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McCain's Edge in Albania

By Patrick O'Brien, Newsweek

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Obama would probably be the clear victor if the American election were held in Europe. But in little Albania, McCain would probably win.

Albanians tend to view both candidates through the double lens of support for Kosovar independence and support for Albania's integration into Western institutions. Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in February, but the new state's struggle for legitimacy is far from over. Since both Albania and Kosovo are predominantly ethnic-Albanian, the Albanian government has been the staunchest supporter of their "brethren in Kosovo".

In such a light, McCain's tougher reputation and- more importantly - his history of supporting Albanians (especially for his support of the bombing of Belgrade in '99) make him seem the more likely candidate to ensure that Kosovo remains independent.

The political landscape of the Albanian-American immigrant community is one indicator for this (admittedly close) hypothetical race. Former Republican Congressman Joe DioGuardi, who has Albanian roots, is the founder of the Albanian American Civic League and has long been the most prominent voice of the Albanian diaspora. He makes no secret of his support for the McCain campaign. Meanwhile, current Democratic Congressman Eliot Engel of the Bronx, representing perhaps the largest Albanian-American constituency, has become a strong advocate for Albanian causes. He supports Obama. However, not only does DioGuardi have the stronger network to connect to Albanian-American voters at large, but Obama also has difficulty overcoming his carefully crafted image as a dove among people who want someone tough in the White House to counter Serbian and Russian influence in the Balkans.

Besides supporting the Albanians in Kosovo, McCain is also perceived to be the better candidate to push for Albania's more pressing issue - integration into the West. It was under the current Republican administration that Albania was recently extended an invitation to join NATO in April, and McCain was one voice in the Senate that had been calling for a "NATO Renaissance", to include the addition to the alliance of Albania, Croatia and Macedonia. Of course, there were plenty of Democrats who joined the call, but Obama was never particularly vocal about this issue until recently after Albania had already been invited to join NATO. Also, Albanians' affinity for Bill Clinton would have meant something for the Democrats given a Hillary candidacy, but many Albanians still feel slighted by her upset.



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The characterization of being unsupportive to Albanian causes is perhaps not fair to Obama, but is due to his own campaign statements: "Serbia and its people have also suffered terribly over the past two decades" was interpreted in the Albanian broadcast media as a "pro-Serb" comment. The implication is that someone who is "pro-Serb" must, ipso facto, be "anti-Albanian". Such false dichotomies (so widespread in Balkan politics) are enough to lead many Albanians to conclude that Obama would not be as supportive of their causes as would McCain. Similarly, Illinois governor Rod Blagojevic, a Serbian-American who as a Congressman in the 90s had naturally opposed the bombing of Serbia, may have weakened Obama's support from Albanians by endorsing him [[link in Albanian](#)].

Obama has recently attempted to strengthen his "pro-Albanian" credentials by giving essentially the same position as McCain - unambiguously defending the territorial integrity of Kosovo and supporting Albania's accession to the EU. But the damage was already done. Essentially, both parties and both candidates equally share the same supportive views of the issues important to Albanians - reinforcing Kosovo's independence and encouraging Albania's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. But to Albanians, what is important is not only what the candidate says, but with how much intensity he says it.

If you ask most Albanians, they love both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush - the first for his campaign against "ethnic cleansing", the other for his leadership in support of an independent state of Kosovo. Given their affinity for America, Albanians would follow the next American president - Republican or Democrat - literally into battle, as they continue to do in Iraq and Afghanistan. But whereas most Europeans are tired of a hawk in the White House, a little toughness suits the Albanians just fine.

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