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GEOGRAPHY

Country Overview

Albania is a small, mountainous nation located on the southwestern edge of the Balkan Peninsula, comparable in size to Maryland. It lies next to the Adriatic Sea and the Strait of Otranto that connects the Adriatic with the Ionian Sea. Albania’s mountains isolate the inaccessible regions of Albania from the Balkan Peninsula, including other sections of Albania. This geographical isolation was intensified by political isolation during the mid-to-late 20th century, when the government of Enver Hoxha pursued a strict Marxist-Leninist path of communism that sealed it away from other communist nations of the Soviet bloc. Albania, therefore, emerged from its communist era in the early 1990s as possibly the poorest and least developed nation in Europe.¹

One lasting reminder of the Hoxha era endures as one of the most dominant features on the Albanian landscape. Bunkers were built between 1972 and 1983, when Albania became increasingly isolated from all other nations.² Approximately 750,000 cement-and-iron bunkers, designed to withstand tank attacks, remain strewn across the Albanian countryside—along city streets, in farms, on sandy beaches, and encased within mountain slopes. Since the bunkers are nearly immovable, some enterprising Albanians have begun converting them into kiosks, stables, planters, restaurants, and even residences.³ These industrious transformations of the ubiquitous “concrete mushrooms” are symbolic of the larger institutional changes that Albania is undergoing to become a political and economic member of the European Union.

Geographic Regions and Topographic Features

More than two thirds of Albania’s landscape consists of mountains broken up by river valleys. Such terrain has contributed to the relative isolation of many Albanian communities.⁴ The most rugged peaks and narrowest river valleys are found in the Northern Albanian Alps, in the region near the Montenegrin and Kosovan borders. This range is the southern-most section of the Dinaric

Alps, mountains that parallel the Adriatic Sea coastline northward all the way to Slovenia. Much of this northern region of Albania remains forested and largely unpopulated.\(^5\)

In central Albania, the mountains run north-south along the eastern half of the country. Within this section lies Mali i Korabit (Mount Korab), a border peak that is the highest point (2,764 m, 9,068 ft) of both Albania and Montenegro. To the south, the mountains shift to a southeast-northwest orientation and the river valleys separating the ranges become wider. Tree cover in this region is thinner than in the north, and many of the hillsides serve as grazing land for livestock.\(^6\)

Much of Albania’s coastal lowland belt consists of marshlands, lagoons, and barren badlands in their natural state. Where irrigation is feasible, some of this land has been reclaimed for agricultural purposes.\(^7\) On average, this strip of coastal land reaches inland less than 16 km (10 mi) from the Adriatic Sea. It extends from Albania’s northern border to just south of the coastal city of Vlorë. Beyond this region to the east lies a narrow area of mid-elevation rolling hills (100-900 m, 328-2,953 ft). Many of Albania’s largest cities are found here, including Tirana, Elbasan, and Berat.\(^8\)

Within the mountain regions of Albania lie numerous river valleys of lower elevation that support hillside agriculture. In the east, near where Albania, Macedonia, and Greece occupy a border region along Lakes Ohrid and Prespa, lies a high plateau (850 m, 2,800 ft) surrounded by mountains. Within the plateau lies Korçë, the largest city within Albania’s eastern mountain region. The countryside surrounding Korçë is one of the nation’s primary wheat-growing areas.\(^9\)

**Climate**

Although Albania is relatively small, its climate is remarkably variable due to the altitude difference between the coastal region and the inland mountainous areas. A Mediterranean climate dominates the coast, characterized by mild, wet winters and warm, dry summers.\(^10\) This pattern continues into the middle elevations of the inland regions. Farther east, rainfall totals increase dramatically along the western slopes of the first major mountain ranges, where coastal and continental air masses converge. Here,
temperatures vary more in the summer (compared to the coast), and winter reaches much colder temperatures. Snow is common at the higher altitudes during this time of the year. In Albania’s eastern-most mountainous regions, where the coastal and continental air masses are less likely to interact, precipitation levels are lower than in the mountains to the west.\textsuperscript{11,12}

Precipitation levels in Albania tend to be the highest in the north and decrease toward the south. They are uneven throughout the country, since elevation differences and distance from the coast affect rainfall patterns. In the North Albanian Alps, annual precipitation is more than 2,500 mm (100 in.) in some areas. In contrast, less than 760 mm (30 in.) of annual rainfall occurs in parts of the nation’s southeastern corner.\textsuperscript{13} Korçë, for example, averages 720 mm (28 in.) of annual precipitation, whereas the city of Vlorë, located at nearly the same latitude but roughly 100 km to the west along the coast, averages nearly 1,000 mm (39 in.).\textsuperscript{14,15}

\textbf{Rivers and Lakes}

\textit{Rivers}

Virtually all of the rain and snow that falls in Albania never leaves the nation’s borders as it flows in rivers westward toward the Adriatic Sea.\textsuperscript{16} The Drin River, Albania’s longest river at a length of 282 km (175 mi), is fed by two major tributaries— the White Drin (Drini i Bardhë) and the Black Drin (Drini i Zi).\textsuperscript{17} They originate in Kosovo and Macedonia, respectively. The Drin is economically the most important river in Albania because of the three hydroelectric plants built along its northern-most stretch. Under normal conditions, the plants supply about 90\% of the nation’s electricity.\textsuperscript{18}

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Albania’s other rivers are very seasonal in their flow, alternating between raging torrents during the heavy winter rains and dusty riverbeds during the dry summer months. Among the longer of these rivers are the Seman and the Vjosë. Both drain the southern mountains of Albania via their source rivers and primary tributaries (Osum and Devoll Rivers for the Seman; Drino and Shushicë Rivers for the Vjosë).

The Shkumbin River, which flows through Elbasan has been one of the most important rivers in the western Balkans. During the Roman Empire, the Via Egnatia running through the Shkumbin river valley was one of the region’s major trade and military routes. It connected Albania’s Adriatic coast with Thessalonika (modern Thessaloniki) on the Aegean Sea and Byzantium (modern Istanbul) on the Bosporus.\(^\text{19,20}\) The Shkumbin is also the traditional dividing line between speakers of Tosk and Gheg, the two major dialects of the Albanian language.\(^\text{21}\)

**Lakes**

Most of Albania’s larger bodies of water are reservoirs. Two significant exceptions are Lakes Ohrid and Prespa. Both are part of the border between Albania and Macedonia. Lake Ohrid, Europe’s oldest lake, is one of the world’s most unique large lakes in that much of its water comes from surface and underwater springs. It has been isolated from other bodies of water for millions of years, resulting in the evolution of a large number of plant and fish species that are unique to the lake.\(^\text{22}\)

Lake Prespa sits astride the meeting point of the Albanian, Macedonian, and Greek borders, southeast of Lake Ohrid. (It is also sometimes called Great Lake Prespa, as a very narrow isthmus is its only separation from a smaller lake that lies mostly within Greece.) Lake Prespa is situated at an elevation more than 150 m higher than Lake Ohrid and supplies water to its lower neighbor through underground channels, which flow through the porous limestone bedrock that separates the two lakes. Through this underground connection, Prespa serves as the headwaters of the Black Drin River (Drin I Zi), whose outlet lies on the northern shore of Lake Ohrid within Macedonia. As a result of being

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used for excessive irrigation, Lake Prespa’s water level has declined by more than 5-6 m (16-20 ft) over the last 60 years, representing a loss of roughly 25%. Lake Prespa has also suffered from an increasing amount of chemical nutrients in its water, a process known as eutrophication, which leads to poorer water quality and biological diversity.23

Lake Shkodër, the largest lake in the Balkans, lies along Albania’s border in the nation’s northwestern corner. An extension of the Adriatic Sea in former years, Lake Shkodër now receives the water from six rivers that flow out of the mountains of Albania and Montenegro to the lake’s north and northwest.24 The Buna River drains the lake’s southern end and for its last 25 km (16 mi) forms the boundary between the two nations.

Cities

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<td>Vlorë</td>
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<td>Fier</td>
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<td>Korçë</td>
<td>55,130</td>
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<td>Berat</td>
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<th>City</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kavajë</td>
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*Tirana (Tiranë)*

Tirana, the capital and largest city of Albania, lies approximately 27 km (17 mi) inland from the Adriatic Sea, at the southeastern end of the fertile Ishëm-Gjole-Tirana River Valley. While the site of the city has been inhabited by humans since prehistoric times, the city really did not emerge until 1614.<sup>27</sup> At that time, Süleiman Pasha Mulleti, a local feudal lord and general in the Ottoman Empire army, supposedly built a mosque, bakery, and Turkish sauna in the region. Thereafter, the city steadily grew as a regional trading center.<sup>28</sup>

Tirana was still a modest Albanian city of roughly 12,000 people with virtually no industrial development when it became the temporary national capital in 1920.<sup>29,30</sup> (Five years later, it was named the permanent capital of the newly constituted Republic of Albania.) With few Ottoman influences still visible, the central part of the modern city reflects a mix of Italian-style government buildings constructed during the 1930s and drab Soviet-era architecture. A notable exception is the Ethem Bey Mosque, often celebrated as the city’s landmark building. The mosque was completed in the early nineteenth century, but was closed for many years under communist rule until its reopening in 1991.<sup>31</sup>

Today, Tirana is unchallenged as Albania’s political, industrial, and cultural center. Lacking the many historical buildings of other Albanian cities such as Durrës and Shodkër, Tirana has begun to refashion itself as a modern city. Since current Tirana

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mayor Edi Rama, a former Parisian artist, assumed office in 2000, many of the dreary communist-era buildings have been repainted in bright colors and eye-catching patterns that have visually transformed the city. Others are scheduled for demolition, to be replaced by new buildings designed by some of Europe’s most innovative architects. Acres of new parks and thousands of newly planted trees have contributed to the city’s remaking.32

Durrës

Albania’s primary port is at Durrës, a city whose history stretches back to its founding in the 7th century B.C.E. by colonists from the island of Corfu (modern-day Kérkira in Greece). Originally known as Epidamnus by the ancient Greeks, the city later came to be called Dyrrachium by the Romans, who made it the western end of the Via Egnatia (which linked the Adriatic coast with Byzantium). Ruins from the Roman and Byzantine era still dot the area near the city’s port. During Ottoman rule, Durrës was again renamed. Known during this time as Diraç, the city declined significantly under Turkish rule. By the middle of the 19th century, only about 1,000 people lived there.33

During the 20th century, the city’s fortunes improved. Between 1918 and 1920, Durrës served as the temporary capital of the Principality of Albania. The city’s first harbor was constructed in 1927, although it was destroyed by aerial bombardment during the latter stages of World War II. Following the war, the port was rebuilt and rail connections were constructed that eventually would link Durrës to most of Albania’s larger cities. The marshlands surrounding the city were also drained, opening up the area to agriculture and relieving the city of its plaguing malarial mosquitoes.34

Besides being Albania’s major seaport, Durrës is the site of several manufacturing industries, such as shipbuilding, food processing, cigarette production, leather, and plastics. South of the city, a tourist industry has developed along the beaches that front the Adriatic Sea.35,36

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Elbasan

Located on the Shkumbin River, Elbasan (known first as *Masio Scampa* and later *Hiskampis*) was an important trade center along the Via Egnatia during the Roman era. Though once the site of an imposing fortress, it could not save the city from destruction by invading armies of Ostrogoths in the late 5th century and Bulgars roughly four centuries later.\(^{37,38}\)

In 1466–67, Elbasan’s fortress was rebuilt by Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II. Over successive centuries, the city became a commercial center, with a large merchant class. The fortress was again razed in 1832 by Ottoman Grand Vizier Reshid Pasha. This time, it was demolished as part of a campaign to quell resistance to Ottoman administrative reforms by local Albanian feudal and tribal chiefs.\(^{39,40}\)

In the 1930s, Elbasan industrialized, starting with the construction of factories that produced cigarettes and alcoholic beverages.\(^{41}\) Heavy industry arrived during the 1970s, when Albania’s largest metallurgical complex was constructed with major Chinese assistance on the city’s southwestern flank. At one time, the “Steel of the Party,” as the complex was known, employed about 12,000 people producing 50 types of metal over a vast array of factories linked by roughly 50 km (30 mi) of railway.\(^{42}\) The pollutants released from the unfiltered chimneys of the Elbasan complex have left a damaging environmental legacy in the area. In 2004, the author of a UN report on Elbasan, stated his belief that the soil in the Elbasan region was “the most contaminated in Europe.”\(^{43}\) Environmental technicians have since made filtering improvements at the metallurgical complex.

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complex. In spite of this, a report in 2009 still found soil within 15 km (9 mi) of the site to be heavily contaminated with copper, zinc, and cadmium.  

Shkodër

Few, if any, Albanian cities have as important and extensive a history as does Shkodër. It has been held, at various times over the millennia, by virtually every group of outsiders that ever laid claim to what is now Albania. During the Ottoman era, Shkodër was easily the largest city within modern-day Albanian borders. From the last half of the 18th century through the early 19th century, Shkodër was the capital of a semi-autonomous pashalik that included the northern half of Albania and parts of modern-day Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Later, the city served as an Ottoman province.  

Shkodër is located adjacent to the southern tip of Lake Shkodër. Southwest of the main part of the city, Albania’s longest river, the Drin, joins the Buna River near where the latter flows out of Lake Shkodër. Within the narrow strip of land between these two rivers is a promontory of long-time military importance. This has been the site of several fortresses and castles, whose ruins (Rozafa Castle) can still be seen.

The city has always been the major market town for Albania’s mountainous northern region. It was also a commercial center for trade routes that linked the Adriatic Sea with inland areas of the central Balkans. Industrial development took place in Shkodër’s northeastern section beginning in the 1930s and expanded during the communist period, with local factories manufacturing textiles, cigarettes, wood products, processed foods, copper-wire products, and other items. Many of these factories, however, are dilapidated and have closed since the 1990s. New businesses, particularly textile and shoe manufacturers, have since been recruited to the city’s old industrial zone, which has become the country’s first industrial park.

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45 A pashalik was an administrative region within the Ottoman Empire governed by a Pasha, a title granted by the Ottoman Sultan to the highest dignitaries within the Empire.
Vlorë

Vlorë is Albania’s second largest port city, situated on the Bay of Vlorës in an area sheltered from the open sea by the Karaburun Peninsula and Sazan Island, Albania’s largest island. The city began as Aulon, a Greek coastal colony on the ancient Illyrian coast, later renamed Vlorë. Like most Albanian towns and cities, Vlorë has been either occupied or dominated by numerous kingdoms and empires during more than two thousand years of existence. In November 1912, the city was the site of a hastily arranged assembly from which emerged the Albanian Declaration of Independence, marking an end to several centuries of Ottoman rule. Shortly thereafter, Vlorë became the capital of the Provisional Government of Albania, whose prime minister was a Vlorë native, Ismail Qemali. The new government would be short-lived, however. Approximately two years later, Vlorë was seized by Italian troops, even though Italy had not yet entered World War I.\(^52\)

During Albania’s communist era, the Soviet Union upgraded the Vlorë harbor for use as a naval facility and submarine base.\(^53\) When, in 1960–61, Albanian communist ruler Enver Hoxha severed relations with Moscow in favor of closer ties with Maoist China, the Soviet Union threatened to occupy Vlorë in retaliation.\(^54\) The concurrent Cuban Missile Crisis, however, quickly overshadowed the Albanian standoff within the Kremlin’s inner circle. Subsequently, the threat against Vlorë was never carried out.\(^55\)

Vlorë’s economy continues to center around port trade. Local agricultural products such as fruit, olives, and olive oil are exported from Vlorë, as are petroleum products from oilfields and refineries located in the city’s northeast. Beaches in the southern part of Vlorë have helped jumpstart local tourism.

Unfortunately, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, Vlorë became well known for its criminal activities such as human trafficking and contraband smuggling. These occupations became so prominent that they began to rival the city’s legitimate businesses.\(^56\) Speedboats operating out of Vlorë’s harbor would ferry their illegal cargo across the Adriatic Sea to Italy each night. The situation became so critical that the Albanian government banned the use of speedboats for a three–year period beginning in

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2006. Recent evidence indicates that these and other governmental measures have put a significant dent in Vlorë’s smuggling.\(^{57,58}\)

### Environmental Concerns

Albania faces many environmental challenges. While the fall of the communist regime in the 1990s led to the closing of many of the worst polluting factories in the country, other sources of pollution increased in the post-communist era. The number of cars on Albanian roads skyrocketed as stolen vehicles from Western Europe were smuggled in on ships from Italy.\(^{59}\) As consumption increased, so did waste; illegal trash dumps were scattered throughout the nation’s beaches, rivers, and forests—particularly near major cities.\(^{60}\)

Another environmental problem is the burning—as opposed to dumping—of trash. Unregulated garbage burning is one of the major sources of air pollution in Albania. Others include emissions from automobiles, cement plants, oilfield and refinery operations, and fuels consumed for heating purposes. Many aging industrial plants have been closed since the early 1990s. However, those still in operation (particularly in Tirana and Elbasan) contribute to air pollutant concentrations two to five times higher than allowable levels.\(^{61}\)

Land erosion and soil contamination are also serious issues for the country. The nation’s mountainous topography and heavy winter rainfalls create natural conditions for extensive erosion. Furthermore, activities such as overgrazing, deforestation, and river dredging have added significantly to Albania’s soil loss. Soil contaminated by chemicals is generally not a problem in agricultural areas, but some soils close to industrial areas are dangerously polluted and unfit for vegetable gardens.\(^{62}\)

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Most of Albania’s rivers north of the Vjosë contain stretches that are considered polluted.63 Perhaps the worst cases occur where rivers flow through urban areas. Tirana, for example, does not treat any of its domestic or industrial wastewater.64 Water-monitoring studies have shown that the Lana River, which flows just south of the center of Tirana, is one of the two most polluted rivers in Albania.65 The other is the Gjanica River, a small tributary of the Seman River that flows through the city of Fier and by a nearby refinery in the town of Ballsh.66

Natural Hazards

Albania is one of the most seismically active regions in Europe, and small earthquakes occur regularly. Moderate earthquakes (magnitude ranging from 5.0 to 7.0) are much rarer, and large earthquakes (magnitude larger than 7.0) are unknown in the historical record. Such large earthquakes have occurred primarily along regions of the Adriatic-Ionian coast next to modern-day Albania.67 The most deadly earthquake to have struck Albania since 1900 had its epicenter off the coast of Montenegro. Thirty-five Albanians died in the 15 April 1979 earthquake that also left over 100 dead in the coastal region of Montenegro.68

Earthquakes generated in the Mediterranean Sea may increase the risk for tsunamis along the Albanian coast. Historically, the most damaging waves to strike Albania occurred in 1866 along the coastline near Vlorë.69,70
Extreme weather and climate events lead to Albania’s most costly natural disasters: droughts and floods. Because of the country’s heavy reliance on hydroelectric plants, insufficient precipitation reduces the electrical power supply. One such drought in 1989–1990 forced many of Albania’s factories to shut down when the Albanian communist government was struggling to retain control against a rising tide of political protest. Floods are even more costly and occur relatively frequently. In January 2010, about 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres) of northwestern Albania were flooded after heavy rains caused the Drin and Buna Rivers to overflow in the region around the city of Shkodër. Less than 8 years earlier, this same region was also one of several to be hit hard by floods that left 26,000 hectares (64,000 acres) of the Albanian countryside underwater.

**Self Study Questions**

Historically, Albania’s political isolation was intensified by its geography. True or False?

Albania’s “concrete mushrooms” continue to have military application. True or False?

Most of Albania’s largest cities are found in its coastal lowlands. True or False?

Albania has a consistent climate. True or False?

Albania is home to Europe’s oldest lake. True or False?

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History

Introduction

Albania became a nation in 1912, after spending many centuries as spoils of various empires. The modern Albanian state was carved out of the Ottoman Empire, with the new country’s borders based on the regions where many (but far from all) Albanian speakers live. Up until the latter half of the 19th century, there was little sense of a shared cultural identity among the inhabitants. Unlike other modern nations of the Balkans, religion has never been a unifying force in Albania. That role has mostly been played by the language, even though significant linguistic differences existed between the Albanian spoken in the north (Gheg) and that spoken in the south (Tosk).74

After World War II, Albania was a communist nation for over 40 years, led for most of that period by Enver Hoxha. During the later stages of his reign, Albania was one of the most isolated countries in the world. Communist rule ended during the early 1990s, and since then, the nation has traveled a bumpy road to becoming a modern democracy with a market-based economy.

Early History

Illyria

The Western Balkans region that is now the Republic of Albania has been occupied for millennia. Archaeologists have found flint tools in caves that date back to Paleolithic times (pre–10,000 B.C.E.).75 Then, about 1,000 B.C.E., tribes of people appeared in this region. Today, the ancient inhabitants of the Western Balkans are known collectively as Illyrians. The origin of the Illyrians is a matter of historical debate, as is the connection between the ancient Illyrians and modern Albanians. There is some supporting linguistic, archaeological, and anthropological evidence that the Albanians and their language may have descended from the Illyrians. However, no Illyrian

inscriptions or written documents have yet been discovered, so it is nearly impossible to resolve the issue.\textsuperscript{76}

The Illyrian tribes occupied a region that extended from modern-day Slovenia in the north to the Greek region of Epirus in the south. Semi-nomadic pastoralism dominated Illyrian life during the first millennium B.C.E., and can still be found in some of the most isolated parts of Albania.\textsuperscript{77,78} The vestiges of several well-fortified hill settlements from this period indicate that attacks launched by rival tribes or marauding groups from the north were a constant danger.\textsuperscript{79}

Between the 6th and 8th centuries B.C.E., the Greeks living to the south of Illyrian lands sailed north and established coastal trading colonies. The most famous of these were Epidamnus (modern-day Durrës) and Apollonia (near modern-day Vlorë), whose ruins can still be seen today. Exposure to the more advanced Greek civilization influenced the Illyrians, who soon began forming more sophisticated tribal confederations that eventually would lead to the first Illyrian kingdoms.\textsuperscript{80} Several of the larger kingdoms would fall in battle during the 4th century B.C.E. to the Macedonian leader Philip II and his son Alexander the Great.\textsuperscript{81}

\textit{The Roman Empire}

By the early 3rd century B.C.E., many of the Illyrian tribal kingdoms had arisen once again. One of these was the Ardiaean Kingdom, whose capital was at Scodra (modern-day Shkodër). Ardiaean raids on Italian trading vessels in the Adriatic Sea led to a Roman naval invasion against Scodra in 229 B.C.E. Further Roman campaigns against Illyrian rulers in 219 B.C.E and 168 B.C.E. eventually brought all of Illyria under Roman control.\textsuperscript{82,83}


For several centuries, Illyria remained under Roman rule, with the region divided among several provinces during that time (Illyricum, Macedonia, Epirus Nova, Praevalitana). The Romans brought a period of peace that generated prosperity, at least for some. The Via Egnatia was built, linking the Adriatic coastal settlements at Apollonia and Dyrrachium (the Roman name for Epidamnus) to other parts of the Balkan Peninsula. It became a major military and trading route between the Adriatic and Byzantium.84

The Medieval Era

The Byzantine Empire

Christianity arrived in the Western Balkans during the 1st century C.E., and by its end Dyrrachium was the seat of a bishopric.85,86 When the Roman Empire was divided into western and eastern parts in 395 C.E., the lands that now constitute Albania became part of the Eastern Roman (“Byzantine”) Empire, ruled from Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). However, the Christians of “Albania” remained under the jurisdiction of the Roman church until 732 C.E., when the Byzantine Emperor Leo III placed the Albanian church under the patriarch of Constantinople.87 During the Great Schism of 1054, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches split, and so did the Albanian church, with the south remaining loyal to Constantinople (Orthodox Church) and the north turning its allegiance back to Rome.88

The Byzantine Empire would survive for over 1,000 years, but its Balkan territories experienced frequent incursions by outsiders. During the late 4th and 5th centuries C.E., Albanian lands were invaded by Germanic Visigoths and Ostrogoths, respectively.89,90 The northern Illyrian regions—the modern-day countries of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia

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86 A bishopric is the office of a high church official.
and Herzegovina, and Serbia—were overrun by Slavic invaders between the 6th and 8th centuries. Ultimately, the Slavs assimilated the Illyrians in these areas, and the native Illyrian language disappeared, replaced by South Slavic languages. However, in the southern Illyrian lands, including Albania, no such assimilation took place.91

Invasions and Political Fragmentation

Between the 9th and mid-14th centuries, the Byzantine Empire proved increasingly unable to control the Western Balkans. Bulgarians, Norman Crusaders, Venetians, and Serbs invaded Albania, one-after-another in successive waves. The fall of Constantinople in 1204 during the fourth crusade led to political fragmentation in the remnants of the Byzantine Empire as several successor states emerged. One of these was the Despotate of Epirus, which encompassed virtually all of modern-day Albania plus significant sections of other Balkan lands. Thereafter, Epirus began to splinter as succession battles divided the Despotate into several quarreling fiefdoms.92 In this weakened state, and with the reconstituted Byzantine Empire enmeshed in a civil war, Epirus and the other Albanian feudal states were easily conquered by Serbian ruler Stefan Uroš IV in the 1340s.93 The rapidly expanding Serbian Empire would prove to be short lived, however. Already, a new powerful army was advancing westward towards the Balkans from its initial base in northwestern Anatolia. These Ottoman Turks would bring Islam to the Balkans, introducing lasting changes that are still readily visible in Albania.

The Ottoman Empire: Early Years

The Ottoman Turks, under their leader Osman I, emerged during the 14th century from a small ghazi emirate, one of several such states in Anatolia during the time. Ghazi warriors were quite similar to the knights of the Crusades, except that they wished to spread Islam rather than Christianity.94 In 1389, a Serb-led coalition army that included Albanian troops was defeated by the Ottoman forces at Kosovo Polje (located near Kosovo’s modern-day capital of Priština). Over the next several decades, all of the feudal

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families of the Albanian region capitulated to Ottoman rule. Some of the coastal cities affiliated with the Republic of Venice, such as Shkodër and Durrës, were able to hold out a bit longer, but by the beginning of the 16th century virtually all of Albania was under Ottoman control.

During the 1440s, Gjergj Kastrioti, the son of a feudal leader in the Krujë region north of Tirana, formed an Albanian force of about 30,000 fighters that resisted the Ottoman troops for nearly a quarter century. Kastrioti, better known today as Skanderbeg, converted to Islam while a hostage to a Turkish sultan. He later served as a military leader in the Ottoman army. After his Ottoman forces were defeated in a battle near Niš (located in present-day Serbia) in 1443, Skanderbeg returned to Krujë and reconverted to Roman Catholicism. Afterwards he campaigned against the Ottoman Turks until his death from malaria in 1468. Today, Skanderbeg is widely viewed by Albanians—both Christians and Muslims alike—as their nation’s greatest national hero.

Modern History

Ottoman Rule

Albania remained part of the Ottoman domain for over four centuries. During this time, a majority of the population converted to Islam. The Ottoman Turks did not initially promote conversion to Islam, but this policy changed in the late 16th century and continued through the 17th century. The people of the Albanian northern highlands, a mountainous, remote region, successfully resisted the Ottoman authorities. Those living in more accessible lowland regions, however, faced strong pressures to convert. One of the most effective Ottoman measures to encourage conversions was the burdensome poll tax paid by non-Muslim citizens. Some Catholic and Orthodox Albanians


staged rebellions against Ottoman rule, most of which were quickly quashed, while others either converted or moved to areas not under Ottoman control. An estimated 25% of the Albanian population fled the region during the Ottoman era, moving primarily to Italy, Sicily, and the Dalmatian coast.

Ottoman authorities granted temporary landholdings (timars) to members of the Ottoman army as compensation for their military service. This system of land ownership largely replaced the tribal system in areas of Albania south of the Shkumbin River. By the 18th century, however, the timar system had mostly broken down as Ottoman central authority waned. The timar lands became mostly hereditary fiefdoms managed by powerful families or clans, the equivalent of local rulers in their provinces. During the late 18th to early 19th century, two such clans fashioned semi-autonomous domains over parts of modern-day Albania. In the north, the Pashalik of Shkodër, under the rule of the Bushati family, oversaw a large region that included modern-day Kosovo. To the south, Ali Pasha’s increasingly autonomous Pashalik of Janina grew through a series of murders, alliances, and other intrigues. At its peak, the Pashalik of Janina consisted of all of southern Albania and northern Greece. Both the Janina and Shkodër pashaliks would eventually be overthrown by the Ottoman sultan in 1822 and 1832, respectively. (Two


105 A pashalik is the territory governed by the Ottoman dignitary known as a pasha. Pashas were nonhereditary titles conferred by the sultan on high officials or military commanders.


decades later, Ali Pasha’s downfall would become a fictionalized plot device in Alexandre Dumas père’s famous novel, The Count of Monte Cristo.\textsuperscript{110}

\textit{First Stirrings of Nationalism}

During the mid-19th century, the Ottoman rulers tried to reestablish their authority through a series of reforms known as the \textit{tanzimat}. The goals of this program were to modernize the Ottoman state and to reassert its authority against the nationalistic movements developing within the Empire. Overall, the \textit{tanzimat} measures failed badly, and Balkan nationalist movements flowered in Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Greece.\textsuperscript{111} Albania, with a much higher percentage of Muslims than these other regions, was relatively late in developing a nationalistic anti-Ottoman movement. Nevertheless, as the Ottoman Empire weakened further, Albanians were forced to coalesce around their national identity. They did so defensively, to create a unified front against proposals to divide Albanian-populated lands among other post-Ottoman Balkan states. In 1878, the Ottoman forces suffered defeat in the last Russo-Turkish war. The Treaty of San Stefano, which followed the war, called for splitting up parts of Albanian-populated lands between the new Balkan states of Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria.\textsuperscript{112} Later that year, the first nationalist group—the Albanian League—was formed at a meeting in Prizren (in modern-day Kosovo). The League’s initial goals were to stop the proposed San Stefano treaty and to gain autonomy for all Albanians within the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{113}

The Albanian League’s call for unification faced significant challenges. The chief one was the lack of a strong national consciousness. Although Albanians all spoke the same language, unlike their Slavic counterparts in other Balkan areas, religion was not associated with nationality.\textsuperscript{114} At the time, Albanian speakers within the Ottoman Empire lived within four vilayets (“provinces”) of the Ottoman realm—Shkodër, Kosovo, Manastir, and Janina. None of the four could be described as the political or cultural center of the Albanian people. Unlike the Serbs or Bulgarians, for example, the Albanians


never created a medieval empire that could later become a touchstone of national identity.\textsuperscript{115}

Even language, the main unifying link of the Albanian people, was problematic in terms of forging a national identity. The written Albanian language lacked a standard form that could serve as a bridge to communication. Instead, it consisted of three main scripts (Latin, Cyrillic, and Arabic), each having a religious connection (Roman Catholicism, Orthodox, and Islam, respectively) that alienated the other two major religions of the Albanian-populated region.\textsuperscript{116} The absence of a standardized form of written Albanian had the effect of creating division, not unity. To further complicate matters, schools teaching in Albanian were nonexistent; Turkish and Greek were the main languages of instruction.\textsuperscript{117}

\textit{The First Albanian Resistance}

The San Stefano treaty that had followed the Russo-Turkish War was never implemented. Instead, a European Congress held later, in 1878 in Berlin, modified the treaty by redefining the Balkan borders such that more of the Albanian lands were left under Ottoman control than had been proposed under the San Stefano treaty.\textsuperscript{118} Although the Berlin Treaty lessened the amount of majority-ethnic Albanian territory ceded to neighboring Balkan states, this change provided little comfort for Albanians living in areas designated to become parts of Greece, Montenegro, or Serbia. In these regions, Albanian resistance movements took root. Ultimately, Ottoman forces were compelled to put down these rebellions in 1881 and to arrest and deport the Albanian League leaders. Nonetheless, the 1878-1881 Albanian League resistance first raised the issue of Albanian autonomy and foreshadowed and inspired a more widespread Albanian resistance movement over 30 years later.\textsuperscript{119,120}

A coalition of reformers, popularly known as the Young Turks, came to power in Istanbul in 1908, espousing full constitutional rights for Albanians. The reformers also promoted the establishment of schools that would offer subjects taught in Albanian. Contrary to these stated goals, however, the Young Turks soon followed a path of Ottomanization in the outlying regions of the Empire. This path conflicted with that of Albanians seeking greater autonomy. In March 1910, a revolt broke out in Kosovo over a newly instituted tax levied by Istanbul. Although the rebellion was put down within a few months, new insurrections continued to break out in Kosovo and regions to the south over the next two years. By August 1912, Albanian rebels controlled large portions of the four Albanian-populated Ottoman vilayets. The Ottoman government was forced to negotiate a settlement in which the predominantly Albanian vilayets would become a self-governing province within the Ottoman Empire.

Leaders of Balkan states adjoining the Albanian region wanted to annex parts of these same vilayets, and viewed the prospect of an autonomous Albania with deep concerns that soon translated into actions. In October 1912, the Ottoman Empire’s Balkan regions erupted into war as Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro—the so-called Balkan League—attacked the remaining Ottoman lands from all directions. Albania was quickly occupied by the latter three members of the Balkan League during this First Balkan War. During the war, the city of Vlorë, one of the larger Albanian cities not under occupation, served as the site of a November 1912 national assembly. It was here that the 83 delegates established a provisional government and declared Albania an independent nation. Fighting continued into the summer of 1913 after three of the Balkan League members turned upon their former ally, Bulgaria, thus triggering the short Second Balkan War.

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The First Albanian State

After the fighting ended, the Balkan League members, under pressure from the Great Powers of Europe (France, Britain, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary), negotiated a treaty with the Ottomans. Under the terms of the accord, Albania became an independent principality, secured by the protection of the Great Powers. The borders of this new Albanian state were similar to those of modern-day Albania, and thus excluded several regions that contained a high percentage of Albanian speakers. In particular, most of Kosovo, the center of the 1878 and 1910 Albanian revolts against the Ottoman Empire, became part of Serbia. This decision had major repercussions more than 80 years later with the advent of severe ethnic fighting in the region.

Albania’s independence came at an unfortunate time. In Europe, military alliances between the Great Powers were creating conditions in which regional conflicts could escalate into warfare that would overtake the entire continent. When World War I broke out, the armies of Italy, Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, and later Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and France soon occupied parts of Albania. After the War ended in 1918, Greece, Italy, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (the Western Balkan state later known as Yugoslavia) placed territorial claims on parts of Albania. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, British, French, and Greek negotiators agreed to such a division, but American President Woodrow Wilson vetoed the proposed deal. Shortly thereafter, the United States established formal diplomatic relations with Albania, which became recognized as a fully sovereign state upon admission into the League of Nations in December 1920.
Interwar Albania

Albania in the early 1920s was one of the poorest and most underdeveloped nations in Europe. Feudal agricultural practices from the Ottoman era continued to dominate in the country’s central and southern sections. For example, the vast majority of peasants practiced subsistence farming, using methods and tools that had changed little over the centuries. Illiteracy was rampant, and the average life expectancy was only 38 years.129

In the first half of the 1920s, Albania’s politics were dominated by an ongoing battle between conservatives and reformers. The conservatives supported the status quo concerning land ownership policies. The reformers, on the other hand, wanted to adopt ambitious programs to restructure land ownership and to modernize the nation’s economy and infrastructure. The leaders of these respective movements were Ahmed Zogu, the son of a feudal landowner from the Mati region of north-central Albania, and Fan Noli, a Harvard-educated bishop of the Orthodox church.130,131 In 1924, Noli assumed power after a peasant revolt forced Zogu into exile. However, Noli himself was forced to flee just six months later when Zogu reentered the country with the support of a Yugoslav-backed army.132

Zogu quickly consolidated power. As Albanian President under a new constitution passed in January 1925, Zogu eliminated all vestiges of opposition to his rule. In 1928, another newly passed constitution established Albania as a kingdom under the rule of Zogu, now known as King Zog I.

Albania under Zog depended on Italy’s economic and military support. Such dependency did not please many Albanians, who still remembered Rome’s interest in obtaining Albanian territories before and after World War I. Zog, sensitive to this growing popular discomfort over Italian domination, periodically carried out measures to establish more distance between the two nations. Nevertheless, by 1939, roughly 70% of Albania’s

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128 The “interwar” period refers to the years between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II (1918-1941).
exports went to Italy, and all of its imports were either produced by Italian factories or paid for by the Italian government.133

World War II

1939 became a turning-point in the short history of the Albanian nation. In April, Italy invaded Albania and quickly annexed it, with King Zog fleeing to Greece.134 Italy’s attempt in 1940 to invade Greece using Albania as a base was unsuccessful, but the German army proved more formidable in April 1941, when it captured both Greece and Yugoslavia.135 Both nations were carved up among the Axis allies: Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria, which separately administered their portions of the newly acquired territory. Much of Kosovo and the Albanian-populated regions of Montenegro and Macedonia fell within the Albanian Protectorate of Italy.136 Ironically, the Albanian League’s goal of a unified country eventually came closest to fruition under an Italian puppet state established during World War II.

During the Italian occupation, two main Albanian resistance groups fought against the occupiers: the Balli Kombëtar (National Front) and the National Liberation Movement (NLM). The latter was dominated by communist leadership, headed by Enver Hoxha, a former teacher at a French school in Korçë. In September 1943, both groups were affected when the Italians signed an armistice agreement with the Allies and the German army, almost immediately thereafter, entered Albania. The occupation by German troops forestalled a takeover of Albania by resistance fighters. Berlin tried to curry favor with Albanians by taking a less heavy-handed approach in their administration of the Albanian Protectorate. For example, the German government officially recognized the new Albanian government as an “independent,” neutral state and supported popular proposals, such as the annexation of Kosovo. These tactics neutralized the National Front, several of whose leaders joined in to become government officials. At the same time, some anti-communist National Front units joined the Germans in opposing the NLM’s activities.137

The NLM (now known as the National Liberation Front, or NLF) continued its resistance, both against the German and other Albanian resistance groups. With the British supplying arms, the communist partisans of the NLF captured southern Albania in January 1944. By that summer, NLF forces had entered central and northern Albania. They helped to establish a provisional Albanian government in October 1944 in the town of Berat, with Hoxha serving as prime minister. The Germans left Tirana on November 18 after several weeks of fighting, and Hoxha entered the city 11 days later, now the leader of the newly liberated Albanian state.

Post-War Albania

Even while planning their retreat from Albania, the Germans continued to occupy Kosovo. In that region, Kosovar ethnic Albanian nationalists (who were more anti-communist and anti-Serb than they were anti-German) were purging ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins. Albanian resistance forces joined the Yugoslav Partisans under Josip Broz Tito in liberating Kosovo. Afterward, Kosovo became an autonomous region within the Serbian Republic of post-war Yugoslavia.

Under Hoxha, the Albanian Communist Party quickly consolidated power and instituted increasingly radical reform measures, beginning with the agrarian sector. Authorities confiscated the large agricultural estates of the beys of southern Albania. Then they divided the property among peasants who were either landless or land-owners of tiny parcels. As early as December 1944, the government began to nationalize industries, corporations, banks, water and mineral resources, and commercial and foreign properties. The first steps toward collective land ownership began in 1947. Twenty more years were needed to complete the job by bringing in the resistive, small farming communities of the nation’s northern hills.

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141 A bey is a Turkish title that roughly translates as “lord.” During the Ottoman era and the years beyond, beys in the southern part of Albania were the primary landowners.


Failed Alignments: Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union

Albania continued to be Europe’s poorest country, and it turned to a series of benefactors among the communist nations for the economic support needed to modernize its economy. Initially, Hoxha pursued an alliance with Yugoslavia, Albania’s large neighbor to the north. Similar to the situation with Italy in the 1930s, Albania increasingly found itself economically reliant on and integrated with Yugoslavia. By early 1948, Tito, Yugoslavia’s leader, was moving forward with plans to absorb Albania into the Yugoslavian federation, assisted by Koçi Hoxe, Albania’s minister of the interior.146 Only Yugoslavia’s June 1948 expulsion from Cominform, the Soviet-led association of European communist parties, spared Albania from a Yugoslavian merger and Hoxha (the Albanian leader) from being removed from power and possible execution.147

For the next 13 years (1948-1961), Albania’s communist sponsor was the Soviet Union. Relations began to deteriorate after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, but during those initial years Albania’s health care and educational infrastructure rapidly improved.148 Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin’s successor, took a more tolerant approach toward Tito and Yugoslavia than his predecessor. He soon normalized the Soviet Union’s relations with the renegade socialist state, a move that was viewed with alarm in Tirana. Increasingly, Hoxha voiced complaints about Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization measures and his acceptance of Yugoslavia’s “separate road to socialism.” By 1960, relations between Albania and the Soviet Union had reached rock bottom, marked by an inflammatory speech delivered by Hoxha in Moscow in which he denounced the Soviet Premier. After the speech, Hoxha returned to Tirana by train, fearing an “accidental” crash if he flew, and never again traveled outside Albania.149

Enter the Chinese

Albania’s next communist benefactor, China, proved an odd partnership from the beginning. Separated from China by thousands of miles and with a still primitive economy, Albania offered little to Beijing other than a limited presence in Europe and a mouthpiece at the UN. (The People’s Republic of China, until 1971, was not a member of that body because Taiwan held the Chinese seat.) To some extent, Chinese aid helped

offset Albania’s loss of Soviet assistance, although Chinese equipment proved less sophisticated and its delivery was less timely than had been the case with the Soviets.\(^{150}\)

Albania’s period of close relations with China (1961-1978) encompassed the Cultural Revolution of the P.R.C., and Hoxha followed in lockstep with his own Cultural and Ideological Revolution. During this period, the Albanian government abolished organized religion, severely curtailed access to foreign publications and media, and instituted restrictions on dress for women and facial hair for men. The government even went so far as to eliminate ranks in the armed forces.\(^{151}\) During the early 1970s, the first concrete “mushrooms” were built, 750,000 bunkers designed to provide shelter to a civilian army, which in theory would protect Albania from any form of foreign invasion.\(^{152}\) Built to survive artillery attacks, most of these bunkers are still visible today.

\textit{Going It Alone}

China began to open itself up to the West in 1972, but Hoxha refused to open Albania up in a similar fashion. After Chairman Mao’s death in 1976, relations between the two countries quickly deteriorated, leading to a formal break in relations in 1978. For the first time since the end of World War II, Albania had no foreign ally to help support its economy. Self-reliance became the new guiding principle as an ailing Hoxha began planning for his succession. Hoxha’s long-time ally and Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Mehmet Shehu, refused to step aside and clear the path for Ramiz Alia, a rising star in the Albanian Party of Labor. (This was the official name of Albania’s communist party; abbreviated, APL.) Ultimately, Shehu committed suicide under circumstances that suggested he may have had little choice.\(^{153}\)

Hoxha died in April 1985, ending a 40-year hold on power that made him the longest serving European leader in the twentieth century.\(^{154}\) Alia, his successor, began to establish contacts with Western European nations, the United States, and neighboring countries in the Baltics. As the 1980s ended, the socialist countries of Eastern Europe were swept up in a series of revolutions, both peaceful and violent, that rejected the


ruling communist governments and ushered in an era of new multi-party political systems. In Albania, street protests began in January 1990. Alia responded by making some concessions, such as the May 1990 National Assembly act reintroducing freedom of religion. However, the unchallenged authority of the APL did not crack until later that year when alternative political parties were finally allowed to form.\footnote{George Fox University. \textit{Religion in Eastern Europe}. Hiorth, Finngeir. “Albania: An Atheistic State?” 1990. http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/undergrad/departments/soc-swk/ree/Hiorth_Albania.html}

\textit{Period of Transition}

Albania’s first multi-party elections since World War II were held in spring 1991. The APL (which changed its name to the Socialist Party of Albania, or SPA, a few months later) retained power, largely on the basis of its strong showing in rural areas.\footnote{Inter-Parliamentary Union. “Albania—Parliamentary Chamber: Kuvendi Popullor—Elections Held in 1991.” 1991. http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2001_91.htm} The nation itself was also soon thereafter “re-branded,” with the name changed from the “Socialist People's Republic of Albania” to the “Republic of Albania.”\footnote{The Balkans Since the Second World War. Crampton, R. J. “Chapter 16: Albania Since 1991 [p. 299]. 2002. London: Longman.}

Name changes alone, however, were not enough to still the growing wave of protests and strikes by dissatisfied Albanians. In the northern city of Shkodër, four protesters of the 1991 election results were shot and killed by the police.\footnote{New York Times. Binder, David. “Albanian Troops Kill 3 Protesters and Wound 30.” 3 April 1991. http://www.nytimes.com/1991/04/03/world/albanian-troops-kill-3-protesters-and-wound-30.html} These “Shkodër martyrs” would become a rallying point for the Albanian protest movement, which also gained momentum as inflation and unemployment quickly rose. By December 1991, the coalition government headed by the SPA collapsed, and elections were called for the following spring, just one year after the previous elections.\footnote{The Balkans Since the Second World War. Crampton, R. J. “Chapter 16: Albania Since 1991 [p. 300]. 2002. London: Longman.}

In the 1992 elections, the Democratic Party of Albania (DPA) claimed a sweeping victory. Party leader Sali Berisha, a noted cardiologist, became Albania’s new president, and Aleksandër Meksi was chosen as prime minister. The Berisha/Meski regime would head the Albanian government for the next five years, a period of wrenching changes as the leaders shifted the centrally planned economy to one of an open market. Foreign aid helped to reduce some of the worst problems, including a food shortage during 1992–1993. By 1994 the Albanian economy had begun to stabilize. Political stability, however, began to decline, especially after a referendum giving the president greater powers was
defeated in November 1994. Despite the defeat, Berisha’s presidential powers remained substantial, and the Berisha/Meski government increasingly used those powers to stifle oppositional voices.\(^{162}\)

**Chaos**

Shortly after the DPA returned to power in 1996 elections, which were judged by monitoring groups “not [to] meet international standards for free and fair elections,” Albania was teetering on the brink of total chaos. The triggering event was the (inevitable) failure of several pyramid investment schemes\(^{163}\) into which a large percentage of Albanians had plowed their savings. Albania’s relatively primitive financial sector provided little opportunity for investment, thus making the high rates of return offered by the pyramid schemes attractive.\(^{164}\)

The pyramid schemes collapsed in January 1997, and rioting and looting immediately erupted on the streets of Tirana and other cities. Berisha declared a state of emergency and ordered police and military units to intervene. Rather than helping to control the situation, however, the presence of military forces seemed to fan the flames. Crowds broke into armories, stripping the military of much of its weaponry. (Many of the estimated 750,000 stolen weapons would later help arm crime syndicates operating in Albania and insurgency groups in Kosovo and Macedonia.)\(^{165,166}\) Roughly 2,000 Albanians died during several months of conflict in the streets.\(^{167}\) The intervention of a UN-mandated, Italian-led coalition force of 6,000 troops may have prevented the country from slipping into a civil war.\(^{168,169}\)

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\(^{163}\) Pyramid schemes are investment funds that operate by offering high rates of returns to the initial investors. With the fund having no real assets to generate profit, the initial investors are paid their interest by using the money of subsequent investors in the fund. Eventually, however, money from new investors is insufficient to cover the interest payments for existing investors, so the scheme usually collapses in a quick and messy way.


A few months after security forces restored order, the SPA (Socialist Party of Albania) won a landslide victory in a hastily called election. Fatos Nano, who briefly served as prime minister before the 1991 elections, became the new prime minister. He resigned one year later, in 1998, after what may or may not have been a failed coup attempt. Nano began serving his third stint as prime minister in 2002 after being appointed by Alfred Moisiu, the new president of Albania. The latter emerged as a compromise choice when the 2001 elections produced a political impasse in the nation’s parliament.

The War in Kosovo

During 1998 and 1999, Albania became deeply affected by a violent conflict involving ethnic Albanians living outside the country. In the Kosovo province of Serbia (one of two remaining republics of Yugoslavia), the Kosovo Liberation Army, an ethnic Albanian resistance group, initiated armed attacks against Serbian security forces. Yugoslav military and police forces were then ordered into action by Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević. The troops responded to the uprising with a brutal campaign that targeted Kosovar Albanians. Ultimately, NATO entered the conflict and extensively bombed Serbian cities in an effort to stop what was widely perceived to be a case of ethnic cleansing. Over 800,000 Kosovar Albanians fled Kosovo during the Kosovo war, with over half of these refugees ending up in Albania.

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172 Kosovo, at the time, was an autonomous province within the Serbian republic, known officially as the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija.


Recent Events

Elections in 2005 brought the DPA-led political alliance to power. Sali Berisha, whose presidency had crashed and burned during the pyramid schemes crisis of 1997, once again rose to power, this time as the new Albanian prime minister. Berisha’s government pursued a policy of integrating the nation into the top European economic and military institutions—the European Union (EU) and NATO. In 2008, Albania, along with Croatia, was voted into the latter group, and became a part of NATO in April 2009. That same month, Albania officially applied for EU membership. Most observers, however, expect the country to be involved in years of talks before it is accepted into the EU. The anticipated delay is the result of ongoing concerns about organized criminal activity within the country, reports of governmental media intimidation, and a fractious political environment.

The year 2009 also witnessed Albania’s most recent round of parliamentary elections. Berisha’s DPA alliance narrowly carried more seats than the SPA alliance and was forced to form a coalition government with a minority coalition party holding a critical number of seats. The defeated SPA alliance, led by Tirana mayor Edi Rama, protested the results, staging large rallies, parliamentary boycotts, and hunger strikes in support of their demands for a recount.

Self Study Questions

Albania first became a nation after World War II. True or False?

The link between modern-day Albanians and the ancient Illyrians is disputed. True or False?

A number of Albanian coastal cities were affiliated with the Republic of Venice. True or False?

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Christianity was brought to the area of modern-day Albania in the Middle Ages. True or False?

Ruled by the Ottoman Empire for centuries, a majority of the population adopted Muslim affiliation. True or False?
ECONOMY

Introduction

Arguably, no Eastern or Central European country entered the post-communist era in worse economic condition than Albania. Despite this disadvantage, the country has made significant economic strides since the early 1990s. However, the collapse of pyramid investment schemes in 1997 destroyed the early momentum toward developing a stable market economy. Still, Albania has experienced steady growth in recent years, although poor rural regions have not yet experienced this improvement.

One lingering impediment to economic reform has been the high volume of business that is conducted via cash transactions, the so-called “informal” economy. These transactions are hidden in official economic statistics. By some recent estimates, the informal sector of the economy may make up as much as 50% of the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP).  

Agriculture

The agricultural sector is a significant part of the Albanian economy, especially in terms of employment. Over 60% of Albanians work in agriculture, which generates about 20% of the nation’s GDP.  

Because of Albania’s mountainous terrain, only 39% of the land is used for agricultural purposes, and just over half of that is devoted to arable crops (i.e., cereals, fruits, or vegetables grown on frequently cultivated land). Another 37% of Albania’s agricultural lands are grasslands used mostly for raising livestock. The remainder (about 11%) supports permanent crops such as olives and grapes.

Most of Albania’s former collectives and state farms have now been privatized. The average farm is tiny (1.2 ha, or 3 acres), six times smaller than the smallest average farm

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plot (7.2 ha in Hungary) among the European Union’s 27 countries. These small farms are also often divided into four or five parcels that may be separated by large distances. One of the Albanian government’s pressing agricultural policy goals is to provide credit to farmers to allow them to expand and consolidate their acreage. Currently, most farms are too small to justify investing in modernization or expansion to achieve economies of scale. If implemented, these strategies could make food crops more competitive in domestic and foreign markets.

Small Albanian farms typically grow a subsistence-level mix of crops, including cereals (mainly wheat), vegetables, potatoes, beans, tobacco, and forage crops (grasses, alfalfa and wheat grasses). Many also include grapevines and a mixture of olive, fruit, and citrus trees. Small numbers of milk cows, sheep or goats, chickens, and pigs are also found on most of these farms. Only larger farms in coastal regions or near cities focus on fewer crops that are to be marketed rather than consumed locally. Very few of Albania’s agricultural products produce significant export revenues. One notable exception is medicinal and aromatic plants, which are harvested in the wild and then sold to other countries of Europe and to the U.S.

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Manufacturing

The end of the communist era in Albania was disastrous for Albania’s aging and inefficient industrial sector, which was unable to compete in the world market and collapsed during the 1990s. Overall, manufacturing and industry dropped from over 46% of GDP in 1988 to only 16% of GDP in 1998. Since then, it has slowly risen to nearly 20% of the nation’s GDP, comparable to the percentage contributed by the agricultural sector. Manufactured items now provide roughly 70% of Albania’s merchandise exports. About 35% of Albania’s factories are located in the Greater Tirana metropolis.

Today, the most active manufacturing sectors in Albania are food and beverage processing, building materials (mostly cement), apparel, and footwear/leather. The latter two categories of manufacturing together represent more than 10% of Albania’s privately employed work force. Because of Albania’s low labor costs and close proximity to other European countries, shoe and apparel firms headquartered in the EU often outsource their unfinished goods to Albania for assembly.

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### Banking and Currency

Albania’s national currency is the lek (plural lekë; currency code: ALL). As of mid-June 2010, the U.S. dollar (USD) traded at an interbank value of about 110 lekë, significantly higher than the 77 ALL per USD rate of two years ago. During the same time period, the Euro’s value also rose against that of the lek, although at a lower rate of increase.\(^{203}\)

The banking system in Albania was nonexistent when the country began transforming itself into a market economy in the early 1990s. The State Bank of Albania shared attributes of both a commercial bank (e.g., extending credit to state enterprises) and a central bank (e.g., currency oversight) during the communist era when it was the nation’s only bank. Post-communism, it became the Bank of Albania, the nation’s central bank and overseer of the Albanian banking system.\(^{204}\) Three state-owned banks—the National Commercial Bank, the Savings Banks, and the Rural Commercial Bank—were spun off from the Bank of Albania to become commercial lenders. Other private, joint-venture, and foreign-owned subsidiary banks started up as well, although the vast majority of deposits remained in the state-owned banks.

The collapse of the pyramid schemes in 1997 shook the nation’s entire financial system and marked the beginning of major changes in Albania’s banking system. That year, the government closed the insolvent Rural Commercial Bank. By 2004 both the Savings Bank and National Commercial Bank had been privatized through sales to foreign investors.\(^{205}\) By Spring 2010, 16 banks were operating in Albania, but only two were controlled by Albanian investors.\(^{206}\) Raiffeisen Bank, the Savings Bank descendant now owned by the holding company of a large Austrian bank, is the nation’s largest bank.\(^{207}\) Next largest is the National Commercial Bank (presently majority-owned by a Turkish consortium).\(^{208}\)

The Albanian banking system has been relatively unaffected by the global financial crisis that began in 2008 because Albanian banks did not deal in the complex financial products...

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(e.g., derivatives) that precipitated the crisis.\textsuperscript{209} The banking industry has also been conservative in its lending practices. Despite rapid growth in loans in the years prior to the global financial crisis, Albanian banks still have a relatively low ratio of loans to deposits compared with banks in Western Europe.\textsuperscript{210}

**Trade**

Albania’s trade balance tilts heavily towards imports, because few of its potential exports are price competitive in foreign markets.\textsuperscript{211} In 2008, the most recent year for which data is available, the value of imports was nearly four times that of exports, resulting in a net trade deficit of nearly USD 3.9 million.\textsuperscript{212} The Albanian trade deficit for 2008 as a ratio to GDP was 26\%, an extremely high ratio.\textsuperscript{213} For purposes of comparison, the U.S. trade-deficit-to-GDP ratio was about 5\% for the same time period.\textsuperscript{214}

The most lucrative export categories for Albania are footwear/leather and apparel. Mineral ores and their concentrates—primarily chromium, copper, and aluminum—also contribute positively to Albania’s trade balance, as do scrap metals (principally copper and aluminum) and medicinal and aromatic plants. In addition, Albania is a net exporter of crude oil and asphalt/bitumen, although its imports of other petroleum products dwarf these values.\textsuperscript{215}

Imports satisfy the demand for most consumer products in Albania. This dependence causes large trade deficits for imported items such as automobiles, electronics, household appliances, and pharmaceuticals. Although the country supplied itself with food during the communist era, Albania now imports large amounts of raw and processed grains (wheat, corn, rice, bread, pasta), meat, fruit, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages,


cooking oils, and other items. The Albanian construction industry depends on imports for much of its building materials and machinery. The largest contributor of Albania’s trade imbalance is, by far, energy imports, especially electricity, refined petroleum, and natural gas.

Over 60% of Albania’s export revenue, including virtually all of its footwear/leather exports, comes from Italy. The remainder of Albania’s exports goes to neighboring Balkan countries (primarily Greece and Serbia). Italy also tops the list of countries from which Albania imports goods, followed by Greece, China, Germany, and Turkey, in order of trade volume.

**Investment**

Foreign direct investment in Albania has increased in recent years, boosted significantly by privatizations of formerly state-owned enterprises. Still, it remains low when compared with that of other Balkan nations. Albania’s low labor costs and close proximity to countries in the European Union are possibly its greatest attractions for many outside investors. The economic sectors that have received the most foreign investment include banking, oil and gas production, telecommunications, mining, manufacturing (especially footwear/leather and apparel), and cement production.

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investor countries have been Italy, Greece, Turkey, Austria, Germany, Canada, Spain, and the U.S.  

**Energy and Mineral Resources**

**Energy**

Albania has the most extensive oil reserves of any country in the Balkans, but its production is relatively modest, making the country a net oil importer. Most of the oil that is currently produced comes from fields in southwestern Albania, in a triangular region roughly defined by the cities of Durres, Vlorë, and Berat. One of these fields, located just east of Fier, is believed to be the largest onshore oilfield in continental Europe. This field has experienced very large gains in production since 2004 when Bankers Petroleum took over. Bankers Petroleum is a Canadian oil company and the largest single foreign investor in Albania.

Albania’s coal consumption and production has significantly declined since the 1980s. Coal was used up until the 1990s to power much of Albania’s heavy industry and, to a lesser extent, to heat some Albanian homes and businesses. All of Albania’s obsolescent coal- and oil-fired power plants were decommissioned during the 1990s, leaving Albania almost totally dependent on hydroelectric plants for its electricity.

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needs.\textsuperscript{234} As the nation’s demand for electricity has increased, Albania has had to import significant percentages of its electrical power, particularly in dry years when river flow is less.\textsuperscript{235} Unfortunately, the nation’s ability to import electricity is impaired by an aging transmission system that has insufficient capacity. Thus, power outages of several hours a day have become an increasingly common phenomenon.\textsuperscript{236}

Much of Albania's current hydroelectric power is generated by three large plants on the Drin River (located in the northern part of the country). Since 2007, plans have been put in motion for private companies to develop over 20 new small- and medium-sized hydropower plants on other Albanian rivers.\textsuperscript{237} In addition, coal- and oil-fired power plants are planned for the Durrës and Vlorë regions, respectively, although both projects have attracted controversy for environmental reasons and a perceived lack of public input.\textsuperscript{238,239,240} Construction is completed on the Vlorë power plant, but a problem that occurred during the testing phase delayed the plant's commissioning.\textsuperscript{241}

\textit{Minerals}

Albania’s mineral wealth primarily lies in its chromium and copper deposits. Iron is also mined, and nickel has been mined in the past.\textsuperscript{242} Albania was once believed to be the world’s third largest producer of chromite (chromium ore), trailing only South Africa and the former Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{243} Current chromium and ferrochromium\textsuperscript{244} production has

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greatly declined from peaks during the communist era, when the metal was Albania’s principal source of foreign currency. However, the two chromite products collectively remain Albania’s leading mineral export, followed by copper.  

**Standard of Living**

Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, Albania has frequently been labeled the “poorest country in Europe.” This claim no longer strictly applies, since Moldova, Kosovo, Georgia, and Armenia are all poorer. Even so, Albania’s GDP per capita, the most common statistic used to measure person productivity, is less than 20% that of the average European Union country. These figures would be even lower if not for the relatively high amount of money that flows into the country each year in the form of remittances sent by Albanians working in foreign countries. Most work in Greece and Italy, and their total remittances represent an estimated 10 to 15% of Albania’s total GDP. 

By any recognized measure, however, the standard of living in Albania has been improving during the last decade. The World Bank, for example, estimates that the number of Albanians living below the poverty line in 2008 was 12.4%, less than half the rate in 2002. The official unemployment rate remains high (12%), and the unofficial rate may be more than two-and-a-half times larger, but there has been dramatic improvement since 2002.

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244 Ferrochromium is an iron-chromium alloy obtained by refining chromite, the mineral from which chromium is derived.


Tourism

Albania’s Adriatic coastline attracts vacationing beachgoers and water-sports enthusiasts and there are several historical and cultural sites in the country’s mountainous regions. Albanian tourism revenues have risen in recent years, and in 2008 they accounted for over 4% of the nation’s GDP. Most travelers come from other parts of Europe—Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro (all with significant ethnic Albanian populations) being the largest source countries. Despite this recent success in attracting visitors, the Albanian tourism industry is still hampered by infrastructure issues. Such problems include a poor road system, limited international flights, and insufficient hotel rooms in many areas. In addition, marketing and promotion efforts have been limited.

Transportation

Albania emerged from the communist era with a sub-par road system, and until recently, few significant improvements had been made. Several high-profile road projects are now underway, one of which will ultimately link the Albanian coastal city of Durrës with the Kosovan border. When finished, this road will cut the travel time between the two points from six-plus hours to just two. Another major road project is a section of one of ten Pan-European Corridor roads planned to better link the countries of Eastern Europe. When this modern highway is completed, it will link Durrës with Bulgarian port cities on the Black Sea via a route that connects the Macedonian capital of Skopje with the Bulgarian capital of Sofia.

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Albania’s rural roads are notoriously bad and have hindered attempts to alleviate the rampant poverty of the nation’s most isolated regions. In rural areas, more than 75% of workers still commute to and from work each day by foot.\(^{261}\) Albania’s roads are also a safety hazard, as Albania has one of Central and Eastern Europe’s highest rates of fatal accidents per vehicle. Several international and European agencies have earmarked loans and other forms of aid to improve these roads.\(^{262}\)

Albania’s rail system, consisting of 651 km (404 mi) of main and secondary lines, runs mostly north-south, connecting Montenegro’s rail system with the main port cities of Durrës and Vlorë to the south. An east-west line runs to a point near the city of Pogradec, located on the southern shore of Lake Ohrid, but it does not connect to the rail lines of nearby Macedonia.\(^{263}\)

All commercial air traffic and air freight in Albania goes through Tirana International Airport, located northwest of the city center near the village of Rinas. A German consortium has been managing the airport since 2005. During that time a new passenger terminal has been built, leading to an expansion in the number of airlines offering flights to and from the airport.\(^{264}\) No other domestic airports currently offer commercial air service in Albania.

Presently, Albania has four operating seaports—Durrës, Vlorë, Sarandë, and Shëngjin. Durrës is the most important of these four, handling nearly 75% of Albania’s trade volume. A new container port is being planned for Vlorë.\(^{265}\)

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Economic Outlook

Albania’s economy has shown steady economic growth in recent years, averaging between 5.4% and 8% annual GDP growth from 2005–2008. In 2009 Albania’s economy continued to grow, although at a slower pace than previous years, while most European economies saw their GDP decline due to the worldwide recession.\(^{266}\) Inflation has remained low, increasing at an average rate ranging from 2.2% to 3.4% during the 2005-2009 time period. The unemployment rate has also steadily decreased, although the recession in 2009 caused it to inch upward.\(^{267}\)

One of Albania’s most significant economic concerns is its ongoing and sizable negative trade balance.\(^ {268}\) Fortunately foreign direct investment and money sent back to the country by Albanians working abroad offset the trade deficit. Nearly 40% of the trade deficit is counterbalanced by remittances flowing into the country by Albanians working abroad.\(^ {269}\)

The Albanian government has recently emphasized improving its economic competitiveness. Its focus has been to better position itself to increase its level of business investment and ultimately its export base. Some of the steps taken include streamlining business-registration procedures and modernizing the nation’s tax system.\(^ {270}\) The government has certainly made progress, as measured by various rankings of country-level business environments. However, the Albanian economy still suffers from corruption, ineffective government bureaucracy, and weak infrastructure (electricity, transportation) that are difficult to address through legislation alone.\(^ {271,272,273}\)

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International Organizations

Albania became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2000. It applied for membership in the European Union (EU) in 2009 and is a candidate for EU accession. The nation joined the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) as a member in 2007. This trade organization includes a large number of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that are not yet in the European Union, most in the Balkans. CEFTA has not had a major impact on Albania’s trade patterns, although the CEFTA countries nearest to Albania (i.e., Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia) more than doubled their combined percentage of Albania’s overall trade between 2006 and 2008.

Self Study Questions

The majority of Albanians are engaged in agricultural work. True or False?

Albania’s terrain lends itself to extensive agricultural use. True or False?

Albania’s larger farms are located primarily in the coastal regions. True or False?

Albania’s smaller farms export most of their products abroad. True or False?

The end of the communist era was disastrous for Albania’s industrial sector. True or False?

Society

Introduction

“Wake, Albanian, from your slumber
Let us all, brothers, swear in common
And not look to church or mosque
The Albanian’s faith is Albanianism!”

Pashko Vasa (translated by Robert Elsie)

*O moj Shqypni e mjera Shqypni* (“Oh Albania, Poor Albania”) 277

Albania, a crossroads of conquering empires and nations throughout recorded history, reflects the many influences that others have brought to the region. As noted above in Pashko Vasa’s poem—familiar to all Albanians, religion is just one of these foreign elements in the Albanian mosaic. Yet at the same time, Albania is one of the most culturally distinct countries of the Balkans. The Albanian language, believed to be derived from ancient Illyrian, is distinct from any other Indo-European language. 278 As such, it has helped to define Albania’s character more than any other cultural element. In contrast, religious affiliation has played a greater role in cultural identification in other parts of the Balkans. Albania’s steep mountains, which have long provided an imposing barrier to outsiders, have also helped to isolate parts of the country and thus preserve longstanding clan traditions after other nations lost touch with such ancient roots. 279

Ethnic Groups and Languages

Ethnic Albanians, defined as those who speak Albanian as their native language, are by far the largest group in Albania. The most recent census questionnaire (2001) did not contain any questions concerning ethnic affiliation or language. For this reason, estimates of the percentages of ethnic Albanians and minority groups in the country vary significantly from source to source. 280 The most

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frequently cited ethnic percentages, taken from the CIA World Factbook and based on 1989 estimates, are 95% Albanian, 3% Greek, and 2% other groups (e.g., Vlachs, Roma, Slavic Macedonians, Serbs, Bulgarians).²⁸¹

*Albanians*

The ethnic Albanian population is divided into two subgroups: the northern Ghegs and the southern Tosks. Traditionally, the Ghegs, occupying the mountainous north were viewed as more clannish, isolated, and independent than the southern Tosks. Exposed to the ways of foreigners, the Tosks were an agrarian society dominated by conservative Muslim landlords prior to the Second World War.²⁸²,²⁸³ Most of these cultural distinctions, however, were eliminated during the wrenching changes of the communist era.²⁸⁴ Many of the nation’s leaders, including Enver Hoxha, the First Secretary of the Albanian Party of Labor, were from the southern (Tosk) part of Albania. Since then, however, the majority of Albanian presidents and prime ministers have been from northern (Gheg) Albania.²⁸⁵

The Ghegs and Tosks speak separate dialects of the Albanian language, with the Shkumbin River dividing the two groups.²⁸⁶ In 1972, the two dialects were combined to create a standard form of written Albanian. While more reflective of the Tosk dialect, the standard is generally used today by all ethnic Albanians, both inside and outside Albania.²⁸⁷


²⁸⁵ Since April 1992, five of the six who have been Albanian prime minister have been from north of the Shkumbin River: Sali Berisha (2005-present; Tropojë), Fatos Nano (1997-1998, 2002-2005; Tirana), Pandeli Majko (1998-1999, 2002; Tirana), Bashkim Fino (1997; Tirana), and Aleksander Meksi (1992-1997; Tirana). In the same time period, all four of Albania’s presidents have been from the north: Bamir Topi (2007-present; Tirana), Alfred Moisiu (2002-2007; Shkodër), Rexhep Meidani (1997-2002; Tirana), and Berisha (1992-1997). [All biographical information from the Biography Resource Center: http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC;jsessionid=7CAEA5CF9AEC1CF87D00E35F1D5476A?locID=cfc_remote].


Greeks

Ethnic Greeks are Albania's largest minority population and live predominantly in the southern regions of the country. They are the only non-Albanian ethnic group to have a significant political and social position within the Albanian-dominant culture. During the mid-1990s, southern Albania was the center of a conflict between the Albanian government and ethnic Albanian Greeks seeking autonomy (and even union with Greece). Though never easy, diplomatic relations between Tirana and Athens became extremely strained in 1994, when Greece expelled 100,000 Albanian workers. The action taken by Greece came after five ethnic Greeks in Albania were tried and convicted on espionage charges.

Many of the southern Albanian cities and villages with longstanding ethnic Greek majority populations have been losing residents since the early 1990s. To a great extent, this decline is a result of the Greek government’s work permit policy, which favors ethnic Greeks from Albania over ethnic Albanians. Over 40% of more than 450,000 Albanians working legally in Greece in June 2008 were ethnic Greeks—a percentage much higher than that of ethnic Greeks within the entire Albanian population.

Other Groups

Vlachs speak Aromanian, a language derived from Latin, and are scattered in small communities throughout Albania and the rest of the Balkans. There are various theories about the origin of the Albanian Vlachs, who themselves consider modern-day Romania and Greece to be the most likely places from which their culture sprang. To some extent, Vlach attachments to either a Greek or Romanian origin appear based on pragmatic

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economic and educational interests. Traditionall, the Vlachs were known as shepherds who moved seasonally with their livestock or as traveling merchants, selling surplus wool. Today, however, Vlachs are as likely to be living in cities as they are in mountain villages adjacent to pasturelands. This trend toward urbanized life, where Albanian is the dominant language, threatens the continued usage of the Aromanian language.

The Roma (sometimes referred to as Gypsies) are found throughout Europe, although their numbers are largest in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Their language is Vlax Romani, whose Sanskrit roots tie its linguistic development to the Indian subcontinent. The Roma are believed to have arrived in modern-day Albania over 600 years ago, thus predating the Ottoman Turks. Most Roma converted to Islam during the Ottoman Era, as did a large percentage of ethnic Albanians. The Albanian Roma are divided into four tribes, each of which is involved in distinct professions: Meckars (agricultural workers and entertainers), Kurtofs (small-scale trade and handicrafts), Kabuzis (musicians and artisans), and Cergars (traveling tradespeople and fortune tellers).

Albania’s ethnic Macedonian population (as recognized by the government) lives in the region near Lake Prespa, close to Macedonia’s southeastern border with Albania. In this region, the language of instruction at school is Macedonian. Macedonian rights groups claim that many more ethnic Macedonians, officially unrecognized by the Albanian government, live along the northernmost Albanian-Macedonian border, as well as in larger Albanian cities.

Religion

Religion was suppressed in Albania for several decades during the communist era. As many as 95% of all churches and mosques were either torn down or completely repurposed as warehouses, sports arenas, or other types of buildings as part of the government’s campaign against religion. The 1990 lifting of the ban against religion marked the beginning of a gradual religious revival in which hundreds of buildings of worship have been rebuilt.

The validity of statistics on Albanian religious practice is suspect since the numbers still cited today are drawn from the pre-communist era. For example, one commonly listed religious breakdown, representative of a much earlier period, is 70% Muslim, 20% Roman Catholic, and 10% Albanian Orthodox. However, in present-day Albania, it is believed that many citizens actually do not affiliate themselves with any organized religion. Among Albanians who are active practitioners, the most popular traditions are Islamic and Christian. Two branches of Islam (Sunni and Bektashi Muslims) and two Christian denominations (Albanian Orthodox and Roman Catholic)—are dominant among the diverse religious affiliations.


Muslims

Albania’s Muslims practice both Sunni and Shia Islam. Sunni Muslims are the larger of the world’s two Islamic sects. Most of Albania’s Shiite Muslims are Bektashi, a Sufi order that takes a mystical approach to the teachings of the Quran. The Bektashi sect is one of the most tolerant and least orthodox of Islamic orders, ignoring many Islamic norms such as the veiling of women and prohibitions against consuming pork and alcohol. Bektashi is considered the form of Islam most often practiced in rural areas and small villages. In cities and towns, Albania’s Sunni Muslims are divided between two factions: the Hanafi school, a relatively liberal form of Islamic legal thought, and the Salafi school, which takes a stricter interpretation of Islamic doctrine.

Christians

Albania’s Orthodox population lives primarily in the southern half of the country. The modern-day Albanian Orthodox Church traces its roots to Boston, Massachusetts, where the Albanian immigrant and noted linguist Fan Noli (who would later briefly serve as Albania’s Prime Minister in the 1920s) first delivered the Orthodox liturgy in the Albanian language in 1908. Even though the majority of the Albanian Orthodox community is ethnic Albanian, the church has long been associated with Albania’s ethnic Greek population. This relationship dates back to the Ottoman era when all church services and cultural activities were conducted in Greek.
Roman Catholicism is primarily practiced in the northern half of Albania. The spiritual heart of the country’s Catholic community has traditionally been the city of Shkodër. During the communist era, the city’s large cathedral was repurposed to host basketball and volleyball games.317 Today, Shkodër and Tirana are the seats of Albania’s two Roman Catholic archdioceses.318

Gender Issues

Domestic Abuse

As Albania begins the process it hopes will lead to membership in the European Union (EU), increasing attention has been drawn to Albanian human rights issues that may be in conflict with EU conventions. One example is domestic violence against women, a problem judged to be “underreported, under-investigated, under-prosecuted and under-sentenced” by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).319 Albania’s first law addressing such violence did not come into effect until June 2007.320 Since then, non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International have noted that progress has been achieved because women are now more likely to report abuse and seek out protective services.321 In many cases, however, it remains difficult for women with limited access to employment opportunities and housing to come forward against abusive husbands. In 2009, Amnesty International estimated that one out of three women was still affected by domestic violence in Albania.322 In March 2010, the Albanian government announced plans to provide monthly assistance stipends to at least some of the women who have left their homes to escape domestic violence.323

Sworn Virgins

Among the clans of the mountainous regions of Albania, an ancient code of laws has long ruled village life. Known as the Kanun of Lek Dukagjin, it was an oral tradition handed down from generation to generation. Some aspects of the code are still practiced in pockets of Albania, although more than four decades of communist rule has weakened the Kanun’s hold on rural traditions. Preservation of honor is an important element of the Kanun, manifested most notably in the blood feud, in which a deadly sequence of reciprocal family-vs.-family revenge killings could be initiated by the slighting of one family’s honor. Such feuds continue to this day, despite the Albanian government’s attempts to bring this ancient tradition to an end.324

Women’s rights, under the Kanun, were limited, as the laws effectively institutionalized patriarchy in the rural communities. Arranged marriages were the norm, sometimes negotiated shortly after the birth of a child.325 Some women lived in families with no patriarch or wished to avoid an arranged marriage without causing loss of honor to the intended groom’s family. In such cases, these women took vows of permanent chastity, cut their hair short, wore men’s clothing, and were recognized, within Albanian village society, as men. Some of these “sworn virgins” (virgjinesha) still live in Albania to this day. The practice, however, has mostly disappeared as even the most isolated areas of the country are influenced by modern ideas about the role of women.326,327

Traditions: Celebrations and Holidays

Religious Holidays

Each of Albania’s four major religions celebrate official holidays during the year. Given that religious lines have long been blurred in Albania, especially after decades of religious repression, it is not uncommon for Muslims and Christians to enjoy each other’s holiday festivities.328 For Albania’s Orthodox and Roman Catholic communities, Easter and Christmas are the primary celebrations. Typical Christmas traditions—such as gift

giving, tree decorations, midnight church services, and large family meals—are as common in Albania as in other parts of Europe.\(^{329}\) Albanian Easter traditions include church services, candlelight vigils, and colorful Easter eggs.\(^{330}\) The Orthodox and Catholic churches use different methods for determining the date of Easter. For this reason, the holiday falls on the same date for both religions in certain years, while in others the Orthodox celebration may follow the Catholic observance by a week or more.\(^{331}\)

For Albania’s practicing Sunni Muslims, Lesser Bajram (also known as Eid al-Fitr), the celebration marking the end of 30 days of dawn-to-dusk fasting during Ramadan, is one of two major holidays. The other is Greater Bajram (Eid al-Adha), marking Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son according to God’s will. During the latter holiday, it is customary to sacrifice an animal, share some of the meat with family friends, and give the rest to the poor.\(^{332}\) Both holidays are linked to the lunar calendar and each occurs approximately 11 days earlier (in the Gregorian calendar) each year.\(^{333,334}\)

Bektashis in Albania celebrate Sultan Nevruz, a holiday marking the birth of Ali (the Prophet Muhammad’s son-in-law) that also aligns with the spring equinox. Ali holds a special position within the Bektashi community, comparable in importance to Muhammad. To Bektashis, Ali is the revealer of the inner, mystical truths of the Quran.\(^{335}\) Lavish meals featuring sacrificed lambs are commonly a part of the Bektashi celebrations on this day.\(^{336}\)

**Non-Religious Holidays and Celebrations**

In addition to the religious holidays, Albanians also commemorate several secular holidays. These include New Year’s Day (January 1), International Workers Day (May 1), Mother Theresa Day (October 19), and Liberation/Independence Day (November 28/29).

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The end-of-November secular holiday marks two events: (1) the declaration of independence from the Ottoman Empire by Albanian nationalist leaders during the start of the First Balkan War (November 28), and the withdrawal of the German army from Albania during World War II (November 29).337,338

One of Albania’s most festive holidays is Summer Day, which ironically falls in the late stages of winter (March 14).339 It is a holiday marking the coming of spring. Traditionally it has been associated with the city of Elbasan, but it has now become more of a national celebration. In Tirana, Summer Day is a day-long street festival marked by musical concerts and other forms of outdoor entertainment.340

No celebration in Albania, however, can top the wedding in terms of exuberant revelry. The wedding banquets and related ceremonies can involve hundreds of people and last for days.341,342 Non-stop dancing until dawn, continuous servings of food, ceremonial burning of handkerchiefs, and gifts of money showered upon the bride’s head are just some of the elements that make up a typical wedding celebration.343

Cuisine

Albanian dishes reflect the nation’s Mediterranean location and history of periodic domination by its neighbors. Italian, Greek, and Turkish influences are evident in many of the food items.344 Lamb and mutton are the most common meats, with fish dishes popular in coastal regions. One popular meat dish is qofte të fërguara, which consists of fried meatballs (often lamb) spiced with mint, garlic and/or onions, oregano, parsley, and feta cheese.345,346 Nuts, such as walnuts, pine nuts, and hazelnuts, are used in many dishes, often as

ingredients in sauces or combined with crushed garlic and olive oil as an accompaniment to vegetable and chicken dishes. Dairy items include yogurt (known as kos) and cheese made from the milk of goats or sheep.347

Stews (fërgesë) are a common main course in Albanian cuisine. A typical one is Tirana stew (fergesë e Tiranësë), which can be made with veal (me mish vici), peppers (me speca), or other ingredients. Salads made of fresh garden vegetables, including tomatoes, cucumbers, olives, and peppers, are often served with the main meal as well.

Bread (bukë) is the staple food of the Albanian diet, and its importance is reflected in the fact that bukë also translates as “food” in Albanian.348 In much of Albania, a variety of grains (e.g., wheat and barley) may be used in baking bread. In the mountainous northern areas, however, a flat, round maize (corn) bread is commonly consumed.349, 350 Phyllo dough (made from thin sheets of unleavened flour) is used both for vegetable pies and for desserts such as baklava. Salty Albanian vegetable pies (byrek shqiptar me perime) are sometimes served as the primary dish of a meal.351

The national drink of Albania is raki, a brandy-like spirit that is made from grapes or, in more mountainous regions, plums.352 Unlike Turkish raki, the Albanian counterpart has no anise flavoring. It is a very potent drink and is sipped, rather than quickly “downed.” At meals, beer, wine, and mineral water are frequently drunk.353

Traditional Dress

Today, most Albanians dress like their counterparts in other European countries. The colorful traditional dress is most often seen at Albanian folk festivals, Independence Day events, or in displays at ethnographic museums in larger Albanian cities.354 Different styles are visibly evident between northern and southern Albanian traditional dress.
Arts

Literature

At particular times in Albania’s history, events have impeded the development of a body of literature in the Albanian language. During the Ottoman era, for example, a ban on documents or publications written in the Albanian language meant that writing was produced in Greek or Turkish.\(^{355,356}\) Later, during the communist era, severe constraints were placed on writers; they were allowed to produce only materials that conformed to the state-approved style known as Social Realism. Thus, most written works during this time embraced socialist themes, such as the development of a classless society and the importance of individual achievements as contributions to the greater social good.\(^{357}\)

Despite these constraints, however, Albania has produced several writers whose work is widely admired by readers around the world. One of the most notable of these is Ismail Kadare (1936- ), a poet and novelist, who is frequently mentioned as a short list candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature. He managed to produce writings of artistic integrity while living in Albania during the most repressive years of the Hoxha regime. Kadare is not considered a dissident writer, although some of his books in the 1970s and 1980s were oblique critiques of communist Albania and even Hoxha.\(^{358}\) He affected this form of criticism by situating some of his stories in different eras, such as the many centuries of Ottoman rule.\(^{359}\) Several of Kadare’s books were banned in Albania for several years for content that violated state-mandated injunctions. As penance for having crossed the line in some of his other writings, the author was forced, on at least one occasion, to write a work of unabashed pro-Hoxha propaganda.\(^{360,361}\)

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358 Kadare admitted in an interview that the act of writing genuine literature in a totalitarian state was, in and of itself, an act of dissidence.
Music

Few countries can boast that a form of their native folk music was designated a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). Albania is an exception. Iso-polyphony is a traditional Albanian form of folksong in which two separate melody lines are sung against a background drone. Several variations of this basic style exist, including differences in how the drone is sung. For example, among some groups of southern Albanians, the drone chorus continues after the soloists pause. Today, one is most likely to hear iso-polyphony performed at Albanian folk festivals or traditional-style weddings.

Instrumental Albanian folk music may feature various instruments, including clarinets, violins, bagpipes, and a single-stringed lute-like instrument known as the lahuta. Some of this music, such as the southern Albanian kaba, echoes the styles of iso-polyphonic vocal music, with a guitar most commonly supplying the drone element. Other types of Albanian music include the epic poetry of the northern Ghegs, often sung with lahuta accompaniment. Albania’s Roma have their own style of music, characterized by a driving brass section. Some modern bands often fuse these various Albanian musical styles, often with nontraditional instrumentation, to create an aurally stimulating mix of old and new. An example is Fanfara Tirana, a Roma-style band from Tirana. Their 2007 composition Apocalyptic Kaba (a melding of Roma and kaba styles) is just one example of this recent trend of cross-fertilization of musical genres.

Folk Tales and Folklore

Folk tales and legends have long been a part of the oral culture of the remote Albanian mountain regions. One such story (The Tale of the Eagle) explains how

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362 The iso of “iso-polyphony” refers to the ison, or drone-singing, of Byzantine religious music.
Albania came to get its name (which is generally interpreted from the Albanian language as “land of the eagles”). Other legends and epic poems trace the exploits of historical and mythical figures, such as Skanderbeg, famed for his long resistance against invading Ottoman armies. Others on the list include Gjergj Elez Alia (a great warrior who slayed a giant sea monster that was terrorizing the Albanian countryside) and the Muslim brothers, Mujo and Halil. These two siblings’ heroic actions are the subject of epic verses still recited and sung to this day by some northern Gheg folk singers.

Sports and Recreation

Soccer (known as “football” in most of the world) is Albania’s most popular sport. Tens of thousands of Albanians are members of one or more of the nation’s many professional and amateur football clubs. In world rankings, the national team has reached number 62 (August 2006), although it has yet to qualify for the World Cup or the European Championship competitions.

Basketball and volleyball are other team sports that Albanians both play and follow as spectators. Their level of interest in them, however, is markedly lower than it is in soccer. The country has senior basketball leagues (with players over the age of 20) for both men and women. Albania is currently trying to establish stronger youth programs for boys and girls that will eventually lead to more success in European competitions. Over 70 men’s and women’s volleyball teams compete at the senior, junior, and youth levels in cities throughout the country.

Non-team sports in which Albanians regularly take part include swimming, gymnastics, cycling, weightlifting, and tae kwon do. Popular board games include backgammon and chess, with players of the former a fixture in coffeehouses, bars, and city parks all around the country. ^ Albanian beaches in the summer months abound with tourists and locals enjoying various water sports, while further inland several of Albania’s lakes and streams provide good opportunities for fishing.

**Self Study Questions**

The Albanian people base their sense of national identity on ethnicity. True or False?

Greeks make up Albania’s largest ethnic minority. True or False?

The written form of the Albanian language is based on the dialect of one group. True or False?

The two predominant faiths in Albania are Christianity and Islam. True or False?

The modern-day Albanian Orthodox Church traces its roots to the USA. True or False?

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Security

Introduction

The late 1990s were a tumultuous period in Albania. A large-scale uprising occurred in 1997 after numerous pyramid schemes had failed, eventually requiring the intervention of international military forces to quell the violence. Two years later, Albania received a massive influx of refugees from neighboring Kosovo during the conflict that took place there. Now, more than 10 years later, the domestic and regional security situation in Albania has calmed considerably, although an ongoing political standoff over the 2009 elections has raised fears that it could threaten Albania’s application to the European Union if a compromise is not reached.

Military

Since April 2009, Albania has been a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). To meet NATO military standards, Albania has restructured its armed forces and implemented various military reforms in the last few years. One of these reforms is the elimination of compulsory mandatory service. This move is part of the transition to professional armed forces, composed of 10,000 troops, by the end of 2010. In contrast, the Albanian Army had a troop strength of 40,000 in 1993, but the soldiers’ training and equipment were deficient compared to now.

Albania’s military budget for the first half of the 2000s averaged a little more than 1.3% of the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP). However, that percentage has risen significantly since then. The most recent data show that Albania’s military expenditures are now slightly more than 2.0% of GDP.

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Given Albania’s many domestic needs, this percentage is significantly high for military spending.\textsuperscript{391}

Given the relatively small size of Albania’s forces, NATO has encouraged the nation’s military leaders to focus on developing specialized strategic capabilities to support NATO missions. Such units include rapid reaction forces, special operations teams, and explosive ordnance disposal specialists.\textsuperscript{392}

Albania’s reform goals include having 40\% of its army troops trained and ready to participate in international military missions.\textsuperscript{393} As of July 2010, Albania had 250 troops active in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{394} A comparable number of Albanian troops participated in the U.S.-led Coalition in Iraq until the end of 2008.\textsuperscript{395,396} Fewer Albanian troops have also participated in the United Nations peacekeeping missions in Chad and the Central African Republic and in the European Union peacekeeping efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.\textsuperscript{397,398,399}

**U.S.-Albanian Relations**

Since the period following World War I, the United States has had a strong relationship with Albania. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, American President Woodrow Wilson steadfastly resisted a plan by some


European nations to divide Albania among its neighboring states. Some 80 years later, most Albanians and their government strongly supported NATO’s air strikes against Yugoslavia. These attacks were in response to Belgrade’s refusal to end the escalating violence in Kosovo, a region predominantly populated by ethnic Albanians. The role of the United States in this action and its later support of Kosovo independence generated pro-U.S. sentiment throughout Albania. The United States was also a strong ally in Albania’s successful bid to enter NATO and is supportive of its membership application for the European Union.

In recent years, the United States has been providing between USD 23 and 31 million of annual foreign aid to Albania. Much of this assistance is directed to programs designed to promote good governance and democratic institutions, encourage economic growth, and implement security sector reforms.

Relations With Neighboring Countries

Greece

Albania’s foreign relations with Greece today are much improved compared to the early 1990s, when tensions escalated over the status of the ethnic Greek minority in southern Albania. For nearly a century in northern Greece and parts of southern Albania, there has been a small but vocal minority of people pushing for Greek annexation of southern Albania—the region that they call Vorio (“Northern”) Epirus. They have long advocated for the sovereignty of ethnic identity in defining Greece’s northern border. Such an irredentist position has not been endorsed by any recent Greek government, but it has proved to be an unsettling force in

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408 Irredentism, or the advocacy of defining national boundaries on the basis of shared cultural attributes such as ethnicity, religion, or historical associations, is a phenomenon endemic to the Balkans.
Albania when issues of minority rights for Albania’s ethnic Greeks have arisen.\textsuperscript{409}

Since the end of the communist era, Greece has been a popular destination for poor Albanians seeking employment.\textsuperscript{410} At one point during the early 1990s, it was estimated that anywhere from 10\% to 20\% of all Albanians were in Greece, either working or looking for jobs.\textsuperscript{411} During this period, the Greek government would regularly expel thousands of Albanian migrants, sometimes in response to actions deemed discriminatory against Albania’s ethnic Greeks.\textsuperscript{412,413}

Somewhat intertwined in these disputes was the status of the Chams,\textsuperscript{414} a group of ethnic Albanian Muslims who had long lived in coastal regions of northern Greece. Between 1944 and 1945, under the authorization and support of Allied military personnel, Greek anti-fascist resistance groups expelled what remained of the Cham population living in the country. Considered Italian/German collaborators, Cham residents were driven out of Greece in a bloody purge. Since then, especially in the past two decades, the Chams have tried to reclaim—or at least be compensated for—their confiscated lands in Greece.\textsuperscript{415}

The Albanian government has not pressed the issue in its relations with Greece, except between 1992 and 1994, when Albanian-Greek relations were at their lowest. A law was passed by the Albanian parliament declaring 27 June to be “The Day of Greek Chauvinist Genocide Against the Albanians of Chameria.”\textsuperscript{416}

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\textsuperscript{414} The Chams are named after Chameria, the Albanian name for the region of Greece from which they originate.
Albania and Macedonia relations today are marked by strong political and economic ties. The two nations are also bound together by cultural connections. Macedonia has a significant ethnic Albanian minority in its western regions, while a smaller number of ethnic Slavic Macedonians live in eastern pockets of Albania. Altogether, ethnic Albanians represent about 25% of Macedonia’s total population, although some sources estimate ethnic Albanians could actually make up more than 30% of the Macedonian population.

In general, relations between the two countries have been very good since Macedonia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. Nonetheless, the status of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia has been a significant political issue, which has spilled over into Albania at times. Perhaps the most threatening point in bilateral relations came in 2001, when an ethnic Albanian rebel group began staging a series of attacks in the western and northern parts of Macedonia. Known as the National Liberation Army (NLA), the group was composed of many former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army. There is no evidence that the rebels had any ties with groups inside Albania; indeed, the Albanian government in Tirana voiced strong, public support for Macedonia’s fight against the NLA forces. Nevertheless, some Macedonian officials and media outlets in Skopje accused Tirana of allowing the NLA to establish training camps in Albania and crisscross the border on recruiting raids. The situation simmered down in August after a peace deal that established the framework for guaranteed rights and access to political power for Macedonian ethnic minorities.
Kosovo

Kosovo and Albania have strong historical links. The majority populations of the two nations are overwhelmingly ethnic Albanian. Periodically, politicians on both sides of the border have called for “national unification” in the future. Such pan-Albanian appeals were far more common in the early 1990s. At that time, Kosovar Albanians were being persecuted by the Yugoslav government and Albanian political candidates could score political points by publicly supporting Albanian nationalism. Reality soon set in, however, as Albanian government officials reluctantly accepted that their nation was too weak, both economically and militarily, to become embroiled in the Kosovo conflict. Critically needed foreign aid was not likely to come to Albania if its leaders continued on a path of inevitable entanglement in an ever-widening Balkans conflict. In recent years, popular support for unification is not very strong among Kosovars and Albanians.

During the 1990s and 2000s, Albania was a strong supporter of Kosovo’s fight for autonomy. During the Kosovo War of 1999, Albania provided shelter for hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the ethnic violence in Kosovo. Albania was also one of the first countries to formally recognize the Republic of Kosovo when it declared independence in 2008. More recently, Albania and Kosovo have tried to strengthen their economic ties by improving the transportation link between the two countries. Specifically, Albania is financing the construction of a new highway connecting its Adriatic coast to the major cities of Kosovo. Albania views the new road as a means to develop tourism and increase agricultural trade between the two countries. Some outside donors, however, perceive more of a political agenda at work and have been hesitant to offer financial assistance for the project. Building the road might lead to increasing calls for Kosovo-Albania unification, something few regional neighbors want to see.

highway project is controversial for two other reasons: feasibility studies were not carried out prior to its inception and spiraling cost overruns substantiate charges of corruption in the bidding process.\textsuperscript{431} Though construction is ongoing, stretches of the highway are completed and open for traffic.

\textbf{Montenegro}

Montenegro has been an independent country since 2006, and has had excellent relations with Albania.\textsuperscript{432} Montenegro’s capital and largest city, Podgorica, is linked by rail and highway to the nearby Albanian border, although trade between the two countries is still rather limited. Both nations are currently candidates for entry into the European Union, and Montenegro has applied for NATO membership.

Each of the two countries has small ethnic minority populations of the other within its borders. The most recent Montenegro census (2003) reported that a little over 7\% of all Montenegrin citizens were ethnic Albanians, although this percentage dropped to about 5\% (about 31,000 people) when only Montenegro’s resident population was considered.\textsuperscript{433} The Montenegro government in turn estimates that about 30,000 ethnic Montenegrins live in Albania. If that figure is accurate, it would represent less than 1\% of the Albanian population.\textsuperscript{434,435} However, other sources estimate the ethnic Montenegrin population to be only about 2,000 people.\textsuperscript{436}

\textbf{Terrorist Groups and Activity}

Albania has taken a strongly proactive stance toward fighting global terrorism over the last decade and a half, although a lack of resources and effective border security have at times hindered these efforts.\textsuperscript{437} Domestic instability in 1997 led to lootings of Albanian arsenals; these arms were later used in conflicts in neighboring Kosovo and Macedonia. In 1998, the U.S. and Albania foiled a plot to attack the U.S. embassy in Tirana. That same year, an Al Qaeda forgery ring was also broken up and several suspected members

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of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad were arrested and handed over to Egyptian authorities. After the 9/11 attacks against the U.S. in 2001, Albania began preparing an anti-terrorist action plan. Resulting legislation included an anti-money-laundering law in 2003 that included international standard provisions for the freezing of financial assets of known terrorist support groups. Since the law went into effect, the Albanian government has frozen the assets of 6 individuals and 14 foundations and other organizations listed on a United Nations Security Council list of al Qaeda and Taliban supporters.

Issues Affecting Stability

Political and Electoral Strife

As Albania polishes its credentials for membership in the European Union, its candidacy continues to be tarnished by the nation’s ongoing political crisis over the validity of the 2009 parliamentary election results. The current crisis is simply another chapter in the frequently fractious political environment of Albania. The concept of “loyal opposition” has taken a long time to gain a foothold in Albania. This fact is not surprising given that the country never had any semblance of a democratic system of government prior to 1991.

Since the fall of the communist government, the political stage in Albania has been dominated by the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party. Between 1992 and 1997, the Democratic Party retained power even as party chairman and Albanian President, Sali Berisha, became an increasingly divisive public figure; he brooked no opposition in setting the administration’s course. For some Albanians, Berisha’s unwillingness to compromise and his focus on controlling the media stirred up bad memories from the communist era.

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In the immediate wake of the pyramid schemes scandal and resultant violence, Berisha and the Democratic Party were forced out after the 1997 parliamentary elections. The latter fell one year after the previous election, which had been roundly criticized by outside observers for its numerous voting irregularities. The Socialists, who won the flawed but nonetheless fairly run 1997 election, retained power until 2005. Socialist Party infighting and Democratic Party opportunism between 2002 and 2005, led to parliamentary inaction on much needed social, political, and economic reform. In the 2005 elections, Berisha and the Democratic Party were narrowly returned to power. This election exhibited some of the same problems as in previous years: lengthy and controversial vote counting, inaccurate voter lists in some locations, and sporadic violence in the run-up to the vote. Given this situation, the 2009 Albanian parliamentary election was watched very closely by officials in European Union nations. The resulting street protests, hunger strikes, and parliamentary boycotts organized by the Socialist Party might have irreparably damaged Albania’s short-term prospects for EU accession.

Pan-Albanianism

Much has been written about the concept of a “Greater Albania”—a hypothetical state made up of the areas with ethnic Albanian majorities in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia. There is little concrete evidence of any strong popular will in Albania to redraw the national boundaries. Stability is critical for the country’s continued economic development, and any pursuit of pan-Albanian

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irredentism would foster strong resistance throughout Europe. For Albania, the current national goal is to become part of “Greater Europe” (i.e., the European Union), rather than the center of an ethnic Albanian homeland.452

Corruption

As recently as 1998, the World Bank identified Albania as Europe’s most corrupt nation. At the time, nearly half of all Albanians reported having paid bribes, and two thirds of government officials polled conceded that bribery was part of the price of doing business in Albania.453 Since then, the Albanian government’s policy reform initiatives aimed at taxes, business licensing, and governmental procurement have improved the nation’s business climate.454 Transparency International is a non-governmental organization that monitors transparency and corruption within more than 150 nations. It produces an annual Corruption Perceptions Index, which indicates that the level of transparency in Albania has shown significant improvement since 2006. Nonetheless, the nation still appears in the Index as more corrupt than all 27 EU nations and many EU candidate states, such as Croatia, Turkey, and Iceland.455

Furthermore, corruption has been a significant contributing factor to Albania’s ongoing problems in combating organized crime and drug trafficking. Investigations and prosecutions of criminal behavior are often stymied because of biased judges and other government officials.456

Self Study Questions

Albania is a member of the European Union (EU). True or False?

The collapse of financial pyramid schemes in 1997 was a catalyst for a major social uprising. True or False?

Albania’s military has refused to cooperate in international peace-keeping missions. True or False?

Ethnic Greeks living in Albania have been fully assimilated into mainstream society there. True or False?

Albania’s prospects for entering the European Union (EU) depend greatly on the government’s ability to maintain civic order and run fair elections. True or False?
Further Reading


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Appendix A: Answers to Self Study Questions

Geography

1. Historically, Albania’s political isolation was intensified by its geography.

   **True.** The majority of Albania’s landscape consists of mountains, which has contributed to the relative isolation of communities within the country, as well as of the country itself.

2. Albania’s “concrete mushrooms” continue to have military application.

   **False.** Albania’s cement-and-iron bunkers, known as “concrete mushrooms,” are undergoing conversion into kiosks, stables, planters, restaurants, and even residences.

3. Most of Albania’s largest cities are found in its coastal lowlands.

   **True.** Tirana, Elbasan, and Berat—three of the country’s largest cities—are found along the coast.

4. Albania has a consistent climate.

   **False.** Although Albania is a relatively small country, its climate range is remarkably wide due to the altitude difference between its coastal region and inland mountainous areas.

5. Albania is home to Europe’s oldest lake.

   **True.** Lake Ohrid, located in Albania, is Europe’s oldest lake, and one of the world’s most unique large lakes in that much of its water comes from surface and underwater springs.

History

1. Albania first became a nation after World War II.

   **False.** A provisional government first declared Albania an independent nation after the outbreak of the First Balkan War in 1912.

2. The link between modern-day Albanians and the ancient Illyrians is disputed.

   **True.** The connection between the ancient Illyrians and modern Albanians is a matter of historical debate. Though there is some supporting linguistic, archaeological, and anthropological evidence, no Illyrian inscriptions or written documents have been discovered.
3. A number of Albanian coastal cities were affiliated with the Republic of Venice.

   **True.** Some of the coastal cities affiliated with the Republic of Venice, such as Shkodër and Durrës, were able to hold out longer against the Ottoman Turks, but by the beginning of the 16th century, virtually all of Albania was under Ottoman control.

4. Christianity was brought to the area of modern-day Albania in the Middle Ages.

   **False.** Christianity arrived in the Western Balkans during the 1st century C.E.

5. Ruled by the Ottoman Empire for centuries, a majority of the population adopted Muslim affiliation.

   **True.** Over the course of four centuries of Ottoman rule, a majority of the population converted to Islam.

**Economy**

1. The majority of Albanians are engaged in agricultural work.

   **True.** The agricultural sector is a significant part of the Albanian economy, especially in terms of employment. Over 60% of Albanians work in agriculture, which generates about 20% of the nation’s GDP.

2. Albania’s terrain lends itself to extensive agricultural use.

   **False.** Because of its mountainous terrain, only 39% of the land is used for agricultural purposes: just over 50% is devoted to arable crops, another 37% for raising livestock, and approximately 11% supports permanent crops such as olives and grapes.

3. Albania’s larger farms are located primarily in the coastal regions.

   **True.** Small Albanian farms typically grow a subsistence-level mix of crop. Only larger farms in coastal regions or near cities focus on fewer crops that are to be marketed rather than consumed locally.

4. Albania’s smaller farms export most of their products abroad.

   **False.** The products from Albania’s smaller farms tend to be consumed locally.

5. The end of the communist era was disastrous for Albania’s industrial sector.

   **True.** The phasing out of state subsidies, prevalent under communism, left the industrial sector bankrupt.
Society

1. The Albanian people base their sense of national identity on ethnicity.

   **False.** A sense of national identity among Albanians is based on the language they speak, not their ethnic heritage.

2. Greeks make up Albania’s largest ethnic minority.

   **True.** Greeks are the only ethnic group lacking deep roots in Albania that enjoys significant political and social clout. Tensions have erupted over their efforts to gain greater autonomy.

3. The written form of the Albanian language is based on the dialect of one group.

   **False.** The written form, which was standardized in 1972, combined two dialects of Albanian.

4. The two predominant faiths in Albania are Christianity and Islam.

   **True.** A number of branches of each religion claim followers in Albania.

5. The modern-day Albanian Orthodox Church traces its roots to the USA.

   **True.** Fan Noli (who would later briefly serve as Albania’s Prime Minister in the 1920s) first delivered the Orthodox liturgy in the Albanian language in 1908 in Boston, MA, where he was a member of the immigrant community.

Security

1. Albania is a member of the European Union (EU).

   **False.** Albania has become a member of NATO, however, its application for membership in the EU is still under review.

2. The collapse of financial pyramid schemes in 1997 was a catalyst for a major social uprising.

   **True.** An unregulated informal credit market emerged in the 1990s, but collapsed when investors could not get their money out. Riots ensued.

3. Albania’s military has refused to cooperate in international peace-keeping missions.

   **False.** Albanian troops have participated in UN and European Union-led peace-keeping missions.
4. Ethnic Greeks living in Albania have been fully assimilated into mainstream society there.

**False.** Ethnic Greeks who live in Albania experience discrimination because of their heritage. In retaliation, the Greek government has periodically expelled ethnic Albanians working in Greece.

5. Albania’s prospects for entering the European Union (EU) depend greatly on the government’s ability to maintain civic order and run fair elections.

**True.** The run-up to Albania’s 2005 parliamentary election was marked by sporadic violence and controversy over electoral processes. In light of this history, EU nations watched the Albanian parliamentary election of 2009 very closely. The resulting street protests, hunger strikes, and boycotts over similar controversies have not inspired confidence among EU member nations.