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Small nations, big names: The Albanians and their international high-flyers

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Like any nation in the Balkans, indeed throughout the world, the Albanians are very proud of their historical figures. Being the direct descendants of the Illyrians, they take pride in several famous ancient kings like Bardhyllus and Glaucius and Queen Teuta. Following their defeat by the Romans in 165 BC, however, the Albanians began to take pride mainly in 'their' international high-flyers living abroad. Today as well as in the past, the Albanians are often keen to mention that many Roman and Byzantine Emperors such as Diocletian, Julian, Claudius, Constantine the Great, Justinian I, and Anastasius were apparently of Illyrian origin. While the Albanians never fail to blame the five-century-long Turkish occupation of their country, they always mention with pride that they allegedly gave the Ottoman Empire twenty-six grand viziers (prime ministers) as well as

some of its greatest architects like Master Sinan.

The Albanians are also very proud of the following internationally famous expatriates: Mehmet Isa, a seventeenth century architect, who acted as the chief builder of the Taj Mahal; the eighteenth century Pope Clement XI, apparently the fourth pontiff of Albanian origin after Saint Eleutherius, Saint Caius and John IV in the second, third and seventh century respectively; Mohammed Ali (1769-1849), the founder of the 1802-1952 Albanian dynasty of Egypt; Karl von Ghega (1802-1860), the architect of the world's first mountainous railway in Semmering, Austria; Francesco Crispi (1818-1901), the charismatic Italian politician who served twice as prime minister; Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938), the founder of modern Turkey, and the list goes on. According to the well-known French memoir writer Laure Junot, Duchess d'Abrantès (née Permon) (1784-1838), the renowned French statesman and historian Adolphe Thiers (1797-1877), and the French linguist and ethnographer Robert D'Angely (1893-1966), Napoleon Bonaparte also is of Albanian origin. The three French authors maintain that Napoleon came from the Albanian community in Corsica. Albania's defeat by the Turks in the latter part of the fifteenth century caused an Albanian exodus of Biblical proportion towards the West. Napoleon's ancestors are thought to have moved from Albania to Mani in Southern Greece before immigrating to Corsica. The remarks of the above-mentioned French authors about Napoleon's Albanian origin have not escaped the attention of the Albanians, who are understandingly interested in exploring further the genealogy of one of the most prominent European figures over the last three centuries.

But if the Albanians will have to do more research to claim Napoleon as one of their 'own', they are in much safer grounds when it comes to the Albanian roots of numerous internationally famous people of our time. So, for instance, nowadays the Albanians take pride in modern celebrities of Albanian origin among whom

they are keen to mention the Hollywood brothers, James and the late John Belushi; the promising actress Eliza Dushku, who has worked with Robert De Niro, Leonardo Di Caprio and Arnold Schwarzenegger; and the 1998 Nobel Prize Laureate in Medicine, Ferid Murad. The collapse of Communism in Albania in the early 1990s meant that many talented Albanian artists and athletes chose to immigrate to further their careers, and some have been very successful. The Albanians are particularly proud of many expatriates currently living abroad like the writer Ismail Kadare (several times Nobel Prize nominee, and the first winner of the Man Booker International Prize in June 2005), the painter Alush Shima, the soprano Inva Mula, and a number of athletes who have become world and Olympic champions such as Pirro Dhima, Mirela Manjani, Luan Krasniqi, and Kreshnik Qato.

The Albanian nation has traditionally given to the world outstanding military strategists, politicians, religious personalities, scientists and artists. Most of the internationally renowned figures of Albanian origin in the past had an acute awareness of their European identity. This is one of the reasons why they could integrate so well in the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire. The Albanians retained their European consciousness especially throughout the 500 years of Turkish domination of Albania, during which time many of them looked towards Istanbul for jobs and career opportunities much in the same way as present-day talented and ambitious Albanians and other Eastern Europeans look towards London, Paris, Berlin and New York.

While they were certainly loyal employees to their Ottoman paymasters, many bright Albanian politicians, military figures and intellectuals were often courageous enough to go against the grain when it came to introducing new and daring reforms. Some of them even did not hesitate to defy openly the Sublime Porte when its blinkered officials were unwilling to introduce changes in their old-

fashioned and repressive methods of governing colonies and collecting taxes. So, for instance, the 19th century Albanian-born ruler of Egypt Muhammad Ali was instrumental in bringing Egypt closer to Europe, something he was able to do only after severing completely the ties with the Porte.

Another internationally famous military figure and statesman of Albanian origin who played a similar, if not more important, role in orienting his adopted country towards 'rational' Europe was Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938), the founder of modern Turkey. Kemal was the inspiration behind the breathtaking transformation that Turkey went through in the early decades of the twentieth century from a humiliated former superpower to a new vigorous and ambitious state with clear aspirations to join the family of Western European nations.

Like her famous compatriots Muhammad Ali and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Mother Teresa was always aware of her Albanian and European identity in spite of the fact that she went to extraordinary lengths to present herself as a Catholic nun who had gone 'native' in her adopted country India. Like Ali and Kemal, she was also highly motivated and had a very practical mind. Differently from Ali and Kemal, however, Mother Teresa was essentially a spiritual human being. What is more important, the source of her spirituality came exclusively from the Catholic interpretation of the New Testament endorsed and championed by the Vatican.

As a rule, the successful Albanians abroad through history have distanced themselves from their country of origin. Most of them have hardly done anything to benefit Albania directly. Muhammad Ali, Mustafa Kemal and Mother Teresa are some of the more recent and best known examples of this ongoing ancient Albanian mystery. These three Albanian international personalities were completely disengaged from their own native country throughout their long and successful careers. Like numerous successful expatriates over the past two

millennia, Ali, Kemal and Mother Teresa devoted their lives wholeheartedly to the causes they embraced or invented for themselves, causes which had nothing to do with Albania as such. For them and for many other internationally renowned Albanians, the Albania they or their predecessors had left behind was a distant and alien country. Some famous Albanians apparently did not even know anything of their Albanian origin until they were told about it. Cases were not rare when, for the sake of promoting their careers and to achieve their highly ambitious and egoistic targets, many successful Albanians abroad even chose to keep quiet about their Illyrian-Albanian-Balkan roots, and at times had no qualms in denying their ethnic origin and nationality altogether.

More recently this tendency is manifested among some Albanian athletes in Greece who, much to the consternation of their countrymen, have opted to take Greek names, allegedly as a precondition to be allowed to compete in Olympic Games and European and world championships as members of the Greek national team. Concentrating mainly on the case of Mother Teresa, one of the purposes of this lecture is to identify and explore some of the reasons for this apparently pathological alienation of internationally famous Albanians towards their country of origin.