

**ALBANIA:
THE STATE OF THE NATION 2001**

25 May 2001

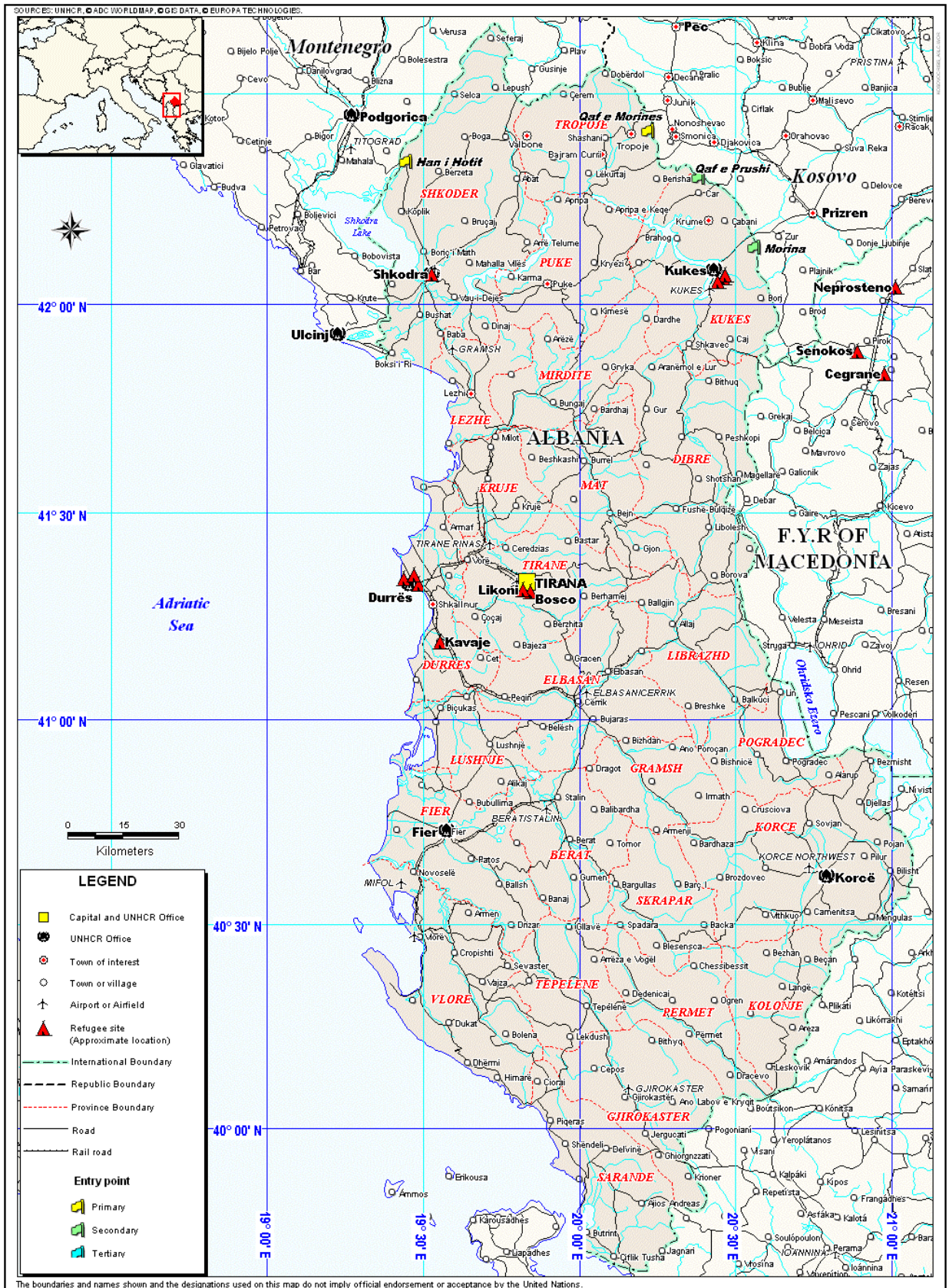
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MAP OF ALBANIA





ALBANIA: THE STATE OF THE NATION 2001

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes the current situation in Albania, paying particular attention to relations with the country's Balkan neighbours, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Greece. The recent upsurge in fighting in the Presevo Valley of southern Serbia and in Macedonia has damaged the reputation of all Albanians in the region and has once more raised the spectre of a Greater Albania. Consequently, the Albanian government has been at pains to stress that it does not support the ethnic Albanian insurgents and wishes to see the territorial integrity of Macedonia upheld. To this end, Tirana has requested NATO's assistance to secure the Albania-Macedonia border, and has called for a solution to the crisis through dialogue.

The Socialist-led government in Tirana has a difficult task to convince the international community that it is striving to contain and minimise ethnic Albanian irredentism without being seen by Albanians themselves as jeopardising broader national interests. At the end of 2000, Premier Ilir Meta made an historic visit to Kosovo in a bid to promote Albania's growing socio-economic interests in the province and to strengthen ties between Tirana and the Kosovo Albanian leadership. In January 2001, diplomatic ties were restored between Albania and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This move was criticised by many Kosovo Albanians as premature; it reinforced their perception that the Albanian government's commitment to the so-called "national question" is feeble.

This report pays particular attention to Albania's relations with Greece and the sensitive position of the ethnic Greek minority—the only minority of any significance in Albania. Attempts by Greece to draw the Greek minority into playing a bridge-building role between the two countries are proving very problematic. Some Albanians are concerned that Greece is using the minority to increase the Hellenisation of southern Albania while some elements within the minority accuse Tirana of ignoring minority demands, trying to steal minority lands, and attempting to force them to become Albanians.

Domestic politics are dominated by preparations for the forthcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for 24 June 2001. The ruling Socialist Party faces damaging splits in its four-year old coalition, and the main opposition Democratic Party is trying to reinvent itself in order to survive. While the domestic security situation has visibly improved, organised crime—primarily internationally-based—has worsened considerably over the past year. It has become increasingly sophisticated and more difficult to identify, and Albania requires greater international assistance to combat it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Albanian Government

1. Continue to take a responsible position on issues affecting ethnic Albanians living outside Albania, in particular with respect to the inadmissibility of changing borders by threat or use of force.
2. Scrutinise all aspects of the electoral procedures in the ethnic Greek districts of southern Albania, especially Himara, prior to the June Parliamentary elections, in order to ensure fairness and so avoid repetition of the tensions that resulted from the October 2000 local elections.
3. Establish a National Drug Centre to coordinate information and research and become the focus of a national anti-drugs strategy for government, non-governmental organisations, and the media.
4. Implement a public awareness programme, particularly in rural areas, to inform girls and young women of the dangers of accepting dubious offers of marriage or jobs abroad and of the real dangers of the human trafficking business.
5. Extend the UNDP pilot project for weapons collection in Gramsh throughout the country.

To the International Community

6. Pay closer security attention to the fund-raising and other activities of the Albanian (including Kosovo and Macedonian Albanian) diaspora in the United States and Western Europe.
7. Help fund, equip and train a special mixed EU/Albanian border police to combat the smuggling of illegal goods and people into Albania.
8. Use diplomatic pressure to encourage countries of origin of illegal emigrants from Albania to sign repatriation agreements with Albania.

Tirana/Brussels, 25 May 2001



ALBANIA: THE STATE OF THE NATION 2001

I. INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the situation only three years ago, the main threat to the stability of Albania today comes from forces outside the country—from the Albanian-inhabited territories of the former Yugoslavia and internationally-based organised crime. The post-Milosevic era is viewed by Albanians with grave concern. With the status of Kosovo still unresolved and the international community courting the new government in Belgrade, the West's perceived attempt to shore up the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) is viewed with alarm. The recent fighting in the Presevo Valley and western Macedonia is regarded, therefore, by Tirana very much as round one of a conflict that was waiting to happen, and over which the Albanian government has very little influence. As the spectre of a pan-Albanian threat to South Eastern Europe has now been raised, Tirana is concerned at a possible weakening in international support for Albania. As one prominent Kosovo Albanian analyst observed, with the emergence of the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (UCPMB) in southern Serbia and the National Liberation Army (KLA) in Macedonia, the Albanians are acquiring the image of a warmongering nation, taking over from the Serbs as regional troublemakers.¹

This has led to calls from the Albanian leadership for all Albanians to work together to improve their image. Maintaining the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Macedonia is perceived to be in Albania's interests. The government has declared "zero tolerance" for those supplying arms to rebel Albanian groups in Macedonia. To this end checkpoints have been set up on routes towards the Macedonian border, and the Albanian authorities have asked for a NATO mission to be posted along that frontier. In response, NATO has sent an assessment team to consider how Albania might tighten its border with Macedonia.

On 12 March 2001, shortly after the conflict started, ethnic Albanian leaders from the FRY and Macedonia were hosted in Tirana to discuss ways of resolving the crisis. Virtually all the main political leaders attended, with the notable exception of Democratic League of Kosovo leader Ibrahim Rugova. The government wished to create a united front of Albanian political forces in an effort to find solutions to the troubles in Kosovo, Presevo and Macedonia through political dialogue. Statements from the meeting reiterated that the territorial integrity of Macedonia must be preserved, and the use of violence to achieve political goals was not acceptable. Tirana's moderate internationalism runs the risk, however, of exacerbating the distrust between the Albanian government and many ethnic Albanians in the former Yugoslavia. It has angered many Kosovo and Macedonian Albanians and

¹ Shkelzen Maliqi in Balkan Crisis Reports, Institute of War & Peace Reporting, 8 March 2001.

their powerful diaspora, as well as those on the right of Albania's political spectrum, by specific actions including: restoring diplomatic ties with Yugoslavia; the recent meeting between Socialist Party leader Fatos Nano and FRY President Vojislav Kostunica; recognising the border between FRY and Macedonia; and accepting EU, as opposed to Macedonian government, funding for the newly proposed Albanian-language university in Macedonia.

Meanwhile, the political scene in the country is polarised ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for 24 June 2001. In the wake of last October's local elections, tensions are still running high in the southern town of Himara, where representatives of the ethnic Greek minority claimed manipulation of the local vote. Relations between Albanians and the Greek minority in southern Albania are complex. Hence this report looks closely at some of the main points of contention in advance of the June elections.

The opposition Democratic Party (DP) has spent the last few years trying to present Albania as a country without a government. Yet the international community has thrown its weight behind the Socialist-led government, which has made impressive strides in restoring public order and resisting the threat of political violence. The illegal protests of the DP in Tirana, where the police were continuously provoked by protesters, were a test of the government's commitment not to be drawn into confrontation with the opposition. The DP can no longer hold hostage the democratic development of the country. Instead it is belatedly trying to reinvent itself as a party of moderate, progressive and tolerant ideals. The party, however, will remain severely compromised as long as its controversial leader, Sali Berisha, stays at the helm.

The Public Order Ministry has declared that the biggest danger to Albanian society today lies in the increasing sophistication of organised crime, coupled with endemic corruption, which is able to compromise and co-opt senior officials in all strata of society. A dangerous psychology is being rooted in some parts of society and among state employees that the wealth from illegal trafficking can be used for the economic development of the country and an increase in investments. Such logic is used by top officials as an excuse to justify crime, which is a form of patriotism in many eyes.

II. RELATIONS WITH ALBANIA'S BALKAN NEIGHBOURS

Political stability in the Balkans is essential for Albania's continued democratic and economic development. Albania's strategic objective is integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. The Albanian leadership is, therefore, at pains to be seen by the West as paying special attention to fostering good relations with Balkan neighbours and cooperating in regional integration initiatives. Albania has made great strides over the past year toward building strong relations with her immediate geographical neighbours, sometimes at the expense of alienating her ethnic kin. In response to the recent fighting in the Presevo Valley and Macedonia, Albanian authorities have repeatedly called for an end to violence from all ethnic Albanian extremist groups. Prime Minister Ilir Meta told the BBC that "Tirana would have zero tolerance for anyone supplying weapons to the ethnic Albanian rebels in

Macedonia." Meta said that the situation was totally different from that in Kosovo two years ago, adding that his government would give no support to the rebels.² Having been at pains to stress that the notion of a "Greater Albania" does not exist, the Albanian government was greatly alarmed and embarrassed at the recent pronouncement by a government minister concerning union of Albania with Kosovo. The secretary general of the Democratic Alliance (DA), Arben Imami, who is Minister of Justice in the Socialist-led government, stated that "The Democratic Alliance declares as one of its future political commitments to devote itself to inspiring and accelerating the unavoidable peaceful unification of Albania with Kosovo."³ If the DA, with its tiny membership, were not a coalition partner, few would be concerned over its statements.⁴ However, given that the DA is in government, such a remark had to be taken seriously. There was in fact resounding criticism of Imami's statement by almost all the country's political establishment, including the DA Chairman, Neritan Ceka, and senior leader Prec Zogai, as well as virtually the entire Albanian media. Most of the press, bar those that voice the views of the extreme right, concluded that Imami was trying to score a few points ahead of the June elections. Within days of the statement, the DA's general assembly voted down Imami's proposal and felt compelled to tone down the wording of its electoral programme. The Party called for a "rapprochement" between Albania and Kosovo rather than any actual union.

Although it is a recurring theme in private discussion among Albanians that Albania and Kosovo should and will unite at some time in the future, Imami's statement coming so soon after the crisis in Tetovo⁵ was considered irresponsible. This was the first time a senior political leader had raised the issue, and with it speculation that some of the country's major political parties were seeking a Greater Albania. It is generally supposed that economic realities will drive the two entities together, regardless of political pressure to keep them apart. Yet, across the political spectrum, it is considered inappropriate to discuss the controversial issue in public. Albania's current leadership, together with the majority of the opposition, have clearly acknowledged the complexities entailed by the multi-ethnic reality of the Southern Balkans and the consequent threat to the socio-economic and political development of the region. As a result, all but a few extremists have adopted a relatively responsible attitude towards nationalism. Among citizens of Albania, as distinct from Kosovo or Macedonian Albanians, there is a genuine belief that there is no need to redraw national borders by force. All that needs to be done is to make the borders irrelevant.

Two considerations are important here. Firstly, the citizens of Albania already have their nation state. Secondly, the government and political elite tend to think internationally rather than regionally. Thus Arben Imami attempted to explain his controversial statement by reference to global processes. "As for the idea of viewing my statement as feeding the desire of Albanians for a Greater Albania, I am of the opinion that we are speaking about a contemporary trend for a divided nation to unite: there are no two Vietnams or two Germanys any more, and there

² BBC monitoring, 4 April 2001, 10:35.

³ Reuters, 13 April, 2001.

⁴ The Democratic Alliance, whose supporters are predominantly from the urban, educated elite, collected just 2.8 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary elections.

⁵ On the Tetovo crisis, see ICG Balkans Report No. 109, *The Macedonian Question: Reform or Rebellion*, 5 April 2001.

will be no two Koreas in the future," Imami told journalists.⁶ In the same vein, it is generally understood in Tirana that one of the main concepts of Europe is the dismantling of borders. It is very common to hear the phrase "but soon there will be no more borders in Europe". This clarification was certainly in tune with a very widespread assumption in Tirana that the enlargement of the European Union will lead to the virtual dismantling of state borders, and hence to the effective resolution of the Albanian "national question". There is little evident realism, however, about just how long it is likely to take for Albania to satisfy the EU accession criteria.⁷

A. Kosovo

The Albanian leadership remains deeply concerned by the unresolved status of Kosovo, arguing that self determination for both Kosovo and Montenegro, following the smooth disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation, will help ensure the long-term stability of the Balkans.⁸ In discussions it is clear that Albanian leaders, on both the left and the right, are alarmed at the West's new "cosy" relationship with Belgrade and convinced that the West's only strategy for Kosovo is to perpetuate indefinitely the present uncertainty over final political status.⁹ There is concern that the international community remains committed to preserving the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). President Rexhep Meidani told this year's World Economic Forum summit in Davos that he was "confident that the future of Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia itself, just as the future of the Balkan region, cannot be based on artificial federative concoctions, which were an obstacle to Yugoslavia becoming fully democratic."¹⁰ The view of the Albanian authorities is that the two remaining Yugoslav republics should go their own separate ways.

Meanwhile, Foreign Ministry statements have stressed that there can be no change of borders surrounding Albania, and that the "Albanian Question" has no military solution. What is strongly desired, however, is to open up communications across those borders. With this in mind, at the beginning of December 2000, Prime Minister Meta made an historic first official visit to Kosovo to discuss strengthening economic, cultural, health, and educational contacts. He urged moderation in settling differences between Serbs and Albanians in the region and made a point of explaining that he had come to visit "all the inhabitants of Kosovo, not just the Albanian population".

During his visit, Meta was frequently asked what he was going to do to improve bilateral relations between Kosovo and Albania. Having commented that poor infrastructure is perhaps the biggest obstacle, he explained a number of initiatives planned to improve links between Albania and Kosovo. These include: rehabilitation of the existing road at the Morina border crossing; opening two more border crossings; construction of a new road from the Adriatic port of Dures to Morina; and an energy interconnection line from Fierze to Prizren to connect the two energy grids. There is strong demand for a new crossing through the Northeastern Albanian town of Kukes to the border with Kosovo at Morina. Kosovo

⁶ Albania Daily News, 20 April 2001.

⁷ See 'EU Membership: Dream and Reality' in ICG Balkans Report No. 108, *After Milosevic; A Practical Agenda for Lasting Balkans Peace*, pp. 253-263.

⁸ ICG discussions with Foreign Office officials, Tirana, March 2001.

⁹ ICG discussions with Albanian political figures, Tirana, December 2000 and March 2001.

¹⁰ Reuters, 29 January 2001, 11:46.

Albanians believe that expanding the trade route through Kukes would ease their dependency upon Macedonia, while Albanians believe it might benefit the most impoverished region in the country. Meta also promised to promote tourism projects that would "attract as many Kosova citizens as possible to visit Albania and get acquainted with the beauties of Albania."¹¹ Since the end of the Kosovo conflict, Albanian companies have been rushing to the Kosovo market. INSIG, the Albanian Institute for Social Insurance, was the first to discover the market, to be followed by many other companies such as the Tepelena and Glina mineral water firms, and Albanian Airlines, which now flies to Pristina five times a week.

Meta's visit was also important for consolidating pan-national political dialogue as well as establishing contacts between the Albanian government and the Kosovo Albanian leadership, most importantly with the LDK leader Ibrahim Rugova. Rugova himself is somewhat discredited in Tirana by his deep involvement with the former Albanian president, Sali Berisha, during the worst excesses of the latter's presidency. Since the overthrow of Berisha in 1997, the Albanian government has ignored the "Rugova" factor in Kosovo politics. Premier Meta's invitation to Rugova to visit Tirana, was, therefore, a demonstration of desire to bury old antagonisms. To date Rugova has not taken up the invitation; presumably he is waiting to see who will be in power after the forthcoming elections. Meta refused to be drawn out on the controversial issue of Kosovo's independence. He said judiciously, "The position of the Albanian government is quite clear. We are for a democratic Kosova, for a European Kosova, and for a Kosova whose status will be defined by all its citizens in a democratic and free way."¹²

As Albania had at that time no diplomatic relations with the FRY, Meta's visit was unofficial. For three months prior to his visit, Tirana had been receiving direct and indirect messages from Belgrade to discuss the resumption of diplomatic ties. Tirana replied positively, but stipulated that the Albanian government wanted to see that the Belgrade authorities were treating release of Kosovo Albanian political prisoners and the fate of missing Kosovo Albanians as priority issues and in a democratic manner. That said, diplomatic ties between Albania and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were officially re-established by an exchange of notes on 17 January 2001."¹³

By restoring diplomatic relations, the government was seen as accepting United Nations Resolution 1244, which recognises Kosovo as a province of the FRY.¹⁴ There was a backlash of criticism from Kosovo Albanians, who, together with those on the right of Albanian politics, saw the resumption of ties as a betrayal. They argued that by failing to attach definite preconditions to an agreement with Belgrade, the Albanian government had effectively disowned any obligation towards Kosovo. Foreign Minister Paskal Milo impatiently rejected this criticism. "It's absurd to think that now that Kosovo is liberated, we should not re-establish relations with Belgrade, when we had such relations even when Kosovo was occupied, exploited, suppressed, and subjected to genocide by the Serbs," Milo

¹¹ *In Kosova*, Department of Information of the Council of Ministers, Tirana, December 2000, p.11.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹³ Diplomatic ties with the FRY were severed in March 1999 due to Albania's support for the NATO bombing campaign. Albania never sent an ambassador to Belgrade after the FRY was established in April 1992 by Slobodan Milosevic. Instead, Tirana maintained relations at the chargé d'affaires level.

¹⁴ ICG discussions with Kosovo Albanians and Albanian opposition supporters, Tirana, March 2001.

told reporters.¹⁵ Deputy Foreign Minister Pellumb Xufi echoed Milo's statements, arguing that there was nothing unreasonable in Tirana's decision, and that Albania was duty-bound to act constructively regarding Kosovo, and it was in the Kosovo Albanians' own best interest to have Albanian representation in Belgrade.¹⁶

Tensions were somewhat diffused after Xhufi went to Pristina to explain Albania's decision to prominent Kosovo Albanian leaders. Some, most notably the leader of the Alliance for Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj, later said openly that they accepted Tirana's decision. Others remain very sceptical, especially after Socialist Party leader Fatos Nano's meeting with Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica in Athens in December. The majority of Kosovo Albanians, who regard Kostunica as no less of a nationalist than Milosevic, still harbour deep resentment at Nano's meeting with the latter in Crete in 1997. As long as the current Socialist government is in power in Tirana, relations with the Kosovo Albanians will remain problematic. The Kosovo Albanians themselves have shifted back and forth between an idealistic attachment to the Albanian state and a disappointment with the stance of Albanian officials on cardinal issues such as open support of their quest for independence.

B. Montenegro

Meanwhile, relations with Montenegro have been going from strength to strength. In mid-January, a delegation headed by Minister of Trade Ramo Bralic visited Albania for talks with the government and business community. During its meetings in Tirana, the Montenegrin delegation proposed projects on Cupertino and trade exchange, emphasising the importance of putting into operation the Han i Hotit–Podgorica railway line. A recent agreement on the laying of a new fiber optic cable will improve communications. There is almost universal acceptance among Albanians of the government's initiatives towards strengthening ties with Montenegro. "They are not like the Serbs. They are more like us. They understand us and how we work" was the general response among traders in the northern town of Shkoder. There is also a good deal of respect for the Montenegrin leader, Milo Djukanovic, due to his commitment to stand up to Belgrade.¹⁷ All Albanian political parties hailed Djukanovic's election victory, and hope that he will hold a referendum on independence as soon as possible. Tirana's policy of dealing separately with Podgorica and Belgrade reflects the view that the FRY's peaceful and smooth disintegration is in the best interests of everyone in the Balkans, including the Serbs.

C. Macedonia

Relations between Macedonia and Albania have been relatively good since the border between the two countries was reopened in April 1992 for the first time since 1948. Cultural and economic ties have been gradually improving. Tirana has recently supported the human rights issues raised by the ethnic Albanian minority, but has done so rather half-heartedly. For the Albanian political elite it is important that the Macedonian state survives. As one Albanian analyst wrote: "For Tirana, Macedonia, home to a large ethnic Albanian community, is a source of deep angst,

¹⁵ Albania Daily News, 20 January 2001.

¹⁶ ICG discussion with Deputy Foreign Minister Pellumb Xhufi, Tirana, March 2001.

¹⁷ ICG discussions about Montenegro with small businessmen in Shkoder, November 2000.

a foreboding that destabilisation of the fledgling country could lead to Serbian intervention, and consequently, Serbian-Greek encirclement of Albania."¹⁸

Aside from differences over the status and treatment of Macedonia's Albanian minority, relations between the two countries have been gradually developing to the benefit of each. At the end of January 2001, they signed cooperation accords in the key areas of education, free trade and health. The two countries also agreed earlier this year to iron out differences over Albanian-language teaching in Macedonia by undertaking to set up a private Albanian-language university to be funded by the European Union. Currently diplomas issued by an Albanian-language university in Tetovo are recognised in Albania but not in Macedonia. However, this compromise has angered many Macedonian Albanians, who believe the university should be state funded.

The flare up of violence in western Macedonia put the Albanian government in a difficult position. As the crisis worsened, Tirana tried to find a middle course by condemning "extremist" ethnic Albanian violence while urging Skopje to improve conditions for its ethnic kin. In Tirana there was awareness how the actions of the rebels would appear in the eyes of Albania's deeply suspicious neighbours. One daily newspaper commented: "The latest incidents taking place on the border between Macedonia and Kosovo have revived ancient prejudices, historical divisions are again resurfacing. Albania's neighbours are still haunted by the term Greater Albania, or at the very least a Greater Kosovo. The ending of the war in Kosovo and the strengthening of the position of Albanians following that conflict has again brought to the surface the old syndrome of 'the Albanian threat to the region'."¹⁹

On a visit to France, Prime Minister Ilir Meta spoke of his "hope that the Albanians of southern Serbia and Macedonia would choose dialogue because otherwise they will become isolated and lose everyone's support. The Albanians of Serbia must negotiate with Belgrade. As for Macedonia, the maintaining of its territorial integrity and sovereignty are as essential for Albania as they are for regional stability."²⁰ Macedonian officials have warned that ethnic Albanian guerillas are planning to open a new front on the western border with Albania following setbacks in the north near Kosovo. In response, the Albanian government reinforced the border with Macedonia by dispatching 100 special troops to assist the border police.

Despite this official reaction, there is some level of support in Tirana for the insurgents, and plans to assist them, should they need it, are underway. Should the fighting in Macedonia escalate, some elements in the Albanian political and military structures would be unlikely to stand by and watch their ethnic kinsmen fight without assistance. Weapons and military equipment would be available if needed. It must be remembered that there are elements in both Albania and Kosovo who feel they missed out on the chance to play a significant role in the Kosovo liberation war—most notably those on the right of the political spectrum. There are also sectors of the non-governmental Albanian political and

¹⁸ Elez Biberaj, *Albania in Transition. The Rocky Road to Democracy*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998, p. 239.

¹⁹ *Shekulli*, 7 March 2001.

²⁰ Reuters, 6 March 2001.

military establishment who feel their hands were tied during the Kosovo war by international demands to seal the border to halt the flow of weapons and supplies.

As the crisis in Macedonia has worsened, the Tirana government has been accused by its opponents of ignoring the plight of the Macedonian Albanians. Social Democrat Party (SDP) leader and former foreign minister in the last Democratic Party government Arjan Starova accused the government of "being absent during this very severe conflict. Albania's official policy, from Foreign Minister Paskal Milo up to the President, Rexhep Meidani, has sold out Albanian patriotism on behalf of a false internationalism. I realise that nations cooperate but not to the detriment of [their own] national interests. Unfortunately, Tirana shows no patriotism at all but only cosmopolitanism, which is being pursued without any fixed idea. Rather, they are the yes-men of this or that force, which might even be anti-Albanian, just to hold onto their posts, from which they are making a huge fortune."²¹

Starova has continued to accuse the government of imitating the West in its description of the National Liberation Army (KLA) as terrorists or rebels instead of "patriotic guerrillas".²² Such attacks are echoed in the right-wing media outlets, such as the daily *Tema*, which argued that the conflict in Macedonia would not have occurred at all if the Albanian government "had done its minimum towards the realisation and protection of the rights of Macedonia's Albanians....If the Albanian state had given the minimum effort to demand and protect the rights of the Albanians in Macedonia according to all the international conventions and bilateral relations, we would no longer be dealing with this crisis."²³

In recent correspondence between the Albanian Academy of Sciences and the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the President of the Albanian Academy, Professor Ylli Popa, was at pains to remove Macedonian concerns about a document issued in 1998 entitled "Platform for Solving the Albanian Question".²⁴ This Platform, which talks at length about "historic truths" in relation to "historic Albanian ethnic space", has proved very damaging to Albania's relations with her Balkan neighbours, who are understandably concerned over the emphasis put upon defining historic Albanian lands. The Macedonians professed alarm at the document, which argues for "the unification of all ethnic Albanian land in one national state", using the phrases "the whole of Kosovo with its capital in Skopje", and "the southern part of historic Kosovo and the northern part of the Republic of Macedonia". The president of the Macedonian Academy, Professor Georgi Efremov, concluded that the fighting in western Macedonia represented the activation of this Platform: "When we visited Tirana last summer [2000] as your guests, we wanted to discuss the issues of that dialogue we had started but not finished. At that time you said that the Platform was something that belonged to the past. Thus we received no response regarding our critical attitude. To date we have still not received an answer from you, but now it seems that the answer is coming from Tanusevci."²⁵

²¹ Rilindja Demokratike, 28 March 2001.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *Tema*, 21 March 2001.

²⁴ A popular pamphlet dealing with the historical dimension of the Albanian National Question, which is on sale throughout Albania, Kosovo and western Macedonia.

²⁵ Open letter to Academician Ylli Popa, Chairman of the Academy of Sciences of Albania, 8 March 2001. Tanusevci is the village in northern Macedonia where violence flared in January 2001. See ICG Balkans Report No 109, *The Macedonian Question: Reform or Rebellion*, 5 April 2001.

Professor Popa replied that: "The past belongs to the past. Let us look forward to the future in order, as you say, 'to rise into the great world of Western European universalism and humanism'." He concluded by expressing a wish that the two academies could "play a substantial role in calming tensions in order to achieve the best settlement in the interest of both sides and of the region as a whole."²⁶

Despite these assertions that the Platform belongs to the past, the fact remains that suspicions about Albanian expansionism have been well and truly sown among Albania's neighbours by the actions of the KLA, UCPMB and the NLA, as well as by the Academy's "Platform" itself. This has happened, moreover, despite the fact that (with the single exception mentioned above) no Albanian leaders have called for border changes.

III. ALBANIAN-GREEK RELATIONS

Aside from the Kosovo issue, maintaining good relations with her regionally influential southern neighbour Greece is arguably the most important factor in Albanian foreign policy. Since the mid-1990s an estimated 400,000 Albanians work at any one time in Greece, and their substantial remittances contribute significantly to the Albanian economy and provide a vital economic lifeline for thousands of families. Alongside Italy, Greece is the biggest economic investor in Albania, and the country is continuously developing a larger stake in the Albanian market. Since the present government came to power in 1997, Albania's relations with Greece have improved significantly, yet many bilateral problems remain over the Greek minority.

During the presidency of Sali Berisha (1992-1997), relations were cool and at times frosty. In the spring of 1993, a Greek priest, Archimandrite Chrysostomos, was expelled from Albania for allegedly subversive anti-Albanian activities. Tirana accused him of abusing his ministry by preaching Enosis—union with Greece. There followed widescale attacks on Greek-owned property in southern Albania. In November 1993 tensions rose further with the expulsion of nearly 2,500 Albanians from Greece. The following year relations deteriorated sharply. The Berisha government accused Greece of working with Serbia to undermine the Albanian state. In April 1994 the first armed violence broke out, when an ultra-nationalist ethnic Greek militant group, the Northern Epirus Liberation Front (MAVI), attacked a small Albanian military post near Gjirokaster, and two soldiers were killed.²⁷ Five ethnic Greeks belonging to OMONIA, an organisation founded in 1990 to promote the interests of the Greek minority in Albania, were immediately arrested and tried for complicity in the attack, while Greece vetoed a major European Union loan to Albania. From this low point, relations gradually improved as both countries recognised the benefits of strengthening economic relations. The release of the five OMONIA defendants in 1995 paved the way for the successful visit of Greek President Konstandinos Stefanoploulos to Tirana in 1996, following which the two

²⁶ Open letter to Academician Georgi Efremov, President of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 12 March 2001.

²⁷ On 20 January 2001 the same group, which claims that part of southern Albania—known to Greeks as Northern or Vorio Epirus—belongs to Greece, carried out a grenade attack on an Albanian target in Athens, damaging several vehicles.

countries signed a Treaty of Friendship whereby Greek minority rights were to be respected and more Greek language schools were to be opened.²⁸

Greece and Albania have starkly different estimates as to the size of the minority, with Albanians claiming its population is around 60-70,000 at most, and the Greek government citing a far higher figure of between 200,000 and 400,000. Greek historiography claims that since its inception in 1912, the Albanian state has attempted to de-Hellenise the southern part of Albania.²⁹ In contrast, the Albanian Academy of Sciences and the Historical Institute have produced countless documents alleging that many of those who are considered part of the minority are in fact Albanians, who happen to speak Greek due their close proximity to the minority, or that they are really Vlachs in origin and have been classified as minority persons due to their Christian Orthodox religion.³⁰ Since 1921, Albania's ethnic Greek population has been registered as a minority living in recognised "minority zones". Among the first measures undertaken by the new Albanian communist regime after the Second World War was to limit the area of southern Albania described as a "minority zone" to just 99 villages in the districts of Gjirokaster and Saranda. This "minority zone" did not include the three villages of Himara, Drimades and Palassa, which had been recognised as minority areas by the League of Nations in 1921. Thus, all ethnic Greeks living outside the "minority zone" were denied minority status. As a consequence the Tirana authorities were able to assert that the Greek minority numbered no more than 58,000.³¹

The coastal Himara region of Southern Albania has always had a predominantly ethnic Greek population. There are seven villages in Himara district, including two that speak mainly Greek and the rest which are bilingual. Unemployment has hit the ethnic Greek community hard since the collapse of the one-party state in 1991, in common with everyone else, and emigration has been high. In the autumn and winter only a few elderly people remain in the southern coastal villages, with the rest of the population living and working in Greece. Historically there has always been substantial emigration of both Albanians and ethnic Greeks from the Himara coast, principally to the United States. During the 1930s, a small but significant number of Greeks moved to Himara from Corfu, mostly left-wingers escaping from the Metaxas dictatorship. In the aftermath of the collapse of Communism in Albania in 1991, ethnic Greek emigration from Himara to Greece resumed. Whole families moved, leaving deserted olive groves and fields and producing a detrimental effect upon the local economy. The sensitive position of the Greek minority has led to tensions, especially regarding the granting of highly valued Greek visas to members of the Greek minority in preference to their Muslim Albanian neighbours. Another bone of contention which has stirred jealousy among Albanians involves pension payments by the Greek government to some local people. These individuals are ethnic Greek citizens of Albania who never worked in Greece. Many Albanians regard the payments as unjustified since they create

²⁸ Pursuant to this agreement, several more schools were opened, and a Greek-language faculty was established as a branch of Gjirokaster University.

²⁹ For a well researched documentary account of the history of Albania's Greek minority, see *The Greek Minority in Albania, A Documentary Record (1921-1993)*, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki, 1994.

³⁰ Vlachs are semi-nomadic pastoralists, who speak a language akin to Romanian and live in south-eastern Albania, north-western Greece and southern Macedonia.

³¹ *The Greek Minority in Albania, A Documentary Record (1921-1993)*, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki, 1994, p.21.

disparities between ethnic Greeks and Albanians.³² As the local economic superpower, Greece is also able to offer financial incentives to those who are in line with Greece's policy objectives.

Another major factor in the increasing political tension in southern Albania is the widespread local fear that a 'Greater Greece' is in the making. Recent concern has focused on the construction of a new road to Gjirokaster, which is regarded by some as a basically "imperialist" project. Also, Greek clergy are attempting to recover and reconsecrate abandoned churches in southern Albania, many on land subject to restitution claims and the ownership of which is strongly contested. Many Albanians accuse the Union of Human Rights Party (UHRP), a government coalition partner, and the Greek minority association OMONIA of gathering funds from Greek nationalist lobbies to Hellenise the southern coast.³³ However irrational, the Greek government should understand that these are genuine fears and the views are deeply held across a wide Albanian political spectrum.

A. The Local Elections in Himara

Recently attention has been focused on the political allegiances of the Greek minority. This follows the controversial local election in October 2000, when Greek minority leaders reported widespread ballot-rigging and violence against voters, particularly in the district of Himara. The 1 October electoral campaign in Himara was characterised by strong nationalist overtones from both Albanian and ethnic Greek political parties. Relations between the governing Socialist Party (SP) and the Union of Human Rights Party (UHRP) were very tense in the run up to the elections in Himara Municipality. This began after the UHRP invited Greek legislators to speak at local election rallies. Albania's electoral code prohibits the participation of foreign citizens in election campaigns. Several Greek MPs and diplomats went to Himara, where around a third of the population of 12,000 works in Greece, to observe voting in the second round. In an effort to play down the visit, however, the Greek government was at pains to stress that the MPs had gone "privately".³⁴

The MPs' visit angered ordinary Albanians, and even the moderate daily newspaper *Koha Jone* responded angrily, declaring that "Albania's politicians should react against such interference by a neighbouring country in its internal affairs, especially during an electoral campaign, with the aim of Hellenising Himara and using Albanian land as Greek land."³⁵ Foreign Minister Milo summoned the then Greek Ambassador to Albania, Alexandros Malias, to protest against the latter's claim, reported in the Greek media, that seven villages on the Ionian coast were "bastions of Hellenism".

The election itself was therefore imbued with strongly nationalist tones. There was a feeling among some Greeks that the Albanian secret service (SHIK) was

³² Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Balkan Report, Vol. 4, No. 78, 20 October 2000.

³³ The Union of Human Rights Party (UHRP) mainly represents the Greek minority in Albania but has also sought an electoral base among Albania's tiny Serb, Montenegrin and Macedonian Slav organisations. The UHRP comprises rival pro- and anti-government groups. It remains to be seen whether the party will remain loyal to the government or follow an independent course and play its own agenda through shifting allegiances.

³⁴ ICG discussions with Greek officials, Tirana, March 2001.

³⁵ *Koha Jone*, 11 September 2000.

aggravating the situation by telling the Albanian authorities that “there is something wrong in the minority areas”.³⁶ In other words, SHIK was implying that underhand activities were going on in the Greek-inhabited areas which were detrimental to the interests of the Albanian state. As the campaign gathered pace, the nationalist United Right called for restrictive measures against the UHRP and OMONIA. The Albanian parties accused the UHRP of trying to buy votes and spread Greek influence by suggesting that Greek investments would flow into the area if the UHRP won.³⁷

One of the most telling indicators of the potential strength of Albanian nationalism occurred when Socialist Party Secretary Petro Koci called upon the main parties to join their vote against the UHRP. In response, non-Greek parties formed the “Alliance for Himara”, which encouraged all candidates not involved in the run off to ask their supporters to vote for the Socialists. In an unprecedented move Besnik Mustafaj, Secretary for Foreign Relations for the Democratic Party, called for DP voters to support the Socialist candidate in Himara. Consequently, Himara was the only area of the country where the left and right in Albanian politics formed an alliance in the second round of voting. This was the first time such unity was displayed, and it gave victory to the Socialist Party in both rounds of the local polls. Results from the local electoral commission confirmed that the Socialist Party had won 73 per cent of the vote. The UHRP managed to win in only four communes.

Greek officials immediately complained of violence and irregularities bordering on election rigging against the UHRP candidate in the first round of voting and of other violations during the second round. Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreou told the media that “the Albanian position will affect relations between the two countries”.³⁸ Greek Foreign Ministry spokesman Panos Beglitis warned that problems caused to the Greek minority during the second round of voting were an issue with more than bilateral effects: “It is also a problem affecting Albania’s relations with the European Union.” The OSCE, while admitting that the second round of voting had been less transparent than the first round, ruled out any impact on the overall result. Nevertheless, according to its Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the ballot was marked by serious irregularities ranging from the intimidation of electoral commission members to one case of violence in which a ballot box was destroyed, to verified evidence of fraud in at least three other voting centres.³⁹

In this acutely sensitive context, it is not surprising that the ongoing 2001 census has aroused the suspicions of minority representatives.⁴⁰ The chairman of OMONIA, Vasil Duli, has accused the Albanian authorities of trying to force the Greek minority to become Albanians, citing the census as part of this effort because it will not refer to ethnicity or religion. OMONIA has urged the Greek minority to boycott the census in order to halt the “Albanianisation” of minority areas. The Institute of Statistics, which is responsible for carrying out the census, is basing it upon United Nations criteria, which do not include ethnicity. The census has been funded by foreign donors, which include Greece. While the Albanian

³⁶ ICG discussions with Greek officials in Tirana, March 2001.

³⁷ RFE/RL Balkan Report, vol. 4, No. 78, 20 October 2000.

³⁸ Reuters, 16 October 2000.

³⁹ ICG discussions with ODIHR officials, November 2000.

⁴⁰ At the time of writing a census to register the population and property was due for completion by the end of May. The last census was held in 1989 and registered 60,000 ethnic Greeks.

government set up a symbolic fund of Euro 30,000, the European Union, Switzerland, Italy and Greece have contributed a total of Euro 7.2 million. Hard-line nationalists in the Greek parliament have attacked Papandreou for awarding financial aid to Albania for the census, accusing him of "making continuous concessions to Albania and showing compliance."⁴¹

Leaders of OMONIA constantly criticise the Albanian government for not taking minority demands seriously. They have accused it of sidelining minority demands over land ownership and representation in the armed forces. They also claim that pastures and other property formerly in the ownership of Christian Orthodox monasteries are not being returned and that the government is reluctant to fill the quota for Greek minority representation in police and army structures.⁴² At a news conference where he spoke to ethnic Greeks from Albania who are currently working in Greece, Vasil Duli accused the Albanian authorities of trying to grab the property of ethnic Greeks by forging property title deeds. He said that 75,000 stremmas (7,500 hectares) were being seized in this way. He added that the minority has begun a campaign to inform the international community of the problem and that representatives of the Council of Europe and other organisations would soon visit the Greek minority areas.⁴³ Albanians are angered by what they see as the hypocrisy of Greece, which demands improved rights for the ethnic Greek minority in Albania while not recognising the existence of minorities within its own territory.⁴⁴

B. The State of War

Technically a state of war may still exist between Greece and Albania. The law in question, adopted in 1940 when Greece was invaded by Italian troops through Albania, was repealed by the Greek government in 1987 but never nullified by Greece's parliament. In his speech at the UN General Assembly's Millennium Summit in September 2000, President Meidani obliquely criticised Greece for maintaining a legal state of war with Albania. "We must ask ourselves", he said, "can we arrive at an acceptable definition of good governance while members of the United Nations maintain a de jure declaration of war with other members? Certainly not."⁴⁵ Albanian officials maintain that the law prevents Albanians from claiming property they owned in Greece prior to World War Two. Greek officials, however, counter that the state of war cannot be said to exist because it was lifted automatically in accordance with international law in 1947.⁴⁶ This is clearly a matter that needs to be clarified, particularly in view of the questions raised about property rights.

C. Repairing the Damage

The above are just some of the issues in the very complex relations between Albania and Greece. On the whole, aside from minority issues, these relations can

⁴¹ *Albania Daily News*, 4 April 2001.

⁴² ICG discussion with OMONIA representatives, Tirana, March 2001.

⁴³ *Kathimerini*, Athens, 19 February 2001.

⁴⁴ ICG discussions on the elections with Albanian voters, Tirana, November, 2000. For an account of the difficulties confronting many Albanian workers in Greece, see James Pettifer, "The Albanians on Kithera", *Besa*, Vol.5. 2001.

⁴⁵ RFE/RL, 9 November 2000.

⁴⁶ ICG talks with Greek officials, Tirana, March 2001.

be described as good. At the beginning of December 2000, a number of senior Albanian leaders were invited to Athens. Prime Minister Ilir Meta and his Greek counterpart, Costas Simitis, agreed to discuss how to increase cooperation, thus moving beyond the tension created by October's local elections. During the visit and after Simitis expressed concern, Meta said that minorities in Albania would continue to be treated in compliance with international conventions signed by Albania, and that the adoption of legislation covering Greek minority rights would be speeded up. Shortly after this meeting, it was announced that land would be allocated for an Orthodox Archbishopric in Tirana and a Greek school to be called Arsakeion.⁴⁷

For its part, the Greek government recognises that it is viewed with distrust among Albanians from ministerial level down. Trying to address this problem, Athens has put in place a number of bilateral confidence-building measures over the past few years, including a series of workshops on restructuring various ministries and transferring institutional know-how involving public administration officials, judges, magistrates and scientists. Also, numerous projects within the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe involve Greek experts helping to consolidate Albania's institutions and harmonise its legislation and practice with EU legal and political culture.

Within the last six months of 1999 and during 2000, a series of bilateral meetings were held between the Greek and Albanian Public Order Ministers aimed at consolidating the aid Greece gives Albania in the field of law and order. The assistance and commitments undertaken by Greece in this area are fairly comprehensive. They include reinforcement of logistical support for the police in the form of patrol vehicles, anti-riot armoured transport vehicles and bullet-proof jackets; nomination of a Greek Public Order official as a liaison officer to the Albanian Public Order Ministry; various training seminars for Albanian police officers; guarding the common borders; joint sea patrols (Corfu-Saranda); regular exchange of confidential information; and a crackdown on smuggling, narcotics trafficking and illegal immigration.⁴⁸

Thus, Albania's relations with Greece, arguably the most important for the country's foreign policy, have advanced considerably from their low point in the mid 1990s. Greece no longer threatens to deport Albanian workers, which would seriously harm both country's economies.⁴⁹ Although Greece maintains strong political leverage due to its NATO/EU membership, Albania is becoming increasingly less concerned that Greece might exert its influence to block economic aid. This is due to the fact that Albania is becoming economically stronger. Although still very much dependent upon EU assistance, the country is gradually less reliant upon foreign aid and now has a number of bankable financial projects. Also, Albania is one of only two Balkan countries which could be described as water-rich (the other is Montenegro). If Balkan summer droughts continue, water

⁴⁷ In the minority areas there are Greek-language classes for primary and secondary school children. There is also a Greek-language faculty at the university in Gjirokaster.

⁴⁸ Programme of Assistance by the Ministry of Public order of the Hellenic Republic in the field of Law and Order in the Republic of Albania, Embassy of Greece in Albania, November 2000.

⁴⁹ Greece would lose indispensable cheap labour, and Albania would lose the workers' valuable remittances.

politics will become increasingly important. Thus, within five years Greece could be asking Albania for water.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, significant bilateral issues remain. The legalisation of Albanian emigrants in Greece remains a problem. Tirana is particularly concerned over a recent Greek ministerial decision not to grant green cards to families of Albanian emigrants. The agreement on the legalisation of foreign emigrants in Greece, which was initiated in January 1998, is still in its implementation phase. Meanwhile, Greece would like Albania to lift the "minority zone" status so as not to pinpoint the minority legally in specific areas. This would be seen as "a mature stance by the Albanian authorities".⁵¹ Greece wants the whole minority issue tackled from an EU rather than a Greek perspective. While the ethnic Greek community seeks closer economic and cultural links with Greece, Athens likes to envisage this minority as becoming a bridge between the two countries rather than a source of division.⁵² If this is ever to happen, the Greek government, OMONIA and the UHRP will have to convince Albanians there is no ulterior plan to Hellenise southern Albania.

IV. INTERNAL POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENTS

It is widely acknowledged that state institutions have been significantly strengthened over the past two years with the adoption of several excellent laws. It can, therefore, be said that the country is now in the implementation phase where the challenge is to put these laws into practice. However, there remains a serious discrepancy between the laws as written and their enforcement. The need for judicial reform is one of the biggest challenges. There are serious problems with the political independence of the judiciary, the professionalism of judges and prosecutors, and above all, the corruption which eats at the heart of the justice system. The continued contribution of international institutions is crucial to the efforts being made to strengthen state and government.

This assistance, however, and the special attention given to Albania, have not created a long-term vision of development. There is a tendency to think of governance as a partnership with foreigners rather than management of the needs and concerns of the public and the country. The growth and consolidation of democratic institutions have been hampered by an inability to make a clear distinction between the state and the government of the day and confusion over their respective powers, by efforts to control the justice system, and by the populism that often characterises Albanian politics. Despite efforts, there is still no modern or well-functioning public administration. In large part, this is due to a mentality which politicises everything and places party interests ahead of the state.⁵³ Effective governance depends on popular respect for government and its mechanisms. Instead, distrust towards the state and its institutions is increasing.

⁵⁰ There are already water shortages in many parts of Greece during the summer. The Albanian government plans to export water from a famous beauty spot known as the Blue Eye Spring, near the southern town of Saranda, to the island of Corfu—a scheme that should cause concern to environmentalists.

⁵¹ ICG discussions with Greek officials in Tirana, March 2001.

⁵² ICG interview with Greek officials in Tirana, March 2001.

⁵³ UNDP Albanian Human Development Report 2000, Tirana, November 2000, pp.23-24.

A. The Socialist Party

Such support as the government enjoys is due mainly to the general populace's relief that the public order situation has vastly improved over the past year. The high-profile crackdown on armed gangs, the government's handling of DP rallies in Tirana to protest against the results of the October 2000 local elections, and the firm police response to an attack by DP supporters on a police station in the northern town of Bajram Curri at the beginning of December 2000 (during which two people were killed) have gained the government a measure of respect. Nevertheless, there is a lot of popular discontent with the governing Socialist Party (SP), which retains more visible support among the international community. After a particularly difficult winter with frequent power cuts, there is understandable frustration among ordinary people, who see no tangible improvement in the infrastructure that affects their daily lives. Newspapers are filled with stories of corruption in the highest echelons of government and of internal rivalry within the SP, which threatens the party's attempts to produce a candidature list acceptable to all members prior to the 24 June parliamentary elections. There are two antagonistic groups within the SP—one led by the chairman, Fatos Nano, the other by the Prime Minister, Ilir Meta. Both groups seek to have their candidates run in the elections.

Not only are there damaging divisions within the Socialist Party, but the future of the four-year-old ruling coalition, the "Alliance for the State", is in doubt following recent failures to strike an internal balance within the coalition. The SP is visibly hesitating over cooperation with its allies. Numerous widely publicised clashes among coalition personalities have badly marred the image of the coalition. Junior government allies, keen to shed their vassal status, are pressuring the SP to adopt partner-like electoral alliances by threatening to run alone in the June elections. The Democratic Alliance has already declared that it intends to do so. The Union of Human Rights Party (UHRP) has said that it was not asking the SP for any favours, rather a pre-electoral deal with mutual benefits. The UHRP want seven to ten uncontested constituencies in Greek minority areas, including Himara, on which they intend to concentrate their efforts. The Social Democrats have also warned that lack of cooperation in the June polls could destroy the party's seven-year alliance with the Socialists.

B. The Democratic Party

Ten years after its founding, the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) is trying to reinvent itself. At a meeting in February 2001 of the DP's National Council, the party's new platform was announced as part of its forthcoming electoral strategy. DP leader Sali Berisha opened the meeting calling for the "union of all Albanians who believe in freedom and the motherland". The familiar use of such rhetorical phrases was hardly an indicator of change. Yet change it must if the party wishes to survive at all. A priority of the party, which has seen its membership dramatically decline over the past four years, is to concentrate on establishing alliances with right-wing parties and the country's intellectual elite. The DP is daily trying to join with the smaller opposition parties. According to Fatos Beja, DP Secretary for Human Resources and Elections, the selection of candidates must be based upon essential criteria, namely, "the attraction of personality, level of professionalism, that persons must be known for their purity and character, and be determined to respect the values of democracy and guarantee the fulfilment of the

demands of the electorate.”⁵⁴ This is a tall order indeed. However, in asking for these qualities in prospective candidates now, the party has at least acknowledged what was sorely lacking in many previous DP candidates.

Berisha has committed himself to unifying his party with those who left it in 1992. To this end he has been inviting intellectuals to rejoin the party or at least to work within a united coalition of right-wing forces. Berisha himself would have us believe that he has shifted from the right to the centre, yet his opponents have no faith in this change of heart. A part of Berisha’s new “responsible” image is to appear moderate on the fighting in Macedonia. He has considerably toned down his nationalist rhetoric with pleas for restraint on behalf of all parties involved in the conflict. The DP, however, will have little credibility as long as Berisha remains at the helm.

C. The New Democratic Party

At the beginning of the year, the Reform Movement faction within the DP, together with two other parties created by former Democrats—the Democratic Party of the Right (DPR) and the Movement for Democracy (MD)—announced the formation of a new political party that “should be capable of breaking the bi-partisan politics that has so crippled Albania’s moves towards democracy.” The party, called the New Democratic Party (NDP), is headed by a steering council that includes previous deputy chairman of the DP Gence Pollo, DPR leader Petrit Kalakulla, MD head Dashamir Shehi, former Tirana mayor Albert Brojka, and Democrat MP Nard Ndoka. The new party aims to gather its support base from right-wing elements which supported the Democratic Party since its founding in December 1990 but have recently abandoned it due to its anti-intellectual stance and its leader’s rigid authoritarianism. The main challenge for the NDP is to present itself as a progressive centre-right force that can offer alternative solutions to Albania’s apathetic and disillusioned population.

The new party’s Political Secretary, Gence Pollo, explained why he thought the time was now ripe for another alternative to the DP: “The DP has degenerated into an exhausted marshal and certain hapless yes-men. Its disorientation has brought about the abandoning of that party by a lot of seasoned cadres. The old DP has no chance of inspiring them. It is not the DP of 1992, which gave them victory.”⁵⁵ This is a reference to the many former DP personalities who abandoned politics several years ago. The NDP hopes they will rejoin political life through the NDP. This is a forlorn hope, however, since the new party was not even able to take with it the complete membership of the Reform Movement Faction, including two of its leading members, former Prime Minister Alexander Mexi and former DP foreign affairs spokesman Leonard Demi, who say they prefer to remain within the DP in order to democratise it.⁵⁶ The Democratic Party itself has chosen to ignore the new party, asking instead for more “reformists” to return to the DP.

⁵⁴ Rilindja Demokratike, 21 March 2001.

⁵⁵ *Albania Daily News*, 12 February 2001.

⁵⁶ ICG interview with Leonard Demi, Tirana, March 2001.

D. Emigration

As Albania's political class continues its bitter polemics and infighting, ordinary Albanians continue to seek ways to escape the country. An estimated half a million out of a total population of 3.3 million Albanians currently work abroad. The prime causes of Albania's high emigration are limited prospects for employment combined with poor socio-economic conditions.⁵⁷ It is not just the unemployed that are leaving. Various surveys show that Albania's brain drain continues unabated. During the past decade, 45 per cent of the country's academics have emigrated. A survey conducted in February 2001 by the Tirana-based Economic and Social Research Centre showed that most of Tirana University's students and lecturers are poised to emigrate as soon as they have a chance. The results indicated that 77 per cent of the students did not "hope to find a job in the country, despite their qualifications." Asked whether they would like to work in Albania, the students said they would prefer to do manual, but better paid, jobs in Western countries than good, but poorly paid, jobs in Albania. Around 60 per cent of the university teaching staff also said that they were considering seeking work abroad.

E. Crime

Over the last year, the government has continued to consolidate public order throughout the country. The main police priority is no longer trying to eliminate individual criminals or gangs, as it was until a year ago. Today, the biggest challenge for the security forces is posed by organised crime, which has grown steadily more sophisticated as it consolidates links between closely-knit Albanian diaspora clans and the wider world of organised criminality. Such crime has become not only increasingly sophisticated as networks develop between regional criminal groups but also more difficult to identify because the hierarchy of these criminal networks are, for the most part, based outside Albania.

Serious problems remain within Albania's police and judiciary, which are plagued by political interference and wide-spread corruption. Lack of cooperation between prosecutors and police is blamed for poor performance against organised crime. Limited resources, political pressure, and inexperienced and untrained personnel, combined with widespread corruption, weaken both the police and the judiciary's ability to function independently and efficiently. Corruption is one of the most visible evils of Albania's transition period. A Stability Pact anti-corruption initiative announced in November 1999 has had little impact. Albania is not unique—the majority of other countries in the region face the same problem. It is thus much harder to harness any real political will to fight corruption. In a recent criticism of the judicial system, Justice Minister Arben Imami said that judges themselves were becoming an obstacle to the adoption of stronger laws against corruption in the judiciary. He called for the sacking of several prominent judges involved in blackmail and the release of suspects involved in drug trafficking and other serious crimes.

According to a 1998 World Bank survey on corruption in Albania, more than half the firms surveyed admitted to having bribed public officials. Corruption costs these firms approximately seven per cent of their turnover. Most of the bribes to public officials were paid by trade and construction companies, 75 per cent of which

⁵⁷ Economic and Social Research Centre, Social Survey Report, Tirana, February 2001.

admitted to the practice. Almost 50 per cent of private citizens acknowledged paying bribes since 1991. According to public officials, more than 50 per cent of customs inspectors "purchased" their positions. Twenty-five per cent of private citizens with a sick family member admitted to bribing health officials.⁵⁸

Interior Ministry officials say their main objective is the fight against the trafficking of drugs and people. Over the past year Albania has become a transit centre for an ever increasing number of illegal immigrants who embark from Albania to destinations in Western Europe. A recent report issued by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) criticised the authorities for failing to stem the tide of trafficked women entering Albania. The report highlighted the fact that many of the traffickers work in collusion with the police, who turn a blind eye to the highly lucrative trade. Apparently appeals to the Albanian government to start prosecuting the traffickers have repeatedly been ignored. The IOM report claims that an alarming 90 per cent of girls over the age of 14 no longer attend school in rural areas for fear of being kidnapped. A separate report by Save the Children says that thousands of Albanian girls have been abducted and forced into prostitution. Ministry officials call for the urgent and immediate strengthening of the country's poorly stretched border police, which is one of the weakest points in this institution.⁵⁹

There are three distinct categories of people passing illegally through Albania: genuine political refugees, who require asylum; people being trafficked against their will, mainly women and children; and the majority, who are purely economic migrants. The UNHCR office in Tirana, which is concerned for genuine asylum-seekers, assists the government to determine which of the three categories the illegal immigrants belong to. At present there is not even sufficient infrastructure to accommodate the genuine asylum seekers. Support is also urgently needed from international organisations to accommodate the ever increasing number of other refugees, who arrive needing shelter, food and medical care.

Most of the countries from which the refugees arriving in Albania originate will not accept them back because they do not have repatriation agreements with Albania. At the beginning of February 2001, Prime Minister Ilir Meta pledged to fight illegal immigration but put the onus on the West to help, in particular to provide the logistical and communications equipment he has requested. "We do not lack people. Our people are doing their best. There is cooperation with Italian security and Italian police but our people need more sophisticated equipment," he said.⁶⁰ A regional centre to combat trafficking in illegal goods and migrants will start functioning in Albania this summer. The centre, which will be funded in part by Greece, Italy and Germany, will be located in the southern port of Vlore from where much of the smuggling from Albania takes place. The centre aims to exchange information and to co-ordinate activities between the police of several countries on international trafficking.

During the last six months, security in the Adriatic has been considerably tightened. Better cooperation between Italy and Albania has resulted in a degree of progress in fighting human and drug trafficking. Ever since the arrival in Albania

⁵⁸ UNDP Albanian Human Development Report 2000, Tirana, November 2000, p.24.

⁵⁹ ICG discussions with officials from the Public Order Ministry, March 2001.

⁶⁰ Reuters, 6 February 2000,13:17.

in 1992 of 500 Italian soldiers to distribute international aid, Italy has invested considerable financial and manpower resources in the country. In much the same way Greece is providing technical and knowhow assistance, so Italy is concentrating very much upon security issues. Its proximity—just a short boat ride across the Otranto Straits—has resulted in tens of thousands of people attempting to enter Italy from Albania. The concerns of Italy on this matter were highlighted recently at a meeting of European interior ministers when Interior Minister Enzo Bianco proposed a feasibility study on whether to set up a European border police to tackle the growing problem of illegal immigration, particularly from Albania. In an attempt to legalise at least some Albanian immigrants, Italy has now opened an Italian consulate in the northern town of Shkoder, where potential immigrants can have their cases assessed and work permits granted. In the meantime, Albanian and Italian police forces and prosecutors are also stepping up efforts to destroy the drugs networks that operate on both sides of the Adriatic Sea. The countries have signed an agreement to attack the mafia “without mercy”. This followed the recent destruction of an Albanian drugs network by Bari’s anti-Mafia police. This was the third powerful drugs network to be eliminated in a month, due to intensified collaboration between Albanian and Italian police forces.

There does not appear to be the same degree of success on the Greek-Albanian land and sea borders, where traffic in illegal immigrants, drugs and stolen cars by joint Greek-Albanian criminal gangs is booming. As a result, tension remains very high along the border. Sporadic incidents in 2000 put a strain on relations. In April 2000 Albania, concerned by recent border incidents in the Ionian Sea, urged its southern neighbour to avoid opening fire on boats. The call came after the Greek coastguard fired at a speedboat ferrying illegal immigrants from Albania across the narrow strait to the island of Corfu. In June 2000 Greece issued a diplomatic warning to Albania after a Greek border guard was killed in a shootout with a gang of Albanian drug smugglers. In November 2000 Greek police shot dead an Albanian who was leading a group of seven immigrants into Greece.

In recent years Greece has boosted patrols on its mountainous northern border with Albania to prevent illegal immigrants from entering the country and to stop rampant smuggling. Greek police repatriated on average 150 to 200 illegal Albanian immigrants per day in 2000. Reassuring as this may be, there does not appear to be the same level of commitment regarding the apprehension of illegal immigrants who are merely in transit through Greece en route to Western Europe. In the Athens bus station, for example, on any given night one can find groups of Kurds boarding buses bound for the north-western town of Igoumenitsa and the island of Corfu.⁶¹ There they are met by Greek and Albanian contacts who arrange the Kurds’ passage by ferry boat to Italy. This very lucrative trade appears to be unhindered by the authorities.⁶² Greek officials rightly claim that Albania needs to intensify its efforts to stop crime from spilling across the border into Greece. Yet Greece also must pay more attention to the collaboration between Greek and Albanian criminals in the smuggling of cigarettes and drugs as well as people trafficking.

Albanians are involved in several types of drug trafficking. Foremost is the cultivation and production of cannabis sativa, which goes to Italy. Albanians are

⁶¹ There is a sizeable Albanian community in both places.

⁶² ICG talks with Albanians living in Igoumenitsa, December 2000.

also involved in the trafficking to Italy of cocaine from the United States and heroin from Turkey and Central and South East Asia. Narcotic plants cultivated by villagers have become a major source of revenue for the export market, in particular to Italy and Greece. The market is well controlled by Albanian trafficking gangs, who have the necessary structures.⁶³ Interior Ministry sources say that recently apprehended international drug traffickers had planned to convert Albania into a base for storing cocaine. The large Albanian diaspora community in the United States has provided a useful conduit for drugs trafficking gangs from South America looking for a means to transport drugs into Western Europe. Sources at the Ministry of the Interior believe that a hierarchy based upon five Albanian families maintains close contact with Colombian drug barons to import huge quantities of cocaine with the help of Albanians living in New York. The drugs are then transported from Albania to Western European markets by speed boat across the Otranto Strait. It is this degree of sophistication through the broadening of criminal networks that most deeply concerns Interior Ministry officials.⁶⁴

V. CONCLUSIONS

Domestic politics remain typically polarised ahead of the June elections, as the Democrats scramble to forge a broad alliance of right-wing forces, while the Socialists either have to make deals and compromise, or risk breaking with their coalition partners. Despite better internal security, much remains to be done in the fight against crime and corruption and to improve the performance of judges and the police force. Five changes of public order minister in just three years have increased distrust and lack of confidence as many specialists lose their positions with each change of minister. This lack of stability is a major hindrance to building strong institutions. Trafficking in human beings has become big business throughout south-eastern Europe, generating billions of dollars for organised crime groups. In Albania there appears to be a real lack of political will and determination to confront this type of crime. The fight against illegal trafficking requires far stronger co-ordination from both regional and international agencies in order to strengthen information networks and databases. Increased international financial and technical assistance is also urgently needed to reinforce Albania's beleaguered border police.

For some time now the economy has been gaining in strength. Its overall performance is satisfactory, with prices stable and growth at around 7 per cent in 1999 and 8 per cent in 2000, admittedly from a low base. Structural reforms have progressed in line with an IMF programme. Great strides have also been made to improve relations with the country's neighbours. Yet within the Albanian establishment there is a growing feeling that the international community does not want "a strong Albania, with the attraction and pull factor to act as a magnet for the creation of a Greater Albania. It might be better therefore to keep Albania dependent."⁶⁵ While it is accepted that there is no international master-plan to keep Albania backward, there is a conviction that more could be done to accelerate the country's development, and a suspicion that other economically weak and

⁶³ UNDP Albanian Human Development Report 2000, Tirana, November 2000, p.34.

⁶⁴ ICG talks with Interior Ministry officials, Tirana, March, 2001.

⁶⁵ ICG discussion with officials in the Foreign Ministry and the Council of Ministers, Tirana, March 2001.

politically fragmented entities with large ethnic Albanian populations are being propped up for the sake of the status quo.

The political elite in Tirana preserves a traditional belief in great power patronage. The European Union has taken the place of China or the Soviet Union as the benefactor. As a result, the country waits patiently for Associate EU membership in order to “be integrated into European structures”. Whatever this actually means and whenever it is supposed to occur have almost become irrelevant. This is believed to be the path which Albania must follow in order to appease the new patrons. It is why Albania does not openly call for Kosovo’s independence and why foreign ministry statements calling for an end to ethnic Albanian military activity in Presevo and Macedonia are indistinguishable from those issued by the international community. Whatever government comes to power after the June elections will continue to pursue EU membership as the focus of its foreign policy. The long years of isolation under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha have left the Albanian people with an indelible sense of wanting to belong or to be a part of something associated with progress, prosperity and international acceptance, as opposed to the ideological and political poverty and stagnation that is the legacy of five and a half centuries of Ottoman and communist domination.

However, the current Albanian government has embraced internationalism so avidly that it has failed to articulate what is considered a legitimate national program. With growing concerns over the perceived Hellenisation of southern Albania, the problems in Presevo and Macedonia, and the unresolved status of Kosovo, both the Albanians of the former Yugoslavia and many within Albania have accused Tirana of selling the nation out. To some degree, Albanians living outside Albania accept the predicament the Albanian authorities face in having to toe the West’s line. They also recognise that Albania has a role to play in the delicate balance of power between the various Albanian entities while simultaneously building closer economic links with its Balkan neighbours. But their message to Tirana is clear: don’t sacrifice the national interests. The dilemma facing Tirana is how to continue to strengthen ties with Albania’s regional neighbours while simultaneously pressing hard—as past governments have neglected to do—for human rights improvements for ethnic Albanians living outside Albania’s borders.

Tirana/Brussels, 25 May 2001

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