most important factors for the overall stability in the region. Throughout the period of communism, human rights and freedoms of all ethnic groups, both majorities and minorities, had been grossly violated in Albania, while spiritual and ethnic sentiments were forcibly mitigated by the communist regime. During this period, bilateral relations between the two countries have constantly been haunted by the existence of a Greek ethnic minority in southern Albania and the issue of contested Cham’s land ownership in parts of North-western Greece. Moreover, inter-ethnic relations between the Greek minority and the Albanian majority in Albania were for quite some time predominantly shaped by Greece’s territorial claims over southern part of Albania. After the fall of communism, several ethnic groups were officially recognized as national minorities in Albania, however the Greek minority is the largest and the only minority large enough to have sufficient political, economic and social significance. Consequently, during this period the main inter-ethnic dispute in Albania was about the size of the Greek minority living in the country as well as its political, human, educational and cultural rights in the country. Although in 2011 the Albanian government conducted a country-wide general census that included a question pertaining to ethnic identity, the census results were heavily criticised and were not accepted by Greek and other minorities in the country. The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities also considered the 2011 census in Albania as unreliable, inaccurate, and incompatible with established standards for the protection of national minorities. The fact that some 14 percent of the population refused to answer the question on ethnic origin undoubtedly implies the need for an objective and trustful population census that would clarify any ambiguity regarding numbers of the ethnic minorities in Albania. The paper has shown that inter-ethnic relations between Albanians and Greeks in Albania and inter-state relations between Albania and Greece are basically the components of the same equation. Throughout the paper a considerable number of examples and arguments that prove such thesis have been put forward. The paper concludes that similarly to other countries of the Western-Balkans, in Albania there also exists causality between inter-ethnic relations between Albanians and Greeks in the country and inter-state relations between Albania and Greece. In conclusion, only an improvement of overall relations between Albania and Greece could ultimately contribute to the relaxation of inter-ethnic relations between Albanians and Greeks in Albania, and vice versa.

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