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**Education and the new nationalism in the Balkans:
the case of Albania***

Introduction

Following a 50-year harsh communist dictatorship, Albania is in the course of a new direction as it tries to transform itself to a democracy and become a part of Europe, to which it geographically belongs. The government is working diligently trying to achieve this objective, but the path is difficult due to a number of rather serious constraints. The role of education can be significant in this effort, but the same factors that negatively affect the government make it also difficult for education to play its part.

The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the constraining factors with the hope that such a scrutiny will lead to useful recommendations. Special emphasis will be given to the extent the new nationalism that swept the Balkans, following the fall of communism, is playing a part in preventing Albania from realizing its new vision. This emphasis is especially important in view of the fact that Albanian history, and especially since the middle of the nineteenth century, has been characterized by a strong nationalistic spirit. Albania will have difficulty transforming itself to a democracy and joining Europe, if, at the same time, it continues to exhibit nationalistic tendencies similar to those of the past. Nineteenth century type of strong nationalism is incompatible with the concept of democracy and today's European mentality.

Background on Albania

Albania is relatively unknown to most people, and a brief back-

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ground is necessary. A small country, about 11,000 square miles, Albania is located by the Adriatic Sea across from Italy. To the north and northeast it is bordered by what used to be Yugoslavia, and to the south and southeast by Greece. Albania is inhabited by about 3,250,000 people belonging to four different ethnic groups. The Albanians are in the majority, while the southern part is populated by Greeks, numbering, according to optimistic estimates, about 400,000 to 600,000. Albania disputes these estimates and claims that the Greek ethnics are less than 100,000. The third group are the Vlachs, traditionally a nomadic people who are now settled all over the country. Nobody seems to know how many they are. A rather small number of Slavs, spread along the northern border, constitute the fourth ethnic group. It is interesting to note that an additional 2,000,000 to 3,000,000 ethnic Albanians live in territories of former Yugoslavia. The apparent dislocation of people was the result of actions by the so-called great powers, which in order to satisfy their own interests, created new countries and set borders without paying attention who lived in each side of a particular border. About seventy percent of the Albanians are Moslem, twenty percent are Eastern Orthodox, and ten percent belong to the Roman Catholic Church. With the exception of the people in the southern part who speak Greek, the Albanians have their own language.

The Albanians as a group of people are very old —historians are not clear when and how they settled where they are, but Albania as a country is a product of World War I. Prior to that, all Albanians were part of the Ottoman Empire, and it was during this time that an overwhelming majority of them joined the Moslem religion. Prior to that, the Albanians belonged to the Byzantine Empire and they were Christians. Skanderberg, the most notable Albanian historical figure of about five hundred years ago, was a Christian and his real name was George Kastrioti. One can still visit the beautiful Orthodox monastery in which he was married. Prior to the emergence of the Byzantine Empire, the Albanians were under the control of Rome. As a matter of fact, they claim to be the direct descendants of the people of Illyria, a well-known Roman province in that general area, but certain non-Albanian scholars have doubts about that particular claim¹. There is a

1. Hill Stephen, «Byzantium and the Emergence of Albania», in Winniffrith, *Per-*

considerable amount of archeological evidence that prior to the Romans the Greek civilization was thriving in that area, and particularly in the southern half of the country.

The first time Albanian frontiers were established by the great powers of that time was in 1913, but for several years thereafter Albania was under the influence and protection of Italy. It became an independent country in 1920 and by 1928 the then Prime Minister Ahmet Zogu declared himself King Zog and ruled until Mussolini threw him out in 1939. The communists began their underground movement during the Nazi occupation and consolidated their power following the departure of the Nazis in 1944.

The communist regime was initiated and absolutely controlled by one man, Enver Hoxha, until his death in 1985. It was a regime reflecting a hardline communism as perceived and shaped by this one man. In general, Enver Hoxha resembled Stalin in most of his policies and practices, but many of his actions made him look more like Pol Pot of Cambodia. The state was above self, family, and everything else, and all property and means of production were confiscated and nationalized. The people were forced to work in collective enterprises and were subjected to a continuous ruthless propaganda. Religion was outlawed and the country was virtually isolated from the rest of the world. Only high level communist officials were allowed to travel abroad, and very carefully selected communist sympathizers from other countries were permitted to visit Albania. Enver Hoxha was succeeded by Ramiz Alia who continued the policies of his predecessor until he was forced out of power by the waves of popular uprisings inspired by the monumental changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. A democratically elected government took control of the country in the Spring of 1992.

Education and traditional Albanian nationalism

Albanians did not have the opportunity to begin an effort in the development of a national system of education prior to the middle of the nineteenth century. Since that time, three distinct periods in the history

of Albanian education can be identified. The first one covers the period during the last 70 years, approximately, of the Ottoman Empire. The second period extends from independence to World War II. The third period coincides with the duration of the communist regime from 1944 to 1992.

A significant group of Albanian nationalists emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century. Exhibiting a strong enthusiasm, they tried to establish an Albanian system of education in order to promote national identity, but they were not allowed to do so by the Ottoman rulers. Having accepted the Muslim religion, Albanians were considered by the Ottoman authorities to be Turks, and as such, they could have only Turkish schools. As a matter of fact, a rather large number of Turkish schools were established during the 1840s. The language of instruction in these schools was Turkish. The Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, were considered part of the *millet* of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Constantinople and they were allowed to have schools in the Greek language. The Roman Catholics in northern Albania were permitted to have their own schools supported by the Pope of Rome. Instruction in these schools was in Italian². As a result, the number of schools in Albania's southern half section alone in 1878 were 80 Turkish schools and 163 Greek schools. There were no Albanian schools³. The Albanians had no choice but to go to schools taught in a foreign language or not to go to school at all. They were advised by their emerging leadership to do the latter in order to preserve their national identity.

It can easily be assumed that the fathers of the nineteenth century Albanian nationalism were disappointed with the refusal of the Ottoman Empire to allow them to have their own schools in the Albanian language, but it can also be said that their dreams were not fully realized even during the period between independence and World War II. Outside influences continued to play a part in Albanian education. Speculation leads to a number of reasons which prevented Albania during this period from eliminating outside influences and establishing a vigorous and unified system of education devoted to Albanian nationalism. One

2. Logoreci, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

3. Pollo Stefanaq and Arden Puto, *The History of Albania*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 115.

reason was probably the continuous preoccupation of the country with a struggle among and between the various leaders and their factions to gain power and to bring about some sort of political stability⁴. Obviously, there was not enough energy left to devote to education. A second reason was, most likely, the poor economic conditions which forced Albania to be dependent on other countries for financial assistance, particularly Italy. As a result of this dependency, Italians not only continued to operate a good number of schools in the north, but they were heavily involved in the training of the Albanian military forces, as well. The third reason was the continuous demand on the part of the Greek minority to preserve its Greek identity and have its own Greek schools. Greece, of course, was sympathetic and supportive of this effort.

Albanians were always suspicious of outside influences in their education, and in numerous occasions took advantage of various opportunities to eliminate them. For example, upset with some of Mussolini's economic policies toward Albania, King Zog decided by decree in 1932 to forbid Albanian children from attending foreign schools. This decree affected both Italian and Greek schools. In 1933 the Parliament repealed the clause in the Constitution which allowed private and religious schools to operate, and established a single system of education under the control of the Ministry of Education⁵. This in effect completely closed all Italian and Greek schools throughout the country. However, both types of schools were later re-opened, the Italian schools after relations with Mussolini were reestablished, and the Greek schools after Greece complained to the League of Nations and the International Court in the Hague decided against Albania⁶.

The strong nationalistic desires of the Albanians were unable to rid the educational system and the country of outside influences. At the same time, and mainly due to lack of resources, the Albanians were unable to adequately educate their population. By 1938 there were only about 650 elementary schools and some 20 secondary schools in the entire country. There were no universities. Only 36 percent of school age children received education of any kind. Whatever intellectual life

4. Fischer Bernd J., *King Zog and the Struggle for Stability in Albania*, New York, Columbia University Press.

5. Pollo and Puto, *op.cit.*, p. 206.

6. Logoreci, *op.cit.*, p. 61.

existed, it was concentrated in the capital and a couple of other cities and dealt with the country's problems in an abstract manner. The crucial problems of the peasants, constituting the overwhelming majority of the Albanian people, were totally ignored⁷.

As soon as the communists took over, they adopted the Soviet educational system and instituted a seven-year compulsory educational system. They also established a number of vocational schools in such fields as agriculture, engineering, economics, oil technology, medicine, and teacher education. Most of the personnel for these schools were trained in Moscow. This wholesale adoption of a foreign educational system went, of course, against the traditional Albanian nationalistic spirit, something which even Enver Hoxha admitted in 1967. Following this admission, he masterminded the design of a new system of education based on the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and the achievement of national objectives consistent with his vision of Albania. The textbooks were revised and a stricter ideological scrutiny was applied to both national and foreign works of literature⁸.

Because of his communist ideology, Enver Hoxha's nationalism had to be somewhat different from that of the nineteenth century Albanian nationalists. However, as far as resentment of foreign interferences and the creation of a uniform society were concerned, Enver Hoxha had no equal. Schools operated by foreigners were completely out. So were the graduates from those schools. Most of them were imprisoned and a great number of them were executed. Religion was eliminated, and as far as the minorities were concerned, they had no special rights whatsoever. In fact, they were treated as second class citizens and quite often they were persecuted. Unless they and their families had demonstrated unquestionable devotion to communism and the regime, they were not to be trusted with official positions, and their children, no matter how qualified they were, could not have access to higher education.

Change, education, and the new nationalism

The communists lost power in Albania just two years ago and a

7. Logoreci, *op.cit.*, p. 62-63.

8. Logoreci, *op.cit.*, p. 170.

freely elected government assumed power. The expressed intentions of the new government are to establish democratic institutions in Albania, develop a free market economy, and facilitate the integration of the country with Europe. This appears to be the new vision of Albania.

It is evident that education is viewed as a basic instrument in realizing this vision. In the introduction of a basic document on restructuring Albanian education, the Minister of Education writes: "Albanian education should be considered as one of the most important factors for the great democratic, economic, cultural, and psychological transformation of the country and for its accelerated integration into the European and world community"⁹. At another point, the same document states: "The triumph of the democratic process in Albania and its integration into Europe put primary school education (8-year education) high on the list of priorities so as to reach the European level of progress"¹⁰.

One of the reasons for which the Albanians put so much emphasis on elementary education is the realization that the communist propaganda has had a tremendous impact upon the current adult population, to the point where they might not be able to move the country toward a full democracy. Most likely, they will have to turn to the younger generation in order to achieve the required transformation of the character of the people. During one of his recent visits to the United States, the Vice-Minister of Education of Albania supported this notion with this statement: "Those of us in responsible positions feel we have some kind of sickness that has remained. We rely a lot on the children to create a pure, solid democracy"¹¹.

Consistent with an effort to transform the character of the people is the design of a new social studies program. In a document recently developed by the Pedagogical Research Institute of Tirana the stated objectives of social studies reveal the new person the Albanians would like to develop through education. Among the basic characteristics they envision in the new person are: "the values of citizens in a democratic society..., knowledge of the freedom, rights, and the responsibilities of

9. Ministry of Education, *Mid-term Plan for Education Sector: 1993-1995*, Tirana, Albania, 1993.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

11. Zoto Vasillaq, *University Week*, 11.4. (1993), Seattle, University of Washington, p. 2.

the individual in a democracy..., (and) basic skills for critical thinking so that they can be active participants in social life, this being an essential characteristic of citizens in a democratic country”¹².

From a theoretical point of view, there is no question that the Albanians wish to transform their society into a democracy with a free market economy. This vision is clear, but a vision is only the beginning. A method to achieve it and the right set of circumstances are also necessary, and here is where Albania faces enormous difficulties. Education can provide the needed method to achieve democratization, but education cannot be effective in the present environment. Unfortunately, a number of realities present themselves as serious constraints to the development of education as well as to the whole movement for the transformation of the country. Included among these realities are: poverty and the lack of resources, authoritarian tendencies and inadequate openness, religious conditions and developments and the posture of the state, diversity in society and an unwillingness to accept it, and Balkan nationalism and the Albanians outside Albania. Most of these realities were inherited, to a great extent, from the communist regime, but their roots go back to last century’s nationalism, revived and fueled by the new nationalism that is currently sweeping the entire Balkan Peninsula and Eastern Europe.

The harshest of the constraining realities are poverty and the lack of resources. After describing the natural beauty of Albania, during one of his recent visits, John Henderson (1994) wrote: “But to find paradise, be prepared to find hardship. In Albania, natural splendor clashes head on with poverty unmatched anywhere in Europe”¹³. As stated earlier, all means of production during the communist regime were strictly centralized and the people worked for the government under hated circumstances. As they tasted a degree of freedom during 1990-91, the people destroyed or abandoned all production facilities and unemployment reached dramatic proportions. Industrial production dropped by over 60 percent and about 50 percent of the urban labor force was out of work in mid-1992. At the same time, the annual inflation rate reached 300

12. Pedagogical Research Institute of Tirana, *Main Tasks for the Reconceptualization of Social Studies*, 1993.

13. Henderson John, “A Vacation Report from Albania”, *Los Angeles Times*, 16.1.94, p. L14.

percent and real wages for the year dropped almost one half. "In this context of scarcity of national resources, the ability of the government to cope financially with the urgent needs of the educational and training system is seriously jeopardized"¹⁴.

Turning to the reality of the authoritarian tendencies, one would expect Albanians, after 50 years of brutal dictatorship, to detest any form and any degree of authoritarianism. In theory they do, but they have difficulty determining where authoritarian rule stops and due process begins. In fact, documents spelling out due process are lacking and those at the top at the various levels of the governmental machinery tend to make arbitrary decisions, until someone higher up in the hierarchy dismisses them. The President of the country was very popular when first elected two years ago, but now many people resent the way he makes decisions, and his method of governing brings memories of the old regime. In a way, this is to be expected since the entire Albanian leadership grew up and was educated in an authoritarian system. It is no simple matter to overcome habits and ideologies that were well established.

Another form of authoritarianism is manifested through extreme centralization in areas that are critical to a democratic system of education. For example, the Ministry of Education recently initiated a decentralization process in the field of education, but it is limited to financial and administrative matters. The curriculum, textbooks and other teaching materials, and supervision are totally under the control of the Ministry¹⁵. Discussions with Albanian educators revealed that certain curriculum materials, especially history textbooks, must be approved by certain boards of intellectuals. This apparently is a practice inherited from the communist regime, but as a team of American scholars who recently visited Albania and other former communist countries advised, this practice can be problematic. This practice was used in the past, according to the scholars, "to promote nationalist myths and attitudes that conformed quite closely to pre-communist ones"¹⁶. Such practices are unacceptable in a democracy because they limit openness and stifle debate,

14. Ministry of Education and UNESCO, *Policy Paper on Major Educational Issues*, Tirana, 1993, pp. 1-2.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

16. Academic Advisory Team, *Democratization and Higher Education: A Proposal for Aid to the Social Sciences in Balkan Universities...*, 1993, p. 7.

two of the most critical elements in a democratic society.

Religion and the way the government responds to it present another problematic reality in Albania. This reality tends to blur the country's vision, which, in turn, renders the role of education unclear and confusing. As it was pointed out earlier, about 70 percent of the Albanians are Muslim, 20 percent are Eastern Orthodox, and 10 percent belong to the Roman Catholic Church. During the communist regime all religion was outlawed, but now Albanians are free to practice whatever religion they wish. The Orthodox and the Catholics are organized and directed from the outside. The former from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in Istanbul, Turkey, and the latter from Rome. This situation is very sensitive for the Albanians because it reminds them of the resentful interference of these two entities during the earlier part of their history in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Recent indications demonstrate that the resentment is especially strong toward the Patriarchate of Constantinople which is closely tied to Greece, the advocate for the human rights of the Greek minority in southern Albania. To make things worse, the Patriarch appointed a Greek to become the first post-communist era Archbishop of the Orthodox Church in Albania. He was accepted reluctantly by the Albanian government and he is considered to be there only on a temporary basis. Unable to find theologically qualified individuals in Albania, the Patriarch attempted to appoint four more Greeks as bishops. The Albanian government refused to accept them using as a pretext a 1924 law which stipulated that all church leaders had to be Albanian. This became a source of friction between Albania and Greece and further rekindled old kind of unpleasant memories.

The Muslim religion presents another interesting situation. Turkey and several of the Arab countries sent a number of religious leaders to Albania to organize the Muslims and promote Islam. This raised the concern of a possible Islamic fundamentalist movement in Albania, something that is disturbing even to many of the Muslim intellectuals. When Albanian government leaders began visiting the capitals of the various Muslim countries, the Europeans became nervous, especially when Turkey revealed designs of an axis starting in Albania and stretching all the way to the new Muslim countries that came out of the former Soviet Union. This situation raised a serious question in the

minds of many people in Europe and elsewhere. Does Albania really want to become a true democracy and join Europe?

Probably the most disturbing reality in Albania, with significant implications for education, is the unwillingness on the part of the majority of Albanians to recognize and accept the diversity of their society. The fact is that the people in Albania have different ethnic backgrounds. As it was already pointed out, in addition to the ethnic Albanians, who constitute the majority and set the standards, there are Vlachs, ethnic Slavs, and ethnic Greeks. The Albanian language is not the only one spoken, and Albanians belong to different religions. Now that Albania is free and open and more and different people move in and out of the country, this diversity will most likely increase. It can no longer be ignored.

In the past, especially during the communist regime, Albania systematically discriminated against the various ethnic minorities and tried to suppress all differences. It was to be expected then, but there are signs that, while official Albania professes to be democratic, it continues to suppress the differences. For example, as recently as last summer, the President of the Republic announced a decree closing all foreign schools, just like King Zog did in 1932. The intellectuals in Tirana and the foreigners living there were shocked learning about this decree. It went directly against the pronounced vision of the country, and they could not understand its logic. It turn out that the reason for the decree was to prevent the opening of a couple of independent community schools among the Greeks in southern Albania.

Finally, another reality that clouds the democratic vision and prevents the achievement of an educational system capable of materializing this vision, is the militant preoccupation of the country with the Albanians outside of Albania. It was mentioned earlier that millions of Albanian ethnics live in what used to be Yugoslavia. The conditions under which these people live deserve Albania's concern and attention, but Albania is not in a position right now to grant them their ultimate wish, which is to become a part of Albania. Hostile rhetoric is not enough. If anything, continuation of the hostile rhetoric simply aggravates Albania's position by reinforcing the impression that, contrary to their expressed vision, all the Albanians are interested in is traditional nationalism and the fulfillment of an old dream for an expanded Albania.

Summary and conclusions

The key elements characterizing Albanian history are a struggle for independence, interference from the outside, autocratic rule, and an intense effort to unite all Albanians and develop and preserve a national identity. There have been some highlights in Albanian history, but overall the policies of the past led Albania to obscurity and extreme poverty. The geopolitical events of the last three to four years gave Albania the opportunity for a new beginning—to move toward democracy and to join Europe. The current leadership and the people of the country want it, but will the new nationalism, now strongly evident in the Balkans, permit it?. Will the Albanians be able to resist it?

Albanians can succeed in moving toward their newly found direction, but they need first to exhibit the courage to resist being held hostage to the past. They need to reject traditional authoritarianism and make the people feel a part of the government and the governing process. This requires openness. Religion must be strictly separated from the state and the various religious groups be left alone to function as they see fit. In a world in which there is a lot of mobility diversity must be accepted and facilitated. As far as the Albanians outside Albania are concerned, the approach to their problems needs to be reconsidered. Impossible as it may sound, Albania should attempt to negotiate their fate, even with the Serbs, and the emphasis should be on human rights. If the Albanians outside Albania can have their human rights and live in a unified Europe, borders and a strong national identity will not be as important as they are now or used to be.

Free from the past, Albanians should then concentrate on three basic fronts: due process, the economy, and education. Due process is projected as a critical priority, because without it the country cannot move forward. It cannot even be considered to be a democracy. Laws should replace individuals as the ultimate authority, but laws should be derived from the people and they should be designed to protect their freedoms rather than restrict them. Needless to say, freedom should not be interpreted to mean anarchy, and old habits should give way to the development of new ones. The role of the police, for example, should be to protect the freedoms of the people rather than harass them, as it often happens. People need to develop a trust in the government and a feeling

that it is no longer their enemy.

Another equally critical priority is the economy. Democracy cannot be developed, or sustained, in poverty and in an atmosphere in which the people feel helpless. Toward this end, Greece, next door neighbor and a member of the European Union, can be an important ally. Both countries should forget the past, respect each other's borders, and work together. The Greek minority in the south can and should become the link between the two countries. This can be done, if only the ethnic Greeks are allowed to be different. As it has already been demonstrated in the more recent past, the Orthodox Church can also play a similar role.

Due process and a healthy economy will create the conditions for a strong emphasis on education. But if the educational system is to be effective, it needs to be transformed through depolitisization and an effort to make it reflect the European mentality in all of its aspects. That mentality means: abandonment of indoctrination and respect for scholarship, openness, and the development of the potential of each individual; less attention on restrictions and more protection of freedoms; less dictating by the government and more reliance on the creativity of the people; less attention to the development of a uni-cultural society and more acceptance for diversity; less attention to national identity and more respect for the human rights of all the people; less attention to borders and more interaction between the people living in both sides of any border; less attention to territorial expansion and more effort to ensure the well-being of all people in as wider a region as possible; less inflammatory rhetoric in the face of serious differences and more negotiations with a willingness to compromise; less attention to what divides people and more emphasis on what brings them together.

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