

Migration and Ethnicity in Albania: Synergies and Interdependencies

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THE EMPHASIS ON ETHNICITY IN the Balkans has proven to be a politically divisive force. Identities fueled by labels of ethnic, ethno-cultural, and ethno-linguistic have historically been associated with periods of conflict and war in the region, and a strong sense of ethnocentrism, isolation, and xenophobia emerges amongst the peninsula's inhabitants. These various divisions derive from the ethnic compositions of the populations and the nature of states in the region, as well as from the peninsula's historical role and Byzantine heritage.¹ The politics of ethnic identity is one of the most important factors in determining the future developments in the Balkans, a region which consists of a mixture of populations, ethnic groups, and state territories. In the case Albania, however, the ethnic divisions, despite their historical significance, are in fact more virtual than real. Among the general populace, ethnicity plays a minor role; however, in recent years politicians and religious leaders have made ethnicity a political issue to leverage their own political power. While the term "ethnicity" carries for the West a cultural-political connotation, in the Balkans and Albania, where governments have failed to adjust to "the rising tide of cultural pluralism," ethnicity has taken on a singularly political tone.²

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MIGRATION EMERGES

Albania is a nation whose people have fashioned a new international diaspora. Albania has at present the highest migratory flow in Europe: approximately twenty-five percent of the total population and over thirty-five percent of the labor force have emigrated

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from the country.³ Albania has approximately nine hundred thousand emigrants, who have settled mainly in Greece (six hundred thousand) and in Italy (two hundred thousand), while the rest reside in other West European countries, the United States, and Canada. In fact, the Albanian migratory flow remains around five times higher than the average flow of emigration in most other developing countries.⁴

The Albanian migratory flow exploded in the early 1990s. During this period, the Albanian economy was in crisis: inflation hovered around three hundred and fifty

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percent, and gross domestic product (GDP) was rapidly decreasing, about fifty percent a year. From 1989 to 1991 exports were reduced from four hundred million US dollars to fifty million US dollars, and external debt was forty percent of the nation's GDP.⁵ These economic difficulties came hand in hand with rapidly increasing unemployment stimulated by interrupted production, and job loss for thousands in the public sector. Unemploy-

ment also forced thousands in rural areas of the nation to move to large cities searching for employment. This economic crisis produced an explosive environment, and made emigration appear to be a healthy alternative to remaining in Albania.

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Though unemployment was a major cause of Albania's emigration, the appeal of living in a Western European country was an additional incentive for this mass migratory flight. Albania has a very young population. In 1989 around twenty percent of the population was between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four.⁶ For these young Albanians, the West had become a utopia of sorts. After a half-century of political isolation, Albanians instinctively identified the freedom and liberty of the Western world with free movement. Moreover, the fall of Communism in Eastern and Central European nations allowed young people and others to pursue lives other than what they had experienced under the hammer and sickle.

Though the world has changed drastically since the fall of Communism, the migratory potential in Albania remains high. Albania has not cured its economic troubles. National income levels remain quite low. In 1998, thirty percent of Albanians were living below the poverty line, and around half of this number lived in extreme poverty, receiving less than one USD per day.⁷ Unemployment remains high. Infant mortality rates are also relatively high, and one out of seven children up to age five is poorly fed. The level of education has decreased as compared to 1989; although eighty-eight percent of the population over the age of fifteen is able to read and write, this number was much higher in years past.⁸

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With a poorly performing economy, “brain-drain” is a significant feature of Albanian migration. Between 1990 and 2003, approximately forty-five percent of Albanian university professors and researchers emigrated, and more than sixty-five percent of scholars who received graduate degrees in the West during 1980-1990 chose to remain there.⁹ We can expect that if economic and social situations in the country do not improve, the Albanian “brain-drain” will continue to be devastating. Albanian legislation currently poses no obstacles to the emigration of its intellectual future.

POST-COMMUNISM: ETHNICITY EMERGES

Under Communist rule, religious and ethnic forces were mitigated by Communist ideology, which privileged social identity over primordial identities.¹⁰ Ethnic groups, both minorities and majorities, lived side-by-side in relative harmony. With the end of the Communist regime in 1990 and amid intense economic difficulties, religious and ethnic forces took over Albania’s political sphere.¹¹ These forces profited from a destitute nation redefining itself in the international system. For many years the Albanian people were blind to ethnic and religious constructs, but now these identities have been reawakened with vigor. Though somewhat artificial constructs, these identities have now become a real political force.

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THE NUMBERS GAME: ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS COMPOSITIONS OF THE POPULATION

Albania is an ethnically homogenous country, with a population of approximately ninety-eight percent ethnic Albanians. According to Albanian official sources, the non-Albanian population consists of sixty thousand Greeks, five thousand Macedonians and Serbian-Montenegrins, and a few other small racial communities.¹² Ninety-six percent of ethnic Greeks live in South Albania.¹³ Macedonians are found in some villages of Southeastern Albania, while Montenegrins are found in the northwestern part of the country, close to Shkodra, the biggest city in the North. It is important to note that these official figures are under dispute. According to ethnic group leaders, the number of ethnic non-Albanians living in the country is at least twice the number recognized by official sources.

The most significant census debate concerns ethnic Greeks. Greek cultural organizations, like the Hellenic Church, believe that twelve percent of the Albanian population is Greek, or four hundred thirty thousand.¹⁴ Recent surveys taken by Greek scholars have furnished the surprising number of sixty thousand.¹⁵ The Albanian government, on the other hand, believes that no more than thirty thousand Greeks live in Albania. Nonetheless, it appears that the Albanian government is not going to conduct

an official census, which would clarify the numbers. The Albanian government fears that if a census were adopted, a considerable part of the population would be registered as Greek.¹⁶

Though the historic, literary, and media debates concerning Albanian ethnology have consumed Albanian and ethnic-minority leaders, the general population has generally ignored the discussion. In assembling their neighborhoods and communities, Greeks and Albanians seem determined to ignore the political fuss. They continue to coexist without great tension.

As the lone country with a Muslim majority in an otherwise Christian Europe, Albania had demonstrated an exceptional pattern of tolerance and peaceful cohabitation between its religious communities. Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and the Muslim sect of Bektashi lived together in relative peace.¹⁷

Within the last decade, however, this peace has been disrupted. In 1990, Western missionaries entered Albania, and the traditional Albanian religious organizations treated these other religions with distrust and apprehension, implementing a sort of religious exclusionism. In these instances, religiosity has become linked to territory, ethnicity, and political relations. Political-religious clienteles were born in this context, and they appeared in two forms: involvement of religious authorities and institutions in the domestic political debate, as well as advantaged support given to politicians by religious institutions and communities.¹⁸ While Albania has generally proven to be a tolerant nation, within the last decade economic strain and mass migration has put a strain on the nation's social fabric, exacerbating tensions among its many religious and ethnic communities.

ALBANIA AND GREECE: ETHNIC ISSUES ON A BILATERAL AGENDA

Concomitant to Albanian domestic ethnic strife, ethnic tensions exist between Greece and Albania. In fact, Albanian-Greek relations inform much of the dialogue that exists between the Greek populations in Albania with the nation's majority, and vice versa. There are three central issues at the heart of Albanian-Greek relations: first, the political, human, educational and cultural rights of the Greek community in Albania; second, the economic and social rights of Albanian emigrants in Greece; and third, the property rights of the Çam population, who after the Second World War moved from Greece to Albania.

Ethnic Greeks represent a minority in Albania. That this group constitutes one of the most economically, culturally, and educationally prosperous communities rouses a sort of "Hellenic-phobia" and jealousy among other ethnic groups living in the country, including Albanians. As a result, the political rights and political participation of

ethnic Greeks in Albania remain the main point of contention between the two governments. Albanian-Greek relations experienced several tense moments between 1992 and 1996, when the Albanian Democratic Party was in office. Hostilities between the two countries reached its peak in 1995, when five Omonia activists were arrested and imprisoned, accused of collaborating with Greek secret service agents against the integrity and sovereignty of Albania. It was no coincidence that the Albanian President, Sali Berisha, did not officially visit Greece during his 1992-1997 term. This conflict paralleled Albanian participation in the Islamic Conference, a move heavily criticized by both the opposition at that time (the Socialist Party) and the EU.¹⁹

Greek political participation in Albania is organized through Omonia (translated as “unity” in Greek), the ethnic-political organization of the Greek community in Albania, and has as its party the Human Rights Union Party (HRUP). During the first pluralist elections in the country, Omonia elected five members of parliament. In 1992, the Parliament of Albania passed an act which disallowed the establishment of ethnically based political parties. This act was the result of a strong reaction from nationalistic circles in Albania against the political participation of the nation’s Greek minority population through Omonia. After international, European, and Greek pressure, the HRUP was later on established as a compromise. The HRUP is formally known as the political party representing all minority populations. The transition of political power from Omonia to HRUP has made Greek political participation inadequate, as it does not provide for a diversity of political expression, and because it is employed by all minorities for political representation. As a result, the HRUP has lost its traditional electoral domains in South Albania, which is heavily populated by ethnic Greeks. The Socialist Party seems to have usurped the political representation of the Greek community of Albania.

Another reason for HRUP’s decreasing influence is the privileged relations of the Socialist Party of Albania (SPA), the country’s governing party since 1997, with the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), Greece’s governing party between 1992 and 2004.²⁰ Kostas Simitis’s administration has shown interest in strengthening ethnic Greeks’ influence on the SPA, unintentionally drawing support away from the HRUP, which entered the Parliament after 2001 elections only through coalition with the socialists.

In response, the socialist government has been prudential towards relations with its southern neighbor and has targeted collaboration and relations with Greece as a strategic priority. Socialist governments in both countries have made efforts to mitigate their reciprocal Albania-phobia and Hellenic-phobia. Efforts have been made to extend the rights of Greeks in Albania, to postpone or avoid Çameria’s issue from the bilateral relations agenda, and to guarantee better treatment towards Albanian immi-

grants living in Greece. Consequently, the number of documented Albanian immigrants in Greece has rapidly increased to four hundred thousand in 2003, compared to ten thousand in 1997.²¹

The Albanian government's moderation has caused frequent and furious reactions from the opposition, which accuse Albanian socialists of being pro-Greek and sacrificing their national interests. The most debatable issue is the way socialists and their opposition identify and address the Çameria question. After the Second World War, Çams were forced out of Greece, because of charges of German collaboration. This accusation was never accepted by either the Albanian government or the Çam community, both of which argue that while some Çams did collaborate, the majority did not. The nationalist-oriented political parties, particularly the Republicans and the Royalists, have been very active in raising the Çam question in the Albanian Parliament, demanding Çams' right to resettle in Greece and recognition of their former properties. Various Greek administrations, both socialists and conservatives, have publicly declared the Çam question a non-issue. After continual postponements and modifications on the parliamentary agenda, socialists accepted the resolution on Çameria to be included in the agenda of the Albanian Parliament in April 2004 and it was rejected, through socialist abstention.²²

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Nonetheless, both governments have formally and publicly cooperated on the conflictive issues between the two countries. Disagreements have been resolved through diplomacy. In 1996, Albania and Greece signed "The Treaty of Collaboration and Friendship" and are currently trying to implement it. Intergovernmental cooperation is encouraged by traditionally good relations between ethnic Greeks and the Albanian population.

MINORITIES AND IMMIGRANTS: TARGETS OF INTER-STATE RELATIONS

Greece constitutes the main destination for Albanian emigrants, due to its geographical contiguity to Albania and cultural similarities. Migration has increased the number of Greek-speaking Albanians and has bridged the linguistic distance between the two countries. More than half of the six hundred thousand Albanian emigrants living in Greece are documented as legal immigrants.²³ By adapting a favorable legislation and setting up necessary institutional capacities, Greece offers many opportunities for Albanian immigrants, particularly installation in the labor market and the enjoyment of social services and social integration.

The improving situation of Albanian immigrants has periodically experienced several aberrations, stemming neither from labor market insufficiency to absorb foreign labor force, nor from a limited societal capacity to accept newcomers. Deporta-

tions of undocumented Albanian immigrants either have been inspired by domestic electoral motivations or concerns from the Greek community in Albania regarding infringement of ethnic, human, educational or cultural rights. Albania's reaction has been immediate: parliamentary statements, media pressure, coercion of Greek minorities, and delays in opening schools in Greek majority areas. Despite these two groups being the targets of reciprocated political reactions,

Winning elections in Himara is perceived as neither a political nor electoral feat, but rather as a purely ethnic victory.


the presence of ethnic Greeks in Albania and Albanian immigrants in Greece has softened the aggravated political climate between the two governments. Tensions were rooted in electoral and political motivations rather than in real antagonism between peoples; thus, once both communities gained a voice in their non-majority countries, this political aggression was mitigated.

THE HIMARA PUZZLE: ETHNICITY'S ELECTORALIZATION AND POLITICIZATION

A bilingual (Albanian and Greek speaking) population resides in Himara, an area along the southern coast of Albania. Because of its disputable ethnic identity, Himara has been one of the most emotional issues of electoral debate in Albania. As such, the attention Albania pays to Himara has recently increased, aggravating the political dialogue and electoral debate. Winning elections in Himara is perceived as neither a political nor electoral feat, but rather as a purely ethnic victory.²⁴ Political parties have made remarkable efforts, especially during municipal elections, not to let Himara be governed by the HRUP or ethnic Greeks. The first and only coalition between socialists and conservatives was reached during the October 2000 elections, in order to beat the candidates of Omonia and HRUO in Himara. During the 2001 parliamentary elections, the socialist government made an unusual electoral and political investment in its victory in this municipality.²⁵ Meanwhile, during the 2003 municipality elections the Democratic Party created a surprising electoral alliance through its support of the HRUP candidate in Himara, and prevented the socialists from repeating their previous electoral victory.

Putting aside their accusations of socialists as cosmopolites, anti-patriots, the conservatives sacrificed their nationalistic dimension and allied with the HRUP. Furthermore, democrats designed to correct their previous performance in Greece, expecting that Greek conservatives would win the coming March 2004 elections. Meanwhile, socialists stigmatized the Democratic Party-HRUP coalition so as to improve and strengthen their image (passing from anti-patriots to nationalists) and weakening the

conservatives' image (passing from nationalists into anti-patriots). In both cases, it is clear how ethnicity, nationalism, and politics are reciprocally implicated. Socialists were totally committed to winning Himara in order to reconstruct their ethnic-nationalistic portrayal, previously attacked by conservatives. By willfully accepting a short-term mutilation of their ethnic-nationalistic appearance, the Democrats established an alliance with Greek minority party in order to reach a desirable electoral victory,

These political mutations prove that ethnicity has become a strategic issue called upon by the various Albanian political parties to spark support. Ethnicity is real, but ethnic tensions are not. The Albanian people ought to recognize that their identities and cultures are being appropriated by over-zealous political parties, who would rather see their own political influence increase than a conciliation of ethnic relations. 

NOTES

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2. K. Kirici, "The Kurdish Question and Turkish Foreign Policy," in *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy*, ed. L.G. Martin & Dimitris Keridis (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004).
3. Albanian Center for Migration Studies, Tirane, 2003.
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5. Tribuna Ekonomike Shqiptare, Albanian Economic Tribune, Tirane, 1992
6. Kosta Barjaba, "Pauzat e Integritimit," *Rinia ne fokusin e Sociologjise* (Europa: Tirane, 1995). Albanian Institute of Statistics, 2003
7. "Report No. 26213-AL: Albania Poverty Assessment," Human Development Sector Unit Europe and Central Asia Region (World Bank, 2003). For more statistical information refer to For more statistical information refer to Albanian Institute of Statistics, 2003.
8. Ibid.
9. Center for Economic and Social Studies, Tirane, 2003
10. Introduction in *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy*, L. G. Martin & D. Keridis (London: The MIT Press, 2004).
11. Suhrke E. Suhrke, "Towards a Comprehensive Refugee Policy: Conflicts and Refugees in the Post-Cold War World," in *Aid in Place of Migration*, International Labour Office, eds. W.R. Böhning & M.L. Schloeter-Paretos (Geneva, 1994).
12. See WorldFact book, CIA <<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/al.html>>.
13. Ibid.
14. CIA WorldFact book.
15. Koloumbys Veremis Nikolakopoulos, *O Elenismos tis Alvanias* (Sideris, Athens, 1995).
16. During 2003, the Department of Geography of Tirana University issued the Albania Population Atlas first edition, which included statistics about ethnic composition of population of the country. Considering the figures published extended the numbers officially accepted in Albania, it caused a severe reaction of public opinion, media, political parties and civil society, which led to stop the circulation of Atlas and to institutional measures for the authors.
17. Kosta Barjaba, "Recent Implications of Inter-Ethnic Relations in Albania," *Anthropological Journal on European Culture* 4 no.1 (1995).
18. During the constitutional referendum (1994) the representatives of Muslim majority and population of Northern areas supported the Constitution bill, meanwhile Orthodox communities and Southern

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area populations refused it. Among the reasons of refusal was the article allowed the state to interfere in internal regulations of religious communities and institutions. The bill provoked severe reaction from the Orthodox Church and the Orthodox community, who voted against the Draft. The article, which determined among the eligible conditions to be the leader of religious community the Albanian citizenship, was the hidden effort to dismiss the Archbishop of Albanian Orthodox Church, HE Anastasios, who is a Greek citizen.

19. Nevertheless, while in government from 1997, the socialists have not taken any step to withdraw from the Islamic Conference, albeit due to their pressure Albanian Parliament has never ratified the membership.

20. Albanian government and Socialist Party welcomed the victory of Nea Demokratia in Greece, March 2004, and declared it will not negatively effect bilateral relations and cooperation and Albanian immigrants rights in Greece. The Albanian Prime Minister Fatos Nano was the first foreign Prime Minister to visit Greece after the Nea Demokratia won the elections.

21. Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of Albania, Tirane, 2003.

22. The opposition's pressure on Parliament to issue the Resolution on Cameraia (April 2004) seems to intend balancing government decrees on the establishment of State Minorities Committee (March 2004).

23. Albanian Center for Migration Studies, Tirane, 2004.

24. Even sport activities are rarely considered ethnic and political. The similar emotions have been noted last years in the stadiums of Tirana and Athens, during national soccer teams matches.

25. Albanian Prime Minister Ilir Meta demonstratively went to Himara during the second balloting round of municipality elections, in order to reach the government declared objective to "win Himara"!