

The complexity of heritage and societal development – The example of Gjirokastra, Albania

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Abstract - Albania is formerly the most closed country in Europe and has suffered from severe economic and political problems during the last two decades. In the southern part lies Gjirokastra, birthplace of former dictator Enver Hoxha, and home to diverse communities of Albanians and Greeks. Gjirokastra Old Town, proclaimed “Museum City” by the regime in 1961 and later turned into a UNESCO World Heritage City, climbs the steep western side of the Drinos valley. During the communist era the city was heavily industrialized with a metal work factory as well as factories for products such as shoes, refrigerators, and umbrellas. On the eastern side is the archaeological site of the ancient city of Antigonea, thus defining a landscape with long historical processes and a multitude of narratives and interpretations.

In recent years this landscape has witnessed increased efforts to secure what are perceived heritage values, focusing on the older structures i.e. the world heritage part of the city and the archaeological site. However, the structures of post-war era of Albania contribute significantly to the full context of the landscape, but since the mid-1990s and the collapse of Albanian post-communist economy the former industrial sites are increasingly deteriorating. Parallel with severe economic problems with massive volumes of unemployed, a criminally based economy on drug trafficking is increasing.

This paper will discuss the societally based problems in securing different heritage assets for a positive societal development.

Keywords – heritage, regional development, Albania

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Gjirokastra and the Drinos valley – Introduction

The Drinos valley in southern Albania represents several layers of historical remains representing not only a complex history but also a multitude of challenges for sustainable landscape development and heritage management. The valley, running in a southeast to northwest orientation with steep mountainsides, has since antiquity been an important communication link and is the setting for UNESCO World Heritage City Gjirokastra as well as the archaeological remains of the ancient city of Antigonea. The dominant agricultural character of the valley including the small villages on the mountainsides, bear witness of longstanding traditional farming.

Historic development

Gjirokastra was established early through its strategic position with its citadel built in the 13th century. In 1419 Gjirokastra became part of the Ottoman Empire and was developed into an administrative centre for the region. The old part of the city is characterized by the fortified tower houses typical for the Ottoman Empire.¹



Figure 1. Map over Albania (Source: www.nationsonline.org, accessed August 25, 2015)

¹ Mezini, Ledita & Dorina Pojani (2014) “Defence, identity and urban form: the extreme case of Gjirokastra”, in: *Planning perspectives*, Volume 30, Issue 3

The architectural tradition dates back in history, but most of the buildings in Gjirokastra was erected during the 18th and 19th centuries, and mixes the Ottoman style with local components such as the lack of gender based quarters and the distinctive exterior features in stone created by the use of the local building material. In 1912 Albania become independent but it took to 1921 before the southern border became ratified, following the First World War. During World War II Gjirokastra was occupied in periods by either the Italians or the Germans resulting in the formation of a partisan resistance movement. In 1944 the region was liberated through the efforts of the partisans, and Gjirokastra became the centre for the liberation of whole Albania which was accomplished in November 1944.²

Enver Hoxha, born in Gjirokastra and the General Secretary of the Albanian Communist party in 1943, became the leader of Albania after the war much because of his ability to unify the fragmented partisan movement. Under his leadership up to his death in 1985 Albania developed into an increasingly isolated nation under a regime inspired by Soviet under Stalin's leadership, with massive number of dissidents put into hard labour camps. But the regime also brought about industrialization often in a small scale, electricity to remote regions, intentions to become self-sufficient through agricultural development, free education and health care, and the equal status between women and men.³



Figure 2. The Drinos valley, view from Antigonea
(Photo: Bosse Lagerqvist)

The industrialization in Gjirokastra under the communist period resulted in the creation of factories for cutlery, shoes, clothing, cigarettes, umbrellas and similar light industrial products. The factories were located close by the main road going through the valley, on some distance from the old city thus providing the base for expanding

²http://www.gjirokastra.org/sub_links/about_sub/about_history.html (accessed August 21, 2015)

³ Gjirokastra the essential guide (2009) Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization. ISBN 978-99956-747-0-0

the city without interfering with the old parts. This was probably due to the fact that the heritage values of the old part of Gjirokastra, was recognized early by the regime.⁴

During the last years of communist rule under heavily decreased economy, efforts were made to keep people in employment thus enforcing the small industries to take in far more employees then what was needed. By the final collapse of the regime thousands became out of work in a short time and were forced to move either to Tirana or abroad. The whole Albanian society became unstable and at that time the large statue of Envar Hoxha, erected just 7 years previously was pulled down. The site for the statue is today functioning as a viewpoint and car park.⁵

After the fall of the communist regime in 1992 a slow development in a market economy based society without any experience from such paradigm begun, which in the Albanian context implied a complex scheme of pyramid savings in order to finance a growing business life. In retrospective this was a very chaotic period peaking in 1997 with the collapse of these pyramid schemes resulting in huge losses of life savings for a great number of Albanians.⁶

As with the situation in 1992, the financial crash in 1997 resulted in massive civil unrest such as the burning and damaging of the bazaar area in Gjirokastra and a population struggling to survive in an increasingly violent and lawless environment. Societal functions necessary to maintain and restore the old parts of Gjirokastra ceased to exist.⁷

Opportunities and challenges for the societal development of the Drinos valley

Presently the local economy of Gjirokastra is based on agriculture, predominantly fruits, vegetables, animal husbandry and dairy products. The former industrial sites are more or less abandoned.

Agriculture will continue to be the major base for economic development in the region but there are factors that constitute problems presently and for the future development.⁸

⁴ Gjirokastra the essential guide (2009)

⁵ http://www.gjirokastra.org/sub_links/about_sub/about_history.html (accessed August 21, 2015)

⁶ Jarvis, Cristopher "The Rise and Fall of Albania's Pyramid Schemes", in: *Finance & Development*, March 2000, Vol 37, Number 1. International Monetary Fund.

⁷ <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2000/03/jarvis.htm>

⁸ http://www.gjirokastra.org/sub_links/about_sub/about_history.html (accessed August 21, 2015)

⁸ Valbona Duri,(2011) "The economic situation in the district of Gjirokastra after the year of 1990. Trends and perspectives", in: *European Scientific Journal*, vol 13. ISSN 1857-7431)



Figure 3. Statue in Gjirokastra of Enver Hoxha, erected after his death in 1985 and demolished in 1992. (Source: https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monumenti_i_Enver_Hoxh%C3%ABs_n%C3%AB_Gjirokast%C3%ABr Accessed August 21, 2015)

There are a small number of farms with a small-scale economy with 1-2 cows and between 10 to 30 sheep and goats. Livestock is however important and 55% of the farmers build their economy on this, while at the same time lacking experience of operating in a free-market economy. In the region there are about 7,800 cows, 145,000 sheep and 40,000 goats, and from these dairy products and meat are produced and sold mostly locally and regionally. Gjirokastra. 40% of the farmers deal only with crops, but there is an absence of different high quality seeds. The agricultural economy has big potentials but some problems need to be managed such as improving the irrigation systems, to secure sites for products processing.⁹

The **tourist industry** is easily recognized as an increasing economic base where the Drinos valley constitutes a potential resource for natural and cultural oriented tourism. The firm base of the region in agricultural production forms a natural base for local food traditions which might be seen as a resource for a sensitive development of sustainable tourism combining nature and culture.

The cultural and historical foundations for developing a tourism economy rests on the heritage values of primarily Gjirokastra old city, the archaeological site of Antigonea and the fact that the Drinos valley has long standing traditions as an important communication route. The former communist regime declared Gjirokastra as a Museum City in 1961 and could organize massive restoration works through volunteer youth brigades.¹⁰ In 2005 Gjirokastra was inscribed on the World Heritage List of UNESCO.

⁹ http://horizont-albania.weebly.com/uploads/4/1/5/3/4153222/profile_of_gjirokastira_region.pdf (accessed August 21, 2015)

¹⁰ Gjirokastra the essential guide (2009)

Of growing interest and concern for the heritage area are also the remains of contemporary history such as the system of command tunnels from the communist era situated in the rock under the fortress, or the widespread network of small bunkers. Much of this heritage and its preservation are depending on the efforts by individuals, on a more systematic level there is a lack of experience from working with contested heritage.¹¹

Of definitely more severe nature and constituting a massive challenge for societal development, is the establishment of a **hub for drug traffic** in the Balkan region since the 1990s, primarily heroin from Afghanistan to Europe and the production of Albanian cannabis.¹² The trail from South America to Europe (cocaine) is however based on other European countries. Albania is part of the western branch of the Balkan route of heroin in South-East Europe, and provides transfer to primarily Italy. Although the Balkan route is considered to be the main import structure of heroin to Europe low quantities of seizures has been made within the Balkan region. This might depend on large quantities being split and repacked into smaller portions within the region through well organised systems, an indication on that this is going on is that repackaging and storage activities has been found in e.g. Albania¹³

Through secured distribution links in combination with corruptible parts of the society few seizures of heroin are actually made. Albania's main role in the drug traffic is focused, however, on cannabis. The Albanian cannabis, produced from cannabis herb, is normally shipped from ports in north-western Greece to destinations in Western and Central Europe. Within the southern part of the district of Gjirokastra is one of Albania's largest cannabis cultivation sites situated.¹⁴ Given the background to the economic situation in Albania it is perhaps not strange that young people start a career in drug business, when 1 kg of cannabis herb was priced to 300 US\$ within Albania in 2012.¹⁵

¹¹ Myhrberg, Karin (2011) Heritage from the Communist Period in Albania – An Unwanted Heritage Today? University of Gothenburg, Department of Conservation, ISSN 1101-3303, ISRN GU/KUV—11/9—SE, <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/29221>

¹² The illicit drug trade through South-Eastern Europe, UNODC United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UN March 2014. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Illicit_DT_through_SEE_REPORT_2014_web.pdf. (accessed 20 August, 2015)

¹³ EU Drug Markets Report. A strategic analysis.(2013) European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. pp. 31-<http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/drug-markets> (accessed 21 August, 2015)

¹⁴ The illicit drug trade through South-Eastern Europe, UNODC, p 100, See also The Guardian, 17th June 2014

¹⁵ The illicit drug trade through South-Eastern Europe, UNODC, p 101

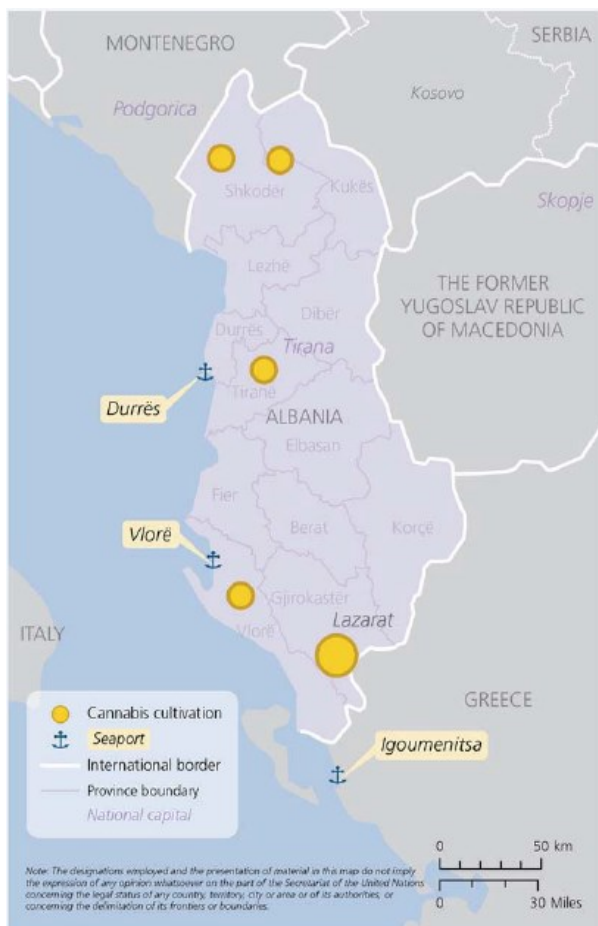


Figure 4. Reported cannabis cultivation areas in Albania. (Source: The illicit drug trade through South-Eastern Europe, UNODC, p 100)

Heritage as base for development

The crucial question is if heritage and heritage related activities could constitute an alternative to criminal networks, for individuals possibilities to make a living especially the younger generation. This is not a problem limited to the Balkans, in the Naples area in Italy, the NGO Cultura contro Camorra has been actively working since 2013 with the objectives to:¹⁶

- restore confidence among the citizens in the role of cooperatives and other social economy enterprises (which base their activities on values such as participation, transparency and democracy) as opposed to the reign of organised crime;
- make citizens, and especially young people, understand that also in those areas which are dominated by organised crime a different culture is possible;
- raise awareness of the increasing threat of trans-border organised crime to democracy and the rule of law among Europeans;

¹⁶ Manifesto, Culture against camorra. European civil society network against organised crime. <http://www.culturacontrocammorra.eu/> (accessed 24 August, 2015)

- assemble civil society and social economy actors throughout Europe for a constant struggle to resist the economic influence of organised crime.

It would be possible to get inspired by the ambitions of the Italian NGO, and in discussion with Ministry of Youth and Ministry of Culture in Albania it becomes obvious that there is a clear ambition to develop heritage practices and specifically craft skills within heritage practices as a way to provide work opportunities for young people.¹⁷ There is also a clearly stated interest from the Ministry of Culture to support efforts to use heritage as an instrumental opportunity to create sustainable local economies.¹⁸

These interests have the possibilities to become realized in Gjirokastra. The bazar area, situated in the centre of the old parts of the city, has been restored through efforts channelled by the Swedish NGO Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB). The Balkan branch of CHwB have a number of offices spread over the Balkan region, and one is situated in the bazar area in Gjirokastra. A number of restoration camps that have attracted students from all over Balkan has successfully inspired the understanding of heritage processes as a mean for conflict overbridging ambitions.¹⁹ In Gjirokastra is also The Gjirokastra Foundation active with the objective to secure the heritage of Gjirokastra. The Foundation has also the ambition to get more women to start craft businesses – possibly in the former bazar area.²⁰ Some of the facilities in the bazar area could also be used for training youth in vocational skills and heritage work.²¹

The true potential facilities resource however are the former industrial sites situated in the post-war areas along the main road through the valley. They provide space for possible utilities that would be valuable for establishing heritage as a resource for development:

- A visitor's centre including parking lots for buses, giving information background to the valley and different opportunities to explore it.
- Larger workshops and studios for training in craft skills with areas for exhibition and sales.
- Development of small scale industries for food production from local agricultural products, where this is part of a heritage based foodscape approach.²²
- Market halls for local sales of agricultural products.

¹⁷ Personal communication Rubin Beqo, Ministry of Youth, Tirana, 13 March 2014

¹⁸ Personal communication Mirela Kumbaro, Minister of Culture, Tirana, 17 March 2014

¹⁹ Regional Restoration Camps

²⁰ personal communication, Enkeleida Roze, Gjirokastra Foundation, 16 March 2014

²¹ Personal communication Rubin Beqo, Ministry of Youth, Tirana, 15 March 2014

²² Laven, Daniel (2013) "Eat or be eaten? Local regional food systems and sustainable tourism development", presented at: *Israeli tourism researchers forum*, Kinnert College, Israel.



Figure 5. Part of restored bazar area, Gjirokastra (Photo: Bosse Lagerqvist)



Figure 6. Former post-war industrial building. (Photo: Bosse Lagerqvist)

Possibly further uses would be defined if and when a positive development have been initiated and running for a while. One such possibility would be a large scale heritage observatory and laboratory, where universities and professional organisations could cooperate in long term research framing the complexity of heritage – especially as it is situated in the Drinos valley. In this context it would be possible to address the principally different natures of heritage as a consequence of different stakeholder needs (as presented in figure 7) in joint efforts. The observatory function is a concept borrowed from the process of implementing the European Landscape Convention, where a number of

Landscape Observatories has developed across Europe.²³ Some fundamentals of a proposed heritage laboratory would be that it could constitute a *meeting point between* governmental bodies, local/regional authorities, formal heritage organisations, university research and education, education system, civic society organizations, and trade organizations. It could organise *long term monitoring* of heritage and its role in societal functions, evaluation of activities and societal effects and through its activities it would *increase the knowledge* in all layers of society on heritage content, heritage interpretation, and potentials for sustainable development. Finally it would *stimulate cooperation* in order to facilitate:

- development of models for heritage inventories, interpretation activities, decision support systems, and
- development of routines, procedures, techniques for operating conservation in a broad sense.

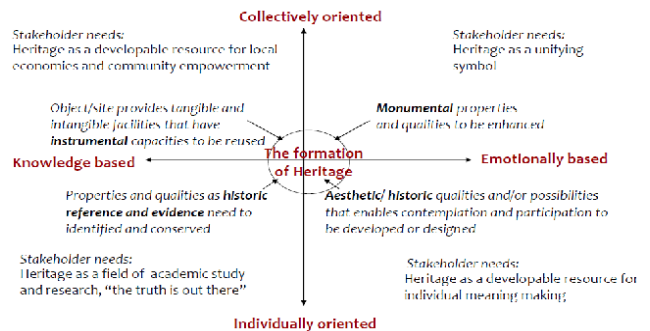


Figure 7. Different needs from different stakeholders provides decision base for actions deploying conservation, restoration, reconstruction, design, addition and demolition. (Source: Lagerqvist & Bornmalm (2015) “Development of new economies by merging heritage and entrepreneurship”, in: *Ecocycles* 1:16-21)

Conclusion

The post-war development in Albania is complex and contains all facets of societal life including severely illegal economic development. At the same time due to its closed borders during a long time of this development, it carries a large amount of obvious heritage qualities that will be in the focus for a growing tourism industry. A positive economic development is necessary to counteract processes within drug trafficking, and provide alternative options for societal life. In this process it is of course also easy to ruin the potentials of the heritage with too far-reaching exploitation interests. A long term plan for sustainable development of tourism, heritage and local economies therefore need to be formulated and integrated with the local societal functions. The concept

²³ Landscape Observatories in Europe II. 1st UNISCAPE En-Route International Seminar, <http://www.uniscape.eu/pageNews.php?idCont=1553&lang=en&tit=Landscape%20Observatories%20in%20Europe%20II.%201st%20E2%80%98UNISCAPE%20En-Route%2%80%99%20International%20Seminar> (accessed 23 August 2015)

sketched in this paper is to turn this part of the valley into a large scale laboratory for heritage processes underpinning sustainable societal development, social justice and cultural tourism through empowering local people. The challenges of working in Albania are many and considerable, but this unique part of SE Europe is a living museum that demonstrates the interconnectedness of international cooperation, museums, landscape, communities, and not the least 20th century of industrial development in a formerly severely closed community.

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