

19 Neither the Balkans nor Europe: The “Where” and “When” in Present-Day Albania

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On a hot afternoon in mid-July, I was sitting in a café called Britania in the Albanian coastal city of Vlora. I entered into a conversation with Bledi, a man who seemed to be in his forties and was sitting at the next table with his sister-in-law and two nieces. Some minutes into our conversation, he became curious about where I was from.¹ My telling him I was from Slovenia elicited his comment: “Oh, then we are all from the same area: the Balkans.” Not long after he succinctly added: “Though we [the Albanians] are in fact Illyrians.” Bledi further explained that Albanians are descendants of Illyrians, which he claimed to be one of the oldest populations in Europe. This kind of explanation can be heard from any number of Albanians when they try to explain their identity and emplace themselves on the historical, geopolitical, and social map of Europe and the world.

The hypothesis of Albanians originating from Illyrians was promoted in the period of the communist regime when its autocratic leader at the time, Enver Hoxha, turned it into an official historical fact. With this he promulgated the idea of Albanians as “the first civilization” in Europe who have “always” lived in the present state territory, thus glossing over any differences existing between the ancient past and the present. Despite the fact that over two decades have passed since the collapse of the regime in 1991, this idea still has currency and remains part of the Albanian school curriculum.

The communist regime in Albania was arguably one of the most consistently Stalinist regimes in Europe. Political and economic centralization and draconian restrictions imposed on movement (for example, the ban on private cars and any cross-border transportation), including on imports and exports, as well as foreign political partnerships with western European countries—these factors profoundly influenced peoples’ perception of their location on the geopolitical map. Many people can still recall how they were absolutely convinced that Albania was one of the most beautiful and prosperous countries in the world, located at its very center. Only in the course of the last years of the communist regime, following Hoxha’s death (in 1985) and during the succession of Ramiz Alia (who soon

lost power and control over the country), did people start to realize that many countries were in fact economically, politically, and financially much better off than Albania.

Compared to the ex-Yugoslav countries, the meaning of the phrase “the Balkans” (and the phrase itself) appeared relatively late in the Albanian discourse. After the fall of communism, which was largely brought about by the country’s economic and political crisis, a lot of nonprofit, governmental, and nongovernmental international organizations from the United States and western Europe flooded the Albanian public space. It was then that many Albanians became aware that Albania was one of the poorest and least developed countries in Europe. Consequently, the phrase “the Balkans” was never fully adopted in everyday parlance, although it was a phrase often used in Europe and America.

“I want Albania to be like Europe (E duam Shqipërinë si Europa)” was an often-repeated slogan that echoed in many street protests against the communist dictatorship by the end of the 1990s. Although more than two decades have passed since, this slogan is still often heard nowadays, especially after the government signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement on June 12, 2006. This event made it to the front pages of all Albanian newspapers as well as other media, with the then Albanian prime minister Sali Berisha underlining the historical importance of this moment with such statements as, “Albania is returning to Europe after a century of unjust and undeserved slashing of its territory, occupations, racism and ethnic cleansing, and a harsh dictatorship that isolated it from Europe.”² Since that moment onward, the media have been relentless in discussing issues regarding the European Union (EU) accession on a daily basis, despite the fact—or precisely because of it—that after several years of striving it was finally given the status of a candidate state in June 2014.

This chapter addresses the various meanings of Europe as expressed in people’s daily conversations as well as in the media and political discourses on the EU accession. It discusses the ways in which people define themselves in view of geographically, politically, and historically shifting borders. The chapter observes how people’s feelings of an uncertain and precarious present get replaced with high hopes and expectations for a better future envisioned in Albania’s accession to the EU.

Envisioning Europe

Blerta is a young lawyer, born in 1988 in Vlora, who at the time we spoke still lived with her parents. She is the youngest in a family of three children. Her parents own a small grocery shop in one of Vlora’s neighborhoods. In comparison to many families struggling to make a living, this has, according to her, made a crucial difference to their lives, allowing them to earn enough money to survive and save money for the future—or, as she put it, “për të mirë dhe për të keq” (for the good and for the bad). After completing her studies at the Law Faculty at the University of Vlora, she got a job as a lawyer at the Municipality of Vlora. She is obliged to follow daily media reports, which she sees as being saturated with



Figure 19.1. Men having coffee in Vlorë near the Europa bakery, Albania, 2012. Photograph by Nataša Gregorič Bon.

information about the EU. To the question on what she thinks about the EU and its role for Albania, she responded: “For us, this [the EU] is a great achievement. I was born at the time when the system [communist regime] was entirely closed [any kind of border crossing was forbidden] and I only learned about that life from my family [literally “të afërt” or “the nearest”]. EU is the greatest achievement. They will help us improve jobs, education, development, economy, all perspectives. I am very positive about the EU. . . . My feelings are more than positive. I don’t expect us to join soon. But definitely we will join at one point.”

Blerta’s view is that geographically and historically Albania is already within Europe. In this she refers to the Albanian historians who are arguing that the Albanians are direct descendants of the Pelasgians: “Several historical studies, for example, argue that we originated from Pelasgians who are the most ancient population in Europe and who preceded the Illyrians.” This knowledge, which is part of the school curriculum in Albania, generates an important basis for

people's understanding of Albania's position in Europe. In the continuing discussion, Blerta was complaining about the current political and economic situation in the country, which was distancing Albania from Europe. In contrast to other western European countries, where development was gradual, Albania entered the liberal democratic system abruptly after 1991. Blerta reasons that twenty years is not enough to catch up with the economic, political, and social development characteristic of western European countries. She suggests that the communist legacy "took Albania" out of Europe and located it on its margins. Albania, in her description, has been shifted from "inside" or from the "center" to the "outside" or the "periphery" of Europe, and her merging of Albania's historic preeminence with present-day Albania is on what she bases her hopes for a better future in the EU. Though she is careful to emphasize she "only hopes," she anticipates that moment in no uncertain terms as something that is yet to come.

Similar reasoning was given to me by Spiro, who was born in 1953 and also lives in Vlora. During communism, he worked as an economist in one of the textile factories in Vlora. After the collapse of the regime, he became a financial advisor in one of the trade companies in Tirana. Due to disagreements with his manager, he left his job and opened a private accountant business in Vlora. One October afternoon in 2012, we had a conversation about the economic, political, and social situation in Albania and the meaning of its accession to EU. Like Blerta, Spiro also firmly set Albania historically onto the map of Europe: "Albania is part of the old Europe, not only geographically but also as a nation. We are an old nation. . . . We are an old nation, and we have contributed to the history of Europe in many periods, such as the period of Skenderbeg. We have many distinguished individuals who have participated in the history of the developed countries of the West. Emperors in Italy, the pope in Rome, the Vizir in the developed Turkey in the middle ages."

Spiro also thinks that media reports are bombarding people with information about the EU on a daily basis, adding that: "The media and politicians write and speak a lot [about Albania's accession to the EU] but mainly they blame one another for the failure to enter the EU so far. They do not explain our weak points or how to avoid them and how to fight them; what efforts and changes could be made to eliminate the problems of the accession procedure. They hardly have anything to say on these points. Politicians are not as interested in joining the EU as they are in political in-fights." Like Blerta, he also thinks that the communist regime "took" Albania "out" of Europe and placed it on its periphery: "We were raised in the socialist system which made us what we are and therefore we cannot change so easily. Our point of view, our way of thinking and our ideas cannot be changed that fast. Therefore we have difficulties. In these twenty years of democracy we have not made any considerable changes. If one compared us with any other developed EU country, our society has certainly developed in comparison to our past, but in comparison to other western European countries we are considerably behind." With these words, Spiro expressed his dissatisfaction with the current political, economic, and social situation in the country.

Spiro's and Blerta's narratives shift not only the location of Albania, from the "center" to the "periphery," but also its temporality, moving it from the present to the future. This generates the "rhythm" of the "where" and "when" of Albania, through which they, as Spiro notes, are able to anticipate a brighter future:

Well, EU will not bring us higher taxes. It will bring development, and we'll join the rhythm of their development and law implementation, like the other countries. Here we should consider one or two facts. The current inflation in Albania is 6 percent, and it still fluctuates almost to double levels. The EU, on the other hand, has a rule that does not allow for such high fluctuations of inflation. And this depends on the economic policy of the state. Secondly, their [the EU's] debt management does not allow its members to increase the inflation rate above a certain percentage, whereas here, in Albania, inflation usually increases very fast. EU imposes certain limitations. Therefore Greece for example did not declare its debt but kept it secret and tried to lie when it reported the budget balance to the EU experts. And thus it almost came to the brink of collapse.

Despite their negative vision of the present, many residents of Albania express hope for a more positive and optimistic future. Archilea, who was born in 1972 and originates from and lives in the bilingual (Albanian and Greek speaking) area of Himara in southern Albania, elaborated on these expectations in 2010 with the following words: "The problem is that people here are . . . I would not say stupid. . . . I would say naive, or I would say . . . if you promise them wealth and money they will tend to buy it, even though they might understand that it is very unlikely. It is only because they want to believe that their life will become better, that they believe you." To the question of why people believe that the accession of Albania to the EU will bring them prosperity and well-being, Archilea responded: "People believe that if they get into the EU all their troubles will disappear . . . all their problems. They think that the solution to their problems will be found if they get into the EU. They don't believe there is any way that anything will get better under the Albanian government. They lost faith in the Albanian politicians, parties, whatever. The only thing that this country needs to improve its lot is to join the EU. And that is my opinion too." Archilea continued to criticize the current political situation in Albania: "There is nothing that they [the government] does not control. Everything is a monopoly. There is no hope; that's the problem. The only hope for us individuals is to leave [go abroad]. And even the government says that 'the biggest dream for Albanians, which we are going to realize, is the liberation of the visa regime.' Do you understand what that means: we [the government] cannot feed you here, but we can help you go and find help any way you know how somewhere else. Can you imagine that, after twenty years of democracy!"

I was talking to Archilea in September 2010, a couple of months prior to the liberalization of the visa regime, which took place in December and was widely discussed by the political establishment and promoted by the media. Archilea thought that if Albania were going to "enter" the EU, this would happen not because the Albanian economy and policy have improved their standards. As he went on to say,



Figure 19.2. A bus stop showing support for the EU that, ironically, has become less frequently traveled as a new road is constructed nearby, 2017. Photograph by Yllka Fetahaj.

the EU needs us [the Albanian citizens]—it needs our manual labor workers, because EU countries have realized that they have fewer problems with workers from Albania, Romania, or Bosnia than with migrants from Africa or the Middle East. The EU thinks in the direction that people are young here, they can speak foreign languages, they are Christians by religion, or if they are Muslims they do not strictly follow their tradition. Besides they [the EU] know that if they try to keep them out, they will come illegally anyway. Therefore, it is better to control them and let them enter.

While we were talking, Archilea’s wife jokingly noted, “But we are already in Europe, as we are all over it” and added that one-third of the country’s population lives in Europe or elsewhere, which means they do not have to “enter” it anymore, as they are already “present” in Europe.

Archilea’s reflections on Europe and the EU and his wife’s remark express their lack of trust in the Albanian state. Because they both originate from the bilingual area of Himara, they own special identity cards as coethnic Greeks, which enabled them to cross the Schengen Area borders even before the 2010 liberalization of the visa regime. Therefore, they considered themselves as being “mobile” and “free” to cross borders already for years, which makes them different from the majority of the population in Albania.

For Archilea, Europe and the EU reflect, on the one hand, the expression of their uncertainty and dissatisfaction with the present economic situation in their own country, while on the other, they symbolize hope for a better future. Despite

the “Euro crisis” in Greece and Archilea’s negative opinion on the role of the EU in Greece, he conceptualizes Europe, Europeans, and the EU as the benchmarks of “modernity” and sees Europe as a place where the better future of Albania could be envisioned.

In contrast to my other two interlocutors, Blerta and Spiro, who see Albania’s location in Europe as ambiguous, Archilea exposes the interdependence between Albania and Europe—while Albania needs the EU leadership in order to be saved from its political and economic crisis, at the same time the EU needs the Albanian workforce. Europe is thus defined as a space that embodies hope, if not quite the expectations of full well-being.

Re-Turn to Europe

All these visions of the future should be understood in the context of EU politics, the expansion of the Schengen Area, and the introduction of the European Neighbourhood Policy, which has brought Europe, as an idea and as a place, closer to the people’s lives. In people’s daily conversations, the concept of Europe is often invested with ideas of a more economically successful and stable future, embodied in the country’s “entering” (*hyrie*) the EU. As the Albanian historian Armanda Hysa succinctly observes, in contrast to the present situation of economic and social insecurity in the country, Europe is often imagined as the “ultimate structure of freedom and well-being.”³

The enlargement of the European Union and subsequent redefinition of its polity borders have brought changes to Europe’s cartographic map and its social one, particularly for the ways in which the changing political geography of the EU has influenced people’s perceptions of particular places seen to be “within” or “outside” Europe. The “free movement” (*lëvizje e lire*), as many Albanians refer to the visa-free crossing of the state borders after Albania’s accession to the Schengen Area in December 2010, has changed significantly their understanding of themselves and their location. This shifting location that Albania now occupies in people’s imaginaries is interesting because of the tension that has been created between the perceptions that Albania is Europe’s “immediate outside” located on the margins of Europe,⁴ and those that allocate it a central place and represent it as the “cradle” of the “European civilization” and modernity.

The latter view is propagated across the disciplines of Albanian historiography, archaeology, and other social sciences. Several Albanian and also foreign historians refer to the period of Pelasgo-Illyrians.⁵ As already mentioned, many of them contend that modern Albanians are direct descendants of the ancient Pelasgians, the “pre-Indo-European population” who were the first population and direct predecessors of the Illyrians, settling the area of present-day Europe.⁶ In her book *The Role of Pellazgo-Illyrians*, Elena Kocaqi defends the European identity of the Albanian nation and identifies its people as the direct descendants of Pelasgo-Illyrians, the first autochthonous population of Europe, with the Albanian language being today’s only surviving proof.

The signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between Albania and the EU on June 12, 2006, was one of the hopeful moments for Albania accession. Many saw it as Albania entering Europe with “one foot,” as several media outlets have worded it; for example, the daily newspaper *Korrieri* explicitly stated that with this momentous agreement “Albania is with one foot in the EU.”⁷ On a similar note, the *Standard* titled its front page “Europe Is Opening Its Doors to Albania.”⁸ Several Albanian politicians talked about the “years of knocking on European doors,” wrote about the “return to the maternal continent,” and declared the signing of the agreement as the “historical step toward development.”

Albanian scholar Gerda Dalipaj states that the aspirations and projections of Europe in contemporary Albanian society have to be understood in its historical context related to the period of the communist regime. After decades of life in isolation and on the periphery of Europe as well as the Balkans, the Albanian people have formed a “poetic quest for freedom” which they associate with “free movement” across European borders.⁹ Dalipaj continues that this poetic quest, laden with communist legacy, constitutes the people’s “lyrical quest” of becoming “modern Europeans.”¹⁰

In his book *The European Identity of the Albanians*, the world-renowned novelist Ismail Kadare differentiates between the pro- and anti-European versions of Albanian history. The pro-European history is centered on the Albanian language as one of the core mediums that emplaces Albania and the Albanians onto the map of Europe. The anti-European history, on the other hand, is marked by the period of the Ottoman dominance, which “took” Albania “out of Europe.”¹¹ While Kadare aims to “bring” Albania “back to Europe” and reaffirm its “European roots,” the Albanian literature scholar from Kosovo, Rexhep Qosja, in the essay entitled “National Identity and Religious Self-Understanding,” sets Albania at the crossroads of civilizations, between East and West. One of the main obstacles to the Albanian road toward the EU is not its culture but its political system, which is economically undeveloped, lacks democracy, and is corrupted.¹²

The Kadare-Qosja debate, in a sense, encompasses the full scale of Albania’s ambiguous location. It reveals relations and connections between various places and time periods (Antiquity, Byzantine period, Ottoman period, present time) that set Albania sometimes “in,” sometimes “outside,” and sometimes “not quite” in Europe.

Hoping for a Better Future

Everyday uncertainties facing people living in Albania have given rise to a complex and conceptual space in which a better future is hoped for. Even in the context of current ramifications of economic and fiscal crisis in neighboring Greece, for European relations hopes have not dampened but remain embedded in the country’s accession to the EU. In their daily conversations, people rarely refer to or emplace Albania in the Balkans. Through their conceptualizations of the ancient past and their self-identification as direct ancestors of

Pelasgo-Illyrians, they emplace themselves more in the territory of Europe than that of the Balkans. People's narratives, as well as media, political, and intellectual discourses, also underline temporality, with the present lingering between the past and the future. When people reappropriate and redefine the hegemonic discourses about Europe, they generate their understanding of their time, their place, and themselves.

Notes

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1. To keep anonymity of my interlocutors all their names are pseudonyms. The ethnographic data presented in this chapter were mainly gathered in the years between 2008 and 2010 when due to liberalisation of the visa regime in Albania (December 2010) the discourse on the role and meaning of the EU and Albania's accession to it was very pertinent. After 2010, this has changed because of the growing numbers of returnees to Albania from Greece and Italy, the countries that were hit most by the fiscal and economic crisis in 2008.

2. "Evropa hap dyert për Shqiptarët," 2006, 2.
3. Hysa 2008.
4. Jansen 2009.
5. See d'Angely 1998; Kokalari 2001; Aref 2003; Kocaqi 2010.
6. Ceka 2005.
7. "Shqipëria më një këmbë në BE," 2006.
8. "Evropa hap dyert për Shqiptarët," 2006.
9. Dalipaj 2008, 82.
10. *Ibid.*, 79–86.
11. Kadare 2006, 25.
12. Qosja 2006.

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