

The Economic, Political and Socio-Cultural Influence of Turkey and Russia in Albania: Perceptions from Youth Political Forums

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Abstract

Background: The specific geographical position of Albania, has promoted opposing influences from Western and Eastern countries. Two large influential countries with clear economic and political interests in Albania are Russia and Turkey. Aim of study: The aim of the present study was to assess perceptions of economic, political and cultural influence of Turkey vs. Russia in Albania. The main hypothesis of the study was that perceptions of Turkish influence would be stronger as compared to Russian influence. **Methodology:** The sample included 140 participants, 71 women and 69 men, mean age of 23.84 (SD=3.53); In terms of political forum membership, the sample was divided as follows: 57.1% belonged to FRESSH 40.7% FRPD and 2.1 % LRI. The instrument was a self-report questionnaire, aiming to assess perceptions of Russian and Turkish influence in Albania and was administered through the Google Docs Platform. **Results** indicated that a predominance of Turkey over Russia across all 3 dimensions, economic, political and cultural. However, while Turkey was rated highest in terms of economic influence, Russia was rated highest in terms of political influence. Moreover, the different political organizations (left or right wing) did not differ in their perceptions of both countries' influence. Finally Turkish influence was perceived as a stronger barrier to European integration as compared to Russian influence although scores were moderate to low.

Keywords: Albania, Turkey, Russia, influence

Introduction

Albania is a South-East European country, which has been constantly under opposing influences of the East and West. Eastern cultural values and norms particularly from countries such as Turkey, which have a historical connection with Albania, are very prominent in the country. Influences are also extended towards political and economic dimensions, including the increasing foreign direct investments in the country, or joint agreements and treaties.

Apart from Turkey, Russia represents another important Eastern influence in Albania. Although the role of this country in terms of political, cultural, and economic impact is not as obvious as that of Turkey, there are several indicators (mainly economic) in the recent years suggesting its growing influence in Albania.

The present study has been developed in the effort to understand perceptions of the impact of these two countries in Albania, as reported by members of the two largest youth political organizations in the country. It is claimed that perceptions of the influence of these two countries, as reported by youth who are politically engaged might provide important insights not only of the current political climate but also the future political strategies of Albania.

A literature review of the Turkish and Russian multidimensional influences in Albania is discussed in the following section.

Literature review

Turkish interests in Albania

The recent years have marked a growing Turkish economic influence in Albania; According to the Turkish ambassador, Mr. Yörük currently there are more than 400 Turkish companies spread across numerous areas (e.g., telecommunications, banking, energy etc.), with a growing number of employees now exceeding 15,000 people. Examples include Türk Telekom with investments in the telecommunication field; Epoka University and Mehmet Akif College operating in the education system; Cengiz Construction company in the construction and transport areas etc. Albania in fact holds the third place in

South Eastern Europe (following Serbia and Croatia) in terms of foreign direct investments reaching 750 million euros a year, with Turkey providing substantial contribution; for instance Turkish foreign direct investments during the last year (2017) reached the value of 45 million euro (Bank of Albania, 2017).

Several political decisions have positively influenced the growing economic impact of Turkey in Albania; an example is the Free Trade Agreement between the two countries in 2006, which provides a distinct advantage to Turkish goods imported in Albania; for instance, only in year 2015 Turkey has exported goods to Albania worth 287 million euros (SETA, accessed in 2018). Another influential dimension, which goes unnoticed but is quite crucial refers to socio-cultural influences. The historical connection between Turkey and Albania, has resulted in important similarities in terms of norms, values and way of life, which might be either directly connected to religion (a predominance of Muslim religion in Albania) or not (Vracic, 2016).

To summarize, evidence suggests that Turkey has impacted mainly Albanian economy as outcomes in this area are also more straightforward and measurable. However, the political and cultural aspects are intertwined with the economic dimensions, although the impact might not be very obvious.

Russian interests in Albania

Although Albania is not listed among the top 10 countries of Russian economic interest, in the recent years there have been several 'positive' signals on the Russian side. For example, after a 13% drop in 2016, the first quarter of 2017 has marked a growth of almost 20%, in Albanian- Russian trade exchange (Federal Custom Service of Russia, 2017; Institute of Statistics. 2017)). As regards Albanian export to Russia, after the significant drop of 2010 (with 4 million Lek), a significant growth occurred each year, peaking in 2014, with 457 million Albanian lek. (Federal Custom Service of Russia, 2017; Institute of Statistics. 2017)

Moreover a significant increase in imports of Russian products has been noted. In fact between years 2013 and 2015, there has been a steady growth, and during the first quarter of 2017, Russian imports rose by over 70% (Federal Custom Service of Russia, 2017)

The growing economic influence of Russia has been certainly helped by the political efforts to revive and develop the economic relations between the two countries; the focus has been on boosting Russian investments in the energy, transport and tourism sectors. The first changes are already becoming evident. For instance there are some indications of negotiations between the Chinese and Turkish Companies Lukoil and Gasprom as regards oil extraction in the area of Patos-Marinze (Metohu, 2017.).

Along the same lines, there is some evidence that the Russian Embassy in Tirana is trying to take control over the Albanian part of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) by considerably boosting Russian investments in the area. The dependence of European countries on Russian gas and the growing threat of the alternative route of Azerbaijan gas to Europe justifies the growing Russian interest for the TAP project, going through the Albanian territory (Metohu, 2017).

Russia's strong economic and geopolitical interest in the region is complemented by efforts to change media discourse in Albania, in addition to other countries in the region. Examples include a series of very debatable journal articles openly denouncing Russian efforts to 'buy' media influence in Albania; such a strategy would involve several Albanian TV stations, newspapers and online media to Russian companies, the ultimate goal of which is the spread of "Russian propaganda" (Gjonaj, 2017; Mejdini, 2016) . Nonetheless, it should be highlighted that the information has been officially contested by the Russian Embassy in Tirana. Moreover CIA sudden visit to Albania in 2016 also raised doubts on Russian influence in Albania; nonetheless it could be stated that political relations between the two countries cannot be described as very active; the economic or cultural dimensions are rather more prominent areas of influence (Gjonaj, 2017; Mejdini, 2016)

In fact a bilateral intergovernmental meeting between Russia and Albania countries will hold its seventh session in Tirana after 7 years of interruption in the future. (Mlloja & Hunci, 2016). Although relations between the two countries are slowly improving (as confirmed by the Albanian Ambassador to Russia and the Russian Ambassador to Albania in separate interviews), the growing efforts to maintain a bilateral dialogue despite fundamental differences in political affairs are quite evident.

Aim of the study

The aim of the present study was to assess perceptions of economic, political and cultural influence of Turkey vs. Russia in Albania. Perceptions of influence were assessed among the three largest youth political organizations in Albania FRESSH, FRPD and LRI. The main hypothesis of the study was that perceptions of Turkish influence would be stronger as compared to Russian influence. Also no significant differences in views were expected from the different political organizations (left or right wing). Finally it was also expected that Turkish influence would be perceived as a stronger barrier to European Integration as compared to Russian influence.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

The study sample consisted of 140 participants, 71 women and 69 men aged between 17 and 34 years old with a mean age of 23.84 (SD=3.53) (see Table 1. Gender distribution of the sample). As regards employment status, 38.6% of the sample were students, 46.6% were graduated and employed while 17.9% were graduated but unemployed (See Table 2. Sample distribution by employment status). In terms of political forum membership, the sample was divided as follows: 57.1% belonged to FRESSH (left wing youth Organization), 40.7% FRPD (right wing youth organization) and 2.1 % LRI (youth organization of the Socialist Movement for Integration) (see Table 3. Sample distribution by type of political forum). Participants were recruited from the political organizations registers; the questionnaire link was sent to their online email addresses.

Table 1. Gender distribution of the sample

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	71	50.7	50.7	50.7
	Male	69	49.3	49.3	100.0
	Total	140	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Sample distribution by employment status

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Student	54	38.6	38.6	38.6
	Graduated/Employed	61	43.6	43.6	82.1
	Graduated/Unemployed	25	17.9	17.9	100.0
	Total	140	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. Sample distribution by type of political forum

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	FRESSH	80	57.1	57.1	57.1
	FRPD	57	40.7	40.7	97.9
	LRI	3	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	140	100.0	100.0	

4.2 Instruments

The instrument was a self-report questionnaire, aiming to assess perceptions of Russian, Turkish and Chinese influence in Albania. For the purpose of the present study only sections addressing Russia and Turkey were considered. The first section of the questionnaire consisted of demographic information such as age, gender, employment status, political forum membership etc. Questions on perceptions of political influence were answered on a Likert Scale ranging from one to five were 1-not at all, 2- a little, 3-somewhat, 4-considerable and 5-a lot. The three dimensions of influence assessed consisted

of Economic influence, Political influence, and Socio-cultural influence. The questionnaire was constructed and administered through the Google Forms Online Platform.

Results

Descriptive analysis regarding Russian Economic, Political and Cultural influence, revealed a moderate to low score for each of the three dimensions. The dimension rated the highest was Russian Political influence, followed by Economic Influence and ultimately Cultural influence (see mean values, Table 4). Moreover, t-tests revealed statistically significant differences between these 3 dimensions (see Table 4.1.)

Table 4. One-Sample Statistics: Perceptions of Economic, Political, and Cultural Influence of Russia

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Russian Economic influence	140	2.54	1.055	.089
Russian Political Influence	140	3.07	1.173	.099
Russian Cultural Influence	140	1.74	.845	.071

Table 4.1. One-Sample Test: Perceptions of Economic, Political and Cultural Influence of Russia

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Russian Economic Influence	28.429	139	.000	2.536	2.36	2.71
Russian Political Influence	30.979	139	.000	3.071	2.88	3.27
Russian Cultural Influence	24.308	139	.000	1.736	1.59	1.88

As regards Turkish influence, results indicated moderate values, as participants reported the highest scores in terms of Economic influence, followed by Political influence and ultimately cultural influence (see Table 5). Moreover, t-test revealed statistically significant differences in terms of the three dimensions (see Table 5.1).

Table 5. One-Sample Statistics: Perceptions of Economic, Political and Cultural influence of Turkey

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Turkish Economic Influence	140	3.51	1.202	.102
Turkish Political Influence	140	3.27	1.180	.100
Turkish Cultural Influence	140	2.86	1.323	.112

Table 5.1. One-Sample Test: Perceptions of Economic, Political and Cultural Influence of Turkey

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Turkish Economic Influence	34.509	139	.000	3.507	3.31	3.71
Turkish Political Influence	32.791	139	.000	3.271	3.07	3.47
Turkish Cultural influence	25.561	139	.000	2.857	2.64	3.08

As regards comparisons between the two countries in terms of each specific dimension, results indicated significant differences as regards the economic dimension (see Tables 6 and 6.1), where scores were significantly higher for Turkey.

Table 6. One-Sample Statistics: Russian vs. Turkish Economic Influence

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Russian Economic Influence	140	2.54	1.055	.089

Turkish Economic Influence	140	3.51	1.202	.102
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Table 6.1. One-Sample Test: Russian vs. Turkish Economic Influence

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Russian Economic Influence	28.429	139	.000	2.536	2.36	2.71
Turkish Economic Influence	34.509	139	.000	3.507	3.31	3.71

As regards perceptions of political influence, results also revealed significant differences, as scores on Turkey were significantly higher than those on Russia (see mean values Table 7; t-test Table 7.1)

Table 7. One-Sample Statistics: Russian vs. Turkish Political Influence

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Russian Political Influence	140	3.07	1.173	.099
Turkish Political Influence	140	3.27	1.180	.100

Table 7.1. One-Sample Test Russian vs. Turkish Political Influence

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Russian Political Influence	30.979	139	.000	3.071	2.88	3.27
Turkish Political Influence	32.791	139	.000	3.271	3.07	3.47

Finally, significant differences were also found in the third dimension, i.e., cultural influence, as reports on Turkish influence once more outscored Russian influence (Table 8, Table 8.1.)

Table 8. One-Sample Statistics: Russian vs. Turkish Influence

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Russian Cultural Influence	140	1.74	.845	.071
Turkish Cultural Influence	140	2.86	1.323	.112

Table 8.1. One-Sample Test: Russian vs. Turkish cultural influence

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Russian Cultural Influence	24.308	139	.000	1.736	1.59	1.88
Turkish Cultural Influence	25.561	139	.000	2.857	2.64	3.08

Comparisons of reports from the two political forums revealed no significant differences mean values as regards Economic, Political and cultural influence of Russia and Turkey (see Table 9).

Table 9. Group Statistics: FRESSH vs. FRPD

	Political Forum	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Russian Economic Influence	FRESSH	80	2.55	1.146	.128
	FRPD	57	2.51	.947	.125
Russian political influence	FRESSH	80	3.10	1.218	.136
	FRPD	57	3.04	1.149	.152
Russian cultural influence	FRESSH	80	1.69	.836	.093
	FRPD	57	1.77	.846	.112
Turkish Economic influence	FRESSH	80	3.40	1.249	.140
	FRPD	57	3.61	1.130	.150
Turkish Political Influence	FRESSH	80	3.26	1.199	.134
	FRPD	57	3.30	1.180	.156
Turkish cultural influence	FRESSH	80	2.85	1.406	.157
	FRPD	57	2.84	1.236	.164

One sample t-test revealed significant differences as regards perceptions of Russia and Turkey as barriers to the European integration of Albania. As demonstrated in Tables 10 and 10.1. participants reported Russia as being a stronger barrier to European integration as compared to Turkey. However there were no significant differences in terms of reports by the specific political forums (see Table 10.2.)

Table 10. One-Sample Statistics: Russian vs. Turkish Perceived Barriers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Russia as a barrier	140	2.50	1.178	.100
Turkey as a barrier	137	2.35	1.192	.102

Table 10.1. One-Sample Test: Russian vs. Turkish Perceived Barriers

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Russia as a barrier	25.103	139	.000	2.500	2.30	2.70
Turkey as a barrier	23.082	136	.000	2.350	2.15	2.55

Table 10.2. Group Statistics: Russian vs. Turkish Perceived Barriers

	forumi	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Russia as a barrier	FRESSH	80	2.46	1.190	.133
	FRPD	57	2.56	1.180	.156
Turkey as a barrier	FRESSH	78	2.26	1.200	.136
	FRPD	56	2.46	1.206	.161

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to assess perceptions of economic, political and cultural influence of Turkey vs. Russia in Albania. Perceptions of influence were assessed among the three largest youth political organizations in Albania FRESSH, FRPD and LRI. The main hypothesis of the study was that perceptions of Turkish influence would be stronger as compared to Russian influence. The dimension rated the highest was Russian political influence, followed by economic influence and ultimately cultural influence; however scores were moderate to low, indicating a perception of moderate to weak Russian influence in the 3 dimensions.

As regards Turkish influence, results indicated moderate values, as participants reported the highest scores in terms of economic influence, followed by political influence and ultimately cultural influence (see Table 5). As regards comparisons between the two countries in terms of each specific dimension, the hypothesis was supported as results indicated a predominance of Turkey over Russia across all 3 dimensions, economic, political and cultural. Moreover, the different political organizations (left or right wing) did not differ in their perceptions of both countries' influence.

To conclude, the present study found that Albanian politically engaged youth overall perceive a stronger influence from Turkey rather than Russia, although values were quite moderate. An important point to mention is the difference in the strongest reported dimension; Turkey is perceived as a stronger economic influence while Russia's influence is perceived to operate more in the political dimension. Finally, in terms of barriers to European integration it should be noted that although Turkish influence is perceived as stronger than Russian influence, the two countries are not perceived as strong barriers to European Integration.

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