

# The conceptualization of an Albanian nation

Stark Draper

*Ethnic and Racial Studies*

Volume 20, Number 1

January 1997

(preprint version)

## Abstract

The communist era of the mid-twentieth century was a pivotal period for the coalescence of many national identities. Often communism provided the first modern, stable, state governments and infrastructures upon which overarching ideas of identity, such as nationalism, could readily grow. The communist era was certainly a crucial one for Albanian national ideology and thus it is important to reevaluate Albanian nationalism in light of the recent ebb of communist hegemony in Eastern Europe. Placing the current issues confronting Albanian ideas of self in perspective by tracing their historical background, we find that the situation of Albanian-identifying communities, divided among three or more states and caught between Eastern and Western influences, is forcing upon Albanian ideas of self an extreme change from a decidedly introverted to an extroverted ideal. Such forces are counterpoised by prior ideology regarding Albanian nationalism and the history of the Albanian people, as well as by the perennial Albanian insecurity over issues of religion. It is from this interplay that the Albanian character will evolve and endure.

**Keywords:** Albania; nationalism; post-communist identity; Yugoslavia; Greece; religion.

Albania has long been seen as a xenophobic, hard-line, and unimportant communist state. Its visibility has recently been heightened through the attention drawn to the Balkans by the civil wars in Yugoslavia. Such attention has highlighted questions regarding the role that the six million strong Albanian ethnicity, spread across Serbia, Macedonia, and Albania, will play in the peninsula's future. One of the most central of these questions concerns the effects that democracy, capitalism, and the Yugoslav wars have had on Albanian self-conception. Before discussing these influences, we approach anew Albanian nationalism, and the history it has painted for itself, for two reasons. First, the underpinnings of Albanian national ideology were molded by the communists and, in light of the recent ebb of this political force, a reexamination is necessary. Second, scholarship on Albania often conceptualizes the Albanian nation as an everlasting, unchanging entity. This method of conceiving of nations is no longer unquestioned on a scholarly level, it is worthwhile to approach topics of Albanian nationality in light of new thinking that conceives of national identities as dynamic and ever-changing. Keeping these two motivations in mind, this paper will retrace the development of an Albanian national identity, and will analyze the trends within that self-conception, before addressing the current issues facing the Albanian ethnicity.

## The origins of the Albanian national movement

The theoretical approach most appropriate to an analysis of Albanian national identity is rooted in the modernist school where nationalism, and the idea of a ‘people,’ are seen as recent political constructs intricately related to the importance of the individual in politics and to questions of state legitimacy. This point of view is in marked contrast to much historical scholarship where nations are treated as timeless and unchanging formations. The fundamental shift in the modernist view is in the conception of national identities as dynamic and developing ideas, rather than as static and permanent entities. However, one must be careful when approaching nationalism from a modernist perspective as often at the popular level (and nationalism professes to be intrinsically a popular ideology) the view of nations as timeless entities remains most prevalent, and thus is still relevant for any study of national ideas. A corollary to the modernist viewpoint is that ‘national’ movements that existed in the past, even ones of the same name, may have been of a fundamentally different character from those today. If one accepts this view of nationality as a continually developing sense of identity, one can start to distinguish different stages of national consciousness. In the case of Albania such stages are especially apparent as it was only in the communist era that a concerted and successful effort was made to popularize the idea of an Albanian nationality among the citizens of that state.

If nations are not timeless, and thus at the beginning of the ‘Age of Nationalism’ were not simply waiting around comatose to be ‘awakened,’ there must be some driving force behind nationalist movements, there must be some need which will be answered by identification as a national community. In the case of Albanian nationalism, the distinction between the Catholics and Muslims of Kosovo and today’s northern Albania with the surrounding Orthodox (and therefore Slavic) communities motivated such identifications. Until the time when it became clear that the Ottoman Empire was in retreat before the European powers and their Balkan clients, there was little reason for the Muslims of the area to identify on national bases; they were the favored people of the Empire with many of their best and brightest serving in the Ottoman administration. Only when the Ottoman Empire started to contract, and the Muslim and Catholic intellectual and religious leaders of Kosovo began to fear domination by the Orthodox Slavs—a community into which they could not assimilate because of their religion—did nationalist conceptions begin to hold real interest for these leaders.

That southern Orthodox communities were also included in early nationalists’ definitions of the Albanian nation is often taken as proof of a pre-existing national consciousness. But rather, it points to one of the defining characteristics of Albanian nationalism, the lack of the use of religion as a mark of identity. Indeed, there were concrete political reasons behind the inclusion of the Orthodox communities. First was the intermingling of Muslim and Orthodox communities in the south, geographically, and through marriage, a result of the very gradual conversion to Islam. Any division that would separate Muslims and Orthodox Christians would cause havoc, as in Bosnia today. Second was the realization among cooperating Catholic and Muslim leaders that since they could not choose a single religion as a defining characteristic of the Albanian, Orthodox communities could be Albanian as well. Third was the existence of a common, though dialectic, language. If religion was not to be a

determining factor for inclusion within an Albanian nation, but language was, Albanian-speaking Orthodox communities of the south had also to be included within the definition.

While religion continues to play a very minor constructive role in defining Albanian national ideals, the fear of certain religious communities was the main catalyzing force behind early Albanian national movements. However, many changes were needed in the society and government of the Albanian state, which was founded in 1912, before national conceptions could finally become one of the primary loyalties and forms of identification of the state's subjects, a time when an Albanian nation could truly be said to exist.

## **An historiographic setting for an analysis of nationalist movements**

States often play central roles in fostering national conceptions, and thus the formation of an independent Albanian state in 1912 could have been a pivotal moment in the coalescence of an Albanian ideal among the citizens of the new state. However, as we will see, it would not be until the end of the Second World War, when the communist state was founded, that this coalescence would really begin. States foster national identities by creating a modern infrastructure through which people can develop a sense of an overarching community beyond local, personal ones. Without such an infrastructure, people have little shared experience upon which to formulate such beliefs. This is what Benedict Anderson meant by his phrase 'imagined communities;' communities that have grown beyond personal reach and thus rely on some non-personal means of connection (Anderson 1983). That is, the crucial aspect of a mass media system that gives people a sense of common identity is not necessarily what is broadcast—though naturally that matters as well—but rather the simple knowledge of having such a point in common with so many others. In many cases there was little need for these overarching conceptions until the advent of industrialized, centralized states, and thus one must be cautious when speaking of 'national forms of identity' or of a 'people' in earlier periods. In the case of Albania it would not be until the communist period that such an infrastructure was realized.

The relationship between nationalist conceptions and political legitimacy is partially evident in the term 'national self-determination,' a connection that points to a crucial underlying aspect of nationalist thought: the potential political power of the individual. The transformation of European thought and society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the increasing reliance of states on the decision-making capabilities of their subjects, and the people's gradual enfranchisement and metamorphosis from subjects into citizens, all point to the increasing involvement and valuation of the individual in the European political system. Subjects who had never before been motivated to identify as a community now, as citizens, were being pushed to do so in order to support their state. However, the enfranchising states of nineteenth century Europe did not always conceive of their appeals in nationalist terms. That is, just because the potential power of the citizen was recognized, nationalism was not necessarily fostered by the state. In fact, most often nationalist movements developed among peoples whose languages or cultures were not fostered by their state's centralizing tendencies. The core of the matter is that while upsetting one type of divine political legitimacy (divine right and heredity), states created another, the will of the people. Nationalist ideology hijacked this seemingly eternal source of legitimacy and donned a mantle of eternity

itself.

Since nationalism is supposed to be, at its base level, a popular form of self-identification, it is useful to investigate what kind of prerequisites there are before an individual can view themselves as truly belonging to a national community. First there must be a need that identification in a national manner can potentially address. After the creation of a political movement stressing national themes, people must share both a culture and a belief that they belong to the same overarching national community before the movement can be emotionally appealing for the individual. Culture necessitates the existence of an infrastructure upon which a community can exist, and belief in community, a mental attitude binding a person to others they have never met. We will look for these characteristics of need, commonalities, and belief when investigating Albanian nationalism.

A frequent criticism of the modernist analysis is that nationalist movements have emerged in non-industrial, non-western societies. This is a legitimate criticism that cannot be answered simply by citing the global spread of western culture and ideas through commerce, colonialism and western-educated elites, and thus seeing non-western national movements as movements only by imitation. However, the central idea of the modernists, that nationalisms are dynamic and ever-changing movements can be applied without regard to geography, as can the search for the motivating characteristics of nationalism as enumerated above. In this paper we will apply modernist ideas to Albania, a non-industrial, peripherally western state, and we will see that the tools presented by this type of analysis can still lead to valuable insights.

## **The first years of Albanian independence, 1912–1922: A national community?**

The case of the formation of an Albanian national identity is especially elucidating as the proto-nationalist bases for such an identity were both unclear, and claimed by multiple groups. The important group here was the Orthodox Christian community in what became Albania. Both Greek and Albanian nationalists claimed this community as part of their nation. The dispute began after the founding of an independent Albanian state in 1912 and took place mostly at a great-powers level. The arguments of each side were strong enough to balance one another in the eyes of the international conferences that addressed these issues, and the commissions sent to the area were unable to resolve the dispute according to strictly ‘national’ criteria. The nature of the dispute therefore leads to some major insights regarding the prevalence of national consciousness, or lack thereof, in this area of the Balkans in the first decade of Albanian independence.

The commissions of 1913 and 1921 were formed by the London and Paris Peace Conferences. The first commission was sent to delineate on an ethnographic basis, and according to the language spoken in the home, which areas were Greek and which Albanian. The commission soon ran into problems as Albanian was often the language of the older generation, and Greek of the younger, as well as of industrial, intellectual and religious life. The commission then fell back upon economic, strategic and geographical arguments for the delimitation of borders. The London Conference eventually proposed a line to the commission (rather than the other way round) which the commission accepted, leaving most of the disputed

area ('Southern Albania' or 'Northern Epirus,' depending on ones political affiliations) to Albania. This decision catalyzed an uprising among the Greek-identifying population of the region that was settled by the Corfu Agreement guaranteeing religious and linguistic equality. However, before this agreement could be tested, the First World War began (Stickney 1926, pp. 35-50).

The 1921 commission, appointed by the Paris Peace conference to reexamine Albania's borders, was similarly at a loss to draw the borders according to a national basis, and ended up leaving them as they had been settled in London. The report of this commission highlights how muddled the national situation was in southern Albania.

[In Korca there is a] complete absence of Greek nationals. Nevertheless, a certain proportion of the population (less than one-third) is, for various reasons, opposed to the present regime. The Grecophile element, which included a great number of fervent adherents to Greek culture, fears the creation of an Albanian autocephalous [Orthodox] Church, which is desired by the Albanian nationalists, may cause an open rupture with the Patriarch of Constantinople (Commission of Inquiry 1922, p. 2).

The commission did not specify how they would have identified 'Greek nationals,' had there been any, but it seems that there were both religious and intellectual motivations on the part of a significant proportion of the population to avoid one of the primary objectives of the Albanian nationalists, the formation of an autocephalous Albanian Orthodox Church. This report, along with the failure of the international commissions even to attempt to set the border according to national criteria, indicates that rather than having highly intermingled, but distinct, sets of nationals, the inhabitants of the region had never before needed to identify as such. It was unclear to all to what community they belonged, and even if they did belong to a national community at that time.

Both Greek and Albanian representatives to the Paris Conference contended that the area should be included within their respective states according to the principle of national self-determination, a principal that each side believed favored it. The set of characteristics to which the two delegations looked to demonstrate the population's Greek or Albanian nationality were mutually exclusive. The Greeks asked whether the area should be assigned according to race and language, or culture and religion, thinking that the latter two criteria favored them (Stickney 1926, p. 87). The Albanian representatives disputed these bases for national identification and held that although Greek was the language of commerce, education, and religion, Albanian language schools had been banned by the Ottomans and now that the Ottomans had left, there would be an Albanian renaissance. They also identified a separate Albanian race as a major differentiation.

We will see that Albanian national ideology, as formulated by the communists, holds the importance of social continuity dating back centuries to be a basic tenant. In outlining the debates at the Paris Peace Conference we see that such continuity cannot be taken for granted. Continuity implies an unbroken cultural progression, but the dispute between the Greeks and Albanians contradicts this. It seems as though the Greek and Albanian representatives in Paris were not so much arguing that the notions the other side championed were invalid, but rather that those were not the crucial points to national identity. The simple fact that these national representatives could hold an argument of such a flavor indicates that they had a far different view of a nation from that held today. They understood that these

future Greek and Albanian citizens had multiple, and conflicting, influences and that they, the representatives, were themselves making overtly conscious choices in helping to define the nation and who belonged to it, rather than rejuvenating a dormant entity. To argue that a cohesive, unitary community existed for all time is specious; to argue that in a certain area there were many similar cultures, dialects and methods of identification is not. The transformation began when people took such proto-nationalist similarities and emphasized some to the exclusion of others, eventually formulating a national ideal that in retrospect appears defining.

## **Nationalism and the communists**

In opening the first postwar democratic parliament of Albania in 1992, the Democratic Party Deputy Pjeter Arbënorë stated that, ‘The Albanian nation has not survived for centuries in vain,’ and encouraged, ‘Let us prove to the world that we are a nation deserving support after a long paralysis.’ (FBIS 1992, p. 2) Rather than imprisoning the Albanian nation as is implied by this statement, the victory of the communist partisans in 1944 heralded the coming of a much solidified Albanian identity. The pre-war monarchy of Ahmed Zogu had been founded upon the support of the northern tribes, and so had generally left the social fabric of the country intact. Thus, at the end of the Second World War, Albanian nationalism was still troubled by the questions raised in Paris over twenty years before. The great break with the past that was the partisan victory meant that the societies of the Albanian kingdom could be reshaped by the communist government to such an extent that new forms of identity, such as nationalism, would emerge triumphant.

The direction in which the communists would lead Albanian society was based in the partisans’ war-time experience. During the war the partisans had appealed to the populace by arguing for land and social reforms and for an equal society. They also led by example, drawing members from all classes and religions, forcing a strict moral code on those members, and actively fighting the Germans. Since their base of support was in the south, the communists were able to return northern Kosovo—annexed to Albania by Mussolini—to the brotherly Yugoslavs after the war. This was accomplished without causing much disgruntlement among the partisan soldiers. However, this transaction was not looked upon with ambivalence by the Muslim and Catholic Kosovar communities, communities that had been at the forefront of the emerging political program of Albanian nationalism in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, the Muslim and Catholic Kosovars’ displeasure is evident in the difficulty that Tito had recruiting in these communities. This issue demonstrates the lack of identification between northern and southern communities at the time. The partisan struggle also did much to further peoples’ thinking along national lines by exposing remote parts of the country to communist ideas and to the partisans themselves, patriots fighting a foreign aggressor (Prifti 1978, p. 12-20). Other resistance groups based upon traditional power structures of the country were unable to counter the radical program of the communists, and thus the communists positioned themselves to undertake a monumental restructuring of Albanian society once they had come to power.

One aspect of the restructuring was the fostering of an Albanian national identity. The communists looked to national ideology for justification of their right to direct Albanian life,

a justification that grew in importance as Albania's political isolation increased. As is often the case with nationalist ideologues, the communists first tried to establish a link between their movement and the past. In this case the connection was to the fifteenth century warrior George Kastriote, or as he is better known, Skanderbeg. Kastriote was born into the family of a Christian Illyrian<sup>1</sup> nobleman in what is today Albania. As a child he was taken as a hostage to the Sublime Porte, the seat of Ottoman government, in order to guarantee the loyalty of his family. There he was raised as a Muslim, given the name 'Skanderbeg,' and fought as a general for the Sultan. In 1443 Skanderbeg returned to his Adriatic homeland, renounced Islam, joined the various lords of the area together in the League of Llesh (1444) and, receiving rather intermittent aid from the Vatican and Venice, held off the Ottoman armies until his death in 1468 (Pollo and Puto 1981, pp. 68-85).

Casting back to Skanderbeg's wars against the Ottomans, the communists hoped to mold the story of the Albanian nation to lead naturally to a contemporary and contextualized view of the Communist Party as heir to Skanderbeg's struggle. This interpretation, if accepted, would augment the right of the Party to direct Albanian life. Initially, to make the historical figure of Skanderbeg relevant for Albanians, the communists accented the continuity and distinctiveness of an Albanian people throughout the centuries of Ottoman rule. Then they recast the partisan struggle against the Axis powers in the light of Skanderbeg's struggle against the Sultan, placing great weight on the self-reliance and isolation of the two movements, further proof of the continuity of an Albanian character. However, even more interesting than the connections the communists choose to accent is the way they customized Skanderbeg's story to make it useful in their attempts to solidify the idea of an Albanian nation among Albanian citizens. That is, one of the defining aspects of Skanderbeg's resistance—its markedly anti-Muslim character—was seen as so potentially divisive that it is rarely acknowledged in the communist retelling.

Indeed, religion is often seen as the determining characteristic of nationality in the Balkans. But it cannot serve as such in Albania because of the multi-religious composition of the state. The major characteristic of religion within Albanian nationalism, its official absence, and the very relaxed attitude most Albanians take towards it, is well encapsulated in the saying, 'Ky eshte shpata eshte feja.' ('Where the sword is, there lies religion.' (Skendi 1967, p. 20)) The communists taught that religion had never been a divisive issue among the Albanians, and that it never will be. The true feelings of the communist leadership were in sharp contrast to these teachings.

## Postwar developments

When the communists came to power following the Second World War they were in a strong position to help solidify the sense of an Albanian nation among Albanian citizens. And, as foreign relations with Yugoslavia soured and internationalist ideals tarnished, the communists increasingly subscribed to national slogans. No longer was the socialist badge of the Albanian Communist Party (ACP) enough, nationalism was also needed to augment the right of the communists to lead. Indeed, this change meshed well with the war where

---

<sup>1</sup>The ancient name of the lands encompassing the present borders of Albania.

Albania had been liberated by her own partisans with little outside help; and in the telling of the story of war-time resistance this self-reliance was increasingly accented.<sup>2</sup> The partisans could truly claim to be a popular national movement that derived its legitimacy from the Albanian nation, rather than from internationalist ideals and associations.

It was in this era that Albania created the infrastructure necessary to sustain a national creed. The communist reforms focused on roads, land, the media, and education. Prior to the war people had remained relatively isolated in their mountain clans or as sharecroppers on farms in the lowlands. The agrarian reforms of 1946 broke up the large estates and distributed land among the people, resulting in a tremendous increase in the interactions of citizens with the state and with each other (Sjoberg 1991, p. 84). Mass literacy campaigns, and a corresponding explosion in sources of news and literature, also increased the sense of an Albanian community. Seven year schooling followed the war and became mandatory in 1952 (Sjoberg 1991, p. 65). In the following years a bureaucracy educated exclusively in these new schools began to emerge, and with them an underlying vision of the Albanian nation as an overarching, all-encompassing entity.

As a product of the new curriculum, and a foundational material for it, Albanian social-realist literature is one of the best places to locate the official ideology of Albanian nationalism. It was here that the connection between Skanderbeg and the partisan struggle was fully developed. Now the five hundred years between Skanderbeg and the League of Llesh (1444), and Enver Hoxha<sup>3</sup> and the liberation of Tirana (1944), was seen as the story of an oppressed, freedom-loving people, who were continually fighting to throw off the 'yoke' of foreign oppression (Pipa 1978, p. 170), a struggle that culminated successfully only with the partisan victory in 1944. Whether this interpretation of the area's history had anything to do with the situation of the (mainly Muslim) local populace in the Ottoman Empire is not really relevant. What is relevant is that the partisan resistance fit in perfectly with this romantic image, and nationalism seemed to be a priceless tool for the Communist Party.

Ironically, this interpretation of history led Albanian writers to portray the archetypal Albanian as an isolated northern Gheg mountaineer, rather than as a Tosk southerner who fell under the sway of the Ottoman governor.<sup>4</sup> But it was the Tosk southerner, and not the Gheg northerner, who formed the power base of the ACP. The idea of the archetypal Albanian is further reflected in the character of the bandit. This character first emerged in the literature of the Arbresh Albanians of Italy whose forefathers emigrated from Ilyria after Skanderbeg's death. Many of these soldiers were too proud to work the land and supported themselves as mercenaries or bandits. The image of the noble bandit later became prominent in their descendants' literature and was afterwards co-opted by the communists (Pipa 1978, p. 110). The communists further used such images to draw Albanians in the light of a rogue people, unable to be subservient to any foreign authority, a concept that they used to justify their successive breaks with each of Albania's patron states. Albania broke first with Yugoslavia in 1948, then with the Soviet Union in 1960, and finally with China in 1978.

Albanian social-realist literature also tended to focus on the stories of the peasantry,

---

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted, however, that while the importance of Yugoslav help to the Albanian Partisans has been deemphasised since Albania's split with Yugoslavia in 1948, Yugoslav assistance was almost certainly crucial in the formation of the Albanian Communist Party and in the organization of the partisan resistance.

<sup>3</sup>Enver Hoxha was the partisan and post-war leader of Albania until his death in 1985.

<sup>4</sup>Albanians are divided into two rough ethnic/ linguistic/ cultural groups: northern Ghegs and southern Tosks.

rather than those of the townsfolk. By championing the peasant the communists hoped to inspire agricultural workers to achieve self-sufficiency, and to reinforce the idea of the continuity and purity of the isolated Albanian people. During the centuries of Ottoman administration the town areas were greatly influenced by the cultures of the Empire. Isolated rural mountain villages provided a much better environment for the preservation of what could be said to be typically Albanian. Therefore romantic writers focused on them. Thus, Albanian social-realist literature was used to spread the ideals of the Albanian nation to its increasingly literate and politically conscious people. But for the most part this literature avoided the complexities of Albanian society that the ACP was trying to homogenize.

Ismail Kadare, who rebelled against the idea of literature as a ‘weapon in the hands of the Party’ (Pipa 1991, p. 33), revealed the struggle between old and new, between Albanians of the communist era and the remnants of pre-war societies, in his book, *Kronik ne Gur* (Chronicle in Stone). In the course of the story the young narrator experiences Italian, German, Balli Kombetar,<sup>5</sup> and partisan rule and must, for the first time, confront the concept of ‘Albania.’

I listened carefully, raking my brain trying to understand exactly what was this Albania they were so worried about. Was it everything I saw around me: courtyards, breads, clouds, words, Xhexho’s voice, people’s eyes, boredom, or only a part of all that? (Kadare 1987, p. 108)

It was a tough problem, figuring out what was Albania. The tensions between town and country, rich and poor, Muslim and Christian, the recurring blood feuds, all were obstacles impeding the creation of a single Albanian national identity. When the older generation thought about being Albanian they considered all these things and said, ‘It’s a complicated business, all right... Albania.’ (Kadare 1987, p. 108) But when the youth of the country thought about being Albanian, they saw these complexities as only remnants of old that would be done away with in the new society promised by the communists. Although traditional forces were substantially weakened by the victory of the partisans, they did leave marks on Albania. Urban-rural differences, north-south divisions, and multiple religious affiliations were all impediments to the new order and needed to be dealt with by the communist program.

Such influences become especially apparent in investigating how well the reality of the communist era corresponded to communist ideology. At Paris in 1921 a number of defining characteristics of a nation had been proposed. The communists managed to adopt almost all these criteria (Albanian and Greek) in their attempts to define what it meant to be Albanian. They established a comprehensive state schooling system; normalized the disparate local and non-written cultures of the country into a single high culture; isolated the Albanians from other peoples; and, succeeded in standardizing the Albanian language. However, one characteristic remained problematic for the Albanians—religion. While in their official teachings they professed otherwise, the communists believed religion to be such a potentially divisive issue that in 1967 Albania became the first, and only, officially atheist state in the world. Whether religion was as divisive an issue among the Albanian people as the communists believed it to be is unclear, but it is apparent that today the reintegration of religion into Albanian national conceptions is one of Albania’s greatest challenges.

---

<sup>5</sup>An Albanian resistance group of the Second World War.

Apart from religion, urban-rural differences were a great impediment to the establishment of a unified society. The communists continually strove to equalize the standard of living throughout the country, but rural areas consistently lagged behind. Following the war there was an initial migration from urban to rural areas, but this trend was markedly reversed after the first five-year plan was inaugurated in 1950. In accordance with its attempts to attain agricultural self-sufficiency, the Party worked hard to get people to stay on the land. Tax incentives, assignment of technical graduates to rural tours, and barriers to migration all helped stabilize the urban-rural ratio at 1:2 by the late 1960s (Sjoberg 1991, p. 52). Although lowland farms were collectivized in the mid-50s, the push to collectivize in mountain regions did not even begin until over a decade later, evidence that even under the communists highland society took a long time to come into line with that of the lowlands (Sjoberg 1991, pp. 86, 95-6).

North-south divisions were still more blatantly divisive than urban-rural ones. In 1947 a peasant rebellion in the northern city of Shkoder was crushed by the communists, but established the north as staunchly anti-communist, and communism as a Tosk phenomenon. The suppression of this rebellion was followed by the persecution of the northern Catholic priesthood, one of the most energetic sources of pre-war Albanian nationalism (Sinishta 1976). North-south discrimination continued throughout the communist years. It is most evident in the creation and adoption of Unified Literary Albanian which is based upon a Tosk grammatical structure, relegating Gheg to rounding out the dictionary (Pipa 1989, p. 224). This standardization is especially important when considering Albanian identity because Albanian nationalists have always looked to language as the central differentiating characteristic of Albanians. The adoption of Tosk as the basis for standardized Albanian implies that Tosks are more truly Albanian than are Ghegs, no matter what the literature says, an assertion perhaps borne out by the relative lack of important communist leaders from the north.

The great irony of the communist period is that communist ideology is avowedly internationalist and therefore anti-‘national,’ but by providing much of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union with its first modernized infrastructure, communism set the foundation for the coalescence of many national identifications and, as had happened elsewhere, for many nationalisms besides those officially endorsed. Communism’s central planning system provided a most fertile ground for national developments as dissent was not allowed. Therefore, as the conception of an Albanian nation was crystallizing, it was not so hampered by competing influences as it had been earlier in the century. While initially an advantage, this later led to tension because the officially formulated national ideology was very static and resisted evolution. The Albanian Communist Party used nationalism as a tool to legitimize its control of the government, to unify the disparate elements of Albanian society, and to give the citizens of the state a sense of dedication to an encompassing whole—the nation—dedication that the communists then tried to convert into belief in the Party. There were some major aspects of life in communist Albania that did not mesh with the view of the Albanian nation championed by the communists. The ways in which the Communist Party dealt with these issues were defining tests for the Party and for the evolving Albanian nation. Today, with the ebb of communism, competing aspects of Albanian national identity are becoming more apparent and the communist triumph of a single national ideal is beginning to fade.

## Nationalist development in Albania today

In many ways what is going on today is a debate over what the Albanian nation should be in the future. The debate is analogous to parliament where some fondly recall communist security, while others laud the opportunities of democratic capitalism; some look solely to the West for inspiration, while others accent Albania's position at the meeting point of Christian and Islamic civilizations and the wider cultural influences and potential benefits of such a situation; some believe that Albania should take a strong stance regarding Albanian communities in the surrounding states, while still others believe that moderation is the more productive strategy. It is such discussions, strongly influenced by the past as well as by current events, and which are taking place at both the political and personal levels, that are shaping the future of the Albanian nation.

One crucial point to these discussions is how much of a sense of a single overarching nationality exists among the Albanians. Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia respectively contain 3.2 million, 1.7 million, and 375,000 people who identify as Albanian (Ministria e Ekonomise 1991, p. 370; Poulton 1993, pp. 57, 76). The initial relaxation of Albanian border controls in the early 1990s allowed people to travel, families to reunite, commerce to increase, and generally heightened feelings of similarity between the various communities (OAEEDB 1993, p. 2). Such increased interaction was soon augmented by Yugoslav Albanian investments in the liberalizing Albanian economy, investments that provided Albania with its first examples of capitalist enterprise and personal initiative. However, with increased interaction, cultural differences between these communities also became apparent. While Albania was ruled by a very oppressive and isolationist communist party, the Yugoslav Albanians lived under one of the most politically and economically liberal of the East European governments. This divergence in experience has led to disenchantment among many Albanians as they view much Kosovar and Macedonian Albanian investment as being overly profit-motivated and exploitative.<sup>6</sup>

While heightened mobility and interaction between Albanian communities are giving them a greater perspective on one another, external factors that motivate integration are also appearing. As during the emergence of the first Albanian nationalist movements over a century ago, again the greatest motivation the Kosovar and Macedonian Albanians have to identify with Albania is their differentiation from the surrounding Slavic communities and the political power they might be able to exercise if the three communities work in concert. In Kosovo the 1980s was a period of growing mistrust and antagonism between Serb and Albanian. These feelings came to a head in the spring of 1987 when the current President of Serbian, Slobodan Milosevic, delivered a speech in Kosovo centered on the historic importance of Kosovo to the Serbian nation. This speech portrayed the Albanian Kosovars as Muslim invaders who had no right to Orthodox Kosovo, and marked the beginning of Milosevic's own rise to power. Since that time Kosovar Albanians have felt themselves to be more and more removed from the decision making process of their country. In the case of Macedonia, although the Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity has been a crucial part of the Macedonian governing coalition, and at Turkey's urging Albania was one of the first states to recognize Macedonian independence (Macedonian Tribune 1993, p. 1), still

---

<sup>6</sup>Interviews conducted in Tirana, Durres, and Korce. July-August 1993.

the precarious position of the Macedonian state has led to increasing friction between Albanian and Slavic communities. Thus, both communities are strongly attracted to the idea of increasing their political influence through an alliance with Tirana.

Indeed, early in his tenure President Sali Berisha pursued an aggressive policy with respect to Albanian minorities abroad, though more recently—and under western pressure—he has grown increasingly clear in his support for the moderates in each community and for the sanctity of regional borders. ‘I expressed my view that the Albanians are not seeking a change of borders by force,’ he said in the spring of 1994, ‘but on the other hand Albanians will react as a single nation towards every massacre or practice of ethnic cleansing that anyone may undertake against them.’ (FBIS 1994, p. 1) Such a shift in position reflects a realization of the weak pull that irredentism has for most Albanians who are much more concerned with feeding their families than with nationalist agendas and who, in addition, watch CNN reports on the events in Bosnia each night on the roughly 250,000 (EIU 1994b, p. 63) satellite-dish-equipped televisions in the country. Realizing the weakness of their position, most Albanians would shy away from irritating their neighbors—Serb, Macedonian, and especially Greek as there are hundreds of thousands of Albanians working illegally in Greece who support their families back home.

While often the prime objective of nationalist politicians is ‘reunification,’ Berisha manages to voice the single community ideology of nationalism while at the same time undercutting that objective. He can do so, to speak of having a unity of purpose with the Kosovar Albanians while reaffirming borders, because Albania is so plainly unable to carry on any military action that his words do not alarm Serbia as irredentism disguised. What is more interesting, however, is not that Berisha doesn’t have to fear Serbian retribution, but that he doesn’t really have to be too concerned with Yugoslav Albanian interest in reunification either; though this might change if the situation of the Kosovar Albanians continues to decline. That is, Berisha’s statement implies that Albanians are unified in purpose and organization, but such organization suggests coordination and, just as the Albanians feel that Yugoslav Albanians are taking advantage of them in business, Prishtina and Tirana have such different agendas that large-scale cooperation would not be an easy matter. The problems of any ‘Greater Albania’ would parallel those of 1930s Yugoslavia where the divergent experiences of the Croats and Serbs made the idea of an overarching ‘Yugoslav’ nation untenable. Thus Berisha can advocate this pseudo-nationalist agenda without worrying over the prospect of sharing power with Prishtina. Indeed, the idea of the Albanian communities acting in concert, as if belonging to one nation, is perhaps all the more workable if the Albanians never do have an opportunity for unification.

What this reveals about nationalist conceptions in general, and Albanian ones in particular, is that there are many tiers of national identity. Just as Yugoslav citizens could identify as Yugoslav on one level, and as Serb or Croat on another, Albanians can today identify as Albanian on one level and as Albanians from Albania proper or from Kosovo on another. The common conception of being ‘Albanian’ which extends across sections of Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo and even Montenegro, could be termed a ‘lowest-common-denominator’ national identity. This lowest-common-denominator nationality seems to serve more to differentiate the Albanians from surrounding communities than to unite them. Although this national feeling is differentiating, since its unifying aspect is so weak it betokens a more extroverted

view of the world than most nationalisms. Such a view is forced upon the Albanians because even if they wish to 'react as a single nation,' since they cannot be unified (in geography or purpose), each community must individually seek to deal with its own problems. In doing so, being forced to look outward for options rather than inward for strength, Albanian communities have often elected to follow a moderate, conciliatory path in regional politics. Such forced openness and moderation hints at the constructive role that the Albanians might play in Balkan affairs.

This new openness of Albanian nationalism is also important when Albanians question where they place themselves mentally and emotionally in the world community. Considering both the historical ties between Albania and the Ottoman Empire, and the religious makeup of the country, there are many reasons why Europe and America are not the only places that Albania can look for assistance in reinvigorating her economy and society. Albanians, however, have always viewed themselves as European, and so integration into Europe is one of their top priorities. Such thinking traces back at least to Skanderbeg, who today seems to be a popular figure across religious lines. One might therefore hypothesize that if religion does not matter to Albanians to the extent that the Muslim majority can accept a Christian (and more importantly anti-Muslim) national hero, then the idea of looking to the Muslim world for help, as well as to the Christian European one, should not really be an issue either. This, however, is not the case.

In December 1992 Albania joined the Organization of the Islamic Conference (RFE/RL 1993, p. 28). Since ratifying that agreement President Berisha has been attacked by both the socialist and democratic oppositions as tying the country to the 'fundamentalist' Muslim world and turning away from Europe. But, with a Muslim majority in the country, with Albanian Islamic leaders tense as a result of the inroads Christianity is making in traditionally Muslim areas (World Council of Churches 1992, p. 4), and with the high conversion rate among young Albanians job-seekers in Greece,<sup>7</sup> Berisha had many good reasons to make this decision. And, as he argued, the Albanian economy is in such poor shape that Albania should be looking to all possible sources of support. Accordingly, by 1994 many of the relief organizations operating in Albania and much of the investment coming into the state was of a non-European, non-American origin.

Although ties with the Muslim world, and Turkey in particular, have increased greatly over the past few years, this does not mean that ties with European states have been slackening. In fact, Albania's most important trading and investment partners are all members of the EC (Tribune Ekonomike Shqiptare 1991, p. 5; EIU 1994a, p. 64) and Albania has been the biggest per capita recipient of western aid in post-communist Europe (EIU 1994c, p. 71). Above and beyond such trade and investment, the Italian operation Pelican brought relief supplies and personnel to Albania between 1991 and 1993 and 'saved Albania from mass starvation,' an effort for which the whole country is grateful (EIU 1994a, p. 56). Finally, it is the influx of hard currency from the economic refugees in Greece and Italy that has stabilized the Albanian currency, raised the standard of living, and filled shops with goods; remittances that were estimated to be worth \$500 million in 1994 alone (EIU 1994a, p. 57). Albania's European connections are paramount, and in no way will Albania isolate itself

---

<sup>7</sup>Albanian Muslim workers often get baptized and adopt Orthodox names as this tends to better their treatment by the Greek police. (Interviews with young Albanian refugees in Tirana, Gjirokaster, and Saranda, 16-20 August 1993.)

from Europe in order to draw closer to other Muslim countries.

While the international ties of formerly isolationist Albania emerge with both east and west, the prominence of the dispute over whether Albania should strengthen ties with both communities or with just one, and the argument that to choose one community precludes significant interaction with the other, points to the insecurity of the Albanian identity today. Emerging from communist isolation into a world where international connections are growing in strength, Albanians are hampered by their past. This is true not only politically, but also socially and economically. President Berisha's authoritarian tendencies, his willingness to crack down on opposition parties and the independent press, and his disregard of international human rights norms when it comes to such matters, have often raised storms of protest abroad, threatening Albania's integration into the international community. All this results from Albania's historical legacy of isolation, one-party rule, and single-patron foreign relations. In another sense, however, the argument that Albania must choose only one community with which to ally is not so much indicative of a sense of insecurity as it is of a debate over what Albania should become. While classic Albanian thought tells people that they are European, economic and social incentives are leading Albania in non-European directions. And so, just as with the political situation of Albania and the surrounding Albanian communities where they are forced to look outwards, the material situation of Albania is forcing its people to acknowledge what are classically thought of as non-European aspects of themselves, and to develop an increasingly multi-lateral approach and attitude towards foreign relations.

Finally, the issue of religion is the most disturbing of all. Rather than forcing the Albanians to reevaluate and reposition themselves and their mental framework with respect to each other and the rest of the world, issues of religion question the underlying stability of that framework and its fundamental postulates. As earlier in the century, the main area of contention surrounds the Albanian Orthodox faith. Since there are no other Muslim or Catholic communities in the area, the Catholic and Muslim Albanians are by the process of elimination Albanian, and thus the influence foreigners can exert on these communities through religious institutions is minimal. This is not the case with the Orthodox Church.

In the summer of 1991 the Greek Bishop Anastisios Yannoulatos began directing the revival of the Albanian Orthodox community. But his temporary appointment a year later as Archbishop of Tirana and all Albania by the Patriarch of Constantinople led to an uproar and accusation of Greek hegemonic intents in the Albanian press, government, and emigre church community (Hellenic Chronicle 1992). Most illustrative was an issue of *Relindje Demokratike* that contained a small article quoting Bishop Fan S. Noli,<sup>8</sup> '[The Albanian Orthodox] Church was founded with the intent of not belonging just to the Orthodox Community, but to all Albanians, therefore it should be defended by all, independent of faith... especially from the interventions of the church of Satan which is the Greek [Church].' (RD 1992, p. 2) For *Relindje Demokratike*, the governing party's newspaper, to call the Greek Church the 'church of Satan' is unthinkable regardless of how disturbed the government was by the course of events, or what kind of message Tirana wanted to send the Greeks. Evidently religious questions are still the most disturbing ones of all for Albanian politicians, and learning how

---

<sup>8</sup>The first leader of the Albanian Orthodox Church and, in 1924, the Prime Minister for six months of the only democratically elected government of Albania prior to 1991.

to deal with them is one of their greatest challenges.

Within a month, however, the Albanian government did recognize the appointment (Berisha 1993a). This decision makes it clear that Tirana greatly values good relations with Athens. While Albanian-Turkish, and more generally Albanian-Muslim, links are strengthening, Athens should realize that Greek support is vital to Albania, not only through official contacts but through the remittances of Albanian workers in Greece. Thus while tensions worsen and improve cyclically, in the end, Tirana is speaking from a weak and questionably popular position since every time there is a crisis thousands of economic refugees are sent back across the Albanian border to their jobless families.

The conflict with Greece was especially incisive for it strikes at the spot of perennial weakness of the Albanian nation, at the central question of religion and Albanian national identity. The great myth of Albanian nationalism is that religion doesn't matter, but the perpetual denial of religion as an issue is in fact a tacit acknowledgment of its potential divisiveness by Albanian leaders. The communists sought to solve this problem by outlawing organized religion, thereby fostering secular national identifications. Today people must again deal with their religious affiliations and try to reincorporate these beliefs into their national identifications. It is not enough to argue that religion can never divide the Albanians because Albania is surrounded by historically hostile states that force Albanians to smooth over internal disagreements. The prevalence of religious influences in Albania today, and the important role it plays in Albanian foreign relations, means that all Albanians must reincorporate notions of religion into their national identity, if indeed they ever left.

The next confrontation with Greece came in July of 1993 when a Greek priest, Chrysostomos Maidonis, was deported from Albania for carrying on political irredentist activities, along with his religious duties, among the Greek minority of the southern town of Gjirokaster. The negligible chance that Greece will try to annex southern Albania because of the Greek minority did not upset Tirana so much as the way that Athens drew a parallel between the situation of Greeks in southern Albania and Albanians in Kosovo (Hellenic Chronicle 1993). This dispute had a resounding impact on Greco-Albanian relations because the Epirus-Kosovo analogy questioned the image the Albanians have drawn for themselves in the world media—that of the non-violent protester and victim. By putting the situation of Greeks in southern Albania on a par with that of the Albanian Kosovars in southern Serbia, the Greeks implied that all the Albanian accusations leveled against the Serbs also held against themselves. Not only does this put Albania in a poor light for international human rights organizations, but it also questions the way the Albanians have tried to portray their influence in the Balkans, as proponents of 'peace and stability.' (Berisha 1993b) This is the primary justification of Albanian cooperation across borders. If Albania can be criticized as not truly fulfilling this constructive role because of the treatment of its own ethnic minorities, it then has a lessened right to strengthen political ties with the Kosovar and Macedonian Albanian communities.

In reaction to the Epirus-Kosovo analogy Albanian Prime Minister Aleksander Meksi spoke of 'absurd parallelism' and of an 'alliance between Athens and Belgrade.' (Meksi 1993) While this particular event actually obscures any such cooperation, since by drawing this parallel Athens is actually putting pressure on both Albanian and Serbia to recognize their ethnic minorities, such an alliance has been remarked upon by other observers of the

Yugoslav wars. One of these is Nicholas Rizopoulos who writes that ‘Athens and Belgrade (see themselves) emerging as defenders of the *res publica christiana* vs. the hordes of Muslim ‘barbarians’ once again knocking on Europe’s eastern gates.’ (Rizopoulos 1993, p. 4) Greece and Serbia are the two communities that have pressed Albania in the past and make Albanians feel that Islam is a stigma attached to their nation. In addition, the idea of an Athens-Belgrade alliance is most distressing to Albanians because it implies that political decisions should rely on religious identifications. It is this final thought that penetrates the Albanian insecurity over religion and over their political allegiances to Europe and the Muslim world. The prime Albanian *modus operandi* is that religion does not matter in politics, that Albania is a secular state and should be evaluated as such. The idea of a Greco-Serbian alliance based on a common Christian Orthodoxy and distrust of Muslims contradicts such ideals.

## Conclusion

Nationalism is a dynamic process. Albanians are continually making choices: to be practicing Christians or Muslims; to think in terms of an eastern or western community; to support the return of land to its pre-communist owners, or to keep it distributed as it is currently. Each person in the Albanian communities must decide upon their own position in regard to each of these questions. The sum of these opinions, the *gestalt*, determines the character of the nation. This is the idea of ‘democratic’ nationhood in which each individual’s opinions contribute to defining the nation, and it is an idea that is becoming increasingly ascendant in modern societies. But since one’s opinions are continually developing and changing, so must the character of the nation. While Albanian nationalism gained wide acceptance as a means of self-identification only in the communist era, it was a crafted identity that became formalized and therefore resisted evolution. Because people were politically disenfranchised a democratic form of nationhood could not emerge. However, Albanian citizens had to be given the tools with which to conceive of themselves as a nation in order for the communists’ crafted identity to have purchase among them. Now, with the democratizing of the politics and society of Albania, there has been a shift towards a more democratic form of national ideology. While new influences on and ideas about Albanian nationalism may clash with those of the communists, to a great degree they collaborate as well. Such is the momentum of history: conceptions of self rarely change abruptly, rather they evolve slowly. Earlier identities will continue to affect the way in which Albanian nationalism, now of a more fully democratic nature, develops today. It is the influences that persist throughout all political and social upheavals, such as the enduring questions of religion and Albanian identity, that are the true defining concerns of the Albanian nation. Only by appreciating such themes and acknowledging the influences of the communist era will people be able to come to a fuller understanding of Albanian nationalism and post-communist nationalisms in general.

The modernist analysis of nationalism is developed from the direction of democratic nationalism, a form not predominant in Albania until recently. Even so, the tools that it contributes were valuable in examining this non-industrial, peripherally European society, and made clear the defining questions of Albanian nationality in the past and today. There is no reason these questions must be answered in the same way in each of the three Albanian

communities discussed herein or even for each member of a single one of these communities. Albanian nationalism will remain a strong force in the Balkans Peninsula, but for it to be a successful and constructive force, given the widely differing challenges facing each community, it must develop an ideology which runs counter to that of most nations. It must nurture a very open and cosmopolitan ideal that readily spans state borders. The unique situation and character of the Albanian peoples forces this challenge upon them; whether they can meet the challenge and help to stabilize the Balkans is, as yet, unclear.

## References

- [1] ANDERSON, BENEDICT 1983 *Imagined Communities*, New York: Verso.
- [2] BERISHA 1993a “Letter of President Sali Berisha to Secretary General of the United Nations, Boutrous Boutrous-Ghali,” 28 June 1993.
- [3] ----- 1993b Albanian Telegraph Agency, 29 November 1993; reprinted *Federal Broadcast Information Service*, 2 December 1993, Washington.
- [4] COMMISSION OF INQUIRY “19 April 1922 Albania: General Report Presented by the Commission of Inquiry to the Council of the League of Nations,” Geneva.
- [5] EIU 1994a *Country Report: Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, 1st quarter 1994*, London: Economist Intelligence Unit.
- [6] ----- 1994b *Country Report*, 2nd quarter 1994, London.
- [7] ----- 1994c *Country Report*, 3rd quarter 1994, London.
- [8] ----- 1994d *Country Report*, 4th quarter 1994, London.
- [9] FBIS 1992 Tirana Radio Tirana Network, 4 April 1992. Reprinted *Federal Broadcast Information Service*, 6 April 1992, Washington.
- [10] FBIS 1994 “Transcription and translation of interview with President Sali Berisha given on TV Albania 31 March 1994,” *Federal Broadcast Information Service*, 1 April 1994, Washington.
- [11] HELLENIC CHRONICLE 1992 *Hellenic Chronicle*, 2 July 1992, Boston.
- [12] ----- 1993 *Hellenic Chronicle*, 9 September 1993, Boston.
- [13] KADARE, ISMAIL 1987 *Chronicle in Stone*, New York: Meredith Press.
- [14] MACEDONIAN TRIBUNE 1993 *The Macedonian Tribune*, 22 April 1993, Fort Wayne, IN.
- [15] MEKSI 1993 “Deklarate e Kryeministrit te Republikes se Shqiperise Aleksander Meksi ne Lidhje me Qendrimet me te Fundit te Qeverise Greke te Shpallura nga Kryeministri Mitcotaqis” (Statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania Alexander Meksi on the recent stand of the Greek government, as announced by Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis) Tirana, 18 July 1993.
- [16] MINISTIA E EKONIMISE 1991 *Vjetari Statistikor i Shqiperise, Ministia e Ekonimise, Drejtaria e Statistikore* (Statistical Yearbook of Albania, Ministry of Economics, Director of Statistics), Tirana.
- [17] OAEEDB 1993 *Oxford Analytic East Europe Daily Briefs*, 23 November 1993, London.

- [18] PIPA, ARSHI 1978 *Albanian Literature: Social Perspectives*, Munchen: Dr. Rudolf Trofenik.
- [19] ----- 1991 *Contemporary Albanian Literature*, Boulder: East European Monographs.
- [20] ----- 1989 *The Politics of Language in Socialist Albania*, Boulder: East European Monographs.
- [21] POLLO, STEFANAQ and PUTO, ARBEN 1981 *The History of Albania, From its Origins to the Present Day*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- [22] POULTON, HUGH 1991 *The Balkans, Minorities and States in Conflict*, London: Minority Rights Publications.
- [23] PRIFTI, PETER 1978 *Socialist Albania since 1944, Domestic and Foreign Developments*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- [24] RFE/RL 1993 *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty Research Report*, 12 February 1993, Munich.
- [25] RD 1992 *Relindje Demokratike*, 8 August 1992, Tirana.
- [26] RIZOPOULOS, NICHOLAS 1993 "A Third Balkan War?" *World Policy Journal*, Summer 1993.
- [27] SINISHTRA, GJON 1976 *The Fulfilled Promise, A Documentary Account of Religious Persecution in Albania*, Santa Clara, California: private publication.
- [28] SJOBERG, ORJAN 1991 *Rural Change and Development in Albania*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- [29] SKENDI, STAVRO 1967 *The Albanian National Awakening, 1878-1912*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- [30] STICKNEY, EDITH PIERPONT 1926 *Southern Albania or Northern Epirus in European International Affairs, 1912-1923*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [31] TRIBUNE EKONOMIKE SHQIPTARE 1994 *Tribune Ekonomike Shqiptare*, no. 1 1994, Tirana.
- [32] WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES 1992 "Report of the World Council of Churches Visit to Albania," 9-14 September 1992, Geneva.

**STARK DRAPER** is a doctoral candidate in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This paper grew out of a thesis he originally wrote for the Department of History, Stanford University. During the 1996-97 academic year he will be doing research as a Fulbright Fellow in Albania.

**ADDRESS:** 18 Bellevue Street, Newton MA, 02158 U.S.A.  
E-mail: ktaadn@mit.edu