

The political crisis in Albania is growing

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Anti-government demonstrations in Tirana organised on 21 January by the largest opposition party the Socialist Party (PSSH) led to unrest and clashes with police which claimed the lives of three people and left over a hundred injured. PSSH accused the government of provocation and brutal repression of a peaceful demonstration. The right-wing government of Sali Berisha claimed that the demonstration was an attempt at a coup incited by the opposition leader – the mayor of Tirana Edi Rama. It thus placed responsibility for the death of demonstrators on the organisers of the protest.

The clashes in Tirana are the culmination of the dispute between the ruling Democratic Party (PDSH) and the opposition party PSSH that has been ongoing since June 2009. The actions of the Albanian political elite were met with severe criticism from the EU and OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) which are calling on the two parties to engage in dialogue and to seek compromise. Nevertheless, the two parties hold uncompromising positions and are aiming at confrontation. Therefore further violent protests and attempts made by the government to quell them are to be expected. Without the direct involvement of the international community, stabilisation of the political situation in Albania will not be possible.

The sources of the crisis

Albania's main problem is the state's weak structures and a deep conflict between proponents of the right-wing PDSH and the left-wing PSSH, which can be identified to clan and territorial divisions in Albanian society. The factors that have a significant impact on the fierce political rivalry are the ambitions and authoritarian tendencies of the party leaders. A low political culture, a lack of democratic traditions and the search for compromise also contribute to this situation. The conflict between the major political forces has been ongoing since the collapse of the communist regime and in 1997 it brought Albania to the verge of civil war.

The opposition's protests began after the parliamentary election on 28 June 2009 which was won by a small margin by the party of Sali Berisha – PDSH. Although the election was generally well assessed by the international community (including the OSCE), the opposition PSSH deemed that the election was rigged. The opposition party decided to boycott the new parliament, which led to the partial paralysis of its work (only legal acts that do not require a qualified majority are being adopted) and the hampering of reforms. The opposition organised mass demonstrations and hunger strikes and demanded a recount of the votes. A

lack of political dialogue and the will to seek compromise were criticised by the Western countries and institutions (NATO, EU, Council of Europe and OSCE) from the outset. The attempts at mediation between the conflicted parties that they made proved to be ineffective.

The escalation of the conflict

A pretext for further anti-government protests was provided by recordings, revealed at the beginning of January 2011, intended to prove that the deputy prime minister and the leader of the coalition party, the Socialist Movement for Integration – Ilir Meta was involved in corruption. Although Meta resigned, the opposition used the allegations against him and accused the whole government of corruption, calling for the prime minister to resign and demanding an early election. These demands were accompanied by a demonstration held in the capital on 21 January which was attended by approximately 20,000 people. This protest turned into a riot when a part of the protesters tried to get through to government buildings. Three people were killed in clashes with police and over a hundred were injured.

The government fixed the blame for this unrest on the organisers of the demonstration who were charged with an attempted coup. Over 113 people were arrested for provoking fights with the police. The government claim that the opposition fomented a coup intended to let Edi Rama seize power. A special investigation commission was set up in order to throw light on the issue at an extraordinary session of the parliament held on 26 January. At the same time Prime Minister Berisha accused the prosecutor general Ina Rama (the fact that her and Edi Rama's names are the same is coincidental) of supporting the opposition as she ordered legal action against seven members of the republican guard for use of weapons during the demonstration. The opposition rejected the government's charges and the funerals of the victims turned into further political demonstrations. PSSh has announced more protests whereas the ruling party is preparing for a counter-demonstration.

The aftermath of the demonstration shows that none of the parties will be seeking to look into the acts of violence. They will however be used in the current political struggle. The two sides are accusing each other of authoritarian tendencies and a breach of democratic principles.

Prospects

So far the attempts at mediation between the conflicted parties – made by the Council of Europe and the European Parliament – and pressure (including making the positive assessment of Albania's EU accession application conditional on engaging in political dialogue) from the European Commission brought no results. When one takes into account both parties' reluctance to reach a compromise, the appeasement of the situation cannot be expected in the immediate future. In these circumstances the two sides can probably only be brought round to a compromise by a strict reaction from the EU, including the announcement of severe sanctions that will encompass for example the suspension of the process of extending the EU to Albania and the freezing of EU funds combined with direct mediation by representatives of the European institutions on a clearly higher level.

Otherwise the current crisis may lead to a deep erosion of Albanian state's institutions, which sooner or later will require a much wider scope of intervention from the international community.