



Clash of Eagles with Two Heads: Epirus in the 21st Century

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A 2013 study into popular opinions in Hellas and Albania produced a series of fascinating results. It found that while 18.5 per cent of Albanians viewed Greece as the number one threat to their country (pushing Serbia into second place for the first time), so few Greeks saw Albania as a threat that the finding fell within the range of statistical error and was not measured.¹ The Epirus issue has remained a smouldering (rather than a flaming) issue for more than a century. It is one that will hopefully never flare into a Skopje-sized problem. At its core is control of the Epirus region.

While Epirus is one of the European Union's most underdeveloped regions,² its geostrategic importance into the 21st century should not be underestimated. Its coastline controls access to the Adriatic Sea, is suspected of having substantial deposits of petroleum and natural gas, and is being developed as a key corridor for the transport of Caspian Sea natural gas to Italy, the European Union's largest consumer. The Epirus issue is not a regular feature of newspaper front-pages, nor is it widely-known as a *Εθνικό Θέμα* (National Issue) in diaspora circles. This is despite the issue of Epirus being around for as long as its more famous Macedonian counterpart. Examination of the status quo, and the modern history of Epirus suggests that bringing Albania into the European Union *may* prevent escalation of the Epirus issue into another FYROM³-size crisis. As evidenced by Greek-Bulgarian relations, when interests align, old enmities quickly fade.

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Status Quo

According to the 2013 study (conducted jointly by the Greek ELIAMEP and the Albanian Institute for International Studies, with funding from the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation), Albanians see relations with Greece as “important” or “very important” (76 per cent); on the other hand, Greeks rank relations with Albania as less important than with Turkey, Serbia and Bulgaria. While for Greeks, migration was the primary concern (41 per cent), for Albanians delineating the maritime border between the two countries was top priority (46 per cent).⁴ This latest study encapsulates the outstanding bilateral issues between the two neighbours. These may be grouped into three categories: (1) historical, (2) geopolitical, and (3) human rights.

The historic category binds all the issues together. In practical terms, it concerns expansionist propaganda, especially from Albanian émigré circles in the United States, Australia and western Europe, the “property and right of return” claims of the Chams of the Thesprotia district, the official state of war dating to the Axis invasion of 28 October 1940 that currently exists between Athens and Tirana and the state of Greek World War Two-era graves in Albanian jurisdiction. In the geopolitical category, top priority in the eyes of the Albanian population and of the government in Athens, is the delineation of the maritime border and the two Exclusive Economic Zones. Given the least attention by almost everyone involved are the human rights of the indigenous Greek population (much reduced in number due to migration to Greece since the early 1990s).

While it is not seen as the most pressing of the outstanding issues in the Greek-Albanian relationship, the campaign of expansionist propaganda emanating from Albanian émigré circles is of great concern. Taking into account the experience with Macedonia and looking into the future Hellenism worldwide could be faced with another FYROM-sized problem. Following the removal of Kosovo from Belgrade’s rule, the eyes of those campaigning for a “United States of Albania” have turned to western FYROM. Their propaganda does not seek to disguise the fact that their final goal is the creation of an Albanian Federation encompassing current Albania, Kosovo-Metohija, Tetovo (western FYROM) and Çamëria (southern Epirus). While this, for the moment, remains a dream of the extreme right wing fringe of Albanian politics, circumstances can and do change that may make such ambitions more palatable to the populace at large.

Since the fall of communism in Albania in 1990, Tirana has pursued an aggressively pro-American foreign policy position. It has also been perceived as resuming its traditional role of proxy for the Turkish state, at times accepting Ankara’s “advice:” at other times rejecting it. This is illustrated by the recent controversy over Kosovo’s school textbooks. Through funding infrastructure projects such as the terminal at

Pristina Airport, Ankara has been endeavouring to improve its image, “starting with whitewashing the history of the Ottoman Empire in school books.”⁵ As stated by Ian Brzezinski in a commentary piece on the Albanian ministry of Defence website,

Albania and the United States both benefit from close relations with Turkey ... It seems only natural that a forum involving these three Allies could serve as a creative mechanism for addressing security, economic and political challenges and opportunities in Albania and its surrounding region.⁶

Until economic crisis began to seriously bite in Greece in 2009, Greece hosted large numbers of economic migrants from Albania. As the construction and other unskilled work Albanians depended on dried up, tens of thousands of Albania were relocating home, According to a survey carried out by Usadis, paid for by the United States Department of State and the Albanian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, about 200,000 people returned/migrated to Albania between 2008 and 2013. For many of these people, Albania is a foreign country; therefore, the relocation there is migration, not repatriation. According to the Greek register office, between 2004 and 2012 alone, 104,225 children were born in Greece to migrants from Albania.⁷ The impact of these children and teenagers, born and raised in Hellenic society, on Albanian society will not become clear for many years. As Greeks of the diaspora well understand, there will inevitably be an impact.

For almost two decades, remittances from Albanian citizens working in Greece were a major contributor to the national economies of both states. For example, the IMF reported in 2005, that remittances of Albanian migrants in Greece were worth US\$778 million annually, equal to twice the value of Albanian exports to Greece or one-third of the national GDP. Equally important were the savings of Albanian migrants in Greece, estimated at between 10.7 and 15.7 billion euro.⁸ These figures illustrate the economic significance of Greece to southeastern Europe, and hint at its potential social and political importance. The impacts of the financial crisis in Greece on Albania and other neighbours will be played out for many years to come, with unforeseeable consequences.

One of these may be the deliberate stoking of tensions in Tirana’s relations with Greece by more extreme elements of Albanian society. A regular target during election campaigns in the country is the Epirus issue, the role the remaining indigenous Greek population of northern Epirus, and especially their spiritual leader, His Eminence Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana and All Albania, play in relations with Athens.

An illustrative example of Tirana’s erratic approach towards north Epirotes is its persistent refusal to permit people living outside a small “minority zone” around Ayioi Saranta (Sarande) to declare themselves as ethnic Hellenes. Both the *Unity for Human*

Rights Party (UHRP; led by Vangjel Dule) and the *Hellenic Ethnic Minority Party* (MEGA; led by Kristo Kico) appealed for north Epirotes not to participate in the registration for the 2011 Census in protest at restrictions on who could identify as “Hellene.” Therefore, the 2011 census officially records Albania’s Greek minority as 0.87 per cent of the population or 24,243 people. Considering that the UHRP, one of three north Epirot political groups, secured 18,070 votes at the last general election, the official Census results are brought into serious question. The third Greek-based party in Albania is OMONIA, led by Vasil Bollano.⁹

The human rights of north Epirotes remain a very sensitive topic for the Albanian government (regardless of which party is in power). Their treatment of the country’s largest minority demonstrates the attitude of powerbrokers in Tirana towards the north Epirotes and the Greek state.

History

Geographic Epirus is bounded on the west by the Ionian Sea, on the south by the Amvrakia Gulf, on the east by the Pindos Mountain range and the north by the River Genousos. Throughout recorded antiquity, the Illyrian and Molossian kingdoms struggled with each other for control of the region’s fertile mountain valleys. This tug-of-war was settled when both were brought under the control of King Philip II of Macedon; in both cases, by marriage.

While it is claimed that modern Albanians are the direct descendants of the Illyrians of antiquity, this claim is more to do with nation-building than with historical reality. It is not until the late-medieval period that Shqiptar (“sons of eagles” as modern Albanians call themselves) enter the historical record. The national hero of modern Albania – Skenderbeg – was a Christian lord of Kruje named Georgi Kastrioti. Known to Turks as *Iskanderbey* (Lord Alexander), this became *Skenderbeg* in Albanian. He died in exile in 1468, having failed in his mission to resist Ottoman Turkish expansion. The first book in the Albanian language appeared in 1555: the *Meshari* (The Missal) of Gjon Buzuku, who used the Latin alphabet to translate the Roman Catholic Mass. Other important writers include Marin Barleti who wrote the *History of Skanderbeg*. The modern Albanian flag also derives from Kastrioti’s crest, bearing the medieval double-head eagle of the eastern Roman (Byzantine) Emperors.

Converted to a form of Sufi Islam known as Bektash in the 1600s, Albanians became the enforcers of the Ottoman Empire across southeastern Europe. Some, such as the Koprulu clan, rose to great power and prominence as high-ranking officials of the Ottoman Sultan. Others, most notably Ali Pasha, “the Lion of Tepelene,” accumulated such power and wealth they provoked the response of the Sultan, and died violently.¹⁰

In some ways, Ali Pasha's revolt and the subsequent awakened a push amongst the Albanian tribes for a state independent of the Sultan. Demonstrating the inextricable ties between the modern Greek and Albanian states, the birth of the former in 1830 contributed to the birth of the latter eight decades later. In part, in response to the success of the Greek and Serbian revolts against the Ottoman Empire in creating Greek and Serbian kingdoms, between 1830 and 1847, the autonomy of Albanian warlords was violently suppressed. This only served to hasten the development of Albanian national consciousness, at the expense of the pan-Islamic "Ottoman" one being promoted by Muslim intelligentsia in Constantinople and other major centres.

One of the lesser known effects of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 and the subsequent treaties was the impact on the Albanians. The treaties of San Stefano and Berlin (both 1878) are discussed in "Why Macedonia Matters" in the Winter 2012/2013 of the *AHIF Policy Journal*. In large part to thwart the creation of a large Bulgarian kingdom at the door of the imperial capital, the Sultan's ministers permitted the creation of the League of Prizren on 10 June 1878. About eighty Muslim and Roman Catholic Albanian leaders from four Ottoman *vilayeti* (Kosovo, Scutari, Monastir and Janina), met in Prizren (a city in Kosovo), forming an organisation that worked to gain autonomy (but not independence) for the Albanians.¹¹ As long as the League remained loyal to the Ottoman Sultan, it was permitted to operate openly. Once it shifted to follow other national groups of the Ottoman Empire's European provinces and began demanding independence, it was suppressed and driven underground.

The Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, and the subsequent response by the Young Turk regime ruling the Ottoman Empire, gave the Albanian nationalist movement the right circumstances to break free of the Sultan. A series of Albanian uprisings in the first half of 1912 were actively supported by Bosnian Muslims induced by the Young Turks to relocate to Ottoman Macedonia, districts where the Muslim population was weak. Even some ethnic Albanian Ottoman government troops switched sides, joining with the revolutionaries. In May, after driving the Ottomans out of Skopje, the Albanian revolutionaries pressed south towards Monastiri (modern Bitola), forcing the Ottomans to grant effective autonomy over large regions in June.¹²

By summer 1912, Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro and Romania had created a network of military alliances, the Balkan League. Despite the efforts of the Great Powers, by late September, both the League and the Ottoman Empire had mobilised their armies. The declarations of war followed within days: Montenegro on 8 October; Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece declared war on the Ottoman Empire nine days later.

On the Epirus front, the Royal Hellenic Army was initially heavily outnumbered, but quite successful. The strategic port of Preveza was liberated on 21 October 1912. On

5 November, Gendarmerie Major Spyros Spyromilios led a revolt in the coastal area of Himarra (modern Himarë) and expelled the Ottoman garrison without facing significant resistance. On 20 November, Greek troops from western Macedonia liberated Korytsa (modern Korçë). The formidable German-designed defences before the fortress city of Ioannina would not be cracked until 6 March 1913.¹³ The Greek advance stopped once Epirus had been secured, completely free of Ottoman rule for the first time in over five centuries.

With the expulsion of the Ottomans from the region, Italy saw the chance to control the entrance to the Adriatic, including Albania and Northern Epirus. The people of this latter region, were in spite of Albanian immigration, predominantly Greek. Even the Albanians there having repeatedly shown their national Greek consciousness, revolted in November 1913. The Protocol of Florence decided that northern Epirus should be annexed to Albania in deference to Austria-Hungary and Italy. This resistance, led by Georgios Christakis-Zographos, encouraged a partial re-negotiation. Hence, in 1914, the Powers came to terms with the Provisional Greek Government and decided that northern Epirus should be autonomous, with only a nominal allegiance to Albania.¹⁴ A Note of the Great Powers on 13 February, compelled the Greek troops to evacuate the above territories. As reported in media across the world on 28 February 1914, "the autonomy of Epirus has been proclaimed at Argyrocastro (Gjirokastër) and Delvino, where the flag of independence has been hoisted,"¹⁵ The districts of Himara (Himarë), Ayioi Saranta (Sarandë) and Premete (Përmet) quickly joined the autonomists. The flag of the new state was a variant of the Greek national flag, a white cross centered upon the blue background surmounted by the imperial 'Byzantine' double-headed eagle in black. This banner remains the standard of those few who continue to advocate for self-rule for northern Epirus.¹⁶ Fighting broke out between Greeks and Albanians, particularly for control of the strategic town of Korytsa (Korçë). Despite advancing on the field of battle, without the open support of Athens and the Great Powers, the autonomists had no real hope of success.

Zographos agreed to negotiations, held on Kerkyra (Corfu), where Albanian and north Epirote representatives signed the Protocol of Corfu on 17 May 1914. According to its terms, Northern Epirus would acquire complete autonomous existence (as a *corpus separatum*) under the nominal Albanian sovereignty of Prince Wied.¹⁷ The Albanian government had the right to appoint and dismiss governors and high-ranking officials, taking into account as much as possible the opinion of the local population. Other terms included the proportional recruitment of north Epirotes into the local gendarmerie and the prohibition of military levies from people not indigenous to north Epirus. In Orthodox schools, the Greek language would be the sole medium of instruction, with the exception of the first three classes of primary school. The use of Greek was made equal to Albanian in all public affairs. The Ottoman-era privileges of Himara (Himarë)

were renewed, and a foreigner was to be appointed as its “captain” for ten years.¹⁸ The execution of, and adherence to, the Protocol was entrusted to the International Control Commission, as was the organisation of public administration and the departments of justice and finance, and the creation and training of the local police force.¹⁹

The outbreak of World War One prevented any serious effort at implementing northern Epirus’ autonomy. With the approval of Great Britain and France, Greek troops and administration returned to the region in October 1914.²⁰ In early 1916, the inhabitants of northern Epirus participated in the Greek parliamentary elections, sending sixteen representatives to the Parliament of the Greeks in Athens. In March, despite the warnings of former Prime Minister Eleutherios Venizelos against any move without the support of Great Britain and France, the Royalist government officially declared the region’s union with the Hellenic Kingdom, dividing the region into the prefectures of Argyrokastro and Korytsa.²¹

Taking advantage of the national schism that had developed in Greece between royalists and Venizelists, Italy secured the approval of London and Paris to enter the region in September 1916 as part of the Macedonian Front. Under the terms of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (the Venizelos-Tittoni agreement), northern Epirus was to be reunited with Hellas. However, strong Italian opposition in favour of Albania caused the area to be finally ceded to Tirana in 1921. The Albanian Parliament approved the Declaration of Minority Rights in February 1922. Contrary to the 1914 Protocol of Corfu, the new document recognised minority rights only in a defined area - parts of the districts of Argyrokastro (Gjirokastër), Ayioi Saranta (Sarandë) and three villages in Himara (Himarë), without implementing any form of local autonomy. All Orthodox schools outside this “minority zone” were forced to close until 1935, in violation of obligations accepted by the Albanian government at the League of Nations. This “minority zone” concept remains central to the treatment of north Epirotes by all governments in Tirana ever since.

The concluding act of the Greek, Armenian and Assyrian genocides – the euphemistically named “Compulsory Exchange of Greco-Turkish Populations” – presented some interesting questions for Greek and Albania. Under the terms of the “Exchange,” all Muslims had to depart from the Hellenic Kingdom (with the exception of western Thrace) and all Christians had to abandon their ancestral homes in the new Turkish state; only the Greeks of the city of Constantinople and the islands of Imvros and Tenedos were exempt. While some Chams did move to western Anatolia, to occupy homes left by the indigenous Christian Greeks, Italian pressure on the League of Nations meant the majority of Cham Albanians remained in Epirus, exempted from the ethnic cleansing being otherwise enforced.²²

During the 1941-1944 Axis occupation of Yugoslavia and Greece, there was large-scale collaboration of Albanians with the forces of Mussolini and Hitler. Fascist and Nazi propaganda promised that Çamëria, Kosovo and more would be awarded to Albania once the war was won. The result was active support Axis operations and the commitment of war crimes against civilians across the region. Local collaborationist administrations and armed security battalions were formed as was the terrorist *Këshilla* and *Balli Kombetar Çam* organisations.

After the capitulation of Mussolini's Italy in 1943, the Nazis established more collaborationist units such as police volunteer regiments and a national militia to replace their former allies. In April 1943, *Reichsfuhrer-SS* Heinrich Himmler created the 21st Waffen Mountain Division of the *SS Skanderbeg* (1st Albanian). By June 1944, its military value was deemed low in lieu of partisan aggression and by November, it was disbanded. The remaining cadre, now called *Kampfgruppe Skanderbeg*, was transferred to the *Prinz Eugen* Division where they participated in actions against Josip Broz Tito's partisans in December 1944.²³

Thousands of Greeks and Serbs were murdered or expelled from the territories planned as part of "Greater Shqipëria" and dozens of villages burned, particularly in Epirus and Kosovo. From 29 July-31 August 1943, a combined German and Cham force launched an anti-partisan sweep operation codenamed *Augustus*: 600 Greeks and 50 anti-Nazi Chams were killed and 70 villages were destroyed. On 27 September, the Nazis and their Cham collaborators again combined forces in burning four villages north of Paramythia, killing 50 Greeks. On the same day, Cham militias orchestrated by the brothers Nuri and Mazar Dino arrested 53 leading Greeks of Paramythia, executing 49 of them two days later. On 30 September, the Swiss representative of the International Red Cross, Hans-Jakob Bickel, while visiting the area, concluded that Cham bands were completely out of control, committing atrocities against the unarmed Greek population. Similar occurrences took place in north Epiros, especially the Konispole (Konispol) district.²⁴

In Epirus, the *EDES* (Εθνικός Δημοκρατικός Ελληνικός Σύνδεσμος (National Democratic Hellenic League) resistance group attacked the Chams of Thesprotia, "encouraging" their departure. With the retreat of Axis forces in late-1944, many collaborators moved to Albania to escape trial and probable execution. According to British reports, the Cham collaborationist bands managed to flee to Albania with all of their equipment, together with half million stolen cattle as well as 3,000 horses, leaving only elderly members of the community behind. On 18 June 1944, *EDES* forces with Allied support launched an attack on Paramythia, liberating it after a short battle against a combined Cham-German garrison. Soon after, violent reprisals were carried out against the town's remaining Chams, considered responsible for the massacre of

September 1943. This is now claimed as the key event in the “Cham Genocide.” When the war ended, special courts on collaboration sentenced 2,106 Cham Albanians to death in absentia for war crimes, while their immovable property was confiscated by the state²⁵ The death sentences were never enforced; the war crimes remained unpunished since the perpetrators had already fled abroad.

In a sign of the times, during the period of Fascist-Nazi occupation, Yugoslav communists helped a former teacher named Enver Hoxha found the Albanian Communist Party. Hoxha became first secretary of the party’s Central Committee and political commissar of the communist-dominated Army of National Liberation. With the collapse of the Nazi occupation in late-1944, Hoxha became Prime Minister, transforming Albania from a semi-feudal relic of the Ottoman Empire into an industrialised economy with the most tightly controlled society in Europe.²⁶ Under communist rule, with its extreme isolationist policies, old territorial designs were suppressed but not eliminated.

Chams who fled north of the border were given refugee status and homes in specific areas of Northern Epirus to dilute the indigenous Greek element. At the end of 1945, numerous Cham Albanians were imprisoned by the communist authorities as “collaborators of the occupation forces” and “murderers of Greeks.” Protests brought further arrests and transfers of Cham Albanians away from the region.²⁷

In a 1946 memorandum, the Anti-Fascist Committee of Cham Immigrants (CAFC) claimed that 28,000 Cham Albanians were evicted, 2,771 killed and 5,800 houses were looted and burned and asked the international community to react in order to return to their homeland and to receive reparations.²⁸ In 1953, the government gave all Chams Albanian citizenship. Many older Chams continued to regard themselves as refugees illegitimately deprived of their Greek citizenship and the right to return to their property in Greece.²⁹

Hoxha’s Albania played a key role in the Greek Civil War (December 1944-December 1949) as a support base for the *Δημοκρατικός Στρατός Ελλάδος* (Democratic Army of Greece), especially during its retreat. Albania was the key staging post for implementation of the *paedomazoma*, an operation by the communist-led rebels to abduct or “evacuate” Hellenic children from the areas under its control.³⁰

The support the communist government in Tirana gave to their co-ideologists in Greece, the Cold War context, and especially the extreme isolationism of the governments in Tirana combined to place Greek-Albanian relations in the deep-freeze for many decades, a partial thaw essentially only coming after the collapse of the communist system in 1990. In the semi-chaos that followed, tens of thousands of Albanians and north Epirotes crossed the border in search of employment and lifestyle opportunities. A decade later, their numbers were estimated at well over 500,000

people, or two-thirds of the total immigrant population of Greece, although the official census recorded 438,036 individuals or 57.5 per cent.³¹

The 21st Century

The semi-chaos that followed the dissolution of the communist regime unleashed long-suppressed aggressive sentiments within Albanian society. Frozen out of domestic politics for decades, the Albanian Diaspora has become a key player in relations between Athens and Tirana in the last two decades. For example, an Albanian-oriented website in Australia states that the Great Power created the Albanian state in 1913,

ignoring the reality of the population and the military status quo on the ground. ... Kosovo, Çamëria, Dibra, Struga, Ulqin, Gostivar and the surrounding regions were given to the neighbouring countries, leaving nearly half of the Albanian lands and people outside the Albanian borders.³²

In July 2013, an initiative to collect one million signatures for a petition supporting the unification of all Albanians in the Balkans was been launched among expatriates in Germany. According to German media reports, Koco Danaj intends to collect signatures from Albanian expatriates living in Europe in order to convince Western governments of the need to unite all Albanians in one state. The former adviser to several Albanian prime ministers stated that the creation of a "Natural Albania would the last step in the national unification of Albanians in the region." Danaj argues that a "natural" Albania should include all areas inhabited by Albanian-speaking people, both where they are the ethnic majority today, and areas where they were a majority in the past but were expelled over the past century. According to the German resident, a "Natural Albania" is different from a "Greater Albania," because the latter term is used negatively by Albania's neighbours to suggest that Albanians are seeking some form of territorial expansion.³³

The "Greater Shqipëria" concept first espoused by the League of Prizren in 1878 is being promoted to Albanian communities and power centres in the United States, western Europe and Australia. While to date "Greater Shqipëria" currently attracts only marginal support, circumstances constantly change. Having secured Albanian control of Kosovo, these "United States of Albania" circles³⁴ now have their eyes fixed on the autonomy and later independence, of the western part of FYROM.

During speeches for the 100th anniversary of independence, Prime Minister Sali Berisha referred to districts in all four of his country's neighbours as "Albanian lands." In the text of his message to a museum to mark the centenary, Berisha referred to "the Albania of all Albanian lands, from Preveza to Presevo, Skopje to Podgorica."³⁵ In

January 2013, he hailed fallen UCK members as “heroes of the Albanian nation.” Then in February, in a Munich speech railing against “Albanophobia,” Berisha rejected the idea that Albanians could be regarded as five different nations because they live in five different Balkan states: “Albanians cannot accept this. ... The national unity of the Albanians will be the alternative to this.”³⁶

The 2001 Arachinovo rebellion by the Albanian “Army for National Liberation” was only the opening salvo in the extremists’ campaign to secure the creation of a third Albanian state in the region. Between February and August, approximately 200 were killed and wounded, technically concluding with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement on 13 August.³⁷ The granting of a number of concessions to FYROM’s Albanian population – including recognition of Albanian as the country’s second official language, has only served to whet the leadership’s appetite. In early 2012, an Albanian grouping said to be based in Mitrovica declaring itself to be an “Army for the Liberation of the Occupied Albanian Lands” has threatened to attack army and police unless Skopje ‘vacates’ its Albanian-populated regions. This new grouping might be modelled after the paramilitary “Kosovo Liberation Army.”

Albanians already constitute one-third of FYROM’s two-million population. When Turks, Slavic Muslims and the Romany are added almost one half of the nation is Muslim. As with the north Epirotes, one key issue is the lack of concrete figures. The question of exactly how many Albanians live in FYROM is unknown. Inter-ethnic tensions effectively ruined the planned census of October 2011. The last official census in 2002 put them at 509,000 (25.2 per cent). This marked a growth amongst the Albanian population of more than 34 per cent across the two decades since the 1981 Census. Factor in massive Slavomacedonian emigration (particularly on Bulgarian EU passports) due to FYROM’s 30 per cent unemployment and stagnant economy, and the demographic picture will continue to be a source of instability for years to come.³⁸

With Albanian states to the west and north, the consensus is that given the precedent of Kosovo and with a birth-rate far ahead of the Slavomacedonian majority, FYROM’s Albanian population will not settle for minority status within a Slavomacedonian state. Will there be a return to violence or will the Albanian political parties continue to push through the democratic process? The precedent set with the NATO-sponsored amputation of Kosovo from Serbia has triggered impacts (intended and unintended) that are redrawing the face of the region.

From a Greek perspective, southern Epirus (the prefectures of Ioannina, Arta, Preveza and Thesprotia) is the main area of concern. In the language of Albanian parties such as the *Aleanca Kuq e Zi* (Red and Black Alliance)³⁹ and the *Partia Drejtësi, Integrim dhe Unitet* (Party for Justice, Integration and Unity),⁴⁰ this is Çamëria, the last and least-spoken about “lost” territory. In the words of the PDIU party programme, “...

resolution of the Cham issue today is an obligation for the Albanian government.” This is generally interpreted as bringing southern Epirus under Albanian rule.

Unlike Kosovo and other areas with substantial Albanian populations, Çamëria has no such population base. Despite the protestations of the *Shoqëria Politike Atdhetare Çamëria* (National Political Association: SPAC) regarding the “return” of the Chams to Greece, “receipt of compensation and greater freedom for the Orthodox Chams in Greece,” there is no evidence the current inhabitants of southern Epiros identify with their claims.

Formed in 1991, SPAC organizes activities aimed at promoting its cause, particularly with the PDUI. Most prominent of these is the annual Cham March remembering the expulsions of Cham Albanians. It is held on 27 June in Konispolë (Konispol), not far from the Greek border, designed to provoke tension between the two neighbours. The SPAC has encouraged the Cham Albanians who fled with the retreating Nazi occupiers of Greece in late 1944 to return to their family areas, demanding the Albanian state take up the issue of compensation for property seized by the Greek state.

The Albanian Parliament passed a law in 1994 declaring 27 June *The Day of Greek Chauvinist Genocide Against the Albanians of Çamëria*. A decade later, the Chams created the Party for Justice and Integration to represent their interests; this became the PDIU in 2011 when two Cham parties combined forces.

While the Epiros issue appears to be one of history and human rights, contemporary geopolitical stakes are involved. The entire region of Epirus (both the Hellenic south and the Albanian-ruled north), especially its major city – Ioannina – is moving to reclaim its historic role as a centre of commerce, culture and learning. The first step was the completion of the Via Egnatia motorway, a project that broke the difficulty in accessing the Epirot capital city for large-scale road transport. Running for 670 kilometres across northern Greece from the Evros River border with Turkey to the Ionian port of Igoumenitsa, travel times have been greatly reduced, bringing down the cost of transporting people and produce to and from Epiros.⁴¹ A similar project has commenced to build a similar multi-lane motorway from the Albanian border to the port of Antirrio on the Gulf of Corinth. Officially known as *Αυτοκινητόδρομος* (Motorway) 5, it is commonly called the *Ionia Odos* (Ionian Way).⁴² The two major European Union transport corridors are designed to intersect on the southern outskirts of Ioannina, part of the plan to develop Greece’s place as the European Union’s southeastern trade gateway. The geographic position of Greece and Cyprus as the European Union’s closest access to the Suez Canal and the major trade partners of the Persian Gulf, India and the Far East has long been underutilised, historic errors that Athens and Nicosia are finally moving to correct.

Of greatest interest, indeed the element that binds together the historic, economic and geostrategic strands of this study is the potential of Epiros as a trade and energy hub. As aforementioned, motorways (both completed and under construction) are linking the European Union's easternmost major ports (Piraeus, Thessaloniki and Kalamata) directly with land transport networks in Bulgaria, Italy and other members of the EU.

Other major developments in 2013 and early 2014 have taken place that will enhance Epiros' geopolitical significance. In late-June 2013, the consortium that owns Azerbaijan's giant Shah Deniz II field announced it had chosen the route by which it would export to the European Union's largest natural gas consumer, Italy. The approximately 870 kilometres of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) will connect with the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) at Kypoi on the Evros River, running along a similar path to the Via Egnatia until the Pindus Mountains before turning north-west into northern Epirus and the Adriatic Sea and terminating in southern Italy.⁴³

The key benefits that the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) offers over rival planned pipelines are cost and distance. While Nabucco and the subsequent Nabucco West required compliance by multiple states, stakeholders, and greater distances, TAP will connect directly to TANAP and take advantage of the shorter distances across Greece and Albania as well as the well-developed gas infrastructure and storage facilities in Italy.⁴⁴

In a demonstration of the upgrading of Greece's geostrategic significance these infrastructure projects offer, a memorandum of understanding and co-operation was signed on 8 January 2014 to further develop strategic infrastructure in south-eastern Europe. The agreement will allow for co-operation between the Trans Adriatic Pipeline and Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria companies on construction of a secondary pipeline from the TAP junction at Komotene in western Thrace to the Bulgarian gas network and further into southeastern Europe.⁴⁵

Currently reliant almost completely on energy imports and encouraged by the discovery of Cyprus' Aphrodite natural gas field, Greece has commenced its own program of hydrocarbon exploration. Epiros' Ioannina Prefecture is currently the site of exploratory drilling to determine the volume of reserves of petroleum and natural gas, as well as the commercial viability of their extraction. It is also projected that the waters around the islands of Kerkyra, groups such as Paxoi, Othonoi, and Ereikousa. More island groups will be explored for hydrocarbon deposits in coming years.⁴⁶

As aforementioned, 46 per cent of Albanians stated that the country's top priority was delineating the maritime border between the two countries.⁴⁷ Control of sections of the Ionian and Adriatic Seas and consequent possession of the natural resources below the seafloor is what the survey's participants had in mind. Under international law,

such possession can only be secured by signature of a bilateral treaty delineating the maritime boundary between two neighbours.⁴⁸

One of modern history's most significant agreements was reached on 10 December 1982 when nearly 120 countries signed the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Part 5 (more precisely Articles 55 to 75) provides for an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extending 200 nautical miles seaward from the coasts, making all the waters and seafloors their "economic patrimony." Turkey has been one of the few states with maritime interests that opposed UNCLOS and the implementation of EEZs.⁴⁹ It has subsequently endeavoured to use its influence in countries such as Lebanon, Egypt and Albania to have agreements between them, Greece and Cyprus cancelled.⁵⁰

Albania did not establish an Exclusive Economic Zone, therefore limiting its sovereignty to its territorial sea. After two years of negotiations, a draft agreement on the maritime boundaries, which delimited the respective areas of continental shelf and territorial waters in the Ionian Sea was signed in Tirana in April 2009. This draft agreement was immediately challenged before the Constitutional Court by a number of scientific and political groups led by opposition Socialist Party leader Edi Rama. He accused the Berisha government of holding negotiations in secret and giving up an area of about 225 square kilometres in exchange of future political support from Athens.⁵¹ There was considerable public and political pressure with the media describing the draft agreement as "selling out to Greece" and "treason." On 26 January 2010, the Albanian constitutional court annulled the maritime boundary agreement due to "procedural and substantial violations" of the constitution and the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁵² Opposition leader Rama was elected Prime Minister at the following general elections in June 2013. In an interview with the country's Top Channel, the former mayor of Tirana outlined his foreign policy priorities: a settlement with Athens on the issue of maritime borders (which Athens has been unwilling to renegotiate) and improved ties with Italy as well as Turkey.⁵³ It is not surprising that these countries are central to the TAP project.

Concluding Comments

The wave of migration *into* Albania in the first years of the twenty-first century, combined with the new international infrastructure being developed present a series of new questions for the Greek-Albanian relationship. These questions concern the people of both countries as much as the official policies of Tirana and Athens towards each other.

The Albanian government's official position regarding plans such as Danaj's "natural Albania" has been that the "unification of Albanians" can come about only through the

broader process of regional integration into the European Union. Prior to his inauguration, Prime Minister Edi Rama argued that such ideas “could destabilise the region.”⁵⁴

The only party in Tirana that openly supports such moves is the Red and Black Alliance, which secured little more than 10,000 votes (less than 0.3 per cent) during the June 2013 general election. The Alliance had proposed a similar petition to hold a referendum in Albania and Kosovo seeking national unification. Florian Bieber, Professor of southeast European studies at Austria’s University of Graz, noted that the Red and Black Alliance “failed to break the polarised Albanian political system between the Socialist and Democratic parties,” while Berisha’s efforts to stoke Albanian nationalism “provided him with no electoral advantages.” Popular Albanian commentator Ardian Vehbiu stated that the fact that Danaj is seeking signatures from expatriates shows that Albanians at home have other priorities, “The fact that the Red and Black alliance turned into little more than hot air and disappeared from the political scene after the elections suggests that a ‘nation state’ is not a necessity for Albanians.”⁵⁵

Amongst the questions that arise from last year’s election results is what role did the Albanian citizens returning from Greece play? How did their votes influence the defeat of Sali Berisha’s Democratic Party and the more extreme Red and Black Alliance? Will the extremism espoused by two-time former Prime Minister Sali Berisha and others remain confined to the fringes of Albanian politics?

Research since the early 1990s has focused almost exclusively on the economic contribution of migrants from Albania on Greece, and the social impacts on the migrants, and to a lesser extent, their Greek-born children. One unexplored issue remains the impact of migrants from Albania (both Greeks and Albanians) on Greek society in the religious, cultural and political spheres. Many are Orthodox Christians; many others nominal or practising Muslims. How has – and will – their personal religious beliefs change a society where Orthodox Christianity is entrenched as the state religion? With north Epirotes having been given Greek citizenship, and therefore voting rights, in recent years, how will their votes influence electoral outcomes in a party political landscape where traditional voting blocs have been shattered and coalition governments are the new norm? What will their electoral influence be on future European, parliamentary and municipal elections in the Greek republic?

Will a realignment of Albanian geopolitical interests and the return of many émigrés bring a change in the state’s approach to the indigenous Greek population of northern Epirus? The early signs of the Socialist Party administration are not hopeful. Clergy and faithful were violently ejected from an Orthodox church in Premeti during the celebrations for the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on 16 August 2013, by private security and municipal authorities. Religious items such as icons and utensils were also

confiscated. The eviction occurred under the pretext of a court order, which stated that the building be returned to municipal authorities. According to Albanian legislation, the building must function as a culture centre. During his sermon at the Cathedral Temple in Tirana, Archbishop Anastasios of the Orthodox Church of Albania commented that the ousting harkened back to the communist era, when religious beliefs were banned. He demanded that the Albanian government fulfil its 2009 promise to return seized church assets. Archbishop Anastasios explained that the Albanian state had recognised that the cultural centre was built on top of a razed Orthodox church and had handed it over to the Church in exchange for the cost of converting it. In the past the Church has repeatedly been vandalized, with the clergy alleging the attacks have municipal backing.⁵⁶

Bringing Albania into the European Union *may* prevent escalation into a FYROM-size crisis regarding further claims of fringe elements on Greek territory. As evidenced by the relationship between Athens and Sofia, when interests align, old enmities fade.⁵⁷ Realistically, this is more than a decade away. In the meantime, the “catch” remains in overcoming the deep mistrust between the two peoples that exists. The treatment of the north Epirotes by the Albanian state demonstrates this point: the indigenous Greeks are viewed with suspicion as extensions of Greek foreign policy. Like the Albanian migrant community in Greece, they should be seen as a bridge between the neighbours. Like all diaspora communities, both groups are living in two “worlds.” The key question that will only be answered in a decade or so is what will be the impact on Greek-Albanian relations?

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² Johannes Hahn “REGION OF THE WEEK: Epirus,” 4 November 2013.

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³ The Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia.

⁴ Τάνια Μποζανίνου «Έλληνες και Αλβανοί: τόσο κοντά, μα τόσο μακριά» 24 Δεκεμβρίου 2013.

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⁵ Uffe Andersen ‘Kosovo’s New Golden Age? Political ally and major investor Turkey is taking a hand in writing history textbooks, and not all Kosovans are happy about it’ Transitions Online: Regional Intelligence 6 December 2013 <http://www.tol.org/client/article/24082-kosovo-education-turkey-erdogan.html>

⁶ Ian J. Brzezinski *Albania-US Relations: A Pillar of Stability in an Increasingly Uncertain World* Republic of Albania Ministry of Defence

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¹⁰ Cornered on his home on the island in Lake Pamvotis, Ali Pasha was shot and beheaded. His head, preserved in wax and honey, was sent to Constantinople to confirm to the Sultan that Ali was in fact dead. His headless corpse lies in his tomb in the Inner Citadel of the Fortress of Ioannina, at the highest point of the old walled city, in the forecourt of the Fethiye Cami.

¹¹ Leften Stavros Stavrianos, Traian Stoianovich *The Balkans since 1453* Edition 2, C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000, page 502.

¹² Noel Malcolm *A Short History of Kosovo* pages 246-251.

¹³ As it was 21 February by the old calendar, the anniversary continues to be celebrated on that date each year.

¹⁴ [untitled] *Political Science Quarterly* 9 January 1919, pages 516-518.

http://archive.org/stream/jstor-2141697/2141697_djvu.txt. See also N. J. Cassavety "The Question of Epirus," *The Journal of Race Development*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (January 1919), pp. 230-246.

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¹⁵ "Autonomy in Northern Epirus," *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* (NSW) Tuesday 3 March 1914, page 2.

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¹⁹ Protocol of Corfu 17 May 1914.

²⁰ Nicola Guy (2007) "The Albanian Question in British Policy and the Italian Intervention, August 1914-April 1915," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Volume 18, Issue 1, page 1.

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²³ The Waffen-SS (3): 11. to 23. Divisions By Gordon Williamson, Stephen Andrew

²⁴ Dean Kalimniou, "Diatribes: Cham Chumps," *Neos Kosmos English Edition* 10 July 2010 <http://diatribes-column.blogspot.com.au/2010/07/cham-chumps.html> Accessed 29 January 2014.

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²⁷ Kyriakos Kentrotis "Myths and Realities About Minorities in Greece: The Case of the Moslem Chams of Epirus" in Lyubov Grigorova – Mincheva (1995) *Comparative Balkan Parliamentarism* Sofia: International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, page 153.

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