

ALBANIA AND KOSOVO – COMMON TIES, COMMON ISSUES

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Abstract: Sharing the same language, culture, and except for the last hundred years, history, Albania and Kosovo are closely tied to each other. With common symbols, history, and geography, the two states have had to build new ways of cooperation in the new millennium, especially in the field of transportation, energy, and tourism. The two societies keep each other in high esteem, there is a social will for further cooperation, as well as a common commitment to European integration, which is even preferred over national integration, as it is obvious that in the twenty-first century it is the European Union that can offer a national union for Albanian people.

Keywords: Albania, Kosovo, Western Balkans, EU integration, Albanian nationalism, Albanian diaspora

Introduction

Albania and Kosovo come to mind for different reasons nowadays (e.g. war or tourism), thus it is easy to forget about their closeness. The Albanian population in these two countries shares the same (or more or less similar) language, traditions and heritage, which were formed in the Ottoman Empire until 1912, and under different conditions since then.

This study does not undertake to give a full picture of the Albanians in the Balkans, nor does it try to picture the state-of-play of the Albanian communities in Serbia, Montenegro, or North Macedonia. It aims to examine Albania and Kosovo, now two independent states,

neighbouring countries, closely connected economies, and societies in transition towards the European Union. Focusing on their current relations, it is also necessary to discuss the past, the historical turning points, to understand the reality of our days. In terms of the future, it is only possible to talk about the ambition the two countries share, the European perspective. The populations of Albania and Kosovo have the same commitment: living in a political union without internal borders, with the possibility to travel and work where they would like to (European Western Balkans, 2021).

Referring to people of Albanian ethnic background who live either in the Republic of Albania or in the Republic of Kosovo may result in confusion. Albanians, but from which country? Except in a historical context, I refer to ethnic Albanians living in the Republic of Kosovo as Kosovars, and to those living in Albania as Albanians, using an epithet when necessary.

Background: Geography, Language and Symbols

Geography and Regions

The most important natural cause that leads to the traditional, non-political differences of Albanian societies is the very special geography. The seaside in Albania is a thin region, going east along enormous mountains, high hills, cliffs, and rocks, which have been impassable for centuries, except from roads that follow rivers and by ascending through passes, as Via Egnatia did from Durrës. These mountains almost completely close Albania off from Kosovo, where even the climate is continental, unlike the Mediterranean climate of Albania. For someone born in a village it was possible to easily move along the rivers, and even reach the sea, but visiting a neighbouring village over the mountains was an almost impossible task. As a result, the development of the language, the habits, and even the vestments resulted in a diversity of dialects, costumes, and traditions.

It is part of the national tradition to have a very strong bond to one's place of origin (village, district, or region), and even if a person lives in the capital or abroad, their family typically keeps a property in their village or town of birth. Regionalism is important in politics as well, the north and the south support their own political blocks in Albania: the Democratic Party of Albania (*Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë*, DS) dominates the north, the ruling Socialist Party of Albania (*Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë*, SP) the south. Until the last elections in 2021, the parties in power in Kosovo represented specific regions: the Democratic League of Kosovo (*Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*) represented the middle of the country, the Llapi region, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (*Partia Demokratike e Kosovës*), which came out of the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, UÇK), is based in Drenica, while the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (*Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës*) represents Dukagjin, the mountainous border to Albania.

The Language

In Albanian-speaking communities, there is a social, political, and linguistic division between the north and the south, which originates in the difference between the southerner “tosk” and the northerner “geg” communities. In this respect, Kosovar Albanians are gegis, and although there are some local characteristics, they belong to the geg linguistic community, which also includes further sub-dialects and regional differences. The grammar and pronunciation of tosk and geg used to be so different that traditionally speakers of the two dialects barely understood each other.

Traditionally, the River Shkumbini in the centre of Albania was considered the boundary between the two communities, leaving Tirana, the capital, predominantly geg, but historical developments have moved the language boundary north. After the communist era, where the leaders were typically southerners, the unified, official, or academic Albanian language is mostly tosk. The intellectuals of the north could speak both dialects, but southerners usually understand but do not speak the northern dialect.

National and State Symbols

Through Albania, the red-and-black Albanian flag (with a black double-headed eagle on a red background) flies over public buildings, castles, and points of special interest. Throughout Kosovo, the same flag flies over private houses, and sometimes over monuments, but public buildings and institutions are decorated with the blue-and yellow flag of Kosovo (the yellow silhouette of the territory of the Republic of Kosovo on a blue background, with six white stars above the silhouette).

State and national symbols express and represent national unity, the bond all members of a nation feel and cherish. The Albanian flag, originally the family standard of the Kastrioti family, became the symbol of all Albanians during the centuries of Ottoman rule. In 2008, the newly formed Republic of Kosovo adopted new state symbols that represent all its ethnic communities through the six stars of its flag. Public conversation in Kosovo has come up with a new term to refer to the flags, and the traditional Albanian red-and-black flag is called the *national flag* (*flamuri kombëtare*), while the new blue-and-yellow flag is the *state flag* (*flamuri shtetëror*).

Historical Relations

Medieval Times and the Ottoman Period

The Ottoman conquest of the land inhabited by Albanians (and other nations) was a long process, starting well before the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Lasting more than a century, it was not only a military but also a diplomatic endeavour, and the Ottoman leaders took advantage of the fact that there was no central power. What is now Albania was dominated by cities by the sea that were under Venetian rule or influence, and by principalities and local chieftains inland. Local rulers formed a special ethnic and political mosaic in Kosovo, which was easy for the Ottomans to handle, and by the middle of the fifteenth century, the Ottoman Empire ruled the region.

The Ottoman period meant the biggest social change to date for Albanian society, where they were allowed to live anywhere in the region, and the majority of the population converted to Islam from Christianity. The process was not fast, and some sources (Malcom, 2002, 130) refer to the coexistence of Christianity and Islam even within one family, but the majority did convert by the middle of the sixteenth century.

Although there was a change in faith, religion has never been an issue in Albanian society. Families could incorporate members of different faith and accept that family members join another family of a different faith. Among Albanians, this has never been a question of tolerance, as one does not have to tolerate something that one respects. *Albanians respect the Albanian identity, of which religion is only an attribute.* Under the Ottoman rule, the region was administered as part of one unit, the Rumelia Eyalet, until 1877, then four, ethnically heterogeneous vilayets were set up, covering the territory of recent-day Albania and Kosovo, the vilayets of Kosovo¹, Shkoder, Janine, and Manastir,² among others. Despite the geographical differences, and with the local Ottoman leaders having the real influence (Albanians were rarely nominated to these positions, although the community played an important role at the highest levels of the Porte), more or less the same rules applied to all the inhabitants of these ethnically heterogeneous administrative units. As elsewhere, the nineteenth century also meant a national awakening for Albanians, with a will for unity and demands against the Ottoman government. Starting from the Treaty of San Stefano (1878), all the nations of the Balkans started to seek the division of the Ottoman Empire, trying to secure as much territory as possible.

Albanians were fundamentally loyal to the Ottoman Empire, and as Muslims they usually enjoyed positions in the administration and typically found their place in the Ottoman system, which was facing increasing challenges from the nationalistic movements and offered less protection to the Albanian community. The Albanian national movement awakened

1 The former vilayet of Kosovo covered the territories of today's Serbia (Nis), Bosnia, and North-Macedonia (Skopje), constituting a geographically different administrative unit from today's Republic of Kosovo.

2 Now the city is called Bitola (North Macedonia).

after San Stefano, and in 1878 the League of Prizren summoned the Albanian leaders for the first time, expressing the will of Albanians to be administered in one vilayet. As the Ottoman Empire was ready to cede territories that were considered Albanian soil by the members of the League, loyalty soon turned into hostility, and then an armed conflict that the Porte could defeat, and *the Ottoman identity of the Albanian population turned into an Albanian identity for good*. The political struggle continued with the League of Peja (1899) and the League of Manastir (1905). It is important to note that of the three seats of the leagues, none is located in modern-day Albania.

Independent Albania and Yugoslavia

As a result of the Balkan wars (1912), the state of Albania appeared on the map for the first time in history. It was independent, but for the contemporary Albanians, it was deprived of great parts of its land and population, losing it to Montenegro, Serbia (the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), and Greece. The city of Shkodra, claimed by Montenegro, was returned to Albania by the Conference of Ambassadors in London in 1913, which was the last lasting result of the Austrian-Hungarian efforts and is still well remembered locally (Pearson, 2004).

Declaring the independence of Albania in November 1912, delegates were invited to Vlora from all the lands inhabited (or claimed to be inhabited) by Albanians, including Ohrid, Struga (later ceded to Serbia, now North Macedonia), Peja, Gjakova (ceded to Serbia, now Kosovo), and Janina (Greece). By August 1913, the independence of Albania was finalized, as were the borders of the new state, followed by a mass movement of populations.

The interwar period of Albania was dominated by Ahmed Zogu, Prime Minister, then President, and later King of Albania, under whose rule the first major investments into infrastructure, urban planning, and the modernization of administration drastically reshaped the country.

Establishing a bond between Albania and Hungary, King Zog married Hungarian Countess Geraldine Apponyi, making her the first (and last) Queen of Albania.

As for Kosovo, it became part of the Kingdom of Serbia in 1912. The 87 years when Kosovo was part of Serbia or Yugoslavia were tumultuous (with an intermission during World War II, when it was under Italian and later German rule, and a part of Kosovo was united with Albania). It was a long period characterized by conflicts, violence, and struggle, as well as, especially in the period between 1950-1980, by economic development, industrialization, and peaceful cohabitation.

As the two countries both self-proclaimed to have been liberated by their own communist-led partisan units, in 1948 the idea of Albania joining Yugoslavia as its seventh republic was even voted for (Zickel & Iwaskiw, 1994). After the Tito-Stalin split (1948), Albania broke with Yugoslavia, then after Khrushchev's famous speech in 1956, it broke with the Soviet Union, and in 1978, after a new phase of US-China relations, it broke with China as well. As a result, Albania fell into economic and political isolation, closing all ties to the world.

During the same time, ethnic tension eased in Tito's Yugoslavia during the sixties and seventies, making room for economic prosperity and a more comfortable way of life. In Enver Hoxha's Albania, although they had some undeniable results in terms of industrialization, the use of hydropower, and transportation, the Stalinist ideology ruled everything, establishing total repression over the population.

The Kosovar diaspora in Germany and Switzerland started to grow as the Yugoslav "Gastarbeiters" arrived to Germany from the 1960s, counting hundreds of thousands of people by 1990, and creating the financial, social, and professional network that became essential by the Kosovo War. In contrast, Albanians were forced to give up all their contacts in Albania, and by the end of the 1980s, the possession of a radio capable of receiving foreign broadcasts was considered a crime. With a bit of exaggeration, *by the time Kosovars had satellite TVs, Albanians were forced to give up their radios.*

The Fall of Communism and the Kosovo Question

In communist Albania, schools, movies, books and poems discussed the question of Kosovo, and the fact that there was an Albanian “country” over the borders. Students were taught that they were there, and from 1981, even Enver Hoxha sometimes spoke publicly about the oppression of Albanians in Kosovo. After the fall of communism in Albania in 1992, the country opened up, and the Albanian government dedicated itself to the issue of Kosovo. After 1991, following a referendum on its independence that was not recognized internationally, Kosovo introduced a parallel state led by Ibrahim Rugova, with representation abroad in Tirana, Albania (Albanian Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

It is important to emphasize the welcome Albania and the Albanians gave Kosovar refugees in 1999, during the Kosovo War. Approximately 450,000 Kosovars (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1999, 321) arrived to a country of 3 million inhabitants, meaning that all regions and cities, be they northerners or southerners, welcomed, helped, and accommodated Kosovar families.

The border between Albania and Kosovo is long, mountainous, very difficult to control, and easy to penetrate. In 1999, many UÇK units operated in the area, receiving supplies through Albanian territory. The Albanian military was not involved in the conflict, but weapons that had once belonged to the (communist) Albanian army “disappeared” in 1997, after the collapse of the Albanian state due to the losses generated by a Ponzi scheme, and they often ended up in Kosovo, helping the UÇK (Jarvis, 2000).

Since 1999, in a unique situation, Albania and Kosovo have been able to cooperate on their own (until 2008 they could do so under international governance, since then, at least in these bilateral relations, in a sovereign manner). The starting point was more than difficult, the basic infrastructure was non-existent in Albania, while it had been destroyed in Kosovo, and their economies were in a state after a total collapse in Albania and after a war in Kosovo. The chance to reach out to the

Kosovar diaspora was limited, and by losing the best of the population, the diaspora from Albania just started to build up. 23 years have passed since then, and both countries have changed fundamentally, providing the opportunity to work on shared economic projects, and reaching out to each other on transport and energy issues.

Economic Relations, Transportation, Energy, Tourism

Compared to no relations in the communist era, Albania and Kosovo have now developed a brand new transportation system and cooperate in electrical energy distribution, as well as boosting tourism.

Transportation and the Nations Highway

Traditionally Via Egnatia was the most important way passing through modern-day Albania, with no network connecting it to Kosovo. Therefore, until the 2010s, visiting Tirana from Prishtina meant passing through two borders via Skopje and driving eight hours, so except for professional reasons, visiting Tirana from Kosovo was a whole-day endeavour, not a neighbourly visit, and only those who had business there did so, and vice versa.

With the greatest investment in Albanian history to date, the Albanian government started a project to change this situation in 2006, opening up a transportation axis between the two capitals and creating a previously non-existent connection in terrain where even construction work was difficult to imagine. With a joint venture of US and Turkish companies, a brand new highway of 114 km was opened by 2009, and this new road has created a new reality (Revista Monitor, 2016).

In Kosovo, construction started on the new highway from the Albanian border to the capital city of Prishtina in 2010, and it was finished in 2013. Since then, there is a direct, easily accessible, and fast connection

between the two countries, helped by the fact that as a result of cooperation between the two governments, there is only one passport control for passengers in each direction, with the ambition to abolish all controls in the near future.³

This new reality means a drastic change not only in economic relations but also in everyday life. Passing the weekend at the Albanian seaside is now a reality for the citizens of Kosovo. The Albanian section of the Tirana-Prishtina highway is called the Nations Highway (*Rruga e Kombit*), while the Kosovar section was named after the late president Ibrahim Rugova.

The road now ends in Prishtina, but it is under construction to Merdare, the Kosovo-Serbia border, and construction works are at last also ongoing in Serbia (Bjelotomic, 2018), improving the quality of the existing road from the border village of Merdare to the Serbian town of Niš, and turning it into a real highway. When finished, Kosovo and Albania will have their first connection to the European highway system, accelerating logistics, transportation, and hopefully boosting not only tourism but production as well.

The Nations Highway is also key to the new endeavour of the Albanian aeronautics sector and passes by the recently opened Kukës Airport, which makes it possible for citizens from Kosovo and northern Albania to travel from a new destination.

Electricity and a Common Grid

The basis of an economy is the infrastructure, accessibility, and the use of synergies. The Nations Highway was the first major investment of great success, the next step is the use of synergies, which in Albania's case is the production and transmission of electricity. Albania is one

3 During a trial phase this past summer, between 1 July-30 September, 2022, there was no passport and customs control during public holidays and weekends at the land border crossing between Albania and Kosovo based on an agreement between the two governments.

of the cleanest countries concerning energy production, almost all the power produced in the country is generated by hydroelectric power stations (Gegprifti, 2019), although these only cover 80% of the country's needs. On the other hand, Kosovo has one of the dirtiest energy productions, and its aging and technically obsolete power plants burn lignite (World Bank, 2013), polluting the air and the environment. Approaching Prishtina, one cannot avoid seeing the chimneys of the Kosovo 1 and 2 power stations, and the smoke rising towards the sky.

As a heritage from Yugoslav times, Kosovo has access to the international electricity network, which provides access to the international energy market, but troubled relations make operating the network complicated. With an investment of almost EUR 30 million, a new power line has been built parallel to the Nations Highway (Likmeta, 2021), connecting the energy network of Albania and Kosovo, and allowing Kosovo to be part of the European energy system in its own right (Koleka, 2020). As hydropower generation is subject to weather, rainfall, and different environmental conditions, while lignite-burning thermoelectric power plants can produce energy in a very stable way, the two sources, as synergies, could help stabilize the situation of electrical energy in both countries.

Since June 2020, Albania and Kosovo form their own regulatory block based on an agreement signed between transmission system operator company KOSTT and the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E) (van Uijtregt, 2020).

Despite this development, Albania and Kosovo have recently been facing an energy crisis, as the price of electricity is soaring on the international market, and regarding the energy generated by hydroelectric power plants, due to a lack of rain, almost half of the electricity consumed has to be imported in Albania (Bytyci, 2022). Due to the obsolete power plants and problematic grid network, electricity has always been an issue in Kosovo, but now the long-forgotten generators are back in use again (Euractiv, 2021).

Tourism

Tourism plays an important role in Albania-Kosovo relations, usually with Kosovars coming to Albania to enjoy the seaside. With a shore of approximately 320 km, Albania has huge potential, which has been unused or underused for a long time but is now becoming an engine of economic development.

The Albanian tourism industry focuses on the south of the country, especially south of Vlora, where the Ionian Sea offers great beaches. As a major investment, the new Airport of Vlora is under construction, just like a new highway under the Llogara Pass, which reduces the time needed to get there by several hours. This area is a focal point for foreign tourists, and a significant and increasing number of Scandinavian, German, Czech, Polish, and even Serbian citizens arrive there annually.

International tourism is booming, in the summer season Albania is even open for countries whose citizens usually need a visa to enter the country. Citizens of India, Egypt, Qatar, Bahrein, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Russia only need their passport, without any further procedures. Although the Albanian government is committed to 100% CFSP alignment, and as a UN Security Council member, it is working closely with the US on the sanctions on Russia, Russian tourists are still welcome (Tirana Times, 2022).

Kosovar tourism focuses on the centre of Albania, the area around Durrës, the most important port of the country, where Kosovars have built many settlements to house weekend homes, and the northern area around Shëngjin, at the end of the Nations Highway.

2020 and 2021 were special years for tourism everywhere, as the COVID-19 pandemic devastated the industry. Unlike other destinations of tourism, Albania decided to keep open, allowing foreigners to come, but it still lost hundreds of thousands of tourists from the EU countries. During these two years, the key of survival for the Albanian tourism sector was the inflow of Kosovars and Albanians from North Macedonia, who kept the hotels and restaurants running in the southern area as well. As previously stated, ties

have never been as close between Kosovars and Southern Albanians as the ties with Northerners, and it is a positive effect of the pandemic that it has brought people closer to each other.

The Albanian and Kosovar Diaspora

An additional but extremely important part of the Albanian nation and Albanian and Kosovar society is the diaspora that has emerged through the centuries, now a million-strong community with strong ties to their land of origin. In the communist era, the Albanian and Kosovar diasporas were on different tracks, but nowadays these two entities are on the verge of forming close ties outside Albania as well.

There is always a reason why people leave their home, and the reason is usually connected to security or the economy. In the case of the Albanian diaspora, the first wave of Albanians fled their homeland and arrived to Italy in the fifteenth century, during the time of the Ottoman conquest. They founded a unique Albanian community in the south of Italy, the Arbëreshes (Arbëresh is an old form of Albanian), which still flourishes today. With approximately 100,000 people speaking a special, ancient form of Albanian and another 150,000 belonging to this community without speaking the language, they preserve poems, tales, and a dialect long lost on the other shore of the sea (Bruni, 2004).

After the fall of communism, Italy was the number one destination from Albania. The ties between the two countries date back to Roman times, and even during the communist era, speaking and understanding Italian was common. Italy has always been the most influential country for the Albanian culture and economy. Unlike the Arbëresh community, the modern diaspora is there in all Italian centres, from Naples and Rome to the north Italian economic centres, counting 500,000 people (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2014). Emerging since the fall of communism, the Albanian diaspora is a generation younger than the Kosovar one.

Concerning the Kosovar diaspora or the modern Albanian diaspora in the EU countries (as well as the US, Canada, and Australia), the reasons for immigration are mostly economic in nature. As the “Wirtschaftswunder”-era West Germany was in need of a workforce, multi-ethnic Yugoslavia was ready to provide it, establishing the first wave of ethnic Albanian “settlers” in Germany. Based on their experiences, especially after the start of tensions in Kosovo in the 1980s, a second wave of Kosovars arrived to Germany and Switzerland, where this less educated, but capable and committed population soon became an integral part of the construction sector, or in the case of Switzerland, the waste management industry. They did not cut their ties to their homeland, keeping and developing property there, and creating the influx of homecoming Kosovars at the borders around public and school holidays.

In terms of numbers, 300,000 ethnic Albanians live in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021), while 250,000 people live in Switzerland, mostly of Kosovar origin, and to a smaller extent from North Macedonia (Burri Sharani et al., 2010). In fact, almost half of the Swiss National Soccer team was from an ethnic Albanian background at one point (McVitie, 2016).

This diaspora is well integrated into the local society, the second generation, which was educated there, speaks the language perfectly, with all positions open to them. Ethnic Albanians typically come from a Muslim background, but without any real attraction to religion, especially to its formalities in clothing and appearance, and they are an integral part of the society and only switch from German to Albanian at home, where they live their social life together, supporting and helping other members of the community. Young Albanians often marry other Albanians, saving their precious Albanian world for family life while proudly identifying as an integral part of their new homeland as well.

As the official population of Albania is approximately 3,000,000 people, and Kosovo has a population of 1,800,000, migration is a social and national issue.

Unlike in the EU countries, the term “migration” does not refer to the population that arrives to the country in Albania and Kosovo but to the

population that is leaving the country. This is a fundamental difference that results in the depopulation of Albania and Kosovo, with migration strengthening the diaspora but weakening the homeland. Second-generation Albanians spend the summer holidays with their grandparents, creating or strengthening the bond between them and their homeland, while those belonging to the third generation accompany their parents, who show them their former family homes. New destinations have become attractive to live and work during the last decade for Albanians, especially as Germany has opened its market to the Albanian workforce. Secondary schools for nurses offer education in German and even potential workplaces in Germany after graduation (Kersting, 2016). Soon a second, non-Kosovar Albanian diaspora is going to emerge in Germany or Switzerland, as usually Kosovars and Albanians know about each other but do not really mingle. Maybe this will change as well.

Statehood and Politics

No one questions the statehood of Albania, the country is a member of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, OSCE, and NATO. It is an active and respected state in the region, a candidate for EU membership awaiting the start of the negotiations, and it recently became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the period 2022–2023.

Kosovo has only been recognized as an independent and sovereign state by 97 countries, with 15 countries (mainly smaller African or Pacific countries) that once recognized its statehood withdrawing their recognition, as a success of the Serbian diplomatic offensive to convince the them to do so, Ghana being the biggest Serbian success in this undertaking (Palickova, 2019). Five members of the EU (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) still refuse to recognize Kosovo's independence, while Hungary did so on 19 March, 2008.

This means that Kosovo is not a member of the United Nations, cannot talk to the European Union as a state, and its international capability to act is limited. Until it reaches a final and comprehensive agreement with Serbia,

no progress can be made, just like no progress on Serbia's EU membership is likely without this agreement (although talks are ongoing).

As a result of the Russian war on Ukraine, Russia has left the Council of Europe, so Kosovo now sees a good opportunity to join one more international organization (Taylor, 2022), a step that is essential in the long run for joining the European Union.

Political Life and Bilateral Relations

Political life in Albania is dominated by two major political parties, which basically represent the north and south of the country, in the form of a mostly southerner Socialist Party and a mainly northerner Democratic Party. Based on geography, governments led by the Democratic Party have focused more on the relations with Kosovo, while former President/Prime Minister Sali Berisha used an especially pro-Kosovo rhetoric. The Socialist Party, in government since 2013, uses a very pragmatic approach towards Kosovo, especially regarding the infrastructure leading to it, as they have gone from initial opposition to recently funding reconstruction, maintenance, and even development. As discussed previously, the new transportation connection has set up a new economic reality, from which Albania benefits substantially, boosting economic growth, which is the focus of the government.

Until 2021, Kosovo's governments were dominated by traditional parties of parallel structures, or the UÇK movements. Growing to prominence during the 2010s, during the last elections in 2021, Self-Determination (*Lëvizja Vetëvendosje*), a former popular movement, won most of the votes for the first time in the history of independent Kosovo, governing Kosovo with more focus on national interest, and less on solving long-standing international conflicts.

Since 2013, Albania has been governed by Prime Minister Edi Rama, who won an unprecedented third consecutive term in 2021, while Kosovo has had five different prime ministers during the same

period. Current Prime Minister Albin Kurti holds the position for the second time, which has meant six governments in nine years in Kosovo, during which period having joint governmental meetings has become a tradition. One of the priorities for Albanian foreign policy is to promote Kosovo's independence, also using its membership in international organizations to advocate for Kosovo.

Travel: Visa and Citizenship Issues

For the citizens of the European Union, visas and passports are thankfully not part of everyday life, but for the approximately 18 million citizens of the Western Balkans, they are. Unlike European travellers using their ID, the citizens of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia must present their passport upon entering the Schengen zone, while the citizens of Kosovo are obliged to apply for a visa before travelling.

Kosovo is the only country in the region whose citizens have to do so, and so its citizens face extra difficulties entering the European Union. Of course, visa liberalization is a challenging technical procedure, but since 2018 the European Commission has acknowledged that Kosovo has met the criteria for liberalization and fulfilled the necessary benchmarks (European Commission, 2018), but there has still not been a decision from the Council.

For ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, Albania is close. According to Albanian legislation, there is a VIP possibility, an honorary citizenship for athletes, artists, and those who have made a significant contribution to the Albanian state (Mejdini, 2019). Even for those ethnic Albanians who do not qualify as VIPs, it is possible to obtain Albanian citizenship (Law on Albanian Citizenship, 1998), which grants them the right to travel.

At the regional level, the Open Balkans initiative, promoted by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, aims to ensure that from 1 January, 2023, the citizens of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia are allowed to travel without border controls in the three countries, and that labour force and services can move freely, just like they do in the European Union, which why this initiative has also been called “Mini-Schengen” (Ristić, 2021).

Although the European Union supports the initiative, the three other Western Balkan countries are still either reluctant or hostile towards it, especially Kosovo, although it had initially agreed to join the initiative as part of the Kosovo and Serbia economic normalization agreements⁴. As a paramount opponent of the initiative, when Albin Kurti returned to the Prime Minister's Office of Kosovo in 2021, he refused to sign the agreement or negotiate any more on the issue, claiming that it is only a way for Serbia to gain influence in the region, and that all cooperation should happen with the presence and participation of the European Union (Euronews Albania, 2021). However, he is ready to remove all the obstacles of free movement between Kosovo and Albania on a bilateral basis. Although it is technically and legally challenging, there is a good chance that it will soon be a reality to drive through the region without border crossings, saving time and offering better access to the respective countries.

National Unity

Greater Albania

As for public opinion, there is real social support for national unification, a united Albania and Kosovo, although it is necessary to clarify the relevant terminology.

The most important fact concerning Greater Albania is that this term hardly exists in Albanian, and although this phrase can be translated into Albanian, it is not in common use. Talking about a greater entity presupposes that this entity existed, or there were real ideas to form it. However, Greater Albania never existed, as Albania did not exist until 1912. To refer to the territories where the Albanian population once lived or was supposed to live, the Albanian term “Trojet shqiptare”, meaning ‘Albanian lands’, or sometimes “Shqipëria etnike”, ‘ethnic Albania’, is in use, technically covering the territory of the four vilayets in the Ottoman Empire, which were heterogeneously populated during that time.

4 Signed in Washington on 4 September, 2020.

Concerning Albania and Kosovo, establishing even closer cultural and economic ties, coordinating in foreign policy, focusing on their common interests and representing them together is a political reality, and the two countries are naturally bounded to each other.

Unification is something else. Despite what the polls and surveys show, the two countries spent the last 100 years in different political and geopolitical environments, which has resulted in different political mentalities, and the differences of the north and the south remain part of everyday life. There may be Albanians in the northern regions who feel closer to Kosovars than to the people of the south, but in the south of Albania, the majority would certainly consider even the possibility of unification the undesired rule of the North on the South.

Public Opinion

The Kosovo Foundation for Open Society and the Open Society Foundation for Albania published a detailed study in 2019 (Demi & Çeka, 2019) focusing on public opinion concerning the relations of the two countries in various fields. Talking about Albanian and Kosovar relations, one question asked whether Albanians have ever been to Kosovo, and vice versa. 88.7% of Kosovars say they have visited Albania, mostly for tourism (89.9%), while only 31.6% of the Albanians have been to Kosovo, although 88.3% of them would like to pay a visit there in the future.

Public opinion values the official cooperation between the two countries, but there is further room for improvement, according to 61.4% of Albanians and 55.8% of Kosovars. A very important fact, especially concerning the future, is that citizens totally agree that pre-university curricula and textbooks should be unified (67.9% of Albanians, 58.2% of Kosovars). As a big support for the above-mentioned Open Balkans initiative, there is substantial support on both sides for the abolition of customs between the countries (74.8% of Albanians and 57.5% of Kosovars), as according to general consensus, both countries are profiting from enhanced cooperation (75.6% of Albanians and 58.5% of Kosovars).

The perhaps most important finding concerns people's attitude towards national unification, 63% of the responders in Albania and 54% in Kosovo were in favour of it, with only 16% opposing it. Would there be a chance to vote, 75% of the Albanians and 64% of the Kosovars would vote for it. However, the majority does not think national unification is a possibility (only 23% of the Albanians and 17% of Kosovars do so), mostly due to the international factor and the resistance of Serbia. Still, 46.5% of Albanians and 29.6% of Kosovars see national and European integration as complementary processes, and if they had to choose between national and European integration, European integration would prevail, with 84.7% in Albania and 66.4% in Kosovo preferring it.

National Unity in Recent Politics

Recent developments, the highway, and the energy connection have brought Kosovars and North Albanians close, and in the future this process will most probably deepen, with geography a key element, as always: they are close to each other, and the mountains are now also accessible. There has been a Kosovar presence in Shëngjin and Velipoja, Lezha and Shkodra, as well as an Albanian presence in Prizren and Peja, and these bonds are expected to deepen.

The reality in Albania is that the economic centre is in the south, and most income is generated there, and now even the capital, Tirana is part of this region. The differences are not as big as they used to be, and there is more openness towards northerners, but the difference is still there.

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has spoken about having a common president (Janjevic, 2018), and Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti has said how he would vote for unifying Albania and Kosovo (Crowcroft, 2021), so the issue is sometimes even discussed in a positive tone at the highest possible levels, although these statements tend to be for the benefit of the public, without any further steps or consequences. There are joint governmental meetings, there are agreements, but in the end, these happen as part of bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

Although unification is an issue, it is not a goal. Both countries aspire to join the European Union, where the four freedoms would create a situation of de facto unification, as the same rules would apply to everyone. This is also the aspiration of Serbia and North Macedonia, while Greece is already a member of the bloc. They know both in Prishtina and in Tirana that the only option to include all the “Albanian lands” with their heterogenous population in one political entity is the European Union.

International Perspective

National unity outside the European Union would mean a drastic change in regional political reality, and it may even have global negative repercussions. First of all, even though Serbia has its issues with Kosovo, they are now in close cooperation with Albania, economic and political relations between the two are flourishing, and Tirana would certainly not risk this respected partnership. Secondly, a Greater Albania would raise questions about its capital, national elite, and influence. Although the two societies are cooperating and have close ties to each other, once again, for the southern citizens Greater Albania would risk a rule of the north, which they are not willing to see. The figures of the poll above indicate that Albanian society is much more eager and enthusiastic about national unity than Kosovars (63% in Albania, 54% in Kosovo). Unfortunately, there is no available data concerning the share of Albanian opinion within the country, but it is likely that the absolute enthusiasm of the north is facing a much moderate approach in the south.

Of course, there are legal issues as well, most importantly the Constitution of Kosovo openly declares that Kosovo shall not seek a union with any state or part of any state (Constitution of Kosovo, Article 1(3), 2008). The Constitution of Albania does not mention the issue of unification, but there is an obligation to protect the national rights of Albanian people who live outside Albania's borders (Constitution of Albania, Article 8(1), 1998). Throughout the long process of creating the Constitution of Kosovo as part of the Ahtisaari Plan (United Nations Security Council, 2007), the obligation against unification was one of the first fundamental principles on which the whole process was built.

As the statehood of Kosovo is still an issue in international relations, even the closest and most supportive partners would never consider giving up this principle. Close cooperation between Albania and Kosovo is most appreciated, bilaterally and at the regional level, but it is cooperation, not unification that the international community can support.

Conclusion

In the history of the region, Albania and Kosovo have shared a common fate except for the last 100 years, and now they are part of the international community as two states, culturally and economically close, but different sovereign entities. Separated right before the industrialization of the Balkans, substantial investments have been necessary to connect them in the modern way, but now their infrastructure of transport and electricity enables them to work on building an interconnected economy. As the two economies develop, the cultural differences will certainly diminish, and the distancing of southerners concerning Kosovo and Kosovars will ease, leading to cultural unity, economic cooperation, and as a common dream, close partnership in the European Union.

After a troubled past, conflicts, wars, and suffering, European integration is the only way for the future. Of course, there is a price to pay for this, but it is worth it. Albania has almost completely rebuilt its entire justice system to this end, and North Macedonia has even changed its name. It is a long, troubled, and winding road, without the unification of Albania and Kosovo but with the peaceful coexistence of the two countries, as well as their diasporas of Albanians, wherever they live in the European Union.

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