

# Albania: Perspectives and Perceptions of the Mediterranean

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Albania is a Mediterranean country oriented towards Europe in its value systems and lifestyle. At the same time, as Kosta Barjaba highlights, the economic crisis in Europe is stimulating certain inclinations of Albanian citizens towards the USA and Canada. The author also draws a parallel between the country's democratisation process and the 'Arab Spring' movement, suggesting it will have a positive impact on Euro-Arab relations, while the Union for the Mediterranean is considered a tool to strengthen the acceptance of diversity.

The perceptions of Albanians towards other Mediterranean countries are affected by ethnocentrism and geographic vicinity. These links explain the fact that, in addition to their home country, Italy and Greece are the countries Albanians have mostly in their minds while hearing about the Mediterranean. Italy remains the most typical Mediterranean country because of its location on the other side of the Adriatic and because during the last fifty years it has been perceived by Albanians as a symbol of Europe and the West. Both Italy and Greece are found at the top of the list as the most popular receiving countries of Albanian migrants, important tourists' destinations and rich of cultural and historical heritage. However, Albanians' perceptions reflect the consequences of the recent economic crisis and political instability in both countries, and, in the case of Greece, episodes of tensions between the two countries related to Albanian migration to Greece, the Greek minority in Albania and the Greek-Albanian sea border/continental issue.

## Optimism despite the regional crisis

For Albanians three traits mainly characterise the countries of the Mediterranean region: firstly, their natural and cultural heritage; secondly, their democratic transition; and thirdly, the implications of political changes. The traditional image of the area as a place of hospitality, good food, colourful and interesting life, and admirable history still has a strong and visible impact on contemporary views. However, these associations are competing with the impact of turmoil, instability and political changes the region experienced recently. Meanwhile, among the identified common features of the Mediterranean region, we do not find development, trade and economic cooperation despite the historical role that the region played as a space for commerce. The intensity of political changes over the recent period has superseded any other association (reference to Chart 16.1).

**Chart 16.1**  
Characteristics of the Mediterranean region for Albanians



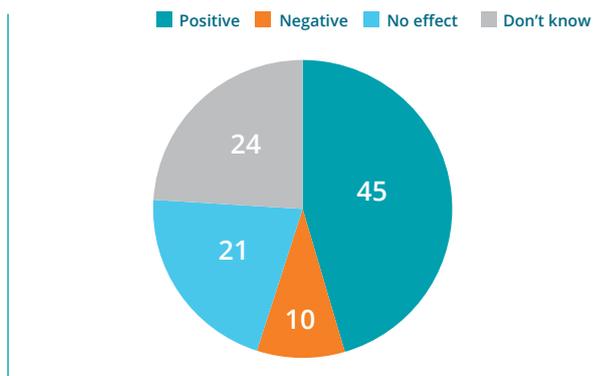
**Survey Question:** I will read out a set of ideas/images that may come to the minds of different people, and please tell me, if you think these characterize the Mediterranean region strongly, somewhat or not at all?  
**Base:** % of all respondents % of the sum of 'Strongly characterize' and 'Somewhat characterize' answers are shown (© Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

Albanians are optimistic by nature and this is reflected also in the responses concerning their personal life expectations. We note, in fact, a difference between the perception of the present life compared to five years ago and the very positive expectations for the future that mirrors a natural trend of social changes during a period of transition. They are also positive about the prospects of the role of women in society, declaring an improvement in comparison to some years before and counting on a similar pattern for the future.

At the same time, however, this assessment does not mirror the actual situation of women, their role, their level of employment and unemployment, differences in wages, social exclusion rate, and particularly their segregation and segmentation at work. Women represent less than 40% of the workforce in Albania and respondents' estimations reflect the fact that gender equality has recently dominated the political communication and dialogue in the country.

**Chart 16.2**

**Ultimate effect of the Arab Spring on the Euro-Arab relations for Albanians**



**Survey Question:** Most of the Arab countries are experiencing significant changes started with social movements which have been called an 'Arab Spring'. What do you think, will be the ultimate effects of these changes on the relations between Europe and the Arab countries? **Base:** % of all respondents, where the 'Positive' effect: sum of 'Very positive' and 'Positive' answers, and the 'Negative' effect: sum of 'Very negative' and 'Negative' answers (© Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

The expectations from the Union for the Mediterranean are all positive and very little differences can be found among the potential benefits however the order of priority reflects the scale of priorities within the country and the aspects most needed rate the highest: liberty, justice, diversity, solidarity come first, while respect for the environment, gender equality, innovation and entrepreneurship appear as secondary expectations.

In general, citizens anticipate the improvement of Euro-Arab relations after the Arab Spring because from their experience, they remember EU-Albanian relations improved in parallel to the democratic progress in the country (Chart 16.2). Democratic performance drives the barometer of EU attitudes towards countries in transition. Albanians rank among the most important characteristics of democracy freedom of speech, free elections, and the rule of law and prosperity. Strong family ties traditionally characterise the Albanian society. This value is still vital, as it is ranked the first among other values to pass on to children. Independence is ranked the second and obedience, as a norm of social behavior, ranks on a lower position, proving a kind of democratisation within the family, especially in the parents-children relationship (Chart 16.3).

**Attitude to diversity**

Albanians do not make any distinction between their values preferences and those of parents in other European countries showing an alignment of Albanian values to those of the rest of Europe. While they assign a higher level of importance to religion in the upbringing of children in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries.

**Chart 16.3**

**Key values to Albanians when bringing up their children**



**Survey Question:** Assuming that we limit ourselves to six values only I'd like to know which one of these six would you say is most important when raising children? And the second most important? **Base:** % of all respondents % of the sum of 'Most important' and 'Second most important' answers are shown (© Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll 2012).

The interest of Albanians in SEM countries is motivated and influenced by their economic and financial situation. In Albania, one of the poorest countries of the region, with a poverty level of around 62% (measured by Purchasing Power Parity), people judge the world around them economically and financially. This explains why their interest in SEM countries is focused primarily on the economic conditions of these countries and the quality of life of their people. Political changes rank as the third interest and religious beliefs as the fourth. The underestimation of religion stems from the fact that living in a multi-religious country, Albanians do not have much curiosity for the religions around them.

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