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The Albanian Question: Reshaping the Balkans

James Pettifer and Miranda Vickers

I. B. Tauris, London and New York, 2007

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Reviewed by Gëzim Alpion

Winston Churchill is alleged to have once stated that the Balkans produce more history than they can consume. The events in the region over the last two decades have shown that, on the whole, his (alleged) assessment was correct.

James Pettifer and Miranda Vickers's writings illustrate that the Balkan tendency to churn out excessive history is true particularly in the case of Albania. They record the Albanian nation's recent 'surplus' of history in the two books they have co-authored: *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity* (2000) and *The Albanian Question: Reshaping the Balkans* (2007). The former concentrates on events from 1985 to 1996. The latter catalogues what happened between 1997 and 2006 in Albania and its neighbouring territories such as Kosovo and Western Macedonia, where the population is overwhelmingly Albanian.

The Albanian Question: Reshaping the Balkans is structured into six parts, each consisting of two (Part IV), three (Parts I, II, III and VI) or four (Part V) chapters. In Part I '1997—The Crisis of Post-

Communist Albania' the focus is on the failure of the Berisha government and of Western diplomacy to foresee the social unrest triggered across Albania following the 1997 collapse of the fraudulent pyramid saving scheme. The anarchy that ensued and the armed uprising in the south are rightly not explained as 'a Mafia-inspired phenomenon' (p. 48) or in terms of an 'entrenched' Gheg-and-Tosk dichotomy (a mistake frequently made by Westerners since the start of the 20th century), but instead as the outcome of old conflicts inherited from Enver Hoxha's totalitarian regime and new ones created during Sali Berisha's 'autocratic rule'.

Part II 'The Struggle for Power' concentrates on Berisha's tight grip on Northern Albania as a result of the terror exerted by the Albanian Intelligence Service (SHIK). When SHIK could no longer subdue northerners, it became evident that Berisha was almost as unpopular in the North as in the South, and that the crisis would not develop into a civil war between the Gheg and the Tosk, as some had anticipated. This part of the book also assesses the role of 'Operation Alba' in 'policing' the June 1997 election that brought to a close five years of Berisha's government and returned to power the socialists.

Part III 'The Kosova Dimension of the National Question' traces the origins of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), paying particular attention to Tirana's inconsistent attitude towards Kosovo Albanian militants in the early 1990s which ranged from enrolment in the military academy in Tirana in 1991 to arrest, jail and even assassination. Berisha's decision to arrest key leaders of the KLA between 1993 and 1996 and purge the Albanian Army of officers sympathetic to their cause, while made under immense Western pressure, indicates that 'the Democratic Party government betrayed the nation' (p. 99) at a crucial moment.

The Berisha government is however not alone in 'betraying' the interests of the nation. King Zogu and Hoxha had apparently betrayed Kosovo Albanian patriots in the same way in the 1920s (pp. 194, 263) and 1981 (p. 263), respectively. In his infamous 1937 paper 'The Expulsion of the Albanians' Vaso Čubrilović stated 'money plays an important role in Tirana'. Seventy years later it seems that certain Albanian politicians can be bought just as easily, though this time not by Belgrade but by Athens. The authors cast 'the hand of Athens bearing gold for Tirana politicians', specifically Fatos Nano's Socialist Party government, 'to betray Kosova' as a 'a recurrent cancer' infecting 'the Albanian body politic' (p. 105).

Part IV 'The Political Crisis in Albania' concentrates on the alleged involvement of Berisha, SHIK, the KLA, FARK (Armed Forces of the Republic of Kosovo—a rival to the KLA—founded in 1998) and certain 'foreign intelligence services' in the coup attempt and assassination of politician Azem Hajdari in September 1998. The truth about 'the real perpetrators of the various destabilization processes' (p. 170) then at work in Albania has yet to come out.

Part V 'Albania and the Deepening Kosova Conflict' focuses on the spread of the war in Kosovo and the struggle of the Albanian politicians to agree on a common strategy. Of particular interest here is the emphasis on the traditional inferiority complex of many Albanian politicians, which can be partly explained by the fact that '[v]irtually all Tirana governments have had problems of democratic legitimacy since the foundation of the state in 1913, whether during King Zog's inter-war pro-Italian period, under the communist one-party state, or in the successor transition governments after 1991' (p. 180). This explains why the Albanian political class has often been unable 'to put forward a united vision of the national interest' (ibid.), and why the Albanian

people have frequently found themselves with many leaders but no leadership.

The united front the Albanian politicians in Kosovo and Albania adopted in January 1999 prior to the Rambouillet conference is unique in the history of modern Albania. Had they not risen to the occasion, the West would not have considered them partners in the period prior to and during the NATO bombing campaign which resulted in the withdrawal of the Yugoslav Army from Kosovo. This part of the book also explores the handling of the Kosovo refugee crisis in Albania; 'the brutality of the Macedonian army and police' against refugees (p. 223); and the Greek government's refusal to accept any refugees, 'a cruel decision that was in breach of international humanitarian law' (p. 226).

The final part 'The New Albanian Space and the Future' highlights the shift in the international community's attitude towards Kosovo in the wake of 'the largely bogus "revolution" of October 2000 in Belgrade' (p. 247). According to the authors, the removal of Milošević was used by Serbophile elements in Britain, the USA and other Western countries to sabotage Kosovo's independence. This part of the book sheds light on the media campaign, especially in the British press, aimed at demonizing the Albanians between 2001 and 2006. The authors finally urge the West to pay due attention to the long neglected Albanian nation stressing that failure to do so could have serious consequences for the stability in the Balkans.

Anyone with a general and professional interest in Albania and the Balkans would benefit from this meticulously researched book. This study could be useful, especially for Western scholars, politicians and reporters who have made it a habit to use terms such as 'the Balkans', 'Balkanize' and 'Balkanization' in a derogatory manner and often out of

context, or who conveniently ignore that the 'insignificant' Balkans and the 'unimportant' Albanian nation have often been at the centre of attention of imperial powers. The Balkans will cease being such a 'prolific' producer of history when regressive forces in the region no longer enjoy the support of the powers which have contributed to past and present Balkan troubles.

Gëzim Alpion
Department of Sociology, University of Birmingham
Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK