

Albania: From Hunger to Consumer Society – A Price?

■ When I first visited Albania over twenty years ago it was on a coach that started its journey in Greece. Visas for British and American citizens were still difficult but a short three day trip was possible that began in Ioannina and was designed so that members of the Greek minority with relatives in Greece could see them. So our coach was full of Greek-speakers and thinly disguised British authors and journalists. I was working for the London Independent then and also with us were correspondents Helena Smith, from The Guardian, and Kerin Hope from the Financial Times. We made a slow progress through darkness, with limited street and house lighting picking out the Drinos valley villages in the black and total darkness.

After a while the coach reached Saranda or as ,amy on the journey called it 'Agia Saranda', and we spent the night in government Hotel Butrint, which had a fine sea view but was a chilly and damp concrete edifice. The town was somewhat severe and unwelcoming but with magnificent buildings from many different periods periods and a dramatic view across the landscape to the snow-covered Buret Mountain peaks. This was clearly no ordinary country. The red star and other symbols of communism were visible everywhere, people were dressed poorly with 1970's bell bottomed trousers a ,male speciality and many children looked small and not particularly well fed, if always lovingly cared for. One or two of the more energetic of us had got up early in the morning and watched the bread van arriving from out of town and soon an agitated crowd was milling round outside the metal grill that guarded the local bread shop. This was a society where scarcity was common and there were very few luxuries. That seemed to sum up Albanian communism.

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After a while, the 'Albturist' guide arrived, a helpful friendly man and we were taken on a conducted tour, which included meeting some local villagers. They came from a particularly pro-communist village near Gjirokastra and seemed to be enthusiastic supporters of the government. One particularly old lady turned out to have been a famous Partisan in World War II, and it emerged that although no one was quite sure she was thought to of been born in 1911. It was only when we were returning to the hotel that it occurred to me that she might well have been born in the Ottoman Empire. That was an extraordinary thought. Communist history seemed at first sight to be all-embracing but in fact it was contingent. I had been born in 1949, while communism had been established here just five years before. And now there were serious questions about whether communism would survive. It was the time of falling dominos throughout Eastern Europe. Albania was expected to follow shortly, or so many journalists would not have been around, muddling through the gloom at six in the morning to watch the bread delivery. The bread came in traditional baskets and was dark brown and weighed very heavy. This was a very different country to anywhere I had been before; the people looked Greek, in some ways, in their appearance but like Greeks photographed in Civil War photographs. They had lived and were living hard lives, that was for sure.

Now twenty years later things are very different. Albania is an increasingly urbanised consumer society and it is very hard to find any traces of the Ottoman or Zogist or communist worlds at all in material life. But the mind does not change so quickly. The French philosopher Louis Althusser has written of the presence of 'survivals' in historical and social consciousness, the role of the past in determining the ideology and behaviour of the present. Much of this takes place through the structures of living, the inheritance of the mind and spirit here the legacy of the past is much more difficult. Nowadays nobody sees the undernourished children and the grinding poverty of those days, but most of those in positions of authority grew up under Enverism, at least as children and many as adults.

I do not share pessimism of some about the present and the future of Albania. Albanians and Albania have some very real achievements in the last period of their history. It was very hard to run from the autarchic and isolated society that Albania used to be towards the wider world. It was particularly difficult when the wider Balkan community was descending into conflict as Yugoslavia fell apart and the issue of the future of Kosova moved inexorably first on to the centre of the Balkan stage and then the wider international arena.

The material world of Albanian society has changed a great deal. When I first visited Tirana, it was very unusual to meet anyone much from outside Tirana and certainly not outside Albania. Now Tirana is a pan-Albanian city, with people from every part of the Albanian world living there and doing business in the city. Durres has changed from a sleepy communist port to a city with six times the

population it had in 1990. there is a dynamic free market and liberal society everywhere in Albania with some of the highest economic growth rates not only in the Balkans but throughout Europe. The recent world economic crisis has been difficult, but not as severe in its effects as in many surrounding nations.

Yet some questions remain unanswered by this perspective. A great deal has been gained in material terms but there have also been losses. The isolated world of Albanians in 1990 was very limiting but it did mean some important Albanian traditions in the family and society had been maintained. The literature, songs and poetry of the past were known by every child. Albania was seen as a special nation with unique social traditions and there was a general pride in being Albanian and perhaps different from many other countries. Now the changes of the past twenty years have plunged Albania not only into the wider world community but into a maelstrom of international political and military activity. Globalisation threatens Albanian cultural traditions, as it threatens those of small countries and peoples with difficult languages. In my recent books I have tried to explore what this means, particularly in 'The Albanian Question', where Miranda Vickers and I have made a detailed study of the events of the year 1997 and what they have meant for the development of the national question.

Rampant mindless consumerism is not the answer to the future of Albania. Much of the most important aspects of the cultural heritage are not being well managed, so that a new road is destroying the peace of Butrint and other new routes are wrecking the hitherto ecological paradise north of the Greek Border. We are told these roads are required to bring tourists. I reject this view, the reason tourists do not come in the numbers the governments would like is nothing to do with roads but the lack of infrastructure, uncertain medical services if tourists are ill, lack of proper sewage treatment and disposal facilities resulting in an increasingly polluted sea in many places and illegal building on or near ancient sites. Apart from the disrespect this shows, it is also very short-sighted economically as tourism is now the second largest industry in the world after petroleum. Neglect of what tourists want to come to see is very foolish economically, as Spain and other mass tourist destinations have discovered.

The coast south of Durres has been wrecked and there is no sense of the government being willing to face the issues involved. Rubbish collection and street cleaning are important issues. When I started writing 'Blue Guide to Albania' over twenty years ago, there was little of a waste-producing modern consumer society in Albania. Now there is one but there is not enough planning on how to deal with the waste and rubbish that society produces. It is not possible to make progress, as Mayors or Tirana have shown. The awful mess of illegal buildings in central Tirana of ten years ago has gone, and the landscaping of the parks and River Lana has produced one of the most attractive capitals in the region.

All this rests on lack of a sense of national tradition in some quarters in the political elite, where the genuine and very important achievement of the normalisation of Albanian relations with the outside world in the post-communist period has been confused with an empty disregard for some national interests. Democracy brings diversity and that diversity can benefit Albania very much but it should not be at the price of an empty cultural cosmopolitanism and vague Europeanism that is not rooted in Albanian reality.

I am optimist about the future but only so long as some of the outstanding problems are recognised and confronted. In particular I am thinking of the environment crisis, so that, for instance, most authorities and experts say that the recurrent and ever more serious winter flooding of the Shkoder region is caused in part by illegal logging and deforestation in the Lura and upper Drin regions.

The international community should also recognise that democracy brings diversity and that the political path followed by the Albanians since 1990 has not been an easy one. The country has not done badly in its extraordinary transformation in such a short period of time, and the youth and energy of the people is a good omen for the future.