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ALBANIA:  
LANDMARKS OF TRANSITION

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# ALBANIA: LANDMARKS OF TRANSITION

(field study, 2003)

Valeri Grigorov

In late October 2003, an IMIR research team carried out a follow-up field study in Albania<sup>1</sup>. It continued the topic of “Albanian Communities in the Balkans” elaborated during the last few years. Applied was the “urgent anthropology” method including various techniques of quick collection and analysis of data: anthropological enquiries and observations, adapted semi-standardised sociological interviews, statistical data, and scholarly experts’ opinion. The aim of the study was to take a snapshot of the situation in this country. The team’s efforts were focused on getting a deeper insight into the political and economic processes, the specific cultural and ethnographic characteristics of the population, the discrepancy between the North and the South, the processes of migration, the family, and the different minorities.

Within the span of four years, it was the second field study conducted in Albania. Because of the still unstable situation there, during the 1999 expedition the researchers failed to fulfil the team’s initial intentions to carry out a survey in Northern Albania and efforts were limited to the area of the so-called security triangle of Elbasan–Tirana–Durrës. Today (four years later), the situation has improved a great deal. This has allowed the team to complete the plans for conducting a survey in Southern Albania. In the course of a week, the fieldworkers travelled more than 800 km along the extremely difficult mountain roads in Central and Southern Albania and succeeded in carrying out dozens of interviews in Tirana, Vlora, Saranda, Korça, and Pustec, as well as in Pogradec and the villages of Dragot, Këlcyrë and Vrbnik.

## THE LOCAL ELECTIONS

In October 2003, the recently held local elections were the major political event. Analysts described them as normal – having taken place in the context of a low level of electoral participation. The results had shown the existing balance between the two major political forces – the candidates of the Socialist Party had received 42 per cent of the vote and the candidates of the Democratic Party – 36 per cent, respectively. The lower turnout could be explained by the high percentage of émigrés, as well as by the voters’ withdrawal from extreme politicisation. A comparison with the preceding elections showed a tendency towards a decrease in support for the ruling Socialist Party, but that was considered to be natural following a six-year rule and in view of the growing conflict within this party’s parliamentary group during the past several months. The victories won by the Democratic Party in the cities of Elbasan, Saranda, Lushnjë and Korça, where the Socialist Party had traditional majority in the past, were given particular importance. The success achieved was deemed to be the first serious breakthrough of the Democrats in Central and Southern Albania since 1997.

As there is no unified system of population registration and data administration, nearly 10 per cent of the electorate had not been registered and were not on the voter lists which necessitated entering their names on Election Day. This fact was used by the Democratic Party as a reason for

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contesting the results in Tirana and some other cities thus causing a general delay in the publishing of the official election results by the Central Election Commission. According to Remzi Lani from the Albanian Media Institute, the political class in Albania had considerable problems with what he called the *culture of losing* – the non-acceptance of defeat in elections.

A subject of intra-party commentary was the crisis in the governing Socialist Party. It was connected with the formation within the parliamentary group of a faction, around former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of foreign affairs Ilir Meta and Pandeli Majko, severely criticising the authoritarian style of party leader and Prime Minister Fatos Nano. Prevalent in number in the splinter group were young members of Parliament who wanted to introduce a new line of conduct and bring about the replacement of the old nomenclatura. In the opinion of people familiar with the subject, the contradictions between Meta and Nano were mainly associated with the parcelling of economic influence in the country, while political strife was only an element. As a result of intraparty feuding, the Premier's ministerial nominations were rejected by his own parliamentary group. According to the opposition Democratic Party, the fact that the country had been governed for months on end by deputy ministers was non-legitimate and early parliamentary elections had to be considered.

### CORRUPTION, TRAFFICKING, AND CLANS

In the opinion of most of the interviewees, corruption in Albania had reached incredibly high proportions and had become a problem for the nation's development. People mentioned as causes of this phenomenon both the internal socioeconomic processes and some negative factors linked with the transition period in the countries of Eastern Europe. As some respondents put it, "much of the illegal trade today goes through Albania". Geographically, this country is the final gateway to Italy. Furthermore, it is the loose border security and control that make Albania a preferred and convenient stop for international trafficking.

People said that in the period of the economic embargo on Yugoslavia hundreds of petrol stations were built in Northern Albania within the span of only a few months, and the daily amount of petrol sold could meet the nation's overall monthly needs. Despite the strict sanctions, every day dozens of tons of fuel were smuggled across the border through various channels, and, to this end, an illegal pipe-line was specially laid in the bottom of Lake Scutari. In some experts' opinion, the profits from this illicit trade exceed profits in the official economy, involving at the same time almost half of the active population<sup>2</sup>.

One can judge about the existence and size of profits from illegal and semi-legal business by the amazing scope of construction activities throughout the country. In the city of Saranda alone, where there was a single hotel in 1989, some fifty new hotels have since been built, two of which with over 2 100 beds. In Durrës, the built-up areas have reached the beach destroying the tropical coastal vegetation. Of course, most stunning is the scale of construction activities in the capital city of Tirana, filling up every vacant spot in the suburban areas. It would be naïve to believe that the financial resources behind this wave of unprecedented countrywide construction come from Albanian emigrants' savings or from cross-border peddling, the less so from public servants' salaries. In the respondents' view, "Albania has become a world money-laundering place" where powerful criminal structures invest their illegal trade capital.

A salient conclusion from the interviews has been that not only is the Albanian political system closely interrelated with the economy, but also that it is a function of the economic and

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<sup>2</sup> Казер, К. Приятелство и вражда на Балканите. Евробалкански предизвикателства. София, Военно издателство, 2003, с. 182.

clan groupings that emerged in the 1990's. These formations were successful in accumulating considerable financial resources during the embargo on Yugoslavia getting involved in illegal trafficking in fuel, weapons, narcotics, and humans. A widespread practice was to evade paying customs duties on imported goods. In the interviewees' opinion, this was usually done with the assistance of customs officers and under political protection.

A member of Parliament from the Democratic Party was categorical that every minister belonged to some of the big clans having monopoly over a particular economic sector. "As a rule, ministers are also chiefs of these same clans." In his opinion, the most influential and economically powerful clans in Albania today are: the Ruchi clan, whose patron is Secretary General of the Socialist Party; they have monopoly over the production of and trade in building materials. The Duka clan run the food stuffs business. The Mayor of Durrës is one of them. The Andjeli clan have established control over the gas and fuel supply. The Nano clan manage the mobile-phone operators. A striking fact is that the economically powerful clans come from Southern Albania and are connected with the Socialist Party. By their structure and mode of action they follow a distinct subordination, one of the centres of control being attributed to the Nano clan ranking higher than the rest – "Nano's the Boss". Their major rival is the Meta clan to which belong ex-President Rexhep Meidani, Skender Jenushi – former deputy leader of the Socialist Party, and Fatos Klosi – former chief of the secret services. Similar economic clan structures exist in Northern Albania too. Usually, they are closely linked with the Democratic Party. In the political observers' opinion, this is where one of the fundamental shortcomings of Albanian society lies: "the government system imposed on Albania in the 1990s was such as to serve directly the economic interests of the big clans thus weakening the public institutions and defrauding government revenue."

## SOCIAL STATUS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

One of the indicators of human growth and social status is the national income level. The average monthly salary for those employed in the public sector and the administration is about €150-160, the minimum pay – €90, the average pension amounts to about €50, the maximum – €100. Paradoxically, given the low levels of income in this country, quite expensive cars run in the streets, the most preferred brand being Mercedes. As put by a respondent, "an Albanian wouldn't count as a car anything but a Mercedes". Unlike four years earlier, when the number of vehicles in Albania was small and the drivers, ever so happy with their new acquisitions, would enthusiastically honk their horns to salute one another, what one can normally see today in Tirana are constant traffic jams.

Among the major daily life problems experienced by the population are the ongoing electrical power outages. Most drastic are the power cuts in the villages, but even in the capital city of Tirana people live in the rhythm of imposed power curbs. By way of a protective measure against a dramatic rise in the price of electric power during the current winter season, about 800 thousand individuals (nearly ¼ of the population) were supposed to get social assistance. The problem of accurate measurements of electricity consumption has not been adequately resolved either. Some of the households are equipped with watt-hour electric meters, others are not, the latter paying no more than a base amount of €20 a month. The high prices of electric power induce the households that have electric meters installed to save, while those with no such devices would consume power uncontrollably, especially during the winter months.

In some urban areas there is a water regime as well. In Tirana water is available for only an hour in the morning, at noon and in the evening. This is a consequence of the too old water-mains

which have not been designed for the large consumption of the city today. One of the election promises of the old new mayor of the capital has been that by the end of his new term of office “water will be available round the clock”.

Another troublesome subject is the road problem. Roads are in very poor condition, in some places there is no pavement at all. The Vlora – Saranda stretch turned out to be especially difficult for the team. The building of new roads has proceeded at a relatively slow pace. We noted that now, four years later, the much talked about Corridor 8 project was still at an initial stage of construction. A new road segment has been built from the border checkpoint at Kakvil to Gjirokastër.

Because of the reduced passenger flow from Bulgaria, the direct bus line Tirana – Sofia has been cancelled. Small retailers that used to be its chief customers have already become rich enough to use mostly their own transport.

The past years have seen social differentiation growing deeper. One of the interviewees gave the following example by way of illustration: “the rich in Albania are now 10 per cent – they speak over mobile phones, while the rest of the people talk to themselves”. A café owner in Vlora complained of people’s low incomes which had made many establishments close up. The decrease in the number of customers was also caused by the high percentage of emigrants (predominantly young people) from the city itself. He, too, intended to close up his café not only because of the lack of clientele, but also because he was afraid of being robbed or killed. He wanted to get away from Vlora and emigrate to America.

An Albanian from Gostivar told us that during the recent years the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia had been developing active trade relations with Albania. He himself was selling stone-crushers used in gravel production. Entrepreneurs in Gostivar had opened many confectioneries in Elbasan, Tirana and Durrës. Comparing the economic conditions, our Albanian interlocutor described the business relations with Kosovo as the most promising and reliable ones. In his opinion, the current situation in Macedonia is peaceful, but there is much uncertainty concerning the future of this state. Conditions in Albania were seen as improving, though much was still needed to be done in terms of infrastructure. On hearing that we planned to travel around Southern Albania, he was horrified and admitted that he himself would not risk undertaking this route. The problem comes not only from poor roads, but also from fears concerning safety. Although the present situation in Albania is incomparably calmer, Albanians still avoid making trips in the countryside, anywhere far from the big cities.

In Vlora, the team talked with the former city prefect, now director of a brewery. We learned that a local businessman had invested 15 million euros in the plant’s construction. During our visit there, the newly purchased machines and installations were being fixed in the spacious shops. The production process was intended to be fully automated, and the product quality to be monitored by a laboratory in Germany. The management of the brewery had ambitions to put on the market a new brand of beer, named after the investor Argon, but spelled backward – “Nogra”. What shocked the team most, however, was the architectural design of the administrative building. In its exterior, it is a multi-storey modern edifice, with rows of sculptures of young girls, boys, eaglets, and lion cubs mounted on the flat roof. Still greater was the team’s surprise when we entered the building: instead of the customary desk places, before us were large offices supplied with modern office furniture, computers, luxury leather armchairs and reproductions of works of Rubens, Renoir, Caravaggio, Dali and the like. The central lobby was designed after the fashion of luxury hotels – there were clocks hanging on one of the walls, telling the exact time in the big capitals round the world.

The special attention given to this episode is not accidental. In the first place, the case of an ex-politician, now manager of a brewery, is indicative of the natural government-to-business transformation that occurred in the beginning of the transition period in Albania. At various levels, the *power-business/business-power* symbiosis has already established a solid and indissoluble link and has formed the backbone of the Albanian economy. Of interest is also the architectural representation of the environment. It is a particularly exciting experience for a researcher travelling in Albania to see the alternating sights of strangely mixed architectural styles, bleak buildings with peeling walls built during the socialist period, and next to them renovated or newly constructed mansions with bright-coloured fresh-painted facades, fashionable hotels and small private castles representing bizarre designs based on heterogeneous conceptions. The ambition has been to have something different from the old way and, if possible, to have every bit of everything – drawing lavishly on world examples. And, suddenly, there it is - a fresh masterpiece, a brewery with elements of classic, of baroque, with sculpted figures and ornaments, with an art gallery – all that suggesting vanguard aesthetics of the work place. The aim has been for art and luxury to become an inseparable part of business. Obviously, the long years of total isolation have produced a strong hunger for variegating socialist bleakness by including new elements, by experimenting with different styles, very often producing some really shocking patterns – entirely in the fashion of the modern so-called “gangster baroque”.

## THE AGRARIAN REFORM

In contrast to the rest of the East-European countries, Albania’s agrarian reform of the early 1990s counted on the principle of egalitarianism – each individual was supposed to get an equal share of the land. The underlying reasons for this approach resided in the fact that before its nationalisation the land had been owned by only several hundred big landlords, while the vast majority of the rural population were just tenant farmers. The aim of the agrarian reform carried out in the beginning of the 1990s was to give land to all peasants while observing the principle of “the land belongs to those who till it”. Based on the number of adults, the arable land pertaining to the domain of each village was parcelled into equal-value plots and each family, depending on the number of its members, was given the corresponding amount of land. So, parallel with the transformation of the state-owned lands into privately owned ones, the reform sought to put all farmers on an equal footing allowing the harmonisation of agrarian relations. The process of farm land privatisation was more or less complete by 1995 when 95 per cent of the agricultural land became private property<sup>3</sup>, and the results were soon felt – the production of almost all agricultural crops experienced considerable growth.

Of interest, in connection with certain problems in agricultural development, are some data published by Albanian sociologist Artan Fuga in the metropolitan newspaper “Koha jona”. In his view, ten years after the onset of the agrarian reform, some regional problems began to surface more clearly. Because of the poorer quality of the soil and the local climate characteristics, yields in North-eastern Albania and the mountain areas are much lower. The land in those parts has been parcelled into very small plots preventing the efficient use of mechanised equipment. During the team’s first expedition to Albania in 1999, the common sight would be the ploughing of the land using draught animals and the wide application of manual and inefficient labour. The growth of regional differences has also been determined by the entire lack or the poor quality of roads.

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<sup>3</sup> *Bobev B.* Albania in the Difficult Years of Reform (1989-1996). – In: Albania and the Albanian Identities. Sofia, IMIR, 2000, p. 230.

Under socialism, the state used to make investments mainly in the fertile lowland areas and this practice has been going on to the present day. All these circumstances have provoked certain tension between people living in the highlands and those inhabiting the lowlands. According to the research data presented by Fuga, only 10-15 percent of the agricultural produce from the mountain regions is sold on the market, the remaining part is consumed by the producers' households. This deprives farmers of motivation to develop production. It is much better for a family to send its younger members to work in the large cities or abroad rather than keep them on the farm.

## MIGRATIONS – EMIGRATION

Over the past 13 years, Albania has experienced unprecedented internal and external migration of the population. With the fall of the communist regime, the severe restrictions on the freedom of movement were eliminated. The economic crisis, the mass closure of loss-making state-owned enterprises and the drastic shrinking of the labour market brought about in the early 1990's an avalanche of migration of the population from the rural areas towards the larger cities. The capital city of Tirana became a particularly attractive place with its most dynamically growing economy. Within only five years (from 1993 to 1997) its population increased from 242 000 to 568 758 inhabitants<sup>4</sup>. In our previous study (1999) this phenomenon was often described by the respondents as an "invasion". The local urban residents felt definite resentment towards the newcomers. Some adherents of the Socialist Party would even blame Sali Berisha for deliberately populating the capital with scores of thousands of his followers from Northern Albania.

On the principle of the pendulum, following the long years of Albania's isolation and total enclosure during the communist regime, nowadays Albanian society demonstrates certain openness. A new and particularly important circumstance for Albanians today is the possibility to emigrate. In the beginning of the 1990s, in an absolutely spontaneous urge, and very often in an act of despair, they were heading en masse towards either Greece or Italy. Despite the lack of accurate statistics, observations have shown that the percentage of economic emigrants from Albania is among the highest in Europe. Experts estimate their number to be between 500 thousand<sup>5</sup> and 1 million.

The surveys we carried out have made it possible to distinguish two major migration waves. The beginning was set in the summer of 1991 – a month after the Albanian Labour Party (later renamed The Albanian Socialist Party) won the parliamentary elections. Driven to utter despair by their thwarted expectations of political changes, the Albanians swarmed into the port cities with the intention of leaving the country. The lights of the Italian ports Bari and Brindisi became a dream for tens of thousands who risked their lives absolutely determined to reach the "opposite shore or get drowned and sink to the sea bottom". Others headed for the Greek border with the purpose of trying to cross into Greece illegally.

A characteristic feature of this first emigration wave was that it took place under extreme circumstances. One of the participants said he could not even call his family when he decided to start for the border in order to cross over into Greece. Desperation caused by the dire living conditions had reached its ultimate point of endurance and even the smallest incidence was sufficient to trigger off a mass exodus. As put by a respondent, "the communists had driven us to the point of dreaming about fleeing our own country". A specific aspect of the first wave of

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<sup>4</sup> Karaj, T., A. Tamo. Some Tendencies in the Modern Albanian Family. – In: Albania and the Albanian Identities. Sofia, IMIR, 2000, p. 266.

<sup>5</sup> Karaj, T., A. Tamo. Some Tendencies in the Modern Albanian Family. – In: Albania and the Albanian Identities. Sofia, IMIR, 2000, p. 266.

emigration was the involvement of men alone. The intention of most of them was to work for several years abroad and return to Albania with the money earned.

In 1995-1996 there was a process of return of emigrants who invested the money they had made in the construction of houses, new shops and restaurants. It was a period of dramatic economic upsurge and a rapid improvement in the standard of living. According to a group of men from Vlora, it used to be quite common for a person to have “2000 [Deutsche] Marks for pocket money”. Data on the national economic indicators in the first half of the 1990s fully confirm the respondents’ accounts. Especially remarkable was the rate of growth of the national income – it ran up to 9.3 – 9.6 per cent in 1993 and 1994, to reach the record level of 14 per cent in 1995<sup>6</sup>.

All that lasted till the collapse in 1997 of the so-called fraudulent pyramid investment schemes, in which most people lost their life savings. The drastic impoverishment of the population generated a second large wave of emigration. Nearly 1 million people fled the country. In order to limit the uncontrollable influx of immigrants, the Greek authorities concentrated additional gendarmerie force along the Albanian border. The lack of official statistical data makes it difficult to establish the exact number of émigrés, and, yet, the research team succeeded in obtaining some fairly accurate percentages: Krujë – 21 per cent; Vlora – 50 per cent; Saranda – 50 per cent. Korça – 32 per cent, the village of Dragot – 30 per cent. In spite of the tendency to occasionally exaggerate the number of emigrants, the information collected shows that those who have left the country account for between 20 and 25 per cent of the population. In Italy alone, the Albanian students are already 8 000, as many as they are in Tirana.

The different thing in the second wave was that entire families became emigrants, with the aim of settling in the new place. Many of them had completely lost their confidence that it was possible to build a normally functioning state in Albania. At the same time, their ties with the relatives left behind remained very strong – some of the money earned was regularly sent home, new houses were built. This has put the emigrants in a specific position – on the one hand, they are making every effort to obtain permanent residence abroad, they send their children to Greek and Italian schools, but, on the other hand, they also feel obliged to maintain contacts with their kinfolk back in Albania. According to estimates by economic experts, emigrants put about one milliard US dollars into the Albanian economy each year.

## THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH – THE TWO FACES OF ALBANIAN IDENTITY

The *North-South* differentiation has been traditional for Albania. It has been determined, above all, by the so-called “geographical” factor responsible for the formation of numerous ethnographic groups within a relatively small territory. In the course of history, two of them eventually incorporated the smaller ones and imposed their cultural domination – the *Gegs* in the north, and the *Tosks* – in the south. The borderline between these is the Shkumbin River dividing modern Albania into two parts, approximately equal in area.

It is not always possible for an outside observer’s eye to discern what are the similarities and differences between the *Gegs* and the *Tosks*. The Albanians themselves do not like being divided. Very often, however, in discussions on various subjects, certain tension and even open resentment to some group of Albanians could be felt. As a rule, the dividing line is that of North and South, rather than that of particular local groups.

Smaller subgroups, with their own specific regional features, can be differentiated within the larger ethnographic communities. Such are the people from Malësia (*Malësori*). They live in

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<sup>6</sup> Смирнова, Н. Албания върви към еднопартийно управление. – Сп. “Новое время”. Москва, 1996, бр. 32.



the Malësia region around Lake Scutari. In the respondents' view, "Malësori are the most backward of all people in the country – wild and uncivilized". Their southern counterpart are the *Kurveleshi* living in the mountains south of Vlora, in the villages of Nivicë, Ftterrës, Corraj, Ramicë, Vërniku, Bolena, Progonat, etc. Both groups are characterised by their stern character, often also described as "primitive". Some of the interviewed laid special emphasis on the fact that many of Albania's national heroes are of Kurveleshi origin. Although the former live in the northern mountains and the latter in the southern highlands of the country, opinions of them are quite similar. So, along with the traditional north-south distinction, there is yet another distinction in Albania – that of highlands-lowlands. Widespread is the view of those living by the seaside that Albanians from the mountain areas are "wild", "uncultivated", "conservative" and governed by the norms of the Code, "once they live at 1700 m above sea level, they are like the Malësori and the Kurveleshi".

An attempt was made under the communist regime to reduce the cultural and economic differences between the individual ethnographic groups and between the North and the South. Conducive in this respect were also the accelerated processes of industrialisation and urbanisation – the concentration in the urban areas of large masses of people, members of various social and cultural groups. As reported by the interviewees, "in the communist times everything was mixed up, the communists made a Russian salad and it was difficult to speak of Gëgs and Tosks any more"<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless, some long-established stereotypes characterising the two major regional groups are still alive. In the respondents' opinion, northerners and southerners are distinguished in the first place by their dialect – "you can tell right away whether you're talking to a Gëg or a Tosk". Anthropologically, people from Northern Albania are taller (Dinaric type), they have strongly marked features and a stern look, while those from the South are shorter (Mediterranean type), with more delicate facial appearance. "In the south, they sing without accompaniment, but in the north they always sing to the accompaniment of *çifteli*". Quite common is the view that Tosks are "more educated – most of the intellectuals, men of the arts, and politicians come from the South", while Gëgs are said to "have always been soldiers – people of honour". In economic terms, the South has developed more dynamically and has dominated over the North – the vastest and most fertile plains and the large seaside urban centres are located there. Besides, Tosks have a large immigrant community in Italy with whom they maintain close contacts. All these circumstances make them "more open to the world". Gëgs are described as "more conservative and uncommunicative" – "they live in small mountain villages and remote tribal hamlets". Gëgs point out as their advantage the fact that the Code of Lek Dukagjin is part of their cultural tradition, while it is only little known in the south. Southerners argue back that the standard contemporary language has been developed on the basis of the southern dialects.

Historically, the relations between the two regions have been characterised by a constant rivalry for domination. Thus, for example, during World War II the guerrilla squads of the Communist Party had an active role in the southern parts, while the nationalists were dominant in the north. Collaboration of the chiefs of the northern clans with the German occupation authorities was used as a pretext for the offhand imposition of communist power in the autumn of 1944, an act associated with mass killings. Some contemporary studies point out that the guerrillas exterminated just about 1/3 of the adult male population in Northern Albania<sup>8</sup>. During the

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<sup>7</sup> Желязкова, А. Албанският национален въпрос и Балканите. Теренни проучвания. Спешна антропология. Том 1, София, IMIR, 2001, с. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Krasztev, P. The Price of Amnesia. Interpretations of Vendetta in Albania. In: - Albania and the Albanian Identities. Sofia, IMIR, 2000, p. 194.

following years, thousands of people were sent to labour camps or interned to other parts of the country.

One of the contemporary “projections” of regional antagonism can be perceived in the multi-party system established in the 1990s. The nation’s two most influential political parties were differentiated on geographical rather than on ideological grounds. Based on the strong anti-communist sentiments, the Democratic Party gained support in Northern Albania, while the Socialist Party (successor of the former Communist Party) preserved its traditional influence in the South.

As reported by the respondents, under Sali Berisha the southerners were completely ousted from the key public offices and replaced with people from the North. The victory of either the Democratic Party or the Socialist Party was in fact the victory of the North or the South, respectively, the triumph of some clans or others, ensuing reshuffles in the public administration at all levels. Thus, political life in Albania was involved in a vicious circle periodically nourishing the traditional regional rivalries. Based on this division, the turbulence in the autumn of 1997 was perceived, in a sense, as “a revolt of the South against the rule of the North”. There were even appeals by activists of the Democratic Party for the formation of armed troops of the North in order to bring under control the riots in Vlora and the other southern towns. Albania was faced with the danger of a civil war which could not only deepen the gap between the North and the South, but also result in the actual break-up of the country.

Among the factors determining people’s rising discontent were the spreading rumours that the entire network of pyramid schemes was run by the secret police backed by the then Prime Minister Sali Berisha. The country was flooded with mass protests and looting. In the course of 8 months chaos was complete – no police and no administration in place. In response to the insecurity and pillage, the population began mass seizure of weapons from the military depots in order to be able to defend themselves. An example of an extraordinary civic consciousness was given by some of the History Museum personnel in the town of Korça who drove along a tank to protect the building during the riots. In the end, the crisis was overcome – the desire to keep the state’s integrity prevailed in Albania’s society. Not least in importance was the political elite’s interest - although actively capitalising on the existing discrepancy between the North and the South, the elite’s immediate concern was to preserve the integrity of the country.

One of the aftermaths of these events was that the Albanian population armed themselves on a mass scale. The repeated campaigns organised by the government in an effort to buy up the weapons seized from the depots, achieved only limited success. Even to date, a considerable amount of this weaponry is still in the hands of the population. According to the respondents’ reports, there is no Albanian family out of possession of at least one or two assault rifles. The fact was explained by the precarious times, the high crime rate, and the weak public institutions unable to protect the citizens in an adequate way. Yet, there is clearly something else beneath this development too. The requirement for every man to possess some kind of weapon has deep roots in the Albanian tradition – it symbolises his independent spirit and capability of defending his family honour. Under socialism, for nearly half a century, the right to arms possession was taken away. In 1997, however, chaos and banditry opened up the opportunity for most Albanians to have their own guns again. Paradoxically, even women who had never before touched an automatic weapon, told us how thrilled they had been firing an entire cartridge in the air – “just like that, out of joy”. Unlike the way things were in the past, when guns used to be prominently displayed, occupying the most conspicuous position in the house – hanging on the wall by the fireplace, today they are hidden and taken out only when necessary or on festive days.

The 1997 events have shown that regional antagonism in Albanian society, especially in a period of crisis, could rapidly re-activate the old rivalry stereotypes. At the same time, in consequence of the dynamic migration processes witnessed in the recent decades, the significance of this opposition has considerably decreased. Nowadays, almost 2 million people, out of a total population of 3.5 million, live in the central parts of the country. In demographic terms, the influence of Northern and Southern Albania is already very small. In contrast to the widespread view of the North-South dividing line, political scientist Remzi Lani launched the thesis of the new integrating role of “Central Albania, no Gegs, and no Tosks”. The population in those parts is mixed and to a lesser extent influenced by the cultural and political differences underlying the confrontation between the two Albanian peripheries.

## ÇAMS

One of the objectives of the survey was to establish to what extent the Çam population group, a community on which there were rather contradictory reports and which had been the subject of various political speculations had been preserved<sup>9</sup>. Today the Çams are compactly settled in the municipalities of Komispol, Markat and Ksara (Southern Albania) and in Filiates (Greece). In relatively large groups, some of their descendants have also resettled in the towns of Saranda, Vlora, Fier, and Durrës. A distinctive characteristic of Çams, according to the interviewees, is their stronger religiousness and the observance of the Ramadan fast. When introduced, “they say their family name first and next their given name”. Widespread is the view that Çams are “very hard-working”, that they are chiefly engaged in business and are wealthier than the rest of the Albanians. We often heard the statement that “there’s no such thing as a poor Çam”. Those living along the coast are engaged in fishing and in transportation services – they live in a separate quarter in the city of Vlora<sup>10</sup>.

During the last few years, there was quite a stir about the issue of Çam claims for restoring their ownership of estates abandoned during World War II in Greece. The reason for their fleeing to Albania en masse in the autumn of 1944 is to be found in the accusations of collaboration with the fascist occupation forces. Faced with the pending threat of acts of bloody retribution, several dozen thousands of families fled the country together with the withdrawing German troops. The lands owned by some 1700 Çams accused of collaborationism were confiscated by the Greek government. Exposed to constant pressure and threats until 1946, almost all Muslim Çams, constituting about 90 per cent of this population, emigrated. The legal status of their abandoned properties, however, remained unsettled. Fifty years later, their successors believed it was their right to be restored to ownership of their ancestors’ lands.

In the beginning of the 1990s, seeking a wider international response, the Democratic Party brought a claim against Greece for the resoration of Çams’ estates in Epirus, a claim which the Greek side left without any answer. Later, the Socialist Party suggested that the problem be resolved by means of pecuniary compensation. The Greek side countered with a claim for money compensation in return for the nationalised Greek-owned properties in Albania. During the ongoing dispute, each side began to present its own data on the number of Çams: according to the Greek authorities, they were about 80 000 persons, while according to the Albanian authorities their number was about 500 000. The figures cited were absolutely arbitrary, not based on any

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<sup>9</sup> For further historical and demographic data see: *Zhelyazkova, A.* Albanian Prospects. Fieldwork. – In: *Urgent Anthropology*, Vol. 2, Sofia, IMIR, 2003, pp. 202-209.

<sup>10</sup> The respondents’ estimates are that the number of Çam residents in the city is about 35 thousand.

statistical surveys but rather seeking a suggestive impact. The team members repeatedly heard statements made by different politicians, not only in Albania, but also by representatives of Macedonia and Kosovo, who were apparently delighted to give plainly inflated figures about the number of Çams in Greece and who were gloating over the neighbouring nations' fear of the rapid growth of the number of ethnic Albanian population. For the Albanians, "it's people's number that determines everything". Some of them even go so far as to draw a parallel and claim that "Çameria could become a second Kosovo"<sup>11</sup>. In response to the overstated and apparently unrealistic data on Çams presented by the Albanian side, the Greek side reports similarly inflated and unreal figures concerning the Greek minority in Albania. As a result, the problem of the property and number of Çams has been directly linked with the property and number of Greeks in Albania. According to the team's approximate estimates, today the Çams living in Albania must be around 120-150 thousand<sup>12</sup>.

Until now, all attempts to find a political solution to the dispute have failed. The issue has been drawn into the sphere of political speculations and is, therefore, only destructive to the bilateral relations. Many of the interviewees think that the question should be referred to an international court which should rule independently on this controversial case. The Albanians believe that (kept in the archives) in Turkey are the old title-deeds certifying Çams' land ownership and this circumstance is to be used as a key argument.

## BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY – THE PLACE OF CUSTOMARY LAW

One of the challenges to Albanian society is how a tradition involving a number of medieval elements will be woven into the modern standards. For centuries on end, in the mountainous areas difficult of access, customary law played the part of an alternative, even sole institution, symbolising not only a particular way of life, but also the actual independence of the population. Albanians have found in its rigid rules the fundamentals underlying their unique spirit and their strong sense of honour.

In its most widespread version, customary law has been known as the *kanun* (code) of Lek Dukagjini – after the name of the feudal lord Lek III Dukagjin (1459-1479). It has not been preserved in its original version. In the early 20th century the Franciscan priest Shtjefën Gjecov collected and published some customary law rules applied by the Albanian mountain dwellers near Shkodra<sup>13</sup>. The edition included moral norms and rules regulating social and interpersonal relations. Its key points were: keeping personal and family honour, collective responsibility, the pledge (*besa*), and blood revenge. Along with the Code of Lek Dukagjini known from the Shtjefën Gjecov edition, in some parts of Albania the memory of some other versions of customary law codes has been preserved such as the Kanun of Skanderbeg in the regions of Debar and Mat. Near Vlora and Tepelena in Southern Albania, in the Labria region, still living is the memory of a local variant of the Code different from that of Lek Dukagjin's. Among the Kurveleshi, the so-called Code of Zuli (kanuni Zulit) was applied. It is quite possible that other local variations and versions have existed, the memory of which has already faded out or has been completely lost.

The communist regime of Enver Hoxha undertook drastic measures for eradicating customary law. The subject of *kanun* was banned and, instead, the socialist legal system was implemented. The aims of this tough and uncompromising policy were two: to obtain full control

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<sup>11</sup> Сп. Балканите+. Албанският национален въпрос. Брой 23, декември 2002 г., с. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Zhelyazkova, A. Albanian Prospects..., p. 209.

<sup>13</sup> Gjecovi, St. Kanuni i Lëke Dukagjinit. Skoder, 1933.

of the population hitherto accustomed to an independent status (untouched by anyone's authority), as well as to overcome the utter primitiveness and cultural isolation of the highlanders.

One of the paradoxes of contemporary Albanian society is that in spite of the very long period of total restriction, the spirit of customary law has not completely lost its influence. With the fall of the communist regime, customary law norms rapidly found a medium for new development. In the Albanians' view, the revival of the Code has been a reaction on the part of society to social insecurity, inefficient laws, the weak state and the high incidence of criminality. In the emerging legal and social void of the early 1990s, people would ever more often refer to customary law norms for resolving the concrete cases of their daily interrelations. As a result, older feuds were resumed and hundreds of new ones were triggered off. Paradoxical as it may sound, in the late 20th and the early 21st century Albania was yet again faced with the nightmare of vendetta which threatened the safety and the lives of tens of thousands of men and children dooming their families to constant fear and economic ruin.

The largest number of blood feuds is present in Northern Albania where tradition is deep-rooted. In order to survive, many of the endangered families seek to escape by moving to other towns in Central and Southern Albania, or even abroad. The number of feuds in Southern Albania is lower and often has no direct relation to the prescriptions of the Code. In general, these feuds are actually rivalries between competing criminal structures. Having gone beyond the rules of customary law, they are much more difficult to put under control, and the conciliatory approach provided by the Code most often proves to be inapplicable.

We can conclude that blood feuds rise to the surface especially in times of "crisis" in society, when the public institutions are too weak to manage the deep-going and dynamic social transformations. Coming as a natural alternative to the "missing state", the rules of customary law have regained a medium for development within the framework of a society that has preserved its patriarchal traditions.

#### 'THE RELIGION OF ALBANIANS IS ALBANIAN-NESS'

A distinctive feature of contemporary Albanian society is its high level of religious tolerance. Against the background of the severe ethnic and religious clashes seen in the Western Balkans during the past years, this sounds truly astonishing. Many of the respondents explained the phenomenon with the rigorous religious restrictions imposed during the communist regime. In 1967 Albania was proclaimed to be the first atheist state in the world. Under a special law, the religious institutions were suspended, their property confiscated, and the places of worship were converted into sports halls, shops, holiday rest homes, or simply destroyed<sup>14</sup>. Fear of persecution was so strong that within the lifespan of a generation religious practices were entirely abandoned.

Some important historical prerequisites were also conducive to the formation of certain indifference to religious doctrines in the Albanians. Even the Code of Lek Dukagjin itself specially mentions that the church is a separate institution from the commune<sup>15</sup>, and the priest is not allowed to take part in the assemblies of the village commune even when they are held in the church yard. In one of Skanderbeg's instructions to his son Gjon Kastrioti, too, stress is laid on the necessity of a distanced attitude to the church institution and on brooking no interference in

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<sup>14</sup> *Eldarov, S.* Eastern Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics in Albania. – In: *Albania and the Albanian Identities*. Sofia, IMIR, 2000, p. 102.

<sup>15</sup> Used is the Macedonian translation of the Code by Kim Mehmeti: *Канонот на Лек Дукагини*. Тетово, "ФИ&ГА", 1994, p. 23.

politics<sup>16</sup>. This theme was given special place in the works of the great national poet Pashko Vasa. His legendary motto, “*Rise, Albanians, wake up from your sleep, all like brothers pledge to one religion, and mind neither church, nor mosque, the religion of the Albanians is Albanian-ness.*”<sup>17</sup>, became a slogan of the Albanian revival. This definition of Albanians’ religion is of key importance for the understanding of a unique characteristic of the Balkans, namely, the peaceful co-existence of three religions – Islam, Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.

On the other hand, the inaccessible mountains were the reason why none of the religions imposed by external pressure succeeded in taking deep root in the Albanian mind and soul. As Fernand Braudel wrote, “the mountain world as a whole was only remotely committed to the dominant religion of the sea”<sup>18</sup>. A mountain is a world that has always stayed apart from civilisation, preserving its own specific spirit. With the Albanians, tradition (in the form of customary law) has often had the significance of both law and religion, sometimes wholly substituting religious rules imposed from outside. Remarkably, this tradition has proved to be so resilient that neither Christianity, nor Islam, nor even the regime of Enver Hoxha, could erase or replace it. Even today, when the rules of the Code have to some degree been obliterated, its spirit could be found in a whole range of behavioural patterns. It seems the Albanian has been cradled in these prescriptions and bears them as part of the genetic code. If you ask a contemporary Albanian whether he knows and observes the Code, the most frequent answer will be that its rules have already lost their significance for the young people. And immediately after, he will explain how his parents have chosen him a wife (in conformity with the Code rules), assert that if someone kills, he should be paid back in blood – “blood is blood, it’s not water, blood is repaid in blood alone”. To the Albanians, Islam, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy are only elements of tradition, a historical nuance. They are built in the Albanian cultural model in a way allowing one to preserve the community’s unity without destroying one’s sense of belonging to the Albanian ethnos.

With the elimination of all restrictions after 1990, a rapid process of reinstitutionalisation of religious cults began. Hundreds of new temples – mosques and churches, were built with funding chiefly from foreign sponsors. Especially active in this process have been the Arab countries, the Vatican, and Greece. In order to stimulate Catholic propaganda, Pope John Paul II made an official visit to Albania in September 1992<sup>19</sup>. With the help of various Islamic organisations, scores of religious schools have been opened, and an enormous bulk of religious literature has been published. The world headquarters of the Bektashi order, too, are based in Tirana<sup>20</sup>.

In the first years after the ban on public religious worship was lifted, people availed themselves of the opportunity to exercise their right in a very adaptive way. Some of them, who had previously belonged to the Muslim tradition, came to believe it especially “chic” to go to Catholic churches, because they identified these churches with “things European”<sup>21</sup>, others were baptised in Orthodox churches. For most of the interviewed, religion was something secondary, “a

<sup>16</sup> Zhelyazkova, A. *Albanian Identities...*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Vasa, P. *Vepra letrare*. V. I. Tiranë, 1987, f. 39. Cited after: *Hristova-Beyleri, R.* *Myth and Reality in Albanian Literature*. – In: *Albania and Albanian Identities*. Sofia, IMIR, 2000, p. 172-3.

<sup>18</sup> Бродел, Ф. *Средиземно море и средиземноморският свят по времето на Филип II*. Книга първа. София, 1998, с. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Eldarov, S. *Eastern Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics...*, p. 103.

<sup>20</sup> In the early 20th century about 20 per cent of the Muslim population in Albania belonged to the Bektashi order. After the Order was banned in Turkey under Kemal Ataturk, Albania became the last stronghold of this religious tradition. Today most of those familiar with religious practices are gone, which makes the revival of the cult difficult

<sup>21</sup> Казер, К. *Приятелство и вражда...*, с. 135.

matter of personal choice and judgement”. In the conversations, the respondents usually described themselves as Muslims, Orthodox Christians, or Bektashi, but most often they had no particular knowledge of the essence of their respective religion. In this sense, the data released by the Vatican in 1995 stating the Catholics in Albania to be 492 021 (14.8 per cent of the total population), and the Orthodox Christians to number about 615 000 (18 per cent of the population)<sup>22</sup>, could be accepted only with the reservation that they imply populations with presumed religious preferences rather than believers engaged in active religious practices.

In downtown Tirana, the research team came across a group of women dressed according to all strict prescriptions of the Islamic tradition, and men wearing thick waist-length black beards – the “Taliban” style. Against the background of the secular appearance of the other Albanians around, the team members presumed these were probably foreign Islamists. It turned out they were Albanians from the villages near the city of Shkodër who had come to attend a course held at one of the new Islamic schools in the capital. We pause on this particular example in order to draw attention to the fact that in order to spread its influence religious propaganda, in this case Islamic one, would most easily find vacant niches in the poor rural areas that had remained apart from modern tendencies and the modern value system. It is no accident that the most intensive processes of re-Islamicisation over the past years have been witnessed in these particular areas. This is a phenomenon caused by the difficulty of providing some kind of *raison d'être* and prospects for development to these more conservative communities, which have not yet crossed the “borderline” of modernity and feel it ever more difficult to adapt to the dynamics of transformations. The lack of “the future” results in turning to “the past”, already perceived as a super-value, and the consequence is returning to the most conservative religious forms. This further extends the marginalisation of these communities deepening their alienation from the rest of society. It may well be that in the next few decades, when the processes of re-clericalisation will have advanced, the idyllic “religious tolerance”, now present in Albania, will take a sharp turn, while the tendencies of religious confrontation will start increasing.

## THE ALBANIAN FAMILY

According to Shtjefën Gjeçov, a family consisted of the people in the household. When their number increased, they would part and form *vlaznijas* (fraternities), several *vlaznijas* would form a *djin* (kin group) and the latter, in turn, would form *fises* (clans) and *bajraks*. All *bajraks* together formed a larger family, called a people, which shared one land and had common blood, common language and customs<sup>23</sup>.

Historically, the clan system began disintegrating as early as the Middle Ages. After the restoration of the Albanian state, many fraternities and families found themselves living in different countries, others emigrated to Western Europe and the United States. All these circumstances led to the gradual breaking up of the old clan structures and to a certain erosion of patriarchal relations.

The major changes in the structure of the Albanian family were associated with the period of the communist regime. Following the example of the other socialist countries, the modernisation of social relations became, within a short term, a priority task for the Albanian communists – so that one of their objectives became to eradicate the archaic patriarchal tradition and to create a new type of “socialist family”. The processes of urbanisation during the second

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<sup>22</sup> *Eldarov, S. Eastern Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics....*, p. 104-105.

<sup>23</sup> Канонот на Лек Дукагини. Тетово, “ФИ&ГА”, 1994, с. 33

half of the 20th century largely contributed to the gradual establishment of the nuclear family as the basic social unit in the urban centres. Only in some of the rural and mountain areas, certain elements of the extended family have persisted and are still found.

One of the most important indicators of the level of development of social relations is the status of women. In this respect, the communist regime in Albania pursued a purposeful policy of guaranteeing equality between the sexes in public life. Unlike the cases of Kosovo and Macedonia, women in Albania were granted much larger opportunities for participation in the spheres of education, science, and administration. Nevertheless, persistent in the Albanian society was also the conviction regarding the subordinate position of women, whose role should be limited to their functions within the family. Over the past years, this tendency seems to have become ever more dominant strengthening the impression of a growing inequality between the sexes. One of the team's observations was that even in the big cities one could very rarely see women walking in the streets – females should in any case be accompanied by a male (a husband or a relation). The restaurants and cafés are full of men, while women's attendance is very low. All this creates a feeling of a "male" world in which a woman's exclusive place is the home.

An important aspect of tradition is connected with finding a marital partner. "Intermarriages" (in terms of creed) in Albania are quite common and are accepted by all religious communities without any prejudice. As a rule, (in accordance with the Code) the head of the family is the one who should make the choice and give permission for a marriage. This requirement is explained by the desire to prevent marriages between close relatives. Before the engagement, it is a must to make sure there is not anyone of the other family who suffers from a genetic disorder. It is not uncommon for the heads of the two families to arrange a marriage between their children while the latter are still very young, and it is absolutely unthinkable to break one's pledge. This practice is strictly observed in the villages, especially in Northern Albania, but it is not rare in the cities either. As prescribed by tradition, a marriage is considered contracted after the engagement and neither side has the right to break it off. Should the girl's family go back on their word, they risk getting involved in a blood feud with the boy's family and losing the bride-price paid in advance. Paradoxical as it may seem, in Albania, where the population is among the youngest in Europe, the possibilities for an individual's own independent choice are only limited. Observing the strict prescriptions of tradition, it is very difficult to come to dissolving a marital union. As a rule, divorce is seen as unacceptable by both sides, each of the families considering it their duty to help the young couple keep the marriage. This is the major reason for the relatively low incidence of divorces in Albania.

In contrast to the ethnic Albanian communities in former Yugoslavia, there has been a steady and clear-cut tendency in Albania itself to a drop in the birth-rate. Statistically, this process can be traced back to 1960 when the birth-rate was the highest – an average of 6.5 births per woman, dropping down to as low as 2.7 births in 1995<sup>24</sup>. The reduction in the number of births is a complex issue. It is influenced, on the one hand, by various social and cultural factors, and, on the other, by purely medical ones – the legalisation of abortions<sup>25</sup> and the wider use of contraceptives. In addition, witnessed during the recent years has been a tendency to an increase in marriage age – about 28 years for males and 23.3 years for females<sup>26</sup>. Experts explain the phenomenon with the high level of unemployment, the economic insecurity and the large size of emigration which stop young people from early marriages. In some cases, the long period of university studies is also a reason for delaying marriage.

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<sup>24</sup> Karaj, T., A. Tamo. *Some Tendencies...*, p. 267.

<sup>25</sup> Abortions were legalised as late as 1991.

<sup>26</sup> Karaj, T., A. Tamo. *Some Tendencies...*, p. 270.



The nation's strongly shrunk labour market has been responsible for an ever greater number of women losing their jobs and being compelled to assume the role of housewives. The family's priority is to have the husband employed, "because he is better paid". This circumstance inevitably makes many women economically dependent on their husbands. Ultimately, they have begun losing their social status and their social function is limited to the family sphere alone. This growing tendency puts to the fore the question of the economic factors underlying women's emancipation and the modernisation of social relations.

The loss of the sense of social security and government protection after 1992 is considered to be one of the greatest drawbacks of the country's democratic development. As put by a shepherd from the village of Këlcyrë "under communism, we had no money, but we had bread, and now we've got no money to buy bread". On the other hand, chances to emigrate, be it illegally, provide new economic opportunities not only for surviving, but also for raising the family's standard of living. At the same time, living outside the native land confronts thousands of Albanian families with the necessity of making a choice: be separated or leave the country together thus allowing their children to attend foreign schools. This is a process affecting nearly 1/6 of the Albanian families, and the consequences are to be observed and analysed during the years to come. Many of the emigrants think that the attempts to establish a democratic and strong state in Albania have failed. One of them shared his distress: "Albania has no future, it doesn't function as a state, people in the villages raise hashish, and the country is turning into the Balkans' Columbia"<sup>27</sup>.

In the context of a weak and "corrupt" government, the Albanian comes to seek foothold in the family again. The vast networks of family and peer ties by means of which each individual is able to find ways and channels for economic survival have been restored and reactivated. Since the adequate government mechanisms for protection and assistance are missing, the family has proven to be that Albanian institution which continues to ensure permanent and efficient protection and mutual support for its members.

## MINORITIES

The issue of minorities in Albania is ambiguous and quite difficult to elucidate because of the lack of statistical data. In the latest population census, taken in 2001, there were no entries for ethnicity, language and religion. The official Albanian position maintains that the country's population comprises 95 per cent Albanians, 3 per cent Greeks, and 2 per cent other ethnic groups (Wallachians, Gypsies, Macedonians, and Serbs). These data are not based on any serious studies and are released for propaganda purposes. It is by the specific characteristics of the Albanian national and religious feelings that scholars (sociologists and political scientists) explain the reluctance of those in power to include questionnaire items that would give information on the number of ethnic and religious minorities. The religious "mimicry" of Albanians has been historically determined and is a phenomenon known in historiography. It has been motivated by pragmatic reasons alone and has not been in conflict with ethnic origin. During the Ottoman

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<sup>27</sup> Григоров, В. Икономическите имигранти в Гърция. – В: Да живееш там, да се сънуваш тук. Емиграционни процеси в началото на XXI век. София, IMIR, 2003, с. 238.

period, a substantial majority of the Albanian population used to present themselves as Ottomans maintaining, however, their Albanian identity. Nowadays, it is a common practice for the Albanian immigrants in Greece to identify themselves as Orthodox believers, to be baptised in church and change their names in order to obtain a more favourable status in that country<sup>28</sup>. Such acts, however, serve strictly pragmatic purposes and do not impair the immigrants' manifest affiliation to the Albanian ethnic community.

It is the Greek, Wallachian, Romany, Montenegrin, and Macedonian communities that are recognised as ethnic minorities in Albania. For the present, the recognition of the Bulgarian ethnic minority has been deferred because of the dispute between Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia over the identity of certain groups of Slavic population. The issue is further complicated by the lack of stable ethnic consciousness of this population who easily change their allegiance to either Bulgaria or the Republic of Macedonia depending on the benefits expected.

There is a certain discrepancy in the data concerning the number of the individual minorities. In principle, each country tries to present higher figures for its respective minority. Greece, for example, insists that its ethnic minority numbers 300-400 thousand<sup>29</sup>. Today most members of the Greek minority of active age live and work in Greece their aim being to obtain permanent residence there. Still living in the Albanian villages are mostly elderly people. On its part, the Greek state makes every effort to keep the ethnic Greek population back in Albania. To this purpose, it funds projects for building schools, production enterprises, and infrastructure. Irrespective of the regularly insufficient number of students in Gjirokastër, a Greek university has been opened in this city. In many places, new churches and chapels have been built, and a huge illuminated cross towers above the town of Korça – a prototype of the cross rising over Skopje. In spite of the special concerns of the Greek state, the chances for young people to return to Albania are not great. They travel back home only during the annual holidays to see their relatives, or during elections. A desperate attempt by the Greek nationalists to strengthen the national spirit and more seriously engage the population in withstanding the Greek character of particular regions was manifested in the provocative anti-Albanian slogans raised during the latest elections in the town of Himara. They have been widely discussed by the public and perceived as an attempt at aggravating interethnic relations.

A focus of special attention in the study was also the Slav population identifying themselves as ethnic Bulgarians or as ethnic Macedonians. Three regions compactly inhabited by such population may be recognised in Albania: in North-eastern Albania – around the town of Kukësi, known as Goren; in Central Albania – in the area of the Golo Brdo Mountains; and near Lake Prespa. Curiously, the three groups are isolated and do not have contacts with one another. They also differ in the dialects they speak, as well as in their religious faith – the Gorans and the Golo-Brdans are Muslims, while those inhabiting the area around Lake Prespa are Orthodox Christians.

Existing estimates with reference to the number of this population are contradictory. The Bulgarian side insists on a figure of about 100 000, but it is obviously quite exaggerated. The interviewees in our inquiry were ethnic Bulgarians from Golo Brdo, citizens of Tirana, and Bulgarians (Macedonians) living in the Prespa area. According to the latest census, the number of the population in Golo Brdo is about 8200. Ethnic Bulgarians live in the municipalities of Trebišt, Ostrenje, and Stebljevo: compactly in 17 villages, and mixed with Albanian population in another 23 villages. Alive among the elderly residents is the memory of the population in Golo Brdo being of Bulgarian origin, as well as of the local Albanians calling them “Bugars”.

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<sup>28</sup> *Zhelyazkova, A.* Albanian Prospects..., p. 215; *Григоров, В.* Икономическите имигранти..., с. 237.

<sup>29</sup> According to some other estimates, the actual number of the Greeks in Albania is between 100 and 150 thousand.

Over the last two decades, the majority of people of active age have moved to the cities of Elbasan, Tirana, and Durrës populating entire neighbourhoods in compact masses<sup>30</sup>. An association named “Prosperity – Golo Brdo” with as many as 168 members was founded in Tirana, where the largest group is concentrated. A similar association was set up in Elbasan. Both associations engage in various cultural and educational activities; they actively support the sending of students to Bulgaria, and contribute to the organisation of Bulgarian language courses. An initiative has also been launched for the opening of a Bulgarian college in Tirana. Intensified cultural relations with Bulgaria play an important part in reawakening Bulgarian consciousness among the younger generation. Over 50 students have completed their higher education at and graduated from Bulgarian universities in the recent years.

The other group, comprising those identifying themselves as Macedonians, less often as Bulgarians, live in the area around Lake Prespa. This region was annexed to Albania after the Italian protectorate of 1921-1924 was terminated. The proximity of the border has made it possible for the population to keep alive the cultural ties with their co-nationals in Vardar Macedonia. In the 1940s Yugoslavia carried out an active policy of affiliating this population to the newly emerged Macedonian nation. During that period, many teachers from Macedonia were sent to the villages in the Prespa area, and they engaged in wide-ranging educational and propagandist activities.

The proclamation of the independence of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991 paved the way for a more active cultural policy among the population from the Prespa region. This population became a key priority for two reasons: because of its closeness to the border with Macedonia and because of its preserved Orthodox tradition. In the height of the military conflict in 2001, the question of the Prespan villages, inhabited by a “Macedonian” population, acquired a new implication. The proposal by the Chairman of the Skopje Academy of Sciences Efremov for exchanging territories and populations between the Republic of Macedonia and Albania received wide publicity. The claims of the Macedonian side were chiefly focused on the Prespa Lakes region. The number of this population has been estimated at over 5000 people living compactly in the villages of Pustec, Ostec, Galičica, Suva gora, Golem Grad, Mali Grad, Progun, Blaca, Crnava, Krušja, and Vrbnik. The people in these villages speak in the Vardar region dialect, while the inhabitants of Vrbnik use the Kostur dialect. Today, a prevalent number of the population have Macedonian consciousness, and a small minority of the intelligentsia describe themselves as Bulgarians. This is the reason why there are two cultural societies: “Prespa”, where members are people of Macedonian identity, and “Ivan Vazov”, members of which are those of Bulgarian identity.

## KOSOVO AND THE ALL-ALBANIAN PROSPECTS

Invariably present in each of the team’s trips around the Balkans were the themes of Kosovo’s status and the all-Albanian prospects. Naturally, they were a subject of discussion in this Albanian expedition too. The thesis that there is no other outcome for the Albanians but independent Kosovo has been fully confirmed. This option is seen as the only one that could stabilise the Balkans and, at the same time, be a counterpoint to the fears of the neighbouring countries about the establishment of a single larger Albanian state. None of the Albanian politicians thinks that the question of a union of Albania and Kosovo is part of the agenda. What is more, the majority of the respondents categorically denied any such possibility. The team’s

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<sup>30</sup> In Tirana, the Golo-Brdan Bulgarians live in the Kodra e priftit (Popovo brdo) neighbourhood.

observations in Kosovo have also shown that the predominant number of ethnic Albanians consider the establishment of an autonomous and independent state as their major priority. The natural aspirations for Albania's closer integration with Kosovo are seen as a matter of long-term development within the framework of the all-European integration process.

Irrespective of the belief in the common ethnic roots with their co-nationals from Albania, the ethnic Albanians in former Yugoslavia have gone through a number of processes of formation among of their own specific ethno-cultural community and national consciousness for the past 80 years, a development which presumes the need for an independent political course. The prospects for the emergence of a second Albanian state do not contradict the historical tradition. The periods of political unification of the Albanians were too short and transient and it was regionalism that prevailed in the long run.

Furthermore, the thesis that Tirana does not function as a centre of the Albanian national ideology has been confirmed. As a rule, people here take small interest in any forms of nationalism. According to Eva Hiskaj, lecturer in Balkan history at the Tirana University, during the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, it was not possible to speak of nationalism, and "in general, Albanians imply a different content in this concept". Even today's university students mix up nationalism with the history of the national-liberation army<sup>31</sup>. At present, the ideological centres which promote the all-Albanian national idea emerge exclusively in the periphery – in Kosovo and in Macedonia, the Albanian diaspora in Western Europe and in America proving to be especially influential and active. Living away from the motherland, the old-time Albanian emigrants are much less influenced by regional differences and confrontation. Through their eyes, the prospects for an Albanian national and political unification seem much more realistic. Possessing considerable financial resources and a sense of national commitment, they actively intervene in all developments within the Albanian communities in the Balkans.

Being aware of the regional differences, either inherited from the historical past or reinforced by present political divisions, the Albanians of today are certainly trying to find what brings them closer together – their language, tradition, and customs. As put by the respondents, "there are certain differences between us (Albanians), but what's more important is that we're of the same blood". Revived is also the memory implying that the Albanians from Northern Albania are descended from the same clans as their fellow-countrymen from Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro.

Discussed in connection with the subject of the all-Albanian future was the issue of ethnic Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia. There is a common view that Macedonian society is faced with a difficult test – to prove that a multi-ethnic state can exist in the Balkans, or else show that things will follow the path of ethnically pure states. The second option is considered to be less favourable because it will lead to new tensions and antagonisms between the neighbouring countries and, as a whole, will impede the integration of this region into the EU.

For the Albanians, the state does not have the significance it has for the Kosovars, for example. In a quite businesslike manner and free of unnecessary emotions, many of the interviewees explained they did not mind if any of the Great Powers should protect them. Albanians have a pronounced respect and high regard for the big nations and states. In the past, these were the USSR and China, now they are the United States and the EU. Widespread is the wish that "Italy and Albania unite, Albania become a quarter of Italy". Italy is an example to follow – the Italian TV channels are among those most preferred, and the Italian goods are described as being of the highest quality. We were told of an episode at a chemist's shop: A woman wanted to buy a medicine produced in Italy. However, an analogous drug from Belgium

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<sup>31</sup> Сп. Балканите+. Албанският национален въпрос. Брой 23, декември 2002 г., с. 16.

was available in the pharmacy, at the same price (and with even better characteristics). Still, that woman insisted on purchasing the Italian drug, because she was convinced it was of the best quality.

The Albanians' special attitude to Italy has been noticed by other researchers too. In this connection, Petar Chaulev writes: "there are Serbophobes in Albania, there are Graecophobes, but no Italophobes"<sup>32</sup>. This special attitude was also manifested during World War II, when the Italians came as occupiers, but were nevertheless welcomed by the native population. In turn, the Italian occupation authorities were actively engaged in the development of the Albanian economy. Many of the public and government buildings in the central part of Tirana date from this period. As an Albanian said, "out of a village, such as Tirana was, the Italians made a city". Still living is the memory that the Italians did never keep distance from the Albanian population, but rather treated them with respect, in contrast to the Germans. After Italy's capitulation, many Italian soldiers found shelter and refuge from the Vermacht troops in Albanians' homes. Against this historical background, it is hardly by chance that nowadays the country's major trade and investment partner is Italy again.

The dozens of interviews conducted and the possibility to travel in the Southern Albanian parts has made it possible for the team to come up with a more comprehensive picture of the ongoing processes. It may well be said that the country is developing with an extraordinary dynamics and is now rushing to make up for the delay in its social development. Naturally, Albania has not evaded a high incidence of criminal acts and a growing illegal trafficking, which, as a matter of fact, are developments characteristic of Eastern Europe in general. However, their forms here are more aggressive, and the criminal groupings are much more influential because of the weak government institutions. The dispersion of Albanians to Albania's neighbouring countries and their extreme mobility are further contributing to the organisation of illegal trafficking.

Counting mainly on intrafamily mutual support, Albanians do not feel any particular affinity to their own state. What they are emotionally attached to is their native place and their kin. This is both an advantage and a drawback. Albanians are very active in their quest for various opportunities for personal prosperity without expecting much from the state. At the same time, their distanced attitude does not contribute to strengthening the authority of public institutions and allows the establishment of powerful clan and economic structures functioning as a state within the state.

Present are conditions for overcoming the traditional North-South division. In periods of crisis, however, the old stereotypes of confrontation may easily be revived. The political parties themselves play a particular role to this effect. Formed largely on a regional principle, it is quite convenient for both major parties in this country to maintain and use this confrontation for political purposes.

Following the long-lasting total isolation of Albanian society during the communist regime, the subsequent "shock-like" opening of the country has caused significant shifts in the social layers which are now trying to find their new place under conditions of ruthless competition. This reflects, above all, on the extreme dynamics of the economic and migration processes, on the vigorous nationwide construction activities – an unceasing rat race for new breathing space, economic resources, and power.

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<sup>32</sup> Чаулев, П. Скипния (Албания). Цариград, 1924, с. 23.